



THE  
*Hearts*  
WE BREAK

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# Playlist

## Scarlett's Playlist

I Don't Want to Be by Gavin DeGraw

You Belong With Me by Taylor Swift

Just a Friend to You by Meghan Trainor

Best Song Ever by One Direction

Remember the Name by Fort Minor

That Way by Tate McRae

Back To You by Selena Gomez

Bubbly by Colby Caillat

Paradise by Coldplay

Five More Minutes by Scotty McCreery

Fire On Fire by Sam Smith

Supermarket Flowers by Ed Sheeran

## Slater's Playlist

It's Goin' Down by Yung Joc, Nitti

Memories by David Guetta, Kid Cudi

All That Really Matters by ILLENIUM

Friends by Chase Atlantic

Better by Khalid

Freak-A-Leek by Petey Pablo

Night Changes by One Direction

Not In That Way by Sam Smith

Without You by Avicii, Sandro Cavazza

Don't Give Up On Me by Andy Grammar

Teeth by 5 Seconds of Summer

I Don't Want to Be by Gavin DeGraw

# Dedication

*To everyone who has ever been in the friend zone but wanted to get in the end zone.*

## Trigger Warning

**A**fter much deliberation, I have decided to place the triggers into the back of the book. This book is best experienced if you go in blind and I encourage you to do so! If you would like to check over the triggers before starting, please go to the very back of the book. Your mental and emotional health is always first priority.

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Thank you

Acknowledgments

Trigger Warnings



## Scarlett

There is nothing quite like the rush of adrenaline that comes with that first snap. Despite only ever being on the sidelines, football runs through my veins, it's ingrained in my soul. It's not just because my dad and both my older brothers played in college. It's also not just because there is an extreme beauty to the sport, a delicate balance between skill and instinct. No, football is so fundamentally a part of me for one main reason.

Slater Santos.

I'll never forget the day the Santos family moved in next door. I was seven years old at the time, Aaron was twelve, Ezra was eight, and the dark curly headed boy with deep chocolate eyes you could drown in was the same. My mom and dad were inside the house, spring cleaning while me and my brothers played outside. They think they were the first ones to see the new neighbors. I guess they were the first to greet them, but from where I sat underneath the large evergreen tree in the backyard blowing bubbles, I saw him first.

He hopped out of the backseat of the black SUV before quietly taking in his surroundings. Even at seven years old, I was already used to living in my brothers' shadows. I was the quietest Hayes child, and I was okay with that. I didn't need attention like my brothers so desperately craved from anyone who was around. But when those chocolate eyes fell on me, like two magnets snapping together, I never wanted to be seen more in my life.

Unfortunately for me, a rambunctious Ezra came barreling into our new neighbor, stealing his attention as he and Aaron introduced themselves. When I finally worked up enough nerve to leave behind my special spot and bubble wand, I made my way over to where the group of boys were playing tag. The dark-haired boy looked at me for a moment, pausing as he chased after Aaron and Ezra before giving me a smile that had my little seven year old heart pattering out of rhythm. I was about to introduce myself, but before I could, he was off, running in the direction my brothers took off.

Before I knew what I was doing, I was chasing after him. Even back then, I knew that wherever Slater Santos was going, I wanted to be there. And that's how it always was. Since that day, we have been practically inseparable.

Losing my mom to ovarian cancer when I was only thirteen was probably the hardest thing I ever faced. If I hadn't had Slater by my side, I don't know if I would have survived it. He's been my rock, my protector, my everything, for as long as I can remember.

The second hardest thing I have ever faced? Sitting in the front row as I watched the man I've loved practically my entire life marry someone else. Yeah. That one hurt like hell.

I did what I was supposed to despite the crippling pain inside me. I smiled encouragingly when he told me he was going to propose. I even helped pick out a ring Nikki would like. I was there to help him and my brothers when it

came to choosing tuxes, and I congratulated them at the wedding while I was choking down tears and nursing a broken heart.

That was the day I knew Slater would never be mine, not in the way I wanted at least. I could have pulled away, created distance for my own sake, but despite the fact he would never be mine in that way, he will always be my best friend and I can't imagine living a day without that.

The sound of a whistle brings me back to the present. The roar of the crowd is deafening, the energy palpable inside the stadium as fans for both the Crusaders and the Pumas shout their agreement or outrage at the call just made.

"On the receiving side, number forty three, holding. Fifteen yards."

"C'mon!" Coach Aberton snaps as he throws his clipboard on the ground and begins pacing.

To be fair, I wasn't paying too close attention to the play, so I can't be certain if Aberton is being overdramatic or not. But if I had to go out on a limb, I'd say he was. He's known for being one of the most hot-headed coaches in the league. Regardless of his reputation, he has countless championships and a handful of Super Bowl rings under his belt so whatever he does works.

"Andrews looks stiff out there," Collin, the team's physical therapist comments as he watches our starting wide receiver stretch out his arm. Damion Andrews dislocated his shoulder at the beginning of the season, and though we are in the playoffs now, he's still hurting.

"Once we get through this game, I'll work with him. See if I can come up with a more comprehensive plan."

Collin nods as his eyes stay focused on the field in front of us. I know what you're thinking, how did I get so lucky, right? I'm an athletic trainer for the

NFL, the Seattle Crusaders to be exact. I decided early on that I wanted to help people and the human body always fascinated me, but I never thought about applying that to football until a linebacker on our high school football team broke his ankle in the middle of a game my freshman year. I was one of the first people on the field to help, and unfortunately for Ronnie Robinson, he didn't seek proper physical therapy following his injury and never played again.

We are in the NFC championship against the Las Vegas Pumas, and the score is currently tied up 31-31. We only have two minutes left in the fourth quarter, and at this point, we really need to pull something off if we want to move on.

The ball is snapped, and Danny Smith, our QB, backpedals a few steps before looking at his options. He has several. Andrews is open about ten yards away, though he's swarmed with defensemen. Sebastian Caldwell is trying to lose the guy covering him but isn't having too much luck. Then again, the tight end is 6'6", so does it really matter if someone is covering him? He could catch the ball over his opponent's head and take off with ease if he needed to.

Then Smith sees his opening, the perfect player to bring home the win for us. Slater Santos is downfield a way, turned just enough to signal that he's ready. Smith throws the ball, and it sails across the field in a spiral. It's no surprise that it lands in Slater's arms perfectly. I think the man has only fumbled maybe five times in his professional career. It's like his hands are made of Velcro.

The player covering Slater knows in that moment it's over for them. If Slater has the ball, that's all there is to it. Being the fastest running back in the league, he's nearly untouchable. Don't get me wrong there are plenty of

fast players out there but none quite like Slater. When he runs, it's almost like he's flying.

I watch in awe as that white number thirty seven stands out against the green jersey as he eats up the distance between himself and the end zone.

My face breaks out into a smile, my heart full at the fact that he is about to win it all for us, to help crown us the NFC champions. Until the worst possible thing could happen. A defensive end, who seemingly comes out of nowhere down the field, begins after Slater. He is covering the distance faster than others, and because of the angle that he's coming from, I don't think Slater sees him.

"On your left!" I shout uselessly. The guys on the sidelines can't hear me over the deafening crowd, let alone Slater, who is over sixty yards away from me.

The impact comes harder than I expect—harder than anyone expects. The two hundred and some pound man drives into Slater low, taking him down at the hips before plowing him into the turf. A collective 'ooo' sounds from the sidelined players and coaches as we watch several other players dogpile on top of them.

Slowly, players from both teams begin untangling themselves as they stand up and start making their way back into position. All but one.

"C'mon, Santos. Get up," Collin murmurs on my left.

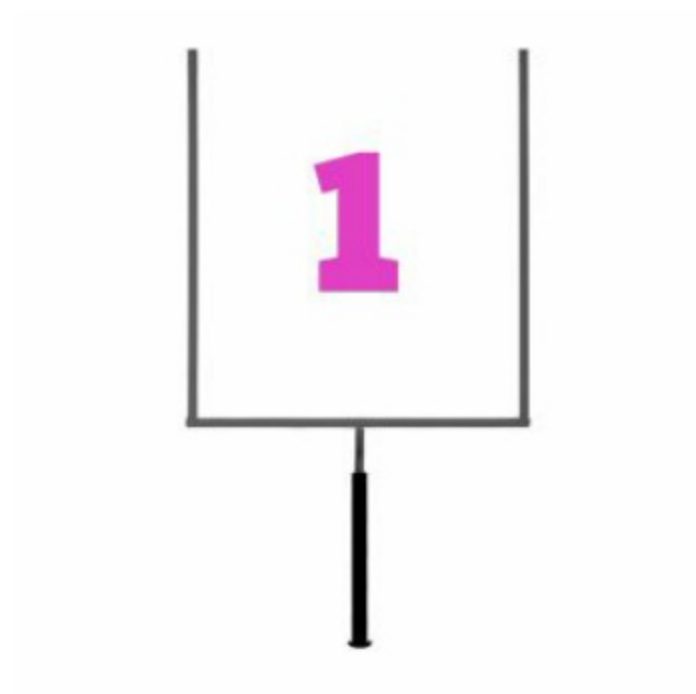
I'm running onto the field before I can stop myself. Technically, Collin should be the one to do so, but I can hear him right on my heels, so it doesn't really matter. When I reach Slater, I drop to the ground to see him cradling his left knee with a pained expression. His eyes come to me first, pain and fear equally heavy in those rich chocolate eyes. I do my best to school my

own expression, but I know I don't do a great job. Slater's eyes flick over my face quickly, panic beginning to replace the pain on his face.

"You're gonna be okay, Santos. We got you," Collin says as several others rush over with the gurney.

I know he's lying, though. Slater knows he's lying. We both know that injury too well. I also know that this moment is about to change Slater's life forever.





## Slater

“I don’t even understand why you’re here in the first place. You’re not his wife, *Scarlett*. I am, in case you need the reminder,” I hear Nikki sneer as a heavy fog begins to lift.

A hollow laugh comes from who I know to be Scar. “No reminder necessary. That gaudy ring you forced Slater to replace your wedding ring with could be seen from space.”

“Get the fuck out of my husband’s room before I-”

“Ladies, ladies,” I rasp dryly. “Can we keep the volumes down? I feel like I just got tackled by a two hundred and fifty pound linebacker...oh wait.”

“Slate! Baby!” Nikki exclaims as she comes closer and wraps her hands around mine. Slowly, I peel my eyes open to find myself in a hospital room. I blink up at Nikki for a moment until my vision clears before I smile weakly. Her big blue eyes are filled with tears, her long blonde hair is smooth hitting just above her ass, and she’s wearing the tight fitted, black satin dress that I bought her a few weeks ago. Or she bought herself with my credit card, same thing, right?

“How you doing, Nik?”

“I’ve been a mess! When I got the call I had to jump on a flight from New York to get back here. They took you into surgery without even talking to me!”

“That’s because they talked to me,” I laugh lightly. “I wasn’t unconscious, Nik.”

“Oh,” she says with furrowed brows like she hadn’t thought of that.

“I told you,” Scar mutters under her breath, earning a poisonous look from my wife.

Internally, I sigh. My two favorite people in the world are like oil and water. I guess there was a time in college where they got along decently, but that is definitely not the case anymore. Scar tries to be cordial, while Nik... well, doesn’t. She is the most real person you’ll ever meet. If she doesn’t like you, she will tell you in the first five seconds of meeting you. Just how she is.

“How did it go?” I ask, directing my question to Scar because I know my best friend well enough to know she was all over the doctors the moment they wheeled me into recovery.

She takes a few steps closer to me, and when she does, I see the blank face she’s wearing begins to slip. Her eyes are slightly reddened like she’s been crying, her fingers are twisting together like they do whenever she’s nervous, and she is currently looking just above my head, not making full eye contact with me. Her dark brown hair is slung into a low ponytail like usual, her arms folded over her Seattle Crusader team gear, before she glances down at her white sneakers.

“Eyes,” I say simply, causing Scar’s hazel ones to snap up to me.

“It was confirmed. Full ACL tear. Surgery went as well as expected.”

I nod. That’s what they had already assumed within five minutes of

arriving here.

“Your surgeon and Collin have been talking with me briefly about what comes next. A recovery plan and all of that.”

“Good. Thank god it’s the end of the season, more time to heal.”

Scar looks away again causing my stomach to clench.

“Scarlett,” I say seriously, garnering her attention once more. I rarely use her full name, so she knows I’m serious.

“Collin isn’t sure, based on your age, if you’ll be able to make a full recovery, especially in time for next season.”

“My age? What the fuck is that supposed to mean? I’m only twenty eight years old!”

“I know, but a six year career in the NFL has obviously taken its toll on your body. You’re-”

“The fastest fucking running back in the league, and they are just ready to dump me?” I scoff.

“No, Aberton was pissed when Collin suggested it. He is just trying to look after you as a person, not just a player.”

“He is a player, though,” Nikki argues.

Scarlett doesn’t even glance at her as she continues to watch me.

“What does the surgeon say? What does he think I can get back to?” I ask.

She cringes softly. “Do you remember when you messed up your knee in eighth grade? How you had to sit on your ass all summer? And then again your junior year of high school? Both times left behind substantial scar tissue and-”

“Goddamnit, Scarlett. Quit beating around the bush.”

“70%. Optimistically.”

I lean back into the bed, my eyes flicking up to the dotted ceiling.

“I can’t perform at 70% mobility. Not the way I need to,” I say quietly.

“No,” Scar confirms. “You can’t.”

Slowly, I feel Nikki’s hands slip from mine before they pull away altogether. Voices begin speaking, but it all sounds muffled, like I’m underwater. Like I’m drowning. So that was it? That tackle, that play, that game? That was my last time on a football field?

Every player knows that eventually his time will come. Most don’t know when that time will be, due to injury or being forced into retirement. Never thought that would be me, though. I’m still on top, or I was. I still had a lot in me. I was going to choose when I was done...but I guess my knee just decided for me.



It's been two weeks since the surgery. The doc just cleared me to lose the crutches, but I think he must be a quack because I hurt just as much today as I did the day after surgery. I can barely put any weight on my left leg, and honestly, I don’t see much point in trying. Everything fucking hurts.

Collin and Scar came to my appointment, both met me with disappointed looks when the doc told me I should be in less pain than I am. I’ve known a lot of guys that have torn their ACL throughout my football career. Some come back for a season or two, but they’re never the same.

Coach is losing faith in me. The whole team is. And if I’m honest, I’m losing faith in myself.

I'm sitting on the couch, watching highlights from last season, when a beige Prada dress obstructs my view, hands on slim hips as a pinched look transforms my wife's normally stunning face. I glance up to her, waiting for her to say whatever she has to say because god knows it's always something.

"What?" I finally ask.

"I'm tired of you laying around like a bum. You're never gonna get back to the field if you just sit and sulk."

I scoff as I turn the TV off and look up at her.

"I'm not laying around like a bum. I'm fucking hurt, Nik. I hurt every day. Don't you get that?"

"Don't talk to me like I'm stupid, Slater! I went to college just like you."

*Before you dropped out.*

I don't say that part out loud. All it would do is cause a bigger fight than the one we've suddenly found ourselves in.

Truth is, I wanted her to drop out more than anything back in the day. I was getting drafted, and I wanted to keep her with me. I was head over heels and wanted her by my side as much as possible. So when she said she was dropping out to travel with me more, I was all for it. I just didn't know the shine would wear off so quickly for her.

Going to the games became less about seeing me play and more about hanging out with the other wives. Then, she just stopped coming altogether, choosing girls' trips instead of stadiums on Sundays and self-care retreats over having dinner on a Wednesday night with me and my family.

The thing is, we haven't been us in a damn long time. We've both changed since we first met seven years ago, so I can't totally fault her, I guess. People change, it's the way of life. Couples usually grow together, not apart, though. Or maybe they do, and I was just hopefully naïve at the time.

A small part of me was hoping that while I was down, Nik and I could get back to being us, in some capacity. I was hoping that me not traveling so much would help. Guess I was expecting too much with that because we've been at each other's throats more than ever since I was discharged from the hospital.

"You've been in a shit mood ever since the injury. You haven't even looked at me twice," she pouts as she crosses her arms over her chest in a way that pushes her tits up.

I cock an eyebrow at her. "You horny, Nik?"

"Duh, we haven't fucked in literally weeks."

I run a hand over my face as I settle back into the couch. Trust me, I know how long it's been. But me not being able to walk without a couple of sticks kind of hinders the ability to fuck, at least the way I want to. When I take my hand away from my face, I look up at my wife. God she's a stunner. She hasn't aged a day since we met, of course that's probably with the help of her good friends down at the Botox clinic. Still, while the foundation of Nikki and my marriage has begun to crumble, one thing has remained solid, and that is our sex life.

"Alright, you gotta do all the work, though," I say as I pull down my sweats enough to get my cock free, wincing at the movement before I grip the base and begin stroking up and down.

Excitement comes to life in Nik's blue eyes before she quickly slips her dress off, undoing her bra and tossing her panties to me. I grab them with one hand, inhaling her scent deeply as she carefully maneuvers herself on top of me.

The moment she slides down my cock we both let out groans of pleasure. Fuck, this is what we were missing. This is what we needed to connect. Nikki

smiles down at me, a genuine sweet smile that I haven't seen in a long fucking time. She lifts herself up before slowly moving herself down, I dig my tattooed fingers into her bare ass to help control her movements as she repeats the motion.

Her pace quickens, and a subtle twinge runs through my leg at the bounce. I grit my teeth as I focus on the pleasure I'm getting from my wife riding my cock and do my best to push the pain away.

"Slater, yes," she moans as she grinds her clit against me.

I lift my hips slightly, not being able to resist the urge to thrust as her speed picks up again.

Fuck.

The subtle twinge has now become a sharp pain. Breathing through it, I cup one of Nik's breasts before flicking my thumb against her nipple. She lets out a breathy moan as she begins bouncing harder.

"God, yes. Fuck me, Slater! Fuck me hard!" she demands.

I begin thrusting, not giving a damn about the throbbing pain in my leg as Nikki continues bouncing on my cock like the fucking Energizer Bunny.

"Cum on my cock," I say through clenched teeth, wishing like fuck that I would have just opted to eat her pussy instead of fuck. The pain is literally making a cold sweat break out across my body.

Her movements become jerky, and the gentle care she was taking in the beginning is lost as she tries to chase down her orgasm. Unfortunately for both of us, one of her thrusts comes down too hard and too far back, causing my left leg to bounce up and an excruciating pain to rip through my knee.

"Fuck!" I shout as I release my hold on her and practically shove her to the side of the couch.

My hands cradle my knee as my face tightens. I take deep measured



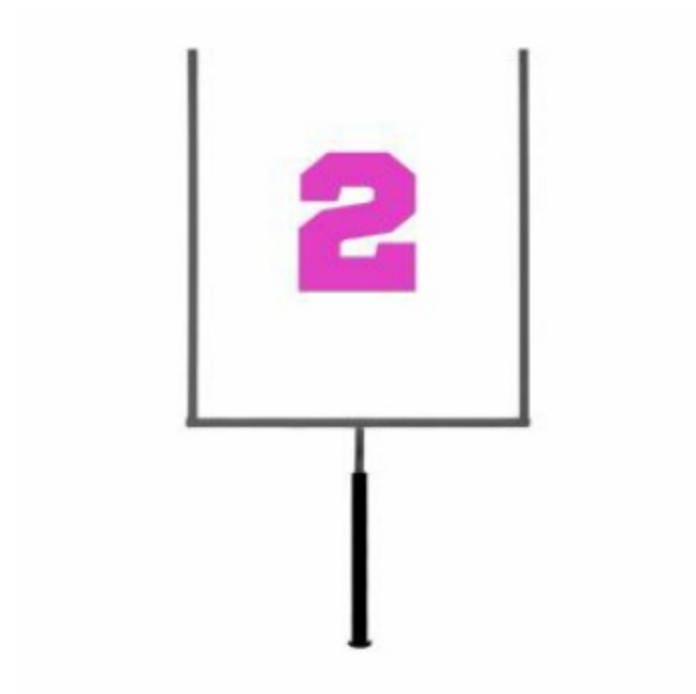
breaths, doing my best to get past the throbbing but it won't stop.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Nikki snaps.

I ignore her bitchy tone as I focus on not moving a muscle. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"First, you can't play football, now, you can't even fuck your wife. What a man you are, Slate," she sneers as she slips on her dress before storming towards the front door, grabbing her purse as she slams the door so hard the walls shake.

I do my best to not let her words get to me, to not let them sink in, but they are ugly and cut deep. I know the pain will subside eventually, I'll walk without crutches one day, and I'll be able to fuck as hard and fast as Nik demands.... but football. I don't know if I'll ever play that again, and even I'm not dumb enough to deny, it was a huge reason Nik and I got together in the first place. She wasn't a cleat chaser, but she liked dating the star of the football team, she likes being a football player's wife. It sounds stupid, but I can't lie, a small part of me is terrified that one day Nik will wake up next to me and realize that without football, I'm nothing.



## Slater

Nik didn't end up coming home until around midnight. Not that it's out of the norm for her. She's still in her party girl era and has plans nearly every day. I tried to wake her up around eleven this morning to see if she would, for once, come to my family's house for our weekly dinner, but she barely grumbled about being hungover before rolling over.

Whatever.

Since weekends for a large part of the year are impossible for me to see my family, we get together on Wednesdays almost every week. Nik used to come with me, especially when we first got married. Not really sure when that stopped, it just kinda did.

I shut the door to my car before pushing out the crutches in front of me as I swing my body forward. My mom is the first to greet me before I can even get to the front porch.

"Hey, Mom," I say as she comes to the bottom of the stairs to meet me.

"My sweet boy. How are you?" she asks as she pulls me in for a hug.

Her eyes dart behind me, as if she is looking for someone else. I give her a short shake of my head before she purses her lips disapprovingly. She follows behind me closely as I slowly get up the stairs before making my way into the house.

As soon as I step through the door, the familiar smell of my grandma's paella instantly surrounds me. It's my favorite and even though my mom is an amazing cook, she's never been able to come up with a better version than Grandma's. Mom always said Grandma Santos handing over that recipe was the one good thing she ever did. That and having my dad. As you can imagine their relationship is hostile at best.

My dad is sitting on the couch with their neighbor, who is also Scar's dad, Ross. They both look over to me before getting out of their seats to greet me.

"How you doing?" my dad asks as he wraps me up in a quick hug.

"Doing good, Pop. You?"

"Good. Business is staying steady, despite being winter."

"How are you feeling, Slate?" Ross asks as he glances down at the crutches.

I do my best to give him my perfected carefree smile, but I can feel that it falls short.

"I'm hanging in there. One day at a time."

Ross nods sympathetically as Aaron and Ezra walk into the room. Aaron slaps me on the back as Ezra comes in for a bro hug.

"Slate, man! I didn't know you were coming tonight!" Ezra says.

"I've missed too many Wednesdays. Mom has been on my ass."

"I heard that," she calls from the kitchen.

All of us laugh at that before Dad says that we can head into the dining room. Ezra is telling us about what happened on the jobsite today, while

Aaron rolls his eyes like the big brother he is. Ross owns a general contracting company that Aaron and Ezra help him run. My dad has his own electrical company, and he works on most of the jobs with them. If football didn't work out for me, I always planned to join my dad. It used to be something I wasn't opposed to...can't say I feel the same contentment with that idea now, though.

The door opens behind me as everyone begins filing down the hall. I turn to see Scarlett tuck back a piece of her chocolate brown hair that has fallen from her ponytail as she drops her purse onto the kitchen counter. She leans over and kisses my mom's cheek before helping her grab plates.

"Sorry I'm late. I had to stay a little longer and-"

"Keep us all waiting," I say dryly.

Her hazel eyes shoot up to mine, a wide smile spreading across her face as she hurries around the kitchen island over to me.

"Hey! You didn't tell me you were coming tonight," she says as she wraps her arms around me for a quick hug.

When she pulls away though, her eyebrows dip as her gaze falls to my crutches.

"You're still using those things? Doctor Rosenberg told you they weren't necessary anymore."

My happiness at seeing Scar dissipates slowly as I spin on my crutches and make my way into the dining room.

"The pain in my knee says otherwise."

She follows behind me because Scar has to be one of the most persistent, and at times annoying, women that I've ever met.

"I get that, but you aren't going to get any better if you continue staying off it. C'mon, Slate, you're an athlete. You know how the body works. You

have to move it, stretch it, push yourself-”

“Drop it,” I say as I look over my shoulder at her, softening my tone as I glance at my feet. “Please.”

Her mouth opens like she is about to say something before she closes it and nods. I dip my head in thanks before I hobble my way over to the dining room table. I sit back and enjoy the banter between Aaron and Ezra, while my dad fills me in on his latest projects. My mom and Scar come in a few minutes later with several large serving dishes piled high with food.

During season, I never allow myself to pig out. Some of the guys do here and there, but I’ve always kept myself on a strict diet, trained and prepared my body to be in top physical shape at all times. All of that work only for it to fail me when I need it most. Ironic, huh? I take an extra helping of bread and rice because fucking why not, right?

I feel Scar’s judgmental gaze from across the table. I don’t have to look to know that it’s there. Scar and I have been attached at the hip since I moved in next door when I was eight years old. We know what the other is thinking with just a single look, and right now, I don’t want to know what she is thinking about me, so I keep my eyes firmly on my plate while I squeeze some lemon on top of my food and avoid eye contact with everyone. I already have countless people disappointed in me. Don’t know how I would handle seeing that same look on my best friend’s face.

Once everyone has finished eating, the guys all grab the dishes and walk them to the kitchen where they begin cleaning up, a tradition in our household. Mom does all the cooking because we would all starve without her, but she never touches a dirty dish. My dad always preached that marriage, like life, is all about balance. You have to give as much as you take. I always admired my parents’ marriage. They were the perfect example.

A couple of young kids that fell in love before they even knew what it really meant. I thought I had known how much my dad loved Mom, but when she got sick, I had never seen someone so devoted yet absolutely terrified at the same time.

The beginning of my junior year of college I got a call. My mom had collapsed at work and rushed to the hospital. They rushed her to the hospital, not sure what was wrong. Turned out Mom had breast cancer. Stage two. The entire drive from Brighton, California to Seattle I could hardly breathe. My mom was the heart of our family. We couldn't go a day without her, and thankfully, after a hard fought battle, she has now been cancer free for four years.

I ended up transferring to Seattle U my junior year from Brighton University. It took some convincing, but I was able to get the coach to match the full ride scholarship I was on back in Brighton and a starting spot on the team, because honestly, their team was not in a great way when I came around.

I'm not saying I made a difference because honestly, I didn't. It's a miracle I got drafted with how many losses we had. There was something special about our team back in Brighton. When me and my buddies, Mikey, Sebastian, and Trevor, were on the field it was something else.

Seb plays for the Crusaders with me. Mikey played for the Knoxville Bucks for most of his career before being traded to the Crusaders last year. He ended up retiring at the end of the season though and moved him and his little family back home to Tennessee. Trevor has been playing for the San Antonio Cobras ever since he got picked up six years ago.

It's been a while since we all got together. With wives, kids, and our competing schedules it's hard to make time. All of the guys have at least

called since my injury, though. Seb and his wife, Erica, came to the hospital before I was discharged and brought by my favorite girls, their twins, Rosie and Daphne. The girls are almost six now and made me the cutest damn cards that I put up on the fridge at home.

A hand on my shoulder grabs my attention, bringing me out of my thoughts to see that everyone has made their way into either the kitchen or the living room except for Scar and me.

“How you doing?” she asks as she takes a seat next to me.

“I’m good.”

She gives me a look before raising an eyebrow. “Uh huh, and how are you actually doing?”

I stare at her for a moment before I blow out a breath and shake my head, running my hand through my hair as I do.

“Fuck, Scar. I don’t know. What the fuck am I supposed to say? I’m doing great? I’m happy. No. I’m not. I’m doing my best to keep this shit show of a life together but what is there to do really? My career is over. The one thing I was put on this earth to do has been ripped away from me.”

Scar rolls her eyes at me. “You were put on this earth for a lot more than football, Slater, but that aside, your career isn’t over. Not yet at least.”

“Don’t be naïve, Bubbles. 70%, at best,” I remind her.

“That’s just an estimate.”

“No, it’s my reality,” I bite out before putting my head into my hands.

Scar is quiet for a moment before she speaks.

“Wow. I’ve never known you to give up so easily.”

I shoot her a daggered look that I hope hurts, but instead of showing any amount of effect from it, she continues.

“Look, Slater, is it going to be hard? Yes. Are you going to hate me, your



body, and maybe even yourself at times? Probably. But is it worth it?”

“Is what worth it?” I ask.

“Your career. The ‘one thing you were put on this earth to do.’ Is it worth the blood, sweat, and tears you’re going to have to put in to make it out the other side? At the end of the day your doctor, Collin, or even I can’t answer that for you. Only you can, and if your answer isn’t a resounding yes, then I agree. You should retire. Go out on top and look back at your longer than average career with fondness.”

I mull over her words for a few moments before I whisper more to myself than to her.

“I’m not ready to be done. I have more in me.”

“I know you do. You just need to want it bad enough.”

I nod before letting out a hollow laugh.

“How do you always know what to say?” I say with a melancholy smile.

Scar shrugs as she does her best to bite down her smile.

“I don’t. I just know you. I know what you’re capable of, and I know for a fact it’s a hell of a lot more than this. So,” she says as she stands up and reaches for my crutches.

“We are gonna start your PT with these. I’m letting you keep one to help support you, but I want you off it completely in the next three days, got it?”

“Scar, I need them-”

“Bullshit. They are a crutch, actually, literally. You’ve already set yourself back at least a week with your little woe is me attitude. We have a little under six months before training camp, so you better buckle down.”

I laugh dryly as I go to stand, making sure to keep as much weight as I can off my left leg while I do. God, who’d have thought the sweet little girl who

spent practically her whole childhood blowing bubbles would turn into such a hard ass?

“Why do I get the feeling I’m gonna regret hooking you up with the job on the team?”

Scar shrugs. “Maybe, but I’m the best thing for you and you know it.”

“Yeah, yeah. Thanks, Bubbles,” I say as I grab her and pull her in for a tight hug.

“Always,” she murmurs against me.



I spent another hour or so hanging out with everyone before I decided to head home. I stopped by Starbucks and picked up Nik’s favorite coffee as a sort of peace offering since we didn’t really talk things out from yesterday yet.

Using only one crutch like my pain in the ass friend demanded, I make my way up my driveway before pushing open the front door. I only make it two steps though before I freeze. To my left are six very familiar Louis Vuitton luggage pieces stacked against the door, while Nik and two of her friends carry more down the stairs. The moment they see me, they all share nervous looks. Except for Nikki. She has on a mask of indifference as she sets the bags next to the others. Now that I think about it, I did see a couple extra cars in the driveway.

The girls glance to Nikki before grabbing as many bags as they can and slip past me out the door. I limp forward a few steps until I’m in front of

Nikki.

“What the hell is going on?” I ask.

She is staring at the wall behind me, but her eyes lazily come to me as she shakes her head.

“You know what’s going on.”

“No, clearly I don’t because I have some wild fucking scenarios playing in my head right now, so why don’t you spell it out for me.”

“Fine. I’m leaving, Slater. This isn’t what I signed up for. You’ve changed.”

I let out a bitter laugh as I shake my head. “No, say what you mean, Nik. My income has changed, or more accurately *could* change. You’re scared that your cushy lifestyle is going to disappear so you’re bailing. On seven fucking years? Over what? A few dollar signs?”

She rolls her eyes as she shakes her head. “It’s more than a few, and we both know that. We’ve been growing apart for years now. We’ve just been too comfortable to say anything.”

“You mean you’ve been too comfortable. We’ve been together for close to a decade, and you just want to throw it all away? So what, football might be done. That’s a deal breaker for you?” I ask, hating that the hurt in my voice peeks through as she looks up at me with that same indifferent look.

“Honestly, yes. I’ve been miserable with you for years, but I knew you would always take care of me as long as I stuck around. Looks like you won’t be able to do that anymore, so why the hell would I stick around?”

Her words are like a physical blow. I stand there in stunned silence, wondering who the hell is standing in front of me. It isn’t the sweet little blonde that I met at a frat party years ago. It isn’t the girl that I spent

countless nights watching the stars with as we spoke about our dreams. I don't know who the hell this woman is.

"I honestly can't believe you're being this goddamn shallow. I've been there for you through everything. I've always done my best to give you anything you ever wanted. I've practically handed you my heart and the fucking world at your feet, and you're just walking out on me? When I need you?"

"Your manipulations won't work on me, Slater. I'm done fighting with you. I'll have our lawyer draw up the divorce papers soon."

Without another word, Nikki strides past me, grabbing the remaining two bags before wheeling them out the door and shutting it behind her with a hollow thud. I stand there frozen in place, unable to move, to think, to barely fucking breathe. That's it? It's just over? First football, now my wife?

Setting the cooling coffee down on the entry table, I numbly stumble over to the couch before putting my head in my hands. I can't fucking believe this. I can't believe this is happening. We've had problems, that hasn't been a secret, but how could she just walk away like this, now of all times? My eyes begin to burn with unshed tears, but I do my best to push them back as my hand reaches into my pocket and shakily grabs my phone, dialing the only person I can think of in this moment. When they answer, I let out a choppy breath as I close my eyes.

"I need you," I croak.



## Scarlett

**M**y heart is racing as I practically fly through the otherwise quiet streets of Slater's posh neighborhood. I don't know what's going on or what happened. He wouldn't tell me. I quite literally took one step inside my apartment when I got his call. All he said was that he needed me. When I asked if he hurt himself, he didn't respond, just let out another shaky breath.

Was I an asshole for forcing him to only use one crutch? It's been two weeks, he shouldn't be on them at all, I thought I was being generous, showing a little tough love. I swear to god if he fell and hurt himself because of me, I'll never live it down. With him or Coach Aberton.

When I get to his house, I notice Nikki's car isn't in the driveway, she's probably on one of her 'girls' trips' again. Shaking my head, I rush across the front porch with my emergency bag in hand. It's not like I'm a doctor or anything, so it doesn't have a ton inside but what it does have is the basics. The door is unlocked, so I don't have to use my spare key before I push through.

As soon as I step inside though, I pause. The lights are off, the house silent. It takes my eyes a few moments to adjust before I see a figure sitting on the living room floor.

“Slater?” I ask carefully as I walk over to him.

He doesn’t respond which scares the living shit out of me. When I round the couch, I see that he’s leaned up against the side of it, tattooed arms laying in his lap as he stares at the blank wall in front of him with a vodka bottle in hand, taking a long pull off it before wincing.

“Slate,” I say carefully as I squat down next to him.

Still, he doesn’t respond, doesn’t even look at me. I gently rest my hand on his right leg, which finally seems to gain his attention. His brown curls fall away from his face enough to reveal him, his deep eyes flick over to me, and my breath catches at what I see. The whites of his eyes are completely red rimmed and raw, his face sullen and stoic. Slater is literally the embodiment of sunshine. When he steps inside a room, he lights up everyone and everything around him. In twenty years of friendship, I’ve never seen him look so broken, not even when Alison was diagnosed with cancer.

“Slater, talk to me,” I say softly. “Are you hurt?”

He nods slowly, his eyes still heavily on me.

“Where?”

“Everywhere,” he rasps.

I furrow my brows as he lifts the bottle to take another sip. I don’t understand. He was doing better when he left his parents’ house not even an hour ago. What could have possibly happened in such a short amount of time?

“Where is Nikki?” I ask as I slowly settle in next to him, my back resting against the plush couch as I do.

He glances up at the ceiling before squeezing his eyes shut.

“Gone,” he says roughly.

“Gone where? Look, do you want me to call her? I think-”

“No, Scar, she’s *gone* gone. She isn’t coming back.”

“Wait, what?”

Slater’s shoulders begin to quake with silent tears as he shakes his head. Wrapping my arms around him, I hold him tight as the man I’ve looked up to my entire life crumbles right before my eyes.



We sat on the floor for at least another twenty minutes before I was able to convince him to at least sit on the couch. I basically had to lift him and gently set him down myself since the guy could hardly stand without wobbling. Probably thanks to his nearly empty bottle.

Walking across the kitchen and into the living room, I bring a cup of black coffee to him before sitting down. Slater takes a large drink of it before setting it onto the table. We sit in silence for a few more minutes, knowing he needs the time to collect his thoughts before he finally speaks.

“When I got home, her bags were packed. Her friends were helping her take them. I guess she was hoping I wasn’t going to be home yet.”

My heart aches at the pain laced in his words. I can’t believe it. I’m honestly stunned for a number of reasons, and yet, not at all surprised at the same time. Have I mentioned that I despise Nikki to a cellular level? Because I do. A lot.



“She said that she was leaving, that this wasn’t what she signed up for-”

“Oh you mean she didn’t sign up for ‘in sickness and health?’ ‘For richer or poorer?’ I was there that day, Slater. I remember vividly as she spoke those words to you. What part of that did she not sign up for?” I practically seethe before checking my anger. Clearly it’s not going to help the situation.

“I don’t know. She said we’ve been growing apart for a while now, which she isn’t wrong about. I knew we had problems. Hell, with the way we fought, everyone knew. I never thought she would just walk out on me. Never thought she’d give up on us like that.”

Reaching over, I lace my hand with Slater’s, ignoring the light flutter feeling that always comes to me at the simplest touch from him.

“She’s a gold digger, and you’re better off without her.”

He winces at that but doesn’t defend her like he would have any other day. Instead, he just leans back against the couch and shakes his head.

“I’m fucking pathetic, Scar. I can hardly walk, I lost my career, my wife... what do I have left?” he strains as his grip on me tightens.

I reach over with my other hand and turn his face, so he’s forced to look me in the eye.

“Me. You have me, always. And you have your parents and my brothers and my dad and Seb and Erica, Mikey and Vi, even Trevor. We are all here for you, Slater.”

He stares at me for a few moments before nodding and leaning his head on my shoulder. I rest my head against his, closing my eyes as I blow out a slow breath.

“I love you, Bubbles,” he whispers softly.

My heart does a backflip, despite me telling it not to. He doesn’t mean it like that, not in the way I want him to. No matter how many times I tell the

stupid organ, I swear it doesn't take the hint. I know I'll never have Slater's love in that way, even if Nikki is out of the picture, but any kind of love from Slater Santos is like a gift from above.

"I love you too."

4

## Slater

When I blink my eyes open, at first I'm confused at what I see. I'm in my living room. On the couch. What the fuck? Even when Nikki and I fight enough to sleep separately, I take one of the five spare bedrooms.

Then it hits me, everything from yesterday sinks in, and I realize that it wasn't some fucked up dream. My wife actually left me. Walked out without even a single backwards glance. Despite her spoiled brat attitude, her selfishness, and her obvious me first attitude...I still love her. I've loved her for nearly a decade. Though, I'm starting to wonder if she felt the same. She couldn't, right? If you love someone, you work through things together, you don't just bounce.

A soft snick of the fridge door grabs my attention. My eyes flick up to see Scar carefully cracking a few eggs into a pan. Slowly, I push myself to sit up as she glances over to me.

"Hey. How are you feeling?" she asks as she stirs her eggs.

"I'm fine."

She bites the inside of her lip. A habit I know she only does when she has something to say.

“Spit it out, Scar,” I sigh as I begin massaging my temples.

“What?” she asks as she turns off the burner and plates her food.

“Whatever you want to say, go ahead. Spit it out.”

She opens her mouth like she’s going to argue before she shakes her head. Instead of saying anything, she sets the plate down in front of me, which has a few pieces of turkey bacon and some scrambled egg whites on it.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I say quietly as she hands me a fork.

“I wanted to,” she smiles softly.

I do my best to give her a smile, but it just feels fake. I take my first bite, my body practically humming in approval when a knock comes from the door. My pulse races and my first thought is that it’s Nik. That she’s changed her mind. But as I watch Scar get up and answer the door, I know that’s stupid. Nikki Santos is not the kind of woman to knock on any door, her house or not. She flaunts in like she has every right, like everyone can’t wait to see her. Which was always true for me, at least.

“Who is it?” I ask as she pulls the door open and smiles.

“Seb?” I question as he steps inside the foyer and hugs Scar. My giant of a friend practically dwarfs her as he gives her what I know to be a genuine Seb smile before he tightens his man bun and looks towards me.

“Hey, Slate,” he says as he crosses the room to me, clapping a hand on my shoulder before coming to sit on the other side of the couch as me.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

Seb shrugs as he settles back into the couch.

“Scarlett called me.”

*Of course she did.*

“Miss Scarlett, always a pleasure,” a familiar thick southern accent greets Scar from the front door.

“It’s good to see you too, Declan,” she smiles.

“I’ve told you it’s okay to call me Mikey,” he says with a shake of his head and a laugh. “’Bout the only people who call me by my real name are my family.”

“Mikey? The fuck? Shouldn’t you be in Tennessee with that smoking hot wife and picture perfect kids?”

He smiles at me as he shakes his head. “They’ll manage. Vi is holding down the fort for me with the help of my mama.”

“Let me guess, Scar called you too?” I ask as he steps into the living room, slapping my back lightly before dropping down into the loveseat beside me.

Declan nods as a third voice enters the room.

“Of course, she saved the best for last,” Trevor says as he steps inside. He goes to walk past Scar before he pauses in his steps, turning to face her as his eyes slowly run over her.

“Fuck, babe, is it just me or do you get hotter every time I see you?”

I shake my head and roll my eyes as Scar giggles like a schoolgirl. Can’t blame her. Nearly every woman I’ve ever met falls at her knees for Trevor Michaels. Being one of the top quarterbacks in the country paired with his blonde hair, blue eyed All American boy looks, I guess it’s not for nothing.

“Trevor,” she says with a laugh. “With lines like that, it’s a wonder why you’re single.”

“I couldn’t do that to the female population. There are way too many women who have yet to experience the pleasure of a night with me. I’m too selfless to deny them that experience. Want to be next on my roster?”

“Hmm, tempting but I think I’ll have to pass. Go ahead and move on to the

next girl.”

“Trevor,” I sigh. “Stop flirting with Scar. She’s basically our sister, it’s weird.”

Trev lets out a short laugh as he makes his way over to us, setting down the duffle bag in his hand onto the coffee table before Scar speaks.

“I have to get to my appointment with Damion. You guys behave.”

“Not making any promises!” Trev calls out with a wink that earns another amused laugh from Scar before she slips out the door.

As soon as she leaves, the room is plunged into silence. It stretches for several long seconds before I look up to see all three of my best friends sharing uncomfortable glances with each other.

“How are Tuck and Rodney doing, Mikey?” I ask, trying to break this suffocating tension.

He smiles widely at the mention of his kids.

“Good. Rodney is pulling himself up on furniture, so he’ll be walking any day now. Tuck just started peewee football.”

“No shit? What position?” I ask.

Mikey laughs and shakes his head. “It’s peewee football, Slate. They rotate positions.”

I smile softly at that as I nod before turning to Seb.

“How are the girls doing? They liking kindergarten?”

Seb nods. “Yeah, their teacher is great, and now that they are in school, Erica is getting a bit of her sanity back, which is good for everyone.”

“I couldn’t believe Rosie when I saw her,” Trevor says softly with a shake of his head. “She is a spitting image of Erica.”

His voice turns wistful at that, which has Mikey and I exchanging glances. Seb’s brows furrow as he sits up straighter.

“When did you see the girls?”

Trevor shrugs. “Erica and the girls FaceTimed me last week for a bit.”

A pinched look takes over Seb’s face as Trevor’s gaze falls to the ground. There is a long story to the whole Sebastian-Erica-Trevor love triangle. It happened years ago back in college, and for the most part, they are able to get along at least well enough for everyone else’s sake. But if your, at one time, best friend was still in love with your wife eight years later how would you handle it? Seb’s a better man than I. The fact that Trev and Erica still talk regularly would bug the living shit out of me, no matter how much we all know her entire world is Seb and the girls.

“How are you feeling?” Mikey asks, his eyes on me as Trev and Seb both face me as well.

“I’m fine, Mikey,” I say as I lean back into the chair.

He frowns as he shakes his head. “Slater, your wife just left you, man. You shouldn’t be fine, it’s okay to not be okay.”

“I don’t want to talk about her,” I say as my eyes flick up to the cathedral ceilings in the house. “I just want to drink, forget about how shitty my life has become over the last two weeks, and hang out.”

“In that case...” Trevor says as he reaches into his duffle bag and pulls out three bottles that have my eyebrows raising to my hairline at the label.

“Pappy Van Winkle? Really, Trev?” Mikey laughs with a shake of his head. “Isn’t that stuff like a grand a bottle?”

“More like two to five grand a bottle, if you get the really good stuff, and we aren’t going to drink Pappy and not drink the good stuff,” Trevor says as he makes his way over to the bar Nikki insisted I have built in the corner of the room, grabbing four crystal glasses before setting them down on the table.

He fills each one up near to the top before holding the glass in the air in



toast as a complicated look takes over his face when his eyes meet mine.

“To forgetting, even if it’s just for a little while.”

*Hey, I’ll fucking drink to that.*



“So, I’m about to finish, right? Then all of the sudden, the door gets fucking kicked open and a guy in military clothes walks in looking like a fucking bull ready to charge,” Trev says before he pauses dramatically. “He was a fucking Marine!”

We all laugh at that, even Seb who I swear only laughs for his girls as Trevor sprawls out on the couch across from me and pours the rest of the last bottle of Pappy. I know what you’re thinking. Did we really spend an entire day just getting drunk so that I could avoid my problems? Yes. Am I absolutely shit tagged because of it? Also yes.

“Fuck, man. I’m starving,” Seb grumbles as he stands up and sways for a minute before making his way to the kitchen.

“Of course you are!” I call out. “You’re fucking 6’6, you’re probably insatiable.”

“That’s what Erica says,” he smirks before casting a shady look at Trev that has him grimacing.

Fucking A. Shots fired. Maybe they aren’t as amicable as I thought.

The next moment, the front door opens, and Scar walks in, carrying several bags of what smells like Mexican food.

“Thank god. If we were gonna depend on Sebastian for food we’d all starve,” Mikey says as he stands up and only slightly stumbles over to help Scar with the bags, ever the Southern gentleman.

I stand too and barely even limp as I make my way towards her. She looks down at my leg before smiling up at me.

“Look at you! Not even using the crutch?”

“Nope,” I pop as I sling an arm around her shoulders and take the rest of the bags out of her hand.

She takes a sharp breath in before looking at me with those big kaleidoscope brown and green mixed eyes.

“You’re drunk.”

“That he is,” Trevor agrees from the other side of the room as he pours the rest of his drink down his throat.

Scar rolls her eyes and laughs as we make our way into the kitchen.

“Have you guys done anything else besides sitting around getting drunk all day?”

“They’re helping me forget about...fuck, I think it’s working. What the hell is my wife’s name?” I laugh as my mind begins to fog over.

Mikey and Seb chuckle as Trevor corrects over a mouthful of food. “Ex-wife.”

My laugh subsides, and that ache in my chest that was practically consuming me five drinks ago begins to come back and my buzz begins to fade, at least a little. Fuck. I’m getting divorced. Whether I like it or not. How fucking shitty is that? Takes two people to enter a marriage but only one to end it. Where is the logic in that?

I feel a light hand touch my shoulder and look down to see Scar watching me carefully, like she knows exactly where my head is at. I give her a small

nod and cover her hand with mine before facing the bags of food that my friends are quickly annihilating. I dish up a plate for Scar and myself before the vultures attack the rest as we all sit down and eat. About ten minutes later, a soft knock comes from the door as me and the guys all shout to come in.

Erica steps inside with two little balls of energy bouncing behind her, one with fire engine red hair to match her mom and one with a deep brown almost black hair to match her dad. Seb smiles wide as the girls scramble over to him, jumping into his arms as Erica hugs everyone as she makes her way around the table. I notice out of the corner of my eye that Trevor watches Erica like a hawk until she reaches him before he stands up to hug her. He holds onto her for a little longer than would normally be deemed appropriate before she whispers something to him that has him taking several healthy steps back and running a hand through his hair. Poor bastard.

“You ready to go, babe?” Erica asks Seb.

“I’m fine. You didn’t have to come all the way out here to get me,” Seb says as he stands up.

Erica raises an eyebrow at him as her face lifts into half a smile.

“How many drinks have you had?”

Seb thinks about it for a moment as he begins counting on his fingers. When his hands get to eight he shrugs as he pulls her in for a kiss.

“Like two.”

She lets out a laugh as she shoves his chest away.

“Righttt. Thanks for the text, Scar. Lunch this weekend?”

Scar smiles and nods as the twins run circles around the house, clearly showing no interest in leaving. All it takes is one stern look from their mom to send them racing for the front door, though.

“I’m gonna go crash if it’s cool, Slate,” Trevor says as he pushes away

from the table, a melancholy look on his face for the first time today.

“Sure, man. Whatever room you want.”

He nods and claps my back before grabbing his bag and making his way upstairs.

“What do you say, Mikey? Wanna go get some ink?” I ask.

He lets out a dry laugh and shakes his head. “I’m way too fucked up for that. No way in hell they’d take us, man. I’m gonna go call Vi before I pass out.”

“Fuck, for real? You guys are acting like old men. We’re in our twenties, we’re pro-athletes. We need to be living it up!” I say with a shake of my head.

“Barely. We are on our way out of our twenties, I’m already retired and you’re...” he trails off before looking down at his phone. “I’ll see you in the morning,” he finishes before grabbing the backpack he brought and heading upstairs.

Pushing his words aside, I smile at Scar as I waggle my eyebrows.

“Looks like it’s just you and me, Bubbles. Let’s go out. Hit up a club or something?”

“Tempting,” she smiles with a small laugh, “but I had a long day at work, and I’m pretty sure you need to sleep off whatever the hell you’ve been drinking.”

I frown at that. Why is everyone being such a fucking buzz kill?

“Fine, I’ll make you a deal,” she says with a sigh.

I perk up instantly as I listen to her.

“If you can walk in a straight line heel to toe, we will go out and do something, if not, it’s bedtime.”

“Bedtime,” I snicker as I push myself to stand up, noticing that for once

my knee doesn't hurt even a little bit. Fucking sweet. "I'm twenty-eight years old, Scar. I don't have a bedtime."

"Maybe you should," she smirks. "Alright, Santos, let's see what you got."

I shoot her a wink before lining myself up and begin taking one step at a time. I'm doing great until the whole room tilts. Are we having a fucking earthquake? Thankfully, I'm able to right myself, and Scar is right there as if she was ready to catch me before I fell on my bad knee. How hilarious would that have been?

"Bedtime it is," she says as she slips underneath my arm and starts pulling me in the direction of the stairs.

"I don't want to," I protest.

"Too bad, we made a deal," she says as we reach the top of the stairs, and she goes to push the door to my bedroom in.

"No," I say, causing her to pause. "I don't want to sleep in there. I don't even want to be in this fucking house. It's all her. Her designs, her choices, her style. I'm uncomfortable in my own fucking home, have been for years, but you know the saying: happy wife, happy life."

Scar looks at me sympathetically before shaking her head sadly.

"Should be more like: happy spouse, happy house. Your feelings and thoughts matter too, Slater."

I wave her off because I didn't say that to get into a touchy-feely conversation that I'm not in the right headspace for. She nods, accepting my brush off before steering us down the hall a bit. Scar pushes open a door to reveal a half-naked Trev crawling into bed. The shadowed look on his face downstairs is gone, replaced with a drunken smirk.

"You come to join me, Scar? I promise it'll be a night you'll never forget."

Scar's cheeks flame before she shakes her head. She's always gotten so

easily embarrassed, even as a kid.

“Fuck off, Trev. She’s too good for you anyways,” I mutter as I nudge Scar to keep walking.

Trevor’s eyes run down Scar’s body, slower than this morning as he bites his lip and nods.

“I don’t doubt it.”

I scoff and roll my eyes as I practically drag Scar out of there. The sounds of Trevor’s chuckling follows us down the hall until we step into an empty spare room. I begin to sway slightly as we make it to the edge of the bed. Scar ducks away from me, and I drop to the bed with a bounce before I roll over and look up at Scar with a smile. She rolls her eyes and shakes her head as she turns to leave when I reach for her.

Grabbing her hand and tugging softly, she tips over before falling onto the bed beside me. She giggles as she tries to push her hair out of her face. Lifting my hand up, I brush the few pieces that have fallen from her ponytail before tucking them back.

“Stay?” I ask softly.

She licks her lips and glances at the door. I’m sure she wants to go home. She already spent the night last night. She probably wants to get home to her own bed, and I should let her. But selfishly, I want her here. Scar grounds me, she gets me, and time and time again, she’s proven to stand by my side when life tries to knock me down. I could use some of those good vibes right now.

Slowly, she nods as she crawls onto the bed fully. We both slide under the blankets before I lift my arm up for her to come closer. She takes her ponytail down and shakes her hair out before resting her head on my chest. I press a kiss to the top of her head before closing my eyes.

“Love you, Scar,” I murmur slightly as sleep overtakes me in record time.





## Scarlett

My eyes flutter open, for the second day in a row, to see that I'm not in my apartment. Instead, I'm in a spare bedroom at Slater's house. I go to sit up when the mattress shifts underneath me. I pause for a moment before lifting my head to see Slater beneath me, softly snoring. It's not the first time we've shared a bed.

Growing up next door to each other, sleepovers were practically constant, and neither one of us grew up in lavish houses like this with several spare bedrooms to choose from. But it's been years. Before he met Nikki, before he went off to college even.

I'll never forget that day in particular. Even though Brighton was less than a ten hour drive from Seattle, it was still heartbreaking for me. Though Slater and I have always been just friends, there was a time where I thought things were changing.

Growing up, Ezra and Slater were always the closest. Aaron quickly became too cool to hang out with everyone, and I was just the annoying little sister that wanted to tag along.

Over the years, Slater and Ezra stayed close, but me and Slater quickly developed our own kind of friendship. He listened to me, understood me better than anyone else. He was instantly my best friend.

It didn't take long for my mom's cancer to spread. She was here and gone within months of being diagnosed with stage three cancer. When she passed away, Slater snuck over to my house every night for weeks and held me while I cried. When his mom got sick, I did the same.

Just before Slater went off to college, we had a going away party for him. When everyone had gone home or gone to bed, it was just Slater and I left in front of the dwindling bonfire in his backyard. We were talking about what college was going to be like, what being a Brighton Knight would feel like for him when he turned to face me.

*"I'm gonna miss this, Scar."*

*"What?" I ask.*

*"This," he motions between us. "Just talking with you, hanging out. Everything is just easy with you."*

*I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear as I dip my head in an attempt to hide my smile. It's getting harder and harder to conceal it around Slater. I've loved him for practically ever, and despite the fact I know he doesn't see me as more than his best friend, I want him to. Desperately. But now he's going off to college, where he will be surrounded by gorgeous, experienced women for months before I'll even see him again. The thought alone sours my stomach and has me looking into the fire, my previous smile vanished.*

*"Me too."*

*I feel his hand tilt my chin, forcing me to face him as his deep brown eyes scan over me with concern. He doesn't speak for several seconds, instead just continuing to watch me, as if he were committing me to memory. Suddenly,*

*something passes across his face. Something completely new before his eyes dart down to my lips.*

*My stomach dips in anticipation as my pulse begins to thunder. Oh my god. He looked at my lips. Is he thinking about kissing me? Slater wouldn't, would he? I watch steadily as his tongue wets his bottom lip slowly. I can barely breathe as his hold on my face tightens just slightly.*

*"Slater! You out there?" Ezra calls out.*

*Just like that, one sentence from my older brother seems to douse him with ice water as he drops my face and scoots back before calling out to Ezra.*

*"Yeah, man. Was just about to head in," he says as he stands to walk over to where Ezra is watching us from our back porch.*

I thought that moment was going to be our chance, but that was the first and last moment where I felt like Slater reciprocated anything more than friendship and looking back on it, it was more than likely all in my head.

I've tried to let go of my feelings for him. I've dated, hooked up a bit, even gone short periods without talking to him at all. In the end, unfortunately, nothing has been able to remove the imprint he has left on me. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not a lonely old hag who has spent the last twenty years pining after a man that will never be mine. I've had boyfriends that I was genuinely happy to be with and could picture a future together.

But they weren't Slater.

I slip out of bed, knowing that when Slater is hungover he sleeps like the dead, so I couldn't possibly wake him before I walk downstairs and make my way to my car. Something inside told me that Slater and the boys weren't going to be in a great way when I came to check on them yesterday so before I picked up food I swung by my apartment and grabbed a change of clothes and some basics.

When I grab my bag, I slip into one of the guest bathrooms downstairs before taking a shower and getting ready for my day. Once I'm dressed, I step out of the bathroom and find that the house is still completely silent. I know those boys are gonna be feeling like hell this morning, so I pop my head inside the fridge to see what kind of supplies Slater has.

I grab a little bit of everything, making whatever kind of breakfast items I can out of what is in the house since I know there are about to be three grumpy and hungover men that are definitely not used to abusing their bodies like this. It doesn't take me long before I have eggs, turkey bacon, whole wheat toast, and some protein pancakes piled high on the counter.

The first beast to emerge is Declan. He runs a hand down his face as if he can wipe the feeling away before giving me a tired smile. I smirk as I pour a cup of coffee for him and slide the mug in front of him.

"Fuck, Miss Scarlett. You're an angel from above," he says with his accent drawing out above as he takes a sip.

I let out a laugh as I shake my head and start making a plate for myself.

"Hardly."

"What's all this?" Trevor yawns as he pads into the room, only wearing a pair of boxers, his blonde hair mussed on one side.

"Breakfast," I say as I sit down and eat a piece of bacon.

Trevor chuckles to himself as he shakes his head.

"Not sure what Slater is so bummed about. Nikki was a fucking bitch. You treat him better than she ever did."

His words strike a nerve. A good or a bad one, I'm not totally sure. So instead I focus on the food in front of me.

"What's that smell?" Slater rasps as he slowly makes his way down the stairs.

He's definitely not looking as confident walking on that leg as he was last night. My guess is he definitely overdid it when he had a nice buzz going, and his body is making him pay the consequences today.

"Scar made breakfast," Trevor says over a mouthful of food.

Slater smiles tiredly as he hobbles behind me, kissing the top of my head as his hand rests on my hips.

"Thanks, Bubbles," he says as he moves to grab a plate and start dishing up.

The spot on my hip is still tingling from his touch, and though I hate my body for outing me, I can feel that my cheeks are on fire. Apparently, I'm not the only one who notices because Trevor and Declan both give me knowing smirks before they thankfully mind their own business and continue eating.

Once we are all finished, Trevor rinses off his plate before standing.

"I'm gonna grab a shower and then I gotta catch a flight back to Texas."

Slater nods as he goes to stand, wincing when he puts too much weight on his leg before breathing through it.

"Alright, man. Thanks for coming out yesterday. It was good to see you."

"Anytime, Slate. I've been where you are. I get it. You get hurt, and you feel like the world is over, like you'll never be the same. You got this, though. If you want it."

Slater runs a hand through his curls and shrugs. "We'll see."

Trevor claps him on the shoulder before walking upstairs.

"What about you, Mikey?" Slater asks, facing Declan who is still scarfing down the remnants of food leftover.

"The plane is set to take off at six tonight. I promised Tuck we would go fishing this weekend."

Slater smiles fondly at the mention of Declan's stepson. Though they

aren't blood related if you saw them together, you'd never know it. I think Tucker was about four or five when Declan met Vi and from everything Slater told me, he fell hard for the sweet single mom almost instantly. It wasn't an easy road for them, far from it actually, but I'm so glad that they are in the place they are in life. They deserve it.

"Well, we can't break a promise made with Big Man," Slater teases, causing Declan to chuckle. "How about a little therapy session before you leave?"

"I don't know, Slate. Pretty sure we still have too much alcohol in our system for a tattoo," he laughs dryly.

Slater shrugs. "I know a guy. Grab a shower and meet down here in twenty, yeah?"

"Fuck it, sure. I've been wanting to fill in some pieces on my back," Declan says as he looks over his shoulder where his under tank shows the beginning of his full sleeve tattoos creeping onto his back. Honestly, I can't tell which one is more tattooed, him or Slater. They are both covered. They got into it back in Brighton, and within a few short years they looked like new men, I mean, not really but you get my point.

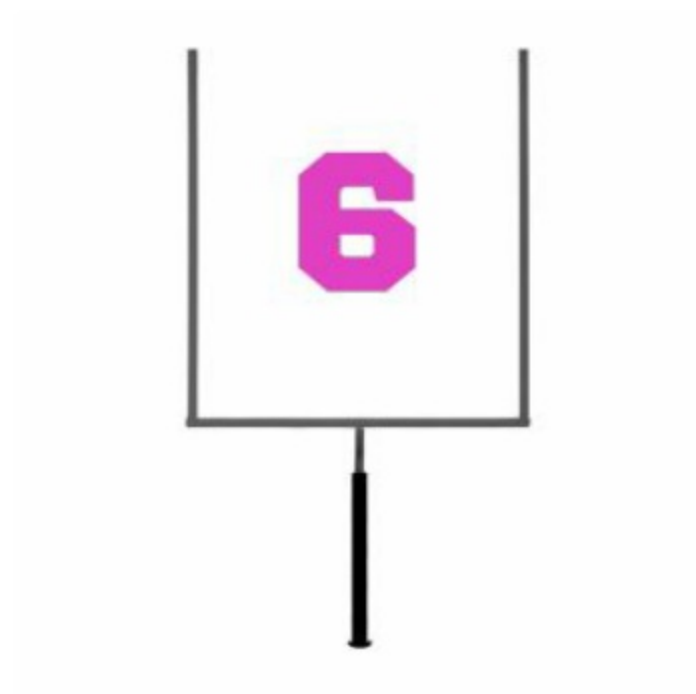
"Well, I have to meet up with Collin and go over some stuff before I work with a few of the guys today. Call me later. Let me know if you need me, okay?"

Slater nods as he pulls me in for a hug that lasts longer than I expect before he lowers his mouth to my ear.

"Thank you...for everything. I don't know what I'd do without you."

I pull back and pat his shoulder. "Good thing you'll never have to find out."

"Thank fuck for that," he smiles before limping his way up the stairs.



## Slater

**M**ikey winces as the gun begins filling in the tattoo near the back of his neck. I can't help but chuckle. He always gives me shit for using numbing cream, says I'm being a bitch about it, but I'm not the one in pain, am I?

He is getting a little black and white pair of Converse on his shoulder, one with Tucker's birthday on it and the other with Rodney's. His wife Violet is obsessed with them, has been since she was a teenager, so it's a nice little tribute to his whole family.

I usually always have an idea of something I want to get done but when I walked into the store, I blanked. I scrolled on my phone for a few minutes until I found a cool looking hourglass. Time feels like it's running out for me so though a bit depressing, I thought it was perfect. Since my arms are completely covered I had my guy pick a spot on my chest.

Unlike Mikey, I've never gotten a tattoo symbolizing my and Nikki's relationship. I was always hesitant of what the future held for us to ink



something permanently onto my body. I guess that right there should have told me everything I needed to know.

“So, when do you start PT with Scarlett?” Mikey asks as he turns his head to face me.

“Don’t know if I’m gonna,” I say as I look down and watch the needle etch the design into my skin.

“What do you mean? You have to.”

“Says who, Mikey?” I ask with a raised eyebrow.

“I mean, if you ever wanna walk normally again, it’s a good idea,” he says with an eye roll.

Yeah, I guess. Regardless, whether I retire or not, I still need to get my leg back to normal function.

“What’s going on, man? This ain’t you. I know this doesn’t all have to do with Nikki. This is your dream. Football is everything to you, and you are the last man that I know to give up on anything.”

“Everyone else has given up on me, Mikey. Just feels like maybe they see what I don’t want to.”

“Like who? I haven’t given up on you. Neither has Trev or Seb. Your parents haven’t. I know for a fact Scarlett will never give up on you.”

“Yeah...” I say as I trail off and stare at the wall behind me.

If I’m honest with myself, I’m scared. Scared that I’m going to give it one hundred and ten percent, and it still won’t be enough. I’m used to being the best of the best. Not mediocre, not average. The best. That’s a tall bar to set myself, and I know that if I don’t reach it, it’s me who is going to want to give up. Shitty attitude, I know, but still.

“She’s pretty amazing,” Mikey says lowly.

I blink away from the wall to look at him. “Who?”

“Scarlett,” he says with a deadpan look.

“Oh, yeah. Of course she is. She’s the best.”

Mikey nods. “I don’t know many grown women that would put everything to the side for their guy best friend and focus on what he needs first. From taking care of him and his best friends when they are drunk, feeding them the next morning, constantly checking in on her best friend to make sure she can’t do more.”

I smile softly and nod. “She really is the best. I don’t know how I got so lucky.”

Mikey stares at me for several seconds before blowing out a deep breath.

“Well, the choice is yours, Slate. No one can force you to get back to it, but we have a little over five and a half months until you need to report to training camp if you want to keep your spot. It’s probably gonna be really fucking hard, but you’re a tough son of a bitch. So I guess you gotta ask yourself, how badly do you want it?”

I want it. Bad.

I already failed at my marriage. I can’t fail at this too.

I know that I’ve already had a longer career than most, and I should be grateful for that. But it’s not enough. I need to decide when I’m done. Not an injury, not a doctor. Me. And I’m not fucking done yet.



After our tattoos were all wrapped up, Mikey and I went and grabbed some food before I took him to the airport. After that, I texted Scar and asked

where she was. She said she was still at the training center working with Andrews. I slowly limp my way inside and down the hallway to our PT room when a voice shouts out to me.

“Santos, what are you doing here?” Coach Aberton calls out.

I slowly spin around, proud of myself for not wincing when I put too much weight on my leg.

“Just came to start a therapy plan with Scar, Coach.”

He nods approvingly as he casts a worried look down to my knee.

“How you feeling?”

“I’ll be just fine by the time practice starts, Coach.”

He raises an eyebrow at me and crosses his arms over his chest.

“You sure about that?”

My smile becomes tight, but I’m determined to not let it fall.

“I’m good, Coach. Little pain when I put pressure on it, but Scar will get me whipped into shape in no time.”

“We’ll see,” he mumbles as he runs a hand through his hair before turning into his office.

I feel my fake ass smile fall at the disbelief in his words before I shake my head and turn back around. When I step inside the PT room, I pause as I see Andrews laying down on the massage table. His shirt is off, and Scar is massaging his shoulder, bringing her hands down his arm and towards the ends of his fingers. He groans in what I know is pleasure because on top of being an amazing athletic trainer, Scar’s hands are like fucking magic.

“Alright, Damion,” she says as she pats his back. “Remember to keep your water intake up, and I’ll see you back here next week, okay?”

“Nooo,” he fake complains as he sits up. “I think we need a couple more minutes, for my shoulders sake, don’t you?”

She lets out a laugh and rolls her eyes before walking over to her laptop and typing in a few notes.

“Nope. You look fine to me,” she says as she turns around to face him with a smile.

“Fine?” he scoffs as he begins making his way towards her. “We both know you think I look better than fine,” he teases with a wink.

To my surprise, Scar doesn’t get embarrassed. Her eyes trail down his naked torso appraisingly before making her way back up to his face.

“Meh, you’re alright.”

Andrews clutches his chest like she has just delivered a physical blow as he staggers back.

“You wound me, babe.”

“What have we talked about?” she scolds.

“Sorry. You’re right. Doctor Babe.”

Scar laughs at that and shakes her head. “Get out of here.”

I knock on the wall, making my presence known and also helping put Andrews out of his misery. It’s clear Scar isn’t interested, and the poor fucker can’t get a clue.

They both turn to face me with smiles.

“Santos! Look at you. How you doing?” Andrews asks as he makes his way over to me, bringing it in for a quick bro hug before pulling back.

“Doing good. Just about to start a therapy plan with Scar if she has the time for me?” I ask as I glance over his shoulder at her.

“I’m not the PT for this team, Slater. You need to be making a plan with Collin.”

“Nope,” I say with a shake of my head. “I told him I would only work with you. Collin and Coach gave me the go ahead to set stuff up with you.”

She huffs out a breath as she runs a hand over her ponytail.

“I was planning on heading home. I haven’t eaten since breakfast, and I have an early morning tomorrow. I need to get some decent sleep.”

“Please, Scar. I’ll have anything you want delivered. Half hour tops, I swear.”

“You swear?” she asks with a raised eyebrow.

I nod as I take my finger and draw an X over my chest.

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Scar was the first person to ever say that to me. I probably had only lived in the neighborhood for a week at the most, and when it got late one night, my mom said I had to come in. I told Scarlett that we would play tomorrow morning, but she didn’t believe me. She looked up at me with hesitant eyes as she twisted her fingers.

*“You swear?” she asks.*

*I nod. “Sure. Sometimes, usually only when I get hurt or something.”*

*She frowns for a moment before she shakes her head.*

*“No, like you swear you’ll come back and play with me? You have to swear it.”*

*“I swear,” I say with a nod.*

*Her eyes roll as she practically stomps over to me and lifts my hand, grabbing my pointer finger before making it draw an X over my heart.*

*“You have to say, ‘cross my heart and hope to die’ otherwise it doesn’t count,” she says, as if it was common knowledge.*

*I roll the words over in my head before I nod my agreement and repeat the motion.*

*“Cross my heart and hope to die.”*

*A small smile takes over her face as she nods and skips off back to her*

*house.*

Shaking the fog of the childhood memory away, I look to Scar, waiting for her response.

“Yeah, right,” she grumbles before pointing to the massage table. “Take a seat. We’ll do some range of motion tests.”

“Good luck, man. I’ll see you around. Doctor Babe, see you next week,” he says with a smirk before grabbing his shirt and bag next to the door as he slips out into the hallway.

“Is he always that flirty with you?” I ask as I hobble over to the table before sitting on it.

She shrugs. “He’s harmless.”

“Well if he ever makes you uncomfortable, let me know, I’ll rough him up a bit.”

Scar laughs as she types something into her laptop.

“Oh yeah? With a freshly repaired ACL? You’re gonna get into a street brawl?”

I frown at that and nod. “Good point. I’ll have Seb knock him around. No one can touch that ogre.”

“You’re ridiculous,” she smiles as she makes her way over to me. “Alright. Let’s start with the basics. Move your foot, flexing up and down.”

I do as she says, wincing when it’s too stretched either direction. She watches carefully as she speaks.

“Okay, side to side.”

Fuck. That one hurts more. A hell of a lot more. For the next ten minutes or so, Scar walks me through different tests until she tells me I can stop as she begins typing quickly on her laptop. Her brows are pinched together, her teeth sinking into her lower lip as she does.

“What’s that look for?”

“Huh?” she asks as she looks up.

“That look? You’re nervous, or maybe worried. What is it?”

She shakes her head. “It’s nothing, Slater. I deal with stuff like this literally every day. Remember Hughes tore his ACL last year and I worked with him-”

“Just before he retired because the coaches benched him?” I fill in.

Her shoulders drop slightly at that as she looks at my knee before up to me.

“Over two weeks post op you should be able to do more than you can right now. No doubt probably due to the fact you took it too easy after surgery. But it’s okay. That just means we are about a week or so behind schedule. We have plenty of time. We will start easy. Get you walking, some mobility stretches every day, and go from there. Do you want to do our sessions at your house or here?”

“Here, for sure. I don’t want to spend any more time at the house than I have to. Do you think you can get me to one hundred percent by July?” I ask, not liking that the normal confidence Scar has when it comes to things like this seems to be missing in her words.

“Slater, I’ll be honest. I’m not sure if you were at one hundred percent before the injury. You’re getting older, your body is getting older, and as you know, being a pro-athlete puts a lot of strain on it.”

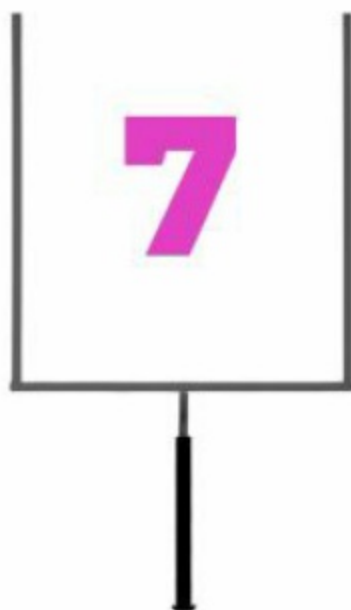
Her words weigh heavy on my chest. Fuck. I knew this wasn’t going to work. I’m fucked. I’m-

“But,” she continues. “If you dedicate yourself, buckle down and work for it, I’m gonna get you ready for your starting spot again. I can’t guarantee you’ll be the same Slater, that part is up to you.”

“I’m all in,” I nod seriously.

She smiles proudly as she shuts her laptop. “Alright, let’s go to work then.”





## Slater

The first day of PT with Scar is turning out to be a lot less productive than I was anticipating. When she said, ‘Let’s go to work,’ I was expecting some light weightlifting, maybe some time on the treadmill or something, but what I got was stretching exercises. Yeah, she has me basically doing a yoga routine. I love Scar, but I’m starting to question her credibility right about now.

“Scar, we’ve been at this for almost an hour, and you haven’t had me do more than sit up and down from a chair and stretch. How am I supposed to get my mobility back if this is the hardest you are going to push me?”

She looks at me like I’m dumb before shaking her head.

“Slater, you just barely gave up crutches. What did you expect? To be deadlifting? Maybe hit the stair master?”

I roll my eyes at her sass before running a frustrated hand through my hair as I walk over to the bench and grab my water bottle. Scar wordlessly follows me, sitting down beside me before she speaks.

“Do you want to try this at your house instead? Maybe you’ll feel less pressure and therefore less stressed if you are in your own environment, without all of this looming over you,” she says as she gestures around the room.

“Can’t say I feel less stressed at home, probably the opposite. It’s just a big empty house filled with too many fucking memories that I thought meant forever. I can hardly even go into my own bedroom, Scar. Because all I think when I step in there is how Nik insisted that we paint the walls the ice cold gray because it was ‘in.’ Or I look at the bed frame, how it cost ten grand because Nik insisted it was essential, and I just wanted her to be happy. Every piece of furniture in that house was handpicked by her. Her fingerprints are everywhere, and it’s fucking suffocating.”

I don’t talk about my feelings with others usually, I’m not that kind of guy. At least not with anyone that isn’t Scar. She has this way of listening that makes me feel like I’m not a little bitch for feeling the way I do. She always sits quietly, letting me rant or vent out anything I need to with zero judgment. One of the many reasons I love the girl.

“What if you change it?” she asks.

“Change what?”

“Everything, I guess. You’re stupid rich. Hire an interior designer and get the place gutted. New paint, new carpet in the bedrooms. New furniture everywhere. Make the house yours. I mean, it is yours, it always has been.”

Honestly? Not the worst idea I’ve ever heard.

“I wouldn’t know where to begin. That stuff was Nik’s thing, not mine.”

Scar nods, pulling out her phone as she begins typing on it before holding out her hand.

“Hand me your credit card, the black one.”

I raise my eyebrows at her like she's crazy but reach for my wallet anyways.

"Pretty sure the Crusaders pay you to work with me, Scar. Don't know that you are going to get away with charging me personally on top of that," I say as I pull out the card and hand it to her.

She takes it from me as she puts the phone up to her ear.

"Hi, yes. I'd like to schedule a consultation for a full re-decoration," Scar says before waiting. "You're booked for two weeks?" she says with a sigh. "Alright, I'll let Mr. Santos know. With the offseason only lasting so long before the Crusaders' practice begins I'm not sure we will have the time to wait that long."

Pausing for another minute, she smirks before shooting me a wink.

"Oh my gosh, really? An opening just became available? Fantastic. How does six o'clock sound? Perfect. I'll email you the address right now. See you then," she says before hanging up and turning to me.

"Well, that went over better than I expected. I thought for sure they'd ask for a deposit or something. C'mon. We have an appointment to get to," Scar says as she begins typing on her phone again.

"Wait, what?" I say as I stand and follow her over to her purse.

She grabs it before turning the lights off in the room and holding the door open to the hallway.

"C'mon. Let's go make sure we scrub away every memory possible of that spoiled gold digger from *your* house."

I'm a little stunned at first. Mainly because though I knew Scar never overly liked Nik, I have never heard her actually call her a name, I guess apart from the other day. The wounded hurt part of me wants to laugh at that, revel in the fact that my best friend is so fiercely loyal to me. The other side,

the one who still loves and cares for the woman I spent the last near decade with, wants to come to Nik's defense. What would I say, though? That Scar is wrong? She isn't. They say hindsight is 20/20. From the moment Nik walked out, I saw everything in a new light, and every day I start to realize more and more it's a miracle we lasted this long.



“What are you thinking for color scheme?” Bethany, the interior designer, rushed over to the house at the drop of my name thanks to Scar.

“Uh, I don't know. Just different. Maybe white?”

Her smile crinkles at the edges like she wants to sneer but remembers she needs to keep it in check.

“All white and it'll feel like a hospital,” Scar intervenes with a shake of her head before turning to face Bethany. “I think he needs some warm neutral colors. He wants this place to feel like a home, not a house. It needs to be less modern and more traditional.”

Bethany is writing quickly on her iPad as she nods her understanding. I sling an arm around Scar as I smile.

“Since when did you know all about this stuff?”

She laughs. “This stuff? Slate, it's kinda common sense. Cool colors make a room feel cold, warm colors make it feel warm. You are the opposite of a cold person. I always thought this house never fit your personality.”

“Your girlfriend is right. Though the home is beautifully designed, I wouldn't choose it for you after meeting you,” Bethany says.

“Oh, I’m not his girlfriend,” Scar laughs as she shakes her head and blushes in embarrassment.

“Oh, sorry. My mistake,” Bethany says with widened eyes.

“No worries,” I shrug. It isn’t the first time someone assumed Scar and I were together, probably won’t be the last.

We wander into the bottom floor spare bedroom where several boxes sit. This is the leftover room, also known as the room with stuff Nikki didn’t want to be displayed in our house. I hobble over to one of the boxes, opening it up and smiling as I pull out the pink and black skateboard before lifting it higher to show Scar.

“Remember this?”

Her mouth drops open as she looks from it to me.

“Oh my god. Where did you find that?”

I shrug. “I’ve had it for years. I bought it for this neighbor chick for her birthday, but she gave up trying after, what? Two days?”

She rolls her eyes as she walks over to the box and sifts through the dozens of skateboards I’ve collected over the years. I don’t ride anymore, obviously, but back in the day, Ezra and I used to tear up Manor Road.

“I wanted to keep up with you guys, but after too many bruises, I accepted my defeat and decided the skateboard life wasn’t for me,” she shrugs.

I nod sympathetically as I squeeze her shoulder.

“Hey, it’s alright. Not all of us can be as athletically gifted.”

She scoffs and shoves me to the side before picking up another skateboard. A look comes over her face before she walks over to Bethany and begins speaking in hushed tones, while I cruise down memory lane.

Once we are done going through the house, Bethany asks a few more questions and shows us a few inspo pictures, which I let Scar handle, before

she is driving off with the promise to have a contractor out here tomorrow to put in new carpet and paint the walls. I couldn't believe that she was able to put something together so quickly, but then again, money talks and I'm sure I'll be paying a pretty penny for the rush. Doesn't really matter, though. It's just money.



I crashed at Scar's house last night since Bethany had people working at my place literally around the clock since yesterday morning. I don't know what Scar told her as far as the deadline, or what she promised to pay her, but whatever it was, it must have been good because Scar and I are walking into my freshly renovated house, and I hardly recognize it. We didn't do anything structural to the house but changing the wall color, art on the walls, and furniture is enough to have me confused as to whether I walked into the right house.

At first, I didn't get what Scar meant when she said warm colors make the room feel warmer, but I do now. The walls are a soft cream color, almost white but with a little color to them. I see greens, browns, and some reds nearly everywhere I turn. The crisp white couches that used to take up the living area have been replaced by plush chocolate brown couches that look like you'd melt into the furniture.

"What do you think?" Scar asks as we continue walking through the house, noticing how even the kitchen cabinets have been painted a dark brown as opposed to the stark white color from before.

“It’s really nice,” I smile as we make our way up the stairs.

Scar pushes the master bedroom door open first, and my pulse thuds a little harder as I step through, feeling like I’m standing in a brand new room that has been added to my house. The bed has been moved to the opposite side of the room as well as all of the furniture. Again, the colors are all completely different and the carpet is a thick fluffy beige as opposed to the short grey from before. Nik always insisted on short carpet since her heels would get caught up in longer carpet.

The makeup stand that used to be in the corner is gone, a mini fridge filled with sparkling waters and beer in its place. It’s surreal. It’s as if everywhere I look, every trace possible of Nikki is wiped clean. Instead of hurting at the thought, it brings me a small sense of peace. Like I can breathe for the first time in days. I’m starting to come to the realization that my pain from Nikki leaving wasn’t necessarily from losing her but more the fact that I was losing everything. My own life was becoming unrecognizable in front of my eyes, and I didn’t know how to cope with it.

“I have one more surprise for you,” Scar smiles as she pulls on my arm and leads me out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

She stops outside the downstairs spare bedroom before she looks at me excitedly as she pushes open the door.

I smile in anticipation, but it quickly falls when I see what she’s done. Mounted on the north wall are each of my skateboards, displayed like a museum. There is a lazy boy in the corner and a flat screen on the other wall which looks nice too, but I can’t help but admire all of the boards. A million memories rush to the forefront of my mind.

Ezra and I swore one day we’d make it to the X Games. Looking back, I’m not sure how much was actually talent versus confidence, but we had a good



fucking time riding. Nikki never understood why I kept them if I wasn't going to use them. She understood even less why I ever rode them in the first place.

I go to speak when something catches my attention out of the corner of my eye. A framed picture is propped up on a side table in the corner of the room. I walk over to it, picking it up to see a gap toothed Scarlett smiling up at the camera wearing a helmet and elbow pads, while ten year old versions of Ezra and I have our arms slung over her shoulders, both grinning as Scarlett's mom took the picture.

For some reason, my eyes begin to mist over. It's not that I'm sad, but I'm not exactly happy either and I couldn't for the life of me tell you why.

"You okay?" Scar asks softly.

I nod quickly before setting the picture down and turning to wrap my arms around her. I rest my head into her neck and lightly inhale. Cocoa butter. She always smells like cocoa butter. Ever since she was a little girl. It's the lotion she uses. It was the same kind her mom used too.

When I pull back I smile before brushing some of the loose hair from her ponytail away from her face.

"Thank you for doing all of this. It really means a lot."

She furrows her brows as she smiles and shakes her head.

"Slate, it's nothing. All I did was make a call and-"

"No," I say with a shake of my head. "It's everything. I don't know how I could do any of this without you."

"Any of what?" she asks curiously.

"Life," I laugh dryly before shaking my head. "I'm so fucking glad you're my best friend."

She nods with a smile that seems a little tighter than before as she nods and

pulls away.

“I’m gonna use the restroom. Be right back,” she says, her voice catching slightly.

I furrow my brows, confused why she is all of the sudden upset, but she is out of the room before I can even say anything.

“So, I hope this isn’t too forward,” Bethany says, coming seemingly out of nowhere as she stands beside me. “But working with you has been wonderful. I’d hate for that to end. If you ever want to grab a drink or something, call me,” she smiles beneath her eyelashes as she hands me a business card.

I take it from her to be respectful but her very obvious offer doesn’t intrigue me in the slightest. Maybe it’s because I’ve been so used to being in a relationship that I’ve forgotten what it was like to have someone flirt with me. No, that can’t be it. Married or not, women have been throwing themselves at me ever since my name was announced on the draft. Everyone wants to be tied to an NFL player, even if it’s just for a night. My lack of interest is also not because she isn’t pretty, she’s actually gorgeous. Blonde, tan, and tight in all the right places. She actually reminds me of Nikki a little bit. Maybe that is the ultimate thing working against her, though.

I never saw Nikki as a gold digger. We fell in love long before the money came, but what if she was just playing the long game? I can’t be naïve enough to not assume that wasn’t at least part of her interest in me. She knew I had a pro-career ahead of me, everyone did. Maybe I was just her meal ticket, and once the meals looked like they’d stop, she dined and dashed on me.

Fuck, if it wasn’t so depressing I’d probably laugh because that’s a good one.

“Thanks, I’ll think about it,” I say politely before stepping out of the bedroom to search for Scar.

When I walk down the hall, I run into her running a hand over her hair, a nervous habit of hers.

“What’s going on?” I ask bluntly.

She doesn’t look surprised, just gives me a soft shake of her head and a fake smile.

“Nothing. You should see what they did to your guest bathroom.”

“I don’t give a shit what was done to a bathroom. Are you okay? What did I say?”

“Slate, nothing. Please, just drop it,” she says as she reaches out and rests a hand on my bicep.

I frown but nod, knowing that when Scar is ready, she will talk about it. Holding out my hand to let her go first down the hall, she smiles and nods.

“So, what do you say? Should we christen this place with a good ole fashioned party with some of the guys? Beer, pizza, you in?” I ask.

She raises a brow in question as she cocks her head.

“If by beer and pizza, you mean water and boiled chicken with steamed broccoli, then yes, that’s exactly what I was thinking.”

I roll my eyes at her. “Aw c’mon, Scar. You’re my PT, not my nutritionist.”

“Healthy diet and good sleep are key to recovery, and you know it. You just want to pack this place with a bunch of people to drown out the loud thoughts in your head.”

Fuck. She doesn’t have to call me out like that. Even if she is right.

“Fine. One Tree Hill reruns and whatever boring dinner you just suggested?” I say with a heavy eye roll.

She bites back a laugh and nods as she makes her way into the kitchen, and I start up the TV in the movie room. Scar used to have to practically pin Ezra and me down just so we would watch the garbage show with her. She told us that we secretly liked it, which we both vehemently denied. Until she came home early one day and found Ezra and me on the couch, catching up on episodes. He still denies that he likes it, but now, I'm a proud fan. Plus it makes my girl happy so even if it sucked, I'd tough it out for her.



## Scarlett

“C ’mon, Slate. You got this. Push yourself,” I encourage.

His brows are pinched, his face dotted with sweat as he slowly squats down for his last set. We’ve been working together five days a week for three months, and we are making good progress. Unfortunately, the progress isn’t as fast moving as Slater wants, and his frustrations at this point are interfering with his mind set.

His legs begin to shake as he drops down to the ground, more out of exhaustion than inability. Slowly, I make my way over to my phone before pausing Slater’s playlist. I bend down next to him, watching his chest heave as he stares at the mat. Staying silent, I let him work through whatever is going on in his head before he speaks.

“This is fucking pointless, Scar.”

I frown as I look at him. “What are you talking about? You’re doing great. You’re nearly back to your original warm up routine. That’s no small feat. Your knee is working its ass off for you, Slate. It just takes time.”

“I’m running out of time, Scar,” he says with a shake of his head.

“Slater, you can’t rush these things. Everybody is different, every injury unique. Considering you were just getting off crutches when we started, I’d say you are doing great.”

“Yeah, but will I be able to run a 4.56 second 40 in three months? Will I be able to stop, pivot, turn, and jump the way I need to in order to avoid defensemen while simultaneously catching the ball and gaining us yards and touchdowns?” he snaps.

I roll my lips together, choosing not to respond. Slater rarely raises his voice at anyone, let alone me. The fact that he is getting so defensive now just proves how not like himself he’s feeling. Slowly standing up, I walk across his gym before reaching for my purse. It only takes me a moment to find what I was looking for before I grab it and bring it over to him.

He watches me carefully, that frustrated scowl still on his face when I pull out the small white bottle.

“Bubbles? Really, Scar?”

I ignore his words as I untwist the cap and pull out the miniature wand, holding it out for him.

“Blow,” I say simply.

“Bubbles are your thing, not mine. Blowing on a soapy stick isn’t going to magically destress me or take my problems away.”

“Blow,” I repeat.

His eyes narrow on me as he leans forward and blows out a harsh breath that just sends the soap splattering across the floor.

“Satisfied?” he practically growls out.

“Not really, no,” I say as I re-dip the stick and hold it out for him wordlessly.

He is still glaring at me as he leans forward and blows into the bubble

wand a little softer this time, but not soft enough. Only a few small bubbles come out before he looks back at me. Without saying a word, I re-dip it and hold it out again. Each time he seems to calm down more, his blowing becoming softer, until he is blowing one large bubble. I dip the wand one last time, holding it to myself before I speak.

“Now put everything into this one. Every frustration you are feeling, every pain, physical and mental, that you are struggling with. Slowly let it all blow out with this breath, and when the bubble pops, it’s time to let it go.”

His eyes gloss over, whether at the verbatim words my mother used to use with all of us kids or from all the emotions he’s feeling before he nods. I hold out the wand for him, and he blows out a slow and steady breath for several seconds. The bubble gets bigger, bigger, and bigger until finally, it pops.

We are silent for several seconds before he speaks.

“I’m sorry,” he rasps lowly. “I shouldn’t be taking my anger out on you. You don’t deserve that.”

I nod. “How do you feel now?”

He lets out a dry laugh as he rubs the back of his neck.

“Honestly, better. I never really understood why it helped you, just that it did. I kinda get it now.”

“Good. Do you want to call it a day? Try again tomorrow?”

He shakes his head as he pushes himself to stand.

“No. I gotta keep going. What’s up next, Doc?”

I smirk in pride before I nod towards his weight bench.

“Let’s switch gears for a bit. Make sure you don’t get string beans where your arms used to be,” I tease.

His mouth drops open at that before he charges me. I don’t expect it, especially when he blocks me in against the wall and begins mercilessly



tickling my ribcage. It's the only place on my entire body that is ticklish, a fact Slater has exploited for years since he discovered it.

"Oh my god! Stop!" I shriek as laughter rips through me.

"Not until you take it back, you little shit," he says as his fingers quicken. "Do my arms look like string beans to you, Scar?" he asks as he pins me in place with one arm while flexing his other.

The ink covered bicep strains against the motion, and I have to physically force myself not to drool because Slater definitely has some of the nicest arms that I've ever seen. Not too bulky but not lean either. Enough muscle to have those sharp carved out lines, and the fact that they are covered in black and dark gray tattoos only makes them all the more entrancing.

Ripping my eyes away from his arm, I see a cocky smirk on Slater's face, like he knows that I was checking him out. Asshole.

"Take it back," he says lowly as he tilts forward until our noses practically brush against each other.

My breath hitches, my heart thundering in my chest at having Slater this close to me. In twenty years of friendship, I don't think we've ever been this close. My eyes watch him carefully as his smirk begins to fall, a look of almost confusion seems to take over his face. I glance down to watch him run his tongue across his lower lip slowly before his eyes flick down to my mouth. I swear he moves forward, just half an inch, only millimeters separating our lips now. Something that I've thought about a million times over the years but never once thought could be a reality.

Suddenly, a sharp piercing noise rings through the air, effectively slicing the previously thick sexual tension like butter. Slater takes several large steps backwards, practically staggering back as if a haze has been lifted before he

makes his way to the bench. It takes me several seconds to realize that the moment ruining noise was none other than my phone.

Slowly, I make my way over to my bag, reaching down to pull out my phone before seeing that it's Erica.

"Hey, what's up?" I answer.

"Hey, babe. I was just wondering if you were close?"

My mind is blank for several seconds before I remember. "Oh no! I'm so sorry. You guys have those art show tickets. I'm on my way now. I'm at Slater's. I'll be there in ten."

"No worries. We will see you then," she says before hanging up.

I look over to see Slater benching well over what he was doing at the beginning of the week. He's breathing through the set heavily, but his muscles don't appear to be straining too much.

"I'm sorry. I forgot that I promised to watch the girls tonight for Seb and Erica. We will pick this back up tomorrow, okay?"

"Sure," he says, not looking at me as he continues pressing.

I pause, wondering if I should say something. Do I acknowledge what just happened between us? Or I guess what almost happened is a more accurate description. Though with the way Slater is avoiding my gaze as if I were Medusa, I'm gonna say that leaving is probably the best course of action for now. So, without another word, I grab my purse and slip out of the room and head to my car.



I had a blast with the girls. They are at that age where pretty much everything that comes out of their mouths is hilarious. Whether it was intended to be funny or not is irrelevant. After I apologized about a million times for showing up late, Seb and Erica left for a friend of Erica's art show across town.

Erica is a painter, a damn good one at that. Though Seb is about the least artistic person out there, he supports his wife so wholly. They are basically couple goals. I mean, Declan and Vi definitely give them a run for their money in that department, though. Those two are perfection together.

"Thanks for watching them, again," Erica says as she pulls me in for a hug. "Did they give you any trouble going down? Rosie has been fighting us tooth and nail when it comes to brushing her teeth lately."

I smile and shake my head. "Daphne wanted to wait for you guys to get home, so of course Rosie agreed. We almost had a mutiny, but I promised to take them out for ice cream next week, and it was smooth sailing from there."

Seb chuckles as he kisses the side of Erica's head before nodding at me as he makes his way into the kitchen.

"Thanks, Scarlett. I'm gonna go check on the girls before I get the bath ready," Seb says as he gives a smoldering look to his wife that turns her face about as red as her hair.

"Well, looks like you're about to have a fun night," I tease as Erica smacks my arm.

"Shut up. How's Slater doing?"

"Good," I nod, my mind instantly flashing back to that moment we had in his workout room. It was a moment, right? I've fantasized about Slater plenty over my life, but that wasn't a fantasy. That happened. Didn't it?

Erica is unfortunately too perceptive as her eyes narrow on me

suspiciously.

“What happened?”

“Nothing!” I defend quickly, causing my voice to squeak.

Erica’s mouth drops open as her eyes widen.

“Oh my god! You guys hooked up, didn’t you?”

“What?” I scoff. “What world are you living in? No, definitely not.”

Her expression falls as she tilts her head to the side curiously.

“But something did happen?”

My eyes flick to the staircase that Seb just disappeared up before I lower my voice.

“We almost kissed,” I whisper. “I mean, I think we did. I don’t know. Maybe I was just fabricating things.”

“What do you mean almost? What happened?”

I flick my eyes to her. “A certain redhead called my phone and when it rang he backed up like he couldn’t get away fast enough.”

“Fuckkk. I’m sorry.”

I shrug as my eyes begin to water. “It’s fine. He couldn’t even look me in the eye after so maybe it’s good that it didn’t happen. Not sure how I could handle it if Slater kissed me and then looked at me with regret.”

She gives me a sympathetic frown as she pulls me in for a hug.

“Do you think you and Slater working together so closely is such a good idea? At least right now?”

“What do you mean?”

“I just mean, emotions are running a little high right now. Slater’s career is hanging on by a couple of repaired ligaments, literally. His wife just left him, and he’s now having to resonate with the fact that she only ever wanted him for what he could give her. That’s a lot of change for one man. Throw you

into the mix, and I'm not sure either of you are in a good place to be supporting the other."

I shake my head. "I need to be there for Slater. He doesn't have anyone else to lean on."

"He has plenty of people to lean on, he just doesn't want to lean on anyone but you."

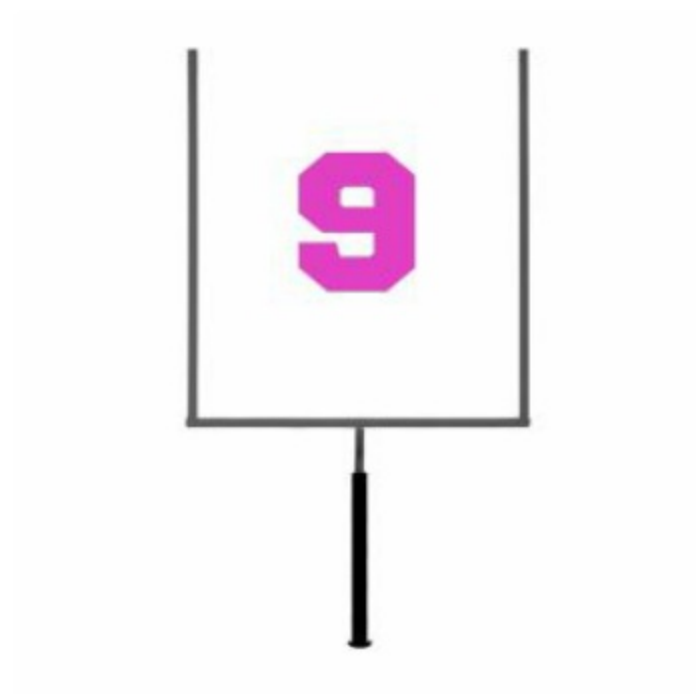
I shrug as I glance at my shoes for a moment as I soften my voice.

"Is that such a bad thing?"

"No, babe. I'm just saying that Slater is in a vulnerable state right now and considering the feelings you have had and continue to have for him...I'm just worried about your heart."

I don't say anything to that, part of me is more than a little concerned for the reasons she is saying. I've been in love with the man for two decades. His life is in shambles, and if he used me to numb the pain for a bit, I'd let him, in a heartbeat. But then where would that leave us?

Nothing quite scares me like finally admitting to Slater how much I love him, how much I always have, and him not reciprocating those feelings. It would shatter me. Twenty years of friendship be damned, I don't think anything could survive a blowout like that. I need to let go of my hopes of a future with Slater, for good. If we were meant to be, we would have been by now. But we haven't, and I need to find a way to deal with that. For my own sake, I have to let it go.



## Slater

**S**car: Hey, I think we should give you an extra rest day. We will start again on Monday.

That's all her message said. At first, I was confused because Scar never lets me off the hook that easily, but then, I just felt relieved. I've never not wanted to be around Scar, but yesterday has my head all fucked up.

I almost kissed my best friend. For half a second, I almost forgot who we were to each other, where we were, all of it. All I could focus on was the comforting scent of cocoa butter that practically surrounded us as I got lost in those kaleidoscope eyes.

It's been years since I've even contemplated crossing that line with Scar. We never talked about that night, maybe she never even thinks about it, but I used to, a lot.

Still do occasionally.

*"I can't believe I'm about to be a D1 athlete. It's fucking surreal," I say as I stare into the bonfire in front of Scar and me.*

*I leave for Brighton University in the morning. A ritzy D1 school with one of the best football programs in the country. And they picked me. Not just picked me, they gave me a scholarship. Full ride. I'm sure as a freshman I won't start right off the bat, but I'm determined to take my place as starting running back.*

*"I can," Scar says with a sweet smile. "I've always believed in you. You're gonna be amazing, Slate."*

*I smile at her, and when those hazel eyes land on me, my stomach twists as nerves begin to creep in. I'm not a nervous guy, far from. I've been with plenty of women and have no problem flirting. Except with Scar. Somewhere along the road, I started crushing on my best friend. I couldn't tell you when it happened, maybe it was a slow building thing. All I know though is that since I graduated and have been getting ready to head off to college, I can't help but think about what I'm leaving behind.*

*"I'm gonna miss this, Scar."*

*"What?" she asks with a slight tilt to her head.*

*"This," I say as I motion between us. "Just talking with you, hanging out. Everything is just easy with you."*

*More wants to come out, but I stop myself. I'm conflicted. For months, I've gone back and forth whether I should shoot my shot with Scar or not. I care about her, obviously, and over the last year in particular, she has gotten so fucking gorgeous. Her legs go on for miles, her skin is always perfectly smooth, and her eyes could pin me in my place mid-field.*

*I've been worried it could mess up our friendship, though. To make a move and have her turn me down, say that she doesn't see me that way. Something. But I watch as she nervously tucks a piece of hair behind her ear before trying to bite back her smile. A smile she only reserves for me.*



*Lifting her head, she faces the fire while I watch her before she speaks.*

*“Me too.”*

*Slowly, I lift my hand to grasp her chin, gently turning her until she is facing me. My eyes bounce across her face, hoping that I can somehow etch her beautiful face into my mind just from memory alone. Thanksgiving break is going to feel like forever when I’m over ten hours away. Sure there is FaceTime and shit, but it’s not the same as being here with her, the smell of cocoa butter surrounding us as my fingers brush against her satin skin.*

*Without meaning to, my eyes dart down to her lips. For months now, I’ve wondered what they would taste like. Do they taste like the cherry flavored lip balm she has her dad buy practically in bulk? Would they taste like the beer we just stole from my parent’s fridge? Or would they taste like something totally unique? Something totally Scar.*

*My tongue runs along my lower lip in anticipation as my grip on her face tightens. Fuck this. I can’t leave for over three months and not know. To not try, even just once. I go to lean in when the worst possible sound comes from Scarlett’s house.*

*“Slater! You out there?” Ezra calls out.*

*Fuck.*

*Ezra would kill me if he knew I had a thing for his baby sister. When I started noticing Scar, really noticing her, I think Ezra picked up on it. Lately, he has been inserting himself between Scar and me whenever he gets the chance. Like he knows if we are left alone for too long something will happen. Like me grabbing her by the face and kissing her.*

*I pull back, and my chest squeezes as I see what looks like disappointment splash across Scar’s face as I do so.*

*“Yeah, man. Was just about to head in,” I shout out before I stand up and*

walk over to where Ezra is standing on their back porch.

I glance behind me to see that Scar is watching me go, but when we lock eyes, she quickly turns away and focuses on the dimming fire in front of her. Walking to step past Ezra and hang out in his room for a bit like we planned he stops me, his hand gripping my shoulder tighter than he ever has before.

“What was that?” he demands.

“What was what?” I ask, doing my best to maintain a casual indifference.

He narrows his eyes on me like he sees right through my shit. He probably does. Next to Scar, no one knows me like Ezra.

“Don’t go there, Slater,” he warns.

“Ezra, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say as I shrug off his hand and step around him. I only make it one more step before he speaks, quieter this time like he doesn’t want to be overheard.

“Don’t act like I’m fucking stupid. I have two eyes. I’ve seen the way you look at her.”

I pause, turning around to face him. I don’t say anything because really, what is there to say? Am I going to lie?

“You’re into Scarlett,” he states simply.

I blow out a breath and scratch the back of my head as I nod.

“Yeah, I am.”

“You’re going off to college hours away, tomorrow, Slate.”

“So?”

He lets out a short huff as he crosses his arms.

“So, she isn’t just some girl that you can mess around with just because you’re bored.”

I frown at that as I look at my friend and shake my head.

“Don’t you think I know that?”

*Ezra stares at me for several seconds, seemingly weighing his words carefully before he speaks.*

*“Don’t go there, unless you are all in. If she isn’t your end game, then you better back the fuck off. She deserves better than to be your hometown side piece while you’re out living it up in college.”*

*His words have me pausing. I have never thought about Scar like that. Not once. He’s right. She isn’t just some girl, she is...everything. My biggest supporter, my loudest cheerleader, my best friend. I could never even think of treating Scar as someone who is dispensable, because she’s not. No one could ever replace her spot in my life.*

*Then, an old thought takes up residence in my head. What if you did shoot your shot, and things fell apart? What if you shoot your shot, it doesn’t work out the way you hoped and you lose your best friend in the fall out. That last thought is like a punch to the gut, and it’s what solidifies in my head that I’ve done the right thing fighting what I feel for her over these last few months. I’m not willing to gamble with losing Scar in my life. Even if I want to give us a shot, it isn’t worth the risk.*

*It was hard for the first few months at Brighton. Scar and I still talked consistently and being so far away from her was a lot harder than I thought it would be. Maybe it was because I saw the way she looked at me that night. How I could see plain as day that she wanted me too. Despite there being a lot of beautiful women at Brighton, none of them held my attention when I had Scar texting me from Seattle. Just before Thanksgiving break, I was ready to say the hell with it and tell her how I felt, make things work somehow and say fuck the consequences. But then, she told me about how Jeremy Burke asked her out and she said yes. It fucking hurt. I told her that I played with Burke on the football team, and he was a good guy, because he*

was. Didn't mean I wasn't tempted to drive the six hundred miles and kick his two front teeth in.

The night of Scar's date with him was the first night I hooked up with someone in close to six months. It was the first time I had hooked up with someone since admitting to myself that I had a thing for my best friend. When I took that blonde to bed, I forced myself to shut down all thoughts of Scar in that way. Forced myself to bury the feelings that I had and focus on the best friendship I ever had and would ever have.

I fumbled a bit here and there, occasionally thinking about her but each time I found a new girl to lose myself in and it all got a little easier until the feelings were nearly muted. When I came back up to Seattle to help Dad take care of Mom, I almost caved again. Scar was a sophomore at Seattle U, and I transferred in for my junior year. We were practically inseparable, the fear over Mom's cancer binding us together in a way stronger than ever before. Until one night Scar had to work, and I was desperate to drown out the noise in my head, the fear and doubts about my mom, about football, about Scar all running rampant. I grabbed the cute blonde girl that my friend Violet had introduced me to and dragged her into the closest bedroom before letting out all of my stress and frustrations on her.

We started seeing each other casually for a few weeks before becoming official and getting married a few years after that. I thought that it all ended up working kinda perfect. I got to fall in love, have a smoking hot wife who loved and cared about me, and I got to keep my friendship with Scar perfectly preserved. Never even able to risk a chance of ruining it because we would never cross that line. I could keep her by my side forever.

That foolproof plan is beginning to crack at the seams, though. I just hope to god I can keep it together, for both our sakes.



10

## Scarlett

I'm sitting outside Coach Aberton's office waiting for him to wrap up a call with Collin on my right and Slater on my left. We have a meeting today to go over Slater's progress, how he's feeling, and what we think this season is going to look like for him. Letting Slater have Friday was probably for the best, considering he has barely said two words to me since he got here.

Maybe he is confused or freaked out that we almost crossed a line? Maybe he is sitting here feeling guilty because he just doesn't see me that way and he's worried about hurting me? Whatever the case is, I hate it. For twenty years I've lived in the friend zone, and though it sucks, at least I had my best friend. Can't say the same right now. The air around us is thick with tension, so thick even Collin can tell if his frequent side eyes between the two of us are anything to go off of.

The door finally opens, and Aberton greets us all, ushering us into the office before we all take our seats.

“So, how you doing, Santos?” Aberton asks as he leans forward into his chair, his fingers tented on top of his desk.

The offensive and defensive coaches are also in here, watching us carefully as we all get settled. Slater makes direct eye contact with Coach and gives him one of the most convincing smiles I’ve ever seen anyone pull off.

“I’m feeling good, Coach. I’m already back at my regular warm up routine and improving every day,” he says with ease like he wasn’t rolling his eyes at me days ago when I said the same thing.

Aberton raises an eyebrow at him like he doesn’t quite believe him before swinging his gaze to Collin.

“What do you think?”

Collin nods. “Scarlett and I have been going over Slater’s training plan, and he is progressing well. As long as he doesn’t face any hiccups in his recovery, I’d be confident to say he should be able to return to regular practice in July.”

Slater smiles at that, a genuine one this time. So does every coach in the room before Aberton nods.

“Good, that’s just what we wanted to hear. Keep up the good work, Santos. And you both will be keeping me updated,” he says as he looks between Collin and me.

We both nod wordlessly as he claps his hands together and stands.

“Good to hear.”

We all stand and shake hands before Collin, Slater, and I file out of the room. Collin glances down at his phone before quickly responding to a text.

“The wife?” I guess.

He smiles at me and nods. “Apparently she’s craving clam chowder and Doritos,” he says with a shake of his head.

I bark out a laugh. “That sounds truthfully disgusting. How much longer until she’s due?”

“Six weeks, unfortunately. Meredith is so ready to not be pregnant anymore.”

I smile sympathetically and nod. “He’ll be here before you two know it. In the meantime, you better make a run to Ivar’s.”

Collin runs a hand over his jaw and laughs before waving goodbye. He and his wife are so cute. Obviously, I only joined the team two years ago, but I’ve met Meredith a handful of times and she is so sweet. They are adorable together, like the picture perfect doting husband and loving wife. A pang runs through me at that, like maybe I’m missing out. Who am I kidding? I know that I’m missing out. I’ve spent practically my entire life hung up on one of the only men in this life that I can never have. I’m not sure I’ve ever properly seen anyone but Slater. It’s always been him, but if the other day was anything to go off, I definitely need to put that fantasy to rest once and for all and move on.

I’m not ashamed to admit that I dream of having a family one day. I want to have a husband who is madly in love with me, a few kids, and the whole white picket fence dream. I know twenty-seven isn’t exactly the age where I should be worried if that’s going to happen for me or not yet, but when I start to look around at all of my friends who are married with kids or expecting, it makes me feel like somehow I’m behind. Like I’m late to the game of musical chairs and if I don’t pick soon, I’ll be left standing when the music stops.

Okay. Enough morbid self-loathing thoughts. The only thing I can do is move forward, try to keep my eyes open to new possibilities, or really any possibilities as long as their name isn’t Slater Santos.



As if god has a sense of humor or something, I turn to smack right into Slater's chest. His hands quickly grip my biceps to right me as I tip for a moment. Glancing up at him, I smile timidly as I take a step back, feeling his fingertips skate over my bare arms as I do.

"Sorry, I thought you saw me," he says quietly, which is unusual on its own. Anyone who knows Slater knows that him and the word quiet don't even exist in the same zip code. Granted, as he's gotten older, he has lost some of that high energy, frat boy attitude but still.

We stare at each other for several seconds, not really knowing what to say before I figure it's best to just rip the Band-Aid off.

"Are we okay?"

His brows furrow for a moment before he gives me a soft smile and nods.

"Yeah, of course."

Nerves that I didn't know were inside me loosen a little at that, even if I know he isn't telling me the whole truth. We aren't okay, but we will be. I think that's what he means.

"You up for some PT today?" I ask.

Slater nods as he holds out his arm dramatically and smiles.

"After you."

I smile at him and bump his shoulder with my own as we make our way out of the practice center and to our cars. Ever since his house was redecorated, we have been doing all of his sessions there. He didn't admit it, but I know the training center wasn't working for him. The pressure he felt walking through those doors was clearly visible, and that is one of the last things he needs when he's focusing on recovery.

I follow him to his house, and when we get there, he opens the front door before walking into the kitchen.

“Want anything?” he asks.

“Just water, you should have the same,” I call out as I set my purse down on the coffee table.

“Yes, Mom,” he snarks before chuckling.

Suddenly, a knock comes from the door.

“Can you get that, Scar?” Slater calls out.

“Sure,” I say as I walk over to the entryway, pulling the door open to reveal a short pudgy man with a receding hairline in an ill-fitting suit.

“Can I help you?” I ask.

“I’m looking for Slater Santos.”

I roll my eyes as I begin to shut the door. “He’s not interested.”

“Wait! It’s about Nikki Santos,” he calls out through the remaining open sliver of the door.

“What about Nikki?” Slater asks as he pulls the door open from behind me. “Is she okay?”

The man hands Slater an envelope addressed to him before nodding.

“You’ve been served.”

Slater and I still instantly as the man turns to walk back to his car at the end of the road. Served? What-

“Divorce papers,” Slater says before clearing his throat.

I don’t say anything as I watch him closely, noticing a myriad of emotions pass over his face all at once.

“I was surprised I hadn’t gotten anything over the last couple months. I thought maybe she had changed her mind, maybe. Second guessed herself. Joke’s on me, I guess,” he laughs hollowly as he tosses the papers carelessly onto the entry table before making his way towards the gym downstairs.

Wordlessly, I follow him. By the time I reach the bottom, I see Slater

standing at his weight bag, his bare knuckles beating into the thick leather as he unleashes what looks to be a lethal amount of fury. I know better than to intervene. I can only imagine how I would feel. I can't blame him. If the person I thought was going to love me for the rest of my life woke up and left me so callously, I'd want to beat the hell out of some things too.

As soon as I see one of his knuckles pop and blood begins to seep down his hand, I step in.

"Hey," I say, to which he ignores me as he continues to wale on the bag.

"Hey!" I snap, causing his eyes that are practically black with anger to look at me.

He takes several ragged breaths, staring at me like he can't quite see me as I slowly reach for one of the spare towels to my side. I take slow steps towards him until I am only inches away. Moving as if I was working with a skittish deer, I gently take Slater's bleeding hand in mine and apply pressure with the towel. He doesn't wince, doesn't say anything. Just stares at me.

"You can't hurt these money makers," I say in a soft tone that I'm hoping will help settle him down a bit.

It seems to work at least a little. The angry look on his face eases as he swallows heavily and nods.

"You're hurt," I say evenly, though we both know I'm not talking about his knuckles.

He nods.

"And that's okay. You should feel hurt. Sometimes life isn't fair, and though we have to deal with it, it doesn't mean we aren't allowed to feel it. Don't try to hide from the hurt or push it away. Feel it, let it consume you, let it overwhelm you but just remember to get back up when it's time."

Slater thinks over my words for several seconds before his raspy voice

speaks.

“How will I know when it’s time?”

“I’ll be here to tell you.”

Slater lets out a short huff as he shakes his head and stares at our feet.

“You’re too good to me, Scar.”

“I know,” I say with a small smile that earns me the tiniest of smirks from him.

*Progress.*

“But you’re worth it.”

His eyes focus on mine, flicking back and forth over my face as he speaks.

“I could never lose you, Scar. I could lose a lot in my life, but never you. I’d never survive it.”

My heart flutters at his words despite how desperately I try to stop it as I nod and look down to his hand which has already stopped bleeding thankfully.

“You’ll never lose me. I’m here. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

11



## Slater

**I**t's been a month since Nikki has me served with divorce papers. I still haven't signed them. I couldn't tell you why. I've sat down at least a hundred times to do so. Each time I'd grab a pen and then I just...couldn't.

Why I feel any kind of loyalty to her, I'll never know. I gave her everything, did everything for her, and then she does me dirty like this? She doesn't have the decency to give me a call? To let me know she is sending some piece of shit to my doorstep to serve me papers for a divorce *she* wanted.

I've tried not to think about her over the months. It was surprisingly easier than I thought it would be. Maybe it's because I've spent nearly every waking moment training, doing everything in my power to get me back to one hundred or at least close to. Maybe the other reason is because almost all of those moments were spent with Scar. Something about her brings me peace, she's like home. Comforting, safe, warm. When Scar is around there is no room in my head to dwell on the fact that in my loneliest times I miss my wife. She takes that loneliness away, replaces it with something better.

All that aside, I still can't get my pen to move on that fucking paper. So for now, it stays stuck to my fridge as a constant reminder. I know Scar has something to say about it, Seb and Erica too. Anytime any of them are over they glance at it for several seconds before giving me a heavy look that I pretend not to read.

I'm doing better, a fuck ton better. I'm able to run and pivot with virtually no pain. I'm not as fast as I was before but Scar says that is to be expected and between regular PT training with her and practice starting up next week, everyone is confident that I will be back to my superstar self. I'm even feeling more like myself again, which is a fucking relief. I wasn't sure I'd ever get back to this.

A song from my playlist comes through the speaker and I immediately begin nodding my head to the beat. Scar's mouth drops open in surprise as she looks at me.

"One Direction, Slater? Really?"

"Fuck yeah," I say as I finish another rep. "You introduced them to me, and I'm 1D for life."

"You do realize they broke up in like 2015, right?"

I scoff and shake my head. "Still not over it."

Scar laughs lightly and I can't help but do the same. Ezra and I used to make fun of Scar for listening to all of the boy bands, but for Scar's fifteenth birthday, I surprised her with One Direction tickets. I didn't expect to have a good time, but it was hands down the best concert I had ever been to.

We did unfortunately get kicked out when I tried to swipe Harry's jacket from the stage that he dropped mid-song. I had it in my hands for less than thirty seconds before security was on my ass. Too bad, too. It would have been an awesome present for Scar, but it did make one hell of a story.

I'm wrapping up my last set when my thigh begins to cramp.

"Fuck," I hiss as I nearly drop to the ground.

My hands wrap around the spot, doing my best to apply direct pressure but it's doing nothing for the spasming muscle.

"Talk to me," Scar says as she drops down beside me.

"Cramp," I grit through clenched teeth.

Scar nods seriously as she forcibly removes my hands and covers them with her own. In seconds, her thumbs have found the pinpoint of my pain and bears down on it until it finally loosens. I let out a sigh of relief as my pain begins to ease.

Instead of pulling away, Scar begins massaging all around my leg. It's not as hard as her usual massages are. She always told me a good massage should leave you right on that pain point. That's how you know that it's working. I always told her she just said that because her muscular hands weren't capable of a light and soft massage. I guess I'm the fool though because her fingers are like delicate feathers barely running over my thigh in a motion that sends my entire body easing back to the floor.

"Fuck, that feels good," I groan as I close my eyes.

Her hands continue the motion, up and down, up and down until my leg feels like it's made of Jell-O. When I crack open my eyes, I see Scar has taken out her ponytail for once, her long rich brown hair hanging on either side of her face as those hazel eyes are intently trained on where she is working on me. The scent of cocoa butter fills my nose, and I can't help but let my eyes wander to where the v in her Seattle Crusaders shirt is giving the barest sight of cleavage. Scar's cleavage. Fuck. I should not be looking. I should not be wanting to look.

But when her hands inch up a little higher than before, her breasts pressing



together as she does, my hardening cock tells me that me not wanting to look and the fact that I shouldn't be looking at my best friend is irrelevant.

I don't know if she can see the semi in my shorts, probably can, or if it's the fact that I'm staring her down because I don't know if it's possible to look away right now. Either way, something makes her look up at me and when she does, I see nothing but pure desire flooding her entrancing eyes. My eyes bounce down to her full pillowy lips, not nearly for the first time wondering what it would be like to taste them. To *finally* know.

Sitting up slowly, I lean forward before wrapping her hair around my fingers as I pull her closer to me. She comes eagerly, like I could take her anywhere I wanted, like I could do anything to her, and she would be more than willing. Something about that unrelenting obedience has a dark greedy feeling overtaking me. A feeling that wants to see how far I can bend her, what it would take to break sweet Scarlett.

It doesn't take much to close the distance between us. I feel the silky softness of her lips barely press against my own and it sends my heart thundering and my stomach flipping. I tighten my hold on her, bringing her closer to me as her lips move against my own effortlessly.

Fuck. She tastes better than I could have imagined. She feels better than I've ever dreamed.

Running my lip against the seam of her lips, she parts them slightly, allowing me access when she lets out a soft whimper.

"Slate," she gasps a sound that, though sexy as fuck and has a direct line to my now rock hard cock, is also the very thing that brings me out of the lust fueled haze I've found myself in.

Fuck! What am I doing?

I meant what I told her. I could lose a lot in my life, but never her.

Regretfully, I break the kiss and lean back, turning my head before I catch a glimpse of any emotion. I don't want to see anything on her face. Disappointment, relief, want. All of it will make things more complicated than they are. More complicated than I just made it. Again.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that," I say lowly.

Instead of responding, she sits there for several seconds silently before I hear her slowly stand, making her way over to her purse. She doesn't say a thing as she opens the door and starts walking up the stairs. I don't even move until I hear the front door open and shut with a hollow thud. I'm playing with fire here. Our friendship is hanging on by strings, and if I keep fanning the flames over those strings they're gonna snap.



You ever get to a place, anticipation filling you up because you know just a few steps in front of you marks the spot your life changed forever? I felt that way the first time I stepped through these doors. I was officially a Seattle Crusader. I had done it. I was going to be an NFL player. Well, despite me being at the training center often this off season, I still get that feeling when I lock my car and get to the entrance.

Blowing out a steady breath, I let the nerves and uncertainties in my head go as I push open the door and take a step in. When I turn from the hallway and push into the locker room I'm instantly greeted with a chorus of shouts and names being hurled at me.

"Ayyyyy, Slate!" Bennison calls out.

“Good to see you didn’t retire just yet, Old Man,” the rookie Taylor hollers as I walk by.

I smirk at the guys until I come up to stand by Seb. He claps me on the back as he begins sliding on his practice gear.

“How you feeling, man?”

“Good,” I nod. “Ready.”

Seb nods approvingly but doesn’t say anything else. Once we are suited up, we grab our water bottles and helmets as we step out onto the turf covered practice field. Dropping our stuff to the side, I begin doing the warmup stretches that Scar taught me. No way in hell I’m risking re-injuring myself day one of practice.

“Look at you,” Scar says as she walks over, squatting down next to me as she watches me warm up.

I smile at her, only a little bit of tension rising in my chest at seeing her for the first time since our kiss. Fuck. I can’t believe I kissed Scarlett Hayes. Even more so I can’t believe that I stopped it at just a kiss. Definitely not how I ever imagined it going, but it’s better this way and based on her genuine smile, I’m hoping she feels the same.

*Kinda.*

“I know,” I nod. “Can you believe I made it here? I didn’t think it was possible.”

She rolls her eyes and pushes my shoulder. “I knew it all along. You were just too busy throwing yourself a pity party to see.”

“Fuck, tell me how you really feel, Scar,” I laugh.

She raises an eyebrow at me as she smirks. “You probably don’t want the full truth.”

“Yeah, probably not,” I laugh.

“Hey, Doctor Babe! Got a sec?” Andrews calls out to Scar.

She rolls her eyes heavily as she stands, but I see a slight smile on her face as he jogs over to her. They are only about thirty feet away from me so well within hearing distance as I finish my warmup.

“Damion, I’m serious. You’re gonna get me in trouble. Aberton will fire my ass so quick if he thinks there is anything going on between us, which there isn’t in case you need the reminder,” she laughs with a smile that doesn’t look nearly annoyed as it should.

“Aw c’mon. You know I’d never let anything happen to my girl,” he smiles as he takes a step towards her.

My teeth clench together and my jaw ticks at the way he so casually refers to Scar as his girl. She’s not his girl. She’s not anyone’s. But if she was going to be anyone’s, she’d be mine, obviously. We haven’t been best friends for two decades for nothing.

“Besides, I was hoping we could change that,” Andrews says lowly.

“Change what?” Scar asks.

“There not being anything between us. C’mon, babe. One date. I promise you’ll never have more fun.”

Scar rolls her eyes and shakes her head.

“What part of no don’t you get, Andrews? You’re cute, but you aren’t worth me losing my job.”

His bright white teeth flash as he smiles at her and reaches out to cup her elbow in his hand.

“You’ve never said that I’m cute before. I knew you were checking me out during our sessions.”

Her face turns bright red, which makes my stomach twist. What the fuck? She actually thinks he’s good looking? She’s been checking him out during

their sessions? The thought that she could be getting as close to the other guys she works with as me sends a fucking inferno of anger inside me.

“C’mon, Scarlett. In all seriousness, I’d love to take you out. Get to know you outside all of this. What do you say? Saturday?”

I expect her to shoot him down instantly. How could she not? Instead, she stands there, smiling at him like she’s actually fucking debating it.

“Fine. One date. But you better keep your mouth shut about it. If any of the coaches catch wind of it, I’m going to deny it until my last breath.”

“Our little secret, babe,” he says with a wink before jogging onto the field with an extra pep in his step.

“You ready, bro?” Seb asks as he holds out his hand for me to stand up.

I take it as I scowl in the direction Andrews disappeared to, half tempted to find out what the fuck he’s playing at.

“What’s up with you?” Seb questions as he tries to see what I’m glaring at.

“Did you know Andrews has a thing for Scar?” I ask as I turn to face him.

He smirks before letting out a short laugh.

“I mean, him and the rest of the team.”

“What?”

“Slate, man, open your eyes,” he says as he points to a group of at least six guys who are all watching Scar bend over the bench to grab something out of her bag.

Something inside has me ready to punch every single motherfucker out just for looking at her, while the other part of me wants to just scoop her up and get her the fuck out of here so no one can even try to look at her.

“Since when?” I snap as I gesture towards the dead men walking.

“Uh, since always,” Seb says with a raised brow. “She’s a gorgeous woman on an NFL team’s staff, who literally gets paid to put her hands on

these horny fuckers' bodies."

"You make her sound like a goddamn prostitute," I balk.

"Fuck, no," Seb says with a shake of his head. "But everyone knows that apart from a small handful of us, no man would pass up an opportunity with Scarlett."

I go to ask him more, why he never told me any of this, why I never saw it for myself, when he keeps talking.

"But Andrews? He's had his eye on her from the moment she stepped through those doors. I wouldn't put it past him to find out he got hurt on purpose just to spend one on one time with her. Dude is gone over her."

"I don't like that," I scowl as I continue glaring at Andrews.

"Of course you don't," Seb scoffs.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you've had Scarlett's sole attention your entire life. You're used to it, so when you see someone coming in and taking some of that, it pisses you off. You're like a toddler learning how to share toys for the first time."

"She's not a toy, Seb," I snap.

"It's a simile, dumbass. Point is, women her age have had two, three, maybe even four serious boyfriends by now. Has she had even one?"

I pause at that before I shake my head slowly.

He shrugs. "She's probably tired of being single, and Andrews is a nice enough guy. He really likes her, don't sweat it. He'll treat her right, otherwise, I'll help you kick the shit out of him. Good?"

"I guess," I mutter as Seb jogs off.

My eyes flick over to Scar and see that she is watching Andrews with a small smirk. I want to snap at her, ask her what the fuck she is doing smiling at another man when less than twenty four hours ago her lips were on mine,

my tongue in her mouth. I almost do too as I feel my body take a step before I pause. Who was it again that stopped it all, though? Is this her way of punishing me? No. Scar doesn't play mind games like that. If she's into him, it's because she likes him, at least mostly. For some reason, that thought makes me even angrier. I catch the moment Andrews sees her watching him because a wide smile spreads across his face before he winks at her and slips on his helmet.

I don't fucking like this.

**12**





## Slater

“**H**ike!” Smith calls out as the play begins. Practice has been good. Actually, better than good. It’s turned out way better than I could have expected. I was fucking nervous that, despite the fact I’ve been able to run for weeks with no pain, the moment I suited up, stepped onto the turf for my coaches and team to see, that my body would fail me.

Thankfully, the first ball Smith tossed to me, my legs carried me the distance, my hands reached out at just the right time, and I was running the ball thirty-five yards. I could tell that when Burns tackled me, he was going easy on me. I appreciated him not trying to lay me the fuck out with my knee freshly recovered, but I can’t have my guys going easy. Especially not if we want to make it further than we did last season. I told him and the rest of our defense that, and from there, it was on.

I’m not at the level I was last season, but the first practice is always about working out the bugs. We’ve all been off for months, and even though we

keep up a rigorous workout and nutrition schedule in the off-season, it isn't the same as playing six days a week for months.

Though I don't have quite the speed that I did before, I did pretty fucking good today. I've gained my scrimmage team some solid yardage and even grabbed an interception. Technically, it was an interception from my own team, since I snagged the ball that was intended for Andrews. He gave me a pissy look, but he knew better than to say anything about it. He's still considered a rook, and though he is talented, he still knows his place.

I dip past Burns, though I feel him on my ass, ready to stay on me should Smith decide to throw the ball my way. Deciding to test my knee a bit, I jerk to the left and am thankful when I only feel a small twinge as I dodge the beefy defenseman beside me before I glance behind me towards Smith. His eyes quickly scan over his options before I see him land on Andrews.

Smith winds back his arm and delivers a bullet straight in the pathway of Andrews. It's a beautiful pass, probably would be a nice clean catch, if I didn't high tail it to snag it from him first. My fingers graze against the leather ball before I tuck it close to my body and run like hell.

When my feet cross over that end zone line, a euphoric feeling washes over me. The same feeling I get when I score a touchdown in an actual game. It's a high I wish I never had to come down for, a high few ever feel but everyone wants.

A few of the guys around me clap my back in congrats but one offensive player in particular looks fucking pissed. Our wide receiver rips off his helmet as he comes barreling towards me. To my surprise, he doesn't stop until he's right in front of me. His fists grip the fabric of my practice jersey as he rams his chest into mine.

"What the fuck, Slater?" he snarls.

I push him off me as I roll my eyes and toss the football to the ground. I'm walking away from the little punk when Coach blows his whistle and starts making his way over to me.

"Santos! What the hell was that?"

"A touchdown, Coach," I say dryly.

"Don't be a fucking smartass. Why in the hell have you deliberately stolen a ball from your own teammate twice in one goddamn practice?"

I don't know what he expects me to say or what he wants to hear, so I stay silent as he rages.

"You want to be a big man, prove that you still got it? This ain't my first rodeo, Santos. Selfish bullshit like that will get you benched faster than you can blink. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," I say, knowing there isn't anything I could say right now to pacify him.

He must know I'm not at all sorry because he just grumbles something under his breath and stomps off towards the other coaches.

"We're done for the day!" Aberton snaps. "See you all tomorrow."

Seb makes his way over to me, a raised eyebrow pointed towards me as we start walking to the locker rooms.

"Well you certainly made a scene for your first practice back."

"I wasn't trying to make a scene. I just knew I was faster than that slow motherfucker," I shrug as I begin pulling off my practice gear.

"Right. And you feeling the need to prove yourself doesn't have anything to do with the dick move you pulled not once but twice?" Seb asks with a deadpan look.

I don't say anything as I finish getting changed into my street clothes. Unfortunately, Seb gets changed just as quickly as I do and follows me out of

the locker room and into the hallway.

“I’m serious, man. I get it. You need to show that you haven’t lost it, and you did. You didn’t have to do Andrews dirty like that just to prove your point.”

I think Seb is still talking. Unfortunately, all I can focus on is the fact that Andrews is talking to Scar, again. He’s crowding her against the hallway, a hungry smile spread across his douchebag face and the part that pisses me off the most? She’s smiling up at him like she likes his attention, like she likes him invading her space.

“Huh, maybe I was wrong,” Seb says, shaking me from my thoughts as I turn to face him.

“What?”

“Maybe you didn’t fuck Andrews over to prove that you hadn’t lost your touch. Maybe you were trying to make sure that you didn’t lose something else.”

I narrow my eyes at Seb before shaking my head and crossing the distance across the hall.

“Hey, Scar. You ready?”

Andrews gives me an irritated glare and opens his mouth like he’s about to start talking shit. Oh, I fucking wish he would. Last player that went to blows with another was Mikey and our old QB two seasons ago. Though Chad deserved it, Mikey was suspended for it. I know the risks for punching Andrews’ stupid fucking face. For some reason, the consequences don’t look too bad compared to the satisfying feeling I know I’d have at putting him in his place.

Before he can say whatever stupid shit he is about to spit, Scar looks at me and cocks her head to the side as her brows furrow.

“Are we going somewhere?”

I nod. “Let’s go grab some dinner.”

She nods her agreement before giving Andrews an apologetic smile.

“Apparently even off the field, he’s impatient,” she says, obviously throwing a dig at my behavior at practice today.

Andrews snorts at that and nods. “No shit. I’ll text you.”

“Okay,” she says as he turns and walks into the locker room.

We walk over to my car before I unlock it and open the door for her. We can always make our way back here once we are done to grab her car.

When I fire up the car, I only make it to the first stoplight before she speaks.

“So, what the hell was up with the stuff you pulled today?”

I flick my eyes to her before turning back to face the road and shrugging.

“Just being aggressive.”

“That’s code for being a jerk, right?”

I let out a dry laugh as I run a hand through my hair and nod.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

I can feel her eyes on me but I’m smart enough not to look. Nothing good comes from me looking into Scar’s eyes. She’s either going to see right through me or the thoughts I’ve been trying like hell to bury lately are going to flare to life, and I’ll probably do something stupid. Like devour her fucking whole and not stop this time.

No, the road in front of me is the safest place to keep my eyes.

“So are you just going to ignore me?” she asks impatiently.

“Trying to,” I tease.

She lets out a short huff before settling back into her seat. I cruise the familiar streets before pulling up to one of Scar’s favorite food spots in the

city.

“Dicks? You trying to butter me up for something?” she smiles as she slips out of the car and goes to stand in line at the drive-in.

I’ve never been a huge fan of the place. I mean, it’s nothing special. Just some basic burgers pre-assembled and french fries. But I’m not sure you can call yourself a true Seattleite if you haven’t at least tried Dick’s Drive-In once.

“You better not be getting anything for yourself,” she says with a raised brow.

I roll my eyes as we step up to the counter.

“I’ve got my meal prep at home. I just couldn’t resist the temptation of watching you stuff your face with dollar burgers.”

“They’re good,” she defends as she places her order.

Chuckling, I slide some cash to the teenager working the register before he hands Scar her grease bag. We head back to my car, and she smiles happily as she pops the first fry into her mouth. I can’t help but smile at her. I swear she is so fucking easy to please.

“What?” she asks as she finishes chewing her bite.

I scoff as I shake my head. “The way you light up over a five-dollar dinner is just wild sometimes.”

“Hey, this is the closest I’ve gotten to any kind of dick in a while, let me enjoy it.”

A sarcastic chuckle escapes me before I can stop it.

“Yeah, don’t think that will be the case for much longer,” I mumble.

“What?” she asks with furrowed brows.

I shrug casually, though a knot begins forming inside my chest that makes me feel anything but casual.

“Just saying, Andrews seems to have his eyes on you.”

She swallows another bite before nodding.

“We are actually going out this weekend.”

“I heard,” I clip out shortly.

Scar frowns as she sets her bag on the ground.

“Do you not want me to go out with him?”

For a moment, I’m not sure what to say. What do I say to that? Fuck, of course I don’t want her to go out with the guy. First off, out of all the guys on the team he is probably the least compatible for Scar. He’s young, flashy with his money, and pretty fucking full of himself, and that’s coming from me. He’s a nice enough guy but definitely not who I would pick for Scar. Then again, who would I pick for Scar? No one fucking deserves her. She’s too perfect for anyone and everyone.

*Even me.*

“Just want you to be careful is all,” I shrug. “If he breaks your heart, I’ll have to beat his ass.”

Scar scoffs before smiling.

“Please, you wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“For you, I would.”

Her smile slowly drops until she is just staring at me, her eyes flicking over my face quickly as if she were looking for something. I’m tempted to ask her what it is, but she must not find it because her eyes drop back down to her food as she continues eating wordlessly.

“Why him?” I ask after a few moments.

She turns to her head as if she were considering the question as she finishes her bite.

“I don’t know. He’s the first guy to ask in a while, I guess.”

I frown at that, causing her to throw her hands up.

“I know, that sounds bad. I don’t mean it like that. I just mean, before I wasn’t really in a good mental place for dating or relationships, so I always turned guys down. Recently I’ve realized though, I’m not getting any younger and me shutting every guy down before I can even learn their middle name isn’t helping me any. One day, I want to get married, have children, all of that, you know? I want the kind of love that my parents had, the kind that yours do. I want to be the reason someone can’t breathe yet be the same reason their heart beats.”

She looks away from me quickly, her eyes on the floorboard as her cheeks begin to flame.

“Corny, I know,” she whispers with a self-deprecating laugh.

I shake my head as I reach over and place my hand over hers.

“Not at all. You deserve that kind of love, Bubbles. Any man would be lucky to make you their whole world.”

Her eyes peek up to watch me as she turns her head. “You mean that?”

Swallowing over my slowly tightening throat I nod.

“I do.”

A sweet smile slips across her face as she nods.

“I love you, Slate.”

My chest tightens at the soft lilt of her voice, or maybe it was her words. Either way, I squeeze her hand a little tighter as I give her the best smile I can muster as I nod.

“Love you too, Bubbles.”



**13**



## Slater

Scar's date is tonight. I don't know why I can't get that thought out of my head. I called her this afternoon, to see if she wanted to hang out or something when she reminded me that she couldn't because she had her date.

I didn't forget, just hoped she'd pick hanging out with me over Andrews, I guess. It sounds selfish and maybe even a little spoiled, but for twenty years, it's always been Scar and me. We've done everything together. She was always there for me and was always down to do whatever I had in mind.

Now that I really think about it, though, how much must that have sucked? Not that Scar is the type to complain because she wouldn't ever. But what has our friendship really been like for her? Hanging back to watch me chase tail, or more recently, my wife? Then after I was done with them, we would hang out and watch whatever I threw on or go wherever I pointed my car.

She has always been down for anything that I just assumed she was this laid back, easy going woman. What if that isn't the case, though? What if she did all of that just to appease me? A sickening feeling begins settling inside my stomach at the thought of that. I don't like that thought at all.

Tipping back my whiskey, I take a large sip before setting it back down onto the bar top. I don't usually like to go out, especially downtown. It's usually too crowded, not enough security, and way too many Crusader fans that want to talk my ear off about football. Not that I don't love them or what I do, but sometimes, I just want some quiet.

Seb and I found this place just on the outskirts last year. They never really took off in a big tourist way, but since that's the case, a lot of local celebrities have taken a liking to it, and it's become almost an unofficial hangout of ours.

I called Seb to see if he wanted to come grab a drink tonight, but he's having a family night with Erica and the kids. Obviously, Mikey and Trev aren't options since they both live out of state. I'm not really too close with any of the other guys on the team, and my best friend is currently on a date. That only left one person that I knew I could call and would show up for a drink, no questions asked.

"Slaterrr! What's up, man?" Ezra calls out across the bar as he makes his way over to me and claps my back.

"Not much. Glad you weren't busy. We haven't hung out in forever."

"Yeah, well that's what happens when you become a superstar and forget all the little people," he laughs as he flags down the bartender and orders a beer.

I frown at that and turn to him. "You don't actually think that, do you?"

He smiles and shakes his head.

"Nah, just fucking with you. We are all busy. Aaron and I are slowly trying to take the reins from Dad so he can actually retire one day. You've got your career. Shit. The only one of us who never stopped seeing you regularly is Scarlett."

“Yeah, don’t know where I’d be without her.”

Ezra nods as he takes a sip of his drink.

“So, what’s new with you? Besides work stuff?” I ask.

He smiles wide and ducks his head in a move that instantly reminds me of Scar before he looks up at me.

“I’ve been seeing someone.”

My mouth drops, and my eyebrows raise. Ezra is not the type to ‘see someone’. Much like me, especially in high school, he liked to keep his options open. As far as I know, he’s kept it that way ever since then too.

“No shit? That’s awesome, man. What’s her name?”

His face flushes as he messes with the peeling label on his beer bottle as he speaks.

“Uh, his name is Alex.”

I can tell by the way he is avoiding eye contact that he’s worried about revealing that piece of information to me. Like maybe he thinks I’ll judge him or something. Fuck that shit, though. Who the hell am I to tell him who he can and can’t be into? If he’s happy, that’s more than good enough for me.

“I’m so happy for you, bro. I can’t wait to meet him.”

Ezra’s eyes whip up to me quickly, confusion and concern heavy across his face. Like maybe he thinks I’m fucking with him. He watches me carefully for several seconds before his shoulders seem to relax and he nods.

“Yeah, he’s been asking to come over for Wednesday night dinner. I just don’t know if I’m ready to take that step yet, you know?”

I nod. “I can understand that. But if you’re concerned about what everyone is going to say, don’t be. As long as he treats you right, that’s all that matters.”

“I still like women,” he says, almost like he is trying to reassure me, or

maybe he's trying to reassure himself. "I just like...him too."

Smiling at one of my oldest and best friends, I nod.

"That's fucking awesome, bro. I'm happy for you."

Ezra finally lets go of the residual tension he seemed to be holding as he nods and smiles too.

"What about you? How have you been holding up since Nikki?"

I pause on that for a moment because I don't really know how to answer it. Fine, I guess? No, maybe not fine. If I was fine, wouldn't I have signed the papers already? I'm not, not fine, though. I'm...

"Hanging in there," I say simply as I take another sip of my drink.

He nods sympathetically and pats my back.

"I'm sorry, bro. I'd like to say I'm surprised, but I'm not. She was a shallow bitch," he says with a shake of his head before he looks at me sheepishly. "No offense."

I wave him off. Before if anyone would have spoken that way about Nik, I would have rolled on their ass, now? I can't help but feel like an idiot for not seeing what everyone else clearly did. Rose-colored glasses and all that, I guess.

"Scar is on a date," I say, not quite sure where it came from.

Ezra raises an eyebrow. "Really? With who?"

My lip curls at the reminder of the douche.

"Damion Andrews."

"No way? That dude is a beast. Fuck, good for her," he laughs as he drains his beer and sets it to the side.

My brows furrow at his casualness.

"That's all you have to say?"

He turns his head to the side with a soft chuckle and shrugs.

“What do you expect me to say?”

“I don’t know. Where is the whole big brother act that I’ve seen you put on a million times before?”

Ezra shrugs as he orders another beer.

“She’s a grown woman with a good head on her shoulders. She doesn’t need me interfering in her personal life.”

I just stare at him because I really don’t understand. How is this the same guy that warned me and damn near every other guy within a five-mile radius away from his baby sister? He was a protective motherfucker always, and while I liked having extra eyes always looking out for Scar, I can think of one time in particular he wouldn’t have acted a tenth as calm as he is now.

“Are you fucking kidding me? What about when you got all growly with me before I left for college? Where is that guy when I tell him that his sister is out on a date with a douchebag?”

He shakes his head as he takes a sip of his new beer.

“That wasn’t because I didn’t think you’d treat her right, Slate. That was because I knew if you two crossed that line there would be no coming back for her. I was worried about my baby sister starting something with her best friend, who was moving over ten hours away.”

I mull over his words for several seconds, not quite processing them right. At least, I don’t think I am. Is he seriously saying that he wouldn’t have had a problem with Scar and me back then? Because that is sure as shit not the impression I got. Then again, his reasoning makes sense. He knows me, better than most. He knows Scarlett is the last person I would ever hurt. That since the day I’ve met her, I have been ready to do anything and everything to protect her. That I always would.

“You know,” he continues, clearly oblivious to my inner thoughts. “When

you came back to Seattle, me and Aaron had a bet of how long it would take you to go after Scar. When you brought Nikki home and introduced her as your girlfriend, we were both shocked. But you two seemed happy, and Scar started dating that geeky dude so it's not like we were going to say anything," he laughs lightly.

I can't find it in me to laugh, though. What the fuck?

"Wait. What? You guys had a bet? On if Scar and I started dating?"

"It wasn't if, it was when," Ezra points out with a smile and a shake of his head.

"So, you guys wanted us to get together?" I ask slowly, still not quite sure what the fuck is going on right now.

"I mean, we both just thought it was inevitable, you know?"

Inevitable.

Huh.

We catch up for another hour or so, talking about work, football, and Alex. I try to stay present and focused on my friend, but I feel my mind drifting to other places. Places like an alternate present where I would have kissed Scar that night by the fire. Or if I would have gone after her instead of Nikki. Where would we be now? Would we be together? Married? Kids?

Or would all of my worst fears have come true? That we would have given us a shot, done the whole nine yards, only to have it not work out. Then I'd be worse off than I am even now. I lost my wife. I thought I was going to lose my career, but I never once thought I would lose Scar. Playing the what-if game will only drive me crazy. Everything happened for a reason, whatever that reason is, and Scar and I just were not meant to be. Not like that.

*Right?*



14



## Scarlett

I was excited for tonight. I genuinely was. It was the first date that I had been out on in over four years, by choice but still. I like Damion, he's a nice guy. I've been working with him for a while now on his shoulder, and in that time, he has used every opportunity to get to know me better and flirt, heavily.

I thought his persistence was sweet, that it showed he was really interested in me. Now, I think I've figured out that's just part of his personality.

He picked me up in his McLaren, and though it's a very nice car, I probably didn't need a breakdown of every aftermarket add-on he had put on this thing, or how much each add-on cost. I'm sure he is probably trying to impress me with how much money he makes, most girls probably would be. But I'm Slater Santos' best friend. I've seen his bank account balance. He is one of the top paid running backs in the league, and Damion is only into his second season with the Crusaders. Their net worth is definitely not the same.

We pull up to Canilise, one of the most expensive and exclusive restaurants in the state. I know because when Slater got his signing bonus

with the Crusaders, he took the whole family out to dinner here. With eight people, the bill was north of \$3,000, and even though it was good, the portion size was laughable. We all agreed never to come back for that reason. In Damion's defense though, maybe he's just never been.

"This is my favorite restaurant in the city. You're gonna love it," Damion winks as he steps out of the car for the valet.

*Or maybe he has been here before.*

When I step out of the passenger seat, I look to see Damion is already walking through the front doors of the restaurant. I don't know why that irks me. Maybe because I grew up as the only girl in a house full of men, especially after my mom passed away, I have come to almost expect men to open my door, or at the very least, hang back while I get out. Then again, it's not really a man versus woman thing. I can honestly say Erica or Vi have never walked off without me when we have gone out to lunch.

Shaking it off, I smile at the man holding the front door open for me as I find Damion waiting at the hostess table for me. He smiles widely before slipping his hand behind my back.

"Our table is ready. I reserved something private, so we won't get swarmed with people."

Okay, maybe I'm just being irritable but a small part of me wants to remind him that he isn't Trevor Michaels, or Slater Santos, or even Sebastian Caldwell. He may be good, but he's not a household name, at least yet. I keep it to myself though because I don't think emasculating a man is the best start to a first date.

Damion surprisingly pulls out my chair for me when we get to the table that is tucked away from the main dining area, while still maintaining the

waterfront view. I thank him as I take my seat and open up the smooth leather menus placed on the table.

“Good evening, Mr. Andrews. Can I start either of you off with something to drink?” our waitress asks.

“Water is good with me, thank you,” I smile.

Damion gives me a disbelieving side eye before he shakes his head and smiles.

“We will take a bottle of Chateau Mouton Rothschild, and I’ll also have a glass of Highland Park. Thanks, Sweetheart,” he says with a wink that has our young waitress blushing viciously before scurrying off, his eyes tracking her every step before she turns around a corner. Finally, he seems to be able to peel his gaze off her ass before he looks at me with a carefree smile.

Did that really just happen?

Doing my best to remain polite, I keep my mouth shut and focus on the menu. I didn’t have time to eat lunch today, and I am starving. The sirloin and baked potato are practically calling my name.

“So, you are from Illinois, right?” I ask.

Damion nods. “Yeah, can’t tell you how happy I am to be out of all those farmlands.”

“Don’t like rural?” I laugh.

He rolls his eyes and chuckles hollowly as he shakes his head.

“Definitely not.”

I nod at that as an awkward silence falls over us. I guess when he isn’t talking about himself and I’m not talking about work or his therapy, there isn’t much to say.

Thankfully, our waitress comes over to break the tension, filling up both of our wine glasses before she sets down his scotch and my water. Fun fact: I

hate wine. It makes me sick every time I drink it. Not that Damion knew that when he ordered it. It's not fair to hold that against him, right?

"Have you two had a chance to take a look at our menu? Would you like to hear our chef's special for the night?" the waitress asks.

Damion holds up a dismissive hand to her as he speaks.

"I'll take the filet mignon, medium rare with steamed vegetables and a baked potato. She will have the garden salad with grilled chicken, dressing on the side."

A laugh bubbles out of me at that but when Damion turns to me curiously like he isn't sure what is so funny, my smile drops.

"You're joking, right?"

"What?" he asks.

"You did not just order for me. No, wait. You did not just order yourself a large decadent meal while ordering me a salad that for all intents and purposes displays that I am trying to watch my weight, right? You couldn't possibly be that sexist or ignorant. I have a vagina between my legs, it doesn't mean I don't enjoy a steak and a potato."

Damion's face flushes as if he were embarrassed before glancing to the waitress apologetically.

"Lower your voice, you're making a scene."

Ha! Lower my voice? He clearly wants a docile perfect little trophy piece, and though I am polite, I won't be pushed around by a guy I barely know. So it's probably best to end while we are ahead. Or more accurately, before we fall anymore behind with this train wreck of a date.

Silently, I grab my purse at my feet and stand before making my way through the dining area and out into the valet area. I'm just finishing ordering

myself a ride home when a hand cups my elbow and spins me around to face a furious looking Damion.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” he snaps.

“Me?” I laugh. “What about you? Do you actually think any of your behavior tonight has been remotely acceptable for a date?”

“What are you even talking about?”

“Exactly,” I say with a shake of my head. “You don’t even see it. You will, though. One day.”

Damion huffs an irritated breath as he shakes his head at me.

“Scarlett, can we please wrap up whatever this is and get back to our table?”

As if the lord himself was looking down on me, my ride conveniently pulls up, rolling down the passenger side window as he speaks through it.

“Are you Scarlett?”

“Yes,” I say gratefully as I take a step away from the big dumb idiot to my right.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

“Home,” I say dryly. “Let me make it clear for you, Damion. The date is over. Spoiler alert: It didn’t go well. Bonus material: There will not be a second.”

Without another word, I open the car door and slide into the backseat.

“Jesus,” I huff as the driver turns to face me.

“Was that Damion Andrews?”

Turning my eyes to face him I just shake my head as I look out the window.

“Just drive, please.”

The guy nods and thankfully, puts the car into drive. It doesn’t take long to

get to my house. I slip out of the car and quietly make my way through the lobby and up to my apartment. I've got to say I'm moving with a lot less pep in my step than when I left here not an hour ago. Looks like I had it right the first time when I had my whole hiatus from dating. If that is what's out there, then I'm better off single.

After I unlock my door, I flick on the light before kicking off my heels and dropping my purse onto my entryway table.

"How was your date?" a voice asks from my couch.

I startle for a moment before looking to see that it's just Slater. He is perched on the edge of my couch, his elbows resting on top of his knees as his head is turned to face me.

"Holy shit, you scared me. What are you doing here? Is everything okay?" I say as I slowly walk towards him.

He doesn't answer, instead his eyes flick over my dress before coming back to my face.

"You look beautiful."

I smooth my hair out, not used to it being down for once before I drop my hands against the black satin of my dress and give him a tired smile.

"Thanks."

Slater stares at me for several seconds before he speaks again.

"Well? Did you have a good time?"

I let out a dry laugh as I shake my head and drop down onto the couch and place my legs into his lap. Slater leans back to accept them before he begins massaging the balls of my feet.

"What happened?" Slater asks curiously as his fingers begin easing the relief of those stupid tall high heels.

I run my hands through my hair and toss it behind me as I rest my head

onto the armrest of the couch.

“What didn’t? He talked about himself the entire way, not so subtly bragging about how much his car was worth. When we got to the restaurant he didn’t get my door, didn’t even wait for me before he was walking inside the restaurant. I ordered a water, he corrected me and ordered wine-”

“Wine makes you sick,” Slater says with a scrunched face.

“Mhmm,” I agree as I continue. “He flirted with the waitress right in front of me, and the cherry on top? He ordered for me, a grilled chicken garden salad, dressing on the side,” I say with a laugh.

Slater’s mouth is open, his face stunned before it spreads to a smile. A small chuckle slips out before another and another until he is practically rolling laughing. I scoff and grab a throw pillow from behind me, throwing it at his stupid handsome head.

“It’s not funny! It was awful! He even followed me out of the restaurant and didn’t understand why I was mad or leaving. You could have warned me that he was dumber than a box of rocks,” I scoff.

Slater throws his hands up in defense as he tries to control his laughter.

“Hey, I don’t know the guy very well off the field, but I told you to be careful.”

I roll my eyes as I reach for the remote, flicking on the tv and find myself more than pleased to find a One Tree Hill rerun on. I grab the pillow I threw at Slater and set it in his lap before resting my head on it and facing the TV.

“Whatever, I just hope he doesn’t say anything to anyone now that things ended badly. I definitely don’t want to lose my job because of that man child.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Slater says before he bends down and presses a quick kiss to the side of my head. “If he opens his mouth to anyone, I’ll shut him

up. But if it went as bad as you say, I doubt his ego would let him tell anyone about tonight.”

“Here’s hoping,” I laugh as the intro music winds down and the episode begins.

Slater props his legs onto the coffee table and settles back into a more comfortable position as we quietly watch our favorite show. I’m not sure when I closed my eyes, but I feel a slight shift underneath me before Slater’s hushed voice sounds over the TV.

“Hey, Scar?”

“Hmm?” I hum, choosing to keep my eyes closed.

“Do you ever think about that night? Before I left for Brighton?”

He doesn’t have to specify past that. I know exactly the night he’s talking about, in detail, but I’m too tired to say any of that, so I settle for a simple, “Mhmm.”

A short pause comes from Slater as I begin to drift back to sleep. I feel a soft kiss press against the side of my head and whispered words so quiet I almost miss them.

“Me too.”





15

## Scarlett

When I woke up that next morning, Slater was already gone, which was kind of weird. Then again, there has been a lot about me and Slater lately that has been weird. I'm sure it has to do with the divorce, the injury, just all of the uncertainty in his life right now that is causing this weird tension. When he finally faces it all, I'm sure things will go back to normal.

Can't quite tell if I'm happy about that.

I'm helping Erica and Vi clean up Slater's kitchen after the amazing barbeque the boys just did. They wanted to squeeze in one more get together before things really get into full swing, and since we are deep in practice season now, they won't get many more opportunities.

Looking out to the yard, I watch Tucker, Rosalie, and Daphne all chase each other around while baby Rodney very unsteadily toddles after them. I know you aren't supposed to pick favorites but that chubby sweet face that Rodney has going for him melts my heart every time. He's a perfect

combination of Declan and Vi. You can tell he is going to be a tank just like his dad, but he has his mother's eyes, just like Tucker.

"What are they getting up to now?" Erica sighs as she peeks past me.

"Relax, they are just playing."

Erica gives me a deadpan look. "That's what you think. Until one of them ends up hurt, while the other is breaking everything in sight when she thinks no one is looking."

"You make them sound like gremlins," Vi laughs as she wraps up the potato salad and sticks it into the fridge.

"I wish. Then that would mean they only came out part of the day or if they got wet."

We all laugh at that as Erica finishes her wine before rinsing her glass.

"I love them, I swear I do but some days," she says with a shake of her head.

"Preach," Vi chuckles as she pats Erica's shoulder.

A pang that is beginning to feel familiar runs through my chest. I can't help but feel once again like I'm missing out. I wonder what it would feel like to be able to complain about my own kids with other moms. A weird thing to want, right? I guess it's just another small reminder that it feels like everyone around me is passing me by.

Once the kitchen is cleaned, Vi pokes her head outside and calls for the kids while Erica grabs her purse.

"C'mon, kids! Nap time," Vi shouts.

"Aww but Mama, I ain't tired," Tucker says with a slight southern drawl he's no doubt picked up from living down in Tennessee.

"Not you, baby, but the rest of the kiddos need their naps. We are going to head over to Auntie Erica and Uncle Seb's, okay? We can do something just

the two of us.”

The sweet mama’s boy smiles up at her and nods as the rest of the kids filter inside. Erica walks over to Seb, leaning down to brush a quick but sweet kiss against him. I don’t miss the way Trevor watches the encounter closely. I’m probably in the minority here, but I actually feel bad for Trevor. I know what he did when they were in college was messed up; believe me, I got every last detail from Slate on it. But you know what they say, all is fair in love and war, and boy, did he fight hard, and he still didn’t get the girl. That had to hurt.

Trevor catches me watching him sympathetically and quickly turns his gaze down to his nearly empty drink before tossing the rest back and setting it to the side. Maybe I feel a sort of kinship with Trevor because in a way we are the same. Forever friend zoned. Destined to stand idly by while the ones we love go off with others. I’m grateful Slater and Nikki never had any children because I can only imagine how hard that would have been to see. Poor Trevor has to sit back and watch these beautiful twins, one looking exactly like Seb and the other just like Erica.

You can tell he has a soft spot for Rosalie, not that he doesn’t love Daphne too. But Rosalie’s long red hair seems to capture his attention almost instantly. She probably reminds him of Erica when she was a little girl, and it doesn’t help that out of all the guys, apart from her dad of course, she always runs to Trevor first.

“Drive safe, okay?” Seb tells Erica in that demanding tone that if you didn’t see the adoration on his face when he looked at her, you’d think he was being a controlling jerk. I thought that about Sebastian Caldwell for a long time. I never thought he really liked me. It just took me being around

him and Erica just once to realize that is just how he is, and he only ever really smiles around her or the girls.

“It’s like five blocks. We will manage,” Erica laughs as she comes up to Trevor.

He stands and wraps her up in a hug before speaking into her hair.

“I’ll call you guys when I land.”

“You can just text,” Seb says in a tone that lacks any heat but is thick with tension.

Trevor glances over Erica’s shoulder and shares a heavy look with Seb before he swallows roughly and nods, giving Erica a tight smile.

“I’ll text you.”

I watch as Erica gives him an almost sympathetic smile in return before she moves to Declan and Slater, hugging them both before catching up with Vi who is wrangling the kids. Once they are all out of the house, the place is quiet for several seconds before I remember the peach cobbler I have warming in the oven.

“Crap, I totally forgot about dessert,” I say as I walk into the kitchen. “Seb, Dec, do you guys want me to wrap some up for Erica, Vi, and the kids? I made plenty,” I say as I start shuffling through the back of Slater’s cabinet where he always haphazardly tosses his Tupperware dishes.

“She bakes for you and knows where everything in your house is? No wonder you aren’t too upset about Nikki leaving. You got Nikki 2.0 in there. Though this model is an obvious upgrade considering I don’t think the original even knew where the kitchen was,” Trevor laughs, though he is the only one laughing.

“Trev,” Declan says lowly, like he is trying to warn him to shut up.

“Shut the fuck up,” Slater scoffs. “Scar and Nikki are nothing alike, and I

sure as shit didn't slide Scar into the position. She's my friend, you asshole, a better one than you."

I expect that verbal barb to land, and Trevor to get angry, but instead he just laughs it off and shrugs as I dish up the dessert into the containers, doing my best to keep my head down and stay out of the quickly heating conversation out there.

"Just a friend? I don't buy that shit for one moment. You can't spend as much time as you two do and not want to at least see each other naked."

My face heats at his words when Seb lets out a derisive grunt as he takes a sip of his drink and says, "You would know."

Trevor turns to face Seb but doesn't give him anything to work with before turning back to Slater. Apparently he is only trying to get under Slater's skin tonight.

"I mean, seriously, Slate. You can't tell me you haven't thought about how Scarlett would-"

A fist bangs into the side table, silencing the room before Slater practically snarls at Trevor.

"Shut the fuck up! She's my friend. Just my goddamn friend! No, I don't want to see her naked. No, I've never thought about her in that way. We. Are. Just. Friends."

I know his sharp words were meant for Trevor, but it feels as if they were aimed directly at me and dang, did they hit the mark. Letting out a shaky breath, I slowly put down the servicing spoon before quietly slipping through the living room and out the back sliding glass door. I keep walking until I make my way over to the pool, sitting down on the edge, just where my feet barely dip into the water.

I shouldn't be upset. I have no right to be and to be honest, I'm tired of the

emotional whiplash I'm giving myself. It's been hard enough trying to push away the amazing kiss and stinging rejection that shortly followed it. Since then, I've been trying so hard to convince myself that I'm over my feelings for Slater, that I've moved past it all. When it comes down to it, though, I'm hurt to hear the words that, in my head, I know to be true. That part isn't the problem, though. It's the big stupid beating organ in my chest that's the problem. It won't get a clue.

You'd think when I helped Slater pick out an engagement ring, it would have gotten the hint. Maybe even when I watched him put said ring on her finger in front of a church full of people. Or maybe even over any point in the last twenty years when we had every opportunity to be more, and it never happened. It's just not meant to be, and I really wish my heart would get the memo because being in this awkward limbo hurts so fucking much.

I feel my eyes beginning to brim with tears when the sliding glass door opens and shuts. God, I don't want to talk to Slater right now. I know he is going to apologize for raising his voice and maybe even apologize on Trevor's behalf, but I just don't want to hear any of it right now.

Quickly wiping at my eyes, I glance to my right to see a pair of bare legs without a trace of ink on them settle in next to me. I furrow my brows to see that Trevor is sitting next to me, not Slater.

"You okay?" he asks in a voice that is surprisingly caring coming from him.

I wouldn't say that Trevor isn't a caring person, just very unbothered by most around him, unless we are talking about Erica or the twins. I'm sure he wasn't always that way, though. I see good in him so maybe he was once a good guy before he became this big time pro-athlete playboy that the whole country knows him to be.

I shrug, not trusting my voice at the moment as I try to swallow past the large lump that has formed.

Trevor nods as he stares out at the pool before he speaks.

“The friend zone fucking sucks, huh?”

I can’t help but laugh. It’s not funny what he said, instead it’s really true. Maybe it’s just the way he said it, like he’s resigned to the fact just as much as I am, but it doesn’t make it suck any less.

“Yep.”

Trevor lets out a half chuckle as he turns to face me, those bright blue eyes practically staring into my soul as if he were trying to figure me out.

“Slater’s an idiot. He’s into you, he just won’t let himself admit it.”

I scoff. “Uh, were you not just in that same room as me? Where he seemed almost repulsed by the thought of being interested in me? In seeing me naked? Not sure what you tell the girls down in Texas to get them into bed, but I’m pretty sure it isn’t that.”

He laughs and shakes his head.

“Freckles, I don’t need to say much more than a few words to get a woman into bed.”

I frown at the sudden nickname for me. I have a few freckles across the bridge of my nose from years of being in the sun practically all summer long, but not enough to warrant an entire nickname around it.

“Well, good for you, I guess,” I say with a shrug because what else do I say to a man bragging about how easily he can sleep with women?

We are silent for a few more moments before I feel Trevor lean in closer to me, his breath only a few inches from the side of my face as he speaks.

“Want to make him jealous?”

I jerk back several inches to look at him properly, my face in a disbelieving



scowl.

“What?”

“Slater. He clearly doesn’t see a good thing when it’s right in front of him. Men are stubborn like that, trust me,” he laughs hollowly. “Sometimes all they need is a little push, a little perceived competition,” he says as he rests his left hand on my bare thigh where my shorts have ridden up.

I look down at his hand, frowning at it. Not necessarily at it but more at the fact that as soon as he touched my thigh a zing of something ran up my leg and through my entire body. His hand is large and warm, gripping my thigh with the pressure that tells me I could push him off if I wanted to but heavy enough that he is making his intentions clear.

Is he crazy? He thinks that if I sleep with him it will make Slater jealous and realize that he wants to be with me? Fat chance. That is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.

Trevor’s hand begins to move slowly up my thigh, snapping my attention to his face as he watches me with a steady yet confident smile.

“A-and if it doesn’t work?” I stutter, hating myself as I even entertain this idiot.

Trevor’s mouth breaks out into a smile that is honestly kind of breathtaking. Wow, has he always been this gorgeous?

“Well, then at least you’ll get a handful of orgasms out of it.”

“A handful?” I ask with widened eyes.

He shoots me a wink as his grip on my upper thigh tightens.

“You know my game on the field, Freckles. I’m a big player, I go for those big numbers. I’m no different in the bedroom.”

I turn away quickly, my cheeks reddening by the mental images already flickering to life in my head as butterflies begin swarming in a place a lot

lower than usual. His left hand stays planted on my thigh as his right hand comes up to my chin, slowly turning me to face him.

“What do you have to lose?”

**16**



## Slater

Fucking Trevor. I'm genuinely wondering why we are still friends with the asshole. He clearly still wants Seb's wife, a thing I would not take kindly to at all. He has disrespected Declan's wife in the past and now he's talking shit about me and Scar, making up a bunch of bullshit that couldn't be further from the truth.

*Or at least, I don't want any of it to be true.*

I think we need to put it to a vote. Trevor needs to get voted off the fucking island.

"Who the fuck does he think he is?" I snarl out loud, still not over his comments despite him leaving the room a few minutes ago.

Seb scoffs as he shakes his head. "Trevor fucking Michaels. Thinks he can do or say whatever the fuck he wants with no consequences."

"C'mon, guys," Mikey says, always being the voice of reason. "You know why he is the way he is. He's miserable with his own life, he tries to bring others down because he doesn't know how else to deal with it. But he's our friend-"

“Is he? Is he our friend, Mikey? Did you think he was your friend when he told you that you should dump Vi and run when you were finally happy? How about when he pulled the endless amount of shit with Seb and Erica? That guy hasn’t been our friend in a long fucking time.”

Seb stays quiet, assumingly agreeing with me, but Mikey just shakes his head.

“I knew then what I know now. He was being an asshole because he’s hurting. Everyone in this room knows that, whether you want to say it out loud or not. Trevor is a good guy.”

Seb scoffs as he points his beer out to the backyard.

“Yeah, well that good guy is all over Slater’s girl.”

“She’s not my girl,” I snap at Seb before his words actually sink in. “Wait, what?” I say as I lean up to look through the sliding glass door as I see Trevor and Scar sitting next to each other at the edge of the pool. Too close. One of his hands is resting on her thigh while the other is cupping her face. He says something to her that she seems to be thinking over before she licks her lips and gives him a nod.

I watch as Trevor goes to stand up, holding out a hand for her to do the same. When they are both up, he doesn’t release her hand, instead intertwining their fingers together as they step inside and walk straight past us without a word, heading up the stairs that only leads to the guest bedrooms.

What. The. Fuck.

Anger begins to burn inside my veins when I hear a bedroom door open and shut. Are you kidding me? Are you fucking kidding me? Trevor and Scar? In my fucking house no less? No. No way. No way in fucking hell.

My eyes must look manic as they flick over to Mikey and Seb because

surely I didn't just see what I thought I did. But Mikey's widened eyes and Seb's disgusted head shake tell me that I'm not imagining things. That he is really trying to make a move on Scar.

And she is letting him.

Hell fucking no.

Standing up quickly, I begin making my way to the stairs.

"Should we stick around to help you hide the body?" Seb offers in a tone that honestly sounds completely serious.

"No," I snap.

If I'm gonna kill this motherfucker, I'm gonna do it with no witnesses. Except Scar, but I'll deal with her later.

I hear Seb and Mikey grab their keys and open and shut the front door just as I make it outside the only closed bedroom door upstairs. My chest is heaving, my pulse rapidly thumping in my neck. I feel like I'm about to have a goddamn heart attack. Maybe it's not that bad. Maybe they are just talking or something.

Suddenly, a sweet moan comes from inside the door. A moan I've never heard before, but I wish I could again because I honestly don't think I've heard anything so hot. Did that come from Scarlett? My shaky hand reaches for the doorknob, slowly turning it just to peek inside.

When it cracks open a few inches, the first thing I see are Scar's jean shorts that she was wearing haphazardly tossed onto the floor along with a hot pink G string. A G string? That is definitely not the kind of panties I ever pictured sweet blushing Scarlett to wear. And if I'm being honest, especially back in high school, I thought about her panties a lot.

The next thing I see is Trevor at the end of the bed, on his knees with Scarlett's bare thighs wrapped around his head like a pair of earmuffs as his

face is buried in her pussy. Rage rushes through me, jealousy a close second, but something surprising also takes over me.

Lust.

I watch as Trevor's hands grip Scarlett's smooth skin tightly, so tight I know he's going to leave bruises on her flawless skin if he isn't careful. He doesn't seem to care about being careful right now as he savagely eats her pussy like he's less of a human and more a fucking animal. Part of me wants to rip him off her, beat his pretty boy face into a bloody pulp for daring to touch what has always been mine. But another part of me deep down inside, a confusing part, knows that Scarlett is close. The way her toes curl and her fingers tighten in my sheets tells me she is about to cum and something in me can't deny her that.

As if she can sense me, Scarlett's eyes spring open, looking directly at me as her mouth drops open into a perfectly round O as she cums all over my best friend's face. Those sweet moans I heard from before are amplified as she writhes and grinds against Trevor's mouth, pulling every ounce of pleasure she can from him until her body falls back into a limp heap.

Trevor slowly eases back onto his heels, licking his lips slowly as if he is savoring the taste of her when he glances at me with a knowing smile.

"Took you long enough. Are you going to just stand there and watch or are you going to join us? I'm not even exaggerating when I say this has got to be some of the best pussy I've tasted in literally years."

I glance down at Scarlett's half naked body, not being able to resist. My cock hardens to a steel pipe when my eyes run over her almost bare pussy except for a thin strip of hair down the front. A fucking landing strip? Another surprise that I never pictured Scar with.

My mouth waters at the sight of her pussy partially spread open. As if

Trevor can read my mind, he looks up to Scarlett and winks at her.

“C’mon, Freckles. Open your legs for him. Show him what a pretty little pussy you have,” he encourages.

Scarlett’s stunning hazel eyes flick to me, never once wavering as her legs slowly drop open. I don’t look at first, instead continuing to stare at her beautiful face. A face I’ve loved nearly all my life, even if I never wanted to admit it out loud. A face I’ve admired, even when I shouldn’t have.

I know we are about to cross a line, one that we can never come back from, but the desperate look in her eyes and the matching feeling in my chest tell me that we already crossed that line. In fact, we probably crossed it a long time ago.

Breaking eye contact with Scar, I look down to see her thighs spread open, her pussy pink and glistening from her orgasm. Fuck. She is so fucking perfect. Slowly, I make my way over to her, dropping down to my knees just like Trevor was earlier, but I don’t touch her, not yet. What if I touch her and this delicate limbo we are balancing in falls apart? What if I touch her and...

Trevor seems to sense my hesitance and being the overbearing asshole that he is, takes matters into his own hands. Literally. I watch as he slips a finger inside her pussy, pushing as far in as he can before withdrawing almost all the way. The second time he does this Scar lets out a content sigh that turns into a breathy moan.

Glancing over at me, Trevor gives me a challenging look before glancing up at Scar who is watching us carefully.

“You like my fingers playing with your pretty little pussy, Freckles?”

She bites her lower lip, glancing to me before looking back at Trevor and giving him a little nod. Trevor smirks like the cocky bastard he is as he continues fingering her.



“I know you do, baby girl. I can feel you pulsing around me. Do you want Slater to touch you too?”

I turn my gaze to Scar, a million things wordlessly passing between us. Did she want me? Had I lost my chance with her? Was she more than satisfied with Trevor, and I was nothing but a creepy voyeur interrupting?

When her head gave another nod, her eyes solely on me, I felt my chest beat out of rhythm for several seconds before I took a deep breath and nodded back to her. Glancing to Trevor, I expect him to move but the cheeky fucker just smirks at me as he continues rubbing against her g-spot. I know he’s goading me. He thinks I’m gonna back out or something. Well fuck that. He’s the one in here touching *my* girl.

I push my finger inside her, forcing her pussy to make room for both of us as we slowly thrust in and out of her. Scar’s eyes flutter closed, a louder pleased moan escaping her as Trevor and I fall into sync.

“Oh my god,” she gasps when my finger brushes over her g-spot.

“Do you like that, Scar?” I ask, finally finding my voice for the first time.

“Yes. So good,” she moans as I do it again.

Trevor lets out a throaty chuckle as he keeps our pace.

“You love having both of us in you at once, don’t you, Freckles? Like feeling Slater and I work together to please you?”

“Yes!” she gasps as our pace quickens.

“Good girl,” I praise as her pussy constricts against our fingers.

I glance down to see her clit, pink and so tiny, it makes my mouth water just looking at it. Without allowing myself to get into my head, I continue fingering her as I lean down and draw a line with my tongue from where my finger is all the way up to her clit.

“Oh god, yes,” she gasps as her hand reaches down, burying itself into my

curls as she pushes my face against her harder.

I'm all too happy to oblige because Trevor is right. She is the most delicious thing I have tasted, ever really. Like vanilla and a hint of cocoa. The familiar yet intoxicating scent sends me into a haze. I continue thrusting my finger in and out of her, but I'm instantly obsessed with her taste, desperate for more.

I don't realize that Trevor has stopped and has pulled out of her until he is standing at the bed next to her.

"Let's get this shirt off, Freckles. Show Slater these beautiful tits he's probably thought about more times than he can count," Trevor says in a soft voice.

I hum my agreement, suddenly greedy to see Scar fully bared to me. She gasps at the feeling, so I do it again and again, humming against her clit, allowing the vibrations to pleasure her as Trevor works on her shirt and bra.

"Fuck, baby girl. These are some beautiful tits. Are they real?" I hear Trevor ask as I continue devouring Scar's pussy.

"Yes," she gasps.

"Beautiful," he murmurs. "Slater, look how beautiful our girl is."

I tear my mouth away from her pussy before pinning Trevor with a deathly glare.

"Mine," I rumble.

He smirks at me in a challenging way as he leans down and cups one of her breasts.

"Not tonight," he says just before he closes his mouth over one of her nipples.

Scar's back arches at the contact as she digs her hand into his hair much like she did with me. Jealousy and maybe a little bit of my competitive side

comes to the forefront. Her attention should be on me, not him. Glancing up at her beautiful breasts, my mouth waters, eager to taste them. Soon. For now, I need to make my girl cum again. Trevor got one orgasm from her. He won't be getting any more. They are all mine now.

Turning my attention back to her pussy, I eat her with a renewed aggression. I suck and flick against her, moving my tongue as quickly as I can, while consuming every drop of flavor I can from her. I slip two fingers inside her, finding her g-spot instantly before putting pressure on it and rubbing in fast motions.

“Oh my god! Guys! I'm gonna...gonna-”

My eyes flick up to see Trevor still sucking on one of her nipples while his other hand pinches the other. I don't take my mouth off her pussy, instead sucking and licking her clit until her body tenses and her pussy begins spasming against my fingers. I let her ride them through her orgasm, moving my mouth from her clit down so that I can lick every drop clean.

When the shaking in her body has stopped and her breathing has shallowed, she sits up slightly to see us, uncertainty in her eyes.

“W-what about you guys?” she asks in a sexy voice that I've never heard come from that mouth until now.

“You think we're done?” Trevor says with a smirk. “Aw, sweet girl. I didn't promise you two orgasms. What did I promise you?” he asks her, causing her gaze to move to him.

“A handful,” she says breathily.

A handful? Really? I swear to god if I didn't have Scar spread out like a fine buffet in front of me, I'd deck the motherfucker.

“That's a good girl. A handful is at least three. You can give us one more but this time we are going to play too. Right, Slate?”

I roll my eyes at his pushiness before I walk around the bed, sitting down next to Scar even if it takes all my willpower not to touch her smooth skin. Keeping my eyes on hers, I search her face for any hesitance.

“Do you want to stop, Bubbles? Say the word and it’s over.”

“No,” she says softly.

My breath quickens at that as I feel my restraint beginning to slip.

“Tell me what you want. I need to hear your words.”

“I want...I want you to make love to me, Slater.”

Her breath catches at the end, like she is steeling herself for a rejection. I can’t say I blame her. I’ve never been clear with her about how I really feel for her, and I’m the one who pushed her away the other day. Even now, she probably thinks this is all physical and that’s okay. She can think that but by the time I’m done with her, there will be no question that she is and always will be mine.

Leaning down slowly, I cup her smooth cheek as I tilt her head up and press my lips against hers, wondering how the hell I found the restraint to stop last time because fuck. I could drown in Scarlett Hayes. She moves against me with ease, so naturally. Like we were always meant to. I lick the seam of her lips, dipping my tongue inside her mouth as I tangle with her tongue. She lets out a whimpering moan into my mouth as I deepen the kiss, running my fingers through her smooth hair as I savor every last bit of her.

Moving my mouth from her lips, I kiss across her cheek and down her neck.

“Aww, I know that look,” Trevor coos with a hand over his heart.

I scowl at him. “You can go now.”

Trevor shakes his head and gives me that stupid fucking smirk.

“I don’t think our girl wants me to go. Do you, baby girl?”

Pulling away from Scar's skin, I glance up to her, surprised to see hesitation.

"I just...that's not fair if I don't-"

"You don't owe him anything," I cut in.

"I know but I want to," she says as she ducks her head to the side and blushes in embarrassment.

Disappointment fills me that she doesn't want our first time to be just us but another part of me understands. Why I understand, I'll never know.

"Hey," I say as I turn her face to look at me. "It's okay. If you want him to stay, he stays. Just know, this is a one-time thing. I'll never share you again, so you better enjoy it while it lasts."

Her breath quickens as lust clouds her eyes and she nods. I place a gentle kiss against her lips before I resume my work kissing down her body.

"I know I'm gonna. Come take my cock out, Freckles. I want to see those pouty little lips wrapped around me," Trevor smiles.

I do my best to ignore Trevor, instead choosing to focus on Scar as I make my way down her body. I quickly pull my shirt over my head and shove my pants off before I stroke my cock a few times. Scar is staring at me, her eyes watching my hand move up and down my cock before Trevor tosses something to me.

I catch the foil packet that lands against my chest before tearing it open with my teeth and rolling it on my cock, keeping my eyes on Scar as I do. I line myself up to her, knowing that though we've already crossed a line, this moment is about to change everything.

"You sure, Bubbles?" I check one more time.

She nods. "Yes."

Smiling softly, I push into her, my eyes rolling into the back of my head at

the feel of her wrapping around me so tight.

“Slater,” she gasps once I’m fully seated in her. “You feel so-”

“I know, baby-” I say through clenched teeth, doing my best to calm myself down so I don’t make a fool of myself and cum before I’ve even had the chance to make love to my girl properly.

I begin thrusting slowly, pushing in and out of her until we are both moaning in pleasure.

“C’mere, pretty girl,” I hear Trev say before glancing up to see him pushing his cock into Scar’s mouth.

I’m a jealous motherfucker. Through and through, I meant what I said. This will never happen again. But fuck if it’s not hot seeing my girl take a cock deep into her mouth.

“Shit, yes,” Trevor groans as he tosses his head back. “Fuck, Freckles, just like that,” he praises as he holds the sides of her head while I continue fucking her.

She lets out a muffled moan around Trevor’s cock that has him bucking his hips.

“Fuck!” he shouts. “Where’d a sweet girl like you learn something like that,” he smirks as he looks down at her.

“What did she do?” I ask as I snap my hips a little faster.

Trevor turns to me with a satisfied grin.

“Fuck if I know, but it felt amazing. Be a good girl and show Slater soon, ‘k, baby girl?”

Scar nods as she looks up at him before her eyes glance over to me. The promise of more time to come with Scar is an all too enticing thought. I feel my restraint slipping as I lose the steady pace I once had.

“God, look at you, Freckles, taking us both so good. You like two cocks in

you at once, don't you?"

She doesn't answer but the way she clenches around me tells me she definitely does.

My dirty girl.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to let this mouth go," Trevor groans. "We might have to talk Slater into doing this a few more times, don't you think?"

"Not on your fucking life," I snarl as I fuck Scar faster.

Trevor just laughs before gripping the back of her head as he begins guiding her movements. I can feel her pussy begin to pulse around me, and I know she is about to cum. Thank fuck for that because I feel the building tingle running up my spine already.

"Up here, Scar. Eyes on me," I say, causing her kaleidoscope eyes to flick over to me while her face is still turned towards Trevor. I don't give a fuck, though. I just need those pretty eyes on me.

Reaching down, I brush my fingers against her clit, rubbing tight, quick circles over her sensitive spot before sending her hurtling right over the cliff. Her pussy squeezes me hard, so hard that it sends me cumming instantly. I gasp for breath as my cock continues pulsing inside her while her muffled moans are drowned out as Trevor too groans out his release.

All of our movements slowly still before Trevor and I pull out of Scar. I watch as my beautiful Bubbles slumps back into the bed, her skin dotted with sweat, breasts heaving with deep breaths as a blissful haze seems to overtake her face. I quickly slip into the attached bathroom before taking care of the condom and sliding into the spot next to her on the bed.

Like so many times before, I lift my arm and she comes right to me, resting her head on my chest in a spot that has always been hers. Scar's eyes come up to me, so many questions that I'm not sure how to answer in them. I hold

her tighter, hoping that will be enough for now and she seems to ease deeper into me at that.

Trevor finishes buckling his belt before running a hand through his hair. He smirks at us before bending down and pressing a kiss against Scar's cheek.

"Thanks, Freckles. Best head I've had in a while."

I smack my stupid friend's arm since it's the closest thing I can reach without letting go of Scar, causing him to chuckle.

"You aren't staying?" Scar asks, not necessarily in disappointment but more curiosity.

Trev laughs as he stands back up and makes his way to the door.

"Rule number three, Freckles. I don't cuddle. If dumbfuck over there ever lets you go, let me know. I wouldn't mind a repeat or two," he winks as I shout at him to get the fuck out of my house.

All I hear is his laugh echoing down the hall before heading out the front door. Shaking my head I turn to face Scar, who still has those uncertain eyes on me.

"Are we...what are we...now?" she asks nervously, dipping her eyes to look anywhere but me as she voices the thought that has no doubt been rolling around in her head since the moment I stepped inside the room.

Tipping her chin up so her eyes stay on me, I take a minute to run my gaze over her beautiful face before I shake my head slightly.

"You've always been mine. Always will be too."

"Swear?" she whispers hopefully.

I smile at her softly and nod.

"Cross my heart and hope to die."





17

## Scarlett

**M**y eyes flutter open the next morning, a warm body pressed underneath me. Confusion clouds my memory for all of two seconds before everything comes flooding back.

Trevor. Slater. All of us, together.

Holy fucking shit.

I can't believe I did that. I can't believe we did that. How awkward will this morning be now? Obviously, Trevor left, probably to catch a flight back to Texas, so half the issue is gone, but the larger, vastly more important part is still sound asleep underneath me. And if I'm guessing here, I'd say neither one of us got dressed last night so we are both very naked.

I slept with Slater Santos.

I slept with Slater freaking Santos.

If I wasn't the one that was there and felt *everything* myself, I wouldn't believe it. Instead of feeling joy or excitement though, nerves are the only thing that I have room for as they overtake me. I'm holding my breath, waiting for him to wake up and realize what we did. For him to turn to me

with sad regrettable eyes and tell me that this was a mistake, that he got caught up in the moment, and he doesn't care for me in that way.

A lump forms in my throat just in anticipation for the conversation that will shatter me. It's one thing to be resigned to the fact that I would never be with Slater in that way, that I could never truly call him mine. But it's another thing entirely to have him, even for a night, and lose him.

A soft kiss presses against the top of my head as Slater's sleep laced voice says, "Good morning, Bubbles."

My stomach flips at the way my nickname rasps off his tongue. Slowly, I turn my head to look up at him, slightly surprised to see a calm patient smile on his face as he brushes some of the loose hair out of my face.

"You're so beautiful in the mornings, have I ever told you that?"

Slowly, I shake my head, confused why he is still looking at me like he did last night. I'm waiting for the lightbulb to appear, for understanding of our situation to come over him before he goes on damage control. What little damage he could control at least.

His smile falls slightly as he turns his head.

"What's wrong, baby?"

You know how my stomach flipped at Bubbles? Well my stomach just did a somersault while my heart tripped over itself at baby.

"Baby?" I question.

He smiles and nods. "Do you not like it? I can come up with something else. Sweet cheeks, baby cakes, darling, boo bear, honey buns-"

"Okay, that's enough," I laugh, causing him to chuckle and press another kiss to the side of my forehead as he holds me a little tighter.

"So you're like...okay? About last night?" I ask.

Slater frowns slightly as he looks down at me.

“I mean, do I like that another man has put his hands on you and vice versa? It’s not my favorite thing to think about. But it got us to right here, so I don’t really have any complaints. How about you? Did you have a good time last night?”

I scoff and roll my eyes before laughing. “Uh, yeah. Definitely.”

Slater winks as he turns, forcing me to lay on my back on the bed as he hovers over me.

“Good, because I meant what I said. Last night was a one-time thing. I’m not the kind of guy to share a woman. Especially not the woman I love.”

“Love?” I whisper softly, surely I’m not hearing him right.

Oh, god. If this whole thing has been a dream, I am going to be seriously pissed when I wake up.

Slater nods as he cups either side of my head and nods.

“I’ve always loved you, Scar. It just took me too fucking long to see how much.”

“I-really?” I ask in disbelief.

He nods again, his eyes flicking up to mine before he lowers himself down and presses his lips against mine. I thought that first kiss Slater and I shared was going to go down in history as the best kiss ever. Maybe even the one we shared last night. But having Slater kiss me after telling me that he loves me? Nope, that wins. Hands down.

The kiss starts off sweet and slow, his lips gently brushing against mine as his tongue slowly brushes against mine. I’m not sure who started it, but the kiss quickly turns heated as I feel one of Slater’s hands skate down my bare skin before cupping the front of my pussy. His palm rubs against my clit, eliciting a moan to rip through me from the contact.

“You like it when I play with your sweet clit, don’t you, baby?” Slater says

as he pulls away slightly, his teeth nipping at the sensitive skin beneath my ear.

“Yes. I love it,” I gasp as he applies a little more pressure.

I feel his hand move lower as he dips a finger inside me before groaning.

“Fuck, you’re already soaked, baby. Is this all for me?” he asks as he pushes in deeper.

“Always!” I gasp.

“Hmmm,” he smirks. “Tell me, how many times have you played with your sweet pussy thinking about me?”

“Way too many times to count,” I laugh, though I’m only laughing because it’s embarrassingly true.

Slater gives me a self-satisfied smile like he loves that answer before he pulls his finger out and leans away from me.

“Show me.”

“What?”

“Show me how you used to touch yourself. When you would lay in bed and think about me. Make yourself cum for me, baby.”

Embarrassment flushes my cheeks, but the daring look in Slater’s eyes gives me the courage to trace my hand over my stomach as I push it lower, lower, and lower until I brush against my clit. My eyes flutter closed as I do it again and again. I keep my eyes closed as I think about a regular fantasy of mine. One where Slater would sneak into my room at night but instead of curling around me and falling asleep, he’d finally make love to me.

I let a finger push inside me before pulling out and repeating the motion. Letting out a breathy moan, I continue this pace until I add a second finger. Curling my fingers up, I begin rubbing my g-spot as my toes curl.

“What are you thinking about, Scar?” Slater whispers against my upper

thigh, not quite touching me but I can feel his hot breath blow against my pussy lips.

“Y-you,” I say. “I think about what it would have been like if all those nights we fell asleep in the same bed, we didn’t just sleep.”

Slater lets out a seductive chuckle that I’ve honestly never heard come from him before as he places a featherlight kiss to the seam where my thigh meets my pussy.

“You’ve wanted this for a while then, haven’t you, baby?”

“So long,” I moan as I reach my free hand up to pinch my nipple just how I like it.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” Slater pants.

I peek an eye open to see him watching me, his tongue tracing his lips as his hand slowly strokes his hard cock. Fuck. I thought I was going to about die when I saw Slater’s cock. Of course, it would be big. Slater is practically the founder of big dick energy. I just didn’t know how much he actually had to back up that attitude. The answer? A lot. Enough to stretch me to the point where I still feel a little sore.

There is something so erotic about watching Slater touch himself while I’m touching myself. Something almost taboo about it. I’m not sure exactly what it is, but I feel my pussy begin to spasm against my fingers as I pick up my pace and fall over the edge. My other hand pinches my nipple harder this time as my toes curl and back bows.

“Oh my god! Slater! Fuck, Slater!” I gasp through my orgasm.

When my breathing evens out and I crack open my eyes, I see Slater watching me with the hungriest look I’ve ever seen on any human. Slowly, I pull my fingers out of me, only just barely getting them out before Slater snatches my wrist and brings my fingers up to his mouth. He wraps his mouth

around them, his tongue licking up and down, sucking like he is trying to get every last drop he can. I've never had a man say that I taste good like Trevor did last night, and I certainly have never had a man seem almost desperate to taste me the way Slater is right now. It makes me feel more desired than I ever have. Like a fucking queen.

He keeps his eyes on me as he pulls my fingers out of his mouth before leaning over me.

"Tell me what you want," he demands, just like he did last night in that deep sexy voice.

"You. In me. Now," I practically beg.

Trust me, if you could see Slater's cock you'd be begging for it too.

Slater lowers himself until he is lined up. His hand is still stroking his cock as he runs it up and down me, not quite entering me. Just driving me fucking crazy instead. He goes to push in when I stop him.

"Wait. Condom."

His seductive smile falls as realization comes over him.

"Fuck. I don't have any. Give me five minutes," he says as he stands from the bed and reaches for his pants.

"Slater, no."

He runs a hand through his curls as he shakes his head.

"I'll be fast. There is a gas station around the corner. Just-"

"Slater, come here."

He pauses, looking at me with uncertainty until I spread my legs wider. His eyes instantly drop to my pussy for several seconds before he tosses his pants to the ground and closes the distance between us. He crawls on top of me once again before cupping my face.

"Are you sure?"

I nod. "I've seen your physical, remember? You're clean and I've been on the pill since Jared Barlow took my virginity my freshman year of college."

Slater slams into me at that, no warning, no slowly easing in. Just snaps his hips against mine until his cock pushes inside me.

"Fuckkk," I cry out, half in pleasure and half in pain.

When I look up at Slater, his jaw is clenched, his eyes angry.

"I fucking hate that that geek stole your virginity."

I can't help but laugh at his jealousy.

"He didn't steal it. I gave it willingly."

Slater snaps his hips again, in a punishing way, though I don't think punishment should feel this good.

"Hate that even more," he practically snarls as he begins thrusting.

"How do you think I felt when you lost yours to Kenzie Milton in the eighth grade?"

Slater's eyes crinkle with what looks like regret as he leans down and grips a handful of my hair.

"Her hair was the same color as yours."

"What?" I ask.

"You both had this deep chocolate brown hair. At the time, I didn't put it together why I was all of the sudden into her. But I remember staring at her hair and for a moment, I thought it was you I was with," Slater says as he pauses in his movements.

"Slater," I say softly, not knowing how to respond to that.

"Don't you see? It's always been you. Even when I didn't want it to be, I couldn't help it. It's always been us, baby."

With that, he begins thrusting again as I pull him down to me. Our lips crash together in a collision of passion, pain, and lust. His tongue flicks



against mine as I nip his bottom lip, earning a groan from him in return. His large hands grab the sides of my hips before pulling me in closer as he begins fucking me even deeper than before.

“Holy fuck,” I moan. “How are you doing that?”

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” he says before pulling away and slapping the side of my ass.

“Flip over.”

“What?” I ask.

“Over.”

I quickly do as he says, getting on my hands and knees, assuming this is how he wants me when he shakes his head and taps my wrists.

“Grab the headboard.”

My hands reach up to grab the smooth wooden headboard, only gripping it for a moment before Slater pushes into me. The angle is so much different and also a lot harder to get used to.

“Fuck, Slate. I think you’re too big. I-it hurts,” I whimper as he continues fucking me.

“You can take it, baby. Deep breaths.”

I inhale deeply before exhaling, allowing his words of encouragement to relax me.

“That’s it. You’re such a good girl. Look how beautifully you take me. This pussy was fucking made for me, Scar.”

“All for you. Always you,” I babble as I feel my orgasm begin building rapidly.

“That’s fucking right, baby. All me. Now, hold on. I’m about to fill you up until all you can feel is me.”

His words send me hurtling as he continues slamming into me from

behind. I feel my body tremble and shake as I hold onto the headboard for dear life. Slater's hips continue snapping against me as I feel his cock begin to pulse before his hot cum shoots inside me. My orgasm practically pulls the cum out of him, taking every last drop he's willing to give me.

We collapse in a heap on the bed, our ragged breaths slowly calming before Slater presses a soft kiss onto my spine as he speaks.

"Is this how we are saying good morning from now on? Because I could get used to this."

**18**



## Slater

**A**fter Scar and I take an extra-long shower that may or may not have ended with her getting bent over my bench seat, I get dressed before grabbing my phone. The first thing that I notice is it's already almost noon. Good thing it's rest day, I guess. The second thing is that I have a missed text from Trevor that came in probably only a couple minutes after he left last night.

**Trevor: You're welcome.**

I scoff as I send him the middle finger emoji. Fucking asshole. I want to hate him more than I do. I know that he knew exactly what he was doing, though. He wanted to get a reaction out of me. He wanted to push me and being best friends for nearly ten years, he knows all the ways to do that. He's still an asshole, though.

I'm still kinda in shock, clearly less so than Scar if this morning's behavior is anything to go on. But still. Me and Scar. For real. It's something I never thought would happen, but I can't deny that I haven't felt this light or excited in a long fucking time.

Scar walks down the stairs and into the kitchen where I'm making coffee with a timid smile. Her hair is still wet from our shower, the ends dripping onto what looks like one of my shirts.

"I didn't exactly bring an extra set of clothes. I'm assuming you don't mind," she says as she glances down at the shirt and sweatpants she obviously swiped from my bedroom.

Crossing the distance between us, I loop my arms around her back and yank her towards me. She lets out a little shriek before looking up to me. I reach down and grab her hand, resting it over my already hardening cock as I smirk.

"I never mind seeing my girl wear my clothes. You look almost as hot as you do out of them."

Her cheeks flame as she ducks her head, still not moving her hand away as she blushes.

"Slater," she whispers.

"Yeah, baby?" I ask as I lean down and nip her ear lobe, causing her to let out a soft whimper that has my cock twitching.

"I don't know if I can handle you right now. I'm kinda sore," she says softly, almost as if she was embarrassed by it.

It's douchey to say, but a small amount of pride fills me at that.

"Oh really?" I ask. "My cock stretched you too much, Bubbles?"

She smacks my arm in irritation, though her smile is still in place as she attempts to get away from me.

"Let me goooo," she groans.

I wrap my arms around her tighter as I shake my head.

"Never."

Something like surprise passes across her face before she gives me a soft

smile and leans up onto her tiptoes, pressing her lips against mine. I loosen my hold on her before reaching up to cup her face. Her hand regrettably lets go of my cock before her arms wrap around my neck to deepen the kiss. Goddamn, I could get lost in the way her soft lips practically melt against mine.

When we break apart, she smiles wide. A breathtaking bright smile that practically lights up the entire room. Scar has always been like that, though. Shit. I was a fucking idiot to think that I could ever stay just friends with her. I'm amazed I lasted this long if I'm honest.

The rest of the day is spent actually kind of like any other day. We make lunch, do a light workout, and binge watch a new show on Netflix. Only difference from before is that now I can't keep my fucking hands off her. Not like I've tried.



Today is weight training, and since I'm all cleared from my surgeon as well as the team doctor and Scar, I can actually participate. Scar had some other patients to work with today since she runs her practice on the side to a select few when she isn't tied up with the Crusaders.

I lock my car outside the training facility and make my way up to the front door when I see Seb walking from the other side of the parking lot. His eyes look me up and down once before what looks like a knowing smirk spreads across his face.

"What?" I ask as I open the front door.

“So, you and Scarlett, huh?”

My head whips around to see if anyone is around to listen. Not that it matters to me, but I know Scar is worried Aberton will terminate her contract. She said there is a no fraternization clause, but I told her there is no way he’d fire her if I said I’d walk too. She made me promise not to say anything at least until this season is over, so for now, we are keeping things quiet.

“Relax, man. No one will give a shit.”

“Scar is worried Coach will.”

Seb shrugs as we make our way upstairs to the weight room, since we are already in our workout gear.

“So, is Trev buried in a shallow grave in your backyard?”

It takes me a second to realize what he is talking about when I remember the last thing Mikey and Seb saw was Trevor going into a bedroom with my girl and me storming after them. Ha! They probably think what went down was a hell of a lot different than what actually did. Looking back, I probably should have just buried Trev, or at the very least kicked him out.

“Nah, he made it back to Texas in one piece.”

“Shame,” Seb grumbles lowly.

I raise a curious eyebrow toward him at that. Obviously, he and Trev aren’t best friends like they used to be in college, but the more I pay attention the more I see how completely uncomfortable the two of them are around each other. If Mikey and I weren’t keeping all of us together, I doubt they’d even see each other anymore.

Well, that’s not true. There will always be Erica in the middle of them.

Wonder how much that irritates the fuck out of Seb?

When we get to the weight room, I notice none of the coaches are in yet, but a few of the guys have already started their routines. Seb and I drop our

stuff and start warming up when I hear a laugh that grates my fucking ears.

Andrews is laughing it up in the corner like a fucking hyena with a few of his buddies. I roll my eyes and do my best to ignore him until a name catches my attention.

“Scarlett sure is a fucking vixen in bed, let me tell you,” he smirks to Walsh.

“No way you tapped that. She seems way too prudish to put out on the first date,” Ford laughs.

Andrews gives him a cocky smirk as he shrugs his shoulders.

“What can I say? I took her to Canilise, wined and dined the shit out of her, and she ate it up. Girl jumped me in my car before I could even pull out of there. Gave the valet a nice show before we went back to my place.”

Rage fills me at the absolute horseshit coming out of his mouth as I storm over to him. I hear Seb call out my name, but I don’t pay attention as I plow straight through their little group and grab Andrews by the shirt, lifting him up before pinning him against the wall behind him.

“What the fuck did you just say?” I snarl.

Fear fills his eyes for a moment before they bounce over my shoulder, probably to see his friends waiting to see what he’s gonna do. The arrogant little prick has the audacity to smirk as he looks at me.

“Don’t be mad, Santos. I know she’s your bestie and shit, I won’t get in the way of that. We are friends too, just in a different way,” he says with a wink.

A fucking wink.

It’s like the goddamn idiot wants me to crush his windpipe.

“You aren’t shit to her,” I spit. “Keep her name out of your fucking mouth or you’ll be choking on your teeth.”

“Alright, man. That’s enough. Coaches will be here any minute. He ain’t



worth it,” Seb says.

“Nah, you’re right,” I say. “He ain’t worth shit. At least that’s what Scar told me after she walked out on you at the restaurant.”

I hear Walsh ‘ooo’ from behind me like he knew Andrews was full of shit the whole time before I continue.

“If I hear my girl’s name come out of your mouth again, we are gonna have a fucking problem.”

He scoffs, though it’s clear his once inflated ego is pathetically limp on the ground.

“She isn’t your girl.”

Now, it’s my time to smirk. “The fuck she isn’t. That girl has been mine for twenty years. Always will be too. Got that?”

Andrews attempts to shove me off him, but I don’t let go until I’m ready, making it known that I’m the one who holds the true power in this situation.

“Watch yourself,” I say before taking a step back with my eyes on him before turning to find Seb watching me with his mammoth arms crossed over his chest.

He looks at me in disapproval for half a second before he smiles and claps my back.

“Well, now it’s official.”

“What is?” I ask with a quirked brow.

“You and Scar. Once you threaten to make a dude choke on his own teeth just for speaking against your woman, you know it’s the real deal.”

I can’t help but bark out a laugh at that. He’s got a point.

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## Slater

Once weight training is over, we have a little team meeting before we are done for the day. Seb and I part ways as I pull out my phone and shoot off a text to Scar.

**Me: I can't wait to eat you. I mean, see you.**

Her response comes almost immediately.

**Scar: Oh my god! You can't just text things like that.**

**Me: Says who?**

**Scar: Uhm, everyone?**

**Me: Not a good enough answer. Are you coming over tonight?**

**Scar: Do you want me to?**

**Me: Is that even a question?**

Her next response takes longer than the others, so I toss my phone to the side as I fire up my car and make the short drive home. When I pull into my driveway, I glance down to see a message from Scar.

**Scar: Then yes.**

I can't help but smile at that.

**Me: Good. Now get your sweet ass over here and spread those legs. I'm fucking starving.**

**Scar: SLATER!**

Chuckling as I step out of my car, I pocket my phone as I grab my gym bag and unlock the house. I drop my stuff onto the counter and walk over to the fridge, pulling open the door when I pause. The papers that have become practically a permanent fixture on the fridge stare at me.

My hand pulls them down, setting them on the counter before I can even second guess it. I open up the junk drawer to my left, grabbing the first pen I can find and scrawling my signature across the blank line. I stare at the two signatures in front of me. Nearly identical to the ones we signed when applying for our marriage license. It's weird how even ink on a page can change so much over time.

It feels pointless to dwell on the what-ifs of life but the thought rolling around my head, especially in the last couple of months, has been louder than most. What if I would have shoot my shot with Scar any of the countless opportunities I had? Before Nikki. Before Brighton.

Too late to question now. Nothing good comes from looking in the rearview mirror. I'm moving forward with my girl by my side.

Pushing away from the island, I jog upstairs to take a shower before Scar gets here. Once I'm done, I'm just slipping on a pair of gray sweats and a T-shirt when I hear the front door open and close. Smiling like an idiot, I step out into the hallway before making my way down the stairs to see Scar walking inside.

"Hey, beautiful," I say as I walk up to her and slip my hand behind her head before pulling her mouth to mine.

When I pull away she blinks up at me, a soft dazed look in her eyes as she

smiles.

“I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to that.”

I smirk and wink at her before I notice that she is carrying a grocery bag. I grab it from her and set it on the table.

“What did you get?” I ask.

“Just some general supplies. You were running low. What sounds good for dinner?” she asks as she begins putting the groceries away.

“You always make dinner. Let me make it tonight.”

She tosses a disbelieving look over her shoulder as she laughs lightly.

“No offense, but I don’t really want to eat burnt mac and cheese.”

I scoff before I nudge her out of the way to take her place and finish putting things away.

“That was literally one time, and I was fourteen. I’ve become quite the cook I’ll have you know.”

She’s not buying it as she stares at me with a blank look.

“Since when?”

“Well, I haven’t tried in a while. I’m probably better now,” I shrug as I look at the ingredients in front of us.

“Lemon chicken and asparagus?” I offer.

She just shakes her head and laughs.

“Sure, just make sure you order something when that goes up in smoke.”

“Ye of little faith!” I call out as she steps out of the kitchen and makes her way into the living room.

I’m looking down at the ingredients, trying to figure out what to do first.

“Cut the veggies first,” she calls out from her spot on the couch as she pulls a book out of her purse.

Ah! That makes sense. I grab the onion and asparagus before I begin

chopping.

“Read to me,” I say.

“No,” Scar grumbles as she buries herself deeper into the couch.

“Pleaseeeee. You always used to read to me when we were kids.”

“Yeah, but you only ever wanted to hear the dirty scenes,” she scoffs with a smirk.

“Still do. Some of the shit those women write is freaky. I fucking love it.”

She ignores me as she continues focusing on the book. That’s how I know she’s super into it, and the fact that she is refusing to read to me tells me she’s in a dirty scene. I quietly set down the knife before wiping my hands on a towel and creeping up behind her. When her grip loosens on the book to flip the page, I yank it out of her hand, running through the house because I know she’s coming for my ass.

“What is *Tied in Leather* by C.L. Menegon about?” I laugh as I begin flicking through the pages.

“I swear to god if you lose my place, I will castrate you!” she threatens as she chases after me.

“Ouch, that would only hurt us both. I know they’ve come to be one of your favorite things.”

“Egotistical, much?”

I ignore her as I look at the description on the back. “Sounds spicy,” I say with a smirk before I flip the book open to where I’m assuming she left off.

““When my knees hit the metal, I throw her down on the bonnet. She whimpers at the impact, but I don’t miss her smirk.”” I skim over a few paragraphs before I continue reading. ““I run a delicate finger over her clit and her breathing instantly turns heavier when her hands curl around my

waist as she pulls me into her. I slide down through her slit and slowly dip my finger inside her.’”

My mouth drops as my eyebrows shoot up to my hairline.

“Scarlett Hayes, are you sitting on my couch casually reading about a girl getting bent over a car?”

Her cheeks burn bright red as she makes her way over to me.

“The story is really good. I think you’d like it.”

“Based on where I think that’s going, I know I would,” I say as Scar takes the book from my hand and slips a bookmark in place.

She goes to walk away from me, but I wrap an arm around her waist, pulling her into me before tucking my head into her neck.

“You know, all you have to do is ask. I’ll be happy to re-enact any of these scenes with you,” I say as I nip at her ear lobe.

“Really?” she gasps breathily.

I can’t help but smirk as I pull away from her, reaching down to intertwine our fingers before I pull her with me.

“C’mon.”

She follows wordlessly, as I move through the house, dinner on the stove long forgotten. That’s what the fire department is for, right? This is much more important.

I push the door to the garage open as I tug Scar in through the entrance.

“Pick a car, baby,” I say as I gesture to the four cars I have parked inside.

Her eyes skate over them before she looks at me with a confused furrow to her brows.

“For what?”

“Pick.”

She hesitates for a moment before she points at my jet black Jaguar E-

Type. I can't help but smirk as I press my hand to her lower back and guide her towards it.

"Great choice."

We walk until the front of her thighs meets the side of the hood. I lift my hand to her lower back before gently pushing down.

"Bend over for me."

Slowly, she does, bending to my touch without a single ounce of hesitation before she is sprawled out across the '67 classic. Reaching out, I slip my fingers under the hem of her yoga pants before slowly beginning to peel them off her legs. I watch as goosebumps spread across her bare thighs before I place a kiss to the bottom of her ass cheek. She lets out a little gasp, causing me to chuckle before I do it again and again as I start making my way up until I'm leaning over her.

Pulling her ass to meet the front of my shorts, I grind my cock against her as I groan.

"Fuck, I love seeing you bent over like this for me. What happens next?" I ask.

"I-I don't know. I didn't get that far in before you took the book from me," she whispers huskily.

"Improv then, baby."

She turns her head to look at me from the side as she looks up at me.

"Take your pants off," she says, in a voice that is dripping a hell of a lot more confidence than it was two seconds ago.

Without a second thought, I drop my sweats to the ground before gripping my dick, running my hand up and down the length before squeezing slightly, doing my best to take the edge off. Too bad it doesn't fucking work.

"Now what?" I rasp.



“Push inside me.”

“No foreplay?”

She balks at that as her eyes widen.

“You’re kidding, right? If you don’t get inside me right this second I’m pretty sure I’m going to combust.”

I chuckle lowly before lining myself up and pushing inside her. She lets out a low moan as her pussy grips me like a vice. Drawing my hips back, I pull out almost all the way before pushing in deeper this time. Scar arches her back into me in encouragement, causing me to do it again and again until our pace quickens.

“Oh my god! Slater,” she groans as my fingers grip her hips.

“You like having my cock buried inside your tight pussy while you’re bent over my car, baby? Like feeling the cold steel pressed against your tits while I fuck your wet cunt?”

She moans something inaudible as her head nods quickly. Letting go of one of her hips, I bury my hand into the back of her thick chocolate hair before lifting her head up and off the car.

“Got something to say, Bubbles?” I smirk as I continue fucking her.

Her eyes are drenched in lust, her face full of want and drunk with desire as she looks at me.

“More,” she pleads.

I nod. “Good girl,” I say as I release my hold on her hair and bring my hand around to brush against her clit.

“Yes, god! Yes!” she shouts.

“I love how responsive you are to my touch.”

“Your touch is so good,” she whimpers as her hips thrust into my hand.

My fingers rub tight, quick circles over her as I increase the pace of my

thrusts until her legs are trembling beneath me. I know she's right on the edge, ready to fall apart any minute, and if I wasn't about to lose it myself, I'd stretch this out for a little longer because holy fuck, that C.L. chick knew what she was doing. This is hot as fuck.

“Cum for me. Let that sweet little pussy cum all over my cock. I want your cum dripping down this car.”

“Oh my god!” she shouts as her pussy begins to convulse around me.

I feel her orgasm tear through her, and it sends me right over the edge with her, my cock twitching and pulsing as I empty myself inside her. Fucking hell. Thank god for smutty books.



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## Scarlett

**T**he next morning, I slip out of bed before Slater to make us some coffee. I feel the muscles in my legs strain with each step, and other places are more than sore from last night. Going from nearly celibate to having sex practically every chance we can get is definitely something my body is adjusting to. I swear I've literally been sore non-stop since Slater and I got together. Not like you'll hear any complaints from me.

I start up the machine and grab two mugs from the cupboard when something on the counter catches my attention. Slater's divorce papers? I didn't even notice that they weren't on the fridge anymore. They were up there for so long I'm surprised I didn't. A new inked mark catches my attention and has me leaning in closer.

He signed them.

A hopeful feeling blooms inside of me. Does that mean he's ready to officially put things between them to rest? I mean, hopefully, right? Considering how many times he's told me over the last few days how he's in

love with me, that we are together now and the sheer amount of times that he's made me cum.

I don't know why it took him so long to sign the papers. I mean, they had a pretty inclusive prenup in place and they will probably still have to get things finalized in person. So what was the hold up? Was he second guessing giving up on her? Was he planning to go after her? Was I just a momentary distraction?

No, obviously not. If that was the case why would he all of a sudden sign them now? No, this is good. He's moving on, moving forward. With me.

"I can practically hear your thoughts all the way from over here," Slater says from across the room, causing me to jump in surprise.

I cover my racing heart with my hand as I blow out a soft breath.

"Shit. You scared me," I say as he crosses the distance between us. "Sorry. I didn't mean to snoop. I just saw them on the counter and I-"

"Shhh," Slater says as he brushes a finger across my lips before bending down and pressing a soft but passionate kiss to them. "Never apologize. You're never snooping. I don't have anything to hide from you, Bubbles."

The uncertainty that was rising inside of me quickly dwindles from the combination of his words and the way he is watching me lovingly.

"Why did you sign it? Or I guess, why did you wait?"

He licks his lips for a moment like he is searching for the words before he speaks. "If I'm honest, I'm not really sure. I think a part of me was scared. Scared to admit that I failed the one thing I shouldn't have. Scared to close the door on what had been my life over the last seven years. It only took one night with you to realize that it wasn't about what I did wrong, it was about what I was doing right going forward. We aren't starting this thing with my

obviously failed marriage hanging over our heads. I want to get all of it handled as quickly and drama free as possible so we can focus on us.”

I nod. It makes sense, and I’m glad he feels that way. Though, a small nagging voice in the back of my head whispers doubts. Like maybe he isn’t quite over Nikki. How could he be? They were together for so long and have only been separated for a handful of months. Is he really ready to move on? Jump into another relationship at the drop of a hat? I want to believe it, but part of me is hesitant.

Slater cocks his head to the side, his brows furrowing as he watches me closely because the man knows me way too well.

“Talk to me, Bubbles.”

I shrug as I look away. “It’s nothing. Just dumb insecurities.”

“Insecurities aren’t dumb, don’t disregard yourself like that. I’m listening,” he encourages.

“I just...are you sure you are ready for all of this? I’ve been waiting for you for over twenty years, I think I could wait a little longer if you need it. I’d rather wait than risk you moving on too quickly when you aren’t ready.”

His hand slides to the nape of my neck, holding me steadily as his deep brown eyes burrow into me.

“The thing is, I’m starting to realize that I fell out of love with Nikki a long time ago. It sounds like a bullshit thing to say but it’s the truth. Our good times were few and far between, and practically nonexistent over the last three years or so. All the bright spots in my life revolved around you, it always has.

“Maybe that means our marriage ending the way it did wasn’t all Nikki’s fault. Maybe it means I was far more invested in this,” he says as he gestures between us. “More than I ever was in that. I’m not perfect, Scar. I have

baggage and probably some drama in my future, but one thing is for sure. I've never not loved you, and I'll never be able to stop. If you want us to take things slower than we have, we'll do it. I'm not in a rush. You're the end game, and I'll play it however you want as long as it all wraps up with you in my arms."

Butterflies swarm through me at his words. Slater isn't the sappy type, ever. He will be straight up with you, he will listen and give advice, but he doesn't openly express his innermost feelings. At least not with anyone but me typically, but even I have never heard him speak like this.

"I love you," I say softly, still not getting used to the feel of it on my tongue.

Saying it in my head a million times over the years isn't the same as openly speaking the words out to the universe, right to Slater.

A sweet smile takes over his face as he pulls me closer, pressing his lips against mine in a kiss that I hope never ends. When he pulls away, he rests his forehead against mine as he shakes his head and laughs.

"I think I love you too much for my own good."



My knee bounces nervously as we pull up.

"Will you chill? You act like you've never been to your dad's house before," Slater laughs as he squeezes my thigh.

A flutter runs through me at the action, but I can't seem to force myself to focus on it when Slater parks the car.

“I’m nervous. What will everyone think?”

“That I’m the luckiest bastard around?” he says with a simple shrug.

God, sometimes I wish I could bottle his confidence and sell it. I’d be filthy rich.

“I’m serious, Slater!”

“Baby,” he says as he turns in his seat to face me. “Who gives a shit? Even if they have something negative to say, which they won’t, will that change the way you feel about me?”

“No.”

“Good because there isn’t a thing in this world that will change the way I feel about you. You’re mine, Scar. Now get that sweet ass up your front steps before I do something stupid like fuck you in your dad’s driveway.”

Miraculously, I let out a little laugh at that as I unbuckle my seatbelt while Slater gets out his side and comes around to open my door.

“That would be the last thing you ever did,” I say as he shuts my door and grabs my hand, interlacing our fingers as we make our way inside.

“Yeah, but it would be one hell of a story to tell at my funeral.”

We step inside the house to find my brothers, Dad, and Slater’s parents all hanging out around the kitchen island laughing and talking. As soon as their eyes land on us, the room becomes instantly silent. I watch as each person looks from Slater to me, down to our intertwined hands before back up to us. I hold my breath, steadying myself for what they will say or think when Slater’s dad is the first to speak.

“It’s about damn time.”

That causes the entire room to break out into a chorus of laughter before everything resumes as normal. We greet everyone and they hug us both before asking how work for both of us has been. Really? That’s it?



Slater squeezes my hand, shooting me a wink that I know means ‘I told you so.’ If I wasn’t so relieved, I’d be irritated with him. Slowly, I walk over to Alison, who is moving around my dad’s kitchen, putting the final touches on what looks to be her homemade baked potato salad as the men head out to the backyard to start barbequing.

“Something on your mind, sweet girl?” Alison asks with a soft knowing smile.

“Is it...okay? I mean, I feel stupid for even being insecure. Slater told me no one would care but-”

“Am I concerned that my son is moving on with you when he is still married?”

I freeze at her words. I hadn’t quite thought about it like that. Can’t say I love it.

“Scarlett, if you ask me, this is long overdue. My son has loved you for as long as he knew how to. He didn’t always show it in the right way, and he made a mess of things by not facing it head on and instead getting involved with *that* woman. But he loves you, and I know for a fact you love him more than anyone else in this world. What mother couldn’t be happy by that?”

I wrap my arms around her and pull her in for a hug.

“Thank you, that means a lot.”

“Love you, sweet girl. Your mom would be so proud of the amazing woman you’ve grown up to be.”

I feel my eyes begin to water at the mention of my mom as I give Alison a soft nod.

“Thank you.”

“Now, enough of all that. Grab that tray for me, will you?” she asks as she gestures to her left.

I nod my head and grab what I can before we set up the backyard dining table. Dinner goes by a little odd. Odd being that everything is completely the same apart from Slater's hand permanently on my leg under the table and the occasional cheek kiss he would give me. Everything has slipped into place so flawlessly. It's almost like we were already in a relationship, just minus the physical aspect, until now. And we can't forget about the physical aspect because holy hell I've never met a man so obsessed with me and my body. He's insatiable and makes me feel like the most desired woman in the world.

After the guys clean up, everyone is doing their own thing when I find Slater and Ezra by the fire pit in the Santos' yard hanging out. Ezra is having a beer while Slater sticks to water. I walk over to sit in the seat next to Slater before he reaches out and grabs my hand, yanking me down to sit in his lap. I try to get off quickly, worried I'll hurt his legs or something when he locks me down into place and lowers his mouth to my ears.

"Keep wiggling that ass on my lap, and I'm gonna have to shove my cock in it."

My toes curl in my tennis shoes as I turn my head to look at him. He's giving me a dirty smirk that apparently Ezra picks up on too because he lets out a dry chuckle and takes a sip of his beer.

"You guys are disgusting," he says with a fake sneer.

I roll my eyes at him as I settle back into Slater's lap.

"You know I love you man, but I wouldn't be a good big brother if I didn't tell you that I'll knock your front teeth out if you hurt her."

"Oh my god, Ezra! We are way too old for this," I sigh.

Slater chuckles underneath me before pressing a kiss to my shoulder.

"It's all good, baby. He knows I won't hurt you. He's just trying to make himself feel important."

“Ironic, huh?” Ezra laughs. “This is the fire pit that caused me to have the first big brother talk with you and now here I am again.”

“Wait, what?” I ask.

Slater and Ezra share a look before Ezra smirks. “You didn’t tell her?”

“Tell me what?” I ask as I turn to face Slater.

His eyes flick to Ezra almost in irritation before coming back to me.

“That night before I left for Brighton, I almost kissed you. Obviously, you knew that.”

“I started to wonder if I imagined it after a while,” I admit softly.

His grip tightens as he shakes his head.

“Definitely not. I had a huge crush on you. I was just shit scared to cross a line we couldn’t come back from, you know? That night I decided to hell with it, that it was worth the risk when this asshole interrupted us,” he says as he nods towards Ezra.

“He told me that I better not start something with you before I go away to college if I wasn’t serious about you. I was, obviously, but it got me thinking about the what-ifs. I was a chickenshit, and I can’t tell you how many times over the years I’ve thought about what an idiot I was back then.”

“I could say the same,” I say with a small smile as I nudge his shoulder.

He pinches my upper thigh as he rolls his eyes.

“Smartass.”

Turning my eyes to Ezra, I glare at him.

“So it’s you I should be blaming for all of this,” I say to my annoying brother.

“Hey,” he says as he tosses his hands up in surrender. “Not my fault you two danced around each other for fucking ever. I was just doing my brotherly

duty, and I did. Have fun, kids,” he says as he stands up and pats Slater on the shoulder before heading back over to the house.

“Sooo,” Slater says with a smirk. “Wanna recreate that night?”

I chuckle at him as I shake my head and lean down to kiss him briefly before pulling away.

“Nah. Just take me home and fuck me into your mattress.”

Slater is out of the chair and standing up, my entire body tossed over his shoulder as he fireman carries me through the yard.

**21**



## Slater

The weeks leading up to pre-season seem to go by faster than normal. Maybe because I feel like I have more to prove than ever on the field. Maybe because everything has changed over the last few months. I'm officially divorced since everything was pretty much black and white in the papers, Nikki got her share, I kept mine, and we split ways. I honestly expected her to fight more, for what I'm not sure, but based on the fat diamond that was on her hand during the mediation, it seems like she's already got a new sucker on the hook.

You'd think finding out my wife, or more accurately my ex-wife, is already engaged to someone else would hurt but when I think about what I got at home, I know I'm the one that came out on top. Waking up to Scar every morning has been by far the best part of every day for the last few months, hands down. Fuck, I can't get enough of my girl.

Coach is giving us a long drawn out speech about starting this season out right, taking it one down at a time and all the typical shit he uses. I glance around the room, taking in the newer faces. We picked up three rookies and

four trades this year, all who at least in practice, seem talented and dedicated. Our team is pretty solid, hopefully it's enough to go all the way this year.

As my eyes flick over everyone, they pause on one person in particular. Scar is standing next to Collin, listening to Coach intently like the good employee she is. She's wearing her usual Crusaders game day gear, something I've seen her in dozens of times before. Now that I know exactly what is underneath that uniform, though, I can't help but bite the inside of my lip as I let my eyes rake over her.

She must feel my gaze because her eyes glance to me, sending me a warning look with a barely suppressed smile. I smirk at her before giving her a quick wink that sends color flooding her cheeks.

"What are you so fucking smiley about, Santos?" Coach snaps.

I turn to face him before I shrug and hold my hands out.

"It's a great day to play ball, Coach. Can't wait to beat the piss out of Carolina."

He grunts but doesn't say anything before he ends his little pep talk, and we start filing out into the tunnel.

Showtime.



"Blue forty two! Blue sixty seven! Blue thirteen! Hike!" Smith calls out as the ball is snapped.

I sprint to my left, doing my best to gain some distance between me and Carolina's defenseman that has been on my ass these last two quarters. We

have a minute until halftime, and we are tied up 7-7. I'm slower than I used to be, and it fucking shows. The South Carolina Wolves sure as hell seem to have picked up on it. They've had several guys on me all night and no matter what I do, I can't get past them enough to get open.

Smith tosses the ball to Seb, who catches it above a few Wolves' heads, before turning and running. He bobs and weaves around everyone in his path while our guys help pick off the linemen after him. I push against Gerald Hastings, the fucking prick that's been up my ass, as I watch Seb pass the thirty, the twenty, the ten.

Touchdown.

"Fuck yeah!" I shout as I throw my hands up just as the second quarter ends.

"See ya in thirty, Santos," Hastings smirks through his mouth guard.

"Fuck off," I grumble as I shove past him and make my way over to Seb, clapping him on the back as I pat on his helmet.

"That's my boy!" I holler.

Seb grins as he tosses the football to the ref before we all begin making our way into the tunnel for halftime. Everyone rides the high of a fresh touchdown as they holler and shout while filing into the locker room. A voice stops me in my tracks, though.

"Santos!" Coach calls out from behind me.

My celebratory smile slips as I turn to see his pissed off expression.

"Why in god's name was it so difficult for you to get open? You left Smith high and dry out there!"

I do my best to keep my tone respectful, but he makes it hard some days.

"I was doing my best, Coach. Hastings has some wheels on him."

"Yeah, well, so do you. Or you used to," he says with a shake of his head



as he blows past me and into the locker room.

Irritation and almost a little bit of disappointment begin to flare inside me. This isn't me. I don't let people down. I've always been one of the fastest guys on the field, one of the best.

A small hand touches my forearm from the side. I glance over to see a concerned look on Scar's face.

"Are you okay?"

I shake my head. "Not really."

Her eyes flick down to my knee before looking back up at me.

"How's it feeling?"

I bend my leg slightly and nod.

"Feels good."

She nods. "Then why are you playing safe?"

Wait, what? Scar is my cheerleader. My biggest supporter. Not another fucking critic.

"What are you talking about? I'm doing my best but-"

"Bullshit," she scoffs. "You're playing safe. You don't have a fire lit under you. Yeah, you're out there and you're present, but are you actually playing your game? No. And you know it too. Look, Slate. We did not spend months working our asses off to get you back to nearly one hundred for you to just half-ass it. Now, I love you, I will always support you, but if you don't dig deep and find that drive in you by the time the third quarter starts, you might as well ask Aberton to bench you. Is that what you want?"

"Fuck no," I huff.

"Good," she smiles softly. "So dig your feet in, look for the opening, and lose Hastings for good. The guy isn't even that good. He's just in your head. Or you're in your own head. Or both."

I nod as my eyes glance around to see that we are alone in the tunnel. Cupping the back of her neck I bring her face to mine, crushing our lips together before resting my forehead against hers.

“Fucking love you, Bubbles. Thank you.”

“Always,” she breathes softly as she looks up at me.

I smile before swatting her ass and jogging into the locker room.



Popping my mouthguard in as we line up, I face off against Hastings, who has a smug as fuck smirk on his stupid face. I shake my head as I turn to see Scar standing on the sidelines watching me intently, a firm nod in my direction as if she was trying to tell me that I got this. Fuck yes, I got this.

When Smith hikes the ball, I take off. Hastings is on me just like the first half, but I dig my heels in harder and stretch my legs out farther. The next time I turn to look over my shoulder, he is a good eight feet away from me, not a lot, but it's more than enough space between us.

The ball spirals through the air a few feet in front of me. My fingertips just graze it before I take that final step and grip it fully, yanking it to my chest as I bear down and run like fucking hell. It feels different. I ran at practice. I've run at home. I've run during PT. But none of those times have felt like this. Felt like I was practically flying above the field, doing the one thing I know I was meant to.

When I cross that line and the stadium goes wild I nearly collapse from the adrenaline. I toss the ball to the ground before throwing my arms in the air,

causing the fans to lose their shit. Smiling, I look to the sidelines to see Scar excitedly bouncing and clapping as I pretend to dip a bubble wand and blow on it in an exaggerated celebration. I probably look like I've lost my goddamn mind, but I couldn't give a shit because the megawatt smile I can see on Scar's face all the way down the field tells me she knows that touchdown was for her.

Seb jogs over to me, slapping my back in celebration as we run back to keep the game going. I pass by Hastings and may or may not give him a little extra nudge as I do. Not that the little bitch says anything before slinking off with his tail between his legs.

The first half of the game is nothing like the second. The Wolves got another touchdown in the beginning of the fourth quarter, but Seb was able to run another touchdown, as well as Andrews, though I definitely didn't celebrate too hard for that one.

We have two minutes left in the game and the score is currently 33-14. The Wolves can't come back from a point difference like that in this amount of time and they know it too. We could play an easy game, run out the clock, and be on our merry way. Something about that doesn't sound enticing, though. Pre-season or not, we are starting this season off with a good old fashioned ass kicking.

The O-line and D-line crush together in a sound that is closer to a car crash than bodies rushing into each other. I dart to my right, but Hastings anticipates it, sticking with me better than before. Maybe he hasn't quite given up. Or maybe he just doesn't want to be responsible if we score one more touchdown on them. Either way, dude is shit out of luck.

I continue dodging left to right, right to left to keep Hastings on his toes, and when I glance back to Smith, his eyes lock on me as I nod. He looks

hesitant with how heavy I'm being covered but tosses the ball. I take a large step to my right before turning my back and spinning to my left, covering the remaining feet between me and where the ball will land before it drops into my arms.

The catch is sloppy at best as it almost bounces right off my forearm but once I'm able to wrangle it, I pump my arms and legs as fast and as hard as I can. I feel Hastings on me, his feet are practically on the heels of my cleats, and when his hand grazes the back of my jersey, a sinking feeling fills my stomach. Fuck!

I chance a glance behind me to see him lowering himself, ready to plow me to the ground before Clifton Matthews, one of our defensive ends, comes out of nowhere and takes Hastings down. Fucking A. I owe Matthews a drink or a stripper or something. My feet cross over that white line and two seconds later the game is over. End score 39-14.

Fuck. Yes.

A bunch of guys damn near tackle me in the end zone, pumped over the win, and I'm smiling so wide swear to fuck my face is gonna split open. I love celebrating with my team, but someone is missing. I see Scar hugging Collin in celebration before turning to face the field. She lands on me instantly, or at least she better be looking at me. I jog across the field, running at Scar and not slowing down until she's slung over my shoulder. I carry her around like she's the fucking Heisman trophy even though we both know she's so much fucking better.

When I set her down, I take off my helmet and smile at her.

"I liked your little touchdown celebration. It was new."

I give her a wink as some of the coaches call my name. They all tell me that I did a good job and even Aberton looks pleased. The guy is an asshole

but it's just because he likes to win, and he does a good job of it since we are one of the best teams in the league.

Some reporters rush onto the field, instantly swarming me as they ask questions on how I'm feeling after my first game since my injury. How I feel the season will go and all the typical questions they ask. I smile and play my part, making sure to emphasize that without the team effort made in my recovery, I wouldn't be standing here today.

Once they are done with me, they pounce on Smith, Seb, and Andrews as they begin firing off similar questions. I smile and start walking into the tunnel deciding that I'll just take a shower when I get home. I take a step the wrong way for a second, and it sends a twinge up my leg. Fuck, maybe I'm not feeling as great as I thought. Still, I'm proud. The game was much needed, and I'm still riding the high, but I just want to celebrate with my girl properly.

Several guys pat my back as I strip off my gear and change into my street clothes. I give them thanks and nods, but I don't make it a secret that I'm on a mission. When I step out of the locker room, I see Scar standing across the hall, leaning against the wall with a wide smile.

"Nice game, Santos," she smiles as she pushes away from it.

I grin as I cross the distance between us and pick her up, lifting her by her ass and spinning her around as her arms wrap around me.

"Slater!" she squeals. "Put me down you oaf."

I chuckle at that before placing a brief kiss to the inside of her neck before lowering her to her feet. She glances around us quickly like she's checking to see if anyone is around before she leans up onto her toes and presses a kiss to my lips. It's there and gone before I can grab her, and she must know that I'm not nearly satisfied with it being cut that short because she gives me a cheeky

grin before she takes off running towards the parking lot. So, of course, I chase after her.

She doesn't stay ahead of me for long, but I let her think she is. We climb into the car and to her surprise, I don't jump her. Though, it's not because I've lost interest. It's only because this game was a family event and what I plan to do to Scarlett Hayes is the farthest thing from family-friendly.

As we make our way to my house, I can practically feel her excitement in the seat beside me. I slide a hand to her thigh, squeezing tightly as we turn around the corner. When we finally park in the driveway, we are still for a moment before I turn to face her.

"You get a ten second head start, Bubbles."

She doesn't even hesitate before she is flying out of the car and tearing up the front steps. I watch as she struggles with the keys, wasting her time before she finally pushes inside. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, for her, her time is up.

I pop open the car door, running inside the house, and catch Scar around the waist as she tries to run up the stairs.

"No!" she laughs as I swing her around, keeping an arm around her torso as I walk away from the stairs.

"Slater, stop! You stink! At least take a shower!" she giggles as she tries to pry out of my arms.

"You love it," I say as I hold her tighter.

She fakes a gag as she turns her head away.

"I can promise you, I don't."

Laughing at that, I release her, allowing her to scramble away before I run a hand through my hair.

"Alright, fair enough."

Scar smiles as she brushes a piece of my hair out of her face.

“How are you feeling?”

“A little sore, honestly. Flared up once the game was over.”

“You mean you allowed yourself to feel it once the game was over?” she asks with a raised brow.

I point at her. “Bingo.”

“Okay, well maybe a bath is better than a shower. Relax your muscles.”

“Only if you join me. Bubble bath with my Bubbles? Sounds like heaven,” I groan.

She laughs and nods. “Fine, but if I’m getting in with you, then you have to at least rinse off in the shower first because I literally can’t handle smelling you any longer,” she says as she takes an exaggerating step back.

I scoff as I stand up and roll my eyes.

“Baby, if you can’t handle me at my worst, you don’t deserve me at my best.”

She laughs at that. “Slater, I was there when you went through puberty. Trust me, I’ve been there at your worst.”

My mouth drops open as I lunge for her. She squeals and takes off running through the house. Girl is gonna get it.

I jog up the stairs, telling myself that if she isn’t in here by the time I’m done with my rinse off then I’m coming for her. Lucky for her, just as I’m stepping out, she is starting the water in the tub. When I bought the place, it didn’t even have a bath in the master, so I had one of those extra-large Jacuzzi tubs installed because who the hell likes sitting in a bath where your knees can’t even go under the water?

When I step out around the glass door of my shower, I waste no time slipping into the tub. Scar is easing herself in, but she’s taking too long for

my liking, so I grip her by the hips and yank her down. Water sloshes over the side of the tub and onto the tile floor, but I couldn't give a damn when I feel her pussy perfectly line up with my cock.

She tries to scoot away from me, unintentionally rubbing against my cock as she does before I pull her back to me again.

"Fuck yeah, ride me, baby," I moan as I bite my bottom lip.

"Slater," she laughs as she attempts to push off of me.

"I love the way my name sounds on your lips," I say as my forearm wraps around her lower back. "Say it again."

Her playful smirk turns devilish as she stops trying to fight me and leans in closer, her bare breasts brushing against my chest as her mouth hovers millimeters away from mine. She has a lusty glint in her eyes as she smiles and cocks her head to the side.

"Slater," she moans in a soft sultry voice that has my cock hardening to a steel fucking pipe.

"Goddamn, baby."

"Slater," Scar says, gasping again as she begins lining herself up, her hand slipping underneath the water and gripping the base of my cock before slowly sinking down onto me.

"Oh, Slater," her soft voice echoes off the walls of the bathroom.

"Fuck, yes. Ride that cock. Take what you want."

She gives me a shy little smile before she nods and lifts herself up, before slowly sinking down again. The water isn't really doing us any favors with the extra friction, but the way Scar's breasts look wet and smooth, bouncing in and out of the water is more than enough to keep me fully focused on wringing every ounce of pleasure I can out of her.

I feel her hands come up to rest on my neck, her fingers playing with the



ends of my hair as she continues her rhythm.

“I never thought sex in the water could feel good,” she says before a moan slips out of her.

“Usually doesn’t,” I grit between clenched teeth as I slowly start thrusting my hips to meet her movements.

She continues bouncing on my cock before I lift my hand up to cup one of her breasts, pulling it to my mouth before I flick my tongue out to meet her nipple. Letting out a gasping breath, Scar arches into my hold as I do it again. I swear to god I could feast on her for the rest of my life, and it would never be enough.

Burying my fist into her thick hair, I pull her closer to me, causing her to moan in approval. Inhaling deeply, I let out a groan as the intoxicating smell of her surrounds me. Goddamn, I love this woman.

I feel her legs begin to tremble as my teeth graze her nipple and her hold on me tightens.

“Slater....Slater...Fuck, oh, fuck,” she chants as her eyes close, and she tilts her head up to the ceiling.

I glance up at her, taking my mouth away from her only for a moment to speak.

“Eyes on me, baby. Let me see those pretty kaleidoscopes when you cover my cock with your sweet cum.”

Her eyes fly open as they land on me, and her mouth falls open into a beautiful O as she shouts out her release. I’m right behind her, my cock emptying itself inside her as my orgasm slams into me like a fucking freight train. My fingers dig into her hips tightly as I draw out every last bit of it until we’re both left panting.

It takes a few moments before Scar speaks.

“Alright, that was fun, but I’m beyond prune. I’m out of here,” she says as she quickly stands up and reaches for the nearest towel.

I open my mouth in mock offense as I pretend to cover myself with my hands.

“So that’s all I’m good for, is it? I’m just an easy lay?”

She looks down at me with an appraising look before she shrugs and nods.

“Pretty much.”

Bolting out of the bath, Scar squeals as she takes off for the bedroom.

Okay, the little shit is definitely getting it now.



22

## Slater

Scar opens Seb and Erica's front door for me as I carry the two gifts in my hands. It's Rosie and Daph's birthday today, and since our weekends are now fully booked until our first bye, they decided to do a small party after practice today.

Daphne loves to bake and pretend to bake, so Scar bought her this fancy pretend baking set with all the little accessories. It looked cute as shit. Rosie, much like Erica, loves to paint, so we got her an art supply bag filled with the best things money could buy. At least, that's what Scar said. I just handed her my credit card and told her that if she was willing to pick the presents, I was willing to pay for them.

Rosie probably already has it all if I'm honest. Erica set up a spot for her inside the studio Seb had built for Erica when they bought the house. But she's a sweet kid who will love it no matter what.

There are only a handful of people inside but there are more than enough kids. The sounds of piercing screams damn near blows my eardrums after two steps inside. I watch as Erica chases after the twins while Vi tries to help.

Wait, Vi? I look around and spot Mikey sitting with Seb in the corner, no doubt trying to hide from the noise.

“C’mon, baby,” I say as I nod in the direction of the guys.

“Slater,” Mikey smiles as he stands.

I turn to Seb and dump the presents in his lap before bringing Mikey in for a hug.

“I didn’t know you guys were gonna be here.”

“Neither did we,” he laughs. “But when Tuck heard the girls were having a party, he begged us and-”

“You’re a softie that couldn’t say no.”

He scoffs as if he was offended before grinning because we all know he’s definitely the marshmallow of the group, despite his sheer size and inked skin. Can’t judge a book by its cover and all that.

“Nice to see you, Miss Scarlett,” Mikey’s Southern accent draws out as he smiles at Scar.

I wrap my arm around her and kiss the side of her head, causing Mikey’s eyebrows to rise as he looks between us and down to Seb.

“What the hell have I missed?”

“Everything,” Seb laughs with a shake of his head.

“Hi, Declan,” Scar says. “I’m gonna go see if the girls need some help.”

“Appreciate it,” Mikey smiles with a nod.

I pull Scar in for a quick kiss before swatting at her ass, causing her to giggle as she shoots me a look of mock irritation over her shoulder before disappearing into the kitchen.

When I turn back to face my friends, I find them both staring at me.

“What?”

“Look at you,” Mikey laughs.

“Don’t start,” I say as I roll my eyes and drop into the chair behind me.

“Nothing bad,” Mikey says with raised hands. “Just surprised. I didn’t think you felt that way about Scarlett.”

I nod. “I do. Think I always have, just was too dumb to see it.”

Mikey smiles and nods. “You’re happy.”

“Really fucking happy,” I grin as I wipe a hand over my mouth in attempt to hide it.

“Good for you, man. What about Nikki? What’s the latest with that?”

I shrug. “I’m officially divorced. She’s free to do her thing and I’m free to do mine.”

“And you’re good with that?” Mikey asks curiously.

“Yeah,” I nod. “Nikki and I weren’t right for each other. I don’t have any bad blood against her. I just want to move on.”

“Good.”

“So, did Trev make it too?” I ask as I glance around the room.

If anyone would rearrange his schedule for those girls, besides Seb, it would be Trevor. Hell, when the man found out Erica was in labor, he left in the middle of a GQ photoshoot in the Bahamas and flew straight to Seattle. Sat in the hospital waiting room for hours just to be there for them.

Seb shakes his head. “Too hard with practice and their away game next week. That’s what he told the girls this morning when he FaceTimed them to say happy birthday. Sent a couple ridiculous presents though,” he scoffs as he points to the corner of the room where there is a large play kitchen set that basically resembles a real modern kitchen as well as a full-size easel, boxes of paints, and tools that probably cost thousands.

“How do you do it, man?” I ask.

“Do what?” Seb asks.

“Fucking put up with that. If a man that I knew was completely in love with my woman and inserted himself into my family’s life the way he does, I’d deck him.”

“Been there, done that,” he snorts with a twitch of a smile.

Mikey and I laugh at that before he continues.

“He’s been Erica’s best friend since they were kids, like you and Scar. I know Nikki asked you at least a hundred times to stop being friends with Scar, right?”

I scoff. “Try a thousand.”

“And you never did. Not that your marriage was less important, but it wasn’t fair of her to ask that. It’s the same thing. Does it bug me that a man that would happily take my place in a heartbeat is constantly talking to my wife and children? Abso-fucking-lutely. But I trust Erica. She would never betray us or our family. Trevor can be in love with her all he wants. It’s never going to change the fact that she picked me.”

“Shit, that’s fucking mature of you,” I say with a shake of my head.

He shrugs. “I love the guy. He was the person I was closest with for a long time. We will never be close like that again because of everything that has gone down, but I know who he is. He’s a good guy on the inside.”

Mikey nods his agreement. Fuck, well alright then. Seb’s a better man than I.



After cake, presents, and a piñata that more accurately resembled a controlled looting, the kids are playing in the bounce house in the backyard, while the adults that aren't pro-ball players are having beer or wine by the pool. I glance around the yard but don't see Scar. Frowning, I stand up and make my way inside to find her doing the dishes. I smile as I lean against the wall and shake my head. Heart of gold, that one. I don't know if she knows how not to care for others. It's ingrained in her.

"I didn't know Seb and Erica hired you to be their maid," I say as I take a step towards her.

Scar looks over her shoulder before rolling her eyes at me and laughing.

"Shut up. I'm just trying to help. They have enough going on. I want them to actually enjoy their daughters' birthday."

"You're too perfect, Scar."

She snorts and shakes her head as she finishes washing the last dish.

"Hardly."

I close the gap between us and rest my hands on her hips, lowering my head down to hers as I brush my nose against her neck and inhale her sweet scent.

"Completely," I rumble before pressing a featherlight kiss against her heavily beating pulse.

"Slater," she whimpers. "Not here."

I pull back and smirk at her as an idea begins to form in my head. Taking her hand, I intertwine our fingers before leading her down the hallway.

"Where are we going?"

I don't answer as I lead her through the labyrinth that is Seb's house.

"Slater," Scar hisses at me. "We are *not* sneaking into one of Seb and Erica's bedrooms to have sex."



“God, no,” I sneer. “That’s disgusting. Do you really think I would do that?”

“Yes,” she says blandly.

“Ouch.”

“Where are we going then?”

Pushing the door that I’ve been looking for open, I pull Scar inside before shutting it behind her.

“The laundry room?” she asks with furrowed brows.

I run my tongue along my lower lip, nodding as I lift her up by her hips and set her onto the washing machine. Her sundress rises up, exposing her silky thighs that I instantly run my hands up and down.

“Slater, we are not doing this in the laundry room,” she says as my hand slides up higher, brushing against her already damp panties.

“Why not? Seb swears by it,” I smirk as I slide her panties to the side, running my finger up and down her wet lips.

“C’mon, baby. Spread those legs. Show me that pretty pink pussy.”

“Slater,” she breathes as her eyes dart toward the door.

“We don’t have too much time. Someone could walk in here at any moment,” I say as I nip her ear lobe.

She lets out a breathy moan as her legs begin to fall open. I drop down and wedge my head between her thighs, pushing them open as I dart my tongue out. Licking a slow line through her pussy, the addictive flavor explodes against my tongue. I grip the soft flesh of her thighs, forcing her legs even wider as I flick my tongue faster, making sure there isn’t a centimeter of her that I’m missing.

Her hand digs into my hair as she begins grinding her pussy against my face.

“Oh, fuck,” she whimpers. “Slater, I need you to fuck me. Please.”

I pull away from her, my lips still wet as I smirk.

“No need to beg, baby. I’ll give you what you want. First, come here and see how good you taste.”

I expect her to shy away but surprising me, she grabs my face and pulls me into her, her lips capturing mine before her tongue slips out almost greedily. She rolls her tongue over mine before letting out a needy moan into my mouth. The kiss becomes more frantic, more hurried as she holds me tighter, like she can’t get enough.

“You like tasting yourself on my tongue, baby?” I ask against her lips.

She nods quickly as her tongue runs along my lips.

“Fuckkk,” I groan. “That’s so fucking hot.”

I feel her hands go to my belt, quickly undoing it before she slips her hand into my jeans, wrapping her slim fingers around my cock as she pulls it out. She strokes me up and down several times before she scoots closer to the edge.

“Fuck me, Slater. I need to feel your cock stretch me.”

“Goddamn, baby. Whatever you want,” I say as I hold her silk panties to the side, lining my cock up to her before pushing in.

We both let out groans of pleasure until I am fully seated inside her. Her legs wrap around my lower back as she begins thrusting on me. Fuck. If she keeps moving her hips like that, this is gonna be over a hell of a lot faster than I was hoping.

I watch Scar use me with zero remorse, taking everything she needs from me as soft sweet moans escape her. Her eyes are closed, head tilted to the ceiling, when I smack the side of her thigh. Those hazel eyes fly open, surprise in them as she looks down at me.

“That’s a good girl. You keep those eyes on me. I don’t want there to be any confusion about who is claiming this pussy right now.”

She nods her agreement as I begin fucking her harder. The washing machine is beginning to rock with our movements, making way too much noise if we want to stay discreet, but I’m too fucking gone in my girl to give a damn.

“Oh, fuck! Slate. I’m gonna,” she gasps.

“Yeah, cum on my cock. Let me hear those sweet lips say my name as you cover me in your sweet cum,” I say as I reach down and flick my thumb against her clit. Her body begins to shudder as her legs dig into me before she is screaming her release, and I do mean screaming.

I cover her mouth with my hand as I feel my spine begin to tingle and my balls start to draw up.

“Fuck, Scar!” I groan as my cock explodes, dumping my load inside her and filling her to the brim. I fuck her through my orgasm, drawing it out as long as possible before I rest my forehead into the crook of her neck as I let out a shallow breath.

Slowly, I pull out of her watching as my cum begins spilling out of her pussy and onto her panties. I dip my fingers inside her pussy one more time, pushing my leaking cum back inside her where it belongs before I draw my fingers out of her. I hold them up to her, silently commanding her.

She keeps her eyes on me the entire time as she carefully leans forward opening her mouth into the perfect O before sucking my cum covered fingers into her mouth. My eyes practically roll into the back of my head as her warm tongue wraps around them, licking each one clean.

“Such a good fucking girl,” I murmur.

When I pull my fingers out of her mouth, she licks her lips as if she was

savoring the taste of us together one more time before giving me an almost shy smile.

Little vixen.

Before I can call her out for it, the door opens. I shove my cock back into my pants as Scar quickly pulls her dress down to cover her as Seb steps inside. He takes one look at me and Scar before his shoulders sag and he shakes his head.

“Goddamnit, Slater. My fucking laundry room?”

“Freshman year, bro. Sucks being on the other side of the door, huh,” I laugh.

Seb scoffs as he shoots me a deadpan look before his mouth twitches and he brings his hand up to cover his laugh, shaking his head as he steps out of the room. Scar smacks my shoulder while I laugh. That was ten years in the making. Fucking worth it.



23

## Scarlett

Once we sneak out of the laundry room, Slater and I start making our way into the living room when my stomach turns. My mouth begins to water, and my eyes widen. Erica starts making her way over to us, but she must see the look on my face before I dart to the left and run for the closest bathroom. Thankfully it's not far, and I'm just barely able to get to the toilet before my stomach empties itself. My gut twists as it does it again and again.

Suddenly, I feel a gentle hand on my back and a soft voice.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" Erica asks.

I look up at her with watery eyes as I grab a piece of toilet paper and wipe my mouth before flushing and shakily standing up. Erica takes a step back as she begins rifling through the cabinet before handing me a new toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste. I give her a grateful smile as I begin brushing my teeth.

"Are you sick?" she asks.

I shake my head. "I don't think so. I feel fine now. Slater and I got some sushi before we came here. Maybe it was a bad batch or something," I say

over the toothbrush as I continue brushing.

Erica nods as she looks at me for a second.

“Are you late?”

I frown at that before I shake my head.

“No, I should be starting any day now. Why?”

She shrugs as she crosses her arms.

“I got sick really early with the twins. I was only like three weeks along.”

“What does-” I pause before I look at her with widened eyes. “You think I might be pregnant?”

Erica shrugs again. “You tell me, babe.”

I open my mouth to speak but nothing comes out. I’m always religious about my birth control and yeah, we haven’t been using condoms, but birth control is like 99% effective. There’s no way. Unless.

“I guess I don’t know.”

“One sec, wait here,” she says as she slips out of the bathroom.

It only takes her a minute before she comes back in, with Vi on her toes. She gives me a shy smile before Erica closes the door behind them. Vi reaches into her purse and pulls out a pregnancy test box and hands it to me.

“You just carry these around, Vi?” I laugh hollowly as nerves begin building inside me.

She shrugs with a small smile. “We aren’t trying, but we aren’t not trying, you know?”

“I absolutely don’t know,” Erica says with a playful sneer. “Two kids are more than enough, thank you very much.”

Vi laughs and rolls her eyes at Erica before smiling at me kindly.

“Do you want us to give you some privacy?”

I shrug as I look down at the box. Pregnant? Could I be pregnant? My

stomach twists at the idea. Not necessarily in a good or bad way. Just in an unknowing way. Opening the box, I pull the test out and step around the privacy wall in the bathroom where the toilet is. I've only ever taken a pregnancy test once before and that was shortly after I lost my virginity, and my period was a few days late. Thank god, the test was negative then, but if I'm honest, I don't have that same fear swarming through me as I did then.

Maybe because I know that if I am, it's Slater's, and I know he will support me endlessly in whatever I decide to do. It doesn't take long for me to finish the test as I set it on the floating shelf above the toilet before stepping around the corner.

Vi and Erica watch me hesitantly before Erica speaks.

"So how are we feeling?"

"I don't know."

"Would you be happy if you were?" Vi asks softly.

I give her half a shrug. "I mean, I always pictured myself having kids. Seeing you guys with yours definitely makes me think about them more and more often. And I couldn't complain about who the baby's father would be," I smile.

"Oh my god!" Erica practically squeals before Vi nudges her, quieting her down as Erica covers her mouth. "I'm sorry. I just pictured Slater holding a little baby of his own, and my heart just melted. He'd be like the cool uncle turned daddy," she says with swoony eyes as she covers her hand over her heart.

"And you know he would spoil the hell out of you while you were pregnant," Vi chimes in with a nod.

"And you'd have us! Best aunties ever!" Erica claps.

I can't help but laugh as the girls get more and more excited. Truth be told,



a small amount of giddiness fills me at the thought too. Would it be ideal? Not preferably. I mean, the timing isn't amazing. Slater and I have only been together for a few weeks, and he's currently getting a divorce and starting his comeback season. We have a lot on our plate.

But an image pops into my head of Slater holding a little pink blanket. I don't know why pink. I've always wanted at least one of each, but something tells me Slater would be a great girl dad. He'd protect her like he always protected me.

I'll never forget when Slater, Ezra, and I were in school. I was in fifth grade, and Slater and Ezra were in sixth when Arnold Beeman was bullying me on the playground at recess. Despite my efforts at ignoring him, he pushed me down from behind, causing me to rip my jeans and skin my knees.

Slater and Ezra were tossing the football around on the other side of the playground but somehow Slater seemed to look over in that exact moment. Through blurry eyes, I watched as the most thunderous look I had ever seen on a twelve-year-old's face took over Slater as he stormed our way. Faster than I thought was possible, Slater shoved Arnold to the ground right beside me before punching him in the mouth. Slater was suspended for a week, and I was officially head over heels for him. Cliché to fall for my knight in shining football jersey, I know. Even back then I was a goner for him.

"Scar," Erica says gently, forcing me to blink myself out of the past as I look at her.

"You want one of us to look?"

I shake my head with a small smile as I walk around the corner. I grab the face down test before walking out to them. Erica and Vi are eagerly holding each other's hands as they watch me. I smile at them, my heart swarming with butterflies as I flip the stick over.

The butterflies in my stomach quickly turn to lead, bottoming out as my pulse thunders to a slow beat. I feel the smile on my face slowly fall before I look up to see matching fading smiles on the girls. To my embarrassment, I feel my throat tighten as my eyes begin to mist over. I go for a casual shrug as I throw the test into the empty trash can to my right.

“Must have been the sushi,” I say, my voice shaking only slightly as I do.

They both give me sympathetic looks before opening their arms for me. I walk into them, hugging them tightly as they don’t say a word. I really appreciate it too because if they did, I’d probably break out into tears, and no one wants that. We’re at a birthday party. We need to be celebrating.

God. How stupid was I to get my hopes up so high so quickly? This is a good thing. It isn’t a good time for kids, we aren’t prepared, and our relationship has only begun. This is a bullet dodged. Really.

When we break apart, I wipe underneath my eyes before looking in the mirror to make sure my makeup is semi-intact. I run a hand through my hair, not quite used to having it down as I fluff it over my shoulders and look at the girls.

“Beautiful,” Vi smiles softly.

“Always,” Erica says with a kiss to my cheek before she opens the bathroom door.

We all file out into the hallway as Slater turns the corner, his head whipping around before he lands on me.

“Hey, I was looking for you. Where’d you run off to?”

“Bathroom. Don’t think that sushi sat well with me,” I say with a light laugh.

Something is off in my voice, though, and he can tell. His smile instantly fades as a frown takes over his face.

“What’s wrong?”

I shake my head, doing my best to be convincing as I smile.

“Nothing. Just not feeling the best.”

“Want to head out?”

“Yeah, probably best.”

He gives me a quick kiss before lacing his hands with mine and leading us out to say our goodbyes.

*Maybe someday.*



24

## Scarlett

**W**e just landed in Pittsburgh for our game against the Tigers tomorrow. The team is required to stay in a hotel the night before all home and away games, to cut out any possibility of players not getting a restful night. Obviously, I'm not required to stay in the hotel when we are in Seattle, but since I travel with the team, I always stay at the same hotel as them.

Most of the rookies and lower-level staff have to share rooms, but being as I'm the only woman on staff, I'm able to have my own. Probably one of the sole perks of being the only woman. The players just had dinner, but I chose to forego it and catch up on some paperwork that I've been slacking on. The Crusaders are my bread and butter, but obviously the season doesn't last all year long, so I have to keep up with my other patients on the side.

I'm just finishing finalizing the next two-week plan for my newest patient when my phone buzzes.

**Slater: It's been too long since I've been buried inside that tight pussy.**

**Me: It's been thirteen hours since you've been inside my 'tight pussy.'**

**Slater: Exactly. Too fucking long. Come sneak into my room. Your side of the bed is all ready for you.**

I laugh at that. After the first night we slept together, Slater and I quickly realized something. We both prefer sleeping on the right side of the bed. There was a debate about who actually got to sleep on that side before Slater came up with the ultimate compromise. He slept on the right side while I laid on top of him. That only worked out for one night before we both woke up horribly uncomfortable, and Slater conceded that I could have that side like the gentleman he is.

**Me: Yeah, can't exactly do that. You know the only reason you all have to stay in a hotel in the first place is to take away any...distractions. I'm pretty sure your athletic trainer sneaking into your room counts as a distraction.**

**Slater: A sexy one.**

I scoff and smirk as I type out my response.

**Me: Not tonight, Mr. Santos.**

**Slater: How am I supposed to go to bed if I don't have my favorite late night snack?**

**Me: Believe it or not, you calling me a snack doesn't make the idea of sneaking into your room any more appealing.**

**Slater: Would you feel better if I told you that you were a whole damn meal? Because I swear to god, I could eat you for hours.**

**Me: Goodnight, Slater.**

**Slater: What if I come to you?**

I set my phone down as I glance around my room before shaking my head.

**Me: You getting caught sneaking into my room is no better. The only way you could get in here without being seen is if you scaled the balcony.**

**Slater: I'm in 1218. Which room are you in?**

**Me: 1214.**

**Slater: Ah, that's nothing. Only one balcony between us. I'll see you in five. Don't start touching yourself until I'm there to watch.**

**Me: What! Are you crazy? Who would willingly go out and jump to TWO balconies just to get laid?**

His response comes immediately.

**Slater: Many men have done a lot more for less, and none of them have had the honor of tasting you. Trust me, you're more than worth it.**

Tossing my blankets and laptop to the side, I rush over to my balcony, throwing my slider glass door open to see Slater lining up a chair against the edge of his railing two balconies over. The back of the chair pushes up against the wrought iron as if he is planning to use it as a step to jump off.

"What are you doing?" I whisper.

He looks up at me and waves like an idiot. A sexy one.

"Coming to see my girl," he says as he takes a step back like he's going to get a running start.

"Okay, Slater. Stop. I thought you were kidding before, but this is not going to work, and you will probably die. Please just go inside. We are heading home tomorrow night."

Slater has a look of determination on his face as he shakes his head seriously.

"Gotta get to my girl," he says almost to himself.

My stomach is in knots as my hands begin to sweat.

"Slater! You are not going to make it, that chair is not going to help you."

"Sure it will. I saw it in a movie."

"I saw that same movie. Do you remember how only one of the characters

made it?”

He shrugs, seemingly unbothered. “I’m a pro-athlete, Scar. I got this.”

Before I can argue with him more he gets a running start, placing his left foot onto the chair and leaping across the six-and a half foot gap between his balcony and the other before landing with a hard thud.

A light turns on inside the room as Slater and my eyes both round. He looks around for a place to hide but comes up short when Seb comes out running a hand through his shoulder length hair.

“What the fuck? Slater? How’d you get out here?”

“Jumped,” he says as he takes one of Seb’s chairs and begins lining it up the same way he did the last one.

“Why?” he asks as his eyes move over to me. I wave awkwardly causing Seb to let out a heavy sigh.

“I take it this was your brilliant plan?” he asks Slater.

“Yep,” he says as he backs up to the other end of the balcony.

“Don’t die. We have a game tomorrow,” Seb says before walking back inside.

Slater runs the short distance, springing off the chair and leaping through the air. I quickly backpedal to give him enough room to land. He barely clears the edge of the iron fence before landing in a crouch at the ground.

When he stands, he gives me that trademark Slater smile that still makes my stomach flutter before a tattooed hand lifts up to cup my face.

“Hi, baby.”

“Hi?” I laugh. “That’s all you have to say right now?”

He thinks about it for a moment before he nods seriously.

“You’re right.”

He crouches down low and slings me over his shoulder as he opens and



closes the slider door before crossing the room to my bed and dropping me down with a bounce.

“I missed you,” he says in between kisses as he crawls on top of me. I can’t help but smile into him as I kiss him back.

“I missed you too,” I murmur.

I feel his hands begin to move down my torso before resting on my pajama shorts. My breath stutters as he cups my pussy through the thin material before grinding his palm down.

“Have you touched yourself tonight, Bubbles?”

My eyes flutter open, just realizing that at some point, I closed them as I give him a soft shake of my head.

“Good girl, you know how much I like to watch,” he says as he leans back onto his heels.

That I do. We quickly learned that Slater loves watching me, whether I’m taking off my clothes, touching myself or virtually anything in between, and I discovered that I love putting on a show just as much.

I never would have considered myself an exhibitionist, but the way I feel when Slater’s eyes are on me makes me feel more desired and sexier than I’ve ever felt in my life. Our first clue was the whole Trevor thing. Having Slater’s eyes on me when he first walked in sent me falling over the edge before I even knew what was happening, and based on the heavy lustful look in his eyes as he watched us, he loved it.

Slowly, I slip off my sleep shorts, my panties coming off with them before pulling my tank top over my head. I spread myself across the bed before dropping my knees open so that Slater has a perfect view. I put two fingers into my mouth, sucking on them just enough to get them wet, before I lightly

trail them over my breast, pausing on one of my nipples before moving lower.

There is something so powerful with the way Slater watches me. Like he's enraptured with every inch, every touch. It only makes me want to take things slower, drag it out until it's nearly torture for him. When my fingers reach my pussy and brush over my clit briefly, my breath hitches, causing Slater's eyes to flare with lust. I watch as he reaches down to his sweats, pushing them down as he begins stroking himself slowly, his eyes solely focused on me.

Dipping one finger inside first, I roll my eyes into the back of my head as I moan.

"There you go, baby. Play with your pussy. Are you wet?" Slater grumbles lowly.

"Mhmm," I nod as I slowly stroke myself.

"Fuck, I bet you are. You're always so wet. Let me see."

I pull my finger out of myself, holding it up to prove it. He leans forward, sucking the glistening finger into his mouth before his tongue wraps around it and licks me clean. When he pulls away, he nods to my pussy as he speaks.

"Keep going, baby."

I do as he says, this time slipping two fingers inside. I let out another breathy moan as I begin fucking myself with them.

"God, you're such a good girl. Finger fucking yourself just for me."

"Yes," I gasp as I toss my head back when I brush against my G-spot.

"Eyes on me," he commands lowly.

I do as he says, watching as he lowers himself down to where his face is only inches from my pussy. He places a few soft kisses against the inside of my thigh before inhaling deeply.

"Fuck. You smell so good. Take out your fingers."

I pull them out despite a flutter of disappointment inside me at taking away the good feeling I had building. Slater surprises me though by sliding two of his fingers inside me. My breath hitches at the sudden feeling before I moan my approval.

“Yeah, let me play with you. I’m gonna make you cum all over my hand while you suck your pussy off your fingers.”

Desire pools in me at his dirty words. Another surprise I discovered about myself. I was unsure when Slater first asked me to taste myself, but if I’m being honest, I kinda love it. I never thought that would be my thing and as far as taste goes I don’t crave it like Slater does. But the way he watches me eagerly as I do urges me on.

Bringing my fingers up to my lips, I make a show of sticking my tongue out, softly running up and down them, and it doesn’t escape my notice that Slater’s pace begins to quicken at the action. Pulling them into my mouth, I begin sucking on them, causing Slater to let out a guttural groan as his mouth drops to my clit.

I let out a muffled cry of relief as he begins flicking his tongue quickly against me, his fingers furiously rubbing my G-spot as I taste myself on my tongue. It’s all too much. Sensory overload in the best way possible, and I barely have a moment to think the thought that I’m about to cum when my pussy is contracting, and a wave of euphoria is flooding through me.

“Fuck, yes. Cum on my hand. Give it all to me.”

I don’t know if my pussy is listening to him or what, but another ripple of pleasure runs through me at that.

When Slater pulls his fingers out of me, I open my mouth to which he only smirks and shakes his head.

“Such a greedy little thing. You already had your taste,” he says as he

sucks on his fingers in front of me before he yanks off his shirt that he has managed to keep on.

My eyes run over his beautifully inked skin. It's practically art. All of the sculptures and paintings at Erica's art shows, no offense to her, are nothing compared to him.

"Bend over, baby. Show yourself to me."

Moving to get onto my hands and knees, I face away from Slater as I arch my back.

"Fuckkk. Your body is perfection, Scarlett Hayes. Absolute fucking perfection," he says as his large hands begin running up and down my ass.

He leans over me, his hands continuing to rub me as he whispers into my ear.

"Do you trust me?"

I turn to look at him over my shoulder, answering him instantly.

"Completely."

A satisfied smile spreads across his face before crushes his lips to mine. His mouth takes control of the kiss immediately. I feel his tongue run against mine as his teeth graze my bottom lip. Every time he nips me, his tongue comes and soothes the pain. It's a deliciously intoxicating combination of pleasure, pain, and insurmountable lust.

When he pulls away, he begins running his mouth against my shoulders as he descends down my spine. Feeling his warm lips on nearly every inch of me has me practically trembling. My eyes are closed as I let out a soft moan. Until he gets to my ass. My eyes shoot wide open when his tongue flicks out where it definitely shouldn't. He couldn't have mistaken it for my vagina, he's literally fingering that right now.

"Uh, Slater?" I ask, concerned.

He pulls away and squeezes the side of my ass while his finger continues working its magic inside me.

“Yeah, baby?”

“What are you doing?”

“Licking every inch of you,” he says as if it was that simple.

“But that’s my-”

“Your sexy ass, I’m aware. Trust me. I’m going to make you feel better than you ever have.”

I go to tell him that isn’t possible when his mouth goes back to work. It’s different at first. Not unpleasant just...different. With the combined efforts of Slater’s fingers though, pleasure begins to give way. What the hell? There is no way I’m actually enjoying this, am I?

A barely there moan slips from my mouth, causing Slater to pull away.

“Feel good, baby?”

“It’s starting to,” I admit.

“Good, just relax,” he says as he withdraws his fingers from me.

“Hey,” I whimper in protest.

Slater doesn’t answer me, though. Instead, he draws back and starts easing a finger into my ass.

“Ow, fuck! What are you doing?” I complain.

“Shhh, calm down. You’re getting too tense. Relax, baby. Deep breaths, let me in.”

“Why do you even want to get in?” I almost whine as his movements stall.

He doesn’t speak for a moment, and I think it’s because he isn’t going to answer me when he says, “Because I want to know what it’s like to give my girl pleasure in every possible way. If you want to stop, we will, though.”

I pause, not wanting to stop but also nervous about where this will lead.

“Just...go slow,” I whisper softly.

Slater presses a kiss to the bottom of my spine as he pulls his finger out before he speaks.

“Of course. Stay relaxed for me. One second.”

I feel him get off the bed and bend down to his discarded shorts before he pulls something out of the pocket. When he climbs back on the bed I feel his hand rub up and down my spine, slowly relaxing me before he rubs a cool liquid against my ass.

I hiss in a sharp breath at that, but he just keeps rubbing soothing circles on my back with his other hand as he begins easing his finger inside me.

I keep taking big breaths until I feel the tenseness of my body begin to seep out of me.

“That’s a good girl,” Slater praises as he begins moving his finger once again, small soft strokes that push him a little deeper each time.

Soon, the pressure I felt in the beginning has nearly disappeared, and it actually feels good.

“Think you can take more, baby?” Slater asks.

I bite my lip but nod my head.

I feel Slater push a second finger in, causing my body to tense up at the new intrusion as he pauses.

“Breathe, Scar.”

Breathe. Right. I need to breathe. Inhaling through my nose and out my mouth, I force my body to relax until it’s nothing more than a mix of pleasure and pressure. Suddenly, I feel Slater rub a spot that has my toes curling. Slater obviously notices because he chuckles.

“Is that the spot?” he asks as he rubs against it again.

“Y-yes,” I gasp.

“Do you want to keep going?” he asks.

“Going where?” I laugh, semi-joking but mainly not at all joking.

Slater laughs. “All the way until my cock is buried in your tight ass.”

My eyes bug out at his words, even if I knew that’s where he was going with it, I didn’t expect him to actually say it.

“If you aren’t comfortable with it, we can stop,” Slater offers.

“No, I don’t want to stop,” I say.

Slater slowly eases his fingers out of me as I feel him sit up a little more, angling his hips up to mine as he runs the tip of his cock from my pussy all the way up my ass and back down. He pauses when the head of his cock gets to my ass, one of his hands rubbing soothing circles on my thigh as he speaks.

“Okay, baby. Deep breath in and let it out when I tell you.”

I nod and inhale a deep breath.

“Breathe out,” Slater says.

I do as he says, letting the air escape me when I feel him push in. A sharp pain rips through me and I instantly tense as my fingers twist the sheets beneath me. Slater doesn’t stop though, instead, the bastard lets out a pleased moan.

“Goddamn. Your ass is practically choking my cock. I’ve never felt anything tighter in my entire fucking life,” he pants.

“Happy for you. I’ve definitely had better,” I grit through clenched teeth.

The jerk laughs. Laughs! Can you believe it? Why do people like this? It freaking hurts.

“You have to relax for me. Otherwise it’s only going to feel good for me.”

“I have a feeling it’s going to be that way regardless,” I grumble.

Slater smacks the side of my ass.

“Don’t be a brat. Take another deep breath and force yourself to let go of all the tension inside you.”

I’m tempted to snark back, but lucky for him, I don’t. Instead, I take deep breaths, as if breathing alone could take away from the fact that someone’s cock is literally inside my ass right now.

Slater’s thrusts are slow and methodical. He doesn’t buck against me wildly or lose any kind of control. Instead, he keeps everything measured and even to where the pain is *almost* manageable. Almost.

“Touch your clit,” Slater rasps as he picks up his pace slightly.

I reach a hand down, softly rubbing against myself, even if I won’t be able to cum like this. Maybe it’ll distract me.

It takes a few passes before a tiny amount of pleasure zings through me. I repeat the motion again and again until a soft moan slips out of me.

“There you go,” Slater encourages. “Keep doing that. I want to hear you.”

I gasp out another soft moan as my fingers find the perfect rhythm with Slater’s cock. The pain has started to ease. It’s not totally gone, but it’s more pressure at this point as my own pleasure begins to take the front seat.

Slater’s thrusts are becoming deeper and a little faster until he reaches that spot he touched earlier. The one that has my toes curling and my mouth opening.

“Oh my god,” I gasp.

Slater takes note of that spot and begins rubbing the head of his cock over it again and again.

“Why does that almost feel good?” I groan as my hand begins rubbing myself faster than before.

“It’s like a G-spot for your ass,” Slater says through what sounds like clenched teeth as his thrusts become jerky and uneven.



“Fuck! I don’t know if I like this position. I can’t see those beautiful kaleidoscopes on me.”

“My eyes?” I ask.

“Yes, baby. Your fucking big beautiful green and brown swirled eyes that make me want to cum as soon as they land on me.”

Satisfaction runs through me that I seem to have that much hold on Slater, or more specifically my eyes do.

“Fucking hell, Scar. You take me so good. Every single hole is fucking magic. Do you like this? You like my cock buried in your ass?”

Pleasure sparks in me at his words as I nod my head.

“Yes.”

“God, that’s fucking hot,” he groans.

On the next thrust, a wave of pleasure crashes into me and surprisingly takes me over the edge before I even knew I was close.

I feel my pussy clench around nothing as my body shakes, and I let out a louder than acceptable moan for the thin walls this hotel has. The pleasure that hits me is so different than I’ve ever felt before. It’s more intense, more lasting and I can’t believe I’m saying this but it’s amazing.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Slater chants as a warmth floods me, filling me up as his cock pulses inside me.

We are still for a moment, both of us stuck in that post-orgasm haze before Slater slowly but steadily pulls out. Ah! Okay. Ow. So maybe not amazing, way better than I was expecting, though.

I collapse onto my chest, feeling Slater’s cum leaking out of me but too tired to get up right this second, when I feel a soft kiss hit my spine before coming up to brush against my cheek. Slater pushes my hair away from my face as he smiles down at me.

“Was that okay, Bubbles? Did I hurt you?”

“I mean, yes. But it got better. Even felt good right there at the end.”

Slater nods as he presses a gentle kiss to my forehead.

“You know what helps so that it feels good all the time?”

“No, what?” I ask.

“Practice,” he smirks.

I scoff and shove him to the side as I practically have to waddle to the bathroom. Practice? Definitely not. That was a one-time thing.

Maybe.

**25**

## Slater

Once Scar is done in the bathroom, I'm just finishing getting dressed. It's already nearly midnight, and we have to be up in less than seven hours, so I need to somehow get back to my room in one piece. I give Scar a quick kiss before walking towards her balcony.

"Where are you going?" she asks as she follows me.

"Back to my room," I say as I open the door.

"Slater, don't be dumb. You got lucky last time. Just go out into the hallway. Be fast."

I glance at her with mock horror. "And risk being caught with this just-got-fucked hair? No shot."

She rolls her eyes and laughs, clearly used to my fucking hilarious sense of humor.

"Love you, baby," I say as I shoot her a wink before running up to the chair that is still pushed up against the railing and leaping to Seb's balcony. Unfortunately, it looks like when I jumped last time, I moved the chair by

accident and so instead of landing with ease, I get caught up on the chair and end up landing on my hip. Fuck. That didn't feel great.

"Oh my god! Are you okay?" Scar asks, panicked. I love that she cares about me so much. That girl loves me more than I think anyone could ever possibly.

"I'm fine," I say with a slight rasp.

Damn that shit is gonna hurt tomorrow.

The sliding glass door opens, revealing a sleep-tousled Seb who more closely resembles a grumpy grizzly bear.

"Use the fucking door, you dumbass," he grumbles before walking back inside.

I can't help but chuckle as I slowly stand up. I turn to face Scar as I hook my thumb to point towards Seb's room.

"I think I'm gonna go this way."

Scar smiles and nods. "I think that's a good idea."

"Alright. Night, Bubbles," I say as I blow her an exaggerated kiss that has her laughing.

When I step inside the room, Seb is already laying back down in bed, ignoring me completely even though I know he's awake. I open his door and do my best to shut it quietly behind me, when I run into the special teams coach, Schmitt.

"Santos, what are you doing out of bed?" he asks as he glances at a piece of paper in his hand and frowns.

"And why are you coming out of Caldwell's room?"

"I forgot to give him his goodnight kiss. The princess wouldn't go to sleep until I did," I shrug.

Schmitt rolls his eyes before continuing to walk down the hall.

“Get to your room, Santos.”

“Yes, sir.”

I walk over to my door, trying the handle but finding it locked, obviously. I pat my pockets but come up empty. I definitely didn’t grab my door key when I was jumping from balcony to balcony. Who would have thought I’d need it?

Turning on my heel, I make my way downstairs to get another key before I run into any more coaches. I know what you’re thinking. Was this all worth just a little time spent with Scar? The answer is hell fucking yes.



I’m running as fast as I can, my legs stretched, my arms pumping, and my chest heaving as I close the distance to the end zone. I feel the defenseman on my heels, but I focus on what’s in front of me as my feet cross over that white line.

Touchdown, motherfucker!

I toss the ball to the ref before doing what has quickly become my signature touchdown celebration. I pull out my imaginary bubbles and blow them out to the sidelines, where Scar blushes like a tomato. Seb slaps me on the back as we get into formation and a few other guys are bouncing around like a couple of jumping beans. I’ve had a damn good game today. One of the best in a long time. It feels good to perform to my capability. To surpass the expectations others had for me and be the best I can.

The game ends with a score of 42-17. The Tigers never stood a chance. When the game is called, a few of us speak with some reporters briefly before making our way into the locker rooms. I keep my eyes on Andrews until he disappears into the locker room, not sparing Scar even a single glance.

Good.

I'm buzzing from the adrenaline of the game and the excitement that this wasn't the end for me, it was only the beginning of something better.

"Guess who's back? Back again. Slater's back. Tell a friend!" I sing as I sway into the locker room to the tune of Eminem's *Without Me*.

"Guess who's back, guess who's back, guess who's back," a couple of rookies sing, automatically catching on.

Alright, I like those two. I fist bump them before patting their backs and making my way to the shower. When I pull off my gear, I wince as my pants rub against my hip.

"Oh shit, what happened to you?" Seb asks as he looks at the large deep purple and blue bruise covering my hip.

"Bro, locker room rule number one. Never let your eyes go below the belt. What would Erica say?" I gasp in horror as I cover myself up before I bust up laughing.

Seb just raises an unimpressed eyebrow at me.

"What the fuck is up with you? It's like I got in a time machine and I'm standing next to twenty-year-old Slater."

"I fucking feel like twenty-year-old Slater, brother."

Shaking his head, Seb chuckles under his breath but doesn't say another word. I know he's giving me shit and I'm acting crazy, but fuck, I feel good. My knee hasn't bugged me once all game, my speed was right where it needed to be, and Smith and I seem to have our silent communication down.

The kid did great throwing the ball everywhere I was. I feel fucking unstoppable and knowing that Scar was on the sidelines watching every moment of it only pumps up my ego more. You know, showing off for my girl and all that.



When we get home, Scar and I share an Uber and take it back to my place. I don't know why I even call it my place. At this point, it's our place. Her apartment is basically just a spot where she keeps her stuff, even though some of it has already started migrating here. I couldn't tell you the last time she slept there. And all of that is more than fine with me. If I didn't know her so well, I'd just tell her to move in already, but this is Scar we are talking about. She will want to hold onto her small piece of independence, at least until she feels fully secure in our relationship. The fact she doesn't feel that way bugs the fuck out of me, but I know she needs time, and even though patience isn't my strong suit, I'll give her whatever she wants.

We pretty much pass out once we get through the doors, after she rode my cock of course. Goddamn, have I mentioned how good that girl can ride me because fuck.

Today is our rest day, and I told Scar to make sure she had her schedule clear. We made some breakfast before getting in the car and heading north. Scar has been guessing what we are doing or where we are going for almost an hour now, but there is no way she's going to guess.



We finally get to our destination as I take a left at the light and turn into one of the makeshift parking lots. Scar's mouth parts as her eyes widen before she turns to me.

"The Evergreen State Fair?"

"Yup," I smile.

"Why didn't we go to the one in Puyallup? It's a lot closer than...where are we?"

"Monroe. Everyone goes to the Puyallup fair, media included. No one is going to look for a celebrity in this small town," I shrug as I pay the parking attendant before pulling into an empty spot.

"Okay but why a fair?" Scar laughs as I shut off the car.

"You know I can't resist the water gun game," I say with a wink before I step out of the car and walk around to get Scar's door.

She slips her hand in mine before I pull on my baseball hat and sunglasses, just in case.

"Aww, so you're taking me on a little fair date?" Scar coos as we make our way to the front gates.

We pay our admission and get wristbands for the rides because Scar can protest all she wants, she's getting her cute ass on the zipper with me. After we walk around for a bit, we stop over at the food and get a fucking brick of french fries that Scar impressively eats all by herself, a couple of Philly cheesesteaks, and an elephant ear. I tried to warn her that eating that much before the rides was not a good idea, but she insisted that she wasn't going on any rides so there wasn't a problem. Silly girl.

"Slater, I'm not getting on that fucking death trap," she says with her crossed arms as we take a step forward in line.

"Sure you are. You think I bought you the wristband for fun?"

She rolls her eyes as we take another step forward.

“I’ll go on the Ferris Wheel or the teacups. I’m not getting locked into a metal cage and spun around sixty feet in the air. Do you know how many people die on these things every year?” she asks, lowering her voice as she does.

“No,” I draw out with a side eye. “Do you?”

“Well, not an exact number but I’m sure it’s high. One is too many for me. So, have fun gambling with your life,” she says when she gets to the front of the line. “I’ll be waiting over there.”

I smirk at her and shake my head before lifting her over my shoulder as we walk past the operator. He gives us a funny look until I lift my sunglasses off. Recognition fills his eyes as I smirk at him and walk us into the waiting zipper. I place Scar onto the seat before sitting next to her and pulling the bar down. Her head whips over to me, eyes full of panic and anger.

“What the fuck! I said I don’t want to go on this ride, Slater!”

Scar’s voice begins to shake as she white knuckles the bar holding us into place.

“Hey,” I say softly as I lift her chin until she’s looking at me. “I would never let anything hurt you, you have to know that, right?”

“Some things are out of your control, though.”

I shake my head. “Have you met me? I’m Slater fucking Santos. Nothing is out of my control. I’d go to the ends of the earth to keep you safe. I’d destroy anyone who would even dare to raise their voice to you, let alone hurt you. You’re safe with me, Scar. Always.”

“What about you?” she asks softly.

“What about me?”

“What if you hurt me?” she asks before darting her eyes away, like she’s

scared to hear the answer. I knew she had some hesitations, and as much as I hate it, I get it. But it's time that she knows the truth.

Cupping her face with both of my hands, I bring her closer until our noses touch before I speak into her bright eyes.

"I'd tear out my own heart and lay it at your feet before I would ever hurt you. You're mine, Scar. Always have been, always will be too."

Her eyes widen as she seems to soak up my words before a soft smile touches her mouth as she nods her understanding. I wish she knew what I would do for her, or even better what I wouldn't do. That list is much shorter.

The ride begins and she clings to the bar in front of her as her breathing picks up. I lift up my arm in offering and she hurriedly buries herself into my side as she wraps her arms around my waist. I can't help but chuckle as I hold onto her tighter.

"I got you, baby," I say against the top of her head before placing a kiss against it.

As soon as the cage starts spinning, Scar lets out a piercing scream that could shatter glass. Her eyes are pinched, body tensed, as she screams like her life depends on it. I hold onto her as we spin, and when we finally stop spinning at the top, I nudge her.

"Look out there."

She peeks open her eyes and looks through the tiny holes in the metal cage to see the view of the fairgrounds. Her eyes widen in terror as the ride starts up again.

"Why the hell did you tell me to look? Now I know exactly how high we are!"

She starts screaming again, but I don't know if my ears can handle much more of that, so I slip my hand behind her neck and crush her lips against

mine. Unbelievably, she is still able to scream as I kiss her but soon the screams fade into nothing. Her lips move against my own eagerly, like she needs this to survive. That's perfect because I'm pretty sure I need Scar to survive at this point. I've basically never not had her at least in some capacity. Not sure I'd know how to even breathe properly if I was faced with losing her. So I'm more than happy to make sure there will always be a spot for her, right under my arm.

We don't break the kiss until the ride is over and the cage opens, revealing the late afternoon sun. I'm about to tell the guy to go around again so we can continue, but Scar seems to feel her freedom and flees towards it. Chuckling as I wipe the lip gloss from my lips, I step out behind her and follow after my girl who is running like she's a cat who just got out of the bath.

When I catch up to her, she's staring up at The Zipper with an evil glare, like it's the ride's fault she was on it in the first place. She glances down at me, her eyes narrowing as she speaks.

"I deserve a funnel cake for going through that hell."

I do my best to smother my laugh and nod my agreement.

"Yes, you do, baby. Let's go," I say as I wrap my arm around her shoulders and walk her to the closest food stand.

For both our sakes.



26

## Scarlett

After I eat my funnel cake, Slater and I are walking through all the vendors when my eyes catch on a henna stand. I can't help but watch in fascination as the dye is methodically applied to the skin. It's practically mesmerizing.

"You want one, Bubbles?" Slater asks me as he brings me closer to him and kisses my temple.

I shake my head softly as I continue watching the process.

"Ah, come on. You won't even get henna? I understand not wanting to get tattoos. I mean, I don't, but I respect your decision not to. But henna is temporary. I know you don't want to mark your body but--"

"It's not that," I say with a shake of my head. "I just don't know what I would ever get. I don't know of anything that is meaningful enough, that I'd never regret, to put onto my skin for the rest of my life, you know?"

Slater nods in thought for a moment as he looks at me.

"What about Mom?"

My stomach balls up at his mention of her. We are coming up on the anniversary of her death and despite that it's been fourteen years, it still hurts every year.

"What would I get to represent her?" I ask.

Slater's brows furrow as he thinks for a moment before nodding.

"I got an idea. Trust me?"

I hesitate for a moment.

"Yeah, always."

He pulls out his phone, quickly typing across the screen before he tugs on me.

"C'mon."

I follow him wordlessly, knowing that if he wants wherever we are going to be a surprise, then it will be. A short ten-minute drive later, and we are pulling into a parking spot in what looks like the main street in town before I look up at the neon sign in front of me.

"Riverside Tattoos?" I ask as Slater opens my door for me.

Slater nods. "They had really good reviews," he says as he leads us inside.

There is one guy sitting in a chair to our left getting his forearm tattooed while two other employees are talking at the front desk. They both look up to us before one smiles, clearly in recognition.

"No way. Aren't you Slater Santos?"

Slater nods modestly. "You guys got any time for two? They're small pieces."

"Two?" I question.

He turns to me and smiles.

"If you think I'm gonna just sit here and be jealous while you get ink, then you are mistaken."

“Fuck yeah, man. Come on back,” the tattoo artist says as he leads us over to the other end of the shop where two chairs are side by side.

I take a seat next to Slater as he holds my shaking hand. Fuck, I’m nervous. Slater said it hurts. I glance over to see Slater talking with the guy next to him as he sketches something on a tablet before showing Slater. He nods before turning to me.

“Want to see?”

I nod as the guy turns the tablet to face me. My throat begins to tighten as I look at the simple tattoo. A teal ribbon, the symbol for ovarian cancer, with a soft cursive date in black ink running down one of the tails with my mother’s death day. A day that is quickly approaching. The fact that Slater even remembers the date by heart speaks volumes to how much she meant to him.

“You don’t usually get colored tattoos, though,” I say as I look down at his black and white full sleeves.

Slater shrugs. “Mom is worth it.”

My heart flutters at that as I nod and squeeze his hand a little tighter.

“Do you know where you want to get yours?”

I shrug. “Back of my neck?”

Slater and the guy both wince and shake their heads.

“For your first tattoo? Don’t recommend it, Bubbles.”

“Okay, then where?”

“Side of your calf? Just above your ankle?” Slater suggests as the tattoo artist nods his agreement.

“Alright. Ink me up,” I say as I roll up my jeans and lean back into the seat.

Slater busts up laughing before leaning over and placing a kiss against my lips.



“I fucking love you.”

“I love you too,” I smile against him.

A soft twinkle takes over his eyes as he gives me one more kiss before taking a seat. The guy Slater was talking to starts prepping my leg, mapping out exactly where I want it as another guy starts doing the same with Slater. Or, trying to. He rolled up his pant leg and told the guy to find an empty spot, which was easier said than done.

The first bite of the needle had my nails digging into the leather armrest underneath me before Slater offered up his hand as sacrifice. Pretty sure he was regretting it a few minutes in as crescent shapes are being etched into his skin from my hold. He’s a good sport about it though as he keeps me talking, telling me about some tattoos that I haven’t seen before because honestly how could I memorize all of them?

“Did you ever get one of Nikki’s name?” I ask.

Not sure why. I guess I’m just curious. I’ve never seen one, and he’s never mentioned one, but he has a tattoo for practically everything. Seriously. He has a tiny Taco Bell logo woven into the pattern over his abs because he was obsessed with it as a kid.

“Fuck no,” Slater laughs as the guy on his leg finishes the shading.

“Why not?”

“Getting anyone’s name tattooed on you, maybe minus your children, is a terrible idea. Even I’m not dumb enough to do that.”

I frown at that. “What do you mean? Don’t a lot of people do that?”

“Yeah, and they regret it,” the guy working on my leg mumbles.

“He’s right,” Slater agrees. “We never know what life can hold for us. One day you think you met the love of your life and are happily married, the next

you find out she was a gold digging bitch, who was only after your money,” he scoffs as he looks at me and wiggles his naked ring finger.

“Case and point. If I would have gotten a tattoo symbolizing Nikki or worse, her name, I’d have booked a coverup immediately. You never know what can happen, people change, feelings change. To get them etched into your skin seems like an unnecessary headache. If it doesn’t work out, you’re stuck with the reminder of them, the memory, forever.”

I nod. I never thought about it that way, but it makes sense. I’m glad he never did get anything symbolizing her. I can’t imagine Slater and I making love, only for me to look down at his skin and see another woman’s name on him. Okay, yeah. Him avoiding that was probably the smartest thing he ever did.

“Alright, what do you think?”

I glance down to see the artist holding my leg up slightly so I can see it fully. It looks even better than it did on the tablet and even though teal is probably close to my last choice for colors of tattoos I would have wanted, the fact that it represents my mother’s battle means a lot.

“I love it,” I say softly. “Thank you.”

“Smile,” Slater says before the sound of a camera echoes through the room.

I look up to see Slater grinning with his phone pointed at me.

“I had to get a picture of you officially getting your tattoo cherry popped.”

“Slater,” I scoff on an eye roll before I laugh.

He snickers to himself as his tattoo artist finishes up. They both move to grab what I assume are the supplies to wrap the tattoo when Slater stops them.

“One sec,” he says as he swings his leg over to mine before snapping a

picture of them together.

“That better not be going on Instagram, Slater,” I grumble as he begins typing away on his phone.

“You know my agent told me I need to post more things about my personal life on my pages.”

“Yeah, about you, not me. I like my privacy.”

He stops typing as he looks up at me, a serious glint replacing the previously playful one in his dark eyes.

“You are the most important part of my life, the most important part of me. I know that because of your job and mine, it makes things a little difficult at the moment, but make no mistake, I’m the luckiest man in the world, and I’m ready to shout it from the fucking rooftops.”

My stomach flips at his words as I feel my cheeks begin to heat, mainly because I can feel the two tattoo artists’ eyes on us like they aren’t sure if they should stay or go.

“O-okay,” I say.

“Okay?” Slater questions.

I nod. “You can post the picture. Just don’t get me fired.”

Slater rolls his eyes like I’m ridiculous as he continues on his phone.

“We’ve been over this. They won’t fire you, especially if I tell them I’ll walk if they do.”

“You can’t threaten that. You’re in a contract.”

“So? Mikey broke his contract. He paid some fines and said it’s the best decision he ever made for him and his family. If it comes down to football and you, then I choose you. If it comes down to anything and you, it’s always gonna be you.”

I lean forward and press my lips against his before his words are barely

out. He doesn't hesitate, slipping his fingers into my hair as he deepens the kiss and pulls me closer. We only pull apart when a not-so-subtle cough comes from our left.

Leaning back, Slater gives me a wink as he wears a satisfied smile while our legs are being wrapped up. They quickly go over after care before Slater is paying for our sessions, leaving an extra heavy tip in exchange for them keeping whatever they heard of our conversations to themselves. Not sure how solid that actually will be but they seemed like nice guys so hopefully they will respect our privacy and not blast it all over social media. I've never had to really worry about that before, but with the drama that will no doubt circulate once Slater's divorce goes public, I probably should watch what I say in public.

"Alright, Bubbles. Where to now?" Slater asks as he slings his arm around my shoulder and guides us to the car.

"Home," I smile up at him, causing his face to stretch into a grin in return as he nods his head and opens my door.

**27**

## Slater

**I**t's one of my least favorite days of the year.  
Beth Hayes' death day.

I'll never forget the day she passed. It's been fifteen years, but it feels like yesterday.

*I wake up to a blood curdling scream coming from the house next door. My heart plummets at the sound and I'm out of my bed, running through the house before I can even see which way is up or down. My feet eat up the distance between me and the Hayes' family home before I push through the front door.*

*My pulse is thundering as a wave of nausea instantly hits me. I know what's happened the moment my foot crosses the threshold of their home. Aaron is sitting on the couch, his head in his hands as his shoulders shake softly. Glancing to my left, I see Ezra standing in the hallway, holding a sobbing Scarlett. My eyes lastly flick to Ross who is sitting on the floor outside his bedroom weeping into his arms. One of the strongest men I have*

*ever met seems to be reduced to a sobbing mess, and in my gut, I know why and it breaks my goddamn heart.*

*Scarlett seems to see me first, as always. I watch as she practically shoves Ezra away before leaping into my arms. I catch her instantly, that comforting cocoa butter scent filling my senses as she clings to me for dear life, as if I was the only thing grounding her in this moment.*

*“Sh-he’s gone,” she sobs into my neck as her body begins to shake.*

*My chest aches at her words as my throat begins to burn. My arms tighten around her as I feel a tear of my own begin sliding down my face. Beth is gone. Fuck she’s gone gone.*

*She has been like a second mom to me for years now. She’s the kindest woman you could ever meet and funny as hell too. Her passing is going to do more than fuck us up. She’s going to leave behind a Beth sized hole in all of our hearts forever.*

*She passed away in her sleep, and I’m grateful that she wasn’t in pain any longer. Her cancer was extremely aggressive, and it took her faster than we expected, but with the way she deteriorated so quickly, I’m not sure she would have lasted much longer regardless.*

*When my mom got sick, it was nothing compared to watching Beth fade. My mom had to have surgery to remove her tumor, and she did a few rounds of chemo, but thankfully, her battle was a lot more cut and dry than Beth’s. I think the hardest part for everyone, though, was how she slowly withdrew into herself. She knew she didn’t have long, and she wanted everyone to be able to be okay without her, so she shut down, closed herself off in a strange form of protection. For herself or everyone around her, I still don’t quite know.*

*I wrap my arm around Scar a little tighter as we make our way through the*

grass hill, stopping in front of the familiar grave. My mom throws out a large blanket as my father sets down the two large picnic baskets she packed. Ever since that first year without Beth, this has been a tradition of ours. We all come and have dinner with Beth, catch up on what we've been up to, and just spend the afternoon together. It feels even more appropriate that today happens to be a Wednesday.

"Hello, my sweet friend," my mom says with fondness as she places a single rose at her grave.

My dad wraps his arms around her as they sit, before Ezra and Aaron do the same, saying hello to their mom before Scar and I do.

"Hi, Momma," she says with a slight catch to her voice. "I miss you."

"Me too," I say as we set down our flowers before sitting down on the blanket.

The last to say hello is Ross, who sets his rose down before taking a seat next to her headstone.

"Hey, baby. It's been too long and don't get started on me with the beard. I know I have to shave," he says as he rubs his longer than normal beard.

We all chuckle at that as my mom opens the picnic basket and begins dishing out the plethora of food. We easily fall into easy conversation, talking about how the season is going, what has been up with Aaron and Ezra, and how our parents' companies have been going.

I'm not sure if everyone notices, but Ross isn't really present, he never is. Instead, he spends more time staring at the headstone than the people around him. He did a good job of burying his grief for the kids, but I know it was hard on him. The fact that he was the first to find her, to wake up next to the love of your life and realize that she was already gone...fuck, I couldn't imagine. I squeeze Scar a little tighter, thankful that I finally pulled my head



out of my ass and went after her. We already lost too much time together, I won't waste another minute going forward, and I'll never take a second with her for granted.



We hung out with our families for a little while longer before everyone went their separate ways. Scar was quieter than normal, which was understandable, all things considering, so I made a quick call in order before I wordlessly drove us to our destination.

“What are we doing here?” she asks as we pull up to our destination.

“Just picking something up. I'll be right back,” I say as I slide out of the driver's seat and run inside.

It doesn't take long for the restaurant to bring me my to-go bag before I quickly pay and am walking back out to the car. I carefully set the bag into the backseat before firing up the car and pulling out of the parking lot.

I feel Scar's eyes on me waiting expectantly for an explanation before she finally speaks.

“Where are we going? Your house is back that way.”

“Our house,” I correct as I reach out to rest my hand onto her thigh.

“Uh, since when have I moved in?” she laughs lightly.

I turn to her with a raised brow. “Since you haven't slept in your own bed in eleven weeks. Let's be honest, your apartment is basically a glorified walk-in closet at this point, which is pointless since the whole damn thing could fit into my gym downstairs.”

She narrows her eyes at me but doesn't deny it. It seems so obvious that she'd move in with me, I mean, wouldn't she want to? Her silence has an unusual sense of nervousness setting in, though.

"Do you want to?" I ask softly.

"Want to what?"

"Move in. Officially. Ditch your lease."

"Oh, I don't know. I don't want to put a strain on our relationship by moving too fast and-"

"Baby, we've been living together our entire relationship. Let's just call it what it is. We spend damn near every second together, and I still can't get enough of you. There is no strain, at least not on my end, but I know you and I know that your independence is important to you so let's not make it a big thing. The offer is there, whenever you're ready. In my opinion, the house is already half yours."

She is silent for several seconds before we pull up to a red light, and she leans over, pressing a kiss to my lips before looking up at me from underneath her eyelashes.

"Okay."

"Yeah?" I smile.

She bites her lower lip and nods, causing me to grin a little wider as the light turns green.

"Seriously, where are we going, though? And what's in the bag? Your mom brought enough food to feed an army. There is no way either of us could eat right now."

"You'll see," I say as I take another turn.

Only a few more minutes go by before understanding hits her, and when I pull into the parking lot, I'm more than pleased to only see two other cars.

Then again it's not all that surprising when it's seven o'clock on a Wednesday night.

"Why are we at Gasworks Park?" Scar asks as I open her door for her before grabbing the take-out bag from the back.

I reach down and grab her hand, intertwining our fingers as we find that last bit of sunny spot on the hill overlooking the Puget Sound as the sun begins to set.

"Because this has always been your favorite place to just think, and you look like you've been doing a lot of thinking today."

She smiles at me softly as I sit down, pulling her down to sit between my legs before leaning her back against my chest. We stare out at the Sound in silence for several seconds before she speaks.

"I just miss my mom. Today never gets any easier. I was glad for the time I spent with her, but I'm greedy and I wish I would have gotten more. Any amount of time, just five more minutes. You never know when you say goodbye for the last time to someone. Never know when you say goodnight, if you'll never get to again, you know?"

I press a kiss to the side of her head as I nod.

"Only today is promised. We can't live in fear of that, though. We just have to live for the here and now. Like Mama Beth used to say-"

"Smell the roses, eat the cake, and dance in the rain," Scar smiles as she fills in her mom's words. Her mom was always spouting off something profound, I swear. She was an amazing woman in a lot of ways. I see a lot of her in Scar, makes me appreciate her all that much more.

"Well, we smelled the flowers today, it ain't raining, and it isn't cake, but it's close enough," I say as I grab the bag from behind me and set it in her lap.

She opens it, peeking inside before letting out a chuckle and leaning her head against my shoulder.

“Only you would go to a five-star restaurant for a to-go order of flan.”

I smirk as I tighten my hold around her waist.

“It’s your favorite, but I get a bite,” I barter.

Scar opens the container and grabs the plastic fork before giving me a shady side eye.

“Yeah, right. Stay back, buddy. These portions are tiny.”

She takes her first bite before I loosen my hold and begin tickling her ribs.

“Oh, yeah? That’s not nice. You gotta share,” I say as she begins hysterically laughing.

My fingers dance across her stomach, knowing exactly where will send her into a laughing fit when she shouts, “Ow, ow! Stop!”

I immediately drop my hands before looking at her with concern.

“Sorry, baby. Did I hurt you?”

She shakes her head before she laughs lightly. “Yeah, you and your bony fingers. It’s a miracle you don’t pop the football when you catch it with those things,” she says as she takes another bite of her flan.

I scoff. “Bony? You weren’t complaining about my ‘bony’ fingers this morning when they were inside your-”

She spins around and slaps a hand over my mouth before casting a look at the only other people at the park.

I chuckle as I watch them stand up and make their way to their car. Slowly, I reach up and peel her hand away from me before I raise an eyebrow.

“They’re leaving, no one for you to be embarrassed in front of now. And since they are the last cars in the parking lot, looks like I have you all to myself,” I say with a devilish smirk.

“You’re insatiable,” she laughs. “Do you know that I’ve forgotten what it’s like to not be sore?”

“We can sleep in separate rooms if that’s what you need because if memory serves you woke me up this morning riding my cock soooo...”

Her cheeks flame as she smacks my arm and rolls her eyes.

“It’s not my fault your gigantic cock feels good.”

“Mmm, I like hearing that,” I smirk as I nip at her earlobe. “Tell me more about this gigantic cock of mine.”

“Like how I love to suck on it?” she says boldly, her eyes flicking down to my lips as she lowers her tone. “How much I love the feel of you filling me until I can’t take much more and then taking it just a little further? Do you want to hear me tell you about how I woke up this morning, wet between my thighs, and knew the only thing that would fix it is sliding down on you?”

I let out a growl that comes low in my chest before I spin her around until she’s facing me, claiming her lips before she even has a second to hesitate. Her tongue brushes against mine as I deepen it, tangling my hand into the back of her hair as I hold her closer. Her thighs slide onto either side of my legs as she slowly starts grinding her pussy against me. I feel my cock hardening in my jeans with each pass until I’m rock fucking solid.

Scar must feel it too because she drops a hand down, rubbing against my hard on before moving for my belt. Where the hell my blushing shy girlfriend went, I have no idea. She has gained so much confidence since we’ve been together, in the bedroom specifically. I’m so glad that she is able to be completely herself around me. There is nothing sexier than a woman confident in her own skin, and Scar was already the sexiest woman on earth, so it just makes me the luckiest bastard alive.

Her hands effortlessly undo my belt and jeans before pulling my cock out.

I can't help but watch her with equal parts surprise and excitement.

"Is Scarlett Hayes really about to just take my cock out and fuck me in the middle of Gasworks Park?"

"If Slater Santos will let me," she smirks as she rolls up her sundress and slides her panties to the side before lining up against me.

"Oh, baby, you already know you can have anything you want. All you have to do is ask," I say as I cup her ass with both hands.

She smiles at me as she slowly lowers herself down onto me, causing both of us to groan until we are flush. Her cocky confidence has faded for a moment as a touch of vulnerability passes across her face.

"I love you, Slater."

I smile as I lift a hand to cup her face, brushing her hair out of her face as I look into her eyes.

"I love you, Bubbles."

Her eyes twinkle at that, causing my heart to squeeze just at the sight.

"Swear?" she breathes out.

"Cross my heart and hope to die," I say as she rises up on me before sinking back down.

Fuck. I'll never get enough of her. It's not possible.

Scar begins riding my cock, using me to take every ounce of pleasure she possibly can. I hold onto her hips, helping set her pace as she rubs against me. The sun has set and though there wasn't anyone here when she climbed on top of me, who's to say how long we have before someone else shows up.

"We gotta be quick, baby. Someone could show up at any moment, see you riding my cock like the dirty girl you are," I whisper against her neck, causing her to let out a breathy moan.

I press a kiss against the sensitive spot behind her ear as I chuckle.

“I know you like to put on a show but I’m the only one that gets to watch you fall apart, Bubbles. Your orgasms are mine, all mine.”

“All yours,” she gasps. “Only yours.”

“Good girl,” I say as I reach down to slide my hand beneath her dress, brushing my thumb against her swollen clit causing a shudder to run through her body.

“Again,” she pants.

“Ask nicely,” I grit through clenched teeth as she comes down farther this time, causing a wave of pleasure to run up my spine and my balls to tighten.

“Please, Slate. Please. Make me cum,” she begs as her eyes squeeze close, her head thrown back in pleasure.

“Eyes,” I command.

They fly open, landing on me instantly, and it’s my undoing. I quickly rub against her as my balls draw up, and my cock empties itself inside her. Looks like it’s Scar’s undoing too because she falls apart right after me, gasping and clenching down on me as she rides out her orgasm.

When we both come down from our highs, she slowly scoots off me before laying down on her back, her chest heaving with ragged breaths. I lean over to kiss her, keeping my lips against hers as my hand wanders down to her wet thighs. Pulling away, I look down to see my cum running down her leg. Something inside me doesn’t like that, and I find myself gathering up the leaking cum, pushing it back inside her where it belongs. Where it’s always belonged.

I’ve always assumed I’d have kids one day, but it was the farthest thing from Nikki’s mind, so I never pushed the issue. Thank god we didn’t because I couldn’t imagine Nikki being a very good mother, and our separation would have been way more complicated with kids involved.

Scar though, I know she'd be an amazing mom. She's always wanted kids, and I've always believed any kids would be lucky to have her. She'd be just like her mom was, I know it. The idea of having kids with Scarlett, watching my baby grow in her belly, holding a tiny human that is half her, half me. It's a thought that has my cock stiffening and my heart swelling.

Would she think I was totally batshit crazy if I asked her to go off her birth control? I know we've only been together for a few months, but let's be real, we've loved each other for decades. She'd probably say I'm moving too fast, normally I'd agree but everything feels different with her.

My dad even joked today about when I was going to pop the question. I laughed it off, reminding him that I literally just got my divorce finalized, but I'd be lying if he didn't spark an ember that was already flaring in my head. After the way shit with Nikki went, you'd think marriage would be the most unappealing idea in the world, but the idea of Scar wearing a ring that I gave her, telling the world she is all mine in every way possible? Fuck. Can't say I hate the idea of that.





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## Scarlett

I t's game day, and we are playing against the Denver Hawks. We've been doing good so far, the score is currently 21-17, and we are just about to wrap up the third quarter. I can't help but be grateful the game is almost over because it is taking everything in me to keep it together. I've been fighting the flu over the last two days and as badly as I wanted to stay in bed this morning, I knew I had to show up, for the team and Slater.

My mouth waters for probably the thirtieth time today as my stomach twists. Oh my god how embarrassing would that be if I got sick right here on the sidelines in the middle of a game?

*Don't throw up, Scarlett. Don't throw up. Don't throw up.*

Thankfully it passes just in time for me to watch as Slater leaps into the air, snagging the throw Smith sent him before he takes off running.

"Go, Slater! Run!" I shout, as if he could actually hear me.

His legs eat up the distance between him and the end zone, the entire stadium shouting and cheering as he gets closer and closer.

"He's got this. He's got it," Collin says excitedly to my left.

Of course he does. I think it's safe to say Slater Santos is officially back. Mentally and physically. People are talking about how his recovery was amazing. How he goes from having an injury that ends most careers to stepping back out onto that field and still hanging with the best of them. Hell, not hanging, beating the best of them.

The sidelines and home side of the stadium break out into celebration when his feet cross that line.

"Touchdownnnnnn Crusaders!" the announcer booms.

Collin and I turn to each other, hugging quickly before clapping and cheering. When I spin to face the field though, something's not right. A sharp pain suddenly comes from my stomach. It's excruciating as it sears through me, the overwhelming pain immediately dropping me to my knees.

It's not like a simple stomachache from the flu or even an air bubble in my rib cage. It's a hot, sharp, stabbing pain that feels as if I'm being torn from the inside out. My knees curl up into my chest, hoping that if I compress myself, it'll go away.

I hear people calling my name, even feel someone's hand touch my shoulder to gain my attention. Unfortunately, I can't give it to them, though. All I can do is squeeze my eyes tightly, hold onto my legs, and pray this stops soon.

A cold sweat drips down my spine, causing me to shiver as I squeeze myself tighter, the world around me becoming darker and quieter as the pain overcomes me.



## Slater

As soon as my feet cross over that line, euphoria washes over me as the adrenaline in my veins practically buzzes to life. The crowd goes fucking crazy as I turn and begin doing my new signature touchdown dance. They seem to love it, even if they don't know what it represents. I kinda love it that much more because of it. It's something private, just between Scar and me.

Turning to face my girl, my smile drops when I don't see her. It takes me two seconds to realize there is a huddle forming on the sidelines, more and more players gathering by the second. Something in my gut twists, telling me there is something wrong. I notice Seb is now over there before he rips off his helmet and makes eye contact with me. He gestures for me to come to him, and even though I'm too far away to really get a good look at his face, I can tell by his gesture alone that it isn't good.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

My feet carry me across the field faster than they did just seconds before. It doesn't feel fast enough, though. When I finally get to the sidelines, I push my way through the practical barrier of Crusader players, not caring as I push, shove, and stomp my way through everyone.

I don't know what I was expecting to see, but Scarlett curled up into the fetal position on the ground, sobbing was not it. Dropping to my knees instantly, I crawl to her, touching the side of her arm as I speak low.

"Bubbles, baby, what's wrong?"

She doesn't answer, just whimpers in pain as more tears seem to roll down the side of her face. Panic surges through me as I look up to see a concerned Collin standing over her.

“Get the ambulance.”

He nods quickly as he pulls out his phone as he steps out of the crowd of people. I feel them coming closer, surrounding us, no doubt in concern for my girl, but right now, I can hardly think, and they are suffocating us.

“Back up!” I shout as I look around wildly. “Everyone back the fuck up!”

Looking back down to Scar, I brush her hair away from her face so that I can see her better. Her face is contorted into pain, eyes squeezed tight as if she was wishing she was anywhere but here. I want to pick her up into my arms and hold her, make it all go away, but I’m shit scared I’ll hurt her more.

“Baby, baby, baby,” I say softly. “You gotta tell me what’s wrong. What hurts?”

Her eyes blink open, just barely, but it’s enough to have my heart tripping over itself. I’m not sure if in relief or panic because the pure pain in her eyes is enough to knock the wind right out of me.

“S-stomach,” she stutters before letting out a cry of pain as she squeezes her eyes shut and curls deeper within herself.

“Appendix?” Seb guesses from my left.

I whip my head up and shake my head. “No. She got her appendix removed when she was fourteen.”

“Could be an ulcer,” Andrews chimes in.

What the fuck is he doing over here?

“Really? You think an ulcer would drop her to the fucking ground and make her practically incoherent? Fucking idiot,” I snarl with a shake of my head as I turn back to Scar.

I know I’m being a dick, even more so than I usually am to Andrews but be fucking for real. Scar is tough. Her pain tolerance is high so whatever is going on, it’s fucking bad.

The ambulance pulls up to the side entrance of the field before two paramedics come out with a gurney. The players surrounding us quickly make a hole for them as they come up to assess her.

“She said it was her stomach,” I tell them as they start carefully lifting her onto the gurney. “It isn’t her appendix, she had it removed when she was a kid. I didn’t see what happened,” I say as I turn to face Collin who shakes his head,

“I don’t know. One second she was fine and then the next she dropped.”

“She does have the flu, or something. She threw up this morning, but she said she felt fine besides that.”

The paramedics share a look before nodding and carting her off.

“Wait!” I say as I follow after them. “I’m coming with.”

“Santos! We have a game here,” Coach shouts after me.

The look I pin him with must be something fierce because he closes his mouth instantly and shakes his head, calling in my back-up before shooing the guys onto the field to continue on. Everyone does except for Seb who jogs after me.

“Going to Seattle Memorial?” he asks the paramedics.

They both nod as Seb turns to face me.

“As soon as the game is over, I’ll meet you there.”

I nod at that before following the paramedics into the ambulance. They begin taking Scar’s vitals as the ambulance starts moving. I take a seat next to her, reaching out to hold her hand. She clings to me instantly, her nails digging into my palms as sweat dots her forehead. My stomach is in knots as I lean my head down to press a kiss against her wrist. I don’t know what the fuck is going on, but I can honestly say I’ve never been so fucking scared in all my life.



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## Scarlett

When we got to the hospital, they gave me some pain meds before they started running tests. It took a while for them to fully kick in but thankfully the pain is tolerable now. I feel embarrassed. I can't believe I fell apart like that, in front of an entire stadium of people. I'm choosing to focus on my embarrassment because something in my gut doesn't like the way the doctors keep looking at me as they take me for scans and blood work.

Slater is holding my hand as we wait in the ER. He hasn't let it go since we got into the ambulance and I'm overly thankful for it. The poor guy is still in his football gear, pads and all. I told him he could at least go take his pads off, but he refuses to move even a foot away from me.

Finally, the doctor comes back into the room along with my nurse. I give them both a tight smile, but it falls away as soon as I see the look on their faces. The nurse will hardly hold eye contact with me while the doctor looks like he's uncomfortable in his own skin. Nerves begin swarming through me as a chill begins seeping into my skin. I tell myself it's because the room is so cold, but I know it's a lie.



Slater stands when they step inside, still not letting go of my hand as he does.

“What’s going on, Doc?” he asks. “Do you know what’s wrong with her?”

He opens his mouth to speak before he pauses and turns to face me.

“Can we speak in private for a moment?”

“What? No,” Slater begins when I squeeze his hand to silence him.

“It’s fine. Whatever it is, I want him here.”

The doctor casts a look at Slater before nodding and looking at me.

“Based on your test results and scans, we were able to determine the cause of your stomach pains.”

He pauses for a moment as he wets his lips before looking at me sympathetically.

“I’m afraid it’s not good news. There’s no right way to tell yo-”

“Just tell me. Please,” I say, my voice shaking slightly as anxiety begins to fill me.

His blue eyes crinkle slightly as he looks at me sympathetically and speaks.

“You have ovarian cancer.”

The rest of his words become muffled. Like I’ve been dunked under water. Like I’m drowning, sinking lower and lower as the once bright room fades into darkness. My lungs burn, desperate for air despite the greedy breaths I’m beginning to gasp, but it’s no use. I can’t fucking breathe.

Cancer. Cancer. Cancer.

Worse.

Ovarian Cancer.

I need to react. I know I do, but I can’t. I can’t move, I can’t blink. I can’t even think. I’m frozen in place, frozen in time.

I feel Slater release my hand, causing me to look at him as he stares wide eyed at the doctor, his mouth parted, face crumbling as he lifts his hands to his head and buries his fingers into his hair, pulling at the base as he shakes his head.

“No. No. You got the wrong scans. You aren’t reading things right. There has to be a mistake. You can’t be....she can’t be...” his voice cracks as he trails off, turning to face me.

His face blurs in front of me, making me realize that tears are streaming down my face as I look up to him.

“Baby,” he whispers brokenly before he closes the distance between us, wrapping his arms around me tightly.

His pads crush against me, but I welcome the pain. Slater has always been home to me, always been my comfort, but right now, I know even he can’t take this pain away. Like when my mom passed, the pain I feel is insurmountable, all consuming.

“Wait,” I say, my mouth muffled against Slater’s jersey.

Hesitantly, he pulls away enough for me to look at the doctor. He has a regretful look on his face as he watches me.

“What stage?”

“At this point, I wouldn’t feel comfortable saying stage two. So for now we are going to label it early stage three,” he says.

Stage three? Three? Just like...

“Like my mom?” I choke out, my voice shaking despite my best efforts.

“Your mother had ovarian cancer?” the doctor asks as the nurse begins writing something down on the tablet in her hands.

I nod. “She died fifteen years ago. S-stage three.”

His cheeks wince at that before he can help himself as he nods. “Do you

know what being stage three means?”

“It means it’s in three places, right?” Slater asks.

“Correct. Right now we are seeing it in your fallopian tubes, lymph nodes, and your liver, though the majority of it is in your fallopian tubes-”

“I thought you just said she has ovarian cancer? Why is it in her fallopian tubes?”

“A lot of the times, it’s called ovarian cancer, but more often than not the tumors reside in the fallopian tubes,” the doctor explains.

I remember that when my mom was told the same. I didn’t get it then either. I was only thirteen at the time, but it didn’t make sense to me. It still doesn’t. Then again, nothing does.

“So what do we do? Where do we start?” Slater asks, what sounds like determination entering his voice.

“We will have one of our oncologists come down and set up a consultation with you, but I highly suggest you get on the books for surgery as soon as possible. Every day is important,” he urges.

“Surgery?” I ask hollowly.

His eyes crinkle again before he turns to the nurse before looking back at me.

“Maybe we should give you two sometime. We will send an oncologist to do your consultation before you’re discharged.”

“You’re discharging her already? What if she’s in pain again?” Slater asks.

“We will prescribe you something if the pain comes back, and the oncologist can go over more with you,” he says with a soft nod before stepping out of the room with the nurse on his heels.

When the solid door thunks shut, we sit in silence for several seconds before Slater speaks.

“Are you okay, baby?”

I look up at him as my lower lip begins to wobble. Fear like I’ve never truly felt takes over me.

“No.”

He wraps his arms around me, holding me tight as I cling to him desperately.

“Slate, I-I don’t want to die. I don’t want to end up like my m-mom,” I cry into him.

His hold on me tightens for several seconds before he pulls away, cupping my face with both hands as he forces me to look into his deep eyes.

“You won’t, do you hear me? You aren’t going to die. You won’t end up like your mom. We are going to take this one step at a time, together, and we are going to kick the shit out of this. Do you hear me? You’ve been unwaveringly by my side for twenty years, it’s my turn to be in your corner. I just got you, Scar, and I don’t intend to lose you.”

“S-swear?” I ask through the hot tears building in my eyes, tightening my throat by the second.

He lets out a deep breath, closing his eyes as he cups the back of my neck, pushing our foreheads together before he looks directly into my soul.

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

**30**



## Slater

I texted Scar's dad off her phone when we were in the ambulance since I obviously didn't have mine on me. I knew one text to Ross would have the cavalry coming, and when I checked Scar's phone shortly after we were left alone in the room, I found dozens of messages from everyone in both our families.

Stepping out her door, I turn down the hall before coming out to the waiting room. Cancer. Scar has cancer? My mind is still reeling. I don't understand. She can't be sick. She's been fine. A little nauseous here and there and maybe more tired than normally, but I didn't think anything of it.

An image of her sick like my mom was, like her mom was, flashes into my mind, pausing me in my tracks. I feel my throat tighten as my eyes burn. Turning slowly, I face the wall in front of me, leaning my forehead against it as I feel my heart break into a million pieces right there on the hospital floor.

She can't have cancer. Not my Bubbles. Not when I just got her.

The pain is debilitating and instant, starting in my chest and spreading to the tips of my fingers and toes. I know I have to be strong. I have to pull

myself together. But it hurts so fucking much.

I feel tears running down my cheeks as I do my best to choke down my sobs. Taking a deep breath, I blow out a shaky one before pushing away from the wall. I straighten my shoulders to stand a little taller, wiping underneath my eyes as if that alone could hide the pain I'm in before I continue making my way to the waiting room.

When I finally get there, I see Ross pacing frantically, while Ezra and Aaron try to calm him down. My mother is sitting in a chair looking concerned while my father's arm is around her. I also see Seb and Erica sitting in the chairs beside them.

Everyone looks so concerned. So scared. They don't fucking have a clue how scared they should be, how scared I am. Ezra sees me first. He speeds past his dad and right for me.

"How is she? What did they say?" he fires off.

That gets the attention of everyone as they all stand and quickly surround me. Seven pairs of eyes watch me eagerly, desperate for any kind of news. But the words die on my tongue before I can even form them because I still can't believe this is real. I don't want to believe this is real. You can call it denial or desperation. I don't give a shit. She can't have cancer. Not my Bubbles. Not my Scar.

*How long?*

Two words that popped in my head the moment the doctor's mouth opened.

How long has she been sick?

How long have I missed the signs?

How long does she have?

"Slater?" Aaron asks, the usually quiet eldest Hayes brother looking at me

with concerned eyes.

“They...” I trail off before clearing my quickly tightening throat. I do my best to force back the burning tears but it’s so goddamn hard. “They said it’s cancer.”

Though the ER waiting room is normally a louder crazy environment, in this moment, you could hear a feather drop. Everyone around me instantly freezes, and I watch each and every heart break right before my eyes.

“What kind?” Ross strains.

When I look into his eyes, he already knows the answer. He shakes his head as he wrinkles his nose, looking up at the ceiling as he shoves my shoulder away.

“Don’t say that to me. Don’t fucking say that,” he says. “I want to talk to her doctor. Now,” he grits out before walking up to the receptionist’s desk, probably to go do exactly that.

“I’m going to check on him,” my mom says with tears already building in her eyes. She gives me a warm hug that I didn’t realize I needed until this moment before my dad does the same.

They both follow after Ross before I look to see Aaron sitting in a chair, his hand over his mouth, shaking his head.

“Like Mom?” Ezra asks, a tear running down his cheek before he swipes it away.

The vulnerability in his voice does something to me. Unlocks a memory, strikes a nerve. Reminds me of a dark day for both our families that has my resolve crumbling. My legs give out, and I buckle, mentally and physically. I drop to the ground, my back leaning against the hospital wall before I lean my arms over my bent knees and bury my head into them as I let it out.

My shoulders shake, my chest aches, and my throat burns as I let out every



nasty, ugly feeling inside of me. I feel someone sitting down next to me, but I don't bother to lift my head. I know it's Seb. Wordlessly, he reaches out an arm wrapping it around my shoulders in a side hug that has me losing it all over again. I lean against him as my sobs get louder, uncaring of who hears or what anyone thinks.

"She's stage three, Seb. The doctors looked scared. We haven't even talked to an oncologist, and they got me thinking I'm gonna lose my girl."

"Fuck," Seb says, his head hitting the back of the wall as he closes his eyes tight and shakes his head.

"I can't lose her. I can't live a goddamn day without Scar. I won't survive it."

He opens his eyes and turns to me, squeezing my shoulder in a move that I know is meant to be reassuring as he looks at me seriously.

"You won't lose her. Scar is a strong woman. She can fight it. She will fight it, and you're gonna be by her side every step of the way. It's gonna be hard, you know that. It's gonna be ugly. But you have to be her support. She needs you to be strong, Slate."

I nod as I wipe under my eyes again.

"I know. I know. I will. I just...what if-"

"Cut the shit," he snaps, though his words hold no real heat. "Don't play the what-if game, no one wins that one. Just like on the field, one down at a time until you reach the end zone."

"Yeah," I rasp as I look up to see Erica watching us, tears pouring down her face.

Slowly, I stand, and as soon as I do, she's on me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders as she cries into me. I hold her tight, taking every ounce

of comfort she is offering me before letting her go. I don't see Ezra and Aaron, so they probably went off with Ross.

I asked Scar before I left the room if she wanted me to tell anyone, she told me that she couldn't do it. That she needed me to do it, and how could I say no to that? Whatever she needs, I'll do. Whatever she wants, she'll get. Nothing matters anymore, not even a little bit. Only Scar. Always Scar.



When I finally make it back to Scar's room, a woman is sitting across from her talking, and I kick myself for leaving her alone in the first place, even if she asked me to. I hurry over to Scar's side, holding her hand in mine as I quickly introduce myself before listening to what she was saying.

"I'm Dr. Poehler, I'm an oncologist here at Seattle Memorial. I was just telling your girlfriend about our first steps. I've been able to look over your scans, and to be honest, I don't like to sugarcoat things. Cancer is tough, but I'm tougher. We need to do biopsies on the tumors we found to know more, but I would guess this is a very aggressive cancer we are dealing with."

I feel Scar's hand squeeze mine a little tighter at that, and I try to ease her anxiety by brushing my thumb against her hand and bringing it to my lips as Dr. Poehler continues to speak.

"How long have you been experiencing symptoms?" she asks Scar.

"I didn't notice any symptoms," she says quietly.

Dr. Poehler nods sympathetically as she continues.

“Common symptoms can include nausea, unexplained pain in the abdomen, pain during sex, abdominal sensitivity-”

“Oh my god,” Scar says with watering eyes.

“What, baby?” I ask.

She looks at me, opening her mouth slowly as she speaks.

“I-I’ve had symptoms for a while. Months,” she says as she turns to face Dr. Poehler. “I thought I was just sore because Slater is, uh, bigger than I’m used to, but the soreness never went away. And the abdominal sensitivity, the other day in the park-”

It’s like a puzzle clicking together as I speak for her.

“When I tickled you, and it hurt. It really hurt, didn’t it?”

She turns to me, biting her lip as she nods.

“A-and at the twin’s birthday party, I wasn’t feeling well. I got sick. Erica and Vi thought I was pregnant and made me take a pregnancy test. I thought it was just some bad sushi that we had though, when the test was negative.”

“You took a pregnancy test?” I ask, not quite sure why that is the piece that stuck out to me.

“It was negative,” she shrugs.

“I don’t care. I would have taken it with you.”

She gives me a weak smile as the doctor continues.

“Okay, I’ll make notes of this in your chart, and I will get you booked for surgery as soon as possible. We are typically booked out two to three weeks unless we can get a drop-out.”

“Sorry, did I miss this, what kind of surgery exactly? Surgery to take the tumors out?” I ask.

Dr. Poehler’s face tenses just slightly as she speaks to Scar.

“I think it’s best if we perform a total hysterectomy.”

“What?” Scar croaks.

“What’s that?” I ask, hating myself for being so fucking uneducated right now.

The doctor turns to me. “It’s where we remove the entire uterus and in Scarlett’s case, the cervix, ovaries, and fallopian tubes. From the scans alone, the cancer has already spread and leaving anything is leaving chance and I don’t like chance.”

“So, I’ll never be able to have kids?” Scarlett asks quietly.

The doctor flattens her mouth as she looks at her and shakes her head.

“You couldn’t carry them, no. Though we can save some eggs and have them frozen for you. We would just need to fertilize them before we had them frozen if that’s something you two are interested in.”

“Yes,” I say instantly. “We would like to have kids one day. So, it would still be biologically ours, just someone else would have to carry the baby?” I ask.

Poehler flicks a look at Scar before nodding.

“To put it simply, yes.”

I nod as I look to Scar. “That’s good, right?”

The look of utter devastation on her face tells me she is not seeing the upside right now, and to be honest, I’m struggling myself. But I have to stay positive for her, to stay strong. Does it make me sad that one day when we decide on kids, it won’t be as simple for us as having a little too much to drink and some messy car sex? Of course. But regardless of how they come into the world, I know that I want children with Scarlett, when all of this is behind us. I’ll pay for a dozen surrogates if that’s what she wants. We will have as many children as our hearts desire.

Fuck. Kids.

I can honestly say I feel zero hesitation when thinking this through, which should scare the shit out of me, but it only confirms what I already know. I want it all with Scar. Every beautiful, painful, ugly, wonderful thing about life. That's why she can't die, we have too much life to live. I'm not nearly done with her yet and she's not allowed to be done with me.

"I'll leave you two with some literature," Poehler says as she hands me some pamphlets. "And I'll have my office be in touch with you when we have an opening for surgery, if that's the route you choose."

"And if I don't?" Scar asks, causing my head to whip to her at record speed.

"If you don't want to do a hysterectomy," Poehler speaks carefully, "and you only want to remove the tumors, we can. But the likelihood that more will return is very high, especially considering it has already spread."

Scar doesn't look scared like she did a minute ago. She looks almost determined.

"Maybe it won't," she says. "Maybe you can take them out, we can do chemo to kill the rest and that will be the end of it. More isn't going to show up if I'm in chemo, right? I could keep my uterus. I could keep everything and-"

"I don't recommend that course of treatment, Scarlett. Not if you want to live past Christmas."

"She does," I insert quickly. "We want to do whatever is going to give her the longest life possible, right, baby?"

Scar doesn't look at me, just maintains eye contact with Poehler, who has yet to break eye contact with her. They stare at each other for several seconds before she sighs softly.

"This is a lot to take in for one day. Let me get your discharge papers

going, and you two can go home and talk about it. I'm going to prescribe you something for the nausea as well as the pain if it flares up again. Scarlett, when you have made a decision, you give my team a call, and we will go from there."

Without another word, she walks out of the room. The woman could honestly work on her bedside manner. Fucking hell.

"You're not actually thinking of only having her take the tumors, are you?" I ask.

Scar finally looks at me, her normally glowing kaleidoscope eyes hardened and dim as she speaks.

"I am. It's my body, Slater, and I'll choose what happens to it."

"Fuck that," I snap. "It's the love of my life's body, and right now, you're not in the right frame of mind to be making decisions for her."

She scoffs. "You act like I'm two different people."

"You are right now, because the love of my life wouldn't be so willing to gamble with her life like this. She is analytical, rational, and would make the best decision to provide the highest quality of life for the longest."

Scar doesn't respond, she just stares at me. The hardened mask she's trying to wear begins to slip before her mouth slowly parts, her face twisting in pain as she lets out the most haunting cry I've ever heard. It breaks something inside me and the only thing I know to do in this moment is to hold her. Seb's right. This is going to be hard, and painful. So fucking painful. But we will make it out the other side, and we will be stronger for it.

*God I fucking hope so.*

31



# Scarlett

**I**t's been two weeks to the day since I was rushed to the hospital. Two weeks since the life I thought I was living, the future I thought I was planning, shattered apart.

I feel numb, like I'm floating through a dream. Nothing feels real, and everything seems hard. I'm grateful the oncologist prescribed me the anti-nausea meds because if I didn't have them, I'm not sure how my esophagus would be holding up, and I wish I were joking. I'm sick constantly, and in two weeks, I'm already losing weight quickly because of it. I can't tell if the meds are working or not, honestly, but if they are, I'd hate to see what I'd look like without them.

After I was discharged, I was swarmed in the waiting room by everyone. Slater warned me they were all here and told me he'd tell everyone to go home if I needed time, but I knew they needed to see me. It was the same way I felt when my mom got sick. I needed to see her, touch her. Reassure myself that she was alive and well. Or at least, as well as she could be. Until she wasn't.



There were many tears shed, mainly by all of them that day. I think I was in too much shock after the initial wave of it all. Probably still am, if I'm honest. My dad held me for so long, tears pouring down his face. It was only the second time I ever saw him cry, the first being the day mom died.

My brothers both held me, promised it would be okay and they would be there for me, and I loved them for it, but a bitter part of me wanted to tell them they shouldn't make promises they can't keep.

Slater's parents were a little less emotional. Don't get me wrong, Alison was crying, but being a cancer survivor herself, she gave me words of encouragement rather than false promises, which I appreciated.

Erica cried. A lot. And Seb gave me the most sympathetic look I've ever seen on the man's face. It was honestly a sight to behold, but I wasn't really in the mood to properly enjoy it, unfortunately.

Since then, I've gotten calls and flowers from Collin and his wife, Declan and Vi, a few guys from the team, and even Trevor somehow got a hold of my number (probably from Erica) and sent me a text message. It said something like, "cancer sucks, but I know for a fact you suck better." Slater was furious when he read it, but it kinda made me laugh so I liked it.

Obviously, Aberton reached out to me about my job and told me that it was mine when I was better. I thought he was being a little optimistic with the whole "when" part, but that's just me. Slater told me that he was going to sit out the rest of the season to be with me, but I reminded him we are already well into the season and there was no point in him paying hundreds of thousands in fines when I'm literally sitting down. He didn't agree. It's one of the things we've disagreed on the most, next to whether or not I should have the hysterectomy.

I know I should, I'm not a doctor, but I have enough of a medical

background to know where everyone else is coming from, doctors and family alike. I realize I'm being unreasonable. But I'm only twenty seven. Twenty seven. I'm supposed to have years. Years to decide about when to have kids, how many to have, and how I'll have them. If I'm honest with myself, I've finally admitted to myself that I wish I already had them.

One day, I can get a surrogate to carry my baby. It will still be genetically mine. I know that, and I know that I would love them with all my heart. But it breaks me that I won't be able to do the one thing a woman is supposed to be able to do. I won't be able to feel my baby grow inside me, feel them move for the first time, feel them have hiccups inside me. I won't be able to read a book to it or sing songs so that it's comforted by my voice when it's born. It seems so trivial in the grand scheme of living or dying, but for some reason to me, I can't shake the reminder of all that I'm about to lose.

I say about to because I am currently in a hospital gown waiting to be taken to the back for my hysterectomy. Though I wanted to dig my heels in, Slater got on his knees and begged me to go through with it, that he needed me to live. I knew in that moment I needed to do what was best for me long term, I knew I needed to do whatever would buy me more time.

They are going to harvest my eggs and freeze them for me so that I can use them when I'm ready. Slater already provided them with his "contribution", as he liked to call it. It was shocking to me how quickly he agreed, practically insisted on using his sperm. I told him if he wasn't comfortable taking that step that I could use a donor, to which I received the dirtiest look of my life.

*"That means the baby will be half you and half me. What if we aren't together anymore and I decide I want a baby? You're okay with that?"*

*He looks at me like I've grown a second head as he tilts to the side slightly.*

*"Bubbles, in what fucked up universe are you imagining that you and I*

*exist in the same time and aren't together? Wait, scratch that. I don't want to know because whatever it is, I don't want it. There is no question if we will or will not be together down the road. I'm wherever you are, always."*

"How are you feeling, baby?" Slater asks, shaking me out of my thoughts.

I turn to him, squeezing his hand tighter as I speak.

"Scared," I admit truthfully.

"Don't be," he says simply as he brushes some hair out of my face. "It'll be done easy peasy, and then, we can get you set up in bed. I have all of your favorite snacks waiting for you and the entire *One Tree Hill* box set with our names on it."

"My name," I correct. "You have a game tomorrow in Cincinnati. And let's be honest, all of that might go to waste if I don't make it out of this-"

"I swear to god, Scar, don't you dare finish that sentence," he says with an aggravated breath. "First off, you know that I'm not playing tomorrow, and Coach understands. Second, you know what the doctor said, you have to stay positive. You can't go into surgery with a negative mindset. It can be dangerous."

"I'm just-"

"Scared," he interrupts, not guessing the correct word I was going to use but hitting the nail on the head at the same time. "I know you are, Bubbles. I'm ready to tear this whole hospital apart with the nerves bouncing around in me, but I'm not worried about the surgery not going successfully."

"Why is that?" I ask.

"Because we have way too much life to live still, and I intend to savor every moment with you."

Tears spring to my eyes for the first time in days. I thought I was past this emotional side of things, but I guess it hits in waves. Though right now all I

can think about is how much I love this man.

I slip my arm around the back of his neck and bring him closer to me, pressing his lips to mine as we lose ourselves in each other. Unfortunately, breaking us apart is a knock at the door. A nurse steps inside with a wheelchair before giving me a small smile. Slater clings to me for a second longer, like he isn't ready to let go. Like he isn't nearly as confident as he wants me to believe before he finally releases me.

"You promised me I would never have to live without you, Bubbles. You promised. So I need you to fight, okay?"

My heart aches at his words, at the desperation in his voice. I know he needs me to fight, but I'm just so freaking scared. Still, I have to try. I muster a small smile before I nod softly.

"I love you."

He smiles at me, shaking his head like words aren't enough before he speaks.

"I love you too. So fucking much."

Slowly, I stand, only wobbling for a moment before I'm able to take the few steps into the wheelchair. The nurse slowly starts wheeling me out of the room and into the hall when I turn to see Slater still sitting in the same place, watching on as if he's frozen. Our eyes don't lose contact until the door shuts behind us. The thunk sends a rush straight through my chest, forcing me to take a steadying breath as we pass through the 'staff only' doors, knowing I'm about to take the first step in what's sure to be the hardest thing I've ever done.



My eyes slowly blink open, taking in the white room around me. The faint beeping from beside me and Slater's relieved voice tells me that I made it through surgery.

"Baby, there you are. Open those pretty eyes for me," he says as he brushes the hair out of my face and leans over the bed to look at me better.

I open my eyes a little wider before landing on his handsome face. His hair is getting longer, he's probably going to get a haircut soon. He usually doesn't like his curls to get too long, it makes him feel young, but I kinda like it. It reminds me of the boy I first fell in love with.

"Hi," I rasp hoarsely.

He gives me a sad smile that turns to a laugh as he bends down and places a soft kiss to my lips.

"Hi, Bubbles. Do you want some water?"

I nod and he reaches over to the side table where a bottle of ice water and a straw is filled up before he holds it in front of me. I take several long drinks, reveling in the feel of the icy chill running down my dry throat.

"Thank you," I say as I look around the empty room. "Where is everyone?"

"I told them to wait in the waiting room. I didn't know how you would be feeling, and I didn't want anyone to overwhelm you when you were coming out of the anesthesia. Your dad and brothers weren't happy with me, but," he shrugs.

I can't help but smile. "My little guard dog."

He gives me a dubious look. “Baby, you better than anyone know I’m anything but little.”

Letting out a short laugh, I nod.

“Part of the reason I didn’t realize anything was wrong. That thing would make any woman sore,” I say with a chuckle, but Slater doesn’t join in.

His smile vanishes and a look of concern, maybe even guilt takes over his face.

“I’m so sorry, Bubbles. I should have seen the signs earlier. Should have put things together. I-”

“That is not now, nor will it ever be your responsibility, Slater. This is my body. If something was concerning, I should have spoken up. I honestly just thought all of the signs were weird one-off coincidences.”

A knock comes from the door before Dr. Poehler and a nurse push inside. The nurse moves to me, beginning to take my vitals as Dr. Poehler stands at the foot of my bed.

“Good, I’m glad to see that you’re awake,” she smiles. “The surgery went really well. We were able to perform a full hysterectomy, and honestly, it was the right call. We found a few smaller tumors beginning to form on your uterine wall so delaying this would have only caused future problems.”

Her tone is positive, like I should be excited about that news. However, a heavy twisting feeling settles in my gut instead. I feel so...empty. Like something has been stolen from me. Technically, it has, not by the doctor or the hospital, but by cancer. Cancer has already taken so much from me, why does it crave more like an insatiable beast?

“We also were able to harvest your eggs, and those will now be fertilized and frozen for you. We have biopsies being run on the tumors as well so that we can create a tailored plan to your treatment.”

I nod, my head swarming with information, questions and intrusive thoughts I wish would go away as Slater speaks.

“So, what’s the next step? Chemo? When can we start?”

I reach out to hold his hand when he says we. It may seem small to most, but I don’t miss it. For two weeks, I’ve been operating in a haze, stuck with my morbid thoughts on repeat, and Slater has done everything and anything to change that. He’s been amazing and has made me feel more cared for than I ever have. I’ve always tried to be a strong person, to take things one step at a time and be the voice of reason when it’s necessary. I’m grateful that Slater is stepping up to that role for me right now so that I can fall apart, at least for a bit. I know he will piece me back together and that’s something I didn’t know I wanted or really needed until recently.

“We need Scarlett to fully heal before we begin chemo, so you are probably about three weeks out from your first round. Like we discussed, I believe doing six rounds of chemo will give us a good starting point. Each round will be done once every three weeks, and we will obviously do scans before each round to see how the chemo is working, if we need to change anything as we go and what our next steps will be.”

I nod, knowing firsthand what comes with chemo, all of the ugly things that go hand and hand by the poison they pump into you that is supposedly saving you. God, I’m not ready.



Two days later and we are finally on our way home. I don't know how Slater has been able to take this much time away from the team without being in breach of his contract. He says that Aberton is being really understanding and making things work. Part of me thinks Slater could be in the middle of a lawsuit and I wouldn't know it, though. He wouldn't tell me if he was and maybe that should make me upset but the fact that he is so willing to give up everything just to sit in a hospital room with me means more than I could ever express.

I'm still in pain as we make our way through the front doors but it's manageable. When we get to the stairs, I pause, looking up at the daunting trek before Slater bends down and scoops me into his arms bridal style before gently carrying me.

"You don't have to carry me, Slater," I say as we get to the top.

"Who says I'm doing it for you? Maybe I just wanted an excuse to hold you?" he asks.

I can't help but smile at that as we get to the bedroom door.

"Okay, I have a surprise for you. Close your eyes."

Looking at him suspiciously, I slowly do so. I feel him open the door before taking several steps inside as he carefully lowers me onto the bed.

"Alright, keep them closed," he says as he pulls the covers over me.

"I am."

"Good," he says as a whirring sound begins. "I know this is hard, all of it. I know you're hurting and scared and I hope you know that I'm gonna be by your side through every step of this until we make it out the other side together. We both know positivity is key in all things in life, and if we want to kick the shit out of this, we both have to stay positive and you being



trapped inside a house, more accurately in a room makes that hard so, open your eyes.”

I do as he says, smiling at him before my smile falls and my mouth drops open. My eyes widen as I take in my surroundings, not quite sure how I’m seeing what I’m seeing at first.

Hundreds of bubbles fill the room, swirling above our heads before mingling in the air all around us. It’s then that I notice the two bubble machines set up in two corners of the room, blowing out dozens of bubbles every second. When my eyes come back to Slater, a soft smile is on his face as he watches me.

“I’m scared, Bubbles. I know you are too, but we are going to take this one day at a time, one step at a time. And the first step is letting go of our negativity.”

He takes a step towards me, pulling a small bubble wand out of his pocket before he holds it up for me. I blow on it instantly, before he re-dips again and again, until tears are brimming in my eyes. Tears of fear, of pain, of love, and acceptance all mingling into one.

“Now put everything into this one,” he says. “Every frustration you are feeling, every pain, physical and mental, that you are struggling with. Slowly, let it all blow out with this breath, and when the bubble pops, it’s time to let it go.”

One of my tears manages to escape, gliding down my cheek as he catches it with his thumb and nods at me encouragingly. Sucking in a shaky breath, I close my eyes and hold it for a moment before letting out a slow and steady breath. I let it all slip out of me in that moment. I can’t promise it won’t come back. I can’t promise the fear and pain won’t win more days than not, but when I open my eyes, seeing the man that I’ve loved practically my whole

life sitting there watching me with all the love I always dreamed to see in his eyes, I know that I'll be okay. Even if it's for a little while.

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## Slater

Scar has been doing good. She's healing quickly, and she's been in really good spirits. We have been taking it easy at home, our families have been coming over almost every day, but I see the weariness in Scar when they spend too long fussing over her, so I usually have to kick them out after a while. Erica and Seb have also been over a few times, the girls too, though Scar asked them not to tell the girls what was wrong with her. She said they are too innocent to know how ugly the world can be, so for now, the girls think Scar has the flu and I honestly think there is something beautiful in the way she wants to protect the girls.

She's going to be an amazing mother one day, and I honestly can't wait to see it.

Over the last three weeks, I've been going to practice and games like normal. I missed a game and several practices while we were in the hospital, but when we got home, Scar insisted that I go. She actually started to get upset when I wasn't agreeing with her, so I conceded but only on the condition that she had at least someone with her at all times, just in case.

I've been showing up, doing the work, but I have to be honest, my head is not in the game. How am I supposed to focus when I know that my girl is home, sick, without me to take care of her? Who gives a fuck who can carry a ball to the other side of a field the most amount of times in four quarters when my Bubbles has fucking cancer?

Today is the first day of chemo, and I honestly think I'm more scared than she is. I know what it's about, I sat with my mom a few times, and I watched the toll it took on Beth. I know today isn't necessarily when things will start getting bad, it's what comes after.

When we step inside, I'm holding onto Scar's hand so tight she actually winces.

"Shit, sorry, Bubbles," I say as I press a kiss to the side of her head.

"If it's too hard for you to come with me, I understand," she says as she looks up at me.

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't want to be anywhere else in the world."

"Really?" Scar laughs. "I can think of at least another dozen places that I'd rather be. Like Valencia, Bali, Venice, Hawaii."

"Okay, smartass. I get it. When you're cleared to travel, I'll take you to all of those places. Anywhere you want to go."

She gives me a sad smile, nodding before someone comes in from the back and calls her name. We stand together before I slip my arm around her waist and follow the worker to the back. They walk us through what to expect today before they do some scans.

Soon enough, we are settled into a private room with a large chair overlooking the city. There is a larger room of several others that are currently undergoing chemo, but it wasn't too much to just have a private

room set up for just Scar. I want her to be as comfortable as possible while she has to be here.

Scar had to get her port implanted last week, and though I know it's a good thing, that it's something that is going to help save her life, it breaks my heart to see it on her. The oncologist comes in, hooking her up before leaving us alone. We are quiet for several seconds before she speaks.

"This is kind of boring."

I can't help but muffle a laugh. "Only you would complain about chemo not being productive. What would you prefer to be happening?"

She smiles softly and shrugs her shoulders as she leans her head against the headrest.

"I don't know. I wish I would have brought a book or something."

"Well, it's a good thing that your boyfriend is on top of it," I say as I grab Scarlett's purse that I happened to sneak a surprise into.

Pulling out the sleek paperback, I hold it up so she can see it with a wiggle of my eyebrows.

"*Sing Your Secrets* by Kay Cove?" Scar asks, her eyes lighting up with excitement. "How did you know that's been on my TBR?"

"I may or may not have logged onto your laptop and peeked at your Amazon wish list," I shrug before opening the book.

I look to see Scar holding out her hand, waiting for me to hand it over.

"Well, can I have it?" she asks with a smile.

"Nope, I'm gonna read it to you. Alright, chapter one."

"Slater," she laughs as she tries to reach the book.

I tut at her before scooting away a few feet and opening the book.

"Sit back and let me read you your smutty rockstar book. Don't think it's escaped my notice that this is the second rockstar romance you've been into.

You got me feeling like I chose the wrong career, baby. Aren't there any football ones?"

She lets out a short laugh as she shrugs.

"Sure, but that's too close to real life. I like to escape to a different reality in my books."

I keep my eyes narrowed on her for several seconds before I crack a smile and begin reading to her.



It's been two weeks since Scar's first round of chemo, and thankfully, she hasn't been feeling too bad. A little tired and her nausea still comes and goes, but that was the case before the chemo. She has her next round of chemo next week, and the coaching staff has been understanding enough to let me take each Tuesday off to go to chemo with Scar. Coach said I may not start because of it, but I've got a lot more important things to worry about than that.

I just got out of the shower and am brushing my teeth in front of my sink, while Scar is sitting in front of hers, getting ready for brunch with Erica. She's been getting out of the house lately, which I think has been helping her a lot. Not having work to go to has been hard for her and being cooped up can't be easy.

"Where are you guys going?" I ask as I rinse off my toothbrush.

"I don't know. Erica said it just opened up downtown," she says with a smile as she runs a brush through her hair.

I nod at that, my mouth open to respond before I freeze.

Scar's brush combs through her hair, but when it gets to the end, it just keeps going. It takes me a second to realize it's because that piece is no longer attached to her head. She slowly pulls the fallen piece away from her before holding it up to her face. I watch her eyes flick from the hair to her brush, back and forth, back and forth.

Slowly, I cross the distance between us, carefully reaching out to take the brush and hair from her hands. She lets go of the brush easily, but the rich chocolate locks are another story. It takes a little coaxing before she lets it slide through her fingers. I pull it quickly, tossing it into the trash so it's at least out of sight before coming back to face her.

Her eyes are beginning to water as she looks in the mirror, carefully moving her hair around to help hide the new bare patch.

"Baby," I say gently.

"It's fine," she says. "It's just hair. I just wasn't expecting to lose it this quickly."

I step up behind her, lowering myself down to her before wrapping my arms around her chest and pulling her back against me.

"You're so beautiful, you know that, right?"

She gives me a sad smile as her hand reaches up to hold my arm in place.

"Hope you feel that way in a few weeks, or a few months."

"You've been the most beautiful thing I've seen since you were seven years old, that's not changing, ever."





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## Scarlett

C hemo was harder this week. Last round, I just felt a little tired. The nausea had stayed about the same, but I was doing alright. Despite having more hair than I would like laying on my pillow every morning as opposed to on my head, I've been able to go out with Erica here and there, go over to my dad's house a few times a week, or go into the bookstore. Slater has been reading to me every night even when it's not a chemo day. It's become one of my favorite things. I swear his voice is so smooth, he could be an audiobook narrator if the whole pro football thing doesn't work out for him.

I've been sick more this week, a lot more. On top of that, I can't hold down any food anymore. It's a miracle if I can keep down one meal a day at all, and I lose weight fast. Weight I didn't have to lose. I've never been overly skinny, but I've always been healthy, and I worked out regularly. At 5'6, I looked healthy at one hundred and thirty pounds. I'm already down to one hundred and twelve, and I've never felt worse.

I can hardly walk by myself anywhere, being a combination of fatigue, lack of nutrition, and me just having no energy in general. Slater has been carrying me up and down the stairs because one day last week ended with a late night visit to the ER for a mild sprained ankle when I tried to go up the stairs on my own.

I'm starting to feel like a burden, he already misses practice when I have chemo, and I know his head isn't in the game on game day like it should be. Just because I haven't been to a game in person in a while doesn't mean I haven't been watching it on TV. He's not playing to his potential, and it makes me sick to think that could be because of me.

Slater has a home game tomorrow, and if he doesn't get his shit together for it, sick or not, I will force his butt downstairs and make him workout until his legs give out.

We took a shower together this morning, which mainly consisted of Slater washing my hair for me and peppering me with kisses. It's been weeks since we've had sex, and I feel guilty for it. I wish I felt better because I want him and more importantly I want him to want me. A man can only go so long without, right? I asked him that last night, and he threw his head back and laughed at me. Laughed until tears were nearly running down his face.

He told me that was the most ridiculous thing he ever heard and that he'd be perfectly happy if we never had sex again, to which I called him out for because I knew right then and there that he was lying through his teeth. But I love him for it.

Slater is brushing my hair for me when his movements still. I open my eyes to look in the mirror. His face is frozen as he stares at the back of my head.

"What?" I ask.

His eyes snap up to mine as he drops his hand.

“Nothing, just a few more pieces of hair,” he says as he moves to the trash can.

“Stop.”

He pauses before slowly turning.

“Show me.”

Slater shakes his head when I speak.

“Please.”

Slowly, he opens his clenched hand, revealing a thick wad of wet hair. Slowly, I lift my hand up and run my fingers through the side of my head, my stomach bottoming out as every strand I touch comes with it. I stare at it for a second before I sigh.

“Well, guess it’s time.”

“Time for what, baby?” Slater asks softly.

I reach for the middle drawer before grabbing Slater’s electric clippers.

“Just shave it,” I say as I hand it towards him.

He frowns at me as he takes them from me.

“Are you sure? I-”

“Just do it, please.”

He nods softly, turning them on before lifting it up to his head.

“Wait, what are you-”

Before I can finish my sentence, Slater is running them through his thick hair, brown curls falling to the ground leaving a bald line in its path. Without a word, he takes the clippers to my head, doing the same before looking at me in the mirror.

“One for you, one for me. We’re in this together, Bubbles.”

My throat tightens as my eyes begin to water. I nod as he shaves another

strip of his hair before doing mine again. He goes slow, alternating between us both until there is nothing left on either of our heads. I feel a tear run down my cheek as Slater reaches out and gently runs a hand over my now bald head as he looks at me with the most tender look I've ever seen.

"So fucking beautiful."

Before I can speak, he closes the distance between us, pressing his lips against mine. My heart swells as he deepens the kiss, cupping my face gently as he pulls away.

"Can I ask a favor, if you're feeling up to it?"

"Are you kidding? Anything," I smile through my tears as I quickly wipe under my eyes.

"Will you come to the game tomorrow? Vi and Mikey are coming in for the game, they can pick you up."

I'm already exhausted thinking about it, but I know how much it would mean to Slater, and maybe if I'm there, he will finally be able to pull his head out of his ass and play to his capability.

"I can try," I say with a half-smile.

He hugs me tightly before giving me another kiss.

"I got to get to walk-through. I'll see you tonight, okay?"

"Okay. I love you."

"Love you more, baby."

-

The next morning, I'm all dressed and ready for the game. Slater carried me downstairs this morning after he helped me get dressed, and he told me Vi and Declan would come pick me up at eleven. At ten fifty nine, a knock comes from the door. Slowly, I make my way across the house, wavering a few times before I make it to the door. When I open it, I'm greeted with Vi

and Declan's smiling faces, that is until they see me. Both of their smiles drop as a look of sympathy and horror replaces them. Damn, guess I look really bad to those that haven't seen me since I got sick.

"Hey, guys," I say with a nervous smile.

Declan is the first to wipe the surprise from his face as he smiles and nods.

"Hello, Miss Scarlett. You look very nice. You ready?"

I nod as I grab my purse from the entryway table to my right. It takes me a second to notice before I cock my head to the side.

"Did you cut your hair? It looks shorter?"

Declan lifts a hand to run over his buzz cut before he nods but doesn't say anything more. Vi steps beside me, wrapping her arms around me in a hug before looping her arm through mine. Declan does the same on the other side of me as we all start taking slow steps towards the rental car ahead of us.

We chat on the car ride over, Vi shows me pictures of the kids, telling me all about how Tucker's first year of peewee football went. Declan boasted about all the good plays Tuck made and how he was going to be a force to be reckoned with when he gets older. I was tempted to remind them that the poor kid is too young to have NFL dreams pinned on him, but they both looked too deliriously happy for me to say anything, and Tucker says to anyone who will listen how he wants to be just like his daddy when he grows up.

It doesn't take long for us to get to the stadium. We park in the family and friend's lot before we head up to the tunnel. A familiar redhead is standing there with a wheelchair. Embarrassment burns through me as I come closer.

"That's a little unnecessary, Erica. I can walk, I'm just kinda slow."

"Sorry, babe. Slater's orders, I'm not going to get in trouble because you want to be stubborn. Now, sit."

If I thought I was capable of it, I'd storm past all of them and make my way through the tunnel myself. Unfortunately, my stomach begins to turn as my head begins to sway, and I decide it's probably safer to take a seat. A chill runs through me as the cold air nips at me as Declan comes behind the wheelchair and starts pushing me. Erica reaches into her bag before pulling out a small throw blanket. She drapes it over my lap, and I can't help but laugh.

"Looks like you thought of everything," I tease.

She shrugs with a smile before we get to the main hall. Instead of going to the elevator to head up to the boxes, we go down towards the field and locker rooms. I frown as I look up at Declan.

"Where are you taking us?" I ask as we miss the turn for the field and continue heading towards the locker rooms.

I glance back to see Vi and Erica sharing secret looks before giving me way too wide smiles. I narrow my eyes at them. Something is up.

Erica hustles in front of Declan before holding the door to the home team locker room open, allowing us to go in first. When we do, I'm frozen in place at what I see.

The Crusaders are all gathered no doubt for their pre-game huddle, but that's not what surprises me. There isn't a lock of hair in sight. In the whole room. Every single head is completely shaved, including the coaches.

Slater steps forward, pressing a kiss to my lips before grabbing my hand to hold.

"You look so beautiful today, baby. I'm so glad you came."

"Slater...what's going on?"

"You've always been there for us, and we want you to know that we are here for you. All of us," a player says as he steps forward.

Wait. Not a player. Sebastian. Wait...Sebastian?!

My eyes are wide, my mouth hanging open as I look at him. Yeah it's the same face, and he's still the 6'6 giant of a man, but there is one crucial piece of him missing. His hair. The signature Sebastian Caldwell man bun is gone, a barely there buzz cut in its place. My eyes swing to face Erica as she nods to me.

"I know, right? I didn't even recognize him when he came out of the bathroom."

"Seb, your hair!" I say.

He shrugs, that aloof look still on his face.

"It's just hair. It will grow back."

A lump begins to form in my throat as my eyes skate over each player, all looking at me with sincere smiles or sympathetic frowns. I can't believe they all did this. For me?

"We got these too," Slater says as he shows me his wrist, a teal wristband with the Ovarian Cancer ribbon and my name scrawled into it.

"Slater," I say softly as I shake my head.

He nods, pressing another kiss to the side of my head.

"We all just wanted you to know that we love you and we are here for you."

"Thank you...everyone. It means a lot," I say to the group of guys.

Coach Aberton nods.

"You'll always be a Crusader," he says before gesturing to Collin.

He steps up to me, giving me a smile before handing me a jersey. My eyes water when I see the name on the back is Hayes with Slater's number, thirty seven. Slater takes it from my lap, quickly slipping it over the long sleeve Crusader shirt I was wearing.



“Love that number on you,” Slater says with a wink. “Alright, boys, let’s go kick the shit out of the Bears, for my girl!”

The guys come together and cheer in agreement, causing me to blush in embarrassment. God, I hate attention. Declan chuckles from behind me like he can hear my thoughts before he spins the wheelchair around.

“Alright, enough torture for you. Let’s get you up to the box.”

Please.



34

## Scarlett

**M**y stomach rolls as I empty what little contents I have into the toilet. I feel Slater's hand soothingly rubbing up and down my back as he coos soft words to me.

“Easy, baby. Let it out. You're doing so good.”

I was humiliated the first few times that Slater watched me throw up. It's basically become a daily ritual at this point though, so embarrassment has kinda left the building. The comfort he brings just by standing by my side helps. God, I do not deserve this man.

I dry heave several more times before my stomach finally gives up. Blowing out a shaky breath, I push myself up to stand, but I'm so weak my legs tremble instantly. Slater is there, catching me in a flash before clutching me to his chest like I'm the most precious thing in the world. As if it takes no effort at all, he slips an arm under my knees before lifting me into his arms.

He carries me to the bedroom before laying me down in the middle of the bed. He hovers over me, his eyes full of concern as his hand cups the side of my face.

“Do you want me to get you some crackers? Ginger ale? What can I do, baby?”

My eyes flutter closed, as exhaustion takes over me.

“I’m okay, thank you.”

Slater nods helplessly before he lays down next to me, wrapping his arms around me until I’m laying on top of him. We sit there in silence for a few moments before he speaks.

“You’re getting so tiny. I feel like you’re slipping through my fingertips,” he rasps, his voice tinged with emotion.

I don’t know what to say to that, because if I’m honest I feel like I’m deteriorating. I wonder most days if my mom felt this way. If she just held it together better than me. I’m only two rounds of chemo in, and I don’t know how much more of this I can take. I got on the scale a few days ago and noticed that I lost another five pounds. My ribs are starting to show, my muscle is practically disappearing, and I feel so damn frail. The only thing about me that isn’t practically dissolving is my cheeks which are currently puffed from the steroids.

I know saying any of that out loud won’t do any good. It will only ratchet up the fear Slater has, and it won’t make me feel any better speaking it out into the universe. So, I keep my mouth shut, burrow deeper into Slater, and let sleep overtake me.



When I wake up, the space beside me is empty. I feel around for Slater but come up short. Frowning, I sit up, my head spinning instantly at the movement. It's Slater's rest day so he should be here.

Suddenly, I hear soft voices from outside the bedroom.

"I don't want to wake her," Slater's voice says.

"I'm awake," I say as loud as I can.

The door snicks open a moment later, Slater poking his head in first as he gives me a sweet smile.

"Hi, baby. Did you have a good nap?"

I nod, doing my best to shake the fog off as I rub my eyes.

"You up for some company? It's okay if you aren't. It's just Seb and Erica."

"Yeah, sure," I say as I sit up the rest of the way and run my hands down my face, trying to wipe the sleep away before Seb and Erica come into the room behind Slater.

"How are you feeling, babe?" Erica asks as she comes to sit next to me.

I give her a tired smile as I nod. "Better. How are you guys?"

"We're good. We made a little stop on the way over here for you. Hopefully it helps," Erica says as she gestures to Seb.

I turn to face him, still caught off guard by the nearly bald head. I still can't believe he shaved his head, and in support of me of all reasons.

Seb takes a step forward, handing me an unmarked white paper bag. Curiously, I open the bag, my mouth dropping open when I see what's inside.

"You guys went to a dispensary?"

Seb shrugs as he leans a shoulder against the wall.

"Slater said you have been having a hard time keeping anything down. Some of this should help chill out the nausea and hopefully even make you

hungry.”

I pull out a bag of gummies, looking them over before pulling out some kind of lemonade drink. These have THC in them? What don’t they make as an edible these days?

The last few things in the bag are a couple of joints in plastic tubes. I roll it over to read the labels.

“Blueberry Sour Diesel and OG-Kush? Who comes up with these names?” I laugh.

“Oh shit. Ezra and I used to buy Blueberry Sour Diesel way back in the day,” Slater laughs.

“You mean back before it was legalized?” I tease.

Slater holds a finger up to his mouth before giving me a wink. I can’t help but laugh as everyone joins in. I’ve smoked weed maybe twice in my whole life, both times with Slater and Ezra. I don’t want to tell Seb that I doubt I’d be able to keep the edibles down and truth be told I’m not sure I’ll get the nerve to try to smoke one of the joints but then again if it helps me stop throwing up and potentially be able to eat, I’ll try anything.

Seb and Erica hung out for a little longer and it was nice, but things felt a little...awkward. Or maybe that’s just me. It feels the same when Slater and my family come over. Everyone is all smiles. They avoid the C-word like they could catch it themselves and always emanate this shiny disposition that is clearly fake.

The only person that acts themselves around me these days is Slater. I get it to an extent, no one knows what to say or do. Truthfully, there is nothing they can do. I’m almost halfway through chemo, and we aren’t seeing any improvements on my scans or my tumor markers yet. I’m only getting sicker. Slater and I try not to talk about the negative. Any time I even bring up a

remotely worst case scenario, Slater turns on the bubble machines and we go through the whole routine all over again. I'd say it was getting to be annoying if I didn't love him so much for it.



I'm downstairs on Thursday morning. I asked Slater to help me down there before he went to practice. I'm tired of being stuck upstairs while he's gone. My dad wanted to come over and pick me up for lunch today, but I told him I wasn't feeling up for it. Settling in on the couch, I wrap the blanket tighter around me, pulling my beanie down a little farther. It's winter in Seattle, which means rainy and cold and the twenty-some pounds I've lost recently hasn't helped me retain any heat, unfortunately.

A knock comes from the front door, causing me to groan in frustration. It takes me longer than it should to stand, but slowly, I'm able to make my way to the front door. When I open it, I'm surprised to see Trevor standing there. He has a bag slung over his leather jacket covered shoulder and a smirk on his face. However the smirk falls away when he takes a look at me. I'm used to the pity. I've seen it more times than I can count over the last few months. What I don't expect to cross Trevor's face is anger.

I'm taken back by it for a minute before he speaks.

"Fucking hell, Freckles. You look like hell."

I scoff as I tighten my grip on the doorway.

"Gee, thanks. Everything a dying woman wants to hear."

He narrows his eyes at me.

“Shut the hell up, you aren’t dying.”

“Wouldn’t be so sure about that,” I say as I push off from the door and slowly make my way to the couch, though I get tripped up and go down.

I wait for the impact to hit but it never comes. When I slowly open my eyes, I look over my shoulder to see Trevor’s arm wrapped around my stomach.

“I got you, Freckles,” he says softly before lifting me up. “Wrap your legs around me.”

I do as he says, clinging to him as he slowly carries me.

“Where to?”

“Are you staying for a while?” I ask.

“If you want me to.”

I nod. “Bedroom, please. I just don’t like being stuck up there while Slater is gone.”

Trevor wordlessly carries me up the stairs before pushing Slater and my bedroom door open. He lays me down on the bed before taking a step back and running a hand through his hair.

“So, tell me why the fuck you are home alone when you can’t even get to the door? I’ve talked to Erica and Slater and neither of them told me you were...this.”

“There you go again boosting my confidence,” I say with a weak smile.

“I’m serious,” he says. “I would have come sooner. I was waiting for a bye week, but if I’d have known...”

I shake my head. “Trevor, relax. You don’t need to feel guilty. We aren’t even really friends. My boyfriend is your friend, my best friend is your ex-girlfriend/friend. You don’t owe anything to me.”

He frowns at that like he doesn’t like that.



“We’re friends, Freckles. I don’t have many, but you’re definitely one of them.”

His words are surprisingly sweet for him, they are out of character from the Trevor I’m used to, and they have me looking at him twice, a slight tilt to my head as I watch him. He must be able to understand what I’m thinking because he quickly wipes the concern from his face before he shrugs.

“Besides, I’ve eaten your pussy, and you’ve sucked me off. I’d say that makes us the best kind of friends.”

Therrrrre’s the Trevor I know. Rolling my eyes, I can’t help but huff out a laugh, too tired to be embarrassed by his words.

“Do you always have to use crass words as a defense mechanism?”

“No defense mechanism. I’m just a crass man, Freckles.”

Trevor sits down on the side of the bed before looking around the room. His eyes pause on the white bag Seb brought over before he smirks. He grabs it, rifling through the contents before pulling out one of the joints.

“Shit, you got pre-rolls,” he laughs.

“Sebastian and Erica brought them over, to help with the nausea and appetite.”

“That explains the weight,” Trevor nods.

Self-consciously, I wrap my arms around my stomach, hoping maybe it will help hide the fact that my clothes are drowning me. They were always a little loose because I liked them that way. Now, I just look like a kid playing dress up with her mom’s clothes.

“Again, though. Why are you alone? Where is Slater? Erica? Your dad or brothers? Slater’s parents? You have people, Freckles, so where are they?”

I shrug as I pick at the blanket in front of me.

“I don’t like burdening people. I already feel bad enough for everything

Slater does for me. You don't even know how many times he's tried to break his contract to stay home with me."

"He should," Trevor says instantly, his tone full of judgment.

I frown at that. "No, he shouldn't. I'm gonna be sick whether he is here or not. He needs to continue living his life so that way if I-

"Swear to god, I'm gonna get pissed if you say some morbid shit. You're not dying, and Slater should be here taking care of you. That's what you do for the ones you love."

I pause at that as I tilt my head at him.

"So, if you had a girlfriend who was sick, you'd give up your dreams? Drop out of the NFL? Give it all up just to be a caretaker?"

He's quiet for a moment before he shrugs. "If I loved her the way Slater loves you, sure."

"If it was Erica?" I test softly.

Trevor shoots me a look to drop it before he opens the plastic tube that is still in his hand, twisting the joint between his fingers before digging in the bag for a lighter.

"Want to smoke?" he asks.

I wrinkle my nose. "I don't know. I haven't done it in years."

"Have you eaten today?"

I shake my head.

"Do you want to eat?"

I shake my head again.

"Alright, toke up," he says as he lights the joint before deeply inhaling.

My mouth drops as I watch this superstar professional football player smoke weed right before my eyes.

"What are you doing?" I gasp. "You aren't supposed to drink alcohol

during the season, let alone do drugs!”

Trevor scoffs. “Please, weed can’t even be considered a drug.”

“Still. If you get UA’d, you’re done for.”

“You think they are going to piss test me? Their star quarterback? Yeah, right,” he says with an eye roll, inhaling one more time before he holds the burning joint out to me.

I hesitate for a moment before taking it from him and lightly inhaling. I cough immediately, the distinct flavor burning my throat as my lungs desperately try to clear it.

“There you go,” Trevor nods. “Better you cough, the better you’re off.”

A calming haze slowly wraps around me within minutes, the constant nausea that I’ve lived with for months now begins to slowly fade as a sense of relief fills me. Trevor takes another hit before passing it to me. I think about passing, but really, I just want to hold onto this feeling, so I inhale again, surprisingly able to hold the smoke in for a little longer before I go into another coughing fit.

Trevor takes it back as I settle against the headboard, closing my eyes as I take several slow breaths. We sit in comfortable silence for several moments before I speak.

“How do you do it?”

“Do what?” he asks.

“Deal with all the pain from you and Erica, the isolation from your friends, from your family.”

He stares at me blankly as he raises an eyebrow.

“We having a therapy session?”

I chuckle to myself, not quite sure where that all came from. I’ve always wondered but never thought it was appropriate to ask. I guess being stoned

paired with the whole dying thing has made me lose a bit of my couth.

Trevor stares at me for a moment, like he's contemplating what to say before he blows out a deep breath and shakes his head.

"I don't really have a choice. These are the cards I've been dealt," he shrugs.

"You're still in love with her. It's written across your face anytime she's in the room." I say as I let my head rest against my shoulder as I watch him.

He purses his lips but doesn't deny it as he nods.

"I'll never not love Erica Pembroke. But I blew it, long before I ever realized it. The shit I pulled back in college was awful, I regret it. I really do. But I was fucking desperate. I felt her slipping through my fingers, and I panicked, tried to hold on to us the best I could, but I only ended up causing me and everyone that I cared about pain." He stares at the blank wall in front of him for several seconds, a far off look in his bright blue eyes before he shakes himself out of it and faces me.

"There's your answer, I guess. I don't have a choice other than to suck it up and keep pushing forward. I know the guys have never looked at me the same since everything, especially Seb. Honestly, I could drop off the face of this earth and no one but Erica would miss me too much."

"I would," I say softly, my heart suddenly hurting for Trevor.

He gives me a barely there smile as he nods and faces the ceiling.

"Appreciate that, Freckles."

"You're a good guy, Trevor. You hide it with a bunch of bullshit but when you love, you love hard. Is that really something you can be faulted for?"

He doesn't say anything as he continues staring at the ceiling.

"You deserve someone who can love you the way you love others. Erica was your first love, not your last."

His head turns to face me, a surprised look gleaming in his eye before he shrugs his shoulders and slips that nonchalant mask back into place.

“That’s enough emotional shit for me. You ready to eat or you need to get more stoned?”

My stomach doesn’t repel the idea of food as much as it normally does, but it’s not nearly welcoming to the idea yet, so I nod towards the bag.

“What else do we got?”

**35**



## Slater

I'm losing her.

My best friend, the love of my life, my fucking person is dying and there isn't a goddamn thing I can do about it. I've never felt this helpless, this hopeless. Even my mom had more spirit in her, more hope.

She's been losing so much weight, literally withering away in front of my eyes and most days she can hardly hold down a piece of bread. Her ribs are showing, her hip bones protruding, and her muscle has virtually disappeared overnight. She can't even walk on her own anymore and the worst part is despite her oncologist ramping up her treatment, going for a more aggressive approach, they aren't seeing a change. In fact, the last time we were there, they said it's spread even more.

I can't even sleep anymore. I'm too terrified that if I do, I'll wake up, and she'll be gone. Every time my body wins the battle, and my eyes drift closed, my first thought is that when I wake up the next morning, I'll find her cold and stiff beside me. Just like Ross found Beth. It's a thought that has been haunting me to my core.

I haven't even let myself fathom what I'll do if I lose her because I can't. I fucking can't. I won't survive it. She's my rock, my soulmate...my fucking everything.

I've done my best to stay positive, at least in front of Scar. I try not to let my bone-deep fear show when I'm home, but I know I'm starting to slip up. I worry about her and me not being home as she struggles day in and out is taking a toll on me. I want to be with her, I've told her that playing football isn't nearly as important as being there for her, but every time I bring it up she vehemently disagrees.

I know part of it is because she feels like she's been burdening all of us. She won't even let her dad and brothers come over because she doesn't want them to see how hard of a time she's really having, which is driving them all crazy. I text Ross practically daily, giving him updates. The other reason I suspect is the scarier one. The one where Scar doesn't want those around her to change their lives because she doesn't think she will be here for long.

I've known her for twenty years. I know her, probably better than anyone in the world. I know how her brain works and I know that the same thoughts ran through her own mother's head when she was battling the same disease. Ross had told me himself. It's one of the biggest reasons why her pushing him and the rest of the family away is hurting him so much. It's hurting her too. She just won't admit it.

I got a text from Scar an hour ago. She asked if I could pretty please pick up some food on the way home. It wasn't just one thing that finally sounded good like it has been here and there. No. It was a grocery list of places to go to, and I couldn't have been more excited to do so.

She's basically been on a liquid diet for weeks so the fact that she requested all of this food has hope soaring inside me. Maybe we are turning a



corner, maybe she will start getting better.

Even I don't buy the shit I'm trying to sell myself, but I have to at least try. I have to at least hope.

I gather the various to-go bags that I picked up on my way home. I've got mac and cheese from Chik-fil-A, chicken noodle soup from PCC, nachos from the little taqueria down the street from the training center, and even a cinnamon roll from Sally's Sweet Treats.

My phone dings in my pocket as I shut the car door and walk up the front steps. It's probably Trev. He told me he was coming to town and said he wanted to come check on Scar. I was able to text him and tell him that I'd check to see how Scar was feeling just before practice began. I'll get back to him as soon as I get this food up to my girl.

When I step inside, I'm surprised that she isn't on the couch. After her fall, I pretty much all but insist she wait until I'm home before going up or down the stairs, which I know emotionally is driving her crazy.

I start making my way to check the bathroom for her when I pause. A light sound of laughter comes from upstairs. My brows furrow as I turn and slowly start making my way towards it. There's no way she made it all the way up the stairs on her own. Unless she really is feeling better.

Suddenly, I hear a deep baritone laugh come from the bedroom, sending my stomach to the ground in an instant. What the fuck? Pushing the door open quickly, I'm surprised to see Trevor sitting on the end of my bed while Scar is leaning against the headboard. The bubble machines are going so it's more bubbles than air really but I'm still able to see a wide smile on Scar's face.

Fuck. It's been a while since I've seen a smile like that. Can't tell you how much I missed it.

“Baby!” She smiles wide before giggling.

“Baby?” I ask curiously with a chuckle. “You’re my baby, since when am I your baby?”

“Since always,” she says with a smile before she frowns and pauses. “Well, not always. You used to be married to Nikki while I was heartbrokenly in love with you. Quite rude of you to marry someone that’s not me.”

My eyebrows raise before she begins giggling to herself again. It’s at that moment I take the time to notice the smell. Glancing down at the table I see two burnt roaches sitting on the table and a lighter. I raise an accusing eyebrow to Trevor who gives me a cheesy grin.

“Did you get my woman stoned?” I ask.

He doesn’t even try to hide his laughter as he nods.

“Fuck, yeah. She’s hilarious too.”

“What are you doing getting stoned, during season no less? They let you do whatever the hell you want in Texas?” I ask dubiously.

“Pretty much. Long as I get those numbers on the scoreboard.”

I roll my eyes as I shake my head at him before facing Scar, bending down to her level before pressing my lips against hers. She loops her arms around my neck, deepening the kiss before I cup her face to do the same.

When she pulls away she has a sweet dazed smile on her face as she looks up at me.

“Hi,” she whispers softly.

I can’t help but smile as my eyes run over her face.

“Hi, baby. How are you feeling?”

“Good, hungry.”

“I love that,” I say as I lift the bags in my hand up, spreading them out on

the bed for her. “Your banquet, my queen.”

Her eyes light up as she opens the mac and cheese first, taking a bite before letting out an audible moan.

“Oh my god, I’ve missed food. It hasn’t tasted good in so long.”

I smile as I run a hand over her back and nod.

“I’m glad. We’ll let you eat. Holler if you need me, okay?”

I give Trevor a look that says he needs to follow me, and thankfully, the little asshole does. We are just stepping into the kitchen when I turn on him, crossing my arms over my chest as I narrow my eyes.

“What are you doing here?”

He shrugs as he opens my fridge and begins rifling around.

“I told you I was in town.”

“No, you told me you were coming to town. You didn’t tell me that you were already in town and spending the day at my house.”

Trevor turns to me, taking a bite of some leftovers from last night as he shrugs.

“Does it matter?”

I scoff. “Uh, yeah. It does. Scar is sick, Trevor. I know that it’s hard for you to grasp the concept of putting others before yourself, but she didn’t need you barging in here and making yourself at home. No doubt smoking the joints was your idea. How did she even get upstairs? You carried her? What else did you do while I was gone?” I ask, the accusation in my tone clear.

Trevor watches me with half-lidded eyes, the rest of his face expressionless.

“Yeah, smoking was my idea, and it gave her an appetite, so I’d chalk that up to a good fucking idea. Of course I carried her upstairs, she nearly busted her face just walking to the couch. Though I don’t think those are the things

you actually care about. Ask what you really want to, Slater. You don't trust me-

"Fuck no, I don't! Why should I? Look at your track record, Trev! You're about as untrustworthy as it gets. What the hell am I supposed to think when I come home and find another man in my bed, with my sick and vulnerable girlfriend."

Trevor scoffs as he shakes his head at me.

"You're blowing this way out of proportion."

"Am I? Last time you saw Scarlett, it was after we had a threesome. Me assuming you tried to pick up where we left off isn't too much of a stretch, is it?"

Trevor actually looks hurt for a moment as his eyebrows furrow. He shakes his head as he looks at his feet while he speaks.

"I can't believe you think I'd do that to you."

"I don't know what to think when it comes to you, Trev. For close to a decade you've been a wildcard, and it's never affected my life, so I haven't made it my business. But when you involve Scarlett, it becomes my business."

Trevor's eyes come up to me, irritation and a small trace of pain in them as he crosses his arms.

"I just wanted to check on her. Erica said she hasn't been doing well. She's my friend."

"Since when?" I laugh.

"I'm gonna give you a pass because I know you're only being a dick because you're insecure and scared shitless. And you might not believe me, but I only had good intentions coming here. I just wanted to check on my friends, both of you."

The sincerity in his words makes me pause for a moment. It's so unlike Trevor. He's usually all cocky confidence, self-centered me first attitude. Not...this.

"I'm gonna head out. Had some plans I didn't want to miss this weekend anyways," he says as he shoulder checks me on his way out the kitchen.

He grabs a bag that was resting against the side of the couch before he opens the front door, speaking without even turning around.

"Tell Freckles I said bye and that I'm here if she needs anything." He pauses before looking over his shoulder briefly. "And I do mean *anything*."

With that, he shuts the door and is gone.

*Fucking asshole.*

For some reason, I feel like I'm the one that's been a prick, though. Who could blame me? This is Trevor Michaels we're talking about. How was I supposed to know what his intentions were? I won't trust anyone with Scar. She's worth too much.

Blowing out a breath, I run a hand over my buzzed head before making my way up the stairs. When I open the door, a smile touches my face when I see several empty containers already surrounding Scar.

"How is it?" I ask as I come to sit next to her.

She smiles at me before leaning forward, pressing her lips against mine before abandoning her food and laying on me.

"Sooo good!"

I smile as I hold her to me before she sits up a bit and kisses me. Turning my head, I cup her face as her tongue slides against mine, deepening the kiss before she moves her lips to my cheek and down my neck.

"I miss you," she whispers against my skin.

"I'm right here, baby."

“No,” she says as she sits up. “I *miss* you. We haven’t been able to...do anything really in a while, and I miss it.”

Understanding dawns on me as I run my hand up and down her back.

“I know where you’re going with this, and we’ve already been over it. It hasn’t been on my mind even for a second. There are a lot more important things in life than sex.”

She pouts, her lower lip almost sticking out as her brows furrow.

“So you haven’t thought about sex with me in weeks? Haven’t missed it?”

“Well, of course I do. But I don’t want you to spend your time worrying about it. I want you to be taken care of before we even think about anything like that, okay?”

“What about you?” she asks.

“What about me?”

“Are you taken care of? Have you been taking care of yourself?” she asks, her soft voice suddenly taking on a seductive rasp as she looks at me.

I swallow as I watch her slowly sit up more until she is resting on her knees.

“Do you touch yourself, Slater?”

“Sometimes,” I say, keeping my eyes on hers.

A small smile spreads across her face at that.

“What do you think about when you do?”

“You,” I say instantly. I would never admit to her just how badly I’ve missed being with her. She has way more important things to worry about than my dick that refuses to stay soft around her. But fuck do I miss having my girl, the quick shower jerk offs are definitely not the same.

“Show me,” she practically whispers.

I pause for a moment, my eyes flicking over her face as I see desire filling

her expressive eyes. Before I can second guess myself, I'm sliding off my sweats, pushing my boxers with them as I do. Reaching down, I grab my cock, running my hand up and down it a few times before gripping the base.

"Now what?" I ask.

"Touch yourself like you do when no one is watching," she says, her eyes moving from my face down to my cock.

Lifting my hand up, I spit into it before wrapping my fist back around my cock and begin stroking myself. My movements start slow, from base to tip and back down again. I keep my eyes on Scar as she watches me with rapt attention.

There is something about getting yourself off in front of someone else, something almost taboo about it. The way Scar is biting her lip, not letting her eyes stray from me only encourages me, though as I pick up my pace.

"Fuck, Scar," I groan as I quicken my pace.

"What are you thinking about, Slater? Are you thinking about me sucking on your cock?"

"I wasn't, but now I sure as shit am."

She smiles as she leans closer, lifting her shirt up and over her head, revealing her perfect breasts to me. Her nipples are hard, and I want nothing more than to suck on those pretty little pink nipples until they melt into my mouth.

Scar grabs my left hand, lifting it to her breast, encouraging me to squeeze as she speaks.

"I love sucking your cock. Feeling your thick head push down my throat. It's hard for me to take you all the way but when I do, the look in your eyes is like a shot of adrenaline for me," she says.

"You suck my cock so good, baby. Best I ever had," I groan as I run my

thumb over her nipple, causing a shudder to run through her body.

Slowly, Scar leans forward, her mouth hovering only inches above my cock. My pulse begins thundering inside my chest as my breath catches. Fuck, I miss that sweet mouth.

Surprising me, she opens her mouth and spits on the head of my cock. My cock twitches at that as my eyes roll into the back of my head.

“Fuck, baby. That’s so hot,” I say as I pick my speed up.

“I like watching you touch yourself,” she admits as she rubs her thighs together softly.

“Are you wet for me, baby?”

She bites her lower lip, nodding softly.

“Do you want to touch yourself?”

Shaking her head she opens her mouth to speak.

“I want you to touch me. I don’t think I’m able to have sex but-”

Before she can even finish her sentence I’m up, off my back and on my stomach as I grip the hem of her yoga pants, pulling them down her hips and off her legs before tossing the useless material behind me. Not having the patience for the scrap of silk in my way, I grip it with both hands and tear it. Something satisfying ripples inside me at the sound of the rip before I push the remnants away, spreading Scar’s thighs before I bury my face into her pussy.

I hear her gasp and feel her hand grip the back of my head as I run my tongue up and down her wet slit. The familiar taste of her explodes against my tongue, causing me to let out a muffled moan as I grip her hips and pull her into me closer. My tongue moves up, resting on her clit before I pull away and speak.

“Is this okay, baby?”



“Okay?” she gasps. “This is amazing! Don’t you dare stop.”

I smirk against her thigh as I press a light kiss to it.

“Hold on tight, Bubbles.”

Focusing my attention on her clit, I flick my tongue against it, finding an easy rhythm that has Scar’s hips lightly thrusting into me. She’s gasping and moaning, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d say she was already close.

“T-touch yourself, Slater. I want us to cum together. Can you cum like this?”

“You kidding?” I say as I pull away. “I could cum just from the smell of you.”

Reaching down to grip my cock, I lower myself back down to Scar, sucking on her clit while I stroke myself. The combination of her soft moans, her sweet taste, and my hand is just enough to push me over the edge, and apparently it’s enough for Scar.

She curls her fingers into the little bit of hair that I have left as her back arches and her legs begin to shake.

“Oh my god! Slater! Slater! Yes!” she cries out.

I quickly move lower, licking every inch of her, making sure not to waste a drop of her cum. As soon as the first bit hits my tongue, I’m a goner. I hold my left hand out as I stroke myself into it, continuing to lick and suck Scar’s orgasm as I stroke myself through my own.

When we both come down from our highs, I quickly make my way to the bathroom, washing my hands before stepping back into the bedroom. I grab a new pair of panties from the dresser and her yoga pants before I slide them up Scar’s legs.

She is slipping her shirt back on when I lay down next to her, helping her into it before I grab my boxers at the end of the bed and pull them up. I lift

my arm up, and Scar comes to me instantly. We are quiet for a few moments as I trace patterns on the back of her shoulder when she speaks.

“So, why haven’t we been doing that the whole time?”

I chuckle before pressing a kiss to the side of her head.

“Today is the first time in a long time I’ve seen you with any sort of energy, baby. Not sure you would have been up for it any other time.”

She nods as she looks up to me with a dazed smile.

“Thank you for stopping at all those places. I’m blaming the weed for the random food choices. Sorry if-”

“Please don’t apologize, baby. I’d drive to a million places if it meant you were able to eat. It’s been killing me to see you like this.”

Her smile slowly falls as she nods seriously.

“I know and I’m-”

“I swear, Scarlett Hayes, I will take you over my knee if you try to apologize one more time.”

“Promises, promises,” she chuckles.

“Easy, trouble,” I say as I wrap my arms around her, burying my nose into her neck as I inhale her sweet scent.

“Seriously,” she says as she looks up at me. “Have I told you how much I appreciate everything you have been doing for me?”

“Only every spare moment of every day,” I smirk. “Honestly, Scar, I wish I could do more. If I could swap places with you, I’d do it in a heartbeat.”

“Don’t say that,” she says with a shake of her head as she closes her eyes. “I can’t even imagine a reality without you.”

“Me neither,” I say, causing those kaleidoscopes to open for me.

“I’m trying,” she says softly, her voice tinged with what sounds like regret.

“I know, baby. You’re doing so good. My little fighter,” I smile as I hold

the back of her neck, forcing her to keep her eyes on me as I do my best to keep the fear out of my voice as I speak to her.

“I just want you to try to let those around you help. I know you’re keeping people away because you’re scared, but we are all scared too. We want to help you anyway we can, and I hate that you’re alone more often than not. Once the season is over, things will be different but for now I don’t think you being in this house alone is good for you. At least, not emotionally.”

She nods but doesn’t speak.

“We love you, Bubbles. So much. Let us be there for you.”

“It felt good to hangout with someone today,” she nods.

I do my best not to bristle at the reminder that she spent the entire day with Trevor, it’s not that I don’t trust Scar. I’d trust her with my life. It’s Trevor that’s the problem. Though, I do feel a small amount of gratitude towards the guy. Whatever he and Scar talked about or did today has changed something in her. For the first time in weeks, I see life in her eyes. I see her fire. It’s small, but it’s there. I can’t help but feel a little jealous that I wasn’t the one to evoke that, though.

“I was just scared. I didn’t want to disrupt everyone’s life in case I don’t make it. If I end up like my mom. I want to be realistic and-”

“And nothing,” I say softly. “I’m right here in your corner, Scar. You could try to push me away, but it would be moot. I’ll never give up on you, and neither will our families, so do us all a favor and let us love on you.”

She sits there second, mulling over my words before she slowly smiles and nods.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

She nods. “Okay.”

I smile at that, cupping her face. “I love you so fucking much.”

“I love you too.”

Closing the distance between us, I can’t help but get lost in the feel of her, the taste, the smell. I commit everything to memory, doing my best to ingrain this moment into my head forever. Not because I’m worried it will be one of my last times with her because like I said, I’m not even allowing myself to fathom that nightmare. I’m memorizing it because this is the exact moment that I’ve decided I can’t live without Scarlett Hayes being mine forever another moment.

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## Scarlett

I'm sitting on the front porch when the familiar pickup truck pulls into the driveway. The green script of 'Hayes Construction' elicits so many memories as the truck parks before three doors open almost simultaneously.

Ezra is the first to make it to me, and he wastes no time clinging to me. He buries his head into my neck as he holds me close.

"God, never thought I'd say I missed you," he says with thick emotion clogging his words.

"Gee, thanks," I laugh lightly as he pulls away.

"I'm serious. We saw each other weekly and texted almost daily. I don't think I've ever gone this long without talking to you."

A pang of sadness runs through me. I really have been shutting everyone out because I couldn't tell you how long it's been since I have seen my family. Guilt twists my stomach as I look at Ezra.

"I'm sorry. I just needed some time to...process, I guess."

He nods as Aaron comes up behind him, pushing Ezra out of the way before wrapping his arms around me.

“Fuck, Scarlett. You’re tiny.”

“I’ve actually gained three pounds,” I smile proudly, though the smile falters slightly when I see the pure anguish on my father’s face just over Aaron’s shoulder.

He stands a few feet away from me, conflict heavy in his features before I speak.

“Hi, Daddy.”

As if the words sent a bolt of lightning to my dad, he quickly closes the distance between all of us, scooping me up into his arms before holding me tight. I cling to him, taking comfort in the familiar scent of wood, oil, and that cologne my mom started buying him back when they first got married.

“How are you feeling, sweetheart?” he asks when he finally lets me go.

“I’m okay. I have chemo tomorrow, so I’m doing better than I will be tomorrow,” I laugh lightly but stop soon when none of the guys laugh. Tough crowd.

“Is it bad?” Ezra asks.

Aaron scoffs. “I mean, she basically gets poison strong enough to kill cancer pumped into her body, so I bet it’s not good.”

Ezra flips Aaron off as he rolls his eyes. I can’t help but chuckle. I missed them more than I realized.

“Alright, enough of that,” my dad grouses. “Are you able to eat, sweetheart? We could go to that little diner by our house?”

My stomach isn’t one hundred percent on board with the idea of food, but I haven’t eaten or thrown up today yet so it’s probably best if I try. I give him a small smile and nod.

“I can try.”

He nods as he wraps an arm around my shoulders.

“That’s my girl,” he says as he slowly starts helping me to the car.

I feel Ezra on my left as Aaron comes up behind me. It’s like I have my own personal security detail but I kind of love it. It doesn’t take long for us to get to the nostalgic diner. We’ve been coming here since we were kids. It’s a great hole-in-the-wall place with hands down the best apple pie you’ll ever have. I guess Vi used to work nights here for a while before she met Declan. It’s amazing I never ran into her because my family used to come here that often. We practically knew everyone.

We take our seats in the booth as our waitress comes over, wearing a robin’s egg blue diner dress that I’m pretty sure has been the dress code since it first opened over thirty years ago. After we all order our food, we are talking about how the company has been doing when the door opens, ringing the bell throughout the diner.

A guy in a nice suit with sandy brown hair walks in, looking entirely out of place in this hole-in-the-wall diner. We make eye contact and instead of staring at my bare head like most people do, he gives me a kind smile as he walks towards our table.

“Hey, sorry I got caught up in a meeting,” he says to the table as Ezra stands.

I furrow my brows in confusion before Ezra and he hug. It lasts for half a beat before they are sitting down, the mystery guy pulling up a chair at the end of the table.

“Nice to see you again, sir,” he says as he sticks his hand out to my dad.

Dad nods and smiles as he shakes his hand before he says hello to Aaron. Then his eyes land on me.

“Sorry, I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Alex. It’s nice to meet you, Scarlett.”



I smile and reach out to shake his large hand.

“Nice to meet you too. Are you a friend of Ezra’s?”

Alex smiles before casting a look at Ezra.

“He’s actually my boyfriend,” Ezra says with an almost sheepish smile.

I watch as Alex nods with a proud smile before resting his hand on Ezra’s thigh. Ezra blushes in a way that I’m all too familiar with, and I know that he wants the attention off him as soon as possible, so I decide to save all of the embarrassing ‘how long have you been together and when did you meet questions’ for later.

Smiling, I nod as I turn to face Alex.

“Well, my sympathies. Ezra is a pain in the ass eight days out of seven.”

Ezra’s blush fades into a mock scowl before the entire table laughs. We all fall into easy conversation as our food comes. I learn that Alex works for a marketing company downtown and has been there for a little over six years. I guess he’s from Arizona but came up here for school before deciding to settle down up here.

I was able to keep both my soup and half a sandwich down, which was a huge success. It was a really great day and it had me kicking myself for not letting my family get closer to me sooner. Putting up that wall was only hurting all of us. I needed this. Needed them.



Slater shuts the book with a satisfying *thunk* before setting it down on the side table. He insisted that we read a football romance when we finished the

last one, so this time, I let him pick. I don't really care what he reads, I just enjoy listening to him. Looking out the window, I watch the rain fall down, soaking in the city on this gray and gloomy day.

It isn't gloomy for me, though. It's actually a really good day. For the first time since starting chemo, we have good news. My tumor markers are down, and though the oncologist said we still have an uphill battle, it's a start. A really good one. I don't think I've seen Slater smile that wide in a few weeks, which of course made my smile bigger. His joy has always been so infectious.

"How are you feeling, Bubbles?"

I look away from the window, smiling at Slater before reaching my hand out for him. He laces our fingers together before bringing my hand to his mouth and places a soft kiss to it.

"I haven't been this good in a long time," I smile.

"Me neither," he agrees. "I know we still have a long road, but, fuck, I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. Can't you?"

"I'm starting to," I nod.

"So, what do you think? Where are we going when you finally kick the shit out of this?"

I chuckle lightly as I mull it over.

"Somewhere warm. I want to lay on the beach, drink a little too much, eat some good food, and lock ourselves in a hotel room for days."

Slater smirks, a devilish glint entering his eyes. "I don't hate the idea of that."

I laugh. "I bet not."

He winks at me before nodding. "Alright, baby. Somewhere warm."

I like the fact that we're planning for the future. Even if it's a bit

preemptive. It's motivating, like there will be more to life again one day than all of this. I've lost some battling this cancer, I may lose more, but when I glance to my left, I know there is one thing I'll never lose, and for that, I'll never not be thankful.



It's been a week since my last round of chemo, and I'm finally starting to feel good again. Thanks to a trip to the dispensary every now and then, I've been able to maintain a slight appetite which is helping me keep the weight on. It still varies on the day. Some days are better than others, but the bad days only make me more grateful for the good.

Today is a good day, and to make it better, it's a Wednesday. Slater and I are on our way to our first Wednesday dinner in a long time. The Crusaders' season was cut short, again, this year. It wasn't just Slater who was off his game. Smith struggled keeping up all season, and according to Slater, word is already out that he will be traded. Poor guy.

Slater is holding my thigh as he drives, while singing horribly off key to 5 Seconds of Summer. I can't help but laugh as I try to sing along. When we pull up outside of Slater's house, he pauses, turning to face me with a soft smile.

"I can't believe how long we've been friends. It feels like just yesterday we moved into this place."

"Really? I feel like that was a lifetime ago," I laugh as Slater smiles and shakes his head.

“Do me a favor?” he asks.

“Anything.”

“Close your eyes.”

I do as he says, feeling something smooth wrapping around my eyes.

“Are you blindfolding me?” I ask.

“Maybe.”

“Uh, why?” I laugh.

“You ask too many questions. Just roll with it, baby.”

I scoff but smile as I allow it, listening carefully as Slater’s door opens and shuts before mine open a moment later. I feel his hand take mine before he carefully helps me out of the car. The door *thunks* shut behind me as he slowly starts leading me forward. I feel my sneakers brush against the wet grass as we go. In typical PNW fashion, it has been raining almost every day over the last few weeks. Today is the first cloud break we’ve gotten.

We walk for what seems like forever before we pause.

“When I was eight years old, my parents told me we were moving. I was furious at first. I liked our neighborhood, liked my school. I was worried that I wouldn’t like Seattle, that I’d never make any friends. Then, we pulled up to the house and something changed. I was looking out the window the whole way, refusing to talk to my parents because I was so mad about the move. Turns out, that was the best thing I could have done because it meant the first thing my eyes landed on when we pulled into the driveway was a little girl with long brown hair blowing bubbles.”

My breath catches as his words paint a picture vastly different than the one that I always thought to be true. He saw me first? Before he even got out of the car?

“There was something about you, I didn’t know what it was at the time,

but it had me unbuckling my seatbelt and sliding out of the car. I was on my way to you when Ezra and Aaron ran over. I wasn't about to turn down new friends, but I still wanted to know you, I wanted to be next to you.

"When your eyes landed on mine, it was like a punch to the gut. All the air was sucked out of my lungs, and my heart tripped over itself. I didn't know at the time what it all meant, only that you were important. That the moment was important and that I would never forget it."

"Slater," I say softly.

"Take your blindfold off, baby."

My fingers shake as I slowly untie the knot behind my head. When the material falls away, I blink several times before my eyes adjust. I stop breathing the moment they do. Bubbles, everywhere. More bubbles than I think I've ever seen at once in my life. It's like we're in a hurricane of them. And we're in my backyard, underneath the old evergreen tree I used to sit under. The same one Slater was referring to.

I don't bother looking for the source of the bubbles, too enraptured in the sight in front of me. Slater is two feet away from me, on one knee, holding my hands as he looks up at me with loving eyes.

"I love you, Scarlett. I've always loved you. I loved you before I knew what love was, I loved you even when I didn't want to, even when I shouldn't have. And I know with every fiber of my being that I'll never stop loving you."

Tears begin to build in my eyes as my pulse hammers in my chest. My breathing becomes short and ragged as the gravity of this moment sinks in. Slater releases one of my hands before reaching into his pocket. I don't miss the tremble in his fingers as he pulls out a black box before he looks up at me.

“Scarlett Hayes, you are my best friend in the entire world. I couldn’t imagine spending a single second without you, and I hope I never have to. I want to re-watch *One Tree Hill* a thousand times, I want to blow endless bubbles with you, and I want to grow old with you. Will you do me the extreme honor of becoming my wife?”

“Swear?” I breathe out, hoping to god this isn’t a dream. If it is, I better never wake up.

Slater’s mouth twitches in amusement before he nods slowly.

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

I’m nodding before I can help myself, biting back the tears, and failing miserably as I cry out.

“Yes! Of course. A million times yes.”

Slater takes out a gorgeous solitaire diamond ring, slipping it onto my finger effortlessly before he scoops me up into his arms spinning me around in celebration.

“She said yes!” he shouts.

Before I know it, both our families are coming out of the woodwork. Aaron and Dad come down from the back porch while Ezra and Alex come out from around the side of the house. Slater’s parents come over from their side yard with Sebastian, Erica, and the twins on their heels.

I look down at Slater, smiling wider than I ever thought possible, my heart fuller than I ever knew it could be.

Twenty years have passed, and I still know now what I knew then. There was something about Slater Santos, something special. And wherever he was, I wanted to be.

**EPILOGUE**



# Slater

6 Months Later

Scar and I have been married for three months now. I insisted that we wait a little longer so that I could give her the big white wedding that she deserved, but she didn't want it. She said that she just wanted to be married to me so how could I say no?

We decided that the perfect time to get married was after her graduation from chemo. As of now, she is in remission, though the oncologist did warn us that it could come back, I don't like to entertain that possibility, though. Watching my wife go through literal hell once was one time too much.

Our ceremony was a small one in Valencia. My dad's great-grandmother was from there, so it felt kinda special and it was sunny and warm, just like Scar wanted. Seb and Mikey were both my best men, and Trev was a groomsman. Erica and Vi were both technically Scar's matrons of honor since she couldn't choose between them, just like I couldn't choose between Seb and Mikey.

Since we had an uneven number of bridesmaids to groomsmen, Trev ended up walking the twins down the aisle who were the cutest flower girls on the



planet. Tucker was our ring bearer, and Ross only faltered for a moment before he handed Scar's hand to me.

I'm man enough to admit that Scar's vows had me tearing up, and I didn't even wait for the preacher's okay before I kissed her. Everyone got a kick out of that.

We honeymooned in Valencia for two weeks and it was amazing. Two weeks of sun, sand, and making love to my wife every chance possible. Reality took some adjusting when we got back. The football season is about to start, and things are already getting crazy. The Crusaders' offered Scar her old position back, and she accepted for now, though she was honest that her availability might be more limited than it was before. She's taking it easy, per her doctor's requests and mine. Just because she's in remission doesn't mean she's back to one hundred, but we're getting there.

Today, we decided to have a big get together with everyone before training camp started. A lot has changed in the last six months, like us trading our quarterback and a handful of other players in exchange for one.

Trevor Michaels is the new Seattle Crusaders' quarterback. We were all shocked when we heard. Supposedly, Trevor and Aberton have been talking for a while. I guess Trevor has been wanting to move up here for a while. I'll give you one guess for the red-headed reason. Seb was less than enthused as you can imagine.

This is going to be a big year for us. Mainly because I have a strong feeling that this will be Seb's last year. He's getting tired of all the travel, and to be fair, this will be his tenth season in the league. I think the guy is just ready to enjoy his family, and I don't blame him.

Scar getting sick really put things into perspective for me. Football isn't as important as I thought it was. It's not the only reason I was put on this earth

for. There is a hell of a lot more to life, a hell of a lot better to it. So who knows, this might be my last year too. I'm in the last year of my contract so you never know.

The other surprise coming this year is that Mikey is coming out of retirement for one more season. When he heard that the three of us were all playing together on the same team, I think he got jealous and reached out to the Crusaders. They couldn't jump fast enough, Mikey still holds the record for the most sacks made by one player in a game, who would pass that up?

So, for at least one season, we'll all be back together, just like in college. And this year, I know we have what it takes to go all the way. I'm pumped for it but based on the tension being thrown from one side of the table to the other, I'd say we are in for an interesting season.

"Pass the potato salad please, Trevor," Scar says from beside me.

He looks up from his plate, giving Scar a small smile before he passes it to her.

"Sure thing, Freckles."

"I still don't get why you call her that," Erica says with a laugh. "She has barely any, at least in comparison," Erica says with a laugh as she points to her smattering of freckles across her face.

Trevor gives Erica a smile and a shrug before easing back into the chair.

"Guess I have a thing for them," he says, winking at Scar.

I shoot him a murderous glare as I wrap my arm around her shoulders. He gives me a mischievous smirk before busying himself with his plate again.

Scar plays with the hair at the back of my neck, her fingers rubbing against the newly inked skin. I surprised her with it a few weeks ago and when she saw it she was speechless. It's a bubble wand with a few bubbles surrounding it, so I could always have my bubbles with me. She seemed shocked when

she saw it, like I hadn't already gotten a tattoo for her on my body. Shortly after we got married, I knew during football season, I would have to take my ring off more often than not, so I had Scar's name tattooed on my ring finger.

Ironic, right? I was the guy that thought the dumbest thing someone could do is get tattoos of a woman on their body, and here I am with two just for my wife. I don't regret either for a second, though.

"You're such a manwhore," Scar says with a laugh and a roll of her eyes.

Trevor smirks as he shrugs. "You say that like it's a bad thing. Besides, if I get tied down like all these sad sacks, who is going to help satisfy the Seattle female population?" he asks as he goes to stand.

"Speaking of," he says as he glances at his phone, "looks like duty calls."

"Duty or booty?" Mikey asks on a smothered laugh.

"Both," Trevor winks before he walks around the table, kissing each of the girls on the cheek before grabbing his leather jacket and aviators.

I feel bad for him. It seems like Trev has been looking for the right moment to make his exit all night. When he came over, he sat down at the table for eight, every chair filling up except for the one next to him. I caught the sideways glances he gave the empty seat a time or two, followed by a few longing glances towards Erica. He doesn't even try to hide it anymore. Not out of disrespect, but because I think he genuinely can't help it. I can't imagine being hung up on someone who has been with your best friend, or should I say ex-best friend, and not able to let it go.

I always thought he was just stubborn when it came to her, that he was refusing to "lose." But watching him after all these years has me wondering if maybe Erica was it for him. If maybe she really was his soulmate. If that's the case, I feel, really do feel, bad for him because it's obvious to anyone with eyes that she's Seb's too.

Seb shakes his head as Trevor leaves before he wraps his arm around Erica, kissing the side of her head as she smiles up at him, running her hands through his shaggy jaw length hair. I think we are all getting used to Seb with no man bun. He's been trying to throw it up into a baby bun, but he's not quite there yet. I think Erica misses it the most out of anyone.

They've been through a lot together. From the shitstorm they had to navigate to get where they are, to endless amounts of travel for both of their work and raising twin girls. I've always looked up to their relationship, admired it. They are like that OG couple of the group. The ones that always have the good advice, who are basically Mom and Dad over the rest of us.

I glance across the table to see Mikey and Violet clearly enjoying their first kid-free night in a while as they make goo goo eyes at each other. Fuck, they didn't have it easy either. I've known Declan Daniels a long time, and when things went to shit for them, I didn't know if my best friend was going to make it out the other side. I'm so glad they did, though, because Vi is perfect for him. I'm supposed to act surprised when we find out later, but Mikey already spilled the beans this morning to me, and they are expecting baby number three in April next year. I swear to god they are gonna have their own football team of kids one day. Couldn't think of a better couple for it, though. Mikey worships the ground Violet walks on and she treats him like a king. On top of that, they really are the best parents.

Pressing a quick kiss to Scar's lips, I can't help but grin when I pull back and look at my beautiful wife smiling up at me. Fuck, Scarlett Santos. I can honestly say I didn't see that one coming, but I'm glad I didn't. It made things all the sweeter. Don't get me wrong, I wish we would have given in sooner. I wish I never would have wasted years with Nikki when they should have all been Scar's. It was always supposed to be us, and I'll never forgive

myself for wasting precious time. But our clocks aren't running out just yet, there is still time on the board for us and anything is possible.

I've tried to broach the topic of having kids one day, but Scar shut it down pretty quickly. I don't think she's ready to face the fact that it will be harder for us than it was for our friends, and that's okay. I'm not in a rush, when the time is right, we'll both know. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't excited to hold a little piece of half Scar and half me. Regardless of who carries that baby, they will be all ours.

Our story isn't perfect. It's kinda messy and complicated and more than a few hearts broke throughout it. Hell, I think that's the case for everyone around this table's stories. But we're all stronger for it. And if there is one thing that I've learned in my life it's that love hurts but if it's the right kind of love, it heals too.

## Thank you

**T**hank you so much for reading *The Hearts We Break*! I hope their story was everything you were hoping for. Oh man, these characters gave me a run for my money. Honestly, all of them did. This series has been one of the most frustrating, thrilling, tear inducing, rewarding experiences of my life. Thank you to every single person whether you've been here since *Loyalties*, or this is your first introduction to these characters. Your support means everything!

If you haven't gotten a chance to read about Seb, Erica and Trevor or Declan and Vi, you can start reading below!

The Alphaletes Series –

The *Loyalties We Break* – Sebastian, Erica and Trevor

The *Walls We Break* – Declan and Violet

Reviews mean everything to indie authors, so if you could take a moment to leave a review I would be so thankful!

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## Acknowledgments

First off, I always have to give my thanks to Skarlet. You are my PA, my graphic designer, my alpha, my counselor, my confidant, my anxiety reducer and one of my closest friends in the whole world. I swear, I have no idea where I would be if it wasn't for you. We both know this book would have never seen the light of day if it wasn't for you pushing me to keep going when these characters refused to work with us. There are too many reasons why you are completely invaluable and irreplaceable to name, and I know how compliments and praise make you itch, so I'll keep it short. I fucking adore you, I'm so thankful for you and everything you do, and I hope you never forget how spectacular you are. Love you forever, bitch.

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To my readers, I love you. Every single one of you. Thank you for reading my books, for leaving a review, for taking a chance on a new to you author or to binging my back list. It's because of you all that I push on when the days feel too hard and too impossible to continue. It's because of you that I'm able to turn a pipe dream into a reality and I could never thank you all enough.

## Trigger Warnings

If you skimmed over the trigger warning page in the beginning, I bet you're wondering why the heck it is all the way back here. After a lot of deliberation I felt that it was best for the most people to go into this book blind, if possible.

For those of you that came straight back here when you saw the message in the beginning, please be advised that this book does touch on several tough topics that can be triggering for some. Your mental health is always first priority so please look over the below potential triggers before continuing.

This book contains:

- Cancer
- Death of a parent
- Divorce
- Infertility
- Explicit sexual scenes
- Drug use

- Explicit language