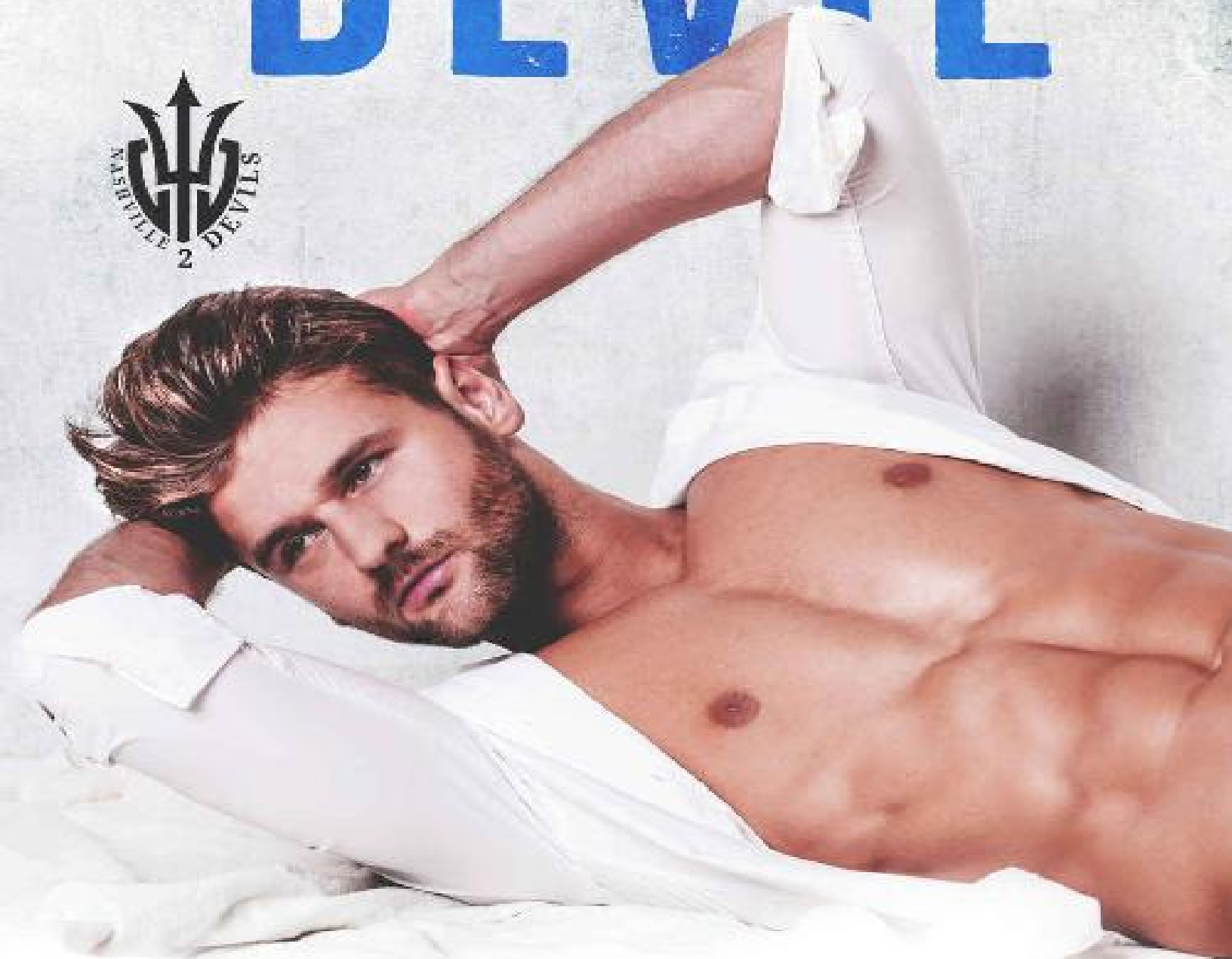


Untamed DEVIL



MELISSA IVERS

UNTAMED DEVIL

A NASHVILLE DEVILS NOVEL

MELISSA IVERS

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Untamed Devil

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For the readers who just need a push in the right direction

CHAPTER ONE

TAG

WHAT I NEED RIGHT NOW IS A DISTRACTION FROM MY DISTRACTION.

Linc and Jazz are great company, but I expected there to be more people here. A few guys from the team, maybe a couple people from the Devils' front office. The whole purpose of this little gathering at Whiskey and Rye was to welcome Lucy's sister to the city, and no one's even bothered to show up. Instead, I'm impatiently playing third wheel to Linc and Jazz's happily ever after. Not that they don't deserve it after the hell they went through to get it, but that doesn't mean I want to witness all the sappy lovey-dovey bull every damn minute.

My leg bounces under the table and I check my phone for what seems like the hundredth time. I double check to make sure the volume is turned on, and then check again. I had several missed calls from my sister because my dumb ass had forgotten to turn the ringer back on after hockey practice. I tried calling her back—multiple times—and sent her a bunch of text messages. Crickets.

But Finley? There's no telling what kind of trouble she's in, and Finley is always in trouble.

"What's up with you?" Linc nudges my foot with his and throws an arm around Jazz. "You're not your usual annoyingly talkative self."

I lean back and glance over at him, giving him the best smile I can muster before deflecting. "So, where's Lucy and this sister of hers? I need a bourbon. Stat."

"How the hell should I know? They're not even ten minutes late. If you want a drink, order a fucking drink. Maybe it'll calm your ass down." Linc sits back and presses a kiss into Jazz's hair, but then throws me a look over

her head that says we'll be talking later.

I make a show of rolling my eyes, and that's when I see the blonde beauty at the bar.

Hello, distraction from my distraction.

Watching Linc dry hump Jazz all night isn't going to stop me from thinking about my fucked-up family.

This girl, on the other hand...

She could be a night of no-strings sex to occupy my time. Forgetting about my problems is easier when I'm face-first in a nice set of tits. Make me focus on something else for a while. Or in this case, two something elses.

The honeyed hair falling in waves down her back would be perfect for wrapping around my fist as I lose myself in her luscious body. She's perched on one of those rounded bar stools, forcing her to slide back just enough for me to see an ass rounded to perfection in a pair of form-fitting dark blue jeans.

Curves are my weakness, and she has 'em in all the right places.

I strain my neck to get a better look and hold back the groan building in my throat. I really want to bite down on that ass, but I don't think it's appropriate in the middle of the bar.

At least not until we've been properly introduced.

"See you losers later. I've got someone to meet." I push away from the table, the chair scraping against the wooden floor, and make my way toward the girl who's going to wake up in my bed tomorrow morning. Hair tousled, cheeks flushed, and thoroughly fucked.

She's hunched over the bar, her eyes never leaving the bartender as he pours two shots of Jäger right in front of her and the empty seat to her right. The first she tosses back immediately, exposing the length of her delicate throat, and giving me a new appreciation for the curve of a woman's neck. Her whole body shivers before she slams the bar-top with her free hand, and sets the empty shot glass upside down. She looks at the next one for a moment, laughs to herself, and then downs it as easily as the first.

She stares at the empty glasses like I'm staring at her, like she's in desperate need of regret, and I'm only happy to oblige us both.

With my tongue. My hands. My cock.

All of the above.

"Rough day?" I slide onto the barstool next to her with as much finesse as I have on the ice. When she turns to look at me with an arched brow, I extend

my hand. “Tag.”

Her eyebrows shoot up and she squints, her bright blue eyes narrowing on my face, and she reaches out, poking my shoulder. “You’re it.”

“Ha. Ha. Very original. Haven’t heard that one before,” I reply, pushing the taunting voices of several prepubescent boys from Oliver Lewis Elementary out of my head. Suggesting a game of tag during recess had been a favorite pastime of theirs while we were growing up, and it got real old, real fast. “Maybe I can hear you say it later. Much later. And louder. Who might you be?”

She sucks in her lips and blushes a magnificent shade of pink. For a second, I don’t think she’s going to respond. Then she flips her hair over her shoulder and gives me an appraising look. “Elle.”

You can take me out of the country, but as soon as her name hits my ears in that smooth Southern accent, it brings me right back to the Bluegrass state. Rolling hills, sunny days, and home.

I know the second her small hand slides into mine, and her ruby lips tip in a smile, that she’ll be leaving Whiskey and Rye and going straight to my bed. And the couch. The kitchen counters. The shower. Not necessarily in that order, but definitely all by morning, because that’s when this relationship expires.

I’m not above using the bathroom stall of the bar, either. I’m sure it’s clean... enough.

“So, is it a rough day or do you always order two shots of Jäger?” I smirk at her, gesturing to the shot glasses.

Her bright blue eyes meet mine, her lashes flutter, and the air sizzles around me. She’s only said three words to me and I’m already on the edge of my seat waiting for more.

“You have no idea.” She throws back the last shot, her gaze never wavering from me. “But I’m sure you don’t really want me to carry on about my day.”

I don’t.

“I do.”

“Well, I moved out of my ex-boyfriend’s house this morning. We’d been together two years when I found out he’d been cheatin’ on me with Brittney, Summer, and Caraway.” She pauses, her nose scrunching up. “What kind of name is Caraway? That’s not even one of the good spices.”

What the fuck is a caraway? I didn’t even know it was a word, let alone a

spice. I'm not even sure it's not the name of a Spice Girl, if I'm honest. "Not even in the top ten spices, I agree."

"Anyway." She waves her hand erratically, and I'm in range to inadvertently take a hit to the throat. Me, hunched over, grabbing my neck and struggling to breathe isn't a sexy look, so I back up a few inches. She seems completely unaware that she's hit me in the arm already. "I threw some stuff, broke a few things, and after being called a few disparagin' names, I high-tailed it the hell out of there. I'd like to say I feel bad for going full crazy, but I don't."

"Bless your broken heart."

I think I only heard half of what she said. And she might be a bit crazy, but who isn't?

Maybe it's because my family is a little fucked up, but I like crazy.

I like rebounds even more. They never want more than a friendly fuck, and I'm the master of casual. In. Out. Repeat a few dozen times. No one catches any feelings, and I maintain my status as a perpetual bachelor.

"I'm sorry. I'm sure you really don't care about some stranger airin' her dirty laundry."

I signal the bartender for another round. "We're not complete strangers. I know your name is Elle. Short for...?"

She accepts the shot and tosses it back. "Just Elle. Is your name really Tag? Like a shirt tag or a skin tag? Maybe a luggage tag?"

"For the record, I prefer a shirt tag over a skin tag." I spin my shot of Jäger, drain the glass, and suppress a shiver because that shit is nasty as fuck. When you're raised on all things bourbon, there's not much that compares, but for her, I'll suffer. "If you're wishing to know my government name, it's Taggart. My family's Kentucky Irish."

"I wasn't aware there were Kentucky Irish."

"We don't like to tell many people." I sweep my eyes over her, taking in all her lush curves. "Can I buy you something else to drink? Maybe something that won't take the paint off my car?"

Elle throws her head back and laughs, a deep throaty sound that has my dick knocking on the inside of my zipper. "What's the fun in that, Taggart? Would you prefer a sex on the beach? Or a piña colada? Maybe a Shirley Temple? I can see if the bartender has any of those cute umbrellas."

Hearing my name roll off that little pink tongue of hers spreads heat through my veins and tightens my balls. I can't wait to hear her scream it.

Maybe after I spank her ass red for making fun of my drinking choices.

I shift on the barstool, closing the distance between us, and run the tip of my nose over the shell of her ear. As she shivers, I smooth my fingers down the bare flesh of her arm, and whisper, “I think you’ll find I’m a lot of fun, Elle.”

“Is that so?” She holds my gaze before dropping those baby blues to my lips, watching with intrigue as I slowly wet them with the tip of my tongue. “I could use a bit of fun in my life.”

“A little more than a bit, I think.”

A grin spreads across her face as she looks down at my crotch. “I’m hoping so. For as tall as you are, I’d be disappointed if things didn’t correlate.”

“Baby, when I get you back to my place, I’m going to fuck you so thoroughly you’ll forget your own name.”

Elle leans closer and puts a hand on my thigh. Not high enough to feel my half-erect cock through my jeans, but high enough I know she wants to. “In that case—”

“Tag!” Lucy smacks me on the back of my head, bringing me back to reality. She glares at my balls, smoke coming out of her ears, as Elle snatches her hand away. “I swear on all that is holy, if you don’t keep your hands to yourself and put those bedroom eyes away right now, my right foot is gonna be well acquainted with your nuts. Leave. My sister. Alone.”

I hold up my hands, “Messaged received,” I grin.

I rake my eyes back over Elle’s body. Her plump lips. Her perfectly rounded breasts. That ass... And message ignored.

I make a quick adjustment, promise my balls they will *not* find themselves crushed beneath Lucy’s pointed pink witch shoe, and they will, in fact, get to empty into this gorgeous woman.

Who, ironically, turns out to be Lucy’s recently single sister.

Guess I didn’t have to wait around to meet her after all.

My distraction just got a tiny bit sweeter.

CHAPTER TWO

“SO, YOU’RE LUCY’S SISTER.”

Tag’s eyes never stray from mine, but the way he says *Lucy’s sister* leaves me feeling vulnerable and very naked under his gaze. It’s everywhere. Slowly undressing. Caressing. Drinking their fill. Their deep amber hue is soft, yet penetrating. It’s what drew me in the minute he sat down. That, and his muscular torso. And god-like arms. Call me shallow, but I’m a sucker for big arms, and he doesn’t disappoint.

Derek, my scumbag-ex, had good arms. But nothing compared to Tag’s. Derek wasn’t bad to look at either, which I’m sure is what lured in all those other women. It sure as shit wasn’t his sorely lacking personality. I guess he did have a jersey with his name on it, and that was all most punt bunnies needed. If I learned one thing from that asshole, and the several other professional athlete serial cheaters I’ve known, it’s that they’re not husband material. They’re good for one thing, and one thing only.

The sad truth is, I have a weakness for muscle-bound jocks.

Which makes me wonder how this six-foot-two walking definition of sex-on-a-stick, knows my sister. Unfortunately, I have a sneaking suspicion that I know the answer. There’s no way this man clad in a worn pair of jeans and a yummy, bicep-hugging, gray t-shirt is in public relations. None of Lucy’s male colleagues would be caught dead looking so casual.

And Lord knows those arms don’t come from sitting behind a desk all day. Not unless he’s lifting filing cabinets on his lunch hour. Plus, he’s cocky as all get out. He already thinks I’m going home with him, and while I’m considering it, I haven’t made up my mind.

It’s a strong maybe.

“How do you know my sister? Pilates instructor?” My gaze narrows as he strokes my arm with his knuckles. I should pull away, but it feels so good. It’s been a long while since anyone but my battery-operated friend made my blood race. I bet he could put those rabbit ears to shame.

He cocks his head to the side and smiles. “I play for the Devils.”

Of course, you do.

I’m sixty-five percent sure I’m going home with this Devil. After being cheated on and made a fool of, I could use a one-night stand. A quick rebound and then I can pull up my very adult panties and move on with my life.

Even if that means settling down with a man that Daddy approves of, and I hate disappointing him. Derek was already a big disappointment but one he allowed because *he didn’t see a future there*. If I don’t settle down with a man well suited for me and my family, I put my entire future with his company at risk. And that’s something I refuse to leave to chance. It’s so important for him that the company stays with family and that we maintain a certain image and presence in Savannah. Family’s very important to me, and I’d do anything to keep the values my father put in place for us.

For tonight, I just want to feel good. And maybe, I want something to be about me. Tag is all flirty smiles and charm. His bedroom eyes are inviting, his arms will work just fine for holding him up while he’s thrusting. Even his long blonde hair, which I don’t normally like, has me itching to run my fingers through it and hold on. He’s perfect for what I want from him, and what he wants from me.

A little bit of naked howdy-do.

A sensual two step.

A horizontal cowboy cha cha.

“How about you order me a Jack and Coke? We are in Tennessee after all and I might need to slow down.” I reach out to steady myself, and because I can’t help it, grip Tag’s bicep and run my hand along his shoulders. His muscles tense beneath my fingertips and my core clenches in anticipation. My thong is so damp it’s in need of emergency resuscitation. “And you best hustle. My sister looks like she’s ready to come back here. I’d hate for you to lose the use of your balls.”

“You got it, sugar.” He gives me a wink and turns to order our drinks.

I may be asking for trouble, but tonight, I don’t care. It’s about time I let loose and have some fun.

“Sugar?” I say, letting my drawl flow through my lips in a way I know men like. “I thought I was ‘baby’?”

“I changed my mind. You look like a Tootsie Roll Pop and I want to see how many licks it takes to get to your center.”

“Oh, come on.” I throw my head back and laugh. “I think most of the women in your target audience are too young to get that reference.”

Tag offers me a drink and leads me towards Lucy’s table with a hand on my lower back. A hand that’s searing me through the thin fabric and practically branding the skin beneath. My heart’s hammering against my chest and my entire body feels like it’s tingling. He leans close, his nose touching my ear again, his breath warming my neck as he murmurs, “You are my only target audience.”

“For tonight maybe.” I push him away and sit next to a muscular giant of a man who must’ve gotten here around the same time as Lucy. He’s wearing black dress pants and a white dress shirt with the top buttons undone. Very handsome, and very much leaning into my sister.

Interesting.

“I thought I told you to leave Lucy’s sister alone. The poor girl hasn’t even been here five minutes.” Another handsome man, who’s draped around an equally attractive girl, lifts his head in Tag’s direction, a frown etched across his face.

These people look like they stepped out of an issue of *People Magazine*, and I suddenly feel inadequate. I wasn’t good enough to fit in with the football wives and girlfriends, or WAGs as most people call them, and I certainly don’t fit in here. Despite Mama’s best efforts to put me in every beauty pageant known to man, I’ve never been a queen. Runner-up, maybe. But never a queen.

“She’s been here fifteen minutes,” Tag corrects Lucy as he takes the empty seat next to me, his fingers grazing my neck as he brushes a strand of hair over my shoulder.

Being around Tag makes me hyper aware of everything. And I mean *everything*. Every little touch, innocent or not, sends shivers down my spine and makes me painfully aware of how empty my vajayjay is. Anything remotely sexual with Derek had always been mediocre. Even before the affairs.

Something tells me nothing about Tag is mediocre.

“Let me apologize for their rudeness.” Lucy narrows her gaze and shoots

a look between Tag and his hand at the nape of my neck before she points around the table. “Elle, this is Lincoln. He plays for the Nashville Devils with Tag, whom you’ve already had the pleasure of meeting.” She pauses to flash him another warning look, and he winks in response. “That’s Lincoln’s girlfriend, Jazz, and this is her brother, Gordon. He’s the owner of the Devils.”

“Jazlyn Benson?” I lean forward, chastising myself for not recognizing her sooner. Me and my bag of movie theater butter microwave popcorn were glued to her story. “You were the talk of the town when you stepped down as owner. That was incredible. Hats off to you.”

“Thank you.” She looks up at Lincoln with a smirk and pats his cheek. “Poor guy would’ve ended up in Chicago, crying in his cereal every morning. He couldn’t survive without me.”

“You know it, kitten.” He pulls her to him, frames her face with his hands, and gives her a very R-rated kiss.

I turn to give them privacy, and glance around the table. Tag looks like he’s seen their displays hundreds of times. Lucy has a small smile on her face as she takes a sip of her drink, and Gordon quickly averts his gaze, swallowing hard. Poor guy is horrified.

He must not be a big fan of their relationship. Either that or he’s not used to seeing his little sister publicly displaying her affection.

“So, Elle,” Gordon covers his mouth with a fist and clears his throat, “Lucy didn’t say why you came to Nashville. Are you here for vacation, or are you thinking about moving up from Georgia?”

I can’t help the laugh that bubbles out of my throat. “Heavens no. Daddy wouldn’t hear of lettin’ his little girl out of his sight for very long. He agreed to let Lucy borrow me until the Tuesday after New Year’s Eve, but then he expects me to report to work. That’s when my stored-up vacation runs out.”

“So, you work for your dad?”

I nod. “He’s grooming me to take over his investment company.”

He’s been prepping me for the position my whole life. Or at least since grade school. I had an internship before I finished college and an office the day after I graduated. Daddy never left me much time for myself, and I hadn’t gotten to visit Lucy in what seemed like years. I was surprised he let me move to Atlanta after I got my degree. He likes to oversee most facets of my life, but I did report to my uncle, so I’m sure he knew exactly what was going on in my day to day.

Having these next couple of months of freedom before I move back under his direct supervision is exactly what I need to unwind and recharge my batteries. It's not the life I asked for growing up, but it's the one that's going to set me up for a nice and secure future and the life I now choose.

"And is that something you want?" Tag leans forward, sliding his hand along the length of my arm and resting it on top of mine.

My brain misfires and I'm not sure I'm capable of rational thought. At least not when he's touching me, pumping my body full of lust.

Lucy pipes up, "Yes, what do you want, Ethel? Do you want to spend the rest of your life slavin' away at Daddy's company?"

Lucy's use of my horrible full first name lifts my brain fog, and my gaze narrows on her. If there's one thing Lucy hates, it's her own first name. I can't believe she just threw mine out there so casually. And also, it really doesn't matter what I want. "I don't know, *Lucille*. It's a job, and it's what Daddy expects. You know how important this is to me."

It might be childish to get her back for the name slip, but I can't find it in me to care. Mama had an obsession for nostalgic shows. She said they reminded her of a simpler time when her life wasn't ruled by societal expectations. Her favorite, of course, was *I Love Lucy*.

"Lucy and Ethel? This is fantastic. I can picture the two of you crushing grapes with your bare feet." Tag chuckles beside me and I throw an elbow into his side. It doesn't go very far. The man has abs for days, but jabbing him still makes me feel better.

He bites his lip, and dammit, now I want to bite his lip.

Gordon turns to Lucy, a smile stretching across his face. "So, *Lucille*, did you get a chance to talk to your boss today?"

"Gordon?" Lucy puts a hand on his shoulder and smiles at him, her eyelashes fluttering. It's not her usual smile; it's one that promises she'll maim him. He should be afraid. Very afraid.

"Yes, *Lucille*?" Gordon teases.

He should run.

"Alright." Tag claps his hands, breaking up Jazz and Lincoln's tongue jousting and stealing the attention from Lucy and Gordon. Thank God, this was about to get awkward again. "How about we play a game of drink roulette?"

I'm only starting to feel tipsy. I could use a few more drinks to properly wash away the unpleasantness of my day. "Sounds interesting. How do you

play?”

“You get a tray of shots. Half of them clear liquor and the other half water. Without smelling them, you guess what it is and take it. If you’re wrong, you take another.”

“Ohhhh, I’m in.”

“We’re out. That sounds like something that will make me vomit in the morning and no offense, but I have a prior engagement.” Lincoln stands abruptly, pulls Jazz up beside him, lifts her palm and plants a kiss in the center of it.

She smiles, staring up at him with cartoon hearts practically floating above her head. “Oh, yes. I almost forgot.”

Lincoln grunts and leans down to whisper in her ear. If the redness spreading across her cheeks is any indication, he must’ve said something naughty.

Jazz peers around the table and waves, a grin stretching across her face. “Nice to meet you, Elle. I hope we get to hang out soon.”

Gordon shakes his head as the pair head out the door. “I apologize for my sister and her idiot boyfriend.”

“No worries. They seemed nice. I’m sure they had somewhere important to be.”

Tag snorts, leaning back in his chair and pointing a finger at Gordon. “No doubt they’re running over to Jazz’s to have some alone time while this guy is hanging out with us.”

“I think I’ll take those shots now.” Gordon rubs a hand over his face with a groan.

“Oh, come on, Gordie,” Tag gets up and stands behind me, his hands resting on my shoulders. My clit throbs as he draws small circles on the back of my neck with his thumb. If only he could go lower, make those circles tighter, let his fingers wander... “Your sister is a beautiful, grown woman. It’s only natural she would want to—”

“Say another word and you’re fired.”

“One large tray of shots coming up.”

CHAPTER THREE

TAG

“THIS ONE’S VODKA. I’M VERY SURE IT’S VODKA.” I NARROW MY EYES AT THE glass in my hand. I’ve yet to get a single watery shot. I throw it back, swallowing it in a single gulp. Nope. Not vodka. “Well, I was wrong. It does happen on rare occasions.”

“It happens more often than you think.” Gordon laughs, slapping his hands against the table.

“A lot more often.” Lucy nods so fast I think her head may pop off.

Fuck both of them.

And Elle? She looks radiant. A little drunk. Slightly wobbly. But no less radiant. I need to get her alone. Her and her round ass. I grab another shot and drink it down. Ah, there’s the vodka.

I shoot to my feet, throwing the chair back several inches. “You’re all a bunch of assholes. Two of you anyway. I’m going to get some air. I’ll be right back. I believe it’s your turn, Gordo.”

Gordon leans over the table, his eyes narrowed to slits as he glares at me. “Call me Gordo again, and I will slit your throat with your own skate and replace you with a player from the minor leagues.”

I gasp for dramatic effect and grab my neck. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.”

I laugh, awkward as fuck, dropping the subject faster than a two-headed snake—or any snake really. I don’t want to tempt him any further. He may replace me for a game to fuck with me. I don’t know him that well, and after watching him slide across the ice in dress shoes to punch Lincoln, I wouldn’t put anything past him.

Trailing my fingers through the ends of Elle’s soft, wavy hair, I cast one

last glance at Gordon, and make my way around the table.

I'm not coming back.

Hopefully I'm coming.

Once I'm behind Gordon and Lucy, I turn around to catch Elle's gaze. Once her baby blues connect with mine, I give her a wink and nod my head a few times toward the side door. She nods and takes a sip of her water.

As I stand outside by myself, in the cool fall breeze, it occurs to me that it would've been wise to get her number. If she doesn't show, like she hadn't for the past five minutes, I could text her and give her more specific directions than a head nod. Well, shit.

I pull out my phone and turn it over, half expecting to see a message from her anyway. It seems more likely she would magically have my number than that my sister would actually return my phone calls. I debate calling her again, but whether she answers or not, it will only serve to put me in a bad mood. There's plenty of time to be in a bad mood tomorrow. I shove the phone back in my pocket.

Just when I'm about to tuck my tail securely between my legs and head back in, Elle slips out the side door with a coy smile and a smoldering look.

All for me.

Slowly, very slowly, I advance on her, forcing her backward, pushing her against the wall and caging her in my arms. She looks up at me and runs a fingertip along the length of my ribs, her eyes dancing as a shiver runs through her. The air between us is charged with a palpable energy. She licks her lips and sucks the bottom one into her dirty little mouth. My cock thickens in my jeans as I imagine sliding it in between her glossy red lips, pumping it in and out until my come runs down her throat.

"I can't wait to feed you my cock."

Her lips quirk up. "What makes you think I don't bite?"

And now I'm hard as a rock. I need to get inside this woman.

Now.

"I'm counting on it, sugar."

I trail my hand down the length of her neck and lean in to graze my mouth over hers. I take small sips at her lips before I suck her bottom one into my mouth and rake its plump flesh with my teeth. My dick jumps, my balls tighten, and I feel like I'm on fire. Christ, this woman. I don't know what it is about her, but she's reduced me to a teenage boy whose dick hardens with a passing breeze.

After giving her one more peck, I pull back. She has the softest lips I've ever had the pleasure of kissing. If I don't stop now, I may not be able to. I don't want to take her behind a bar, with her sister inside, fifteen feet away from a dumpster.

Not that I'm trying to be romantic, but I can do better than fucking her while *eau de garbage parfum* fills the air.

"What do you think about ditchin' your sister and comin' back to my place?"

She loops her arms around my neck, peering up at me, her eyes shining like a summer sky. "And what would we do at your place?"

"Hmm, I don't know." I place a soft kiss on her cheek. "I'm sure we could think of a few things." One on the side of her jaw. "How do you feel about Scrabble?" Another on her neck. "Or maybe Monopoly?" Another on the curve of her shoulder. I can't seem to stop touching her.

Elle's head falls back on a sigh. "I do love a good game of Monopoly. But I've got to warn you, I cheat at board games and I'm a sore loser."

"Me, too." I plant kisses across her collarbone. "I always make sure I'm the banker and I slip myself extra fifties."

"Savage."

"Abso-fuckin-lutely."

I lick inside the seam of her blouse, skimming the cleavage she has on display, and she quivers against me. Hell, I'm a little weak at the knees myself. My dick's been painfully hard in my jeans all night, and my palms are damp. Never have I been so affected by a woman. Never craved the touch of her skin, the smell of her hair as much as I do Elle's. I blame the vodka.

"And what will you do if you can't pay my rent?" I kiss the hollow behind her ear, burying my nose in her hair and inhaling deeply. *What the fuck is wrong with me?* But then the scent of vanilla and jasmine hits my nose, and I can't find it in me to care.

"I'm sure we can work something out."

She pulls back and looks at me with a coy smile and this minx, this fucking minx, inches her fingers toward my erection and strokes it lightly. One more and I might need new pants. I grab her hand, pull her into a very convenient waiting cab at the curb outside the bar, and reach my place in seven minutes flat.

Elle grips my shoulders and whimpers as I walk her down the hall, one hand up her shirt, circling her hardened nipple over her lacy bra, and pinching

the firm peak. She gasps and I take advantage of the opening, sweeping my tongue inside her mouth and stroking it against hers. She stumbles before we reach the door to my apartment, but I catch her, pushing her against the wall and grinding my cock between her thighs. Her head falls back, hitting the wall with a small thud, and I take a step away, pulling her into my apartment and across my living room.

She stops outside the bedroom, her eyes torn between me and my package. “Are you taking me on a tour or are you going to show me what that cock of yours can do?”

I crash my mouth to hers, plunging my tongue inside, and taking control of the kiss. Elle moans, pressing her body against me, the soft mounds of her breasts crushed to my chest. I grasp her hips in a punishing grip as I push her into my bedroom.

“That mouth is going to get you in trouble.” With a grin, I take a step forward, driving her toward the bed. And then I take another. And another.

“Maybe that’s the plan.”

“I think you have too many clothes on.” I reach back with one hand and yank the shirt up over my head, tossing it behind me. Shoes and socks are next. Then pants. I pause, pulling a condom out of my wallet, tossing it on the bed and glancing over at Elle. She’s frozen in place and staring at my body. So I do what any man in my position would do, I flex my abs before I peel off my boxer briefs. “There’s still the issue of your clothes, Elle. Off. Now.”

That seems to snap her to attention, although her gaze lingers on my rigid cock as she pulls her shirt over her head and unsnaps her bra. Hello to the most perfect tits I’ve ever seen. The left one. The right one. Amazing. They’re full and perky with little dusky pink nipples I need in my mouth yesterday.

Another shot of lust shoots through me, filling my balls with a painful ache.

Our kiss is frenzied as we grab at each other, our tongues stroking against one another, fighting for control. Her hands roam my arms, shoulders, and chest while I battle the zipper on her damn pants.

I manage to get her undressed, her whimpers and moans egging me on as I grip her hips and rub the head of my cock over her slit. She’s fucking soaked for me, and I can’t wait to get a taste, to see if her pussy is half as sweet as the hints of vanilla on her skin.

Jesus, I’m going to bust, and I’m not even inside her yet.

Picking her up, I toss her on the bed, and crawl up her body. I plant open-mouth kisses on her thighs, over her abdomen and between her breasts. Her nipples are seeking attention, so I draw one in my mouth while rolling the other between my fingers. Her back arches beneath me and I nip, teasing her hardened bud with my teeth.

“Tag, I need you...” She grabs my hair, steering my mouth to her other breast. “I need you inside me.”

“You want me to fuck you, Elle?” I swirl my tongue around her nipple as I peer up at her.

Her eyes are closed, her mouth drawn in a tight line as she nods.

“No, sugar, I want to hear you say it. Look at me.”

I trail my hand down her side, across her hips and run a finger through her sex. I let out a groan as my finger gets coated in her essence.

Her eyes are on mine as she lifts her hips, pressing my finger against her clit. “I want you to fuck me, Tag. I want you to make me forget my name. I want you to make me scream.”

“As the lady wishes.”

Holding Elle’s gaze, I grab the condom, tear open the package with my teeth and roll it down my length.

She takes a deep breath and shudders. “Goddamn, that’s a beautiful dick.”

I press against her, claiming her mouth, before notching that beautiful dick at her entrance. Elle’s legs wrap around my waist, tightening around me as I slide forward, inch by delicious fucking inch. She’s so tight; her pussy quivers around me, gripping me, making me lose my mind. I start to thrust, rocking my hips against her. Slowly at first, driving into her with measured strokes.

Elle pants as she grabs my shoulders; her nails dig into my skin, biting my flesh, and I love it. “You feel so good,” she says breathlessly.

She’s whimpering and moaning underneath me, but that’s not good enough. I promised her a scream.

I fuck her harder, pounding into her with my cock, tunneling in and out of her with no mercy, forcing her to take all of me. Her cries grow louder. Sharper. I reach between us and stroke her clit with the pad of my thumb.

Her walls flutter around me and her eyes practically roll to the back of her head. I give her clit a squeeze, and she detonates. She pulsates around me, squeezing me as she screams my fucking name. My cock jerks, my balls tighten, and my thrusts become erratic. Her name is a groan on my lips as my

hips buck and I empty into her.

I knew she'd end up in my bed.

I knew it was going to be good.

I lean my forehead against hers, our heavy breaths the only thing between us. My heart beats frantically in my chest and sweat dots my skin. She peers up at me, her eyelids heavy, a small smile spreading across her face.

I knew she'd scream my name.

I love it when I'm right.

CHAPTER FOUR

TAG

JESUS. I DIDN'T THINK I HAD THAT MUCH TO DRINK LAST NIGHT. I CERTAINLY thought I sobered up the second Elle took off her bra and released her luscious tits into the wild. If the incessant pounding in my head is any indication, I might've had more vodka than I thought.

Elle groans, burrowing her face into my chest, her hair tickling the underside of my chin. I tighten my arms around her and draw her closer, taking a deep breath of that vanilla and jasmine I can't get enough of. I relax into her touch and sink the side of my head into the pillow. My head—which feels fine. Then what the hell is that noise?

“Is that your phone, sugar?” I mumble into her hair. “I don't have practice until later.”

She pushes off my chest and a curtain of her hair drapes over my face. “That's not my phone, Tag. I think that's your front door.”

I sweep her hair out of my mouth and pull her back down to me, wrapping my arms around her waist. “I'm sure they'll go away.”

“I know you're in there, Taggert. I saw your car.” A familiar female voice calls from the direction of the front door.

Shit.

This can't be good.

“Tag, I have to talk to you.”

Elle stiffens in my arms and rolls away. I instantly miss her touch. That clinginess alone confirms I'm still feeling the effects of the vodka. I don't let women spend the night. Hell, I usually insist on going to their place and even then, I never stay long. I know it makes me a dick, but after a few mutual orgasms, it's time to part ways. So I'm a little confused as to why it felt so

damn good to wake up wrapped around Elle's body, her soft skin against mine, smelling her damn hair and failing to get a grip on myself.

"Oh, God," Elle whispers.

I pop my eyes open. Elle is clear on the other side of the bed assessing me with wide eyes as she clutches the blanket in front of her breasts.

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

I can see where she'd think that, what with some crazy chick yelling and pounding on my door. And I shouldn't laugh. I know I shouldn't. But seeing her sitting there, her eyes wide with her sexy as hell ruffled hair, I can't help the chuckle that rumbles through my chest. "That's my sister."

My sister who has never just shown up at my apartment before. She knows my hectic schedule means I'm gone more often than I'm home. Plus, she never returned any of my phone calls or texts, which has me very concerned. Did she have a relapse? Is she using again? Did she blow through all her money?

Whatever trouble she's gotten into this time can't be good. I can only hope my niece isn't involved. She's as innocent as they come, and I intend to keep it that way. It's why I moved the two of them to Nashville last year when my sister had a relapse. Why I've done everything in my power to make sure they're comfortable, including paying for their rental house and helping with expenses. She would've never stayed clean if I left her to fend for herself in the hills of Eastern Kentucky. At least here, I can check in on her more often, even with my grueling hockey schedule.

Elle relaxes and she moves to get out of bed, but I stop her with a hand to her waist. "Stay here. My sister is... Just stay here. Please."

She studies my face and eventually nods as the knocking becomes more frantic.

"Hold on, I'm coming." I run my hands through my hair then throw on a pair of sweats and an old Devils tee before making my way through the living room and opening the front door.

"I almost didn't think you were going to answer." Finley brushes past me, scanning the room with narrowed eyes. "It took a long time for you to answer the door."

"Good morning, Uncle Tag." My niece, Chloe, skips through the door, holding the straps of her silver unicorn backpack tightly to her chest as it bounces across her small frame. After I ruffle her blonde curls and lay a kiss to the top of her head, she makes herself at home on the far end of the couch

and turns on the TV.

“I wasn’t expecting you.” I keep my tone even since Chloe’s here, but cross my arms over my chest and narrow my eyes so she knows I’m less than pleased.

My sister’s eyes widen slightly, and she fidgets, twisting her fingers around each other and wrapping them in the bottom of her gray sweater.

“I know, I’m sorry.”

I take a second to look at her. Really study at her. Aside from a little redness in her eyes, she seems fine. She doesn’t *look* high. But I’ve been wrong before. She’s been clean and attending meetings since I got them out of Kentucky, but she still makes me nervous. All it would take is one incident, and all the progress she’s made could go away. I’ve seen enough backslides with our mom to know that each one is harder to recover from than the last.

Especially with Chloe involved.

I take a deep breath and let my arms fall to my sides. “It’s fine, Finley. What’s going on? Are you okay?”

Finley glances over her shoulder, gazing at her daughter for several seconds, as she continues to toy with the hem of her sweater. Her gaze falls to the ground, and she opens her mouth. Closes it. Opens it again, but remains silent. I shift on my feet, wanting to tell Finley to spit it out, but know if I say anything, it’ll only lengthen the process. An old country music ballad cuts through the awkwardness, and her shoulders relax as she reaches into her back pocket for her phone.

“I’m sorry.” She holds it up for a moment and steps around me, heading for the front door. “I’ll only be a minute.”

I don’t think she’d have left any faster if the place were on fire. My stomach is uneasy, and it has nothing to do with the vodka I consumed last night. This hollow feeling that spreads through my body and settles in my bones always comes before something completely and utterly terrible. It was there every time my mom went off the rails when I was a kid. It was there before I walked in on my high school sweetheart getting plowed by two forwards from the basketball team. And it was there before I got the call from some rural doctor telling me my sister overdosed on heroin.

Fuck.

And I still have Elle waiting for me in the bedroom, so I hurry in to check on her. She’s right where I left her, sitting up in bed, the sheet pulled up and

wrapped around her breasts, a golden curtain covering half her face as she types on her phone.

“Hey, sugar.” I clear my throat and she lowers her phone to meet my gaze. “I’m going to be another minute. You okay in here?”

She nods. “Just checking in with Lucy. You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. Totally fine.” I lean against the doorframe, tapping on it with my fingers, as Elle searches my face. Part of me longs to tell her that I’ve never truly been fine. That as a kid I spent more time worrying about my mom than having a true childhood. That hockey was my only escape, the only time I really felt I truly belonged. That I was devastated when I realized my dad was only paying for hockey in exchange for silence. My mom’s. Mine. His real family didn’t know about his affair, or his bastard son. His secret turned the sport into something I both love and hate. It represents all the good in my life, and the biggest betrayal of it. “I’ll be back in a few. If you need anything, let me know.”

She nods again, and I make my way back to the living room. With a loud sigh, I plop down next to Chloe and stare blankly at the TV.

“Have you seen my new snake?”

I jump back as what I’m hoping is a stuffed animal gets shoved against my face. It’s soft and fuzzy exterior roams up my cheek and I hesitantly push it away, a little leery of touching it. “Um, no. I haven’t met your snake.”

“His name’s Leo.” She hugs the lime green plush toy tightly to her chest.

“Leo, huh? Sounds like a great name for a snake.” My gaze wanders to the front door. The one Finley has still not come back through. I lean forward on the couch and sigh. She’d better not take too long on that phone call. I don’t have all day.

“Are you mad at Mommy?”

“No, honey.” I run a hand down my face, wring it around the back of my neck and massage the muscles that are now suddenly, painfully tense. “I’m just waiting for your mommy to come back in from her phone call.”

Chloe smooths the lace around the edges of her pink skirt and beams at me. “Mommy says I get to stay here with you for a little while.”

“That’s—wait, what?”

“She says it’ll be like a vacation. Don’t you want to spend time with me, Uncle Tag?”

Her lower lip quivers, and I know I’ve got sucker written across my forehead. I was there when she was born, but until they moved to Tennessee,

I hadn't gotten to spend much time with her. We're still getting to know each other, but I already know that I'd give her just about anything she asks for. "Of course, I do, I'm just surprised. I have to leave for a game tomorrow."

No wonder Finley was acting so skittish. She knew I'd say no. It's not that I don't want to spend more time with my niece. I wish I had more free time to spend with her, but I have a very demanding job. I'm not even a viable option for a few days when it's midseason. Between home games, away games, and practices, I hardly have time for myself.

"I promise to be good." Again, with that pouty lip.

"I bet you're a perfect little angel."

"Mommy says I'm real helpful."

"Well, your mommy and I have some things to discuss. Why don't you watch your whatever kind of cartoon that is?"

Chloe tilts her head and looks at me for a moment. Then she reaches into the front pocket of her backpack and pulls out a piece of paper. She hands it to me, and that sick feeling has returned, gnawing me from the inside out... Something very bad is about to go down.

"What's this?" I ask as I start to open it.

"Mommy said to give it to you once she left." She shrugs her little shoulders and turns toward to her show.

With trembling fingers, I unfold the notebook paper covered in my sister's scrawl.

Tag,

I'm so sorry to do this to you. You've been such a good brother to me and that's why I know you'll take good care of Chloe. You can be a better parent than I'll ever be.

I met someone. His name is Brett, and he asked me to move to California with him. He doesn't have kids. I think the idea scares him. Maybe he'll come around in time, but for now, he thinks Chloe will hold us back, and I can't exactly bring her with us if he doesn't want her there.

I know Brett is going to be my future, and we can be happy together. I hope you can be happy for us.

I know you won't understand all this. You'll think I'm being a bad parent and a bad sister. But I know in my heart I'm doing the right thing for all of us.

With Love,
Finley

I read through the note twice. Three times. Then a fourth. For the first time in my life, I'm completely and utterly speechless. There are no words. I have no words.

Surely this is some kind of fucked-up joke. She'll come on in from the hall, tell me I should have seen my face, and we can all have a laugh.

There is no fucking way she would do this. She'd never run off.

I spring to my feet, pace in front of the couch, and charge to the front door, practically pulling it from its hinges and launching myself in the hallway. The damn thing is empty. So are the stairwells. And the parking garage.

This is a bad day to be fucking around. I have practice in a few hours. I'm leaving for an away game tomorrow. I can't do this. Not right now.

The door slams behind me as I stalk back into my place, grab a bottle of water from the counter and empty it.

"Fuck."

"Fuck's a bad word."

With a sigh, I chuck the empty water bottle in the direction of the trash can. "Yes, it is a bad word, and you shouldn't say it either."

"Mommy says I can say whatever she says." She turns up the volume on the TV, and I'm pretty sure I've just been dismissed.

What the fuck—sorry, bad word—am I going to do with a nine-year-old girl during hockey season? I can barely take care of myself. I don't cook, I don't clean, I don't know shit about actually raising a kid. Sure, Chloe and I have hung out, watched movies, played with a few toys... but I've never had to take care of her. There's mealtime, bed time, bath time, play time. So many times, and I don't know when to do any of them.

And doesn't she need stuff? The kid only has a backpack. Jesus. I snatch it off the couch and look inside. She has a few pants. A couple shirts. Several pairs of socks and undies. No jacket. No toys. But there is a two-pocket folder, covered in kittens, which does nothing to calm me down. Inside are Chloe's birth certificate, social security card, immunization records, and some other miscellaneous health paperwork.

I'm going to kill my sister.

I can't do this.

There's no way.

There is no world where I should be responsible for the welfare of a small

child.

I'm so fucked. Sorry. Screwed.

CHAPTER FIVE

ELLE

I KNOW TAG ASKED ME TO STAY, BUT THE LONGER I HANG OUT, THE MORE uncomfortable I feel. After he popped his head in to tell me it would be a few more minutes, I decided to get dressed. Well, mostly dressed. I searched the room from top to bottom and couldn't find my thong. I know damn well I had one when I got here.

Just as I'm about to sneak out of his room, Tag hurries in, grabs his phone from the nightstand and stabs it a few times with his finger. As he puts it up to his ear, he meets my gaze. His eyes are hard, his stance rigid, and his free hand is clenched at his side. I'm not sure what happened with his sister, but it couldn't have been good.

Even from a few feet away, I can hear the automated chime followed by 'the phone number you are calling is no longer in service.'

Tag lets loose a string of expletives that I imagine would make most hockey players blush before jamming his phone in the pocket of his sweats and pinning me with a look I can't quite decipher. "I'm so sorry about all this."

"Don't worry about it. Things happen." I wave my hand as he sits on the edge of the bed and throws his head in his hands. "Are you okay?"

The tense muscles in his back and the fists balled beside his temples give me all the answers I need, but still, my Southern upbringing demands I wait for him to answer.

"Peachy," he mumbles into his fingers and lets out a long sigh. "I don't know what to do. My sister just abandoned her nine-year-old daughter in my living room. Just snuck out and left. She had Chloe give me a note telling me she was running off with some fucking dirt-bag. I don't think Chloe has any

toys. Hardly any clothes. I don't understand how Finley could do this."

"Nine years old? It's Friday. Shouldn't she be in school?"

"Yeah," he scoffs. "I'm getting the impression Chloe's education wasn't my sister's priority."

I stand up straight, my blood boiling in my veins. I've always had a soft spot for children and can't wait to be blessed with my own someday. Kids look up to their parents for protection and guidance. You don't abandon your own child to go run off with a man. If kids didn't fit in with this guy's plan or the mere thought of children repulsed him, Tag's sister should have dumped his ass and moved on to find someone else. Kids should come first. My parents aren't the most affectionate people on the planet, but I know that.

I can't help but feel for Tag. I can't even imagine the anger and hurt he must be feeling right now. The worst thing Lucy ever did was steal my Backstreet Boys CD and refuse to give it back.

He had his world turned upside down and his life changed in a matter of minutes. He went from being a playboy without a care in the world to being a single dad.

I sit down next to him and place a light hand on his shoulder, a gesture that seems miniscule, but I hope he feels my support.

"I obviously need to take her shopping for clothes. Fuck. I'm not even sure where to go. I have practice in a few hours, and tomorrow I'm getting on a plane to Canada."

There's no way he's going to get through the next couple days by himself. I know what a professional athlete's schedule looks like during the season, and it's not pretty. He can't exactly leave her in the stands during games and hope she'll be fine. "Do you have any other family?"

"Not really. Our mom is hiding out somewhere in Eastern Kentucky. It's just me and... I guess just me and Chloe now. I know we just met, and this is a lot to ask, but do you mind keeping her company while I try Finley a few more times?"

I nod. Not exactly how I pictured the morning after a one-night stand going, but I can sit on a couch with a little girl. It's the least I could do. The poor kid is probably just as scared as Tag right now.

I walk out into the living room, and find Chloe sitting on the couch, her feet dangling out in front of her. She looks all tiny and innocent in her pink skirt and sparkly top, watching a cartoon with a platypus and two brothers. Curious. My parents never allowed me to watch cartoons or wear anything

flashy unless it was for a pageant. Mamma said cartoons were for people who were less well off than us, and my time would be better spent learning the piano or cross-stitching. I kept my head down and did what I was told. Still do, I guess. Anything for family. At least I had Lucy, so I was never truly alone.

“Hi there. Are you Chloe?”

“I might be.” She makes no attempt to turn her head from the direction of the TV.

“Is that a snake you have there?”

“Yep.” She looks at me for the first time and smiles as she holds up a bright green and yellow snake. “His name is Leo.”

“I love that name. Can I sit down with you?”

“Sure.” She slides a quick glance my way. “You’re pretty too. But you need to brush your hair.”

I sit down on the couch and twist my hair up in a messy bun, securing it with a hairband I keep on my wrist. “I just got up. I haven’t had a chance to shower yet. I like your blonde curls.”

“Did you sleep here with Uncle Tag?”

“Uh...”

“Are you his girlfriend?”

“Well, you see—”

“Do you love him?”

“Hold on, I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves.”

“Are you going to get married?”

“I don’t—”

“People who sleep in the same bed always get married on the shows Mommy watches. Maybe you guys can get married and have a baby.”

Well, that escalated quickly. While a baby is certainly in my cards, it’s not going to be today. And it’s definitely not going to be with a man I picked up at a bar last night.

But of course, this is when Tag walks back out to the living room, his mouth tilted in a frown. “Who’s havin’ a baby?”

“You are.” Chloe looks between her uncle and I with a wide smile.

Tag trips over his own feet but catches himself before he falls. “Care to repeat that?”

I smooth the flyaways around my face and straighten my wrinkled top. “Someone has been watching a lot of soap operas, I think. Did you manage to

get a hold of your sister?”

“No.” He falls down on the couch next to me and runs a hand through his hair repeatedly. “I keep getting the same message. I think she... uh... has her phone off.”

“Mommy lets her phone die all the time. She forgets to charge it. I usually do it for her.”

Tag leans forward and lays his head in his hands, shaking it back and forth, his hair falling forward to cover his face. “I don’t know what to do.”

My empty calendar is practically mocking me. I’d signed up for six weeks of pottery and art classes, Daddy approved, of course. He thought the art classes would expand my finer arts education which would help me with social events. But the teacher cancelled everything as soon as I got here and I’ve yet to fill my schedule. Which means, right now, I have nowhere to be, nothing to really do except relax and hang out with Lucy. Of course, she’ll be working everyday while I’m lazing around her house. Tag and Lucy are friends. It’s not like he’s some completely random man. And Daddy doesn’t have to know anything was cancelled.

Plus, seeing him so distressed tugs at something inside me, and before I can stop myself, I place a hand on his thigh. “I can help out if you can’t find anyone. I’m here until New Year’s Eve without any plans. That should give you plenty of time to find someone more permanent. I can watch her when you have games and practice.”

His head snaps up and he looks at me with an intensity that levels me. “Elle... Are you sure? I know you’re here to be with your sister. I don’t want to take away from that.”

“There will be plenty of opportunity for that.”

“I’ll repay you. Dinner. A salary. Whatever you want.”

“Are you two having a moment?” Chloe whispers from her corner of the couch.

I laugh and turn away from Tag. This girl is a spitfire, and I can see a little bit of myself in her. “What do you think about hanging out with me today?”

“Uncle Tag too?”

Tag shakes his head. “Not today, honey. I’ve got to work, but you’ll have fun hanging out with Elle.”

Her little nose scrunches up. “Elle. Like the letter?”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t like it.” I’m dismissed as she turns back to the shenanigans of the brothers and that weird green platypus.

Tag slings an arm around my shoulders and runs his nose along the shell of my ear. “If she doesn’t like that name, she should hear your real first name. That’s enough to send most people running for the hills. Don’t you think, Ethel?”

I know he didn’t just use my full name. Not when I offered to help with his childcare issues. I purse my lips, narrow my eyes and he pounces, wrapping me up in a hug so tight my head might pop off. He presses his lips to my neck and then the hollow behind my ear, whispering ‘thank you’ between each kiss.

“What’s happening here?” Lincoln stands over us, amusement written all over his face. He must be part ninja; I didn’t even hear the front door open and close. “Did we come at a bad time?”

“They were having a moment. Again.”

Thank you, Chloe, for your astute observation.

He points between us and Little Miss Judgy-Pants. “Did we miss a few years?”

“She’s not mine, you idiot.” Tag pulls away and slouches back, crossing his arms over his chest. “And yes, you came at a bad time. You could have called or knocked on the door. What if I was naked?”

Lincoln throws his head back and laughs. “You literally walked right into my place yesterday. And the day before that.”

“And the day before that,” Jazz adds, crouching beside Chloe. “Hey there, I love your sparkly shirt. Your Uncle Tag has one just like it.”

Tag bristles and extends a middle finger in Jazz’s direction, hidden, of course, by his other hand.

Lincoln taps his lip and hums. “You’re right, kitten, we really do spend too much time at my place.”

“I know. You might have to start looking for a big boy house instead of living in these apartments. They’re barely a step above a frat house.”

Tag scoffs. “Oh, come on. They’re a lot nicer than a frat house.”

“Why do you all live here anyway? Don’t you make good money?” I don’t know much about the hockey pay scale, but I’m pretty sure he can afford to buy his own house.

“The team owns these and most of the guys live here. It’s easier than having to worry about buying and then eventually selling when your owners

decide to trade you.” Tag squints at Jazz while he strikes a ridiculous pose, curling his fist under his chin.

She shoots to her feet and wags her index finger. “Don’t you be looking at me! I’m not an owner anymore. At least not at this very moment.”

“I was banking on you wanting to keep your boyfriend’s best friend in close proximity, and you’ve done ruined that. Wait a sec. Did you say ‘not at this moment’?”

“I might have.” Jazz leans against the couch and twirls a lock of her hair. “Rumor has it that a couple of really big names want to sponsor the team and a few others are looking to pull out. Turns out, me returning to ownership makes everyone happy.”

“Are you serious?”

Jazz nods, and I couldn’t be happier for her. It had to be hard stepping down from a team she so clearly loves. “We’re making the announcement later today, but wanted to tell you first.”

“Congratulations. It’s good to know I can start kissing your butt again.” Tag leans over me and gives her a fist bump.

“Can you guys be quiet?” Chloe huffs, crossing her arms over the sparkly crown on the front of her shirt. “This is my favorite part.”

I laugh and shake my head as I adjust on the couch, tucking a leg underneath me before leaning back. This girl has got an attitude on her. She’s going to keep everyone on their toes. Especially the guys.

“I’m sorry, your majesty.” Lincoln bows to her, a smile stretched across his face. Chloe waves him off and he turns back to Tag, but not before he casts a quick glance in my direction. “In addition to the good news, I came by to see if you wanted to get in an extra workout before practice. But it looks like you might be busy until then.”

I already volunteered to watch his niece for him, there is no way I’m going to play the part of a stage-five clinger and demand Tag stay with me every free second of his day. Besides, this one-night stand has already exceeded its shelf life. I don’t need to convince either one of us into thinking this is anything more than it was. And with Jazz’s return to the team and all the excitement that comes along with it, he needs to be there for her and his friends.

“You should absolutely go.”

“Are you sure?” Tag searches my face and rests a hand on my thigh. “I can stay here and—”

“And what? Help us pick out shoes? Paint our nails? I’ll call Lucy, and we can have ourselves a proper girl’s day.”

He leans over, pressing his lips to my cheek and squeezing my thigh. “You’re a miracle, Elle Hurst. I owe you. I’ll leave you my credit card. Buy whatever you think she needs. Don’t hesitate to call me if anything happens.”

“I might need your number first.”

“Well, shhhhii-oot. I’m an idiot.”

Chloe pauses her show and gives us all the evil eye. “You said it, Uncle Tag. Now leave, I can’t hear the show with all your talking.”

Tag rears back. His mouth hangs open as he stares at his niece. She holds his gaze for several seconds and then he scrambles off the couch and disappears into his bedroom.

Oh yeah, she’s definitely going to be a handful.

CHAPTER SIX

ELLE

“So.” LUCY LEVELS ME WITH A STARE, SIMILAR TO MY OWN, FROM ACROSS the table and then nods to Chloe. “Am I correct to assume you only invited me to breakfast so I wouldn’t yell at you in front of that precious little girl?”

“That’s absolutely correct.” I swirl a forkful of pancakes in the syrup and shove them in my mouth. “I knew you’d be givin’ me an earful.”

I should have called her or stopped by her apartment, but I knew she was waiting to chew me up one side and down the other. In retrospect, I probably should’ve responded to the first couple text messages she sent me after I snuck out of the bar. It didn’t take her long to realize I hadn’t gone to the bathroom like I said, which sparked a string of pissed-off messages.

So I did what any adult with a sense of self-preservation would do. I profusely apologized and asked if she wanted to meet me for breakfast. I knew she wouldn’t cause a scene in public. That would go against both her PR training and how we were raised. I may have kept Chloe’s presence a secret, hoping she’d be enough of a distraction to keep Lucy occupied.

“I need syrup.” Chloe sticks out her hand from beside me and wiggles her little fingers. If she doesn’t slow down, I’m going to have to get another one of these glass syrup pourers. I need to make sure she’s using it for her pancakes and not drinking it.

Lucy takes a bite of her omelet and makes a grunt of approval. “Good choice of restaurant, by the way.”

I hum my agreement around a mouthful of pancakey goodness. French Toasted had the best reviews in a ten-mile radius. So naturally, it’s my top pick. Plus, it’s on the way to the mall.

“I need you to know,” Lucy points her fork at me, flinging some eggs

halfway across the table. “I was worried sick about you last night.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you worry.”

Chloe licks both sides of her fork. “Why were you worried? Did Elle break the rules?”

“I just forgot to tell her where I was going.”

“When you had a sleepover with Uncle Tag?”

“Yep.” Nothing gets past this kid. I eye Lucy, who is trying way too hard to look like she’s not laughing behind her coffee cup.

Lucy leans forward and props her chin on her fists. “Question for you, Chloe: who’s your favorite princess?”

Chloe immediately snaps to attention and launches into a ten-minute dissertation, highlighting what she likes and, in some cases, doesn’t like about each one. At this point I start wondering if Lucy did us a favor or if this was a huge mistake. Either way, Chloe’s distracted enough that she doesn’t ask any more questions about my sleepover with one sexy, muscled uncle.

After breakfast, Lucy insists on following us to the mall. I may not be a mom, but I know what Tag’s sister did is an absolute travesty. Chloe can’t even get through a week with the outfits her mom left for her. And in my experience, kids aren’t exactly the cleanest creatures on earth; they often need midday costume changes. Case in point, Chloe is already sporting a small syrup stain on the neckline of her current shirt.

Upon entering the dressing room, Chloe announces she prefers to try on clothes by herself and disappears, staggering under an armload of clothing. So much for my plan to avoid a confrontation with my sister.

Lucy instantly turns to face me, her arms crossed over her chest, pinning me with an accusatory look. “So, what’s goin’ on here? I thought you were gonna start a man cleanse.”

“Well, I was.” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Last night was a one-time thing. I was distracted by muscles, and I just wanted to feel good and forget for a little while. Derek never made me feel wanted, even before all the cheating.”

Lucy’s face softens as she steps closer and pulls me in for a one-armed hug. “Derek’s a tool. If he ever shows his face around here, I’ll kick his ass.”

“He’s a lot bigger than you.”

“I’m meaner, and I’m not afraid to fight dirty. Plus, my heels can be used as a weapon.”

And I would do nothing to stop her from impaling him with her heel.

After everything he's put me through, he deserves a little bit of bodily harm.

From the beginning, Derek was a less-than-stellar boyfriend; he was never really there when I needed him. But being with him gave me some level of comfort and perhaps a sense of security. Not to mention it gave me a very small rebellion against my parents who did not approve of our relationship. Joke was on me though. When we were together, I operated under the delusion that we were sharing our lives with each other. I couldn't have been more wrong. But waking up and realizing what was going on opened my eyes to a lot of things. Like the fact my life sucked, and I was deeply, deeply unhappy.

I thought moving away from Savannah, from my parents' complete control, would grant me some freedom. My parents, Daddy in particular, wanted me to follow his path and become an investment banker. That's why he paid for my MBA. What I learned was that business and accounting are almost as boring as most of the people who work in the field.

Still, when I graduated, I reported to his Atlanta branch like the dutiful daughter I was. And I stayed there for two years. Until Derek cheated on me. Suddenly, everything seemed wrong. Derek's name was on the lease, so I was homeless. The job I had was unfulfilling, and nothing seemed to tamp down the ache in my chest.

At that point, I realized I had two choices.

Go back home with my tail tucked between my legs, tell Daddy I'm ready for him to dictate the rest of my life, or stay with Lucy in Tennessee to get a little breathing room away from our parents. Of course, I have to be in Savannah, where Daddy is transferring my position, after the New Year when my vacation runs out. That gives me about two months of freedom before I head back to a life that'll be planned out for me. It may not be the most exciting life in existence, but I'll take over the company my father built from the ground up, and I know how important it is for it to be kept in the family. Plus, I have a great salary and benefits package. I don't know what I'd do without either of those and, Daddy won't keep supporting me if I don't work for him.

Lucy bumps me with her hip. "At least Daddy will be happy you and Derek broke up."

"Total understatement. When I called to let him know, he was over the moon. Told me he already had my new office picked out, as well as several suitable prospects."

“Suitable,” Lucy snorts. “More like uppity douchebags.”

“I’m sure they’re going to be the worst, but I can’t tell him no on this.” I reply with a shake of my head.

“It is your life. You should be able to live it how you want.”

I rest my head on her shoulder and let out a sigh. “I don’t think that’s in the cards for me. He wants me to run the company, and whether I like it or not, it’s my duty to keep it in the family. Plus, it pays the bills. And part of that is settling down with the right kind of man. Thank you for looking out for me, though. I know being my big sister can be a pain in the butt, but I love you.”

“I love you too. Even if you are a pain.” She gives my back a pat and rests her head against the top of mine. “I don’t want any details because the last thing I want to do is picture Tag’s... you know.”

I do know, and the memory of how he used that particular appendage makes my body heat. But in the cold light of day, I can’t let myself forget that dick is attached to a man. A man who has the potential to be an even bigger dick than the one I left behind in Atlanta.

A man who’s already pulled me in deeper than I intended to go.

“So, remind me how Tag fits in to going on a two-month sexual hiatus. You made it very clear that you wanted nothing to do with men while you were here. I get last night. I understand needing to feel wanted after everything.” Lucy grabs a piece of my hair and twists it around her index finger. “But now you’re playing nanny for a guy you just met. And I know you like kids, but it’s not like that’s your dream job. What gives?”

I sigh, picturing Tag’s distressed face this morning. “You weren’t there, Lucy.”

“And thank God for that.”

“Oh, shut up. You should have seen him this morning. He was panicked. He had no idea what to do. He has no help, no support, his sister just completely betrayed him, and his practice was about to start.”

Lucy straightens, stretching her arms toward the ceiling. “But then you kinda offered to help out the whole length of your visit. I know you like to be there for people, but I don’t want to see you jumping right back into a relationship. Or pining after a guy who’s made it clear he doesn’t want one.”

“Come on.” I give her a playful swat. “I’m not plannin’ on jumping into anything right now. Especially not when I’m leaving in eight weeks.”

I don’t need to mention that Daddy would not approve, and with his

retirement looming in the near future, being with someone like Tag could compromise the career I've worked too hard for and put my legacy in jeopardy. It's not that Tag is a bad person, but my parents would never approve of someone who didn't run in their circle. Plus, I'd have to live in Tennessee, and the company is in Georgia.

My sister's raised eyebrows and the scowl on her face tell me she thinks I'm full of shit. Whether she wants to believe it or not, it's the truth. I'm going to help Tag with Chloe when he has hockey. It's not like we're going to be spending months together. Nothing will happen in a few weeks. I'm sure he'll have me replaced before Christmas. Maybe even before Thanksgiving.

"Elle, let me ask you a serious question," Lucy says. "Have you ever been without a boyfriend before?" If her eyebrows lifted any higher, they'd be level with her hairline.

"Of course I have."

She purses her lips and tilts her head to one side. "When?"

"There was that one time..." Before Derek, there was the guy from international accounting. Then the guy from economics. Oh, and I can't forget the hottie from the campus coffee shop. Holy shit. There was no one time. High school, college, the two years after, I was always involved with someone.

Lucy glances over at me, her lips stretched in a grin. "I see the light bulb going off. You've never been single for more than a couple weeks, have you?"

"Well, that makes me sound like I need a man to survive on my own."

"Do you?"

I throw Lucy a warning look and give her an extended version of my middle finger before letting out a long, drawn-out sigh. "Alright, oh-wise-one, I guess I don't. You have proven your point. I will not under any circumstances jump into a relationship. I will take care of myself and figure out what I want to do with my life. Not that I have much choice in the matter anyway."

"I found a dress." Chloe comes over, fidgeting with a heap of floral fabric.

Lucy kneels down in front of her and inspects the light blue garment, turning it over in her hands. "What about everything else you found? Is this all you liked?"

Chloe shifts on her feet, glancing between us. “Mama says I can only pick out one thing when we go shopping.”

“Oh, Chloe.” I lean down on her other side and take the dress from her hands. “When you’re with your mom you have to follow her rules, but right now you’re shopping with Lucy and me. Do you know what that means?”

She shakes her head and I want nothing more than to slap her mom. I’m sure Tag helped her out with more than just a house, which makes me wonder what she spent her extra money on. It certainly wasn’t her daughter.

“That means you get to follow our rules. And we say you get to pick out as much stuff as you want. You want to have plenty of clothes to stay at Uncle Tag’s, right?”

She nods, looking back toward the dressing room, chewing on her lower lip.

“Come on. You can show Lucy and I what you like and help us pick out a few outfits.”

“Thanks, Elle.” Chloe launches herself at us, throwing an arm around each of our necks and squeezing tight.

Lucy peers at me, the fire in her eyes reflecting what I feel inside. This little girl deserves to be coddled. She deserves a closet full of clothes and anything else we can give her.

“You’re doing the right thing,” Lucy murmurs to me as we follow Chloe to the dressing room.

I sure hope so.

I don’t want to be another disappointment.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TAG

“SO, WHAT WAS GOING ON AT YOUR PLACE THIS MORNING? THINGS LOOKED like they were getting interesting.” Linc’s sly smile stretches across his face as he quickens his pace on the treadmill.

I knew his silence on the way to the arena was too good to be true. No doubt he’s been biding his time, waiting for Jazz to go up to the office and make arrangements with Gordon so he could interrogate me with a limited audience. “I’m glad Jazz is getting reinstated. I know how hard it was for her to give everything up for your dumb ass.”

“What?” Foster tosses his gear bag on the floor and takes a drink from his water bottle. “Jazz is coming back?”

“Apparently, it’s a stipulation from some of the sponsors. There are some that will leave if she doesn’t come back and some big ones that want in, but only if she’s here. I appreciate that she gave everything up for me, but this is where she belongs,” Linc explains before looking back to me.

Jazz really does deserve her position back on the team. I understand what she did and why, I really do. But Linc’s right, she belongs here. She’s a Devil through and through.

“That’s great.” I nod. “I can’t wait to have her back. Where are Ian and Owen, are they not meeting us?”

“They’re with those Russian twins from the auction. Funny story actually... Oh no,” he points at me, “I’m not letting you keep changing the subject.”

Foster turns on the machine to my other side, quickening to a jog. “I feel like I’m missing something here. What’s going on?”

“Nothing is going on.” I throw Linc a look, hoping he’ll drop it. Today is

not the day I want to bare my soul. Not that any day is a good day for that, but I shared enough with Elle this morning, and that topped out my soul-baring quota for the year. “I thought we were here to work out, not gossip.”

Linc scoffs and takes a swig from his water bottle. “I’m an excellent multitasker. I like to think I can do both. Seriously, what’s going on? I know Lucy’s sister spent the night.”

“Lucy has a sister?” Foster cuts in, “And I didn’t know about it? What the hell?”

“Well, Foster, you didn’t know because we wanted to make a good impression,” Linc replies with a grin.

“Hurtful, mate. I’m thoroughly offended I didn’t know about this. Is this sister of Lucy’s available now?”

“No,” I bark out, increasing my speed. I don’t know why I care, but the thought of Foster even touching her in a friendly way has my blood boiling. Which makes no sense. She’s not mine, and I have no intention of changing that.

But he still doesn’t get to touch her.

Sensing the quizzical expressions on my teammates’ faces, I quicken my pace even further. I’m hoping that if I run fast enough, these assholes get the hint and leave me alone. I don’t want to talk about my sister and my fucked-up family. Having Chloe dropped off on my doorstep was jarring enough. I don’t need or want a pity party from any of these guys on the team. And I certainly don’t want to talk about Elle.

I don’t even have the words to describe her. I feel like an angel sent from heaven is both too much and not enough. Last night was meant to be just that: last night. I already went against my self-imposed no sleepover rule, and now she’s taking my niece out shopping and watching her for the rest of the day.

I’m grateful for her help, I really am. I can’t think of another woman who wouldn’t have run for the hills the second Chloe was dropped off. But not Elle. She seemed genuinely concerned for me and offered up her entire vacation. If I wasn’t so desperate for her help, I would have turned her down and figured it out myself. The last thing I need is to have to rely on someone else.

It never seems to work out when I do.

Foster smacks me on the shoulder, harder than necessary. “Don’t be like that, mate. You’re a one-and-done. Let your old pal Foster have a go.”

My jaw clenches, my teeth grind, and I growl. “I said no.”

“Someone’s a bit touchy,” Foster says, raising an eyebrow. “Doesn’t seem like you. Interesting, isn’t it, Linc?”

Linc studies me for a moment, and I glower back at him. I’m grateful when he shakes his head and says, “We’re off topic. And if Tag says the sister is off limits for you, Foster, then she’s off-limits. You know the rules. So, your niece?” Linc gestures for me to respond, and then reaches over and slows my treadmill to a jog.

I look between them, their gazes level on me, and sigh. “What about her?”

“You haven’t mentioned her much before. Come to think about it, I don’t think I’ve ever heard you talk about your family.”

“There’s not much to talk about.”

And really there’s not. I wouldn’t consider what I have a “family”. Families are supposed to be there for each other and support each other; not be a constant source of stress and disappointment. Moms weren’t supposed to drop you off at school and race home to get high and leave you there three hours past pickup. And dads were supposed to be there for you, to save you from a shitty life, to be proud of you when you made the NHL. Not pay for your hockey with the stipulation that you never contact him, his wife, or his *real* children.

Family’s never been in the cards for me. And likely, it never will be.

“Come on, mate. We’re your brothers. You can talk to us.” Foster’s voice softens.

“You’ve heard me talk about Liam and my mom.” Linc shakes his head, gripping the rails of the treadmill, his knuckles turning white before continuing. “I don’t talk about my dad much because he left us when I was eleven. Ran off with his secretary to start a new family. Asshole.”

“My mom died when I was little, and my dad raised my brothers and me by himself for a long time,” Foster says.

I remain silent for several minutes, staring across the various weight benches, focused on my reflection in the front of a wall clock. I’m not sure I’m pleased with what I see. After what seems like hours, I decide to unpack some of the baggage I’ve carried around for my whole life. “My mom was a drug addict. My sister and I used to take care of her when she would pass out. Sometimes she would go missing for days. There were always strange people coming in and out of the house, taking our food. I guess I should be thankful none of them took me or my sister.”

Linc's jaw falls open and his eyes widen as he stops the treadmill and turns toward me. "Social Services never got involved?"

"They came by a few times, but Mom always seemed to know in advance and sobered up for a couple of days. My sister followed in her footsteps for a while after high school. Got pregnant while she was using, and we have no idea who the dad is."

"Fuck," Foster mumbles from beside me.

"She was doing good for a while until she almost overdosed last year. I rented her a place, moved them closer, everything was fine until she showed up this morning and dropped Chloe off."

My jaw clenches in anger as my own words hit home. Finley had turned both our lives upside down so she could go chase after some dick. Chloe is going to be devastated when she finds out her mom isn't coming back.

Linc runs a hand through his hair, swearing under his breath. "Like for a couple days?"

"Permanently, from what I can tell. And she was supposed to be in school. Left me a fucking note telling me she was running off with some loser across the country. I messaged her landlord and it looks like she turned in her keys and ran. She packed Chloe's birth certificate and all that crap into her backpack with a couple changes of clothes and one stuffed animal. That's it."

"Fuck," Foster repeats, this time louder, harsher.

Linc stabs at the buttons in front of me, halting my machine. His slack-jawed, wide-eyed look is quickly replaced by a narrowed gaze and a tight jaw. "Why didn't you ever tell me about your sister? I could have been there. I could have helped."

I'm not sure what reaction I expected from my confession, but it sure wasn't anger. "I was fine. I'm always fine. I've been on my own my whole life. I didn't need any help."

"It's okay not to be fine. No one is really fine all the time." Linc puts a hand on my shoulder. "It's okay to need help."

"So what are you going to do now? With your niece?" Foster raises a brow as he asks.

"I don't have much of a choice. I'm not going to hand her over to the state. Elle and Lucy are taking her shopping for some extra clothes. And Elle volunteered to watch her while I have practice and games."

Linc chews on the edge of his thumb for several seconds before he

speaks. “Which is all well and good, but you need to get a lawyer. She needs a legal guardian, not a babysitter.”

I stagger backward off the treadmill, catch myself against the wall and slide down to a sitting position. Legal guardian? How am I supposed to be her legal guardian when I can barely take care of myself, and I’m on the ice more than not?

“And I know you didn’t ask my advice,” he continues, “but Elle is only here until the end of December. The last thing she needs is to get in a relationship with a guy who’s clearly commitment-phobic. Even a casual relationship. It’ll get really complicated with a kid involved. You need to start thinking smart, and smart would be not crossing the physical line with her again.”

He’s right.

He’s absolutely right.

But now’s not the time to think about relationships and complications. I need to make sure Chloe stays safe. That she gets the opportunity to live her best life with someone who will actually support her. I wasn’t sure I could do this five minutes ago, but now there’s no uncertainty. I have to step up and be the father figure she needs.

Foster slouches next to me and pulls out his phone. “I have a lawyer friend. Let me make a call and we’ll get you sorted, mate.”

I look over at him and then at Linc. “Thanks,” I say.

The word burns in my throat. I hate leaning on anyone, especially people I care about. It seems wrong; like it should be the other way around. But as Foster dials his friend’s number, I can’t help but feel a little bit relieved.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TAG

I RUB MY TEMPLES WITH MY THUMBS IN A POINTLESS ATTEMPT TO EASE THE tension in my forehead as I cross the threshold into my apartment. After shutting the door behind me, I lean against it and close my eyes. The weight that settled on my chest this morning has grown heavier after my conversation with the family lawyer.

There's a chance, granted, it's a small one, but there's a chance that Chloe can be taken away from me and put in the system. Our future is contingent on Social Services. On a perfect stranger who would inspect and judge my life to see if I'm worthy. And we're not even calling them until Monday, so the worry and dread have plenty of time to eat away at every pleasant thought and memory.

I'll do everything in my power to keep her with me and make sure she's safe, even if that means relying on someone else.

"Hey, Uncle Tag." Chloe rounds the corner from the kitchen and runs into my arms.

I pick her up and hold her close as she wraps her hands around my shoulders and buries her head in my chest. "Hey, Chloe. How was your day? Did you have fun with the girls?"

"Oh, yeah. I had lots of fun." She kicks her legs, squirming until I let her down. "Mommy only lets me get one thing, but Elle said I could get whatever I want."

Fucking Finley. I should have paid better attention. I should have looked deeper, past the smoke screen, instead of accepting everything at face value. I could fill a suitcase with all the things I should've done. Thank God for Elle.

At least one of us isn't an epic fuck-up.

Chloe looks at the ground and plays with the hem of her shirt in a gesture that reminds me too much of her mother. “She let me roll the meatballs too. I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course, it’s okay. Elle’s the boss when I’m not here.” I pull her in for another quick hug and rustle her hair with my free hand. “Did you say there are meatballs?”

“Lots of ‘em.”

She leads me to the kitchen, the smell of Italian spices getting stronger the closer I get. As Chloe climbs on one of the island barstools, I stop behind her, my hands resting on the back of the stool, my knuckles turning white as I grip it.

Elle looks beautiful bent over the oven door, pulling out a pan of meatballs. She’s changed into black leggings and an oversized white sweater that hangs off one shoulder. Her waves are twisted up in a messy bun with blonde strands framing her face and neck. She looks comfortable, casual, almost like she belongs here... but I know better.

There are no happy endings for the Harris family, and we know better than to count on someone other than ourselves. I’ve learned that lesson the hard way, over and over. It always ends the same. With disappointment. From my parents, my high school sweetheart, and now my sister.

Even my teammates will drift away. Whether it’s through trades or marriage and kids, they’ll leave. Everyone leaves. Elle is no different. No matter how grateful I am, how much I appreciate her, her help is only temporary. In fact, her departure date is already set in stone.

“Smells great.” I shove my hands in my pockets and rock back on my heels. “Thank you for making dinner. Really. Thank you for everything.”

She blushes a deep red that matches a sauce stain on the sleeve of her sweater. “I hope you don’t mind, but I ordered some groceries. I noticed you were getting low.”

“I’m not a big cook. I guess that’s another thing I need to work on.”

Elle leans across the island, glancing at me before settling her gaze on Chloe. “We’ve got another fifteen minutes. You have time to draw a few pictures for Lucy’s fridge.”

Chloe hops down on the floor. “Oh, I almost forgot!” she yells over her shoulder as she skips away. “I told her I’d draw a couple of my favorite reptiles. Oh, and Uncle Tag?”

“Yes?”

“Can we watch Discovery Plus tonight? There’s a snake episode I want to watch with Leo.”

“Snakes?” I rear back, not sure I heard her properly. Surely she meant something else. What nine-year-old wants to watch a show about disgusting, slithery creatures that hide in the grass and can kill you with one bite? I assumed Leo the Snake was a prize my sister won for her at a carnival or something, and not at all something she picked out and intentionally purchased. “You want to watch a show on snakes? Wouldn’t you prefer a cartoon?”

Chloe props a fist on her hip and pins me with a look that reminds me so much of her mother when she was younger and being defiant. “Did you know more people are killed by bees than snakes every year? You’re not afraid of bees, are you?”

Bees? Who the hell is this kid? “Sure, we... uh... we can watch whatever you want.”

After flashing me a quick smile, she disappears to the guest room and I lean against the island, letting out a loud sigh.

“Tag...” Elle meets my gaze, her eyes soften and she extends a hand toward me, but stops halfway and lets it drop to her side.

I know I decided any relationship beyond her helping me with Chloe was a bad idea. Hell, I still think it’s a bad idea. But it doesn’t stop me from wanting to reach out, grab that hand she dropped and pull her closer.

I’ve never been one for comfort; never needed it. It’s always been overrated and underwhelming. But I want it from Elle, and I don’t understand why.

“Chloe said Finley only lets her get one thing when they go shopping?” My voice comes out hoarse, like my throat is coated in gravel.

She nods, her blonde bun bobbing around on top of her head. “I told her when she was with me she can get whatever she wants. It may backfire later, but I thought it was the right thing to do at the time.”

“It was brilliant.” I walk the rest of the way around the island, needing to get closer. Wanting to feel her warmth. Needing to feel her against me. Instead, I stop a foot away, as close as I dare get right now, and take a deep breath. “I talked to a lawyer today.”

She stiffens but remains silent, stirring her sauce while watching me out of the corner of her eye.

“We’re calling Social Services on Monday. The lawyer thinks everything

will be fine, but he can't make any guarantees." I hang my head and give it a shake. "I can't let them take her away. I'm all she has."

"You're the best choice, Tag. They'll see that."

"What if I'm not enough?" I ask gruffly.

She abandons her sauce and turns to face me, her soft blue eyes meeting mine. "I can't say this is going to be easy, but all that little girl needs is for you to love her and do your best. You're not always going to be right. You may not know the right thing to say or the right thing to do, but you are the best person for her."

"Thank you. I'm not sure how I got so lucky to find you."

Elle chuckles before looking down and shifting on her feet. "I was just a lonely girl in a bar, trying to drown her sorrows. I was in the right place at the right time."

"Elle..."

She holds her hand to stop me. "I know what it was and what it wasn't. We don't need to rehash it. But if this is going to work, me helping you with Chloe, there can't be any more of... that. I think it's important we draw a line in the sand, and both agree not to cross it. Neither of us is looking for anything serious right now, and we both know I'm only here for two months. I don't need any complications when I go back to Savannah, and I don't think you need any more of those either."

I nod, knowing she's right. Knowing that was the exact thing I needed to say to her but couldn't find the words. I don't need the broken promises that come with any kind of relationship, and she doesn't need my baggage. It's better this way. For the both of us.

"I agree. I don't need any more complications."

"And I hope you weren't attached to that beer bottle collection in the guest room..."

"Beer bottle collection?" I'm not the most meticulous cleaner in the world, but I'm not a slob. I know how to pick up after myself. I don't even use the guest room. "Fucking Bruiser brothers."

"Bruiser brothers?" Her nose scrunches up.

"Two of the guys on the team, they take turns crashing here occasionally." And apparently live like pigs. "I guess they *used* to crash here occasionally. I think it's safe to say their invitation to sleep over in the guestroom has been revoked." I can only hope they didn't do anything else in there.

“In that case, I’m glad Lucy and I cleaned everything up and I washed the sheets. You’ll have to pull them out of the dryer when they’re done.”

“I guess I’ll need something a little more feminine.” I let out a humorless chuckle. I know my niece won’t complain about the dark, masculine bedding, but I’m sure it’s not her preference. She likes bright colors and sparkles.

The exact opposite of how I ‘decorated’ that room.

“One day at a time.” She gives my bicep a squeeze before flitting back to the stove.

One day at a time.

That would be a lot easier if I didn’t know I might lose her in a couple, but that’s no excuse for not making sure she’s comfortable while she’s here.

CHAPTER NINE

TAG

AFTER WATCHING A VERY DISGUSTING AND DISTURBING EPISODE ABOUT snakes, I decide I need a change of scenery and figure I'd clean up the rest of the dishes from dinner. Chloe is falling asleep, so Elle ushers her to her room before slipping into the hallway to take a phone call from her sister.

While I appreciate the irony of Elle stepping out for a call, I don't expect her to run off like my sister did. Not that I think she'll stick around permanently, but she'll stay as long as she said she would. I'm not sure where my faith comes from; it's a new feeling, trust. But it feels... right. Elle feels right.

As I finish putting the last dish in the dishwasher, Elle comes barreling back inside and sets her phone on the counter with a thud and loud sigh.

"Everything okay with Lucy?" I dry my hands on a dish towel and walk over to the island.

"Yeah, Lucy's fine." She lets out another sigh. "It's her apartment that has the problem. She's got a leak in the ceiling that extends from the hallway into the guest room where I'm staying."

"Well, that sucks."

"That it does. She's got plumbers coming over right now and it seems like I have nowhere to stay tonight. I just checked in with a couple hotels downtown and everything is booked because of some big concert going on."

I nod. "It's the Midnight Logic reunion concert. People have been waiting for years for them to get back together."

"Yes, well, their timing isn't very good for me," she huffs and crosses her arms over her chest, pushing her breasts up to the neckline of her blouse, momentarily distracting me. "They could've waited another week."

I cross my arms from the other side of the island, mimicking her stance. I'm not sure how much I'm going to regret this, but she's helping me out so much, helping her with something so small is the least I can do. Even if that means I'll be couch surfing for the night. After laying down those ground rules earlier, I doubt she'll want to share my bed.

"You can stay here."

"No, I don't want to impose, and you're a little short on rooms." She picks up her phone and pecks at the screen. "I'll try to find a hotel further away from downtown. I'm sure I can find something."

I can't say that Elle spending the night alone in a seedy motel with thin walls and even thinner security measures sits well with me. Maybe I'm making things much worse in my head, but I don't care. I'll be damned if she's going anywhere.

Crossing the distance between us, I take her phone and set it back down. She opens her mouth to protest, but I hold up a hand. "You don't need to find anywhere to go. You'll stay here."

"Tag, I don't think spending the night together is a good move. We literally *just* decided that anything physical happening between us is a bad idea. I don't think breaking the rules within a few hours of making them is a good idea."

"I said you can stay here. I didn't say you had to have sex with me." I take a step toward her and crowd her against the island. "That is of course, unless you want to."

Her lips purse and her eyes flash, dropping to my lips as she licks hers. "No. Of course, I don't want to."

My blood wanders south, thickening my cock, but I ignore it. Instead, I tilt my head to the side and smirk. "You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure." She raises her hands and presses them against my chest, presumably to push me away but instead they relax against me.

Her eyes meet mine, the bright blue darkening as her fingers curl into my shirt. My heart beats rapidly under her palm, and I clench my jaw to keep myself from saying something stupid, like begging her to reconsider the rules that are meant to protect the both of us.

Taking a step back, her hands fall back to her sides. I clear my throat and jam my hands into my pockets. "I'll sleep on the couch. Don't worry about it."

She nods, her gaze falling to the floor. "I don't have pajamas or anything."

I can grab a few things from Lucy's tomorrow. She said this should only be for a couple days."

"Lemme get you something to wear," I murmur, turning around and disappearing into my room to search my drawers for something that will pass for pajamas. As much as I'd like to imagine her sleeping naked in my bed, my sheets tucked around her bare breasts, I don't think it's what she has in mind.

"A t-shirt is fine." She stands in the doorway, playing with the sleeves of her sweater, her voice caressing somewhere deep inside me.

I pull out a Devil's tee, one that's faded, but also my most comfortable, and toss it to her. I bite back a groan as thoughts of her wearing one of my favorite t-shirts—*only* that shirt—crowd my mind.

After grabbing an extra pillow and a blanket, I make my way to the couch. I've never had an issue hanging out and watching TV on this thing, but it's not the most comfortable. The skin on my back sticks to the old leather, pulling on it and making loud fart noises every time I move. Great. Now it sounds like I have a serious gas problem. Either Elle is going to think I'm extra gross, or she's going to feel bad and offer me some fart medicine. Neither option sounds enticing.

I flip on my side, pull the blanket up to my chin and tuck my hand under the pillow. I will not move. I will stay here and fall asleep. Except for this wayward spring poking me in my fucking ribs. Mother fucker. I flip again. This time to my other side, facing the back of the couch. You wouldn't think it would be worse, but for whatever reason, it is. I'm not sure where my spleen is, but I think it's being poked to death. My back is even more uncomfortable, and I'm debating rolling off the couch and crashing on the floor.

Then I remember how comfortable my bed is. And how large it is. Even with Elle taking up one side, that still leaves plenty of room. She can have her side, I'll have mine. It won't violate any rules. Won't cross any lines.

There will be no touching. No longing looks from the other side of the bed. Nothing. Just two people who have no lingering feelings, and only an inkling of attraction sharing a bed. It's fine. It'll be totally fine.

This won't have to change a thing.

I toss and turn a few more times, really letting that loose spring massage all the muscles in my torso. I'm still not entirely sold on invading her space, but I'm getting there. If I stay out here, there's no way I'll get any rest, and I

do have a game tomorrow. Plus, I'll be spending hours on an airplane. A good night sleep is pretty essential. I'm sure she wants me to be at my best on the ice.

Flinging the covers to the floor, I grab my pillow and edge my way to the bedroom. Elle is in bed, covers up to her chest, blonde waves spread out on the pillow behind her, her face glowing in the light of her phone.

"Hey, you're still up." I grip my pillow against my side and prop my hip on the door frame.

"Uh, yeah." She clicks her phone off and places on the nightstand. "I was reading. I got a few new books."

"Anything I would be interested in?"

"Probably not," she responds too quickly.

I smirk and cross my arms over the pillow. I'll bet it's something dirty. "What's it about? I like all kinds of books."

"I'm sure the only thing you read is accompanied by pictures of naked women."

"Did you just accuse me of reading Playboy? I'll have you know that I've not seen one of those in years. If I want porn, I've got a few sites that are bookmarked on my phone." I push off the doorway and walk to my side of the bed, which happens to be the unoccupied side.

"What are you doing?" She clutches the sheet to her breasts, her eyes tracking my every move. "Do you need your phone so you can watch porn on the couch?"

Her tone says she's trying to sound disgusted, but her legs rub together, and her eyes darken. I'd say she likes the idea of me in the other room, taking my cock in hand and stroking myself to orgasm.

"The couch is uncomfortable. I figured I'll watch it in here."

She jackknives to a sitting position, letting the sheet and blanket fall around her hips. Her mouth drops open and she stares at me with a mix of awe and horror. "You're going to... to masturbate in here?"

I chuckle, tossing the pillow back on the bed. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"I...Well... I..." She pauses, gazing at my bare chest. "Yes, I have a problem with that."

"Fair. I guess we can compromise, and just sleep."

"What happened to the couch?"

"It's the most uncomfortable couch on the planet."

“How do you know?” She snuggles back into the sheets. “Have you slept on every couch on the planet?”

“Such a smartass,” I chide, as I pull down the sheets and crawl into bed. “I won’t be able to sleep a wink out there, and I have a game tomorrow. Look at all this space between us. I’ll keep on my side, and you can have yours.”

“Fine,” she huffs. “Just don’t get any ideas.”

“No worries. No ideas in this head.”

She mumbled a few expletives before rolling over, giving me her back. I fluff my pillow, wiggle around to get comfy and turn over on my side, my back facing hers. Didn’t want to look at her anyway. I certainly don’t feel the body heat radiating from her bare legs. I don’t imagine it’s her hand caressing me every time she moves, and the sheet shifts against my skin. And I definitely don’t grab an extra pillow to wrap my arms around and imagine it’s her.

Nothing to see here; just going to sleep.

CHAPTER TEN

ELLE

I OPEN MY EYES, THE MUTED LIGHT FROM THE MORNING SUN FILTERING through the drapes and warming my face. Warming me all over. I'm almost cocooned in its glow. I stretch my legs and try to roll over, but a hard band around my waist tightens and refuses to let me move. Tag slept in here. So much for the other side of the bed.

His front is molded to my back, his legs crisscrossed with mine, and his hand is splayed across my stomach. Under my borrowed t-shirt. I shift to create some space, and fail. His nose nuzzles against my neck and because of my wiggling, I've now got a feel for his morning wood. Literally, because even though his dick is encased in boxer briefs, it's tucked between the cheeks of my ass.

The delicious weight of his dick on my backside brings me right back to our night together, and I bite down on my lower lip to stifle a moan.

My stomach flips, and my skin tingles everywhere that's in contact with him; I know this is bad. I know it goes against everything I said yesterday. But my back still arches, pressing my body more firmly against his erection.

He moans and his hand roams up my stomach and brushes the underside of my breasts. My core clenches with need, and I rub my legs together to relieve my aching clit.

"Elle." He groans my name and then pauses. "Shit, Elle. I'm sorry."

Within seconds, the hand is gone from my torso, and he's rolled back to the other side of the bed, leaving me cold and confused. My brain cells are running around, bumping into each other, and setting things on fire. Stupid brain. It obviously doesn't know we've agreed to no longer have any feelings or... anything else... toward each other.

Once I can get my shit together, I'm sure I'll no longer miss his touch, crave his body, or feel an emptiness when he's not around.

"I'm so sorry," Tag apologizes again. "I'm going to leave you to do whatever. I've got to get ready to go. I've got to head to the airport soon." He doesn't wait for a response before he gets out of bed and sprints from the room.

I bury my face in the pillow, willing it to suffocate me right here and put me out of my misery. It makes no move to smother me, but it does fill my nose with Tag's woody scent, and I find myself taking several sniffs.

My phone dings, interrupting my revelry with Tag's pillow. Before I can reach it, the phone dings again.

Daddy: I hope you're enjoying your time away from the office. Can't wait to have you back in Savannah.

Daddy: How are your art classes?

I groan. I haven't told Daddy the classes were cancelled. If I did, he'd demand that I return to Georgia immediately. Visiting Lucy was never enough of a reason for him to allow me to make the trip. There's no way I can tell him I'm spending my free time babysitting. I certainly can't tell him it's for a professional athlete. After Derek, he'd probably come up here to retrieve me himself.

Me: The break is nice, and I'll be ready to take over the home branch when I get back. Learning a lot.

Not a total lie. I'm learning... things. Just not art things.

Daddy: We'll talk about taking over when you come home for Thanksgiving. I've got a surprise for you.

Me: I can't wait.

Only mildly sarcastic. I promise.

I flop back down on the bed and pull the pillow over my face, letting the aroma of spicy sandalwood wash over me. I hate hiding things from Daddy, but being in Tag's bed, surrounded by him, takes some of the guilt away.

Which is why it's so wrong.

I'll have to talk to Lucy when she comes over later. I'm not sure I can handle waking up with him again without doing something about it. Tonight is safe because he'll be in Canada, but tomorrow... Tomorrow she better have that damn apartment fixed.



Lucy bounds through the door to Tag's apartment, holding three hot pink gift bags with white tissue paper coming out from the top. "I'm back, and I brought us all a little something special for the game."

At my insistence, Lucy stopped over early this morning with a duffel bag full of clothes and toiletries. I was in desperate need of a change of clothes and some dry shampoo. What she gave me was more than I'd need for two days, but I keep telling myself she's giving me choices instead of hinting that the leak might take longer to fix.

Tag was nice enough to let me stay here last night, and tonight since I'm watching Chloe, he has no choice. But then he'll be back from his away game, and I need to have an exit plan. Something that takes me far away from his bed and his almost irresistible snuggles.

I'd prefer to stay in the guest room at Lucy's, but after this morning, I'd take the hotel from *The Shining*. It might be safer.

"For me?" Chloe bounces up and down on the couch next me, the popcorn jumping up and falling out over the edges of the bowl in her hand and landing around her on the couch.

I take the bowl and put it next to a larger one on the coffee table in front of us.

"For all three of us." Lucy passes out the bags, keeping one for herself. "Go on, get in there."

I cringe, Chloe's squeal bouncing off the walls as she pulls out a miniature version of Tag's jersey. After weeding through the tissue paper, I pull out an oversized black, red, and white jersey with a Devil on the front and 'Harris' on the back.

"Does yours say 'Benson'?" I hold up my jersey, turning it around, so Lucy can see the last name.

A light pink highlights her cheeks as she scoffs. "Of course not. He's not

even on the team. I thought we could all match.”

“I was talking about his sister, Jazz, now that’s she back in the owner’s box, but it’s interesting how you thought of him first.”

That’s a lie. I wasn’t talking about Jazz. Mostly not, anyway. And Lucy’s reaction gave me the answer I was looking for; a little confirmation that she has a Benson preference; that maybe her feelings for the former-hockey-player-turned-owner are more than friendly.

Lucy turns, shielding the front half of her body from Chloe, and gives me the old California Howdy-Do.

“Come sit with us.” Chloe pulls the jersey over her head and pats the couch next to her. “The game is starting. Uncle Tag is in Vancouver. He had to leave real early this morning.”

Not long after he jumped out of bed and put some much needed distance between us. Once he got done with his shower, he was all business. Tag and I worked out the details of my pay and raised his low expectations as far as my duties. Everything was very polite. A far cry from how we woke up together.

Which means we’re moving in the right direction, and our little slip-up this morning was just that.

Tag is so flirty and easygoing that it would’ve been so easy to cross the line and have sex again. He gave me one of the best nights of my life, and when I’m at home alone, I can bring out my vibrating friend and remember how it felt to have his hands roaming over my body. How he felt inside me. How he drove me to more climaxes in one night than I’d ever had in a month.

But repeating that would be a mistake.

I’m leaving, and I just got out of another shitty relationship. I’m not sure he’s ever had a relationship. Not to mention my father is now intent on interfering with my dating life, thanks to the Derek fiasco. He called me a few hours ago while Chloe and I were making cookies to tell me he had someone he was inviting over for me to meet when I went home for Thanksgiving.

Then there’s Chloe. This poor little innocent girl who doesn’t even realize her mom up and left her. She thinks she’s here on a little vacation with her uncle. Between their new circumstances and Tag’s hockey schedule, the fewer complications in her life, the better.

And Tag and I are full of complications.

“There’s Uncle Tag.” Chloe points to the screen as the music starts

blaring, and one by one, the players skate onto the ice.

Tag is hard to miss. His shoulder-length blonde hair hangs out the bottom of his helmet and the cocky air he had when we met at the bar clings around him like a second skin. I'm not a complete hockey novice, so I know he's wearing pads, but they make his torso look huge. Powerful. Captivating. And the way he skates around the rink with his muscular thighs... I need to log that away to retrieve later when the stars come out and I'm in bed alone. Like tonight.

Good Lord.

By the time the game is over, I'm going to need a cold shower.

"Alright," I settle back against the couch with my bowl of popcorn, "I need you to let me know what's going on."

"I thought you dated a football player. Shouldn't you know what's going on in a game?" Lucy gave me a side eye, kicking off her bright pink heels and tucking her legs underneath herself.

"I did date a football player. Thank you for reminding me, Lucy." I shoot her a tart look before tossing a piece of popcorn in my mouth. "I know what goes on in a football game. Hockey is completely foreign to me. Not to mention so much faster. I don't even know where the puck is right now."

"Right there." Chloe points to the TV again, somewhere in the middle. I'm sure the puck is there somewhere, but between the legs and sticks, I'm just not seeing it. But then Tag breaks away from the group with the puck, passes it off, and absolutely rams one of the players from the Blackhawks into the wall around the rink.

The camera zooms in on him. His gaze is intense, his mouth set in a grim line, and I can't help but imagine him above me looking down at me with all that intensity and raw power.

Never mind the cold shower, I'll be going straight in an ice bath.

I thought football was manly. It's got nothing on hockey.

The whistle blows, pulling my attention away from the back of the Harris jersey, and the ref on the other side of the ice points between a few players.

"What's going on over there?" I glance over at Lucy who's moved up on the couch and is literally on the edge of her seat. I never realized she was such a hockey fanatic. Sports were something we weren't allowed to watch growing up because they weren't lady-like. Thanks to Mamma Dearest, Lucy and I were banned from interacting with anything that was remotely masculine. The only reason I watched a lick of football was to support Derek

while he spent most of the games on the bench.

Lucy's eyes never leave the game as she answers, "Penalty: tripping. Baker, number seventeen, hit the puck and dove in front of the other player."

"Rude."

"Yeah, rude," Chloe repeats, leaning forward to sit like Lucy, even propping her elbows on her knees and resting her chin on her fists.

"He's going in the penalty box for two minutes," Lucy continues, not breaking eye contact with the game to even spare me a glance.

Sounds fair, I guess. Two minutes doesn't seem like a very long time, but it's such a fast-moving sport, it probably seems like it lasts forever when you're sitting in the time-out box.

The next two hours were much of the same. Lucy and Chloe, sitting on the edge of the couch, were gripped by the game. I got distracted every time Tag stepped out on the ice, which then forced me to ask Lucy to explain what I missed. It was a process.

Most importantly, Chloe had a blast. By the time Lucy packed up her stuff to head back to her place, the little girl had fallen asleep on the couch. I waved goodbye to my sister and then scooped Chloe up, tucking her into bed.

With a sigh, I poured a glass of wine and snuggled up with a blanket on the couch. Pulling out my Kindle, I opened up the steamy romance novel I purchased a few nights ago. Pure coincidence that it's a hockey romance. I certainly had no one in mind when I bought it. Just my favorite trope. Single dad.

Ah, fuck.

Who am I kidding?

Two glasses later, I've moved to Tag's bed—because yes, that fucking thing is the most uncomfortable couch on the planet—and I'm deep in the heroine's inner turmoil. The delicious angst of *will they or won't they?* I know the answer. We all know they're gonna get together at some point. At least they better, or I'm going to be a very unsatisfied reader.

Just when the hero has her cornered, and I think I'm closing in on the first kiss I've been so impatiently waiting for, Dolly's *Why'd You Come In Here Looking Like That* starts up from the nightstand.

Snatching up my phone, I find myself staring into a pair of amber eyes. Certainly not like the ones I imagined the hero having.

"Hey, Tag." I sit up and hold the phone away from my face after answering the Facetime call. "I'm sorry if you were hoping to see Chloe; she

passed out pretty hard about an hour ago. That was a great game, by the way.”

“You watched it?” Tag’s eyes widen in surprise as he takes a seat on his hotel bed.

“Absolutely. Lucy came over and the three of us gals had a watch party. Chloe was glued to every minute of the game. Lucy had to explain some rules and plays and stuff, but it was so fun to watch. You should have seen us when you made the goal to tie the game in the third quarter.”

“Period,” Tag chuckles. “They’re called periods in hockey.”

“Well, it was great.”

“You guys will have to come to a home game, it’s even better live. Wait... are you wearing my jersey?” Tag moves closer to his phone, squinting at the screen.

Heat creeps up my neck as I look down to the jersey I’d yet to change out of. I didn’t realize his number was on the sleeves and on full display. “Lucy got us all matching ones. I hope that’s alright.”

Tag pauses for a second, long enough for me to wonder if the phone froze and then he swallows, and I’m momentarily distracted by the bob of his throat and the way he licks his lips. “Yeah. It’s fine. It’s good. It looks good.”

“Chloe slept in hers; she might wear it until you get back tomorrow.”

Tag chuckles again, the deep rumble washing over me as a shiver crawls up my spine.

“What are you up to now? Big plans to celebrate your win?”

“Nah.” He shakes his head, his sandy blonde locks fall in his face before he sweeps them back. “Linc and I are staying in like a couple of old fucks. The lawyer told me to lay low and Jazz couldn’t make it, so he’s moping around like a sad puppy.”

“Fuck off, Tag.” Lincoln shouts from the background.

“What about you? Planning a party while I’m gone?”

“Hardly.” I flip the screen showing off my empty glass of wine and Kindle. “I think after two glasses of wine, I’m about ready to fall asleep. And I really hate admitting you’re right, but that couch of yours is the worst.”

His forehead scrunches and his brows draw together. “You weren’t planning on sleeping on it, were you?”

“No, I was trying to stretch out and read. I think I may have cracked a rib from that spring.”

“I should probably replace it.”

“At this point, you should get it incinerated.”

“Maybe you can help me pick out a new one.”

“Sure. Okay.” I nod in agreement even though I’m sure he’s capable of picking out a couch.

“Good.” He pauses, his eyes flicking across the screen. “Well, I’m gonna run. I’ll call you guys before we board the plane. Maybe I can catch Chloe then. I miss her smiling face. Call me if you need anything.”

“Sure thing.”

“Goodnight, Elle.”

“Night, Tag.”

I toss the phone down next to me and let out a sigh. There’s no way I can read that damn book now. All the *will they, won’t they* feels a little too close to home at the moment. And this story ends on a won’t.

No happily ever after. Not for me. At least not with Tag.

I don’t need to fill my head with what-ifs and all that other nonsense.

But as I lay here, nestled in Tag’s blankets and inhaling his scent, my head begins to fill with other ideas. Like remembering how his hands felt caressing my body and pinching my nipples until I was writhing underneath him. How his tongue speared in and of my core before he assaulted my clit and gave me not one, but two orgasms. And last but certainly not least, how his thick cock plunged into me, filling me up so completely, and fucking me until I was reduced to a boneless mess.

Surrounded by these memories and the smell of spiced sandalwood, I slip my hand underneath the waistband of my lace panties and stoke a finger through my folds. It comes back slick, and I paint that wetness around my clit, working in tight circles.

My back arches off the bed and my body thrums with lust. I work my other hand up Tag’s jersey, pinching my nipples hard, giving myself the slightest bit of pain to enhance the pleasure. I whimper and writhe against the sheets. I add a second finger and imagine it’s his tongue lapping over my sensitive flesh, flicking it, toying with it, strumming it like an instrument.

I bite back a cry, pressing down harder, rubbing my clit like it’s about to give me three wishes. Rolling my nipples between my fingers, I rock my hips, massaging myself faster.

My thighs quiver, my core tightens, and I pinch my clit one last time. My back bows off the bed and I’m plunged into darkness as my eyes squeeze

shut and my orgasm shudders through me.

When aftershocks running through my core abate, I roll to my side and sigh. I really should take off his jersey. But I think for tonight, I'll allow myself to pretend.

Pretend that I get to miss him. Pretend that he's thinking about me as he falls asleep. And the biggest sham of them all, pretend that he's mine.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TAG

I SHIFT IN MY SEAT, CROSSING AND UNCROSSING MY LEGS AS MR. PRATER, the family lawyer I'd retained, picks up Finley's letter from the stack of papers on his desk. After assessing me over his silver wire-framed glasses, he strokes the short hairs of his dark-trimmed beard, clears his throat, and tilts forward to shuffle the pages in front of him.

"I have to say, Mr. Harris, your sister certainly didn't do you any favors."

"No, sir."

He unbuttons his blue suit coat and leans back in his chair before steepling his fingers together in front of him. "Have you been able to reach her since she left?"

"No, sir," I repeat, running a hand through my hair. It wasn't for lack of trying, but it had been impossible to reach her. Just like she planned, I'm sure. "She's disconnected her phone. She isn't responding or even looking at any messages on her social media. I don't even know the last name of the guy she's with. It's like she's completely vanished."

He nods, his face impassive as if he's heard this story before. Hell, maybe he has. Foster's friend, who turned out to be a criminal lawyer he slept with when he first got to town, said this guy was not only one of the best family attorneys in the state, but a huge advocate for children.

While I don't feel great about involving Social Services, I do feel marginally better knowing this guy is on my side.

He's already taken the initiative to contact DCS this morning and get the puck sliding. I'm hoping he hasn't mentioned them yet because he doesn't have much to report, not because he's trying to delay the bad news. My chest tightens and my shoulders droop under the heavy weight. The usual kind of

bad news I can deal with. By now I'm a pro at handling things that would devastate most people. But bad news regarding Chloe... I'm not sure I can handle that.

"The biggest problem is that your sister left you nothing that legally gives you guardianship of your niece. Her note, while to the point, is completely worthless in the eyes of the law. Despite the fact you're ready and willing to care for Chloe, without legal custody, you can't change schools to move her closer to your current residence, or even take her to be seen by a doctor."

Christ. Finley's selfishness knows no bounds. I hadn't even thought of doctors or complications with her school. Her school is located clear on the other side of Nashville, and she's already missed several days there, thanks to her mother. I'd been hoping to move her somewhere closer.

My stomach sinks as a substantial wave of dread snakes through my gut. My hands clench at my side and I take a deep breath. "So what does this mean?"

"You said Chloe's father is not in the picture, correct?"

"That's correct. In fact, I'm not sure Finley knows who Chloe's father is."

He nods. "As you know, I went ahead and called a friend of mine with Social Services. We've worked on several cases together and she's always fair with her decisions. She's also been informed that because of your position with the Devils, discretion with this matter is of the utmost importance. The last thing we want is your niece's face splashed all over the internet."

At this point, I don't give two fucks about my position with the Devils, although I agree, Chloe's situation needs to remain private.

I need to ensure she stays with me and doesn't fall through the cracks and end up in foster care. Regardless of how fair he claims this woman with Social Services is, I would sell her my soul if it would make a damn bit of difference.

"As you're her biological uncle, and there are no other viable family options, DCS and I agree that it would be in the best interest of the child if she remains in your care. I'll file the appropriate paperwork today to ensure you get temporary custody. You should expect a phone call from April Summers. She'll want to set up a time to come by for a home visit, get all the information she needs for a full background check, and I'm sure she'll have several questions about you and your childcare situation. While this is certainly a step in the right direction, it's not yet a permanent solution."

I shift forward and tug on the collar of my button-up dress shirt, glad I decided not to wear a tie. “How do we turn it into a permanent solution?”

“You need to show that you’re ready to take full responsibility for raising Chloe. I understand your living situation, but your own place, preferably with a yard, would go a long way. Once I send you all the finalized paperwork, I recommend establishing medical care by securing a pediatrician. Then if you still want to enroll her in a school within your district, you can.”

“Doesn’t that process sometimes take weeks?”

“It can, and if you’re interested, I played a round of golf with the principal at Herrington Academy yesterday. I mentioned your situation, no names of course, and he said he would be more than happy to sit down and meet with you. He assured me he could expedite the paperwork and have her in school by next week. Both of my boys go there, and I can tell you from personal experience, it’s one of the best schools in Nashville.”

“Anything else I need to do?”

“I assume you already have someone in place to watch Chloe while you have games and practice?”

I can’t help but bring up the mental snapshot I’d taken of Elle, sprawled out in my bed, a faint blush dusting her cheeks and my jersey on her back. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t think of her in my jersey, and only my jersey, when I rubbed one out in the shower this morning. She’s been back at Lucy’s since I got back from my away game, and I’m not convinced it’s a good thing. Not wanting to get involved with a woman beyond a physical release has never been a problem until now.

Talk about terrible timing.

“Yes, sir, I have someone.”

“Excellent. They may want to talk to them as well. Otherwise, continue to follow my initial advice. Stay out of trouble. Stay out of the news.” After a quick glance at my lap, he continued, “and keep the number of people with access to Chloe to a minimum.”

That’s the nicest way someone’s ever told me to keep it in my pants.

This entire situation will be a testament to my willpower. No celebrating after games. No bars. No clubs. Absolutely no women. Now tell that to the man downstairs who has a perpetual hard on for a certain curvy blonde vixen currently baking cupcakes in my apartment.

Walking out of the lawyer’s office, I pull out my phone and see a message from Elle—a photo of a single cupcake with swirls of pink and

purple sprinkled on top.

Ethel: I may have saved you one.

Me: You'd better. I've been craving a sloppy cupcake for days.

Ethel: Why do I feel like this is a sexual reference?

Me: I would never.

Ethel: <laughing face emoji>

Me: Any chance you want to do me a huge favor?

Ethel: That depends... I never answer these questions up front.

Me: I need to go house shopping and don't have a clue where to start.

Ethel: In that case, I would love to help you spend your money. Chloe says she wants a pool.

With a chuckle, I slide my phone into my back pocket, unlock my truck and hop in the driver's seat. I'd be in a world of hurt without that woman, which is why I have to reinforce the walls around my heart and remind myself she's only here on a temporary basis.

No one sticks around forever.

No matter how much you might want them to. And I don't want Chloe to keep experiencing the same heartbreak when someone inevitably leaves.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TAG

“DO I HAVE TO WEAR THIS OUTFIT? I LOOK STUPID. THE OTHER GIRLS ARE going to laugh at me.” Chloe walks out of her bedroom tugging on the navy blue clip-on tie nestled behind a red vest with a blue and white stripe at the bottom. The whole outfit is complete with a matching navy skirt and a pair of black Mary Janes, courtesy of her new private school.

Initially, I was hesitant about uprooting her from her old school. She had friends there, and it had been a source of stability in her life when her mom was not. It is, however, several school districts away, and when I filed the change of address, the school insisted on a transfer. Especially given how spotty her school attendance had been. Thanks again, Finley.

Mr. Prater has been worth his weight in gold. Within a week, he made sure I had a brief home visit from DCS, and expedited the temporary custody paperwork. He talked with the school district to explain all of Chloe’s unexcused absences, and arranged for my interview with the private school since the public ones in our district seem mediocre. After finding out who I was and expressing how big a Devils fan he was, the Principal of the Herrington Academy accepted Chloe on the spot and insisted she start as soon as he could get the paperwork squared away.

I push away from the island, my fingers wrapped around my favorite ‘This guy is AWESOME’ coffee mug. “I think it looks nice. And the other girls will be wearing the exact same outfit.”

“Really?” Her nose scrunches up as she plops down on the couch.

“Lucy and I wore outfits like that every day we went to school.” Elle swivels around on the island barstool, her eyes flicking to mine before her gaze settles on Chloe.

I clench my jaw, willing myself to stop imagining grownup Elle in a white, Britney Spears style button-down, a narrow navy tie nestled between her full breasts, and a scandalously short plaid skirt. A skirt so short the bottom of her ass cheeks can't help but peek out. And when she turns to bend over in front of me—picking up something I don't even remotely care about—I can make out the sliver of black thong covering her delicious pussy.

The black thong currently living in the drawer of my nightstand. The very same one I've held every time I've fisted my cock this past week.

My fingers tighten around the handle of my mug as I bite back a groan. "You're killing me, Elle."

"I didn't do anything," she quips, a faint blush dusting her cheeks.

"What if no one likes me? Everyone there already knows each other." Chloe looks down at her lap and fidgets with the hem of her skirt.

"Nonsense." Elle crosses the room to sit down next to her. "They are going to love you."

"I don't want to talk to anyone," she huffs, before letting out an exasperated sigh. "Why do I have to go to this stupid place? I want to stay with my friends at my old school."

Something I was well aware of. While most of the past week had been smooth sailing, the three of us falling into a rhythm and working around my hockey schedule, this had been a touchy subject. We'd been having this same conversation since I told her she was switching schools.

I take a quick sip of coffee. "You know why we had to change, Chloe. This one is much closer, and you'll be getting a top-notch education."

"I don't care about that." She crosses her arms over her chest and attempts to stare me down. "I want to be with my friends."

"Too bad." I throw my hands up in the air. "Your other school is clear on the opposite side of town. You know it takes way too long to get there and back. You're going to the Herrington Academy."

"I can't wait until my mom comes back. She'll let me go back to my old friends. She lets me do whatever I want."

I freeze. I know she's saying this to dig under my skin and it's working. Those little demons of self-doubt fight their way to the surface, and I wonder for the thousandth time if I can do this. If I'm the best person to do this.

I take another sip of my coffee, letting the bitter taste linger on my tongue. It wasn't like I had a choice. The school had made it pretty clear she couldn't stick around. In fact, if my lawyer hadn't stepped in, the district was

a hair's breadth away from taking legal action against Finley over Chloe's truancy record.

She'll make new friends and forget the old ones. I did when I was her age and my mom moved us from place to place until she finally got a duplex of her own. Plus, Chloe is way more friendly and outgoing than I was at that age.

"I heard that snakes don't have eyelids." Elle leans forward, eyes darting between Chloe and me. "Is that true, Chloe?"

Chloe breaks out in a grin, and I find myself in Elle's debt. "Yes! Did you know that king cobras are the only snakes that build a nest for their eggs and guard them until the baby snakes hatch?"

My lips twist and I shiver. "I did not."

Nor did I ever want to know.

"They can also spray their venom up to six feet. And can stand taller than most men."

If I was on the fence about snakes before, I'm certainly not now. That's the scariest shit I've ever heard. I don't care how big a guy I am, if a cobra stands as tall as me and spits poison at my face, I will shit my pants. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. I may even faint. If only she were obsessed with puppies and kittens like most girls her age.

Nope. Not Chloe. It had to be fucking snakes.

At least the change in subject adjusted her attitude. Hopefully, she'll have an easy first day and make some fast friends. I wonder if there's any way I can dissuade her from telling everyone in her new class about spitting cobras.

"And it's time to go. Grab your backpack."

Chloe lets out a grumbling sound of annoyance, but pushes up from the couch, grabs her unicorn backpack, and drags her feet the entire way to the front door.

The ride to the school is quiet, aside from Elle humming along to the radio. Chloe stares out the window, her feet swishing back and forth to the beat. When we're almost halfway there, she meets my gaze in the rearview mirror. "When's Mom coming back? Can we call her tonight? I want to tell her about my first day at the new school. Even if it is stupid."

My heart seizes in my chest and the breath whooshes from my lungs. I knew this question was coming. I'd been preparing for it, but it still manages to take me by surprise.

I should've talked to her about it right after her mom left, but when I had a free moment from hockey, I was so wrapped up in the legal shit... nah, those are excuses. The truth is, I was a chicken. She's been in such good spirits, I've been afraid to shatter her reality with the truth. I didn't want to break her heart.

Elle looks over and gives me a small, encouraging smile.

"We can talk about your mom tonight, okay?" I glance at the rear-view mirror in time to see her nod.

I spend the rest of the drive telling her and Elle about the houses the realtor has lined up for us to look at today. Chloe perks up, asking if each one has a pool. Or if there's a fence for the dog we're not getting. For the life of me, I can't remember, but I say yes anyway.

I'd give this girl anything to make sure she stays happy. Except for a snake. I don't think I could handle having one of those.

Especially one that stands and sprays you.

The principal is waiting for us at the drop-off circle, and after Elle and I say our goodbyes to Chloe, he assures us she's in good hands, and whisks her away to her classroom. I don't doubt that for a second. I paid a pretty penny for this place, and the least he can do is show her to her classroom. She didn't get the luxury of an open house with a facility tour.

I'm slightly apprehensive as I shift the car into drive and pull out of the circle. The logical part of my brain tells me she's going to be okay, but I can't help the worry seeping into my bones.

"She'll be fine, ya big worrywart." Elle giggles, clearly noticing my hesitation.

I run a hand over the stubble of my chin before tossing her a smile. "I could've just been worried about spending the day with you. Ever think of that?"

"As if." Elle smacks my bicep with the back of her hand. "Everyone enjoys my company."

"Everyone, huh? I reckon you don't see many people."

Another light smack, this time to my chest. "I don't have to look at houses with you today. I could catch a cab from here and spend the day flouncing around the city. I'm sure you'll be fine on your own."

I would and we both know it. While I may not be the best person to look at houses—I don't know or care to know the difference between quartz and granite—it seems unlikely the realtor would lead me astray. I'm confident he

and I would be able to discover something suitable.

But with Elle, we'll find something more than suitable. After watching her pick out Chloe's bedding and some décor, I have little doubt she'd be able to get me something better.

A home.

"You know all these houses look the same to me." I huff out a laugh. "One is just more or less expensive than the next. Depending, of course, on which order Real Estate Agent Tim has picked out for us."

"Real Estate Agent Tim better be on his A game. We're here to look at houses, not swoon over the big bad hockey player. I don't care how big a fan he is."

I bark out a laugh. "I remember a time not too long ago when you swooned over the big bad hockey player, sugar."

Maybe she didn't swoon exactly. I don't remember her fainting at the sheer sight of my manhood, but she did pass out pretty good after several, and I do mean several, orgasms.

"More like settled." Elle picks at her nails.

"I may be a simple Kentucky boy," I glance at Elle out of the corner of my eye, slyly checking out the cleavage showing from her low v-neck sweater, "but I don't remember either of us settling that night. 'Cept maybe when you were on all fours, begging for my dick."

A pretty pink blush sweeps up her neck and brushes across her cheeks. She crosses her legs. Uncrosses them. And then shifts in her seat. "I wouldn't say beggin' exactly." Her drawl sounds more pronounced than usual. I wonder if it happens when she gets excited.

"I believe your exact words were, 'Tag, please...'" I end on a breathy moan, but joke's on me now, because I'm picturing myself notching at her entrance. Gripping her hips as I slide inside her warm, velvety pussy. I let out another moan, this one low, almost a growl. My dick hardens, trapped in the denim of my jeans, throbbing against my zipper.

Lusting after this woman, one I already know intimately is a different kind of torture.

I don't want to want her. I don't want to feel this way. Never have I let a woman distract me; let the scent of her eat me up and consume me from the inside out. This is my own personal hell.

We made it clear to each other nothing would happen between us, and I intend to leave it at that. *Nothing*. I've not been tied down to a woman my

entire adult life, and I don't intend to start now.

Doesn't matter if she smells like a slice of heaven. Or if her clear blue eyes are the prettiest damn things I've ever seen. Or that keeping my hands to myself this past week has made it the hardest week of my life.

Though our decision to keep things non-sexual will probably make today complicated because there's a little bit of information I haven't told her yet. Something she's probably going to be mad about, but it was the only way to make sure we didn't get overlooked by some of these sellers.

People that made it very clear to Real Estate Agent Tim that they will give buying preference to families. Including the people selling Chloe's favorite house. Which means I'm one person short.

Which means I'm in need of a wife.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ELLE

I AM BURNING UP FROM THE INSIDE, BUT IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THE low heat coming from the car's air vents and everything to do with the man sitting next to me. He's trying to distract me from talking about how he felt dropping Chloe off at school, but after hearing *please* fall from his lips, followed by that breathy moan, I'm not sure I can put two sentences together.

Logically, I know I can't give in to the ache between my legs. We decided being physical was a bad idea, and it is. I need to promise my loins a visit from the vibrating rabbit, change the subject, and we'll be good to go.

"That mouth of yours is going to get you in trouble." I repeat the words he told me on our first night together, and of course, that makes me think of all the things his mouth can do. Between my legs. On my breasts. My neck.

His lips curve up in a small smile as he turns into a winding driveway leading to a gigantic stone house. No, mansion. I have no doubt this is at the top of whatever budget Tag gave to Real Estate Agent Tim, and he's hoping we'll be impressed by its sheer size. Although size is important, it's not the only thing that matters.

Anyone who says anything different is a dirty liar.

I'll hand it to him though; the three-story home certainly has the 'wow' factor. The closer we get, the more magnificent the lush gardens and fountains look. But I don't think it fits Tag at all. Where some people like to be over the top and show off the amount of money they have, he's more of a simple guy. What you see is what you get.

"I bet this is a bitch to keep clean." I hear myself say. I cringe, reminding myself I planned to stay unbiased. We're here to pick out a house for Tag, and while I know he wants my opinion, I'm not the one who's got to live in

it.

“You’re telling me. Before we meet this guy, there’s something you should know.” Tag turns off the truck and tucks the long strands of his blonde hair behind his ear. “I might have told the realtor you were my wife.”

“You what?” I screech the question, my brows drawing together as I stare at him in disbelief.

“My wife.” He flinches like I’m going to slap him again, and I should.

This is the opposite direction of where we were going. Silly me thought we had an adult discussion and agreed to stick with our ground rules. Well, really there was only one rule. To build a friendly, but professional relationship, mutually beneficial for all parties, and don’t fucking break it with sex and complications. We agreed.

And yet here he is with a sledgehammer.

“I have a good reason, I promise,” Tag says.

“Well?”

“Some of the sellers are pretty specific about who they want to sell to. A few of them were very clear: families only. Of course, those were Chloe’s favorites.” He turns his body toward me, pouting and giving me those damn puppy dog eyes. I can see right through his little sad face, but I get his reasoning. Doesn’t mean I don’t still want to smack him.

He could have at least been honest with me as soon as he found out about these stipulations. I’m a reasonable person. At least I think I am.

Chloe’s carved out a big soft spot in my heart, and I know I would do almost anything to keep that girl happy, which is why I’ll suck it up and pretend to be his wife for today.

Today only.

He better hope he finds his house, or he’ll be on his own.

“No kissing.” I point a finger at his chest. This favor will not be an excuse to backslide on our arrangement. Not if I have anything to say about it.

Tag smirks, his gaze falling to my mouth momentarily before he nods. I push away the tingle in my lips, the ache building up between my legs *again*, and force myself out of the truck, meeting Tag by the hood.

Real Estate Agent Tim is a middle-aged, tall, and slender man with slicked back blonde hair. As he sees us approach, he pockets his phone and puts on a big, welcoming smile, making his way across the driveway with his hand extended. “Mr. and Mrs. Harris, it’s so nice to meet the both of you. I’m Tim, and I’ll be showing you around today. How are you doing this fine

morning?”

I shake his hand and hike the strap of my purse high on my shoulder. “I’m good, but—”

“But excited to see these houses.” Tag glances over, that smirk returning to his face. “The wife’s been talking about this non-stop since I called you.”

Tim’s eyes light up before he turns toward the house and makes his way to the front door. “Well, don’t let me slow you down. Let’s take a look at this beauty. She’s got six bedrooms and nine bathrooms, a gorgeous chef’s kitchen and a fully finished basement with a game room and movie theater.”

Aside from my parents, who needs nine bathrooms? Ridiculous. I give Tag a look, and I can tell he agrees, but he places a hand on my lower back and guides me forward.

“After you, Mrs. Harris,” he chuckles.

I suppress the shiver elicited by his touch and instead glare at the offending hand before stalking to the house. “Try to keep up, Mr. Harris.”

The inside looks as grand as the outside—antique fixtures, marble fireplaces and countertops, and lots of dark wood. Too much for my taste, but I won’t be the one living here, and judging by the scowl on Tag’s face, neither will he.

I head through the formal dining room and into the large open kitchen, trailing my fingers along the rich brown cabinets. “Are these solid wood?”

“Everything in here is hand-crafted and top-of-the-line.” Tim knocks on the face of the cabinet for emphasis, and I resist the urge to roll my eyes. I’m sure he says this about every house. Whatever brings him the commission and pads that bottom line.

As he continues to tell us about the top-of-the-line appliances and the top-of-the-line flooring, I decide to have a little fun. With the both of them.

“Is there a bidet in the master suite? My dearest husband prefers them over toilet paper.”

Tag gives me a deer in the headlights look as I smile sweetly at him and bat my eyes, but his lips quickly curl into a smirk and I know he’s about to retaliate.

“A removable showerhead is also a must.” He comes up beside me, pressing a soft kiss to the side of my head. “My wife likes to indulge when I’m out of town for games.”

“I... uh... well...” Tim looks between us several times, his cheeks stained with a faint blush, before clearing his throat and shoving his hands in

his front pockets. “Well, yes. The shower in the master has several shower heads. There’s even a jacuzzi-style tub with multiple jets you... er... might like. I do believe there is a bidet, but we can verify when we get upstairs.”

We trail after him, winding through the first floor, and back to the grand staircase. He lists off various statistics about the house and the neighborhood, but they go in one ear and out the other.

As we trudge up the stairs, Tag nudges me with his hip before snagging my hand and bringing it up to his lips. They’re soft as they brush over the skin on the back and again on my palm. My stomach dips. My core clenches. My entire hand tingles with his touch.

I struggle to advance to the next stair without rubbing myself against him like a cat in heat.

Or worse, begging him to take me on the uncomfortable slats of the staircase and drive into me. Realtor be damned.

Instead, I take a deep breath, which does nothing to tame the fire burning within me, and put one foot in front of the other. We follow Tim to the master bathroom, where we discover a shiny white bidet and several removable showerheads. Well, I’ll be damned.

“That was cute,” Tag steps in front of me and whispers in my ear, his breath warming the side of my neck and tickling the hairs on the back of my neck. “I don’t think the realtor knew what to do when you asked him about the bidet.”

“Not as good as yours. The look on his face when you mentioned the removable showerheads was priceless. I’m sure couples who talk about anal waterboarding and shower masturbation are not the norm.”

Tag chuckles and shakes his head. “I’m not sure what I’m going to do with you.”

“Whatever it is that loving husbands do when they appreciate their wives doin’ them a favor, I imagine,” I reply, letting my drawl pour over him as I look up at him through my lashes.

Tag chuckles again, this time running his lips along the column of my neck before whispering. “I’d love to, but we agreed we wouldn’t do those things again so I can’t show you how *extra* appreciative I am.”

Sweet Lord Almighty it’s hot in this bathroom. Needing some fresh air and some distance, I slip past him and make my way for the front door.

The next three houses are much of the same. Big. Extravagant. Full of rich, dark colors and over-the-top fixtures. None of them have a bidet, Tim

made sure to check, and only one other place has removable showerheads.

It isn't a great showing for the Harris power couple.

By the time we leave the last one, we're all a little disappointed with the house hunting. Chloe's favorites, even though they have pools, just aren't right. That is, until we pull into the curved driveway of the last house.

It's more of a modern-style farmhouse, white with splashes of navy for color and reclaimed wood accents. There were wide, tall windows that let in plenty of light. The open floor plan features a kitchen with light, two-tone cabinets and bright white countertops. Everything from the subway tile backsplash to the stainless-steel appliances is beautiful, and I can't keep the smile off my face.

I glance over at Tag and find him watching me as I test the automatic closing drawers and cabinets.

"I'm easily amused." I shrug. "What do you think?"

He pushes off the wall at the far end of the kitchen and saunters toward me, trailing his hand across the tops of my shoulders and leaning down to whisper in my ear. "I'm more concerned with what you think."

"It doesn't matter what I think." I turn to face him, leaning back against the counter. "You're the one who's gotta live here."

"I think it matters a lot."

His fingertips brush against mine as he takes my hand in his and pulls me away from my perch. "Let's check out this bathroom while Tim is distracted with his phone call."

I nod, desire coiling a knot in my stomach, as his fingers lace with mine. His hand feels so large, yet he's so gentle. His thumb swipes small circles over my knuckles before he catches Tim's attention, and points to the rear corner of the house.

His grip is firm as he leads us through the living room, down a short hallway and through the master bedroom.

"Look at that, a bidet." He whistles.

"Lucky you," I laugh, unthreading our fingers and taking a large step away from Tag. "No more wiping your ass. I know how big a chore that is for someone of your magnitude."

"I'm glad people are finally seeing it. I've worked hard for years to finally arrive."

"Not sure if I'll ever arrive. Not while my dad is in charge of my life."

Hadn't meant for that to pop out, but now that it did, I can't take it back.

Tag has enough problems without worrying about mine. Although, it's not as much of a problem as it is an obligation. To Daddy. To his company. To this life I was born into.

Tag's brows draw together, and he takes a small step toward me. "You don't have to let him run your life. Can't you do your own thing like Lucy?"

I sigh and glance at the floor before meeting his gaze. "It's because Lucy did her own thing that I'm stuck. With no other brothers or sisters, he's counting on me to take over the company when he retires. It's important to the both of us that it stays in the family. Plus, Lucy lost a lot of financial support from my parents when she decided to pursue public relations. I can't afford to live without a paycheck or a trust fund that I don't have access to until I'm thirty."

"But is it something that will make you happy?"

I'm not sure if anyone but Lucy ever cared enough to ask me if investment banking is something that would make me happy. Most people just assume it would because of who my father is, and no one else seems to care. They see me fulfilling my duty to my family and having a good life provided for me.

And it would be a good life. Financial security. Job security. A guaranteed promotion. A 401K. More likely than not, a nice, well-bred man to settle down with, who would vaguely tolerate me, our three kids, and a dog. No doubt he'd be as dull as the job. And there's the niggling fact that I'll never be able to forget that I don't really deserve this career. Sure, I've worked hard, but if it weren't for my genetics, I'd be passed over for someone more qualified. Someone who loves it. Because while it would be a good life, it would be a lackluster one. And I never would have picked it for myself.

I take a step back, sit on the edge of the tub and lean forward, resting my elbows on my thighs. "I don't know. There're a lot of positives about working for Daddy. I'm not sure I'll ever feel like I earned my position though. My work hasn't, and will never be, judged based on my merit. If I'm honest, I find the whole job boring."

"What would you do if you weren't working for your dad?" Tag sits down next to me, his long legs stretching across the bathroom floor.

"I think that was always the plan and Daddy knows best. I'd hate to disappoint him after everything he's done for me. But there was one thing I really liked doing, although I'm not sure how practical it is as a career."

“Does it involve being a nanny for an extremely talented and sexy professional hockey player?” He nudges me as his lips curve in a wide smile and he winks.

I toss my head back and laugh. “Hardly. You’re not nearly as charming as you think you are.”

“I beg to differ, but we can agree to disagree. So, what is it you liked doing?”

“You won’t laugh?”

He draws an ‘x’ across the left side of his chest before extending his pinky. “Cross my heart. Do you need me to pinky swear too?”

I slap his hand away with a chuckle. “Unnecessary. I actually planned weddings for two of my sorority sisters. It was the most fun I ever had while working. Maybe it was all the sparkle, the glitz, and the glam from my childhood... I don’t know. It never felt like work for me, even when the girls got a little bridezilla.” I pause and look at the ground, anything to avoid his gaze. “You probably think it’s stupid.”

“I would never judge you for wanting to follow your dream. No matter how much glitter is involved.” Tag runs his fingertips along my jaw and turns my head toward his before resting his hand against the side of my neck. “You deserve to be happy.” He pauses for a moment, and his eyes flash. “You deserve everything, Elle.”

My breath catches in my throat and my lips part as his soft amber gaze flicks between my eyes and my lips. The air around us thickens and I inch closer, closing some of the space between us. Somehow it still feels as if he’s too far away.

His thumb strokes my cheek. My core clenches, my nipples harden, and my hands grip the outside seam of my dark blue jeans to keep from reaching out and touching him.

I’ve got a little over six weeks to keep it together, which is why I’m most definitely not staring at his lips and wishing he would close the rest of the gap between us. I’m not thinking about our night together where I lost myself in the throes of passion as his hard cock slid inside me and his tongue lapped at my breasts. How he had me begging him to fuck me harder. Faster.

Nope. Not thinking about that.

My tongue darts out, wetting my lips and he tracks its movement. His eyes darken and his hand runs along my neck to dive into my hair and pull. The delicious sting on the back of my scalp has me shifting along the tub’s

edge, clenching my thighs to abate the inferno rising inside me.

He lowers his head, our lips almost touching as he stares into my eyes. I'm frozen. My heart's racing. My stomach's flipping. My nails are digging into my pants. The pain is the only thing grounding me.

His fist tightening in my hair is the single warning I get before his lips touch softly against mine. The kiss is surprisingly chaste, but the gentle touch makes me feel more exposed than if I were sprawled out beneath him. Brick by brick, I can feel my resolve fading away until there's nothing left. Except Tag. And me. His lips slant over mine, drinking me in. They're soft and careful and I whimper against them, needing him to deepen the kiss. Wanting more. Wanting everything.

My fists loosen and inch toward him. The hand not wrapped in my hair bumps into mine and he winds our fingers together. Our night together was full of passion; two strangers using each other for pleasure, taking what we needed.

This feels different. This *is* different. I'm burning for his touch, drowning in his soft kisses and strong hands. He's holding back, teasing us both, and I don't think I'm the only one wishing for more.

"Hey guys." Real Estate Agent Tim bounds into the room like a golden retriever, and Tag and I jump apart like two horny teens caught making out on the couch. His smile is wide and completely oblivious to the moment he just... ruined? Saved? "I see you found the bidet. Did you get a chance to check out those removable showerheads?"

No, Real Estate Agent Tim, I did not get a chance to check out the damn shower heads. I was sliding down a very slippery slope I had no intention of going near and I think I'm still falling, but thanks for asking.

Thank the Lord, this is the last house. I'm not sure I can take another minute pretending to be Tag's wife. It's dangerous; not because it's wrong, but because it feels so damned right. It makes me think maybe, someday, I could be his. I could be with him. Be his person. We could work to be better people together. Better people for each other.

I could see myself turning this place into a home, coming here every day after work, making us dinner and snuggling next to him, resting my head on his chest every night as we fell asleep.

It's not that it's hard to convince Tim that this façade is real. It's hard to convince myself that it never will be.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TAG

DESPITE HOW STUPID SHE THOUGHT SHE LOOKED IN THE UNIFORM, CHLOE HAD a great first day at her new school. She made several friends, including her latest bestie, Brittany, who I had to hear all about, and who she is currently texting on my phone. Apparently, all the cool girls in the class have their own phones, and if I want her to fit in with her new crew then I'll get her one too.

It'll be here tomorrow.

Which is great because I don't need one of those assholes I play with to send me a message laced with obscenities, or a picture that wouldn't be kid appropriate. Something that happens almost every day, since Owen and Ian both have my phone number, and they both act like they're about thirteen.

"So, how were your classes?" I look over at Chloe expectantly, trying to break the silence that has filled the room since Elle went back to Lucy's. Or rather since Elle ran back to Lucy's.

Not that I blame her.

She was very clear when she told me the physical line was something we shouldn't cross again. She was also very clear when she agreed to be my fake wife as long as there would be no kissing.

Of course, my ass got a steam roller and flattened that stipulation before the day was out.

I don't know what I was thinking.

Correction—I wasn't thinking.

I was running on pure instinct, and when she had talked about her dad and opened up about what she wanted to do with her life—what she truly wanted to do—she looked so vulnerable all I wanted to do was... comfort her? Protect her? Be there for her?

That doesn't sound like me. But with her, things feel different.

I tried to resist, I really did. But like a moth to a flame, I felt myself drawn to her. Like there was this invisible tether between us that tightened, pulling us together. I was as powerless to stop it as I was the first night we met. Only this time, there's more behind it all. She means more.

But more has never been in the cards for me, and it never will be. I need to shut this relationship down; give us both the distance we need to reset. Ignore this feeling in my gut that tells me she's something special because I already fucking know it, and she's going to be special for someone else. It will never be me.

I clear my throat, trying again to catch Chloe's attention, needing very much to stop thinking about Elle. "Did you like any of your teachers?"

"They're okay." She offers me a quick glance before her eyes dart back to the phone.

"The classes or the teachers?"

"Both."

"I put in an offer on a house." I stretch back on the couch, rest my feet on the coffee table and wave my hand between her and the phone screen. I'm on the verge of jumping up and down in front of her like a lunatic to break her focus on that phone.

She doesn't bother lifting her gaze to respond. "Which one? One of the ones I liked?"

"It has a pretty backyard."

"And a pool?" Her little fingers fly across the screen as it dings several times in succession.

"It might."

There's actually a pretty big pool with an attached spa, not that I'm going to tell her all that while her nose is glued to the phone, and she's only half paying attention. Nor am I going to specify which house, because it's not one she's seen, and I'd like it to be a surprise.

Elle too. I might have let her believe I was putting in an offer on the first house instead of the last. She tried to look casual and remain neutral through the tour of homes, but her whole demeanor changed on the last one. It was my favorite too.

I could tell that Elle agreed with me that the other ones were too fancy. Too stuffy. Too uncomfortable. Lucky for me, with a cash offer over the asking price, the sellers accepted immediately and are allowing me to move

in next week while we wait for all the final paperwork.

“Alright, off the phone.” I snatch it out of her hands after several more messages come through.

She finally makes eye contact with me only to roll her eyes before she puts her hand out. “I thought you said I could call Mom.”

My stomach lurches as I remember my promise this morning. Shit. This is going to be hard.

“I said we would talk about your mom tonight.” I turn toward her, giving her my full attention. I don’t want to keep lying and giving her false hope. Her mom is likely not coming back. I’m not sure if I’ll ever see her again. It’ll be easy, right? Like ripping off a band aid. It’ll only sting for a few minutes. “Chloe, I’m not sure if your mom is planning on coming back.”

Chloe stiffens, her eyes suddenly filling with unshed tears. “What do you mean, you don’t know if she’s coming back? Of course she’s coming back.”

I hang my head and take a deep breath, searching for the courage to tell her the truth. To rip apart her world so I can try to hold it together. I’m not sure if my arms are big enough. I’m not sure I’m that strong, that I’ll say the right thing. Is there a right thing? I’m not sure I can make anything right, but I have to try.

“You remember that note your mom left me when she dropped you off?” I watch as she gives me a small nod, swiping the backs of her hands over her eyes. “I’m sorry, honey, she said she was moving and was leaving you with me.”

“No, you’re lying! My mom would never leave me. She loves me too much.” She leaps from the couch, the tears streaming down her cheeks ignored as she holds her hand back out to me. “Let me call her. She’ll answer for me.”

This girl’s about to break my heart. I’ve called Finley so many times and it always ends the same. But I can’t tell her that.

Who am I to deny her the opportunity to try to connect with her mother?

Reluctantly, I pass over my phone and seconds later hear the same recorded message, ‘The phone number you are calling is no longer in service.’ Her face falls and she snuffles before trying the number again.

And again.

After hearing the same message several times, the phone slips from her fingers and lands on the floor with a thud. Her head raises and her eyes meet mine. They’re full of a sadness no kid her age should have to feel. I swear I

will do everything I can to protect this little girl, including telling my sister to take a hike if she ever sets a foot back in Nashville. Finley doesn't deserve to be a part of this girl's life, not after making her feel like this.

I open my arms, wrapping them around her as her head rests on my shoulder. Her body shakes with sobs, and I close my eyes trying to keep my own tears at bay. I don't know what to do or what I can say to make it better. I'm not sure if anything can make it better.

So, I just hold her. For minutes. Hours. I'll stay right here and hold her however long she needs me to, to let her know that not everyone has left her. She still has her uncle, and I'm not going anywhere.

Eventually, Chloe pulls back, her eyes red and puffy, and her lip quivers as she sniffs and wipes her nose across her shirt sleeve. "I'm sure Mom just forgot her phone charger." Another sniff. "Or dropped it in the bathtub again. I bet she doesn't have a bag of rice. She'll call soon, I know she will."

I run a hand through my hair, not sure how to get this conversation on track and cursing myself for telling Elle to head home for the night. She'd know the right thing to say. She always seems to know the right thing to say to make Chloe feel better.

Clearly, I was in denial when I thought we were moving in the right direction, accepting or at least acknowledging her mom left. She still thinks her mom walks on water. A flash of resentment runs through me. Finley does not deserve the faith this child has in her. She's done nothing to earn it.

"Honey," I reach for her, but she steps just out of my grasp. "I don't think your mom has any plans to return to Tennessee."

Her hands make little fists at her sides, and she stomps her feet. "Stop saying that."

"Chloe—"

"She's coming back. She always comes back!"

Before I can open my mouth to utter another word, she spins on her heel and storms off to her room, slamming the door behind her. That could have gone infinitely better. I botched that conversation like I'm sure I'll fuck up everything else.

Again, I'm reminded I'm not cut out for this. To be her guardian. To be in charge. To be her dad.

Fuck.

I'm not ready to be a dad.

My own dad didn't even want anything to do with me. I was an accident.

A catastrophic mistake. The one thing that could ruin the perfect family he built. As a kid, I romanticized the idea of a father, imagined that wherever he was, he loved me. I made excuses for his absence. He was too busy. Too important. He needed to be away from me, away from his family. Not much different from what Chloe is doing now for her mom.

Finley did hang around for a handful of years. I guess that gives her an advantage over the man who was little more than a sperm donor to me. The man who refused to have any contact with me, starting from birth.

I sigh, wiping both hands down my face before collapsing back on the couch and palming my phone. Elle is guaranteed to have some good advice, but after getting closer all day while she pretended to be my wife—not to mention crossing the line and kissing her in the bathroom—we both need some space.

I need some space.

That rules her out.

Bringing up Linc's contact, my finger hovers over the call button. I don't want to suck him into my problems, but he did seem disappointed that I've never asked him for help before. Plus, his nosey ass will probably be knocking on the door soon anyway. I'm sure he heard Chloe's raised voice and her epic door slam. Really, I'm saving the guy a trip.

Linc answers on the third ring. "Well, hey there."

"Hope I didn't catch you at a bad time." My free hand rubs the back of my neck, squeezing the tense muscles but doing nothing to loosen them.

"Not at all. Jazz left a little bit ago and I've been watching LA absolutely spank Missouri. What's up? How did the house hunting go?"

"Good, actually. Found one I really like and put in an offer. It took less than ten minutes for the couple to accept."

Linc chuckles. "I'm sure you made them an offer they couldn't refuse."

"Of course I did, and they're letting me move in early because I'm such a nice guy."

"Must mean they didn't meet you yet."

"Ha. Ha. Ha," I deadpan, shifting the phone to my other ear.

"Sounds like things are coming together." Linc pauses for a moment. "I can't believe you're actually getting a house before me. Look at you, being a grown up."

A grown up, but not by choice. No one asked me if I wanted to give up my perfect playboy ways and independent lifestyle to become a single parent.

No more bars, parties, girls whose names didn't matter. Not for me. Instead, my nights will be spent watching cartoons and snake shows, trying not to burn dinner, and telling bedtime stories.

"You there?" Linc sounds tentative, like he's not sure what to say.

I don't like it.

I don't want Linc to walk on eggshells around me. He knows most of my fucked-up story anyway, might as well give him a little bit more. He'll either listen and we'll talk it through, or he'll run for the hills sooner than expected.

"Yeah..." I clear my throat. "So listen. What if I'm not cut out to be a dad? What if I'm no good at this?"

Linc makes a humming noise, like he's a fucking professor contemplating the meaning of life. "I think the fact that you're questioning yourself means you're doing better than you think you are. Not everyone is born ready to be a parent. It takes hard work, commitment, and patience. You're not always going to get it right on the first try. With you, maybe not even the second."

"Oh, fuck off."

"Does this have anything to do with the door slam?"

I sigh, running my hand through my hair several times. "I told Chloe her mom wasn't coming back."

"Shit. I take it that didn't go over well."

"Like a lead balloon. I'm sure I didn't say the right thing. I don't know."

"Do you need me to come over?" The concern in his voice is palpable, but getting some of this off my chest has made me feel better. "We can watch this game and act surprised when LA wins."

"Nah, it's okay. I think I'm going to head to bed soon."

"I'll see you tomorrow then. And Tag? You're doing the right things. She'll see that."

"Thanks, man."

I stare at the phone after disconnecting the call. I do feel a little more confident about tonight's blowout. He's right. I'm trying. I want to do the right things and be there for Chloe. I've had days to process my feelings about Finley's betrayal, and Chloe's barely had thirty minutes. Time will help her adjust and heal.

Time and me, because as much as I'm not ready to be a dad, I'm not going to give up on her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ELLE

Me: How did 'the talk' go? Is she devastated?

Tag you're it: As well as you think. She was crushed. And then she yelled at me and stomped away.

Me: Wait until she's a teenager.

Tag you're it: It gets worse????

Me: <eye rolling emoji> Have you ever met a teenage girl?

Tag you're it: Dear God...

MY THUMBS ARE POISED AND READY TO LET TAG KNOW ALL ABOUT THE drama he gets to experience with a teenage girl in the house when I feel the weight of Lucy's stare settle on me from the driver's seat.

Which must mean we're at the distillery, and I didn't notice.

Dang it, I'm already sucked in more than I thought I would be. What the hell am I doing? I'm letting Tag consume me. My thoughts. My damn dreams that were doing fine before he came along.

Even my time with my sister.

Fake husband or not, this is getting to be too much. He's too much. He's big and imposing and impossibly charming and... nope, not going there. Not after kissing him in front of God and Real Estate Agent Tim.

Stupid. That's what I am. I should have never let that happen. His wonderfully soft lips should've stayed far away on the other side of the bathroom. I didn't need to feel his desire, his yearning, as he brushed his lips against mine. I sure as hell didn't need to feel the same way.

The phone buzzes a few more times, and without looking at the screen, I turn it to silent and stuff it in my purse. Chloe should be in bed by now, and

Tag is a big boy. He can handle himself.

It would be an innocent thought if my brain didn't instantly connect it with an image of him handling... himself; something I personally witnessed during our night together. The way he held his hardened length in his fist, so strong, so sure as he pumped himself. With every movement of his hand, his eyes remained fixed on me. Drinking me up.

I turn to Lucy, a wide smile plastered on my face. "Oh, look, the distillery. That was fast. This place must be close to your place."

Lucy scrutinizes me and I squirm under her narrowed gaze. "How would you know? You've been glued to your phone since you left the house. How is Tag? Good?"

Busted.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I unbuckle the seatbelt and hustle out of the car. We need a new subject, and fast, before I do something I'll regret. Like telling my sister about the kiss that shouldn't have happened, but that I liked far too much. "Come on, Lucy, it sounds like the band's already gotten started. I hope there are some free tables."

"Don't you worry about that." Lucy rounds the car and links her arm with mine. "I have a connection."

"Why am I not surprised?"

Lucy seems to know someone everywhere she goes. It doesn't escape my notice that most of the connections are male. Although if her popularity gets me a nice table at the Sinful Gentlemen, I'm not going to complain.

"How sinful are these gentlemen?" My eyes sweep over the large bar area. There's a cover band playing the magnificent Dolly Parton on a small stage in the corner of the room. They don't compare to the real thing—nothing compares to Dolly—but they're pretty decent. The bricked far wall provides the perfect contrast to the huge bar made from reclaimed wood. It's gorgeous.

Lucy purses her lips and looks around before a smile takes over her face. "You're about to find out."

I follow her line of sight and holy whiskey gods. This is one of the owners? Now I know why she had such a big smile. He's tall, lean, and gorgeous. His blonde hair is pulled back into a bun, and as his smile tugs his lips, the dimples framing his mouth make an appearance.

A couple weeks ago, I may have paused to really appreciate this man. Instead, I notice how his arms aren't as bulky as Tag's, how his hair doesn't

make me itch to run my fingers through it, how his smile does nothing to warm my insides...

His eyes take in the both of us: Lucy first, of course, wearing a light pink floral maxi dress, and then me, in my flowing red dress. Between his smirk and the mischievous look on his face, I'd guess this guy's a huge flirt.

"Hey there, Lucy." He wraps her up in a tight hug, lifting her off the ground and planting a loud kiss on her cheek. "I've missed you these past couple of weeks."

She pats his shoulder to put her down, her cheeks turning a shade of pink just a little darker than her dress. "Hudson, this is my sister Elle. Elle, this is Hudson. He and his brother own this wonderful place and make the best whiskey in town."

"That's a bold compliment, but I accept." He wraps his arm around her waist and gives it a squeeze before extending his hand to me for a quick handshake. "Nice to meet you, Elle. Any sister of Lucy's is welcome here anytime."

"Thank you very much." I gesture to the bar behind us. "This place really is beautiful."

"Not as beautiful as the two of you."

Hit the nail in the head, looks like I was right about Hudson being a huge flirt. And Lucy is eating it up like jellybeans, which happen to be her favorite type of candy. Hudson and Lucy link arms and he leads us to a table that's a little off to the side with a great view of the stage and easy access to the bar.

"I knew you'd pull through with the best table in the joint." She talks loud enough to be heard over the music and leans over, squeezing his toned, but not very muscular bicep.

He gives us both a wink. "Anything for my favorite customer. How 'bout I bring you ladies some smashes?"

"What's in a smash?" I quirk a brow before searching the table for a menu.

"Trust me." Lucy lays a hand across my forearm. "These are to die for."

I nod. If Lucy says they're good, then I trust her. Plus, being here on Whiskey Wednesday seems pointless if you're not going to drink the whiskey.

"So, what's going on with Tag tonight?" Lucy takes a seat next to me and whisper-yells in my ear. "Seemed like you two were having an intense conversation on the way here."

I shake my head. “It’s nothing. He had a tough night with Chloe. They finally talked about her mom not coming back.”

“Wow.” Her eyes open wide. “I hope she’s doing okay.”

“It sounds like she has some stuff to work out. She was pretty upset.”

“I imagine it was quite the shock.”

I nod. Part of me didn’t want to leave Tag’s apartment earlier because I knew the conversation was going to leave both of them upset. The other half of me knew better. Knew it wasn’t my place to get involved in their deep conversations. Not my place to soothe Chloe and tell her everything is going to work out. And certainly not my place to be there for Tag.

After our kiss earlier, I don’t trust myself to be alone with him. Not right now. Not while the memory of how his lips felt sliding against mine while he fisted my hair is still so fresh.

“The band is good,” I say, hoping to change the subject.

“You know I’m a sucker for Dolly,” Lucy replies, graciously accepting the new topic. “Did you know there’s an entire theme park in Tennessee devoted to all things Dolly?”

“I didn’t. Have you been?”

She frowns. “Not yet. I’ve been so busy, but I want to go. Maybe in a couple months.”

Hudson reappears, highball glasses in both hands filled with an orange liquid and a couple of sliced peaches. “These are a little something I’ve been messing around with. They’re peach and thyme.”

“I can’t wait to try it. It looks delicious.” Lucy takes the drinks from his outstretched hands and places mine in front of me before pulling him between us and whispering in his ear.

I take a quick sip and am pleasantly surprised. I’m not usually a big whiskey drinker, but this is light, refreshing, and sweet, with a bit of a bite.

A quick glance in my sister’s direction tells me she’s still in a deep conversation with Hudson, so while Lucy is occupied, I slip my phone out of my purse and bring up the messages from Tag. Seeing his name flash across my screen has me grinning like an idiot and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.

Tag you’re it: Don’t let me keep you. I hope you have fun with Lucy tonight.

Tag you’re it: I’ll see you tomorrow.

Tag you're it: Actually, one more thing. Would you have any interest in bringing Chloe to the game on Saturday and watching me play?

Tag you're it: I know a guy who can get you really good seats.

Me: I'd love to see you play in person. I've never been to a live hockey game.

Tag you're it: You're in for a real treat. Are you having a good time?

Me: Yeah, Lucy took me to the Sinful Gentlemen. Live music and good company.

Tag you're it: Those brothers are trouble. You should keep your distance.

Me: I've only met one and he's only been friendly.

Tag you're it: How friendly? <frowning face emoji> I know how you get in bars.

Me: <rolling on the floor laughing emoji> I assure you, nothing like that.

Tag you're it: It's not you I don't trust. It's them.

Me: Hudson seems way more involved with my sister than anything I'm doing.

Tag you're it: Text me when you get home. Let me know you're safe.

After sliding the phone back in my purse, I take a sip of my drink. A large one. It's so easy to read into a text like that. To think he meant more. He's just being a good friend, and more than likely, misdirecting some of his new dad vibes my way.

Dad vibes, not to be confused with Daddy vibes. I shiver as the thought slams into me. Daddy vibes would involve a spanking, and more hair pulling, and my breathless confession that I've been a bad girl. Tag would be so fucking good at those vibes. Not that I've thought about playing that game with him. Not at all.

Besides, he was just being a friend, nothing more.

Just a concerned friend.

Nothing special. Nothing to dwell on.

So why can't I stop thinking about it?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TAG

I PULL MY JERSEY OVER MY PADS AND RUN MY DAMP PALMS DOWN THE FRONT of my breezers. Sitting down on the bench outside my locker, my leg bounces up and down. There's this pent-up energy inside me, and I'm not sure what to do with it. I haven't been this nervous since, well, since my first game in the big leagues.

Theoretically, I have nothing to worry about. No *real* reason to be nervous.

I'm healthy. I make millions every year playing a sport I love.

While I'm still walking on eggshells around Chloe, she seems to be doing better. She hasn't mentioned her mom since our blowup three days ago, and I'm not sure if it's a good thing or a bad one. I'm still a bit leery, but she's returned to her normal, happy self. She's covered my fridge with hand-drawn snakes, and the four of us—Leo included—have been watching nature documentaries after dinner every day.

Then there's Elle. The girl with the biggest heart and the most gorgeous ass. After crossing the line and kissing her in the bathroom, I thought things would be awkward. I was ready for a fight, and at the very least, a scolding. But when she showed up at the apartment the next day, it was like it never happened.

Except it makes me wonder if something did happen with the sinful assholes. Maybe one of them got handsy at the bar and made her forget about our kiss. If I find out that one of them so much as laid a hand on her, I'll march down there myself and shove this hockey stick straight up their asses.

Well, maybe after the game, because Elle and Chloe are here to see me play.

Right now, they're waiting in the arena, sitting in *my* seats, and waiting for the team to take the ice. I should be happy about that. I know I should be. But I can't shake the unease that's wrapping itself around me.

"Dude," Linc sits beside me and places a hand on my knee, halting my movement. "You're making everyone nervous with this leg shit."

I blow out a breath and pitch forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "Sorry."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

It's an automatic response at this point. No one usually calls me on my bullshit. I assume they're relieved they don't have to deep dive and talk about someone other than themselves.

"Are you actually fine, or Tag's version of fine, which means the opposite?" He leans forward, mimicking my stance.

No one except Linc.

I chuckle and shake my head. "I knew I shouldn't have told you fuckers anything."

"Well, you did. What's going on?"

I shake my head again, not sure how to explain something so trivial. "It's stupid. Chloe and Elle are here. I know it shouldn't mean anything. It's just..."

It's fucking everything, and I don't know how to say it or what to do about it. My entire career—hell, my entire life—has been a shitshow when it came to family, people being there for me. It's a world I'm not familiar with, and knowing Elle and Chloe showed up and they're here for me is another level of surreal I can't wrap my head around.

Which I know is fucking sad. I've watched my teammates for years, their parents, brothers, sisters, wives, and girlfriends coming to the games. Cheering them on. Watching every play, every pass. Being that face in the crowd they look for when they make a goal.

It's something I've wanted since I started playing peewee hockey.

And now that they're here... I don't... I don't even know how to handle it.

"Just?" Linc looks at me expectantly and waves his hands for me to continue.

"I've never had anyone come to a game before. Not anyone who actually matters."

Linc's brows pull together. "Your mom? Your sister?"

"Uh, nope." I run my hands through my hair as heat creeps up my neck. I might as well glue a big fat 'L' to my forehead, so everyone knows what a loser I am.

"That's fucked." Foster flops down on my other side, clearly eavesdropping.

"I don't recall inviting you to this conversation."

"I don't recall caring."

Linc holds up a hand, hushing us. "Because I'm the captain, I feel like it's my job to say this one thing and then we're playing some fucking hockey." He pauses and puts a hand on my shoulder. "It doesn't matter if you play the best game of your life or the shittiest. They're here because they care about you. Not your money. Not your fame. And certainly not the underwear ad you did two years ago."

As much as I hate to admit it, he might be right. Chloe won't care if I miss a shot. Elle doesn't even know what's going on half the game. And even if she did, she wouldn't care if I missed a pass or a shot went wide. Her investment isn't in the game, it's in me.

Her pretend husband who kisses her in other people's bathrooms.

He's only half right though; if I know Elle as well as I think I do, she would care about the underwear ad. In fact, I might have some pictures in the apartment I could casually leave on the kitchen counter for her to find.

"Hey," I protest, shaking his hand off me. "I looked good. Your mom said so."

"My mom is a depraved woman and must be losing her mind. You get what I'm trying to say, asshole?"

I nod. "I won't stoop to your level and call you names, but yes. Not that it matters, because we are going to fuck the Oilers up."

And we are. It's a fact. They're a decent team, but we're better. Everyone in this room knows it. I'm sure the Oilers know it too.

"And after we win this game," Foster smiles at us, "I'm going to send Lincoln's mom a picture of me in my skivvies."

My shoulders bounce up and down as I hang my head and laugh. I laugh until my belly hurts. I laugh until Foster joins in, and Linc looks at us both like we've lost our minds.

After a couple rounds of manly backslaps and a few more jabs at Lincoln's mom, we fall in line and shuffle out to the ice. I get into step

behind the Bruiser Brothers, who've been suspiciously absent lately in our social circle.

"Where the fuck have you guys been?" I ask, as I tap Owen on the back with my stick.

He turns around with the biggest shit-eating grin on his face. "Did you miss me, you surly fucker? I'm sorry my absence has left a void in your heart, but we've been otherwise engaged."

"Otherwise engaged?" I roll my eyes. This ought to be rich.

"You remember those Russian twins from that fundraiser?"

I'd only met the twins briefly, and from what I can recall, they weren't that memorable. They weren't at all my type. No curves, expensive taste, noses stuck in the air. The event, however, was a different story. It was unforgettable. It was where, on a whim, I auctioned myself off to a rather dashing businessman named Roderick.

He wasn't my type either, but we did have a tantalizing conversation where his hand wandered to my backside—several times.

I suppress a shiver.

I still owe him a date.

"Vaguely. I don't remember much about them. Foster and I were too busy trying to stop Linc from making a fool of himself."

"Lot of good that did," Ian snorted.

"Anyway," Owen interrupted his brother, elbowing him in the side. "Back to the girls. Did I mention they're twins?"

"Yeah. You said that once or twice." I roll my eyes again, letting my sarcasm shine on through.

"They were only in the States for a couple weeks. Let's just say Ian and I made their trip very memorable."

"Is that code for giving them herpes?" Foster asks as he skates past.

I shake my head and laugh, thumping Owen on the shoulder a few times.

"Not cool, man," Owen scowls after Foster.

"Not cool," his brother echoes.

I chuckle again, following them on the ice. The beat of the music thumps in time with the beating of my heart. The crowd's going wild, cheering for us as we circle the rink; faceless people chanting my name, chanting for the team. It's the same as it is every game... except it feels different.

It is different.

Closing in on the players' benches, I look to the right, through the sea of

faceless people, and see why it's different. It's finally my turn to have someone here for me. To cheer me on. To watch me play.

Chloe's never looked happier. Her face lights up as she jumps up and down, waving at me with both hands. I wave back. A smile I can't get rid of sails its way across my face. I sneak a glance to Elle and my heart skips a beat. Her cheeks are flushed, her hair's pulled up in a high ponytail, and I've never seen her look more beautiful. Of course, it could be related to her attire.

My girls are decked out in my jersey, and they have my full attention as they both turn around, displaying my name and number on the back. I hadn't seen them get ready for the game, so it's a surprise. I can't help the stirring of possessiveness that flows through me.

My girls.

I want nothing more than to shout it from the rooftops, let everyone know Elle belongs to me and every other swinging dick better back off. And that thought scares me, so I push it deep down, to the dark recess of my mind, and tell myself I won't dwell on it. Elle is certainly not mine—not even close. She's only here for a short time, and then she goes back to her real life.

One that doesn't have Chloe or me in it. Where she'll go back to working for her dad, find herself some fucking boring accountant who will marry her and give her all the babies she wants.

As much as it pisses me off, that can never be me. I'm not a family man, and happy endings don't exist. Not if you're a Harris.

But still, as I watch her tighten her ponytail and smooth her hands down her fitted blue jeans, I can't help but wonder if she'd be offended if I asked her to wear a uniform while she's watching Chloe. She may not ever be mine, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't like to see her in my jersey every day.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ELLE

AT THE SOUND OF THE FINAL BUZZER, CHLOE THROWS HER ARMS UP, PUMPING them both in the air. “Oh, yeah. We won. We won. Take that Dallas. In your face!”

“Chloe!” I reach over, capturing her hand in mine and doing my best to look horrified, even though I want to join her in the celebration. “There are sore losers and sore winners.”

She turns to me, her face scrunched. “What’s a sore winner?”

“It’s someone who makes the people that lost feel bad, someone who goes over the top about winning.”

“Like that guy?”

My gaze follows her pointed finger, and I bite back one of my mom’s favorite phrases, *It’s not nice to point*. But also, I need this in my life. There’s a grown ass man pounding on the glass, pointing at the Oilers and shouting out some very choice phrases. It’s important to note he’s also dressed in a full devil costume. Tail. Horns. And an entire spandex outfit with a jersey over the top. It’s not Tag’s, thank God. It says Craig across the back.

“Yes.” I nod, returning her gaze, holding back the laughter threatening to bubble over. It’s hard being a good example all the time. “Exactly like that.”

“He looks silly.”

I bite my bottom lip, throwing another glance back over to the devil man. “He looks very silly. Do you think Uncle Tag would look good with horns and a tail?”

Chloe cocks her head to the side and taps her lips with an index finger. “Maybe not the horns. But I think he could pull off the tail.”

You could almost call that thing in his pants a tail.

I'm going to Hell. No doubt about it.

"You ready to go meet the players?" I take her hand and give it a squeeze. "Lucy said she would meet us back by the locker rooms."

Chloe nods and practically pulls me toward the aisle. "Yep! I can't wait to tell Uncle Tag how great he played."

Nine-year-olds tend to exaggerate. Greatly. In this case, though, she's one hundred percent correct. I had a fair amount of trouble keeping up with the game because it ran at such a fast pace, but even I could tell Tag played a great game. Maybe that was because my eyes were glued to him every time he took the ice, but I think that's just a happy coincidence. Tag seemed to be involved in every scoring play, either shooting or assisting. I may not have caught much else while I was staring him down, but I figure those were the most important parts.

Chloe and I wind our way around the arena, weaving through the crowds and trying to follow Lucy's directions. After taking a wrong turn and a detour to the lady's room, we reach the locker room doors.

There's already a small crowd of people gathered outside, a few parents and maybe some siblings, but most of them are women. Desperate women dressed to the nines for a freaking hockey game. Stilettos, miniskirts and jerseys that looked like they were picked from the kids' section. It's a wonder some of them aren't freezing to death with how little clothing they have on.

Puck bunnies, not much different from the punt bunnies who hung out around the football locker rooms. Perfect makeup, perfect hair, perfectly fake.

Bunnies were inevitable when there were athletes, but I couldn't imagine trying to sleep with someone just because of their status, hoping your relationship with a player boosted your reputation. In my experience, at least half of them would be social influencers, and banging an athlete was a sure way to boost your following.

As the players trickle out, the bunnies wander over, running their hands all over them. Up their arms, over their shoulders. Some of the bolder ones stroke their hands down their chests and abs, occasionally brushing their enhanced breasts on them. Chloe's occupied on her phone, which she pulled out the minute we stopped walking, so luckily she doesn't have to witness any of this mess as some of the guys return the bunnies' affection.

But what if this mess is her life? Now that she was living with Tag, would she be weaving through crowds of puck bunnies throughout her teens?

I have no idea what Tag did before we met, but I can take a wild guess

and say he wasn't celibate. A bolt of jealousy shoots down my spine and straight through my heart. How many of these girls have been with him? When I leave, is he just going to scoop up one of these women to hang out with Chloe? Maybe someone without quite so many curves?

"There you are." Lucy sneaks up and hugs me from behind. I know she has no idea, but she got here just in time.

I was close to going over to the bunnies and making a fool of myself. Of course, I have no right to make a fool of myself. I'm helping Tag out. We're not a couple. We're not anything. I'm leaving soon, and when I do, he'll move on with his life and forget all about little old me.

I'll be some girl he used to know.

Someone forgettable.

Chloe pockets her phone and gives Lucy a tight hug. "Did you see the game? Did you see Uncle Tag scoring?"

"I did." She claps her hands together. "He played so well."

"Elle still doesn't know where the puck is half the time." Chloe throws me a sly look before covering her mouth with a hand and giggling.

I shrug. "It's a fast game."

Chloe cups her mouth and whisper-yells, "I think she was watching Uncle Tag instead."

"Shush, I was not."

Yeah, I know I'm a dirty liar, but I don't need this little girl spilling the beans to my sister. As it is, she's already watching me with her brows raised. Knowing Lucy, she's reading way too much into that seemingly innocent statement. I don't need her asking me any more about Tag or our lack of relationship. I have no answers and nothing to say.

"There he is." Chloe jumps up and down, tugging on my hand.

My head snaps up as Tag slips through the locker room door, followed by Linc and another man. Our eyes meet and my stomach flips as his lips curve into a boyish grin.

He's wearing one of his game day suits, and looking that good should be illegal. This one's navy with a crisp white shirt and a burgundy tie with white flamingos. Chloe helped pick it out. I'm not sure who started the tradition of the game day suit, but I'm torn between wanting to shake their hand and push them into a big pile of mud.

His long hair is still damp and tied back from his face, and I want nothing more than to let it loose and run my hands through it.

I'm just lifting my hand to wave when he's intercepted by a brunette with long tan legs, a pair of booty shorts, and more makeup than Bozo the clown. I suck in a deep breath as she wraps an arm around his shoulders and pulls him down to whisper in his ear. My feet are rooted to the floor, my hands curl into fists at my side, and my teeth grind together. He whispers something back to her, puts a hand around her waist, and moves her aside. As he continues his trek toward us, the brunette watches him with a coy smile on her face, rubbing her fingers back and forth over her bottom lip.

What did he say to her? Did he promise to meet up with her later tonight? Did he invite her back to his apartment after Chloe falls asleep?

Lucy bumps me with her hip, catching me off guard and I lurch to the side before catching myself. Before I can utter some choice words, she gives me a pointed look. "I'd almost think you're jealous. But that can't be right because you said there was nothing going on."

"There *is* nothing going on," I grind out.

"Doesn't look like it to me," Lucy says in a sing-song voice.

What it looks like is that he has something going on with Miss Whorey Long Legs. Or at least, he will. That look on her face is nothing but the promise of a good time, and with the number of dicks I'm sure have been in her mouth, I bet she can deliver.

So therefore, I will not look at Tag as he makes his way to us. I will not notice how good he looks in the navy suit, how it compliments his amber eyes and blonde hair. I won't swoon as he drops his bag, kneels down, and sweeps Chloe into a big hug. I certainly will not melt into him as he wraps me in his arms and presses a kiss to my temple.

And I will definitely not inhale his woodsy scent that wraps around me tighter than his arms.

"You played such a good game." Chloe turns to me and tugs on my hand. "Didn't he, Elle?"

I clear my throat, pushing down the jealousy threatening to bubble over. I offer him a forced smile. "He sure did."

Tag narrows his eyes, giving me a questioning look. Before he can open his mouth to say anything, Lincoln tosses his bag down next to Tag's. "Hey guys. I'm so glad you could make it to the game. Chloe, Elle, it's so nice to see you both again."

"Elle? As in Lucy's infamous sister?" The third man who'd come out with Tag and Lincoln throws his arm around Tag's shoulders and peers down

at me, his eyes twinkle and a wide smile stretches across his face.

If there's anyone who should give up sports and model for a living, it's this guy. Perfect bone structure, perfect shaggy blonde hair, perfectly toned body. And that British accent—damn. If I weren't already sure I was on board the Tag Train, I am now. This guy should be making me drool everywhere, but there's not a hint of moisture in sight. Not a single belly-flip. No clenches in the ol' lady core. Nothing.

My body has betrayed me for this... this... player, who'd rather spend his night with some leggy brunette.

"That's me. Lucy's infamous little sister." I smile, channeling my inner Southern belle as I bat my eyes ever so slightly, letting my drawl loose. I'm pleased as punch when Tag's eyes narrow on me once again. "And who might you be?"

"Nobody." Tag pushes him away with a growl.

After shoving Tag back, he meets my eyes, grabs my hand, and places a light kiss across my knuckles. "Foster Craig at your service, love. If you ever free yourself from this wanker," he nods at Tag whose jaw tightens and nostrils flare, "give me a call. I'm sure I can show you a good time."

My eyes flick to Tag for a moment before falling back on Foster. "Of that I have little doubt."

"Alright, Romeo, let's go. Nice to see you all again. Tag, we'll see you tomorrow." Linc grabs Foster by the shoulders and steers him down the hallway.

Tag stands still for a moment, glaring at Foster's retreating back. His jaw clenches and his hands fist at his sides as Foster's laugh sounds down the corridor.

Lucy dances over, squeezes me in a tight hug and whispers in my ear, "Don't think I didn't notice that or how jealous he was." She pulls away and fiddles with the strap of her purse. "I'll see you later on tonight."

Tonight? Wait... what? Tag's done with his game, there's absolutely no reason for me to go home with him and Chloe. The last thing I want to do is pass Miss Whorey Long Legs on her way in to slide down Tag's bean pole. Nope. Don't want to do it.

"I can go home with you now."

Tag's gaze snaps to mine. "Are you sure? I was hoping you'd want to come back with us, order pizza and watch a movie. Apparently, there's a killer snake in *The Jungle Book*."

“His name is Kaa.” Chloe smiles.

I can’t help flicking my eyes to the brunette. “I don’t want to intrude on your plans later.”

“Later?” His brows draw together before recognition lights up his face and his lips tilt in a smirk. “I have no plans later. The only person I want to spend time with is you. And Chloe.”

“And Leo,” Cloe interjects.

“And Leo.”

Lucy claps her hands together. “That’s my cue. You guys have a good night.”

After hugging Chloe, Lucy takes off in the same direction as Lincoln and Foster, leaving me with no choice but to go home with Tag. Not that I don’t want to go home with him. I *don’t* don’t want to go home with him.

Tag holds out his hand. “Come home with us?”

“I... What about the brunette?”

“I told her I wasn’t interested.” He grabs my hand, sliding his thumb over my knuckles. “There’s only one girl I see, and I’m selfish. I want you all to myself.”

This time I do allow myself to melt into his touch, but only a little. How could I not when he says shit like that? Regular Tag is potent enough. If he’s going to get all poetic on me, I don’t stand a chance.

I let him pull me closer as he picks up his gear bag and links our fingers together. Chloe’s hand slips into my other one and we walk to the player lot, toward his truck, and a very risky place for my heart.

One night with Tag wasn’t enough. Not nearly enough. And as his hand squeezes mine and a boyish grin plasters on his face, I’m not sure if every night would be enough.

Especially with my inevitable departure.

I can’t expect him to be selfish enough to want me to stay.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ELLE

I SPENT THE FIRST HALF OF THE MOVIE PLASTERED TO THE SIDE OF THE COUCH, doing anything and everything in my power to keep even the slightest amount of distance between Tag and me. As it is, if he shifted the teeniest bit closer, I'd be in his lap. Not that it's necessarily his fault, Chloe is stretched across most of the couch, curled in a blanket with Leo and using Tag's leg as a backrest for her pillow.

She gasps and holds up Leo to make sure he can see the movie as Mowgli runs off to check on the elephants after they make a rather loud ruckus. Tag shifts, his thigh brushing against mine, and his arms stretch along the back of the couch. My vision tunnels and *The Jungle Book* fades into the background.

I lean back, maybe not even an inch, daring myself to drift back into his fingers, to feel them in my hair, caressing my shoulder, gliding down my neck. His arm is mere centimeters away. I'm still wearing his jersey, but it's two sizes too big, and it droops low on my shoulder. I can feel the heat from his hand across my upper back.

What I wouldn't give to have him pull me closer, to put his arm around me and hold me to his chest. Let me breathe in his scent and drown in him for just a few minutes. Just enough to hold me over until I need another fix.

One more centimeter. A little bit closer.

The tips of his fingers brush the back of my exposed shoulder blade ever so lightly. My skin buzzes, the butterflies in my stomach are wreaking havoc on my libido, and I feel like I'm back in high school about to lose my virginity.

Another sweep of his fingers, and I have to bite back a moan. I didn't know the shoulder was directly connected to the clit. If it's not, I'm pretty

sure mine is wired wrong because every graze, every time his hand comes into contact with me, feels like he's strumming that bundle of nerves and working me into a frenzy.

One more and I think this man is trying to kill me. This time, the tips of his fingers flutter across my skin, caressing down my shoulder and snaking just below the neck of the jersey. This is no accident. Those fingers are moving with a purpose and that purpose is to drive me so mad with need I fall to the floor, crawl between his legs and beg him for an orgasm. How he delivers it can be up to him.

My heart is thumping so loud, I'm half convinced Tag and Chloe won't be able to hear the movie.

I wiggle my hips. Cross my legs. Uncross my legs. Cross them again.

Nothing is easing this ache between my legs. There's nothing to slake the desire taking over my body and turning me into a wanton mess. A tangle of hormones. An addict of penis. A slave to my arousal.

I nearly jump out of my skin as Tag leans down. His nose skims the lobe of my ear and he whispers, "I'll be right back."

He slides off the couch, bends over and picks up a sleeping Chloe, cradling her to his chest. My cheeks heat realizing I missed the entire end of the movie. I was in my own world long enough for Chloe to fall asleep. I'm a horrible person.

Step after step, my eyes are glued to his arms as they bunch under Chloe's body to prevent her from jostling too much, and then they move down to his ass as he walks down the hall and disappears into her room. After wiping the unladylike drool from my mouth, I look down and see poor Leo the snake lying all by himself on the abandoned couch pillow.

Can't have that.

Chloe loves this damn stuffed snake so much. I'm not sure if it's something from her mom, but she carries it almost everywhere.

Snake in hand, I push off the couch and meet Tag at the threshold of her room. He stops, his hand coming up to trace my lower lip and the line of my jaw. His touch is... everything, and I melt into it. His amber gaze holds mine, his lips part, his chest heaves as he closes the distance between us.

I bring up my hand to lay it on his chest. He stops, his eyes drilling into mine in confusion. It takes me a minute to remember why I'm standing here; why I exposed myself this way. Leo. The damned snake. The freaking snake brought me to the brink of disaster when I need to rein myself in and charge

out that front door before either one of us makes a mistake we can't come back from.

Being with Tag the first time was unforgettable. Being with him now might break me.

"Here." I hold out Leo and take a step back. "You left the snake."

"Thanks." His hand covers mine, engulfing it in his heat, as he grabs for the stuffed animal. His fingers brush mine as he takes it from my hand. Energy zaps between us, heating up my body, and the air grows thick around us. He glances back, tosses the snake on the bed with a sleeping Chloe, and closes her door.

Now we're alone in the hallway, and he's holding my gaze once again. "Elle."

The strangled way he says my name lets me know I'm not the only one affected, but still, for every step he takes toward me, I take one back. I back up until I hit the wall and can't go anywhere. His arms cage me in on either side. He leans down, runs his nose through my hair and inhales.

"Elle." This time my name is barely a whisper on his lips.

"Tag... I..." Even as the words come out, even as I'm trying to leave, my hands wander to his hips and up his abs, tracing the grooves carved in his body. "I should go."

"Stay." His gaze captures mine, his eyes holding me prisoner.

I swallow past the lump in my throat. "I can't. I shouldn't."

"Elle. Stay."

I open my mouth for another weak protest but what comes out is a whimper. His woody scent of sandalwood and exotic spices wraps around me, consumes me, and my legs weaken.

His face lowers. His hands cup both sides of my face, tilting it back. My hands fist in his shirt and my eyes flutter closed. Every protest I had in my head is forgotten when his lips graze mine. He's gentle at first, but then his grip on my face tightens and he sinks into me.

My mouth parts and his tongue slips in, caressing mine in long slow sweeps. He tilts my head, takes the kiss deeper. He sucks my tongue into his mouth and groans against my lips as he rocks his hips into me, pressing his rigid erection to my lower belly. My core flutters and clenches and I'm dizzy. Overwhelmed by his touch, his smell, his taste.

Tag is everything, and I want to be everything for him. I want him to want me as much as I want him. But, of course, it's then that I remember the

leggy brunette. My stomach lurches unpleasantly, and I pull back.

His thumbs stroke my cheeks as he peers down at me, searching my face with his penetrating gaze. “Do you want me to walk away? Do you not want this?”

“I... well...” My chest heaves under the weight of his stare, and I curse myself for allowing this wayward thought to eat away at this moment. “The girl at the stadium. The bunny. Have you...? Are you still...?”

I wouldn’t blame him one bit for saying yes. I know he said he wasn’t interested in her, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t others. He and I are nothing, no matter how much my heart may want something different. My head knows the truth.

“There’s no one else, Elle. Not since you.” Tag rests his forehead to mine and runs his hands down my neck and around the curve of my shoulders. “The only woman I see, the only woman I want to see, is you. It’s always you.”

“Tag,” I breathe out, sweeping a hand around his neck and running it through his hair.

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. We can go back and watch a grown-up movie. We can—”

I don’t need him to finish, and I most certainly don’t let him finish. Instead, I rise to my tiptoes and crash my mouth to his. This kiss isn’t the slow, sensual dance from before. This kiss is heated, passionate. This kiss works us into a frenzy that has him fisting my hair and my pelvis grinding against him, desperate for him to fill me up and send me over the edge of release.

Tag’s hands slide down my back where they grab my ass and lift me off the floor. My legs go around his waist, and he grinds into me, rubbing his denim-covered cock against my clit. I lean my head back and moan as he breaks the kiss, trailing his lips along my jaw and sucking my ear into his mouth.

“Shhhh,” he whispers against my neck. “You don’t want to wake up Chloe.”

Chloe. Of course. I can’t believe I let that slip my mind. “Should we—”

“Go to my room and shut the door? Yes.”

I bite on my bottom lip to keep from moaning again as Tag squeezes the cheeks of my ass, pulling me along the ridge of his erection. “Yes. Your room.”

His lips find mine in a chaste kiss before he walks us back to his room, closing the door quietly and locking it behind us. A few steps more and he's lowering me to the bed. He pushes me further up on the mattress and then climbs along my body only to lower himself on top of it. His hands caress my sides as he buries his nose in the hair behind my ear and inhales.

"You really like my hair, don't you?" I giggle.

He inhales again and kisses along my neck. "I really do. I can't get enough. I can't get enough of you."

He's going to make it real difficult to fight these feelings if he keeps telling me these sweet things. Seeing him with Chloe was already enough to melt my heart. And now, knowing that he can't get enough of me... that the only woman he sees is me... I'm not sure I stand a chance.

Along with whatever he's about to do with his hands which are coasting up the sides of my thighs. They circle my waist, and he shifts his weight, sliding down my body as he peels my jeans off me.

"Perfect," he murmurs as he kisses his way from my knee to the lacy edge of my panties. "You're fucking perfect, Elle."

I shift on the bed. The heat from his lips is so close to where I need them. That combined with his praise, releases moisture between my thighs.

He smiles up at me as he touches me, seemingly happy to find me so wet for him. And God, I'm wet and getting wetter. His fingers dance across the lace of my panties as he circles my clit through the thin fabric. My hips lift off the bed, desperately chasing the contact.

"You'll get what you need, sugar." Tag presses his other hand to my belly and pins me to the mattress. He peers up at me with a smile lingering on his face. "Eventually."

I suck in a breath as he licks over the lace, small flicks around my clit, teasing, tempting, but not giving me the pressure I crave. "Tag, please."

"You need me closer, sugar?" Slowly, almost painfully so, he shimmies the thong down my legs and tosses it behind him before raking his eyes over my exposed sex. "Fucking perfect."

Working his way back up my body, he shoves my legs open, settling between my thighs. I gasp and my hands curl into his sheets as he licks along my seam, working me with his tongue, spearing it in and out of me at a controlled pace. My heart is beating so hard I'm afraid it may burst out of my chest. He brings his mouth to my clit, swirling his tongue in tight circles; flicking it, pinching it between his teeth and then sucking it into his mouth.

He's lapping at me, driving me crazy, every lick and nibble and suck sending me closer to orgasm, but he keeps his touches light enough that I never go over the edge.

My hips work off the bed again, lifting, grinding into his face, taking the pressure he refuses to give. He slides a finger inside me, and I cry out before slapping a hand over my mouth.

"I told you to be quiet." He lifts his head from between my legs, but his finger stays inside me, sliding in and out of my pussy, thrusting in at each word. "Do you know what happens to girls who break the rules?"

I shake my head, thrashing it across the mattress. I don't know what he does to rule breakers, but I desperately want to find out. If it involves any part of his body touching any part of my body, I'm here for it.

His finger withdraws from my wet heat, and before I can protest the loss, his hands grip my hips, and I'm face down on the mattress before I even realize what's happening.

"Hands locked together above your head, sugar."

For a second, I debate a sassy retort, but the slight edge in his voice has me doing what I'm told.

"Good girl. Now get on your knees."

Don't have to tell me twice.

I hear the crack before my brain registers the sting as his hand strikes my ass. A muffled cry escapes before I can hold it in, which might be another point against me. Soon, the sting settles into a pleasurable throb and I push back, leaning into him, almost enticing him for another.

As if he's reading my thoughts, his palm connects with my other ass cheek and I let out a quiet moan, arching into his palm as he kneads my sensitive flesh.

"I love seeing my marks on you." His lips brush over the tingling skin. "Lets me think no one else will ever touch you again. Lets me think I'm the only man who gets the pleasure of coloring your pretty skin. Lets me think you're mine."

My body trembles under his touch. Lord help me, but I want those things too. I don't want to move on, find someone else. I don't want anyone else's hands on my body. I want to be Tag's in every way.

I want him to take me. Possess me. Pleasure me. Hold me. Caress me. I want everything.

And that scares me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TAG

I'M NOT SURE WHERE THAT CAME FROM, BUT I CAN'T TAKE IT BACK. I DON'T want to take it back. I've never truly wanted to make someone mine, but I do with Elle. And in a perfect world, I'd give myself to her.

This isn't the perfect world, and I can't give her a happy ending. But I can give her this. I can give her tonight and every night she'll let me be with her until she leaves.

Because she will.

But I'll do everything in my power to make sure she has some damn good memories of her time here. Of me.

"Turn around." If I keep staring at my pink handprints on her fair skin, I'm likely to come in my pants. As it is, I'm having a hard time controlling myself. I always do around her. She flips over without hesitation, and I reach behind me, gather my shirt in one hand and peel it off my body. Her baby blue eyes rake over my abs and chest. "Eyes up here, sugar."

A pretty pink blush crawls up her neck and covers her cheeks as she lifts her head to meet my gaze. "Sorry, not sorry."

I chuckle, working the button of my jeans and pushing them, along with my boxer briefs, to the floor. My erection springs free, bobbing to my stomach and as Elle licks her lips, it throbs. I'd like nothing more than to feed her my cock, hold her in place while I fuck that pretty mouth of hers, but not tonight.

Tonight, I want to feel her. I want to lose myself in her scent and her tight body. I want to feel her shatter around me. And then—fuck me—I want to hold her while she sleeps.

I grip my cock in a tight fist and pump my hand from balls to tip. She

licks her lips, looking up at me in my fucking jersey, begging for me to take her. Begging for me to mark her as mine again. Unable to wait any longer, I climb on top of her. Inching my way up her body, I kiss along the exposed flesh of her legs and abdomen, and then lift up the jersey and drag it off of her.

Her tits are even better than I remembered. Full, rounded, and perky, covered in a scandalous amount of purple lace. Has she been wearing this skimpy lingerie underneath all her sweaters and leggings? God, I hope so.

I'll undress her at the end of every day to find out. But right now, it has to go.

As if she could read my thoughts, her back bows off the bed, and not only does that bring those luscious breasts close to my mouth, it gives me room to reach behind her and unclasp what's in my way.

Throwing her bra behind me, I mold her breasts in my hands, plucking at her hardened nipples with my fingers, sucking them into my mouth and teasing them with my tongue.

Elle shifts beneath me, stifling her moans behind the palm of her hand. She's restless. Desperate. But so am I. My balls ache with the need to bury myself in her body, to brand her on the inside just like I did on the outside.

I rise up and sweep my lips across hers before invading her mouth with my tongue, exploring every nook and cranny. Her hands are on my back, in my hair, tugging my hips and gliding herself along my erection. I groan as she rakes her nails down my back, digging them into my shoulder blades.

"Shhhh." She kisses along my jaw and nibbles at my neck. "Remember, we have to be quiet. I'd hate to have to punish you."

"You do punish me. Every minute I'm not inside you is a punishment."

This time she doesn't contain her groan. "Tag. Please. I need you."

"Hold on." I stretch my arm out, reaching toward my nightstand. "Let me get a condom."

She clutches my hair, forcing me back to her. "I'm on birth control and I got tested after Derek."

I pause. "I'm clean too... wait. Are you saying what I think you're saying? Are you sure?"

It isn't my birthday, but sliding into Elle without anything between us might be the best gift I've ever had. I've never been bare with a woman before, and Elle is the first one in my adult life I've let get close to me. That I've gotten close to as well. The thought of being with her, with no barriers,

feels right in a way I can't explain.

"Only if you are." Her gaze lowers and she looks away like she's embarrassed by her admission. "I trust you."

I lift her chin, my eyes meeting hers, and run my hand down her neck, holding it gently, caressing my fingers along her throat.

My hips settle between her thighs, and I nudge her entrance with the head of my dick. She lets out a soft sigh as I enter her, slowly pushing into her channel. She's so tight. So unbelievably wet. Her hands grip my shoulders as I start to move, taking short, measured strokes in and out of her.

She whimpers and arches against me, trying to get me to take her deeper. Fuck her faster. But I resist. I keep the slow pace, wanting to draw this out and wanting her to be something more than a quick fuck.

I bottom out in her sweet pussy and rub her clit with my pelvis. Her hand fists in my hair, pulling it enough to sting, and her eyes flutter closed.

"Eyes on me, sugar." I change the angle, keeping the same slow tempo, but taking her deeper, making my strokes longer. "I want to see you when you come undone. I want you to see how badly you destroy me."

That plump bottom lip of hers gets sucked in her mouth and she bites down on it as I swirl my hips. Her walls flutter around me and a tingle shoots down my spine. I'm getting close, but I'm going to make damn sure I'm not coming alone.

I reach between us, rubbing her clit with my fingers, rolling it between them and pinching lightly. I fuck her a little faster, maintaining my deep strokes. My name is a whisper on her lips.

Her blue eyes are so soft, so soulful, I'm drowning in them.

I'm drowning in her.

Her pussy clenches and quivers. I give her clit another squeeze and she pulses around me, gripping me so tightly it's tipping me over the edge. My balls tighten as I thrust into her once more. And then one last time before my hips buck, I groan her name, and empty inside her.

We still, her eyes search mine and I frame her face with my hands, pressing my lips to hers. I brush her mouth with shallow kisses until my heart rate slows and I feel like I can breathe again. I pull back and peer down at her, brushing the back of my hand along the side of her face. She's so fucking beautiful sprawled out in my bed, taking my cock, and filled with my cum. I barely resist the urge to pull out and paint her with it, marking her as mine in yet another way. I want to stand over her, beat my chest and let all those

other fuckers know Elle is mine and mine alone. No one else can have her. Not like this. Not ever.

If I had my way, I'd keep her here forever. Just like this. Naked, satisfied, impaled with my cock.

But I'll settle with right now.

"Wow, Tag, that was... that was something else." A lazy smile tugs at her lips and she loops her arms around my neck. "I didn't know you could go slow."

"I didn't know I could either." And that's the truth. It's always been hard and fast, never wanting to linger. But this almost felt like making—nope, not going there.

I bury my nose in her hair, taking a deep breath of vanilla and jasmine before angling my hips and easing from her warmth. After the both of us clean up in the bathroom, I climb back in bed and she stands at the foot, an arm covering her breasts, searching the floor.

"What is it you're doing?"

"Don't you think I should go?"

"Elle, you have two options." I unfold the covers next to me and pat the bed. "Either you get in here on your own, or I'm going to get up and haul your ass back to bed. Either way, you're not leaving here tonight."

"Well, when you put it that way."

She slips into bed and pulls the covers over us as I lay on my back. I draw her to me, her head and hand resting on my chest while I wrap my arm around her, stroking a hand through her blonde hair and down her back.

"What about Chloe... in the morning? I don't want her to get confused." Elle presses a light kiss above my heart.

"I can set the alarm to make sure we get up before her. No problem."

"And don't forget, I'm leaving tomorrow night to spend Thanksgiving week with my parents." She shudders and I pull her closer.

"It honestly completely slipped my mind. Either that or I was in denial."

It was definitely denial. I know she's got a deadline looming over her head. Ticking down the clock like Cinderella, except instead of midnight, she vanishes on New Year's Eve. Only there will be no glass slipper for me. No hunt. No chase. She'll simply be gone.

So, no, I'm not ready for her to go home for Thanksgiving, even if it makes me the most selfish person on Earth. Her parents get her for the rest of her life and my time with her is so limited.

“When are you planning on coming back?” I press a kiss to the top of her head.

“My parents have some benefit thing at the end of the week, so I’ll be back Friday morning. And don’t worry about Chloe; Lucy will be here for your practice on Monday and your game on Tuesday.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do without you.”

And I don’t, but that’s a problem for a different day.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ELLE

AS I EXIT THE CAB AND WALK UP THE PATH TO MY PARENTS SPRAWLING HOME, I can't help but think back to this morning. Waking up early, cocooned in Tag's arms, I felt a rightness I'm not sure I've ever felt before. I was warm, safe, and secure. It felt like I could stay there forever. We made love twice more last night. And I say love because it was slow and sensual. Nothing hurried. No frenzy. It was deeper than fucking. Even "sex" seems too shallow a word to describe the connection between us.

Needless to say, when I woke up this morning feeling like I'd found home in his arms, I bolted. I did the safe thing before either one of us read too much into the situation. It was a good night. A great night. But that's all it was.

Nothing more, nothing less.

I can't expect him to have actual feelings for me, especially after only spending a few weeks together.

And I'm sure what I feel for him is nothing more than attraction and mutual respect. Like I mutually respect the four orgasms he gave me last night. And the cuddling. Very mutually respectful.

But as I walk into the grand foyer of my parents' riverfront home, I feel like I've been transported to a different world, and I wish I'd stayed in Tennessee in the safety of Tag's arms. His apartment, while small and simple, is far more comfortable. I'm not afraid to lean back on the sofa and prop my feet up—something I wouldn't dare to do in front of my mother. She would be appalled if I even sat on one of her hard-as-a-rock, imported couches.

Everything in my parents' estate has one purpose—to flaunt their wealth

in the most pretentious way possible, even if that means creating a very oppressive, stifling environment.

“Elle, honey.” My mother waltzes into the room, her long white dress billowing around her while her heels click against the Italian marble. Her blonde hair, a shade lighter than mine, is gathered in a perfectly coiffed chignon at the base of her head. She kisses each of my cheeks before placing her hands on my shoulders and pushing me back to assess my clothes. Her mouth pinches in the same disapproving look I’ve gotten for years. “I know you were travelling, but would it have killed you to put on a dress or some slacks? I mean, really? Jeans?”

“Sorry, Mother. I wanted to be comfortable on the plane.” I suppress a sigh. Didn’t even make it five minutes before the criticism rolled out like the red carpet.

“You can be just as comfortable in slacks and a nice blouse. Remember what I always told you about first impressions?”

Couldn’t forget if I wanted to, and believe me, I’ve tried. “Yes, Mother. You never get a second chance to make a first impression.”

“That’s right, dear, and what kind of first impression do you think you’ll make in those jeans?” She leans down, squints at my pants and successfully makes me feel like a child. “Are those holes in your knees?”

“Yes, Mother. It’s harder to find a pair of jeans without holes.”

She answers with a loud sigh, like I’ve personally offended her with my pants before her gaze flicks to the top of my head. “Oh, and your hair. It’s so flat. That Tennessee air is not doing you any favors.”

I’m sure it has nothing to do with it being in a ponytail, or sitting on an airplane for an hour and a half. The Tennessee air is the obvious guilty party.

“And your skin.” She gasps—of course my skin warrants such dramatics. “It’s so pale. So lifeless.”

Much like my hair it seems.

“What has your sister been letting you do up there? Is she not taking care of you? Of course, you can come back here sooner if you wish. I can make a call and have her send your bags right now.”

Talk about escalating quickly. “Mom” I take a deep breath, channeling my inner Zen, inner Goddess, whatever will help. “I’m fine. Lucy is takin’ good care of me. I’m havin’ a great time and I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Are you sure, dear?” She pats my cheek like I’m still a five-year-old

child. “No matter. I’ll schedule us a spa day tomorrow. That should fix you right up.”

Because there’s nothing a day at the spa can’t fix. It’s her solution for everything ranging from a stubbed toe to a broken heart. Put a little mud on your face and polish on your nails and it’ll make you a whole new woman.

“Thanks, Mom. I’m going to freshen up.” I pull my suitcase next to me for emphasis and tap on the handle, ready to be done with this conversation already and to go wash my lifeless hair. “Dinner still at six-thirty?”

“Of course. Make sure you wear one of your nicer dresses. I’ve laid out a couple of choices in case you didn’t bring anything adequate.” Her eyes flit to my suitcase and she pats my cheek again. “Your father has invited a guest for dinner. We want to make a good impression.”

“A guest? But I just got here.” I’ve got a sinking feeling I’m not going to like where this is going. There are only three types of guests my parents like to entertain. First, there are old, but classy friends from the upper echelon of Savannah’s society. They’re only invited over when there’s something new to show off. Second, there are the dreadful men who do business with Daddy; the ones who eye me when their wives aren’t looking. And third, and worst of all, there are the self-centered men who kiss Daddy’s ass and would, therefore, make great potential husbands for me. “Who is it?”

My mother’s back straightens. She runs a guilty hand over her hair. “Warren Bissette. And before you protest, because I know you will, your father thinks he’ll be a good match for you. The two of you will be well-suited.”

“Warren Bissette,” I repeat his name more for my own benefit than hers. Surely it’s not the same sniveling kid who used to come over when I was little.

“We used to be neighbors with his family.”

Damn. “That Warren? The Warren who used to rip the heads off my Barbies?”

Among other things. Because Warren had no brothers or sisters, he would come over to torment Lucy and me. He would chase us around the yard, pull our braids and push us in the mud. Then of course, we’d get in trouble for being dirty. Warren was always a troublemaker. And if I remember correctly, he used to call me Elle Smell.

Well-suited, my ass.

I haven’t kept tabs on him, but I know he’s worked for my father since

college. Another plus about working outside of Savannah; fewer run-ins with the boys who tormented me in my youth.

“He’s not the same boy you remember. And I wouldn’t be so quick to judge if I were you. He’s been extremely helpful for your daddy, and you’re twenty-five. You’re not getting any younger. If you’re not careful, your childbearing years will fly by, and you’ll be nothing more than a lonely, bitter spinster.”

Way to put things in perspective, Mother.

I shoot a wistful glance at the door, wondering if it’s too late to turn around and go back to Nashville. No one there would be talking about my shriveled ovaries.



“Speak of the devil; Elle Smell has come down to join us.” A man who I can only guess is the grown-up version of Warren Bissette claps Daddy on the back and gives me a rueful smile as soon as I step out on the back patio.

Daddy almost chokes on his brandy before forcing out a laugh. “I almost forgot about that nickname.”

I can only hope he almost forgets it again before I start working in the same building as him come January. It’s hard enough being the boss’s daughter. I already have to convince my new coworkers I wasn’t merely given the job because of my connections. Or rather, it’s not the only reason. Having the head of the company calling me Elle Smell in the hallways would be digging me a hole I’d be hard pressed to get out of.

I flick my gaze over Warren as I sit in a lounge chair on the back patio and then quickly dismiss him to inspect my nails. “I see you haven’t changed much at all.”

Not a total lie. He still has the same shaggy brown hair and dark brown eyes. While the rest of him has gotten significantly bigger, it’s nice to know he grew into his large two front teeth. They no longer take over his entire face, which, thanks to a five o’clock shadow and high cheekbones, doesn’t resemble that of a little boy.

He’s handsome in a classical sense, but dressed in a polo, khakis, and a sports coat, it’s clear he and Daddy share more than just a fondness for brandy. No doubt he’s more concerned with appearances than things that

actually matter.

“You’ll see that I’m quite grown up, Elle.” Warren smirks as he grabs his brandy snifter from the outdoor wet bar, pops open the button on his sports coat and sits down next to me. “Your father says we’ll be working closely together when you move to the Savannah branch.”

Daddy takes another sip of brandy and leans against the bar. “Warren is one of my best. He’s also the youngest senior VP I’ve ever had. I’ve asked him to show you the ropes, maybe manage some clients together until you see how things work in the big branch.”

“That sounds... nice.” Sounds like he thinks I need a babysitter for a job I did successfully on my own in Atlanta. I’m half tempted to tell him to take this job and shove it. But I would never talk that way in front of him.

I also have no other job prospects. Babysitting was something I saw myself doing when I was sixteen, not twenty-five. Plus, Tag will move on, sleep with other women, and I don’t want a front row seat. He was a playboy when I met him, and just because he’s toned it down for Chloe’s sake, doesn’t mean that part of him doesn’t exist anymore.

“Henry,” My mother calls out after opening the window separating the patio from the kitchen, “could you give me a hand?”

The minute Daddy disappears and the window to the kitchen closes, Warren turns, his gaze roaming over my navy A-line dress before falling to my bare legs. “You’re much prettier than I remember. Smell better too.”

“Gee thanks. I appreciate that.” I shift, tucking my legs against the chair and covering as much of them as possible with the hem of the dress. “Must be because you aren’t pushing me in the mud.”

“You’re sassy too. I like that in a woman.”

“It doesn’t matter to me what you like.”

“Oh, but it will.”

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If I were you, I’d have a chat with your old man before you go back for your little holiday in Tennessee. It looks like you’re not the only one he’s grooming to take over the company.” He flashes a quick smile, one that shows teeth and exposes him for the predator he is.

My spine straightens and I narrow my eyes on his pretty little face. “What do you mean that I’m not the only one? Who else is there? You?”

He chuckles and now it’s his turn to feign interest in his likely overgrown

cuticles. “You don’t think your father wants me to work with you on a strictly professional basis, do you?”

“I would assume so. Last I checked, this wasn’t the seventeen hundreds.”

“Last I checked, Daddy Dearest wasn’t so sure about turning his precious company over to a woman, even if it is his daughter.”

“Yes, well, he didn’t have any sons.”

“But he can have son-in-laws. And seeing as your sister is slumming it with a bunch of hooligans, that leaves you.”

There’s no way Daddy would actually force me to marry someone... is there? He’s tried to set me up dozens of times, but always left it up to me. And he’s always told me I’d be the one to take over once he retired. He never said anything about anyone else. Warren is obviously trying to get under my skin and unfortunately, it’s working. “You’re out of your mind.”

“Like I said,” he leans back, stretching out his legs and crossing them at his ankles, “you might want to talk with your father before you leave.”

“Oh, trust me, I plan to, and I will be making my objection to you quite clear.” I cross my arms over my chest and let out a huff.

“I look forward to proving you wrong. I hope you’re this feisty in all ventures.”

“Trust me, you’ll never find out.”

“We’ll see, Elle. We’ll see.”

Fucking gag me. If he thinks I’m letting his dick get anywhere near me, he has another thing coming. I’d rather be celibate for the rest of my life. At least I can get toys and give myself all the orgasms I want. There’s only one face I picture when I’m vibrating the hell out of my clit with the magic wand, and that’s all there’ll ever be.

No one has ever fucked me like Tag. No one’s made me feel as good, as beautiful, as taken care of. And I doubt anyone ever will.

Certainly not Warren Bissette. He seems like the kind of guy who reaches his own orgasm and then rolls over and goes to sleep. I bet he’s a two-pump chump with a micro-penis. Such a shame to waste those cheekbones on him.

“I think I hear my mother calling,” I stand up and smooth the wrinkles out of my dress. “I bet dinner’s ready.”

Without sparing Warren a glance, I walk around him and make my way inside.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Chloe: Send help.

Elle: Why? What happened?

Chloe: Uncle Tag tried to make dinner.

Elle: Oh, boy. What happened?

Chloe: <GIF of a pot on fire> He burnt everything. We're lucky to be alive. When are you coming home?

Elle: Not until the end of the week. What did he try to make?

Chloe: Grilled cheese. <eye rolling emoji> We ordered pizza.

Elle: Pizza is pretty good...

Chloe: I guess. Have you seen a sandwich look this bad? <downloading image>



Tag you're it: If Chloe texts you, don't believe a thing she says.

Ethel: What if she already did and told me how great an uncle you are?

Tag you're it: Obviously, some things she says are true. No one can argue with that. But anything else? Lies.

Ethel: So are you telling me you didn't burn dinner?

Tag you're it: That's exactly what I'm telling you.

Ethel: The photographic evidence suggests otherwise. I'm actually impressed you managed to burn both sides while also not melting the cheese.

Tag you're it: It's harder than it looks.

Ethel: Is this where I say, “That’s what she said”?

Tag you’re it: <grinning squinting face> Are things going ok with your parents?

Ethel: That depends on your definition of ok.

Tag you’re it: <frowny face> What happened?

Ethel: Well... My mother insulted my hair, outfit and skin within the first 5 seconds, then reminded me that my biological clock is ticking and I’m going to end up a spinster. So, in response, Daddy invited a man who is ‘husband material’ to dinner.

Tag you’re it: ...

Ethel: ...Too much information?

Tag you’re it: Sorry. Processing.

Tag you’re it: Is that the kind of guy you want? Someone like your dad?

Ethel: No. Too self-absorbed. Too flashy.

Tag you’re it: Don’t worry about the spinster thing. You’ll meet the perfect guy for you.

Ethel: Sure.

Ethel: Night, Tag.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

TAG

WELL, I'M A BIG IDIOT.

After the way our text conversation ended and the fact that she didn't respond to me the next day, I know Elle's mad at me, and I don't know what to say to make it better. It's been two days since I've talked to her and it's driving me crazy. I know I told her she'll meet someone perfect for her, and I wasn't lying. She's so... so fucking beautiful. And smart. Funny. Kind. There isn't a single doubt in my mind she'll find her happiness one day.

There's also no doubt in my mind that person is not me. Not in a million years. Doesn't matter how much, or how little, I want it to be.

Her text reminded me of that—as if I needed a reminder. She may say a man like her father isn't the kind of guy she wants, but I can't help but think that it is. That's exactly the kind of guy she's going to end up with, and the kind of guy who will take care of her and love her how she deserves to be loved. She's been living her whole life for her family, striving to please her dad. Aside from a paycheck, it's the only other reason she's working for his company, doing a job she hates, instead of doing something she truly loves.

Like wedding planning. When she opened up about her friend's wedding, her whole face lit up, and it doesn't do that when she talks about investment banking. Not that I blame her. That has to be boring as shit.

"Wow, you've gotten a lot done." Linc whistles after strolling through the front door.

Foster follows close behind, looking around to take in the foyer with its wide staircase and dark wood floors. "I can't get over how nice this place is. Far too nice for you, mate."

"Go fuck yourself. I can have nice things." I lead them into the living

room where Chloe and Leo are sketching on a drawing pad. With an over-the-top sigh, I sit down on my new leather sectional and drape my arms over the back, like a king in his castle.

“Dude,” Linc plops down next to me and looks around, “how much did you unpack?”

“Damn near everything.”

I’d been working almost nonstop since we moved in Monday morning to get everything unpacked and put away. Partly for Chloe. She insisted her room be set up with her new furniture as soon as we got the keys, and once that was done, she wanted to get the whole house done.

But I also did it for Elle. Even though she’s not here, I want her to walk in the first time and see the house completely put together. I want her to be impressed. At least with the house, if not with me.

And on a completely unrelated note, I found the pictures from that underwear shoot last year and have them stashed in the drawer of my nightstand.

Foster sits down on the floor in front of the coffee table next to Chloe and points to her picture. The two became fast friends on moving day. He’s got the mentality of a five-year-old, and she seems to have a little crush on the smooth-talking Brit. “What are you and Leo drawing? You making me something nice?”

Chloe giggles and flashes him the page she’s working on, a multicolored lion and cub that’s supposed to go on the fridge. “This one’s for Uncle Tag. Do you want to color with me?”

“I absolutely do.” He makes a grab for the glitter crayons, because of course he does.

I flip on the TV, settling on a recap of last night’s football game and get a small feeling of satisfaction when I see Atlanta lost, probably because they hire dirt-bags like Elle’s ex.

Linc asks me a few questions about the house which I answer, and then we fall into a comfortable silence. The two of us watch TV while Foster and Chloe drawing in her notepad. At the next commercial break, Linc pulls out his phone, presumably to text Jazz, and after a short deliberation I decide to text Elle.

She may or may not still be mad at me. Maybe if I send her a few of the pictures I snapped on moving day, I’ll get a response. So I send her a few pictures of Chloe trying to pack and move boxes from the old apartment, and

one of Chloe and I in her old room.

I put the phone down on the arm of the couch, trying not to count the seconds until it vibrates with an incoming message.

Ethel: Looks like you guys are having fun. Sorry I missed the move.

Me: Don't worry about it. I made half of the guys on the team help out.

Ethel: Are you getting settled? Does Chloe love her room?

Me: She's over the moon with her new space, and we're getting there.

How are things with your parents? Excited for Thanksgiving?

Ethel: Daddy and I have to have a heart to heart, but he's spent nearly all week at the office. Mother has ensured I'm massaged, waxed, plucked, and buffed. There was a point yesterday I felt like a Thanksgiving turkey. As for the day itself, not really looking forward to it.

Me: What? Why?

Ethel: Turns out we are going to the club for Thanksgiving dinner where we will be having pheasant, polenta, and mini vegetables.

Ethel: I'm sure it'll be good, but I wanted something more traditional, and not necessarily with a room full of strangers.

Tag: That sucks ass. If it makes you feel better, I miss you.

Ethel: I miss you too.

With a small smile, I pocket the phone and turn to Linc. "What are the chances I could find a turkey this close to Thanksgiving?"

"Huh? Turkey?" His brows furrow and his mouth quirks to the side. "You could probably find one today. You do realize there's only two days till Thursday, right?"

"Yeah, I know what day it is."

"We get the whole week off of school." Chloe closes her coloring book and puts her crayons away in a hot pink case. "Uncle Tag says you're from England where they drink tea every day."

Foster nods. "That's right. Do you know where that is?"

Chloe shrugs. "I think so. Will you have a tea party with me? I've never had one before."

"Umm," Foster glances back at us, but Linc and I feign interest in the TV. "Sure, we could all join you for tea."

"Just you, silly. Well, you and Leo. And Miss Sparklehorn. And Elsa."

Foster cranes his head around to mouth, *Miss Sparklehorn?*

My shoulders shake as I struggle to hold in my laughter. I'm not sure what a tea party entails, but I've seen them in movies, so I have an idea of what to expect. I can't wait to see if she has him wear one of her crowns or the purple feather boa she and Elle picked up on their shopping trip.

Chloe grabs Foster by the hand and pulls him to his feet. As she leads the way to the game room, Foster turns his head, silently pleading for help. His sad eyes and pursed lips only make the whole thing funnier.

"Back to business." I turn down the volume of the TV. "Let's say I'm able to find a turkey today. How do I go about cooking it?"

Linc says nothing but raises a brow as he stares at me.

"Don't be an asshole. How do I cook a turkey?"

"Well, it depends. Are you roasting it in the oven? Or deep frying?" He crosses his arms over his chest and gives me a pointed look.

I don't know the first thing about cooking, well, much of anything but I do remember Owen and Ian going on about some fried turkey they had last year. "Deep frying."

"Do you have a turkey fryer?"

He must notice the blank look on my face because he explains the difference between indoor and outdoor turkey frying. I can't say I'm a huge fan of setting my house on fire—which sounds like a good possibility—so I add an indoor fryer to my list, bringing it up to a total of two items.

"You do know you don't have to cook anything for Thursday? Jazz and Gordon are going to have everything covered. You and Chloe just have to show up."

"Which is all I'm planning on doing." I run a hand through my hair and sigh. "Elle's parents are dragging her to a country club for some fancy Thanksgiving dinner when all she really wants is something small and more traditional."

Linc sits up and smirks. "Does this mean you're going to try to make her a full turkey dinner when she gets back?"

"I mean, I was thinking about it." Heat crawls up my neck as Linc continues to examine me with that assessing gaze of his. "You know what? Maybe this was a bad idea. I couldn't even make a proper sandwich."

I push myself up from the couch but he pushes me back down before I can fully get to my feet. "I didn't say that. I think it's a good idea. It's just not very you. It's sweet."

“Fuck you, I can be sweet.”

“I guess I’m more surprised you *want* to be.”

“Elle is...” Different. She’s more. More than any other girl I’ve been with. And even though I know she’s not and will never be, I can’t help that part of me that feels like she’s mine. That she belongs with me; that I will fight every other man, including her father, to have her by my side forever. But of course, that’s ridiculous so I keep my mouth shut and give him something different instead. “She’s been so helpful with Chloe, and I want to do something nice for her.”

The lie feels dirty, and the look he’s giving me—the one that says *yeah right*—tells me he didn’t buy it anyway.

“I’m going to be a nice guy and not call you out on your bullshit today. That doesn’t mean I won’t going forward.” He gestures to the kitchen. “Am I correct to assume you don’t have anything to make sides or brine for the bird?”

“I thought you said we were frying it? Doesn’t that require oil?”

He rolls his eyes before opening his phone. “It does. But you can brine it before you fry it. Makes it better. Jazz made me look into this Pinterest app but it actually has a lot of good recipes. Download it to your phone. You two are about to become well acquainted. We’ll need to print out some recipes and make your shopping list.”

“Thanks, Linc.”

“Don’t thank me yet. There are thousands of ways you can fuck this meal up.”

“I appreciate your vote of confidence.”

We spend the next thirty minutes scrolling through hundreds of recipes for each dish, trying to find ones that sound good but aren’t too complicated. Linc is a damn saint. It’s safe to say I knew less about cooking than I thought. After searching through a few more veggie dishes, we have our completed list and head off to get the tea partiers for a trip to the grocery store.

This time, I don’t try to hide my laughter as I walk into the game room and find Foster sitting cross-legged on the floor in between an oversized unicorn and Leo, wearing not just the purple boa, but the bejeweled crown as well. Linc doubles over, holding on the doorframe, he’s laughing so hard.

Foster eyes us both, tosses the end of the boa over his shoulder and turns back to address Chloe. “Could you pass me another biscuit?”

“I’m afraid we’re going to have to break up this tea party. We need to go

to the store.”

Chloe crosses her arms and sticks out her bottom lip. “Do we have to?”

I cross my arms, mimicking her. “We do if you want to help me make a surprise Thanksgiving dinner for Elle.”

“Just the three of us?” Chloe’s arms fall to her sides, and she perks up.

“Yep.”

“Sorry, Foster.” Chloe reaches across the table and pats his hand. “I’ve got to go to the store.”

Foster pulls off the crown and sets it on the table. “It’s alright. I’ll pretend not to be crushed.”

“You can come with us. You can even wear the feather boa.”

I laugh, plucking it from around his neck and tossing it on her bed. “As much as I’d love to see Foster walking around in public with that on, I don’t want to be seen with him.”

“Oh, we would leave him in the car. No question.” Linc pushes off the door frame and helps Foster to his feet.

“Get your shoes.” I usher Chloe out the door and she takes off.

Foster flings an arm around my shoulders. “So what’s this about you making dinner for that sexy little nanny of yours?”

“She’s not the nanny, and she’s not mine.”

As we file out of the room, I swear I hear Linc mutter, *not yet*, but I ignore him. My thoughts are swimming with turkey and potatoes, and I’m not entirely sure I can pull this off. But I’m damn sure going to try.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

ELLE

I'VE BEEN TRYING TO CORNER DADDY FOR DAYS. LITERALLY DAYS. EVERY time I get within a ten-foot radius, he bolts; to the office, to an important meeting, to dinner with an important client. Even to bed because he had so many meetings. I get it, he's a busy guy, but I think we all know he's not that busy. I suspect that he overheard Warren spilling the beans at our little Sunday dinner, and that's why he's been avoiding me since.

But he can't avoid me today. Not on Thanksgiving when we're putting on our happy faces and prancing around the country club like prized fucking turkeys. Or, as I glance down at my floral dress, maybe peacock is a better word.

After putting in my diamond earrings and checking my reflection one last time, I head downstairs intent on cornering Daddy and finally having this conversation.

"There's my little girl," Daddy's voice echoes off the vaulted ceiling as I join him in the sitting room.

"I'm glad you could make it home early today." I sit down across from him and fiddle with my dress, picking up the fabric and watching it drop back down. "You've been busy this week."

"Business is booming, Sweet Pea. I'm building you an empire."

"About that." I sigh, looking up and taking in his slightly weathered skin. It must be from all the rounds of golf. "Warren said a few things that had me a little curious about my future with the company."

"You can't always believe everything you hear."

"That's true but—"

"Come on, Elle, we have a dinner to get to. We need to find your

mother.”

“So you don’t intend for me to marry Warren?”

Daddy lets out a frustrated sigh, one that he used frequently when I was younger and liked to ask questions. “Warren is a good man. He’s got good parents, a *respectable* job and a stable future.”

That last one was a direct dig at Derek. Daddy never approved of him, didn’t matter how nice he was or how many nice bottles of wine he brought on the few times we visited. Turned out he was right, though. Not that I’m going to tell him that.

“You’d do well to commit yourself to a man like him,” he continues. “Running the company is a huge responsibility for a woman.” He pauses, hopefully to pull himself out of the early seventeen hundreds. “... If she wants a family.” Maybe not.

At my withering stare, he continues, “It’s a big responsibility for anyone, really. It would serve you well to have someone who could help you run it.”

I stand, smoothing down the bottom of my dress. “Daddy, I don’t need —”

“Don’t worry, Sweet Pea, I know what you need. I’m looking out for you and your future. Now, I’m going to go find your mother.”

With a quick nod of his head, I’ve been dismissed, and after grabbing his suit jacket off the arm of the loveseat, he stalks out of the room.

Since he’s never really listened to me, I don’t think he has any idea what I need, and certainly not what I want. If he thinks I’m going to entertain the idea of marrying Warren for the sole purpose of joint company ownership, he’s got another thing coming.

Talk about a relationship with no passion. No spark. Not to mention, no respect. Maybe my father doesn’t think he needs any of those things to have a good marriage, but I do, which leads me to question how my parents got together.

I let out a heavy sigh and plop back down in the uncomfortable floral armchair. We were supposed to leave five minutes ago, so I’ve got at least another twenty-five before we actually head out. My mother’s notorious for being late; she always says it’s better to make an entrance. Apparently, it’s hard for people to notice you when you’re already sitting.

Now that I have this extra time, I can either sit here and stew in silence, or I can call Lucy and we can stew together. Seconds later, I have my phone pressed to the ear and a smile on my face as Lucy answers the phone.

“Hey, Lucy.” I pause, listening in on the chatter in the background. I totally forgot she was going over to Jazz and Gordon’s house for Thanksgiving. But now that I’ve got her on the phone, there’s no harm listening in a little closer. Not that I’m hoping to hear anyone in particular; but with all the other noise it’s hard to tell anyone apart. “Did I catch you at a bad time? I can call you back later.”

“Nonsense. Hold on a sec, I’m walking outside.”

The voices become distant, and I feel a little bad about pulling her away from the party.

“That’s better. So, did you just miss me, or were you finally able to have that little talk with Dad?”

Lucy was the first person, well, the only person I called after my double dinner date with Warren and my parents. I’d reiterated the whole ugly conversation, and while, at the time, I thought the entire situation seemed preposterous, Lucy was skeptical. She agreed that I needed to talk to Daddy, but didn’t think it would end how I hoped.

I cross my legs and shift around in the chair before springing to my feet and walking to the large window. “Oh, yeah. I just had a little chat with Daddy before he ran off to look for Mom.”

“Yeah? And?”

“And you were absolutely right. He doesn’t think I can run the company on my own. He made it very clear that I would do well to find a man who has a stable future, like Warren.”

“Uh-huh,” she says in the tone I know means *I told you so* because she’s too nice to gloat.

“And of course, he took the time to point out that Warren has a respectable job.” I pinch the bridge of my nose to ward off the impending ache building in my forehead. “I guess everyone who isn’t an investment banker, or some boring-ass businessman is dangling just above homelessness and despair. Doesn’t matter if he’s a decent guy or if he’s making millions a year doing something he loves. It’s not *respectable*.”

“Are you talking in general terms? It sounds like you might have someone specific in mind. I know it’s not Derek because he didn’t love the game, he loved the notoriety, and he doesn’t make millions.” She chuckles to herself because there’s nothing amusing about any of this.

“I was one hundred percent talking in general terms,” I mumble, fighting the urge to ask how he looks and if she’d spoken to him about me while on

Chloe duty for the week.

Her laugh carries through the phone. “Liar, liar, pants on fire. In that case, I won’t tell you how nice he looks in his dark-wash jeans and navy-blue sweater.”

“Tease.”

“So, what are you going to do about Dad? Does this mean you’re finally going to come to your senses and quit?”

I drag a hand through my hair, shaking the waves along my back. “You know I can’t do that. If I’m not there, who does the company go to?”

“Who says it has to go to either of us?” She scoffs. “If he likes that Warren guy so much, let him have it.”

“And then what will I do with my life? I can’t not work. I need money to live, Lucy.”

“I could float you until you get on your feet.” Lucy hums, something she does when she’s thinking up ideas. “You could always come and work with me. I could use the extra help.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “Daddy worked hard to build the company; it needs to stay in the family. Besides, I don’t think I’m cut out for your line of work. I’m not sure I have the patience or the desire.”

Understatement. I know I don’t have the desire. I’ve been around enough athletes to know I do not want to be the one cleaning up their messes.

“Jazz is waving me in so I have to go in a sec, but I wanted to ask, do you still have that wedding book full of ideas from when you did Elizabeth and Joy’s wedding?”

The sudden shift in conversation makes me pause. Last I checked, Lucy didn’t even have a boyfriend, let alone someone who’d be marriage material. “Something you want to tell me, sis?”

“Oh, not for me. I have some friends who need some ideas, and after I went on and on about all the things you did, they want to take a look. They need inspiration.”

A thrill works its way through me and gives me a jolt of energy. I’d love nothing more than to share my wedding ideas with someone, even if it’s just to give them to someone else. In a perfect world, I’d be able to keep them for myself, get early access to my trust, open my own business, and use them for myself. Too bad this isn’t the perfect world. This will have to do.

“Makes sense. I think I’ve got everything in a box in the closet. I can bring it back with me.”

“Perfect. I’ve got to run, but I’ll call you when I get home.” Lucy says her goodbyes and hangs up seconds before I’m beckoned to the front door because we’re almost too late to make our reservation.

I roll my eyes, grab my purse, and trudge to the front door to meet my parents for what I’m sure will be a boring dinner full of forced small talk with people who are barely acquaintances, turning what should be a small gathering for family into another pretentious display of wealth.

I guess I should get used to spending my holidays surrounded by virtual strangers. Once I take over Daddy’s company—hell, once I’m back in Savannah—this will be my life.

The monotony. The snooty attitudes. The displaced wealth. The lack of authenticity.

Daddy’s legacy and the approval of my parents, or a happy life surrounded by genuine people.

One or the other. It’s impossible to have both.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

TAG

TAP. TAP. TAP.

I squeeze my eyes shut as something or someone repeatedly pokes me. First my forehead, then my left cheek. Then my right, and now the tip of my nose. I brush it away, roll to my side and let out a groan. I fell asleep on the new couch, and while there's no spring in my back, I slept without a pillow and there's a terrible crick in my neck.

The tapping picks up again, this time my shoulder. "Uncle Tag, it's morning. You fell asleep on the couch."

"I'm up. I'm up," I mutter, opening my eyes and peering into Chloe's face, which is mere inches from mine. "Jesus, I didn't realize you were that close. What are you doing?"

"Duh. Waking you up. Elle's coming back this morning."

Which is most likely why I fell asleep on the couch. I was so stuffed after having Thanksgiving dinner with the gang that I wanted nothing more than to come home, put on some stretchy pants and fall asleep. Of course, that didn't happen. While all the energy in my arms and legs diverted to my stomach, my brain was working overtime. Worried about cooking this ambitious meal—when I've not cooked much of anything in my life—and how things will be with Elle when she comes home.

Before she left for Georgia, there was a shift in our relationship. It wasn't just sex, there was something more, and I'm not sure if it'll still be there or if we're going back to square one. I'm not sure I can handle that if that's the case. Sure, the sex is great, but I don't want only that. I want to wrap her up in my arms and hold her. Watch movies with her once Chloe's gone to bed. Have her face be the first thing I see every morning.

Or at least every morning until New Years.

I stretch out my arms and legs, testing out the limits of the couch. There's a tightness in my lower back, a kink in my neck, and I'm kicking myself for falling asleep out here.

Chloe pulls my legs from the couch and plops down. "Is Elle coming straight here? Why aren't we picking her up at the airport?"

"Lucy insisted on picking her up and bringing her here. Don't worry, it won't be long." I rub my eyes and run a hand through my hair which is sticking up in at least twenty different directions. "I need to take a quick shower. Do you want to start a movie?"

"Didn't you say we could start watching Christmas movies?"

"Technically, it's after Thanksgiving, and that's my rule. So, yes."

"Yes!" She makes a grab for the control.

With a grunt, I push to my feet and rub my lower back. "What's your first choice?"

"I don't know. I like *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. But then there's *The Grinch*—the real life one, not the cartoon. Oh, and *The Santa Clause*."

"I don't know if I've ever seen any of those."

Her eyes widen and her jaw drops. "Really? None of them?"

"Nope." I think the only holiday movie I've seen is *Die Hard*, because, you know, Bruce Willis.

"Will you watch one with me until Elle gets back here?" Her mouth closes but her bottom lip sticks out, and the way she's gazing up at me with her soft brown eyes, there's no way I can say no.

"Pick one and we can start it as soon as I get out."

She nods and I amble to the bathroom to take a quick shower. I'm washed, dried and back on the couch in no time. There's not even a second of deliberation as Chloe hits play, selecting *The Grinch*. I was a bit skeptical, but Jim Carrey knocks it out of the park. I find myself at the edge of my seat for him and that scruffy dog.

Just when the Grinch is having second thoughts, as his heart grows multiple sizes—which seems like it would be a medical issue—there's a knock at the door.

Chloe and I jump to our feet, and I take a deep, ragged breath. She beats me to the door, and even though we've talked about how her opening it is a no-no, she swings it wide open.

I falter in my steps and pause. Elle is simply breathtaking. She's wearing a burgundy, knee length, sweater dress that hugs all her curves, and a pair of black boots that cover most of her legs. She takes a few steps forward, sweeps the blonde waves over her shoulder, and crouches down to pull Chloe into a hug.

She looks up, our eyes meet, and she smiles. It's not a wide smile, but one that's softer, almost shy, and I swallow past the lump in my throat.

"Hey, Elle. I missed you so much while you were in Georgia. Did you miss me too?"

Elle nods, smoothing a hand over Chloe's head and down her back. "I did. Very much."

"Did you miss Uncle Tag?"

"I did." Her cheeks turn a shade of pink, and she releases Chloe to stand.

The two of us stand there, feet apart, staring at each other. Both of us are either afraid to make the first move, or waiting for the other person to step up.

I clear my throat to say something, what, I'm still not sure, but Chloe interjects, "You should hug him too. He was lonely while you were gone. I could tell."

I chuckle, and so does Elle. "I didn't think I was that obvious."

"You were."

"Don't you have a movie to finish?"

She squeals and runs back to the couch, leaving Elle and I to stare at each other once again. This time, I take a step forward, and then another until we're inches apart. The space between us crackles and my heart hammers in my chest.

"I did miss you," I murmur, and do what I've longed for all week. I pull her close, wrap my arms around her and bury my nose in her hair. The smell of vanilla and jasmine envelope me, filling me with calm and a sense of home I've been craving.

Her arms circle my waist and she melts into me, pressing herself into my chest and moving her hands up and down my back. I want to claim her mouth. Run my fingers along her curvy body. Bend her over the couch and flip up her dress so I can drive into her. Show her how much I missed her, and what she means to me.

But I hold myself back from doing anything because Chloe is only a few yards away.

"Did you want to watch Christmas movies with us? We're watching The

Grinch and then some Christmas Nightmare before I start on dinner.” I pull back, and when I move to shut the door, I notice her luggage right outside the front door. “What’s this? Moving in?”

“It was Lucy’s idea.” She looks at the floor and shuffles her feet. “She had all my stuff packed up in the truck when she picked me up at the airport. She found some more water damage while I was in Georgia and figured she’d move me in here. Don’t worry, I’ll have her pick me and everything else up later. If I can’t stay with her, I’m fine with a hotel.”

There’s no way in hell I’m letting her stay at a hotel. Not now. Not ever. I don’t even care if she sleeps in my bed this time, I’d feel more comfortable knowing she was in one of my guestrooms than some hotel room all alone. “No. Don’t be silly. Of course, you can stay with me. There’s plenty of room here.”

She sighs and her shoulders relax. “Thank you so much. I hate to impose but—”

“It’s no problem.”

“And I know I congratulated you on the house, but I didn’t think you picked this one.” She grabs one of her bags and together we bring them to the living room. “You’re sneaky. I thought you bought that first monstrosity we looked at.”

“None of them held a candle to this one. They were too fancy, too upscale.”

“Too pretentious.”

“Exactly.”

“I really do love it.” Her gaze roams around the space and she wanders into the kitchen, running her hand over the countertops. “I love the new furniture you bought. You even replaced that couch.”

I snort. “Trust me, it was the first thing to go. This one isn’t too bad, but I fell asleep on it last night without a pillow or anything and am paying dearly.”

“Maybe I could rub your back for you?” She smirks.

With the movie still going and Chloe occupied, I drag Elle in the pantry and hide us behind the door.

“Tag!” Her eyes fly open, and she lowers her voice to whisper, “Chloe’s right outside.”

“Then we’d better hurry.”

“Hurry?”

I skim my fingers along her bottom lip, across her cheek and bury them in her hair. Her arms wind around my neck and she plays with the hair at the nape of my neck. I lower down to her, grazing my lips across hers, taking just a taste. I move back and forth, giving her the barest touch.

She whimpers and rises up to press our mouths together, deepening the kiss. I sweep my tongue inside, dancing it around hers. I lick, suck, and thrust, using my tongue to promise what I'm going to do to her body later. I tilt her head to get a better angle and trace my other hand down her spine to grab her ass and grind her against my thickening erection.

“Tag! Elle! The movie is over. I'm ready to start the next one,” Chloe shouts, still a good distance away, but Elle and I spring apart.

I rest my forehead against hers and search her eyes. They've darkened ever so slightly, reminding me of a summer storm. “You don't have to stay with me tonight, but I'd like you to.”

She bits her bottom lip and nods. “I'd like that too. Come on, let's go watch this movie.”

It's my turn to nod and I follow her out of the pantry and out of the kitchen. I'd probably follow her anywhere.



After the movie, Chloe and Elle went to explore her room and the game room. They've been gone for a bit, so I'd guess she got roped into either drawing or playing one of the board games Linc and Jazz gave her yesterday.

Since they've been gone, I've got the turkey in the fryer—set up in the garage, of course, to avoid unnecessary fires. The stuffing has been mixed and is in the oven and now I'm trying to peel these bumpy ass potatoes.

“What's all this?” Elle comes up beside me, the awe evident in her voice. “You're cooking dinner?”

“Surprise.” I jerk the peeler and a strip of potato flies back, slaps me across the face, and falls on the island next to the small pile of potato skins. “You said you wanted a traditional Thanksgiving dinner. Something small. I know we're not technically your family but—”

“It's perfect.”

“I don't know about perfect.” I shake my head. “I already called Linc twice about the stuffing, and wrestling these potatoes is harder than it looks.”

Her eyes dart away and her shoulders shake.

“Are you laughing at me?”

“I’m pretty sure I’m laughing with you.”

“Pretty sure I’m not laughing.” I toss a sliver of potato at her which she barely dodges.

She wanders over to the printed recipes and reads. “Can I help with something?”

“How do you feel about green bean casserole? I was about to call Linc. They need this thing called blanching, and I don’t think that has anything to do with watching the Golden Girls.”

“How do you know anything about the Golden Girls?” Elle tosses her head back, her musical laughter rolling down my spine.

“I’ll have you know, I used to watch them all the time growing up.” I point the peeler at her before getting back to work on the potatoes. “My mom used to watch the reruns before she’d pass out on the couch. Sometimes I’d watch them with her.”

“That must have been hard.” She pauses, putting down the paper, grabbing the green beans, and rinsing them off.

“Living with her was hard, but I was lucky. Maybe luckier than Finley. She was stuck in the house with Mom while I had hockey. If it weren’t for that, who knows where I’d be right now.”

“If you don’t mind me asking...” She trails off, glancing at me and I nod for her to continue. “Hockey seems kind of expensive. How did your mom pay for everything?”

I take my time slicing a few of the potatoes in halves and then halves again. Talking about my sperm donor did nothing but stir up all sorts of negative emotions for me. It took me years to stop working so hard to gain his attention. By the time I realized he had a *real* family, I’d already been drafted for the NHL, and I didn’t even get a congratulatory phone call. “She didn’t. My dad paid for it.”

“If your dad was around, then why didn’t you live with him?”

“He wasn’t around. He provided sperm and a monthly stipend which paid for my hockey. I think he knew my mom would spend it on drugs, so it either went through a third party, or he paid for things directly.”

“Well, that’s shitty.” Her nose wrinkles and she opens a couple cabinets before pulling out a large glass bowl. “How often did you see him?”

“Never met him.”

She drops the beans and swings around to face me head on, her mouth hanging open. “What?!”

I shrug and put the knife down on the counter. “He had a wife and kids already, never meant for my mom to get pregnant. I doubt the other family knows of his affairs or his bastard son.”

“Tag—”

“It’s fine.” I put up a hand to silence her. “I learned to take care of myself a long time ago. Come on, let’s get this dinner made before Christmas gets here.”

She huffs and studies me for a minute before she whirls back around, takes out her phone and plays some Dolly Parton. “We don’t have to talk, but we’re going to listen to some good old country music. Dolly makes everything better.”

“Deal.”

Turns out Dolly does make everything better. Elle might have had something to do with it too. It doesn’t take long for the sins of my father to leave my brain and get replaced with new memories. Memories of Elle. She hums along to every song, swishing her hips, occasionally bumping into mine. She even makes me spin her around a few times. I’m not going to complain; I’m good with anything that lets me put my hands on her.

As far as I’m concerned, dinner is a success. The potatoes boil over twice, but we fix that easily enough by blowing on the pot—didn’t know that was a thing—and turning down the heat. The rolls come out a little browner than I’d like, but nothing is burnt. Even Chloe seems impressed.

Unfortunately, Chloe’s marveling is short-lived. As soon as I tell her she’s on dish duty, she grumbles a few things under her breath that might warrant a consequence if I could hear them properly. But she can’t argue with the fact that Elle and I cooked dinner, and it’s only fair that she pitches in.

We spend the next few hours sprawled out on various parts of the sectional, bingeing more holiday movies. Elle and I are on either end with Chloe snaked around the middle. And the actual snake? I think he’s still at the tea party with Miss Sparklehorn.

We’re closing in on the end of our second Christmas movie when Chloe stretches her arms above her head, knocking them against my shins and letting out a very pronounced yawn. “I think I’m going to head to bed.”

“You sure?” I pause the movie and glance her way.

Her head is burrowed in a pillow she brought out from her room, and her

lids look like they're struggling to stay open. "Yeah, I've already seen this one. Can you come say goodnight?"

"I sure can."

She pushes herself off the couch and gives Elle a small hug. "I'm glad you're back."

"Me too, Chloe. Goodnight. I'll see you in the morning."

"Night."

"Be right back," I tell Elle before I follow Chloe to her room. I can feel Elle's eyes on me, roaming my backside, and before I turn the corner, I throw her a quick wink.

"When are you leaving again?" Chloe's sleepy voice pulls my attention back to her.

They gave us a couple days off for the holiday, but I knew they wouldn't last forever. "Tomorrow. I'll be gone for a few days with back-to-back away games."

She nods before disappearing into the bathroom adjoining her room. I sit down on her bed and rub my hand across the soft pink blanket on top of it. I'm going to miss this while I'm gone. It really was nice to have most of the week off to spend time with Chloe. As much as I missed Elle, it was nice being just the two of us. Chloe is such a good kid. We're both lucky her mom didn't mess her up more than she did.

But she goes back to school next week and I'll be gone for most of it. We've got two games in Canada before coming back for a home game against Missouri, and then I'll leave immediately for another one in California. Although, I will be home all next weekend, so maybe I should plan something special for the girls. We've got less than a month with Elle, and I need to make the most of it; make sure she goes back to Savannah with a warm spot in her heart and a head full of good memories.

Chloe comes out of the bathroom a couple of minutes later and climbs into bed.

"Did you brush your teeth? Mouthwash? Floss?" I ask, pulling up the blankets and tucking them around her shoulders.

"Yes, Uncle Tag." Her eyelids flutter and close.

I lay a light kiss on her cheek. "Goodnight, sleep tight and don't let the bedbugs bite."

"Goodnight." She giggles and rolls over, pulling Leo up from beneath the sheets and hugging him to her chest; I guess he wasn't still at the tea party

after all. She sighs and then mumbles, “I love you, Uncle Tag.”

My throat tightens and my heart stutters. This little girl has rendered me speechless with three little words, and in my entire life, I can’t remember anyone ever saying them to me and meaning it.

I place my hand on her back and hold it there for several breaths. “I love you too, Chloe.”

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

ELLE

I KNOW TAG SAID HE'D BE RIGHT BACK, BUT I CAN'T WAIT ANYMORE. I FEEL like I've been waiting for months to get him naked again, instead of just a few days. But between my nitpicky mother, Daddy's concern for my future, and Warren who thinks he has a place in it, I need this. I need Tag. I need him like a woman who's lost in the desert needs a glass of water.

Tag has awoken that inner temptress every girl has. My own parents didn't give a shit if I got the holiday dinner I wanted, but Tag did. Tag, who didn't even know how to make grilled cheese, made me an entire turkey dinner. From scratch. And it was good.

Even if I cooked most of it.

He tried to give Lincoln most of the credit, and while I'm sure he helped, Tag came up with the idea and was the one in the kitchen all afternoon.

And then there was the movies. He's the one killing me. Lounging along the arm of the couch, his body stretched out, and his shirt riding up the ridges of his abs. Please. I couldn't keep my eyes on the damn movie. And I needed a bib to catch all the drool.

That inner temptress likes what she sees in Tag; she won't go back in her cage until she gets her fill. Hopefully of Tag's luscious cock.

I've been in here for a few minutes already, as naked as the day I was born, waiting on him to finish saying his goodnights to Chloe, which is another thing that got my libido going. I never realized how hot dads were. Or maybe it's one in particular.

In what feels like ages, Tag pokes his head in the doorway. His brows draw together, and the poor guy looks thoroughly confused. "What are you doing in here?"

“Is Chloe in bed?” I practically purr, sitting up a little higher, relaxing against the pillows behind me.

“Uh, yeah. She fell asleep pretty fast. What’s going on?”

“Nothing much.” I let the sheet around my breasts fall to my waist and lean back to give him a good view.

His mouth opens. Closes. Then opens again. His head cocks to the side and a lazy half smile spreads across his face. “Did I say that you could come into my room and get into my bed?”

“Nope.” I accentuate the ‘p’, making a popping sound.

“Do you want to be punished?”

My eyes flick over his body, and I lick my lips. “I might.”

“Is this what you want? You want this fucking hard cock in your tight cunt?” Tag’s hand snakes down to his erection and he palms it over his pants. I answer with a nod before he continues, “If you want this cock, you’re going to have to work for it. And let’s not forget that you came into my room and got into my bed without permission.”

If I wasn’t wet before, I sure as hell am now. The memory of Tag’s firm hand coming down on my backside heats my skin and electrifies my body. I didn’t think I’d be a fan of spanking. Turns out, I’m here for it. I feel like I should tell him the punishment isn’t much of one, but that could ruin half the fun.

He pushes away from the doorframe and rakes his eyes down my body, the hungry look on his face sending shivers down my spine. I’m already so on edge, I don’t think it would take much to bring me to the brink of orgasm and throw me right over.

Tag stops at the foot of the bed and points to the floor. “Over here. Now.”

I give him a lazy smile, rise to my knees and crawl down to the foot of the bed. His eyes darken, never leaving my breasts, as he licks his lips and unbuckles his belt. I pause at the edge of the bed, a finger toying with my bottom lip and take in the bulge in his pants. A bulge I want free from its confines and in my mouth.

Tag looks from me to the floor at his feet. I was hoping, for convenience purposes, he’d spank me here. Reluctantly, I swing down and stand facing him, hands planted on my hips.

“Turn around.”

Again, I oblige, but instead of bending me over, he takes my hands and brings them together at the small of my back. I stare down at the floor, my

brows pleated in confusion until I hear the whoosh of his belt as it's pulled from the loops.

“What are you—” I try to turn around, but his firm grip on my shoulder cements me in place.

“I didn't tell you to move.” His voice is low and threatening and has me aching, desperate for him to touch me. “Or speak.”

A whimper escapes my lips as he wraps the belt around my wrists and tightens it, pinning them in place. Even if I wanted to, I don't think I could get them free. He spins me back around and places a heavy hand on my shoulder, pushing me to my knees. In this position, with my wrists fastened behind my back, I'm vulnerable.

Sure, I could roll away, but I couldn't stand on my own. Staying here gives him the power; puts him in charge. A delicious shiver trickles down my spine. This is the one place I will gladly relinquish control.

His amber gaze doesn't leave mine as he pops the button on his jeans and lowers the zipper. He doesn't take off his pants or lower them to the floor; instead, he slides them down just enough to pull out his rigid cock. There's something incredibly sexy about the sight of him fully clothed while I'm naked as the day I was born, on my knees in front of him.

My mouth waters and my pussy floods with moisture as he grips his shaft in a tight fist and works it down the length. The thick head glistens with precum, and I can't tear my eyes away.

“I've wanted you on your knees since the first time I saw you. I'm gonna fuck that dirty mouth of yours.” Tag sweeps his thumb across my cheek and cups my chin, tilting my face up. “What do you think, sugar? You want to be my dirty girl? You want me to use you?”

I nod because, yes please. He can use me however he wants, and I will gladly oblige. In fact, I part my lips, waiting for him. Tag milks another bead of precum to the tip while his other hand dives into my hair and pulls. I relish the slight sting on my scalp as he leans forward, bringing himself closer to my lips. He paints my top lip with his tip and then the bottom, smearing his essence across them.

“Have a taste.” He pulls away and I nearly beg for him to plunge into my mouth. I oblige, licking around my lips and moaning as the musky flavor dances across my tongue. He pushes forward again, this time sliding the broad head of his cock inside my warm and waiting mouth. His hand tightens in my hair, and he forces my head back, gliding in deeper. I suck him in,

laving him with my tongue, taking him deeper and deeper. “That’s right. Suck my cock like the dirty girl you are.”

And I do, because right now, I am.

I suck him from root to tip. Cry out when he retreats and whimper when he pushes forward again. His rhythm changes from shallow thrusts to long strokes. My eyes water when he hits the back of my throat and I swallow him down. He increases his pace, pistoning his cock in and out of my mouth, fucking it so good and thoroughly, I’ll never look at a dick the same way ever again.

Tag grunts and groans, his ab muscles tensing with every plunge. Using his free hand, he swipes away the tears on my cheeks and gazes at me with a tenderness that’s a stark contrast to everything else.

“You fucking destroy me,” he murmurs, and I hum my agreeance.

He abruptly pulls himself from my mouth and I have little time to admire how it glistens in the low light of the room before he pulls me to my feet and bends me over the bed. His hand comes down just above where my hands are clasped, and he pushes my torso to the mattress.

My cries are muffled by the mattress as he slams into me. Over and over, he drives into me, hitting a spot deep inside me that has my toes curling and my fingers flexing against the constraints of the belt. His fingers hold my hips in a punishing grip to keep me in place as he uses my body like he promised, pummeling me like a wild man, making me take every last inch of his cock.

He snakes a hand around my hips and strums my clit, pinching it between his fingers and rubbing it with the same ferocity as his thrusting hips. My knees weaken and I let out a muffled cry. I am wound so tight my body feels like it might snap at any minute. My thighs tremble, my breathing increases, and my heart threatens to jump from my chest. I explode in a burst of starlight, my core quivering and clenching around him again and again.

He thrusts into me several more times before he shudders behind me, filling me up with one powerful stroke, and grunting a string of profanities. “So good, Elle. So good.”

I nod, my cheek rubbing against the comforter, and my legs sagging. After being so thoroughly fucked, I don’t think I have it in me to support myself.

Tag frees my hands from his belt, and it falls somewhere behind us with a thud. He brings my arms up to the bed, entwines our fingers, and rests his

forehead on my shoulder. “I need a sec. I’m not ready to leave you just yet.”

“Tag, that was...” I trail off, not sure what to say or how to even begin to describe what happened between us, or how he makes me feel. My body and my heart.

He presses a light kiss to my skin. “Yeah, it was.”

We lay there for several moments, our hands linked, and our bodies still connected. With a shuddering breath, Tag pulls himself from me and kisses down my spine.

When his heat leaves me and he pulls his hands away, I stand and excuse myself to the bathroom to clean up. After taking care of things, I splash some water on my face and wipe at some of the smudged mascara from under my eyes. I sit down on the edge of the tub for a minute and allow myself to truly catch my breath. I rub my hands along the cool metal of the faucet. A lot has changed since the last time I sat here, since Tag stole that kiss in front of the Almighty and Real Estate Agent Tim.

I feel like I’m almost at a crossroads, with two potential paths laid out in front of me. One takes me back home to Savannah, to parents who want me to live my life according to their rules and have their own ideas of what should make me happy. The other path... well, I guess that one keeps me here, although I’m not sure what that would mean for any of us or what I would do with my life. I’d have no job, no money, not much of a future. Hell, I don’t even know if I’d be welcome past January.

No point dwelling on something that won’t come to pass for another month. I don’t want to miss out on the here and now. And there just happens to be a hunky hockey player waiting for me.

Tag is already undressed and under the covers when I come back into his room. The sheets are low on his hips, and he runs a lazy hand along the ridges of his abdomen. His long blonde hair frames his face and his amber eyes pierce through me as he watches me walk toward the bed. I used to be a little self-conscious of my body, but not around Tag; he makes me feel beautiful. He makes me feel like I’m enough.

“I saved you a spot, sugar.”

“Is it on your dick?” I chuckle, crawling into bed and pulling the sheets over my body.

His deep rumbling laughter rolls over me and he wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me against him. “It might be. Although after what we just did, I might need a longer recovery period. I wasn’t kidding when I said you

fucking destroyed me.”

I lay my head on his chest and run a hand up and down his arm, tracing the veins in his hand. “I know what you mean.” I pause and take a deep breath. “Has it ever been... like that... with anyone else for you?”

“No,” he answers almost immediately. “It’s always been only physical. I’ve never had this connection with someone else before. Not even my last real girlfriend.”

“How long ago was that?”

“High school.”

I push myself up and meet his eyes. “High school? Seriously?”

“Yeah.” He chuckles, smoothing a hand down my hair. “I guess I was burned so bad I never wanted to do it again.”

“What happened?”

“I walked in on her in the middle of a threesome with two of the guys from the basketball team.”

“Yikes.”

“I thought I loved her, but that’s when I realized I’d been blind to whom she really was. And then I never found someone who was worth so much as a second glance.” Tag replies, kissing the top of my head. “Until you.”

I relax, snuggling into him, letting my eyes close. “You’re welcome.”

“You’re something else.” He chuckles. “I’m glad I found you in that bar.”

“Some things are meant to be.”

He hums into my hair and tightens his arms around me.

You can call it fate. Destiny. Predestination. Tag and I were meant to cross paths. I fell into his life when he needed me the most, and he showed me what life was like when I deviated from my parents’ path; when I dared to live outside the box they made for me.

This life with him has forced me to question my future. Even though my time here is temporary, I need to live more for me. I can’t be under my parents’ thumb anymore. I want to be happy. I want to feel safe, happy, loved, supported—like I do right here in Tag’s arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

TAG

THE NEXT WEEK SEEMS TO FLY BY. WITH AWAY GAMES IN TWO DIFFERENT countries and a few different states, I'm barely home. From what they tell me on video calls and through texts, Chloe and Elle spend their evenings watching movies together and decorating the house for Christmas. Chloe has settled in at her new school; she's even been over to Brittany's house a couple of times for dinner.

And Elle? Our time together is limited, but what we have, we make the most of. Dinners full of longing looks and breathless sighs. When Chloe looks the other way, I make sure to touch Elle. Small, hesitant touches that give me a thrill deep in the pit of my stomach and make me wish for more. It's torture, but in a good way. It makes the nights more thrilling, more passionate. The few nights we share together, I fuck her without restraint, without mercy, until she begs me to let her come. As my animalistic craving calms to mere all-consuming lust, I make love to her for what feels like hours.

I always crave her, even when my cock is still buried deep inside her; I am always ready for another round.

Today's my first day off since the day after Thanksgiving and I'd love nothing more than to kick my feet up and relax. However, with three more weekends until Elle leaves, I want to maximize the time Chloe and I get to spend with her, which is why I find myself pulling into the zoo with my girls in tow.

"What? The zoo? You've got to be kidding." The awe in Chloe's voice is palpable.

I pull into a parking spot and glance in the rearview mirror. Chloe's eyes

are wide, sweeping the zoo entrance and then meeting mine. I snag my University of Kentucky basketball hat from the center console, tuck my hair behind my ears, and tug it on. “I thought you might enjoy seeing the animals.”

“Do they have snakes?”

I shiver. “Several.”

“I hear they have some kind of eyelash viper.” Elle smiles and pats my arm. “I know your uncle is excited to see all the reptiles.”

“Sure am.” My smile is tight. While I may not be looking forward to seeing the slithering animals, there are plenty of others I’d love to see. The first time I came to a zoo was two years ago as part of a fundraiser the hockey team was a part of. I posed for pictures, shook hands, kissed babies, and did all that other bullshit I was asked to do, but I didn’t get to enjoy myself.

“That viper is the eyelash palm pit viper. I wonder if they have any babies. They are among the few snakes that have a live birth,” Chloe says matter-of-fact.

“God, I hope not,” I mutter under my breath.

It’s no surprise Chloe’s the first one out of the truck. She opens my door, puts her hands on her hips and taps her foot. I take my time turning off the engine, unbuckling my seatbelt, and making sure I have my wallet. Can’t forget that. Chloe sighs, groans in frustration, and then sighs again.

With a snort, I climb down from the driver’s seat, lead her over to where Elle’s waiting, and we head to the gate. Once we’ve secured our passes, Chloe leads us on a winding path through a bird exhibit.

After tugging Elle’s ponytail, I smooth my hand down her hair, and dance my fingers down her spine to settle on her lower back. She shoots me a warning look which I ignore. Instead, I take in her legs, wrapped tightly in black capri pants, and admire how her floral tank top swishes over the top of her luscious ass as she walks.

“Chloe might notice you touching me,” she whispers, bumping into my arm with her hip.

I twist my hat around, lean down and touch my lips to her ear, relishing the tremble in her shoulders as my lips caress her skin. I whisper, “It’s either this or I bend you over that informational sign and we can show those birds how you scream my name when you come all over my dick.”

“I’m not sure that’s a zoo-appropriate activity.”

“Probably not, but it’s giving me lots of ideas. Remind me to give you

another tour of the backyard later tonight.”

“I’ve seen the backyard.”

“Yeah, but you haven’t seen it at night, lying on a soft blanket, looking at the stars with my cock buried in your perfect cunt.”

“Oh my God, Tag!” She whirls around and smacks my arm. “You cannot say the C word in public!”

I chuckle, keeping my gaze on Chloe as she watches the macaws. “No? Which one? Cock or cunt?”

“You shouldn’t say either in public.” Elle points her finger at me, a pink blush dusting over her cheeks.

It’s cute how she’s trying to scold me with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes. Methinks the lady doth protest too much. “I can’t help it. Not when your particular *cunt* makes my mouth water and my *cock* harder than tungsten steel. If you didn’t know, that’s one of the hardest metals found in nature.”

Elle groans and pushes past me to close the distance between her and Chloe. I tilt my ball cap back to the front to conceal the top half of my face and shove my hands in my pockets. I trail after my girls as they move from the cranes to the monkeys.

“That one is just like you, Uncle Tag.” Chloe points to a monkey, perched high on a branch. I eye the monkey suspiciously. I’m not sure I like the comparison. I’d never sit that high in a tree so casually, for one thing, and I sure as shit wouldn’t be leaning halfway off the branch to scratch my ass.

“Ha. Ha. Ha,” I deadpan. “I’m not nearly that hairy. Nor do I put my finger in my mouth after it’s been precariously close to my butthole. Gross.”

Chloe and Elle share a look before laughing. I’m talking full on hold-your-belly-because-it-hurts kind of laughing, and I can’t help but feel like it’s directed at me. I’m not sure what they’re trying to say, but I don’t think I’m amused.

“It’s totally you,” Chloe wheezes, as she tries to get herself under control.

Elle swipes her fingers under her eyes and shakes her head. “She’s not entirely wrong. I think there are similarities here.”

I narrow my eyes at Elle, taking in her red cheeks and amused smile. She’s lucky she’s so fucking cute. “If you mean he’s roguishly handsome and devilishly charming then I’d say you’re correct. Otherwise, I’m going to have to disagree.”

“Whatever makes you feel better.”

With a scowl, I lead the way along the path, moving away from the primates and ridicule. Chloe stops in front of the next exhibit and snaps a few selfies in front of the zebra and ostrich.

“I could take a few of the two of you if you’d like.” Elle takes out her phone, pauses and scans the screen like she’s reading a message, then frowns. She clicks a few more times and holds it up, ready for pictures.

If I were a betting man, I’d bet money that was a text message from her father. She’s gotten a few of them since she’s been back from Georgia, and they all involve plans for her bullshit future. They always manage to dampen her mood.

Personally, I don’t have anything against her parents. I’m sure they want the best for her; to make sure she’s taken care of. But to push her toward a relationship with a man of their choosing seems a bit extreme. Not to mention horribly old-fashioned. Not only do I think Elle should get to choose her own path, she should also be in charge of the selection of her boyfriend... husband... whatever the fuck she wants. I know she’s going back to Georgia. I know she has a whole life that doesn’t include me, but I want her to be happy living it.

I’ll always want what’s best for her, even if that’s me giving her a clean break when it’s time for her to go.

“You ready?” Chloe’s already standing in front of a small herd of zebras, and I join her.

I put my arm around her shoulders and pull her tight while Elle snaps away. When she finishes, she smiles at the screen for an extra couple seconds. With her head tilted, the sun hits the gold in her hair just right, and she shines. She’s as radiant as she was the night we met in the bar. Hell, more so now, if I’m being honest. Her bright blue eyes gleam in the rays of sunlight, and her lips, a glossy shade of pink, look downright kissable.

Staring at her squeezes my heart and takes my breath away. It doesn’t sound medically correct, but that’s how it feels. With just a small smile and an innocent glance my way, she’s metaphorically knocked me on my ass. And I’m not sure I want to get up. Not if it changes my view.

“You know,” Chloe starts, pulling my gaze away from Elle’s beautiful face, “it’s okay to want to be with her.”

“I—What?” I stutter, taken aback. I didn’t realize how obvious my staring was. Way to be cool.

“I know you like her. You’ve liked her for a while.”

Completely correct. “What makes you think that?”

“Well, you’re always looking at her with these heart eyes, and your face does this weird thing. Plus, you invited her to live with us when you could have easily put her up at a hotel. It’s totally obvious you want to be near her.”

Also, a fair point. “What do you mean my face does a weird thing?”

“It just does. Brittany thinks it means you’re in love. She also says boys are stupid and can’t admit their feelings.”

Brittany can mind her own damn business. I like Elle. I really like Elle. But love? No way. I’m enjoying the time we have together, nothing more, nothing less.

“Elle is a friend and I enjoy spending time with her. Let’s not forget she’s leaving in a few weeks.”

“Are you guys coming?” Elle calls out. “We got rhinos to see.”

Chloe says softly. “She’s not Mom. She’s not going to disappear and leave you with a mess.”

“You’re not a mess,” I say severely. I look down at her, putting my hands on her shoulders and bending down so my eyes are looking into hers. “You are *not* a mess, do you hear me?”

Chloe offers me a sad smile and shrugs. “You should ask her to stay.” With that, she walks away to join Elle, leaving me to stare after her in shock.

She makes it sound so simple, like Elle would even consider staying if I asked. Her whole life, her entire future, is somewhere else. I can’t ask her to stay. I can’t make her leave her family and their legacy. Can I?

No. I really can’t. I can’t ask her to uproot her damn life. I don’t have anything to offer. No future, no certainty. And I can’t bring myself to ask a question I already know the answer to. I’m not worth it. I’m not the guy who walks down the aisle and takes women on romantic dates. I’m a fun time. Sex without strings, nothing more, nothing less.

My brief discussion with Chloe has me distracted and so out of sorts that I don’t fully realize what’s happening when a small group of fans come up and ask to take pictures. I smile and nod, it’s the least I can do for their support. I figure if they recognize me outside of uniform and in a hat, then they deserve a few minutes of my time.

Elle and Chloe must think so too. They stand idly by, chatting with each other as I talk to a dad whose son started playing peewee hockey last year. Some of the guys think it’s a chore, talking to fans, but that’s never been my stance. Without them, we wouldn’t have these kickass jobs, and I don’t know

what I'd do with myself if I had to get a real nine-to-five.

Also, I'm stalling. Not a lot, just a little. I didn't realize we've made it this far, but we've seen everything with the exception of one building: the one with the snakes and all the other creepy crawly animals. But when this man shakes my hand and claps my shoulder, I know it's time.

Chloe skips over to me, dragging Elle behind her. "Are you ready? Can we go in?"

"I reckon we can." I glance between her and the snake building. "Are you sure you want to see the snakes?"

"Of course I want to see the snakes. Why would you even say that?" She turns to Elle. "It's like he doesn't even know me."

Elle snickers and links her arm with mine, tugging me toward the building. "Let's go before Tag chickens out and ends up running to the truck."

"Not my fault this shit is creepy." I mumble as we enter. The lizards and the turtles aren't bad. I'm even cool with the frogs. The tarantulas though, that's where I start having problems. Chloe is glued to each cage. The more disgusting the creature, the more enraptured she seems to become.

"Look, guys! Bats!" Chloe runs over, gazing up at the small furry animals with wide eyes. Most of them are sleeping, a few are eating or cleaning themselves, but all I can think of is one of them weaseling its way out of the enclosure to bite my neck and drain me dry.

Elle runs a hand down my back which does nothing to make me more comfortable. "They're cute little things."

"Yeah," I scoff, "if you're Dracula."

"Don't be ridiculous. The only time a bat is dangerous is when it has rabies. I'm sure these ones are fine," Chloe says, rolling her eyes.

Rabies. That's assuring. But we don't have much time to dwell on it because the snakes are next—rattlers, copperheads, and even a large anaconda—and Elle and I are forgotten. Chloe goes between them, reading any and all information. I keep my distance. Jazz made me watch Harry Potter, so I know that a piece of glass can go missing at any time. I'm not giving any of these slithery fuckers the chance to lunge at me.

"This was a really good idea. Chloe really loves it here," Elle whispers.

"And what about you, Elle?"

"I'm having a good time. The company is nice."

"Just nice?"

“I mean Chloe is exceptional to be around. It’s her uncle that I could give or take.”

“Ouch, sugar. You wound me.” I grab my chest and stagger backwards.

Elle smirks. “Maybe if you set up the blanket in the backyard tonight, you can change my mind. I’d also recommend Chloe have a sleepover at Brittany’s house, so she doesn’t see anything we don’t want her to.”

“Consider it done.”

If she wants me to take her under the stars, bring her to orgasm more times than she can count, then that’s what she’ll get. There are three more weekends until she leaves, and I intend to make the most out of them.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

ELLE

“I THINK YOU’RE A BIT OF A ROMANTIC.” I TAKE THE GLASS OF CHAMPAGNE from Tag, brushing my fingers over his. “Setting up all this while I dropped Chloe off.”

He takes a sip of his own drink and shakes his head. “I don’t know about all that.”

He sprawls out on top of a gray fuzzy blanket, surrounded by flickering electric candles. His long blonde hair is slicked back from the shower he recently took, his chest is bare, and the dips of his muscles are illuminated by the pale glow of the moonlight. I’ve never been more pleased to have a warm winter. The only stitch of clothes on him is a pair of dark gray sweatpants slung low on his hips. He looks gorgeous, and I can’t help the sigh that escapes as I study him, my mouth watering at the sight of the V that points straight to one of my favorite parts of his body.

He’s so sexy. So perfect. I don’t know how I’ll be able to leave him and go back to my life. To go on like this didn’t happen. But the text Daddy sent me earlier brings that to the forefront of my mind. He wants me home early so I can attend a New Year’s Eve party being thrown by Warren’s parents. While my attendance isn’t mandatory, it’s highly encouraged.

The bubbles of the champagne burst on my tongue, and I resist draining the glass. I set it beside the blanket in the grass, lay beside Tag, and turn to face him. My stomach dips as he trails his forefinger along my hairline, down my jaw, and across my lips. The rings of gold in his amber eyes flicker with the candles as his intense gaze meets mine.

“Romantic or not, thank you for this.” I smile and prop my head on my elbow. “Everything is beautiful.”

“You’re beautiful.” His hand cups my cheek, and I lean into his touch.

He dips his head and kisses me softly. He nibbles at my lips, sucking them gently, making no attempt to deepen the kiss. His hand runs down the front of my neck, gripping it ever so slightly, and trailing it down to my chest. My nipples peak as he plucks them through the fabric of my dress. I clutch at him, my nails digging into his shoulder, and he pushes me to my back.

I take a deep breath and my core clenches as Tag’s hand coasts up my thigh and slips under my dress. His knuckles nudge my leg, and I open myself to him with a smile. I may have forgotten a certain undergarment, and he’s about to notice.

He brushes his fingers where my thigh meets my core and groans. “No panties?”

“I didn’t think I needed ‘em.” I suck his bottom lip into my mouth and bite down.

“Fuck me,” he mumbles, running a finger along my slit, and pushing it into my dripping pussy.

His lips are back on mine, and this time, he sweeps his tongue in my mouth and rubs it alongside mine. I moan and arch against him, and he sinks his finger deeper. I grab onto his hair, forcing him closer. He refuses to give me the pace I need. He draws his finger in and out in a slow, lazy rhythm, driving me insane, intent on not letting me orgasm anytime soon.

“Tag, I need you.” I whisper against his lips. “I need more.”

“I’ve got you.”

I whimper as his finger leaves my heat and he pinches my clit before rolling away. Tag kicks off his sweats while I sit up and pull my dress over my head. The warm December breeze has cooled down with the setting of the sun and it feels refreshing on my heated skin, but it still hardens my nipples to almost painful points. Winter has been unseasonably mild this year, but the nights are still cool.

I smooth my hands around my breasts and roll my nipples between my fingers. My head falls back, and a needy moan escapes my lips. Tag twists back to me, lining up his body with mine and staring down at me with a combination of passion and reverence. He lowers down, his thick length pressing against my clit. “Keep playing with your nipples.” His voice is gravelly as he gives his command, and I’m not inclined to disobey.

He rocks forward, rubbing my clit with the broad head of his cock. I

circle my hips, chasing the pressure, until he finally sinks into me with a groan.

“You always feel so fucking good.” His lips are on the side of my throat, sucking and nibbling on my heated flesh.

He pushes forward, buries himself inside me and pauses as I spasm around him. *He* always feels so good. Too good. Gazing into my eyes, connected through our bodies, I can't help but feel like this is it. This is where I'm supposed to be, and who I'm supposed to be with. Like there's some larger-than-life cosmic force that's been pushing us for this moment. Not just because of the sex, but because we're connecting on a deeper level. One where there's trust and respect... and feelings. Feelings that took on a life of their own and grew with every touch, every whisper, and every moment we've shared together that meant more than the last.

I frame his face with my hands, dragging the tips of my fingers through the stubble on his face. The words are right there on the tip of my tongue; three little words that only scratch the surface of how I feel about him. Instead of uttering those words in the empty space between us, letting them get blown away by the gentle breeze, I pull his face down to me and pour everything I want to say into a kiss.

A kiss full of unbridled passion and longing. A kiss full of need and a deep-rooted desire for him. A kiss full of love.

As his mouth moves against mine and my tongue twines with his, he draws his cock out of my body, almost pulling out completely before pushing back in. He fucks me at a measured pace, dragging out the pleasure for both of us with every leisurely thrust.

The slow, deliberate movement of his hips as he makes love to me is almost a confession of how he feels. Every kiss, every time his pelvis grinds against mine, feels like he's saying those words back to me. The words neither one of us dare say out loud.

Together, we climax, and relish in the culminated passion of our release. His forehead rests against mine and our soft breaths linger between us. His length is still hard inside me and he starts to move again, this time slower, and I swear I can feel every ridge of his cock as it glides within me.

We explore each other for hours, our bodies joining together under the waning moonlight. It's only when the temperature drops too low and I start to shiver, that we pack up and head inside. He wraps me tightly in his arms, holds me to his chest, and falls asleep. I lay awake for what feels like hours,

listening to the steady beat of his heart and imagining what my life would be like if I didn't have to leave. If I didn't have to give this up—give Tag up. If I could take control of my own future, my own destiny, and have Tag by my side.

Daddy wouldn't approve, but I'm not sure my heart can let go.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

ELLE

“CAN I POUR IN THE CHOCOLATE CHIPS?” CHLOE HOLDS UP A BAG OF RED AND green M&Ms and looks at me expectantly.

“Of course you can.” I raise the head of the stand mixer and take a step back to give her some space at the counter.

Chloe hops up on the step stool, peers into the sugary brown dough, and dumps the entire bag of candy on top. So much for adding gradually, but I guess this works too. At my direction, she turns the mixer on low and watches with wide eyes as the paddle churns the M&Ms into the dough.

“I really like you being here,” she smiles at me. “Do you really have to leave?”

I’d say that’s the million-dollar question, but one that really only has one clear answer. Despite the blissful few days Tag and I had last weekend, and the feelings brimming inside me, I absolutely have to leave. Daddy’s been calling or texting every day. In fact, he called again this morning as Tag said his goodbyes and ran out the door. He’s insistent that I be home for the New Year’s party, and it doesn’t look like he’s relenting anytime soon.

Tag hasn’t mentioned anything either way, and I’m a little nervous to bring up my early departure. Things have been so great, I don’t want to screw them up. I realize how silly that sounds because I’m leaving in a few weeks, but I want to savor the little time I have left, even more so because he’s got quite a few away games before Christmas. He left this morning for a three day stretch, and he’ll be gone most of next week too.

Which is partially why Chloe and I took it upon ourselves to get the house ready for Christmas. We’ve got a wreath on the front door and mini ones hanging from the kitchen cabinets, lights draping the bushes outside,

some cute decorations Chloe and I found at the store, and a pre-lit tree that's up but not yet decorated. Tag suggested we do that together when he gets home. There were promises of hot chocolate and cheesy Christmas movies.

Which poses another problem I've yet to deal with. My parents, the gems that they are, decided to do a getaway in Hawaii spanning a couple of days, including Christmas. Lucy and I are expected to attend, even though they never officially asked if we would like to. Just like I haven't told Tag I have to leave before New Year's Eve, I haven't told them I'm not going.

Why can't things ever just be simple?

I stop the mixer, detach the paddle, and remove the bowl. "I'm sorry, Chloe. I really am, but I have a job in Savannah."

"Can't you work here?"

"My father's company is in Georgia, so I wouldn't be able to stay here and work there."

"But you're not going to be happy."

She's not entirely wrong, but I'm not sure what I've done to give her that impression. I've tried to keep everything positive, and while we've spent a lot of time together, this is the first we've really talked about my leaving. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you always have a sad face when he calls." She pauses and hands me a couple of cookie sheets. "And Uncle Tag and I are going to be here. Won't you miss us? And Lucy?"

"I absolutely will. But I can't just stay even if I want to. I've worked so hard to get this job and it's what my dad expects." I grab the cookie scoop from the drawer and mumble, "He expects a lot of things."

"Doesn't sound very supportive of you."

"No, I guess he isn't, but I do want to run the company," I muse and shoot Chloe a questioning look. "When did you get to be so smart?"

She runs a finger along the edge of the bowl, swiping some batter and licking her finger clean. "I guess I was just born that way."

I chuckle and get back to cookie making, scooping the dough, and dropping it on the cookie sheets. A lot of it is "left behind" on the spatulas and bowls—a tax I like to call "shipping and handling"—but some of the batter does make its way into the oven.

While the cookies bake, Chloe catches me up on her day at school and the exploits of her friends. Apparently, Brittany and Stephanie got into a huge fight about this boy they both like and Chloe is trying to remain Switzerland,

which is always harder than it seems. Her take is that boys are stupid and should never get between friends. I won't tell her it gets worse in high school and college. While girls claim chicks before dicks, it generally doesn't work out that way.

As we pull the last batch of cookies out of the oven, the doorbell rings. I shuck the Mrs. Clause oven mitts and beat Chloe to the door. Lucy stands on the other side with her Devils' jersey and a wide smile.

"Hey, guys!" Lucy closes the door behind her and greets us each with a hug.

"Hi, Lucy! Did Elle tell you we went to the zoo on Saturday? And that Uncle Tag bought me two giant snakes?"

Lucy eyes fly open, and her mouth opens and closes a few times. "I didn't know about the snakes. Are they... real?"

"If only." Chloe rolls her eyes. "Can you imagine Uncle Tag around a real snake? You should have seen him in the reptile exhibit at the zoo. You would have thought he was being attacked."

I laugh because she couldn't be more accurate. The deeper into the building we got, the more hesitant his steps and the closer he stood to me. It might have been sweet if I wasn't so sure he was thinking of using me as a human shield. He didn't say that per se, but I know if the situation presented itself, he wouldn't hesitate to throw me in front of a snake and run in the other direction.

Lucy relaxes her shoulders and blows out a deep breath. "Where's your jersey? Are you going to wear it for the game?"

"I almost forgot. I'll get yours too, Elle." Chloe takes off down the hall and Lucy turns to me with a devilish smile.

"So," she says coyly, "will she be looking in *Uncle Tag's* room for your clothes or..."

I huff and cross my arms over my chest. "I'll have you know that my clothes are in the guest room closet." Lucy raises a brow. "Just don't look at the bed too closely. It may appear like it hasn't been slept in."

"Oh? Are you a really thorough bed-maker or have you been sleeping elsewhere?"

I look to the floor and jam my hands in the pockets of my jeans. "The second one."

"Hmm. Does this mean you're ditching us for Christmas vacation? This is a lovely house, but I'm not entirely sure it's comparable to Hawaii." She

stops to eyeball the tree. “Not that I’m judging, but shouldn’t there be stuff on the tree? It looks a little bare.”

“We’re decorating it together when Tag gets home, and I promised Chloe I’d be here on Christmas, so I will not be coming to Hawaii. And I haven’t figured out what to say to Daddy yet. Can you keep this between us?”

“Like I would tell him anything.” Lucy waves her hand in dismissal. “But you know, he’s going to blow a gasket if he finds out you’re skipping our vacation for a man, let alone another athlete.”

“Which is why he won’t find out.”

“Good luck with that. He always has a way of finding things out.”

“No shit,” I scoff. “He wants me home early already. Warren’s parents are throwing a New Year’s Eve party and my attendance is highly encouraged.”

“Are you serious?” She stares at me like I’ve sprouted two heads.

“As a heart attack.”

Lucy blows out a breath. “I wish you didn’t have to go back. I like having you here.”

“I’m not even staying with you. You kicked me out, remember? Water leak?” Although now that I’m thinking about it, I’m wondering if there was a water leak to begin with. I may have underestimated my dear sister.

“Yes, but I still have access to you whenever I want. And I know you don’t want to spend the rest of your life stuck as an investment banker. Do you?” She leans her head back and says in that classic Lucy sing-song voice, “Boring.”

“Lucy. It’s what I want to do.” Boring or not, it’s my life. I know she’s never been ecstatic I’m walking in Daddy’s footsteps, but she didn’t want to do it, so the torch was passed to me. And now that I’ve invested my adult life into the company, it’s the future I want as well. It provides me the most stability while carrying out the family legacy Daddy built for us. “And besides, Tag started interviewing new nannies for Chloe.”

“Since when?”

My departure wasn’t something we talked about, but he briefly mentioned looking for nannies around Thanksgiving. It made sense, still does; he needs to replace me. Unfortunately, that hasn’t stopped me from feeling like a knife is plunging into my chest each time a candidate knocks on the door.

“He interviewed a couple right before he left. He hasn’t asked me to sit in on them or anything but they all parade around the house in their little shorts

and tight shirts.”

“Well, he does have to replace you,” Lucy points out.

“I know that. I was hoping he’d go for an older woman. Like grandma old.” I pause, tapping on my lip with my index finger. “Or maybe even a man.”

“You can’t choose for him; you can only pick your own path. While you’re doing that, can you grab your wedding book and some cookies? I want to look at it before the game starts.”

I pass Chloe in the hall, and she hands me my jersey before I dash into the unused guestroom, grab the wedding album and head back to the living room. I’m not sure who she needs it for, but Lucy knows a lot of people. I can only hope they like some of my ideas and that it triggers some of their own.

Lord knows I won’t need this book for myself. If Daddy gets his wish, I’ll be hitched to Warren in less than two years. And my mother would rather die than let me have anything to do with planning a wedding. The only chance I’d have to plan my own wedding would be if I... well, if I didn’t go back to Georgia. Then I’d be poor and homeless. No guarantee Tag would want to continue seeing me if I stayed. He hasn’t asked me to consider living here, to reassess my options. He’s made no attempt to talk me out of anything or offer me a better alternative for my future. And the fact that he’s looking for a replacement nanny tells me he won’t.

There’s a chance that if I gave up everything to stay here, I’d be alone and more unhappy than I would be in Savannah. I’m not so naïve that I think I can change Tag’s bachelor ways in the span of a few short weeks.

I’ve got to go home.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Ethel: Nice game tonight, sexy pants.

Tag you're it: What do you find sexier... me or my actual pants?

Ethel: I 100% meant your actual cute little hockey pants.

Tag you're it: Well, they're called breezers. And they're not cute.

Ethel: Whatever you say. I think they're cute.

Tag you're it: Manly, you mean. What are you doing? Are you snuggled in my bed, reading your sexy hockey book, and imagining it's me doing dirty things to you?

Ethel: Wait, did you read my Kindle?

Tag you're it: I might have looked at it.

Ethel: <grimacing face emoji>

Tag you're it: If you wanted some dirty locker room sex, you only had to say so. I could have arranged something. I might know a guy with hockey connections.

Ethel: I didn't know what that book was when I got it. A friend recommended it to me.

Tag you're it: Oh? A friend told you to read a single-dad hockey romance? <rolling on the floor laughing emoji>

Tag you're it: You're a dirty little liar.

Ethel: I cannot confirm or deny these accusations.

Tag you're it: Do you know what happens to dirty liars?

Ethel: ...

Tag you're it: They get punished. Do you want to be punished, Elle?

Ethel: I feel like this is a trick question.

Tag you're it: Bahaha. Just wait until I get home.

Tag you're it: Maybe it's time I do something more than slap your ass.

Elle: <star struck emoji>

Tag you're it: You're going to be the death of me.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

TAG

LINC THROWS HIMSELF ACROSS THE QUEEN SIZE BED AND I DO THE SAME TO the bed closer to the window. That game was not only a huge disappointment, it was also exhausting. We fought tooth and nail the entire game, but the Edmonton Flames drilled us. We were up by a goal at the end of the first period and then everything went downhill from there. Their center got lucky with a breakaway at the start of the second, and within a few minutes, they were up by two and never lost the lead.

Doesn't help that it's the second game in a row we've lost, and I can only hope this isn't a trend.

"If we keep letting the Canadians spank us, this year may not be much better than it was last year. We're marginally better, but we're not as strong on the other shifts." I glance over at Linc. He's got both legs hanging off the bed and an arm slung across his face.

"We're a bit better than last year. But yeah, we could use another trade or two. The rookies are trying, but some of them aren't ready to play at this level. At least we're winning some games." He pushes to a sitting position and frowns. "I don't know if it'll be enough though."

"Enough for what?"

"To make playoffs this year."

I laugh and run my hands along the scruff of my two-day old stubble. "Eh, I don't know. I guess we have a chance, hell everyone has a chance, but I don't think it's in the cards for us this year."

"I need us to have more than a chance." Linc sighs and flops backwards on the bed.

"What else is new? It's not like we've been to the playoffs in the past

couple years. Benson Senior didn't exactly have a great handle on the team. There's always next year. Or the one after that."

"Not necessarily."

I eye him warily. "What the fuck does that mean?"

"Forget I said anything."

I briefly consider changing the subject, but if I remember correctly, he didn't give me that courtesy when I asked him to do something similar. That was the night I ended up sharing my fucked-up family saga, which was not on my to-do list. Plus, this doesn't feel insignificant. As his best friend, I should know what he knows. I'm sure that's a rule somewhere.

"You can't drop a bomb like that and not explain." I sit up and gesture toward him. "Am I getting traded? Are you getting traded? Are they going to disband the team? You obviously have some insider information that I don't have, and unless you want me to keep wildly speculating, I think it would be wise to share." Linc remains silent for several seconds, so I continue. "Remember that time I helped you get back together with the love of your life?"

"Really? You're going to play that card? Seriously though, no one knows, so you cannot say anything. Jazz will have my ass if she finds out I told you. Her brother, too." He pauses and stares at me until I nod. "If we don't make the playoffs by next season, Gordon and Jazz will be forced to sell the team. It was some bullshit stipulation that Benson put in his will. You know, in case we didn't already realize how big an asshole he was."

"You're serious?"

"Does it look like I'm joking?"

No, it doesn't. If anything, Linc looks drained. No sign of laughter or outrageous finger guns in sight, as if this information has been weighing heavily on his shoulders. "Well, fuck."

The Devils are still reeling from Oliver Benson's death, and adjusting to new owners Jazz and Gordon. While things are going in the right direction, it's still a work in progress. Mr. Benson drove away a lot of the good players, and Gordon has been working overtime to try to fix it. And if the team gets sold to some rich asshole, who knows what they'll do to it.

I lean forward and pin him with a look. "I can't say I'm a fan of this, Linc. Is there nothing we can do to fight this?"

"We can win." He shakes his head and chuckles. "We have two seasons, man. A lot could happen between now and then."

He's right, and the logical part of me knows it. But a tendril of dread snakes its way through my gut and settles deep inside me. The last thing I need to do is dwell on the inevitable, or in this case, the potential. Between Elle, Chloe, and the guys, I was finally starting to think that—just maybe—not everyone leaves. My mistake.

Dammit. Distraction. I need a distraction. I need to get my mind off things so I don't spend the entire evening lost in a sea of negative thoughts.

"I'll be right back." I push up from the bed, grab my phone, and escape into the hallway to call Elle. If anyone can get my mind off things, it's her.

Elle answers the video call, sitting in my bed, her golden hair pulled in a messy bun, and looking absolutely beautiful. "Well, hey there, handsome. You doing okay? That was a tough game."

"Yeah, it fucking sucked. I feel like we're starting a losing streak." I run my hand through my hair and sigh. "I'm just exhausted, but I needed to hear your voice before I went to bed."

"See, romantic."

"I don't see the connection."

"I'm sorry." She chuckles. "That may have been a reach. What I meant was that it was a very manly thing to say."

"That sounds more like it." I pause and study her, taking in her bright blue eyes, her wide smile, and plush lips I'd do anything to kiss. Which reminds me, Lucy agreed to watch Chloe on New Years', since I've yet to find a suitable nanny, and I want nothing more than to claim those lips at midnight. "I don't want to be presumptuous, but do you have any plans for New Year's Eve?"

"I do actually," she says slowly, her eyes darting away from the screen. "I wanted to talk to you about that."

My chest tightens. "What's going on?"

"Well, there's a very important party in Savannah that night and my attendance is just shy of mandatory." Elle winces and her sweater slips off one of her shoulders. Normally, I'd find the slip of skin obscenely sexy, but I don't have it in me to point it out with a lewd comment.

"When are you leaving?" Panic clogs my throat. I knew she was leaving, but I thought I had more time. I need more time. "What about Christmas?"

"I'll still be here for Christmas. I'll just have to leave a couple days earlier than planned. I don't know if you've found someone to take my place. You know, with Chloe. But if you haven't, I can help you look."

Sure, I haven't found anyone yet. Every single candidate I've interviewed seemed more concerned with my dating status than Chloe. Not a single one took any interest in talking to her, but they all managed to squeeze my arm or put a hand on my chest and tell me how cute I was. I'll figure it out. I always do. Everything will be fine. I'll be fine. I'm always fine. "Don't worry about it. I'll figure it out."

Her brows draw together, and she frowns. "Are you sure? I don't mind helping."

"Positive. I don't need any help. I'm fine." I run my hand around the back of my neck and look everywhere but at the phone. "I gotta go, I'm going to head to bed. See you the day after tomorrow."

Without waiting for her response, I turn the whole damn phone off and shove it in my back pocket. As Chloe would say, *this day is the worst.*

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

ELLE

IT'S CHRISTMAS AND I'M NOT QUITE IN THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT, WHICH IS very unlike me. Although, I'm usually somewhere tropical and it's hard to be depressed when you're spending the holiday in an exotic location. And I get to spend time with my parents, even if they're using Christmas as an excuse to trump the neighbors vacation plans. Heaven forbid my parents spend the time at home with family like normal people.

Daddy's still salty I'm not with them in Hawaii. I was lectured about allowing myself to be 'sick' last night—for the third time. The only reason he conceded is because I promised him I'd be there for the stupid New Year's party. I may have been faking my illness, but he didn't know that. You'd think he'd be more concerned with my wellbeing, considering he has plans for me in a week.

And Tag's being weird. He's hovering on the other side of the tree, handing out presents to Chloe, who's being appropriately spoiled for the first time in her life.

He's been distant with me for the past week and a half, ever since I told him about having to go home early. We're still having sex and cuddling after, but it no longer feels like we're building a connection. Instead it feels more like we're both trying to release tension. I don't know what to do to fix it. Or even if there is anything I can do to fix it. I'm leaving in a couple of days, starting the next chapter of my life, and leaving all this behind.

Including Tag and Chloe.

I'm not sure if he has someone lined up to take care of her yet, but he's made it clear it's not my problem. I've offered to help several times, and always get the same response. If I have to hear about how *he's fine* and

doesn't need any help one more time, I'm going to scream.

"Elle, did you see that bike Santa, aka Uncle Tag, left me?" Chloe turns to me with a wide smile on her face. Last night we tried to convince her we needed to leave out cookies for Santa, but her mom let that cat out of the bag when she was five. "It even has streamers and lights in the wheels."

"I did see it." I nod, taking a small sip of hot chocolate. "Someone must've thought you were really good this year. Plus, it's purple, your favorite color."

"I bet it was the extra cookies we made. Sugar makes Uncle Tag extra nice."

I chuckle. "I'm surprised there were any cookies left at all. Your uncle couldn't stop eating them."

"In my defense," Tag interjects and holds up his hands, "you did make a double batch so there were plenty."

"Do you know how to ride a bike?" Chloe blows across the top of her mug and peers up at me from behind it. "Did your dad teach you?"

"I do know how to ride a bike, but no, my dad didn't teach me. I had a couple friends in high school who taught me because they thought it was sad that I didn't know how." I scoot away from the tree, lean my back against the couch, and stretch my legs out in front of me. I can't help but admire my red flannel pajama set, which matches the green ones Chloe and Tag are wearing.

"Uncle Tag said he would teach me."

Tag meets my gaze and gives me a smile that doesn't quite meet his eyes. "It's the least I could do. Now that I'm in a grown-up neighborhood, I've been thinking of getting a bike of my own, and Chloe and I can ride together."

"I think that's a great idea." I smile and take another sip of hot chocolate.

Chloe grabs one of the few boxes left under the tree and skips over to sit beside me. "This one is for you." She drops the small present, wrapped in bright red paper, into my outstretched palm.

"For me?" I tear into the wrapping, open the box, and pull out a white gold, oval locket with an intricate scroll pattern on the front. I pull it from the box, dangling the delicate chain from my fingers. "Wow. This is beautiful. Thank you, guys."

"We both picked it out. You have to open it."

My fingers tremble as I unfasten the clasp and open the locket. Tag's on the left side, his hair piled on top of his head, scruff along his chin, and his

lips drawn up in a smirk. Chloe's on the right with a wide smile and a twinkle of mischief in her eyes.

"I love it."

"It's so you can remember us when you go back to Georgia."

"I wouldn't be able to forget you anyway. Either of you." I give Chloe a hug and raise my head to meet Tag's gaze. A variety of emotions pass over his face before he takes a deep breath, shutting them down, and forcing a smile. "Thank you," I whisper again.

Tag gives me a tight nod and reaches under the tree for another gift. This one is from me. I try to imagine seeing it from his perspective, not knowing what's inside. It's a larger square box, covered in silvery snowflake wrapping paper. Tag's eyes stay fixated on me as his finger slips under the tape to carefully open the present. He tosses the paper aside and glances down at the picture collage in his hands.

My heart races as he outlines the pictures in the frame—pictures of Chloe, the two of them, even one of the three of us. His hand lingers over that one. "This is perfect."

"I wanna see!" Chloe pushes herself to her knees and scoots next to Tag. "These are great. Can we hang this in here?"

"Sure. We can put it right next to the TV."

Chloe stands and puts her cocoa on the coffee table. "I almost forgot. I have something else for you in my room."

As soon as she disappears, I nudge Tag's foot with mine. "Merry Christmas. Thank you for the locket. It was really sweet."

He nods, his long hair bobbing around his face. "You're welcome. I love the pictures. It really is perfect."

We stare at each other for what seems like several minutes before I pull the necklace from the box and clear my throat. "Would you help me put it on?"

"Of course."

He rises to his feet and sits behind me on the couch. I hand him the chain and shiver slightly as his fingers sweep my hair to the side, brushing the back of my neck. The locket slides across my collarbone and settles just above my breasts. His hands rest on my shoulders, and he leans forward, burying his nose in my hair. "I got you another gift, but it's not appropriate to open around an audience."

"Oh, no?" I relax under his touch. "What is it? A vibrator?"

He chuckles and rubs his thumbs along the curve of my neck. “That’s a close guess. Did you know you can buy this kit to clone your cock?”

“You didn’t!”

“I wanted to make sure you had something to remember me by.” He presses closer and whispers, “And I like the idea of you filling that pussy with my dick, even if it is a replica.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

Chloe bounces back in the room with a snowman gift bag swinging by her side. “I found it. I picked it out just for you, Uncle Tag.”

I shift to my side and take a quick sip of hot chocolate, using the mug to hide the smile creeping across my face.

Tag shifts through the gift paper and pulls out a tall container of jellybeans. Or at least what appears to be jellybeans. His brows draw together as he holds it up and gives Chloe a questioning look. I bite down on my top lip in an attempt to keep my shit together.

“These are supposed to be the best. You should try some.” Chloe gestures to the candy, her face completely neutral, not even a spark of amusement. I’m impressed.

“Okay...” Tag says slowly, drawing out both syllables. He unscrews the lid and jumps about three feet in the air as a spring-loaded snake launches out and hits him in the face.

I can’t hold it in anymore and double over, shaking with laughter. Chloe joins me, thumping her fist on the couch. Tears burn my eyes and I swipe them away. That was the funniest thing I’ve seen in a while.

Tag is frozen, eyes wide, and still gripping the now empty jar. The fake snake is lying across his chest. He takes in a deep breath and lets it out slowly before placing the snake and jar on the coffee table and springing to his feet. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to change my pants.”

Chloe and I share a look and break out into another round of giggles.

“So not funny,” he calls back over his shoulder. It only makes us laugh harder.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

TAG

THOSE TWO THINK THEY'RE SO FREAKING CUTE WITH THE SNAKE IN THE CAN. They laughed about it all through breakfast, and then Chloe decided to give me a play-by-play of my reaction when the damn thing sprung out at my face. Again, not funny.

As promised, I hung the picture collage next to the TV. I regret its placement already. We're watching one of the few remaining Christmas movies we haven't yet binged, and it's a damn distraction I didn't ask for. Or rather, the picture at the bottom—the one taken of the three of us at the zoo—is the culprit.

We look perfect together, like an actual family. But that thought is as ridiculous as it should be fleeting. Only it's not, and the more I stare at it, the more I can envision it.

I've thought about asking Elle to stay; of course I have. Every damn day it crosses my mind. But what would I say? Please turn your back on your family, give up your only form of income and let me be your sugar daddy? For one thing, she'd probably laugh in my face. One of Elle's best qualities is how loyal she is, even if her family is using it against her. Which leads me to the second thing: I can't ask her to turn her back on her family, nor can I ask her to depend on me financially. She's a strong, independent woman, and I'd never ask her to give that up.

It's about mid-movie when Elle's phone starts going off. It dings with a message which she ignores, and then it dings again. And then again.

"Your dad?" I nod to the phone. She can't go a day without him calling or texting anymore. They're supposed to be in Hawaii on some bullshit family getaway. All Elle wants is to enjoy a quiet holiday at home, and she can't

even get that from the family she's dedicated her entire life to pleasing. I've yet to talk to her parents personally, but I'm not a fan. If it's not her dad making demands, it's her mom picking on her.

I'm not sure what's worse: parents who are absent or parents who are controlling. Maybe I should ask her to stay; take a damn chance on something that matters for once in my life. Worst case scenario, she says no and goes back home, just like she planned to do from the beginning. And if she says yes... maybe I can get a shot at happiness after all.

"Yep." She flips the phone over on her leg, facing it forward. "It's not enough that I'm coming home earlier than planned. I'm supposed to be sick right now."

I open my mouth to respond and then snap it shut. I'm not sure what she means. As far as I know, she's been feeling fine, unless she's hiding something from me. I try to keep my voice calm as I ask, "You're supposed to be sick?"

Elle flushes and stares at the ground. "I, uh, I may have told my parents I was sick, and that's why I couldn't go with them to Hawaii."

"Why couldn't you tell your parents you wanted to spend Christmas with Chloe and I?"

Her hands are folded in her lap, and she studies them like they have all the answers. As the silence stretches, it becomes more damning. There's only one answer that would keep her quiet. I don't want it to be true, but I'd bet everything in my fucking bank account they don't know I exist.

It's not like I expected her to tell her parents we're having sex or are anything more than friends... but Jesus Christ. She's been living with me for almost two months. She spends almost every day with Chloe. She sleeps cuddled up to me every night I'm home. I'd say that's pretty damn substantial. Unless I was wrong about everything, and our relationship is way more significant to me than it is to her.

No. Fuck that.

There's no way I imagined every smile, every time she melted into my touch and each soft caress. Every time she whispered my name when I made love to her.

"Can I talk to you in the kitchen?" I ask tightly.

At Elle's sharp nod, I kiss Chloe on the top of her head.

"We'll be right back," I tell her. "I expect a full recap of what we missed."

I lead the way into the kitchen. Elle follows, right on my tail, but remains silent. Once we get into the farthest corner and out of earshot, I spin around and cross my arms over my chest. “Do your parents even know you’ve been staying here?”

She bites her quivering bottom lip, her gaze darting everywhere but at me.

“Elle, answer me. Do your parents know you’ve been staying here?” I repeat the question slowly, drawing out each and every word, hating how they taste on my tongue.

“No,” she whispers.

“Do they know about us at all?”

“No.”

The single syllable cuts a hole in my heart and dashes any chance we had at a future. This whole time I’ve been in a one-way relationship, one she had every intention of ending. I’m sure staying here never crossed her mind.

Pain works its way into my gut, twisting and gnawing every good thing its path, and my blood turns cold. The similarities between Elle and my father are alarmingly similar. They’re ashamed of my existence, hiding me from their families. Afraid I’ll ruin their perfect fucking lives. No real concern for me or how my life ends up.

“What the hell do they think you’ve been doing this whole time?” My jaw clenches and I narrow my eyes on her.

She shifts, fidgeting under my glare. “They think I’ve been staying with Lucy and taking art classes.”

“And why would you tell them you’ve been taking art classes? I haven’t seen you take a single one.”

“I signed up for several before I got here, and the teacher cancelled them at the last minute. That’s why I had the free time to help out with Chloe. I just never told my parents the classes were cancelled. It was better if they didn’t know.”

Just like it was better if they didn’t know I existed. Or Chloe. It was fucking better for everyone except those of us who are cast aside and left behind.

“Really? Wow. I didn’t peg you for a liar but clearly that’s exactly what you are. I can’t believe—” I pause as her phone rings, and she makes no move to answer. “You gonna get that?”

Elle sighs, snags her phone from her pocket, and slides her finger across

the screen. "Hey, Lucy. It's not a good time."

"Sorry, Lucy." I step behind Elle and raise my voice so there's no doubt she can hear me. "Your sister is trying to explain to me why she's been lying to your parents this whole time and hiding the fact she's been living here. Guess Chloe and I don't fit in with her high society standards."

"You've been lying to us? Who is that? What are you doing with a boy? I thought you said you were sick." A gruff male voice sounds over the phone, probably her dad.

My stomach lurches and I take a deep breath as my breakfast threatens to make a reappearance. My pulse pounds loud in my ears as the full reality punches me in the face. She really did lie to everyone. A part of me feels bad that I outed her to her parents, but I can't bring myself to apologize. Lies and betrayal are things I can't tolerate, not from the people around me, from the ones I'm supposed to trust the most. I take a step back and lean against the counter, wiping my palms on the sleeves of my black Henley, crossing and re-crossing my arms.

She places her hand over the phone, turns her back, and paces several feet away. Probably afraid I'd reveal more of her lies.

"Daddy. I, well... I didn't realize you were on the phone." She pauses, her eyes darting to me. "He's a friend... I'm helping him with his niece... I'm aware you didn't send me to college to be a babysitter... Of course I care about my future... Yes... Yes... I'll be there."

As soon as she pockets her phone, I push off the counter and take a step toward her. "I'd like to say I feel bad, but I don't."

"Well, thanks. Daddy is pissed. I'm expected home tomorrow to talk about all this and my position at his company. That job is important to me."

"Oh, and Chloe and I aren't?" All things I knew, but then again, I also thought I would have been on that list.

"That's not what I'm saying."

"Then what are you saying?"

"I don't know." She paces the length of the floor. "This whole thing between us happened so fast. It was never going to work out, and we both knew that from the beginning. We both knew I'd be leaving at the end of the year."

"And why did you have to hide Chloe and I from your family? Why keep us a secret?"

She sighs and stops in front of me. "You don't understand, Tag. I want

this job. I want to take over the company my father built up with his bare hands. And to get that job, my father has certain expectations. Some of those expectations pertain to the men I date. Daddy would never approve of me being with an athlete long-term. Someone like you would never get his approval.”

“Someone like me? What do you mean, someone like me? You mean some bastard with a drug addict mom and sister? You mean a single dad who’s trying his best to do right by his niece? Tell me, Elle. Which of those things doesn’t fit into your standards?”

I don’t care how hard her dad worked to build that company. It shouldn’t matter if it gets handed down to some investment banker with a hard-on for money. This is about common human decency. Her excuses about her dad not approving of someone like me are bullshit. Just like it’s bullshit she thought she had to lie to her parents about Chloe and me, that she had to hide our very existence like we’re common criminals.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what the fuck do you mean?”

“What do you want me to say, Tag? You want me to tell you that being with you would cost me everything? I’m glad you have the luxury of doing something you love, but I don’t have that. I have an obligation to my family and a career to get back to.”

I inhale sharply. This must be what getting stabbed in the back feels like. I can’t believe I misjudged her this badly. She’s exactly like my dad. She’s been living a brief double life only to go back home to her real family. She always planned to betray me; she always planned to leave me behind.

“I would hate to cost you everything, Princess. You’re right. Don’t let being with someone like me drag you down to the dredges of society. You go on home and climb up on that high ass horse of yours so you can keep looking down on the rest of us.”

“What other choice do I have? You haven’t asked me to stay.”

“And why would I? You’ve given me no indication that you’d want to. You’ve made it clear that this job is your priority, and that you would do anything to get Daddy’s approval.”

After this, there’s no way that I would get that approval anyway—a three-time loser like me. My father picked his other family. Then my mom picked drugs. And now Elle is picking a faceless corporation. Shame on me for allowing myself a moment to think I could be happy. Shame on fucking me. I

won't make that mistake again.

Elle remains silent, eyes trained on my sweater collar.

“Because that’s the truth, right? This job is your life?”

“Ask me to stay.”

I chuckle—the sound is as empty and humorless as I feel. “I can’t do that, Elle. I may be some stupid jock, but I know better than to ask a question I already know the answer to.”

She finally meets my gaze. Her eyes are glassy and her bottom lip quivers once more.

“Go home, Elle. Go home to your parents and your future husband and your bullshit job. Take over your fucking company and roll around in all the money you’ll make. You’re right; this was always going to end. No point delaying the inevitable. Have a nice life.”

And with that, I stomp around her, leaving her standing in the kitchen with her fingers in knots and her mouth gaping like a fish. I don’t know what she expects to happen. If she wants me to get down on my knees and beg her to stay, she has another thing coming. This, right here, is why I don’t get involved beyond a night. This is why I don’t allow myself to surrender any part of myself to anyone else. Why I never rely on anyone but myself.

Why I’ll always be alone.

I’ve broken all my rules for Elle. Every single fucking one. Which is why I don’t get up—I don’t even move—when Elle grabs her purse and heads straight for the door. She’s out it without a word and it slams behind.

“Where’s Elle going?” Chloe turns her head and peers at the closed door.

I pull Chloe in for a hug and turn up the TV. “She needs to work some things out with her parents. Don’t worry about it right now.”

The last part was more for me because I want to get up and chase after her, but I won’t. Even if it kills me. Even if I want to wrap her in my arms and beg her to stay, exactly like I said I wouldn’t. I sit there like a shell of a man because that’s what I am. An empty husk. Plenty of space for bitterness and self-loathing to stretch their legs and make my body their permanent home.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

ELLE

WHO THE FUCK DOES TAG THINK HE IS? WHAT RIGHT DOES HE HAVE TO TALK to me like that? After everything we've been through together, he practically kicked me out of his house.

It doesn't matter that he's absolutely right. This is a bullshit life, but it's my bullshit life. Daddy worked hard for years to build that company out of nothing. I'll be damned if it falls into the hands of someone like Warren. Because if I bow out, Daddy will need someone to take over, and Warren's so far up Daddy's ass, he seems like the next logical choice.

I've been working my entire adult life to take over that company. So what if that means I need to gain his approval for things? It's how I was raised, so that's nothing new.

And Tag, freaking Tag. He's been pulling away for days, and then has the audacity to make everything seem like it was my fault. It was just as much his. Maybe more. He could have asked me to stay.

Daddy would have a heart attack if I never went back to Savannah, and I could kiss that job goodbye. But it would be my choice to make, even if the outcome remained the same. Tag took that decision from me the second he told me to go home.

Have a nice life.

He said that and then dismissed me like I was yesterday's news—easily discarded and forgotten. At least I had the foresight to change after breakfast, or I would've been stuck travelling in those stupid flannel pajamas.

I stew over those four words the entire night as I sit in the airport. I can't stop repeating them to myself on the morning flight home, cursing myself for my tears, and trying to drown my sorrows in a 9am rum and Coke.

None of those things do me any good. By the end of it, the only things I have to show for my troubles are a headache and a broken heart.

And now it's close to noon, and I'm walking up to my parent's house with an assortment of wadded up tissues in my purse, and a bag of assorted trail mix from the airport. It's a little chilly and I don't have my jacket. It's at Tag's house.

I can't regret it, either. I needed to get out of there before I caved and apologized for no reason. I was close to doing just that. So close. I wanted to feel his arms around me and his lips on mine at least once more. Fuck. He makes me want to forget about everything I've worked for. If he had just asked me to stay...

It doesn't matter now.

I walk into their estate, grateful for the silence, and head straight for the bar in Daddy's den. That's where he keeps the good tequila, and that's what I'll need to drown out the sound of Tag's voice in my head. To quell the rage and hurt threatening to combust within me.

To think I was close to telling him I loved him. I toss back the first shot, relishing the burning in the back of my throat. I'd rather feel that than anything else. *Love.*

Such a stupid, pointless emotion. Who needs it? Certainly not me. I've been fine on my own, taking care of myself and that won't change. Not because of Tag, and not because of Warren and his micro penis. Love makes people stupid. It makes them want things they can't have.

Sometimes when you reach for the stars you get burned; after all, they might seem pretty, but those stars are raging balls of gas and fire. They twinkle so temptingly. They lure you close only to scorch you when you try to touch them. They punish you for trying.

"To hell with this little glass," I mumble to myself and take several long pulls from the bottle. It clanks on the table as I lean forward and my eyes water. A cough works its way out of my throat and I use my free hand to cling to the table as I hack up a lung. That's some strong shit.

Most medicine is.

Snatching the bottle off the table, I stagger to the stairs and take another sip. I've got the entire day to drink away my sorrows; my parents won't get in from Hawaii until tomorrow. That gives me plenty of time to get into trouble. My eyes sting and my vision blurs as wetness coats my cheeks. I inhale on a sob, force down another gulp of tequila and full-on ugly cry.

Damn Tag for making me love him. Damn him for breaking my heart. Damn him for making me question the things that are dictating my life.



“Your sister filled us in on your escapades.” Daddy sits across from me in the formal sitting room, a whiskey in one hand while the other curls casually around the arm of the floral chair. His eyes are harsh, and his mouth has been in a perpetual frown since he arrived with Mother and Lucy trailing behind him. “I wasn’t aware I was paying for your college education so you could be a professional babysitter.”

I groan and hold my hand to my forehead. The thumping behind my eyes hasn’t lessened since I got up this morning. Aspirin and water have made no dent in the incessant pounding. In retrospect, consuming half a bottle of tequila on a mostly empty stomach wasn’t the brightest idea. Not when I knew an interrogation was so close at hand. “Daddy, I was just doing a friend a favor. I wasn’t doing it for money.”

“I wasn’t aware he was amongst your friends, or that you even knew him before your time visiting Lucy.”

“I, uh,” I pause and sigh, my shoulders deflating. No doubt Lucy told him the basics and he already knows the answer to this question. “He was Lucy’s friend, not mine, and he needed my help. I had the free time.”

“It wasn’t your job to help him. It’s not your place. And you should have been honest with me about those classes. If they were cancelled, you should have come back home. It was irresponsible of you to stay there.”

“I’m sorry—”

“That was the deal, Ethel.” Daddy interrupts, holding up his free hand. “I allowed you to go there and stay with your sister so that you could become more well-rounded.”

“Daddy, I—”

“I’m not done yet. And this man, this *Tag*.” He says his name like he’s dog shit on the bottom of his shoe. “Nothing you can say will lead me to believe you two were just friends. There was more going on with you and that man whether you admit it to me or not. What I need to know is that it’s ended.”

I nod, pressure building up in my chest and I take a ragged breath. He’ll

never know the depth of my feelings for Tag, and really it doesn't matter. What we had is over, and there's no going back. We're both focusing on different things and have different priorities. It would've never worked outside the bubble we lived in while I was in Nashville.

"Good. Because you know how things will end with another athlete. And being with someone like him doesn't present the image we want. If you want to take over my company, you need to show some responsibility. I need to know you're ready. You need to show me you're willing to make the proper sacrifices to take the lead. It's time to grow up."

"I understand. I'm ready."

He takes a sip of his whiskey and stands, re-buttoning his charcoal jacket over his crisp white shirt. "Then go upstairs and change. Your mother and I have some business associates coming over for dinner. Warren will be here, and I expect you to be courteous and make him feel welcome in this home. He'll be your business partner, and I know he'd like to extend that to being your personal partner as well. You'd do well to consider him."

I nod again because I can't bring myself to force out the words. I don't want to consider anything about Warren except his resignation from Daddy's company. I'd gladly look that over, but I don't see him handing that in anytime soon. However, if I want to be CEO and owner of Hurst Financial Group, then I'll hold my tongue, nod my head, and bide my time. I gave up too much already to sacrifice this as well. I need this job.

Without it, I'm just some loser who discovered what it was like to feel love and then threw it away. I sure as hell didn't fight for it. Instead, I threw in the towel and ran away like a coward during our first real fight. So without love, without Tag, I need this job or everything I've done will be for nothing.

Daddy takes one last look at me and finishes his whiskey. "Everyone will be here soon. You might want to head on upstairs."

"I'll be ready." I stand, smooth a hand down the front of my blouse and hightail it out of there before I say something stupid. Like how much of an ass-kissing douche canoe I think Warren is. Or how boring all his business associates are.

After shutting myself in my room, I change into a knee-length champagne cocktail dress. Until Lucy has time to pack up my things from Tag's house and ship them, I won't have access to most of my makeup. I did, however, stash my favorite lip plumper in my purse. As I dig around for it, my fingers brush against a cool delicate chain. The locket. I was so mad at the airport I

nearly broke it trying to get it off, but when I dangled it over the trash can in the women's bathroom, I couldn't bring myself to throw it away.

I pull it out, letting the chain slip between my fingers, and open it. Chloe has this mischievous look on her face like she's about to gross Tag out by telling him snake facts. Which she absolutely does on purpose because she knows it bothers him. This could have been taken the day we ordered the snake in the can, and quite possibly a real-looking rubber snake for a rainy day. She was cool as a cucumber when she gave him the canned snake, but I can still remember the cackling laugh she couldn't control on the day we ordered it.

Tag is exactly how I like him. Two-day-old scruff and a lopsided smile. It's the same lazy smile that etches across his face when he's watching Chloe or cuddling with me on the couch, and he doesn't think anyone has noticed.

I always noticed.

I noticed everything about him. The way certain lighting picked up the little flecks of gold in his irises, the way his hair curled ever so slightly in the back, the way he raked his hand through his hair when he was frustrated, and how he melted every time Chloe told him she loved him.

Something I'll never get to do.

This time I don't hold back the tears as they threaten to fall. I let them slide down my cheeks and soak the tissues. I let myself wallow in loneliness and despair for a few minutes before I wipe my face and straighten my shoulders. I may be in love with a man I can't have, and I may never get over him, but right now, I have a dinner party to attend and guests to entertain.

With shaking fingers, I secure the locket around my neck. I may not get to have Tag, but I can take a piece of him with me.

When I make it back downstairs, I'm not surprised to see that Warren has arrived first. He's wearing a navy suit with a white shirt and tie, and this time his dark brown hair is styled back from his face instead of all shaggy. I guess it's an improvement; at least he's no longer dressed identical to Daddy. I can tell the moment he sees me because he turns away from my parents and smiles.

"Elle." He meets me in the middle of the foyer, takes my hand, brings it to his mouth and brushes his lips over my knuckles. It elicits nothing. Not even a single butterfly in the pit of my stomach. "You look beautiful. Simply stunning."

"Thank you, Warren. You look..." I trail off, heat licking up my neck. He

doesn't look bad, but I'm not sure I can bring myself to say something nice. Not after the words we exchanged last time. Although I guess I should thank him. He was right about my father, and had he not said anything, I'd still be in the dark. The seconds tick by and the corner of his eyes crinkle and his grin widens like he knows exactly what's going on in my head. I guess a little compliment won't kill me. "You look nice too."

He releases my hand with a chuckle. "That means a lot coming from you. Have you met Rich, George, and Dan yet?"

I shake my head; I didn't meet many of the higher-ups while I was in Atlanta. I'm not sure if that was an oversight on my part or something Daddy was holding back until I was ready to devote myself to the job.

"I've played golf with them a few times." Warren places a gentle hand on my upper back, leads me toward my parents, and murmurs in my ear. "Watch out for George, he can get a little handsy when he starts drinking."

"Thanks."

"No problem. We're going to be working very closely together for the foreseeable future. It's in my best interest to help you out."

I scoff and hold back an eye roll. Patronizing asshole. At least he's playing nice for now. As we reach my parents, the doorbell rings. I can only assume it's the other associates. My parents move past us to answer, and Warren leads me to the kitchen where my mother has wine and hors d'oeuvres.

"These guys are stuffy old men who are used to running the show. They're not used to having a woman involved in business meetings outside of fetching coffee. I think it's time we tip the scales." Warren continues, keeping his voice low. "Rich is a womanizer through and through. He dates every secretary he has, and is currently married to his third wife. He loves scotch and hockey, which I imagine will be your in with him. George likes to drink—"

"And get handsy."

"And he gets handsy. No one with tits will be safe, including your mother. I think he's a borderline alcoholic with a liking for cigars and ridiculously expensive cars. Dan's an interesting one. I'm pretty sure he has a secret marijuana farm. He's super mellow for a guy with five daughters, but he loves to talk about them."

"Seriously, why are you helping me?" My brows draw together as I study him.

“Like I said, it’s time to tip the scales. I’ve gone over your files and you’re a lot smarter than your dad gives you credit for.” He shrugs and gives me a shy smile. “I know I was an asshole last time I was here, but after going through everything, I think we both bring a lot to the table. I’m looking forward to our partnership and I know you don’t know me very well, but I like to shake things up.”

“Noted.” I chuckle. While I may accept this olive branch, I’m going to keep it an arm’s length away. Warren is talking a good game, saying some nice things, but a game could be all it is. I’m sure he’s intent on using our partnership to his advantage, whatever that is.

I reach up and trail my fingers along the chain and around the locket. Tag would never use me to get ahead or boost his career. I can’t even say he used me for my body because he always made sure I orgasmed twice as many times as he did.

Even on his best day, Warren could never compare to Tag. He’s the best of us. I can only hope one day I can forgive myself for letting him go.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

TAG

“SO YOU DON’T THINK ELLE IS COMING BACK?” I DON’T NEED TO TAKE MY eyes off the road to see the confusion I can hear in Chloe’s voice.

“Her parents needed her to come home,” I answer, my knuckles turning white as I tighten my grip on the steering wheel.

“But she left all of her stuff. She wouldn’t leave all her stuff if she wasn’t planning on coming back for it. And she wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye.”

I grunt but don’t respond. She didn’t need to say goodbye because I said it for her. I said it when I chased her out that damn door.

Two days she’s been gone. Two fucking days of misery since Elle walked out of my front door and didn’t look back. Two nights of me holding and sniffing her pillow, inhaling vanilla and jasmine, so I could try to get a few hours of restless sleep. I did manage to get some rest that way; enough to keep me from being completely dead on the ice. I’ll just be mostly dead. Nearly dead.

Coach will love it.

Chloe won’t be there to see it when I inevitably give up during practice. Jazz, godsend that she is, offered to take her to the movies, and Chloe jumped all over it. I’ve got a few potential nannies lined up to interview after New Year’s Eve—all old ladies—so I only have to go solo for a few more days. We’ve got practice, but with the holidays, it’s a slower week.

“Did you say something to make her mad?” Chloe assesses me as we pull into the arena parking lot.

“Why would you ask that?”

“Brittany says that guys are stupid, and they tell girls the wrong thing all

the time. Mostly because they can't come to terms with their own emotions."

"Jesus. Where does Brittany get this information?" I need to talk to Brittany's mom and find out what she's letting them watch. I'm going to go out on a limb and say it's not the Discovery Channel.

She shrugs. "Mostly her mom. She likes to have wine with dinner and tells us all about her ex-husband and what she calls the wrongs of men." She pauses and tosses me another look. "Her dad didn't say the right thing either."

Great. Between Chloe and Brittany's mom, I'm being attacked on all fronts. "Oh, look." I point out the window to where Jazz and Linc are getting out of his Range Rover. "Jazz is here."

I park my truck next to Linc and grab my gear bag from the backseat. Linc greets Chloe with a fist bump and Jazz pulls her in for a hug.

"Hey, guys." I exchange a head nod with Linc before giving Jazz a quick hug. "Thanks for taking Chloe to the movies. I'm sure she'd be bored sitting around all afternoon watching practice."

Chloe smiles up at me, her blonde ponytail blowing in the wind. "That depends. Does the coach yell at you during practice?"

"He yells at your uncle all the time." Linc claps me on the back.

"Then I might like it."

"Come on." Jazz steers Chloe toward the car, stopping to give Linc a quick peck, and opening the door to the backseat. "Let's head out. I think Tag's eye is twitching."

I say a quick goodbye and after the girls drive off, Linc throws an arm over my shoulder. "How are you holding up?"

"How do you know something happened?" I shove him off me and hike the gear bag higher on my shoulder. "Never mind. Lucy probably told Jazz everything."

"I don't know about everything, but we got the gist. What happened? I thought you were really into Elle."

With a sigh, I run a hand through my hair and wring the back of my neck. "I was. She wasn't into me."

"Oh, come on."

"I'm serious. The whole time she was lying to her parents about what she was doing and who she was doing it with." At Linc's raised brow, I continue, "They thought she was taking art classes and living with Lucy. They had no idea she was staying with me or that Chloe and I even existed. It was like she

was ashamed of us.”

Linc lets out a low whistle and badges us into the player’s entrance. “That’s fucked up.”

“It was like the situation with my dad all over again. I was a dirty little secret he kept from his real family. Elle didn’t want her parents to find out about me because of some job. It wasn’t like I was going to propose or anything, but I thought about asking her to stay.” I shake my head and sigh once more. “Joke’s on me because that was never an option for her. And then she left, ran right out on Chloe and I just like Finley did. No goodbyes. No phone calls. Nothing.”

We fall silent as we enter the locker room, the chatter from the other players taking over. I toss my stuff in front of my locker, pull my shirt over my head, and toss it on the bench. Something sharp pokes into the middle of my back and I’m shoved forward. I turn around to throw an insult at Foster but instead, face some tattooed asshole in a Devils’ jersey I’ve not had the displeasure of meeting. He’s got sharp green eyes and the biggest resting bitch face I’ve ever seen. The chip on his shoulder could power the entire city of Nashville.

He glares at me, nostrils flaring almost like he’s ready for a fight. I don’t know who this fucker is, but he picked on the wrong person. I take a step forward, but Linc halts any further progress, blocking me with his arm.

“You better watch where the fuck you’re going.” I spit out, my hands fisting at my side.

His eyes move to my hands before they meet mine and he has the audacity to chuckle. “You don’t scare me.”

Without another word, he moves past us to an empty spot at the back of the locker room.

“Who the fuck is that guy?” I point after the hulking piece of shit and put on my pads.

“New trade from LA,” Linc scoffs. “He leaves a lot to be desired. You don’t recognize him? That’s Rhett Remington.”

“The guy who was almost benched for the rest of the season because of a fight with his own teammate?”

“The very same.”

“Who the fuck wanted him? He’s a walking cloud of trouble.”

“I think that’s the point. The guy’s a hell of an enforcer. He’ll be valuable on the ice, but it may be best to steer clear of him otherwise.”

Turns out, it's best to steer clear of him on the ice too. Every. Fucking. Time. That asshole passes me, he knocks into me with something. His stick, an elbow, his shoulder. My blood boils as I pick myself up from the ice and readjust my helmet. This fucker is about to get it. My fuse is already short, and I'm about an inch away from punching him right in his smug face.

Maybe if I had Elle waiting for me at home, I'd give him a pass. But she's in Georgia and I'll never get to see her beautiful face again. She chose a job over me. A fucking job. She hid me from her parents and lied to everyone. And then she ran out the door without a second glance.

Rhett slides by me, this time tapping the back of my calf with his stick. Fuck this guy. I'm done. I rip off my helmet, throw it down to the ice, and shove this asshole. The gloves are off next as he turns around with a sly smirk on his face. He rips his helmet off and squares up to me. We're nose to nose, skate to skate. At first, I don't throw a punch and neither does he; we just glare at each other as the seconds tick by. My eye definitely twitches, and my jaw is clenched so hard my teeth may fuse.

And then he winks at me like I'm his fucking date.

I cock my fist, let it fly, and punch that fucker right in the mouth. He grabs my jersey, I grab his, and we both start swinging. His fist connects with my cheek, and I get him a few more times before we're pulled apart. Linc has one of my arms pinned while Foster has the other. The Bruiser brothers are pushing him back, and I snarl at him like a wild animal.

"You need to chill the fuck out." Linc whispers harshly in my ear. "This isn't you."

The fuck it isn't.

I lurch again but Linc and Foster tighten their grip on my biceps and pads. Coach's whistle cuts through the air, and we all freeze. Even the fucking smile on Rhett's ugly face drops.

"Harris!" Coach's gruff voice shouts across the ice. "Get your ass in the locker room and cool off. Remington, you have a date in my office after practice."

The boys release their hold, and my shoulders sag. If Rhett's staying on the ice, he better get his ass handed to him after practice. Fuck. I throw him one last dirty look before I trudge into the locker room to sit out my sentence.

Elle would know exactly what to say to calm me down, to make me feel right. I can't help the laugh that escapes. If Elle were here, I wouldn't be in this mess in the first place. My head would be in the right place, I'd have

gotten some rest and best of all, I'd have Elle's arms around me and her lips on mine whenever I wanted. But she's fucking gone, and I'll never get any of those things again. Not that I deserve any of them—apparently a shitty job is a better choice than a future with me. I know she made the right choice for her life and her future, but damn if it doesn't hurt.

It doesn't keep me from wondering about the what ifs, wishing things ended differently.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

TAG

YESTERDAY'S PRACTICE WAS A FLAT-OUT DISASTER, AND THAT NEW GUY IS officially enemy number one. It's nice to have someone to direct my anger at instead of Elle... or myself. Plus, it was pretty funny to hear Rhett get reamed after practice. I was very amused when Coach threatened to bench him if he picked fights with any of us again. Of course, Coach did tell me to pull my head out of my ass, and he's probably right, but I don't really care.

Right now, I'm pulling my head into a hoodie and splashing water on my face because Lucy is on her way over to pack up Elle's shit and move her permanently out of my life.

I thought about packing her stuff up myself and having it ready by the front door, but the second I walked into the guest room, my heart seized, and I couldn't breathe. It was like I was miles underwater and this heavy weight pressed on me from all sides, compressing my chest and cutting off my air supply. So I did a complete one-eighty, promptly retreating to the kitchen to make pancakes out of the box for Chloe. Elle would have done them from scratch, but even making them from the box is an accomplishment for me.

The doorbell rings, and I hear Chloe answer it. I dry my face and stare at myself in the mirror. I look like shit.

"Lucy's here," Chloe shouts from the living room.

I straighten up, pull my hair in a low ponytail, and head out to meet her. The pressure in my chest is back, increasing with every step I take. It's nothing against Lucy; I'm just not sure I'm ready to face the fact that Elle is never coming back. That she really chose a job over me. I'm not quite ready for the full reality check.

Lucy is standing behind the couch in jeans and a pink sweater. Color me

surprised, I didn't think she owned a pair of denim anything. Her brows rise as she takes me in, and her mouth tilts in a frown.

"Not been sleeping much? I love the dark circles under your eyes. Very becoming."

I shake my head, no use denying what must be written plainly on my face. "Been having a little trouble lately."

Lucy blows out a long breath and leans down to whisper something in Chloe's ear. Chloe beams up at her and runs off to her room. Normally I'd wonder what that was about, but all I can think about is that Lucy is about to pack up what feels like a significant part of my life and take it out the door with her when she leaves. Elle was only here for two months for fuck's sake.

Get a grip, Harris. She left like everyone else, and it's about time you pull your head out of your ass and move on.

So, why does it sound so much easier in my head?

"Lead the way." Lucy sets her pale pink purse down on the sofa table and gestures toward the hallway.

I swallow past the lump in my throat. "I guess we should get this over with."

Lucy nods as she passes me into the guest bedroom where Elle kept all her belongings. She pulls the two large suitcases out of the closet and opens them on the bed. I know I should help, move, do *something*, but I'm rooted to the spot as Lucy pulls a few shirts from the closet and walks them over to the open luggage. My heart hammers in my chest and stars dance across my vision. I suck in oxygen like a starving man, and I can't seem to get enough.

"Are you okay?" Lucy studies me, her nose scrunched up and as she takes a few steps toward me, holds out her arms like she's approaching a caged animal who's about to charge. That assessment may not be far off.

"I'm fine," I ground out. "I'll be fine."

"You don't look fine."

"I'm always fine. Don't worry about me."

"I think you're always stubborn. That's what I think. Come on, sit down." She takes my hand and guides me to the floor.

I push myself against the wall and let my head fall back, clunking against it. At Lucy's insistence, I take a few deep breaths. In. Count to three. Out. Count to three. My heart slows down to a normal rate, and I wipe my palms down the front of my joggers.

"So," Lucy falls into place next to me and nudges me with her shoulder.

“You obviously have some feelings about me taking my sister’s stuff from your house.”

“It’s fine.” I throw her a sideways look and see that she’s clearly not buying it. “What do you want me to say, Lucy? I’m not sure anything matters at this point. Your sister made up her mind, and it wasn’t me she chose. Plus, she damn near tried to hide my very existence from your family.”

“Elle is... complicated.”

I snort. Complicated is both too much and not enough to describe her. The relationship with her parents is indeed complicated, and I can’t even pretend to understand this need she has to please them. Or how she can let them take over her life for a job.

But then when she was here, living with me, being with me, things were simple. What she wanted and how she lived were simple. She didn’t go to expensive restaurants, nor did she flaunt who she was or how much money she made. She spent time with the people she cared about, or at least who I thought she cared about.

Maybe I got everything wrong, and Elle is as complicated as her situation. Before Christmas, I would have never thought she was capable of deceiving her entire family and seeing me behind their back.

Lucy nudges me again and continues. “When we were growing up, I fought with my parents constantly. I refused to let my mother parade me around in her little pageants. I wouldn’t follow my father’s plan when I got to college. Instead of the business and finance classes he insisted I take, I signed up for public relations and communications. You should have seen the look on his face when he found out.” She pauses to chuckle. “He lost his shit, which is not something my father does often.”

“How did you end up here?”

“My father is an old-fashioned man. When you go against the family, you get cut off. And that’s what happened to me: he cut me off. There were a couple of dark years for me where I didn’t speak to either of my parents. I had some money in the bank and a couple offers with PR firms in Georgia. After working there for a couple months and couch surfing with friends, I quit. I felt bad leaving Elle behind, but I got the job I have now, moved to Tennessee, and the rest is history. I eventually forgave my parents and we worked things out, but while I was gone, all their focus shifted to Elle, and she was not the rebel I was. She sought their approval, always has.”

“But she’s not a little kid anymore. She doesn’t need their approval to

live her life.”

“I agree. However, it’s all she knows, and she’s been working toward running Hurst Financial Group for seven years now. It’s all she can see. And if I know my father as well as I think I do, he’ll never let her take over. At least not truly.”

Which is why he wanted her to meet that tool when she was home for Thanksgiving. The more I hear about her parents, the more I really don’t like them. “That’s why he wants to marry her off. That way he can give the business to the successor he chooses without talking to Elle about it.”

“Exactly.” Lucy sighs and shifts her legs underneath her. “So, did you tell her?”

“Tell her what?”

“That you love her.” She says matter-of-fact and crosses her arms over her chest.

My first thought is to flat out deny the accusation, but as soon as I open my mouth my response turns to ash. I always assumed I had the emotional range of a rock, but parenting Chloe has forced me to recognize emotions I’ve been avoiding for years. I can feel them if I want to; I can love Chloe. I can even tell her I love her, and it doesn’t hurt.

But Elle? Ever since I laid my eyes on her and all her luscious curves, she’s the only woman I’ve been able to see. She had me throwing eight years of bachelorhood in the trash after just one night. It’s not only her body that has me hostage. She has the biggest heart of anyone I’ve ever met. She didn’t hesitate to jump in and help with Chloe when I needed it, even though we were virtual strangers at the time.

She makes me laugh, she’s easy to talk to, and coming back to her after a long day of practice or an away game felt like... home. Home wasn’t my old apartment. It isn’t this house. It’s her, and I haven’t felt like that since she left. Even worse, I haven’t felt whole since she left.

If this isn’t a slap in the face, I don’t know what is. My first and only love and I can’t have her. “It doesn’t matter how I feel.”

“Of course it does, especially if she feels the same way.”

If she did, she would have never walked out that door. “I don’t think she does. And weren’t you opposed to us being together?”

“I might have said something against it.” She smirks. “But you also don’t follow directions very well.”

“Was your apartment even flooded?”

“Nope.”

I drop my head in my hands and the laughter rumbles through my chest. “Jesus, you’ve been playing me the whole time.”

“Nah.” Lucy pats my knee. “It’s just that I could see so plainly what the both of you were denying. You just needed a push to get together.”

“Lot of good that did.”

“It will do a lot of good when you pull your head out of your butt and bring Elle back home.” Chloe slides into the room and drops several photos in my lap. Elle and I at the zoo: I’m whispering in her ear, and she has a smile cut clear across her face. Another one where I’m looking away from her and she’s looking up at me like I’m her whole world. My breath catches in my throat, but I can’t stop myself from going to the next one. And the next. Elle and I in the kitchen together, she’s wiping melted chocolate on the tip of my nose. The two of us on the couch together, hovering next to each other but not touching.

“Where did you get these?” I say in awe as I peer up at her.

“I took them with my phone when you weren’t paying attention. Lucy helped me get them printed.”

I take my time studying the photos in my hands, running my fingers over Elle’s features as if I didn’t already have them memorized.

“Are you going to stare at those all day or are you going to do something about it?” Chloe props her fists on her hips while Lucy does her best to suppress a smile. “Elle is family, and we don’t give up on family without a fight.”

“It’s not that simple, Chloe.” I grip the photos tighter as my hands shake. “She made her choice.”

“You need to make sure she knows she made the wrong one.” Lucy puts a gentle hand over mine and squeezes.

“What if she doesn’t want me?”

“What if she does?”

What if she does? That question echoes in my brain, pinging off neuron after neuron, and I can’t let it go. My southern princess; so close, yet so far away. Can I go on living my life with something like that hanging over my head? Can I really move forward without at least trying to win her back?

But... I could fail. I could put myself out there and be shot down for a second time. I could find out this was as one-sided as I thought it was, and she was only using me as an escape. Nothing more. There’s a very real

possibility that she feels nothing for me, never has, and I'd only be making a fool out of myself if I chased after her.

I swallow hard and shake my head to free myself of the doubt that threatens to hold me here. Am I going to be able to live with myself without knowing how she feels about me? There's a possibility that she loves me too. And if she does and I don't go after her, then I'm a coward who doesn't deserve her.

My whole adult life, I've been adamant that a happily ever after was out of my grasp; I was so sure of it that I never considered the alternative: that I was just too scared to open myself up.

Gathering the photos into a pile, I push off the floor and get to my feet. Time to take a chance.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

IT'S NEW YEAR'S EVE AND NOTHING FEELS RIGHT. NOT THIS TWO-thousand-dollar glittery gold dress. Not the priceless diamond heirloom necklace around my neck or the matching studs in my ears.

I shouldn't be here, going to this party like everything is normal. This is my parents' world, one that I used to think I fit into, but I've never felt like more of an outsider than I do right now. I used to feel at home in these luxurious dresses and fancy jewelry; now I feel like a fraud. What I wouldn't give for one of Tag's comfy tees and a pair of leggings.

Daddy expects me to stay by his side all night so he can parade me around and show me off in front of his stuffy rich friends. Except, of course, when I'm dancing with Warren. He's got me penciled in for no less than five dances, and I can't help but wonder if anyone would believe I can't dance because I have a broken ankle. Although, after lying to my parents about what I was really doing in Nashville, I'd probably have to pitch myself down the stairs and injure myself for real.

Before everything went wrong, Tag asked about my New Year's plans. He seemed a little disappointed when I said I was busy. I can't help but wonder if he had something special in mind. Something romantic, I'm sure. He'd deny it until his last breath, but he's a natural at the romance stuff. He always made me feel special, no matter what we were doing. Then there was the night under the stars where we made love for hours. The man set up candles and had champagne at the ready to make it an extraordinary night for both of us. He'd pull out all the stops on a night as special as tonight.

Without Tag, there will be no one to kiss at midnight. No one to make me laugh when I feel awkward and out of place. No one to press his hand to the

small of my back and lead me through this uncomfortable evening with a grin and a wink. Thinking about how different this night would be if Tag were here, my heart feels heavy and full of longing.

I finger the expensive necklace, pulling it away from my neck. It's loose and I can get my whole hand between it and me, but I still feel like I'm being choked with its oppressive weight.

"Elle! Your mother and I are ready to go." Daddy's voice echoes up the stairs, and I jump.

After taking a few steps toward the door, I stop and go back to the dresser. The second I unclasp the ridiculously expensive diamond necklace, the pressure around my throat dissipates. Without a second thought, I pick up the locket from Tag and Chloe and fasten it in place. I may not be able to have Tag with me in a physical sense, but I can keep him close to my heart.

And that will have to be enough.

Before I can head downstairs, my phone dings from inside of my clutch. I pull it out and smile when I see a text from Chloe. I messaged her a few days ago to apologize for leaving. I didn't want her to think I walked out on her like her mother did. She kept me on the hook for a few hours, but after making me promise to send her cookies next week, all was forgiven. Snickerdoodles are a powerful cookie.

Chloe: Are you excited for the big party tonight?

Me: Oh, you know it. I've got my big sparkly dress on. I feel like Cinderella.

Chloe: Maybe without the mice and the whole pumpkin thing.

Me: No prince charming or fairy Godmother either. My version is much more depressing than the Disney one. At least I can stay out past midnight.

Chloe: True.

Me: What are you doing tonight?

Chloe: I made he who cannot be named buy me sparkling grape juice. I plan on eating enough pizza for two grown men and watching the ball drop.

Me: Sounds fun. Don't overdo it on the juice. Gotta run. TTYL.

Chloe: Be careful with your glass slippers. TTYL.

"Elle!" This time my mother's voice carries up the stairs, I stash my

phone back in my purse, and hightail it down. As soon as she sees me, she frowns. “I thought you’d be wearing the Harry Winston. Why are you wearing this plain thing?”

“I thought we were running late.” I force a smile, beaming at my parents.

Daddy hands me a black cashmere jacket with fur trim. As I put it on, he assesses me. “We are late, and you both look beautiful. Marcus is waiting with the car out front. We don’t want to keep the Bissettes waiting. They’re looking forward to seeing you again, Elle.”

Well, we certainly wouldn’t want to make them wait another minute. I can’t roll my eyes hard enough. I highly doubt they want to catch up with little old me. They don’t work for my father’s company, so I can’t imagine we’ll have much to talk about. I don’t remember Warren’s parents from when I was a kid, but I’m sure they’re as pretentious as he is. In fact, I’d say this formal party is proof of that.

The ride there is spent in comfortable silence. Well, I’m comfortably silent while my parents make small talk with each other, and my mother nit-picks my hair and my makeup while I stare out the window. She smooths the back of my jacket and leads me inside the club once we arrive. As soon as I shed my jacket and pass it over to the young man at the coat check-in, Warren grabs my hand and pulls me away from my parents.

The club is decorated in black and silver with several glowing orbs and pearlescent flowers on the tabletops. The crystal chandeliers are dim, and the large room glimmers under twinkling fairy lights. Champagne flows freely from the bar. It’s all pretty typical for a high-society party in Savannah.

One thing does surprise me: the music is shockingly good. Someone had the foresight to hire a swing band.

“Thank the Lord, someone my age.” Warren grabs my hand and pulls me toward the dance floor. I don’t have time to protest as he twirls me in a circle.

A quick glance around tells me he’s full of shit, as usual. “There are several people here our age.”

“Let me amend my statement: there are no unmarried women my age, and certainly no one here as beautiful as you.” He pulls back and looks me up and down before giving me a wink.

I make a sound of disapproval in the back of my throat, but I let him spin me again. At least it keeps his hand off my waist. “Such a charmer. I already agreed to work with you; you don’t need to butter me up.”

“Point taken.”

“Besides,” I nod my head behind him toward a woman in her late forties wearing a tight purple dress that screams on-the-prowl, “there’s a cougar at four o’clock who looks like she wants what you’re offering.”

“I’m not sure I’m offering anything. Who is—?”

He turns his head, and I maneuver us on the dance floor so she’s behind him. “Don’t look.”

“Too late. Mrs. Peters?” He tosses his head back and laughs. “You’re right. She is looking at me like I’m some kind of snack. I’m not sure Mr. Peters would appreciate her perusal of my body. Hell, I’m not sure I appreciate it either.”

“Just hope she doesn’t want to sample the goods.”

“The goods are not available.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. The band changes over and I can’t help but do a white girl wiggle as Warren leads me off the dance floor. “Who was in charge of the band? They’re quite good.”

“I was actually.” He hangs his head and jams his hands in his pockets. “It was the only thing I insisted on.”

I grab a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and hold it up to him in salute. “You did good, pig.”

He snorts which makes my statement even more amusing and takes his own glass. “So, who’s the guy?”

My head snaps up, and my eyes widen. “What guy?”

“Sorry, I assumed.” Warren holds his hands in the air and then points at my chest with the hand holding the flute. “You had your hands on that locket when you came in, and you’re touching it again now.”

“Oh,” I say quietly, looking down where I am indeed toying with the locket. “I didn’t even realize.”

“So, is there a guy?”

“There was.” An unexpected tear slips down my cheek, and I swipe it off before it ruins my makeup. Grief grips my gut in a punishing hold. *Was*. Because whatever Tag and I had is over, and there’s no going back. I can only hope the memories of what was will keep me warm at night. Everything except the look of hurt and betrayal on his face when he found out I was hiding him from my parents. My reasoning means nothing to him. In his eyes, I’m no better than the other people in his life who lied and left. “It doesn’t matter.”

“What would you think about a future between us? You’d make a fine

wife, Elle Hurst.”

“We’re going to be working together. I think that’s a good place to start.”

Warren places a warm hand on my shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go sit down.”

“I’ll be fine.” I shake off his hand. “We should mingle. I bet there are quite a few clients of ours here and several more who could be if we played our cards right.”

He nods. As he leads me from table to table, I feel as if I’m on autopilot. I make the necessary small talk, laugh at the right times, but my mind keeps wandering back to Christmas Day. I wish I’d told Tag about my family and this job. I wish he understood why I had to hide him and our relationship. How important Daddy’s approval is. If he didn’t think I was responsible, he wouldn’t hand the company to me, and every year of my life since I turned eighteen would’ve been for nothing.

The night wears on, and Warren and I part ways. As amiable as he is tonight, I still can’t help but wait for the other shoe to drop. He’s completed a total personality switch since the dinner we had with my parents around Thanksgiving. As much as I wish it were genuine, I don’t buy this cool, friendly guy act. He did bring up our future earlier, and that was suspicious. Leopards can never completely change their spots.

Right now, he’s in the middle of a group of men who all appear to be in their late twenties or early thirties. They’re all laughing and clapping each other on the back, reminding me of how Tag was around his teammates. Except Tag is as real as they come. He’s kind and honest. No false niceties or boisterous displays of wealth like the ones I’m sure flow out of these guys like water.

I manage to hide out in a darkened corner of the room, sans heels, for a few minutes until a young waitress taps my shoulder to get my attention. Her cheeks redden as she profusely apologizes for interrupting me and points to my mother who’s doing her best to look annoyed.

With a sigh, I push up from the table, thank the waitress and head over to my parents. Daddy has forgone the champagne for his usual tumbler of whiskey. His other hand is twirling a cigar and he smiles at a man who looks like an older, grayer version of Warren, and a lady who I’m assuming is his wife. These must be the infamous parents who wanted to meet me.

“There’s my beautiful daughter.” Mother pulls me to her side, links her arm with mine, and whispers in my ear, “You didn’t tell me about your little

secret.”

I stiffen and my hand flies to the locket, rubbing it with my thumb. She already knows about living with Tag and Chloe. And the babysitting. I didn't mention anything about being in a real relationship with Tag. Or being in love with him. “What secret, Mom?” I manage to squeak.

“Hold on, dear. Your daddy is going to announce it in a minute.”

Announce it? Daddy wouldn't broadcast something like that. Would he?

Gripping her arm, the blood drains from my face. “What exactly is Daddy —”

“Elle, I don't know if you remember Ralph and Emily Bisette, Warren's parents.” My father gestures toward the couple in question and takes a sip of his drink.

They extend their hands for a weak shake, and I couldn't be more confused. I look toward Warren, who's being interrupted by a different waitress and pointed in our direction. He meets my gaze with a raised brow and strolls over to meet us.

Before he can get a word out of his open mouth, Daddy holds up a finger to silence him and signals to the lead singer in the swing band. He ends the song, walks over to the side of the stage and hands Daddy the microphone. Warren's parents are completely unfazed, the both of them sipping their champagne like everything is normal. Warren looks more like how I feel. His mouth is slightly ajar with one side lifted and he's scratching his cheek as he watches my father.

“Sorry to interrupt.” Daddy smiles into the mic and has instant command on the room. Conversations die down and people turn, either raptured by what my father has to say or afraid to look like they aren't paying attention. “I'd like to thank everyone for coming out tonight to celebrate the New Year. I'd also like to thank the Bissettes for hosting us tonight. But the New Year isn't the only thing we're here to celebrate. My daughter is back in Savannah.”

I give a slight wave, wishing I could disappear into the crowd. I could've gone all night without him pointing me out to everyone and notifying them of my familial status. I'd have much rather they found out on their own.

He continues, “In her short time home, she's already stolen the heart of an old childhood friend. I'm happy to introduce her business partner and fiancé Warren Bisette. I couldn't be happier to have this relationship uniting our families.”

I freeze, my heart jumping into my throat as the crowd breaks out in applause. People mill around us, murmuring words of support and congratulations. I can see everything happening, but I can't make sense of it. It's like I'm floating above the crowd or sinking underwater, and I can't decide which. Warren shakes hand after hand and the smile on his face tells me he knew exactly what was happening. The deceitful swine.

My mother pulls me in for a hug, shaking me enough it brings my soul back to my body. My heart hammers and sweat trails down my back. My chest is tight, and I struggle to take a breath. Did he really just...? In front of all these people? Does he really think I'm going to marry Warren simply because he says it? I can't marry someone I barely know. Hell, someone I barely like.

"Daddy." I snag the back of his jacket and walk him away from the crowd. "What was that? Why would you announce something like that?"

"I'm just planning out your future, Sweet Pea." Daddy shakes me off and narrows his gaze on me. "Warren said he talked to you about this. He said you were agreeable to the idea. I just pushed it along a little faster than either of you planned."

"Daddy—"

"Don't worry about a thing, this is all part of the plan. Trust that your old man has your best interest at heart." He pats my hand before disappearing back in the crowd to greet his adoring fans.

I'm going to kill Warren the first chance I get. How dare he tell my father that I was agreeable to anything. He may think he's my fiancé, but he has another thing coming. Like a swift right hook.

Before I can hunt him down and let him know how I feel about our little engagement, my mother swoops in from out of nowhere and pulls me in for another hug.

"Are you okay?" She holds me at an arm's length and studies my face. "Your father said you two talked about this. You look rather shaken up."

I shake my head, unable to speak.

She takes my hand and pulls me past the well-wishers, down the hall, and into a sitting room.

"Sit. You look like you're seconds away from passing out." She pushes me into a chair and takes a seat next to me.

"I'm sorry. It's just... it's just a shock." I suck in oxygen as I grip the sides of the chair and lean forward.

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

“What do you mean?”

She sighs and pats my hand. “This job. Taking over your father’s company. Is it what you really want?”

“Of course.” I rear back like I’ve been slapped. My mother knows how hard I’ve worked to get to this point. I’m so close to this job, to taking over the company. I’ve already given up so much—so, so much—for this damned job. “This is what I’ve been working for since I graduated high school. You know this. The job, the company, it’s the only thing I have.”

“What about the guy from Nashville?” My mother tosses me a knowing look.

My hand flies to the locket. “Tag?”

“I’m not stupid, Elle. You could have just as easily watched that little girl without living with them. You wanted to be there, and to be with him. You wanted it so much you had to hide it from us. Has he been so easily dismissed? Did he not mean as much to you as I think?”

My eyes widen, and I can’t help the gasp that escapes my lips. I fully expected to be called out by my father. But this? There are no words. I have no words. Never did I think my mother was the observant one. Sure, she commented on my appearance every chance she got, but she never interjected about my life. I didn’t even think she realized I had a life.

“I have regrets about not being more involved, really involved, with you and Lucy. I let your father dictate your futures, and I should have fought harder to give you more freedom.” She grabs my hand and squeezes. “I don’t want this for you, Elle.”

I’ve still yet to move and force out the only response I can think of. “What?”

“I don’t know if I ever told you, but I had a similar marriage arrangement with your father.”

“What?” My vocabulary is on point right now. How did I not know that my parents essentially had an arranged marriage?

She squeezes my hand again. “I knew what I was getting into and didn’t have anything I was giving up. I don’t want you to settle for this life.”

“I’m not settling. This is what I’ve been working for.”

“Elle. You’re so full of life, so full of love.” She kneels down in front of me, and cautiously reaches for the locket. After a quick glance at me, she flicks open the locket and studies it for several seconds. “He’s cute. Lucy

says he's nothing like the football guy. That he made you happy."

"You talked to Lucy about this?" I squeak.

My mother looks up at me, her eyes filled with concern and love I've never seen before. "This doesn't have to be your life," she whispers. "I support whatever you want to do, and I'll get your father on board if you choose to walk away. But you need to choose what's best for you. Not the family. Not your father. Elle, sweetie, ask yourself: what is really best for you?"

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

TAG

I STILL HATE DRESSING UP IN SUITS, EVEN THOUGH IT'S THE STANDARD DRESS code on game day. Not to mention all the fundraisers and formal events I go to on a regular basis. Still, this is a first for me. Can't say I've ever donned a three-piece suit to hunt down a girl in a grand attempt to win her back.

Lucy told me tonight's event was formal, and if I was going to crash it—which I'm definitely going to do—then I better blend in and look like I belong there.

Another first for me is the hunt itself. There's never been a girl I couldn't live without, and while I obviously didn't die when she left, I wouldn't call walking around like a zombie actual living. I miss her so damn much, and while this may not work, she still may not choose me, I have to try. I can't go the rest of my life not knowing what would've happened if I told her how I really feel.

Lightning cracks in the distance as I walk up the dimly lit path to the country club. The music seeps out of the building, and though it's a very up-tempo song, it does nothing to calm my nerves. My heart is lodged in my throat, and I wipe my damp palms along my suit pants for the hundredth time in the last hour.

The door is mere feet away and I pause as the music stops and a gruff male voice that sounds vaguely familiar takes over in place of the band. I can't make out everything he's saying but as soon as he welcomes his daughter back to Savannah, I know it must be Elle's dad.

Hope he's ready to welcome me too.

As much as I want to bust in and make a scene, I wait for him to finish, and that's when I hear it. Fiancé. And I know he doesn't mean me.

No one has seen me yet, so I could easily turn around and go back to the hotel like a fucking coward. While part of me thinks Lucy's right and Elle loves me, the other half is the scared little boy who thinks he doesn't deserve anything good.

And now that her father has announced her engagement to that fucking weasel she works with, I'm even less sure. I take a deep breath to steady my racing pulse, push that little boy to the back of my mind, and move another step forward. If it's a fiancé she wants, then it's a fiancé she's going to get.

Elle is on the other side of those fancy doors. My future. My love. Simply *mine*. Her job, her parents, her high society standards—all these things are obstacles she's putting in the way, and I'm ready to tear them all down. She will be mine again.

The front door opens with a bang and my step falters. Elle runs out the door looking like a vision from heaven. Her blonde hair is woven in a fancy braid hanging over one shoulder, her blue eyes are bright and wild, and her lips are painted a deep red. The gold dress plunges between her breasts and clings to her hips, showcasing every single one of her mouthwatering curves, twinkling in the moonlight. She looks stunning, and I want nothing more than to pull her against me, wrap her up in my arms, and whisk her away.

"Tag?" Elle stops in front of me, leaving about a foot between us, which is still too damn far if you ask me. "Jesus, what happened to your face?"

I touch my fingertips to the bruised and swollen flesh under my eye and flinch. "This asshole on the team. It's nothing."

"What are you doing here?" she whispers.

"I didn't like how things were left between us." I tug on my tie and shift from one foot to the other. The sky flashes again with several more streaks of lightning, and thunder rumbles overhead. "Do you want to go inside? You'll get that fancy dress of yours all wet if we stay out here."

She shakes her head and that's when I notice the locket around her neck. My heart pounds. If she's wearing it, then I must mean something to her. She wouldn't have it on if I didn't. It would be stuffed in a jewelry box, or even worse, in the trash. But it's not, and that has to mean something.

I take a tentative step toward her, my eyes glued on hers. As I extend my hand to run it down her arm, the sky opens up and begins to pour. She doesn't move and neither do I. We stand our ground as the rain pelts us. It seeps through my jacket, dampening the shirt and vest beneath. My pants are drenched, and she must be soaked as well. Water drips down her face,

cascades from her hair, and runs between her breasts.

“Listen, Elle—”

“Tag, I—”

She glances down and I take a deep breath and continue, “I should have asked you to stay.”

Her head snaps up and her lower lip quivers. “No, you shouldn’t have. I lied to you. I lied to my parents. I don’t deserve you.”

“That’s crazy talk.” I grip her trembling shoulders and tug her to me, holding her against me. Her arms remain limp at her sides, but she doesn’t pull away. “I don’t deserve *you*. You’ve got such a big heart, and you’d do anything to help out someone in need, even if that someone is an almost stranger with a tween niece. I should have listened instead of jumping to conclusions. I’m sorry.”

She pulls back to peer up at me, moving her hands to my waist. “You don’t need to be sorry. You had every right to be hurt and upset. I should have been honest with my parents. I’m so sorry I made you feel like you’re anything less than what you are.”

“I should have told you how I felt. How I feel.” I frame her face with my hands and lean forward to press a kiss to the center of her forehead. I hear her breath catch.

“How do you feel?” she asks.

The thunder booms again and the rain falls even harder. It’s a warm winter but there’s still a chill in the air, and I know I’ve got to get Elle someplace warm soon. But she needs to hear this and even more, I need to say it to her.

“Ethel Louise Hurst,” her gaze narrows, but I don’t let it stop me, “I love you. I don’t care if you have a terrible name or if you have to live in Georgia for the rest of your life. We can find a way to make things work. I want there to be an us. I don’t want to keep living without you in my life.”

“Tag, I—”

“Hold on, I need to get this out. When you left, you took a part of me with you. A part of me I don’t want back. You have my heart, Elle. I think I gave it to you during our first night together. You are my everything” I pause to trace the outline of her lips and run my fingers down the column of her neck. “I know I’m not perfect. Two months ago, I didn’t even think I was capable of being truly happy, but then Chloe happened and you... and everything clicked into place. Please tell me I haven’t lost you forever.”

“My father announced my engagement tonight. To Warren.” She says quietly and I stiffen in her arms. For a moment, something inside me dies. I imagine her telling me she chooses him, and I have to walk away from here alone, leaving her behind. It hurts so badly I almost fall to my knees. But then she shakes her head. Her eyes rise to meet mine. “I had no idea he’d go that far. My mother, of all people, told me I had a choice. She wants better for me. She wants me to chase after love. When I ran out of here... I was... I was going to come find you.”

“Yeah?” A slow smile spreads across my face.

She nods. “I love you, Tag.”

Thank fuck. I press her against me and hold her tight. My mouth descends on hers in a hard kiss. Her lips part underneath me, and I slip my tongue into her warmth, stroking it against hers. The kiss becomes intense and ruthless—a claiming—as I sear her with my mouth. I need her to know she’s mine and I’m never going to let her go again. I take all the things I’ve said and whatever I didn’t, and harness that, moving my lips against hers with the conviction of every emotion I’ve shoved down since we met.

I don’t even feel the rain anymore. There’s only Elle. Her soft body molded to mine, her smooth skin underneath my hands; her soul melding itself with mine.

She shivers beneath my palms and snuggles closer to my body. I’m not sure if it’s from the way my tongue is fucking her mouth or from the cool rain, but I need to get her out of this wet dress for several reasons; the top one being to warm her up. Getting her naked and underneath me a close second.

“Come on, sugar. Let’s get you warmed up.”

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

ELLE

DADDY HAS BEEN CALLING NONSTOP SINCE I GOT TO THE HOTEL ROOM TAG booked on his way down here. I take a deep breath, turn off the phone, and stuff it in my clutch. Nothing he can say can change my mind. Besides, I already know he's mad; he'll still be pissed tomorrow. I'm not going to let him ruin my night.

"Is that your dad?" Tag inclines his head my way and lies down on the bed, his wet hair splayed out on the pillow behind him.

He's wearing a fluffy hotel robe identical to mine; only his is open at the top to expose his yummy muscular chest.

As soon as we got to the room, Tag had our clothes sent off for dry cleaning. They were plopped outside the door in a plastic bag while he chased me into the shower. The warm water felt great against my chilled skin, but not as good as his hands felt coasting over my shoulders, along my back, around my breasts. After he made sure I was warmed up, he got down on his knees, hiked one of my legs over his shoulder and ate my pussy like a man possessed. He made sure I came in his mouth twice before he bent me over and fucked me so good my legs turned to jelly, and if it weren't for him, I'd have collapsed.

"Yeah, but I'm not talking to him right now." I flop down on the bed next to him and prop myself on my elbow.

Tag snags my free hand and holds it in his. "We can talk to him tomorrow if you want."

He's not going to be ready to talk to me like a civilized human being for a few weeks. By walking out of the party tonight, I basically gave him a middle finger and told him to stick the company straight up his ass.

“I’m not sure if I’ll be ready to talk to him tomorrow, or even the next couple days.”

He squeezes my fingers and presses a brief kiss to my forehead. “Aren’t you starting back at work this week?”

“Work?” My brows draw together until it dawns on me—he thinks I’m still going to work for my father. “You want to get back together, even if I’m living here?”

“I want you however I can get you. Even if that means we have to live apart until I can get transferred to a closer team.”

“You would do that?”

“For you, I’d do anything.”

The look on his face is intense, his eyes sharp as he takes me in, and I know he’s not spewing crap. For the second time tonight, I’m speechless. Tag, the perpetual bachelor, is willing to move for me because he knows how important this job was to me—‘was’ being the key word. I can’t believe I didn’t see it before. Tag is everything I need in my life.

“How would you feel if I told you I was poor and homeless? For at least for another five years until I get access to my trust.”

He smooths his hand over my hair, down my back and pulls me closer to him. “Well, I have a big enough house, and I make way more money than I’ll ever need. Wait... what are you saying?”

“I’m not staying here. I’d like to come back home if you’re okay with that.”

“I love you so much,” he mumbles, kissing down my neck. “I’m going to chain you to my bed, so you’ll never leave again.”

I giggle, canting my head to the side to give him better access. “I’m not opposed to that from time to time. But if I’m not working here... I’d like to start planning weddings.”

“Good. You can start with ours.”

“Very funny, Harris.”

“I’m not joking. But you’ll realize that soon enough.”

Before I could respond or really think about what he just said, he pushes me to my back and rolls on top of me. His lips find mine and everything fades to the background. My father... his company... the expectations that he put on me. All of it falls away until the only things left are Tag and me and this moment we created.

He’s everything I need, and as long as I have him, everything else will

work out. He is my home, my love, simply mine. And I couldn't ask for more.

EPILOGUE

RHETT

NO IDEA WHAT THE BIG DEAL IS. SO I DID SOME STUPID THINGS, PEOPLE MAKE mistakes. Besides, I'm not here to make friends. Never needed friends before, and I sure as shit don't need them now.

And let's not forget, I didn't ask to be transferred. I don't want to fucking be here. This team is a fucking joke. The owner is a fucking joke. And this lady dressed head to toe in pink, pacing in front of me in the conference room is a fucking joke.

"Did you hear me, Mr. Remington?" The little pink spitfire stops in front of me, her fists are perched on her hips and her eyes are shooting fireballs. Despite the fact that she's lecturing me, she's got this tight little body with a nice rack, and I can't help but wonder how she feels about a good angry fuck.

"Not really." I lean back in my chair and cross my arms over my chest.

She makes this animalistic noise in the back of her throat, and her face turns redder than a tomato. I shouldn't be amused, I really shouldn't, but better people than her have tried to lecture me on my behavior. I wouldn't be here if it worked.

"This is not a game, Mr. Remington. Your position on the team is on the line here. With your reputation for picking fights with your teammates, no one else in the NHL wants you."

I can't help but bristle. It was one damn fight that got me booted from LA. Not a bunch of different fights: just one fucking fight. I still can't say I regret it, Ron got what he deserved. Actually, I could argue he needed more. I rub my face in my hands, frustrated. Maybe I should have just quit. Told the NHL to fuck my transfer and let me leave the sport for good. I already have more money than I can spend in my lifetime. But if I'm honest with myself,

I'm not ready to give up hockey. Not yet. Not when I have so much fight left in me, and not just for my teammates. I haven't... well, I did fight someone here. That blonde guy with the long hair, I think his name is Bag. Nag? Wag? Whatever, it's something stupid. I hated his face from the moment I saw it.

"I'll try to do better." I put my hands on the sides of the chair, ready to push myself out of it. "Are we done?"

"We. Are. Not. Done," she seethes.

I relax back in the chair and cross my arms again.

"I'm not going to harp on your past discrepancies, but you started a fight on your first day in the locker room."

"He just had one of those faces."

"I don't care what his face looks like." Her arms fly around her, and I flinch, afraid of getting an accidental—or maybe not so accidental—backhand. "And then there was the hotel incident."

"I didn't have my key."

"Obviously, since you didn't have any clothes on. I'm sure the key was the last thing on your mind when those two prostitutes shoved you out in the hallway."

"I didn't know—"

"Save it, Mr. Remington. And after that, you missed the plane to Washington for an away game. You picked a fight with a ref. You were pulled out of a bar fight resulting in several thousand dollars' worth of damage. It's damning on its own, but you've only been here for a month. In case you're not good at math, that's thirty-one days."

I guess when she puts it that way, it doesn't sound very good. But it's all out of context. And I didn't know those girls were prostitutes at the time. I mean, I did when they asked for money, and I laughed in their faces. Which of course prompted them to throw my naked ass out into the hallway where there were several girls coming back from a bachelorette party. They were drunk, but not so drunk they didn't know how to work their cameras.

"Listen, Miss....?"

"For the third time, my name is Lucy Hurst. You, Mr. Remington, are on thin ice, and if you want to stay on this team and not be sent to the minors, then you'd better turn some things around real fast. And whether you like it or not, I will be hiring you a babysitter. You will attend charity events. You will volunteer your time. You will adjust your attitude before I'm forced to do it for you. This person will report directly to me, and if I don't like what I

hear, then I will march my butt straight to Mr. Benson's office and personally ensure you are no longer a professional hockey player."

I blink for a moment. She's threatening to take me out of the game completely. She's saying... well, hell. She's saying this is the end of the line. The idea of leaving hockey makes my whole body ache. I'm not ready; I don't want to give up the game, especially not over something as stupid as my own behavior.

With an inward sigh of regret, I decide that the hate fuck is off the table. Malibu Barbie wants me to behave? I'll show her a goddamn gentleman.

... I just have to remember what that looks like.



Thank you for reading UNTAMED DEVIL!!!! I hope you love Tag and Elle as much as I do!

Want to see what happens next with Tag and Elle? For a sweet and *spicy* bonus scene [CLICK HERE and sign up for my newsletter](#).

Do you want more Nashville Devils Hockey? Lucy and Rhett are next with a hatred running hotter than the flames of the sun. [Click here to order BROODY DEVIL](#).

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As an Indie Author, I would love your help spreading the word about UNTAMED DEVIL. If you enjoyed the story please consider leaving a review on [Amazon](#), [Goodreads](#), or even referring to a friend. Even a sentence or two makes a huge difference.

Thank you for taking this journey with me.

Melissa

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Melissa

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lover of all things romance and hockey, she also loves to bake extra delicious treats. Melissa Ivers loves to write steamy stories with all those hot, alpha men and women who can bring them to their knees, literally and figuratively. Melissa lives in Kentucky with her eye-rolling teenage son and two of the laziest dogs known to man. She has numerous fictional boyfriends, but—shhhh—they don't know about each other.

When she isn't writing or working, you'll find her under a blanket on the couch reading a book on her Kindle, binge watching shows off Netflix, such as the *Office* and *Vampire Diaries* and being an all-around joy.

To keep current with what Melissa is doing stalk her on social media

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