



BREAKERS HOCKEY

a
BREAKERS
christmas

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELISE FABER

A BREAKERS CHRISTMAS

BREAKERS HOCKEY #8

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BY ELISE FABER

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A BREAKERS CHRISTMAS

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BREAKERS HOCKEY SERIES

[Broken](#)

[Boldly](#)

[Breathless](#)

[Ballsy](#)

[Bewitched](#)

[Blowout](#)

[Breathe](#)

[Blazed](#)

CONTENTS

[Breakers Hockey Series](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Newsletter](#)

[Breakers Hockey Series](#)

[Also by Elise Faber](#)

[About the Author](#)

ONE

Eva

“And that, folks,” I said, smiling into the camera, “is our last broadcast of the year. We’ll see you on New Year’s Day for the Outdoor Classic here in Baltimore. Until then, Happy Holidays, stay safe and thanks for tuning in.”

I smiled again, held it until the cameraman signaled we were officially off the air.

Then I turned to my fellow commentators as we all stood up and moved toward the exit. There was an equal amount of razzing and good wishes for the holidays, and normally I liked hanging around, liked chatting with Mark—our director—breaking down my performance, taking his notes for what he thought I could do better.

But I didn’t want to take the time to do that tonight.

I wanted to get out of there and I wanted to get down to my man.

Because we had a Christmas to celebrate together.

I stopped in my dressing room, scrubbed off my camera makeup, changed out my nice clothes for a cozy T-shirt and a hoodie I’d stolen from Theo, trying to figure out if I’d done the right thing when it came to Theo’s Christmas present.

It was our first Christmas as a couple who lived together, as a couple who exchanged avowals of love, as husband and wife.

It was important.

Theo—my broody, smart, sexy hockey player who owned my heart—was incredible.

He deserved a gift that was equally so.

So...I'd taken a leap and—

Now I was worried that the leap had been too big, that it was too soon, that he would hate it.

And the stakes were high.

I'd arranged the gift to be delivered during the team's holiday celebration that we were having at our family dinner next week—the first time all of members of our respective families would be sitting down together around a table, breaking bread, and, hopefully, bonding.

All eyes would be on us, on *him*, and if he reacted poorly...

The confident ball buster that was Eva Moreno—yes, I was talking about myself in third person—was scared.

Petrified, really.

Because the stakes felt really, really high.

“It's going to be fine,” I murmured, pushing my chair in and reaching for my purse on the desktop. “He's going to love it and—”

“The *he* you're talking about better be me, sweetheart.”

I gasped, whipping around and seeing my hockey player leaning back against the doorframe. His dark brown hair was wet and messy, as though he'd run his hands through the strands and called it good. And knowing him, he probably had. Because he must have seriously hauled ass to make it up here this fast.

He moved toward me, gray eyes sparkling with amusement. “What am I going to love, Eva baby?”

My heart skipped a beat because he'd only started calling me that lately, after I'd melted while reading a book about a hero who called his woman baby, all gruff and rough and low. I'd admitted as much and he'd read the scene...

And as Theo always did, he'd given me both exactly what I wanted *and* what I needed.

So, now I got *Eva baby* and just *baby* and—

I got everything.

Including being his wife.

Smiling, I lifted my arms, threw them around his big, broad shoulders, wrapping my legs around his waist as he hefted me up. “You're the *he* I was referring to, Squishy,” I admitted, thinking quick so that I wouldn't give up the goods. “And what you're going to love is *this*.” I leaned back enough to tug at the neckline of his hoodie, the T-shirt, to give him a glimpse of the

lingerie I'd worn for tonight.

Because he had adrenaline highs after his games.

And because *I* usually benefited from that post-game rush. In the form of orgasms.

By being left limp and satiated and dazed, fatigue crawling into every inch of me until I pretty much passed out.

I wasn't complaining.

In fact, I was pretty much crowing about it.

Hence the lingerie that I knew would send his post-game high into the stratosphere.

Grinning, I dropped the neckline, turned my head to press a kiss to his biceps, to the tattoo he had there that memorialized his childhood dog.

His mouth hit my forehead and then he was setting me on my feet, taking my hand, and dragging me forward.

"Whoa, trouble," I teased. "What's the hurry?"

A heated look tossed over my shoulder.

Oh boy.

I shivered, pussy clenching.

"You know what the hurry is, sweetheart." Quiet words. *Heated* words.

Another shiver, another clench.

"I need to grab my stuff, honey."

That brought out my other Theo, the soft, sweet thoughtful Theo.

He squeezed my fingers, dropped my hand, and turned back to grab my purse. He didn't pass it to me to hold, just gripped it like it was the most natural thing, wrapped his other arm around me, and we walked out of the arena together.

"If you move one more ornament," he muttered, flopping back on the couch. "I will paddle your ass."

I grinned over my shoulder at him. "You forget that I love it when you paddle my ass." I wagged my brows. "And it's almost perfect. I just"—I stretched on tiptoe, shifted a glittering Breakers blue orb to the side—"there. *Now* it's perfect." I stared at the masterpiece that was our Christmas tree.

“Don’t you think?”

“Yup. Perfect.”

I frowned, spun to face him.

His eyes that had been fixed at...ass level—*men*—drifted up to meet mine and I nearly melted on the spot.

Hot gray eyes with sparks of lightning in their depths.

“Were you looking at my ass?”

“Yup.” Absolutely not a trace of remorse in those three letters.

God, I loved this man.

“Did you even look at the tree?”

“Nope.”

I narrowed my eyes.

God, this man could also piss me off faster than any other person on the planet.

He grinned, pushed up from the couch in one smooth movement, prowling over to me, arms banding around me, scooping me up, and carrying me back to the sofa that was so comfortable, I often joked that it would eat me.

He dropped—with me on his arms—onto the cushions and we sank deep into the padding, leaving me cozy and warm and, yup, eaten by the couch.

He kissed my temple. “The tree looks perfect, Eva baby.” A brush of his mouth over my cheek. “And my parents are going to think so too.”

Trust that he would source out the immediate crux of my fears.

His family was coming to stay with us.

This was our first big holiday all together.

I wanted to make it perfect for them, perfect for me...and most importantly, perfect for Theo.

Because I loved him and he deserved it and—

He rolled us, big body pressing me even further into the cushions, his hand coming to my jaw. “It will be perfect because we’re together and we love each other and Dommie is going to bake cookies for everyone. Which my mom is going to hate—even though she’ll love them—but she’s going to up the ante because *she*’s the Christmas baking queen, so she’ll have to make her pumpkin bread. And Dommie’s going to hate that everyone loves *that*, so then we’ll get to be the tasty benefactors of a Christmas Bake Off and I’ll be ten pounds heavier before our next game.”

I giggled. “I like this scenario.”

He kissed the tip of my nose. "I do too."

"*And* I have an idea about how to make sure you don't gain ten pounds."

Wicked in gray eyes, those sparks coming back. "Yeah?"

I slid my hand down his chest, fingertips reveling in the hard planes.

Then I was touching something else that was hard.

Squeezing it.

And *then* I showed him my plan to work off those extra calories.

Twice.

TWO

Luc

I smoothed my hand over the top of Noah's head then carefully maneuvered my arm's beneath my wife, scooping her up.

Her pregnant belly bumped against my chest, and I grinned.

She was always like this throughout the entire time she was pregnant—this being number three.

This being gaining the superpower to be able to fall asleep anywhere in an instant.

She sighed, head lolling, body instinctively curling into mine.

And, damn, but I never got tired of that, never got tired of holding her, having the weight of her in my arms, the scent of her in my nose, I was ready to head to bed myself.

Unfortunately—considering she was about eight million months pregnant—the version of going to bed I really wanted wasn't going to happen.

Her words (the eight million months pregnant, not me not getting to fuck my wife).

Not mine.

I thought she was beautiful, pregnant or not. She was the other half of my soul, so how could she be anything else?

The answer was that she couldn't.

I carried her down the hall, settled her into bed, tucking her massive body pillow around her before swishing the blankets over her, making certain she was comfortable as possible...considering she was that eight million months pregnant.

Then I went downstairs.

It was almost Christmas.

The team was on a break.

But as the GM—the general manager—of the Baltimore Breakers, it wasn't easy to turn off my job. Not when we were full swing into the season. Not when there was more work to do. Not when the search for the Cup was never ending.

We'd won two under my tenure.

So, we were hungry.

We wanted another.

And then another and another and...another.

Names etched into a stack of silver rings, forming sports' most preeminent trophy—at least, in my opinion.

Which was clearly the best.

But that wasn't the point.

And I had work to do, games to watch from the other teams in the league who were still playing.

I was good at my job. I put in my time. I had a grasp of most of the players in the league because a GM could never be one hundred percent certain when a player might become available, or if they might need to be used for a multistep trade.

Having my finger on the pulse was only one part of my job.

I was a glorified HR manager, controlled the roster (with plenty of input from our coaching staff), got scouting reports, came up with a strategy for the team's direction, and paid attention to the salary cap.

But I didn't do all of that alone.

My team was great.

I couldn't manage without them.

But that didn't mean I could slack off.

I felt her before she touched my back, rounding my chair and curling up against me. "Did I fall asleep with Noah again?"

I wrapped my arm around her, drew her down into my lap sideways. "Like a rock." A brush of my lips over hers. "Did I wake you when I got you to bed?"

Her head dropped to the side, settled on my shoulder. "No." A beat. "My bladder did."

"My poor baby," I murmured, rubbing my hand up and down her side.

“Which one,” she said tartly. “The one in my belly, or your wife?”

I placed my palm on said belly.

She narrowed her eyes.

I kissed the tip of her nose.

“Sorry you’re not getting any sleep.”

A shrug. “It comes with the territory.”

I waited for her to settle in against me, to curl up and doze off—my lap as I worked at the kitchen island tended to be one of her go-to places to slip into sleep.

But she didn’t nod off tonight.

She shifted...in a very deliberate way.

I leaned forward, met her eyes.

“Okay,” she murmured, her golden brown eyes heated in a way that had my cock twitching. “So maybe it wasn’t just my bladder that woke me.”

“Oh?” I asked, trailed my hand over her hip, up, up, *up* until I could cup the lush curve her breast. I gently massaged the globe. “What might that be?”

Her hands were busy too.

But they were moving down, wrapping around—

I groaned when they tightened around my cock. “Shit, baby. That’s attached.”

She nipped at my jaw. “You like it rough,” she murmured. “And tonight I need to take it like you like to give it.”

Heat arrowing south.

Blood not anywhere in the vicinity of my brain.

That was fine.

Because I was already moving, shoving my laptop out of the way, plunking her onto the counter.

She arched up, slanted her mouth over mine.

And fuck, but my woman could kiss.

Her tongue slipped into my mouth, and I let her have that.

But only for a second.

Because my woman wanted rough.

And we had two kids who tended to wake up and go in search of us at the worst possible times. If my wife wanted to be fucked—*rough*—we needed to be in a room with a door.

And a lock.

I swept her up, carried her up the stairs down the hall, into our bedroom.

Onto the bed.

I left her so I could close the door, and when I turned back around, she was tugging off her bra.

Fucking. *Beautiful.*

Those tits. Her ass when she turned around, placed her elbows on the table, telling me without telling me exactly how she wanted to be fucked.

Click.

I hit the lock.

Then I was moving back toward her.

Running my palm down her back—starting between her shoulder blades, drifting down along her spine, over her ass.

Crack!

She gasped, hips arching, giving me a glimpse of that pink pussy.

Fingers slipping along those folds, circling her clit, sliding home.

“Oh God,” she whispered, head falling forward, hips bucking. “Yes, like that,” she groaned when I slid another finger inside.

Fucking her slow and deep and steady.

Until she was my Lexi—losing patience, demanding what she wanted.

Batting my hand away.

“I want your cock.”

I was already shoving down my pants, positioning it at her entrance.

And then I was pushing home, sinking into that slick heat, feeling her cunt clamp around me.

Yeah, no.

This wasn't going to last long—not for either of us.

So, I fucked her rough and I fucked her dirty, and I fucked her exactly as she liked.

And I only let myself go after she'd cried out my name and convulsed around my cock.

“Shit,” she whispered, breaths still coming in rapid succession long minutes later. “I love your dick.”

I'd been opening up my mouth to tell her I loved her too.

But then I processed her words.

And I started laughing.

Because I knew this woman would never stop surprising me.

And I fucking loved it.

“Oh,” she said, limply reaching behind her and patting my arm. “And I

love you too.”

THREE

Oliver

Giggles greeted me as I moved into the house, still having to focus on shifting my weight correctly on the stairs as I juggled my bags and turning the knob and trying to make it in through the doorway.

But it didn't matter that I was scrambling to get my ass inside, when I opened the door and heard that sound of my son laughing...

It made the rest of the world fall away.

It didn't matter that I wasn't playing professional hockey, that I was forever rocking a prosthetic leg, that my life was dramatically different than I would have thought, even just a few years ago.

Different.

But not worse.

It was fucking amazing.

Especially when I got to hear the sounds of my kiddo laughing mixing with the gentle giggles of my wife.

"I can do it!"

I grinned, hung up my keys on the hook that Hazel had me install when we'd first moved in together—my soft-spoken wife was surprisingly stubborn-minded about any and all forms of home décor.

Something I gave in to.

Because...I'd do anything that would make her happy.

Including hanging a tiny shelf with a row of hooks on it in four different places before she'd decided on this one.

Because...I'd also good at patching holes.

“I know you can, baby,” Hazel said gently, “but you don’t need so much...”

I heard the plop from the hallway, and winced, making a quick stop at the row of hooks for our jackets (which had only taken three relocations before it had been secured in its final location). My shoes didn’t land on the shoe rack because I needed those for traction and maneuvering, and I didn’t think the loudness of that plop meant I should delay in hustling toward my wife and kiddo and running whatever kitchen interference—*cough* cleanup—I would need to provide.

I could change into my house shoes later.

Turning the corner, I all but screeched into the kitchen and—

Blinked.

That was a mess.

And a half.

Hazel was looking wide-eyed between her shirt, which was covered with bright white icing, and Dominic, our son, who was looking equally as wide-eyed and covered in bright white icing...and the cabinets, and the floor (newsflash, both of which were also splattered with white icing).

How did that much icing exist, let alone manage to coat the people and the things I loved?

And not on the gingerbread houses, which were lying in scattered piles.

A couple of roof pieces, walls, a chimney, a...

I tilted my head to the side.

A tiger? An elephant? And a...dinosaur.

Hazel blinked once more at Dominic then must have sensed me standing there because her head jerked in my direction, cheeks going pink, teeth sinking into her bottom lip, she lifted her hand, intending to push her hair back—something I knew she did when she was nervous, because I knew her—but I moved toward her, wrapping my fingers around her wrist, halting her before she got a mittful of frosting in her hair.

Of course halting her meant that I had to halt myself.

And I wasn’t paying attention to the icing covering the floor.

Which meant that halting myself became very tricky...

And then impossible.

“Oh shit,” I hissed, my feet sliding out from beneath me, leaving me scrabbling, almost tap-dancing on the icing-spattered floor, and I’d got good at my leg—really, fucking good at it—but sometimes shit like this happened

and I couldn't control it, couldn't get all of my limbs to cooperate, and—
I went down.

Down.

Ass hitting the wooden floor hard enough to send the air rushing out of my lungs...and to give plenty of flashbacks of painful collisions between my ass and the ice when I'd been learning to skate ages ago.

“Oh my God,” Hazel said in a rush, those eyes somehow even wider. “Oh my God—” She scrambled up to her knees and reached for me...

Then promptly landed face first in the icing.

Now Dominic and I were the ones who were wide-eyed, looking toward each other in slow motion then toward my woman, who was placing her hands flat on the filthy wooden planks pushing up, and...

I chuckled.

That was dumb, laughing at one's wife under any circumstances.

This one—where she could have potentially hurt herself and was now covered in sticky icing...including the majority of her face—was certainly deadly.

“It l-looks like—” I chuckled again, clamped my teeth together, laughter starting to shake my chest. “L-like one of th-those expensive f-face masks you and the g-girls—” My amusement had well and fully escaped at this point, filling the air, not hidden in the least. “Use!”

“Uh-oh,” Dominic said.

My son was smart as hell and empathetic—both traits I knew he got from his father.

Both of which meant that he was right to be concerned.

Haze swiped at each of her eyes, icing glooping from her fingers down to the floor, dripping from her chin onto her shirt.

She glared at me.

“You are in so much trouble.”

“I—”

But I didn't manage to get to attempt an apology (which, in fairness, would have been challenging considering how hard I was laughing). Because then she pounced, launching herself into my lap, knocking me back into the cabinets, smearing the icing further into the floorboards, into our clothes, into our hair and skin and faces.

I gaped.

But then she was kissing me, body pressing closer, hands going into my

hair, making even more of a mess...

And I didn't care.

Because I tasted her laughter on my tongue.

Because our kiss was interrupted by Dominic's war cry as he hurled himself at us, wiggling his body into our embrace, his arms coming around us and wrapping tight.

Icing.

Surprises.

And...laughter.

That was my life now.

It wasn't perfect.

It was messy.

But I couldn't picture living my life any other way.

FOUR

Marcel

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into skydiving.”

The wind was rushing. The noise of the engine deafening
Pru shoved me. “It’s *indoor* skydiving.” She narrowed her eyes. “Since a certain man has requested I no longer jump out of real planes.”

I shot her a sardonic look. “Well, there’s a reason.”

Pru moved around to my front, tugging up the zipper on the front of my jumpsuit, smoothing the strip of Velcro over the top of it that kept the metal tag in place. Then her hands came to my shoulders and she massaged the taut muscles.

Because, yeah, it was indoor skydiving, but it was still scary as shit.

Plus, I’d watched the group before me go and, swear to God, they spent half the time flying and the rest of it drooling as the wind flew up around them.

“Trade?” she asked softly, turning my face toward hers.

There was mischief in her hazel eyes, but softness too—a softness she rarely gave anyone besides me...and our twins, Cat and Leo, and our adopted—but no less *ours*—daughter Mila.

And her friends that had become her family.

And the players she scouted for the Breakers, young talent that were often far from home and needed a gentle touch.

Okay, so my woman might be a big softie hidden beneath that tough, capable exterior.

But she had a huge heart.

And right then it was pointed in my direction.

“What are we trading?”

“This,” she said, bending and snagging her tote bag, rifling through the baby stuff—bottles and snacks and wipes and more diapers than I would have ever thought that we could need (and that would still be *fewer* than we did need). But beneath all of the crap was a wrapped package.

“It’s not Christmas yet, princess,” I murmured.

“No,” she said without the least bit of remorse. “But we’re having our first solo date night in forever, and who knows the next time our little troublemakers will let that happen. “So, this”—she held up the present—“for that”—a tilt of her head toward the wind-tunnel-esque tube surrounded in clear plexiglass.

My heart started pounding.

Probably because the noise in the space had kicked up, the engine that powered the air that would keep us floating turning on, the next group—which we were part of—getting ready to go into the chamber that led toward all of that terror.

Or maybe just because I was a chicken compared to my woman.

“Deal?” she asked softly. “Or”—her mouth curved up—“we could make a different trade, baby, and hit the hotel room early.”

Not gonna lie, my cock was very much on board with that idea.

But...this was my woman, and it was indoor fucking skydiving.

I might chicken out of diving in a shark cave or hiking along the inside of the volcano or mountain-biking down the side of a fucking cliff...

I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t do this—

Or more truthfully, I couldn’t live with myself if the guys in the locker room discovered I’d chickened out about this.

There was mesh at the top and bottom.

I couldn’t be sucked into the massive propellers that kicked up the air.

Which the attendant could turn off with the flick of a wrist.

So, I knew I was being ridiculous.

I also wanted the present...and the hotel room...and to experience this with my woman. Which was why I asked, “What’s inside?”

Fingers walking up his chest, stroking lightly through the stubble on my jaw. “We have a couple of minutes,” she murmured. “Why don’t you open it?”

I studied her closely, trying to gauge her expression, trying to decipher

any hidden message, any hint of what might be beneath the cheerful wrapping paper.

She wasn't giving me anything.

The engine roared.

The air started flowing.

"Too late," she chirped, snagging it from my fingers, stowing it back in her bag, and taking my hand, drawing me toward the torture chamber.

"B-b—"

Then I was inside the waiting area attached to the skydiving tube and the instructor was saying, "Who wants to go first?"

I immediately drew back, wanting to hide, to cram myself into the corner

—

"He does!" Pru called, tugging me forward...right into the line of sight of the instructor.

"Great!" he called back, gesturing for me to move toward him.

"I—" I glared at my woman, whose mischief in her expression had grown.

"I love you," she mouthed, giving me another shove, this time hard, this time propelling me to that opening that would lead out...

To hell.

My palms were sweaty.

My vision was hazing at the edges.

My legs—for as strong as they were with all of my off and on-ice training—were shaky, threatening to buckle.

But everyone was watching...including a pair of girls who looked all of eight years old.

Who looked *excited*.

Little Prus ready to take on the world.

I couldn't back out now.

I couldn't back out because the instructor had already taken my arm, had already pulled me forward...

And then I was out into the tube, the air was ramping.

He grabbed my jumpsuit right beneath my ass, giving me a major wedgie, and then...

I was flying.

Holy shit, I was flying.

I mean, I was drooling too and the rush of air was making spit spread out

over my face.

It was disgusting...

But it was fucking glorious.

Because it seriously felt like I was flying.

And I never wanted to stop.

But even as that thought was going through my head, I was suddenly on my feet and outside the air tunnel again.

I blinked, watched one of the girls dart forward and get her turn, but my eyes were on my woman.

She was grinning, like she knew I'd loved it.

Because she'd known that I would love it.

I wiped my chin, pretended I was cool and sexy instead of a drooling, ridiculously excited man-child who desperately wanted to go again.

I got my wish—and got to go again, got to watch my woman enjoy her turns.

And then when we were done, I got to open the present.

“Princess,” I said, eyes stinging as I slowly flipped through the scrapbook she'd made for us.

Our life in photographs, but portable, so I could bring it on every road trip.

“I love you,” she whispered, pressing a kiss to my jaw.

“I love you more, baby,” I murmured, drawing her close and adding, watching her eyes light up in response, “Next time, though, we jump out of a real plane.”

FIVE

Smitty

“Get it,” my wife ordered, fingers flying over her keyboard, headphones on her head, one ear covered, the other tucked behind so she could hear both me and the game. “Get it before—”

She sighed.

“Never mind.”

“Sorry, little bird,” I muttered, yanking my gaze from her profile, from where I’d been focused—too focused to help us destroy the fuckers in the dungeon we were trying to beat. I was supposed to be the tank—the big guy with a lot of health and strength, who could take the damage and keep on ticking. My woman had excellent hand-eye coordination, was a pro at a ranged attack.

But there was something different about her.

Something she was pricking at my nape, drawing my focus from the game...

And onto her.

She turned her chair, eyes fixing me in place. “Are you okay?”

That was the question I should be asking her.

“Should we try again?” I asked. This was one of our few free nights before my family flew into town, a night to play video games and eat shit food and drink—

Except her beer was still full.

I frowned.

“No, baby,” she said, taking her headphones off her head. “I think that’s

enough.”

Because that was the third time I’d fucked us on this battle, so she was probably losing patience—something my sweet, shy wife didn’t do very often.

But she wasn’t shy with me.

Not any longer.

So why was tonight giving me those vibes—like she was hiding something, or hiding herself behind a wall of something, or—

“Oof!” I grunted as she straddled my waist, dropped down into my lap, testing the weight limits of my chair, since I was a big motherfucker. The legs protested, and we rolled back a few inches but ultimately, it didn’t collapse down on the rug, didn’t send us toppling with my big ass crushing the woman I loved. “*Shit.*”

She smiled at me, running her fingertips through the strands on my beard, pressing them lightly against my jaw, my skin.

One touch and I settled.

Always with this woman.

Always.

“What are you doing, little bird?” I asked softly, winding my fingers into the ends of her long brown ponytail.

“I’m done with video games for tonight,” she said, just as softly, curling up against me, resting her head on my shoulder. A sigh, her arms wrapping tightly around my middle as she burrowed into me. “Your heart is pounding, baby.”

Because there was something prickling at my nape, making me wonder, making me *worry*.

My quiet, shy woman was...

Back.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, weaving my fingers further into that ponytail, tugging lightly until she lifted her head from my chest. “You’re not acting like yourself.”

Her expression changed, teeth coming out to press into her bottom lip.

My worry became...fear, gathering deep in my gut, twisting together, knotting my insides and making me feel like I was going to puke.

I’d fucked up.

Clearly I had.

So how was I going to fix it—

Her hand settled on my chest, pressing lightly. “Baby,” she said. “Breathe.”

How could I breathe?

I’d fucked up and—

That hand pressed a little more firmly, her face dropping to lock eyes with mine. “Breathe,” she ordered in a fierce tone she would have never used a couple of years ago, a tone that she felt comfortable with using because we found our way to something important and beautiful and that meant *everything*.

I opened my mouth, exhaled.

“Good,” she said, sliding that hand up to cup the side of my neck. “Good, baby.”

Another breath, and then words were welling up in my throat—words that I didn’t fucking know what they were going to be, words that probably wouldn’t make any bit of difference, any bit of sense—

But she beat me to the punch.

“I have a present for you,” she said.

I frowned. “But it’s still a few days before Christmas.”

“I know.” A smile. A squeeze of her hand. “I was planning on waiting to give it to you on Christmas, but”—she leaned in, brushed her mouth over mine—“clearly that’s not going to work.”

It took me a minute to process her words—even as I didn’t understand them—but by the time I did, she was already hopping up and out of my lap, moving across the room, and disappearing out into the hall.

I shove my ass out of the chair, followed her, seeing her open the closet at the end of it, reach up on tiptoe for something on the top shelf.

“Let me,” I began. I was big and tall and excelled at reaching shit on top shelves.

And I needed to do something.

Because my intestines had tied themselves into knots.

“I’m good, baby,” she said, dropping back onto her heels, turning to face me as she closed the door. Her lips curved, and she walked back to me, hand coming to my chest again. “My fierce hockey player with the big, vulnerable heart. I’m *okay*. No, I’m perfect. *We’re* perfect.” She shoved the present into my hand. “Open it, baby.”

Another breath, but though I nodded, acknowledging her words, I couldn’t help but think that everything was about to change.

I studied the cheerful wrapping paper on the outside of the small rectangular box like it was going to give me a clue as to what was inside.

But it was just a print of skating penguins.

Cute. Like my woman. But not revealing secrets. Also, like my woman.

“Smitty.”

Right.

I needed to open the box.

I tore into the paper, tossing it aside, seeing that even with it gone, I still didn’t have a fucking clue what the contents of the present were.

“Almost there, baby,” she murmured, reaching toward me, grasping the lid and tugging it off.

For a second, I didn’t get it.

The big, dumb hockey player not understanding what the fuck all I was looking at.

Then I processed the white plastic stick.

The small screen embedded in it.

The word showing up in a font I struggled to read because the letters swam and moved and half showed up.

Pregnant.

My head whipped up. “Little bird,” I rasped.

She nibbled at her bottom lip again then nodded, eyes glassy, cheeks pink. “Yeah, baby,” she said, answering the question I didn’t even know I was asking. “I’m pregnant.”

For a second, I didn’t move, emotions rippling through me—happiness and fear, worry about how she was feeling, if I was going to be a good dad, but then I just felt...

Joy.

The fear went away. The worries banked.

I was sure they’d make a reappearance later.

But right then...

I came back to myself.

I whooped and swept my woman close, dropping my mouth to hers and kissing her long and deep and with every bit of love I felt for her.

And it was a fucking lot.

So it took a long, long time.

Then, chest heaving, cock hard, I rubbed my thumb over her swollen-from-our-kiss bottom lip, and told her what I knew she needed to hear, “You

are going to be the best mom ever.” I touched her cheek. “And I love you so fucking much.”

“So, it was a good surprise?” she asked, eyes soft. “Even though it’s not Christmas yet?”

“The best fucking surprise of my life.” A beat. “And the best present ever.” I bent and lifted her into my arms, carrying her back down the hall.

She squeaked, held up, not speaking until we passed our bedroom door. “Where are we going?”

I grinned, but didn’t answer until I carried her back to her computer and settled her into her chair, kissing her on the top of her chair. “Come on, little bird,” I said. “We have a dungeon to beat.”

SIX

Eva

The hand sweeping my hair to the side didn't make me jump.

Not because I'd heard Theo come up behind me.

But because he'd made it so I always felt safe in his house, his arms, in my life.

Sighing, I leaned back against him, dropping my head against his collarbone, tilting it so I could look up, meet his heated gaze. "How goes the grocery shopping?"

He set the can of cranberry sauce on the counter, then dropped his hands on either side of me, gripping the edge of the granite and boxing me in. I shivered at the sight of those thick fingers, the veins standing out in sharp relief on the backs of his hands.

I loved those hands.

I loved when they trailed over my body, cupping my curves. I loved when they hefted me up, spread my legs, held my hips as he fucked me deep and hard and fast. I loved how strong they were, how capable...and I loved how gentle they could be.

Though, looking at those veins, at those thick fingers, the powerful forearms, and I wasn't interested in gentle.

Not in any way.

His lips hit my temple and he leaned in a little closer, the warm breadth of his chest flush against my back. "Grocery shopping was a war zone. I had to fight three old ladies and at least a half dozen soccer moms to get that can of cranberry sauce."

“Liar,” I said, turning enough so that I could press a kiss to his jaw. “You probably passed cans out like Halloween candy and almost forgot to grab one for your wife.” I saw a blip of guilt flash across his face and grinned. “Thank you for braving the war that is the lead-up to Christmas at the grocery store so I didn’t have to.”

“No problem, sweetheart.”

I shivered.

Then again when those lips moved from my temple down to the side of my throat. “How goes the cookie decorating?”

I looked up, studied the contents of the counter and knew that I had my own blip of guilt flashing across my face. “I may have gone a bit overboard.”

“Considering that you made...” A pause and I knew he was doing the same thing I was—counting. “Twelve dozen cookies,” he murmured, “I might agree.”

I winced.

“But my family loves your cookies and you know the guys are fucking black holes when it comes to sweet consumption.” He turned me around, snagged the piping bag from my hands, and set it on the counter. “They’ll all get eaten, Eva baby, but I’m reserving my right to play the poor neglected hockey player husband card.” A nip to the side of my neck, voice going gruff. “I need you, Wifey.”

I had that last dozen cookies to finish decorating—the *twelfth* dozen. Then I had to pack them up and clean the kitchen and finish preparing everything for the arrival of his family the next day.

I needed to cook dinner for us, or—more likely—to order it in.

I needed to touch base with my sister because she’d been off lately.

I needed to make sure my dress and heels were ready for the benefit for the Breakers Foundation tomorrow night.

And I needed to confirm that my brothers weren’t going to flake out on Christmas Eve dinner in two with Theo’s family...because my mom was my mom and we’d made a sort of peace, but I wouldn’t put it past her to pull all manner of shenanigans.

But most of all, I needed to...

Be with my husband.

Because life was too short and we’d fought so hard against—and then *for*—us, and I didn’t want to waste a second.

I picked up the bag of icing and spun in the circle of his arms.

“I need—” I saw his gaze flick to the bag, saw the tendril of disappointment enter his eyes, felt a pulse in my heart, but I knew exactly what would make that go away, so I kept talking. “—you to take this bag of icing and do whatever you want with it.” A beat. “And my naked body.”

As I talked, his brows had been lifting.

And his smile had been growing.

But I barely got that last part out before he’d thrown me over his shoulder and started carrying me from the room.

I squeaked. “Where are you going?”

“We’ve played this game before, and I know what kind of mess you make, Eva baby.” Which...*rude*, but he was pounding up the stairs, the movement stealing any response I might have made. And to be fair, I wouldn’t have been able to make much of one—even with that rude (because I was definitely not the one who made that mess...or not by myself, anyway). What with that show of strength and the rasping voice and the fact that we had arrived at the bathroom.

“What—?” I asked as he dropped me onto the counter, still holding the piping bag.

He was already stepping back, turning to the shower, cranking on the water.

Then he turned toward me and the heat in his eyes—

I shivered again.

He ripped his shirt up and over his head, dropped it to the tile floor, started working on the buckle of his pants.

Those hit the floor too.

Then his underwear.

But I wasn’t focused on where that landed.

Because his cock had sprung free, and it was glorious and hard and there was a bead of moisture clinging to the slit at the tip.

I hopped down, my knees hitting the fluffy rug.

And then I was sucking him deep, tonguing up the tiny drop of salty wetness.

“*Fuck!*” he groaned, hands coming to my hair, holding me to him.

When I reached up to wrap my fingers around him, I remembered the icing.

Oh yeah. Fucking *yeah*.

I squeezed it on the length of his shaft, tasted the sweetness on my tongue

as I swallowed him deep, as I stroked and licked and used just the slightest bit of teeth exactly as he liked—

For all of thirty seconds.

Because then he lost patience.

Then he was scooping me up, carrying me into the shower, the warm water flowing down on us, soaking through my clothes. “Theo!”

He snagged the bag of icing from me, set it on the built-in shelf.

And then my shirt was being yanked over my head, landing with a wet *slop* somewhere in the distance.

Then my sweats and underwear followed suit.

He picked up the icing, expression going wicked, and he squeezed some onto his finger, licked it off the tip. “Yummy,” he murmured. “But I bet that you taste better.”

Fuck.

That beautiful tongue.

That beautiful man.

He lifted my leg, tossed it over his shoulder, and stroked that tongue through my cunt.

“Yeah, Eva baby.” Another lick. “You’re better.” His eyes came to mine.

“You’re the best fucking thing in my life.”

SEVEN

Raph

Her diamond ring sparkled in the twinkly lights, and I let my smile sneak out.

Thankfully, Beth was too distracted by all the activity around us to notice my sneakiness—or my plotting.

From the moment my woman lowered the drawbridge, allowed me to move inside the thick protective walls of her heart, and gave me all that is her, I had been living a dream.

Romance and balls being busted.

A sweet woman at home and a scary businesswoman who had refocused on herself, her life and future and going after what she wanted.

What she deserved.

Comfortable with pursuing that because of me.

Which made me feel like a fucking superhero, I couldn't lie.

The best part was she no longer had feelings of guilt because she'd grown up well off—even though I could—and had—made the case that just because she had money in the bank and food in the fridge, being raised by nannies and people who didn't care about more than a paycheck and then shipped off to boarding school as soon as she was old enough shouldn't have really left a lot of room for guilt.

Shit parents were shit parents.

It didn't matter how much money was involved.

She'd survived. She'd fought to build a life that was filled with love and laughter and family not built out of blood.

And she never let herself forget that she could also use the resources she

had to do good.

And she *did* good.

Currently with the Breakers Foundation—working with the team’s community outreach arm to raise money for local schools.

Just this year alone she’d used her powers to fund one-to-one laptops for all students in the district and had helped open a vocational program for kids who wanted to get certified in a variety of jobs—from HVAC to medical assisting to vet tech positions.

Tangible things to help kids.

Because she had a big heart.

Because she’d once been a kid who was forgotten—and had bonded with a group of other kids who were also forgotten.

And she wasn’t stopping.

Tonight we were at a benefit for the Breakers Foundation, and I was one of many hockey players posing for selfies and signing jerseys and talking up the items we’d donated to the silent auction.

My woman had called on connections old and new, and the guys on the team—and others including the Gold and the Sierra, and the newest addition to the league, the Eagles—had shown up for her.

But beyond getting players and donors with deep pockets who weren’t afraid to part with their cash to come, she had truly outdone herself. The event was beyond popular, tickets to the public had sold out in minutes, and when we all arrived it was to find the evening well-organized, with plenty of food, drinks, and things to do.

Prime that money to be donated.

Case in point?

My Pass with a Player package in the silent auction was up to six figures.

So, I knew the kids were going to be set, and I couldn’t wait to see what Beth did with the funding.

It would be great because my woman was fucking impressive...

She was also distracted.

And didn’t know that I’d called in a couple of favors of my own.

A man leaned into the room, his hazel eyes coming to mine, brows lifting in question.

I glanced down at my watch, saw that it was indeed time, and then nodded.

He disappeared.

I set my final piece into motion—moving to my woman, taking her by the hand, and drawing her away from the conversation she was having with Cas.

Exactly as planned.

Because it was fucking Go Time.

“Honey,” she said, “Cas needed—”

But my teammate just walked by us, moving into the hall, moving toward the private room I’d set up for just this moment.

It wouldn’t take long.

Then my woman could go back to kicking ass.

We just...had unfinished business.

“Wha—?” She glanced up at me, confusion in her eyes, but I was already drawing her the same direction in which Cas had disappeared.

The same place the rest of the people who loved Beth had already made their escape.

Taking advantage of the crush in the room.

Of her being distracted.

All except Cas, who was supposed to keep her busy.

Until now.

“Honey,” she said. “I have so much to—”

“In a minute,” I told her, reaching for the knob, pushing open the door, and—

She froze. “What is this?”

Our family—the family we made—is all here, filling chairs on either side of a makeshift aisle, all eyes on us, smiles on their faces, thrilled to be in on the surprise for Beth. For the big bright woman who cared so much and gave so much and didn’t expect anything in return.

I turned her toward me, lifted her hand up so she’d notice something else she’d been too distracted to earlier.

When I’d slipped it onto her finger.

Slipped it on and settled the band of diamonds right next to her engagement ring.

“What?” she breathed, eyes going wide, mouth falling open.

Then...

“Raph,” she said, free hand plunking onto her hip. “Are you freaking serious right now?”

Laughter in the air, drawing her focus back to our family and friends filling the chairs.

“You really slipped a wedding band on my finger?” she hissed, leaning close, eyes flashing, but I knew she wasn’t really pissed, not when her lips were creeping up into a smile, when humor was beginning to shine in her deep blue eyes shone.

“You keep getting busy, honey,” I told her, smoothing back a tendril of bright red hair. “It’s beyond time that we get this taken care of.” I dropped my forehead to hers. “So we can get other things taken off.”

A shaky exhale. “Oh, Raph,” she murmured, eyes going glassy now. “What the heck am I going to do with you and all your romance?”

“Marry me?” I asked softly.

She huffed out a laugh then straightened, shaking her head. “Yes,” she said. “I guess we should do that, considering I have an event to get back to.” She turned to the chairs, jabbing a finger at the collective crowd. “When this is over, I expect you all to get back out there and hock your silent auction items because it’s for—”

“The kids!” they called back.

Her nose wrinkled, but, as usual, it was fucking cute.

Which was why I dropped a kiss on the top of her head, nodded toward where a certain grumpy hockey player—Lake Jordan—was standing, anxious to head back to California because the man apparently had a woman now who would tolerate his annoying ass. Still, he was doing me a solid because even though he was a surly bastard and a pain in the ass on the ice...

He was ordained in forty-plus states.

Including Maryland.

So...he’d stayed an extra day after the game.

And he was going to marry us.

Right now.

No more delays. No more worrying about planning something.

Just me and Beth and our family.

“Oh my God,” she whispered as I started drawing her up the aisle. “I can’t believe you did this.”

“My heart,” I told her as we stopped in front of Lake, as I took her hand, pressed it to the spot on my chest where the organ beat, *only* for her below, and stared deeply into her eyes. “My fucking *heart*.”

“No,” she whispered. “*My* heart and soul and every bit of love and joy and happiness you’ve ever given me.”

“More,” I whispered back. “You gave us more.”

“You gave us our future.”

I touched her cheek. “*You* give us our happy ending every single day.”

“I love you.”

“Forever and always,” I murmured, dropping my forehead to hers.

“And *those* are better than the vows I pulled off the internet,” Lake said, making us both jump and jerk our heads toward him, making me remember we had an audience and a wedding to finish. “And since she has already has a ring”—Lake jerked his chin at Beth’s hand—“and we all have a silent auction to talk up...I now pronounce you man and wife.”

My eyes went wide. “Lake, I—”

Beth’s eyes went wide. “I—”

“You may kiss the bride,” Lake announced loudly, ignoring our shock.

But since I wasn’t going to miss my first chance to kiss my wife...

I did just that.

And then when the cheers died down and I found the strength to pull away...

We all went out and drove up those silent auction bids.

EIGHT

Cas

“Ready, Dad?” Ethan asked softly the next day.

I nodded, played it cool, but every time my stepson—a fact I only mentioned to illustrate exactly how big of a fucking deal it was for him to call me that. Every time, every fucking time I heard him call me Dad I felt it in my heart.

Big time.

“Yeah, bud,” I said. “I’m ready.”

He grinned, his half-goofy smile, and picked up the tray with misshapen pancakes, bacon, eggs, and a fruit salad.

Breakfast in bed for his mom.

Creating core memories.

Learning how to spoil his mom, because she deserved it. Learning that if he bent over backward for the woman he loved that love would be reciprocated tenfold.

Never had I been happier.

Not hefting a Cup. Not seeing my name be written in the Breakers’ history books. Not being drafted or making my family proud. Not—

“Woof!”

I grinned down at my pooch, scratched the top of his head, right between his ears, exactly as he liked it.

Not even when Sparky and I were on our own, my little fur bucket, my best friend and favorite companion.

Mostly because he was happy with just time and lots of scratches and a

regularly filled food bowl.

But with Jules and Ethan—

My life was better than I could have ever expected.

“Do you think she’ll like the present?” Ethan asked, carefully balancing the tray as he walks, Sparky hovering close by, in case of spillage (he took his job as family vacuum very seriously).

“I know she will,” I said, walking up the stairs, holding the wrapped package that Ethan had picked out.

It was Christmas Eve.

We’d do the big present opening thing tomorrow. Santa would come and fill stockings and my family would come over and we’d have a living room full of wrapping paper scraps and discarded boxes and eat too much food.

We would make memories, spend time together, and I was lucky enough to finally do it with a family of my own.

But tonight was about Ethan, Jules, and me.

Our little family that we built.

We pushed through the door to Jules’s and my bedroom, and my woman was awake, knees up, computer propped across the tops of her thighs.

Working.

As always.

My woman was applying for nursing school, which meant she had a bunch of tests to study for.

So, no surprise, even on the morning of Christmas Eve, she was getting a jump on it.

My only consolation was that I’d finally convinced her to quit her job at CeCe’s, so that she could go to school full time. It was why nursing school was going to be happening soon.

Because my woman was going to crush her exams.

“Hi, boys,” she said, closing her laptop screen and setting it to the side. “Do you want me to cook—*oh*,” she exclaimed softly, gaze hitting on the tray.

“We cooked you breakfast in bed, Mom!” Ethan said, tray rattling as he hurried toward her.

Jules’s eyes going wide, hand extending to steady it instinctively, but she didn’t take it from him, just let him bring it over and set it onto her lap—though she did move the laptop a safe distance away.

Mom Powers.

Grinning, I watched Ethan show her the pancakes and fruit and eggs and bacon, winking when she glanced over at me, letting my kiddo have his moment. He was proud—rightfully so—and I didn't want to take away from what he'd done.

Looking after his mom.

He just didn't have to do that alone any longer.

Such a good fucking kid.

Then Ethan spun, brows lifting expectantly and I realized in my admiration of mom and son, I'd missed my cue.

I moved forward, passed over the package.

"Here, Mom!" Ethan said, handing it to her and nearly upending the tray.

"Should I wait for Christmas to open it?" she asked, managing to hold it and keep her breakfast safe.

"Nope!" Ethan exclaimed, p popping at the end. "It's got to be now."

Jules's brows dragged together, but she didn't otherwise question the urgency, just began tearing open the paper, revealing the generic online shipping box beneath. "What is it?" she asked, fingers going to the tape holding the flaps closed.

"We're not going to ruin the surprise," Ethan said.

"It's a surprise?" Jules asked teasingly.

"Open it, Mom," Ethan ordered, slightly disgruntled.

Jules pulled open the flaps.

Froze, mouth falling open.

"Mom!"

Her eyes went wide, a shaking hand reaching into the shredded paper and plucking out the black velvet box.

"What did you do?" she whispered, stare coming to mine.

"Open it, sweetheart," I murmured, pulling out an order of my own.

She exhaled, but popped open the lid.

An inhale this time, so sharp I worried she might choke.

"Do you like it?" Ethan asked. "I picked it out."

Wide eyes back on mine then over to Ethan. "I love it, baby."

"I'm not a baby—"

"But you'll always be *my* baby," she finished, like she's told him a hundred, a thousand times before.

Ethan shook his head, but his mouth was curved into a smile. "Okay, Mom." Then he looked up at me, lifted his brows, telling me to get on with it.

Ordered around by a six-year-old.

Chuckling, I move toward my woman, taking the ring box from her hand and kneeling next to the edge of the bed.

“I thought a long time about how to make this special. I thought about getting flowers and whisking you away for the weekend. I thought about showering you with jewelry and presents and vacations. I thought about doing it at the arena for twenty-thousand people to witness my love for you.”

Her inhalation is shaky.

“But then I thought about you and what you would want. I thought about what is most important to you, so I asked Ethan, and he came up with the perfect idea. Me. Him. *You*. A special act of love. Time together as a family. Because it’s the small things we do every day that show how much we love each other.”

She exhaled, eyes damp, expression filled with love.

For me. For Ethan.

For our family.

“So, sweetheart,” I said, “you know how much I love you and Ethan and what we’re building, will you do me the honor of making it official?”

A tear slid down her cheek.

“Yes,” she whispered. “*Yes!*”

Then she threw her arms around me, mouth hitting mine.

I heard Ethan whoop, but I was lost in the moment, in my woman, in all the blessings of my future.

Which meant, that unfortunately, I didn’t have Mom Powers to steady the tray when we upended it with our kiss.

That was okay.

Because sometimes life—even with happy endings—was messy.

Plus, the laptop was safely out of the way.

NINE

Eva

“Can you pass the potatoes?” Dommie asked pertly on Christmas Eve.

I looked up from my plate, seeing her staring at me and, with one look, I could see she was deliberately ignoring the person sitting next to her.

The *man* sitting next to her.

Walker.

Whose eyes are fixed on her profile, her lifted chin and tense shoulders.

Hmm.

I lifted my brows at my sister. “Can *Walker* not pass you the potatoes?”

If looks could kill, I would be dead on the floor, and nothing could send more glee through me—*ah*, torturing my younger siblings was my favorite.

Truly.

I grinned over at her then turned my focus to Walker. “Walker?”

The sexy smile the gorgeous hockey player tossed my direction made me shiver—and I already had my own gorgeous hockey player who sent me sexy smiles on the regular. “Yeah, Eva?”

Theo slid his arm around my shoulders, tugging me and my chair closer to him.

A silent signal to the world—one that everyone at this table certainly already knew, considering the ring on my finger and the picture of Elvis marrying us hanging on my wall—that I belonged to him.

I stretched up, pressed a kiss to his jaw then turned back to Walker...and my sister. “Would you be so kind as to pass Dommie the potatoes?”

Gabe snorted, smirking over at Jer, who was deliberately eating from his

own pile of mash on his plate and not engaging in the typical Moreno nonsense.

Lana and Rose—Theo's sisters—clearly didn't have the same compunction.

They giggled and Lana, who was still dating her hockey player boyfriend (a hockey player who had serious potential to make it in the big leagues) leaned into his lanky-yet-to-be-fully-filled-out frame.

Theo growled.

I grinned, patted his thigh.

Ah.

The holidays.

It was absolutely the best getting everyone together—especially my overprotective hubby and his independent sisters and Lana's über-confident-and-blithely-ignoring-the-growling-and-sitting-across-the-table-from-him-older-brother boyfriend, Levi.

Fun times.

Meanwhile, Walker ignored all of that, just picked up the bowl of potatoes, and did some leaning of his own.

Into Dommie.

“Did you want some potatoes, sunlight?”

Hmm.

I looked up at Theo, lifted my brows.

His eyes dropped to mine, mouth curved, but only for a beat because he was too focused on his sister and Levi.

And planning murder.

Dommie was doing the same, not bothering to acknowledge Walker as she accepted the bowl, started slopping potatoes onto her plate.

I smiled. “Can I have some too?” I asked after she'd loaded about a gallon of them onto the festive-patterned porcelain.

Impressive self-control.

Because she didn't launch the bowl across the table at me.

She just thrust it over the ham and stuffing and deviled eggs, passed it across the Christmas fixings.

And promised payback.

“Love you,” I mouthed.

She glared, but her expression softened and she sighed then mouthed, “I love you too, sissy.”

I scooped up potatoes, loading some onto Theo's plate, then passed it down to Theo's mom, Emily, who winked at me as she took the bowl.

Winked because she was in on the surprise—because, of course she was.

My mother-in-law was capable, organized, and nosy.

She was the perfect accomplice.

I winked back, dug into my potatoes, and looked around the table at my family—my brothers and sister, Theo's sisters (and the aforementioned über-confident boyfriend), Theo's mother and stepdad, and Walker.

Because he was close to Theo.

And also...Dommie.

Fighting a smile, I mentally shook my head, shoved some potatoes into my mouth so I didn't say something snarky, and focused on the conversation that started up, Emily—thankfully—taking charge.

She asked Gabe about art school then Jer about his plans for college.

My youngest brother graduated with honors, but Jer didn't know what he wanted to do, career-wise, so he was taking a gap year—something that Lana wanted to do...and something that wasn't going to happen if Emily and Roger had anything to say about it.

Which they did.

Because they were paying.

Luckily, Lana was smart enough to clue in, and dropped the idea, and pretty soon we were talking hockey and Levi's plans, hockey and the Breakers' prospects, hockey and how I was liking my position as the team's color commentator, and hockey and how Dommie was feeling with her bakery business being asked to fill a food stall at the Breakers' stadium.

Dommie's Cookies had begun as a side project to make some quick cash, the owner of the bakery she worked at in high school, letting her use the kitchen space for free so long as my sister provided ingredients, cleaned up, and worked the morning shift (one that was notoriously hard to get young people to show up for). Now Dommie had bought out a partner's share of the bakery, was going to be featured in a freaking stadium, *and* she was taking college classes toward her business degree.

My sister kicked serious ass, and I couldn't be more proud of her.

Even if her eyes still threatened murder.

I bent and squeezed her shoulder as I rounded the table, starting to collect dirty dishes, ordering everyone to stay put because I was just making room for dessert.

And checking on Theo's Christmas present.

Emily didn't listen, of course.

But then again, she was in on the surprise.

"Is it okay?" she whispered, setting the plates in the sink and watching me creep in from the laundry room—where Theo's Christmas surprise was stowed.

"Yes," I whispered, even as nerves rippled through me. "Do you—do you think that this is a bad idea?"

She slipped an arm around my shoulders. "I think it's the *best* idea."

I nibbled at my bottom lip. "But maybe I should have waited until—"

She squeezed. "His family is all here, and he's going to love it all the more for exactly that reason."

I know she's right.

I was just...

Scared.

Because it meant a lot and I—

Loved him with everything I had in me. The thought of disappointing him...

He walked through the opening, arms full of plates, expression gentle, eyes full of love, and I know...

I couldn't disappoint him—not when my present was created out of love.

"Ready for dessert?" he asked. "The masses are asking for cookies."

I glanced at Emily then back at him, shoving down the nerves in my belly, the worry making my shoulders tight. Then I gave into what I wanted, what I needed.

To show my man how much I loved him.

I smoothed my hand along his chest, weaving my fingers into the silky strands of his hair. "I was thinking that we should let our food settle and do presents first."

Warm gray eyes on mine.

Then his lips quirked up. "You want your presents?"

I brushed my mouth over his. "You know I love getting pressies."

A chuckle. "I *know* I will spend my life giving you anything you want, Eva baby."

TEN

Theo

Her face went soft in that special Eva way, the one that made me feel a hundred feet tall, like I could score a thousand goals, heft dozens of Cups, love this woman exactly as she deserved for the rest of my life.

“I love you,” she whispered, reaching up, stroking her fingers over my jaw.

“I love you,” I whispered back, covering her hand with my own.

My mom sighed, and I remembered that we weren’t alone, that—I glance up, looking over Eva’s shoulder—see that my mom is shamelessly watching us.

And my family is in the next room.

“Pressies, Eva baby?” I asked softly.

She stroked her fingers over my jaw again, a blip of that worry I’d been seeing over the last few weeks reentering her eyes.

“I—”

But then she was dropping her hand away, stepping back. “Yeah, honey.” A nod. “Want to go wrangle your family and I’ll finish up here?”

“I’ll help you—”

“Come into the living room,” my mom said when Eva glanced over at her, and for the first time I realized that she must have been in on whatever this was, but then she was grabbing my arm, drawing me back out of the kitchen. “Present time!” she declared.

Which was enough to send my sisters into motion, dragging Eva’s siblings along with them.

Walker and the hockey-playing boyfriend—I narrowed my eyes at the floofy-haired fucker who was all too handsy with my sister—followed them into the family room gathering around the tree with its carefully placed ornaments and perfectly draped twinkly lights, taking up the couch and armchairs and generally filling the room with people we cared about.

Except that floofy-haired fucker.

Dommie cuddled up next to Rose, the two of them looking at something on Rose’s cell phone. Lana sat in Levi’s lap (something that had both Walker and I narrowing our eyes—my teammate might be a pain in the ass in the locker room, but he had my back). My mom released my arm and went over to Roger, curling her legs beneath her, practically radiating joy when Gabe and Jer joined her, the two having latched onto my mom.

Because my mom was a mom.

Because they hadn’t ever had that—not with anyone who wasn’t Eva, who wasn’t their sister bending over backward and slowly killing herself to help her family survive when her parents checked out.

Because Eva had made it that way.

Made space for my family to embrace hers—no jealousy, no roadblocks.

Just love and togetherness and—

“Ready?”

A rustling came from behind me, and I spin around, see Eva carrying in a huge basket filled with blankets.

Blankets that color coordinate with the throw pillows on the couch.

It was chilly outside, snow falling, the air biting in the strictly Baltimore way, and my sisters and mom all have thin blood—hello California weather. I smiled, knowing that my thoughtful woman had brought them out so my family would be cozy and comfortable while they opened their presents.

I started toward her, intending to help her pass them out.

Only...

The blankets were moving.

No.

That wasn’t right.

There was something moving *in* the blankets.

Eva moved toward me, setting the basket down in front of the coffee table. Rose leaned in and I watched her freeze. Something that Lana immediately picked up on, head jerking up to mine, eyes going wide, mouth dropping open.

The air in the room changed, going taut and still and...

Every single eye in the room came to me.

“What?” I asked.

“*Bark!*”

I blinked.

That sounded like—

“*Bark!*”

A dog barking.

But I didn't have a dog. None of our extended family did. Not since Dog, my childhood dog, had died a few years back, breaking my and my sisters' hearts. I missed him so fucking much, mostly because he'd been the best dog ever and—

A fluffy head popped up.

Big ears. Golden fur. Deep chocolate-colored eyes. And...

A big red bow around its neck.

“I thought it was time,” Eva said softly.

I jerked my gaze away from the tiny ball of fur and looked up at the woman who I knew loved me from my rapidly beating heart down to the depths of my soul and everywhere in between. “What?” I rasped.

“You have so much love to give, honey,” she murmured. “And Pooch needed a good home.”

I inhaled sharply, eyes stinging, throat tight. “Pooch?” I asked, still rasping.

“Well,” she said, moving to the basket and carefully scooping up the puppy, carrying him back toward me, tucking the warm weight of his body into my arms, “you had Dog the dog, and now I thought it was time for Pooch the pooch.” A shrug, her cheeks going the slightest bit pink. “Or we can pick whatever name you want, honey.”

“Pooch,” I whispered.

The puppy lifted his head, eyes coming to mine, head tilting curiously, and just that easily, it was settled.

“Pooch,” I said again, causing his head to tilt the other way.

“Yeah,” she murmured, nibbling at her bottom lip.

“That's perfect.”

Her expression relaxed, body melting against mine, the warm weight of her more familiar, more right than Pooch.

But his wasn't wrong.

His was right too.

Right in the weight of a future, the weight of future hopes and dreams.

A future with squeaky toys and rolling balls and walks out in the cold, of cold noses pressing to my throat way too early in the morning and a tail whipping back and forth at warp speed when I walked through the door.

A future where I wasn't alone.

Where I had a family of my own.

Where I had Eva and Pooch and *more*.

My eyes burned and my throat was tight and I was about a second away from bursting into tears. "Eva baby," I rasped.

She turned into me, her coffee-colored eyes beyond soft. "You don't hate this."

Not a question.

"Now, baby," I tell her, dropping my forehead to hers, settling my hand on her nape. "Aside from the day you honored me by becoming my wife, this is the best thing anyone has ever done for me." I squeezed lightly. "The best."

She exhaled, her breath grazing my lips. "I'm glad, honey. I was so scared it might be too soon." Another breath. "You haven't mentioned getting another dog."

I hadn't.

I probably never would have.

Because it made me feel too raw, too vulnerable. But Eva knew me better, knew that this was a part of my life that was missing, that was aching and ready to be filled.

Knew it was beyond time to fill that void.

"I hadn't," I told her, pressing my lips to her forehead. "But"—Pooch wriggled between us, head coming up as he licked at the bottom of my chin and we both laughed—"I already can't imagine our life without him."

"Honey," she whispered.

"I love you," I whispered back.

"I—"

"I know this scene is sweet and all," Rose said, making us jerk apart and whirl around to face the audience I'd forgotten we had, "but when are we going to get to cuddle the puppy?"

Eva snorted.

I slanted a look her way. "You wanted the audience."

“I *wanted*”—she stepped close, snagged Pooch from me—“our family to have this moment with us too.”

Our family.

Mishmashed and not related solely by blood, ties that ran along DNA but also deeper, tying us tightly together.

Forever.

Which was why I didn’t protest when everyone swooped in...

And Pooch got all of the attention.

Twinkly lights.

Sugar cookies.

Laughter and cuddles. Jeans coated in dog hair.

And a pup with a bright red bow for a collar.

The best Christmas ever.

ELEVEN

Dommie

I gently squeezed the piping bag, spinning the turntable which the perfectly iced cake sat on, sending a thin thread of icing out of the metal tip, draping it carefully.

Decorating the top edge of the wedding cake that would be the biggest I'd ever made.

Six tiers.

Coated in fluffy white buttercream.

Each tier decorated differently with royal icing in an elegant white-on-white pattern that had my hands aching.

And my neck.

And my shoulders.

And my legs and ankles and feet.

Because—one more squeeze and I carefully pulled away, set the piping bag on the metal table—I'd been at this since three in the morning.

It was noon now.

And though I'd been squeezing in the rest of my duties that came from opening the bakery—namely baking the items that filled the cases so people could buy them and eat them and the business made enough money so that I had a job—the rest of the time had been spent decorating the cake.

Busy.

Always.

The job. The bakery itself. My life.

Always busy.

Now I had less than an hour to box up the cake, stow it safely in the walk-in, and get my butt over to class.

I loved decorating cakes.

It was a steady job that paid decent for a college student.

But it wasn't my dream.

It wasn't—

“Did you leave any icing *on* the cake?”

I'd just finished boxing said cake—or the top tier of said cake. Luckily. Because the man's voice had me jerking, my hand bumping into the cardboard.

And if the man—who, unfortunately, I knew just from that single silken question, whose voice I knew (and maybe heard in my dreams)—had made me ruin this cake—or even just one layer of it—I might very well commit hockeycide.

As in, murder of the sexy, annoying hockey player currently leaning against the doorway that led out into the front part of the bakery.

Walker Laine standing there looking sexy, with a big, strong body, tattoos and a beard, and jeans that encased his thick thighs in a way that should be illegal.

And annoying, with his kissable lips turned up at the edges into a smirk.

And his arms crossed.

And his freaking ankles crossed too.

Looking totally comfortable in my space. Invading my space.

Again.

For a man who supposedly didn't like making connections with women, he seemed to be doing that a lot. Crowding me in the waiting room of the hospital when I'd been too upset to know what I was doing, to keep him at arm's length. Driving me home. Showing up at my place, at my mom's house. Sitting next to me at dinner, his thigh brushing mine, his arm pressed close, his scent in my nose. And now at...

My place of work.

I narrowed my eyes, picked up the boxed cake, and carried it to the walk-in, stowing it on the shelf with the rest of the tiers. Tomorrow I'd stay late, and then would go with Roy, our delivery guy, to the venue to set up the cake.

Then live with my hands in ice buckets for twenty-four hours afterward.

Sighing, I wiped those aching hands on my apron which—as a certain

annoying hockey player had pointed out—was covered in a fair amount of icing.

Okay, a *lot* of icing.

Probably it was a comment on me, that I worked so messily. God knew, my mom would say so. Messy life, messy mind. Which was fucking hilarious. Because my mom was...

Not a good person.

So, I just shoved that away and embraced my messiness.

My apartment was clean. My car was immaculate. My aprons...trashed. But, more importantly, my cakes were perfect, even *if* I wore a piping bag's worth of icing each and every time I finish—

“Ack!”

I'd run into a brick wall.

No. Okay, fine. I'd run into a brick-headed hockey player.

“What the fuck, Walker?” I snapped, brushing off his hands, which had come up to steady me—ugh, why did he have to be *nice*?—and started to move by him.

Even though he was smaller than a lot of the guys on the Breakers, Walker still took up a lot of space. Or maybe that was only in my head. It was just...he seemed big, too big, and he sucked all the air out of the room, and he made me feel—

It didn't matter.

What I felt didn't matter.

Not when it came to one Walker Laine.

“I need to talk to you,” he said.

“I think we've done all the talking we need to do,” I snapped.

Regret careening across his face, marring the beautiful features.

Because once I'd thought that his invading my life meant something, that he might want something special with me.

That he might want...just me.

Just Dommie.

Just a girl who was no one special being wanted by a man who was—

Who'd made it abundantly clear a future that included wanting me wasn't in the cards.

“Sunlight—”

Yeah, no.

That he'd called me that, now, after what he'd said and how he'd pushed

me away and...how he'd made me feel?

I could deal with the invading of my life, the annoying presence when I was capable of handling my own shit. I could even deal with him showing up at my place. He wanted to fix my sink? Sure, let him knock himself out.

But calling me Sunlight?

That couldn't happen.

And certainly not in that gentle voice and paired with his hand lifting, fingers trailing down my throat.

That was what had given me the stupid hope, the thoughts of a future that might be.

That was what had hurt so fucking much when reality had smacked me back into my place.

"Don't," I snapped.

His eyes flared with annoyance. "Dommie—"

I didn't focus on that. Couldn't. Not when my gaze slid over his shoulder and I saw the door to the walk-in slowly swinging closed.

Shit.

I lurched for it but was too late.

It closed with a soft *click*.

One that couldn't even begin to demonstrate how fucked I was.

Because the door to the walk-in was broken. Because the freaking handle that was supposed to function to let someone out if the door shut on them didn't work.

Because I was now trapped in this goddamned giant refrigerator with Walker Laine.

"Shit!" I hissed, moving over to the handle and jabbing at it anyway.

No surprise, the door didn't move.

"What's wrong?" Walker asked.

I glared over my shoulder at him, hoping he could see it in the dim overhead lights. "We're trapped," I snapped. "The handle is broken, so we can't get out."

His brows dragged together. "That seems dangerous. What if you were stuck in here and nobody was working?"

I let my glare intensify. "Well, I'm not normally confronted by annoying hockey players in the walk-in."

A beat as he appeared unfazed by my laser eyes. "Didn't really answer my question, sweetheart."

Sweetheart. Ugh. Why did that send a flutter through my insides?

I turned back, wrestled with the handle again. “I’m always just in and out.”

Those brows flicked up, seeming to say, “That didn’t answer my question either.”

I huffed out a sigh. “Normally I’d just call for help and one of the other bakers would come in and let me out.”

“So why don’t you do that?”

Silence.

Annoying, long silence before I had to admit, “I don’t have my phone.”

His mouth quirked.

I hated him.

Detested him.

And I still thought his little smirk was the sexiest thing I’d ever seen.

“I have my phone,” he said, pulling it out of his pocket.

Thank God.

I wasn’t sure I could yell loudly enough for them to hear me out front.

“But...” He tucked it away again, voice like velvet.

“What?” I asked dread gathering in my belly.

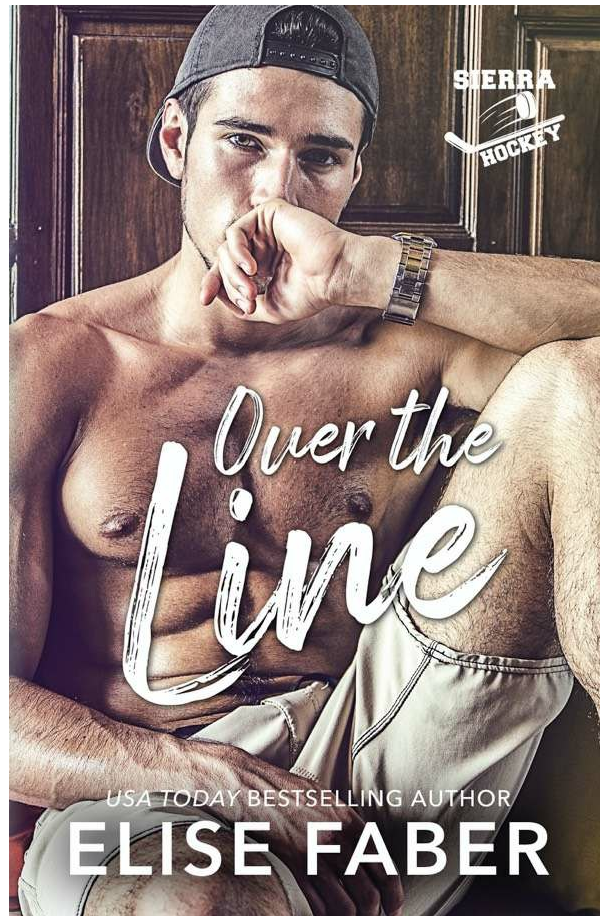
“I’ll only let you use it if you agree to go on a date with me.”

Thank you for reading! I hope you loved this glimpse into the happily-ever-afters of the Breakers crew as much as I did! The next book in the Breakers Hockey series is [BLAZED](#). **I never wanted to settle down. Until she careened into my life.**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author, Elise Faber, loves chocolate, Star Wars, Harry Potter, and hockey (the order depending on the day and how well her team -- the Sharks! -- are playing). She and her husband also play as much hockey as they can squeeze into their schedules, so much so that their typical date night is spent on the ice. Elise is the mom to two exuberant boys and lives in Northern California. Connect with her in her Facebook group, [the Fabinators](#) or find more information about her books at www.elisefaber.com.

