

THE D.C. STARS SERIES

Slap Shot



CHELSEA CURTO

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For the ones with gentle souls and hearts made of gold.

(And for the readers who love to see the sweet six-foot-two NHL player use his mouth for something other than talking... Hudson Hayes is for you)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hello, friend.

Thank you so much for picking up *Slap Shot*. If you've read any of the other books in the DC Stars series, you know I like to write men who are down bad and women who are strong and badass.

That's the case with Hudson and Madeline, but they're also the softest couple in the series so far. Their story is a *very* slow burn. The foundation of their friendship is built over months, long before their romantic relationship begins. I feel like it's necessary for their story, though, and I think it works.

Madeline is a single mom. She's a cynic after what happened to her in the past, and that plays a role in her view of relationships.

Her daughter, Lucy, is deaf. I've relied on sensitivity readers who are part of the Deaf community and extensive research of my own to help me write her story as authentically as possible. I know I'm not perfect. I'm always learning how to do things the right way, and I've tried my best to put the utmost care and consideration into her character.

You'll see Lucy's dialogue, American Sign Language, represented in bold & italics. When the characters around her are signing with her, their dialogue will be italicized. Additionally, if the characters are using SimCom—a technique that involves speaking and signing at the same time—their dialogue will be italicized with quotation marks around it.

On the note of doing things the right way, Hudson's story involves one of heartbreak and becoming happy after losing someone important to him. Grief isn't linear, and it doesn't look the same for everyone. The experience is different based on who you ask, and there's no right or wrong way to

approach a situation like the one he's in.

This is a hockey romance, but some elements of the game have been altered for readability. I don't want to mention twenty-three players on the team (because that is way too confusing!) or include a play-by-play of sixty minutes of game action (other scenes are more important!), but these small adjustments are only a small shift away from reality.

My DMs on Instagram are always open if you want to chat more, and I love hearing all of your unhinged thoughts as you read.

Enjoy!

Xoxo,
Chelsea

CONTENT WARNINGS

Slap Shot is a romantic comedy full of laughs, spice, and swoon, but I want to share a few content warnings that some readers might want to be aware of.

- explicit language
- alcohol consumption
- multiple explicit sex scenes
- mention of infertility (not the main characters)
- mention of divorce
- mention of cancer
- mentions of a past pregnancy
- injury during a hockey game (minor, with some pain)
- parental abandonment
- the loss of a parent (off page, in the past, but a large plot point)

As always, take care of yourselves and protect your heart. If you have any questions about any of the things listed above, please know my DMs are always open (@authorchelseacurto on IG).

CHARACTER CATCH UP

Hi, reader!

I do my best to write my books as standalone novels even though they're part of a series, but some of the characters mentioned have their own books. I never want anyone to feel confused while reading, so I created a quick character catch up so you can know who is who before diving in.

If this is your first book of mine, welcome! I'm so glad you're here.

If you're a big DC Stars fan, I hope you're excited to be back with the boys.

Maverick Miller and **Emmy Hartwell** have their own book, **Face Off**, which is book one in the DC Stars series. It's a dislike to lovers, rivals with benefits, black cat x golden retriever story full of banter and spice.

Piper Mitchell and **Liam Sullivan** have their own book, **Power Play**, which is book two in the DC Stars series. It's a grumpy x sunshine, goalie x rinkside reporter, teach me, accidental marriage story.

For timeline purposes, Slap Shot takes place after the ending of Power Play, but before the Power Play epilogue.

Maven Lansfield, one of the women Madeline meets, is also referenced throughout the book. She has her own book in a different series. **Behind the Camera** is a single dad x nanny, roommates, NFL story.

As always, I've left lots of clues about upcoming books. I can't wait to see if you find them!

DC Stars Roster

Maverick (Mavvy) Miller - right winger

Liam (Sully) Sullivan - goalie

Hudson (Huddy Boy) Hayes - defenseman

Riley (Mitchy) Mitchell - defenseman

Ethan (Easy E) Richardson - center

Grant (G-Money) Everett - right winger

Connor McKenzie - center

Ryan Seymour - defenseman

Brody Saunders - head coach

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ONE

MADELINE

THE BEST PART of my job is being in charge of entitled men who think they're better than me because they have a dick.

The rest of it—the hustle and bustle, the creative outlet for the recipes that come to me in the middle of the night, the breakneck pace—is nice, too.

But having the power of an executive chef?

That's something I've worked *hard* for.

After constantly being overlooked for positions I wanted because the job went to a man less qualified than me, I landed the executive chef role at CARVD, a Michelin star steakhouse in the heart of Las Vegas.

That was three years ago, and I've never loved cooking more.

The kitchen is where I belong.

It's me and food, and it's the longest, healthiest, *happiest* relationship I've ever had.

"Hey, Andre." I smile at my favorite line cook and set my notebook and pen on the prep station. "How are we looking for tonight?"

"What do you think?" Andre raises a brow as he sharpens the knife he's holding. He lifts his chin to the stacked containers, the ones I can see from here labeled *Heritage carrots* and *Confit garlic*, and I nod. It's going to be a long day. *Yeah, stupid question.* We're always busy. He turns the handle and carefully inspects the blade before putting it back in the block against the wall. "Jared wants to see you in his office before we get started."

"Did he say what it was about?"

“Nope. Vague as always.” He shrugs and moves to a paring knife. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

I head for my kitchen manager’s office, nervous. It’s rare he asks to see anyone before our night starts. His management style has always been hands-off, and knowing he’s here hours before we open the doors to a waitlist a mile long concerns me.

I knock on his door and rock back on my heels. I make a list of the half-dozen things I need to accomplish while I wait for him to answer. I have to track down the fresh spinach we got in yesterday. Take our new runners through proper dish placement and presentation. Assist with prep, which also means checking to make sure we have enough heavy cream for a large batch of peppercorn sauce. Steaks are our signature dish, and if I can avoid eighty-sixing yet another item off our menu tonight, I damn well will.

There’s too much to do, and a quick glance at my watch tells me time is slipping away.

CARVD is one of the hottest spots in the city. Our diners are high-profile athletes, celebrities, and millionaires in town to watch UFC fights and F1 races.

I put everything I have into an innovative menu that changes weekly and draws a crowd. I spend hours experimenting with flavors and technique. I pride myself on learning and evolving as a chef, which is why I’m hesitant to find out why my boss wants to speak to me.

As a meticulous planner and overachiever, being told I’ve done something wrong will be enough to send me spiraling before service.

“Come in,” Jared finally yells, and I throw the door open with a smile.

“Hey, Jared. Good to see you.” I stretch my smile wide, hoping it doesn’t look as forced as it feels. “Andre mentioned you wanted to chat before I got everyone together to go over tonight’s menu?” I ask.

He motions to the chairs in front of his desk. “Take a seat.”

I perch on the edge of one and discreetly check the time again. I don’t want the team to think I’m leaving it to them to pick up my slack. “What’s up?”

“I have some news.”

“Is it good news or bad news?”

He drums his fingers on his desk, and my nerves amp up. “I hate drawing things out, so I’m going to cut to the chase. The restaurant is being sold. The

new owners are bringing in a lineup of chefs and runners.”

Hell.

That is definitely *not* good news.

“Sold?” I repeat. “Our profit margins are through the roof. Almost every culinary magazine has featured us in positive write-ups. Why would they —”

“It happens a lot in this business. You know how high turnover is. Someone has an idea they want to try out, and it’s successful for two weeks before going up in smoke. This management company has been snatching up dozens of restaurants in the city, and they chose CARVD as their next project. They’re going to turn it into a tapas lounge.”

“*Tapas?* That’s not even a full plate of food.”

“It’s not my call.”

“When does it go into effect?”

“Immediately. Don’t bother with dinner. They’re bringing in their folks to handle the crowd tonight before shutting down for a week to repurpose the menu,” Jared says.

The menu I’ve spent countless hours on.

The menu I’ve poured my heart and soul into.

It wasn’t good enough.

I’m not good enough, and that’s a terrifying revelation.

My hands shake and I take a breath through my nose. I want to cry, but I learned a long time ago that getting emotional won’t fix the problem in front of me.

Jared throws out words like *investment opportunity* and *new ideas*, and a million thoughts race through my head.

How am I going to pay for my daughter, Lucy, to go to school? How am I going to afford rent, my car payment, and Christmas gifts in a few months?

I’m not rich by any means, but I know I’m lucky compared to others. My low six-figure salary lets us get by comfortably. It lets me pay the bills and gives me a chance to set aside money each month for Lucy’s college fund.

Losing that is going to up-end everything I’ve worked so hard for, and that’s what hurts the most.

“Okay.” I stand and head for the door, wanting nothing more than to escape to a place where I can be weak for a minute. Where I can cry and be mad. My chest hurts. My eyes burn, and I hold back the sob working its way up my throat. “Thank you for letting me know, Jared.”

“Madeline,” he says. “You’ll find something.”

In a cutthroat industry where job openings on a similar compensation scale don’t appear out of thin air, I’m not hopeful. But I smile anyway. I lift my shoulders in a *What can you do?* kind of way and nod.

“If you hear of anything, let me know,” I say, closing the door to his office with an aggressive slam.

My empathetic side tells me to head back to the kitchen and spend a few minutes with the people I enjoy working with, but I refuse to be the one to break the news about our impending unemployment.

Instead, I grab my purse and slip out the back exit to the employee parking lot, grateful for a moment alone.

The dry afternoon heat greets me, and it’s a hug I’ve come to tolerate after so many years of living here. When I first moved to Vegas, I complained about the never-ending summer. I missed cycling through four seasons. Leaves falling in autumn and snow on Christmas Day back in Ohio.

The warmth is a comfort now, and after that news, I need all the comfort I can get.

I climb in my car and start the drive to my parents’ house ten minutes away from the Strip. I grip the steering wheel tightly while an old country song croons from the speakers of my Hyundai. George Strait helps ease the sting of losing something I love, something I’m *good* at, but not by much.

When you’re a single parent who needs to provide for her child, you don’t have time to wallow. You don’t have the opportunity to beat yourself up or stew over what you could’ve done differently.

You have to put on your big girl pants, plaster on a fake fucking smile, and figure out a way to get shit done.

By the time I cut the engine, my mind is working in overdrive. I’m thinking of the contacts I have in the city who might know of any openings. I’m revamping my resume and wondering if I have any business casual clothes in my closet that might be appropriate for an interview.

“Mom?” I call out, letting myself in. “Anyone home?”

“Madeline?” My mom appears around the corner wearing a worried look. “What are you doing here?”

I kick off my shoes. Panic claws at the base of my spine when I realize there’s someone else who can be responsible for a minute. It doesn’t always have to be me.

“The restaurant is being sold,” I say in a voice so faint, I’m not sure I’m

speaking at all. “Which means I’m out of a job.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Mom opens her arms, and I walk into her embrace, grateful for her hugs even at thirty-three. “Tell me everything.”

Half an hour later, we’re sitting at the dining room table deep in brainstorming mode. My computer is open as I make a list of anywhere and everywhere I can think of that might be hiring, and things are looking bleak.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do. I can’t pay for Lucy’s education on a minimum-wage salary, but I don’t want to homeschool her or put her in public school. It’s important to me that she’s around other deaf kids who communicate like her, and I’m not sure how I’m supposed to do that now,” I say.

“What about the child support Clark pays? Where does that money go?” Mom asks. “You could reach out to your lawyer and see if you can negotiate a higher amount now that your income is uncertain.”

“I don’t want to rely on the child support.” I tap my laptop and sigh. “The last thing I want to do is give that man any sort of power over us. I put the money in a separate account, and I haven’t touched a dime of it since he left.”

I’ve never hated anyone in my life, but the disdain I have for Lucy’s father is insurmountable.

We were happy in the years before I got pregnant. Hell, I moved here to be with him. We took trips to the Caribbean and bought a house with a big backyard. We spent every night talking about what our future looked like, and our life was straight out of a fairytale.

When Lucy came into the world, she failed her newborn hearing screening before we left the hospital. She failed her next one, and after a trip to the audiologist, we learned she was deaf.

A month after her diagnosis, Clark left us. He told me he didn’t sign up to raise a child who is “different”. He didn’t want to put in “the work” it would take for her to be happy and taken care of, and the last thing he would ever do is learn sign language.

It’s been the two of us ever since, and she relies on me to give her the life she deserves. Reaching out to the piece of shit who abandoned us when we needed him the most is not demonstrating the strength I try to teach Lucy. No matter how much money he has, I need to come up with another idea.

“How much do you have in savings?” Mom asks, breaking me from my murderous daydreams of what I would say to Clark if I ever saw him again.

“Enough to get through a few months of expenses.” I close my computer

and rest my chin in my hand. “I’m going to stop by some restaurants next week to see if I can find anything, but maybe this is the universe telling me something.”

“Telling you what?”

“That I need a fresh start? I’ve been in Vegas for a decade, but I’m not sure this is where I want to plant roots.”

“What do you mean? You have your apartment. Your father and I are here. Lucy goes to school right up the road.”

“Those are all wonderful things, but I moved here for Clark. It’s never really felt like my *home*, you know? I could bounce between jobs that might make ends meet, or I could see if there’s something else calling my name. Even if it means moving and starting with a clean slate.”

It would hurt to lose my support system.

My parents moved to Vegas to be closer to me after the divorce, and having them nearby to help with childcare has been the only way I’ve kept my head above water.

But deep down, my heart tells me I need to put myself first. I need to take a step out of my comfort zone, and that could mean leaving this city—and its ghosts—behind.

“Dad and I will always support you, Madeline,” Mom says, and that makes me want to cry.

I set my mug down and reach across the table so I can take her hand in mine. “I know.”

Light footsteps and a soft giggle break our moment. Lucy comes barreling into the kitchen. She’s my mini-me, a smaller version of myself I’d do anything to protect.

Mommy! she signs, and I reach for her. She runs into my arms and I scoop her up, holding her close to my chest. **You’re here!**

This will always be my favorite place in the world: with Lucy in my lap, grateful for every second I get with her.

Hi. I kiss the top of her head. *Have you had fun with Grams and Gramps this afternoon?*

We watched a video on parakeets. Can we get a parakeet?

I glance at my mom, and she gives me a guilty smile.

She was very excited about the birds. You know how hard it is to tell her no, my mom signs, and I laugh.

Yeah. I hold Lucy tighter. I’d give her anything she ever wanted. *I do.*

Lucy touches my cheek and frowns. ***You look sad.***

I'm okay, sweetheart. Should we start getting dinner ready?

Can we do hot dogs?

Of course we can, I tell her, not the least bit wounded she doesn't want to eat any of the dishes I've mapped out in my planner for the week.

My daughter squeals and climbs out of my lap. She takes off for the kitchen, and my mom touches my shoulder.

"You're going to figure it out, honey," she tells me, and I nod.

I've been flying by the seat of my pants for the last six years, and I always figure it out.

I can do it a little longer.

TWO HUDSON

“MR. HUDSON? How does it feel to be the second-best player on the Stars?”

I look up from the stick I’m taping and narrow my eyes at Buster Jenkins, one of the young athletes attending kids’ camp today.

“How much did you get paid to say that, Buster?” I ask.

He shrugs, then yells, “Ten bucks. That’s enough money for five ice cream cones,” as he skates to the other side of the rink to join the rest of the campers on their ten-minute snack break.

A figure looming in the tunnel leading to our locker room catches my attention. For years now, management has released United Airlines Arena to the Junior Stars Camp organizers, but the locker rooms are off-limits to anyone who doesn’t wear an NHL jersey. I smirk when I recognize who it is.

“Was honeymooning in Bali not enough fun for you?” I call out, and several heads turn. I give it a minute before my right winger is bombarded by a dozen mini fans. “You had to come home and bribe these kids to try and say you’re a better player than me?”

“Nah. Just missed you, Huddy Boy.” Maverick Miller flashes a grin and skates over to join me at center ice. He doles out a couple of high fives, flips his stick in the air, winds up, and sends the puck at our feet flying straight into the goal. “Thanks for covering for me this weekend.”

“With training camp starting next week, I figured I needed one last rip on the ice that didn’t involve Coach yelling at us.” I snort and flip my hat

backward. The camp kids have returned to happily shoving orange slices in their mouths, and I figure I can extend their break by a few minutes to catch up with my best friend. “Can’t believe summer is over. I guess that’s what happens when you win the most sought-after trophy in professional sports. When did you get home?”

“Damn right.” He taps my fist with his. “And we got in this morning. I would’ve liked to spend a few extra days in Bali, but Emmy demanded we get back so she can get into a routine before the season starts.” A dopey, dreamy smile settles on Maverick’s face. “God. I love that woman.”

Emmy—Emerson—Hartwell is his wife and another one of my best friends.

She’s the first woman to play in the NHL, and Maverick fell head over heels for her when she was on the DC Stars with us. The pair are the definition of opposites attract, but he wore her down enough to earn a second of her attention. Through a weird twist of fate, they started dating, fell in love, and got married in Vegas last season.

“The whole world knows how you feel about that woman.” I toss my tape into the empty players’ box and fire off a shot toward the goal. It hits the left post and works its way into the net. “Did you get any training done while you were gone, or were you too busy enjoying the five-star all-inclusive resort?”

“I did plenty of training.” He hits another puck, but this shot goes wide right. “Long walks on the beach. Bench pressing my weight in chicken satay and nasi goreng. That counts, right?”

“I can’t wait to watch you collapse when we’re back to work. The overspeed drills are going to kick your ass.” I grin. “Do you remember how to lace your skates, or do you need help?”

“You want to go, Hayes?” Maverick tosses his stick on the ice and rolls up the sleeves of his hoodie. “Let’s race from goal to goal, and I’ll mop the floor with you. We both know I’m faster.”

I’m tempted to take him up on that offer. He might be my best friend, but I also like to humble the hell out of him when I can. Watching him lose in a lap around the rink would make my entire year.

Especially in front of a group of kids.

“I spent all summer in the weight room. You’re over there huffing and puffing, Miller, and you’re not even moving. Admit you’re slow, and we can put this to rest.”

“Never.” He glances at the campers, giving them an enthusiastic wave.

“What do you have going on after this finishes up?”

“I’m heading to the bookstore this afternoon, then it’s back to searching for a chef who won’t quit after two weeks.”

“Remember when you came home from our five-game road trip last year and found that woman taking pictures of all your briefs?”

“Don’t remind me. I ended up on a damn Reddit thread.” I sigh, already exhausted. “I have an evening of interviews ahead of me, and none of them are looking promising. Where are the people who don’t care about who I am?”

“You’re one of the biggest names in the city, Hud. Everyone cares.”

He’s right.

It comes with being a professional athlete in a sports-obsessed town.

We have football, basketball, and baseball, but everyone lives and breathes hockey here.

When you’re part of a famed organization that finally won its first Stanley Cup after decades of mediocre performances, it’s impossible to go anywhere without being recognized.

At thirty-one, I’ve been doing this long enough to know the following is part of the job. Our fans are the best in the league, and I’d never turn down signing an autograph or posing for a photo with someone who comes and cheers for me night after night.

But personal space and privacy would be nice.

“So, what you’re saying is I need to put anything I don’t want to wind up on the internet in a locked box?” I drop my head back and groan up at the arena lights. “Great. I love being uncomfortable in my own home.”

“I don’t understand why you keep having this problem. With all of our connections, there has to be *someone* out there who can cook good food for you.”

“There are plenty of people who can cook good food. Finding someone who doesn’t stalk me online is the hard part.” I scrub a hand over my jaw. “Let’s drop it. The more I think about it, the more tempted I am to live off ramen for the rest of my career. What are you doing today? Want to join me on a run with the dogs later?”

Maverick’s smile falls. “Emmy has a doctor’s appointment, and I want to go with her.”

“Doctor’s appointment? Is she okay?”

“She’s not injured. It’s to find out why we’ve been trying to have kids for

months now and haven't had any success. It's weighing on me, man, and I know it's weighing on her. Kind of makes the season seem pointless. How can I go out there and give it my all every night when I'm dealing with shit that's so much bigger than hockey?"

"Hey." I tug on his sleeve and point to the penalty box that's far away from little ears. We skate over and sit on the small bench. "Why did you let me give you shit when you were holding this in?"

Maverick was in his second year in the league when I was a rookie, and we've been buddies from the minute I joined the Stars.

Going from the youngest players on the team who used to be troublemakers to the oldest, our teammates looking to us for guidance has brought a kinship between us.

He's easy to talk to. We spend our free time together. He's been home to Georgia with me for the holidays and has even spent a week or two there during the summer. He stood by my side when my mom passed away. He let me cry on his shoulder at her funeral and told off a reporter for asking about my absence, earning himself a one-game suspension.

He's my best friend in the whole damn world, more like a brother than anything, and to see him hurting hurts me.

"Because we always give each other shit." Maverick bends and fixes his jeans over the top of his skate. "I'm tempted to retire. To get away from the limelight and focus on Emmy."

"Are you serious?"

"Maybe. There's so much going on up here." He taps his head. "It's fucking hard. I can't imagine what you went through when your mom passed. This is small compared to that."

"You saw what I was like. I was living in hell from the minute we found out she was sick until she left us. Even now, it feels like I'm drifting between living and surviving. I wish I could tell you the hard days get better, but sometimes you have to go through a lot of shit before you come out on the other side."

"What helped you get through it?"

I'm not sure I've gotten through it, and I'm not sure I ever will.

I don't think that's something you move on from.

It happened so fast. Now and then, I think it's all a dream. Some trick the universe is playing on me, because how do you go from finding your mom in the stands at every game to learning she has stage four breast cancer after a

routine doctor's visit to burying her five months later?

"You. Hockey. Rescuing Gus and Millie," I say, mentioning my golden retrievers. "Being around the things that made me happy. They didn't make me happy in the moment, but eventually they did. That's different for everyone. Some people like to shut it out. Some people turn to vices. You have to figure out what works for you. If you want to retire, you know I'll support you. The guys will support you. Emmy might try to kick your ass, but that's between y'all."

"I'm most attracted to her when she wants to kick my ass." His dimpled grin is back. "I only have a few seasons left in me anyway. I know you were joking earlier, but I am slowing down. I've spent too many years giving my body to this sport. Maybe now is the time to go."

"Have you talked to my favorite redhead about all of this?"

"Nope. We actively avoided talking about it on our trip. Figured we could use a break from reality. Now we're home, and it's right in front of us. We can't hide from it anymore."

"Communication is important."

"There you go with your relationship advice. Maybe one day I'll be wise like you."

"You're married now, Mavvy. Pretty sure you're wise enough. I'm here if you ever want to talk. I have your back, just like you have mine."

"Fuck." Maverick stares at the kids starting to make their way back to center ice. "Bet you didn't think your day would turn deep as shit when you rolled up to the arena, did you?"

"I thought there would be a lot more dick jokes. Frankly, I'm disappointed."

"You and me both, dude. What are you going to do about your interviews?"

"Scream, probably. Or sign up for a meal delivery service so I never have to interact with anyone ever again."

"You sound like Liam," he says, and I snort.

Our goalie, Liam Sullivan, is the most anti-social guy I've ever met. He's a damn good hockey player, but he has an aversion to talking to people. I'm pretty sure the only person he likes is his girlfriend, Piper Mitchell, our rinkside reporter.

Turning into him wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, but I'd prefer not to become a recluse who communicates in grunts and eye rolls.

“Lovely. Things are looking up.” I adjust my whistle around my neck and stand. “Are you sticking around?”

“Yeah. I think we should ditch the drills, though. Let’s do a scrimmage and see who’s the better coach. Loser has to talk to the rookies and media on the first day of Stars Camp next week.”

“That’s part of your job as captain.”

“You’re my alternate captain. I’m allowed to delegate.”

“Asshole.” I hop back on the ice and take off toward the kids buckling their helmets and putting in their mouthguards. “Knew you were slow, Cap,” I yell.

“You’re getting a hundred laps for that, Hayes,” he yells back.

I grin at the campers. “Who wants to see me beat Maverick Miller in a shootout?” I ask, and they all cheer.

THREE

MADELINE

A WEEK of job searching has left me empty-handed and on the brink of joining OnlyFans.

Every restaurant I visited told me they admired my resume. They applauded my experience, but they didn't have any job openings.

I got the dreaded *we'll let you know if anything comes up* smile a dozen times. Every day I'm losing faith I'll find anything comparable to my previous salary, and every day I'm closer to selling pictures of my feet on the internet.

I settle on my bed with a glass of wine after another long afternoon of wandering around the Strip, exhausted, frustrated, and with dwindling optimism. Lucy is with my parents until tomorrow morning, and I was tempted to bring the whole damn bottle in here with me.

If I'm going to figure out my future, though, I need to keep my head clear. Getting drunk off cheap pinot noir is unfortunately not going to help the situation.

Stretching out my legs, I set my purse on my lap and rifle through it for my phone. Doomscrolling on LinkedIn sounds like the perfect way to cap off another crappy day. My fingers brush against the curve of cardstock instead of the edge of my phone, and I frown.

I set my drink on the bedside table and pull out the folded piece of paper. It's a business card, and judging by the smudged numbers and letters, it must've been in my bag for ages. The right corner is ripped, but I can make

out a logo on the top of the rectangle.

““DC Stars. Piper Mitchell, rinkside reporter,” I read, and the night I came into possession of the card comes flooding back to me. “Oh.”

The Stars are Lucy’s favorite hockey team, and I splurged on tickets when they played in Vegas last season. We sat five rows up from the ice, and after the game, Piper came out of the tunnel with a stack of gear to distribute to waiting fans. She said hello to Lucy, even signed with her for a bit, and gave her one of the players’ jerseys.

Luce was beside herself with excitement.

The jersey smelled like death and hung all the way down to her feet, but she didn’t care. She wore it around for weeks, and it’s still her favorite item hanging in her closet.

I don’t know where her infatuation with hockey comes from. I can barely name two teams in the league, but I’ve been trying to get better about following what the Stars are doing so I can keep Lucy up to date.

This has to be a sign, right?

This card has been in my bag for *months*. It’s been buried under a pack of gum and a pair of AirPods, forgotten and half shredded by keys and bobby pins, and today of all days—when I’m on the verge of freaking out—I find it?

I’m not a big believer in divine intervention. I’ve never gone to church, never believed in miracles, but I’m going to pretend finding this card is courtesy of a guardian angel somewhere out there who is reaching out to me.

I grab my wine and gulp half of it down for liquid courage. When I talked with Piper all those months ago, she said if I ever needed anything or found myself in DC to reach out. Calling a woman I barely know out of the blue is extreme, and I don’t want to seem desperate as hell.

I weigh the pros and cons while I sip my drink. By the time I finish my glass, my inhibitions are lowered. The anxiety that’s taken up residence in the pit of my stomach loosens from the knot it wove itself into, and for the first time all week, I see a glimmer of hope.

I *am* desperate as hell.

What do I have to lose?

“Fuck it,” I say to my empty room, dialing her number.

The call rings twice before there’s an answer, and I sit up straight.

“Hello?”

“Hi,” I say. “Is this Piper Mitchell?”

“This is she.”

“Hi. This is so weird, and I apologize in advance how I might come across.” A laugh rattles out of me, but I power on. “My name is Madeline. Madeline Galloway. We met when the Stars played against the...” I trail off and curse myself for not knowing what the hell the local hockey team’s name is. “When they were in Vegas last season. My daughter is Lucy. You signed with her?”

“Oh my gosh. Of *course*. Hi! How are you?”

There’s warmth in her voice and kindness in her question, like she really wants to know how I am.

It helps me relax. It lets me take a deep breath, and I draw my knees to my chest.

“Do you want the long story or short story?” I ask.

“I love a long story,” she says.

“I lost my job as the executive chef at a restaurant here in Vegas, and I’m looking for work. It feels like I’ve exhausted all avenues in the city, so I’m branching out. Do you know of anywhere in the DC area that might be hiring? Or somewhere else? I’m willing to relocate.”

“Wait. You’re a chef?” Piper asks.

“I am. Or, I was. Now I’m unhappily unemployed.” Another laugh slips out of me. If I hadn’t had that glass of wine, I might be in tears. “New owners are coming in, and they’re cleaning house. I guess the bright spot in all of this is it’s not a reflection on my work.”

“I’m so sorry. Job uncertainty is hard. What kind of restaurant were you working in?”

“A Michelin-starred steakhouse. I’ve been in all sorts of kitchens, though, and I’m comfortable with anything.”

“Anything?” she repeats.

“Within reason. I’m not great with French cuisine, but I’m willing to learn. I have a strong work ethic, and I’m able to stay calm under pressure.” I wince at my tone, at the harshness and bite behind it. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be defensive. I’m so used to having to hold my own against people—men, if we’re being honest—who are less qualified than me but in a higher position of power. It came out like a reflex, and that wasn’t my intention.”

“Don’t get me started on the power imbalance of men and women in the workplace. I see it every day in my role, and I could talk for hours about gender favoritism,” she says fiercely. “But enough about asshats who don’t work as hard as us. Have you ever considered a career as a private chef?”

“A private chef? Um, no. It never crossed my mind,” I say honestly. “I’ve done the majority of my cooking for large groups of people and in restaurant environments. It’s what I’m most comfortable with.”

“Gotcha. Well, I don’t have any restaurant connections,” Piper tells me, and my heart sinks to my feet.

That increasingly familiar dread is back, and the glimmer I saw ten minutes ago snuffs out.

“I totally understand. Thank you so much for —”

“If you’re open to talking more about a private chef gig, I might have something that could possibly work for you.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yeah. There’s a DC Stars player who’s in need of some help in the kitchen. He’s a really nice guy, but he can’t keep anyone around for longer than a week,” she says, and I frown.

“That doesn’t sound promising. Is he a micromanager? Does he only eat food with human blood in it?”

Piper bursts out laughing. “No, but that would make him a hell of a lot more interesting. The people he’s hired in the past haven’t had his best interests at heart, and he keeps striking out on the chef front. Don’t tell my boyfriend, but he’s my favorite guy on the team.” She squeals then lets out a yelp. “Sorry. My other half heard me say that.”

“Are you dating one of the players?” I ask, smiling at the affection she’s obviously being shown. I remember those early days in a relationship when you can’t keep your hands off each other. How everything is easy and fun. “Which one?”

“Liam Sullivan. The goalie. He’s allergic to having a good time, and I’ll do anything to push his buttons. Anyway. Let’s get back to you. How do you feel about cooking for one person instead of an entire restaurant?”

“I don’t have experience, but it can’t be much harder than pushing out eight hundred plates of food a night for a full dining room. I’m definitely interested in hearing more.”

“Eight hundred plates? My god. Are you Superwoman?”

“Hardly.” I smile and put her on speakerphone so I can pull up the Notes app. “How would this work? Should I set up an interview or a Zoom call? He’ll want to meet me, right? Is knowing anything about hockey part of the criteria for this position, because I can’t tell you shit about the sport. Like, I know there are sticks, but that’s about it.”

“Not having a clue about hockey is going to earn you a lot of brownie points. Can you name anyone on the team?”

“Um. Liam, obviously, but only because you just mentioned him. And Maverick... Molder? Miller? Something like that. Lucy *loves* him. There’s a blond guy too, isn’t there?”

“There is a blond guy,” she says, but she doesn’t add anything else about him. “This is going to sound slightly unhinged, but are you free to come out to DC for a few days? The team starts training camp on Monday, so they’ll be in town for a bit before they hit the road for the preseason. I can introduce you to him in a setting that doesn’t feel so formal. If you two get along, you can set up an interview so he can ask you some questions.”

“There is literally nothing on my schedule for the foreseeable future, so I can fly out whenever is convenient for you all. Except...” I play with my comforter and gnaw on my bottom lip. “I have Lucy. My daughter. She can stay with my parents while I’m out of town, but I’m a single mom and her sole caretaker. I’m not going to uproot her life until I know this is something that could work. If I *do* get this position, she would have to move with me. Knowing that, do you think I should still interview?”

“Yes,” Piper says without a second thought. “She’d be welcome here if you decide to take the job, and that’s something you can talk about with him. I’ve known him for years, and I meant it when I said he’s one of my favorite guys not just on the team, but in my life. I promise Lucy joining you won’t have any impact on if he wants to hire you.”

This conversation with Piper has lit a spark in me. I never thought I’d consider DC as a landing spot, but the more we talk, the more I feel like it’s what I should do. What I *need* to do.

I’ve never been someone who takes a giant leap, and trying this new and exciting thing might be the kickstart I’ve been searching for.

“That’s... that’s really good to hear.” I swallow and glance up at the ceiling. “A move like this is so scary to think about, but that might be a good thing. Change isn’t always bad.”

“I remember feeling stagnant in my career, but a big change that terrified the hell out of me at the time ended up being the best thing to ever happen to me. I want that for you too,” Piper says, and I notice how *easy* she is to talk to. She’s genuine. Authentic in her enthusiasm and gracious in her sympathy. Hell, she answered the phone for a number she doesn’t know. That speaks to her character. “Even if that’s not in DC.”

“Do you think I’m out of my mind for getting on a plane to interview for a position I’m not sure I’m qualified for?” I ask. “Like, this is kind of absurd.”

“No.” There’s a smile behind Piper’s voice. The soft inflection in the single word makes me smile too. “I think you’re brave and strong for doing something so far out of your comfort zone. I can already tell we’re going to be good friends, Madeline.”

“I’m going to get emotional.” I wipe under my eyes with my thumb. “I’m sorry. It’s been a hard week, and it’s difficult to stay positive when I’m considering someone other than myself.”

“I’m happy to help in any way I can.”

“Could you send me some hotels in the area? And any other information you think I might need?” I ask.

“Hotels? No way. You’re not going to spend money when you have a daughter to take care of. You’ll stay with us. We have too much space, and you’re more than welcome here.”

“Really?”

“Really. Liam doesn’t like a lot of people, but he’ll get over it.”

“Thank you, Piper. I can’t tell you how much this means to me. To us. I know it might not work out, but if it does, it could change my life. You’re an incredibly generous person,” I say.

“We all deserve the chance to be happy. I have to run, but let me know if you need anything else. I’ll text you some more details.”

When we hang up, I’m dangerously close to bursting into tears, but this time, it’s from happiness, and that’s a damn nice change of pace.

FOUR HUDSON

PIPER

Hello to my favorite defenseman!

ME

I'm not sure Riley will be happy to hear I'm your favorite, but I'll take the honors.

What's up, Little P?

PIPER

Are you free tonight?

ME

Is this for a media thing?

PIPER

No. It's more of a personal thing...?

ME

Those dots aren't ominous at all.

PIPER

I don't know how else to explain it...

ME

I think you're a nice woman, Piper. I value our friendship, but I really don't need Liam decking me in the face. I'm going to politely decline your advances. I don't reciprocate your feelings, and I'm sorry.

PIPER

Ew. You think I'm hitting on you?

You're like my BROTHER, Hudson. My god.

I have an idea I want to run by you. And it doesn't involve sleeping with you.

ME

You have my attention.

PIPER

How did your chef interviews go the other day?

ME

Horribly. The first guy I met suggested I drink carrot juice for every meal. The next one asked if I'm on Tinder because she SWEARS we matched on there last year. Then she told me she lied about her cooking experience. She can't even make a turkey sandwich.

PIPER

Are you on Tinder?

ME

Nope.

PIPER

So, you need a break from the search. Come by for dinner. I promise there won't be any carrot juice.

ME

Sounds better than the ramen I was going to have. Do you need me to bring anything?

PIPER

You and a smile is great :)

ME

Now I'm even more concerned...

PIPER OPENS the door to her and Liam's apartment before I have a chance to knock. She's always smiling, but this wide grin of hers raises my shackles. I step into the foyer, eying her warily.

"Hi." She stands on her toes and reaches her arms around my neck, hugging me tight. I saw her four hours ago at practice, but she still gives me a squeeze and a pat before letting me go. "Thanks for coming over."

"How could I not? Your cryptic messages gave nothing away, so I had to see what you're being weird about." I slip off my Nike high-tops and shove them against the wall. "You're okay, right? I don't need to grab a lamp and use it as a weapon, do I?"

"I'm fine."

Piper yanks my arm and tries to drag me forward. I grin at her attempt to move me, because I don't budge an inch. At six two and almost a foot taller than her, she's going to have to work harder than that to get me to go anywhere.

"You sure sound fine. The last time I got called to a place where you and Liam both were, it was to sort out the aftermath of your intoxicated nuptials. Did that happen again, Little P? I swear to god if he yelled at you, I'll put him in his place."

"You're sweet. Keep up that nice side of yours." She beams, and I reluctantly follow her down the hall. I don't like not knowing what I'm walking into. I hate surprises, and I hate being the center of attention even more. Unease prickles at the base of my neck, but something tells me to fall in step behind her. "I'm so excited about this."

"What is *this*, exactly? A kitchen remodel? New curtains? I really do think you should change out the lights over your island." I sniff and roll my shoulders back. "Whoa. What's that smell? Did Liam spend the offseason getting better at cooking?"

"Nope." She stops us in the center of the kitchen and holds out her arms. "Ta-da!"

I glance around. There's a stack of plates on the marble island and two pans on the stove. I spot a plaid dish towel folded next to the sink and silverware on the counter. Nothing is different from when I was here for pizza night last week, and I'm even more confused.

"Uh." I frown and scratch my beard. "What am I looking at exactly?"

“Where did she—*Madeline*? Are you okay?” she calls out, and my frown turns even deeper.

“Who the hell is Madeline?” I ask.

“You’ll see.”

“Did you set me up on a blind date? My shirt has a hole in it, Piper. That’s not how I make a good first impression. And I didn’t bring wine. Flowers. *Anything*.”

“It’s not a blind date. Give her a second.”

“Sorry.” A soft voice floats through the room, and it’s one I don’t recognize. “I had to grab extra napkins. I made a mess.”

I blink, and a tall brunette walks into the kitchen with purposeful strides. When she looks up from the stack of napkins she’s holding, she stops in her tracks. Her eyes meet mine, and I swallow.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hello,” she answers, and I take a good look at her.

I swear I haven’t seen her before. I’d remember her if I did. There’s a blue apron tied around her waist. Her dark hair is long and falls halfway down her back. A dusting of freckles sits on the bridge of her nose, and her eyes are brown, big and wide. She’s shorter than me, probably five seven or so, with curves like an hourglass.

Whoever she is, she seems relaxed in her leggings and high socks. The pink sweater she’s wearing slips off her shoulder and shows off creamy skin and the tease of a tattoo just below her collarbone.

“I’m Hudson.”

“Hudson.” She wrinkles her nose and puts a hand on her hip. The sauce stain on her apron matches the smudge on her fingers, and my lips twitch at her confusion. “Are you a friend of Piper’s?”

I’m used to people knowing who I am, and this is a nice change of pace.

I don’t have to be Hudson Hayes, the NHL superstar.

I can be Hudson Hayes, the dog dad who goes to bed at nine every night and prefers to stay out of the limelight.

“A friend,” I repeat, rolling with this version of myself. “Yeah. Something like that.”

“I’m Madeline Galloway.” She wipes her hands on her apron and holds one out. I wrap my fingers around hers, not surprised to find her palm smooth and warm. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Madeline is in town for a few days and staying with us,” Piper says

casually, but I can pick out the hint of a scheme under her words. “And guess what? She’s a *chef*, which is something you’re currently lacking, right?”

I take a step back and lean against the counter. I fold my arms across my chest and nod. “I am.”

Madeline turns her back on our conversation to stir whatever is bubbling in the pan on the stove. “I was the executive chef at an upmarket restaurant in Las Vegas until recently.”

“Executive chef? That sounds important.”

She looks at me over her shoulder with a proud grin. “It is.”

“It was a Michelin-starred restaurant,” Piper interjects, and I catch Madeline’s cheeks reddening. “Now she’s looking for employment. I thought with *you* needing help in the kitchen and *her* needing a job, you two could get to know each other. If you get along, maybe you could set up an interview.” Piper gives me a sheepish look before she continues. “I mean, how wild is it that she’s here when you are?”

“What are the chances?” I draw out, knowing a setup when I see it.

“She made us grilled cheese and tomato soup last night, and it was delicious,” Piper says.

“Delicious is an understatement,” another voice adds, and Liam joins us in the kitchen. He’s changed out of the pads and gear he had on when I saw him earlier at morning skate, and his dark hair is wet from a shower. “And you know it takes a lot for me to say that.”

“I do know that. I thought you were allergic to compliments.” I shift my attention back to Madeline. She’s juggling three different tasks at the same time without batting an eye. I swear I saw her spin a knife in her hand ten seconds ago without cutting herself, and I kind of want her to do it again. “Have you ever cooked for a professional athlete before?”

Her head whips around. Her eyes roam down my shirt then back up, and her mouth parts slightly.

“Oh, *you’re* the professional athlete?” she asks. “This makes more sense.”

“Uh, yeah? I play for the DC Stars,” I say.

“That’s right. You’re the blond one.”

“Thank you?”

“Sorry. I’m not a fan, to be honest.”

“Of blond hair?”

“Of sports. Athletes. Teams. You could line up half the Stars players in here with eight other men you found on the street, and I wouldn’t be able to

tell you all apart.”

“There are a lot of six-two, two-hundred-pound men wandering around,” I say, and her mouth quirks. “Probably even more over six three.”

“I went to my first hockey event last year. I think they showed you a lot on the Jumbotron.”

“Your *first* game?” My brain starts running through how this woman fits in with Piper and Liam and what she’s —

“Wine?” Piper interrupts, holding a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon.

“I’ll take a glass. Last one until next summer, and I might as well go out with some fancy shit you two bought.” I turn and open the cabinet behind me so I can grab a few glasses. “Madeline? Do you want some?”

“Sure.” She clicks off the stove and sets a potholder on the counter. “Perfect timing, because dinner is ready.”

The four of us move around each other, doling out food and handing over silverware. Liam asks if I’ve looked at the preseason lineup Coach is putting together for our first game. Piper and Madeline talk about someone named Lucy, and I wonder if it’s a friend of theirs.

When we settle at the square table to eat, my stomach growls. The rice and beans I threw together at lunch barely held me over during weight training, and I’m bordering on ravenous. I scoop a forkful of curry into my mouth, and it takes everything in me to hold back a moan.

“Holy shit.” I swallow the bite, and I swear there are tears in my eyes. This must be what heaven is like: savory chicken. The touch of heat, and the best damn thing I’ve ever eaten. “You can actually cook. And not just cook. You can cook *well*.”

Madeline dabs her mouth with a napkin. “You sound surprised.”

“Given the people I’ve met recently tried to pass off Chef Boyardee as homemade ravioli, I’m cautious when it comes to food.” I shovel down another bite and sigh. There’s no need to be cautious about *this*. It’s perfection. “You said you live in Vegas? How do you and Piper know each other?”

“We met when you all played in Vegas last year—at the event I mentioned,” she clarifies. “She handed out some gear and gave me her business card.” She lifts her glass and takes a sip of wine. “When I was let go from my previous job, I reached out to Piper to see if she knew of any employment opportunities. She mentioned a player—you, I guess—needing a chef, and here we are.”

“The previous job where you were an executive chef? Did the people who let you go not have any tastebuds?” I ask, and she covers up her laugh with another sip of wine.

“It was a management change. We were bought by a company determined to make every restaurant in Vegas a carbon copy of each other with small plates and high prices.”

“So, you need a new job.”

“I do. I’ve looked everywhere in Vegas, and I’ve come up short.” Madeline tucks a piece of hair behind her ear and fixes her sweater. I’m still trying to figure out what her tattoo might be. “I didn’t think I’d ever consider jobs on the other side of the country, but here we are.”

“I’m sorry for meddling, but this could be a good opportunity for both of you,” Piper interjects, and I forgot she was here. “I figured you all could meet, and if you got along, you could talk about an interview or next steps.”

“Interview. Yes. That.” I nod and dig into the rice on my plate. I’m sure I look like a savage, but I don’t care. “How long are you in town? Are you free next week to get together?”

“Really? You want to interview me? You barely know me,” Madeline says. “I could’ve poisoned the food.”

I snort. I like her sarcasm. “Don’t care. This will be a good way to go.”

“You’re the pro athlete with the busy schedule. What day works best for you?”

“Monday? At noon?”

“Sounds great,” she says with another smile. “I’m looking forward to it.”

We pass the rest of the meal with easy conversation and more wine. I’m used to doing things with my teammates in settings where it’s loud and chaotic, and I like how quiet this is. How I can jump in and out of conversations while we eat.

When we’re finished with our food, I’m the first to stand. I gather the empty plates and stack them on top of each other. I add the silverware and shove my chair out of the way.

“I can do that,” Madeline says, grabbing a knife and a fork.

“Nope,” I say. “You cooked. I’ll clean.”

“I made the mess.”

I take the fork from her grasp and head for the kitchen with footsteps trailing behind me. “My mom always told me the person who cooks is the person who gets a pass on cleaning up. I didn’t lift a finger tonight, so this is

my job. I got it.”

“I don’t mind. Really.”

“Nope.” I hum, setting all the dirty dishes in the sink. “Save your energy for your interview next week.”

“Fine.” Madeline leans against the counter at my side and adjusts the neckline of her sweater. That damn tattoo is teasing me. “I’m glad the poison didn’t take this time. Are you sure you want me to try again on Monday?”

“Yeah.” Our gazes meet, and I grin. “I want you to give it your best shot.”

FIVE HUDSON

PUCK KINGS

EASY E

I have good fucking news, lads.

SULLY

You're being traded?

EASY E

Whoa. Easy there, Goalie Daddy. You'd miss me if I got shipped out west.

SULLY

Debatable.

MAVVY

Don't listen to him, Ethan. What's up?

EASY E

DAVE'S DOGS IS COMING BACK TO THE ARENA, BABY.

I started a petition with the food and bev people, and he's coming BACK!

MITCHY

This is why you're interrupting our rest before the game? To tell us a hot dog vendor is back?

G-MONEY

LET'S FUCKING GO!!!!

ME

I'm happy for you, E, but you couldn't wait until tonight to tell us?

SEYMOUR

I was two seconds away from falling asleep. If I suck tonight, I'm blaming you, Ethan.

EASY E

It's the preseason, boys!!! You'll be fine!!

G-MONEY

I kind of want a hot dog now lol.

EASY E

Want to go to the cart on the corner across from the hotel and get one???

SULLY

I'm going to commit a murder.

ME

Move it to a private chat, y'all. And don't eat anything that will make you shit your pants tonight.

MAVVY

Your alternate captain knows what's up, children. And shut up so I can sleep.

EASY E

Love u dad

G-MONEY

Xoxo Mavvy Daddy

Wait. Does Emmy call you Daddy? Lol

EASY E

No way. He probably calls her Mommy. I would!

MAVVY

I'm going to break your jaw.

G-MONEY

It's so fun when he gets riled up!!!

Sully has left the chat
Easy E has added Sully to the chat

SULLY

I'm changing my number the second we get home. Fuck all of you.

EASY E

Love you too, GK!!!

ME

Hey, Madeline. This is Hudson.

Hudson Hayes. From the other night?

MADELINE

Hello, Hudson Hayes. I remember you.

ME

I'm in New York for a game tomorrow, but we'll be back on Sunday. Are we still good for Monday? I'm not sure how long you're in town, but we can adjust if needed.

MADELINE

Monday is perfect. Where should I meet you?

ME

My place would be nice so you can get a feel of where you'd be working, but we can meet back up at Piper and Liam's if that makes you more comfortable. I know we barely know each other.

MADELINE

You're not a serial killer, are you?

ME

Last I checked I wasn't.

MADELINE

Cool. Monday at your place sounds great!

ME

That was the whole test?

MADELINE

No. That was only part of the test.

ME

Can't wait to see what else you're going to put me through.

MADELINE

Have a good match tomorrow night!

ME

Game. We play games, not matches.

If I played cricket, that would've worked really well.

(But thank you. That's kind of you to say)

MADELINE

It's all the same, isn't it? You're trying to get an object in the goal. Match. Game. It doesn't matter. Go sports!

ME

This is going to be fun.

"HOW ARE YOU FEELING?" Maverick asks, and I look up from lacing my skates. "Ready to get back in the groove?"

"You're the one who took a month off, Miller," I say. "Are *you* ready to get back in the groove?"

"I'm not sure how I'm feeling, to be honest. I think I'm excited."

"How was the doctor's appointment?"

"Fine. Emmy told me she's going to keep playing, and she'll be disappointed if I don't face off against her in our regular season opener. I swear the people who make the schedules did that on purpose." He laughs and grabs his helmet. "I love my girl to pieces, but I'm not going to hand her the victory willingly. It's always more fun when she has to work for it."

"I don't need to know about your sex life." I grimace and adjust my

jersey over my pads. “Keep that shit to yourself, please.”

“I wasn’t talking about it like that, you perv. I genuinely meant kicking her ass on the ice.” Maverick takes off his glove with his teeth so he can flip me off. “How’d your interviews go? Did you find a new chef yet? You haven’t knocked on our door in search of food, so I assumed you figured everything out.”

“I think I did find someone. Piper introduced me to this woman who used to be an executive chef, and it might be a good fit. She’s coming by on Monday to talk some more, and she doesn’t give a shit about who I am. I could show her my Stanley Cup championship ring and she’d probably ask what it’s from.”

“Can she cook?”

“She’s like Gordon fucking Ramsay. The chicken curry she made for dinner the other night was the best thing I’ve ever put in my mouth.”

“Wow, man.” Maverick smirks. “If that’s the case, you need to get out more.”

“Shut up. I meant she’s a damn good cook,” I say.

“Look at you. You’re fucking *blushing*.”

“I am not.”

“Yeah, you are.” He taps my shin with the blade of his stick and grins. “Is she hot?”

“I’m not answering that question.”

“Classic deflection. Means she is.”

“Who’s hot?” Riley Mitchell, my defense pair, asks as he takes the spot next to me. “Does Huddy Boy have a new woman in his life?”

“I haven’t dated anyone since Alyssa broke up with me before New Year’s last year,” I say. “And no one is hot.”

“You’re such a bad liar. We’ll finish this conversation on the bench.” Maverick whistles, and the team looks at him. “Listen up, boys. It’s our first game of the year. Last season’s Cup win doesn’t mean shit anymore; every team is starting at zero. I know it’s the preseason and the first two lines are only going to play a handful of minutes tonight, but it’s still a chance to find our chemistry and figure out our footing. For the guys who are trying to earn a spot on the team, play your asses off. You don’t know who is watching out there. For the veterans who’ve been here a few years, this isn’t a chance to slack off. Training camp is over. We’re not fucking around, okay?” He looks around the group, and everyone nods. “Good.”

“Two minutes,” Coach Saunders yells, and he barely glances up from his whiteboard. “Let’s get moving.”

“Hands in,” I say, and twenty-two gloved hands reach around mine. “Stars on three. One, two, three.”

“STARS,” all the boys yell, and we knock our sticks together. Ethan Richardson, our center, jumps up and down. Grant Everett, our right wing on the second line, hits the wall above the door to the hall. Everyone else hoots and hollers, and I smile at the chaos that’s become such an important part of my life.

Adrenaline races through me like it always does before we take the ice. Decades of playing hockey, and it hasn’t lost its thrill. Every time I get to go out with my brothers and play the sport I love, I consider it a good day.

The guys file out of the locker room, but I hang back. Maverick turns to look at me and gives me a nod. It’s his subtle way of telling me to take my time. When I’m alone, I touch the tattoo on my thigh, the one hidden by layers of gear and clothes, and I smile up at the ceiling.

“For you, Mom,” I say to the empty room. “Always for you.” One of the overhead lights flickers, and I laugh. “Yeah. I know you’re here. You wouldn’t miss this. Sometimes I can still hear you yelling at me to get the rebound.” I pause, my shoulders heavy and my eyes wet with tears. “*Fuck*. I miss you, Mama.”

I kiss my finger and point up. Feelings in check and ready to shove some grown men into tempered glass, I slowly emerge from the locker room. I find Maverick leaning lazily against the wall waiting for me, and he lifts his chin in my direction.

“Good?” he asks.

“Yeah. You know you don’t have to wait for me.”

“You’ve been saying that for years, man. When have I ever listened?”

“Never.” I tap my helmet against his. My chest hurts, but some of the pain dissipates when I hear the roar of the crowd. When I see the full arena and my teammates waiting for me. “And I love you for it.”

“Love you too, Huddy Boy.” Maverick grins and throws an arm around my shoulder. “Let’s go kick some ass.”

MY MUSCLES ARE SCREAMING at me.

No amount of training in the offseason can prepare you for being back on the ice where everything moves fast as hell and the stakes are high. I'm getting outskated by a rookie, and I groan when I jump over the boards and off the ice so the second line can take over.

"Holy shit," Maverick pants. He squirts water on his neck and shakes his head. "I'm getting my ass handed to me."

"You and me both." I chug down two gulps of a sports drink. "What was with the penalty you got earlier? I saw you chirping that dude."

"He liked one of Emmy's photos on Instagram last week, and it pissed me off. The hit was worth the two-minute timeout I got in the sin bin."

"You're joking."

"Nope."

"You might be the most deranged man I've ever met."

"Nah. Just an idiot in love." He stands and watches the next line take the ice. His joking grin disappears, and he slips into captain mode. "A couple of these guys are playing well tonight."

"Hughes is good at left wing. His passes are sloppy, but I'm betting it's a mix of excitement and nerves. We could use the help on the third line after Delato signed with Vancouver over the summer. I'd like to see more of him."

"So would I. Hope he makes the cut. Bailey is doing well in goal. Fifteen stops through two periods isn't shabby for a twenty-two-year-old playing in his first NHL game."

"Liam worked with him during training camp. Nothing says 'welcome to the big leagues' like the best goalie in the sport giving you feedback. Where did he go to school?" I ask.

"West Bridge University up in New Hampshire. Won the Hockey East Player of the Year when he was a sophomore and helped his team win the Frozen Four. He played for the World Juniors too."

"Impressive resume. They've got a solid program up at WBU. I like that kid Donohue who plays for them right now. He reminds me of you. Might be the next big thing."

Maverick hums but doesn't agree with me. He might be cocky, but he's humble when it comes to accepting praise about his athletic ability.

"Let's go, Johnson," he yells at the defenseman trying to earn a spot on the team. He looks at me as he takes a pull from his water bottle. "I've missed this."

“What? Games?”

“Yeah, games. But shooting the shit with you. Talking about players’ strengths and weaknesses. The thrill of it all.” He laughs and stands, hitting the boards with his stick when our left wing on the fourth line barely misses a wrist shot. “Maybe I’m not ready to go yet.”

“You’ll know when it’s time. And until then, I hope you’ll stick around and keep giving me shit,” I say.

“Christ.” Grant groans, rolling over the boards. He clutches his side and drops his head between his legs when he collapses on the end of the bench. “I’m dying.”

“Hot dog not sitting well?” I ask, and he shakes his head.

“There’s a brick in my stomach. I puked during intermission. Think I might fake an injury so I don’t have to go back out there. I can spend time in the athletic trainers’ room with Lexi. That sounds way more fun than regurgitated meat,” he says.

“Don’t compare Lexi to regurgitated meat,” Riley chimes in. “This is your own fault.”

“Shut up, Mitchy.”

“Grant—you can puke again during the next intermission, but you’re getting back on the ice. Riley—focus on the game, not what someone is saying about your girl,” I tell them.

“She’s not my girl,” Riley grits out.

“You look at her like she’s your girl,” Mav teases.

“Coach is going to add on laps at practice on Tuesday if y’all don’t knock it off.” I lean against the boards and watch Connor McKenzie, one of our centers, take an elbow to the throat. I clap when the referee points for the Brooklyn Hawks player to head to the penalty box, giving us a much-needed power play. “Show these guys the respect they show us. Not all of them are on multimillion-dollar contracts. They’re fighting for their lives out there.”

“Damn, Hud.” Grant nudges me. “You’re so full of wisdom and shit.”

“Someone on this team has to be,” I say.

“Everett,” Coach barks out, and Grant sits up straight. “Get your head out of your ass.”

The game ends with us earning a 3-1 victory. I only played fifteen minutes, but I don’t mind. It’s nice to give the rest of the guys a chance to shine.

We head to the locker room and shower, then make our way to the bus

that will take us to the airport. It's late, but I'm glad we'll be home tonight so I can sleep in my own bed with my dogs. Spending over fifty nights in a hotel room throughout the season loses its appeal pretty fast.

Maverick passes out the second we're seated on the charter plane. I snap a quick picture of him for blackmail, and I notice a message from Madeline that came through an hour ago. I swipe it open.

MADELINE

Nice GAME tonight.

I smile and rest my head against the seat. She's probably asleep, but I fire off a response anyway.

ME

Thanks. Safe to say I'm in the clear from your attempted poisoning the other night. Can't wait to see what you try next.

Three dots appear then disappear. I tap the side of the screen and wait, wondering if she's going to answer. Just as I'm about to turn off my phone for takeoff, it buzzes again.

MADELINE

I'm particularly good with knives.

See you soon, Hudson Hayes.

SIX
MADELINE

NERVES ROLL through me as I pace outside Hudson's apartment two minutes before noon.

I know I'm damn good at what I do, and I've always walked into interviews with my head held high. The reviews about my food and the month-long waitlist we had at CARVD speak for themselves.

This is different.

I'm out of my element here. I can cook my ass off, but I'm still not sure how to cook my ass off for the hockey superstar.

Clutching the plate of brownies I stress baked in Piper's kitchen last night to my chest like a shield, I take a deep breath and knock. I don't have to wait long before the door flies open, and Hudson is there.

I've never been drawn to blond men, but he's an anomaly. From the deep blue eyes and the scruff of his well-trimmed beard to his shaggy hair and the way he holds himself like he commands the attention of everyone in the room, Hudson Hayes has me curious.

"Madeline." He smiles, and there's a dimple on his right cheek. "Hey. Come on in."

"Thank you." I slip into the foyer, aware of his presence and the scent of his cologne. He smells like oranges and soap, and I do my best not to inhale the fragrance. "Thanks for seeing me."

"Thanks for coming. Did you have a chance to explore the city?"

"I did. There's a lot more history here than in Vegas, and I didn't find a

single casino.”

His laugh is a deep and rumble thing, and he runs his hand through his hair. “I’ll point you in the direction of some if you feel like gambling.”

“Probably not the smartest move to throw my money away while I’m unemployed.” I shove the plate I’m holding his way. “I made you some brownies so you can get another idea of my tastes and flavors.” I freeze when I realize what I’ve said. “Not... not *my* taste. The taste of the food I like to make. Baked goods, I mean.”

“Brownies?” Hudson lights up. His fingers brush against mine when he takes the plate, and I shiver. “I try to be good about my sugar intake during the season, but I’m a sucker for anything chocolate. Anything sweet, really.”

“Noted.” I run my hands over the front of my jeans and shift on my feet. “Should I take off my shoes? Or —”

A big dog comes charging down the hall, interrupting me. When he gets close, he puts his paws on my shoulder and licks my cheek.

“*Shit*. Sorry. Asparagus.” Hudson tugs on the dog’s collar and pulls him away. “No jumping.”

“Asparagus?” I smile down at the dog wagging its tail. “Do you always randomly call out vegetables?”

He hides his laugh behind a cough and scratches the dog’s head. “It’s Gus’s full name.”

I tilt my head. “Okay, but... your dog is named Asparagus? *Why?*”

“Why not?” He gets the dog—Gus—settled on all fours, then looks over his shoulder. “The other one is Millie. She’s older and less of a jumper. She shouldn’t accost you too much, but if she does, just rub her stomach. She loves belly scratches.”

“There are two of them? Who watches them when you’re on the road?” I ask.

“They go to daycare. If this turns out to be a good fit, I can keep them here so you can hang out with them while I’m away. They’re great company.”

“I’m not sure how that would go with my daughter. She’s six, and they’re twice the size of her.”

“Wait.” Hudson’s smile drops. The air shifts. “You have a daughter?”

I swallow and try not to panic.

I didn’t talk about her the night we met, but I expected Piper to at least mention her to him. Judging by the surprise in his voice, this is the first time

he's learning about her, and I'm afraid I'm about to lose this job before I even have a chance to prove myself.

"Yes," I say. "Her name is Lucy."

I miss her so much. I can't wait to get back to Vegas and hug her. This is the longest we've ever been separated, and as excited as I am about this potential opportunity, I really want to be home with her.

"Lucy," he repeats, and I like how he says her name. I almost like it as much as the way he pronounces mine, *Ma-de-lynne*, and he's gotten it right every time. "Where was she when we were having dinner?"

"She's back in Vegas with my parents. I wanted to check out the situation I might be getting myself into before I had her do cross-country travel. I barely know Piper, and I don't know you at all. Her safety is my top priority."

He bobs his head. "Got it. If this works out between us, will your husband make the move out here too?"

"I'm not married."

"Boyfriend? Girlfriend?"

"Neither. I'm single. And divorced," I add, wincing at the overshare.

"Okay. Uh." Hudson rubs the back of his neck. I've probably made him uncomfortable. "I think we should start over."

"This is my fault. I should've mentioned her before, and I feel like a horrible mother for not talking about her *once* during dinner. I didn't know if telling you I had a daughter played a factor into your decision-making," I blurt. "I love her very much. She's deaf, and she'll need to be with me some nights if I'm here late. I —"

"Hey." He stops me, smiling my way again, and I swear I can feel his grin everywhere. "Please don't apologize. You're right; we don't know each other, and you don't owe me any information about your personal life. When you share your daughter with me is up to you, and being a mother doesn't disqualify you from the position. She's welcome here, and so are you. If Gus and Millie are going to be in the way, you can put them in my bedroom. They'll sleep for hours. We can tackle that down the road."

"Okay." I give him a weak smile that hardly matches his. "Should we get started with the interview and forget everything I said in the last five minutes?"

His laugh is light, some melodic burst of noise that makes the space behind my ribs ache. "I don't know why I used the word *interview*. You're

qualified for the job and the only person I'm talking to. I thought maybe we could spend the afternoon getting to know each other. Nothing formal or anything like that. I just want to make sure we're a good fit outside of your cooking skills."

Hudson leads me to his kitchen, and I tell myself everything he said was genuine. I did a deep internet dive into him last night when I was in bed, after he texted me his address. I pulled up every interview, every video clip, every piece of information I could find, and they all told me the same thing: Hudson is a damn nice guy, and he wasn't putting on an act when I first met him.

He's not putting on an act right now either.

His digital footprint is small, and his social media presence is minimal. There aren't any photos with women on boats in Italy. No blurry snapshots of him cradling a handle of vodka while he dodges paparazzi. The two million Instagram followers he has seem to be devoted fans, and the forty people he follows are his teammates and rescue shelters across the country.

I think I made it back eight years— before he reached today's level of fame and success—and I still couldn't find anything about him that put a bad taste in my mouth.

"Your condo is nice," I say, making small talk. "Have you lived here long?"

"About four years. We didn't have a lot of money when I was growing up, and I've never been into materialistic things. I used the same skates even after my feet outgrew them because I felt guilty asking my parents to buy me a new pair. I'm still not into spending lots of money, but knowing DC is where I'm going to finish out my career, I decided to find a permanent spot. This place opened up, and I took it."

When we get to the kitchen, I freeze. I gape at the top-of-the-line appliances, the marble island that's probably nine feet long, and the massive refrigerator that could hold enough food to last three weeks.

I squeak when I find the stove, an eight-burner range that probably costs more than three of my rent payments back in Las Vegas, and fawn over the double microwaves.

"Oh my god. I've never seen a residential kitchen this nice," I say.

"The previous owners did a good job with renovations. It's a shame I can't cook to save my life. It goes to waste, and I swear my oven side-eyes me when I eat a bowl of cereal for dinner," he says.

I step into the room and run my fingers along the curve of the brass faucet. I touch the knob on the stove and open the oven, peering inside and finding it ridiculously clean. “Is that why you need a private chef? Because you can’t cook?”

“It’s a major part of it, but I also hate having to think about food after a game. My mind is shot. My body hurts. Some nights I don’t get home until eleven o’clock, and I need to refuel after burning so many calories. If it were up to me, I’d be at Taco Bell shoveling down five Crunchwrap Supremes. I do go that route sometimes, but I’m getting older. I’m not as quick as I used to be on the ice, and I could use nutrients, not fast-food stuff.”

“How old are you?” I ask. “Twenty-five? Twenty-six?”

“Wow.” He grins again. “I’m flattered. Guess the sunscreen I wear works. I’m thirty-one. My birthday was back in July. And you’re... hang on. You have a six-year-old. You’ve been cooking for a while. I’m going to say you look twenty-eight, but you’re really thirty-three.”

I glance at him. “How did you know?”

“I read an article about you in Food & Wine,” he admits, and knowing he researched me like I researched him makes me blush. “I wanted to make sure you were legit. You check out, Galloway.”

“What can I say? I know my way around a kitchen.” I open the fridge, and the lack of food inside is appalling. “Do you live alone?”

“I do. Some of the guys on the team have a family they need their chefs to cook for, but I’m all by myself.” Gus comes trotting into the kitchen, and Hudson tosses him a toy. “I hope that will make things easier for you.”

“Cooking is cooking, no matter if it’s for one person or four.” I set my purse on the counter and take a seat on one of the barstools. I pull out the notebook I brought, flipping it open to a new page. “I’m going to be honest with you, Hudson, and reiterate what I mentioned at Piper’s the other night: I don’t have any private chef experience. I’m confident in my ability to create meals, though. I can handle stress and fast-paced environments, and I’m open to feedback and criticism. I’m also a quick learner, and I think I can make the transition from handling a dining room to handling a weekly menu for you very easily.”

“Why would I criticize your food?”

“I’d be working for you, and my job would be to make things you want to eat. If something isn’t up to your standard or you didn’t enjoy a particular meal, I hope you’ll let me know. You’re not going to hurt my feelings.”

“Are restaurant kitchens exactly what they seem like on the television shows? With everyone yelling at each other?” He slides onto the other stool and spins so we’re facing each other. He rests an elbow on the island and drums his other fingers on his thigh. “And are there a lot of fires?”

I smile. “A lot less fires, to be honest. But the same amount of yelling. It’s not *mean* yelling. More to get your point across, you know?”

“I don’t know, but that makes sense. Since we’re being honest with each other, my criteria for this position are low. Unbelievably low. Like, in the depths of hell.”

“What are they?”

“I’m looking for someone who can cook good food and not look in my underwear drawer. Oh, and to not hit on me.”

A laugh bursts from me, but I sober quickly when he winces. “Yep, sure, mhm,” I say. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch. I’ve had to let go of the last couple of people I’ve hired because they’ve overstepped the boundaries I put in place. I know who I am. I know the notoriety that comes with being an athlete, but I want to feel safe in my home. I don’t want to worry if someone set up a hidden camera in my bathroom. I want to come back from practice, eat, and go to sleep.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I can’t tell you what number you wear.”

“Twenty-four.”

“Good to know.” I take a breath, deciding to be blunt. “I’m here because I need a job, Hudson. I respect your boundaries, and I’d never do anything that made you uncomfortable. I’ll cook the food you like, then I’ll be on my way.”

“Thank you,” he mumbles, and I swear I can feel the tension leaving his body. “I appreciate that, Madeline.”

“You’re welcome.” I tap my notebook. “What kind of things do you like to eat? Any culinary preferences? Foods to stay away from?”

“I love food. Any and all kinds. I always have. And I don’t have any allergies.”

“Perfect. I’m thinking we’ll do protein-heavy plates for your meals. Chicken with sides of starches and veggies. Fish too, for the acids and vitamins. Carbohydrates like pasta two days out from your games because that’s your main source of energy during exercise, and easier carbs like whole grain toast on game day mornings.” I make a list of what I mentioned, and when I look up, Hudson is staring at my notebook. His eyebrows wrinkle,

and he frowns before shaking his head. “Is everything okay?”

“No one’s ever been so thorough with my nutrition before,” he says in a defeated tone, and it makes me mad at everyone who’s been in his kitchen before me. “The only person who has mentioned ever carbohydrates to me are the team’s trainers.”

“This is serious stuff, Hudson. Your body is what earns you money. Focusing on the ways to help you take care of it seems like the bare minimum.”

“They, ah, were more focused on my body in other ways.”

“What does that mean?”

“They’d try to flirt with me. And get me to sleep with them?” He says it like a question, adding a lifted shoulder. His cheeks turn pink, and he clears his throat. “And then there was the guy who was a super fan and showed me the tattoo he has of my jersey on his calf. My nutrition wasn’t important to any of them.”

“I was going to get your name tattooed on my ass, but I’ll hold off until next month,” I say, testing the waters with sarcasm, and I’m relieved when he lets out a loud chuckle.

“Bonus points for your humor, Madeline. And thank you for being so kind.”

“I’ll take all the points I can get. In all seriousness, that’s very disappointing about your previous chefs, and I’m so sorry you were taken advantage of. I know this might not mean a whole lot yet, but I promise to keep things professional between us. I don’t date or have personal relationships, so you have nothing to worry about,” I say, and I’m more determined than ever to make sure I get this job right.

SEVEN
HUDSON

I'VE HEARD those lines a hundred times before, but this is the first time I actually believe them.

Madeline means business, and I appreciate how she's not scooting closer to me. I like how she's keeping her legs turned slightly to the side so they don't touch mine. I appreciate that her eyes haven't lingered on my chest and she's kept her attention on my face, not my ass.

I think I appreciate her.

It's obvious she's good at her job and would take this role seriously. The chicken curry the other night sealed the deal for me, but no one's come into my kitchen and thrown out words like *acids* and *protein-heavy* before, and *fuck* does that give me hope.

Cooking isn't rocket science.

I should have a handle on this stuff.

My mom was great in the kitchen.

I grew up watching her cook, make bread and pasta from scratch on top of her full-time job, and put together Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve dinners for our extended family.

But I didn't inherit any of her culinary capabilities.

Maybe after she passed, my brain involuntarily shut down. It threw up a defense mechanism and refused to learn how to do anything other than popping a frozen meal into the microwave because that was *her* thing, and if I take over, it'll mean she's really gone.

That's what my therapist would say, and the asshole is always right.
Grief is a fucking menace.

"Thank you for the reassurance," I say, and she smiles. "What was your schedule like at your previous job?"

"I got to the restaurant around two thirty and left around eleven. The days were long as hell, but I loved it so much," she says. "What is your routine when you have a game in DC?"

"Morning skate is sometimes optional when we play that night, but we do have a team meeting around ten. I typically go to the arena early to tape up my stick and get in the right headspace. Sometimes I'll do some skating and shooting, but it varies. A couple of the guys and I will mess around together and play a quick game of soccer in the tunnel."

"Soccer? I didn't know I was in the presence of a multi-sport athlete," she jokes.

I laugh. I've never felt this relaxed around a stranger before.

"Athlete is a very generous term for my soccer skills. It's a way for us to decompress and take the stress off before the game. I'll grab the lunch the team provides for us or head home to eat, then I nap. I try to eat a light meal before I go back to the arena two and a half hours before puck drop, then I eat again when I get home."

"Wow." Madeline frowns. "I feel like an asshole."

"An asshole? Why?"

"I thought you showed up to the arena ten minutes before you took the ice. I had no idea you put so much time into your job before you actually did your job."

"It's a lot of fourteen-hour days, and that doesn't include the nights we fly to our away games right after the buzzer sounds at our home matchups."

"What I'm hearing is you don't have a lot of free time, so I think meal prepping is going to be a good route for us to take. I can batch cook food that will last you two or three days, and all you have to do is heat it up. I can be here as often as you want, but I also want to be respectful of the hours you get to yourself."

"Speaking of hours, talk to me about money. I know this might be an awkward question, but what were you making back in Vegas?"

"A hundred and ten thousand dollars after tax, and it was a fair salary."

It doesn't sound like a fair salary to me for the amount of hours she was working, and I do some math in my head.

The Stars organization was willing to spend everything they had to keep their core group of athletes together. After our Stanley Cup win this summer, my agent negotiated a monstrous deal on my behalf: six years. Sixty-five million. A contract that will take me to retirement and give me more money than I know what to do with.

It gives me the luxury to spend that money on people who deserve it.

People like her.

“Everything we’ve talked about has been really encouraging, Madeline. I think this would be a great fit, and I want to offer you two hundred to start.”

“Two hundred?”

“Thousand. For your salary. DC is more expensive than Vegas. Rent is at least three thousand dollars a month, and that’s a robbery for some of the places around here.”

“You want to pay me *two hundred thousand dollars*? After tasting only one of my meals?” Madeline shakes her head. “That’s a very generous offer. Too high, actually, and way above the average rate for a private chef according to Google.”

“Ah, you know how Google is always right,” I say, tempted to laugh when she huffs. “You’re going to be cooking here multiple times a day. You’re going to have to come up with weekly menus and do food shopping. That’s going to use up a lot of your energy, and you should be fairly compensated for it.”

She eyes me and rolls her lips together. “Will you let me prove it to you?”

“Prove what?”

“That I’m worth that much.”

I already know she’s worth that much and more, but I give in. “Sure. Are you going to spin a knife again? You did that at Piper’s, and I’m still trying to figure out how you didn’t slice a finger off.”

“Not my first rodeo.” Her smile is sharp. “Can I make lunch for you?”

“If you can find something around here that could be turned into a meal, have at it.” I sit up on the barstool, intrigued. “But good luck.”

Madeline fumbles through her bag and pulls out a dark blue apron. She slips it over her head and jumps to her feet, her hands settling on her hips.

“Can I have free rein of the space?” she asks.

“Of course. The stove might weep if you turn it on because it’s so excited to be used, so be careful. I don’t want the place to go up in flames.”

A laugh spills out of her, and it sure is a pretty sound. “I’ll be careful.”

She does a lap around the kitchen and drums her fingers against her cheek. She opens the fridge then moves to the pantry. Gus and Millie watch her, and she stops to give them a pat on the head. After five minutes of looking in every cabinet and drawer, she washes her hands and glances at me. "I'm ready."

"Should I get a stopwatch out or something? Do you want me to put on a hat and say *yes, chef?*"

"You sound like you want to make this a game."

"It's the competitive nature in me," I offer, and she smirks. "NHL player, remember?"

"Oh, I remember. Okay, Hayes. We'll play by your rules. How much time do I have?"

"Thirty minutes." I pick a random number and grin. "You really think you can make something out of nothing that quick?"

"Doubting me already?"

"Hell no," I tell her, and her confidence doesn't waver. "But I will be impressed. Last I checked, I don't even have peanut butter in the pantry."

"I'm not a show-off, but I've always loved proving people wrong." She flashes me another smile and flips her hair over her shoulder. "Start your clock, hockey guy."

I fumble with my phone and hit the stopwatch, trying my best not to laugh. The seconds start to tick by, and Madeline moves around the kitchen like she's been here a dozen times.

I watch, mesmerized as she pulls a package of ground beef from the fridge, unwrapping it and dropping it in a large pan on the stove. As she adds seasoning from a mixture of spices I had no clue existed, and puts three tortillas on a plate.

"Am I allowed to talk?" I ask. "Or will I break your concentration?"

"I'm used to cooking in a kitchen half this size with six people around me." She reaches for a knife and weighs it in her hand. Keeping her eyes on me, she does that spinning thing again, and I'm on the edge of my seat. I don't know why I think that's hot as hell. "I can handle two things at once."

"What was your first job?"

"I worked at a McDonald's." She grabs a block of cheese from the fridge and sets it on the cutting board she found. "I've always liked to cook, and I worked my way up from kitchen to kitchen until I landed my dream job at CARVD."

“CARVD,” I repeat. “Let me guess. It’s a vegan place.”

“You’re funny.”

“Have you ever considered opening your own restaurant?”

“There’s *a lot* that goes into restaurant management, and I’d want to make sure I was financially secure before embarking on an endeavor like that. I’ve dreamed about it, though.”

“Really? You should go for it.”

“Maybe one day.” Madeline bends over and rifles through a lower cabinet, holding up a cheese grater I didn’t know I had. I have no clue where the hell these gadgets are coming from. “How long have you been playing hockey?”

“Since I was a kid. I was born and raised in Georgia, and the sport isn’t as popular down there as it is everywhere else in the country. My parents found camps to put me in, and I learned to play while everyone else I knew was playing lacrosse and football.”

“No ambitions to be a lax bro?”

“Not a single one. My parents paid for me to play on a travel team. They supported me when I went to Denver and won the Frozen Four—that’s the collegiate hockey national championship.”

Madeline finds another pan and puts it on the stove after adding olive oil to it. “Sounds like you’re very dedicated.”

“I guess so. I grew up being told if I’m going to do something, you might as well give it your full effort. That means putting in hours and hours of work. I’m sure you did the same with your cooking. Can you do the knife thing again?” I ask, and she laughs. Flips the knife in her fingers then stabs it on the cutting board. “Sensational.”

“I’ll teach you.” She hums and doles out a spoonful of the cooked meat into one of the tortillas. After adding cheese and shredded lettuce she dug out from the fridge, Madeline folds the tortilla. She sets it in the pan with the oil, flips it two times, then slides it on a plate. “Here you go. A knock-off Crunchwrap Supreme.”

“You’re joking,” I say, and her smile is proud and assured.

“How much time do I have left?”

“Eight minutes. I can’t believe you made this from the stuff I have in my kitchen. It’s a real life *Chopped* episode.”

“Those were the rules, right? I like to follow instructions.”

“I thought you’d hand me a piece of bread with mayonnaise on it. Not—”

I grab the wrap and take a bite. I don't bother holding back my moan. "Not heaven in the form of ground beef and melted cheese. Hell. This is delicious."

"And you didn't even have to stop at Taco Bell."

"Yeah. I'm upping your pay to two hundred and fifty thousand, and I'm not going to let you argue with me." I use my thumb to wipe away a piece of cheese from the corner of my mouth and grin. "You've got yourself a job, Madeline."

She takes a step back and puts a hand over her chest. "Really?"

"Really."

"Thank you. Thank you so much. This is so kind of you. I need to... to do a lot of things, honestly." She plays with the strings of her apron, a bright laugh falling from her. "I need to find a place to live here in DC. I have to pack up my apartment and move my daughter across the country. I need to find schooling for her and—" Her eyes cut back over to me. "When would you like me to start?"

"When would you like to start? I've been surviving off nachos I make in the microwave." I take another bite of the Crunchwrap and wonder if this is going to be my life now. Delicious food made by someone who makes me laugh and might even be a new friend. "I can last another week or two."

"Could I have two weeks? That will let me get everything figured out with my daughter, and then you'll have my full attention."

"Lucy, right?" I ask, and the way Madeline lights up at the mention of her is nothing short of magnificent.

Her eyes sparkle and her shoulders roll back. Her smile is full of joy and love, and I bet her daughter is the best kid in the world.

"That's right. She's a big fan of the team, so I apologize in advance for the dozens of questions she's going to ask." Her eyes drift to the dogs. "She's also going to love Gus and... what was her name?"

"Millie. And I'll answer any questions she has. Speaking of apartments, y'all are welcome to stay here if you want. Road games take me away from home for long stretches of time, and the place will be empty anyway. I have plenty of space."

"You'd be okay with a six-year-old running around here?"

"Can't be worse than my teammates running around. I had some of the guys over during the summer, and one of them ended up with ten stitches on his forehead because he hit the corner of the coffee table when he was being

an idiot. Which I'm now realizing makes it sound like my apartment is a death trap, and I can get a new piece of furniture."

Madeline grins. "Thanks for the offer. I'll see how the apartment search goes, and I'll let you know. Lucy's never lived with a man before, but I'll keep it in mind."

There's a story there. One about her ex and who I'm assuming is Lucy's dad. I want to know what happened, but it's not my place to ask. If she wants to tell me, she'll tell me on her terms, and that's fine by me.

"You know where I'll be." I point to the uneaten food in the pan. "Make yourself a plate. We can talk about schedules while we have lunch."

"Thanks." Madeline sets a portion for herself on her plate. A happy sigh falls out of her when she leans over the counter and takes a bite. "Fuck, that's good."

"Bury me with these when I die." I finish my lunch and sit back on my stool. "I think this is going to be the start of a beautiful partnership."

She gives me another smile, a sly and coy one that does something to my chest. "I couldn't agree more, hockey guy."

EIGHT MADELINE

ME

Thank you so much for the tickets to DC. First class too? I feel spoiled.

HUDSON

I'm still dreaming about that Crunchwrap. And the plate of brownies I ate in two days. If there was a private plane that would get you back here faster than commercial, I would've put you on it.

ME

I'm getting the sense food is your love language.

HUDSON

What gave it away?

ME

Wait until you try my gnocchi soup. You're going to lose your mind.

HUDSON

Counting down the minutes.

Y'all are staying with Piper for a few days, right?

ME

Yeah. She wants to see Lucy, and then I'm going to dive into apartment hunting. I started planning out a menu for you, and I figured we could meet next week.

HUDSON

Let's do Thursday. I have the morning off.

ME

Sounds good!

HUDSON

Text me when you land and get settled.

ME

Will do. Thanks, hockey guy.

HUDSON

You're welcome, knife girl.

THE FLIGHT back to DC goes much faster when I have Lucy with me. The two weeks I've spent at home were jam-packed, and I barely had a second to breathe.

Between getting everything ready for the move, selling my car, packing our lives into a handful of suitcases, reviewing my divorce and child support paperwork, enrolling Lucy in school, and researching nutrition for athletes, it doesn't surprise me four and a half hours pass in the blink of an eye.

It was Lucy's first time on a plane, and I spent the majority of the flight signing to her about the clouds and the sunset outside our window. She was ecstatic about the snack options, and the flight attendant was sweet enough to load us up with a bag to take off the plane.

The extra pretzels turned out to be a godsend, because it's Friday evening, and we're stuck in rush hour traffic. The streets are packed with cars and commuters trying to get home and out of the city, and Lucy is becoming more and more irritated in her booster seat in the back of our Uber.

I'm hungry.

I rest my hand on her knee. *I know, baby. We're almost there, and I promise we'll get some food soon.*

Do we have a house?

Not yet, but I'm going to figure that out on Monday. Until then, we're staying with Miss Piper. She's the nice lady from the hockey game a couple months ago. She gave you the Stars jersey you love to wear.

Lucy lights up. ***She's the one who signs too?***

That's her.

I liked her, Mommy.

So did I.

Piper's been nothing but helpful in the days that have passed since I accepted Hudson's offer. She's sent me apartment listings and pointed out areas in the city to avoid. She set up the second guest bedroom in their home for Lucy and even put a stuffed animal against the pillows. She's answered every question I've had without any irritation, and I'm beginning to wonder if she's an angel.

After what feels like hours on the road, our driver finally pulls up in front of Liam and Piper's place. He's kind enough to help unload our suitcases on the sidewalk, and I'm going to make sure to tip him more than 20 percent.

He deserves all the money in the world for not batting an eye at my antsy daughter in the backseat of his luxury Volvo. For having a spare booster seat and letting us borrow it after I realized I left ours back in Vegas.

The October wind whips through the air, and I shiver. The temperature is cooler than back home, and I'm regretting my choice of linen pants while I try to wrangle all our bags together.

Go wait inside, I tell Lucy, and she frowns.

I want to help.

There's too much stuff, and it's all bigger than you. I'll be right there. You can see me from the window.

With a huff and an eye roll far too mature for a six-year-old, she stomps past the doorman and sits on a couch in the lobby.

"Sorry," I say, and the man tips his hat. It's a different guy from who I met the last time I was here, and I don't want him to think we're loitering. "We're staying with Liam Sullivan and Piper Mitchell for a few days."

"Need a hand with the bags, ma'am?"

"That would be great. I —"

"You're here!" I glance up from the row of suitcases, and Piper is bounding toward me. Her blonde hair flies everywhere and the wide smile on her face is just as kind and welcoming as it was two weeks ago. "I was

tracking your flight and didn't realize you landed. We could've come and picked you up!"

"Traffic is horrible. I wouldn't have let you sit in that gridlock for us," I say, laughing when she stands on her toes and hugs me.

"I'm so glad you made it back okay. Let me help with your stuff," she says. "Did you move out of your place in Vegas?"

"Kind of? I decided to sublet it, and I put some of my furniture in a storage unit and the garage at my parents' house. They're going to stay in Vegas for the time being. My dad is part of a bridge club, and apparently the ones here in DC aren't nearly as good."

"I can't wait for that to be my life. Bridge. Pickleball. Shuffleboard. Sounds way better than the corporate grind." Piper motions me inside and pulls four of our suitcases behind her. "Come on in. Liam is cooking dinner, and it should be ready soon."

"I don't know the last time someone cooked for me." I follow her and do my best to not trip over my own feet. "Thanks for sending me all those apartments listing, by the way. A couple of them looked promising, so Lucy and I won't need to stay here long. The last thing I want to do is be in your way with the season starting and —"

"I know all about starting over, and sometimes, it takes longer than you think. You're welcome to stay with us for as long as you need. If you can't find anything on Monday, we'll try again. Until then, you'll have a roof over your head."

"All of you are so accommodating. Between your hospitality and Hudson's generosity with purchasing the plane tickets for us, I'm going to start to think everyone in this city is nice."

"Don't be fooled. Some people around here are *dicks*. Not everyone has the heart of gold like Huddy does." Piper grins and turns her attention to Lucy. She squats so they're on the same level, and she waves. *Hi, Lucy. My name is Piper*. She spells out her name then makes a B-thumb handshake, placing it on her chin and brushing it down to show her name sign. *Do you remember me?*

You gave me Maverick Miller's jersey. I wear it all the time. I'm Lucy.

Lucy spells her name, adding in her own name sign of touching the corner of her lip with the tip of her finger and moving her palm outward, like she's smiling.

She really does love that jersey, I add. The numbers on the back are

peeling off because I have to wash it so often.

We'll have to see about getting you a new one, Piper signs. You and your mom are going to stay with us for a few days. If you need anything, just ask, okay?

Lucy nods. ***Is your place nice?***

It is, and we have lots of toys ready for you.

You're so sweet for letting us stay with you, I say. I know I've already said it, but thank you again. Especially for introducing me to Hudson and getting this whole thing started.

"Hey. Women need to stick together. If we don't lift each other up, who the hell will?" The elevator doors open. We file out with two suitcases in each hand, and she stops us at their door at the end of the hall. *Let's get some food.*

Piper shows Lucy the living room and the side of the apartment we'll be staying in. We laugh when Lucy jumps on her bed and cradles the stuffed bear to her chest.

When we make it to the kitchen, I lift Lucy and put her on one of the barstools. I set her coloring book on the counter and take the spot next to her.

"Hey, Liam," I say, smiling when the man at the stove turns to look at me.

I only spent a couple hours with him when I was here before. He was busy with practice and team obligations, and I forgot how *big* he is, with broad shoulders and long limbs. There's a tattoo on his forearm, and a lock of dark hair curls across his forehead.

"Madeline," he says. "Good to see you. How was the flight? Tell me Hayes put you in first class and not two middle seats in the last row of the airplane."

"We did have first class seats, which meant we got chocolate chip cookies halfway through the flight. Pretty sure Lucy is going to be disappointed sitting in economy from here on out. What are you making for dinner? It smells delicious."

"Chicken parmesan. Piper told me there were no allergies. I hope it's okay."

"Sounds perfect. I don't mind helping if you need a hand," I say, not wanting to come across like a freeloader. He and Piper have already done so much for me. "Not that I'm doubting your cooking skills or anything."

"Next time," he tells me, and the stiffness in his jaw loosens.

Liam turns his attention to my daughter, and I brace myself for... something. A disparaging comment. A hostile look. The *what's wrong with her?* question I'll get from time to time.

It's instinct after so many years and so many people being assholes.

He does none of those things, and I feel horrible for ever thinking he might. Instead, he lifts his hand. He glances at Piper, lips twitching when she gives him a subtle nod.

I tap Lucy's shoulder, and she looks up. When her eyes land on Liam, her mouth pops open.

He's the goalie!

"*He is the goalie,*" I say and sign so everyone can be included in the conversation.

I see him on TV!

Hello, Liam signs. He touches his chest with a flat palm. *My*. His first two fingers tap the top of his other two fingers in the shape of a cross. *Name is*. Then he slowly spells out *L-I-A-M* with the ASL alphabet.

Lucy lights up. She doesn't meet many adults who use sign language outside of her classroom and my parents, and I'm not sure he knows what he's gotten himself into.

I'm Lucy. I'm six. How old are you? Do you have any dogs? Or cats? I like cats too.

Cat, he tells her. *P-I-C-O-D-E-G-A-T-O*, he spells, and I laugh.

"*Isn't that a silly name, Lucy?*" I ask, speaking and signing at the same time again. I don't know the extent of his ASL vocabulary, and I don't want anyone to feel overwhelmed. "*Do you know what it means?*"

She shakes her head. ***No***.

"*A type of salsa is p-i-c-o-d-e-g-a-l-l-o. The Spanish word for cat is g-a-t-o. He combined the words, and his cat is named...*" I struggle with how to explain it to her. "*Salsa cat.*"

Salsa cat. She repeats my hand movements, giggling. ***That is silly, Mommy.***

"I'm sorry I don't know more sign language," Liam tells us. "I'm learning."

"It's more than enough. Thank you for conversing with her." I tuck a piece of Lucy's hair behind her ear, and she goes back to coloring. "I can't believe I'm here. I can't believe I'm going to be working with Hudson and cooking for him in that insane kitchen. It kind of feels like I'm dreaming."

Piper holds up a bottle of wine my way, and I nod. “Did he tell you about the other people he’s tried to hire?”

“Yeah, and I feel bad for the guy. Is he attractive? Yes. But he still deserves to have someone in his corner who will help cook food that’s going to fuel him.”

“Have you talked to anyone from your restaurant? How are they doing after losing their jobs?”

“The ones I’ve talked to have found something temporary. I wish I could’ve done more to help everyone, but the market is so competitive. I’m really hoping they all land on their feet. They’re so talented, and it sucks to have to scramble to find something.” I accept the wine from Piper then take the two plates Liam is handing my way. I give Lucy the smaller portion and cut the noodles for her. “*Looks good, doesn’t it, baby?*”

I’m so hungry! I could eat my toe!

“Don’t do that, silly. Eat the spaghetti instead.”

Lucy doesn’t need telling twice. She dives into the meal, and a splatter of sauce lands on the counter when she twirls her noodles around her fork.

“Sorry about the mess.” I wipe the splotch of red up with my sleeve. “We’re still working on our manners.”

“Don’t worry about it. Whatever you miss, Pico will clean up later,” Piper says. “Did you figure out where Lucy is going to go to school?”

“I did. I was able to get her enrolled at Kendall Demonstration Elementary. It’s under Gallaudet University’s umbrella, and I’m so excited for the resources they have for kids who communicate like her.”

“You’re a wonderful mom,” she says, and it’s been so long since I’ve heard that from someone other than my parents. The compliment burrows its way into my heart, into the depths of my soul, and I know without a shadow of a doubt we’re going to be very good friends. “Lucy is so lucky to have you.”

“I’m the lucky one,” I say thickly, fumbling with my wine glass. “Okay, wow. This is not how I saw my night going, but I guess crying in your kitchen is on the agenda.”

“Piper cries in the kitchen all the time,” Liam adds, and that makes me laugh.

“Way to throw me under the bus,” Piper says.

“It’s true,” he says, but he follows it up by kissing her forehead. “It’s cute, though.”

“Nice save, Sullivan.” She tugs on his shirt and sits next to Lucy. “*Guess what? We have ice cream in the freezer for after dinner.*”

I love ice cream! She puts a huge bite of pasta in her mouth, clearly in a hurry to get to dessert. ***It’s my favorite.***

We all laugh, and warmth settles in my chest. I’ve been back in DC for all of two hours, and I can already tell this is going to work.

We’re going to be happy here, and my decision was the right one not just for me, but for the love of my life too.

NINE
MADELINE

ME

Hello, hockey guy.

HUDSON

If it isn't knife girl. How was your first real weekend in DC?

ME

The weather was shitty. Don't tell me it's like this all the time.

HUDSON

It's not. You caught us on a bad day. The rest of the week looks nice, so that's promising.

ME

I should've brought some of the Vegas heat with me. Are we still good to meet on Thursday? I figured I'd create a plan with you for the next week or so, then I'd head to the grocery store and stock up on ingredients I'm going to need.

Friday could be my first day, and then you won't have to eat anything out of a can or box ever again.

HUDSON

What about my ravioli?

ME

You'll survive.

HUDSON

Thursday sounds great.

How is Lucy adjusting with the move? Is she doing okay?

ME

She's taken Liam's cat hostage as her own, so I'd say it's going well. I told her she'll get to meet two dogs soon, and she was beside herself.

HUDSON

Gus and Millie can't wait either.

What are you doing today?

ME

Trudging through the city with Piper to find an apartment. It's bleak, but I'm hopeful we'll get there.

HUDSON

Good luck!

"WELL." I look around the apartment from the small kitchen and put my hands on my hips, glad Lucy isn't here to see this. "This sure is... something."

"The mouse in the living room really makes it feel like a home." Piper wrinkles her nose and steps away from the mold on the windowsill. "How is this place not condemned?"

"The better question is how are they asking for twenty-five hundred dollars a month for a place this shitty. That should be a crime."

"You can't live here. And you can't live in the other six apartments we saw this morning. In fact, I don't think you should live anywhere besides our place."

"You don't think having to get a tetanus shot before living here sounds fun?"

"Madeline. You cannot be serious."

"Using humor is a coping mechanism for me, and these are dire times, Piper." I sigh. "I'm going to have to find my own place eventually. I appreciate your offer to let us stay with you rent-free, but my moral compass won't let me rely on other people long-term. I'll figure something out."

“I’m an optimist too, and even I can recognize how shitty this situation is.”

“From what the guy in the front office told me, all the decent apartments were snatched up by college kids and people who moved in this summer. The pickings are slim.” I stare at the stove that has a burner missing, and I can’t help but laugh. “And slim left a while ago. If he’s smart, he’ll never come back.”

That makes Piper giggle, and soon we’re cackling in the middle of the dilapidated hellhole that might be my future residence.

Me, Lucy, and the family of mice living in the walls.

“There were shit stains on the toilet.” She wheezes, and when she reaches out to hold the counter so she doesn’t fall over, I bat her hand away.

“You need an immunization before you touch anything in here. Did you see the shit stains on the walls? I have a lot of questions.” I groan and hug my purse to my chest. “What the hell am I going to do?”

“We’ll figure it out over lunch. I invited my friends to join. Between the four of us, I’m sure we can come up with a plan.” Her smile is sympathetic, and I’m grateful I don’t have to go through this ordeal alone. “Let’s grab a bite to eat so you can tackle this afternoon with a clear head.”

“And leave this place so soon? What a bummer.” I head for the door, eager to get out of here. “Where are we going?”

“There’s a sushi place close to the arena I’ve been wanting to try. I have to head to the office after to get some work done, so I can’t join you for the next part of your house hunt.”

“Lucky bitch,” I say, and we laugh all the way to Piper’s car.

The drive to the restaurant is short, and when we walk inside, the hostess leads us to a table occupied by two women.

One has long red hair and a splash of freckles on her cheeks. She looks vaguely familiar, someone I’ve definitely seen before, and her shirt shows off sculpted arms.

The other has her brown hair up in a messy ponytail. She’s talking animatedly and using her hands, and I can tell she’s someone with a big personality.

Nerves hit me like a ton of bricks.

I had a few girlfriends back in Vegas. A small group of moms I saw once a week, when we’d chat over charcuterie boards.

My coworker, Alice, who I grabbed dinner with every now and then

when I had a rare night off.

It was all surface level stuff, though.

I've never really had a *friend*.

Someone I could spill my guts to and call crying in the middle of the night if I needed a minute to vent. I always felt like a bother, like I was interrupting something more important, so I kept to myself.

I've always wanted that strong friendship—a woman or two I could have in my corner when the going gets rough—and my heart races with anticipation as we join the pair at the table.

Maybe this can be a friend group. Maybe these women have space for me, and I'm more nervous than I was when I met Hudson at his apartment.

"Hi," Piper says brightly. She reaches over to hug the redhead and sits next to her. I slide in next to the brunette and smile her way. "Sorry we're a few minutes late. We were in the eighth layer of hell, also known as apartment hunting. This is Madeline. She's Hudson's new private chef."

"Hi." The woman beside me grins, and there's a twinkle in her eye. "I'm Lexi Armstrong, the DC Stars' head athletic trainer."

"And I'm Emerson, but you can call me Emmy," the redhead says, and now I recognize her.

"Oh my *god*. My daughter is such a fan of yours. She's obsessed. I think we own about ten of your jerseys, which I'm now realizing is embarrassing as hell to admit when meeting you for the first time. I promise I'm not a crazed fan."

"I'm flattered. Truly," Emmy says. "What's your daughter's name? I'd love to write her a note."

"That's so kind of you," I say. "Her name is Lucy. She's six, and I'm going to be the coolest mom in the world when I pick her up from school and show her this."

"We need more girls who are hockey fans." She scribbles on a napkin with swoopy handwriting, adds a heart at the bottom, then hands it over to me with a smile. "Tell Lucy she's welcome to a game anytime."

"I've never seen you smile this much." Lexi puts her elbow on the table and tips her head to the side. "You need to spend more time in Bali."

Emmy flips her off. "Is that better?"

Lexi laughs. "Much. Thanks babe."

"Thank you for letting me join you all," I say. "Piper was helping me look for an apartment this morning, but we're striking out left and right."

“When I moved here, I stayed on the couch of a friend of a friend of a friend. Some guy named Craig. I woke up to him watching me sleep, and I bolted. I found an apartment that was out of my price range at the time, but at least it didn’t include any creepy dudes,” Lexi says. “I’ll see if my building has any openings. I’m only four blocks away from Hudson.”

“Where did you move here from?” Emmy asks. “How do you know Piper?”

“Las Vegas. We met at the Stars game last season. She gave me her card, and I reached out to her a few weeks ago about needing a job,” I say.

“Now she’s Hudson’s chef, and she’s probably going to set the record for being the longest tenured employee at the Hayes household.” Piper laughs. “Not that it would take much. Poor guy.”

“Hudson is great. He’s so kind and thoughtful.” Emmy smiles. “A ten out of ten.”

“I’m glad he finally found a chef. He’s been stressed about it all summer. When he was in the athletic trainers’ offices during the offseason, he’d always ask if we knew of anyone who would be willing to help him out. During—” Lexi’s phone rings on the table, and she laughs. “Speak of the devil.” She answers and hits speakerphone. “Hi, Huddy Boy. I’m talking about you.”

“Good things I hope,” he says. “What are you doing?”

“Getting lunch with Piper, Emmy, and Madeline. What are *you* doing?”

“About to hop in an ice bath. Are you free for a massage before team dinner? My hamstring is killing me.”

“I’ll be back in my office in an hour or so. Come by whenever, and I’ll take a look. New pain?” Lexi asks.

“Yeah,” Hudson answers. “It’s probably from getting back in the groove of things, but I want to tackle it early.”

“We’ll get you fixed up, Hayes.”

“Thanks, Lex. Appreciate you.”

“Hi, Hudson,” Piper says, and his laugh echoes around us.

“Hey, Little P. I figured I was on speakerphone.”

“It’s a good thing you didn’t say anything inappropriate.”

“Inappropriate?” Emmy snorts. “We all know Hudson is a please and thank you kind of man, even when he’s fu —”

“Let’s save the talk about my personal life for later,” Hudson cuts in, and I bite back a laugh when he adds a reluctant, “please.”

“Told you,” Emmy whispers loud enough for him to hear.

“Madeline and I were out looking at apartments this morning. There’s *nothing* available in this city.” Piper sighs and puts her chin in her hand, defeated. “She should just live with you.”

“I offered,” he says, then he pauses. “Can you let me talk to Madeline, please? And take me off speakerphone.”

“Hello?” I say when Lexi hands over the phone.

“Hey,” he answers. “The search is that bad?”

“It’s not great, but it’s fine. I have faith there will be a breakthrough this afternoon.”

“I’m serious about that offer, Madeline. You can stay at my place if you want.”

“I have Lucy, remember?”

“I didn’t forget about your daughter. I have four bedrooms, and there is plenty of space.”

“Wouldn’t that be a massive invasion of your privacy?”

“Not unless you’re going to record me in the shower.”

My cheeks heat at the thought of him under hot water. What he might look like without a shirt on and if his muscles are as big as I think they are.

“I would never do that,” I blurt.

“I know you wouldn’t. I’m just giving you a hard time. Think about it: you’ll be around almost every day. Sometimes late at night. Might be easier for you if you walked down the hall after dinner instead of trying to get across town. And I don’t like the idea of you alone on the streets when it’s nearing midnight. Especially with Lucy.”

I didn’t consider the transportation aspect of my job. I don’t have a car in DC. Taking the Metro to and from his place multiple times a day—sometimes with my daughter and bags of food in tow—sounds like a logistical nightmare.

“We don’t know each other,” I say.

“What do you want to know?”

“You could have a foot fetish.”

“I don’t have a foot fetish.”

“You could be a murderer.”

“I don’t have enough free time to be a murderer, and I saw how good you are with knives. I wouldn’t stand a chance against you.”

That makes me laugh, and I bite my bottom lip. “Why would you offer

your house to someone you don't know?"

"Because it's the right thing to do," Hudson says, voice calm. "You work hard. You want the best for your daughter and you're a good mom. I have space—tons of it. And it should go to good use."

I've always had a good intuition, and it's only gotten better since becoming a parent. I know with every fiber of my being Hudson is a decent guy. Someone who would never, *ever* hurt me or Lucy. Someone I can trust, someone who would help, and in a city where I don't have any resources on hand, where I'm essentially alone, I need all the support I can get.

"Okay," I whisper, and I swear I can hear his smile through the phone. "That... that sounds good to me."

"Great. I head out of town tomorrow for an away game, but I'll be back late Wednesday night. What do you think about meeting somewhere neutral on Thursday, and then y'all can move in on Friday? I know a great frozen yogurt shop near a park. Might be less overwhelming."

"She loves frozen yogurt. We could do after school on Thursday, as long as you're okay with pushing back our menu planning another day or two."

"The menus aren't going anywhere, and I have the Thai restaurant around the corner on speed dial. You're in charge here, Madeline. Tell me how you want me to introduce myself to her, and I'll go off your directions," Hudson says. "And if it doesn't work out, I'll help you find a place where you and Lucy can be comfortable."

"I really like the frozen yogurt idea. Let's do that."

"I'll text you when I get back from our away game. If you need me before then, you know where I am."

"I do. Have a good day, Hudson."

"Later, knife girl," he says, and I hand the phone back to Lexi.

They finish their conversation, and when Lexi hangs up, all three women look at me.

"What?" I ask, put on the spot by their attention.

"I can understand why you're hesitant. Bringing your daughter around a man she hasn't met is a big deal. I'm not a mom, so I'm not going to pretend to tell you what to do, but Hudson is the best guy," Piper says.

"We can vouch for him," Lexi chimes in.

"I don't feel safe around many men, but I feel safe with him." Emmy twists her hair around her finger, and I can tell there's a secret there. Something deep and meaningful buried behind her reassurance, and it makes

me want to hug her tight. “You’ll be in good hands.”

“Yeah,” I say, giving into their praise. It’s impossible not to. “I got that impression from the moment I met him.”

Lexi lifts her water glass, and we all mimic her. “A toast,” she says.

“What are we toasting?” Piper asks.

“To new beginnings and new friends.”

I blush and dip my chin. A smile pulls at my mouth, and I let it burst into a grin. “To new beginnings and new friends,” I repeat, glad for the twist of fate that brought me here with these three.

TEN
MADELINE

HUDSON

Hey, I'm here. I left the dogs at home. Didn't want to create too much chaos.

I'm sitting on a bench under a tree.

ME

We'll be there in just a second. Sorry to make you wait! We accidentally went the wrong way on the Metro and it took me three stops to realize my mistake.

HUDSON

Happens to the best of us. At least you didn't end up in Shady Grove. I did that once after a night out with my teammates. Never again.

ME

I don't think I'd be able to find that on a map.

HUDSON

I definitely can't, and I've lived here for years.

IS *this the way to the frozen yogurt shop?* Lucy asks as we walk down the sidewalk.

It is. And remember how I said we're meeting someone special today?

You said I'm going to know who he is! Is it Elmo?

I laugh and pull her close to my hip. *It's not Elmo, but I think you'll like him.*

Who could be better than Elmo?

I didn't say he was better, I tease, and she giggles. We're going to meet him at the park then walk to get ice cream.

Okay. It's warm today, and I have on my boots. She lifts her leg and shows off the rain boots she demanded to wear to school this morning even though there's not a raindrop in sight. ***We can walk as far as we need to.***

We make our way into the park through an iron gate, and I spot Hudson right away. He's scrolling on his phone, and when he looks up and our eyes meet, he grins. He gives me a wave and flips his hat backward before walking toward us.

Jesus Christ.

Shit like that should be illegal for men to do in public.

His gray joggers hug his thighs and his plain white T-shirt stretches across his chest. He slips his phone in his pocket, smile never wavering.

Do you know who that is? I ask Lucy, and she covers her mouth with a hand before answering me.

He plays hockey! What is he doing here? Are we going to play hockey?

No hockey today, sweetheart. Remember how I told you I was starting a new job? I'm working for Hudson, and he offered to let us live in his apartment.

Wow. Lucy stares at Hudson, and she giggles. ***He's famous!***

He is famous, I agree. Should we say hi?

Duh. We have to!

"There y'all are. Glad to see the Metro didn't defeat you." Hudson stops a few feet away from us. He squats and smiles at Lucy. "Is it okay if I say hi? Except... I'm realizing I don't know any sign language. *Fuck.* Could you—is it rude to ask you to say hello for me? I'm sorry. I should've thought about this ahead of time."

"It's not rude at all." I stroke Lucy's hair and bend down to her level. She's staring at Hudson like he's the coolest thing she's ever seen, and it's hard to break her attention away from him. "*This is Hudson,*" I tell her, making sure to speak at the same time so he can understand. "*He doesn't know sign language, but he wants to say hi.*"

Hudson waves, and my daughter lights up. She giggles and waves back.

He looks just like he does on TV.

“She says you look like you do on TV,” I explain. “She watches the Stars games while I cook dinner.”

“I’m flattered.” He reaches in his pocket and hands Lucy something. “I brought her a gift. It’s nothing big, but I figured she might like it since she’s a fan.”

What is it, Mommy? Lucy asks.

“It’s a trading card,” I say and sign. “And it looks like... Wow, baby. It’s signed by all the boys who play on the Stars.”

I’m going to be the most popular person at school! Thank you... She frowns and looks at me. ***How do you spell his name again?***

“H-U-D-S-O-N,” I say, going slow so she can learn it.

H-u-d-s-o-n, she signs, and I kiss the top of her head.

“Thank you so much,” I say when she examines the card, not caring about us anymore.

“Happy to do it.” He stands upright and rolls his shoulders back. “The frozen yogurt shop is around the corner. I thought we could get our bowls then hang out here. It’s nice enough to sit outside.”

“Lead the way, hockey guy.”

It takes us forever to make it back to the park. Lucy loaded up her cup of yogurt with eight different toppings, and Hudson and I had a disagreement at the register over who was paying before he tapped his phone against the card reader and told me *better luck next time*.

He stopped to sign an autograph for a young fan who held up a napkin and a pen, and thirty minutes later, we finally get comfortable on a wood bench beneath a large oak tree. Lucy sits in the grass, content and happy with ice cream on her face, and I sigh up at the late afternoon sunshine.

I scoop out a bite of my vanilla ice cream and eat it. “I can’t wait for her to meet your dogs.”

“They’re going to go crazy. I’ll do my best to keep them under control.” Hudson looks at Lucy and smiles. “Was it difficult to learn sign language?”

“It was. I still get tripped up on words from time to time. When she was younger, we did a lot of flashcards and picture books. I relied on resources people in the Deaf community sent my way, but it’s a curve. I can’t do it all. I’m so grateful she gets to go to a school that has students and teachers who communicate like her.”

“I want to ask a question, but I’m not sure if it’s insensitive. She’s the first deaf person I’ve met, and the internet only gave me so many answers.”

“I’ll tell you if something is offensive,” I say, but no part of me believes he’d ever make an inappropriate comment. “You can ask anything you want. We’re going to be living with you, and I want you to feel comfortable.”

“I’d never not feel comfortable with her around.” His eyes flick to me before bouncing back to my daughter. There’s softness there. A hint of tenderness no man has ever shown her. “Was Lucy born deaf? Or did it happen over time?”

“She was born deaf.” I eat another bite of my yogurt and shiver. “She failed her newborn hearing test a few hours after her birth, and she failed it a second time. An audiologist confirmed her hearing loss, so it’s all she’s ever known.”

“When you’re talking with her, you only sign. When I’m around, you sign and speak,” he says, and I like that he’s curious. “Why?”

“It’s called SimCom, which is short for simultaneous communication. It’s to make sure Lucy is a participant in the conversation even though she can’t hear. The last thing I want is for her to feel excluded. When I’m with her or other people who understand sign language, like my parents, Piper, or Lucy’s teachers, I won’t speak. When there are people around who don’t know sign language, I’ll do both so she’s a part of what’s happening around her.”

“Noted.” Hudson nods and tosses his empty cup in the trash can. “Was Lucy’s dad deaf?”

“Nope. No one in either of our families is deaf.”

“Is he still in the picture at all? Your ex?”

“He’s not.”

“Okay.” Hudson nods again, and I prepare myself for the next round of questions. The ones where he asks what happened? Where did things go wrong? How could I ever leave a man who seemed to love me so much? But they never come. “Got it.”

“You’re not going to ask me about my ex?”

He turns to look at me. “Do you want me to ask about your ex?”

“Everyone else does.”

“If you wanted to tell me, you would tell me. People are allowed to keep things inside without sharing them with the world.”

“Do you do that?” I ask. “Keep things inside?”

“Sometimes. There’s a lot I don’t want the world to know.”

“That must be hard with your job. Don’t you have a microphone in your face after every game?”

“I’ve gotten good at deflecting.” He leans back against the bench. When Lucy glances at him curiously, he sticks out his tongue, and she dissolves into a fit of giggles. “I have morning skate tomorrow, then I’m doing a PT session with Lexi in the afternoon. Y’all can come by the apartment whenever you want and move your stuff in. I’m happy to help with bags too.”

“I’m planning on dropping her off at school then swinging by.” I nod at his leg. “How is your hamstring?”

“It’s all right. I’m surviving.” He smiles again. I swear this man is always smiling. A sunshine boy who’s never sad. “Lexi has magic hands.”

“That’s a cool party trick.”

Mommy? Lucy taps my knee. **Can I have my Barbies?** I dig in my bag for her dolls and hand them over. **Thank you!**

I finish my ice cream and lean forward on the bench so I can grab Lucy’s empty bowl. “Do you have any siblings?”

“Nope. I’m an only child. I wanted a sibling when I was growing up, but now I have two dozen teammates who are my brothers. They’re more than enough.”

“Are you all close?”

“Yeah.” His smile shifts to wistful. “They’re my best friends. I’ve called them in the middle of the night and they’ve answered. We celebrate birthdays and holidays with each other. When someone is going through a breakup, we’ll all sit on the couch and eat pints of ice cream together.” I laugh, and he accidentally nudges my knee with his. “I’m serious. I’d walk through a fire for them, and they’d do the same for me.”

“That’s sweet. I never knew if you all were people who happened to be on the same sports team, or if you actually got along.”

“We get along. When Emmy played on the Stars, I got in the first fight of my career when I found out what her ex said about her. I decked the asshole in the face, and I’ve never been more proud.”

“I wouldn’t peg you for a violent guy.”

“I’m not. But if you mess with someone who’s important to me...” Hudson trails off and shrugs. “We’re going to have a problem.”

“You’re protective.” I hum. “That’s a good trait to have.”

“That’s what I’m told.” His gaze cuts over to me. “I can’t believe how much Lucy looks like you.”

“She does, doesn’t she? My brown eyes. My dark hair. Her smile is mine, too.”

“I noticed. What’s it like to have a miniature version of yourself running around?”

“Slightly terrifying, but also my greatest accomplishment. I’m proud of a lot of things in my life, but Lucy takes the top spot.”

“I can see why.”

Mommy. Lucy climbs in my lap and rests her cheek against my chest. ***Can you ask him what his favorite color is?***

“*Lucy would like to know your favorite color,*” I tell him.

He rubs his beard and taps his cheek. He pretends to be deep in thought, then he points at the grass. “Green,” he says, and I pass that along to Lucy.

That’s my favorite too! Will you ask him if we can be friends?

“*Lucy would like to know if you want to be her friend,*” I say to him, and the smile he gives me is his biggest one yet.

“Yes,” he says without hesitation. “I’d be honored.”

“*He says yes.*” I kiss Lucy’s forehead, and she giggles. “*And he’s very excited about it.*”

We spend another twenty minutes sitting together. I pass along Lucy’s questions to Hudson then answer for him. She yawns and rubs her eyes, and I know she’s getting tired. It’s been a long few days, and the last thing I want is for her to get burnt out.

“Do y’all want a ride back to Piper’s?” Hudson asks when Lucy closes her eyes.

“Thanks, but she needs a booster seat in the car. We’re okay with the Metro.” I push off the bench and hold her against my hip. She’s getting so big, but I love holding her. “I’ll be by late tomorrow morning, and we can get this rolling.”

“Big week in the Hayes’ household,” he says. “New roommates. Good food. I’m excited.”

“You are?” I ask.

“Yeah. I could use some fun in my life, and I can tell y’all are going to be great additions to the roster.”

“We’re excited too.” I give him a wave. “I’ll see you soon.”

Hudson stands and looks down at us, that smile still on his face. “Looking forward to it, knife girl.”

ELEVEN HUDSON

PUCK KINGS

G-MONEY

I think we need a new group chat name. This one is getting lame.

SULLY

I think we need to win a game before we worry about chat names.

EASY E

Relax, Grumpy Gills. We're 0-2 to start the regular season. We'll survive.

MITCHY

Cap? Are you worried?

MAVVY

Nah. Most of us barely played in the preseason and are still finding our rhythm. Can't judge how we're going to perform in June today. And I'm glad Emmy got the win against us.

G-MONEY

My guy <3 <3 <3!!

MAVVY

Don't forget book club tonight!

CONNOR

Where are we meeting?

EASY E

I forgot to read lol. Whoops.

ME

We picked the motorcycle club book for YOU, Ethan.

EASY E

Let me borrow your audiobook, Goalie Daddy.

SULLY

Fuck off.

G-MONEY

That wasn't a no!

MITCHY

The calendar says Hudson is in charge for October.

EASY E

Huddy Boyyyyy. I love his apartment. There are so many blankets. It's so cozy.

ME

What is wrong with you?

EASY E

Food coma. Too many croissants from that bakery by the arena.

ME

I love their croissants. I ate six last Wednesday after strength training. Don't tell Coach.

EASY E

You get it.

ME

I'd normally love to host, but y'all are going to have to pick somewhere else.

I also can't make it tomorrow. I'll be there next month!

MAVVY

Uh... the fuck?

G-MONEY

This is a hostage situation, isn't it.

EASY E

He said he ate six croissants last week. That's definitely Hudson.

MITCHY

All good, H?

ME

All good.

G-MONEY

Blink twice if you need help!

SULLY

All of you need help.

EASY E

I love when he talks dirty to us ;)

MADELINE

Hi! I dropped Lucy off at school and I'm headed your way with suitcases.

ME

Make sure you don't go the wrong way on the Metro again.

MADELINE

Not funny.

ME

I laughed. Maybe you need a new sense of humor, Galloway.

MADELINE

Wrong thing to say to the girl who has a pack of knives with her, Hayes.

I didn't take the Metro, by the way. Piper let me borrow her car.

ME

She did? I could've picked you up.

MADELINE

That's okay! I'm going to unload our stuff, drive back to Piper and Liam's, then pick up Lucy from school and take the Metro to your place where we'll be for good.

ME

You'll tell me the next time you need a ride.

MADELINE

Okay, bossy.

I didn't want to inconvenience you.

ME

It's not an inconvenience if it's something I want to do.

THERE'S a knock on my front door, and I jog to open it.

"Hey." I lean against the frame and smile down at Madeline with her half a dozen suitcases. "Welcome home."

"Thanks." She steps into the foyer and lets go of the bags she's lugging. "This is so much better than the apartments I saw that had leaky pipes and cockroaches in the bedroom."

"The worst thing you'll find here is my sweaty gear after games. Avoid the bathroom off the kitchen when you see my jersey in there. The smell is horrific." I grab two of the suitcases and tilt my head. "Come on in. I'll give you a quick tour."

"Where are the dogs?" Madeline closes the door behind her and follows me down the hall. "I expected to get assaulted by Gus, and I hate to admit I'm disappointed I didn't."

I laugh. "They're at daycare so we can have some peace and quiet. The lady who runs the place has a son on the Titans. She wanted athletes in the city to have a spot for their animals that didn't have restrictive drop-off and pickup hours. On game days, I take them in late morning, and I pick them up on the way home."

"The Titans," she repeats. "That's... baseball."

"Close. Football."

"That's not close at all." She huffs, and I look at her over my shoulder.

Her oversized sweater hangs past her waist, and her leggings are half covered by thick socks that come up her calves. She brushes her bangs out of her eyes, and I smile at the white ribbon tied to the end of her braid. “I’ve only ever seen your pantry and kitchen. Remind me how many bedrooms there are?”

“Four. The one on my side of the condo shares a wall with my bedroom and has its own bathroom. The bedrooms on the other side of the condo don’t have a bathroom in the room, but they share one in the hallway.” I walk into the living room and wheel her bags next to the couch. “You can pick whichever ones work best for you and Lucy.”

“Wow.” Madeline puts her hands on her hips and surveys the room. “Look how much natural light you get.”

“Gus and Millie love to hang out here in the afternoon. I swear they sleep for hours in the sun.” I motion for Madeline to follow me, and we head down a different hall. “Let me show you around.”

“This is a nice space,” she says when we get to the room that might work for Lucy. “What were you using it for before?”

“Nothing important. I had a desk and a piece of weight lifting equipment in here, but I haven’t touched either in a year. It’s all in storage now. You can do whatever you want with the room. I was going to buy a mattress, but I have no clue what six-year-olds sleep on. Cribs? Race car beds? A refurbished canoe?”

“Definitely not a crib.” Madeline smiles and walks to the window. “A low loft bed would be perfect, but I’m glad you didn’t get anything. I don’t want you to spend money on us.”

I join her by the window and tap her shoulder. “My southern hospitality won’t let me do otherwise.”

“You’re paying me to work for you. I can afford a bed.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t want to help. Let’s table the furniture talk for a few minutes. Come see what I thought could be your room.”

We exchange small talk as we walk to the other side of the condo. Madeline tells me she likes the paint I picked out for the walls. I mention the two-hour debate I had in The Home Depot between Eggshell and White Dove, and she laughs when I say I finally gave up and picked Chantilly Lace.

When we make it to the room next to mine, she gasps. Her hand flies to her mouth, and she blinks.

“This would be for me?” she whispers. “All of it?”

“Yeah.” I point to the double doors. “That leads to the balcony. Over there is an en-suite bathroom. And you can’t forget the nook where you can put books or a desk so you can plan out meals.”

“This room alone is almost as big as our place back in Vegas.”

“The downside is you’ll have to share a wall with me. I hope that’s not too much of a plight for you.”

“Do you snore?”

“Nope. Do *you* snore?”

“I’m snore free, so you don’t have to worry about me. I don’t mind sharing a wall with you. I’m not used to having so much separation from Lucy, but I think this will be good for us. She’s getting older, and she needs to learn some independence without me hovering over her every five seconds. I don’t want to be a helicopter parent, and being on top of each other won’t give her space to grow on her own.”

“You’re a good mom,” I say, and her bottom lip quivers. I remind myself to tell her that frequently when she’s around. “I’ll let you get settled. Come find me when you need a break.”

Madeline smiles, and it’s shy. On the edge of hesitant. But she squeezes my biceps, and electricity jolts through me. “Thank you, Hudson. I’ll bug you in a bit.”

I RUB my eyes and stretch my arms above my head. It’s almost one, and I’ve spent the last hour and a half watching footage from our first couple of games.

I see what Coach mentioned at practice the other day: I’m slow on offense. It’s like I’m a beat late, a second behind everyone else when we cross center ice, and I hate that I haven’t been as aggressive as my teammates.

“Hey. Do you mind if we talk for a minute?” Madeline asks, and I look up from my laptop.

“Sure. Anything beats watching film of my shitty skating.”

“Didn’t you win the Stanley Cup? Your skating can’t be that shitty.”

“Look at you knowing your hockey lingo.” I smile and point at the seat next to me. “What’s up?”

“It’s an awkward conversation.” She slides into the chair and folds her hands on the table. “But I figured we should get it out of the way.”

“Is this about the foot fetish again?”

“For someone who claims to not have a foot fetish, you sure are mentioning it a lot.”

“I could say the same about you,” I toss back, and she smirks.

“It’s not about the foot fetish. I know this is your place, not mine. You’ve graciously opened your home to me and my daughter, but I was hoping we could lay out some ground rules so we can cohabitate cordially.”

I tip my head to the side, intrigued. “What kind of rules? Where I dump my skates and gear? The blades are sharp, but I keep a guard on them when I’m not wearing them. Lucy won’t cut her fingers.”

“Not exactly. It’s not lost on me you’re an attractive professional athlete.” Madeline rolls her eyes. “Okay. Wipe that grin off your face. You know what you look like.”

“A compliment is still nice to hear. Thank you for the flattery, Madeline.”

“You’re welcome,” she answers, and her cheeks are a little pink. “I’m not totally familiar with the athlete lifestyle. From what I’ve read online, it can be... how do I put this delicately? Um. Raunchy?”

“What?”

“I’m grateful for the hospitality, but I think it would be inappropriate for my six-year-old to see things she shouldn’t be seeing. Like... women sneaking in and out at odd hours of the day, bras on lamps and underwear on the kitchen counter...” Madeline swallows. Her face is bright red now. “Those kinds of things.”

I make a show of glancing around. “I don’t see any of that here. Do you?”

“No. Not... not currently. I don’t want to assume anything, but I figured it would be best to set those expectations now.”

“Fair enough.” I lean back and rest my ankle on my thigh. “I’ve never been the guy who likes random hookups. I’ve never had a one-night stand, and I don’t sleep with a woman unless she means something to me.”

“Never?”

“Never. I like relationships. Meaningful conversations. Getting to know a person before I take off their clothes. I swear that’s not a line I’m using,” I add, and it’s my turn to blush. I didn’t expect to be having this conversation in my kitchen.

“Why?”

“Blame my parents.” I rub my thumb over my bottom lip and laugh. “My dad met my mom when they were seventeen, and he was a goner from the moment he laid eyes on her. She wanted the chase, though, because she knew he was going to be it for her, too. But she was adamant he work for it, so they didn’t date until they were nineteen. They got married that same year and never looked back.”

“So, you’re a romantic.”

“Are you not?”

“No.” Madeline shakes her head. “Not at all. I think it’s all kind of bullshit. Nothing lasts forever.”

“Ah. That’s a bummer. I guess I am a romantic. I believe in soulmates and happily ever afters. One person for you kind of thing. I’ve always cared more about emotional attraction than physical attraction. I’m not going to lie and say I don’t like sex. I do. I just enjoy it more when it’s with someone I care about. Which does not include someone I meet at the bar one night and immediately bring home. That’s how some of my teammates act, but not me. It’s not my style, and never has been. I promise there won’t be any bras or underwear around here. You won’t see random women sneaking in and out.” I give her a salute. “What else do you have for me?”

“That was it, honestly. What you do behind your closed door is up to you; I was only worried about what Lucy might see.”

“I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“You don’t have to do *that*. You can be on your worst behavior if you want to be.”

“Nah. This is more fun.” I laugh, and it’s cute how flustered she is. “You sure there’s nothing else?”

“I guess... communication?” Madeline says it like a question. “If Lucy and I are in the way or you want some space, please let me know.”

“I get plenty of space on the road. Trust me when I say it’s isolating as hell. It’ll be nice to bring the dogs home and have someone here. But, I agree. If there’s something we need to talk about, we talk about it before it becomes a problem. No avoiding the issue in hopes it goes away.”

“I think this roommate thing is going to work out just fine.” She smiles at me, and I savor the damn thing. It feels like a perfect summer day. Sun on your face and wind in your hair. “Now that we’ve gotten the awkward conversations out of the way, want to talk about food?”

“You’re speaking my language, Galloway,” I say, and she laughs as she

opens her planner.

She runs through the list of meals she has planned and I nod enthusiastically. We brainstorm an eating schedule that works around morning skates and game nights and talk about the habits I want to create when it comes to nutrition.

When Madeline stands and says she's going to grab Lucy from school, hours have passed, and I can't help but think about how today is the best day I've had in a long, long time.

TWELVE

MADELINE

I BARELY SEE Hudson my first week and a half in the apartment.

We pass each other in the hall with a hello and a wave before he heads to practice or I rush out the door to drop Lucy off at the bus stop. He leaves for two, three days at a time, getting back late after I've gone to bed.

I make his meals for him and put them in the refrigerator, cooked and ready and only needing a quick reheat before they can be enjoyed. Sometimes I'll write instructions on a sticky note and leave it on the aluminum foil so he's not confused.

Every morning when I get up, his dirty plates are arranged neatly in the dishwasher. The sink is clean, and there's hardly a trace of him to be found.

The only sign he's been there is a different sticky note on the counter. Always in the same place—right by the stove—and always with the same message: a *thank you* scribbled in his messy handwriting.

With a little smiley face in the bottom right corner.

It's a silly thing. Something I wouldn't usually notice, and I don't know why it makes me laugh when I'm groggy and sleep-deprived.

But it does.

Our schedules barely overlap, and besides the meals I leave for him, it's like Lucy and I live in his big condo alone. She loves the space, loves spending time with Gus and Millie. She's taken to sitting in the sun that sneaks through the living room curtains late in the afternoon while she reads her book, the dogs never more than a few feet away. I've caught the three of

them napping on the couch, and wherever Lucy goes, Gus and Millie are hot on her heels.

I yawn and stretch my arms above my head as I walk down the hall. It's just after six and I'm desperate for a cup of coffee. My body is screaming for caffeine after I stayed up too late last night planning out this week's menu for Hudson to review.

My eyes can barely open past a squint. My neck hurts from staring at my computer for hours while laying on my side, and it's becoming scarily obvious I'm not in my twenties anymore.

When I get to the kitchen, I freeze. There's a tall, imposing figure lurking in the shadows by the coffee maker. My hand comes up to cover my mouth, and the edges of my vision turn hazy. *Shit. No no no.* Did I lock the door last night? My heart surges up to my throat, and I fight the urge to turn back and barricade myself in Lucy's room.

I look around and search for a weapon. The knives are too far away, and a ladle won't cause enough damage. Somewhere in my subconscious, I know I'm about to make a stupid decision, but I rush forward and grab a banana from the fruit bowl on the counter. Pulling my arm back behind my head, I launch the fruit at the mass of a man as hard as I can.

"What the fuck?"

The voice that fills the dark kitchen is deep and scratchy and— *Oh.* I've definitely heard it before.

Hudson spins around with a cup in his hand, and I'm not too humiliated to register relief that it's not, in fact, an intruder.

"*Madeline?*"

"Hi," I say weakly. "Wh-what are you doing here?"

"I live here."

"I thought you were getting back from Seattle this afternoon."

"We left late last night because of inclement weather. Got in forty-five minutes ago, and I'm a zombie." He bends and scoops the banana off the floor. "Did you hurl this at me?"

"No. I'd never assault my employer after mistaking him for a burglar. Especially after he invited me and my daughter to live in his nice home."

Hudson's mouth twitches. He sets the offending item on the island between us and takes a slow sip of his coffee. "Must've been the ghosts," he says in a level voice, but a laugh cracks through the last word. "They act up every now and then. Kudos to them for wanting to protect the condo."

“That explains the creaking I heard a couple nights ago.” I see a mark on his neck, a light pink indentation below his ear, and I wince. “Shit. I—*the ghosts*—really landed that throw, huh?”

“It’s my fault. I should’ve given you—sorry, *them*—a heads-up I was getting home this morning so there weren’t any surprises.”

“The ghosts are delirious, and you startled them. It won’t happen again.”

“At least it wasn’t an apple. That might’ve earned me a concussion, and I’m not sure how I’d explain to Coach I was injured by paranormal spirits.”

“I forgot to tell you I’m actually the Grim Reaper masquerading as a chef.”

“Is the Grim Reaper a woman?”

“She is now.”

“Secret’s out.” Hudson flashes me a full smile, and the beam wakes me up. So does the thin white shirt that shows off a sliver of skin on his stomach—the thing is like a damn crop top—and the sweatpants sitting low on his hips. “Want some coffee?”

“Yes, please,” I say, and his eyes flick to my thighs for the quickest of seconds.

The heat of his gaze causes me to look down and realize, horrifyingly, I’m in an oversized shirt that hit inches above my knees, socks that come halfway up my calves, and no fucking pants.

Jesus Almighty.

I pull on the hem of my shirt, trying to make it longer, but my efforts are futile. I’m half naked in front of him, and my knotted hair and the sheet marks on my face are not helping my cause.

Determined to maintain my professionalism despite having pigs on my feet, I march over to the coffee maker and stand by his side.

“How do you take it?” he asks.

“Pardon?” I answer, my mind stuck somewhere in a gutter because I got a glimpse of his belly button.

Hudson turns toward the cabinet and reaches for the top shelf, pulling down a mug. The bastard doesn’t have to stand on his toes like I do, and I curse my five-foot-seven stature compared to his impressive six-foot-something height. “Your coffee. Milk? Sugar? Black?”

“Oh. Right. Yeah. A splash of milk and half a spoonful of sugar. How do you take yours?”

“Extra sweet. A little bit of milk but a hell of a lot of sugar.” Hudson

slides the sugar my way, and I add a scoop of it to my mug. “I’m not a huge coffee drinker, but I’m dragging this morning. I need something to wake me up.”

“You and me both.” I get my coffee to the right shade and lean against the counter. I cross my ankles and take a sip from my mug, grateful to be revived. “I sent you a menu last night for the week. I know you haven’t had a chance to look at it, but when you do, let me know if there’s anything you want to change.”

“I’ll check it out right now.” He runs a hand through his messy hair then taps his phone. He hums while he scrolls through his email and opens my color coded attachment. “I’m glad you include salmon every week. It’s one of my favorite foods.”

“Is it? I’ll keep it in the rotation, but I’ll find different variations so you don’t get bored: teriyaki. Coated with breadcrumbs. Seasoning and spices. The world is our oyster, Hayes.”

He laughs. “I can’t wait to see what you come up with. Your chicken noodle soup last week was delicious, then you went and topped it with the best steak tips I’ve ever had. Why didn’t I find you sooner?”

“If you tried to poach me from my job in Vegas, I would’ve laughed in your face. But I’m glad I’m here now.” I swallow down another sip of coffee and set my mug on the counter. “Should I get started on some food while you look over the menu? I can make an omelet and potatoes. Maybe some avocado toast so you’re carb loaded for practice?”

“We don’t have practice today because it was supposed to be a travel day, so that changes things. How do you feel about pancakes?”

“Strongly. They’re my favorite breakfast food. Might even be in my top five foods of all time.”

“That’s a bold statement. It’s a shame we can’t use the banana you launched at me.” His grin is wry and teasing as he dips his chin and scans the menu. “It’s too bruised. Like my neck.”

“Don’t you get pushed into walls for a living?”

“We call them boards, and technically I get shoved into tempered glass, but, yeah. I do, and I never thought a banana would be my demise.”

“You know what? Smart-asses don’t get pancakes. You can have toast for breakfast, and I’m going to make sure it’s dry as hell.”

“Come on.” Hudson pouts. “I need my energy for the day.”

“Fine.” I roll my eyes, pretending like he’s asking me to move mountains.

“But only if you promise not to sneak around the condo anymore. Announce your presence so there are no more fruit catastrophe.”

“Would it help if I shared my location with you? Then you wouldn’t have to wonder if I’m an intruder armed with piping hot coffee as my weapon of choice or a lawful resident of the space.”

“You don’t have to —”

“There.” He taps his screen then tosses his phone on a stack of magazines. I can’t believe he’s giving me access to his whereabouts, just like that. “Menu looks great, by the way. You don’t need to change a thing.”

“If you think of something you want to add or swap out, let me know. I’ll make adjustments as needed.”

“Sounds good to me.” He finishes off his coffee and drops his mug in the sink. “We should start on the pancakes before I wither away.”

“We wouldn’t want that, hockey guy.” I move around the island and stand on my toes to try to reach the mixing bowl. When I come up short, Hudson takes pity on me and grabs the cookware. His arm brushes against mine as he hands it my way, and a shiver races through me. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Are we doing chocolate chips? Straight-up buttermilk?”

“Lucy will be up for school soon, and she loves chocolate chips. I can make a couple batches and —”

“Chocolate chip it is. How can I help?”

“Will you hand me an egg? The milk and butter too?”

“You’re making these from scratch?”

I lift an eyebrow. “You thought I was going to use a boxed mix?”

“I did, and I’m learning it was a wildly offensive assumption. Forgive me, chef.”

“You’re forgiven.”

I grab a whisk and we work around each other. We make casual conversation about his game, about Lucy’s art project that involves dried macaroni and a whole thing of glue, about the dogs getting in trouble at daycare because they stole treats from a puppy.

Hudson is easy to talk to, and the company in the kitchen is nice. It’s even nicer to be around someone who makes me laugh, and when he starts the mixer and batter flies onto his face, I wheeze until my sides hurt.

“Fuck.” He wipes a chocolate chip away from his cheek and pops it in his mouth. “I should leave this to the professionals.”

“What did you do for breakfast before I got here?” I pour the salvaged batter onto the griddle and pull out a spatula from his utensil drawer. “You did eat, right?”

“Hardly. It was mostly cereal. Toast. Bananas that weren’t chunked at my head.” He chuckles and wets a paper towel so he can clean his face. “I’d swing by my friends’ places and steal some of their food. I tried to make scrambled eggs once, and the final product ended up burnt. It was a tragedy. I can still hear the trill of the smoke alarm.”

“You poor thing. You’re lucky I’m here.”

“Yeah.” Hudson beams at me. There’s still batter in his beard, on his Adam’s apple and his nose, but he doesn’t seem to care. “Lucky indeed.”

THIRTEEN HUDSON

PUCK KINGS

G-MONEY

I fucking hate wearing suits to games. Every other league lets their players wear whatever they want, and then there's the NHL.

Making us dress like we're extras on the set of fucking Bridgerton.

And I still hate our chat name.

MITCHY

Good show.

ME

GREAT show.

G-MONEY

My Uber driver asked if I'm in finance. Gag me.

EASY E

I have a meeting with the commish next week because of my "excessive roughness" last season. Want me to pass along your opinion, G? I'll ask if we can roll up in sweats from now on.

MAVVY

Whoa. Wait. You do?

ME

Why didn't you tell us, Ethan?

EASY E

No big deal. I had too many penalty minutes, and they want to make sure it doesn't become a habit.

SULLY

It's fucking hockey. If they wanted us to not be rough, we'd be in the NBA.

G-MONEY

Shots fucking fired.

SULLY

It's true. Look how physical their league used to be. Now a tap on the arm is reviewed for a flagrant foul? Sure as shit hope we don't go that way too. Is a minor for high-sticking going to become a major?

ME

He has a point.

SULLY

Of course I do.

EASY E

It's fine. I'm going to tell him I'll play nice, and all will be well.

No worries, brochachos!!!!

G-MONEY

I can't wait to take off these clothes. I feel like I'm suffocating. I normally don't mind being choked, but from a tie? No thanks.

MITCHY

No one wants to hear that.

G-MONEY

That's what you think.

MADELINE

Hi, hockey guy.

ME

What's up, KG?

MADELINE

This is not time sensitive, so please feel free to ignore me. Do you have a panini maker?

ME

Uhhhhh... I'm pretty sure I don't. But I've also never looked at what I have in the pantry. So maybe? Don't get your hopes up.

MADELINE

No worries!

ME

Why in the world do you need a panini maker?

MADELINE

To make soup.

ME

I like your sarcasm, Galloway.

MADELINE

Lucy wants a panini. I can use a burger press instead.

ME

I have a burger press?

MADELINE

You have two.

ME

Huh. You learn something new every day. I just ordered a panini maker, and it'll be there tomorrow.

MADELINE

Thank you!

Hope you score lots of points in your match!

ME

Don't throw bananas at anyone while I'm gone.

“CANADA CAN KICK FUCKING ROCKS.” Maverick takes the seat next to me on the charter plane and crosses his arms. “I’m still mad Toronto took Emmy away from us. Away from *me*. And for what? Justin Harper who immediately left DC that summer and went to California? Finn came back after he got traded. Emmy could’ve come back so I could play with her every day. None of it should’ve happened.”

“It was seasons ago. You married her, she plays for Baltimore now, and you see her every night.” I pop in an AirPods and close my eyes. “Remind me never to piss you off. You know how to hold a grudge.”

“Dude.” He tugs on my jacket. “*Dude.*”

I take out my earphone and glance at him with one eye open. “You’re incredibly needy.”

“Probably because I was abandoned as a child and I’m making up for it as an adult. That’s what my therapist says.”

“Fuck you for making me feel like an asshole.”

“I’m just messing with you.” He flashes me his signature grin and stretches his legs out in front of him. “Eighty seats on this plane, and you keep sitting next to me. I must not bother you *that* much.”

“You bother me plenty. But I love you, so I overlook all of it. What’s up?”

“I have a bone to pick with you.”

“A bone?” I frown and turn to face him. I rack my brain, trying to remember if I missed a workout or team meeting this week, and I come up short. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Pretty sure your private chef moving in with you is *something*, man.”

“How the hell did you hear about that?”

“I know everything about everyone on this team. People think they can keep a secret, but nothing gets past me.”

“You had no clue Liam and Piper got married in Vegas,” I draw out, and he flips me off.

“Fuck you. So? Is it true?”

“Is what true?” Riley drops his stuff in the row behind us and leans over the back of our seats. “Who’s in trouble now?”

After Maverick, I’m closest with him and Liam. When you spend almost every waking second with a guy on and off the ice for months on end, he

becomes a part of you. Your right-hand man who knows your game—and you—better than you do, and I won the lottery with my teammates.

“Hudson is living with a woman,” Maverick says, and Riley gasps. “I know, right? And the fucker didn’t think to tell us.”

“*What?* You have a new girlfriend?”

“Is *that* why you skipped book club this week?”

“Y’all are annoying with your interrogation.” I shuck off my jacket and toss it on the middle seat. I unbutton my sleeves and roll them halfway up my arms. It’s warm in here all of a sudden, and I adjust the air vent above me. “Yeah, Madeline is living with me. No, we’re not dating. I invited her and her daughter to stay in the condo because it made sense logistically.”

“Her *daughter*?” It’s Maverick’s turn to gasp. “Holy shit. Huddy Boy is in *loveeee*.”

I reach over and knock the back of his head. When Riley laughs, I lean back and flick his forehead. “I know I have a history of serious relationships, but I’m not in love with her. I barely know her.”

“She’s a single mom?” Riley asks, and there’s less teasing in his voice now. “Dude. That must be hard.”

“I’m sure it is, but Madeline makes it look easy. Between making my meals, getting her daughter out the door for school and helping with homework, I don’t know when she has time for herself,” I say.

When I got home from weight training yesterday, I found Madeline and Lucy in the kitchen. I did my best to not disturb them because they looked busy: there were three worksheets spread out on the kitchen table. I saw erasers and mechanical pencils next to their cups of water. A stack of pink folders by a half-eaten apple.

Lucy noticed me, though. She perked up and waved. Asked if Gus and Millie could sit with her, and productivity went out the window.

I apologized to Madeline for interrupting, but she only smiled. Shrugged and said *kids*, like I know what it’s like to be a parent. She got up to start dinner shortly after, and I’m really trying to figure out when the hell she slows down. When she takes a second to breathe and doesn’t put other people first.

I’m starting to think she never does.

“Do you know what happened to the ex?” Maverick asks.

“Not in the picture from what she’s told me. I don’t get it. Madeline and Lucy are great. Fucking fantastic, really, and I don’t know why someone

wouldn't want that. Wouldn't want them."

"Some people aren't meant to be parents." Riley hooks his thumb over his shoulder, and I glance down the aisle. Connor, Ethan, and Grant are filming a video for some social media site, and I snort. "Look at Ethan. Dude would be the world's worst father."

"The day he has a kid is the day hell freezes over." Maverick rifles through his bag. He pulls out an eye mask and sets it on his lap. "Time to get some sleep before we land and Coach makes us head immediately to the rink for practice. Fucking sadistic bastard."

"I'm happy for you, Hud." Riley puts a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. "You seem like you're in a much better mood these days. Glad you don't have to stress about the chef position anymore."

"Can't believe I was worried about something so small. People in this country can't afford to eat, and I was complaining about not having someone to make a meal for me." I pop my headphones back in and sigh. The plane taxis out to the runway, and I close my eyes. "Talk about perspective."

THE TORONTO STINGRAYS are a hell of a team. Even more than that, the energy in their arena is electric. They won the Stanley Cup a couple of years back, and the hometown crowd is hoping they'll do it again this year. They'll have to go through us first, though, and we're on a mission to be back-to-back champs.

"Fucking love away games," Maverick calls out as we jump onto the bench for a line change. "Especially when we're playing well."

And tonight, we are. We have a 2-1 lead with eight minutes left in the third, and it feels like we've finally found our groove as a team.

Liam gave up a goal early in the first, but he's been unstoppable since. Maverick drained a pretty one-timer in the second, and Ethan scored off a rebound at the start of this period.

The pressure we're applying is making the Rays scramble, and they're turning sloppy. Frantic, almost, and I know the rest of our first line is ready to get back out there so we can put this game away.

"That goal of yours is going to be a Top Ten play for sure." I squirt water in my mouth and wipe my neck with a towel. "You feeling good?"

“Every time I’m out there, I remember why I love this game so fucking much.” Mav grins and looks at me. “I have to show off tonight. Emmy is watching from home, and she said if I scored at least one point, she’d let me —”

“Don’t finish that sentence.” I lean over the boards and watch Grant skate backward. He does a good job on defense, stopping a high hit with his glove before dropping the puck and taking off toward the other end of the ice. “You’re going to make my ears bleed.”

“We need to get you a point.” Maverick hits his stick against the boards when Connor misses a shot that goes wide right. “You haven’t scored yet this year.”

“We’ve played ten games. And you know I don’t care about scoring.” I fix my helmet and track the puck, waiting for Coach’s signal to switch lines. “Just want the win.”

“Selfless as always.”

Riley slings an arm over my shoulder and shakes me. “Do you think your chef is watching?”

“I don’t think she gives a crap about any of this.” I wave my glove around the packed arena. “She didn’t know who I was the first time we met—I highly doubt she’s spending her night watching us.” I clap when Liam dives on the puck and stops the Stingrays’ aggressive offensive push. “It’s not her thing.”

“Bummer, dude,” Maverick says, but I shrug.

I don’t care that she doesn’t watch hockey.

It’s refreshing to come home and *not* talk about practice or games. It’s nice to have a part of my life that doesn’t involve around skating or how many assists I had the night before. I like knowing she hangs around the kitchen and pretends to clean up while I eat dinner because she likes me as a person, not me as an athlete.

The clock ticks down to five minutes, and Maverick, Riley and I tumble back onto the ice. The puck gets passed to Ethan who drops it back to me. I skate across center ice and toy with the Stingrays’ player who keeps trying to go for a steal. He moves to the right so I move to the left, passing to Riley who passes it over to Maverick.

His backhand shot hits the goal and ricochets off the post. I’m there to scoop up the rebound, skating backward while my teammates get in position.

“Take it, Hud,” Maverick yells as he powers himself forward, and I eye

my other options.

The obvious play would be to pass it to him or Riley—they're the best shooters on the ice right now—but neither are lined up in a good position. With three minutes left, we're going to get one more break before we head back in for the rest of the period.

Our second line doesn't have the defensive intensity our first line does. If we don't score now, there's a good chance the Rays will try to tie it up when we head to the bench.

One more scan of the ice tells me it's now or never, because an opponent is charging toward me. He slices his stick at my skates and I jump, taking the puck with me as I move to the right.

I pivot and pretend like I'm going to pass the puck inside the crease to Maverick. The opposing goalie tracks my movements and turns, positioning himself to brace for an up-close shot. I take advantage of his misread and pull back, knocking the puck with a slap shot to the upper right corner of the goal.

It sails straight into the net and the horn sounds. The crowd groans in disappointment. My teammates surround me and I knock their helmets with mine in celebration.

I go down the bench to give all the guys a high five then I skate to Liam and tap his helmet.

"About time you got one," he grunts, and I laugh, heading back to the bench.

"Incredible shot, man," Riley says, and Maverick hugs me.

"Y'all need to stop acting like I just won us the Cup," I say.

"Not yet. But maybe in June." Grant touches my knuckles with his glove and jumps over the boards. "Love you, Huddy!"

"Nice shot, Hayes. That's the kind of aggression I want to see this season," Coach says, and I beam at his praise.

"Thanks, Coach. I'll keep working on it."

We close out the game with a well-earned 3-1 victory. After a short interview with Piper, I drop into my chair in the visitors' locker room and start to peel off my gear. My phone buzzes in my cubby, and I reach up to grab it.

It's probably a message from my dad. He sends a thumbs up after every game, and he hasn't missed a single one since he got a cell phone. I slide my finger across the screen, surprised to see a message from someone else.

MADELINE

Nice game.

ME

You watched?

MADELINE

Lucy turned it on, but she fell asleep after the first quarter. There was nothing else on TV, so I figured I'd keep it on and to learn.

ME

Did you learn?

MADELINE

So much.

I fight back a laugh and rub my thumb over my bottom lip.

"What are you laughing at?" Maverick asks, pulling his jersey over his head. "Something Duke said?"

"Hm? Yeah," I answer, not correcting him from thinking it's my dad I'm talking to. "You know Duke."

"Funny as always." He strips off the rest of his gear and stands there in just his briefs. "Tell him I say hey."

I nod and my fingers fly across the screen.

ME

What would you do if I told you hockey has periods, not quarters? And there are only three of them?

MADELINE

That makes so much more sense.

Yay sports!

ME

I didn't know everything when I started playing. I used to think figure skaters and hockey players used the same skates.

I found that out after I showed up to my very first practice in figure skates.

MADELINE

I'm trying hard not to laugh, but I'm picturing you in a figure skating outfit.

ME

Laugh all you want. Wait till I tell you I go to figure skating classes in the off season with some of the guys. And the Pilates classes Lexi teaches downtown. It keeps us in shape. Liam also goes to ballet classes to help with his flexibility.

MADELINE

Wow. There's no such thing as toxic masculinity with you all, is there?

ME

Not at all. Just don't look at our teeth.

MADELINE

Funny.

I should head to bed. It's late. You'll be back tonight?

Asking so I don't assault you again.

ME

Yeah. I'll be at the apartment around two a.m. You still have my location, right?

MADELINE

I do.

Cheez-It Arena has a nice ring to it.

That was a really nice goal you scored, by the way. I think I could get into hockey.

I'm grinning like an idiot, but I don't care.

Madeline watched our game, and that makes me even prouder than the goal did.

FOURTEEN HUDSON

THE FIRST MONTH of the season flies by.

Madeline, Lucy and I settle into a routine, and whenever I'm home, they include me in the things they're doing.

We went to the National Air and Space Museum last Sunday, and today we're working on Lucy's Halloween costume while she's at school. It's a character from a show called *Bluey* that's been on the living room television every afternoon, and Madeline spent the last fifteen minutes explaining how it's a kids show for adults.

I still don't understand.

"I appreciate your help." Madeline holds up the fabric she's been stitching all morning. "It's much faster with two people, and I'm working on borrowed time after Lucy let me know *yesterday* she needs something to wear for class tomorrow."

"I'm not sure I'm actually doing anything." I nudge over the piece of felt she needs to finish the costume. "But I'm happy to assist."

"What are you up to the rest of the day? The calendar shows no game tonight."

"No game, but I have a meeting with Coach at five. I'll be back in time for dinner at six thirty."

"Meeting?" She puts the needle between her teeth and sets the costume on the table. "Are you in trouble?"

"Hope not. Coach likes to talk to us individually every other week. He

checks in and makes sure we're doing all right mentally and physically."

"I've never played a sport before."

"Really? I didn't get that impression with all your sports expertise."

Madeline tosses a spool of thread at my head, and I laugh. "Does every coach have meetings with their athletes?" she asks.

"God, no. Some don't even bother to learn every player's name. When I was a rookie, our coach thought my name was Harold. Coach Saunders is a hard-ass, but he's the best of the best. He's young, so he's easy to relate to. Sometimes he'll join us in our workouts so we're not out there busting our asses alone. We've only gotten better since he's been with the team, and a Stanley Cup Championship wouldn't have been possible without him."

"He sounds like a good guy." Madeline sticks the fabric with the needle and pulls the thread through. "You were young when you started playing hockey, right?"

"Yeah. I was seven or eight. I watched *Miracle on Ice*, and I became obsessed. Wouldn't shut up about it." I smile at the memory of following my parents around the house. Begging for a pair of skates and promising to pay for them with lemonade stand money. It's humbling to know how far I've come. To know I was able to pay off their mortgage and completely wipe out the cost of Mom's medical bills because of the sport. "I took some lessons, joined a club team, realized I was good, and here we are."

"Making Halloween costumes for a stranger's kid," she muses. "A yacht in Turks and Caicos would be way more fun."

"Are you a stranger? I know a few things about you."

"Like what?"

"You're always wearing socks. And you hate cabbage."

"How do you know I hate cabbage?"

"Because you made a face when you were cutting it up for coleslaw the other night."

Madeline lifts her chin. "You noticed that?"

"I notice a lot of things."

"Oh." She's quiet for a minute, working the needle through the fabric again. "No one's done that in a long time."

"Done what?"

"Noticed the little things." She shrugs, still hyperfocused on that damn needle and thread. "There's nothing special about me."

I frown.

She's not wrong about many things, but she's wrong about that.

Madeline Galloway *is* special, and I'm sad she's been led to think otherwise.

"Agree to disagree," I say, and her cheeks turn a faint shade of pink. "Talk to me about cooking. You said you worked at McDonald's, but did you always want to be a chef?"

"For as long as I can remember. My mom used to let me help her in the kitchen. She was a stay-at-home parent while my dad worked as a plumber, and cooking was something we did together. She'd pull a chair up to the counter so I could reach, and by the time I was a teenager, I was making four-course meals like it was nothing. We still cook like that together sometimes. She's the best."

The usual pang of sadness hits me like it always does when someone talks about their mom. It's a jealous ache of knowing they get to spend time with a person important to them, and I don't.

"How old were you when you learned that knife trick?" I ask, swallowing down my emotions, and her laugh is soft. A gentle sound that makes me smile and feel instantly better. "Two? Three?"

"Sixteen, actually. And I nearly lost a finger the first time I did it."

"Now *that* is a cool party trick." I tap my phone to check the time. "Lucy's bus comes soon, right?"

"It's already two? Where the hell has the day gone?" Madeline stands and takes a long look at the costume. "It's not the worst thing in the world. I could've cut up a sheet and told her to be a ghost. This is a little more creative."

"You also could've given her one of my jerseys and let her be a hockey player."

"Dammit, Hayes. Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"Because it's unoriginal." I run a hand through my hair and toss her a sheepish grin. "And I didn't think of it until you were halfway through the second ear. It felt cruel to mention it when you had been working so hard."

"Too late now. My fingers will just be bruised for a week." She holds up her hands, showing off the red marks between her knuckles. I should've offered to help more, even though I don't know how to sew. "It's *fine*."

"Next time there's a costume contest, I'll make sure Lucy doesn't tell you. She can raid my gear drawer and call it a day."

"Fine by me." Madeline grins and heads for the door. She slips on her

jacket and fixes her ponytail. "I'm going to wait for her downstairs."

"See ya in a few, KG."

When the door closes, I walk to the kitchen and grab an apple from the fruit basket. Lucy always eats one after school, and I cut it into the slices she likes before sliding it onto a plate.

Ten minutes later, feet thunder through the apartment. I smile and grab a small notebook sitting on a stack of mail. Gus and Millie climb out of their beds under the window and trot toward me.

I wait at the end of the hall, and Lucy waves when she sees me. I smile and flip to the first page of the notebook, my pen poised above the paper.

Hiya, Lucy. How was school? I write, holding up the notebook so she can read it.

She gives me a thumbs up, then beelines it for the dogs, giggling when they lick her face and forgetting all about me.

"Is it okay if I communicate with her like this?" I ask Madeline, tapping the notebook. "I want to do things right, and I'm not sure if this is the way to do it."

"You'll want to keep it to basic questions. ASL—the sign language Lucy uses—is different from the English you and I use. She does read and write at school, but her primary form of communication is with her hands. It might be hard for her to have full conversations with you on the pages," she explains. "But we can try."

"Got it."

I whistle, and the dogs follow me to the kitchen with Lucy in tow. I set her on the barstool, laughing when she smiles at me with a missing tooth grin, then sliding the plate of apple slices her way.

Thank you, Lucy signs, which is one of the only phrases I've picked up on, and I nod. She bites down on the apple and looks at Madeline, signing something else to her.

"*Lucy wants to know if we can take the dogs for a walk,*" Madeline tells me.

"Oh, yeah. They need to go out, and I could use some fresh air," I say, and I don't like that I have to use Madeline as the middleperson to communicate. "We'll go to the park up the road."

"*Hudson said we can take the dogs, but you have to finish your snack first,*" she explains, and Lucy doesn't waste a second.

She eats the apple slices in record time and jumps off the stool with

another eager grin. I grab the dogs' leashes from the pantry and gesture for her to come close to me.

Without words, I show her how to hook the leash to their collar, and I let her do the second one. She's careful and gentle, placing a kiss on Millie's head when she's attached.

"Way to go, baby." Madeline opens Lucy's backpack and hands over her coat. "*Make sure you zip up. It's getting cold outside.*"

"I hate the cold," I say, and Madeline moves Lucy's empty plate to the sink. "I'd rather be in ninety-degree weather."

"You play on ice."

"I know, and I wish I were in a sauna." I lead the dogs to the foyer. Madeline and Lucy trail after me, and I pull on a hoodie. "I love to sweat."

"Your socks got mixed in with mine last week, and I almost gagged when I opened the washer," Madeline admits. "Why do you bring that stuff home?"

"I don't bring game stuff home. The place would need to be fumigated." I hold the door open for them and we move into the hall. "Just some practice gear."

"I say this respectfully, but it's *horrific*. When Piper gave Lucy Maverick's jersey, I had to wash it four times before it didn't smell like a dead body."

"Been around a lot of dead bodies, Madeline?"

"I told you I'm good with knives."

I laugh. "Trust me, I know how horrible all of it smells. I shower after the game, then I shower when I get home. Feels like it takes two washes to get clean some days." Lucy runs ahead and presses the button for the elevator. Gus and Millie sit beside her, and she strokes their fur. "I'm glad she and the dogs get along."

"She loves them. We've never had any pets because my schedule has always been too chaotic, so it's good to see she's not afraid of them." Madeline smiles and gently ushers Lucy into the elevator. "Have you always been a dog person?"

"No, actually. I was terrified of them growing up. When I entered the league, I realized how isolating this career can be if you're not into the party scene or married with kids. I didn't like sitting around the house alone, so I went to the shelter and adopted Millie. Gus came later, when I had a better handle on balancing my responsibilities. They help keep me sane when it feels like the world is up against me. They don't care if the Stars win or lose,

and it's nice to be loved even if I make a mistake."

"That's parenting," she says as we head for the ground floor. "I've made so many mistakes as a mom. I've messed up, but despite it all, Lucy loves me unconditionally. It's scary, honestly." The doors open to the building's lobby, and we file out.

"Here." I stand behind Lucy and lift her arm so she's holding the leashes. I fold my hand over hers so I'm still in control, but it lets her feel like she's the one leading Gus and Millie. "I have a good grip on them, so they won't yank her."

"Does that feel okay, baby?" Madeline asks, and Lucy nods. "If they're too strong, let me know. Mr. Hudson will take over."

"Mr. Hudson." I laugh. "That's what the kids at the Stars' summer camp call me. Makes me feel ancient. Then you have my teammates who call me Huddy Boy."

"What do you prefer?"

"Hudson is just fine. Beyond that, Hud. Huddy Boy. Hayes." I shrug and let Lucy dictate our pace. Millie and Gus realize they're on a short leash, and they don't sprint ahead like they do when we go out for a jog. "The internet calls me Blond Bombshell, but I'm not a huge fan of that one."

"Blond Bombshell." Madeline starts to laugh, and she covers her mouth. "Sorry. That's—people actually call you that?"

"Don't ever look at my social media comments. It's a scary place."

"Wow." She opens the gate to the dog park, and I show Lucy how to unhook the leash from the collar. Gus and Millie take off across the grass, with Lucy not far behind. "I think I'll stick with Hudson. That feels safe."

I smile. I like how my name sounds coming from her. "Fine by me."

"Hudson Blond Bombshell Hayes. You know what? I take it back. That is what I'm going to call you from now on. It's too good."

"Dammit. I should've kept my mouth shut."

"You should've. Too late now, BB. You've got a nickname for life."

"Watch your back, Madeline. I'll think of something just as humiliating to call you."

"I'd like to see you try, Bombshell. Oh." Her laugh is loud, and she holds her side. "This is going to be so good."

"Shut up." I nudge her with my elbow, a move that makes her laugh even more. "We're no longer friends."

Madeline wipes a tear from under her eye. Her shoulders shake, and she

tips her head back so she can look at me. “You’re stuck with me, hockey guy. Unless you want to go back to eating peanut butter for lunch.”

Her smile grows, and there’s an ache in my chest. The spot that’s been fractured for years feels warmer. Brighter. Like a stitch has gone through it. Like I’m being pulled back together.

“I guess there are worse people to be stuck with,” I say.

When she sticks out her tongue and waves to Lucy, I know I made a damn good choice with these two.

FIFTEEN
MADELINE

I'VE NEVER BEEN the kind of person who likes to go out and party.

I respect the women who like to put on a cute dress and spend their night at the club. I admire their ability to stay up past ten, but after a week where Lucy had a field trip to the Pentagon and Hudson played three games in a row at home—which meant cooking three meals a day for six days straight—the blissful quiet of a Friday evening on the couch with my Chinese takeout and reality television sounds like a fucking *dream*.

I curl my legs under me and sigh. Lucy fell asleep hours ago. Hudson is out with some of his teammates. The dogs are snoozing on the floor, and for the first time all day, no one needs me. I flip on the TV and relax into the cushions. One bite into my spring roll, my phone buzzes. A number I don't recognize pops up on my screen and I slide the message open with a greasy finger.

***Unknown Number has added you to GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE
FUN(DAMENTAL RIGHTS) AND GOOD SEX***

UNKNOWN NUMBER

There we go. I added her!

PIPER

Hi, Madeline! Welcome to the group chat!

UNKNOWN NUMBER

It's Emmy.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

And Lexi!

UNKNOWN NUMBER

And Maven Lansfield! I know we haven't met yet, but hi! I'm a photographer for the Stars!

I smile and set down my carton of food, making sure to save their contact information.

ME

Hi, everyone. I don't think I've been in a group chat before, but I'm happy to be here.

How is everyone's night?

EMMY

Maverick came home from being out with the guys and had food all over him. I asked what happened, and he said instead of going to the bar like they planned, they decided to have a massive food fight. He wouldn't stop giggling when I told him there was spaghetti behind his ear.

PIPER

Are they twelve?

MAVEN

They did this sober?

EMMY

Oh, yeah. Only water tonight. And apple juice for Grant, who started this whole thing when he launched a breadstick at Ethan for making fun of his drink choice, apparently.

LEXI

Boys are so fucking weird.

PIPER

Wait. I looked at the photos on Mav's Instagram story, and they're really funny. That one of him and Riley with lettuce in their hair is so cute!!!

EMMY

It is cute, isn't it?

ME

I've never really looked at any of their social media before. Emmy... Maverick has your name tattooed on him?

LEXI

Yes he fucking does!

MAVEN

Multiple times!

PIPER

Find the photo of him wearing her jersey!

ME

Wow. That's love if I've ever seen it.

EMMY

I'm a lucky girl.

Gotta run. He says he's not getting out of the shower until I come in there and join him.

LEXI

Someone is going to come.

PIPER

Liam just asked why I laughed so loudly. Have fun, Em!! We'll all get together soon.

PIPER

The week after next!

ME

Sounds good. Night, everyone!

I lock my phone and smile, glad to be included in a really fun group of women. Turning my attention to dinner, I polish off the spring rolls before I move onto the white rice and orange chicken. When I finish, I put all the empty food containers on the coffee table and pull a blanket over my lap.

Before I can get too comfortable, the front door opens then closes with a soft click. I crane my neck and see Hudson walking down the hallway.

"Hey." I mute the television and smile. "How was the food fight?"

“How’d you hear?” He leans against the wall and matches my grin. “Could you smell the garlic sauce from the foyer?”

“I was added to a group chat with Emmy, Lexi, Maven, and Piper.” I sniff and wrinkle my nose. “But now I can smell it. Did you *bathe* in it?”

“I might as well have.” He sits in the chair next to the couch and grimaces. “I think it’s in my hair.”

“I hope you retaliated appropriately.”

“Yeah.” His grin widens to a beam. “I launched a whole bowl of tzatziki at Grant’s face.”

“Ah, to be thirty again.”

Hudson leans forward and grabs the collar of his stained shirt with one hand. He pulls it over the back of his head and all the way off, leaving him bare-chested.

I gape at him, caught off guard by seeing his naked torso for the first time.

Broad shoulders covered in patches of freckles give way to sculpted biceps and pec muscles. His skin is smooth and blemish-free, his summer tan fading away as we move through November. Blond hair cascades down his stomach and disappears in his jeans. There’s a mole next to his belly button and veins that travel down his arms.

My mouth goes dry, and I know I’m no better than a man with the thoughts racing through my head.

I’m staring at him like I haven’t been fed in goddamn *years*, but I can’t help it.

Hudson Hayes is built like a god, and he’s hot as hell.

I could pretend to be oblivious to it before.

Sure, he has a pretty face. A smile that can make you blush and eyes that twinkle when he thinks something is really funny.

But now?

Now I know he has a six-pack.

Now I know he’s been hiding a body that looks like it was handcrafted out of the finest marble, but he does and he is, and my brain nearly short-circuits because of it.

“Jesus Christ,” I mumble.

“What?” he asks

“Nothing. I—the smell.” I stare at his ear instead of his chest. I’ve never seen such a good-looking man before. I could bounce a quarter off his

stomach if I wanted to, and I *really* kind of want to. “Did you have a good night?”

“Yeah.” Hudson sets his shirt in his lap and laughs. Drops his head back and spreads his thighs. “We’re all dumb as hell, but at least we know how to have fun.”

“I like that your idea of fun is a food fight, not a strip club.”

“Not my style, knife girl.” His eyes roam over the empty cartons on the coffee table and my position on the couch. “Am I interrupting you?”

“From watching bad television? Not at all. Some company would be nice.” I smile and rest my elbow on the pillow to my left. “I promise I won’t hurl any leftover lo mein at you.”

“You hurled a banana at me.”

“I won’t hurl any food at you *again*,” I amend. “Do you want a glass of wine?”

Hudson’s laugh is soft and slow, an indulgent sound, and he bobs his head. “Why not? I have grilled chicken in my hair. I’m allowed to have a drink. But only one glass. A headache at practice tomorrow sounds like my idea of hell.”

“So, you’re a lightweight? I can’t wait to see this.”

“I’m two hundred pounds. It’s going to take more than one glass of alcohol to get me drunk.” He stands and drapes his shirt over his shoulder. It’s absurd he walks around looking like *that*. “Do you need anything while I’m up?”

“Nope,” I say. “I’m fine.”

I’m treated to a view of his back muscles as he walks away, and I push the heels of my palms into my eyes.

It’s *wrong* to be gawking at him.

That’s exactly what I said I wouldn’t do when I took this job, but here I am: my tongue almost hanging out of my mouth, my skin flushed and my pulse racing. Starry-eyed, like I’ve never seen a man before.

And, *fuck*, is Hudson a man.

Every inch of him shows off the hours he spends on the ice and in the gym perfecting his physique. I’m torn between throwing a blanket his way so he has to cover up and asking him to model for a picture so I can commit every line, every divot, every curve of his body to memory.

It doesn’t help that I haven’t been with anyone in years. That the only physical contact I’ve had since my divorce has been my fingers and a

vibrator. I'm aware this is a natural reaction to seeing someone like him without clothes, but the other things?

The other things are very not good.

Like the way I'm imagining what's under his jeans. What his hands would feel like on my thighs and his mouth on my neck. If he's as nice in the bedroom as Emmy claims, or if he's someone else entirely.

"Didn't feel like cooking?" Hudson asks when he returns with a glass of wine and the bottle tucked under his arm. My stomach swoops low when I notice he's changed into sweatpants and a thin T-shirt. That's not much better than what he was wearing before. "I didn't think to tell you about some of the restaurants around here, but it looks like you found one."

"I ordered takeout, and it was delicious." I shift across the couch so I'm not taking up all three cushions and point to the other side of the sofa. "Sit wherever you want."

"Thanks." He takes the spot beside me and swirls his drink around his glass. "I'm not a big wine guy."

"What's your drink of choice?"

"Beer, typically. If I'm feeling fun, I love whiskey."

"I like whiskey too."

"I'd say we should pour some of that, but it'll get me in trouble."

"Trouble? You mean like going thirty miles an hour instead of twenty-five?"

"Wow. Throwing me under the bus." His throat bobs with a sip, and he leans back. "I know how to have fun, believe it or not. I don't always behave."

"I'm sure you don't," I say, and I'm hopelessly wondering what kind of trouble he's talking about.

"What have you been up to tonight?"

"Watching TV. Greasy food. Enjoying the quiet. It's been a long week, hasn't it?"

"Too long." Hudson rests a foot on his knee and blows out a breath. "Next week isn't going to be any better. I have book club and a home game. After that, we're getting into the holiday season with Thanksgiving, and things won't slow down until the new year."

"Book club?" I finish off my drink and reach for the bottle. "Who do you have book club with?"

"My teammates. We, ah, read romance books."

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. It started when Maverick was trying to impress Emmy—he does that a lot, by the way—and it’s become a regular thing during the season. It’s silly, but I think it’s helped us play better hockey. It takes our minds off the games. Gives us something else to put our time and energy into. Plus, it’s fun as hell.”

“I never would’ve guessed that. An outlet is good, though.”

“It’s not the only outlet. Ethan rides motorcycles. Grant carries around this small notebook but won’t tell us what is inside. He claims it’s to play tic-tac-toe with himself, but it’s obvious he’s lying. I’m wondering if he’s drawing or writing a book. Maverick spends most of his time obsessing over Emmy.”

“What else do you do?” I ask.

“I hang out with the dogs. Go for long walks. Enjoy the peace and quiet when I’m not surrounded by the hooligans I have to call my teammates.”

I laugh. “You love them, don’t you?”

Hudson’s smile melts into something nostalgic, almost, and he nods. “With everything I have. Which is something male athletes are told they shouldn’t say, but whatever. They’ve gotten me through some rough days, and I’m not sure I’d be here if it weren’t for them.”

I lift my glass. “We need a toast.”

“What are we toasting?”

“To the family you’re born with, and the family you meet along the way.”

He scoots toward me. Raises his glass and knocks it against mine. “I’ll drink to that. Cheers, Madeline,” he says in a husk of a voice, and we might have a problem.

SIXTEEN

HUDSON

“ORDER. ORDER,” Maverick yells, and he knocks his rubber mallet on the fireplace. “Can you all shut up for two seconds so book club can commence?”

“Hey.” I put my pinkies in my mouth and whistle. That quiets everyone down, and the boys settle in their spots in Grant’s apartment. “There we go.”

“Leave it to Huddy Boy to get us to listen.” Riley pats an empty spot on the couch, and I sit. “We’re loud, aren’t we?”

“Loud is an understatement.” I set my book on my lap and flip through the annotated pages. “I can hear Ethan and Grant’s voices ringing in my ears when I’m trying to sleep.”

“That means you’re getting old, Hayes,” Ethan tosses back.

“Ten suicides at practice tomorrow, Richardson. Argue and I’ll make it fifteen.” Maverick sits next to me, gives me a sharp grin. “Remember when we were the young and dumb ones on the team?”

“Speak for yourself, Miller. I was never dumb.”

“Bullshit. I remember a hotel in Cleveland and sneaking into the kitchen at two in the morning because we were fucking starving.”

“Do you remember the part where I left money in the fridge because I felt bad for taking their leftover fettuccini Alfredo?” I ask.

“You left two hundred bucks.” He laughs. “That’s when I realized you were always going to hold my ass accountable.”

“Think it turned out okay.” I gesture around us. “Look at what you’ve

built.”

“We. What we’ve built, Hud.” Maverick ruffles my hair. “Glad you got all the food cleaned off you.”

“You helped start that mess.” I tap my paperback and look at the group. “I know y’all said last month’s pick was controversial. How did we feel about this one?”

“It was mediocre,” Liam says. “I liked the narrators. I didn’t like the story.”

“How did you not like the story?” Ethan asks. “It’s about a basketball player pretending to date his best friend’s sister. And she says she doesn’t like him. It’s *gold*.”

“I’m tired of books that claim the main characters don’t like each other. I want to see it. Give me a dagger to the throat,” Liam says, and Grant nods in agreement.

“Pretty sure that could be considered assault,” Riley chimes in.

“Not in dark romance it’s not,” Grant says. “That’s why I like that shit the most.”

“Yeah, because stalkers are more believable than two people not liking each other,” I draw out.

“They could be,” Grant challenges. “And fantasy too. When they’re sword fighting and he’s all *I hope you’re prepared to meet your end*, and she’s all *I’d sooner die than let you win*, and then he nicks her cheek and smirks? I live for that shit.”

“Holy shit. Should we bring swords to the arena and fight?” Ethan asks.

“Not happening,” I say. “I don’t trust half of y’all with sticks, let alone a weapon that could slash someone in half.”

“Mitchy?” Maverick asks. “Thoughts on the book?”

Riley clears his throat. “I liked it. I really liked the scene where, ah...” He trails off and grabs his beer, taking a long sip. “The car scene.”

“The *car scene*.” Ethan slaps the table. “That was hot.”

“And illegal,” I say.

“My god, man. Have you ever had any fucking fun in your life? We know you’d never get a woman off while operating a motor vehicle, but you have to admit it was fun to read,” Ethan says.

Ten pairs of eyes look at me.

Yeah, you set yourself up with this one.

I silently berate myself and then sigh, knowing the guys aren’t going to

let me off easy.

“Fine. No, I will not be getting anyone off while driving. Yes, it was fun to read. Yes, it was hot,” I admit, and Ethan pumps his arm in the air. “But I’m not saying another word about things I enjoy in the bedroom. That’s all you’re getting.”

“Prude,” Connor calls out, and I flip him off.

“I’m not a prude. I just don’t want y’all knowing what my girl might like. That’s for me and her, not you nosy assholes. Besides. I’ve never had any complaints. One ex even sent me a message a month after she broke up with me because she missed my hands,” I say.

The admission sets them all off. Ethan tackles me. Grant jumps on top of us. Maverick is cackling, and even I can’t help but laugh.

“Huddy Boy is a fucking *dog*,” Grant yells.

“I knew he’d be a freak in the bedroom,” Ethan says, and I untangle myself from them.

“I’m not a freak. I just know how to listen,” I say. “Helps a lot.”

“We need to make him watch the ‘Juno’ positions clips and figure out which ones he likes.” Grant drops to the floor and thrusts into the rug. “Have you ever tried *this one*, Hud?”

“If that’s how you fuck women, Grant, it’s no wonder you have to use your hand so much,” I tell him. “I don’t know why y’all care about my sex life. I’m not an interesting person.”

“But your hands.” Riley lifts my arm, and I knock him on the head with my book. “What is it about your hands?”

“Do you want me to start conducting a survey?” I ask.

“Yes,” they all say.

“Who are you dating right now anyway?” Connor asks. “You haven’t mentioned anyone in a while.”

I shrug. “Because I’m not dating anyone.”

“Uh oh. Did our resident romantic turn into a cynic?” Riley sighs. “Dammit. You were my only hope for believing in love, Hayes.”

“I’m not a cynic. I just...” I shrug. “I don’t know. I’ll get back out there, but for now it’s nice to enjoy what’s happening around me.”

“You love to date,” Maverick says, and I shrug again.

I don’t say the things I’m thinking: how I’m always worried I’m too much. Too over the top, like women in the past have called me. That the therapy I’ve been doing since my mom’s death is working, but I still feel like

I'm this ball of emotion who loves people too fiercely, who cares too deeply, who wonders if my brain might be hardwired wrong.

Too soft for an athlete, an ex called me.

You're mature, but I want someone who's a little wilder, another said.

Maybe I am losing hope.

Maybe every day I become less of a romantic and more okay with the possibility of being alone.

Maybe not everyone finds that great love, and I'm one of the unlucky ones.

"I do. I also have two new roommates and a hockey season to focus on. I'm busy doing other things, and that's okay," I say. "Now that we've gotten the conversation about my nonexistent dating life out of the way, can we get back to the book please?"

"Not yet," Liam says. "How's it going with Madeline and Lucy?"

That surprises me.

Liam's never been one to care about what goes on off the ice. In fact, he actively avoids it.

There's a hint of protectiveness behind his question, though, and it makes me think I need to answer very carefully or he'll put a fist in my face.

"Really well," I say. "We go to the park with the dogs and hang out. Madeline is a great chef, and we get along well."

I leave out the part where we sat on my couch together the other night. How her laughs turned into snorts and how I couldn't help having one more glass of wine because it meant spending a little more time with her.

I didn't regret a single minute of it when I got to practice the next day.

"Piper likes Madeline. And I love Piper. I'm not going to be happy if the woman I care about loses a friend because you can't keep those precious hands of yours to yourself."

"When did tonight go from book club to a pile-on-Hudson discussion?" I grumble. "It's not like that with her. We're friends, and we established a professional relationship early on."

"Good." Liam smiles, and it freaks me out. "Why did you like the book?"

"Oh. Um. I thought it was relatable. It's a professional athlete falling for a woman with a normal job who doesn't care about how much money he made or what his stats were. She loved him, not the fame."

Riley pinches my cheek. "I knew that romantic guy was still in there."

"Can we talk about NBA money for a second?" Ethan interrupts, and I'm

glad to get the attention off myself. “What’s with the NHL’s bullshit seventeen point six million a year rule? You’ve got point guards in the NBA earning fifty-five million *a year* and I’m out here getting fucking eight? I should’ve learned how to hoop.”

“They don’t let gingers shoot the ball,” Grant says, and chaos ensues when our center launches himself at our right winger.

I lean back and let them go at each other. They’re always like this, and they won’t cause any actual damage. At twenty-three and twenty-four, they’re the youngest of the group, and it’s good to see they’re not growing up too fast.

“How long are you going to let them flail around before you stop them?” I ask Maverick, and he snorts.

“It would be nice to leave them here for the rest of the night. But I guess I should step in, right?”

“That’s why you wear the big C on your jersey.”

“Could be because of my big c —”

“Ow, you fucker.” Ethan flips Grant onto his back and straddles him. “Apologize for pulling my hair.”

“Never,” Grant yells.

“If you don’t want to apologize for acting like a toolbag, you have to answer one of my burning questions.” Ethan smirks. “What the fuck is up with that notebook you carry around with you?”

“It’s full of numbers I get from girls,” he’s quick to say. “A way to keep track of their names.”

“There’s no way you’re pulling that much pussy,” Ethan says.

“Fuck you. I can pull whoever I want. I get plenty of action.”

“Maybe you should try and pull Hudson’s new roommate. If he’s not going to, someone should. I hear she’s hot as fuck. You could show her you know how to use a stick. Get it?”

“Hey,” I say sharply, and everyone stares at me. I’m not one to raise my voice, but I hate hearing this kind of shit. “I don’t care if that was a joke. Knock it the fuck off or save it for the bar when I’m not around. And keep my roommate’s name out of your mouth. None of you are touching her, and you’re not going to talk about her like that again. Got it?”

“Sorry,” they both mumble, and Ethan hangs his head.

“I come to book club to talk about books. Why? Because the last five years have been really fucking shitty for me, and this right here? This is what

I look forward to every month. I get to hang out with my brothers and not think about hockey for a couple hours. It's one of the only bright spots in my life right now, but I'm not going to stick around if this is how it's going to be every month." I pause to take a breath, fired up. "I know y'all like sex. I like it too, even though it's been a while. I just don't want it to be my entire personality."

"We can talk about Dave's Dogs instead? And how they're going to name a hot dog after me." Ethan climbs off Grant and offers him his hand. "They could cater our next book club."

I laugh. "I'll take Dave's Dogs over learning how many women Grant has slept with."

"It's not as many as you think." Grant stands and drapes an arm over Ethan's shoulders. "Let's listen to Huddy Boy and get back to the book."

"Are you good?" Maverick asks when everyone starts arguing over the lack of third act breakup in the story. "Not sure I've ever heard you so fired up about something."

"Sorry." I laugh again. "I didn't mean to go off like that."

"Wish I could've gotten a hundred bucks for every time you said fuck. I'd be rich."

"Says the guy with the league's biggest contract."

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah." I turn to the chapter with the grand gesture Ethan's raving about. "I'm with you guys. Doesn't get any better than this."

SEVENTEEN

MADELINE

I TIE my apron around my waist and smile at the food spread out on the counter.

I always love this part of my job: mise en place. Getting my hands on the ingredients I'll be using and bringing my visions to life.

It's when everything goes from an idea, a concept in my planner to a full plate of food, and I'm still pinching myself I get to create dishes in a kitchen as nice as Hudson's.

I start the playlist I like to listen to when I'm knocking out smaller tasks like cutting onions. Cooking meat and shredding carrots, and I hum as T. Rex fills the space around me.

"I never would've pegged you as an English rock band fan," Hudson says, and I look up from the head of lettuce I'm slicing in half. "And 'Jeepster' too? Solid choice, KG."

"Seems like you judged too quickly, hockey guy." I laugh. "I like the tempo. It's not too fast where I feel like I'm going to start sprinting around the kitchen, but it also keeps me on my toes."

"It's part of the creative process, huh?"

"Exactly. It also makes the food taste better."

"What are you making?" he asks, joining me at my side.

"Right now? A salad. After this? I'm tackling the vegetables for the week. Broccoli for your pregame meal of chicken and rice. Brussel sprouts for your postgame meal. Some tomatoes, too."

“I’m going to throw a wrench in your plans and ask if you’re busy tonight.”

“I live with my six-year-old daughter and I’m in a city where I barely know anyone. I am, shockingly, not busy tonight.”

“Good. The team does this thing every year called Friends and Family night. It’s an event where players bring—guess what—their friends and family to the arena for a night of skating and hanging out. I thought you and Lucy could come.”

“Sounds fun.” I brush the hair out of my eyes with my arm. “Lucy’s never skated before. I haven’t either. It might be a recipe for disaster.”

“Skating isn’t required, and it’s a pretty low-pressure event. I even bring the dogs. Gus and Millie love the ice.”

“Is it safe? Do the players move around like they do in games and slam each other into the wall? Lucy might get trampled.”

“I won’t let her get trampled. And the guys are all really chill. Half of them are trying to get the attention of someone’s friend or cousin. They won’t be skating like lunatics. What do you think?”

I weigh the invitation even though I know what I’m going to say.

Lucy’s been begging me for skating lessons since Emmy entered the league. She keeps telling me she’s going to be the second woman in the NHL, and I’ve held off on signing her up for any classes.

I’m not sure I can do that any longer. She sees Hudson’s gear and lights up, asking me a dozen questions about sticks and pads and helmets that I don’t have the answers to.

It’s not because I don’t think she’s capable. Lucy is the most coordinated kid I’ve ever met. Determined, too. I’m sure if she laced up a pair of skates, she’d be unstoppable on the ice.

I’m just... afraid. Terrified of something bad happening to her, because she’s my *everything*. I can’t imagine a world without her in it, and a contact sport with sharp blades sounds like a parent’s worst nightmare.

But it’s her life.

She’s going to do a hundred things I’m not onboard with over the next fifty years, and I’d never want her to think she doesn’t have my full support when she wants to chase her dreams.

“Okay.” I exhale, and there’s a heavy weight sitting on my chest when I give him a tentative smile. “Let’s do it. Would you mind showing Lucy the ropes? If I knew how to balance, I’d be out there with her.”

“I’d love to.” His grin stretches wider, and he lifts a shoulder. “But when she sees Emmy, she’ll probably want a lesson from her instead.”

“Lucy would *freak*. Is that something Emmy would do?”

“Without a doubt.” He checks his phone and groans. “I need to run. I scheduled a stretching session with Lexi, and if I’m late, she’s going to torture me. I’ll text you directions to the arena. Come by whenever you want.”

“Okay.” My smile matches his. “We’ll see you tonight.”

THE ARENA IS BUZZING with energy. There are dozens of people skating around the Stars logo in the center of the ice and more mingling in the front row of seats. The glass that’s usually up during games has been put away, letting the skaters stop and chat with folks on the side of the rink.

Wow! Lucy grins. ***Look at how close we are!***

Guess what? Hudson told me he’s going to teach you how to skate, I tell her, and her eyes get wide. And Emerson Hartwell is going to be here.

She is? Lucy scans the building, tugging on my sweater. ***I don’t see her.***

We’ll see if we can find her. Let’s get you some skates first.

We head around the curve of the rink to the opposite tunnel. Lucy makes me stop every five feet or so to point out things she’s seen on TV this year: the large screen above the ice. The bench where the players sit and the penalty box. I nod when she tells me how this arena is different from the one back in Las Vegas, how it’s newer and nicer.

I love that she pays attention to details.

“You’re here!” Piper exclaims when we get to the other side of the rink. She hugs me tight, then bends to give Lucy a hug. *When “Hudson told me you two were coming, I was so excited. This is my favorite night of the year,”* she says using SimCom, and I appreciate her inclusion of my daughter.

“I can see why. It’s so nice they do this for everyone,” I answer, and my attention snags on a woman in the middle of the rink doing spins and jumps. She’s in a black skirt with leg warmers covering her calves, and I can’t stop watching her. *“She’s so good. Is she a hockey player too? Look at her spin, Luce.”*

She looks like a ballerina!

“Who?” Piper follows my gaze. “*That’s Hannah, Grant’s sister. She’s a professional figure skater.*” She smiles at my daughter and transitions to only signing. *What size shoe do you wear, Lucy?*

Twelve. I’ve never skated before.

I haven’t either, I add. Hudson said he’d help her.

I’m going to go so fast with him!

Lucy stands against the boards and watches everyone on the ice. Piper has a quick conversation with the man handing out equipment and grabs a pair of small black skates along with a helmet.

“He should be over in a minute,” she says. “I can take her until he gets here. I’m not great, but I can keep us upright.”

“She’s lying,” a deep and familiar voice says. I turn, and Hudson pulls up to a stop in front of us in a hoodie and jeans. He leans on the half-wall with a grin. “Piper is a liability when she’s on skates.”

“I’ve gotten better,” she challenges. “I didn’t fall when I did a lap with you all after practice last week.”

“Liam pulled you the whole time. Of course you didn’t fall.” He glances at me. “Hey, KG.”

“Hey, hockey guy.”

“I’m glad y’all are here. Does Lucy still want to learn how to skate?”

“She does, and she’s very excited to go fast with you,” I say. “Just... not too fast, okay?”

“I promise I’ll keep things controlled. Under sixty miles an hour,” he teases. “If I’m going to teach Lucy, I’m going to have to touch her. I’ll have to hold her hand and put my arms around her so she learns how to balance. Are you comfortable with that?”

“I am.” I nod, chest pinching tight with his check in. “Thanks for asking. You two have fun. I’m going to watch from here.”

“I can skate next to you and interpret directions to Lucy?” Piper directs her offer to Hudson. “So she’s aware of what’s going to happen.”

“You know I love teamwork.” Hudson points to a row of seats and jumps over the boards with ease. “I’ll lace up her skates.”

“*Let’s go over here, baby, so Hudson can get you in your skates,*” I say.

He’s really good at that, isn’t he? Lucy asks, and I smile.

“*Very good. And he’s going to take care of you while I sit and watch.*”

Lucy drops into a chair and swings her legs back and forth. Hudson buckles her helmet then crouches on his knees to untie her sneakers. He takes

her left foot and rests it on his thigh, making quick work of slipping off her shoes and slipping on her skate.

His fingers knot then double knot the strings into a neat bow. He turns her ankle to the left and then the right, giving a satisfied nod.

"The skate should be snug, but not painful. We also don't want her foot moving around inside it," Hudson tells me.

"*Does that feel okay, Luce?*" I ask, and he waits before moving to the next skate. "*Do your toes hurt? Can you wiggle your foot around?*"

Lucy makes a face then smiles. ***It feels like a glove for my toes!***

"*She said it feels like a glove,*" I interpret, and Hudson nods again.

"That's perfect."

Five minutes later, Lucy stands on wobbly feet. She grips Hudson's arm and he helps her to the ice, keeping his eyes on her and directing a group of guys in Stars gear away from them so they have plenty of space.

Piper follows the pair, explaining to Lucy about her head and shoulders and keeping her feet close together. Hudson skates backward in front of Lucy and holds her hand while he moves at a slow speed that seems effortless.

I dig my phone out of my pocket and record them making their first lap around the rink. They take their time, pausing every few minutes so Piper can mention another tip and Hudson can move them a little faster.

By the time they get back to me, Lucy is smiling from ear to ear. Her cheeks are pink and she's practically tugging on Hudson's sleeve to keep going.

Did you see me, Mommy? I'm flying!

"*You're so fast, I can hardly see you out there,*" I say. "*How do the skates feel? Are you warm enough?*"

I'm sweating like I'm at recess!

I laugh and reach over the wall so I can unzip her jacket. "*Is that better?*"

Much. Can I do another lap?

"*Hudson might need a break,*" I say, and he shakes his head.

"I'm good. Does she want to go again?"

"*Another lap,*" I tell him.

"*I could take Lucy to meet Emmy?*" Piper suggests, and Lucy claps. "*Should we go see the coolest girl in the world, Luce?*"

Yes! Can I go, Mommy?

"*Of course you can, sweetie.*" I kiss the top of her head and fix her beanie. "*Make sure you show her your jersey, okay?*"

“Let me know if you need help, Little P,” Hudson says, and she nods.

Lucy is less stable with Piper by her side, but she stays upright. They get over to Emmy, and I laugh when Lucy throws her arms around Emmy’s legs.

“Should I be concerned by how willing my daughter is to go places with people who aren’t me?” I ask Hudson.

“Nah. Means you’ve taught her how to be a good judge of character.” He taps the half-wall with his knuckles. “Want to do a lap?”

“I mean we can, but I don’t want to injure you. Or myself. I might turn into a human bowling ball and take out half the team.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“And if it does?”

“Then I’ll yell *strike* and we move along.”

I laugh. “Fine. But no making fun of my horrible technique.”

“Scouts honor.” He holds up three fingers and gives me a salute. “What size shoe do you wear?”

“A nine,” I tell him, and he heads to the equipment booth to grab a pair of skates. “Is this the part where I have to strip down to my socks? And before you buy me dinner? Scandalous.”

Hudson lowers himself to his knees again and sits back on his heels. “Take the shoes off, Galloway.”

I find an open chair and take off my sneakers. “You’re sure on the ground a lot tonight.”

“I don’t mind.” His mouth hitches up in a smirk. “There are worse places to be.”

My skin flushes hot at the idea of him on his knees somewhere else—like in his room—and I clear my throat. “Do I tie them like a regular shoe?”

“Kind of. You want them tight so you have a good base, and I always double knot. The more your ankle caves in or out, the more off-balance you’re going to be. We don’t want any movement.”

“Are those professional hockey terms?”

“Yup.” Hudson grins, and I’m treated to the sight of his dimple. He wraps his fingers around my ankle, guiding my foot into the skate. He yanks on the laces, working methodically from the toe to the heel. He repeats the motion with my other foot then taps my shin. “How do those feel?”

“Um. Heavy?”

“That’s normal.”

“So I’m supposed to think I’d sink to the bottom of a lake if I got tossed

into one? Noted,” I say.

When he raises a brow, I mime zipping my lips and tossing the key. He chuckles, then continues. “When we get on the ice, I don’t want you to think about picking up your foot like you’re taking a step. I want you to think about pushing the ice and gliding away. Does that make sense?” he asks.

“Oh, sure. Totally,” I say, and he helps me to my feet. “I could suit up for a game tomorrow night.”

Hudson hops over the small lip that leads to the ice and looks at me. “You’re going to be great.”

My foot almost slips out from under me when I enter the rink. I grab the half-wall beside me and hold on for dear life. “This was a very bad idea. I haven’t updated my will. I haven’t seen the Grand Canyon or the Great Barrier Reef yet. I’m too young to die.”

Hudson holds out his hand. “I won’t let anything happen to you,” he says in an even-keeled voice.

“Do you promise?”

“I promise, Madeline,” he murmurs. “I’ve got you.”

I blow out a breath and lace our fingers together, believing him. “Okay.”

He gently moves me away from the wall. My legs shake, and I hunch forward. There’s a red mark on the ice that looks suspiciously like blood, and I wonder who injured themselves here.

I’ll probably be next.

“Try standing up straight. There you go. That’s perfect.” Hudson smiles when I roll my shoulders back. “And try to look up, not down. Don’t you want to stare at my handsome face?”

“No offense to your supposedly handsome face, Bombshell, but looking down means I can see if I’m about to fall.”

“I’ll catch you before that happens.”

“I don’t want to hit my head,” I admit, and Hudson moves closer to me until our sides are pressed together. Until I can smell his cologne and the hint of toothpaste. He loops an arm around my waist and secures himself to me. “That’s what I’m most afraid of.”

“A reasonable fear. It took me weeks to learn how to get from one end of the ice to the other without falling. Now it’s second nature. In this position, if you fall, I’ll fall too. And I’ll soften the blow for you, Madeline.”

“That’s so chivalrous.” I try to focus my attention on other things around us: Gus and Millie sliding on their bellies. A group of guys eating hot dogs

and chatting on the players' bench. A man in jeans and a black T-shirt watching Grant's sister do another pirouette with the hint of a scowl on his face. "If I die, tell my daughter I love her."

"I'm not going to let you die. Who would make me dinner every night?"

"You know how to pop leftovers in the microwave, don't you?"

"Debatable," he says, and I laugh.

The longer we skate, the less stress I carry. My body unravels with every lap we do. I can tell I'm relaxing, and Hudson's grip on me never wavers. Half an hour and no collisions later, we stop next to Piper, Emmy, and Lucy, who's almost jumping up and down.

I'm doing so well! I haven't fallen!

"*She is really good,*" Piper adds, and Emmy nods.

"You should get her into lessons. She's a lightning bolt on the ice. It helps that kids are so fearless," Emmy says, "but I can tell she's has natural skills."

"She didn't learn it from me." I gesture at the mark on Hudson's arm I left behind from gripping him so tight. "I'm fighting for my life out here."

"You're doing just fine," he says. "Are you going to hang out for a bit?"

"Yeah. I don't think I'm going to be able to get Lucy to leave anytime soon." I smile as she gets a high five from one of the players. "And that's fine by me."

"Good. I'm going to say hi to some people, but I'll catch up with you later." Hudson smiles at me again. "I'm serious, by the way. You did really well for your first time."

"Thanks." I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. "Having a good teacher helps."

With one more glance my way, Hudson takes off. He makes sure to stop and give Lucy a high five too, and seeing the way he makes a point to include my daughter has my heart growing three sizes.

There are a lot of men in the world, but I'm learning there's only one Hudson Hayes.

EIGHTEEN HUDSON

“GOOD MORNING.” I yawn and give Madeline a wave when she looks up from the eggs she’s whisking. “You’re up early.”

“Morning.” She smiles and turns on the stove. “The thunderstorm kept me up last night, so I decided to make breakfast instead of tossing and turning.”

I yawn again and start the coffee maker. “Same. I don’t mind the rain, but I could do without the lightning every five seconds. It was bright with the curtains closed, and the dogs were freaking out.”

“Oh, no. The lightning scared Lucy too. I held her in my bed for an hour or two before she finally fell asleep.”

“Next time we should make a fort in the living room and have a party.”

“I like that idea.” She sets a pan on the burner and grabs a spatula. “You’re heading to the arena early today, right? If you give me a few minutes, I’ll have some scrambled eggs ready for you.”

“Coach canceled practice. Guess he lost power and decided to let us relax today. He also gave us off the day after Friends and Family night. Don’t remember the last time I had this much free time, so there’s no rush.”

“That’s a nice surprise.”

“Don’t be fooled. He’s going to kick our asses to high heaven tomorrow,” I say.

“Okay. Maybe it’s not a nice surprise.” Madeline laughs. “What do you have planned for your unexpected day off?”

“You’re going to think I’m dull.”

“Now you have to share. Come on, hockey boy. Tell me.”

“I’m going to go to the bookstore then catch up on a few emails from my agent. He wants me to do a marketing campaign with a protein drink company, but the shake they sent me is disgusting. I gagged when I tried it the first time, and I have to figure out a way to politely decline the sponsorship they’re offering.”

“Send a video of you hurling. That’ll get the message across,” she says.

“God. I don’t want to know what *those* comments would say.” I pull down two mugs from the cabinet behind her and fill them each with coffee. I add a splash of milk and half a spoon of sugar, remembering the way she made it the morning she threw a banana at my head. “Coffee for you.”

“Thank you.” Her smile is wide and bright, and she takes a sip of the caffeine. “Fuck. This is good.”

“Right? Feels like I’m drinking more and more of it this season. I think I’m getting old.” I take a sip from my own mug. “What are you doing today? How do you and Lucy spend your weekends without school?”

“My list is a mile long. I need to do Lucy’s laundry and put together the dollhouse I got her. My muscles are still sore from skating, and the last time I washed my hair was when you came home from your food fight. Soaking under hot water until my skin is red sounds like heaven. I also wanted to get my hair cut, but there’s no way that’s going to happen.”

“I can put the dollhouse together.”

“That’s okay. It shouldn’t take long. The instructions said only one person is needed, so that gives me some hope.” Her phone dings on the counter, and she taps her screen. “Shit. I forgot I signed Lucy up for story time at the library later today, after soccer. It’s the only time slot with an interpreter, and I don’t want her to miss it. She loves story time. Hair washing will have to wait.”

“Would—I could—” I clear my throat. “If you’re comfortable with it, I could take Lucy to soccer and the library. It would give you some time to yourself. To wash your hair and put together the dollhouse. Or, you know, anything else you want to do.”

Madeline eyes me, and I think I might’ve crossed a line.

I don’t know many people with children.

Ryan Seymour, one of my teammates, is a dad. Dallas Lansfield—a buddy who plays for the DC Titans—also has two kids.

I'm sure they'd tell me spending the day with a child who isn't mine is a *touch* aggressive, but it feels like the right thing to do. The offer slipped out before I could stop myself, and I'm not mad I said it.

"You want to take her?" Madeline asks.

"I'd love to," I say.

"Do you think you could handle that? I don't mean to be blunt, but you can't really communicate with Lucy. It's going to be a lot of work. You've been running yourself into the ground with training and games and media events—the last thing I want you to do is give up free time you so rarely get to entertain my child."

She's not wrong.

My bones are exhausted. My brain is foggy. It's like I'm on overdrive, but I can tell Madeline is tired too.

I know how hard she's working to feed me. Add in helping Lucy with her schoolwork and going food shopping two times a week, and she deserves a break.

"We'll figure it out. And if we can't, I know how to get a hold of you."

"How will you get around? Her soccer practice is on the other side of the city."

"I bought a booster seat after you told me she couldn't ride in the car without one. It's in the hallway closet."

"You did?" Madeline blinks. "You... you didn't have to do that, Hudson."

"Yes, I did. I know her safety is important to you, and it's important to me too. With the weather getting colder, y'all don't need to be walking around when the temperatures drop. You'll take my car from now on when y'all want to go somewhere or if you need to go to the grocery store."

"That was so thoughtful of you," she says softly. "Truly. I... I really appreciate it."

"It's nothing. Really. Happy to do it."

Madeline gnaws on her bottom lip. We spend a few minutes in silence as she adds green peppers and onions to the eggs. She doles out the breakfast onto two plates, and I realize she's going to have to make another round when Lucy wakes up.

More food, more dishes.

More work for her, and now I'm determined to get her to agree to take the day off.

“Okay. You can take Lucy,” she finally says, laughing when I pump my fist in the air. “But she’s a ball of energy. She can run laps around you, Bombshell.”

“I don’t doubt it.” I shovel down a bite of food and sit at the kitchen table. “Tell me more about your kid.”

Madeline brings her plate with her and sits next to me. She draws her legs to her chest and scratches behind Gus’s head before taking a bite of her breakfast. “Lucy needs to eat every few hours, or she’ll get grumpy. I keep snacks in my bag when we’re out doing errands. She loves cheese sticks.”

“Something I can relate to. Is she allergic to anything? Bees? Ants? What do you do while she’s at practice?”

“No allergies, and I sit on the sidelines. That’s probably going to be harder for you to do. You’re going to draw some, ah, unwanted attention from the other soccer moms.”

“I’ll throw on a hat and some sunglasses. If anyone asks, I’m Hudson’s twin brother.”

“Good luck with that. I saw you in a commercial last night.”

“The car one?”

“Mhm. I didn’t know you were so passionate about Hyundais,” Madeline says. “Don’t you drive a Range Rover?”

“I do, but the owner of the dealership is a friend. Someone I met before my rookie season, and he’s a good dude. I know the weight my name carries, and it’s good to give back to people who’ve been on your side since the very beginning.” I down half my coffee. “I’m appreciative of anyone who’s a fan, but I have a special place in my heart for the ones who were there before the lights got bright.”

She rests her chin on her knees and holds her mug with both hands. “Who else would be on that list?”

“The PE teacher I had in kindergarten who told my parents I had athletic abilities. Mr. Wilson was his name. My junior year English teacher, Mrs. Dimetro. She saw I was struggling with SAT prep, tutored me after school twice a week, and helped me get into college. My parents, obviously. My neighbor and friend from childhood, Jimmy Silva. He’s come to a couple games.”

“Sounds like you have quite the support system around you.”

“You have to as a professional athlete. What about you? Who’s been in your corner?”

“My parents for sure. They’ve helped me navigate motherhood, and if it weren’t for them, I’m not sure where I’d be right now,” she says.

“I think you’d be right here, on two feet. You’re a great mother, and it’s obvious Lucy is so loved.”

“She’s my pride and joy. I know every parent says that, but I’m so lucky she’s mine. I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

“I’m excited to hang out with her. Is it okay if some of the guys come to the library with us? I thought Liam could join and do some interpreting for me.”

She groans and hangs her head. “Lucy is going to *hate* hanging out with me after spending the day with a bunch of cool hockey players.” Madeline grins. “I trust your judgment, Hudson. Invite whoever you want. She’ll be over the moon.”

“I’m going to jump in the shower so I can get ready.” I grab my empty plate and stand. “Don’t want to keep her waiting when there is soccer to be played.”

“Lucy and Huddy’s day of fun. Kind of wish I was joining.”

“You’ll join in on the next one.”

She holds up her hand, lifting her pinky. “Promise?”

I bend so our eyes meet, then I hook my pinky around hers. “Promise.”

ME

I have a favor to ask.

PIPER

I’m sorry, Hudson. I don’t see you that way. I’m going to have to respectfully decline your advances.

ME

Oh, fuck off.

PIPER

Kidding! Everything okay?

ME

Can you call the salon you go to and book an appointment for Madeline? Use my name if you have to, and tell them I’ll tip double the price of the services.

PIPER

I can do that, but you're going to have to tell me why.

ME

You're nosy.

PIPER

I'm curious.

ME

She mentioned she wants to get her hair cut but doesn't have time. I'm taking Lucy so she can have the day off.

PIPER

That's thoughtful of you. Can I ask her if she wants to join girls' night tonight?

ME

As long as she's okay with me putting Lucy to bed. I don't want her to feel like I'm stealing her daughter.

PIPER

There's a big difference between kidnapping and lending a hand, Huddy.

ME

I know. I'm just trying to do the right thing.

PIPER

And you're a good guy because of it.

PUCK KINGS

ME

Is anyone free this afternoon? I'm taking Lucy, Madeline's daughter, to the library for story time.

MAVVY

Oh, hell yeah. I could get behind some story time.

MITCHY

Count me in.

SULLY

Piper told me I'm required to go, so I'll be there.

G-MONEY

What kind of story time are we talking?

ME

Probably a book with Clifford, since she's six.

G-MONEY

Not as entertaining as the book I'm reading right now. There's accidental cannibalism in it lol.

ME

I don't want to know.

LUCY IS STILL in her jersey, shin guards, and the big pink bow she wore in her hair during soccer practice. It was a fight to get her to put her jacket on, but I gave her a cheese stick, and all was right in the world.

We FaceTime Madeline so Lucy could tell her about the goal she scored, and we hang up as we walk into the library for story time.

"This place is *awesome*." Grant looks up at the high ceilings of Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library. "I would've read a lot more growing up if I had a spot like this to hang out."

"You're from Florida—it wouldn't have helped," is what Liam tosses his way, before he signs something to Lucy. She smiles and signs back, and our goalie looks at me. "She needs to use the bathroom."

"Oh. Okay. Um." I scratch my beard. "What do we do? Do we let her go in by herself? I can't go in with her. That would be weird, right? What if someone steals her while she's in a stall? What if she falls in the toilet and drowns?"

"For fuck's sake. You all can be so dense." Liam holds out his hand and Lucy takes it, swinging their arms back and forth as they walk to the information desk. I glance at Maverick, Grant, and Riley who shrug and follow after them. "We need a family bathroom," he says to the woman

scanning a stack of books.

“Please,” I add, and Liam rolls his eyes.

“Um.” She looks at Liam and Lucy, then me and Maverick, then Grant and Riley. “All of you? Together?”

“No. No.” I point at Lucy who’s smiling. My teammates and I must look like fucking idiots. “Just for her.”

“We’re codependent, but we’re not *that* codependent,” Maverick says.

“Speak for yourself,” Grant says.

Riley sighs. “None of you are helping.”

“The family bathroom is on the first floor,” the woman says.

Liam leads the way, and after a few minutes of us standing guard outside the door and waiting for Lucy to wash her hands, we find the large room designated for story time. Riley directs us to the section closest to the interpreter, and we settle on the floor.

“This is a whole production, isn’t it?” Grant says. “There are props.”

“And backdrops,” Maverick adds.

“I really hope they pick Liam as a volunteer for something,” Riley says.

“Fuck you,” Liam growls, and Grant gasps.

“Not in front of the kids, Goalie Daddy.”

I laugh and tap Lucy’s shoulder. She turns to look at me, and I point at the stage. I give her a thumbs-up then a thumbs-down, smiling when she gives me a thumbs-up.

The story is more entertaining than I thought it would be, and the interpreter keeps eye contact with Lucy throughout the performance. Liam does get picked as a volunteer, and after shooting daggers at us, he puts on a pink apron and pretends to pour tea much to the delight of the three dozen giggling children.

“Think we need to petition the team store to do a pink Sully jersey,” Maverick whispers, and I hold back a laugh.

“Only if you want to get murdered.”

My phone buzzes. I pull it out of my pocket and see Madeline’s name on the screen.

MADELINE

Hey, hockey guy. How’s it going? Is Lucy doing okay?

I angle my phone and take a photo of her from the side. Lucy climbed into my lap ten minutes ago and is leaning against my chest. Her eyes keep

closing, and I adjust my position so she's comfortable. I send the picture to Madeline, and I only have to wait ten seconds before I get a response.

MADELINE

That's the cutest thing I've ever seen.

ME

We're having a blast.

MADELINE

I'm so glad. Piper invited me out tonight with the girls. Is it okay if I join them, or do you need a break?

ME

No way. Go have fun. We'll be fine. Liam will probably hang out with us too.

I know you had salmon on the menu for tonight, but can we have pizza for dinner?

MADELINE

Is there anything better after a day of fun? She's going to love you forever. Pepperoni is her favorite. Permission granted.

Can you do me a favor?

ME

Anything.

MADELINE

Attachment: 1 video

Sorry for the awkward clip. That's how you say mommy loves you. Can you pass that along to Lucy? Or show her?

ME

I'd be happy to. Have fun tonight, KG. I promise your girl is in good hands.

MADELINE

I know she is.

I click off my phone and smile when Lucy puts her hand in mine and sighs. This isn't how I pictured my Saturday afternoon, but it beats the hell out of any other plans.

NINETEEN
MADELINE

“HOW DID YOU LIKE THE SALON?” Piper asks me in her living room.

“That lady is a miracle worker.” I touch the ends of my freshly trimmed hair and flip the locks over my shoulder. “Thank you for getting me in.”

“Your curtain bangs are so bouncy. I wish I could pull them off.” She grabs her purse and slides it up her arm. “And now you get to enjoy a night out on the town while looking like a knockout. *Damn*, Madeline. That shirt is something else.”

“It’s a bodysuit, and I’m afraid I won’t be able to pee all night. There’s no way I’m getting back into it in a public restroom. I nearly dislocated my shoulder getting it on. Who thought snapped buttons on my vagina were a good idea?”

She giggles. “Whatever it is, it’s working for you. Your curves are, respectfully, out of control. Your boobs? Incredible.”

I smile and touch the black fabric that dips below the top of my breasts. I haven’t shown this much cleavage in years, and while I’m still learning to be comfortable in my body post-baby, it feels *good* to step out of my comfort zone of leggings and baggy sweaters.

“The last time I went out with a group of girlfriends was before Lucy was born. Don’t let me drink too much and embarrass myself,” I say.

“I’d never let that happen. I’m excited to go out with you all, but I kind of wish I could see how Hudson and Liam do with Lucy tonight. I swear the only thing hotter than a guy with a kid is a guy wearing a backward hat.”

“So true.” We head out of her apartment and to the elevator. “I’m sure it’ll be great. They got through the day in one piece, and I’m getting updates every hour. I wouldn’t be surprised if they end up with butterfly clips in their hair and wearing sparkly eyeshadow.”

“If that happens, I need a picture. Maverick sent me one of Liam earlier today in his star role of Old Woman at story time. I’m going to frame it and put it on our nightstand.”

“You don’t think he’d hate that?”

“From anyone else? He’d probably break the frame. From me?” She shrugs. “I think it’ll get him to smile.”

“Your relationship sounds so special.”

“It’s funny. Liam and I haven’t been together long, but he’s made me happier than my ex ever did. And I was married to that guy for almost a *decade*.”

“It’s not the length of time that determines your happiness. It’s the person,” I say. “You can be with a really shitty person for years and never be happy, but you can meet someone right for you and feel like you’re floating after only a week or two together.”

“I like floating. Floating is so much better than drowning,” Piper says.

The restaurant is a short walk away, and the November night air isn’t as cold as it was last week. My coat keeps me warm, and Piper loops her arm through mine. She asks how the job is going, how Hudson and I are getting along, and if I’ve gone through his underwear drawer at all.

That makes me laugh, and when we make our way into the restaurant where we’re meeting Lexi and Emmy, an excitement I haven’t felt in years thrums in my blood.

The hostess leads us to our table, and after a round of hugs with the other women, I get comfortable in my chair and open my menu.

“It’s been too long since we’ve done this,” Lexi declares as she pours us all a glass of wine. “I’m sad Maven can’t be here because of stupid football, but I’m proposing a motion to make sure we have girls’ night at least once a month. I don’t like feeling like I’m out of the loop with your lives.”

“I see you every day at the arena,” Piper says. “We ate lunch together this afternoon, and you told me about the guy you went out with last night.”

“A date?” I ask, sipping my cabernet. I’ve enjoyed the glass or two I’ve had in Hudson’s apartment, but the alcohol tastes better when I’m surrounded by women who are becoming my friends. “How did it go?”

“Horribly, like every other date I’ve been on. The second I mention I work for a sports team, the accusations come out. *You’ve probably slept with most of them, right?* And *Do you actually know anything the sport?*” She clucks her tongue. “This guy hit me with a new one last night. He said something like *So, what, do you hand out Band-Aids?* I’m going to start telling people I’m a lawyer so they stop asking me such stupid fucking questions.”

“Is that what dating is like these days?” I wrinkle my nose. “It sounds exhausting.”

“Yes,” all three women say in unison.

“When was the last time you dated someone?” Emmy asks.

“Dinosaurs roamed the earth and I believed in happily ever afters,” I joke. “I haven’t been out with anyone in years. Before that, it was only my ex-husband.”

“You’ve only been with *one guy?*” Lexi asks, but it’s not judgmental. If anything, she sounds appalled on my behalf. “You poor thing.”

“After he left us, I actively avoided dating. Now that Lucy is older and busy with a hundred different activities, I don’t have any time. My daughter is my top priority, and I’m not going to give up a night with her for a man who’s going to make me want to be celibate for another six years. And... what’s the point? There’s no guarantee it’ll end in anything but heartbreak. We date for three years and then he leaves? No thanks.”

“I agree with you.” Lexi drops her elbows on the table and frowns. “But we need to back up. What do you mean your ex left you? It wasn’t an amicable divorce?”

“That implies it was a mutual decision.” I snort. “Lucy failed her newborn test right after she was born, then she failed it again. We learned she was deaf, and a week later, divorce papers showed up at our home. I haven’t heard from him since.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.” Emmy turns to face me with cheeks as red as her hair. “I’m going to need a full name and address so I can burn his fucking house down.”

“I’m coming with you,” Lexi says. “He’s a worthless human, and this is exactly what I mean when I say men aren’t shit. They want something until it gets difficult, then all they want is an out. What kind of pathetic excuse of a man abandons his wife and newborn?”

“That must’ve been really hard for you,” Piper says, and it helps to bring

the violence level down a degree. “I thought my divorce was bad, but going through it with a child must have been even more difficult. I’m so sorry, Madeline.”

“Those were the darkest moments of my life,” I admit. “There was the postpartum depression—which is debilitating by itself—but then there were the intrusive thoughts. The ones that would keep me up at night where I wondered what I could’ve done differently to keep my family together. How I would explain to Lucy why her father wasn’t around and what made him leave.”

“That was him. And only him, Madeline,” Piper says. “If it wasn’t Lucy being born, it would’ve been something else down the road. I know it’s hard to see—and you still might not be able to see it—but him leaving was a blessing. You shouldn’t be with a man who’s not all in on you and the children you have together, no matter who they are.”

“I know that now. And it’s why I’m steering clear of men for the next ten years. My daughter is my priority.” I laugh and drink some more of my wine. My skin is warm. My head is fuzzy, but it’s good to get this off my chest. To share it with someone else. “I swear I’m not always such a downer. We can talk about dicks or something more fun.”

“What branch of dicks? The anatomical kind or the douche bag kind?” Lexi asks. “I prefer the anatomical kind.”

“That one.” I smile and refill my glass, glad I’m not driving tonight. “I haven’t seen one in ages. Do they look the same as they did six or seven years ago?”

“A lot more are pierced these days,” Lexi says, and I almost choke on my drink. “Definitely makes things more fun.”

“Maverick told me one of the guys on the team is pierced, but he wouldn’t give me a name.” Emmy rolls her eyes. “Damn locker room bro code.”

“*Pierced?*” I ask. “But where —”

“Here.” Lexi taps her phone and scoots it across the table to me. I blink, and an image of a hard dick with a hoop attached to the tip takes up the screen. I zoom in and tilt my head to the side. “This is from my folder titled UNSOLICITED PHOTOS FROM WEIRD MEN I MEET ON DATING APPS. You’re looking at Miguel’s penis, which he sent to me at 11:27 in the morning, immediately after matching with him.”

“Wow. How—would that—does that feel *good*?” I put my hand over the

picture when our server approaches the table. "It looks like it would hurt."

"Best orgasm I've ever had," Lexi says proudly, and Emmy lifts her glass.

"I'll drink to that."

After ordering one of every appetizer off the menu instead of individual dishes, I listen to the three best friends fill each other in on what's been going on in their lives. I add a few comments here and there, content to be an included bystander rather than the center of attention.

Lexi orders us another bottle of wine after we finish the first one, and I'm busy taking a bite of a meatball when a question gets lobbed my way.

"How's it going with Hudson?" Emmy asks.

"It's great. He's easy to be around, and there isn't a meal I've made that he hasn't liked." I pause to wipe a drop of marinara sauce away from the corner of my mouth. I wasn't sure if we'd have anything in common, but we're friends now. At least, it feels that way."

"He's a good guy, isn't he?" Emmy says. "All the boys on the team are amazing, but there's something special about Hudson. It's like he really wants to know you. Once you're close with him, he has your back. He'll do anything for you, no questions asked."

"Remember when he beat up your ex?" Piper asks. "That game was something else."

"He mentioned he did that." I look at Emmy. "Was he provoked?"

"I told him the things my ex said about me, and he didn't like them very much. He and Maverick decided he'd be the one to start a fight so Mav could finish it. I think that's the only time he's gotten physical on the ice, but he's a loyal man."

"Wow." I imagine him shoving a guy into the glass during a game. My cheeks heat in a blush I know isn't from the wine, and I twist my hands together. "I saw him shirtless the other night and realized how attractive he is. Which is a big problem. Am I allowed to think he's hot? Probably not, but I do. I'd *never* act on it," I hurry to say. "It's just... I'm learning it's not the worst thing in the world to be living with a man who looks like him and is sweet as hell."

"Why wouldn't you act on it?" Piper asks, and it's my turn to laugh.

"Because it's unprofessional. Because I have a good thing going right now with this job. I'm doing what I love. I get to be with Lucy every minute she's not at school, and stability is important to me. When Hudson is out of

town, we get to go to the museums and the parks. This is the most time we've spent together, and I'm grateful for it. Sticking my tongue down his throat is not going to help with stability."

"What about a friends-with-benefits thing?" Lexi asks.

"Oh, god. I'm not sure I remember how to have sex. And that would be awkward as hell the next morning."

"Probably for the best. Hud is an all-in kind of guy," Emmy says. "He'd want a relationship, not something casual."

"He told me he's a romantic, and I'm... not. I don't believe in all that sappy shit anymore, and I'm not sure I'll ever be ready for another serious relationship. I'll just admire him from afar," I say. "He's a great guy, and I hope he finds someone who's as lovely as he is, but it's not going to me."

"Let's drink to admiring hot men," Emmy says, and when I clink my glass against hers, I realize it's fun as hell to finally have friends like this.

TWENTY
MADELINE

HOURS LATER, I tap my key fob against the door to Hudson's condo. I slip inside as quietly as I can, smiling as I shrug off my coat and hang it on the hook on the wall.

I didn't mean to stay out so late, but the drinks were flowing. The food was delicious, the company was even better, and I laughed like I haven't laughed in *years*.

I'm happy to be back, though, and I follow the soft glow from the television down the hall to the living room. When I round the corner, I freeze.

Hudson is asleep on the couch, and his body takes up all the cushions. Next to him, Lucy is curled against his chest. Her face is buried in his shirt and his left arm is wrapped around her, as if he's keeping her from falling off the sofa. Gus and Millie are on the floor beneath them, snoozing soundly.

My breath catches.

It feels like someone is squeezing my heart unbearably tight, and I pull my phone out of my purse so I can capture this moment. I want to be able to remember it two months from now when I'm having a bad day and need something that will make me smile.

Making sure the flash is off, I snap half a dozen pictures of the group. Lucy stirs ever so slightly before grabbing a fistful of Hudson's shirt and going back to sleep. I walk toward them, wanting to get closer. Wanting to feel like I'm part of the magic of this place, because looking at them brings me immense joy.

The floor creaks under my footsteps, and Hudson cracks open an eye. He blinks and yawns, his sleep-heavy gaze finding mine.

“Hey,” he croaks, and I like how hoarse and rough his voice sounds. “You’re back.”

“I am. Sorry I’m so late.”

“What time is it?”

“Midnight, so way past my bedtime.”

“Knife girl knows how to party. How was your night? Did you have fun?”

“So much fun.” I sit on the edge of the couch near his thighs, and I don’t miss the way he scoots over so I don’t fall off. “Those girls are something else. I learned all about pierced dicks.”

“Casual Saturday night.” He flashes me a smile that’s tired at the edges and sits up. “Lucy did great tonight. I put her to bed around eight thirty after Liam left, but she came back out an hour later. She let me know she couldn’t sleep, so I let her hang out with me. Guess we both passed out at some point.”

“Yeah.” I hold up my phone so he can see the picture of them. “Now I’ve got some blackmail on you, Bombshell.”

“Hope you can’t see any drool in that photo. I didn’t mean to keep her up past her bedtime. She’s been asleep for a while now, I think, and —”

“It’s the weekend. She’ll sleep a little longer in the morning, and she’ll be fine. Kids are resilient. Much stronger than my ass, because I’m going to be fighting a hangover when the sun comes up. Let me get her to her room so you can head to bed.”

“I can do it.” Hudson climbs off the couch and stands. He scoops Lucy in his arms, looking down at me. “Come say good night, Mads.”

Mads.

I like that.

Hudson steps over the dogs, and they don’t budge. I follow him, and my heart does that weird, painful thing again when he puts a hand on the back of Lucy’s head so she doesn’t bump the wall. When he gently sets her on her mattress and pulls the covers up to her chin.

I expect her to wake up, but she rolls onto her side and lets out a breath. I kiss her forehead, glad she’s safe and content. When I close the door behind me and head for the kitchen to grab a glass of water, I’m surprised to find Hudson lingering by the sink.

“Do you want some food? There’s leftover pizza in the fridge,” he says.

“A couple slices of pepperoni.”

“You couldn’t finish a whole pizza? I’m shocked,” I say.

“We might’ve had six breadsticks first.”

“Ah. The truth comes out.” I laugh and open a cabinet. “I stuffed my face tonight too. I’m pretty sure I’m going to explode like a can of biscuits when I take off my jeans.”

Hudson blinks, and it’s like he moves from unconscious to wide awake in the span of two seconds.

His gaze roams down my body, and he’s never looked at me like this. Intentionally, and without an hurry.

Under his attention, I’m aware of the thin straps of my bodysuit slipping down my arm. The way my breasts are pushed together and how tightly my pants hug my thighs.

It’s like he’s undressing me, almost, and when his eyes get back to my face, they’re full of heat.

“Wow. You look—” He stops mid-sentence. His throat bobs around a swallow. “Incredible.”

“I do?”

“Yeah.” His voice is deeper than before, and he can’t stop staring at my collarbone. “I like your shirt. Top. Thing.”

I think I’m a little drunk.

I think my conversation with the girls earlier is making me a little bold, because instead of hiding, I stay in place. I lean back and rest my hands on the edge of the counter, pushing my chest out ever so slightly.

Hudson’s eyes flick to my breasts for a millisecond before he glances at the floor and cups the back of his neck, acting like he got caught doing something he shouldn’t have.

I wonder what it would feel like if he hooked his thumbs in my bodysuit’s straps and dragged them down my arms. I wonder what it would feel like to have his hands on me.

I’ve been wondering about these things more and more lately, and I wonder if he’s wondering about them too.

“Thank you,” I say, and since he looked at me, it’s only fair I look at him. So, I do.

At his messy hair. At the mark on his arm from the couch cushions and the pair of gray sweatpants sitting low on his hips. Even when he’s not trying, he’s a work of art, and my throat goes dry.

“You’re welcome.” He lifts his chin, eyes zeroing in on the corner of my mouth. He steps toward me, and I don’t know what’s happening. “You have something on your face.”

“What?” I brush at my cheek, self-conscious. “Is it gone?”

“No.” Hudson chuckles and licks his thumb. “Give me a second.”

Cupping my chin, he tilts my head back. He moves the pad of his thumb to my face, and I think I’m being electrocuted.

It’s the most physical contact I’ve had in years, and sparks ignite at the base of my spine. A million synapses fire in my brain. My insides are dangerously close to melting into liquid mush, and I’m burning up.

Hudson keeps his eyes on me as he drags his thumb across my skin. It’s torturously slow. Aching tender, and I stopped breathing ten seconds ago. He goes from my cheek to my jaw to the pulse point on my throat, his touch lingering there.

This is the best feeling in the world.

“Better?” I whisper.

“Perfect,” he says.

He doesn’t pull away, and I don’t step back. We stay exactly as we are, and it takes everything in me to not tilt my head. To not turn my cheek and nuzzle into his embrace, a plant begging for sunlight.

I don’t believe in romance or butterflies, but I do believe in being horny. In needing physical affection to survive, and his single finger is keeping me alive.

“Thank you. And thank you for watching Lucy today. I’m glad I could enjoy some time for myself without feeling like I’m being selfish. Were you two able to communicate okay?”

“Not as well as I would’ve liked—that’s on me—but we managed. Liam brought over a whiteboard, so we used that occasionally. He helped me out with interpreting.” Hudson’s mouth twists into a frown. “I should be doing more.”

“You’re doing enough.” I touch his chest. The threadbare cotton of his shirt is soft against my palm, and his heart is racing. “More than enough. Tell me more about your night.”

“We watched a princess movie while we ate pizza. Had ice cream, obviously.”

My lips twitch. “Obviously.”

“We played a mean game of Scrabble that ended with Liam storming

out.”

“Man. I wish I could’ve seen that. It sounds like a good night.”

“Just missing you.” His fingers graze down my neck the tiniest amount before he drops his hand away. I miss *him*. “It’s late. I should get to bed. Coach is going to kick our asses tomorrow after giving us today off.”

“Me too. What time do you want breakfast in the morning?”

“Want to meet back here at eight?”

“Yeah. I do.” I fill up a glass with filtered water from the fridge and smile at him. I’m already looking forward to it. To seeing him again. “Good night, hockey guy.”

“Good night, Mads.”

TWENTY-ONE
MADELINE

**GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN(DAMENTAL RIGHTS) AND
GOOD SEX**

EMMY

Thanksgiving is at our place on Thursday. I hope you all can come.

MAVEN

The Titans are away, and since we're off, the kids and I are going to fly out to California for the game.

PIPER

Aw. That'll be fun! I'll be at Thanksgiving, Em!

LEXI

Me too.

ME

Thank you so much for the invitation. I'm not sure if Lucy and I can make it, but I appreciate you offering.

EMMY

Of course. Bring something if you want, but it's not a requirement. We eat A LOT of food, so there's always plenty to pick from.

LEXI

Any day I can unbutton my jeans at the table is a good day.

PIPER

I feel like there's a double meaning there.

LEXI

I like how your brain works, Piper.

LUCY SETS a piece of artwork next to my ceramic mixing bowl and tugs on my shirt.

Look what I did at school! She points at the paper boasting a turkey decorated with feathers and glitter. ***That's my hand!***

I'd recognize your hand anywhere. I lift her and set her on the counter beside my ingredients for lemon pepper chicken. *Does your turkey have a name?*

Princess Diamond Horseshoe Ridgewood.

That's lovely. Where should we put her?

On the fridge! She points to the stainless-steel appliance to my left. ***Next to the other pictures.***

I'll ask Hudson if we can hang it up.

Lucy smiles. She stirs the egg mixture I've been working on and wrinkles her nose before letting go of the whisk.

Why is it yellow? It smells funny.

Because there are eggs in it. And the smell is garlic. You like garlic. I put it on the bread you had for dinner last night.

I love bread!

I laugh. I know you do, angel.

Can I help you?

Of course. You're going to get your hands dirty.

Like in the sandbox at school? That's okay!

I smile and walk to the pantry, grabbing the tiny apron I bought for her last year. We rarely got the chance to cook together when we lived in Vegas, and I never wanted her to think she had to enjoy something just because I did.

She's been more curious here in DC, asking about what I'm putting in the meals I'm making and giving her opinion on the tastes and flavors I'm

working on.

I love it.

I roll Lucy's sleeves to her elbows and carry her to the sink so she can wash her hands. Once she dries them off, I put her back on the counter and help her coat the chicken breasts in the egg mixture.

It's so cold! She giggles and moves the chicken to another bowl with Parmesan cheese and flour. ***My fingers are freezing!***

Sometimes I wear gloves when I do this. I let her put the covered chicken on a plate and kiss the top of her head. *Great job.*

I'm a chef just like you!

I don't know why, but that makes me unbelievably proud.

We work for the next thirty minutes, coating all the chicken in Parmesan and putting the breasts in a skillet. We melt butter and garlic in a different pan and add broth, lemon juice, and pepper before pouring it over the cooked chicken and garnishing them with lemon slices.

This is one of my favorite meals to make, and it's even more fun with my daughter by my side. I like teaching her how to slice the lemons without cutting her finger and the way I clean up as I go.

We'll let the food cool, then we'll eat it with the rice I have going in the rice cooker, I tell Lucy, and she nods.

I help her to the ground and she gives Gus and Millie a pat on their heads. Footsteps echo down the hall, and they start to wag their tails.

"Holy shit. What smells so good?" Hudson drops his keys on the counter and walks around the island. "*Fuck.* Is this the lemon butter chicken I like?"

He's been busy with an away game, a home game, and a community outreach project, and I've barely seen him since the night I went out with the girls. Since the night he touched my face and made my stomach swoop low, and I'm glad he's here. I'm glad to have a few minutes with him, because I'm learning I *miss* him when he's gone for too long.

"It is." I slap his hand away when he tries to touch the plate. "Ten minutes and it'll be ready."

"Perfect timing." He turns for the sink and washes his hands. "I thought I was behind schedule, and I didn't want y'all waiting on me for lunch. Morning skate ran late because we opened practice to the public, and I got tied up signing some trading cards."

"Are all your practices open to the public?" I ask, pulling down three plates.

“No. Some teams do that, but we only open them around the holidays and at the beginning and end of the year. With Thanksgiving being the day after tomorrow, Coach was fine with people coming down and watching.” Hudson glances at the turkey Lucy drew. “What is this masterpiece?”

I tap Lucy’s shoulder, and she looks up. “*That’s what Lucy made at school today. Her name is Princess Diamond Horseshoe Ridgewood,*” I say and sign, and he nods like he’s familiar with the name. “*She wanted to know if she could hang it up on the fridge.*”

“Of course she can.” He moves a greeting card to the left and taps the spot next to two photos of Gus and Millie. “Right here will be perfect.”

I bet he’s the kind of guy who keeps every birthday and Christmas card he’s ever received. There’s probably a box of mementos somewhere in his closet. Memories from the past ten, fifteen years tucked away, and he’ll never get rid of them.

“*Hudson said you can put your art up, Luce,*” I tell her.

She jumps to her feet. She grabs her artwork and stands on her toes, trying to reach the spot Hudson designated for her, but she’s too short. He laughs and lifts her up by her middle. He puts her on his shoulder and helps her attach the construction paper with a magnet that looks like a hockey puck.

Damn my heart for skipping a beat.

“It’s like the damn Louvre in here,” he says. “I want a hundred more drawings.”

“*Hudson wants you to do more art, Luce.*”

She lights up and nods. ***I’ll make more turkeys! Can I go play with my dolls, Mommy?***

“*Only for a few minutes. The rice will be ready soon.*”

She nods again, and Hudson sets her down. She takes off down the hall, the dogs chasing after her.

“Thanks for appeasing her,” I say to Hudson when she disappears in her room.

“Appeasing her? I’m not appeasing her. I like having that on the fridge.” He glances around the kitchen, and his eyebrows wrinkle. “Makes this place look a little more welcoming.”

I open the utensil drawer and pull out three forks and three knives. “Are you around this afternoon?”

“Yeah. I’m stopping by the bakery up the road to grab a couple of pies for Thanksgiving. Emmy told me she invited y’all to her and Maverick’s place.”

Hudson pauses and rubs his jaw. “You don’t want to come?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to come. I just feel like we’d be an imposition.”

“What? No way. There are sixty people that show up, and I don’t know who some of them are.”

“That’s okay. We’ll be fine with Chinese takeout and some homemade mashed potatoes.”

“Interesting combination.”

“It’s tradition. Mashed potatoes are my favorite food. I spend every other day out of the year cooking for everyone else, so no matter what I eat on Thanksgiving, I always have to have a bowl of mashed potatoes too.”

“There will be mashed potatoes at Mav and Emmy’s, so you can keep up with your traditions, Mads.”

“You’re not going to let me say no, are you?” I ask.

“Of course you can say no.”

Lucy and I have spent the last six Thanksgivings with my parents. It’s always been a small affair: a turkey I spend all morning cooking, some sides my mom throws together—including boxed stuffing—and mashed potatoes. We sit in front of the television so my dad can watch hours of football, and then we fall asleep early.

We FaceTimed them earlier today because we couldn’t fly out due to bad weather making it across the country. Lucy showed off all her other artwork. My mom told us what they’re doing for the holiday. It was good to catch up with them, and we promised we’d talk more soon.

Maybe I’m a little lonely, because the idea of being here without Hudson suddenly sounds unenjoyable.

“Okay,” I relent, and he pumps his fist in the air. “Under one condition.”

“Anything,” he’s quick to say.

“You can bring your pies, but I’m going to make an extra dessert or two. I refuse to show up somewhere empty-handed. Or with something store-bought. Come on, Hayes. We can do better than that.”

“The team is going to love you, Madeline Galloway.”

TWENTY-TWO

MADELINE

EVERY CORNER of Maverick and Emmy's apartment is full of people.

It's loud.

It's crowded.

It's perfect.

Piper swooped in, handed me a glass of wine, and stole Lucy thirty minutes ago. When I last checked on them, she was showing my daughter Emmy's wall of framed jerseys, and I've never seen Lucy's eyes so big with wonder.

I already decided I'm going to get her skating lessons as a Christmas gift. There's no way I can get through the holiday season without her asking for more time on the ice.

"Dinner in five minutes," Maverick yells. He snaps his fingers at a redheaded guy standing near the coffee table in the living room and scowls. "Ethan, I swear to god, if you get a drop of ketchup on my rug, you're never allowed to eat here again."

"Aye, aye, Captain," the guy says with a mouth full of food.

"Ladies and kids will go first, then it's a free for all after that. Last four people to grab a plate are on cleanup duty," Maverick adds, and the dark-haired guy wearing glasses next to me groans.

"Not fair. I'm always slow," he grumbles before glancing my way. "Hi. I'm Riley. I got here late and didn't have a chance to meet you."

"Madeline." I smile. "Nice to meet you."

“You’re Hudson’s chef, right?”

“You’re the eighth person to come up to me and know who I am. I have no clue who any of you are. But, yeah. I am. That’s me.”

“Because they’re annoying as hell,” Hudson says. He flicks Riley’s ear then drapes his arm over his shoulder. “And hardly worth mentioning.”

“Wow. See if I back your ass up at the game on Saturday,” Riley says.

“You will when you find out we brought pumpkin and pecan pie, plus a pumpkin roll, apple spice cake with cream cheese icing, and sugar cookies courtesy of Madeline here. Snickerdoodles are my favorite, but I know I’m going to be a convert once I try these.”

“Whoa.” Riley gapes at me. “You made all of that from scratch?”

“I did,” I say. “Hudson’s kitchen suffered in the process, and I’m pretty sure I’m never going to get the pumpkin stains out of his quartz countertops.”

“Worth it,” Hudson says with a grin. “Everything is fucking delicious.”

“How have you not gained ten pounds?” Riley hits Hudson’s stomach, and he keels over with a moan. “You’re going to turn into a big boy soon, Hayes.”

“I’m already a big boy, Mitchy,” he tosses back, hooking his arm around Riley’s neck. “I could level you on the ice if I wanted.”

“Boys,” Lexi says, joining our conversation, and Riley stands up straight. He fixes his shirt and runs a hand through his hair. “Why the hell are you terrorizing Madeline? She’s a guest. She doesn’t want to watch you two act like idiots.”

“It’s kind of fun,” I admit.

“Come on. Let’s get our food before these heathens take it all,” Lexi teases as she leads me to the kitchen. “I’m so glad you’re here. I know it can be overwhelming at first, so feel free to tap out in the guest room down the hall if you need a few minutes to yourself.”

“Thank you.” I adjust the hem of my corduroy skirt and wave to Lucy and Piper who are loading a plate up with turkey and mashed potatoes. “Hudson said there would be a lot of people here, but I wasn’t expecting *this*. It’s packed.”

“The guys try to do team dinners once a week, and when we get to the holidays, it’s a whole production. It’s nice of Maverick and Emmy to include everyone. I’ve been the person sitting in a hotel room alone on Thanksgiving wishing I could be surrounded by loved ones. This side of things is way more fun.”

“How long have you worked for the Stars?”

“I’ve only been with them a couple years. I was with an AHL team in Oklahoma before coming to DC. Getting promoted to head athletic trainer is a recent development, but I’ve put in a lot of time to get here.”

“I don’t doubt it. It’s amazing what the guys put their bodies through night after night. Keeping them healthy must be a hell of a feat.”

“Some more than others.” Lexi hands me a silverware roll-up and a plate. “Make sure to get a slice of the garlic bread. Riley made it, and it’s surprisingly good.”

“He seems like a nice guy.” I add salad and a pour of dressing to my plate then move on to the bread and rolls. “He doesn’t wear glasses when he plays, does he?”

“This is the first time I’ve seen him in glasses.” She glances over her shoulder, and I wonder who she’s looking for. “I had no idea he was a contact lens guy.”

I lose Lexi in the dessert line and wander over to find a spot in the dining room. Lucy is next to me at the long table that’s been set up, with Piper and Liam on her other side. She keeps giggling at the cat photos Liam shows her on his phone, and his smile gets bigger and bigger every time she asks him to swipe to a new picture.

“Mind if I sit here?” Hudson asks, pointing at the seat to my right.

“I wouldn’t mind at all. Get comfortable, Bombshell.”

He laughs and folds his large body into the seat. His knee presses against mine under the table, and he keeps it there while he gets settled. “How does everything taste so far?”

“Delicious. How much of this is homemade?” I ask around a bite of turkey.

“Your desserts, and that’s it.”

“Lexi said Riley made the garlic bread.”

“Okay. That’s two things. Everyone relied on store-bought stuff, dishes they ordered from restaurants, or their chefs made it.”

I look around the room that’s full of laughter and energy. Maverick and Emmy are at the head of the table, smiling at each other in a secret way none of us are privy to. Eight other players take up the opposite side of the table, and all of them are eating like their lives depend on it.

“Did anyone else bring their chef? I met most of the players.”

“No,” Hudson says. “But I consider you more than that. We’re friends

now, don't you think?"

"Yeah." I watch him wipe his thumb—the same thumb that touched my cheek—on his napkin. Heat inundates my body, and I take a sip of my water. "I do."

"Huh." His dimple pops when he smiles. He scoots an inch closer to the table, and, inadvertently, me. "You don't sound too sure. Guess I need to do a better job at showing you you're not just an employee. That I appreciate you."

I'm trying to imagine a version of him that's better than who he is right now, and I'm coming up short.

How do you improve on the man who lets me and my daughter take over his condo? How do you top the guy who watches her so I can spend time with the women I'm becoming close with and treats her with respect and kindness? Is there another person out there who will clean up their dishes late at night, even though they're exhausted?

He's not just a friend.

I don't know how he's done it, but in the two months I've known him, he's made himself one of my *best* friends, and I'm happier because of it.

"You do plenty," I say. "I'm glad I get to be here. With your teammates. With Lucy. With you. Thank you for saying I should come."

His smile grows, and he taps the spot on the table between us. "I'm glad you're here too."

"Listen up, everyone." Maverick scoots back in his chair and stands. "You all know what time it is."

"Oh, no," I whisper to Hudson. "Is this a human sacrifice thing? Do you all drink blood and that's why you're so fast on the ice?"

"You should come to book club," he whispers back. "Grant would love to chat your ear off about dark romances."

I laugh and scoop Lucy into my lap. I want her close so I can interpret for her, even if it's going to be difficult for me to keep up with whatever speech Maverick is about to give.

The potatoes were so good, Mommy.

Weren't they? I could've had a whole plate.

"We're going to share what we're thankful for," Maverick says, and when he catches me interpreting for Lucy, he slows down. "It can be a person. A thing. An experience. Anything that's made you happy this year, and since I'm the best player at the table, I'm going to kick us off."

Lucy giggles. ***I think he's the best, but I like Hudson and Liam too!***
They're going to be very happy to know they're your favorites.

"Feels like we should vote on that title," Ethan calls out, and the guy next to him—Grant, I think—nods.

"Yeah. How are we defining *best*, Cap? Because you got smoked in our three-on-three scrimmage at morning skate yesterday," he chimes in.

"Ten suicides tomorrow, Everett," Maverick draws out, and everyone laughs. "I know you're all sick of hearing me say it, but I'm thankful for my Emmy girl. Through the good. The bad. You're always by my side, and I can't believe I get to do life with you. This year has tested the heck out of us, but I love you more than I did yesterday, and I'm going to love you even more tomorrow. Thank you for choosing me, baby. You know I'm always going to choose you." He sits and scoots his chair closer to Emmy, and it takes everything in me not to audibly swoon.

Do they love each other, Mommy? Lucy asks, and I nod.

Very much, I tell her.

Do you love anyone like that?

Just you, peanut, and that's more than enough.

It's funny.

I've been married.

I've been deeply in love.

But I've never seen anyone, not even my ex-husband when we were at our happiest, look at someone the way Maverick looks at Emmy.

It's like she's made of shooting stars and the brightest light in the sky. It's beautiful, and for one blissful, optimistic moment, I can't help but wonder if I'll ever find something close that.

I can't help but *want* to find something like that.

Dating terrifies the hell out of me, because I know what happens on the other side. I know all about the tears and the pain and the stolen moments you can't get back.

Add in Lucy, and it's scary as shit.

I have no clue how I'd navigate introducing someone new to my daughter.

Is there anyone out there who is worthy of being in her life? Who will show up for her like I show up for her, even though she's not theirs?

But seeing that joy radiating off of Maverick and Emmy... I think if I ever *do* feel like putting myself out there again, it would only be for a man

who loves me wholly and deeply. With their entire soul, like we're destined in the stars and I'm the only one in the world.

Everyone is going to tell us what they're thankful for, Luce. You get to answer too.

I already know what I'm thankful for! She wiggles in my lap. ***It's a surprise.***

I can't wait to find out.

We go around the room, and my expectations were low for what the guys would be thankful for. I was waiting for superficial answers like OnlyFans or tight skirts, but every piece of gratitude they share is thoughtful and deep.

It's obvious these men are more than just hockey players. They exist outside their uniform and the pucks they hit, and it makes me smile.

When it gets to be Lucy's turn, I expect everyone to go on with their conversations and ignore the child at the table who doesn't communicate like they do.

Except... they don't.

They smile at her, giving her their full attention, and I'm certain my heart is close to exploding out of my chest when Hudson gives my thigh a gentle squeeze.

"It's your turn, sweetheart. What are you thankful for?" I ask. *"What made you happy this year?"*

Hudson's doggies, she answers, and I share that with the group to enthusiastic laughter.

"I'd pick the dogs over Hudson too," Maverick says.

Lucy taps her cheek, deep in thought, before lighting up. ***You. You're the best mommy in the world.***

"Thank you angel. I'm thankful for you too. You're the best Lucy in the world," I say and sign, and Liam hands Piper a napkin to dab her eyes.

"It's true. You're an unbelievable parent, Madeline," Hudson says to me softly. There's a twist to his words. A hint of sadness, right there beneath the surface. "Can you tell Lucy moms are the best? And she's very lucky to have you?"

Riley clamps a hand on Hudson's shoulder. I'm not sure of the significance, but I nod. I explain to Lucy what he said, and she giggles.

I'm the lucky one, Mommy.

"Your turn, Madeline," Piper tells me, and I forgot I haven't shared yet.

"Let's see. I'm thankful for the best daughter in the world. I'm also

thankful for fresh starts. For having a soft spot to land when I mess up, and being welcomed into a family that's already full, but makes room for me at the table," I say and sign, and Lucy kisses my cheek.

"Damn. Those were good. I'm thankful for the people who aren't here but should be. I'm thankful for good health." Hudson drums his fingers on the table, then looks directly at me. "Most importantly, I'm thankful for strangers who turn into friends."

"Friends," I repeat, and from him, it's a special word.

TWENTY-THREE HUDSON

OUR FOUR-GAME WIN streak is in jeopardy of being broken tonight.

We're getting our asses handed to us by the Orlando Hurricanes, and we've played like shit since the puck dropped.

It doesn't help that the referees keep sending us to the sin bin for questionable penalties, and it feels like we're one play away from the game getting out of control.

To add insult to injury, Coach earned a game misconduct for screaming at the refs after two missed tripping calls. He refused to leave the box for five minutes before being escorted to the locker room by arena security.

Not even our faithful hometown crowd can help revive us. Being down 4-1 with five minutes left in the third period, we'd need a miracle to get out of here with a win.

Things aren't looking good.

"Fucking asshats," Maverick yells from the bench when Grant gets tangled up with an Orlando player. "This is fucking *bullshit*."

"We've got a damn target on our back. The worst team in the league beating the defending Stanley Cup champions? C'mon. That shit is fuel to the fire." I take a sip of Body Armor and hand the bottle back to our equipment manager. "Gotta keep our chins up for five more minutes. That's it."

"If I don't wind up in jail at the end of this, it'll be a miracle," Mav grumbles, and we tumble onto the ice in unison for a line switch.

Both our offense and defense have been stagnant all night. Each shot we

take is an inch wide. Each one of Liam's attempted saves is a half second too late. He broke his stick during intermission, and I know he's pissed at himself for giving up so many goals when he leads the league in save percentage.

"Hayes," Riley calls out. "All yours."

He passes me the puck after scooping up a rebound. The rest of our teammates are still behind our net and throwing an extra elbow when they shouldn't be. They're starting shit because tempers are high, and I take advantage of the open ice. I head for our opponent's goal, refusing to go down without some sort of a fucking fight.

When my mom was around, she used to tease me.

She said I was a giver, not a taker, because I've never really cared about scoring. Some guys want to be the skating leaders with the most points, but that doesn't mean anything to me. I prefer assisting. Passing to someone who can sink a pretty slap shot like it's an easy Sunday morning walk.

It's almost like I can hear her whispering at me to take the shot for once. She's urging me to charge forward, and after a quick glance up at the rafters, I grin as I pass center ice.

The Orlando player who just emerged from the penalty box spots me coming. He takes off in my direction, but he never bothers to track the puck. He's only paying attention to *me*, and there's a scary look in his eye.

I expect him to stop. I expect him to reach out his stick and deflect the breakaway. I expect him to force me left, away and around the goal instead of straight on at the crease. It's a typical defensive play, one I've practiced thousands of times. It's what I would do if I was in his position, but he does none of those things.

Instead, he's leaning forward, pivoting his body, and turning his shoulder. He's moving faster. One minute I'm on my skates, and the next I'm airborne.

A searing pain shoots up my arm as I flail mid-air. A yell works its way from my mouth. In an effort to protect my head and wrists as I come down, I land on my side.

The ice is cold beneath me. There's an excruciating throb in my arm. Everything hurts, and I lie motionless, afraid to move out of fear I broke a bone.

Or worse.

Blinking my eyes open, I see our Stanley Cup Champions banner hanging in the corner of the arena. I hear whistles being blown and what sounds like a scream from somewhere behind me.

You're okay, I tell myself. You're conscious. You're breathing. That's enough.

"Hey. Hey." Lexi appears at my side, and it's never a good sign when she's on the ice. "Talk to me, Hudson. What hurts?"

"My arm." I grimace, holding back the string of curses I want to yell out. "My right shoulder."

"What about your spine? Your head? Can you wiggle your toes?"

"Let me try," I grit out, and the relief is sweet when all five of my toes on both feet curl and release like they should. "I can move my toes."

"Can you tell me your name? Where you are?"

"Hudson Hayes. In the middle of a shitty hockey game where we're getting beat by people from fucking *Florida*."

Lexi smiles and carefully takes off my helmet. "Grant's going to be mad you said that."

"What the hell happened?"

"A cheap shot by that dickbag Davidson." She moves her hand to my chest and stays there while I take a couple of deep breaths. Bending over me, she pokes my back, and I hiss when she drums her fingers against my shoulder. "No bones are protruding. I don't think it's broken, but you're looking at a bad bruise and probably riding the bench for a game or two. I want to get your gear off so I can take a better look and run you through some stretches. You're done for the night."

"What? I'm fine. I can —"

"Say that without looking like you're going to cry, and I'll let you stay in," she challenges, but I can't. It hurts too damn bad, and I know she's right. "Do you want me to get you a stretcher?"

"Absolutely fucking not." I let my eyes close briefly. "Help me sit up, and I'll be good to skate off on my own." I use my left hand to push myself up. The crowd cheers, and I give them a small wave. I turn my neck, noticing gloves strewn across the ice. Sticks are everywhere, and an unattended helmet that isn't mine sits right over the logo. None of my teammates are around me like they normally would be after an injury, and I can't help but laugh. "Hell. Who started it?"

"Who do you think?" Lexi asks. "Maverick didn't like the hit you took. No one did. Even Liam got involved. Pretty sure we're going to finish the game with our fourth line because of penalties."

"Was the hit that bad?"

“It was intentional. You had the puck, sure, but the douche made no effort to go for the puck. On a scale of one to ten, I’d say it was probably an eight.”

“Not sure there are guys out there who are more loyal than ours.” Taking a deep breath, I push myself onto my knees and slowly stand. “You’re going to put me through hell in the trainers’ room, aren’t you?”

“You bet your ass I am, Hayes. Icing. PEMF therapy. You’ll be fine in a few days after I’m finished with you.”

“We’re lucky to have you in DC, Lex. You’re the best of the best.”

She blushes and moves to my other side so she can loop her arm through my uninjured one. I make sure to skate slow so she doesn’t fall, and I wave at the crowd again.

“Hey.” Maverick pulls up to my side. “You okay, man?”

“Hurts like hell, but I’ll be all right.” I look at his split lip and the bruise already forming on his cheek. The front of his jersey is bright red from blood, and I laugh. “Christ, Mavvy. Are *you* okay?”

“You should see the other guy.” His grin shows off dried blood on his teeth. “Fucked him up real good.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“Course I fucking did.”

“Shitty play by the Hurricanes’ player.” Riley skates backward next to us. Even he lost his gloves, and I can’t remember the last time he was in a fight. “I hope the league suspends his ass.”

“Y’all close out this game,” I tell them. “Tomorrow will be better, and I’m going to be fine.”

“Such a selfless guy.” Maverick kisses my cheek, and I do my best to shove him away. “Take care of yourself, Huddy. I don’t like skating without you.”

The rest of the team gives me a pat on my unhurt shoulder as I move toward the tunnel. Our assistant head coach checks in with me, and when I make it off the ice, Lexi and I trudge to the athletic trainers’ room.

I strip out of my gear until I’m left in compression shorts and hop on the table. She takes me through a series of stretching exercises, tests my range of motion, and numbs the pain with an ice wrap. An hour after the rest of the boys leave, I’m glad to learn nothing is sprained or broken.

I’m just thoroughly beat up.

With a couple of over-the-counter pain killers in my system and my arm in a sling that makes driving home nearly impossible, I finally unlock the

door to my condo. I groan when I bend down to take off my shoes. I rest my forehead against the wall and squeeze my hand into a fist, tired and in pain.

When I got banged up in high school games, my mom was there to help clean me up. She never coddled me, but she did wipe away the blood. She plugged in the heating pad and made me laugh. Seeing her made me feel better.

I regret all the times I tried to shrug her off when I was younger. When I tried to pull away and tell her I was fine. When I acted like I was big and tough and cool, because I really fucking wish she was here right now to take care of me.

I sigh and pull away from the wall. It takes me longer than usual to reach the kitchen, and when I do, I find Madeline there.

She's bent over the sink with curved shoulders, and the sight causes me to do a double-take.

"Hey," I call out. "Are you okay?"

When she turns to look at me, her cheeks are streaked with mascara, and I catch the bloodied paper towel wrapped around her hand. I move to her as quick as I can, registering the knife on the counter and pushing it out of the way.

"What happened?" I look around the room then back at her. "Did someone do this to you?"

"That damn knife is the culprit. I was cutting some onions for breakfast tomorrow. Trying to get ahead of the game, you know?" Madeline huffs out a sigh. "My grip slipped. I sliced my finger instead of the onion, and I made a mess."

"What do you need?" I turn on the sink with my left hand and wet a stack of paper towels. "Do you need to go to the emergency room? What about stitches?"

"It's not that deep. I'm just trying to get it to stop bleeding." She holds her hand above her head. Her eyes land on the temporary sling around my shoulder, and she gasps. "Oh my god. What the hell happened to *you*?"

"Bad hit in the game. It's not broken. Just bruised."

"Wow." Madeline laughs. "What a pair we make."

"Between the two of us, we almost have a healthy human. Let's get you bandaged up. I have a first aid kit in my bathroom."

"I'm okay. Really. It'll stop bleeding soon."

"That wasn't up for debate, Madeline," I say, and when I turn and head

for my bedroom, I'm glad to hear her following me.

"Is your head okay?" she asks. "That must've been some hit if you're wearing a sling."

"I hurt like hell, but Lexi told me I'll be okay in a few days." I push open the door with my hip and flip on the bathroom light. "Take a seat."

"I don't get a tour of your room?" Madeline sits cross-legged on the closed toilet seat. "I saw a headboard out there."

"Do most people not have a headboard?"

"I've heard rumors about men putting pillows on the floor and calling it a mattress. Sheets and a headboard are impressive, yes."

"The bar sure is low." I squat and open the cabinet under the sink. I rifle through the toilet paper and electric razors, finding the first aid kit and setting it on the vanity. "Antibiotic ointment first, then a bandage. I'll put some gauze on it after to hold everything in place."

"This isn't your first time patching someone up, is it?" Madeline asks.

"I'm a hockey player, Mads. I've seen lots of injuries."

"I'm guessing you're not squeamish."

"Nope. Blood doesn't faze me." I put on a glove from the kit and move the blood-soaked paper towel away from her finger. When I see the cut, I grimace. "Shit, Madeline. This is deep."

"Not deep enough to warrant stitches. I've had worse."

I don't like the sound of that one bit, but I toss the paper towel in the trash can and open the tube of Neosporin. "Can you wash your hands for me?"

She leans over and turns on the faucet, using soap and water to clean the wound. I'm impressed when she doesn't flinch. "You're up, doc."

I laugh and squeeze out some of the ointment. Dabbing it on the cut, I sigh in relief when I can tell she's right about not needing stitches. I toss the tube back on the vanity and peel open a Band-Aid.

"Did you and Lucy have a good night?" I ask.

"Yeah." Madeline smiles at the mention of her daughter, just like she always does. "We did some homework, then we made cookies for Lucy's class. I left you a couple in a bag on the kitchen counter. I figured it could be a consolation prize after a rough game." She pauses and glances up at me. "We watched the first period, and it wasn't pretty. I'm sorry you all had a bad night."

"It's part of the sport, unfortunately. It sucks, but it doesn't do us any good to dwell on it. What kind of cookies did you make?"

“Snickerdoodle. You, um, mentioned they were your favorite on Thanksgiving, so I wanted to give them a try. I think they turned out okay, but you’ll have to be the judge.”

“Delicious dinners. My favorite cookies. You’re too good to me.” My tongue sneaks between my teeth as I wrap the bandage around her finger. She winces in pain, and I gently smooth over the area with my thumb. “Almost done. You’re doing so well.”

She inhales sharply. Her throat bobs, and her eyes meet mine. I’m afraid I’ve hurt her even more, but then she whispers, “Thank you for doing this for me,” and all is right in the world.

“Of course,” I rasp. My head feels like it’s swimming. The adrenaline from the game is wearing off. The injury is catching up to me, and seeing her hurting isn’t making things any better. There’s this... this *need* pulsing through me. It’s something I’ve never experienced before. I want to make sure she’s okay. I want to help and take care of her. “Last step.”

“If hockey doesn’t pan out, you might have a future in medicine.”

“Might be a few years late with that one, and I doubt all my patients would be as good as you.” I unravel a generous wad of gauze and rip it with my teeth while Madeline watches me. “Are you doing okay?”

“Yes. Are *you* doing okay?”

“Honestly? No. I could use some more drugs. Everything hurts. This is the worst I’ve been injured since—” I roll my lips together and wrap the gauze around her finger and across her palm so the bandage stays in place. I lift her wrist and check to make sure everything is secure before setting her hand on her thigh. “I’ll be okay. That’s the best I can do with putting you back together.”

“It already feels so much better.” Madeline pauses and looks up at me. “Will you please let me take care of you like you took care of me? You’re in pain, Hudson, and I’m sure you exacerbated it by patching me up. What can I do?”

The idea of someone else taking care of me like Mom did makes me instantly feel better. My mouth curves into a smile. “Okay,” I say. “I could use the help.”

TWENTY-FOUR HUDSON

ACCEPTING Madeline's offer snaps her into gear.

She springs to her feet and tosses all the items from the first aid kit back in the plastic box. She throws away the Band-Aid wrapper and moves around me.

"Tell me what I can do," she says.

"I have limited movement with this sling." I try to lift my arm, but I end up wincing in pain. "I promise this isn't a line, but I, ah, could use some help getting out of this suit. My shirt more specifically. And there are pain meds in the kitchen cabinet. I could use two of those and a glass of water so I can take them in a few hours."

"Are you sure you don't use that suit line regularly?" Madeline smiles. "It was very smooth, Hayes."

"First time, if you can believe it." I watch her unbuckle the sling and ease it away from my shoulder and arm. "Has Lucy ever broken a bone?"

"No. She sprained her ankle after a rough game of recess kickball when she was in kindergarten, but she recovered just fine. This is my first time helping with a big injury."

"I'm honored I'm your first."

"On a scale of one to ten, how badly are you hurting right now?" she asks.

"A seven? Eight? I'm getting tired. That's amplifying the pain, but I hurt less than I did after the initial hit. Guess that's encouraging."

“Can you straighten your arm?”

“No, so we’re going to have to get creative with my stripping. You can cut the jacket if you need to,” I tell her.

“Your suit looks like it cost a lot of money. I’m not going to cut it.”

“I can buy a new one.”

Madeline hums and easily takes off the left side of my jacket. She moves to my right arm and gently tugs on the end of my sleeve, successfully removing the clothing and dropping it to the floor. “Step one is done.”

“Next up are a ton of buttons.”

“It’s a shame you didn’t show up to the arena shirtless tonight.” She starts at the top of my shirt, unfastening the buttons one by one. “Would’ve solved a lot of your problems.”

I grip the vanity when she has to give the cuff of my shirt a firm yank to slip it over my wrist. “I’ll keep that in mind for my next game,” I grit out.

“*Shit*. That was too rough of me. I’m sorry I’m hurting you.”

“It’s okay.” I blow out a breath when the air hits my bare skin. “It had to be done.”

“Hudson.” Madeline’s fingers graze my right shoulder. They dance down my arm then back up to my collarbone, and the featherlight touch is like a balm on the ache. “This is a nasty mark. It’s definitely going to bruise.”

“Not pretty, is it?” I glance down at the souvenir courtesy of my dickbag opponent. “I’m sure it’ll be worse tomorrow.”

“Does your body always look this banged up?”

“No. I mean, I’m sore after games, but it’s from exerting myself. I don’t normally have battle wounds besides the occasional cut or scrape. Tonight is an exception.”

“I would’ve decked the guy if I were you,” she says under her breath, and I laugh. “What? I’m serious.”

“Fighting is one of the reasons people watch hockey. He wasn’t going to just let me score. The hit was aggressive, yeah, but he was doing his job.”

“Would *you* have hit someone that hard?”

“No.” I think about the time I accidentally high stuck an opponent. He had to leave the game to get stitches, and I felt terrible for weeks. “It happens, unfortunately.”

Madeline doesn’t say anything else on the matter. She takes a step back, eyes dropping to my pants. “Do you need help with those?”

“Oh. Um.” I blush and clear my throat. “It’s only one button. I think I can

get them.”

“Right. Sorry. I didn’t mean to be presumptuous.”

“You aren’t,” I hurry to say. “Thanks for the offer. I have some pajama pants in my dresser. Top drawer. Could you grab me a pair?”

“Any preference?” She goes from the bathroom to my room, and I do my best to make quick work of the button of my pants and the zipper. The thought of her touching me in that way makes my head spin even more than it already is, and I want to speed this up. “Plaid? Navy? Do these have unicorns on them?”

“You can thank my teammates for those.” I stare at my reflection in the mirror and frown when I get a good look at the aftermath from the hit. It’s not pretty, and it makes sense why I’m ready for some more pain medicine. “We did movie night at an away game last season. Everyone had to bring a ridiculous pair of pajama bottoms for a teammate. Maverick thought he was being cute when he handed me those. I gave him ones with pickles on them, so I got the last laugh.”

“You know that’s the pair you’re getting, right?” Madeline calls out.

“I would’ve been disappointed otherwise.”

She walks back into the bathroom. Her eyes drop to my briefs, but they don’t linger there for very long. She moves her attention to my face and offers me a wide smile. “Here you go.”

“Mind if I hold you while I put them on?”

“Use my shoulder.” She bends over and taps my left leg. I step into the first side, accidentally pulling her hair when I almost topple to the side. “Easy there, hockey guy.”

“Sorry. My balance is off. Did I hurt you?”

“Lucy pulled my hair much harder when she was younger. I’ll survive.” Madeline touches my right thigh. She tips her head back to look at me with wide eyes. “You have a *thigh tattoo*?”

I grin and reach down, dragging my thumb over the collection of flowers inked above my knee. There’s a rose and a hibiscus. A lily and a red chrysanthemum. They all form a heart bouquet that takes up a six-inch space on my skin. “I do.”

“Can I... would it be okay if I touched it?”

“Yeah,” I rasp, closing my eyes when her nails trace over the design. “Do you like it?”

“I love it. It’s so intricate. And the colors are gorgeous. What do the

numbers mean?”

“It’s the day my life changed.”

I don’t mention it, but they mark the last time I held Mom’s hand. It’s the last time I told her I loved her. It was the last time she was in pain, and it didn’t feel right to get the tattoo without including that pivotal date with it.

Flowers were Mom’s thing. She watched the social media channels of some gardening guy down in Florida and learned how to grow her own garden out in the backyard. I’d come home during the summer and see her hands covered in dirt while she planted the new seeds she picked up at the farmer’s market. There was always a vase on the coffee table in the living room, a different bouquet every week.

After she passed, I wanted to find a way to carry her with me. I wanted her at every game—even the ones I lost. If she were here, she’d probably give me a damn earful for permanently marking up my skin, but this seems like the perfect way to honor her.

“It’s beautiful, Hudson. I’m not glad you got hurt, but I’m glad I got to see this.” Madeline touches the petal on the rose one more time and gives me a small smile. I don’t know why, but the way her mouth curves takes away some of the pain I’m holding. “Who knew you were hiding that underneath your clothes?”

“I’m full of surprises.” I step into the second pant leg and tug on the waistband, pulling the pajama bottoms up. “There we go. Thanks for the assist, Galloway.”

“Happy to help. You said the medicine was in the kitchen?”

“There should be some Advil to the left of the sink. Could you also grab me a bag of ice? I’m going to try to fall asleep with it on my shoulder.”

“Get comfortable in your bed. I’ll be right back,” she says, heading for the kitchen.

I make sure the bathroom is cleaned up and grab my clothes off the floor with my left hand. I drop them in the laundry basket then pull back the sheets, groaning as my head sinks against the pillows.

Exhaustion hits me, and it’s hard to keep my eyes open. Madeline’s soft footsteps approach my room, and I smile when she’s by my side.

“Your gauze is still good, right?” I ask.

“Yeah. Hasn’t budged.” She sets a glass of water on my nightstand and puts the pill bottle next to it. “I brought a thin dish towel for the ice so you don’t get too cold.”

“Smart. I’m probably going to pass out the second I close my eyes, but I don’t want to be uncomfortable.”

Madeline sits on the edge of the bed. She wraps the plastic bag of ice with a white towel and sets it on my right shoulder. “How’s that?”

“Perfect.” I sigh, relaxing for the first time since the injury. “Thanks for your help. Are you sure your finger is okay?”

“Totally fine. Accidents like that happen in restaurants all the time. Besides.” She tosses a wry grin my way. “I had the best caretaker.”

“I don’t know about *best*.”

“Fine. A decent caretaker.”

“Wow. Downgraded from best to decent? You’re ruthless.”

She laughs and brushes a piece of hair away from my forehead. “Do you need anything else?”

Stay here with me.

Your touch soothes me.

Every minute you’re around, I feel like the part of myself that’s been broken for years is healing.

“I’m good. You’ve done more than enough, Mads. Your service is much appreciated, but you should get some sleep,” I say, yawning at the end. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“If the pain gets worse in the middle of the night, knock on the wall or yell. I don’t want to see you wincing at breakfast and find out I could’ve done something to help,” she says.

“Same for you. If you need another Band-Aid or fresh gauze, you know where I am.”

“Yeah. I do.” Madeline stands and gives me one last look before turning off my lamp. “Good night, Hudson.”

“Night, Mads,” I say, wishing I could’ve found a way to make her stay.

TWENTY-FIVE

HUDSON

I CAN'T SLEEP.

My shoulder is fucking killing me.

I can't get comfortable in bed, and the second round of pain medicine hasn't helped the ache.

Groaning, I throw the sheets off my legs. Gus and Millie don't budge from the end of the bed when I climb off the mattress and stand, and I'm jealous of the cute fuckers.

I roll my arm back, seeing how much movement my body has. My muscles are stiff as hell, and I know the exercises Lexi is going to put me through at practice in the morning are going to make me hurt even more.

Grabbing a Stars sweatshirt, I slowly pull the hoodie over my head and open the door out to the balcony. Some fresh air sounds nice, even if the December air is biting cold, and I shiver when I look out at the quiet city.

"Can't sleep?" a soft voice asks from a few feet away, and I jump.

"Holy shit." I put my hand over my heart and turn to find Madeline smiling my way. "You scared the hell out of me. Are you a fucking ninja?"

"To be fair, you didn't look around when you came out here. *You* startled *me*, hockey guy."

"My sincerest apologies, KG. I thought I'd be the only one wide awake at three in the morning."

"I couldn't sleep." She pulls on the strands of her robe and folds her arms across her chest. Her hair is up in a messy bun, and a few rogue dark brown

pieces fall out of the knot on top of her head. Her socks are pink, and I spy a pair of plaid pajama pants under her robe. “Would you mind some company?”

“Course I wouldn’t mind. This is shared space.”

“I didn’t see your name anywhere, but I wanted to make sure.”

“Ah. You should’ve looked harder.” I tap my knuckles on the metal ledge. “Some of the guys and I added our signatures when I bought the place.”

“I don’t believe you.” Madeline bends down, tilting her head so she can see under the railing. “No shit.”

“I wouldn’t lie about something like that.”

“Someone could saw this off and sell it for a lot of money.”

“Talk about a safety hazard. And you think my teammates and I are more famous than we probably are.”

She laughs and shuffles backward so she can rest her elbows on the railing, leaning against it. When she looks at me, she frowns. “Is your shoulder still hurting?”

“Yeah.” I drag a loveseat over to us with my one good arm and sit. “I’ve taken some hits in the past, but this one was brutal.”

“Are you ever scared when you’re playing?”

“No.” I flex my fingers and roll my wrist. “I know accidents happen. Add in the fact we play on blades, and that’s another element of safety. But I trust the guys in the league to not do stupid shit. I trust our medical staff to take care of me if something does go wrong. Tonight was a one off because the guy is a dick.”

“A total dick,” Madeline agrees, and I smile.

“How’s your hand?”

“Better. I wasn’t kidding when I said I’ve had worse.”

“Worse than *that*? There was blood on my counter.”

“Like, a drop. It’s not going to scar, and I’ll be able to hold a knife correctly tomorrow. And if not, I guess you’ll be eating some of my fingertip with breakfast.”

“Kinky. Scrambled eggs always taste better with pieces of human in them.”

“Now I never want to eat again.” It’s her turn to laugh, and she giggles before letting out a sigh. “I know it’s part of your job, but I’m sorry you got hurt. That can’t be very fun for your body.”

“What are you talking about? Getting slammed into things for the last twenty-five years is a hell of a time. At least I still have all my teeth.” I grin at her. “Is your hand keeping you up? Is it Lucy?”

“She was out like a light when I put her to bed around eight. They had a book fair at school yesterday, and the excitement wore her out.” Madeline pauses. “There are some things on my mind.”

“If you want to talk about it, I know a guy.”

“I need a minute,” she says.

“Sure. Of course.”

“Stay there.”

She leaves through the sliding glass door that leads to her bedroom, and I glance at the sky while I wait for her to come back.

When she returns a few minutes later, she’s armed with with a big blanket, two glasses of milk, and a plate stacked with cookies. I don’t know how she’s holding everything.

I scoot over so there’s room for her on the bench. When she’s sitting, I take the blanket from her and spread it out over our laps.

“This is a serious operation,” I say.

“It’s a cookie conversation. Well, it’s more like a tequila conversation, but getting drunk at three in the morning when it’s freezing outside sounds like the start of a murder mystery.”

“I don’t have a lot of mobility in my arm. They wouldn’t be able to frame me.”

“You and I both know you don’t have a murderous bone in your body.” Madeline shifts her position until our arms touch. She hands me a glass of milk and smiles. “There. Much better.”

“I allowed to eat before you start talking?”

“Of course. I’m an instant gratification kind of girl.”

She passes me the plate of perfectly baked cookies, and I’m in awe. They look like they were made in a high-end bakery, not my kitchen.

I wonder when I’ll stop being impressed by what Madeline creates.

I take a bite, and an embarrassing sound leaves my throat. The cookie is soft and gooey and full of cinnamon. My shoulders sag, and I’d be shocked if I didn’t have hearts in my eyes.

“That—” I lick my lips. I might lick my fingers next. Fuck manners. “Is the best cookie—the best bite of *food*—I’ve ever eaten.”

“It is not.”

“I swear to god, Madeline. Bury me in a casket of these, because nothing will ever taste this good again.”

“That’ll be fun to explain to the funeral home.” She takes a bite of her own cookie, and her smile fades. “Lucy’s dad liked a photo on my Instagram.”

My hand freezes halfway to the plate on its way to a second Snickerdoodle. I know I need to be careful with how this conversation goes, because it’s the first piece of information Madeline’s offered up about her ex besides the fact that he’s not in the picture.

“Is that not something he normally does?” I ask.

“No. I haven’t talked to him in six years.”

“Hang on.” I turn my body to face her. “*Six years?*”

“That’s not even the worst part of the story.”

“It gets fucking *worse?*”

“My ex and I met when he came into my restaurant while he was on a business trip to Ohio. I had to talk to someone at his table about a food allergy, and he caught me eye. We hit it off, but we didn’t exchange numbers. I thought it was the last time I’d see him. Two months later, he came back, asked me out, and we started dating. It was long distance at first, but I moved to Vegas to be with him about a year into our relationship.” She stops to take a sip of her milk, and I’m on the edge of my seat—literally. “We got married, and we were so happy. Lucy came into the world, and things went downhill. Remember how I told you we learned she’s deaf? My ex, Clark, didn’t take the news well.”

“*Clark?* Let me fucking guess: he’s in banking or finance or some other cushy job like that.”

“Investment banking, actually,” she says, and there’s a hint of a smile behind her words. “After we learned about Lucy’s diagnosis, he kept finding excuses not to be around. He skipped a doctor’s appointment and started staying out late.” She plays with the sleeve of her robe, her voice dropping to soft and sad. “A month after she was born, I came home to divorce papers on the kitchen table. Child support gets deposited in an account once a month, but I don’t use it. I haven’t heard from him since he walked out on us. Until tonight.”

I swear the earth stops spinning. She’s still talking, but I’m not listening because my vision turns red. My blood boils, and I’m tempted to throw a chair off the balcony. To break a window—or someone’s neck.

I know violence isn't the answer. My parents always taught me to solve my problems with my words, not my fists. The sport I play is inherently rough, but I've only been in one fight in my playing career.

The dude I hit—who is the scum of the earth—is an angel compared to Madeline's ex-husband, and I want to meet this guy for myself. I want to tell him what he's missed out on, how beautiful Madeline is, how wonderful Lucy is, and how much joy they bring to my life.

But really, I want to make him *hurt*.

I want to make him hurt the way he hurt them, and I've never felt so... protective of someone before. Like I want to defend them, but since Lucy and Madeline walked through my door, I think it's part of my job now.

A responsibility I'm glad to accept.

"Hudson?" Madeline puts her hand on my arm. My eyes snap to where she's touching me. "What are you thinking about?"

"I'm having a hard time processing what you told me. I can't imagine a world where a man would leave his wife and daughter because she..." I don't even want to say the words. I can't comprehend being that cold. As if Lucy's deafness is her entire personality when, really, it's a tiny part of who she is as a person. "I fucking *hate* him."

"Join the club. I can make us shirts if you want," she teases, but it doesn't help to lighten my mood. "I'm okay, Hudson. Everything in my life has worked out exactly as it should. I'm happy. Lucy is happy, and that's the most important thing."

"Is this why you're not a romantic? Because of what happened in your past?" I ask, and she nods.

"It's so cliché, but my divorce ruined love and romance and relationships for me. We said vows that evidently didn't mean anything. It makes me not want to try again, because what's the point?"

I hum, understanding her reasoning. I've been like that since Mom passed away: what's the point of loving someone if they're eventually going to leave you?

But then I think of all the good parts of love—the parts where you feel complete. Where everything makes sense in the world. And it makes me want to try again.

"What—" I break off another piece of cookie. These are going to get me in trouble if I'm not careful. "What photo did he like?"

"Oh." Madeline chuckles. "I have a personal account that's private. He

doesn't follow me there. I have a separate account where I'll share dishes I've made recently. When I was in Vegas, I shared CARVD's weekly menu as well. I haven't been active on it the last few months, but I opened it up today. He liked an old post showing off a casserole I love to make. I'm being incredibly conceited and pretending the like was by a woman he's dating who's trying to dig up dirt on me."

"He follows your chef page?"

"He did when we were married, and I guess he still does. I bet he forgot to unfollow me. He never used to use social media all that much."

"Must be some casserole." I laugh. "And two Instagrams, huh? I'm going to have to hunt them down. What kind of stuff do you post on your personal one?"

"I don't use it all that much either, but it's mostly photos of Lucy. There's one on there from a year ago that I love. I snapped it without thinking about it. It's Lucy from behind—in a Stars shirt, actually. At the game you all played in Vegas."

I wonder if I saw Madeline in the crowd that night. I wonder if our eyes met during a timeout or before the game.

They probably didn't, because she's impossible to miss.

My gaze bounces to her mouth, and I notice how soft her lips look. I can't help but wonder what she'd taste like. Cinnamon? Sugar?

What would she feel like if I put my hand on her waist? If I dragged my fingers across her stomach and dipped them lower?

I look away.

Those urges weren't there a week ago, and I don't know why they're here now.

Is it because we're sharing things with each other? Is it because her eyes sparkle like the stars? Is it because I haven't felt this kind of closeness with a woman who wasn't Piper, Lexi, or Emmy in what seems like ages?

Or ever.

Maybe it's because it's *her*, and the more time I spend with Madeline, the more I realize she might be the most incredible person I've ever met.

"We won that night," I finally say. "Liam had an unbelievable game. He and Piper got married after, actually. They were drunk off their asses."

"Piper mentioned that happened, but I haven't heard the whole story," Madeline says. "Where did they get married?"

"Some chapel. We went out to this club on the Strip, and everyone was

wasted. That led us into a limo and Maverick and Emmy getting married, then Piper and Liam did the same after.”

“Wait. I went to a club on the Strip that night.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. I dropped Lucy off at my parents’ then went out with a friend from work. There was dark lighting and loud music.”

“Pretty sure you just described every club to ever exist, Mads.”

“There were a lot of people there. VIPs, the bouncer kept saying, so it took us forever to get in. I think the place was called The Library?”

“No shit.” I lean closer to her. “That’s where we were.”

“You’re fucking with me.”

“I swear to god. I’ll show you the credit card charge for my twelve-dollar bottle of water.”

“Huh.” Her smile is coy. “Guess we were always destined to cross paths, Bombshell.”

“I guess so.” I pop a cookie in my mouth. “If your ex, Fark, ever bothers you again and you want someone to put him in his place, let me know. I’m more than happy to give him a piece of my mind.”

“His name is Clark.”

“Oh, I know what it is. That wasn’t a mistake.”

Madeline laughs. “Noted. I doubt he’ll make any more contact—tonight was probably accidental—but if he does, I’ll send him your way.”

“Great.” I nudge her knee. “Think you’ll be able to sleep now?”

“I hope so. It’s hard to hold onto that kind of stuff, you know?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “I do know. How about this: since you told me something that’s been on your mind, I’ll tell you something that’s been on mine. Fair trade,” I say.

“I can’t wait to hear.”

“I’m really glad you and Lucy are here.”

“What?” She shoves my uninjured arm. “Come on. That’s not what’s on your mind.”

“Let me finish. My mom passed away a few years ago,” I say.

Madeline freezes. Her grip on me loosens, but she doesn’t let go. “Hudson.”

“Yeah. It’s been a while since I’ve been happy like this. And I know you and Lucy are the reason why.”

“What happened?” she whispers.

“Breast cancer. Undetected until it was terminal.” I glance up at the sky. Mom wouldn’t mind that I’m talking about her; she used to love it. She was the life of every party. Bright and warm and so welcoming to others. “It all happened so fast, which I guess is a blessing. She didn’t have to suffer for years. I just... I miss her, you know? I’m doing better mentally than I was when she passed. I go to therapy. I’m not where I was when she was here, and I don’t think I ever will be, but I’m getting close.”

“Oh, you sweet boy.” Madeline sets down her glass and moves the plate. She reaches for me and wraps me in an embrace I didn’t know I needed until I bury my face in her hair and hug her back. Fuck the pain. “I am so sorry.”

“I wanted you to know. We’re friends, and my friends know that part of me,” I say into her neck. She smells like vanilla and the sand on the beach on a warm summer day. “Tonight was the first time someone other than her has taken care of me after I got hurt.”

“Thank you for telling me.” Madeline’s hand moves up and down my back. She rubs soothing circles over my sweatshirt, and her touch helps the tension leave my body. “What was her name?”

“Sarah.” The curve of my smile hits just below her ear. “I loved—love—her so much.”

“I bet she loved you more than anything in this world. Every mother loves their child an infinite amount, and you’re so special, Hudson. She was lucky to have you as a son.”

“She was pretty great.”

“Are the flowers on your leg for her?”

“Yeah.” I let out a soft laugh. “They are.”

“What a beautiful tribute.”

“I’ll share more about her one of these days.”

“When you’re ready, I’d love to hear.”

“Thanks. Want to go back to talking about the Fuck Fark shirts we can wear?”

Madeline rests her cheek on my shoulder and picks up the last bite of her cookie. “What font should we use?”

I choke on a laugh and wipe under my eyes. “Comic Sans. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” she repeats, and we settle into silence. A car horn goes off down the block, and I swear I see a shooting star above us. “Hudson?”

“Hm?”

“Thank you for telling me about your mom. Thank you for listening to

me. Just... thank you.”

We don’t say anything else. I put my chin on top of her head and drape an arm over the back of the bench. I like having her by my side. She might be the most favorite friend I’ve ever had, and I know I should be the one thanking her.

TWENTY-SIX
MADELINE

THE NIGHT on the balcony with Hudson was a turning point in our friendship.

I feel so much closer to him now, like I know almost everything about him. I'm glad he shared those parts of himself with me, and it explains so much: why he's more reserved than the other players I've met. His comments on Thanksgiving, and the hint of sadness he carries with him I didn't notice until now.

My heart aches for him. Every parent expects to pass before their child, but to do so while they're so young is devastating.

He's so strong to keep all of that inside, to not let it beat him up mentally and to instead show up every single day for his team. I have so much respect for him not only as an athlete, but as a human, too.

My phone buzzes on the counter. I wipe my hands on my apron and drag my thumb across the screen. A text message from Hudson pops up, and he must've known I was thinking about him.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

Hey, KG.

ME

Hey, hockey guy.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

You know how I told you I'm not going to be around tonight?

ME

I do. The calendar has time blocked off from six to eleven.

Are you part of a cult?

BLOND BOMBSHELL

Ha. Close.

We have a holiday gala every year for charity, and it's scheduled for tonight.

I know it's last minute, but two people can't make it. I snagged tickets for you and Lucy if you want to come.

Black tie, formal, really ritzy kind of thing. There will be food and alcohol, though. And a silent auction to bid on players to spend an afternoon with them.

ME

What do you do with the person who wins the bid on you?

BLOND BOMBSHELL

A few of the guys and I take the winners to the DC Animal Shelter.

ME

Do you have ANY flaws?

BLOND BOMBSHELL

I'm terrible at making my bed.

ME

What a monster.

You want me to be ready for a black-tie event in five hours?

BLOND BOMBSHELL

You don't have to be. It would be fun if you girls were there, but no pressure.

You girls.

There goes my damn heart again, skipping a beat.

Fucking traitorous thing.

I appreciate when he includes Lucy. I appreciate how she's not overlooked, and if I could have two minutes with Hudson's mom, I'd make sure to tell her how gentle her son's soul is.

I'm not sure I have a dress in my closet that would be considered black tie

appropriate, but after having such a great time with the team on Thanksgiving and every day after, I want to be included again.

ME

I'm in. Lucy is going to a sleepover at her friend's house after school, so it'll just be me.

Does that change your offer?

His answer comes seconds later, making it obvious he's not putting his phone down. Wherever he is, I have his full attention, and that makes heat gather low in my stomach.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

Not one bit.

Meet me in the living room at 6:30?

ME

See you then!

I FRANTICALLY OPEN my text thread with Lexi, Piper, Maven, and Emmy.

GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN(DAMENTAL) RIGHTS AND GOOD SEX

ME

Hi. Hudson invited me to the Stars gala tonight, and I don't know what to wear.

PIPER

He did? Ah! So exciting! It's fancy, but so fun.

LEXI

Full-length dress for sure, but nothing over the top.

ME

Lovely. My whole closet is full of full-length dresses, so this will be easy.

MAVEN

You can wear cocktail style dresses too. I did that last year and dressed it up with heels and jewelry. Wish I was joining you all tonight, but my youngest is sick. Take lots of pictures!! I have to meet you soon, Madeline!

ME

I don't know if I own any item of clothing nice enough for this event. I live in leggings and sweaters. The occasional pair of jeans. Not formal attire.

And we do have to meet soon!

PIPER

I'll be finished with work in an hour. We can make a quick trip to the store if you want?

ME

Let me see what I can find, and I'll get back to you.

LEXI

You're going to look great in anything.

EMMY

She's right. Let us know if you need any help.

FOUR HOURS and fifty-eight minutes later, I check my reflection in the mirror, happy with how I look.

"Five-minute warning," Hudson says from down the hall, and I grab my clutch.

"Coming!" I answer, making sure I have my phone and lipstick before I slip out of my room.

When I round the corner into the living room, my tongue almost falls out of my mouth.

Hudson is wearing a tuxedo that hugs every curve of his body. His blond hair is styled neater than it is when he's around the house, and his beard looks freshly trimmed. There's a silver watch clasped around his left wrist, and his white bowtie is decorated with dozens of Christmas trees.

I carefully touch my lips to make sure I'm not drooling.

I've seen him in the suits he wears to and from the arena on game day,

but this is different. He looks like pure man. Devastatingly handsome with a hint of softness in his smile.

“Hi,” I blurt, and he looks up from his phone.

Hudson’s eyes rake down my body and take in the snowflake necklace sitting against the top of my chest. They move lower to the green fabric of my dress hugging my hips and thighs. He works his way down my legs, to my red-painted toes, before moving back up.

The second his gaze snags on mine, I can *feel* the heat behind his eyes. The look is so sensual, so hot, I have a visceral reaction to it.

He’s staring at me like he wants to devour me, and my skin burns hot at the thought of his mouth on my body. Kissing the space below my ear. Running his tongue along my collarbone then moving lower to my thighs.

I blow out a breath and shift on my feet. My underwear is wet, and the ache between my legs is almost unbearable.

“Hi,” he answers. The syllable is rough, ragged, and I swear I feel it everywhere. “You look...” Hudson trails off. Cups the back of his neck with a large palm. Clears his throat. “Wow.”

“Is my dress okay? It’s the only thing I had and —”

“Wow,” he repeats. There’s more emphasis behind it the second time. He moves his hand to his chest. “Shit, Madeline. You’re beautiful. Fucking gorgeous.”

“You said your favorite color was green and I—” I lift the dress at my hip, gesturing at my ensemble. “I thought it was festive.”

“When I said green, I meant that exact shade. You in that outfit, really.” His cheeks are flushed, and his Adam’s apple bobs. “No other variation is ever going to do.”

My insides twist into a knot with his compliment. “I’m glad you like it.”

He’s still staring at me, and I’m seconds away from melting. “I’m sorry. I’m not sure if I should’ve said that, but you deserve to hear it. I hope I didn’t —”

“Thank you,” I interrupt. “For saying it. It’s the holidays, right? We should be able to compliment each other without it being like we’re overstepping a line. You look great too.”

“Do you...” Hudson swallows. He seems rattled. “We should head out.”

I think I’d like to stay here instead.

I’d like to peel off his jacket and unbutton his shirt. I’d like to run my tongue down his chest muscles and see if I can make him moan.

Instead, I smile. Nod and say, “sounds good.”

I unhook my peacoat from the rack in the foyer and look at him over my shoulder. His eyes bounce up from where they were focused on my hips, and I give him a smirk. “Let’s do this, Bombshell.”

I’VE BEEN to a handful of fancy parties in my life, but nothing compares to this gala.

There are twenty-foot Christmas trees and candles everywhere. Holiday decorations hang from the walls and servers walk around with expensive alcohol and crab cakes.

It’s overwhelming, but I’m warm and happy when Piper, Lexi, and Emmy sidle up next to me.

“Madeline. You look *fantastic*.” Lexi takes my hand and makes me do a twirl. I laugh when she whistles, appreciating the way she’s hyping me up and being the ultimate girl’s girl. “And that ass. You get that without doing any Pilates? I’m so jealous.”

“I saw half the team eye-fucking you,” Emmy says proudly.

“They were *not*. No one wants my mom bod.”

“You’re wrong, my friend.” Piper hands me a drink and grins. “Liam had to knock Ethan on the side of the head because he wouldn’t stop gawking at you. Good thing he intervened before Hudson saw.”

“Oh.” I smooth my hands over the front of my dress. The satin is form-fitting but soft, and it’s exhilarating to be seen. To be looked at and noticed. “Is Ethan single?”

“Why?” Lexi smiles. “Interested?”

“No,” I’m quick to say. I don’t want to give anyone the wrong impression. “He’s way too young for me. And I’m not sure I’d like to date someone whose life is so public.”

“It’s hard, and it’s even harder in the age of social media. Everyone has an opinion about everything, and if I post three photos in a row without Maverick in them, I have a thousand comments asking if we broke up, why he’s not included and if I’m hiding somewhere because he cheated on me.” Emmy rolls her eyes. “But then I think about the moments when no one is around, like when he washes my hair after practice. Or the tattoos he gets for

me and how he falls asleep with his head on my chest.”

“*Riiiiight*, yeah. Sounds terrible, Em.” Lexi nods emphatically, and Emmy has to bite her lip to keep from laughing. “All kidding aside, though, I know what you mean. I’m not sure I could date one of the players. I know so much about them. I’ve seen their asses and heard them make stupid jokes to each other when they’re on the trainers’ tables. Kind of loses the mystery, you know? There’s no romance.”

“You don’t want romance.” Emmy scoffs. “You want to be fu —”

“Am I interrupting?” Hudson asks, grinning at the four of us.

His bowtie is loose, and the top button of his shirt is unfastened. He ditched his tuxedo jacket a while ago, and his hair is a little messier than it was when we got here.

“Yes, Huddy, you are.” Lexi flips her hair over her shoulder. “This is girl talk.”

“If any of the guys were to join girl talk, I’d want Hudson to be the one,” Emmy says, and Piper nods in agreement.

“Same. He can be an honorary part of our group.”

“As flattered as I am, I don’t want to impose.” His eyes move to me, and he tips his head to the side. “I was hoping I could steal Madeline for a minute.”

I finish off my wine and set the empty glass down. Anticipation sits at the base of my spine. “Sure.”

“Do you want to dance?”

“I’m not sure I’ve danced since homecoming my senior year of high school.” I laugh and smile up at him. “What the hell? Let’s give it a whirl.”

He leads me to the part of the ballroom that’s been designated as the dance floor. We join the couples bopping to the beat of some pop song, but the music shifts to something slower when we start to move.

“I did not plan this,” he says.

“Are you sure about that, Hayes?”

“I swear.” He laughs and offers me his palm. I drop my hand in his, and his fingers curl around mine. “But did I manifest it so I could have a second alone with you? I’ll never tell.”

“You’ve been busy. You don’t have to entertain me.”

“You’re way more fun than an auction where someone pays thousands of dollars to spend an hour with me.” He settles his other palm on my waist, and I’m glad he’s not wincing when he moves anymore. His shoulder must’ve

healed up, and it's good to see him back at full strength. "I'm glad you're here tonight."

"Me too. This really gets me in the holiday spirit. Time moves so fast these days, and it's nice to slow down for a night and enjoy the season. Y'all donated so much money to local charities, and it's inspiring."

"Our organization does good work. Speaking of holiday spirit, I thought we could pick out a Christmas tree this week. You, me, and Lucy. It's been a few years since I put one up, and it would brighten up the condo."

"She'd love that. We've only ever had artificial trees."

"I'm off on Thursday. We'll go to a Christmas tree farm outside the city and find the best one."

"I'm going to call you Santa Claus." I laugh when he accidentally steps on my toe. My heel gets stuck on the hem of my dress, and he wraps his arm around my waist to keep me from falling. "Shouldn't you be good at this? You leaped over someone during your game the other night, but dancing trips you up?"

"Are you a hockey girl now?" Hudson asks, his voice an octave deeper than it was a minute ago. "Are you staying up and watching my games?"

I am watching his games.

After Lucy goes to bed, I turn the TV back on, mesmerized by how *good* he is at his job.

I've wanted to get better about understanding the rules of the sport, because it lets me have a few extra minutes with him when he gets home.

I linger in the kitchen longer than I did when we first moved in. I've stopped leaving instructions on his meals and started waiting until he sends a text letting me know he's on the way home to cook his dinner.

It's stupid, really, but all of a sudden, I'm looking for any opportunity to be around him. Paying attention to the thing he loves seems like the easiest way to do that.

"I've watched a few of your matches, Hayes," I say, and his smile is the brighter than all the Christmas trees in the room. He dips me, and I squeal when the ends of my hair graze the floor. "But don't flatter yourself. It's only so I can roast you on social media and call you Bombshell."

"That explains the uptick in comments using that nickname. I knew you had ulterior motives." He sets me back on two feet. His thumb rubs along the dip in the fabric on the back of my dress, and the contact is searing. "Are you enjoying the games you're watching?"

“Yeah. I mean, I still don’t understand everything. But I like learning.”

“Think I could convince you and Lucy to come to a game?”

“I’m not sure it would take much convincing. We’d love to come if the schedules lined up.”

“We’ll plan something.” Hudson rubs his hand up my arm. “Gosh. You really are something else, Mads. A sight for sore eyes.”

Funny.

Looking at him makes me think my heart needs to be jumpstarted because he’s so beautiful.

“You clean up well too, BB.”

He steps closer to me. Our chests almost press together. “You’re having fun, right?”

“I’m here with you.” I smile. “Of course I’m having fun. Are you?”

“Yeah.” His fingers bunch my dress in their hold, and I let out at shallow breath. “This is the most fun I’ve had in a long, long time.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

HUDSON

MY KITCHEN IS A DISASTER, but it's for a good cause.

Operation Christmas Eve Cookies for Santa commenced an hour ago, and Lucy, Madeline, and I can barely get through the recipe without laughing hysterically.

There are rolling pins in the sink and flour covers the floor. Ceramic mixing bowls with raw cookie dough sit on the island, and the oven is slowly preheating. 'Jingle Bells' blares from Madeline's phone, and she signs the lyrics to Lucy who shimmies like she's dancing.

I don't care about the clean up, because I swear this is the most alive my kitchen has ever been.

"*We're going to put the cookies on the baking sheets,*" Madeline tells us, and she hoists Lucy onto the island. "*And get this show rolling.*"

Lucy signs something to Madeline that makes her laugh again, and I wish more than anything I was part of their conversation. I've been using my notebook, but it's not the same. It feels like a cop out, and I'm determined to try to pick up on some of the words they frequently use.

"Are y'all making fun of me?" I ask.

"*Lucy wants you to know you have flour in your hair.*" Madeline leans over the island and tugs on the strands near my ears. "*She said you look like Frosty the Snowman.*"

"It's her fault. She's the one who threw a handful in my face." I offer Lucy the spatula covered in chocolate chips, and she takes it eagerly.

“Pretend like you’re not seeing her eat raw cookie dough.”

“*Eating the dough is the best part. Right, Luce?*” Madeline grabs what looks like an ice cream scoop from a drawer and starts to dole out balls of dough onto the baking sheets. “*Which one do you think is going to be Santa’s favorite?*”

Lucy surveys the scene in front of her. I appreciate how she looks at the chocolate chip, the sugar and the peanut butter options before answering. After a few seconds, she points at the bowl full of chocolate chip dough, and I nod in agreement.

“Good choice,” I say, giving her a thumbs-up, and she beams. “Do y’all bake like this every year?”

“We do, but this Christmas is extra special. I didn’t want Lucy to think Santa skipped over our house because we moved. She’s worried she won’t have any presents from him tomorrow morning.”

I crane my neck to make sure Gus and Millie aren’t causing any havoc to the tree. There are already two dozen gifts tucked under the ten-foot fir we brought home last week, and they’re all addressed to Lucy from Madeline.

I have a feeling there will be more there tomorrow.

“How old are kids when they learn Santa isn’t real these days?” I ask, clueless. “I think I was like, nine, when I found out, and I was devastated. Has that changed?”

“That’s a hot topic on the parenting forums.”

“There are parenting forums?”

“Oh, yeah. The drama is hilarious. I was ten when I found out. A kid at school was the one to break the news, so I’m not going to mention anything until Lucy asks. It’s so nice to be carefree, you know? To believe in the magic of the holidays, and I’ll bake cookies every Christmas Eve for as long as I live if it makes her smile.”

Lucy uses her hands to roll a ball of sugar cookie dough and puts it on one of the sheet pans. She and Madeline exchange a few phrases of conversation, and Madeline gestures for me to join them on the other side of the island.

“*Luce wants you to help her make a snowflake cookie,*” Madeline says. “*There are cookie cutters in the pantry. Could you grab them?*”

“A snowflake? Now we’re talking. I’ll be right back.”

I drape a dish towel over my shoulder and open the door to the left of the refrigerator. It used to be empty in here, but with Madeline around, it’s full to

the brim.

There are three different kinds of flour in plastic containers and snacks for Lucy's lunch. Olive oil imported from Greece and some potatoes. I smile when I spot the stack of cookie cutters wedged between a sack of sugar and a dozen different spices. Grabbing them, I shut the door behind me.

Lucy reaches for the metal shapes, and I pass them over. I find a clean rolling pin and put my hands over hers, helping her work out the dough until it's stretched thin. Guiding her to the edge of the dough so there's room for the other Christmas designs we have, I press down on her fingers. I smile when she squeals and pulls apart the shape, setting it on the pan.

"Look at that, peanut. It's a snowflake. Remember when we played out in the snow last week?"

That was a fun morning.

Lucy was off from school, and it was her first time seeing snow. We found a little hill in the park to sled down, and she and Madeline made snow angels until their teeth chattered.

I helped them build a snowman, laughing when Gus and Millie barreled through the poor guy and sent his rock eyes flying.

I sort through the shapes and hand Lucy a Christmas tree. She does this one by herself, and I give her a high five when she successfully pulls the excess dough away without ripping the design.

After we make another dozen cookies in the shape of candy canes and big presents, Lucy yawns.

"We should get to sleep. Santa will be here soon," Madeline tells her, and her smile is adorable. *"Say good night to Hudson and the dogs. You'll see them in the morning."*

With clean hands, a sleepy wave, and a hug where she throws her arms around my neck, Madeline excuses herself to put her daughter to bed. I hum along to Bing Crosby, remembering when my parents used to dance around the kitchen to holiday songs.

"Sorry about the mess," Madeline says, breaking my daydreams. "Let me finish putting these on the pans so I can pop them in the oven, then I'll clean up."

"You do the cookies. I'll be on clean up duty." I grab the supplies we're finished using and dump them in the sink. "And tell me all about the Christmas traditions you and Lucy have. I saw stockings hanging above the fireplace."

“Did you see the ones we got for you and the dogs?” she asks, and when I glance at her, she smiles. “We put them up while you were at practice this afternoon. There’s nothing in them, but it didn’t feel right to not include you.”

“I didn’t see that.” My throat feels tight. I can’t wait to check them out. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. As for traditions, we don’t do anything special.” Madeline lowers the volume on her phone. She makes quick work of scooping out the rest of the dough and spreading it out across the different pans. “When we lived in Vegas, my parents would let Lucy open one present on Christmas Eve. We FaceTimed them earlier today, and she got to open the box they sent. That was nice.”

“They’re welcome here, you know. If they ever want to visit. Or if you want some time off to go see them. I can survive a few days by myself.”

“Maybe in the spring. I don’t want to take Lucy out of school for too long. She’s having a blast with her class and teachers. She’s always been a good student, but she’s really excelling in her learning.” Madeline smiles and pops a bite of the chocolate chip dough in her mouth. “Makes me really proud.”

“And how does the Santa thing work? Do you have more gifts to wrap?”

“Only a few. I’m trying to teach her that Santa doesn’t bring the big-ticket items, because it’s not fair if another kid doesn’t get something off their wishlist. I’ll finish wrapping those after this, pop them under the tree, and call it a night.”

“Man.” I scrub the rolling pins under hot water, and she puts the cookies in the oven. “Christmas has totally different vibes when you’re not the kid. Talk about responsibility. It’s kind of bullshit.”

“You’re telling me. Three a.m. on Christmas morning is when I do my best work. Do your teammates get together for Christmas like we did on Thanksgiving? What about a Secret Santa exchange?”

“We spend Christmas on our own, but if someone is alone, they’ll tag along to a family dinner. As for a Secret Santa exchange, we tried that for a few years. When Liam ended up with a pink dildo, Coach put a stop to it.” I grin. “He still doesn’t know I’m the one who gave it to him.”

“Damn, Bombshell. Look at you being funny.”

“Watch it, KG. I’m plenty funny.”

“So you’re not distributing sex toys this year? Talk about a lame

holiday.”

I don’t know why, but hearing Madeline say *sex toy* in my kitchen makes me drop the spoon I’m holding. The loud noise echoes around us, and I cough.

“Tell me we get to eat some of the cookies,” I say, trying to change the subject before I picture *her* with a sex toy.

“Oh, we eat some of the cookies. It’s the best part of being a parent. We’ll leave some crumbs behind on the plate and an empty glass of milk so Lucy knows Santa stopped in. I’m apologizing in advance for tomorrow, by the way. She *loves* Christmas. She typically crawls into bed with me around five, but by six, I can’t be held responsible for her enthusiasm.” Madeline pauses, and I realize there’s flour on her nose. It’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen. “I hope she likes her gifts.”

“I bet she’s going to love them.” I finish off the last of the dirty dishes and dry my hands. The oven dings, and I toss two potholders her way. “Let’s go, Galloway.”

She laughs and pulls out the trays one by one. “Stop being so damn impatient.”

“They’re cookies,” I draw out. “How can you not be impatient?”

Madeline picks one up off the pan and blows on it. She holds it my way, and her lips pull up into a coy smirk. “Want a taste, hockey guy?”

Fuck, do I ever.

“Yes.” I swallow. “Please.”

She hums and brings the cookie to my mouth. I open my lips and she feeds me the bite, tossing me a full smile when I sigh.

“What do you think?”

I lick my lips and wrap my fingers around her wrist. Her breathing hitches when I tilt my head to the side and take the rest of the cookie in my mouth. My tongue brushes against the tip of her finger, and I swallow. I know I’m playing with fire, but for once, I don’t give a damn.

“Delicious,” I say, and her cheeks turn a pretty shade of pink.

“I’m glad you like it,” she answers. When she touches her thumb to the corner of my mouth to wipe away a crumb, I have to hold onto the counter. “I hope you’ll be around to open presents with us tomorrow.”

“Would that be okay? I don’t want to take away from what y’all have planned.”

“Lucy wants you there.” Her eyes meet mine, and her smile is soft. “And

so do I.”

“Then that’s where I’ll be.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

HUDSON

I'M EXHAUSTED, but I'm awake before my alarm the next morning. I don't remember the last time I was this excited to be up at the crack of dawn, and I practically sprint down the hall. When I make it to the living room, Lucy is on her hands and knees in front of the tree, scouring the presents. She signs something to Madeline, then gives me a big smile and a wave.

"That's how you sign Merry Christmas," Madeline tells me, and she repeats the hand movements Lucy made. *"I'm not sure if you'll use it again, but now you have it."*

I hope I have a reason to use it again, so I mimic what Lucy just showed me. I'm not sure I'm doing it right. I'm not nearly as fluid as they are, but Madeline doesn't correct me.

I take that as a win.

"Did I miss anything?" I ask.

"We're about to start the presents," she says, signing at the same time. I'll never not be in awe of her ability to hold a conversation two different ways. *"We're going to do half of the presents now, then the other half after breakfast so no one gets cranky."*

"Uh oh. Is this based on past experience?"

Madeline grins. "Unfortunately. I'll do anything to avoid a meltdown, and that includes taking a twenty-minute break for eggs and bacon."

"I like this plan. Do you want some coffee?" I ask. "If you're as tired as I am, it might help wake you up before we dive in."

“Do you mind? I can hold her off for five minutes so we can be revived.”

“I’ll be right back.”

“Could you make mine with a —”

“Splash of milk and a little bit of sugar.” I smile at her. “I remember, knife girl.”

“You do?”

“I told you I notice things. Your coffee order is one of them.”

Madeline blinks, holding a couch pillow close to her chest. “Thank you.”

I make quick work with the coffees, and by the time I get back to the living room, Lucy is buzzing with energy. I hand over the coffee to Madeline and knock my mug against hers as I take a spot on the couch.

Lucy’s patience runs out seconds later, and she drags the largest present to the center of the room. She opens the first gift, and it’s a new bike, bright pink with sparkles on the spokes and ribbons hanging from the handlebars. She rides it down the hall, giggling when Gus and Millie chase after her.

“Genius idea,” I say to Madeline. “Now I don’t have to take them on eight walks a day. Give them an hour with her, and they’ll be wiped out.”

“It goes both ways. Twenty minutes of playing with them, and she’s exhausted. I’m glad they’re not going to daycare as much these days. It makes putting her to bed way easier.”

The rest of the gifts follow. Lucy gets some school clothes, a new backpack, and a Barbie doll. Santa brought her a board game and a puzzle, and soon the floor is covered in wrapping paper and bows. The dogs are having a field day with the discarded boxes, ripping them to shreds and littering the rug with chewed up cardboard.

“Holy shit.” Madeline laughs and shoves a red and green plaid bow into a trash bag while Lucy checks out her new pencil case. “It’s like a tornado went through here.”

“Don’t worry about it. I like it.” I toss Gus a ball of rolled up paper, and he fetches it. “Besides. I have gifts for each of you.”

“What?” She looks up from where she’s sitting on the floor and narrows her eyes. “You do?”

“Yeah. Can you have Lucy check the back side of the tree?”

Madeline wraps her arms around Lucy’s middle and kisses her cheek. “*I think there’s a surprise hiding for you under the tree from Hudson. Can you find it?*” she asks, and Lucy sorts through the remaining gifts.

When she finds the two bags I snuck out here after everyone went to

sleep, she nudges the smaller one to Madeline and keeps the larger one for herself.

"I hope you like them," I say.

"*You first, baby,*" Madeline tells Lucy, and tissue paper is already flying in the air. Lucy digs through the bag and pulls out the first gift. Her eyes go wide when she sees the two stuffed animal dogs that resemble Gus and Millie. "*Oh, how cute. It's the doggies, Lucy.*"

Lucy runs over to the dogs with her gift. She holds up the stuffed versions of them next to their heads and laughs. She looks at me while she signs, and Madeline interprets as she says, "*Thank you, Hudson.*"

"You're welcome," I say back. "There's one more thing in there."

"*Check the bag again, sweetheart,*" Madeline says, and Lucy pulls out an Etch A Sketch. "*That's fun. Why don't you give it to Hudson so he can show you how it works?*"

Lucy walks toward me and jumps on the couch. With her head on my arm and the side of her body pressed against mine, she hands over the toy and watches with wonder as I write out her name with the knobs.

"It's another way for us to communicate," I say, and Madeline interprets for me again. "Or to draw pictures."

Lucy flings her arms around my neck, and I smile at the affection. I set the present down and hug her back, running my hand through her hair and squeezing her tight.

"Thank you for her gifts," Madeline says, and when I look at her, she's wiping a thumb under her eye. "They're such thoughtful presents, and this means so much to me. To her. Thank you for thinking of her."

"Open yours next."

Madeline reaches into her bag. A cackle escapes her when she pulls out the gift inside. "You're not serious."

"Dead serious. Comic Sans and everything," I say, and she holds up the plain white T-shirt I had printed earlier this week. *Fuck Fark* is written across the chest, and she covers the curse word so Lucy doesn't see. "Probably shouldn't wear it out in public, but if you feel like breaking plates or something, I think it'll be perfect."

"This is..." She lets out another laugh and fans her face. "I want to frame it."

"We can do that. We'll put it in the foyer so everyone can see it. Forget my jerseys. This will be a great conversation starter."

“I’m not sure I’ve ever gotten something so funny. You’re a good gift giver, Hudson Hayes.”

“I’m glad you like it. All jokes aside, I was going to buy you some new cookware because I know mine is shit, but I don’t know what the hell the best brand is. The internet is extremely divided over colors and sizes and that sort of thing, so I’m leaving it to you. There’s a five-thousand-dollar VISA gift card at the bottom of the bag, so pick what you want.”

“That’s too —”

“It’s not.” I smile at Lucy, and she sticks her tongue out at me. “And no givebacks allowed.”

“Fine.” Madeline folds her shirt and tucks it safely back in the bag. “*Luce. Do you want to give Hudson his present now?*”

She jumps off the couch and races down the hall with the dogs right behind her. When I look at Madeline, there’s a twinkle in her eye.

“You got me a present?”

“Lucy did. She’s been working on it for two weeks and is so excited to give it to you. It’s nothing big, but if you could pretend it’s the coolest thing in the world, I’d be so grateful.”

“I’m sure I’m going to love it,” I say, and ten feet charge toward us. Lucy jumps in my lap and hands over a large envelope. I open it, finding a dozen papers inside. “What —”

“They’re drawings. Of you and her and the dogs. Of you and me at the stove while she watches us make dinner. Of you playing hockey,” Madeline explains as I flip through the pages, and my chest feels impossibly tight.

My throat closes up, my eyes blur with tears. A drop of water falls on the corner of the paper and makes the marker bleed. Lucy touches my cheek and tilts my head to look at her. She starts to sign, and I keep my eyes on her.

“*She wants you to know how much she loves being here. How much she loves the dogs and how much fun she has when you’re around,*” Madeline tells me, acting as my interpreter.

“This...” I shake my head. Words are difficult to find. Impossible, really. There’s a picture of the dogs at the rink and me in stick figure form, and my nose stings. I bring my right hand to my chin with an open palm facing me, and I move it slightly forward toward Lucy. “*Thank you,*” I sign, using one of the only phrases I have memorized.

Lucy lights up. She throws her arms around me again, and her hug is the best feeling in the world. When I look at Madeline, I see her fighting back her

own tears.

“I don’t know how long y’all plan to stay, but my home is your home for as long as you’d like it to be. For another year. For five more years,” I say. “You’re both welcome here. If this is what Christmas looks like from now on, I can’t wait to have a whole condo covered in Lucy’s drawings next year.”

“Best Christmas ever,” Madeline whispers. “Nothing’s going to top this.”

“Without a fucking doubt,” I agree.

TWENTY-NINE HUDSON

THE WEEK after Christmas passes with morning skates, an away game we easily win, a therapy session, and an afternoon delivering gifts to the local hospital.

Our fans donated toys at each of our home games throughout December, and getting to spend some time with kids who can't be home for the holidays really puts a lot of things into perspective.

On New Year's Eve, I sit next to Madeline on the couch and set a bowl of popcorn on the coffee table.

"Did you get Lucy to fall asleep?" I ask, tossing a kernel in my mouth.

"It took me forever, and you're going to think I'm a horrible parent, but I did it. I pulled up a fake countdown on my phone and pretended it was midnight even though it's only eleven forty-five," she says.

"That doesn't make you horrible. It makes you a goddamn genius. And it's not too much of a lie. We're only fifteen minutes away."

"Thanks for the reassurance." She pulls her legs to her chest and glances at the television. "New York on New Year's Eve looks like an absolute madhouse. I don't think I could do it."

"No way. Standing in the cold and having to use an adult diaper? I'm all set." I turn up the volume so we can hear the host give us the ten-minute warning until the ball drops. "Do you have any resolutions for the new year?"

"Wow, Bombshell." She taps her cheek, contemplating. "You're tossing me some hard hitting questions."

“You don’t have to answer.” I shrug and take another bite of popcorn. “You’re allowed to have secrets.”

“I think I’d like to make more time for myself. Lucy is always going to be my number one priority, but I want to say yes to the things *I* want to do. That includes taking care of myself and knowing when to delegate some of my responsibilities to other people who are willing to help.” Madeline pauses and looks at me. “What are your resolutions?”

I like her resolution. It’s nice to hear her wanting to put herself first, and I’m going to make sure I’m ready to jump in if she needs me.

“My resolutions? I want to spend more time with my friends off the ice. I want to volunteer more at the animal shelter. I’d like to give away some of the resources I’ve been blessed with to people who deserve it.” I shrug and play with the throw blanket by my thigh. “The next one is stupid.”

She grins. “Does it involve dying your hair?”

“Fuck you.” I laugh and hit her in the face with a pillow. She yelps and launches one back at me. “I’m not dying my hair.”

“I couldn’t pass up the joke. Tell me your resolution. I promise I won’t make fun of you, especially with how selfless those other ones are.”

“I’d like to start dating again. I’ve always liked having a significant other, and I think this is the year I put myself back out there.”

“Why haven’t you been dating anyone?” she asks.

“Haven’t really felt like it after my last breakup. Plus, you and Lucy are here. Bringing someone else around is disrespectful.”

I don’t add the other part.

The admission that not a single woman has caught my eye, because I’ve been thinking about *her* lately.

Nonstop, really.

Wanting to touch her. Wanting to taste her. Wanting to wrap my arms around her and kiss her until she’s dizzy and forgets her name.

I’m not supposed to want those things. Wanting those things goes against everything I asked from her when she started working for me, and I’ve adhered to that boundary I put in place.

But as someone who’s always followed the goddamn rules, who’s always been so fucking *good*, thinking about something I can’t have makes me want her even more.

“Am I cockblocking you?” Madeline asks. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

“You’re not.”

“It sounds like I am.”

I grab my phone off the table. I unlock it, pull up Instagram, click on my message requests, and toss it her way. “Trust me.”

She frowns and looks at the screen. “What is this?”

“Proof you’re not cockblocking me. Hundreds of those messages are from women in DC. Hundreds more are from cities where I’m playing on a given night. If I felt like finding someone to date... someone to fuck... someone to pass the time with for a while, I could. And I haven’t wanted to.”

“*“I’d like it if you spanked me, baby. Or I could spank you,”*” she reads, and she’s trying not to laugh. “Please don’t tell me that’s what all of these messages say.”

“I haven’t looked through them, but they might.”

“Damn.” Madeline grins. “You really are a bombshell.”

“Shut up.”

“I’m serious. You could have anyone you wanted. You’re like a pussy magnet,” she says, and my entire body heats when she says that word. “Does sliding into a guy’s DMs and making sexual comments actually work?”

“I don’t know. Some of the guys on the team like it. They’ve got a girl in every city.”

“It’s sad. All those prospects in your DMs, and you don’t have anyone to kiss at midnight. They’d be over here before the ball dropped if you asked, but you’re stuck with me.”

“I haven’t kissed anyone at midnight in a few years,” I admit. “Am I missing something good?”

“You’re asking the wrong person. I haven’t kissed anyone at midnight since before Lucy was born. I’m destined for another year of mediocre luck.”

The host gives us the three-minute warning, and I stare at Madeline from across the couch.

Feels like I’m always staring at her these days.

An hour ago, I was exhausted. Now, I’m buzzing with energy. Wide awake and willing to sacrifice sleep if it means hanging out with her.

She’s beautiful with her hair down and her silk pajama set. I’m not sure why I inch closer to her. I’m not sure why I get in her space, but I’m drawn to her like a magnet, and I can’t stop myself.

She jerks her chin to look at me. She tips her head back and inhales sharply. This close, I can see a hint of green in her eyes. More freckles across her nose than I thought she had, and there’s no world where I want to start the

year with anyone but her.

“Madeline,” I murmur.

“Yeah?” she whispers.

“Maybe we should kiss,” I tell her, not fully knowing what I’m saying. But those lips... and the corner of her mouth... “To see if it brings us good luck.”

“You want to kiss me because you want good luck?”

“Yeah. But I also want to kiss you because I’ve been thinking about it for weeks.”

My eyes roam down the front of her shirt. I know she’s a woman with curves, but I’ve been careful never to look at her for too long.

I’m looking at her now, though, and I marvel at the way the silk hugs her chest. How it fuels my imagination as I think about what her breasts might look like. I’m sure as shit headed to hell for wanting to take her in my mouth and show her anything but *mediocre*.

Madeline’s movements are slow, tentative. She glances at the TV then back at me. “What else have you been thinking about?”

“You,” I say. “In every way I shouldn’t want you. In every way I can’t have you.”

The one-minute warning comes. Everything narrows down to *her*, and the careful way she puts a hand on my chest. How her fingers fan out over my shirt and she twists the cotton, pulling me toward her.

As if I wouldn’t go willingly.

As if I wouldn’t fucking crawl or run or climb a mountain to get there.

With thirty seconds to go, her nose brushes against mine. Her exhale is hot against my cheek. I want to feel it against my neck and on my stomach while her lips trail lower down my body. Around my cock as she blinks up at me with a coy smile before taking me in her mouth.

A thousand wicked thoughts race through my head, but I hold back.

I wait for her to tell me how this is going to go, because I’ll be damned if I ruin what feels like a fever dream.

“I’ve been thinking about you, too,” she whispers again.

The announcer counts down from five. He yells out *one* as music starts to play, but I barely hear him.

I’m too busy cupping Madeline’s face with both of my hands. Stroking her cheek with my thumb and listening to the shift in her breathing.

She’s so soft, and when she kisses the corner of my mouth, I whimper.

It's torture—hell on earth—but when she huffs out a laugh at my patheticness and kisses me fully, I'm a lost cause.

A man gone, because she's the best thing I've ever tasted, and once isn't going to be enough.

A million fucking times won't be enough.

It's slow at first. A gentle press of her lips. A swipe of my tongue. Hesitant and learning, but after a minute, when I expect her to pull away, something shifts between us.

Our kiss turns hungrier, rougher, and my hands move from her cheeks to her hair. I wrap the long strands around my wrist, grounding myself to her. Madeline shifts so she's closer. I lean back and pull her with me, her chest flush against mine as I drop my palm to her waist.

"Hudson," she breathes out, and I pull away so I can kiss her neck. So I can suck on the skin above her collarbone, and she whines. "*Fuck.*"

"Should I stop?" I ask.

She shakes her head. Grips my shirt even tighter and lets out a breathy moan when I drag my tongue up the column of her throat. She straddles me, one leg on either side of mine, and I know I'm hard. *She* knows I'm hard—painfully so—and every unintentional roll of her hips has my restraint wavering.

I curse myself for being patient, but none of the things I'm imagining make me a good man at all.

I'm thinking about her, without underwear on, sliding down my cock. How easy it would be to make her moan and how many fingers it would take to get her off.

I'm thinking about her mouth, about how well we'd fit together, and when I move my lips back to hers, it's the most alive I've felt in fucking years.

A loud boom outside the living room window causes us to spring apart. The dogs bark at the noise. Madeline falls onto her ass between my legs. I see a red mark on her neck. Her shirt pulled to the side and swollen lips. A glassy, dreamy look in her eyes, and a hundred different ways I want her.

"What was that?" she asks, and her voice is thick with lust.

It's how I feel, too, and I rest a hand over my lap to try to calm myself down. I'm not sure how well it's going to work, because her nipples are pointed and hard against the thin material of her shirt. I can practically see the outline of them, and there's so much more of her I want to explore.

“Fireworks,” I manage to say, and her eyes move to my gym shorts. I’m a horrible person for moving my hand away and letting her see the effect she has on me. I don’t want there to be a shred of doubt in her mind this is because of her. “They’ll probably go off for the next ten minutes.”

“Right. New Year’s.” Madeline touches her mouth and squeezes her thighs together. “I should—that was—thanks. Thank you. I-I think that will help with some good luck. It was very nice.”

Nice.

I don’t want her to feel *nice*.

I want her to feel like she’s on top of the damn world. Like she’s never experienced something so good, and I want to be the one to get her there.

“No problem,” I say. “Did you, uh —”

“I should check on Lucy.” Madeline stands and fixes her shirt. She brushes her hair out of her face and keeps her attention on the floor. “To make sure the flashes of light didn’t wake her up.”

“Right. Yeah. Okay. I have morning skate, so I should—” I hook my thumb over my shoulder. “Head to bed.”

“Bed. Right.” She rolls her lips together. “I hope you sleep well.”

“You, too,” I say, because I don’t know what the fuck else I’m supposed to do.

“Good night, Hudson,” she says, and she practically runs down the hall toward Lucy’s room.

I climb off the couch and stare longingly after her for a beat before walking to my room and locking the door. I pace across the floor and dial Maverick’s number, waiting for it to ring.

“Hello?” he answers, sounding like he’s been asleep for hours. “Hud? You okay?”

“Did I wake you up?”

“Yeah.” Maverick yawns. “Emmy and I passed out around nine. What’s going on?”

“I did something, and I’m not sure if what I did was wrong.”

“Hang on.” There’s the rustle of sheets on the other side of the line and murmured words. “Sorry. Didn’t want to disturb Em. Talk to me, Huddy.”

“I, ah, kissed Madeline at midnight and —”

“Whoa. *What?* You did?”

“Yeah. Except... she ran away from me?” I pinch the bridge of my nose and sit on my bed. I make sure to keep my voice low. The walls are thin, and

I don't want Madeline to overhear me. "I kissed her, and she ran away from me."

"What do you mean she ran away?" Maverick sounds more awake now, and I can hear his frown through the phone. "Are you a bad kisser, Hayes?"

"I never thought I was. She liked it, I think. That's the impression I got based off—" I snap my mouth closed. I don't want to share too many details. "Now I think she might regret it."

"How long did the kiss last?"

"Um." I scratch my ear and stare at the wall. "A few minutes?"

"And she was an eager participant?"

Those little noises of hers made it seem like she was an eager participant. So did the way she said my name and how she pulled me closer to her.

"Yes?" I say, but now I'm unsure.

"Dammit, Hudson. You're not helping me here."

"She kissed me first."

"Now we're talking. Sounds like she has feelings for you. Those feelings probably scare her because she doesn't think she's allowed to have them, and that's why she ran away."

I sigh and drop my head against the wall. "She's... she's become my favorite person in the world, and I'm confused because I don't do stuff like this."

"Stuff like what?" he asks.

"Kiss women I'm not dating."

"Why did you?"

"I couldn't help it. I've been thinking about her for goddamn *weeks* now, and it felt like the right moment to do it."

"Wow." Maverick chuckles. "You're down bad, aren't you?"

"Yeah." I put a pillow over my face and groan. "I might be."

"I know you're someone who likes to fix problems and make everyone happy, but this is an instance where you need to play it cool, man. Let her decide how you all interact. If that's to pretend like it never happened, then so be it. You like her working for you, right?"

"Obviously."

"Interrogating her about what went wrong is a surefire way to get her to leave."

"I'd never do that. I just don't want to mess anything up, you know?"

"You didn't mess anything up, dude."

“Maybe I am a bad kisser,” I mumble. “I don’t do hookups, and I get the impression she’s not looking for a relationship. I guess I need to write this off as a one-time thing that won’t happen again.”

“Sucks, Huddy. But never say never. Emmy told me the first time we hooked up it was only going to happen once. Now look at us. Happy as can be,” Maverick says proudly. “Married. In love and hopefully going to have a big family one day. That could be you all, too.”

“Yeah. Maybe,” I say, even though I don’t believe myself. “Thanks for listening to me, Mav. I appreciate you.”

“I’m always here.” Maverick yawns. “Except when I’m falling asleep standing up.”

“Go back to bed, old man. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night, Huddy Boy. Don’t kiss anyone else.”

I couldn’t even if I wanted to.

THIRTY
MADELINE

HUDSON KISSED me the other night, and it was the best kiss of my life.

It was a full-body experience. Toe-curling. Heart-stopping.

Goddamn *magical*.

It was like he wanted to consume me. Like he wanted to *possess* me.

And I haven't stopped thinking about it.

I close my eyes, and I see him.

I take a shower, and I feel his hands on my body.

I've replayed every intimate moment of that night over and over again in my head, in excruciating detail—the glide of his tongue, his fingers wrapped in my hair, and how I wish he would've pulled on the strands.

Those few minutes with him were the most I've been turned on in years, and I hate that I had to be the one who stopped us from going any further.

I know what would've come next if I kept kissing him, and as much as my body wanted that—*wants* that—my brain is yelling at me to slow down. To consider the long-term impact of what could happen if we fell in bed together, and I can't let it happen again.

It's been weird in the few days that have passed. We've avoided each other, but it hasn't been intentional.

Not totally.

He was out in Salt Lake City for a game the Stars ended up losing. I went to bed early last night, and something is off. There's tension in the air. An awkwardness, almost, that didn't exist before, and I need to get my head out

of my ass. I can't go the rest of my life without seeing him, and confronting him for the first time since he made me moan his name while we have the condo to ourselves seems like the best way to solve this odd dynamic between us.

He's been walking around the living room for the last thirty minutes, playing with the dogs. I hear his heavy footsteps, the murmur of his voice before he whistles for Gus and Millie to come over to him, and I take a deep breath. I open my door and march down the hall with my head held high like the badass woman I am.

"Hey," I say when I get to the living room. He jerks his neck up and drops the squeaky ball he's holding. When our eyes lock, I realize how much I've *missed* him. How I've come to love the time we spend together, and I bite my lip to hold back a wide smile at the sight of him. "Ready for lunch?"

"Yeah." He coughs. Clears his throat then clears it again. "Do you want some help?"

"Sure. You can be on tomato duty."

He laughs at that, and so do I.

It's silly to be making one kiss a big deal.

I know he doesn't do one-night stands. He's looking for is a relationship—which is something I'm not interested in—and there's only one way this ends.

Us as friends, and I hope that's good enough for him.

I lead the way to the kitchen and grab my apron off the back of the pantry door. Hudson sets up a cutting board and slides a knife my way.

"Haven't seen you do your trick in a while," he says.

"Say please, hockey guy."

Hudson's mouth curls into a wicked smirk. "Would you please show me your knife trick, Mads?" he asks, and it feels like he's flirting with me. It feels like I like it.

"With pleasure." I grab the base of the knife and spin it between my fingers. The movement is perfected after years of handling the equipment, and I smile when I stab the board with the tip of the blade. "How'd I do?"

"A goddamn ten out of ten. Nothing new there. What are we making today?"

"Sandwiches. Boring, I know, but I thought I could do fresh pasta and meatballs for dinner tonight before you head out on your two-game road trip tomorrow."

“Feels like I’ve been away from home a hell of a lot lately, and it’s only going to ramp up as we get into the second half of the season. What are you and Lucy going to do while I’m gone?”

“We’ve done all the museums and landmarks. Given it’s January and freezing outside, curling up in front of the fireplace with the dogs sounds like a hell of a good time.”

“They love going to daycare, but I know they’re glad to have company around here.”

I unwrap the sourdough loaf I made the other day and cut off a few slices. “Hey, I was thinking... Can we talk about what happened on New Year’s?”

“What happened on New Year’s?”

“You already forgot?”

He blushes. “Like I could forget that. I just wanted you to speak it into existence. We kissed, then you ran away from me. Did I do something wrong? Was it not good for you?”

“It’s not that,” I say. “I told you it was —”

“Nice.” Hudson spins his hat backward and carefully cuts the tomato into thin slices with a smaller knife. I’m momentarily distracted by both movements. “I remember. I was there.”

“I don’t want to say it was a mistake, because I don’t regret it, but I don’t think we should do it again. We have a good thing going right now, and adding a physical component to it could mess things up. Is it okay if we acknowledge the kiss happened but agree to move forward as friends?”

“Is that what you want? To be friends?”

Ten minutes ago, when I marched in here, I was certain it was.

Now when I look at him, I’m not so sure. It would be so easy to pull him to me again. To press my mouth to his and spend longer learning what he likes, learning what it would take to get him to say my name again, but I *can’t*.

It’s not about me. It’s about my job and the stability it’s bringing to Lucy’s life.

I get to tuck her in every night. I get to help with homework and see her in the school’s talent show. I’m around for the big moments I missed when I was working around the clock in Vegas, and that’s more important than a second kiss or something more.

“Yes,” I finally say.

There’s a flash of disappointment across his face before it melts into a

smile with a dimple and some eye wrinkles. Marvelously beautiful and marvelously not mine.

“Then that’s what we’ll be. Friends,” he says. “And there are no hard feelings, Madeline. I’m a big boy. I can handle a kiss without it breaking my heart.” His hip bumps mine. “Don’t hide from me anymore, okay? I want to see you.”

He is big, I think, and I blush a furious shade of red at the memory of how hard he was—thick and long, too—under me. The strain of his cock against my ass and how I desperately wished he slipped his fingers up my shirt.

“I promise I won’t hide,” I say.

“Good. I was starting to think I’m a terrible kisser.” Hudson laughs, and the noise fills the room. It fills a part of my soul, too. “Thanks for not damaging my ego.”

“You’re definitely not terrible. You... you took my breath away.”

“Huh. Sounds a lot better than nice,” he teases, and I blush again.

“Don’t make me regret this conversation.”

“I’m sorry. Last thing, and we’ll never talk about it again,” he says, and his voice drops to something soft and sweet. “I was worried I made you uncomfortable, and that was never my intention.”

“You could never make me uncomfortable,” I say, meaning it. “Plus, I kissed you first.”

“You did.” There’s pride behind his words. Smugness I haven’t heard from him before, and it makes me warm all over. “I wasn’t going to stop you. If you wanted to keep going, I would’ve been okay with it.”

I haven’t let myself imagine what would’ve happened if we kept going, but now I am.

Clothes off.

Hands on each other’s bodies.

His mouth, everywhere.

“I’ll remember that.” I whack a head of lettuce with the knife a little too aggressively to help kick my thoughts to the curb. “Now that that’s out of the way, what should we talk about?”

“Wow. Not a subtle segue there at all, Galloway. I’ll help you out.” Hudson drapes a dish towel over his shoulder. “If you could only eat one meal for the rest of your life, what would it be?”

“Chili.”

He looks up, surprised. “Really?”

“It’s my comfort food. I had plans to make it while you were gone.”

“That was my mom’s favorite food,” he says, and my heart aches.

“Did she like to cook?”

“She spent every day in the kitchen. It was her happy place. She tried to teach me, but nothing stuck, clearly. She used to tell me to be grateful for my pretty face, my smart brain, and my athletic ability, because I couldn’t cook for shit.” He sets the knife down, and his shoulders shake. I think he might be crying, but then I hear the laughter race out of him. “She would have a fucking field day with the social media comments.”

“What was she like?” I ask, eager to hear more.

“If I tried to describe her, you’d think she wasn’t real. That’s how special she was. Mom cared about other people more than she cared about herself. She was always laughing, except when it came time for my hockey games. Then she was yelling from the stands. Some of the guys on my team teased me when I was younger, but I’d rather have a mom who was loud than a mom who wasn’t proud of her son. She was kind and patient, even when she didn’t have to be. Her heart was so big.” He pauses and takes the slices of bread. “You two would’ve gotten along.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. You remind me of her. She was the world’s best mom. And so are you.”

“I’m not sure I —”

“You are. I see your selflessness and adoration for Lucy. It’s tangible, Madeline. I feel it when I’m around y’all, and it’s the most beautiful thing in the world.”

It’s the highest compliment anyone has ever given me, and I lock it inside my heart to keep it safe. To come back to when I’m having a rough day.

“I try my best,” I whisper. “But it’s hard sometimes.”

“I bet it is. I’ll never pretend to know what it’s like to be in your shoes and take on all the roles you do, but you make love look effortless. So did my mama. That’s exactly why she would’ve liked you.”

“Thank you.” I wipe under my eye, fully intending to blame the tears on the onion I’m about to chop, not my emotions. Not him complimenting me in a way I’m not sure I’m worthy of. “For saying those things and sharing her with me.”

“Worth finally coming out of your room?” Hudson asks, and I huff out an exasperated laugh.

I grab the dish towel from his shoulder, roll it up, and flick it at him. He yelps and reaches for my arm. His fingers wrap around my wrist, and he takes the towel from me.

“Take it back,” I say.

“You’re fast, but not as fast as me, Maddie.”

The nickname sends a shiver down my spine. We’re staring at each other, and his eyes bounce to my mouth.

“Maybe I’m just trying to play fair,” I say. “I’m stooping to your level and holding back.”

“Why? I can take it. I can take anything you give me.” His thumb moves up the inside of my wrist. It’s a slow drag, skin on skin contact, and I almost moan when he pulls away. “Friends, right?”

“Friends,” I repeat, hating the damn word.

THIRTY-ONE HUDSON

PUCK KINGS

EASY E

We're home with back-to-back nights off. No games. No practice. What are we doing to let loose tonight, boys?

SULLY

Turning my phone off and spending time with someone I like more than you.

G-MONEY

Piper, obviously. I'm down for anything. Cap? You in for a night out?

MAVVY

Nope. Emmy isn't feeling well, and I'm staying home with her.

ME

Count me out too. My shoulder is finally back to 100%, but now my legs are sore as hell from those drills we ran the other day. Y'all have fun. Call if you need a DD. I'll pick you up.

EASY E

Aye aye, Huddy Boy. You're a real one. Mitchy? What are you doing?

MITCHY

There's an art class I've been wanting to try. They finally had an opening tonight, so I'm on my way there.

EASY E

Damn, G. Guess it's just us.

SULLY

I'll be shocked if the city doesn't burn down.

G-MONEY

Aw! That's his way of saying he loves us!

SULLY

In your dreams.

I SET my book on my nightstand and turn off the light. After dinner with Madeline and Lucy, a hot shower, and a twenty-minute stretching session, I'm ready for sleep.

The room plunges into darkness, and I turn on my side. I stare at the wall and wonder what Madeline is doing on the other side, glad she's not hiding from me anymore.

I bet she's watching TV. She told me about the reality shows she puts on to decompress at night. There's one in particular she likes where people get married after only knowing each other for ninety days. The idea sounds so fucking bonkers, I'm kind of intrigued.

She's normally so quiet I sometimes forget we share the wall behind my headboard. I can't hear any muted noise tonight, and I figure she must've gone to bed. She looked exhausted after dinner with heavy shoulders and a slowness to her step. There was a delayed reaction to everything I said to her, and I cleaned up the dishes before she could protest so it was one less thing she had to do.

I hope she's getting enough sleep. I hope the dogs aren't bothering her, and I really hope *I'm* not bothering her.

I yawn and close my eyes, heading to the brink of unconsciousness myself until the sound of a low buzz fills my room. I prop myself up on an elbow and glance around.

The noise isn't my phone, and it's not the dogs out in the living room. It

can't be the smoke detector—I changed the batteries last week.

I don't know what the hell is going on.

And that's when I hear it.

A long, drawn-out moan from the other side of the wall.

It sounds like...

Fuck.

It's Madeline getting off with some sort of toy.

A vibrator, I'm guessing, judging by the noises, and my heart pounds. I stare at the barrier between us like it's going to crumble if I glare at it, and I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do.

Cover my ears so I can't hear her?

Lock myself in the bathroom until she finishes and pretend like it never happened?

Move out of the building and change my name?

All three are good options. All three take the high road. All three make me look like a stand-up guy.

But what the hell do I do instead?

I lean against the headboard. I drop my head back against the wall.

And I listen like a goddamn creep.

She moans again, but it's different this time.

Raspier, deeper. *Needier*, and my mind races.

What is she thinking about? What speed does she like to use? Is the toy enough to get her off, or is it just to tease? Does she use it during sex? What kind of stimulation does she prefer? Does she fuck herself with it, or is it only for her clit?

Madeline's vibrator shuts off, and I hope she's not done.

I hope she's just getting started.

I'm greedy. Feral to hear more, and when the toy starts back up, it's been switched to a faster setting. Some variation that adds a pulsing sensation to wherever she's touching herself, and I recognize the change in the tempo.

I'm proud to admit there's a solid three seconds where I consider slipping on my noise canceling headphones and attempting to sleep, but the other side of my brain—the side still thinking about kissing her even though she said it's not going to happen again—wins out.

I'm a good guy.

I've helped others and gone above and beyond for my community.

I've racked up a lot of good karma, and I hope the gods above don't judge

me too harshly when I yank down my pajama bottoms and wrap my hand around my hard cock.

God.

One touch and I'm on fire. My imagination is running rampant, and I try to remember the last time I got off.

A few weeks ago?

A month or two?

I don't even know.

Tonight, I'm desperate for it. It's like I'm in there with her. I can hear her sheets moving, and I picture her on her back. Her head against the pillows and her legs spread wide. I don't know if I'd want to be between her thighs so I could watch—so I could *taste*—or behind her so I could help guide her through it. So I could whisper in her ear and put a hand low on her stomach, there if she wanted help.

Does she do this every night? If she does, why haven't I heard her before?

Is it a special occasion?

Is she making a video and sending it to someone else so they can watch her fall apart?

Is she thinking about me like I'm thinking about her?

I hear a "*Fuck*" from the other side of the wall and I bite my lip so I don't say it back.

I pull my hand away from my cock. I spit in the center of my palm then start again. This is filthy. Completely unhinged, but I don't care. I stroke myself up and down, and for the first time in months, there's an image of a specific woman in mind as I relax into the satisfaction of getting off: *her*.

We agreed to be friends. I know we said what happened on New Year's isn't going to happen again, but I wish it would. I wish I could knock on her door and join her on her bed.

Hell, I'd be happy to stand in the hall and watch from afar. I'd be happy to keep my hands to myself until she told me I could touch myself—could touch *her*.

And if she let me join?

I'd make it so good for her.

I could be gentle. Rough. I could fuck her like I hated her or I could make love to her and kiss her soft and sweet. I'd get on my knees and beg, or I'd ask her to say please if that's what she liked.

I'd call her perfect. I'd tell her how well she was doing, how pretty she is

when she's taking two of my fingers then three.

I would do anything she wanted.

When a soft "*Oh*" echoes through the wall, pre-cum leaks from the tip of my cock.

I'm not going to last long. Not when there's a bump against the wall, and I pretend it's either her head or her hand. Not when another "*Fuck*" comes next, followed by a gasp.

Christ.

This is the best kind of torture.

I grip my cock tighter. I jerk up and down. There's no rhyme or reason to my movements except to match the pace of her toy. I'm going straight to hell, but I can't find it in myself to care.

I'd rather be a sinner with her than a saint with anyone else.

I'm straining to hear what other sounds she makes. I'm greedy for more of her and trying to commit the noises to memory, so in the off chance I ever *do* get to touch her again, I can make sure I'm doing it right.

I'm not going to let a toy be better than me.

I rub my thumb through the pre-cum and coat my length with it. My strokes turn sloppy and uncoordinated, and I want to get there at the same time as her. I want to fall over the edge to the sounds of her orgasm. And when the vibrator clicks up to the next speed and she pants out a strangled "*fuck, yes,*" I lose it.

I bite my collar, tempted to yell out her name. My hips lift off the bed and warm, sticky cum covers my hand. It runs down my still-hard length, and a soft groan sneaks out of me at the vision of Madeline helping me clean up. Her tongue at the base of my shaft and finding out how deep she can take me down her throat.

"Goddamn," I whisper.

I fumble with the lamp next to my bed. When I turn on the light, the mess in front of me is downright embarrassing. I've never come like this before. My entire body is hot and prickly as I shove my pants all the way off and use them to wipe my hands.

I should be ashamed.

I should go to church on Sunday and repent for my transgressions.

But I don't want to.

Madeline makes me want to be unbelievably bad, and maybe it's time I deserve to be something other than good.

I drop my head on the pillow and stare at the ceiling. I feel weightless and a little drunk even though I haven't touched a sip of alcohol. My shirt is halfway up my stomach, my skin is splotchy, and it takes a good five minutes before my breathing returns to normal.

On her side of the wall, there's a satisfied hum. A deep sigh and gentle giggle.

She liked that.

So did I, but I'm pretty sure telling your roommate you got off to *them* getting off goes against some moral cohabitation code.

I can never, *ever* mention this.

To anyone.

Even if it was the best orgasm of my life.

Suppressing one more groan, I clean up my stomach and toss my pants in the laundry basket. I stand, needing to shower and use the bathroom. I wish I could get a lobotomy to forget the last ten minutes—I am so pathetic—but I also wish I had a way to hear her come again.

Friends, I remind myself in the shower as I picture her blissfully content in her bed.

Friends, I remind myself when I climb back on my mattress and wonder if she's going to go for round two.

If she wants to be friends, I'm going to be the best damn friend she's ever had.

THIRTY-TWO HUDSON

I CAN STILL HEAR the sounds Madeline makes when she comes two weeks later.

I can hear her moans and how she sighs when she finishes, like she's proud of herself.

I've done everything in my power to forget the noises, but I can't.

So I throw myself into staying busy.

I add three extra weight training sessions to my schedule. I spend time with our assistant coaches doing extensive film review. I visit Lexi at her Pilates class and I join Liam at ballet. I go to team dinner, getting there early to help set up and staying late to clean up. I buy five new romance books when we're in Detroit and tear through them all, not giving my brain a second of space to think about *her*.

After kissing her on New Year's and listening to her get off, the last thing I want to do is say something stupid that will scare her away. I appreciate her—and not just her cooking—so much, and pretending like none of it happened is the only way forward.

There's one thing on my mind besides the buzz of her toy. It's something I've been wanting to do for weeks now, and the only way to accomplish it is to follow Liam home one night after a grueling workout that had half the team puking once we got off the ice.

"Is there a reason why you're acting like a lost dog?" Liam asks, unlocking the door to his place. "You're never this clingy. It's usually

reserved for Miller.”

“I want to talk to Piper about something,” I say.

His mouth curls into a grin. “I’m going to propose to her at the end of the season.”

“You’re already married, dude. Drunk weddings in Vegas still count as legally binding commitments.”

Their original nuptials might have been fueled by an excessive amount of tequila, but those two love each other. Liam doesn’t look at anyone the way he looks at Piper, and I’m glad they figured their shit out. I’m glad they realized their feelings, because they belong together.

“I know they do, but I’m going to propose for real. With a real ring, down on one knee. I’ve been sure about her from the moment I met her, and I want to make it official.”

“You’ve been sure about her even when she was married to someone else?” I ask, and he nods.

“Yeah. I’ve never been patient about anything in my life, but with her? I’d wait a thousand years if I had to.”

I’m not sure when all my friends went from being single to happily settled down with people they want to spend the rest of their lives with.

I can’t help but feel behind sometimes. Like I’m doing something wrong or I’m not someone a woman sees a future with.

“Shit, man.” I clasp his shoulder and grin. “That’s awesome. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, Hayes. And thanks for setting my ass right back in Vegas.” Liam rubs the back of his neck. He tosses me a rare, sheepish smile, and I might need to go play the lottery. “Pretty sure I owe my relationship to you.”

“No way. It’s definitely because of your charming personality,” I tease.

“Fuck off,” he says, and I follow him to the kitchen. “I’m home, Sunshine. And I brought a stray.”

“Hudson?” Piper waves from the table, where a half-dozen notebooks are open in front of her, and she closes her laptop. She must be getting ready for our game the day after tomorrow. “This is a nice surprise.”

“Hey, Little P.” I slide into the chair across from her and wring my hands together. I’m nervous all of a sudden. “I came to ask you for a favor. It’s something I’ve been considering doing for a while, and I thought you’d be the perfect person to help me.”

“Is it about piercing a certain body part of yours?” she asks. “I don’t have

any personal experience, but other women love it, apparently.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I heard a rumor that one of the guys on the team has a piercing somewhere... private. Is it true?” she presses, like the media guru she is.

I burst out laughing. “Sorry to disappoint, but my dick does not have a piercing. And I’m not telling you who *does* have a piercing.”

“I’ll get it out of you one day.” She caps her pen and smiles at me. “What’s up?”

I take a deep breath before starting to speak. “I want to learn sign language so I can communicate with Lucy. I want to be able to ask about her day and tell her about mine. I want to know what she’s saying to Madeline that makes her laugh so much. I want to be included, but more importantly, I want to include her in *my* conversations instead of talking around her. I should’ve started learning it sooner. I don’t know why I waited so long, but I —”

“Hudson.” Piper reaches for me. Her smile is bright when she wraps her fingers around mine. “That’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Are we forgetting the time I tied my wedding ring to my skate?” Liam grumbles. “That was sweet.”

“This isn’t about you.” She waves him off and turns back to me. “I’d be honored to help. ASL—that’s American Sign Language—can be really complex. Its linguistic features make it different from any other language, and it’s its *own* language. It’s not based off English. The grammatical structure is different from what you’re familiar with, and it’s very visual.”

“Do you think I could learn some basic phrases if I practice and put in the work?”

“Of course. I can send you videos to get you started, but you live in DC. Gallaudet University is right up the road, and it’s a private college for deaf students. You’ll be more effective learning ASL from a native speaker instead of me.”

“Really?” I sit up in my chair, excited. “I wonder if I could find someone to tutor me even though I’m not a student. I’d pay them, obviously.”

“I bet you could. It would be a more authentic experience, and I’d never want to take away that opportunity from someone more qualified than me.”

“I’ll do some research and see what I can find. Thanks for the suggestion, Piper.”

“Why don’t you ask Madeline? Lucy’s school is under Gallaudet’s

education umbrella. I'm sure she could point you in the right direction."

"I ah, don't want to tell her," I admit, and Piper frowns.

"You don't? Why not?"

That's the question I've been weighing since I first had this idea.

It happened when I saw Lucy zone out of a conversation Madeline and I were having because she couldn't communicate with me and I couldn't communicate with her.

The notepad and Etch A Sketch help us get by. They're *fine*, a tool that works, but I don't want Lucy to have to change her way of doing things for me. I should be the one making an effort.

It seems dehumanizing. Like I'm talking to a piece of paper, not to her. I don't get to see the way her eyes light up when she's sharing something that made her happy. I don't get to see her smile when she asks if she can bring the dogs in for show-and-tell because I'm too busy flipping to a new page. Jotting something down, and by the time I look up, the moment is gone.

I know Madeline would be happy to teach me, but she's always doing things for other people. She deserves to have someone show up and do something for *her*. Not because she asked, but because they want to.

"I want it to be a surprise," I finally say, and I'm glad when Piper doesn't press me any further.

"Do you want to start now? I can make you all some food, then we can go over a few things."

"Really? You'd give up some of your evening for me?"

"Oh, Hudson. You don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?" I ask, confused.

"You've done so much for me. For the team. For Liam. For *us*. You organize volunteer hours for the guys. You stop to sign autographs for anyone who hands you a piece of gear. After our accidental wedding in Vegas last New Year's, your level-headedness kept us both calm. I know we're where we are today because of your ability to get us to communicate," she says, blushing. "You're so selfless, all the time. Helping you with something you're clearly passionate about isn't a chore. It's something I'd be glad to do. You're a good man with a kind heart, and if learning sign language is what you want to do, I'm honored to play a small role in it."

Piper makes me sound like a hero, when, really, I'm just treating people how I'd want to be treated. The *right* way to be treated, and that boils over to Madeline and Lucy too.

“Shucks, Little P.” I grin at her. “You’re too good to me.”
“Fuck me, I guess,” Liam grunts. “It’s like I’m not even here.”
“Calm down, you jealous oaf.” Piper pushes back her chair and claps.
“Food, then we’ll get to work. You’re going to be an expert in no time, Huddy.”

ME

Hey. Sorry for the late text. I lost track of time. I’m eating dinner with Piper and Liam.

MADELINE

I figured you were out and about and having fun. I also might’ve checked your location to make sure you weren’t in a ditch somewhere.

ME

Attachment: 1 image

What can I say? The garlic bread is a hell of a time.

Are y’all having a good night? Is everyone behaving over there?

MADELINE

Attachment: 1 image

Lucy and the dogs are now known as the Three Musketeers.

ME

Love that picture. I’ll be back later, but I’ll give you a heads up before I get home.

Can’t have another banana incident.

MADELINE

Are you ever going to let me live that down?

ME

Never, KG.

I HIT pause on Piper's laptop and press my palms to my eyes. I'm frustrated and tired. I'm not understanding what Piper is trying to tell me, and no matter how many times I watch the video she pulled up, I'm still confused.

"I don't get it." I groan and drop my hands to my lap. "This is really fucking difficult."

"It is, but you're doing great," Piper says encouragingly. "You have to remember you're an adult learning this, and it's an entirely new language. It's new words and new sentence structure. You almost have to forget what you know in English and relearn it in ASL. No one expects you to have it figured out in an hour. Hell, it's going to take hundreds of hours to even be able to communicate in basic conversation with handshapes."

"What's the word? Handshapes?" I ask.

"Yeah. It's the configurations the hands take as they form words. Let's go back to learning how to tell someone to have a nice day. It's an English dominant phrase, but it's a good starting point. Want to watch me?"

I do my best to mimic her. I touch my upper chest with bent handshapes. Next, I place my left hand up in front of me. I move the flat palm of my right hand across my left hand.

I move my left arm, with my palm down, parallel to my body, so my hand is almost touching the right side of my chest. I then take my right elbow and rest it on top of my left hand, and make my right hand close so I'm using my pointer finger to the ceiling. Finally, I start to bring my right hand into a downward motion to meet my left elbow.

"That's it!" Piper squeals. "That was perfect, Hudson. Do it again."

The praise gives me a new sense of determination, and I try for a second time.

"Have a nice day," I murmur to myself, and she nods to me from across the table.

I repeat the sign until it doesn't feel clunky. It takes me a few minutes; I'm slow and get my hands mixed up, but when I finally do the phrase correctly three times in a row, I'm fucking elated.

"I did it." I try it again to make sure it sticks. "Holy shit. I did it."

"I'm so proud of you." Piper is grinning, and I'm not sure I've ever been this proud of myself. "Do you remember how to spell your name?"

I close my eyes and lift my hand. I speak the letters as I try to sign them from memory. "*H-u-d-s-o-m*. Did I get it right?"

"Almost. You did an m at the end instead of an n. That's okay! It's a

simple fix. Move your thumb between your middle finger and ring finger instead of between your ring finger and pinky.”

“*H-u-d-s-o-n*. Is that better?”

“That was perfect, Hudson.”

“This uses a totally different part of my brain than I’m used to. It’s nothing like breaking down plays on the ice or trying to figure out an opponent.” I sigh and stretch my fingers. “Does it start to get easier?”

“Eventually, but that’s how everything is. You weren’t great at hockey the first time you put on skates. It took some time, and now look at you. You’re a Stanley Cup Champion.” Piper pops a grape in her mouth and tugs on Liam’s arm. He’s been walking around the kitchen for the last hour, claiming he didn’t want to participate, but I caught him doing the signs out of the corner of my eye. “If you’re wanting to learn ASL for Lucy, that must mean things are going well with Madeline.”

“She’s so good at her job. The food she makes is truly next level. I feel selfish for keeping her around, if we’re being honest. The world should have a chance to taste her food.” I laugh. “Maybe she’ll open her own restaurant one day.”

“How is it living with her? You’ve never done that with a woman before.” Piper stands so Liam can take her seat. She lets him get settled then sits in his lap. “You seem really happy.”

“I am. I’m eating better. I come home from practice, and I have someone to talk to. You know how hard the last few years have been for me.” I grab my napkin and fold it into a neat square, diverting my attention. “And I don’t ever remember feeling this light. Especially since after the funeral. It’s really nice to have a friend around.”

I like that we eat breakfast together in the morning. I like that she stays up, waiting for me to get home and asking questions about my day. I especially like finding her on the balcony, and I hope as winter melts into spring, we’ll share more nights out there with a plate of cookies while we have a heart-to-heart.

“I knew Madeline was special when I met her in Vegas, but I honestly never thought I’d see her again. I’m glad she’s here.” Piper rests her head on Liam’s shoulder and sighs. “Lucy, too. She’s such a special girl.”

“Yeah.” I rub a hand over my chest. “She is.”

I enjoy spending time with the kids at summer camp and before and after games. I can’t wait to be an uncle to Mav and Emmy’s offspring when the

timing is right. I'll spoil the shit out of them, but I've never been sold on the idea of having children of my own.

It might be because after Mom passed, I became terrified of ever doing that to a kid I love more than life itself. I don't want to make someone hurt like I've been hurt.

It's the worst feeling in the fucking world.

Lucy is changing my thinking.

She's fun as hell. Smart, too, and it's been fun to forge a friendship with her. I've liked watching her grow and change and learn things she wasn't sure of before.

I taught her how to handle the dogs on a walk, and now we do a lap around the neighborhood together every night I'm home if it's not too cold.

She showed me how to put ketchup on my eggs and laughed when I found the taste revolting.

I think I could handle the heartbreak if it was a kid like her.

"I have someone I could set you up with if you're interested," Piper says, and I blink. "She works for Emmy's team in the ticket sales office."

"Maybe in the off season," I say, deflecting. "Things are ramping up with the All-Star Game approaching. It's hell after that with only two and a half months to go before the playoffs."

She hums but doesn't ask any other questions. "I'm glad you're happy, Hudson."

I flash her a grin. "Me too, Little P."

THIRTY-THREE MADELINE

BLOND BOMBSHELL

Where do y'all want to sit tonight? In a suite? Upper bowl? Near the ice?

ME

A suite is not necessary. I think Lucy would love to be close to the ice so she can feel like she's part of the action. She loves when people get rammed into the glass. I'm still trying to figure out the appeal.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

She's definitely going to be a hockey player. I put y'all in row two. The first row filled up, but you'll still be right there. I also snagged you some passes so you can come and go wherever you want in the arena.

There's a lounge with food, snacks and drinks you'll have access to. It also has a soft serve ice cream machine.

ME

How many times have you visited the ice cream machine?

BLOND BOMBSHELL

Not answering that.

ME

Sounds like we're getting the VIP treatment.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

All first-timers should. We do warmups an hour before the puck drops, so I'll have a chance to see y'all.

ME

I can't believe it took us until February to go to our first Stars game. Lucy is determined to get on the big screen.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

I'll put in a good word with the camera guy.

See you out there, Galloway.

ME

Have a great match, hockey guy!

GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN(DAMENTAL RIGHTS) AND GOOD SEX

ME

Help! What do I wear to a hockey game?

PIPER

Are you coming tonight!!

ME

Hudson got us tickets. I'm going to surprise Lucy!

LEXI

Jeans and a sweater. And bring a jacket! It gets cold in here even with twenty thousand fans crowded in the arena.

EMMY

Try to get there early. You don't want to miss the warmups.

MAVEN

They're the best part of the game.

PIPER

You're so right. Last night, I watched a video some girl on social media put together of Liam stretching. I was almost jealous, but then I remembered I get to climb into bed with him every night.

So climb I did.

LEXI

That's our girl!

ME

Wow. Are all of you having regular sex?

PIPER

Yup.

EMMY

Sure am.

LEXI

If men can fuck whoever they want, so can I.

ME

My celibate ass can't wait to see you all tonight.

EMMY

I'm mad I'm in Texas.

MAVEN

And I'm mad I'm at a soccer tournament.

Not really. I love watching my kid play.

ME

That's so sweet.

LEXI

I'm jealous I'm NOT in Texas. The state where everything is bigger? Sign me up.

PIPER

See you soon, Madeline! You're going to have so much fun!

BEING at United Airlines Arena for a sold-out game is different from the Friends and Family night Hudson brought Lucy and me to.

It's also different from the game we went to back in Vegas. The crowd

was sparse. Our team sucked, and there was hardly any cheering.

The arena tonight is packed. Everywhere I look, fans are decked out in their Stars gear. The team's mascot—a bear wearing sunglasses and a jersey—skates across the ice with a Stars flag, and I didn't realize sports could be so *fun*.

Lucy got a fist bump from every player when they came out for warmups, and even now she has her nose against the glass, watching the team finish up a drill.

"I see why you girls told me not to miss the stretching. It's almost pornographic," I say.

"Look at Liam." Piper grins and points at the goalie with the hand not holding her microphone. He's in a full split in front of the net, and my mouth drops open. "His flexibility is also fun off the ice."

"I've never been able to stretch like that, and he's doing it in pads and a helmet. And the rest of them? It's like free entertainment."

My eyes wander over to Maverick and Hudson. They're both on their knees with their legs spread, and they're almost thrusting into the ice. I'm sure there's a physical benefit to the move they're doing—something that makes some sort of muscle limber and warm—but it's indecent enough to take me back to the last time I got off with my vibrator.

I thought about Hudson that night.

I'm thinking about him every night I touch myself lately.

I pictured the toy as his fingers as I circled my clit, and when I fell apart on the silicone—over the span of three separate orgasms—it was a feat not to yell out his name.

Watching him stretch is giving me a new visual: us on a bed. Him holding himself above me as he slowly rocks his hips, burying himself inside me. The hint of a smirk when he asks how much I like being his friend.

"Almost makes me want to date a hockey boy," Lexi says, and I crash back to reality. "Too bad they're all fuckboys."

"That's not true. There are a lot of good guys on the team," Piper challenges. "Wholesome men who won't forget to text you back."

"And if I don't want wholesome?" Lexi gives us a wicked grin. "Then what?"

"Then have fun, Lex. I'm rooting for you." Piper pats her arm then taps Lucy's shoulder. She kneels down to her level, careful to not wrinkle her bright pink dress. *Are you so excited for tonight?* she asks, and Lucy nods.

Some of them autographed my jersey. She points at the signatures on her sleeves. ***I'm going to bring it to school next week.***

Your classmates are going to be so jealous. Wait until they hear you live with a hockey player too! Piper laughs, and Lucy grins at her. *Your seats tonight are very good. I'll come say hi at intermission, okay?*

Okay. Lucy throws her arms around her in a hug, and Piper strokes her hair. ***Your dress is pretty. You look like a princess.***

So do you. Piper stands, looking at me when Lucy goes back to waving to the players. "If you need anything, send me a text. I'm only busy right at the end of the period when I'm trying to wrangle someone for an interview, so I'll be easier to reach than Hudson."

"I'm sure the game is going to be fun, but I'm more excited to see you all in action," I say to her and Lexi. "A rinkside reporter? The head athletic trainer? You two are incredible. If only Emmy was playing against the Stars tonight. Then I could cheer on three badass women."

"Denver's assistant head coach is a woman." Lexi points across the ice to a woman with blonde hair and a clipboard in her hand. Her blue suit is tailored and fitted to her toned thighs, and she's deep in conversation with one of the players on her team. Every few seconds her eyes flick up. She scans the ice, and I wonder if she's looking for someone specific. "It's so fucking fun to see us succeed. There's room for all of us in this sport. Forget what the men say."

"Here, here." I pretend to lift an imaginary glass. "Go do your important jobs. I'll catch up with you later."

They leave with a wave, and Lucy leads us to our spot in the second row. I sit next to her, nervous and excited. This is the first time it's felt like I've had a stake in a game, and it's an entirely different vibe than watching on TV.

Hudson skates by us and taps his glove on the glass. The women in the row in front of us jump to their feet and wave, but he shakes his head.

He lifts his stick, points right at me, and gestures for us to come down to the glass.

Four heads turn to look at me, and I give the women a sheepish smile when we walk down the two steps it takes to reach the barrier.

He waves hello to Lucy and she beams, pointing at the miniature jersey of his I bought specially for her to wear tonight.

He's so big, Lucy tells me, and I nod.

He's very tall, isn't he? I ask.

As tall as the ceiling! she says, and I laugh.

“Are you two talking about me?” he yells.

“She said you’re so big,” I tell him. “And you are. Even more so with all those layers on. You could take a bullet to the chest and not feel a damn thing, couldn’t you?”

“It’s like Fort Knox over here.” He lifts up his jersey to show off the gear I’m not familiar with, but I’m distracted by a bead of sweat dripping down his stomach. “Hey.” He knocks his stick against the glass again, and I jump. “My eyes are up here, Galloway.”

I blush.

I can’t believe he caught me staring.

I can’t believe I was staring in the first place.

“I thought I saw a bug,” I say.

“Nice save.” He lifts his chin. “Whose jersey are you wearing?”

“Oh. Um. Riley’s?” I turn so he can see the name on the back. “Lexi grabbed it for me. I don’t own any Stars gear, and there weren’t many options in the team store.”

“Interesting.” His eyes blaze with heat when I look at him over my shoulder. “Guess I’m going to have to make a call to our merchandise folks. Enjoy the game, Mads.”

With a wink, he skates away from us to join his teammates lining up. When he pulls up next to Maverick, takes off his helmet and looks back at me, there are butterflies in my stomach.

THIRTY-FOUR MADELINE

THE PUCK DROPS after the national anthem, and it's nonstop action from the very beginning. The crowd is loud, standing when the Stars almost score and cheering when Liam blocks multiple shots on goal.

Lucy knows exactly what's going on. She tries to keep me up to speed, but I'm lost when she starts mentioning words like *icing* and *cross checking*.

The first period ends with the score tied at zero, but nothing about it is boring. Lucy and I sneak down to the lounge at intermission to grab an ice cream to share, and we add way too many crushed Oreos on top.

When the second period starts, the group of women in front of us stand. Every time Hudson skates by, they pound on the glass and try to get his attention. They hold up a heart they make with their hands, hoping he can see it.

I'm all for appreciating a man's body. They've been gawking at women for decades, and we deserve to be the ones doing the eye-fucking for a change, but I draw the line at their offhanded comments. There's a sour taste on my tongue when they say things like *he's a fine piece of ass* and *if he knocked me up, I'd force him into letting me keep the baby*, and I do my best to not let them ruin our night.

Maverick scores with four minutes to go in the period to give the Stars the lead, and the way the players celebrate his goal is absurdly cute. The game turns rough in the third period. A scuffle breaks out between Grant and a Denver player after the two start shoving each other, and they both end up

in the penalty box.

I watch every play while sitting on the edge of my seat. My heart is somewhere in my throat, and I didn't realize how *intense* the game is.

Being this close adds a new layer to it. You can hear how hard the contact is. You can see the grimace of pain when they get slammed into the walls. When Hudson lands on the ground after a rough hit, I spring to my feet, checking to see if he's holding the shoulder he hurt before. I'm overwhelmingly relieved when he gets up and keeps playing.

It's so *fun*.

Adrenaline courses through me every time the Stars have possession. Every time Liam makes a diving save or lifts his glove to catch the puck, I gasp with the rest of the crowd.

The other team ties it up with a goal late in the period. I expect the Stars to panic, but they don't. With fifty seconds to go, Riley tears down the ice and banks in an answering goal that sends the arena into a frenzy. Lucy jumps up and down and hugs me around my waist. The guys pile on each other while they tap Riley's helmet.

The energy carries the Stars the rest of the final minute. When the final buzzer sounds and the Stars secure the win, streamers fall from the rafters. The crowd cheers, and the Hudson Hayes fan club almost loses their minds when he skates over and tries to toss one of his gloves to Lucy.

One of the women snatches it out of the air and clutches it to her chest. He frowns, disappointed.

"Hey," he yells. "That was for the kid behind you."

"Oops." She giggles. "Finder's keepers."

Hudson meets my gaze. I shrug and pick up Lucy. It's really not a big deal, and I don't want to create any issues. We give him a wave and fight through the mass of people exiting the building into the cold February air.

She falls asleep on the Metro ride, and when we get back to the condo, I tuck her in bed with a kiss on her forehead.

An hour later, I check my phone to see if Hudson is close so I can start his dinner. I find his location dot down in the parking garage, and I turn on the oven.

The front door opens and closes with a click. Gus and Millie come barreling down the hall, and I give them each a pat on the head.

"There are my favorite friends. Look how clean and fancy you are with your Valentine's Day bandanas. You're so festive."

“Favorite friends?” Hudson trudges into the kitchen and folds himself onto one of the barstools. “I didn’t realize I was in second place behind the dogs.”

“Technically, you’re in third place. There are two dogs, Hudson.”

He grins. “Fair enough. Did you and Lucy have fun at the game?”

“That was unbelievable. I think I’m going to have to purchase season tickets after tonight.” I hand him a bowl of salad, sliding the vinaigrette he likes his way. “Luce is never going to let us sit in the nosebleeds.”

“I like sitting close. You lose a little of the view, but being in the thick of the action makes up for it.”

“How do salmon and green beans sound for dinner?”

“Delicious. I’m starving.”

“You are?” I wash my hands then pull out the fish I marinated earlier this afternoon. “Is this an every night thing or something new?”

“Hard to tell.” Hudson shrugs and finishes his salad in record speed. “I’m always hungry, but I’ve always had a fast metabolism.”

“I’m going to up your protein and fiber next week to see if that helps. I’ll also work on adjusting your pregame meals to include more carbs.”

“You know, if the chef thing doesn’t pan out—which it obviously will, because you’re amazing at it—you’d have a solid career in athlete nutrition.”

I slide the fish in the oven and set a timer. “I’m not sure I have the qualifications for that.”

“That’s not true.” He drops an elbow on the island and yawns. “I’m eating better than every guy on the team. Coach made a comment today about how I’m quicker than I was last season. I’m squatting more in the weight room, and that’s because of how you’re fueling me.”

“Thanks for all the flattery.” I smile and grab a plate from the cabinet. “It’s part of my job, though. Just like how yours is to hit the puck.”

“How did I hit the puck tonight?” Hudson asks. “Grade my game from A to F.”

“Given I know *nothing* about hockey, I’d say you were a C,” I tell him, pulling a random letter from thin air, and he groans.

“A C? Come on. What would’ve gotten me an A, Galloway?”

“Throwing your glove so Lucy could reach.” I pause and coat the pan with olive oil for the green beans. “You have a lot of fans.”

“Do I?”

“Did you miss all the women screaming at you?”

“Ah.” His cheeks flush a dark shade of red. “I tune it out. The attention makes me uncomfortable. I don’t know how I’m supposed to react to someone holding up a sign with their cell phone number on it, so it’s best for me to ignore it. I’m there to do my job, you know?”

“You said hi to me and Lucy.”

“You’re different. I like y’all. You’re my favorite girls in the arena, no matter what anyone else’s shirt says.”

“Really?”

“Really. I’m sorry about the glove. That was shitty of her. Everyone knows sports etiquette is to give the gear to a kid if they’re around.” He tips his head to the side, glancing at me. “I have a closet full of stuff she can sort through. I don’t want her to feel left out.”

My chest hurts at the sincerity behind his apology. I was teasing him. Lucy doesn’t understand what she missed out on, but his acknowledgment of it means the world.

Thoughtful, considerate, and lovely.

Just like he always is.

“We’ll be back for another game. We’ll try again,” I say, and his grin rivals the sun.

“If you want season tickets, just say the word. I’ll buy you seats anywhere in the arena.” Hudson pauses. “Do you want your spectating grade for the night?”

“My spectating grade?” I laugh. “What are you judging me on? How loud I yelled?”

“That’s one of the criteria. I saw you cheering, so you get an A for enthusiasm.”

“I’ve always been a good student.”

He scoots back in his chair and stands. He walks around the corner of the island until he’s close to me. “You failed in one area, though.”

“Oh?” I lift an eyebrow. “Are you going to tell me how I can improve for next time?”

“Turn around,” he says in a low voice. My feet move in a small circle until my back is to him. Until I can’t see him but can only hear him, and I don’t know what’s going on. I don’t know where this is going, but I want to find out. “We’re friends, right?”

I squeeze my thighs together. My breath gets stuck in my throat. There’s nothing friendly about the thoughts I’m currently having, but I nod anyway.

“We are.”

“Next time you come to a game, don’t show up in someone else’s jersey.” His fingers trace the outline of the letters spanning across my shoulders. They dance down my spine, and my eyes flutter closed. “I’ll buy you a hundred jerseys with my name on them so you never run out.”

“And if I don’t want to wear your jersey?” I ask with a hint of defiance.

He brushes a strand of hair away from my neck so he can whisper in my ear. He’s not touching me, but it feels like he is. “I might be nice, Madeline, but I can also be very persuasive.”

My heart nearly flatlines at the insinuation behind his words. I should be pushing him away, but I don’t want to.

“Okay,” I whisper. “Next time I’ll wear your jersey.”

“Good. I see an A plus in your future.” He pulls his hand away, and I miss the contact immediately. He claps and grins. “Ready to eat?”

I nod again, lost for words.

I don’t know what I want more: to wear his name across my back, or to learn how persuasive he can be.

THIRTY-FIVE HUDSON

PUCK KINGS

EASY E

Book club tomorrow night!

I never knew reading could be so much fun.

G-MONEY

You only like it because the characters bang every other chapter.

EASY E

Hell yeah they do. And it's hot AF.

MITCHY

I'm hosting this month. If any of you fuck with the canvas I'm working on, I will make your life hell.

ME

No one is going to touch your artwork, Riley.

MAVVY

See you losers at six tomorrow! Be there or be square!

EASY E

Your dad jokes are getting lame, Mavvy.

SULLY

Not as lame as your face.

G-MONEY

Not your best burn, Goalie Daddy, but any chance to roast Ethan is a good day.

PIPER

How is the signing coming?

ME

Good, yeah. I'm meeting twice a week virtually with a sophomore at Gallaudet. He's really helpful. I'm still slow, but I'm getting there.

PIPER

I'm SO proud of you.

Repetition will help. Are you practicing when you're not meeting with him?

ME

Yeah. I stand in front of my mirror and practice. I record myself too and send it to him. He's a nice dude.

PIPER

I can't wait to learn what your name sign is!

ME

My what?

PIPER

It's such a wonderful part of Deaf culture. A member of the Deaf community will give you a name sign that correlates with who you are as a person. Hang on.

Attachment: 1 video

See how I fingerspell my name, and after, I make a B-thumb handshape, place it on my chin, and brush it down? That's "sweet" in ASL. A deaf friend in college gave me my name sign, and it's how I introduce myself. When I communicate with Lucy, she doesn't spell Piper anymore. She just uses my name sign.

ME

That's really fucking cool. Do you think I'll get one?

PIPER

I bet you will. If your tutor doesn't give you one, I bet Lucy will. Maybe she already has.

ME

That makes me want to practice even more so I can do all of this right.

PIPER

I know it does, Huddy. You're doing so well already.

"RILEY. This piece of art is really good." I stare at the canvas he has set up on an easel in the corner of his living room. "You're getting good."

"No way. There are eight-year-olds in the class who are the next fucking Picasso, and I'm struggling to paint a tree."

"Better than anything I could do." I clasp a hand on his shoulder. "You're going to be a Renaissance man before you know it."

"Order, order," Maverick yells. Riley elbows my ribs, and I make my way to a chair by the couch. "Book club is officially underway, lads. Before we get started, I want to take a moment to wish our own Grant Everett good luck at All-Star Weekend where he's competing in the skills competition next week. May he succeed in being the NHL's fastest skater and have the most accurate shooting."

"Come on." Grant blushes, giving us all a grin. "The only reason I'm invited is because you turned down the spot, Mavvy."

"Not true, G. You earned your place," I say. "You're going to have a blast. We're all proud of you."

"Shucks, guys." He flips open his book and taps the pages. "In honor of my exciting accomplishments that have no bearing on our team or the season, I'd like us to start the discussion of our dark romance book by posing a question to you all. If you were forced to eat a body part of someone else, what body part would you pick, and why?"

"I almost DNFD this book." Riley grimaces. "The thought of chewing on someone's finger literally made me gag."

“But you wouldn’t know you were eating a finger until it’s too late,” Ethan challenges. “I’d probably pick an arm or a toe.”

“A *toe*? You’re sick,” Grant says.

“Says the guy who picked the book with cannibalism in it,” Liam grumbles.

“*Accidental* cannibalism. Jesus. I don’t want to eat people.”

“Bet you want to eat something,” Ethan says, and Grant almost tackles him.

“We made it five minutes,” I say to Maverick. “That has to be a record, right?”

“It’s something.” He grins. “Maybe Grant will do some maturing at the All-Star Game. I don’t have a lot of hope for Ethan.”

“Who knows? Maybe he’ll surprise us.”

We go around the room, talking about the book and the parts we liked and disliked. A debate about stalking ensues, with Grant emphatically arguing there’s such a thing as good stalking, while Riley argues it could all be considered problematic. I’m the tiebreaker and award the win to Grant, noting that red flags in fiction are different than real life.

After a break for pizza, we roll into the discussion questions Maverick prepared. Another argument arises when we get into the topic of morally gray characters. Liam makes a good point about society only being able to function as long as there are people who aren’t totally good or totally bad that are able to sway in the needed direction when the time calls for it.

“Time for a vote on the spicy scenes.” Maverick grabs a pen and paper from Riley’s coffee table. “Who would be down to be the one blindfolded and have their hands tied up?”

I cough and reluctantly raise my hand in the air. My embarrassment lessens when Riley joins me, and the boys all cheer for us.

“Huddy’s been watching the ‘Juno’ positions.” Grant lifts his arms above his head and drops them against the wall behind him. “Have you ever tried *this* one?”

“Very funny.” I throw a pillow at him and laugh when it hits Ethan instead. “What are we reading next month?”

“A cowboy romance. A flight attendant spends the summer in a small town and falls in love with the grumpy trail guide.” Connor pretends to ride a horse. “Yee-fucking-haw.”

“Anyone have any final thoughts or opinions about this month’s book?”

Maverick asks, and when everyone breaks off into smaller groups to have personal conversations, he rolls his eyes. “Fuck me, I guess.”

“Such a sensitive soul,” I tease, laughing when he flips me off. “I’m going to head out. Feel like walking with me for a few blocks?”

“In February when it’s cold as shit?” He shrugs and grabs his beanie off the coffee table. “Why the hell not?”

We say goodbye to the boys, escaping before Ethan can make a convincing argument for a game of strip poker. When we get out to the sidewalk, I shove my hands in my coat pockets.

“I feel like I haven’t seen you much lately. Everything good, Mavvy?”

“That’s on me. I’m sorry, man. When Emmy is in town, I want to spend all my time with her. I went a week and a half without seeing her last month, and it was torture.”

“You’re headed to New York for the All-Star Game, right?”

“Yeah. Em is giving a speech at the PWWL luncheon on Friday afternoon. On Saturday, she and Amelia Green, the associate coach for Denver, are hosting a clinic for a group of girls at Madison Square Garden before the skills challenge starts.” Maverick grins. “I’m so fucking proud of her.”

“She’s an icon, isn’t she?” I laugh. “Funny how things change. Remember when you thought she was a dude from Michigan because you didn’t research who she was before meeting her?”

“I’d take our first meeting back if I could. I hate that she ever thought I doubted her abilities as an NHL player when she’s out here proving herself time and time again.”

“She knows you respect her. We all do.”

“I’m glad.” He looks up at the sky and smiles. “How’s it going with Madeline after your terrible kiss?”

“Shut up.” I elbow his ribs and he shoves me away. “We’re good. Did I tell you I’m learning sign language?”

“No shit. Really?”

“Yeah. I want to be able to communicate with Lucy. I’ve been working with a student at Gallaudet University twice a week. Feels like the bare minimum, you know?”

“Do you still have feelings for her?” Mav asks, and I nod.

“I’m not supposed to, but I do. Maybe they’ll go away.” I shrug, wishing I wore a hoodie under my coat. “Maybe they won’t.”

There's a deep pang of loneliness growing in my chest. It's become familiar at this point. The ache of being alone when all I want is someone by my side.

It's not resentment. It's never resentment. I'm not unhappy other people are happy.

It's fear and jealousy.

Jealousy that they have someone to come home to.

Fear I'll never find it.

Jealousy they have someone who cares about their day.

Fear I'll be left.

Again.

I already had a parent leave me. Girlfriends have walked away from the relationships we've had just as it was starting to mean something.

What's next?

Spending the rest of my life by myself and missing out on what everyone else gets to have?

That sounds really fucking sad.

"Hey." Maverick puts his arm around my shoulder. "You're a catch, Huddy. Your person is out there, and you want to know the wildest fucking thing?"

I huff. My breath comes out like a wisp of smoke, and I can't wait to hear. "What?"

"She's trying to get to you right now. It's just taking her a little while. Traffic, you know?"

"Wow. That might be the deepest thing you've ever said, Mav."

"Want me to follow it up with a sex joke?"

"Quit while you're ahead, dude."

He laughs. "Fine. Look. I know being patient sucks, but it's going to pay off in the end. I promise."

"You're right," I relent.

"Holy shit. Say that again, Huddy. It's music to my ears."

I smirk and shove him off of me. "How are you and Em doing?"

"We're good. I'm in it for the long haul with her, and we have options if things don't pan out quite the way we want. We've talked about adoption, and we're both more than open to it. We'll see how the next few months go."

"And you're okay? I'm sure being away from her isn't easy. Different schedules, different road games. Y'all are taking time for yourselves, right?"

I can't imagine the pain they must be feeling, and saying *hang in there* sounds really fucking insensitive. I hated when people told me that after Mom passed, and sometimes hearing nothing was a hell of a lot easier to listen to than forced sympathy.

I remember the days when I couldn't leave my bed. Maverick would come to my apartment, sit next to me on the comforter, and not say a word. He'd stay there for hours, only moving to bring me a bowl of soup that he hand-fed me so I could put something in my body.

"I'm... I'm not fine, but I'm hanging in there, you know? Being here with you all helps. Doing stuff like going to the All-Star Game helps. Just trying to stay positive," he mumbles.

"I'm here," I say. "No judgment. No questions asked. For anything."

"I know." He smiles my way. "And I'm glad."

We stop outside my building, and I shiver. "Are you okay to get home? Want me to keep walking with you? You didn't have anything to drink tonight, right?"

"Nah. I'll manage. And I haven't had a drop of alcohol in months. Not my jam anymore."

"I'm proud of you, Mav. Not for the not drinking part, even though that's great. For all the other stuff. When the time comes, you're going to be the best dad. Your kid is going to be so fucking lucky."

"Future starting center at Michigan, even if we have a girl. Especially if we have a girl. We're going to break all the fucking glass ceilings, just like her mom," he says before grabbing my shoulders and pulling me into a hug. "Look at us. Two fucking simps for our women. You taught me right, Huddy."

I laugh and squeeze him. "Stop. I don't have a woman. You'll let me know when you're home?"

"Yeah. I will."

"You'll give Emmy a hug for me and let her know she's my favorite of you two?"

"I always do."

"Good." I pat his shoulder and pull away. "Go get warm, Cap."

With a grin and a tip of an imaginary hat, Maverick strolls down the sidewalk, whistling a tune. I nod to the doorman, grateful for the heaters in my building's lobby. I wait for the elevator, pulling out my phone and finding a message from Madeline there.

MADELINE

Attachment: 1 image

Had to send this to you.

I grin at the photo of Lucy curled up between Gus and Millie on the floor. All three are fast asleep with a blanket tossed over them, and I tap the screen to save the picture.

ME

So much for the beds we have for them, right?

MADELINE

They've been like this for an hour. I haven't moved from the couch because I don't want to disturb them.

ME

Ah, to be young and fall asleep in random places.

MADELINE

Are you on your way home?

ME

I'm downstairs, actually. Be up in a second.

MADELINE

See you soon, BB.

I laugh and click off my phone. That pain in my chest loosens with every floor the elevator climbs. When I open the door and slip inside, finding the four of them exactly where I thought they'd be, it goes away entirely.

Home.

THIRTY-SIX
MADELINE

IT'S BEEN an afternoon from hell.

Lucy had a terrible day at school, and she's been having tantrum after tantrum since she got home.

My mom called to tell me my dad went to the doctor because of chest pain, and they want to run some tests on his heart.

I have a pounding headache, and by the time I start dinner—forty-five minutes late because the evening slipped away from me, I'm nearing my wit's end.

The apartment is a disaster, and the kitchen is the worst spot. There are stacks of dishes in the sink. The counter is stained with last night's pasta and meatballs has stained the counter. The roll of paper towels have become detached from the wall, and the onions I'm attempting to sauté are burning to a crisp, making the whole condo smell like garbage.

Lucy's wails echo down the hallway. All I want to do is hold her to my chest and comfort her, but I can't.

There are a million other things waiting for me. The dogs are whining at my feet for *their* dinner. My back hurts, and I can't take it anymore.

With no one around to see my royal fuckups and how massively I've failed today, I lose it.

I put my hands on the counter—right in the sauce I've been trying to clean up for ten minutes but keep getting distracted from because of other things—and start to cry. My shoulders shake. I drop my head back. I stare at

the ceiling, and the cries turn into a ragged, ugly sob.

It feels good to get this out—to break down and not be perfect for a minute.

I could wallow here the rest of the night.

“Madeline?” Hudson asks, startling me. I lose my footing on the water Lucy spilled on the floor when I tried to get her a snack earlier, but he moves faster. He’s there to catch me with an arm around my waist. A hand at the small of my back, steadying me against crashing waves. “What’s going on?”

I sniff. “It’s been a day.”

He looks around at the war zone that used to resemble his kitchen. “How can I help?”

That makes me cry even more.

“I don’t know.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“Is Lucy hurt?”

“No. She had a horrible day at school, and it carried over all afternoon. I missed your text earlier, so I’m behind on dinner. The dogs haven’t eaten. I didn’t get a chance to clean up from breakfast *or* lunch. The onions are burnt, but I should be able to throw the rest of the meal together in a few minutes. And I’ll light a candle to get rid of the smell.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.” Hudson reaches behind me and turns off the stove. He rubs his hands down my arms, and it’s amazing how much better I feel when he touches me. “Forget dinner. I’ll order us a pizza. Forget the mess. I’ll get to it later. The dogs can survive an extra hour without their food. Are you okay, Madeline?”

“I don’t know. Lucy’s never acted like this, and I-I feel like a failure. Like I should know how to handle it, but I don’t.” I hiccup. My throat hurts. I’m so tired. “The icing on the cake of a shitty day was my mom calling and letting me know my dad is experiencing chest pains. The doctor is running some tests on his heart. It’s a lot.”

The words spill out of me like the last drops of a wine bottle, and I realize what I’ve said too late. I register the selfishness of mentioning my dad, who I got to talk to this afternoon, while Hudson won’t ever get to talk to his mom again.

I hesitantly search his face for any signs of bitterness. For a shred of resentment for what I have that he doesn't, but I can't find any.

All I can find is a soft smile. A heavy sigh and his hands back on my shoulders like that's where they belong.

"I'm so sorry to hear about your dad. That must've added a lot of stress to your day. Is he doing okay? Have you talked to him?"

"I talked to him earlier. He's in good spirits." I wipe under my eye. Mascara clings to my thumb, and I probably look like a drowned rat. "He's upset about the changes to his diet. He's no longer allowed to have a bowl of ice cream before bed."

"That's cruel, honestly. What's his favorite flavor?"

"Mint chocolate chip." I huff out the makings of a laugh. "I used to tease him and tell him it tasted like toothpaste."

"Your dad has some fine taste. Maybe I need to start eating a bowl of ice cream every night before bed."

"You could afford it. You're made of pure muscle."

"And those brownies you made last week." There's a boyish glint in Hudson's eye. "I ate half the pan."

"I *knew* it." I try to swat his arm, but he catches my hand. He wraps his fingers around my wrist and holds me there.

"Talk to me about Lucy. Do you know why she had a bad day at school?" he asks.

"Her teacher told me one of her classmates teased her, and then kept teasing her when she cried. They also had a fire drill and a vocabulary test, and I think it was too much stimulation."

Hudson slowly lowers my arms to my sides. "Here's what we're going to do: you're going to take a few minutes for yourself. A shower or some time in your room. I'm going to order us some food then I'll check on Lucy."

"Hudson." I sniff again. "You don't have to —"

"I want to. You do so much by yourself, Maddie, but I'm here when you need to tap out for a minute. I want to help. Let me help."

Every kind of emotion twists into a knot in my stomach with the plea in his ask. There's gratitude and appreciation. Fear of giving over control and careful acceptance of having someone in my corner. I bob my head in a slow nod, ready to welcome the help I so desperately need.

"Okay," I whisper. The single word makes his whole face brighten. "She might—if you need me for *anything*, I'm —"

“We’ll be fine. I promise. And if we’re not, I know where you are.”

I take a step back and turn for my room. Walking away from him is so hard because all I want to do is stay. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Take as long as you need. We’ll be here,” Hudson says. “Go on, Golden Girl.”

“Golden Girl?”

“Yeah.” He gestures around the kitchen, not blinking at the catastrophe surrounding us. “You’re the brightest thing in this room. The brightest thing in every room.”

Oh.

I put my hand over my chest. My heart is racing a mile a minute, and I don’t think it’s going to slow down any time soon. Not as long as he’s in the picture.

“Thank you,” I say.

His smile curves into a beam. It’s brilliantly bright, brilliantly beautiful. When he says, “It’s an honor, Maddie,” I know he means it.

IT TAKES a bubble bath and doing my full skin care routine to feel like myself again. An hour and a half later, I’m ready to conquer the parts of the world I’ve shut out.

I open my bedroom door, peering into the hall. It’s eerily quiet in the condo, and I strain to hear any signs of life.

“Hudson?” I call out, but I don’t get an answer.

Frowning, I walk to the kitchen. When I get there, I stop in my tracks. It’s spotless. The dishes are put away. There’s not a trace of sauce anywhere on the counter or cabinets. The smell of burnt onion has been replaced with a hint of orange and vanilla, and I wonder if I stepped into an alternate universe.

My eyes move to the island where a bouquet of beautiful red roses sit. I break out into a grin, reaching for them. I run my fingers along the petals and long stems, trying to remember the last time I had fresh flora in my house. It’s been months. Years, maybe, and the sight of them makes my stomach do a giddy somersault.

My admiration gets broken up by a laugh floating down the hall. There’s

the clap of small hands, a giggle I know with my whole soul.

I greedily follow the nosies, pausing outside Lucy's room when I make it there. I peer inside, finding her and Hudson sitting on the floor in the middle of her bright pink rug. An army of Barbies are in front of them, from Astronaut Barbie to Pop Star Barbie.

Lucy hands Hudson one with a flashy gold dress. He pretends to have her dance, making Lucy giggle, and every part of me is warm.

"Hey," I say. Hudson lifts his chin to look at me. His face breaks out into a beam that wrinkles the corners of his eyes and scrunches his nose. He taps Lucy's shoulder and points my way. *Hi, baby girl.*

Lucy stands and runs to me. Little arms wrap around my middle, and everything is right in the world again.

We're playing dolls.

Are you having fun?

Yes. She sighs and rests her cheek against my stomach, and I can't find any of the tears she had earlier. ***I'm sorry for being mean.***

You weren't mean. You're allowed to be sad sometimes.

We cleaned the kitchen! Did you see?

It looks so good in there. Did you pick out the flowers?

No. That was him. He said they'd make you smile. Lucy reaches up and touches my cheek. ***Did you smile?***

So much.

Lucy runs back to her dolls. I focus my attention on Hudson, who is watching us. "You got me flowers?" I ask.

"Yeah." In the cozy yellows of Lucy's room, I can see his ears turn pink. His cheeks do, too. "My dad used to buy my mom flowers whenever she had a hard day. Even if there was already a bouquet in the kitchen, he'd show up with more." He pauses, the silence thick, then continues. "In the end, her whole hospital room was covered in vases. I think he hoped the flowers would bring him some miracle."

The tattoo on his leg makes so much sense now. It's not random artwork or a drunken mistake he'll regret five years down the road.

They're parts of his mom he carries with him, and to know he's treating me like his dad treated her makes me feel lucky. Like I'm one in seven billion.

"Maybe she has a garden now. A place up there where she can plant her own flowers and smile nonstop."

“That—” Hudson swallows. He plays with the dress of the Barbie he’s holding then rubs his jaw. “That’s a really nice thought. I hope she does.”

“I don’t know if anyone’s ever bought me flowers.”

“Ever? Not even —”

“Not that I can remember. They’re beautiful. Roses are my favorite. Cliché, I know. But I don’t care.”

“I’m glad you like them. I know they don’t fix the things that didn’t go right today. They don’t solve the problems, but they don’t make anything worse.”

“I like that sentiment.” I lean against the door frame. “You got Lucy to calm down? And you cleaned the kitchen? Are you a miracle worker, Bombshell?”

His blush deepens, cheeks bright pink. “Hardly. It took us a minute. Several minutes, actually. I sat with her and let her cry. When she wore herself out, I asked if she wanted to help me with something. We made cleaning the kitchen a game. After, we went and got some fresh air on a walk to the grocery store up the road. Bringing the dogs helped, too. You know she loves Gus and Millie.”

There’s a thrumming behind my ribs the more he talks. It’s not painful, but something more wonderful: a steady, soothing warmth. I’ve never experienced it before, and it moves all over my body, from my spine to my toes.

I blink. When Hudson hands the doll he’s holding over to Lucy and gives her a smile, the understanding hits me like a ton of bricks.

How I missed it before, I don’t know, because it’s so stupidly obvious.

I have a crush on Hudson Hayes.

An alarmingly real, alarmingly serious crush, where just being around him makes everything better. I can breathe easier. I can think clearer. The night has totally turned around, and it’s all because of him.

Maybe I should’ve tried harder to suppress these feelings. I’m the one who threw the label of *friends* on our relationship, but I don’t want that to be the word to define us anymore.

I want *him*, in any way I can have him, because he’s the epitome of perfection. He’s magic and stardust and everything I’ve ever dreamed about when I let my cynical heart imagine falling for another man somewhere down the road.

He makes me believe, and that’s not something I’ve done in a very long

time.

“What about dinner?” My voice shakes. How could I have missed all the signs? How long have my feelings been hiding from me? How much time have I wasted? “Should I make something?”

“Pizza should be here in ten minutes. Want a glass of wine? I picked up some of that red you like when we grabbed the flowers.”

“Would you judge me if I drank the whole bottle?”

“Not in the slightest.” Hudson stands and offers his hand to Lucy. “Let’s eat.”

THIRTY-SEVEN
HUDSON

MADELINE IS beautiful when she smiles.

She's beautiful all the time, but seeing her and Lucy laugh through dinner makes my brain do this stupid thing where it pretends there's a world out there where she likes me as much as I like her.

And, *fuck*, do I like her.

I caught her sneaking glances at me over her third slice of pepperoni pizza and I panicked, thinking I had sauce on my cheek. When I asked her what was wrong, she only shrugged. Gave me a coy smile and went back to eating.

What I would give to be inside her head.

We watch TV with Lucy on the couch until she falls asleep, curled against my side with a drop of drool dried on her cheek. When she starts to snore softly, I walk her to her room and tuck her in bed. Madeline kisses her forehead then follows me down the hall, her presence all-consuming.

Back in the kitchen, we wash the dishes from dinner in silence. I drop the last plate in the dishwasher and lean against the counter. It's dangerous to be around her when I'm thinking about her.

I want to take her bottom lip between my teeth. I want to know what she would look like with a hickey on her neck, and I want to pour the last of her wine in her mouth then kiss her until she's breathless.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, finding neutral ground. It's safe, polite. The antithesis of the war raging in my head.

“Much better. That time to myself was exactly what I needed. I know I’ve already said it tonight—I’m pretty sure it’s all I’ve said to you since you opened your door to Lucy and me, because you’ve been nothing but kind—but thank you, Hudson. For stepping in. For helping me. For showing me respect in my moments of weakness. And—” Her bottom lip quivers. God, do I want to kiss her. “Thank you for not looking at me differently after I failed as a parent today.”

“Hey.” I step toward her so we’re inches apart. “You didn’t fail at anything. You had an off day because you’re human. Do you know how many off days I’ve had? Hundreds. Thousands, if we’re being honest, and a lot of those have come in the last five years. None of us can be perfect all the time, Madeline, and no one should feel like they’re carrying the weight of responsibilities alone. I’m here. I know I’m not a parental figure to Lucy, but we’re friends. She’s in my life, and I’m glad for it. That’s why I’m going to be better about lending a hand. Not because you’ve done something wrong, but because you’ve done so many things right.”

“Friends.” Her laugh is a heavy exhale, a shake of her head. The sound makes me nervous, and she looks at the floor instead of at me. “I’m starting to hate that word.”

“Did I do something to make you think you’re not my friend?”

“No.” Slowly, hesitantly, she looks back at me. Her eyes are wide with a scorch of heat behind the brown. “When you call us friends, it makes the things I’m thinking about you—the things I’m *feeling* for you—seem wrong.”

I don’t know what’s going on. I might be dreaming. “What kind of things are you thinking about?”

“Kissing you.” Madeline grabs my shirt like she did on New Year’s Eve. She wraps her fingers in the cotton, cementing herself to me. “Doing more than that.”

“You said that’s not something you want. You told me you wanted to be friends. *Just* friends.”

“That’s what I wanted before, but it’s not what I want anymore.”

“What do you want?” I ask, terrified to hear the answer.

“You,” she says, and it’s my favorite word she’s ever spoken.

“I’m not kissing you unless you tell me to, Madeline. And if I do, it’s not going to be a one-time, casual thing. It’s not going to be a two-time thing. It’s going to *mean* something, just like it did on New Year’s, because I’m done

pretending like I haven't thought about that night every single day that's passed. I have. Excessively. But I don't act on it because I don't want you to hide from me again. I don't want to mess this up. You mean too much to me."

The words fly out of me. In the morning, I might regret them. I'll probably want to take them back and kick myself for being so honest, but I'm done playing games.

She's ingrained on my soul, and life is too short to not tell the people you care about exactly how you feel.

Madeline's grip on my shirt tightens. I wonder if she'll walk away or disappear again.

She surprises me when she stands on her toes. I reach for her, cupping her cheeks on instinct, blissfully aware of how fucking *soft* she is and needing to touch her like I need air.

Her lips pull up into a grin. She lifts her chin, a dare there, before she says, "Fuck it," and crashes her mouth against mine.

The planets realign.

The earth stops rotating, and this is different from how we kissed on New Year's.

This is intentional. Something that has purpose and something she's doing without any provoking.

The rational part of my brain is screaming at me to stop. To cool my fucking jets and think about this for half a second because we've been down this road before, and we decided it wasn't the path we—*she*— wanted to take.

The other part of my brain?

The other part of my brain is telling me to walk her backward until we reach the island. To lift her onto the countertop and touch her however I want.

So I do just that.

"Hudson." Her head tips to the side when I set her down. I kiss her neck and the spot below her ear. She smells like the roses she couldn't stop admiring at dinner, and I think I'm already addicted to her. "Please."

I don't know what that *please* is asking for, but I'll spend the rest of my days trying to find out.

"What do you need?" I nudge my way between her legs, resting my hands on her knees. She leans back, palms on the counter, and knocks an apple into

the sink. "What do you want? What can I give you?"

"Anything. Everything. Just—" She wraps her legs around my waist, urging me closer. I'd tether myself to her if I could. "Don't stop."

"The last thing I want to do is stop. I want to make you feel good." I hesitate, the last piece of my rationality coming to the forefront of my brain when I realize we're not alone in the condo. "Should we do this here? What about Lucy?"

"She's a heavy sleeper unless there's a storm. She won't wake up until morning. If she needs me, she'll go to my room first. It's probably best we do this out here."

"Okay. Yeah. We'll stay here." I move my hands up Madeline's thighs until I reach her waist. My fingers tease the hem of her shirt, and I untuck it from her jeans. I graze the pad of my thumb along her bare skin, smiling when a soft gasp tumbles out of her. "What do you like, Madeline?"

"It's been a while." Her laugh is resigned. The hint of shyness, the cusp of embarrassed. "I don't remember. I'm not sure."

"We'll go slow. We'll figure it out. It's been a while for me, too." I rest my palm on her stomach, listening to her blow out a breath. I trail my touch up to her ribs, and her heart races. "Is this okay?"

"Yeah. That's nice," she whispers.

"That fucking word," I say.

Her laugh is beautiful this time, full and bright. "Is spectacular better?"

"We're getting there." I kiss her again, and she melts into me like ice in a fire. With her tongue, with her teeth. With a hand that rests on my hip and snaps the waistband of my sweatpants hard enough to make me hiss. "God, Madeline."

"Is it okay if I touch you?" She dances her hand across my stomach, dipping her fingers in my briefs, and I suck in a breath. "Like this?"

"You can touch me however you want," I tell her. "I'll like anything you do to me."

Ruin me, I almost say, but I keep that to myself.

I kiss her collarbone. I keep my mouth on her until she's whimpering, then I dance my thumb along the soft fabric of her bra. Her moan is wicked, a sinful thing, and when I slowly lift the material and move to the underside of her breast, she whines.

"Oh."

"Okay?" I ask into the crook of her neck. I suck on the skin there, her

throat warm under my tongue. “Too much?”

“More than okay. I told you it’s been a while, and it’s embarrassing how —”

“Nothing about you could ever be embarrassing.”

She relaxes at that, and I close my eyes, willing myself to calm down. What’s embarrassing is how my body is reacting to her. It’s like I’ve been starved, and now I’m being fed. My cock is aching in my pants, and it’s my turn to groan when I find her hard nipple.

“Could you—” Madeline sighs and rests her hand over mine. She guides me back down her stomach, unbuttoning her jeans and lowering her zipper. “Here?”

I’m going to lose my mind. It’s already halfway gone. I’ve never moved this fast with a woman before. I like to go slow, to not do everything all at once, but when I tug the denim halfway down her thighs, I become certifiably insane.

“I’m going to be rusty,” I admit. “Way off my game.”

“Better than six years. We both might suck.” She laughs again. There’s no hesitation in the way she leans back and tips her thighs open wide. “I know I want this. I want *you*, Hudson. So badly. If it’s not great, we’ll work on it.”

“Can I look at you?”

“I’d really like it if you did.”

My hand falls away as I step back so I can see her. I don’t know where to look first—at her creamy thighs or the hint of hair sneaking out through the cut of her underwear. The hint of moisture on the white lace or the faded stretch marks on the curve of her thighs.

“You are...” I trail off. Words are hard to find. I can’t even remember my own name. “So fucking beautiful.”

I touch the bow on the front of her thong. I smile when she tilts her head back and lifts her hips. I grin when I press my thumb against her clit, holding her steady when she arches her back.

“Hudson.” She grabs my collar, nails scratching against my neck. “Please.”

I’m tempted to rip the damn underwear off, but I don’t want to rush this—rush *her*—so I leave them on.

I drop to my knees so I can see her better, so I can *hear* her better, and I put my hands on the inside of her thighs. I stroke up her legs and touch her

again, right where she's warm and wet.

Christ.

I'm a goner.

"Here?" I rub a slow circle over her clit with my thumb. Her underwear is wet, and I can't believe I'm the one who gets to have her like this. "Do you like that?"

"Yes." The word is barely a rasp, and she moves her hands to my hair. She grips the strands nice and rough and gives a tug. "That's perfect."

"Better than nice?"

"I hate you."

"Do you?" I keep circling and reach my other hand up, back under her shirt. I pull the cup of her bra down and roll her nipple between my fingers. "Doesn't seem like you do."

"I don't." She licks her lips. "How could I when you're making me feel like I'm on top of the world?"

"We can do better than that. I want to make you see the fucking stars, Golden Girl."

I'm leaking in my briefs, certain I've never been this turned on. I stop touching her chest only so I can palm myself over my sweatpants. So I can give myself the hint of relief by thrusting my hips against my hand, stopping before I can savor it for too long.

I lean forward and kiss her thigh. I drag my tongue up her leg and use my teeth to tug the waistband of her underwear down half an inch so I can kiss her hip bone at the same time I use two fingers to circle her.

Madeline cries out. She holds my shoulder and claws at my neck again.

Am I wrong for being excited to show off the scratches? Am I allowed to be smug at morning skate tomorrow and let my teammates see?

"That's—I like that —"

I push up on my knees, dipping my chin and kissing her stomach. "Are you going to come for me, Maddie?"

I slow the circle my fingers are making until Madeline lifts her ass off the counter. My name turns into a rough and low moan that echoes around us when she comes undone, and it's the prettiest sound I've ever heard.

I give in to my moment of weakness—hell, my *months* of weakness—and shove my hand down my pants. I stroke myself and drop my head against her knee as my warm release covers my palm.

"Holy shit," I curse when I regain control of my body. "Are you —"

Her ankles wrap around my neck. I stutter out a groan, ready and willing to become a permanent resident between her legs.

“That was...” Madeline grins. “Yeah.”

“I think we corrupted my kitchen.” I glance up at her pink cheeks and messy hair. “Not sure I can look at this counter the same way after that.”

“I’m not sorry.”

“Neither am I.”

“Did you...” Her eyes flick to my sweatpants. “In your —”

“Come in my pants? Oh, yeah. It’s everywhere. Halfway down my leg. Probably on my foot. The social media comments would have a field day with me. The NHL player who can’t last? The jokes write themselves.”

“I don’t care how long you last.” Madeline puts her finger under my chin, lifting my head so our gazes meet. “My sample size is very small, but no one’s ever wanted me in a way where they lose control.”

I want her more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life.

I want her again in an hour and in a month down the road.

I want her body and her soul, and I’d get on my knees and beg until I had them.

“Happy to break the streak for you, KG.”

She laughs, and there’s not an ounce of tension between us. It’s perfectly normal, like we’ve done this together a hundred times.

“I’m not going to hide from you, Hudson.” She tugs on my shirt and helps me to my feet. I almost stumble, feeling off-balance and thoroughly satisfied. “I promise.”

I hold up my hand, smiling when she wraps her pinky around mine. “I’m not going to run from you either.”

Madeline looks at her jeans on the floor and laughs again. “I can’t believe we did that. We have two bedrooms, and we picked the kitchen? We’re animals.”

“Any regrets?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “None. You?”

“Nope.” I put my hands on either side of her and bend my neck so I can kiss her. “I’m just getting started with you, Maddie.”

THIRTY-EIGHT MADELINE

PIPER

I saw a video of that clinic you and Amelia put on in New York last week, Em. You are a QUEEN.

ME

Lucy had me download ESPN+ so we could watch, and I'm in awe of you.

LEXI

Badass women are my favorite kind of women.

MAVEN

I'm still geeking out that the official NHL Instagram page shared all your content. You're paving the way for the next generation of female hockey players. That is so freaking cool.

EMMY

Wow. So many nice things, and it's a change from getting my ass kicked in practice by the boys. Thanks, you all. It was fun, and I'm honored I get to play a small role in the future of the sport.

ME

Is anyone free tonight? I could use some advice on something that happened to me recently.

EMMY

I'm in.

PIPER

Me too!

MAVEN

Wait. Am I free on a night you all are? And do I actually get to meet Madeline? I've been convinced you're not real.

ME

I'm very real, but don't get your hopes up. I'm not that exciting.

LEXI

I'm meeting a Tinder hookup tonight, but you all take priority over Beaumont.

EMMY

Beaumont? I just gagged.

You all can come here. Maverick has a meeting with Coach Saunders. With it being almost March, I bet they're talking about trades they could make before the deadline.

ME

Does that happen a lot?

EMMY

Oh, yeah. It's ruthless. I'd say the franchise players are safe, but I've seen what happens in the NBA. These GMs don't give a shit about loyalty. They'll get rid of anyone and everyone if they think it'll help them win.

LEXI

It's a cutthroat sport. I love it!

ME

Hey, hockey guy.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

What's up, KG? I'm heading back from the arena in a few. Need anything from the store?

ME

I did a grocery run this morning, but thanks for asking!

Could you watch Lucy tonight? I'm going to go over to Emmy's for girls' night.

The calendar said you're free, but if not, I can bring her with me!

BLOND BOMBSHELL

I'd love to hang out with her. We'll have some pizza and ice cream. Top tier nutrition.

ME

So much for that chicken on the menu.

Just kidding. That sounds like a fun night to me!

BLOND BOMBSHELL

Unrelated, but I know we haven't really had a chance to see each other since the other night. I'm leaving tomorrow morning on a three-game road trip that's going to take me away for a week, but I want you to know I'm thinking about you.

ME

Is there something in particular you're thinking about?

BLOND BOMBSHELL

The way your eyes wrinkle when you smile. How your laugh sounds when you're tired. The noises you make when you come.

ME

Sounds like you're thinking about me a lot, hockey guy.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

Here and there.

ME

I'm thinking about you too. I'm sorry we won't get tonight together, but I'm excited for you to get home from your trip.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

Me too.

I CURL my feet under my legs and spread pimento cheese over a cracker. "I love that you all get together so often. When I was in Vegas, I worked so

much, I didn't have time for a social life."

"It helps we all have similar schedules." Piper takes a bite of her cracker and grabs a napkin. "It's nine months of absolute insanity, then things calm down."

"And when it's not insane, I'm wishing it was." Lexi swirls her wine around her glass then takes a sip. "Sometimes I can't believe this is our life."

"I can't believe you're meeting a guy named *Beaumont*. What a stupid fucking name." Emmy snorts. "Sounds like it belongs to a golfer."

"I think it's nice," Maven Lansfield says, and I'm glad I finally met her. She's the perfect addition to the group I've found myself a part of, and her hug told me she's someone who is kind and special. "I bet his dad owns a country club."

"You're biased because you're married to a man named *Dallas*," Lexi challenges. "The only reason I'm meeting up with him is because his dick is going to rearrange my insides, and with how many guys on the team are having aches and pains these days, I could use a little relief from my workload. The last thing we need during this stretch of the season are multiple players on the IR."

"IR?" I wrinkle my nose. "What does that stand for?"

"Injury report," Piper supplies. "It's the list of players who might be out for the night with an injury. It lists their status as day-to-day or out for an extended period of time."

"I really need to get better about learning these hockey terms." I look down at my glass and grin. "Especially if I keep kissing Hudson."

Piper screeches. Lexi pumps her fist in the air. Emmy grins, and Maven claps enthusiastically. You would think I just brought on world pace, not that I told them I had my first physical interaction with a man in goddamn *years*.

"I beg your fucking pardon?" Piper takes my wine from me and sets it on the table next to a bowl of olives. "You better start talking right this second, Madeline Galloway."

I laugh. I like how warm I feel right now. How it's almost like I'm back in high school and having a sleepover with my closest friends where we talk until the sun comes up. It's easy and fun and it makes me want to spill all of my secrets.

"We're going to need the whole story," Lexi says.

"So we can give you the best course of action," Maven adds.

"Bullshit," Emmy interjects. "We just want to know how he is in bed."

I dive into the story about New Year's Eve. I mention the other night in the kitchen where I was the one to initiate contact and the swift way he lifted me onto the counter. I turn bright red when I talk about the way he touched me, when I talk about the way I came on his hand.

I leave out the part where he finished in his pants while he watched me fall apart, the secret something I'm keeping close to my chest.

God.

It was electric. Every touch singed my skin. Every kiss was the sweetest thing I've ever tasted. Seeing him on his knees, looking up at me with nothing but admiration and lust in his eyes, was almost too much.

I felt beautiful. Wanted for the first time in forever.

As if I was the most important person in the world.

"In the *kitchen*?" Emmy asks. "My god. I *knew* that boy had game. It's always the quiet ones."

"What do I do now?" I ask. "Hooking up with someone is so out of my wheelhouse. And so is living under the same roof as him. I'm clueless."

"You fuck him, obviously," Lexi supplies, and I choke on a laugh. "What? You can either fuck him, or you pretend like it never happened. But if it's happened twice, it's going to happen again."

"Do you want it to happen again?" Piper asks, and it's an easy question to answer.

I stopped caring about the possibility of our working relationship suffering the minute Hudson treated Lucy like she is part of his family. If I'm going to spend time with anyone, I want it to be with him.

"Yes," I say. "I do."

"Is this a boyfriend/girlfriend thing?" Lexi looks at me. "Or a physical friends-with-benefits kind of thing?"

"He told me he doesn't do one-night stands, so I'm not sure how a strictly physical relationship could work. But I'm not sure about a serious relationship, either. I have baggage, but I like kissing him. Is there some middle ground that lets us keep doing *that* without the big, messy emotions that come with dating?" I ask.

"I think there's always an emotional component when it comes to sex," Maven chimes in. "You can pretend like it doesn't matter, but eventually, someone starts to care more than they should."

"Well, shit." I laugh. "That complicates things."

"Maybe it doesn't have to be complicated. Why not go with the flow and

see what happens along the way?” Piper asks. “You know he’s not going to break your heart—Hudson is a one-woman man. No one else is going to have his attention.”

*I want to kiss you because I’ve been thinking about it for weeks.
Weeks.*

His words on New Year’s run through my mind. So do the message requests in his Instagram inbox he’s ignored, choosing to spend time with me and my daughter over hanging out with anyone else.

“I’m for whatever lets you keep having sex. You said it’s been how long since your last hookup?” Lexi asks, and I hide my face in my hands.

“Six years,” I admit. “And it wasn’t a hookup. It was my ex-husband. A little different.”

“My god, woman. How many sex toys have you gone through?”

“An alarming amount. My poor vibrator’s batteries get replaced every few months.”

My phone lights up on the arm of the couch. I bite my bottom lip to hold back a grin when I spy Hudson’s name. I tap the screen, and a selfie of him and Lucy pops up.

They’re both smiling at the camera. There are clips in his hair and a smudge of lipstick on his cheek. He’s holding up bunny ears behind her head, and she’s poking his side. It looks like they’re mid-laugh, having the time of their lives, and then a message comes through.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

Hope you’re having fun with the girls.

We decided to have a girls’ night too. Even got my fingernails painted.

ME

Wow. You look really pretty. My daughter has a future in hair and makeup.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

Look out, Broadway.

ME

I’ll be home in a bit.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

I’ll try to stay awake until you’re back.

Lucy misses you.

I miss you too.

My heart almost explodes out of my chest. My cheeks hurt from smiling so hard as I type out my reply.

ME

I miss you both. I'll see you soon.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Piper asks, and when I blush and dip my chin, showing off the photo, she laughs. "Oh, you're so into him."

"Is that a bad thing? To be into him?"

"If you're going to pick a guy to spend your time with, Hudson is one of the best ones. He'll be gentle with you," she says.

I know where things go when you spend time with someone. Feelings get deeper, you become more involved. For as reluctant as I've been to even consider a relationship with someone, I can't deny how drawn to him I am.

The subconscious part of my brain that's actively shot down the idea of dating must feel safe with Hudson. I wouldn't have kissed him like that if I wasn't curious, if I wasn't interested in testing the waters of something serious, something permanent.

"Hopefully not too gentle when you finally get him in bed." Emmy smirks. "Women who are mothers have needs to."

"I'll drink to that," Maven says, and we all laugh.

I hand over the bottle of wine and pour her another glass. I don't have everything figured out yet. I don't know where these feelings for Hudson might take me, but I do know one thing.

If I'm going to give anyone a chance, there's no one better out there than him.

THIRTY-NINE MADELINE

ME

Nice goal.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

I like that you're watching my games, Mads. Your spectating grade is climbing higher every day.

ME

I can't wait until I get an A.

You'll be home tonight, right?

BLOND BOMBSHELL

Yeah. Late, though. We don't land until midnight.

ME

Lucy has a sleepover at a classmate's house. I can wait up.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

You sure? It's going to be past one a.m.

ME

Yeah. I've missed you. The place isn't the same without you here.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

I've missed you too.

How's your dad doing?

ME

Much better. The tests didn't show any signs of concern, but the doctor still wants him to work on his diet.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

I'm glad to hear it.

See you soon, Knife Girl.

"MADELINE."

I roll over and wrap my arms around a pillow. Is my name coming from a dream? From real life?

"Maddie."

It's louder this time.

I yawn and crack open an eye. Moonbeams outline Hudson sitting on the edge of my bed, and I smile.

Real life, but one that feels like a dream.

"Hey," I croak. "You're home."

"I am. And you're asleep."

"What? No." I sit up and rub my eyes, flicking on the lamp. "I was reading my book."

"In the pitch black? You sure are talented."

"It's too late for your sarcasm, Hayes." I yawn again. My vision adjusts to the soft glow from the light. It takes a minute for my sleep-fogged brain to catch up, and I realize he's home. He's sitting in front of me with his navy-blue suit and his tie half-unknotted, and he's so damn beautiful. "How was your flight? How was the game? I saw you were winning when I put Lucy to bed."

"It was pretty boring with a 1-0 score, but we won." He touches my cheek and moves a piece of hair away from my face. "I'm sorry I woke you up. I wanted to see you."

"I'm glad you did." My eyes bounce to his cheek, noticing a welt just above the scruff of his beard. "Holy shit. What happened to you?"

"Ah. I accidentally ran into the other team's goalie after a missed shot. His teammate stood up for him and decked me in the jaw. I can't be too mad. I would've done the same if anyone messed with Liam."

“That looks like it hurts.” I should probably get him some ice. The purple and red mark is going to leave behind a nasty bruise. “Do you need anything?”

“I’ll survive. I’m already feeling better.” Hudson rests his forehead against mine and sighs. It sounds like he’s been holding his breath for days. “I’ll let you get back to sleep.”

“Stay. I’m not tired anymore.”

“Are you sure? It’s the middle of the night.”

“Yeah.” I rest my hand on his chest and give him a gentle shove so he stands. I rise to my feet, wrapping his tie around my wrist. “I don’t want you to go anywhere.”

“Then I’ll stay put.” He takes off his suit jacket, dropping it to the floor. His attention stays on me when he unfastens the top button of his shirt. “Anything in particular you want to do, Mads?”

I stand on my toes and brush my lips against his, desperate for him.

I’ve been waiting to see him. Waiting to see if my heart would still skip a beat when he smiles at me, and it does.

My draw to him isn’t just lust and infatuation. It’s feelings, real and true, and I want to do so many things with him.

I want to see him without any of his clothes on. I want to kiss his chest and trace the muscles he’s spent years perfecting. I want him to fuck me like we’re going to die tomorrow, but I also want him to touch me like we have all the time in the world.

I let out a shaky breath. I forgot how dizzying it is to be around him. How warm and tingly I get, all the way down to my toes. It’s like I’m drunk, tipsy at the sight of his smile. Intoxicated by his piercing gaze.

The buzz of anticipation sits at the base of my spine, and the excitement about what we might do, where this is going, sits low in my stomach.

“Do you want me to make a list?” I ask.

He runs his thumb down my arm. “I’ve always been a visual learner.”

I unknot his tie and throw it on the floor with his jacket. I drag my fingers down the front of his shirt and unfasten the second button from the top. “Can I —”

“Anything. Nothing. Whatever you want.” Hudson cups my chin with so much care, I almost melt because of it. “I’m at your mercy.”

I’m quick to untuck his shirt and undo the rest of the buttons. I push it off his shoulders, watch it fall to the floor. Keeping my eyes on him, I grab the

hem of my own shirt and tug it over my head in a split-second decision fueled by an ache and a need I haven't felt in years.

If ever.

Hudson keeps his eyes on mine when I'm naked from the waist up. He doesn't blink. He doesn't try to sneak a glance at my chest. I notice how red his cheeks are when I take a step back. How he's standing perfectly still, afraid to move, and the way he swallows when I smile.

"Hudson," I murmur. "I want you like I wanted you the other night. I want *more* than the other night."

At some point, we're going to have to have a talk about what's happening between us. We're going to have to dive into a conversation about the future and where this is going. We'll have to mention the important things, like my hesitation for another relationship and how Lucy will always be my number one priority. A man will never take her place.

That discussion won't be tonight, though, and I'm glad.

It's hard to focus on the rational things when I can see the outline of his cock through his pants. When he licks his lips and concentrates on me with a look so intense, I might combust from it alone.

"What kind of more?" Hudson moves toward me, and the backs of my thighs hit the bed. I sit on the mattress and watch with wonder as he stands between my legs. I remember what he said about making me see the stars, and I hope he takes me there again tonight. "I want to make sure I'm not reading this wrong because I've been dreaming about it, Maddie. For goddamn days."

"I'm half naked and sitting on my bed while my child is at a sleepover, Hudson. Is there any other way to read this? Do you want to go play ping pong or take the dogs for a walk?"

His chuckle dies in his throat when he finally pulls his eyes away from my face and looks at my body. A groan, rough and low, works its way from his mouth when he moves from my throat to my chest. His hand flexes at his side when his attention settles on my breasts, and I pretend it's his patience slipping away.

"Fuck," Hudson whispers through a drawn-out exhale. Lifting a shaky hand, he draws a circle around my nipple with his thumb. He pinches it between two fingers and groans when I arch my back. "You're going to be the death of me, Madeline. Please be gentle when you kill me."

It's impossible to find the words to tell him he's going to be the death of

me, because he's holding my cheeks like I'm something delicate and beautiful. He's bending his neck and kissing me so fiercely, I'm afraid I might catch on fire.

I wrap my arms around his neck, moving willingly when he eases me farther onto the bed. I lie flat on my back, squirming when he holds his body over mine and dips his head again, taking my breast in his mouth.

His tongue is warm as he swirls it over my nipple. He makes me pant when he gently bites the soft skin he finds there, and I'm beginning to think Hudson Hayes is a tit man.

"Hudson." I run my fingers through his hair. I tug on the blond strands so he knows to stay in place. "I like that."

"Yeah?" He pops me out of his mouth and uses his fingers to mimic the same pattern. He spreads his saliva across my chest, but I don't care. I want him to make a mess. I want to see a side of him no one else gets to see. "Do you like it?"

It's stimulation no toy could ever give me. My entire body is an inferno, and it's hard not to laugh and blurt out a resounding yes.

"Very much so. Permission to keep doing it." When I look up at him, I catch him staring at the spot below my collarbone. He touches the small tattoo that sits there. "What are you thinking about?"

"I've been wondering what your tattoo could be for *months*." He smiles at the ink on my skin. Draws over each number and the small heart at the end. "Is it Lucy's birthday?"

"How did you know?"

"She's the love of your life. Who else would it be for?"

That makes the string inside me pull unbelievably tight. I'll fawn over the romance of it all and his attention to detail later. I might doodle his name in a journal and put ten hearts around it in the morning—how could I not?—but for now I *need* him. In a way I've never needed anyone else.

I take his hand, guiding it down my body like I did the other night. I don't stop until I reach the waistband of my pajama shorts, and the barrier between us might as well be a scarp of fabric. I stroke my thumb up his arm and look at him with a smile.

"Fuck me, Hudson," I say with absolute conviction. When I position his hand over the seam of my shorts—low enough so he can feel how turned on I am—and add, "*Please*," an honest to god whimper comes out of his mouth.

"Okay. *Okay*. Yeah, that's—are you... birth control," he manages to say,

his face red, chest heaving. “Are you on it?”

“No. I haven’t had a reason to be.”

“Give me a second.”

Hudson kisses my forehead and disappears, but not before I see him shove a hand down the front of his pants to adjust himself.

I grin, proud of the effect I have on him, and wait patiently for him to get back.

He’s not gone long, ninety seconds at most, and when he shuffles through the door, he’s holding a box of condoms.

“Wow.” I smirk and push up on my elbows. “Someone’s ambitious.”

“I, uh, bought these the other day. Not because I assumed anything would happen,” he adds, and I do my best to not laugh at his backpedaling. “Just, you know. In case. Wishful thinking.”

“You’re a planner. That’s a good trait to have, hockey guy.” I gesture for him to rejoin me on the bed, and he lays on his side. “What other traits do you have?”

“I like to think I know what I’m doing. When we’re together, I’ll make sure you’re enjoying yourself. I’ll make sure you finished first, and I’ll make sure to talk you through it when I’m fucking you.” He brings his mouth to my ear, teeth nipping at my skin. “Are those good traits, Maddie?”

“Yeah.” I lick my lips and close my eyes when he moves his mouth down my neck. “Those are definitely good traits.”

“Can I take these off?” Hudson’s fingers dip below the waistband of my shorts. He strokes the skin south of my belly button, and I lift my hips. He doesn’t stay on the mattress very long, choosing to drop to his knees on the floor and tug on my calves so my ass hangs off the bed. “So I can see you? So I can touch and taste you?”

“Yeah.” I’m wet, so eager for him, but some of my confidence wavers. “But only if we turn off the light.”

FORTY
HUDSON

MADELINE'S HESITATION makes me frown. I put my hands on her knees and look up to find her chewing her bottom lip.

I've never seen her so unsure. The assuredness she usually has is gone, and I'm worried.

"Do you want to turn off the light?" I ask. "We can do that."

"No. Yes." She sighs, conflicted. "I'm sorry. You're the first person—the *only* person—I've been this intimate with since my ex, and I'm feeling wildly out of my element. How do I sit? What do I do with my hands and my feet? Do I suck in my stomach? My body is..." Madeline trails off, her bottom lip still stuck between her teeth. "It's not perfect. I'm sure I don't look like the women you've slept with before."

"What?" I trace over the faded stretch marks on her hips, wondering what it's going to feel like when I fuck her from behind and can admire them. I'm imagining the life she lived until she met me. All the incredible things her body has done and how I'm the lucky bastard who gets to be here with her. "Talk to me, Maddie."

"I have cellulite. Stretch marks and pregnancy scars." She gestures up and down her body. "I haven't been to the gym in months—okay, years, I'm lying—and I didn't think to shave anywhere other than my legs. I'm so *proud* of what my body accomplished when I had Lucy and the years I've spent as a mother. But I know I don't look the way I did the last time I had sex. I don't want that to be a turn off for you."

“You think all of those things would be a turn off?” I sit up on my knees and kiss the small white scar on her stomach. “They’re a part of you, and that doesn’t make me any less attracted to you. It could *never* make me any less attracted to you.”

“Really?” she asks, breathless.

I take her hand in mine. I set her palm on the front of my pants, right over my dick, and she gasps.

“Does it feel like I’m having *any* trouble enjoying this, Maddie?”

“You’re so hard.” She traces the outline of my cock and rubs her thumb over the head. My hips buck forward, and I grip the sheets. “And it’s all for me?”

“Yeah, sweetheart. It’s all for you. And if you’d be more comfortable with the light off, we can turn it off. I want you. So fucking bad. And that doesn’t change if I can see all of you or not.”

“We can leave the light on. I want to see *you*.” Her smile curls at the edges. “You can take off my shorts, Hudson.”

I don’t need telling twice.

I wrap my fingers around the hem of her shorts, dragging them over her knees. I toss them at the wall then move my thumbs up her thighs.

She puts her feet on the sheets and opens her legs wider.

For *me*.

Fuck.

Blowing out my last bit of sanity, I look at her. I look at every inch of her, and the decision is a terrible idea.

The worst I’ve ever had, because I’m obsessed. Fucking feral, and everything about her—from the tufts of hair between her legs to the faint scars low on her stomach—is fucking divine.

I can’t get enough.

“Can I—*Madeline*. I want to touch you,” I rasp. My tongue is heavy in my mouth. My dick hurts so fucking bad. “Please.”

Delicate fingers wrap around my wrist. They move my hand off the bed and to the inside of her thigh. I’m inches away from where I didn’t get to touch her the other night in my kitchen, and I’m going out of my mind.

“Right here,” she says.

I drag a finger through her entrance and she drops her head back. I scramble so I’m closer to her, so I don’t miss a goddamn thing, and when I gently push my finger inside her, her moan rocks my world.

I watch her, studying her so I can figure out what she likes.

She enjoys when I curl my pointer finger, but she *loves* when I lean forward. When I bring my mouth just above her pussy, and instead of putting my tongue on her, I spit so I can circle her with my thumb.

“Going to get you off first,” I tell her, smiling when her legs drop open even wider. “Then I’ll fuck you.”

Her giggle is wild, fading into a moan when I add a second finger and slow the circles on her clit so she can adjust to the stretch.

“I knew—” She wiggles her hips, asking me to move, and I do. “You’d be like this in bed.”

“Like what?”

“Nice. Sweet. *Good.*”

“Is that what you like?”

Her eyes flutter open, and she stares at me. She clasps a hand over my wrist to stop my movements. “I’d like anything with you.”

She whines when I pull away from her clit. I use my left hand to unbutton my pants and yank my zipper down, watching with wonder when she fucks herself on my fingers. My pants get caught on my knees, and I try to shimmy them off.

“I want to be good for you, Maddie,” I practically beg.

“Can you come up here so you can kiss me?” she asks, and I’m moving before she finishes the question.

I stand and shove off my pants and briefs completely. Madeline sighs when I’m naked in front of her. She licks her lips then meets my gaze with the hook of a smile on her mouth.

Before I can ask her what else she wants, her hands are roaming up my chest. They’re reaching around to my back and touching my ass. She’s swiping over the head of my cock and sucking on the finger covered in pre-cum.

I hold myself over her, slipping two fingers back inside her and groaning when I find how wet she is. I bend to kiss her, pulling her bottom lip with my teeth. She squirms under me, running her sharp nails down my spine as her breathing turns rough.

“You’re so wet,” I whisper, mesmerized by how she’s soaking my hand. “I can’t believe I get to have you like this.”

Her palms move to my cheeks, and she kisses me urgently. Her back lifts off the bed when I keep my fingers in place but add my thumb on her clit.

I start with a slow circle, taking my time, and I hum when she clenches around me.

“Hudson.” She cups the back of my neck and digs her fingers into my muscles. I can’t help but groan. “I want to finish on your tongue.”

“Yeah?” I pull my fingers out of her and stroke up her thigh. Her arousal sticks to her skin, and I grin at the mess I’m making. “Would that make this nice for you?”

“Shut up with that word.” She laughs, reaching between us. She grips my cock and gives it a few strokes, and it takes every last ounce of my willpower not to come right this very second. “Don’t make me beg.”

“That’s my job.” I kiss her neck and work my way down her body. I suck on her nipple before biting it again. I move to her stomach and give attention to the softer parts of her flesh, like the divots in her thigh and the dip in her hip. I look at every inch of her, and when I settle on my stomach between her legs, I kiss the inside of her knee. “God. You’re so pretty. So beautiful.”

Madeline laughs. “I’m surprised. I didn’t know if you’d be a guy who liked to —”

“Eat pussy?” I finish for her, giving her a wide grin when I see her flushed face. “Why? Because I say please and thank you?”

“I thought it might go against your southern hospitality.” She runs her fingers through my hair, and I melt under her touch. “I’m glad it doesn’t.”

“What would you say if you found out it’s one of my favorite things in the world?” I grip her thighs and push them open. “What if I told you I’d stay here all night if it meant getting three orgasms out of you? What if sometimes, I like this better than sex?” I lick her pussy, and she moans. “Tell me again how *nice* I am, Maddie. I can’t wait to fuck that word right out of your mouth.”

I bury my tongue inside her, and white-hot need pulses through me. I lap at her like she’s my last sip of water before I cross a never-ending desert, and the sounds she’s making send my mind into overdrive. I thrust against the mattress, and I don’t care if I stain her sheets. I’ll wash them when we’re finished, but I can’t lie here tasting her and *not* have a reaction.

She’s too goddamn sweet.

“I love it.” She drops her hands to the sheets. She holds them with a vice-like grip, and that must mean I’m doing something right. “I love that you’re a good boy with a heart of gold who also wants to be a little bad.”

“I’ll be whatever you want me to be.” I replace my tongue with my

fingers, and I can tell she's close. She's getting there, and smug pride races up my spine. "Just let me see you come."

Soon, she's urging my head back down. She's touching my cheek as I lick her again, and just as I part her with my thumbs so I can get even deeper inside her, she says my name.

"Hudson. I'm going to —"

I drape an arm over her stomach to hold her down, and she groans when she comes apart. She writhes beneath me, and I taste her everywhere: on my tongue, on my mouth when I lick my lips, on my beard when she keeps my head in place and nearly suffocates me as she rides through the orgasm.

"So fucking gorgeous. Are you a two-for-one girl, Maddie?" I touch her clit with my knuckles, and she unravels again. "*Fuck*. You are. Let me get one more taste, sweetheart."

"Please," she almost sobs. "I've never —"

"With me you will."

I kiss her leg and ease her down from her high. I take my time as I slow my fingers. My touch turns into something teasing—featherlight caresses that have her shifting on the mattress and letting out a needy whine.

When she settles down and exhales, I crawl back up her body. Her eyes flutter open, and her smile is soft and sated.

"Hi," she says, and I drop a kiss to her shoulder. "You're damn good at that."

"You think so?" I run my fingers up her arm. She's warm under my touch. "Do you want to taste?"

Madeline sits up and eases me onto my knees. She rearranges us so I'm against the headboard, and she straddles my lap. I put my hands on her waist, blown away that this is actually happening.

When she brings her mouth to mine, she doesn't kiss me. She makes me *work* for it by lifting my neck, reaching for her, grateful when her tongue moves over my lips.

"You're so sexy, Hudson." She puts her hands on the wall behind me. "Thank you for taking care of me."

"Thank you," I manage to get out. Madeline lifts up on her knees and rubs the head of my cock over her entrance. "Hang on, Mads. I have two brain cells left, so we need to have this conversation quickly."

"Get talking, Hayes."

"I got tested after my last relationship. No one since. All clear on my

end.”

“Same here.”

“Do you want me to use a condom?”

“Yes. I’m a one-and-done mom. No more kids for me, and I don’t want to risk it without protection. At least not until I can get back on birth control. Then you can fuck me however you want.”

I fumble for the box of condoms and nearly knock it over. I’m too distracted, and grabbing a foil packet takes all of my mental capacities.

“You’re full of surprises too.”

“How so?”

“Six years, and you know exactly what to say. Exactly what to do.” I open the wrapper and roll the latex down my length. “Exactly what it takes to drive me crazy.”

Madeline loops her arms around my neck and smiles. She’s so goddamn beautiful. “Go slow with me,” she whispers, and I don’t know if she’s talking about sex or whatever happens after.

It doesn’t matter.

I’ll give her anything she wants.

“I promise,” I say, and she blows out a breath. She closes her eyes and starts to sink herself on my cock, but I stop her. “Open your eyes, Maddie. I want you to watch when you take me for the first time.”

FORTY-ONE
MADELINE

HUDSON IS NEVER BOSSY, and his tone tells me I should listen. My gaze meets his before I glance down, and the tenderness behind his eyes almost takes my breath away.

“Better?” I ask.

“Perfect,” he says, and that makes me giddy. “If I hurt you, I want you to tell me. We’ll stop and readjust so this is good for you. I don’t care if it takes ten minutes or an hour.”

I’ve had sex—I have a kid for god’s sake—but I’ve never experienced intimacy like this.

It’s not just going to be fucking. We’re going to connect on a soul level, and that almost terrifies me to pieces.

“I want it to be good for you, too.”

“Maddie.” Hudson smiles. Brushes his thumbs along my ribs and drums his fingers against my skin. “This right here—being with you? Touching you? Breathing the same air as you?—is good enough for me. Everything else is a bonus.”

Goddamn him for being the most perfect man.

I brace my hand on the wall behind the bed. I sink down, the head of his cock pushing inside me.

I wince at the first feelings of uncomfortableness. I hiss at the sting of pain, and I shift my position so I can bury my face in his neck.

“It’s okay. Don’t rush. If it doesn’t start to feel good, we’ll try something

else,” he says softly in my ear before pressing a kiss to my cheek.

Soon, the pain subsides. Pleasure builds at the base of my spine. I adjust to the new stretch, to the new sensation, and I take him another inch deeper.

“*Fuck*, Maddie. Does that —”

“So good.” I sit upright, relaxing when I circle my hips. “Best I’ve ever had.”

He laughs. Reaches up and squeezes my breasts. “I’m not all the way in you yet. Don’t make a snap decision.”

“I don’t care. The award has already been handed out. I present to you the honor of being the best dick of my life.”

Hudson laughs again, and the sound is like coming home. A Sunday morning in bed and warm coffee when it’s cold outside. He drops his head against the pillows, exhaling when I grind against his length. “You’re going to give me a complex, sweetheart. I’m going to walk around like some egotistical bastard.”

“You’d be deserving of it.” I move my hands to his chest, leaning forward to find a new angle. “*God*. I’m already so full, Hudson.”

“I don’t know if I want to cover your mouth with my hand because what you’re saying is going to make me come faster than I want”—he plucks my nipple between his fingers and twists—“or if I want you to tell me everything you’re feeling.”

“You can cover my mouth. I’d like to try that.”

“*Christ*. Okay. We’ll add that in next time. But tonight, I want to hear you.”

Next time.

I hope there are hundred more times.

His hands drift back to my waist. Carefully, with the most exhaustive restraint I’ve ever seen, he guides me down his length. He helps me take the first half of his cock then three quarters, stopping before he fully buries himself inside me.

“More,” I whine, aching for him. I’m already breathing heavy, already so close, and we’ve barely started.

“Almost there, Mads. Are you doing okay?”

That’s a difficult question to answer.

I’m stuck somewhere between absolute elation and dreading how empty I’m going to feel when we’re finished. Hudson is *everywhere*: in the scrape of his teeth down my neck and the thumb he presses to my clit. In his other

hand on my lower back, holding onto me while I start to ride him.

My breasts bounce. I settle into a rhythm, and the ache between my legs starts to grow. “Can I go a little faster?” I ask. “Can you make it a little rougher?”

“Is that what you like?” Hudson lifts his hips. I gasp when he pulls me off him before slamming back into me. “Hard? Rough?”

“Sometimes. It makes me feel wanted.” I tilt my head back. “Like you’re desperate for me.”

Hudson thrusts into me, and his fingers dig into my skin. A bead of sweat rolls down his cheek, and I lick it away in a lust-filled haze. He groans when I roll my hips, and I mimic the sound when he holds me in place.

“I’m so desperate for you, Madeline.” His voice cracks, and when I look down at him, I find a man on the edge of possessed. “Can we switch positions so I can show you how badly I want you?”

All I can do is nod, because this still doesn’t seem like real life.

Hudson slips out of me, and I miss the connection between us. He guides me onto my back and draws my knees to my chest. I’m exposed in this position. I’m vulnerable and on display, but I’ve never felt so beautiful.

“I can get deeper this way.” He puts a hand on my leg and teases me for a minute. He drags his cock through my entrance then taps it against my clit. I arch my back, asking for more of him. “And I get to watch.”

“Do you like to watch?”

“I fucking love to watch.”

The sting isn’t as noticeable when he pushes back into me, and he was right about the position. The angle is totally different, something new and exquisite that makes my eyes roll to the back of my head. When he bottoms out inside me with his chest against my shins, I realize no one has had me in this particular way—so thoroughly and so deep—and he’s the first to ever reach these parts of me.

I lift my right hand and use it to hold onto the headboard. “I’m not going to break. I can take a little more, Hudson.”

I don’t know if he’ll give me anymore. I’m afraid I’m already pushing him past his limits, but then he squeezes my knee. It’s a warning for what he’s about to do, and the smile he’s wearing is one of absolute assuredness.

“Like this?” He pistons his hips into mine, and my mind goes blank. My limbs get heavy, and I know I’m minutes—maybe seconds—away from another orgasm. “Look how well you take my cock. Look at how well we fit

together.”

It’s a perfect match.

Filthy but sweet, and he holds me there while he fucks me to the brink of ecstasy.

“Are you close?” I pant. “Because I am.”

“I’ve been doing math in my head so I don’t finish too early.” He reaches between my legs and touches my clit at the same time he slams into me with his full force. “I’m waiting on you, Mads. You’re always going to be first.”

It’s so disorienting. So is the circle he’s teasing me with and the consideration of an orgasm order. The next time we’re together, I’m going to make sure I get him off first. I don’t have time to daydream about it, though, because he’s rocking his hips. Hitting the perfect spot my fingers and toys can’t reach, and I don’t bother to put up a fight anymore.

I cry out. His name falls from my mouth like a prayer, and when his groans echo in my ears, a sign he’s reached the peak of the mountain too, I touch him everywhere I can reach.

“So good, Hudson,” I whisper as he collapses forward. I keep a hand on the back of his thigh and stroke along the curve of his muscles when his legs lock up. “I’ve got you.”

“*Fuck.*” Hudson kisses me through it, and I can feel his release filling the condom. I vaguely wonder what it would be like if we didn’t use any protection, but that’s a far-off thought. “I think you killed me.”

I put my hand on his neck, smiling when I feel his pulse racing. “We’ve got a heartbeat. You’re going to live to see another day, Hayes.”

“I haven’t—that was—” He drops his head back and stares at the ceiling. “You haven’t lost your touch. I’m incapacitated.”

“Neither have you. That was...” Shyness threatens to overtake me. I’ve never done this with someone who isn’t my boyfriend or husband before, and I don’t know what comes next. “Perfect.”

“I can tell the wheels are spinning.” Hudson cracks an eye open and glances down at me. “Do you want to go back to throwing a banana at me?”

“No.” I laugh and stretch my arms above my head. Hudson tracks my movements, and his eyes latch onto my chest. “It really was perfect.”

He pulls out of me, and I squeeze my thighs together. There’s a spot of blood on the condom, but he doesn’t say anything about it. He walks to my bathroom, and when he returns, he’s holding a washcloth.

“Let me clean you up,” he says.

I drop my feet to the sheets, and he climbs back onto the bed. "I'm sorry about the mess."

"Don't be." He drags the rag down the inside of my legs and up my thighs. It's painstakingly slow, incredibly sweet, and this is a new level of care I'm experiencing. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"I would've said something if you did. I like orgasms, but I like my organs to stay in their proper places more."

"You're funny." He sets the clean side of the warm cloth on my stomach, and I sigh. "And beautiful."

"What do we do now?" I prop up on an elbow, and he lies on his back next to me. "What does Hudson Hayes do after he fucks a woman?"

"I do a lot of things."

"Oh?" I lift an eyebrow, curious. "I'm new to the dating scene. Fill me in on your moves and what I should look for. I'm a recovering cynic when it comes to relationships and feelings. Teach me how to be a romantic."

"I'd ask if I could hold you." Hudson moves up to the pillows and opens up his arms. I smile and curl up next to him with my head on his chest. His heart is still beating fast, and I wonder if it's because of me. "We'd stay like this for a while, and then I'd let you use the bathroom before we showered. Privacy, you know? Or a chance to escape out the window if you wanted to run."

"I don't want to run anywhere." I lace our fingers together and hold his hand against my breastbone. "Is it hard to be a romantic? To trust people and give over your heart so easily?"

"It's the worst thing in the world." Hudson kisses the top of my head. "But it's worth it when you find someone you enjoy spending time with. Who treats you with respect and loves you like you love them."

"Have you done that a lot? Loved other people?"

"A few, yeah."

"Have you ever thought about proposing to anyone you've dated?"

"Hm. No. I've envisioned a long-term future with some of the women I've been with, but something always came up that showed us we weren't compatible. I hope I will one day, though. A wedding would be nice. What about you?" He tips my chin so I can look at him. He doesn't seem bothered by my string of post-sex questioning. "Would you ever get married again?"

"No. But that's not to say I wouldn't want to be in a monogamous relationship with the same person for the rest of my life. Being married

doesn't prevent you from heartbreak. If anything, it makes it so much messier when something goes wrong."

"That's fair." His eyes close, and he's quiet for a minute. I trace over the lines of his face, and he smiles when I cup his cheek. "And you don't want any more children, right?"

"Right. And it's not because Lucy is deaf. It's because being a parent is so hard. Doing it alone is nearly impossible. I'm happy with my life. I'm fulfilled, and what I have is more than enough. Do you want children?"

"I don't think I do. I have the dogs. They make me happy. My friends have kids. I'm fine with being an uncle."

Silence settles between us. I kiss the back of his hand, and nerves settle on my shoulders when I take a deep breath. "Hudson?"

"Yeah?"

"What's going on between us isn't just physical for me. But it's going to take me some time to... to feel safe enough to let my guard down again. I'm not sure I'll ever let it down after what happened in my past, but I want to try. You believe in soulmates, and soulmates should be sure about each other, right? You should know right away that they're your other half, and I'm not sure about anything right now. If you don't want to wait around, I understand."

"Hey." He adjusts our positions so our chests touch. "There's no label here. There's no need to rush. We like spending time together, so we'll keep spending time together. We can figure out the rest as we go. And if we don't, that's okay, too. We're friends first and foremost."

"Okay," I whisper. "Thank you for understanding. You really are the nicest man I've ever met."

Hudson rolls away from me. He positions himself above me and kisses my cheek, then my throat and my mouth. "And I really am going to have to fuck that word out of you," he says.

"Well? What are you waiting for?" I challenge, and his smile is the most magnificent thing.

It gives me hope.

FORTY-TWO HUDSON

DAD

Hi, son. Will I get a chance to see you when you're in Georgia in two weeks?

ME

Yeah. We get in late the night before so I won't have time for anything besides the game, but I have a ticket waiting for you at will call. I bought the spot to the left of you too. Still doesn't feel right to have you there without her.

DAD

Still doesn't feel right going without her. Can't wait to cheer you on, Hudson.

PUCK KINGS

MAVVY

Emmy won't stop asking me who on the team has a pierced dick. I told her I'd never share because bro code, obviously, but the truth is, I don't fucking know who has a pierced dick.

ME

Liam, probably.

SULLY

Fuck off, Hayes.

MITCHY

I always thought it was Grant.

G-MONEY

LMAO what? I don't even have a tattoo and you think my COCK is pierced? Keep those needles away from me, motherfuckers.

CONNOR

Does someone really have their junk pierced? Or is it a stupid rumor?

SEYMOUR

Ethan is being suspiciously quiet.

EASY E

Because I was helping an old lady cross the road, jackass.

ME

It's ten p.m.

EASY E

You got me there, Huddy Boy. Fine. I was saying goodbye to tonight's company, who would be more than happy to confirm I am the lucky bastard with a pierced dick.

Want a photo?

SULLY

The depths of hell CAN get even lower. I had no idea.

ME

No pictures, Ethan.

MITCHY

Does it actually feel good?

EASY E

Best fuck of their lives, Mitchy. And mine, too.

MAVVY

Huh. Maybe I'll look into it.

G-MONEY

LOL. Imagine all of showing up to practice with our junk pierced and Coach asking us why we're all hunched over. He'd make us skate laps for DAYSSSSS.

SULLY

Here's hoping I'm traded before March 8th so I don't have to partake in this activity.

EASY E

HEY. You don't mean that, do you, Goalie Daddy????!!!!????

SULLY

I've always loved Canada in the winter.

G-MONEY

You're not going anywhere, Liam. You're stuck with us—ALL OF US—forEVER!

SULLY

Fuck my life.

“THERE HE IS. How are you doing, Huddy Boy?”

Piper smiles when she steps into the renovated recreation room at the arena. It's a new addition after the guys asked for somewhere their friends and family could hang out before and after games. The team delivered with a room that has comfy leather couches and big televisions, and I like to spend time in here when I need a break from my busy day.

“Hi, Little P.” I point to the chairs by a window that overlooks the rink and motion for her to sit with me. “I'm good. Sore as hell from morning skate and dreading our afternoon lift session, but hanging in there.”

“Is that why you're limping?”

“Yeah. Took a hit from McKenzie that shouldn't have been as hard as it was, and now I'm paying for it.” I grin and lean back in the chair. “Guess that's what I get for calling his blocking atrocious. Chirping always gets me in trouble.”

“Boys. You all are too rough with each other.” She opens her laptop on the small table between us. “Are you ready for another signing lesson?”

“I've been working my ass off with my tutor. I think I'm doing an okay

job. I'm sure I look so stupid signing into my mirror, but it's working. I have the basics nailed down, and every time I've hung out with Lucy since starting to learn, I've wanted to show her what I know."

"Is it because you're in love with her mom?" Piper asks with a hint of humor to the question.

I whip my head up and look at her. I narrow my eyes, but her stoic facade gives nothing away. "What do you know?"

"What do you think I know?"

"I'm guessing Madeline told you—and probably the rest of the girls—she and I have been... spending time together."

"That's an interesting way to put it. Tell me, Hud. What are you doing when you *spend time together*? Crossword puzzles? Sudoku? Maybe word searches?"

"You know, you've gotten pretty damn sarcastic since you started hanging out with Liam. I'm not sure I like it."

"Do you care that she talks to us about these things?" Piper asks, and I shake my head.

"Not at all. I'm glad she has some women in her life who can give her advice if she needs it." I pause, and there's a moment of panic. Of wondering if she needs advice because I'm bad in bed or didn't give her what she wanted. I thought the orgasms spoke for themselves, but maybe I'm wrong. "Does she? Need advice?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"You know what? Don't tell me. That's between y'all, and I'd never ask you to violate girl code."

That Madeline has found a group of women she trusts enough to talk about intimate parts of her life with is a good thing, and I know she won't share anything that would make her uncomfortable. She's protective of the things that are important to her, and I'd like to believe I'm on that list.

"Goddammit." Piper groans. "Is there ever a moment when you're not so freaking charming and sweet?"

"Sorry, kid." I pinch her cheek. "My mama raised me right. You're not going to hear anything shitty come out of my mouth, especially about the woman I'm..." I trail off, unsure of how to define what we're doing. It's less than dating, but more than fuck buddies...? I don't know the right word. "Spending time with," I repeat, and she smirks.

"I'm sure your crosswords are very fun," she draws out, and I tap her

computer.

“Enough about what I’m doing when I’m not at the arena. Can we work on some signing now? I only have an hour until film review, then I’m hitting the gym.”

Piper opens her laptop and pulls up a video. She goes through my tutor’s notes, teaching me how to ask someone what they want to eat and how to respond when asked if I’m hungry.

I learn a few words—*potatoes*, *ice cream*, and *cookies*, and I struggle with others like *apples* and *oranges*. Liam pops in halfway through and joins us, and I’m surprised when Riley and Maverick take the seats across from us and try to mimic our handshapes.

“Damn, Hudson,” Riley says. “I’m impressed.”

“I’m not sure there’s anything to be impressed by.” I rewind the video and watch how to sign *breakfast* again. “I’m not doing anything.”

“Bullshit,” Liam grunts. “This is hard stuff to learn. You know more than I do, and Piper’s been teaching me phrases longer than she’s been teaching you.”

“It’s probably because you constantly have a stick up your ass,” Maverick mumbles, which makes Riley snort. “I saw some people online talking about how they teach their kids baby sign language even if they aren’t deaf, as a way to communicate. I think I’d like to do that with our kid if Em and I become parents.” He pauses, glancing at me. “This is a cool thing you’re doing, man. I’m proud of you.”

“I know you’re doing it for personal reasons, but think of how many more people you’ll be able to talk to.” Riley smiles. “And think of all the reporters you’re going to piss off by showing them you’re not just a big, dumb athlete but someone who is bilingual like our Sully over there.”

“Huddy isn’t dumb.” Maverick kicks his feet up on the table in the middle of our group and puts his hands behind his head. “You really fucking like her, huh?”

I make the sign for *donut* and cross it off the list I’m using to keep track of Lucy’s favorite foods. “Who?” I ask, not really paying them any attention.

“Madeline. Lucy.”

“Course I like them.”

“Hey.” Maverick rolls up a ball of paper and throws it at me. “I meant you *like* them. Like you can see a future with them.”

“So what if I do? So what if I have a stupid crush on Madeline like I’m

back in middle school? And so what if I slept with her and it was the best fucking night of my life, and not just because the sex was out of this world? Are y'all going to tease me? Call me 'Mr. Relationship' like you used to and start planning our wedding?"

"No." Riley puts a hand on my shoulder. "We're happy for you, Hud."

"Yeah, dude. I've never seen you smile like this, and you've been smiling for *months*. Not just the days after you slept with her." Maverick grins. "In fact, I don't think I've seen you smile this much since —"

"Your mom passed," Liam finishes for him, and Piper and Riley nod.

"Oh. Well... things are good." I shrug and close the laptop. "I like having Madeline around—with or without the sex—and Lucy is so special. I know what it's like to feel alone after something big and horrible happens to you, and... I want them to feel less alone." I shrug again, put on the spot and the center of attention in a way I don't normally like, but with my best friends, I don't mind. "I want to show up for them, like y'all showed up for me."

Piper looks at the four of us. Her bottom lip trembles, and she buries her face in her hands. "You guys are all so wonderful."

"Jesus." Liam lifts her out of her chair like she weighs less than a sack of feathers and puts her in his lap. He's not big on PDA, but it's nice to see him soft and sickeningly in love. "Why are you crying, sweetheart?"

"Because people talk about how... how shitty professional athletes are and how all they care about are sports, but then there's people like you guys—and everyone else on the team—who are so *not* shitty, and I wish the world could see more of that."

"Maybe we could pitch a reality television show," Maverick suggests. "The cameras can follow Liam around all day. He'd love that."

"Fuck you, Miller," he growls, kissing Piper's forehead. "Want to give us one more lesson before we head down to the film room, baby?"

That brightens Piper up, and she introduces us to signing *cat* and *dog*. By the end of the hour, I'm able to sign, *Hello. My name is Hudson, and I have two dogs* easily, and I'm grinning from ear to ear.

That might be a side effect from being around someone like Madeline; eternally optimistic, even when she doesn't have to be. Bright and full of life in a way I feel like I haven't been in years.

Maybe she and Lucy have been the missing piece all along.

FORTY-THREE
MADELINE

**GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN(DAMENTAL RIGHTS) AND
GOOD SEX**

LEXI

I didn't think I could meet someone with a worse name than
Beaumont, but then I went and matched with Axel.

PIPER

Is he a musician?

LEXI

I wish.

ME

This sounds like a fun game. Is he a data analyst?

LEXI

That would be too obvious.

Axel is a mime. Something I learned halfway through dinner
when he stared at me and wouldn't speak.

EMMY

What the actual fuck? I'm so glad I'm married.

LEXI

Rub it in our faces, why don't ya?

ME

I appreciate you taking one for the team and sharing your horrible stories. You've saved me from having to suffer too.

LEXI

Wait until I tell you about Basil. He was a horse guy.

MAVEN

I love horses!

LEXI

He literally thought he was a horse.

EMMY

You should write a book. Or host a podcast. The internet would love it, because there's no way this happens to anyone but you.

LEXI

I'm a lucky, lucky girl.

LUCY TAKES her usual spot before the Stars' game, her nose pressing against the glass and excitedly watching the players skate by. I love that she gets lost in the sport, and I love it even more that each guy from the team approaches her, pretending to bump their knuckles against hers through the glass.

I hang back with Lexi, laughing when she touches the sleeve of my new jacket.

"Get out." She grins. "This is amazing. Where did you find it?"

"There's a woman on Instagram who repurposes shirts and jerseys from different sports teams and turns them into outerwear." I spin so I can show off the back and the name across my shoulders. "Is it cute?"

"It's so cute. Nice number choice, by the way." Lexi smirks. "I'm guessing you went back for round three with Hayes?"

And four and five and six.

Seven, too, last night.

"You could say that," I admit, which earns me a high five from Lexi.

"Hell yeah. Go get that dick." She bends to give Lucy a quick hug then grabs her clipboard currently leaning against the wall. "You two have fun

tonight. I need to go work on Ethan's ass before puck drop."

"In any other profession, that would leave me with a lot of questions. With yours, I'll say good luck and have fun."

With a wave and a swish of her brown ponytail, she jogs down the tunnel to the trainers' office. I smile, thinking about her comment and *the dick* I'm getting.

It's been a week since Hudson and I slept together for the first time, and not a single moment that's passed has been awkward.

It's natural, almost, like the universe has been waiting for us to find each other.

We stayed up late talking last night about anything and everything. He asked me about Lucy as a baby, and I listened to him tell me about his early hockey days.

We fell asleep at some point, and I woke up in his arms, warm and happy, with his mouth on the back of my shoulder. He fucked me rough and fast when the stars were out, and again as the sun started to rise, nice and slow and with less urgency than our first time. I liked how he held himself above me. How he twisted our hands together on the sheets and said my name when he came.

He always sneaks back to his room before Lucy wakes up. He agreed with me when I said I wanted to wait before I told her the two of us were spending time together alone, and I appreciate that he's not forcing me into sharing our relationship with the world.

We *work*, and even though there's not a word attached to what we're doing, I know with the utmost certainty I want to keep doing it with him.

I'm yanked from my thoughts of feet in tangled sheets and coffee in bed when Hudson skates up to the glass near the tunnel. He lifts his chin to my jacket. Mischief dances behind blue eyes, and he leans against his stick.

"Who are you wearing tonight?" he asks over the song blaring from the speakers overhead.

"Wouldn't you like to know, Hayes?"

"My guess is Grant."

I spin and pull my hair away from my back so he can see the number stitched on the fabric. "Want to guess again?"

He doesn't say anything else, and when I look at him over my shoulder, Hudson is gaping at me. His cheeks are pink and his eyes are wide, and I don't know how to read this expression of his.

“It’s mine,” he says. “You’re wearing my number.”

“I told you I always liked being a good student.” I shrug and face him again. “How’s my spectating grade tonight, Hayes?”

His mouth stretches into a grin, and I give him one right back. “My name looks good on you, Galloway.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. Better than any of the other women in the arena. You’re the only one I want wearing it.”

It’s silly to feel so giddy, but I do. There are butterflies in my stomach, and I’m not sure how I got here: flirting with a professional hockey player, proudly wearing his jersey while thousands of fans watch, and wondering if he’ll fuck me while I wear this—and only this—later.

“You know this means you have to play well tonight, right, Hayes?”

“I plan on it.” He glances at Lucy, lifting his gloved hand in the air. He gives her a wave with a big smile on his face, and she matches his enthusiasm.

Did you show him the pictures we took with Gus and Millie today? she asks, and I’m quick to pull my phone from my pocket.

I scroll through the photos I snapped of her with the dogs earlier in the afternoon, the ones of the three of them looking at the camera while wearing matching HAYES jerseys, and I hold it up to the glass so Hudson can see.

“Lucy insisted we order the dogs jerseys to wear on your game days,” I explain. “It took me thirty minutes to wrangle everyone into the shirts, but I think it turned out okay.”

“Is this what y’all were doing before you left for the arena?” He smirks, cute and cocky. “Why you weren’t answering my texts?”

“Maybe.” I laugh and wrap my arms around Lucy. “The meal-prepping I was working on for you went out the window when Lucy put her jersey on backward. The dogs, surprisingly, were easier to dress.”

“Send that to me. I love it.”

“Will do.” I smile and slip into SimCom. “*Have a good game tonight.*”

“I’ve got my girls in the crowd wearing my jersey, Galloway.” Hudson’s face shifts from playful to something soft. A truth he’s declaring in the middle of the sold out arena. “I could miss every shot I take. We could lose by twenty, and it’d still be a damn good night.”

I'm on the edge of my seat.

I have been for the majority of the game.

It's the most physical matchup I've seen since I started watching hockey. Every time a player gets slammed into the boards, Lucy gasps and covers her eyes. I wince and cross my fingers, hoping our guys are okay.

I'm still trying to figure out how some aggressive plays end up as penalties and some don't. The hit Maverick took in the second period definitely seemed rougher than the call Ethan got against him at the start of the third, but I'm clueless.

At the end of regulation, the Stars and the Longhorns are tied up, 2-2. After a five-minute sudden-death overtime period where neither team scores, we're headed to a shootout. I'm grateful to have Google handy to learn the rules for what happens next so I can explain them to Lucy.

Each team is going to have a chance to shoot, I tell her, and she nods. One player goes against the goalie.

That must be scary for the goalie. She points at Liam who is skating back and forth in the blue circle in front of the net. He's talking to himself, and I wonder what he's saying. ***Does he look scared?***

I don't think so. This is his job, remember? He practices for it.

Who is going to shoot for the Stars?

I crane my neck, trying to read the jerseys of the three players huddled together near the Stars' bench. Their arms are draped around each other, and they're deep in conversation.

It looks like Maverick, Hudson, and Ethan.

I'm nervous.

So am I.

It's not a line I'm giving to placate her. I'm stressed out. I never thought I'd be emotionally invested in a sports team, but here I am, biting my thumbnail then clasping my hands together.

The Longhorns have the first shot, and the enthusiasm in the arena deflates when their player scores on Liam with a hit that's just out of his reach.

Maverick lines up for the Stars' first shot. He's like a bullet flying across the ice. I blink, and he's pulling his stick back. He's hitting the puck into the top corner of the net and sending the crowd into an absolute tizzy.

The Longhorns player misses on the second attempt, but so does Ethan. The internet told me if the teams are still tied after the three attempts, they'll

keep doing rounds until someone scores.

The third Longhorns guy whacks the puck with a shot that looks like it's headed straight between Liam's legs, but he dives for it at the last second. He stops it with his big glove and holds it in the air.

He got it! Lucy jumps up and down as the crowd screams around us. ***They can win!***

I'm so nervous, I can barely watch Hudson skate twice around the puck before lining up with the goal. He scans the crowd. I swear he looks our way and gives us the quick flash of a smile before he taps the puck with his stick and glides over the ice.

"Come on," I whisper. Lucy clutches my side. It's so quiet in here, you could hear a pin drop. "You can do it."

With footwork far more advanced than anything he displayed at Friends and Family night, Hudson maneuvers across the line at the center of the ice. He keeps his eyes up, his attention trained on the goalie, and I know firsthand how distracting that attention can be.

The Longhorns' goalie tracks his motions. He shifts left then right, and I have no clue what Hudson has planned. I'm not sure I'm breathing, and when he pulls his stick to his waist and launches the puck forward, I use everything in my power to will it into the goal.

Time stands still. I swear someone hits pause on the next four seconds, but when the puck soars into the bottom right corner of the net, just past the goalie's pad, everything speeds up.

Confetti falls from the rafters. Pandemonium ensues as the entire team piles on Hudson. After they've smothered him in congratulations, they line up to shake the Longhorns' hands before celebrating again.

That was amazing! Lucy claps enthusiastically. ***I want to play hockey just like Hudson.***

It was such a good play, wasn't it?

It's going to be hell to get her to bed and up for school in the morning, but the joy on her face is infectious. I'm not sure I've ever seen her this happy, and I'm not going to be the one to dampen her glee.

I take Lucy's hand, but before we can walk down the steps that lead to the exit, Hudson is skating up to the glass in front of our seats. He's ditched his gloves and his stick, and I watch while he scribbles something on a whiteboard he's found. When he holds it up, it's impossible to fight back a grin.

COME TO THE TUNNEL, it says. Hudson points to his right and I nod, way too excited to leave without saying goodbye. He erases the words with his sleeve, writing again. MEET U IN 20. MEDIA, SHWR, THEN I'M URS.

I'm yours.

That sounds unbelievably nice.

Lucy practically pulls me down the stairs again, and by the time we fight through the fans leaving the arena and make it to the much quieter hallway away from the music blaring over the speakers, Piper is waiting for us.

I'm so glad you got to see that. She squeals, hugging Lucy tight. *Wasn't that fun?*

I'm going to learn to score like that too! Lucy tells her proudly.

I can't wait to see, Piper signs. "Hudson said something about giving her a quick arena tour. I think he wants to see you. He should be out in a minute."

"Sure. Text me if you need me?" I say, and she nods.

"We'll be back soon!" Piper holds out her hand and Lucy takes it, and they disappear around a corner.

I wait patiently, smiling at some of the staff who pass me with stacks of papers in their hands. I try my best to stay out of the way, and when a door to my left opens, I jump.

"Hey," Hudson says, and I spin to find him grinning at me with wet hair.

"Hi," I answer, my breath catching when I get a good look at him.

The suit he's wearing must be made of sinful thoughts, because I'm imagining unknitting his tie. Letting him wrap the silk around my wrists to keep me from moving and maybe adding a second and third to my ankles so he can tie them to the bed posts.

"Sorry it took me so long. I know it's past Lucy's bedtime, and I hate to keep you waiting." He steps toward me, his hand finding my waist instinctively. "I wanted to see you before I got on the plane for Toronto."

"That's okay. Piper is giving her that tour of the arena you suggested. I'm sure she's going to ask when she can apply for a job with the Stars." I smile and look him up and down. I make a show of it, admiring the cut of his jacket and how his pants fit him in a way that shows off the toned muscles of his thighs. "You know, Hayes, the social media comments got it right. You really are a bombshell."

"Means the world coming from you, Mads." He cups my cheeks, stroking his thumb down my jaw. "I'm glad y'all got to come tonight. I know it's a school night, but I like having you here."

“You were unbelievable. That shot? I got *goosebumps*, Hudson, and I don’t know a damn thing about hockey. I can only imagine how excited you must be.”

“It’s called a slap shot. It’s not really effective so close to the goal—I’ll save you from a statistics lesson—but it’s what my brain told me to do, so I did. It paid off.”

“I’ll say.” I tug on his tie, his mouth near mine. “Is that why you wanted me to meet you down here? So you could give me a hockey lesson?”

“Maybe.” He drops a kiss to my forehead and smiles. “I also wanted to say goodbye before I head to the airport. I’ll be gone for a few days, and I’m going to miss you.”

“You mean you didn’t ask the league to schedule a two-game road trip immediately following us sleeping together?” I joke, and he laughs. “I’m going to miss you, too.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” He sighs, the ghost of his breath tickling my cheek. “I’ll let you know when I land.”

“We’ll be waiting for you. Me, Lucy. The dogs. Hurry home, okay?”

“I will.” One more kiss to my cheek, and I think my feet have come off the ground. I’m floating, some giddy version of myself I never thought I could be because this is far more fun than my cynical approach to attraction. “Be good while I’m gone, Mads.”

I nod and pull away. I watch him go, painfully aware of how empty I already feel without him by my side.

FORTY-FOUR HUDSON

MADELINE

Sorry about the loss in Toronto last night.

ME

It's part of the sport. How are you and Lucy doing?

MADELINE

She's asleep, but we made paninis for dinner. They were so fucking good. That press came in handy.

You know what I'm going to say, but I'm going to say it anyway.

Thank you :)

ME

I'm happy to spend money on things that make you happy.

MADELINE

Are you on the plane?

ME

Just boarded, and Maverick is already asleep next to me. We're off to Georgia, then I'll be home.

MADELINE

Are you excited to visit your home state?

ME

I am. My dad is coming to the game. Sucks I don't get to spend time with him outside the arena, but it'll be good to see him.

MADELINE

I'm so glad. I hope you have fun. We'll be here when you get back.

We miss you.

ME

Been missing you since the minute I left you, knife girl.

WE LAND in Georgia around two in the morning after a flight delay, and I toss and turn fitfully in the hotel bed. I always sleep poorly when I'm here, and I'm hit with the same mix of emotions that creep up—nerves, anger. The dread of knowing no matter how many times I come back, it's not going to change the past.

I get up around six, aware I'm awake hours before my alarm with no hope of drifting back to sleep. I'm tired. My body hurts and my stomach growls, but I can't sit still. I can't turn my brain off, and after twenty minutes of scrolling through rental cars, I snag a truck to pick up thirty minutes from now.

I throw on a baseball hat, a hoodie, and jeans. Grabbing my phone, I open the door and stop in my tracks when I find Maverick sitting on the carpet in the hall.

His eyes are closed. His head is against the wall and his hands are folded over his chest. I take a step toward him, gently nudging his knee with my foot and waking him up.

"Hey, Huddy." He groans and stretches his legs. "Was wondering when you were going to roll out of bed."

"What are you doing here?" I look up and down the hall, confused. I don't know what I expect to find, but it's empty except for us. "Are you okay? Is Emmy okay? Please don't tell me Coach sent you here to break some news about a trade."

"Come on, man." He holds out his hand, and I pull him to his feet. "Do you really think I'd let you visit her by yourself?"

"How did you know where I was going?"

“You’re my best friend. You’re not going to come to Georgia and not see your mom,” he says. “I figured you’d want an early start because of the skate we have scheduled at noon. I have a car downstairs, coffee in the cup holders, and some flowers I grabbed from a gas station.”

A weight pushes on my shoulders. The air in my lungs struggles to escape. A laugh rattles out of me, and I reach for him. He hugs me tight and I hug him back, not letting go until my eyes stop stinging.

“Thank you, Mav,” I manage to get out, grateful my best friend doesn’t say a word about my tears.

“We’re family, Hud. That’s what we do.” He squeezes me another few seconds then lets go. “Let’s get a move on. We have a busy day, and I refuse to lose tonight when your mom is watching.”

THE DRIVE to Kennesaw is quick on a Saturday morning without any traffic.

We talk about our game and the upcoming Frozen Four regional games in a few weeks. He turns the stereo up and we sing along with Noah Kahan and Shaboozey at the top of our lungs while we sip our coffee and pass through half a dozen towns.

The sun warms up the earth and makes everything look alive even deep in late February. When we pull up to the cemetery just after seven, I feel... good. Great, almost, and I know it’s because I’m not doing this alone.

Maverick puts the car in park and grabs a bouquet from the back seat. It’s an arrangement of tulips and daffodils tied together with a nice bow, and I know Mom would’ve loved the bright colors.

“I’ll wait for you here,” he says, cranking up the seat heaters. “But if you need me, just shout.”

Maverick’s come to the gravesite with me before. On the one-year anniversary of her passing and again at year four. I’m in the mood to talk with her today, though, and I wonder if Maverick can sense I need some time alone.

“I’ll be back soon,” I tell him, fumbling for the door. “And come get me if Coach moves up practice.”

“Nah, man. He’ll understand. Take as long as you need.”

I slip out of the car and walk down the gravel path I've memorized after dozens of visits. Everything looks exactly the same as it did during my last trip with the tall grass and the big trees. I spot her up ahead, and my pace increases. My heart hammers, and when I finally get to her, I smile.

"Hey, Mama." I set the flowers on her headstone and sit on the grass. The chill in the air is gone, and I'm happy to bask in the sunshine. "Sorry it's taken me so long to get back and visit. You know we won the Cup, but the summer after was busy. I handled the Junior Stars Kids' Camp, and then my break was over."

I tip my chin up and look at the sky. There's not a cloud in sight, and I wonder if that's her doing.

I bet it is.

The weather is always nice when I stop by, and I imagine it's her way of asking me to stay a while.

"I've been thinking about you a lot, Mom. I mean, I'm always thinking about you, but I'm thinking about you more lately. I met someone, and she's..." I trail off. "Incredible seems like such an insignificant word to use because she's so much bigger than that, but she *is* incredible. Her name is Madeline. She's a single mom and has the cutest daughter. She's also my private chef and living with me. We're friends, but I think we could be more. I think we're on our way there, but I don't want to rush her."

A breeze flits through the air, and I smile, pretending it's Mom talking back. She's calling me out on my bullshit line that we're only *friends*, and I agree with her.

"I'm learning sign language because Lucy—that's her daughter—is deaf. I'm working with a tutor at Gallaudet University, and it's really fucking hard. They deserve someone to put in that effort for them, though. Remember when you tried to get me to take French my freshman year of college? The only class I've ever failed, and you weren't mad at me because at least I tried."

I laugh again. This is so much better than my therapy sessions. It's nice to talk to someone who can only listen. It's nice to spill my guts.

"I really do miss you, Mama. I wish you were here so I could ask how I can be a better support system for Madeline. You always had the best advice. I've dated a few women since you passed, and the relationships were always... fine? I wasn't unhappy or anything like that, but there wasn't a spark, you know? Not like what you and Dad had, but maybe not everyone is

lucky enough to have a love like yours. Maybe that's a once-in-a-lifetime sort of phenomena, and us average folks won't ever find it."

I sigh and rub my forehead with one of my hands. I cross my ankles and close my eyes.

"I told Madeline about you. She shared a story about her shitty ex—sorry, I know you hate when people talk poorly about others, but he's lower than low, Mom, and you'd agree with me—and I told her you got sick. She hugged me after and held me tight. It was nice. *She* is nice. She loves to cook, just like you, and she makes me happy. Happy in a way I'm not sure I've ever been. At least not since you left."

I wonder if there will come a time when I accidentally miss a year the anniversary of her passing. I wonder if soon it'll be fifteen, twenty years since she left, and I'll start to lose the things I can't see in photographs.

I'll forget how her laugh sounds. I'll struggle to remember the traditions she liked to keep at the holidays and what her hugs were like.

It feels like I'm drifting out to sea, away from her. The more time that goes by, the more difficult it is to get to the shore. I'm lost in the ocean with no hope of finding my way back to land.

"Maverick is in the car. He and Emmy have been trying to start a family, but they haven't had any news yet. I hope they do soon. I'm still don't think kids are for me. Lucy is great, though. I like her a lot. You'd like her and Madeline a lot, too. Maddie reminds me of you. She loves people with her whole heart. She's so kind, all the time, and such a good goddamn mom. Just like you were. Are."

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I know it's my alarm telling me I need to start heading back.

Responsibilities are waiting for me, and no matter how long I want to sit here in the quiet stillness with the person I loved—love—more than anything in the world, people are counting on me. Fans paid money to see me—to see us—play, and I don't want to let anyone down.

She wouldn't want me to do that either, and I know I need to go.

"We have a game tonight. The Atlanta Wasps suck this year, so hopefully it'll be an easy win. I'll be back soon. I'll bring Mav next time. Dad, too. Who knows? Maybe I'll have someone to introduce you to by then."

My eyes prick with tears. My vision blurs, but I wipe away the emotions before they can fall. I know she'd tell me not to cry over her, but sometimes I can't help it.

Life is so fucking unfair.

I stand and put my hand on her headstone. I drag my finger over the smooth granite, smiling.

“I love you, Mama. To the stars, the heavens, and beyond.”

I take the walk back to the car slower this time. When I climb inside, Maverick doesn’t say anything. He reaches over, gives me a hug, and drives us to the hotel. I have an ache in my chest the entire ride back.

“HEY, DAD.” I give him a hug in the tunnel, grinning when he ruffles my hair. “Glad I get to see you for a minute.”

“You’re too busy for me these days.” He laughs and takes a step back. “You look good, son. Are you doing okay? Eating right and getting enough sleep?”

“Yeah. I hired a private chef who knows how to do her job. I feel better than I did my rookie year. Wish I found her sooner.”

“You know what they say: everything happens for a reason, even if you don’t know what the reason is at the time.”

“I went and saw Mom. I took her some flowers.” I lean against my stick, wondering where she’s watching from tonight. “I’m going to try to get down here more often.”

“You have a lot on your plate. I know that. She knew—knows—that. No one can fault you for living your life,” Dad says.

“I want to be better about work-life balance. I’m spending more time at home these days. I never really went out before, but it’s so unappealing to me now.”

“Sounds like you have someone special in your life. Tell me about her.”

I think about the evenings on the couch with Lucy and Madeline. First-grade homework on the coffee table and dolls in the kitchen. Carrying Lucy to bed and eating a cookie with Madeline while we split a glass of milk. How much I *laugh* and how light I feel.

Those little moments don’t sound special by themselves, but in the grand scheme of life, they’re some of my favorite things. What I look forward to on the drive back from the arena, a bright spot after a bad game.

“Yeah. I do.” I smile when I say it, rubbing the back of my neck. “We’ll

see what happens.”

“It’s good to see you happy, son. You deserve to be happy.”

“It seems wrong to be happy when others don’t get that chance.”

“That’s life.” Dad shrugs, looking out at the ice. He gives a salute to Liam and Riley and shakes Maverick’s hand when he skates by while warming up. “What’s done is done. Do you really think your mother would want you to stop being happy because of her?”

“No.” I laugh. “She’d tell me to get over myself and knock it off.”

“Exactly. And you know she was never wrong.”

“Five minutes, Hayes,” Coach yells from the end of the tunnel.

“Guess I need to head out there. He sounds like he has a stick up his ass. Someone probably pissed him off,” I say, and Dad gives me a hug. “Thanks for being here, Pops.”

“We wouldn’t miss it for the world, Hud.”

I’M HAVING my best game of the season. I break up every shot the Wasps try to sink into our net. I record two assists in the first period and cheer on Maverick and Connor when they both score on pretty wrists shots from twenty feet out.

There’s energy coursing through me. I’m excited. Eager to stay on the ice, and when Coach tries to pull me with two minutes left in the third, I straight up refuse.

“I’m not sitting,” I argue.

“Hayes.”

“Let me finish.” I wipe my forehead with my jersey during a time-out then gulp down half a bottle of Body Armor. “I’ll gladly play with the third line. Come on, Coach. It’s my hometown. My dad is here.”

“You’re fucking up my system,” Coach grumbles, but when he wipes his whiteboard clean and sighs, I know I’ve won. “Fine. But I don’t want to hear any complaining when your legs are heavy tomorrow.”

I give him a grin and jump back on the ice. We’re up by three. The game is already over, but we might as well have some fucking fun until the clock expires.

After the time-out, I line up another assist, a pass across center ice to our

third right winger. The crowd groans when we score another goal, but I don't notice.

I'm too busy grinning up at my dad, and I swear I can hear my mom cheering for me from the stands.

FORTY-FIVE HUDSON

PUCK KINGS

MAVVY

Did you all see Amelia Green out in Denver got promoted from assistant head coach to associate head coach? First woman in the NHL to hold that position.

ME

Whoa. That's awesome.

MITCHY

Took them long enough. She knows her shit.

SULLY

I always liked her coaching style.

CONNOR

Same.

G-MONEY

Where are you seeing that?

It's not on ESPN.

What's your source? Are you making shit up??

I can't find anything on Instagram either.

MAVERICK!!!!

MAVVY

Why are you yelling at me?

G-MONEY

Because you said something and then didn't answer!!!!

MAVVY

Sorry for not getting to your 18 messages while I was taking a piss.

I have a buddy who plays for the Goldminers, and it was just announced at practice. My sources are good, asshole, and it hasn't been leaked yet. Probably will make headlines in an hour.

G-MONEY

Holy shit.

HOKY SHIIT

SULLY

Why are you freaking out?

G-MONEY

I'm not freaking out.

ME

You're freaking out.

G-MONEY

I think it's cool the league is becoming more inclusive. First Emmy, now Lia? Fucking amazing.

MITCHY

Why are you calling her Lia?

G-MONEY

Sry. IDK why my phone autocorrected. Typing too fast.

EASY E

LOL. iPhones are dumb. No one ever wants to say ducking. It's always fucking.

ME

We play Denver soon, right?

G-MONEY

March 14th

I think?

ME

Speaking of women in action doing cool things, don't forget we have Pilates scheduled with Lexi. We said we'd be there, and attendance is mandatory.

SULLY

Still holding out for that trade.

FEBRUARY BLEEDS into the beginning of March.

The weather gets warmer, the sun stays up longer, and that sad winter glow that likes to hang around disappears.

We're winning games and sitting pretty at the top of the league standings as we move through the second half of the season. Maverick was one of the NHL's Three Stars for February. I'm getting more comfortable with signing, and our book club is thriving.

Things are *good*.

I'm taking my dad's advice to heart: I'm letting myself be happy, and it's a nice change of pace.

And Madeline? She makes me really fucking happy.

We spend every night I'm home together, falling into each other's beds before one of us sneaks out in the morning. I feel like I'm back in my early twenties when she sends me a photo of her in one of my T-shirts while I'm away, always sending one back of my hotel room bed and writing *wish you were here*.

I'm falling for her.

Hard.

It was bound to happen, something I couldn't have stopped even if I tried, and every minute I spend with her and Lucy is the best minute of my fucking life.

"Are you going to do that knife thing?" I ask Madeline, watching her chop up a tomato and drop it in a glass container. She uses her elbow to turn down the anthem blaring from her phone, and I grin when I hear David Bowie crooning from the speakers. "It's been a while."

“Doesn’t it lose its shock value if I do it a hundred times?” she asks.

“Nope.”

“Fine,” she relents, spinning the knife in her hand. “Happy, hockey guy?”

I grin. “Very, knife girl. You’re prepping dinner already?”

“Just the veggies. This part of the process always takes so long. Since Lucy is at school and I have nothing on the agenda, I figured I’d get a head start.”

“What if you put something on the agenda?” I grab a water bottle from the fridge, setting it on the counter. “I’m doing Pilates with the team, Piper, and Emmy. Lexi teaches at a studio downtown, and we’re going to support her. Want to come?”

“The last time I tried to do a split, I pulled a hamstring.” Madeline adds a dash of salt to the tomatoes and covers them with a lid. “I should sit this one out.”

“Come on. None of us are good. Liam complains the whole time, and Ethan is afraid of ripping his shorts. He did that once, and it was the funniest fucking thing. We’re worse than beginners, I promise. There are going to be tears,” I assure her.

“You’re joking.”

“Nope. I’m not going to name names, but Grant’s face turns bright red when he’s sobbing.”

“You know what?” Her grin is lethal. “I’m in the mood to watch Lexi make a grown man cry. Are you heading out soon?”

“In ten minutes, but I’ll wait for you. Leggings are fine. At least that’s what Lexi wears when she puts us in our place.”

“Good thing that’s half my wardrobe. How long of a class is this? Please don’t say more than an hour.”

“It’s only an hour, and half of it might be spent with my head between my legs while I catch my breath.”

“Really?” She wraps her arms around my neck, and I give her ass a squeeze. “You’re really selling this workout. I’m excited.”

“Wait until you’re doing Hundreds on the reformer. We’ll see how excited you are.”

“Sounds like a torture device.” Madeline grin and heads for her room to grab a change of clothes. “I’m in.”

“I FUCKING HATE THIS.” Liam rubs his thighs during a stretching break and glares at Lexi at the front of the studio. If looks could kill, Lexi would be a goner. “My ass hurts. My toes hurt. My fucking calves hurt. This is all your fault, Hayes.”

“Whoa. Don’t blame me.” I wipe my forehead with the small towel next to my water bottle. “Besides, it’s good for us. It’s training muscles we don’t normally use, and we’re getting stronger.”

“Why do we have to train muscles we don’t use?” Grant groans and hangs off his machine. “Isn’t that the point of not using them?”

“Y’all complain too much. Do you know how lucky we are to be here and doing this?” I ask. “It’s only going to make us better athletes.”

“Easy for you to say.” Ethan puts his hands on his knees and dry heaves. “You’ve been looking at Madeline’s ass the last thirty minutes. If I had that kind of motivation, I’d be showing off too. Clark Kent wouldn’t be able to take me down.”

“Fuck you.” I laugh, but my eyes dart over to her.

How could they not?

Ethan’s not totally wrong—her ass really does look amazing in her black leggings.

They’re different from the pairs she wears around the condo. Tighter and more fitted around her hips and thighs, when she did the Elephant exercise on her machine, I had to bite my fist because her curves were so goddamn distracting.

I’ve even caught my teammates glancing her, and I don’t even care.

They can look at her all they want, but she’s coming home with me.

“All right, kids. Back on the machines,” Lexi calls out, and Riley whimpers next to me.

“I can’t do it, man,” he says, dropping his voice low. In the second row, Madeline tosses her ponytail over her shoulder and stretches her arms above her head while she chats with Emmy and Piper. I’m imagining getting her in front of a mirror while I peel her clothes off. Making her watch while I go down on her and asking her to return the favor. “Are you even listening to me complain, Huddy Boy?”

“What?” I shake my head and clear the thoughts away. “No. What’s up?”

“I was saying if I had to spend every day with Lexi and her training plans, I’d probably turn into the fucking Hulk.” Riley grimaces and shoves his glasses up his nose. “How do people enjoy this?”

“It’s not that bad.” I lunge down into a Warrior 2 pose and let out a breath. “You have to center yourself.”

“Fuck your centering, Hayes,” Liam says before he topples over.

“Come on, boys,” Piper teases. I’m not sure she’s even sweating. “Weren’t you saying this should be easy since *girls* can do it?”

“Father Lord, I repent for my sins.” Grant closes his eyes and clasps his palms together. “I vow to never make a joke like that again if you can take away the pain.”

“Guess the saying is true: anything they can do, we can do better.” Emmy gives us a sharp smirk in the mirror. “Maybe if you all smiled more you’d have more fun.”

Madeline turns to look at me with a wry smile. “I think we can up the intensity, Lexi,” she says, and Grant lets out an honest-to-god wail. “Just a smidge, don’t you think?”

“Game on, Galloway,” I say, grimacing when Lexi comes over and pushes on my shoulders, helping me get deeper. My knees shake and my shirt is drenched with sweat, but watching Madeline excel at something is fun. “Want to see who can hold this position the longest?”

“Sure.” She lifts a shoulder in a shrug. “I gave birth to a child, Hayes. My pain tolerance is a hell of a lot higher than yours.”

“Loser does the dishes tonight.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal.”

I don’t care that I’m openly flirting with her in front of my teammates. I don’t care that Maverick is smirking at me and Ethan is pretending to gag. I don’t care that Emmy is filming us and no doubt going to upload the footage to social media and title it: *Hockey player loses to hot mom*, because this is fucking fun.

I know I don’t stand a chance of beating her, but I give it my best effort. Piper, Emmy, and Lexi cheer for Madeline while the guys do their best to encourage me. When sweat rolls down my shoulders and tickles my back, I fall out of the position, the rightful loser.

“Hell yeah, Madeline,” Lexi cheers, and Madeline beams.

I jump off my machine and walk over to her. “Nice job, Mads.”

“You gave it your best effort, Bombshell.”

“You have some strong legs,” I point out.

“Maybe I can put them around your head when we get home,” she tosses back nonchalantly, and I blush.

None of my teammates heard her comment, and that makes it even hotter. It's a secret only for me, and suddenly, I don't care about the workout.

"Is that right?" I tilt my head to the side, smirking when her gaze bounces to the front of my shorts. "Then what are we still doing here?"

"Supporting a friend and contributing to the economy by visiting a small business." Madeline steps toward me. There's still space between us, but I wish there wasn't. "Why? Is there a reason you want to leave?"

"I can think of a few things," I tell her, dipping my neck so I can whisper in her ear, and she answers me with a grin.

"We have the condo to ourselves for a few hours before Lucy gets home from school. Want to get out of here?"

I make quick work of wiping down my machine and thanking Lexi for a nice class. I ignore my teammates chanting my name when Madeline and I leave, making small talk on the drive home.

When we get to the foyer, I lock the door behind us. Madeline kicks off her sneakers, and I push her against the wall.

"Oh," she breathes out, a devilish grin behind the word. "Someone's feisty."

"Because I spent an hour staring at your ass." I curl my fingers in the waistband of her leggings, shoving them down her thighs. "And you have a mighty fine ass."

"It was fun to taunt you." Madeline wraps her arms around my neck, smiling when I drop to my knees and yank the black nylon all the way off. "I like getting you worked up."

"That's not fair, is it?" I kiss the inside of her thigh and lift her foot, putting it on my shoulder. "Especially when you go places without any underwear on. Goddamn, Mads. Are you trying to kill me?"

She hisses when I run a knuckle across her entrance. A sigh escapes her when I push my finger inside her pussy, and she moans when I lean forward to drag my tongue up her stomach.

"No bedroom?" Her head drops against the wall. "I'm starting to think you have an aversion to beds, Hayes."

"It's because I can't keep my hands off of you." I kiss her hipbone before moving my mouth to her pussy. I swirl my tongue over her clit, glad to find her wet. "We'll get there after I taste you."

"What if—*fuck*—I wanted to taste you too?" Madeline holds the back of my neck, burying my face between her legs. I grin, licking her like she's my

last source of oxygen. “I want to suck your cock, Hudson.”

That makes my dick twitch, and I groan when she rolls her hips and doesn’t let me come up for air.

“Did you see how my teammates were looking at you? How they were fucking *drooling* over you?” I part her pussy with my thumbs, spitting on it. “I can’t believe I’m the one you want to come home with.”

“Because you’re my favorite.” Her voice hitches, a gasp taking over her words when I put my palm low on her stomach to stop her from moving. “You’re the only one who knows what I like. Inside the bedroom, but outside of it, too.”

I’ve never been the possessive or jealous type. I’ve never cared if the woman I was dating wore my jersey or showed up to games.

But hearing Madeline say I’m the *only one* who knows her unlocks a new wave of determination in me. I push two fingers inside her, stretching her out. She whimpers my name and knocks a stack of mail off the table next to her when she tries to hold on to something sturdy.

“Are you going to come, Madeline? You’ve been teasing me for the last hour.” She clenches around me, almost losing her footing, and I hum. “You are, aren’t you?”

I pluck her apart piece by piece until she’s grinding against my face, chanting my name like I’m some merciful god, and begging for release.

“I’m almost there. That’s perfect, Hudson,” she whispers, and it’s nearly impossible not to come from her praise. “*Please.*”

Almost isn’t the word I’m looking for, so I curl my fingers, and that’s all it takes for her to fall apart.

I hold her steady as I ease her down, letting her ride the wave until her panting turns to gentle sighs and a satisfied smile.

With one last kiss to her knee, I gently put her foot on the ground, glancing up at her. Her eyes flutter open, and when I stand, I hold out my fingers.

“Suck,” I say, watching her eyes dance with glee. Her tongue sneaks out, and she tips her head to the side so she can take my fingers in her mouth. I imagine it’s my cock instead of fingers between her lips, and I have to pull my hand away. I lift her off the ground in one swoop and put her over my shoulder, smiling when her exhausted laugh echoes down the hall.

“Where are you taking me?” she asks.

“Where do you think?” I reach up and run my hand along the curve of her

ass. I kick the door to my room open with my foot. “You said you wanted to suck my cock.” I drop her on my bed and shove my shorts and briefs off my legs. I step out of them and leave my shirt on, one hand around my shaft. “Open up, Madeline.”

FORTY-SIX
MADELINE

THERE ARE SO many things I like about Hudson, but one of my favorite things is when he turns commanding and desperate, raw and aching hot. A touch unhinged and possessive over me.

He holds his cock in front of me, and I lick my lips. I can't believe we haven't done this yet, and that's a testament to Hudson's patience. An ode to him letting me be the one to control the physical parts of our relationship.

That makes me want him even more.

I take him in my hands and drag my thumb down his length, eager for him.

I can't get over how *big* he is, but it never feels overwhelming.

It feels like we're the perfect fit.

"Do you like this?" I run my tongue over the tip of his shaft. I lick up the pre-cum I find and tilt my head so I can have a better angle. "Or is it not your jam?"

"I-I've always liked it." Hudson swallows, and it's like he's embarrassed to admit it. He bites his sweat-soaked shirt and separates his feet so his stance is wide. "I always feel like an ass asking for it, though. I can't imagine it's very fun for you."

"I think it's fun." I hollow out my cheeks and suck on him, getting him halfway in my mouth. "It makes me think I'm in control. Because when I do this—" I cup his balls with one hand and grip the base of his cock with another, twisting it, and he groans. "I know you'll do anything I ask."

“*Fuck*. Yes. I will.” He bobs his head. “Can you try to take me again? So we can see how deep I can get?”

I adjust my position on the bed, and he stands between my legs. I stifle a groan when he strokes his fingers down my jaw. I melt under his touch when he moves his hand to my neck and tips my head back.

I thought I was supposed to be the one in control, but here I am, close to begging him.

“Go slow,” I tell him. He smiles and drags his thumb across my bottom lip. “Six years, remember?”

“I remember.” He strokes my hair, carefully bringing my head to his length. “I’ll be gentle, and I’ll stop before you gag.”

“What if I want to gag? What if I want it to be messy?”

“Then make a mess of me, Maddie,” he says with a low voice from the depths of his chest. “Please.”

He rests the head of his cock on my tongue. I lick the tip, tasting his saltiness. I hum when he steps closer to me, and soon half his shaft disappears in my mouth.

I put a hand on his thigh. My fingers dance across his skin until I reach his balls again. When I fondle them, learning their heaviness and weight, he thrusts forward until my mouth is at the root of his cock.

Tears spring to my eyes, but I fight through them.

“Good. So good,” he murmurs with a tone of awe. “Can you stay there for a second?” When I nod, his palm moves between my legs. He touches me, finding me wet, and he hums. “You like this, don’t you? You like when I use you.”

I nod again, white-hot pleasure building at the base of my spine. I’ve never been turned on while giving a blow job before, but there’s something about Hudson’s words that fuels a fire in me.

“I’m not going to come in your mouth today,” he tells me. “Next time we do this, though, I want to watch you swallow.”

Heavens.

I want that too.

I do my best to convey it to him by bobbing my head. By licking at him, sucking and using the hint of my teeth when I add my hand.

My mouth and palm work in tandem to find the perfect rhythm that makes Hudson’s grunts turn rough and sharp.

Drool hangs from my mouth, and he wipes it away with his thumb. When

I take him deep again, he tugs on my hair. He pulls me off him and reaches for his bedside drawer.

“Want to fuck you,” he mumbles, voice thick with lust. “From behind.”

“Are you an ass man?” I roll onto my stomach and push up on my knees. I rest my elbows on the sheets, my legs spread wide. “Is that your favorite part of me?”

“When we’re in bed? Yes. But it doesn’t hold a candle to your smile.” I look over my shoulder and find him sliding the condom over his cock. “This way I get to see the parts of yourself you say you don’t love. The cellulite, the stretch marks. You don’t have to like them, Maddie, but I’m fucking obsessed with them. I’ll worship them for both of us.”

God.

I’m terrified one day I’m going to wake up, and this will all be a dream. The happy fog that’s blanketed my life will get pulled away, because what kind of man says those things and means them? What kind of man makes me feel so fucking beautiful while he’s throwing a condom wrapper in the trash?

I’m convinced he’s the only one in existence. One of a kind, and someone I don’t want to let go.

“Fuck me, Hudson,” I whisper, and he grips my hips.

I glance over my shoulder, not wanting to miss a moment of watching him in all his splendor. He lines himself up with my entrance and presses a kiss to my shoulder blade. I exhale at the warm feel of his mouth, but it gives way to a moan. To a delighted exhale of a breath when he sinks inside me and fuses our bodies together.

We’ve done this so many times now, but I’m still not used to how *good* it feels.

“I might be addicted to you.” Hudson reaches around me and rubs my clit with his thumb. “I think about you all the time. I think about fucking you. About touching you. I can’t get you out of my head, Maddie. Haven’t been able to since I first met you.”

A thought enters my brain when he drives into me. It’s hazy, faraway and on the cusp of a fantasy, but it’s the most powerful dream I’ve ever had.

I could love him.

I could love him, and it would be perfect.

I think about him all the time, too. I miss him when he’s gone. I feel alive when he touches me.

Sparks flicker behind my vision when he moves his mouth to the back of

my neck and breathes against my skin.

I could love him, but could I give him what he wants? What he deserves?

I squeeze my eyes closed and focus on the here and now. On the way he's unrelenting with his thrusts. How he moves his hand up to my breasts, giving them a squeeze, before returning between my legs.

It's like he doesn't know where he wants to touch. My body is a blank canvas, and I'm ready to be his muse.

"Tight. Wet. Fucking perfect." He groans. "Mine."

That word sends a rush of adrenaline through me. I moan when I slam back on his cock, wanting to prove I *am* his.

And he is mine, too.

"Are you doing math again?" I pant, and his laugh warms me from the inside out. "And if so, can you hurry up and solve the problem?"

"Gosh I like you." Hudson loops an arm around my waist and pulls me up slightly. His fingers touch my chin, and his mouth is near my ear. "Open your eyes, Maddie."

I blink, and I'm met with the reflection of us in the mirror hanging above his dresser. I gasp when I see my pink skin and messy hair. My entire body flushes when I notice a hickey on my neck and bite marks around my breasts.

"We look so good together," I whisper, and he snakes his hand up my stomach to my neck. "Electric."

"Perfect," he supplies, eyes locked on mine. "I finished the math problem. Are you ready to come again, sweetheart?"

Sweetheart makes me think this thing between us could last forever.

Maybe it could.

"Yeah." I lick my lips and drop my head into the crook of his neck. His hands roam all over my body, and I can't get over how intoxicating his touch is. How hot we are together and how I like seeing us fall apart. "I'm there."

"Me, too." Hudson angles his hips and hits a spot inside me I didn't know existed. Stars appear, and I groan when he finds it again. "So pretty when you fall apart."

That's all it takes for me to combust, and I tumble into a freefall. My body moves on its own, welcoming the orgasm and the blissful satisfaction he brings me.

"Hudson," I whisper, watching him follow me over the edge.

His grip on me tightens and his legs convulse as he spills into the condom. He says my name, a mess of garbled vowels and syllables. When we

settle down, our breathing returning to normal and our bodies cooled off, I reach behind me and stroke his hair. Sweat clings to my fingers, but I don't care.

"Hey," he says.

"Hi," I answer. "You're so wonderful."

"You're going to be my undoing." He hides his face in my neck, the warmth of his skin against mine effervescent. Popped champagne bottles and a million fireworks. "My demise."

Be gentle with me when you kill me, he said, and I hope I can be just as gentle with his precious heart.

With a final breath, I wiggle my hips and slip him out of me. We both mumble something at the loss of contact, and I flop onto my stomach. I feel high on the endorphins being with him bring me.

The mattress sinks beside me, and I turn my head.

Hudson removes the condom and ties it off. He winces and stretches over to toss it in the trash can next to the bed, letting out a sigh.

"Are you doing okay?" I scoot closer to him and trace over his stomach. His muscles flex under my fingers, and I smile. "Can I get you a water?"

"How am I more winded than you? I'm an elite athlete." He exhales a slow release of air and grabs a blanket from the edge of the bed. He drapes it over my ass and wraps an arm around me. "You look like you could run a marathon. And after Pilates? You're a goddamn superhero."

"Are you kidding? My legs hurt, and it looks like there's a bird living in my hair."

He pulls on the tangled strands with a smile meant for only me. "Still beautiful."

I blush, the compliment feeling far more intimate than what we just did. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Making me feel appreciated and wanted."

"I told you I'm addicted to you. It's true." Hudson draws a shape on my arm. He writes a few words and seals it with a kiss. He would be so easy to love, and I'm afraid I might be veering down that road. Racing toward it without any brakes. "What's for dinner tonight?"

"Of course you're thinking about food right now," I tease, my heart squeezing tight.

"Only because you rocked my world and I need to replenish all the

calories I lost.”

“Nice save there, Hayes. I’m doing a tomato and feta pasta with a side of brussels sprouts.”

“Brussels sprouts? Dammit.”

“You don’t like brussels sprouts?”

“No. The last two times you put them on my plate, I’ve hidden them under a scoop of mashed potatoes to make you think I ate them.”

“Oh my god.” I sit up and look down at him. He’s grinning at me, a lazy, unhurried beam that hits behind my ribs. “You sneaky little asshole. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you and Lucy like them. I fake it so you can still eat them.”

“We can have them when you’re not here, knucklehead.” I grab a pillow and hit him on the side of the head. “My job is to make sure you’re eating a balanced meal, and I can’t do that when you’re hiding your vegetables from me like a *child*, Hudson Hayes.”

When I try to roll off the bed to get away from him, he grabs me by my waist. He pulls me close to his chest and laughs again. “I’m sorry. Forgive me, Maddie.”

“I’m mad at you, but I forgive you. What vegetable *do* you like?”

“Broccoli.”

“Broccoli it is.” I close my eyes and sigh. “I should get dressed. I have some chores I need to get done before Lucy’s back from school, and that means I need to get my ass moving.”

“How can I help?” Hudson yawns and rubs his eyes. “Tell me how I can be of service.”

“You can dig through the trash and show me how much food you’ve wasted by tossing out your source of vegetables.”

“I like when you make jokes after an orgasm.” He kisses me one more time and stands. I admire his naked body before he slips on a shirt and a loose pair of boxers. “But only because I like you, knife girl.”

He heads for the kitchen with a wink, and I’m left staring after him.

So easy to love.

FORTY-SEVEN

HUDSON

MADELINE, Lucy, Gus, Millie, and I walk into Maverick and Emmy's place for team dinner on Monday night. I unhook the dogs from their leashes and let them take off through the apartment. They stop and get head scratches from all the guys, and everyone cheers when they sprint after a tennis ball, ready to play fetch.

We're in a rare stretch of the season where we have four days off in a row without any games, and it's been nice to enjoy the extended downtime at home.

I've always preferred my own bed over a hotel, but I like it even more when Madeline sneaks under my covers once Lucy goes to sleep. Sometimes we have sex, but other times we stay up late talking, hours passing in what feels like seconds.

I'll snap a blurry photo of her mid-laugh. She'll rest her head on my shoulder and ask about my mom, allowing me to tell her about little pieces of my life before she showed up.

It's natural now, this thing between us. How we hook our pinkys together in the kitchen while I'm helping her get dinner ready, the way she hugs me from behind and wraps her arms around my waist, kissing between my shoulder blades.

There was no hesitation in asking if she and Lucy wanted to join tonight. She even made a pot of carbonara to bring with us, thwarting all my attempts of trying to sneak a bite while she mixed the ingredients together earlier this

evening.

“What’s up, Huddy Boy?” Grant calls out. “And hello, ladies. Welcome to your first team dinner.”

“Hi,” Madeline says, slipping into SimCom. “*Lucy is very excited to hang out with Ethan tonight. She’s hoping they can discuss the best condiments for hot dogs.*”

Madeline interpreted for me on the ride over while I watched Lucy’s handshapes in the rear view mirror, and I couldn’t help but laugh at the enthusiasm on Lucy’s face when she started signing about pickles.

“Easy E,” Grant yells. “Get your ass in here.”

Ethan walks out of the kitchen holding a slice of bread. He rips off a piece and pops it in his mouth, grinning at us. “You summoned me, lads and ladies?”

I pull my notepad out of my back pocket and chuck it at him. “Lucy wants your opinion on hot dog toppings.”

“*They are her favorite food,*” Madeline explains. “*I mentioned there was a player who liked them, too, and she was very excited to meet you.*”

“No way.” He shoves the rest of the bread in his mouth and wipes his hand on his shirt. “I’ve been waiting my whole life for someone to ask me about hot dog condiment preferences. Do I, uh, just write on the paper?” Ethan fumbles with the spiral notebook, opening it. I think his hands might be shaking. “Sorry. This feels really important, and I don’t want to fuck—sorry, mess up.”

“Flip to the back and write there. And remember she’s a *child*,” I emphasize. “No inappropriate conversations or drawings. I’ll kick your ass if you misbehave.”

“All right, Dad. You know I’ve been around kids, right? I helped you with summer camp in July.” He holds up the notebook, using it to cover his hand from Lucy’s view so he can flip me off. “I’m not totally inept.”

Ethan surprises me by walking over to Lucy. He squats and gives her a wide smile. She blushes and waves, a hint of shyness she doesn’t usually show coming through.

Hello, there, he scribbles in terrible handwriting. *Mustard on hot dogs?*

Lucy wrinkles her nose and shakes her head.

“She and I are going to get along just fine,” he tells us.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but we can trust him alone with her for a few minutes if you’re okay with it,” I say to Madeline. “Do you want a

drink?”

“A drink would be great.” She glances up at me, relaxed and wearing a smile. “Lead the way, Bombshell.”

I put my hand on the small of her back. She steps closer to me as we stop and say hello to some of the other boys on our way to the kitchen. Liam takes the pot of food from her, and Riley bombards her with a string of questions about Greek yogurt in recipes or if it’s all a scam.

Emmy, Piper, Lexi, and Maven pull her into their group when we finally snag a drink, and I’m left to check out the spread of food lining the counter alone.

“There’s my guy.” Maverick jumps in my arms, and I laugh when he spills half of my water on the floor. Gus and Millie are there to lick it up, and Mav dangles from my neck. “And you brought friends with you.”

“Ethan brought someone from Tinder last week, so I figured I’m allowed to have the people who are important to me join us.” I set Maverick down on his own two feet and lean against the wall. “Is that a problem?”

“Dude. Come on. Drop the tough guy act. You know I don’t care who joins us. I’m giving you a hard time. Besides.” His grin is knowing, a smart-ass comment on the tip of his tongue. “You’ve never brought a girl around the guys before. And here you are doing it twice in a couple weeks? You’re so fucked, Huddy.”

“That’s not true.” I frown, racking my brain. I try to think about the women I’ve seriously dated. The list isn’t extensive, but it’s more than a few people. “Shit. I haven’t?”

“Nope. I mean, you’ve brought them to the big stuff like the gala and charity events. But not something small like this where they could ask Madeline what your deepest, darkest secrets are.”

“I want them to know they’re part of my life. If we’re going to spend time together, I don’t want there to be a doubt in her mind how I feel about her,” I say.

“It’s pretty obvious how you feel about her, bro.” He clasps my shoulder. “Speaking of, have you shown her your sign language skills yet?”

“No. I’m waiting until I feel more comfortable, and I don’t know how I want to tell Madeline and Lucy. Do I break out into sign language mid-conversation? Do I start adding it in throughout the day until it’s obvious I know what they’re saying?”

“It’s too bad Christmas is so far away. That would’ve been a good gift.”

Maverick rubs his jaw. “I say you mention you have a surprise, then show it off.”

“That’s probably the route I’ll take.” I pause and sip my water. “Madeline doesn’t want to get married again.”

I don’t know why I’m telling him this. Maybe because he’s full of advice lately, and I need someone to talk some sense into me.

“She was married before?”

“To a douchebag I’ll strangle if I ever meet. She’s against the idea now—rightfully so—and I’m trying to figure out what our endgame is if we want different things in life.”

“Oh, shit.” Maverick puts his hands together in front of him and closes his eyes. “It’s time the student becomes the teacher.”

I lift an eyebrow. “Why are you being weird?”

He takes a deep breath, then smacks the back of my head. “You are an *idiot*.”

“Ow, you fucker.” I wince, rubbing my hair. “What was that for?”

“Who gives a shit if she doesn’t want to get married? Look at me! I was so against monogamy, and now I’m wondering how I can order a fucking casket that fits two people so I can hold Emmy’s hand when we’re dead. Marriage isn’t the only path for relationships. You don’t need a piece of paper to love her, do you?”

“No, but —”

“I’m not finished, Hayes. The teacher is still talking,” he says sharply, and I blink. “So there’s no ring and no wedding. Big fucking deal. You can spend decades together and be just as happy as any other couple who *did* get married. If she’s what you want, the other stuff doesn’t matter. Love is what you make it, dipshit.”

I glance across the kitchen at Madeline laughing at something Lexi is saying. Her shoulders shake, her eyes wrinkle. Her mouth splits into a beautiful grin, and *holy shit*.

I like her so fucking much.

It’s more than a physical attraction.

It’s more than a crush.

If someone were to try and get my deepest, darkest secret out of me, it would be how much I like her, how much I’m thinking I *more* than like her, but she’s not ready to hear it yet.

Doesn’t change the fact that it’s true.

Down the road, if we got to that point, if I'm lucky enough to have more years with her, I wouldn't care about a ceremony or vows. I'd care about her.

Spending my days with her and Lucy and another set of dogs we rescue from the shelter. Jewelry wouldn't matter, but how I feel when I'm around her would.

Like I'm coming home whenever she's in my arms.

Like everything in life is finally right after being wrong for so fucking long.

My heart thunders in my chest. I'm surprised no one else can hear it. My palms are sweaty, and I wipe them on my jeans.

I know she likes me too, but there's a big difference in a *nice fuck* kind of way and *want to hang out for the rest of eternity?* kind of way.

We're somewhere in the middle right now, that *I enjoy your company, so let's keep doing it* way of thinking, but it's so *obvious* I'm nearly in love with her, I can't deny it anymore.

"You okay?" Maverick snaps his fingers in my face, and I blink. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I'm okay." I down the rest of my water and notice Madeline heading my way. She makes a pit stop at the carbonara and adds a sprinkle of parmesan cheese to the top. "Better than okay."

Maverick follows my gaze and smiles. "Amazing how they make us feel better, isn't it? I'll leave you be. Food starts in five minutes."

Madeline slides up to my side and looks between me and Maverick. Her arm brushes against mine, and it's silly how fucking giddy it makes me.

"Am I interrupting?" she asks.

"Not at all," Maverick says. "Hudson and I were talking about whale populations."

"Whale populations," she repeats. "I didn't know you had an affinity for zoology, Hayes."

"It's a recent development." I nod to her empty wineglass. "Want a refill?"

"No, thank you. That was a heavy pour you gave me, and I don't need to start stumbling."

"We need you on two feet, Madeline. There's a game of hide and seek scheduled after dinner, and the first group of people to be found have to eat a bit of the Jello monstrosity Ethan brought," Maverick says. "It's a biohazard, so I'd make sure you have a clear head."

“Thanks for the warning.” She laughs. “I can’t wait.”

Lucy comes barreling into the kitchen. The dogs chase after her, and she’s dragging Ethan by the sleeve. When they get close, he throws the notebook at my shoulder.

“You’ve all been replaced,” he announces. “Lucy and I are best friends now.”

“*Did you figure out your favorite hot dog toppings?*” Madeline asks, and she nods when Lucy answers. “*Diced onions? Good choice, baby.*”

“She is so your daughter,” I say.

“If you ever need anyone to watch her, I’m happy to jump in,” Ethan says, and I gape at him. “What? Why are you looking at me like I have four heads, Hayes?”

“I’m impressed. Six months ago, I wouldn’t leave Gus and Millie with you. Now you’re a natural with kids and animals.” I pat his shoulder. “I guess everyone is bound to grow up eventually.”

“I’m a full-fledged adult. Hey, G-Money,” he yells. “Want to see how many grapes we can fit in our mouths?”

“And there we go. It was nice while it lasted,” I say, and Madeline giggles.

“It’s amazing how sweet everyone is with Lucy.” She strokes her daughter’s hair while Lucy kisses the dogs on the head. “I appreciate how no one treats her like a burden.”

“A burden?” I frown. I don’t like that word. “Why would they do that?”

“Because she communicates differently. It’s what people in the past have implied. Athletic coaches, her friends’ parents. The woman at the grocery store who said it must be *such* a challenge to raise a difficult child.” She sighs, disappointed. “It’s a shame, because Lucy isn’t a burden at all. She’s a regular kid, and more often than not it’s hearing people who don’t have the empathy and patience to make room for a style of life that’s different from theirs.”

“Listen to me, Madeline. If anyone *ever* says some shit like that to you again, I want you to come find me so I can give them a piece of my mind, okay? And if any of the *players* say it? I will have their asses shipped out to Alaska real fucking quick.”

Madeline chews on her bottom lip. She wrings her hands together, almost unsteady on her feet. “You mean that, don’t you?”

“Of course I mean it. I’d go to war for your daughter. For you, too.”

“Why?” she whispers, and I think of a hundred ways I can answer that question.

Because I’m attracted to you.

Because I’m determined to show you there are good men out there.

Because it’s the bare minimum of what you deserve.

Because I’m fucking falling in love with you, and I’d let you break my heart if that’s what you wanted.

“Because y’all are mine.” I tuck a loose piece of hair behind her ear.
“And I protect what’s mine.”

FORTY-EIGHT MADELINE

I'VE WORKED in restaurants throughout my entire adult life, so I'm familiar with large groups in small settings. There's always been a camaraderie in the kitchen. There's communication and kinship with long working hours, but I've never experienced something like this.

Being at team dinner gives a new meaning to the word family.

It's Thanksgiving but amplified, with laughs, jokes, plenty of food, and a ton of love. A dozen conversations happen around me about league standings and playoffs and someone named Amelia Green, but never once do I feel out of place.

Lucy runs around the apartment with the dogs, giggling when Riley chases her and lifts her on his shoulders. The girls and I talk about the Spring Fling dance that June, Maven's daughter, has next week, and we gush over the dress she picked out.

It's perfect.

I feel welcomed here, like I belong, and the togetherness is something I've been missing since leaving the restaurant industry.

"Hey." Maverick whistles, and everyone glances at him. Lucy climbs in my lap and I lift my hands, ready to interpret for her. "It's time for our game."

Grant groans. "Can't we play *FIFA* or *GTA* like we always do?"

"Nope. Coach told me he wants us to start doing more team building off the ice as we move toward the playoffs, and that means putting down the

controllers. Everyone knows how to play hide and seek, right?" he asks, and there's a murmur of yeses. "Good. You'll be with a partner, and if your team is caught, you join the seeking side. When we get down to the last two people, they win."

"What's the prize for winning?" Ethan asks. "That's going to determine my likelihood for participating."

"Given it's mandatory, if you don't want to join in, I'll kick your ass at practice tomorrow until you're crying in pain, Richardson," Maverick warns.

"He runs a tight ship," I whisper to Hudson.

He took the seat next to me ten minutes ago, his thigh pressing against mine as he listened to us discuss what color hair ribbon would look the best with a bright green dress.

"You should've seen him five or six years ago. He missed his alarms and skipped practice. Politely escorting his one-night stands out of his apartment was a regular occurrence for me. Maverick from his first year in the league wouldn't recognize this dude."

"Really?" I glance over at him, watching the way he hugs Emmy tight and kisses her forehead. "I've only been around him a few times, but I can't imagine him being anything other than totally in love with Emmy."

"Times change, and thank god for that."

"Are you going to play hide and seek?" I ask.

"Of course I am. I'm pretty sure it's somewhere in my contract that I have to do anything Maverick says, but even if it wasn't, I'd join. Why the hell not? That means you're playing too, Galloway."

"I can be Lucy's partner," Piper volunteers. "Liam adamantly refuses to play anything, and Lucy is going to be much better company than his grumpy ass."

"I heard that," Liam says without looking up from his phone.

"That was the point." Piper pats his thigh and smiles at Lucy. *Want to be on my team for hide and seek?*

Lucy nods. ***I'm good at hiding.***

"She is," I add. *"When she was younger, I spent twenty minutes looking for her. She was hiding behind the washing machine and scared the heck out of me."*

Genius. Piper grins. *We're so going to win.*

Lucy climbs out of my lap and joins Piper on the floor. My heart is full while I watch them talk about the headband Lucy is wearing and her pink

sparkly shoes.

Piper must mention something funny, because Lucy lets out a giggle and covers her mouth.

“Looks like she’s having fun,” Hudson says.

“She was happy when we lived in Vegas, but she’s so much brighter here in DC.” I laugh. “It’s probably the dogs.”

“Why do you think I rescued those two? They’re the best kind of therapy.”

Around us, his teammates start to split up into pairs. I glance up at him and bump his shoulder with mine.

“Guess you’re stuck with me as a partner, Hayes,” I tell him.

“It would be an honor, Galloway.”

“If you open a box that says PRIVATE on it, I can’t be held responsible what you find,” Maverick says from the front of the living room. “Emmy girl and I will start, and we’ll count to sixty. Don’t touch any of my shit, and you won’t get hurt. We’re starting now.”

“Where are we going to hide?” I ask, standing while everyone around us scrambles.

“They have a small room in their closet that’s used for extra storage. It’s not very big, but it’s tucked away.” Hudson takes my hand and gives it a squeeze. “We can go in there behind a shelf, and we’ll be good.”

“I’m glad I’m paired with the person who knows the floorplan of this place like the back of his hand.” I wave to Lucy and Piper, who take off in the opposite direction. “Were you an architect in another life?”

“I spent seven days helping them move in. I can tell you about every nook and cranny in this place.”

Hudson leads me down a long hallway, and I smile at the pictures on the wall. There are so many hanging up, ones with a group of guys shirtless and a different one at the beach.

I find one with the same group in front of a wedding chapel. Another after what I’m guessing is a big win, because all the Stars players are in a pile on each other. There’s a huge trophy being presented to them.

“I knew you and Maverick were friends, but I’m realizing how *close* you two are,” I say, tapping a photo of Maverick and Hudson asleep on the floor of an airport. They’re wrapped around each other, and it might be the cutest thing I’ve ever seen. “Did you know him before you were on the team?”

“Nope. I thought he was the most conceited toolbar when I first met him.”

Hudson laughs and nudges open a door with his hip. “He grew on me, though. He’s like my brother. I’d run through fire for him, and he’d do the same for me. When we were younger, our team sucked. We were the laughingstock of the league. People in DC booed us, but we both stuck around. There was an unspoken agreement between us that we were going to bring this team out of the ashes, and we weren’t going to leave until we did. A Stanley Cup win later and hopefully heading toward another one this season, and I’d say we did our job.”

“That love is special. It sounds like Maverick might be your soulmate.”

“Maybe he is, but if that’s the case, then we can have two soulmates. Because Emmy is most definitely his, too.”

He opens another door and tugs me inside. It’s dark, and I pull out my phone to use as a flashlight.

“It looks like there’s space behind that shelf over there.” I point to a small metal rack housing cardboard boxes. “We would be hidden from view.”

“Nice eyes, Mads.”

Hudson helps me maneuver around a pile of old skates and a box labeled JERSEYS. When we make it to the other side of the space, I glance around.

“It’s small over here,” I say. “Pretty sure I’m going to have to sit on top of you.”

“Ah. What a plight for me,” he says, and I can hear the grin behind his words. “Let me get situated, then you can sit on top of me all you want, Maddie.”

I laugh, holding the light up so I can watch him take a seat on the ground.

“You’re such a gentleman.”

He opens his knees so there’s space between his legs, and he pats his thighs. “Come here.”

I spin so my back is to him, but before I can sit down, Hudson puts a hand on the back of my thigh.

“What is it?” I run my hand over the pleated material. “Please don’t tell me there’s an army of cockroaches down there.”

“No.” He flashes me another grin I can barely make out in the dark space. “I can see up your skirt, so I’m admiring your underwear.”

“Oh my god.” A laugh sneaks out of me. I shake my head and lower myself to the floor. “You get to see my underwear all the time.”

“Not when I’m out of town I don’t,” he counters. “For what it’s worth, it’s cute underwear.”

I blush.

I've never cared about what I wear under my clothes or chef's whites. Sometimes it was thongs, other times bikini-style underwear. On my period, a ripped pair that sits low on my hips and don't put any pressure on my bloated stomach are my saving grace.

Regularly sleeping with an NHL player has made me want to add a few new pieces to my rotation like lacier pairs. Ones that show off my backside and come in a matching set.

I know Hudson doesn't care what I wear. He's called me beautiful in a hundred different ways, and most of them were when I've been exhausted and worn out, feeling the furthest from attractive.

It's fun to put on something sexy under my clothes. It makes *me* feel sexy, even as the sweater-and-leggings mom.

"Thanks," I say, and I hear noises on the other side of the door. It sounds like more people are trying to hide, and I hope no one else comes in here and joins us. "I got them for three dollars."

"Three dollars? Do I need to up your salary?"

"No. I just love a sale." I pause, biting my lower lip. "But speaking about my salary, I think we should talk about that."

"I love deep conversations when I'm hiding in a closet. What's on your mind, knife girl?" Hudson wraps his arms around me, pulling me close to his chest. "Tell me anything."

"I feel like things between us are getting serious," I admit softly, relaxing when his hold on me tightens like he wants me to stay here forever. "And maybe I'm reading the time we're spending together wrong, but —"

"You're not," he hurries to say, voice hushed. "At all. I'm serious about you and Lucy. Y'all are the best part of my days, and I hope we get to keep going down this path."

"That's why I feel weird taking money from you. I know I'm still cooking your meals," I say before he can interrupt, because I can tell he's ready to protest. "But I have feelings for you, Hudson. It makes me uncomfortable to take money from you when what we're doing exists outside the kitchen."

"It exists in the kitchen a little bit. I did get you off on the counter." He buries his face in my neck and kisses below my ear. I giggle, squirming in his hold. "But I understand where you're coming from. Money blurs lines."

"It does. I'm so thankful for your generosity, but maybe we can think

about moving away from a paycheck and instead becoming two people who care about each other, who are living together, and I cook for you because I *want* to. Not because I'm obligated to."

"Okay." He nods, his mouth moving to my throat. "I accept the changes, but only if you accept I'm going to take care of you and Lucy financially. That includes buying you whatever you need, whatever you want, whenever you need it."

"Okay," I echo, knowing an argument is pointless. Hudson means business, and for as long as I've survived as a single parent doing everything myself, it's *nice* to have someone waiting on the sidelines and willing to help. "I accept that."

"Thank you. It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Mads."

I laugh and stretch out my legs. "And with you, hockey guy."

"Your outfit is cute tonight." He touches the hem of the black skirt I paired with boots. "I like how long your legs are."

"Not as long as yours." I line our limbs up side by side, scoffing at how much taller he is than me. "But close."

"I think I have a problem."

"Problem? Oh, no. Do you have to pee?"

"No." His fingers move up my thigh, and I sigh. They brush against my underwear, and I arch my back. "When I'm around you, all I want to do is touch you. Taste you. Feel you. I told you I'm addicted."

"You don't usually act like this when you're... dating someone?"

The word falls out of me, but that's what we're doing. It's wrong to call it anything less.

"I know how to behave myself with other people." His other hand moves the hair away from my neck so he can kiss me again. "I've also never brought anyone to team dinner. And here you are."

"And here I am," I repeat. The small space emboldens me. The warmth from his body is a heady, dangerous heat, and I act on instinct. I take the hand on my leg in mine. I move it up around my skirt until he reaches my underwear, intentions clear. "Yours."

I've never been this reckless or drunk on infatuation. But that's the thing about Hudson Hayes: he makes me feel alive in ways I've never been.

"Are you sure?" he whispers, and my heart cinches tight—of course it does—with his hesitation. With him giving me the power. "I want you so bad, Madeline, but I don't want you to think I pulled you into a closet to feel

you up.”

“Do you want to feel me up?”

He blows out a breath and kisses my neck again. He bunches my skirt at my waist and pushes my knee to the side. Slowly, so fucking *slowly*, he moves his fingers up my thigh.

“I think I might die if I don’t.”

I gasp when he pulls my underwear to the side. “That would be a horrible tragedy.”

“If someone walks in, they won’t be able to see us. The shelf blocks their view,” he assures me, but I wouldn’t care if they could.

Everything he does is torturous. The way he sucks on my throat and how he strokes back up my leg. He nearly rips my underwear, groaning when he adds two fingers in me and finds me wet.

“When I’m with you, I can’t think straight.” I wiggle my hips, and I feel him hard against my ass. Knowing I have that kind of physical effect on someone—someone like *him*—is invigorating. “You really do make me see the stars, Hudson.”

“Let’s get you to see a couple more, yeah?” He curls his fingers inside me, sighing like he’s mesmerized. “*Fuck*. Your pussy, Madeline. Everything about you, really. Incredible.”

His thumb presses on my clit, and I cry out. I don’t know what I’m saying, only that it “*feels so good*”. To “*not stop*”, and “*I can take a third finger*.”

“Please,” I beg, long past caring how I sound. “Hudson.”

“You have to be quiet, Maddie.” He moves the hand not between my legs up to my neck, covering my mouth. “I don’t want my teammates to hear you. They don’t get that privilege.”

That makes me groan against his palm, makes me open my legs wider. This is exactly how I want to go: blissed out, full, wet, and so close to satisfied.

Hudson does add his third finger with the softest of laughs, the gentlest of “*there you go*” and “*you’re doing so well*,” and I’m glad I can’t make any sounds. The noise that leaves my body is out of this world. This is the most sensual, hottest experience I’ve ever had with a man, and I never want it to end.

“I could watch you all day.” He kisses my forehead, my cheek. Along the curve of my jaw. “But I’d really like to see you come. Please?”

I never believed the women in romance novels who could come on command, but with Hudson, I'm converted.

One ask from him, and I'm lifting my hips. Letting him touch me—letting him *fuck me* with his fingers—and I can't hold it in anymore.

I squeeze my eyes closed and give in to the pleasure rolling through me. I grind against his hand. I push my ass against his hard cock, wanting him to enjoy this as much as I am. And when Hudson kisses my throat and says, "*you're so good, Maddie, you deserve this*," I lose it completely.

Colors explode behind my vision. I bite the heel of his palm. I squirm and ride the wave of gratification until I'm numb and exhausted, made of nothing but limp limbs and an empty mind.

"I've got you," Hudson says gently. I open my eyes and turn my chin so I can see him. "Hi, Maddie."

"Hi, hockey guy." I sigh, relaxing into him. "That was... magnificent."

He kisses my cheek, lips smooth and warm. "Are you okay?"

"You just made me come in a closet, Hudson. I'm better than okay."

He laughs and carefully puts my underwear back in place. He lowers my skirt and rubs my knee. "I wanted to make sure. Was the hand thing all right?"

"Yeah." I grin. "It was more than all right."

"Noted."

"Do you want some help with —"

"You didn't feel me finish in my pants again?" he asks, and when my mouth pops open, he grins. "I'm kidding. I have some control over my bodily functions. Yes, I want help, but no, not right now. I don't think I can be as quiet as you."

"I'm happy to give you a —"

The door to the closet swings open, and I blink at the bright invasion of light.

"There has to be someone in here. God damn skates." A hockey stick goes flying, and Maverick appears around the shelving unit. "Aha! Found you fuckers. You lose, Huddy Boy."

"Nah." He looks at me, his grin even brighter than before. "I definitely won."

FORTY-NINE HUDSON

PUCK KINGS

ME

Tonight is the night, y'all.

EASY E

For what? Are you losing your virginity?

G-MONEY

Pretty sure he's having more sex than you right now, dude.

ME

Thank you for your fascination with my love life, Ethan, but no.

I'm going to show Madeline and Lucy the sign language I've been learning.

MAVVY

Hell yeah, man!! I'm so pumped for you!

MITCHY

Dude. That's awesome. Are you excited?

ME

I kind of want to throw up.

Is this too much?

Probably.

SULLY

No.

G-MONEY

What the hell does no mean?

SULLY

It means no, it's not too much. This is a good fucking thing you're doing, Hudson.

EASY E

I think I might be crying in the club RN????

MITCHY

It's noon. Really hope you're not at the club.

ME

I don't know why I'm so scared.

MITCHY

Because you really care about her.

SULLY

About them.

MAVVY

You're falling in love with her, Hud. Of course you're scared.

G-MONEY

Holy shit. Is Cap a relationship guru now?

MAVVY

I might be.

They're going to love it, Hud.

ME

Okay. Yeah. Thanks y'all.

MITCHY

Text us after.

G-MONEY

Should we get a ladder, climb up to his balcony, and watch?

MITCHY

Not creepy at all.

EASY E

I have a ladder guy.

SULLY

How the fuck do you have a ladder guy?

EASY E

Wouldn't you like to know? ;)

MADELINE

I know it's March and still a little cold outside (which is bullshit, BTW!), but Lucy wants to know if we can get ice cream tonight after dinner.

ME

Do we need dinner? Can we skip straight to ice cream?

MADELINE

That's not a very balanced diet, Hayes. You know nutrition is important, and you're talking to a chef here. No skipping dinner!

ME

Fine. Dinner, then ice cream. What's on the menu tonight?

MADELINE

You didn't look at the calendar I sent you this week?

ME

I stopped looking at that months ago. I love everything you make. You're always going to get a yes from me.

MADELINE

Attachment: 1 image

Do I get a yes on this bra I bought?

ME

Christ, Mads.

You're going to make me have a heart attack.

I'm in the locker room and Riley just asked why I turned my phone brightness all the way down.

A thousand yeses. Take my credit card and buy a thousand more.

MADELINE

Glad you. Like. I'll let you take it off me tonight.

ME

Sorry, what? I'm still staring at the photo you sent. Might make it my phone background.

MADELINE

You would never.

ME

You're right. I wouldn't. But fuck do I want to.

PUCK KINGS

Me: Tonight is the night, guys.

Easy E: What? You're losing your virginity?

G-Money: Pretty sure he's having more sex than you right now, dude.

Me: Thank you for your fascination with my sex life, Ethan, but, no.

Me: I'm ready to show Madeline and Lucy the sign language I've been learning.

Mavvy: Hell yeah, man. I'm so pumped for you.

Riley: Dude. That's awesome. Are you excited?

Me: I kind of want to throw up. Is this too much?

Sully: No.

G-Money: What the hell does no mean?

Sully: It means no. It's not too much. This is a good fucking thing you're doing, Hudson.

Easy E: I think I might be crying in the club RN????

Riley: It's noon. Really hope you're not at the club.

Me: I don't know why I'm scared.

Riley: Because you really care about her.

Sully: About them.

Mavvy: You're falling in love with her, man. Of course you're scared.

G-Money: Holy shit. Is Cap a relationship guru now?

Mavvy: I might be. You're going to be fine, Hud. They're going to love it.

Me: Okay. Yeah. Thanks. I appreciate your confidence in me.

Riley: We love you.

Easy E: A whole fucking lot.

G-Money: The trolls on the internet would lose their minds if they found out we told each other I love you. LOL. I love it.

**

Madeline: I know it's March and still a little cold outside, but Lucy wants to know if we can get ice cream tonight after dinner.

Me: Do we need dinner? Can we skip straight to the ice cream?

Madeline: That's not a very balanced diet, Hayes. You know nutrition is important!

Me: Fine. Dinner, then ice cream. What's on the menu tonight?

Madeline: You didn't look at the calendar I sent you this week?

Me: Stopped looking at that months ago. I love everything you make. You're always going to get a yes from me.

Madeline: *Attachment: 1 image*

Madeline: Do I get a yes on this bra I bought?

Me: Christ, Mads.

Me: You're going to make me have a heart attack.

Me: A thousand yeses.

Madeline: Glad you like. I'll let you take it off of me tonight.

Me: Sorry, what? I'm still staring at the photo you sent. Might make it my phone background.

Madeline: You would never.

Me: You're right. I wouldn't. But fuck do I want to.

**

Lucy skips ahead of us down the sidewalk with the dogs, and Madeline nudges my side.

"Hey," she says, and I look down at her. "Are you okay?"

"What?" I scrub a hand over my face, trying to pull myself back to our conversation instead of zoning out like I have been. "I'm fine."

"You were quiet all of dinner. And you haven't said anything in five minutes."

“Just have a lot on my mind.” I shrug. “Hockey, you know?”

I don’t want to tell her I’ve been a pile of fucking nerves all day. Every time she and Lucy would have a conversation, my fingers itched to join them. I almost started signing when Lucy asked Madeline when my next game is, but I want to make this special for them.

“No, I don’t know,” Madeline teases. “I can confidently say that’s not something I think about regularly. There’s only a month left in the regular season, right?”

“Yeah. We’re locked in for the playoffs, and we should have home ice advantage for the first round. Y’all are going to come to a couple of playoff games, right? They’re way better than the regular season.”

“We can definitely make time for that. Maybe my parents can fly out for one. They haven’t been to DC yet, and I’m sure my dad could be easily swayed to leave the nice Vegas weather with tickets close to the ice.”

I laugh. “Hey. At least it isn’t as gloomy as it was last month.”

“It’s still pretty dreary, Hayes. A far cry from the mid-seventies they have right now.”

“All right. I’m a little jealous. But your parents should definitely fly out. There’s plenty of space in the condo, or if they want some privacy, I can help put them up in a hotel. Plus, I’d love to meet the people responsible for raising you.”

“You really want to meet my parents?” she asks.

“Yeah.” I nod enthusiastically. “Of course I do. Feels like the next step for us, right?”

“Yeah.” Her smile is soft under the late evening sky, and she nods. “I think it is.”

“We’ll plan something.”

Madeline glances at Lucy, watching her wait patiently for gas to pee on the grass in the park before patting his head and moving along for the ice cream shop. “She’s a good kid, isn’t she she? I mean, I know I’m biased as her parent, but I can’t imagine how there’s a child out there better than her.”

“She’s perfect.” I wrap my arm around Madeline and pull her close to my side. Just being near her helps ease the tension I’ve been holding all afternoon. “Just like you.”

“Sounds like you’re flirting with me, hockey guy.”

“I’m always flirting with you, Mads. Pretty sure I was flirting with you the first time you walked into my condo.” I pause, rubbing her shoulder.

“Should we tell her about us?”

“You mean how we’re sleeping together and sneaking out of each other’s rooms before she wakes up in the morning?”

“Yeah. I don’t know what proper protocol is her. I’ve never been with a woman who has a kid before, and I want to make sure I’m doing things right.” I pause and look down at her. I tuck a piece of hair behind her ear, touching her cheek. “And we’re not just sleeping together. You know this isn’t a quick fuck thing for me, right?”

“I know that, Mr. Anti One-Night Stands.” Her grin is bright and beautiful. I don’t know how I went so long without having it in my life, and I hope I get to see it again when we get back to the condo and I show them my signing. I’d do anything to make her smile. “I guess we should tell her. I know it’s going to be hard for her to understand because you’ve already been in our lives for so long already, but I’ll do my best to answer questions she has. She’s never had a father figure in her life. I’m not saying that’s the role you need to fill, but I’m sure she’s going to ask what’s going to be different from how things are now.”

“I’ll be whatever role you both want me to be. And nothing has to change. I don’t want to make her uncomfortable. I don’t want you to have any uncomfortable conversations, so I’m not going to make out with you in the kitchen. Maybe, just, I don’t know. We tell her we care about each other?”

“We’ve done plenty of other things in that kitchen,” she says with pride, and I give her a gentle shake that makes her laugh. “This is my first time navigating dating someone with Lucy in the picture, so we can work together and figure out what to do. Teamwork, baby.”

“Look at you with the sports terms.” Lucy glances behind her and signs something to Madeline. I pick up on bits and pieces—*mommy*, *dogs*, *ice cream*—and I’m really fucking proud of myself. I’m still scared fucking shitless, I still have a long way to go, but I’m proud. “I can hold the dogs while you go in. Will you grab me a cup of cookies and cream with extra Oreos on top?”

“So much for your no dessert stance.” Madeline pokes my stomach, her touch lingering for a flash of a second, then pulls away. “Coming right up, Bombshell.”

Lucy hands over Gus and Millie, and we wait while they file inside. I tap my foot anxiously on the sidewalk, and I practice a few signs with my back

turned so Lucy and Madeline can't see.

My fingers won't stop shaking, and I don't know how the hell I'm going to get through a whole conversation with them.

Ten minutes and three cups of ice cream later, we find a bench in the park under a lamppost. Lucy hops on a swing not far from us and kicks her feet back and forth while the dogs sit in front of her and beg for a bite.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Madeline looks at my bouncing knee then up at my face. "You can talk to me, you know. About anything. About your mom. About your games. I want to be a safe space for you, Hudson."

She's the safest space I've ever had. I could strip myself down to nothing but my bones and I'd feel nothing but shielded with her.

"I know I can." I reach over and give her thigh a quick squeeze. "And that's why I like you so much. Because I can be myself around you. I'm fine. Really. I... I have a surprise for Lucy. For you," I finally admit. "When we get back to the house. And I don't know what y'all are going to think about it."

"Can I tell you a secret?"

"You can tell me anything, Mads."

"You could hand Lucy a rock and she'd think it's the greatest thing in the world. Whatever surprise you have for her—for me—is going to be really fucking cool. I can't wait to see what it is."

"How do you always know the right things to say?" I scoot closer to her. She rests her cheek on my shoulder, sighing. "Every time. It blows my mind."

"It's because I'm so wise. You're still learning." She turns her face so she can kiss the sleeve of my hoodie. "Seriously, though. You're the most spectacular man I've ever met. Everything you've done for us up to this point has been thoughtful. This isn't going to be any different."

"Come on, knife girl. You're putting me on a pedestal."

"I'm not, Hudson. I mean it."

Her words warm me up. They make me hold her a little tighter and a little closer. She could be reckless with my heart, with my feelings, and I'd still find a way to thank her because that's how special she is.

"I'll take a poll after the surprise," I say. "We'll see if your answer is the same."

"And if it is?"

"I don't know. Guess we'll find out."

Madeline smiles. “Guess we will.”

FIFTY HUDSON

I'VE PLAYED in half a do-or-die games over the course of my athletic career.

I've waited to see what NHL team I would sign with.

I've lined up against some of the best athletes in the world when I was kid in his first year in the league.

I've never been more nervous than I am right now.

I'm practically sweating on the couch. Lucy is next to me, and Madeline is on the other end. Gus is at my feet, and I think he can sense how anxious I am.

My knee is still bouncing like it was earlier. I keep wringing my hands together and flexing my fingers. At one point in the princess movie we're watching, Madeline asked, again, if I was okay, and I'm sure the smile I plastered on my face made me look like a lunatic.

"I'm going to grab a hot chocolate for Lucy." Madeline pauses the movie and stands. "Do you want anything?"

"I'm still full from the ice cream. Thanks, though," I say, and when she disappears into the kitchen, I take a breath.

Lucy glances at me, grabbing my notebook off the coffee table. It's the third one I've gone through, and I don't plan to throw any of them away after I show off what I've learned. I like the notes we've written each other. I like her misspelled words. I like how she adds smiley faces to the end of a sentence that makes her particularly happy—usually when she's talking about

her mom or the dogs—and I like the drawings she’s added to the margins.

I like that we’ll be able to communicate on her terms even more.

Where’s Millie? she writes, and I point to the kitchen.

Following your mom around and hoping for a marshmallow to fall on the floor, I scribble, grinning when she giggles. *She said you have a surprise? I have a surprise for you. Do you want to go first?*

You go first, she replies under my note, and I move the notebook out of the way.

“Everything okay in here?” Madeline leans against the wall and holds Lucy’s mug. I know she’s waiting for it to cool down, and I smile when she blows on the top of it. “Are you all planning to take over the world?”

“Maybe one day. I was telling Lucy about the surprise I have for y’all.”

“Oh, I’m so excited.” Madeline crosses her feet at the ankles and watches me. It makes me feel like I’m on a stage with a million people in the crowd. “What is it?”

I’m terrified I’m going to mess this up. I’m terrified I’m going to sign something incorrectly and miss half the words. I take another breath, and faintly, like it’s pulled from somewhere beyond earth, I hear my mom’s voice.

The echo of her laugh and how she held my hand in the kitchen when I told her about my terrible grade in French.

“At least you tried,” she said with a smile. *“Imagine how much less exciting your life would’ve been if you hadn’t. You might have failed the class, but you’re better off than the people who didn’t even show up.”*

At least I tried, I remind myself. *At least I showed up for them.* I’m always going to show up for them, and that’s enough to propel me forward.

I turn my body to face Lucy, and she watches me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Madeline frown. I hope I’ll be able to get her to smile again in a minute.

I think of Piper’s lessons and my teammates’ encouragement. I think of Madeline’s patience and Lucy’s excitement when I showed her the notebook, and I lift my hand in the air.

“Hello, Lucy,” I speak and sign. Her mouth pops open and she scoots closer to me, looking at my hands then up at me. Madeline gasps, but I don’t let myself get distracted. *“My name is Hudson. I have two dogs, Gus and Millie. My favorite food is a cheeseburger, and I play hockey.”* I go slow and take my time to make sure each motion is deliberate. I keep eye contact with

Lucy and use lots of expression on my face. *“I’ve been practicing my signing. I’ve loved having you and your mom here. And I hope you’ll stick around for a while. You are one of my favorite people in the world, Lucy girl, and I’m so excited we can talk to each other. I might not be very good at it, but I’m going to keep learning for you, okay?”*

Lucy’s bottom lip trembles. **Hi, Hudson**, she answers, and it’s not lost on me that she’s signing slower than she does when she talks with her mom. **My name is Lucy. I’m so glad we’re friends. I love your doggies. And you. You make me happy. You make Mommy happy too. How old are you? I’m six.**

“Thirty-one,” I say and sign back, and Madeline lets out a choked sob. I jerk my neck up to look at her, and she covers her mouth. She shakes her head and sniffs. *“I think I made your mom sad,”* I tell her.

Mommy. Are you sad? Lucy asks, and I’m so damn proud I can understand the words.

Madeline walks toward us. She sets the mug on the coffee table and kneels on the floor in front of Lucy. *“No, baby. I’m not sad. I’m so happy.”* She turns to me, and I want to pull her into a hug. I want to kiss her head and hold her tight against my chest. I want to tell her she’s the best thing to ever happen to me, and I want to tell her I’m a little bit in love with her. *“Where did you learn to sign, Hudson? How? When? Why?”*

“Piper.” I spell out her name, and I’m glad she told me to try speaking and signing at the same time. *“I’ve been practicing over the last few months. After practice. Online. Alone in my room. With a tutor from Gallaudet University twice a week. Anywhere I can find someone to talk to.”*

“You did this for Lucy?” Madeline asks.

“Yes. And you.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

I don’t add the other things: how I really am falling in love with her and her daughter. How I might not be her father, but I’d walk to the ends of the earth for Lucy. How it’s the right thing to do, and even if she broke my heart, I’d be glad for my time with them.

“Her dad—” Madeline buries her face in her hands and sobs again. I hate hearing her cry, and I put a hand on her back. I rub a small circle over her shoulders, smiling when Lucy puts her arms around her mom’s neck. It’s amazing how she can sense emotion. *“He didn’t want...”*

“And I do. I’m going to practice every single day. I won’t stop until I

know every word, every phrase, every handshape in existence. In English. In ASL. In whatever other language Lucy wants to learn.”

“I still don’t know why,” Madeline whispers, and she lifts her chin to meet my gaze.

“You know why. Don’t you?”

I love you, I think.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

Her nod is slow. She hugs Lucy and rocks her in her arms. “Yes,” she finally says. “I do, even if I’m afraid to think about it for too long because it scares me. This is... I don’t know what to say. I’m... I think I’m dreaming. I can’t believe you’re real. That you would do this for her. For *me*. I want to say thank you, but that doesn’t come close to how... how much you’ve changed our lives.”

“I wanted Lucy to be included. I wanted to show her how much she means to me, and that just because we might be different in a few ways, it doesn’t make her any less special,” I say and sign, and Madeline cries again.

Should I show him his surprise? Lucy asks, and I laugh.

“You might need to, kid. Your mom has the waterworks going over here.”

“Shut up.” Madeline smacks my arm then helps Lucy stand. She looks at me straight on with big, beautiful eyes, and I feel the love radiating off of her. The love for her daughter. The love she has for me and the life we’ve built together, even if she’s not ready to say the words. There’s so much of it, and for the first time in years, I feel... complete. *“Show him the surprise, baby. I think he’s really going to like it now.”*

Lucy giggles and pads to the center of the living room. The dogs lift their heads, watching her. She holds out her hand and waves it toward her. Gus and Millie jump to their feet and trot over. When they get close enough, she turns her palm upright toward the ceiling. She lifts it in front of them, and they sit on their bottoms and wag their tails.

“You taught the dogs sign language?” I ask, and she nods excitedly. “That is so cool!”

“She’s been working very hard, and we’re still teaching them the sign for sit in ASL,” Madeline tells me. *“Do you want to show him the next part, Lucy?”*

“There’s more? I’m spoiled,” I say, and Lucy shifts on her feet. She almost looks nervous. *“What is it?”*

“She wants to give you a name sign,” Madeline explains, and my heart

rate kicks up. *“Do you know what that is?”*

This is the most important moment in my life. Bigger than the Stanley Cup win. Bigger than any contract I could ever sign, and I’m so excited, I’m going to be sick.

“Kind of. Piper explained it to me.”

“It’s a special part of the Deaf community. It’s how other identify you in lieu of having to fingerspell your name each time.”

“I can’t wait to see, Lucy,” I tell her, and she smiles.

H-U-D-S-O-N, she spells out, putting her left palm up. Her right pointer finger looks like an upside down hook, and she moves it back and forth a few times over her left hand. She follows it up with **H-U-D-S-O-N** again.

“That’s the sign for hockey, which you did earlier. Name signs can be based off hobbies or what you looked like, so she thought it would fit for you,” Madeline explains.

I mimic Lucy’s movements, committing it to memory. *“Thank you so much for the name sign. Do you have one? Does your mom?”*

M-O-M-M-Y, Lucy spells, and then she crosses her fist over chest, almost mimicking a hugging motion. **L-U-C-Y**, she does next. After fingerspelling her name, she touches the tip of her finger to the corner of her lip, like she’s smiling. **I’m Lucy!**

“Those are beautiful, Lucy,” I tell her.

She giggles and sits with the dogs, petting them on their heads. I take her distractedness to check on Madeline. I give her arm a gentle tug, helping her to the couch beside me.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. *“It’s silly to be emotional over this.”*

“Don’t you dare apologize.” I link our hands together and give her palm a squeeze. I’m on the verge of tears myself. I feel like someone crowned me king of the world, and no high could ever be this good. *“It’s a big day.”*

She wipes under her eyes with her thumb and lets out a soft laugh. *“I don’t think you’ll ever know how much it means to us that you did that, Hudson. I could visit a hundred different worlds and I’d never find someone as wonderful and kind as you.”*

“I was afraid it was too much,” I admit. *“I know I’m... some guy y’all are living with. But I wanted to show you that there are people out there who are willing to show up for you girls. That you should never have to settle for someone who can’t do the bare minimum.”*

“Nothing you do is too much, and you’re not some guy we’re living with.”

You're my best friend in the entire world," she whispers, and I drop a kiss to her forehead. "I think you're everything to me."

"You're my best friend too, Maddie. And I was serious when I said I want y'all to stick around."

Stay forever, I almost add. Here's my broken heart. I think you're the only one who can fix it.

She touches my cheek, and her smile rocks my world. "I don't think we're going anywhere anytime soon, Hudson."

FIFTY-ONE
MADELINE

I'M FALLING in love with Hudson.

How could I not be?

The man learned sign language for my daughter. He spent hours and hours of the little free time he has to figure out how to communicate with her. He put in the effort, did the work, and because of it, he stole my fucking heart.

It was bound to happen.

If it wasn't this, it would've been something else. Another selfless act of his, because that's who Hudson Hayes is.

The greatest man to ever exist.

All of this—our relationship, his adoration for my daughter, his adoration for *me*—is something I never let myself think I could have, could want, but hell am I glad I get to have it.

He makes me think I'll never have my heart broken again. He makes me realize there's so much *good* that comes with giving yourself to someone, and maybe one day, after I've been with him for a year or two, I'll never be afraid of the pain that could come from things going wrong.

He makes me believe.

In love, in healing, in relationships that don't end.

He makes me want to take off my cynic-colored glasses and give in to a romance full of respect and communication, without the fear of being abandoned.

Again.

I need to talk about all of these feelings I'm having, though. The ones that make my head spin, make my heart jump with joy whenever he's near. I want to gush and brag and be the one with a story to tell for once, and a night out with friends sounds the perfect excuse.

"Wow." Hudson leans against the wall to my bedroom and looks me up and down. He stares at my skirt and the boots that come halfway up my calves. He moves to my shirt, a strappy white tank top I paired with a leather jacket. "You look like a goddamn dream, Mads."

I smile and put in an earring before checking my lipstick. "I'm grabbing dinner with the girls. Lucy is at a sleepover, so you're on your own tonight, champ."

"Canned ravioli it is."

I grab a pillow from the bed and toss it at his face. "You're not undoing the months of food I've made for you in one night, Hudson Hayes. Take the chicken noodle casserole out of the fridge and heat it up in the oven for twenty minutes."

"Yes, chef." He walks into my room, wrapping his arms around my waist and dropping his chin on my shoulder. His hands squeeze my hips and he buries his face in my neck. "Can I have you when you get home? Multiple times?"

"Do you want me multiple times?"

"I want you all day, every day, Mads." His touch dances up my arms, moving to my stomach. He slips his palm down the front of my shirt, pinching my nipple. I arch my back and let out a sigh, wishing I had more than five minutes before I need to leave. "Is it not obvious?"

"It's obvious." I reach behind me, running my hand over his length. I'm not surprised to find him already hard, straining against his sweatpants. "You're so good at treating me right, Hudson."

"Never thought I had a praise kink." He kisses my throat then my jaw. "Until you started calling me good."

"Yeah?" I give him a gentle stroke over his sweatpants and he groans. "You know what would make you really good?"

"Tell me."

"If you touched yourself while I was gone, but didn't come. I like when you get worked up."

"Fuck." Hudson rests his forehead against mine, and he thrusts his hips

against my palm. "Are you going to think about me while you're out with your friends?"

"Mhm. I'll probably talk about you, too."

"Make sure you tell them no one takes care of you like I do." It's his turn to tease, and he slips his hand up my skirt. He grazes his knuckles against the front of my underwear, and I curse him for being so cruel. "That I'm the best you've ever had."

"Someone's sure of himself," I murmur, but any other retort dies on the tip of my tongue when he pushes a finger inside me and curls it. "That's not fair."

"What's not fair is jerking off and not getting to come when I think about all the ways I'm going to have you when you get home. But I can be good. I want to be good for you, Maddie."

"Good." I kiss him, and he sighs against me. He sucks on my bottom lip, and I whine when he pulls away. "I'm going to miss you."

"I'm going to miss you too." He adjusts himself and gives me a smile. "And not just how hot you look. Going to miss your smile too, Golden Girl. How my heart beats fast when you're around."

"It does not."

"Does to." He takes my hand, resting it on his chest. I feel it beating rapidly, and it makes me blush. "Told you."

I'm *definitely* falling in love with this man.

It's not an if but a when, and the idea of something being so good, so perfect scares the absolute hell out of me.

"I'll be back soon." I stand on my toes and kiss him one more time. "And if you feel like sending me a video, I won't be mad about it."

"You can't say that to me right before you leave." Hudson drops his head against the wall. "You're evil, Galloway."

"You'll survive." I touch his arm, and he looks at me. "See you soon, hockey guy."

"Have fun, sweetheart."

PIPER, Lexi, Emmy, Maven, and I sit at a booth at the back of a restaurant, and my stomach hurts from laughing so much.

“Can’t say I’ve ever seen a tattooed dick,” Emmy tells us after Lexi finishes up another terrible hookup story. “I feel like you can’t do that unless you’re really packing.”

“And this dude was not.” Lexi takes a sip of her wine and glances my way. “Are you going to tell us how Hayes is packing, Madeline?”

“Nope. But he did do something really special for me.” I nudge my water glass out of the way and rest my elbows on the table. “He learned sign language.”

“What?” Maven asks.

“It’s true,” Piper tells the group. “He came to me one night and said he wanted to learn. I’ve been helping him in between practices and games, but he’s done more than just that. He watches videos on our plane rides and meets virtually with a Gallaudet student twice a week. He’s been really determined to communicate with Lucy, and I know how hard he’s worked to get there.”

My eyes well with tears.

It’s different hearing about this from Piper because she’s not underselling his effort. She knows the time and energy it takes to learn a new language—especially at our age—and hearing the ways he’s gone above and beyond makes me want to scream from the rooftops.

“I think I’m falling in love with him,” I blurt, and the four women blink at me.

“Obviously you’re falling in love with him,” Emmy says with a smile. “You two have been getting close for months now, and I see the way he looks at you when you come into a room.”

“He looks at you all the time,” Piper tells me gently. “I’m not sure there’s a moment when he’s *not* looking at you.”

My mind is running a mile a minute. How long has he felt like this? As long as I have? Longer? Why hasn’t he said anything? Why haven’t I?

“I’m scared,” I admit. “Because of how much he means to me. Because I know what can happen on the other side. I need you all to tell me it’s going to be okay.”

“None of us can tell you that,” Maven says, voice gentle. “Relationships end. People fall out of love, and that’s scary to think about when you’re with someone you care about. But instead of thinking about the what-if, I think you need to figure out how you feel in the moment, you know? Are you happier when he’s around? Does your life feel more complete when he’s in

it? If those things are true, all you can do is enjoy what you have while you have it.”

“I can’t do another heartbreak. And... and I won’t put Lucy through that. She’s attached to Hudson. She loves him so much, and I know he’d never intentionally do anything to hurt her—to hurt me,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper now. “I have to consider that when I’m thinking about long-term plans, and I’ve never had to do that before because I’ve never brought a man around her.”

“You’ve seen how Hudson is,” Piper tells me. “You’ve been around him for months. When he loves people, he *loves* them with every part of himself. Is it a flaw? Maybe. But you know you’re never going to doubt his feelings for you.”

What they’re saying is true.

He wears his heart on his sleeve, and when he does something, he does it with all that he has. *Nothing*, not a single action of his, is a half effort.

I know his love for me would be the same. I know if we ever got to a point where things were strained, where the love wasn’t mutual and something needed to change, he wouldn’t let it fester into destruction. He wouldn’t walk out without talking with me, without giving every part of himself to what we had.

If we went down, we’d go down fighting like hell to stay afloat, and there’s a comfort in that.

He’s not Clark.

He’s not afraid, he’s not scared. He’s seen my past, the fears I carry, and he’s still here. He’s still the golden boy smiling at me like I’m the brightest star in the sky, and that might be enough.

“I think if I were to fall for anyone, it would be him. He... he learned sign language for a girl who isn’t his. Her own father wanted nothing to do with her, and here’s Hudson. Letting her paint his nails. Treating her like she’s a princess and not batting an eye. How could I *not* love him?” I croak.

“One time, some of the other players joined in when I was teaching Hudson some ASL,” Piper says. “You all should’ve seen him, Liam, Maverick, and Riley sitting around and talking with their hands. I think it’s important to remember there are men out there who would do things if they wanted to, and these guys do. The title of *dad* doesn’t have to apply to the person who’s biologically attached to a kid. It can be someone else who’s willing to step up and fill that role.”

I close my eyes and imagine us ten years from now when Lucy is in high school. We're sitting at the kitchen table and watching her get ready for a dance. We're meeting the person she's in love with and giving her advice on bad first kisses. Hudson tells her if the guy doesn't bring her flowers, he's kicking him to the curb. I tell her to protect her heart, but to not be afraid to live.

There's more Christmases, more dogs, more memories. Laughter and tears and battles we'll have to face together, and I can't picture anyone else in that future besides him.

"Thank you for listening to me," I say to the girls. "I know some people fall in love a half a dozen times in their life, but that's never been me. And I want to make sure when I do, it's right."

"You deserve the world, Madeline," Emmy says. "And a huge upgrade."

"Emphasis on huge," Lexi jokes, breaking the tension, and I laugh.

"He is all of that," I tell them, and I wonder if there's a video in my inbox waiting for me. I wonder if I'll get to watch him bring himself to the brink of coming undone and then be the one to finish the job when I get home. "And more."

He's perfect.

God. I think I love him.

I think I love him with my whole heart.

"Hudson loves you, too," Piper says. "And he's going to be willing to wait for you until you're absolutely sure."

"Yeah." I smile. "I know he would."

The conversation moves away from me to talking about Emmy's team battling for a playoff spot. Maven tells us some of her photos were picked up by AP for sports photographs of the year.

Piper gushes about the program she's working on with the Stars' management team, an internship program that focuses on young girls in sports and filling office roles with people other than white men. Lexi nervously shares that *Sports Illustrated* wants to do a write-up on her, highlighting her role as the first woman to hold the title of head athletic trainer in the NHL and the program she's creating that helps rehabilitate athletes after accidents like ACL tears and acromioclavicular joint injuries.

I'm proud to sit beside them. I'm honored to call them my friends, and I know no matter what happens with Hudson, I've fallen in love with four women I'll have in my corner for the rest of my life.

FIFTY-TWO
MADELINE

“YOU SURE LOOK fancy in your suit,” I tell Hudson from the couch, and he tosses a grin my way.

“You flirting with me, Galloway?”

“Maybe. Blue is definitely your color. It matches your eyes.”

“You’re going to make me blush.” He fixes his tie and grabs his bag, sliding a beanie on his head. “You have the tickets I sent you, right?”

“Yup. I already downloaded them. Thank you for changing our seats again. Lucy is determined to figure out what spot in the arena she likes best. I think it’s going to be against the glass like the last game we went to, but only time will tell. I smile at him and rest my elbow on the cushions. “I hope you have a great game.”

“I’ve got you to look at in the stands. Of course it’s going to be a good night.” He bends down to kiss me, and I grab his collar so he can’t get away. He laughs against my mouth, kissing me again. “Mav is picking me up so you and Lucy can take the car to the arena. I’ll ride back with y’all after.”

“You know she’s going to want to stop for a treat on the way home.”

“Girl after my own heart.” Hudson moves his lips to my forehead, kissing my bangs. “Call if you have any trouble getting in, okay?”

“We will. And don’t be mad at Lucy if she’s not wearing your jersey tonight,” I add when he heads for the door. “She has a new obsession with Grant.”

“As long as you show up wearing my name, I’m happy. See you soon,

sweetheart.”

Hudson flashes me one more grin, gives the dogs a pat on the head, then slips out the door. I watch him go, giddiness bubbling inside me at the thought of seeing him again in action tonight.

Lucy skips into the living room decked out in her Stars gear, and she hands over a hairbrush.

Could you do braided pigtails?

Of course, baby. I pat the floor in front of me and she sits. *Do you want them high on your head above your ears? Or down low?*

High, please, she tells me, and I smile. ***We get to see Hudson play tonight, right?***

I set the brush down and lean forward so she can see me. *We do. I think he’s going to have a great game, don’t you?*

He’s the best. The Stars are going to win the Stanley Cup!

I laugh at her enthusiasm, braiding the left side of her hair and loving how much she looks like me even from the back. I attach the hair tie then move to the right side, making quick work of it until she’s ready to go.

We’re going to leave in an hour so we can get there early and watch the warmups, I tell her.

Can we get chicken tenders, too?

’Course we can, baby.

She’s always had an elevated palate for a kid. Last night, she stole some of Hudson’s honey sriracha chicken, but every now and then, she wants to take it back to basics. Chicken tenders, hot dogs. Frozen pizza and frozen vegetables, and I’ll never deny her a meal just because I didn’t make it.

I spend the next hour feeding the dogs and taking them on a short walk with Lucy by my side. She makes me watch clips from the last time the Stars played the Hurricanes. It was the night Hudson got hurt, and I fast forward through the video that shows his injury so she can’t see him lying on the ice.

When we get to the arena, we grab some food and head to our seats halfway up the section. Lucy settles in and waits patiently for the guys to come out for warmups, and when they take the ice, she jumps up and down.

I like being closer to the ice more, Mommy.

I’ll make sure to tell Hudson that for the next game. I point to Liam in the goal, grinning when Lucy waves even though he can’t see her. *Do you like their jerseys? They’re wearing blue tonight.*

I like the white better.

She finishes her chicken tenders and fries, squealing when Hudson skates up to the glass in front of our section. I follow behind her as she barrels down the stairs to the glass, putting her hand against the barrier. He takes off his gloves and puts his before pulling away so he can sign.

Seats okay? he asks, and she shrugs.

Last month was better, she tells him bluntly, and when his eyes meet mine, I grin.

“Kids,” I yell over the crowd starting to fill the arena, and he chuckles.

“They’ll say the darndest things.” Hudson turns his head and nods at something one of his teammates is saying. “Gotta jet. Hope my favorite girls have fun.”

“Score a goal for us,” I say, and the wink he gives me makes me feel like I’m dating the biggest athlete on campus.

“If I do, I’ll make sure to point my stick right at y’all.”

With one more wave he joins the line of his teammates taking their turns shooting on goal. Lucy and I climb the stairs back to our seats, and she rests her head against my arm. I scan the building, trying to see if I can find Piper or Lexi, but I don’t spot either of them.

“Madeline?”

Hearing my name makes me turn my head, and when I do, I blink, convinced I’m imagining things. There’s no way what I’m seeing is really happening, because Clark is staring at me.

Here.

Five feet away.

At a goddamn hockey game in DC.

When I haven’t seen him for *years* in Las Vegas.

Everything happens in slow motion. He walks toward me with a hesitant smile on his face. I wrap my arm around Lucy out of instinct, and she looks up at me with a frown. His eyes drop to our—*my*—daughter, and my blood turns to ice.

“Hey,” he says when he gets close to me.

I’ve dreamed up a hundred different things I’d say to him if I ever got the chance, but I’m coming up short. I’m striking out because all I want to do is scream. I want to give him a shove and tell him to never come near us again.

“What the fuck do you want?” is what I wind up saying, and the woman in front of me with a child of her own turns to give me a nasty glare.

“Hey,” he repeats, his gaze bouncing to Lucy.

Mommy. Lucy tugs on my shirt when he looks at her. **Who is that?**

Do I tell her who Clark is?

Do I pretend like he's someone I've never met? Do I pass him off as a friend?

He's someone Mommy knew many years ago, I tell her.

Is he nice?

He's okay, I sign, not wanting her to be scared. Look at Maverick on the ice!

Her attention temporarily diverts to the players running a drill, and I feel like the scum of the earth for not including her in my conversation.

"What do you want?" I ask, doing my best to keep my voice even-keeled.

"Is that Lucy?"

"No. This is another kid you abandoned," I deadpan, and he winces. "What are you doing here? Did you... you didn't try to track us down, did you?"

"I had no clue you'd be here. I'm in town on business, and my buddy and I decided to come to the game tonight. Realized it was you when I saw you talking to Hayes." His mouth twists as he says it, and I realize he has a very punchable face. Decking him between the eyes has suddenly become my lifelong dream, but I know violence isn't the answer. "What's that about?"

"My personal life doesn't concern you."

"It does when our daughter is involved."

"Our daughter? I must've missed all those times you helped me change a diaper in the middle of the night or sat by Lucy's side when she was sick."

I hate that the people around me are close to seeing me have a breakdown. I hate that because of this, I'm going to have to find somewhere to hide so I can cry out my anger. I hate that after the *hell* he dragged us through, Clark is going to go to sleep tonight without a care in the goddamn world, and I hate that I won't be able to think of anything else.

Except... he winces. He rubs the back of his neck and blows out a breath.

"I deserved that," he mumbles.

He deserves a lot more than that, but I don't have the energy for a fight. I didn't then, all those years ago when he left, and I don't now.

"Yes," I say. "You do."

"Madeline, I —"

"I don't have anything to say to you." I turn my attention to Lucy, stroking her hair. *Let's go visit Piper for a few minutes, peanut,* and she lights

up. I have to get us out of here before she sees me crack in two. *We'll try to find her before the game starts.*

I bet she's in the tunnel! That's where she always hangs out.

We only have a few minutes before the national anthem, and the last thing I want to do is draw *more* attention to us. Lucy stands, and I try to usher her to the stairs as quickly as I can.

"Where are you going?" Clark asks, and I hate that he sounds concerned.

"I hope you're happy, Clark," I say, proud of myself for taking the high road. "Because we've never been happier."

Before he can get another word in, I take Lucy's hand in mine and walk down the stairs. I check over my shoulder to make sure Clark isn't following us, and when I make it to the tunnel that leads to the locker room and the season ticket holders lounge, I spot Piper.

"Hey." She smiles at me while she fixes her earpiece. "What are you two doing down here? Is it time for some ice cream?"

"I—" I gulp down a lungful of air. It feels like the walls are caving in. It's hard to breathe, and my chest hurts. "My ex. He's here. I can't —"

"Media room." Piper puts a hand on my lower back and carefully guides us down the hall to a small room tucked away from the noise.

Are you okay, Mommy?

I'm fine, sweetie. Just a little tired, I tell her, and she nods.

You need a nap!

I laugh at her innocence, glad she's never had her heart broken and stomped on. I'll do everything in my power to make sure that never, ever happens to her.

I think I do.

How would you like to be my right-hand girl tonight, Luce? Piper asks. *Do you want to hold a microphone and get close to the players?*

Really? Lucy looks at me with expectant eyes, her little body buzzing with excitement. ***Can I go? That is way better than our seats!***

Of course you can, sweetie, I tell her, and she practically leaps with joy. "Thank you," I say to Piper while Lucy runs to the door. "I didn't want her to ask questions, and I need a minute to process everything."

"Understood. Take the time you need, and I'll check back during intermission." She bends down to give me a hug. "And if you want me to get arena security to throw him out, I will."

I choke on a laugh and hug her back. "No. I'm going to take the high

road, which doesn't involve murder, and that should be celebrated."

"If you need me for *anything*, send me a text and I'll be right back. The station can survive without a player interview, and lord knows Liam will be happy." Piper squeezes my shoulder one more time before pulling away. "You're going to be okay."

"I know." I nod. "I will be."

Lucy blows me a kiss and Piper gives me a sad smile. I watch them disappear out the door, and then I shatter into a million pieces.

FIFTY-THREE

HUDSON

I CAN'T FIND Madeline and Lucy anywhere, and it's distracting me.

Every time I look up at their seats during a stop in play, they're not there. They haven't been there since before puck drop, and I'm starting to worry something happened.

I play like shit each time I'm on the ice. Coach calls me out for being slow, for lacking aggression, but I don't care. When the horn sounds at the end of the first period, I'm heading toward the tunnel before any of my teammates.

I spot Piper leaning against the wall with Lucy by her side, and that's when I *know* something is wrong. Madeline would never leave her daughter unless it was an emergency, and the same fear I had when Coach pulled me off the ice to tell me about my mom settles like a brick in my stomach.

"Where's Madeline?" I ask, and Piper's smile falls.

"There was, a-ah situation."

"What kind of situation?" I look down at Lucy who seems unharmed, but that doesn't bring me as much relief as I thought it would. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine. No one is hurt," she tells me, and I let out my first breath in what feels like hours. "Her ex... well. He's here."

I swear to all that is holy my vision turns red. I grip my stick so tightly I don't know how it doesn't break in two. Fury like I've never experienced before races up my spine, and I force myself to take a breath before I say something I might regret.

“What did he want?” I ignore my teammates passing us on their way to the locker room. I ignore the fans yelling my name, and I keep looking at Piper. “Is she with him right now?”

“God, no,” Piper says, and that makes me feel marginally better.

Hi, Hudson, Lucy signs, and I give her a smile.

Hi, Lucy.

I’m Piper’s assistant.

You’re doing such a good job, kid.

Lucy turns her attention away from me when Liam walks down the hall. One look at Piper has him marching over to us with all his gear. He holds out his arm and Lucy giggles, holding onto his blocker and letting him lead her toward the locker room.

“Where is Madeline?” I ask.

“She needed a minute alone, so I took her to the media room. I didn’t get the full story, but she was shocked to see him.” She waves at Riley and holds up her microphone. “Give her some space, Huddy. She’ll be okay.”

The last thing I want to do is give her space. I want track down the piece of shit who hurt her and teach him a lesson.

I know I have a job to do, but hockey is the last thing on my mind. For years I’ve given everything I have to this team, and I hate that I have to pick between the sport I love and the woman I’m gone for.

“Hayes,” Coach barks out, and I jerk my neck up. “Enough socializing. Get your ass moving.”

“Yes, Coach,” I mumble.

Heaving a deep breath, I trudge to the locker room. When I make it inside, I throw my stick at my locker. I grip the wood sides of the cubby and rest my helmet against my nameplate, seething.

Maverick is at my side in an instant. “Dude. The fuck is going on? You’re playing like ass tonight.”

“Madeline’s ex is here,” I manage to get out.

“Like, here here?” he asks.

“Like found her in the stands and talked to her here.”

“*Shit.* Is she okay? Are you okay?”

“I’m seconds away from committing a homicide.” I close my eyes and try to practice centering myself like my therapist taught me. I try to shove away all the external conflicts and distractions, but I come up short. “How the fuck am I supposed to focus on hitting a goddamn puck when the man who

divorced the woman I fucking love sits in the stands without getting a piece of my fucking mind? He left them because his daughter is deaf. Do you know how horrible he is?”

“The woman you —”

“Obviously,” I practically yell. “How can I not fucking love her? She’s perfect.” I sit in my down and throw off my helmet. I yank off my gloves, pressing the heels of my palms into my eyes and groaning. “I love her and her daughter, and while I’m mad as hell she ever had to go through any of that pain, I’m glad she did because now I get to have her, and I’m never fucking letting her go.”

“Who the fuck is this bastard?” Grant asks. “I’ll go take care of him right now.”

“Sit your ass down, Everett,” Maverick orders, but Grant’s offer makes me smile. “What do you need, Hud?”

“I never thought I could hate someone I’ve never met, but I fucking *despise* this dude.” I move my hands away and look at my best friend. “I don’t need anything. The venting helped.”

“Yeah?” He smirks. “Are you going to track her down and yell at her how much you love her?”

“Not sure she’s ready for that. Not yet.” I roll my shoulders and tilt my neck to the side. “I want to finish this game then get the fuck out of here. So if we could hurry up, I’d be really fucking grateful.”

The second period passes in a blur, and it’s like I slip into a trance. It’s the same thing that happened when I played while Mom was sick. I know I’m here. I know I’m getting slammed into the boards and assisting Ethan on a goal, but it doesn’t really feel like I’m *here*.

Each time-out my mind wanders, and I want to know what he said to her to make her so upset. When I collect a rebound off a missed shot by our opponent and take it down the ice to score during a power play, the celebration doesn’t mean shit because Madeline and Lucy aren’t there to see it.

We make it to the third with a 4-2 lead. I check my phone, and there’s no word from her. Knowing she’s okay gives little solace, and that’s only thanks to Piper, who stopped me in the tunnel on our way to intermission to tell me she checked on Madeline and she was doing better.

I barely pay attention the last two minutes of the game. I play good defense. I support my teammates. I do what I’m asked to do, but when the

buzzer sounds, I'm heading off the ice.

I feel like a dick for not showing any sportsmanship to our opponent, but I'm hoping Maverick can come up with an excuse for my quick departure.

"Where is she?" I ask Piper, and she gestures down the hall.

"Still in the media room," she tells me, and I grab a pair of skate guards from our equipment manager.

I cover the distance in what feels like five steps, and when I swing the door open, Madeline looks up at me. Her eyes are red and her cheeks are puffy, and there's mascara near her nose.

"Sweetheart," I say. She stands and charges toward me, not stopping until she throws her arms around my neck and buries her face in my jersey. Her shoulders shake and I stroke her back, but I stop when I hear her laughing. "What's so funny?"

"This jersey smells like the pits of hell." Madeline pulls away from me, and I'm glad to see she's smiling. "My god, Hayes. This is from sixty minutes of playing?"

"My socks smell even worse."

"Don't even try to get your feet close to me."

I smile and cup her cheek. "What happened?" I ask. "Did he come here looking for you?"

"No. Nothing like that." Madeline shakes her head. "He's here on a business trip and saw me in the stands. He came up and tried to talk to me, but I shut it down right away. I got out of there as fast as I could."

"Did Lucy see all of this happen?"

"Yeah. He asked if that was her. He tried to call her *his* daughter, and that's when I snapped. I didn't want to cause a scene. I was so caught off guard by seeing him. I didn't know what else to do." She sighs and unbuckles my helmet. "I'm sorry I missed your game. I heard you scored a goal."

"It's not important. What can I do to help you, Mads?"

"I want to go home," she says, and I love that's what she calls the condo. I love that she feels like the place is hers, because it is. "Please."

"Let's go. I need to change, then we'll head out. Lucy is with Piper. She's doing okay. Liam even stole her away for a minute, and I think he might've been smiling," I say, and that gets a laugh out of her. "Hell is freezing over."

"She has a way of nestling her way into your heart, doesn't she?" Madeline tells me. "She can break down even the grumpiest motherfuckers."

It's my turn to laugh, glad to hear her making jokes.

“Let’s get our girl,” I say, draping my arm over her shoulder, but she shoves me away.

“You do not get to touch me with that funk on you, Hayes.”

“So I need to shower before I’m allowed to leave? Got it, Galloway.”

“Two showers would be preferable.”

We walk to the door and I put my hand on her lower back. When we get close to the locker room, Madeline freezes.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, and when I follow her gaze, I see a guy standing in the tunnel with some other fans lingering around the lounge. His khakis are too short. His polo is an obnoxious shade of yellow, and I hate the stupid tennis shoes he’s wearing. His eyes dart between me and Madeline, and he frowns. “Is that Fark?”

“Yeah. Just my luck the friend he’s with is a season ticket holder.” She steps closer to me. “I’m fine.”

“I can’t bring you into the locker room with me, but I need to get my stuff. Give me two minutes, and I’ll be right out.”

“It’s okay, Hudson. Really.”

She smiles up at me, and the douche canoe of her ex comes walking toward us. He puts on some nice-guy act with the security guard, pointing at us over his shoulder, and when I hear *my daughter* come out of his mouth, I want to deck him in the jaw.

“Where did Lucy go?” Clark asks, and I step forward to create a buffer between them.

“You can’t be down here, man,” I say.

He rolls his eyes and tries to get around me. “I’m just asking about my daughter. Relax, *man*.”

“Back up,” I tell him, and when he doesn’t listen, I throw off my gloves and shove him against the wall. “I said back the fuck up.”

“Hudson.” Piper runs over, and out of the corner of my eye, I see Lucy watching all of us. “Enough. What are you doing? Lexi, can you get Maverick for me?”

“I wanted to apologize,” Clark says.

“You don’t get to talk to her.” I keep my arm against him, and that’s when I see the first moment of panic in his eyes. “Don’t look at her. Don’t talk to her. You go through me, buddy, and guess what? I don’t want anything to do with you.”

“I was young and stupid.” He closes his eyes. “It was a mistake.”

“Hudson.” Madeline touches my arm, and I relax under the press of her fingers. “Let him go. I don’t want Lucy to see you like this. It’s not who you are.”

Lucy.

“I’m sorry.” I drop him from my hold and take four steps back. “I didn’t —”

“I know.” Her smile calms me down. It makes me take a deep breath, and I huff. “You protect what’s yours. I remember.”

Mine.

Mine, mine, mine.

Lucy and Madeline are mine, and I’ll do anything it takes to keep them safe.

“Yeah,” I mumble, and when Maverick makes his way into the tunnel, I shake my head. “I do.”

Madeline turns her attention to Clark. She puts her hands on her hips and stares at him. “You’re years late with an apology,” she says to him, and I don’t know how she’s keeping her voice so calm. “We’re fine without you. We’ve always been fine without you, and I never want to see you again. Do you understand me?”

“Yeah.” He hangs his head, defeated. “I understand.”

“Lucy is not your daughter. She’s mine. Your money means nothing to me, and you don’t get to call her yours,” Madeline adds, and my heart swells in my chest with her fierce tone.

“Okay.” Clark shifts to his left, moving away from us. “I got it.”

“Hey,” she calls out, and it’s pathetic how quickly he turns around. “Why did you like my photo on Instagram?”

“What?” His brows furrow. “I didn’t do that.”

“On my chef page. You liked a photo from a year ago.”

“I don’t know.” Clark shoves his hands in his pockets. Stupid fucking khakis. “It must’ve been my girlfriend’s kid when he was messing around on my phone.”

“Girlfriend.” Madeline snorts. “Right.”

Maverick gives me a look, and I nod. Piper mentions something about taking Lucy into the lounge for a candy bar. The second Clark is gone, I’m reaching for Madeline, holding her against my chest and not caring how horrible I smell.

“Are you okay?” I ask into her hair, and she nods against my jersey.

“That was... cathartic. Closure, almost. I don’t have feelings for that man. I haven’t had feelings for him in *years*, but to see him and know I survived all the hurt he put us through?” Madeline tips her chin up to look at me. “It gives me hope. It tells me my heart has healed. That I could...”

The sentence hangs between us, unfinished.

Love you.

Spend the rest of my life with you.

Be with you until my dying days.

“I want you to know I’m going to spend every second I’m on this earth proving to you that I’m not him.” I untangle our limbs and cup her cheeks. I stroke my thumbs over her skin, smiling when she sighs and melts into my touch. “I will never be him. I will never leave you and Lucy, and I promise you won’t ever doubt my...”

Love for you, I want to say. I swallow it down, but she nods, eyes bright.

“I know,” she whispers. “I know that. I’ve never doubted you for a second. I’m not scared, Hudson. I just... go slow with me, please.”

“We’ll go as slow as you want, sweetheart.” I touch her chin, tilting her head back. I kiss her, not caring who is watching. I sure as shit hope Clark is. “It’s you, me, and Lucy. For as long as you’ll have me.”

Her grin is my favorite thing. “What a team we make.”

FIFTY-FOUR HUDSON

MADELINE HAS BEEN different in the week since Clark showed up. She's smiling more. She's lighter, like this enormous weight has been lifted off her shoulders. The change is contagious, and every day I'm with her, I fall more and more in love with her.

"What's that smell?" Madeline sets two bags of groceries on the kitchen table and shrugs off her coat. "Are you cooking dinner?"

"Trying to." I grab a colander and put it in the sink. "We'll see how it turns out."

"Are you ill?"

"Wow, Mads." I laugh and drain the pot of pasta. "You wound me."

"Seriously. What's the occasion?"

"I don't know." I make room on the counter and set the pot on top of a holder, dumping the pasta back in. "Lucy is at a friend's house for the night. I leave tomorrow for four days. You've had a long week."

"Have I?" She arches an eyebrow and puts a gallon of milk in the fridge. "Remind me what happened?"

"Your shitty ex-husband happened."

Madeline grins and stands on her toes to kiss my cheek. "Seeing you that protective was hot as hell."

"Hopefully he learned to not fuck with what's mine. You haven't heard from him, have you?" I ask.

I know she would tell me if she had. I'm not worried about any lingering

feelings or dredging up past emotions.

I just want to make sure I don't need to actually kick his ass.

"Nope. I made sure to block him on social media so he doesn't have access to any parts of my life, and I'm going to reach out to my lawyer on Monday about what happened."

"That's why I wanted to cook dinner for you. You have a lot going on, and I wanted to do something nice." I dump the pasta back in the pan and turn off the stove. "You deserve it."

She buries her face in my shirt and sighs. "That's very nice of you. Thank you for thinking of me, Hudson."

"I'm always thinking about you, sweetheart." I kiss the top of her head and give her ass a light tap. "But don't get too excited. I used sauce from a jar instead of your homemade vodka sauce."

"I'll overlook the travesty." She tips her chin up and kisses my jaw. "Is that garlic bread I smell?"

"Shit." I give her a squeeze and untangle myself from her. Grabbing the dish towel from my shoulder, I use it to pull out the sheet pan from the oven. "I can work with this. It's not too burnt. This half is salvageable."

"Look at you. You're getting better every day," she teases, and I reach for her again.

"I love how confident you are in the kitchen." I bend so I can kiss her neck, and she relaxes against me. "It's so fucking sexy."

"I chop cilantro, Hudson. I'm not out there finding world peace."

"Don't care. It's hot as hell." I run my fingers along the hem of her shirt and she sighs. "Pretty sure I have a Pavlovian response to you picking up a knife. I get instantly hard. Might need to have my head checked."

"Yeah?" She reaches behind me and holds up a butter knife in front of her. "Should we test that theory?"

"Baby, you can do whatever you want to me," I say, and when she gently presses the cool silver against my neck, I let out a rough breath. "I definitely have a knife kink."

"That's new. And so hot," she whispers, touching the jagged edge to my skin. I can't help but groan. "I don't want to hurt you."

"I told you, you can do anything to me." I wrap my fingers around her wrist and keep her there. "Just don't cut off my dick. I want to fuck you later."

Madeline laughs and kisses me. Her mouth is hot against mine, and she

slides her free hand under the back of my shirt, pulling it off by the collar and letting it fall to the floor.

She drags the knife down my chest, and it's embarrassing how I'm practically panting. It's embarrassing how hard I am, and when she unbuttons my jeans, I almost come in my pants again.

"I like how much I turn you on." Madeline takes a step back, and I take the opportunity to shove my hand down my briefs and adjust my cock. "It makes me feel beautiful."

"You're the most beautiful person I've ever seen," I say, and I'm glad the stove is off. Dinner is the last thing on my mind. "I close my eyes and see you, Madeline. And when I open them, there you are. Even more gorgeous than when I saw you ten seconds ago."

A blush creeps up her chest to her cheeks and it matches her red shirt. She sets the knife down and slowly lowers the zipper of her jeans. When she steps out of the denim and reveals a pair of black underwear, I get even harder.

"Touch me," she whispers, and I shove my jeans down my legs and step out of them.

I lift her by her hips and set her on the counter, putting my hands on either side of her thighs as she drapes an arm over my shoulder.

"How do you want me to touch you, sweetheart?" I trail my right hand up her arm and across her chest. I pinch her nipple and she moans. "Like this? Right here?"

"Yes." Madeline wraps her legs around my waist. Her heels dig into my spine and she tips her head back. "But I want more."

"I can give you more." I move my hand down her stomach. Her skin is soft and warm, and I smile when she wiggles her ass back so she can open her legs wider. "Can you say please for me?"

"Please. Please, Hudson," she practically begs, and when I press my thumb against her clit, her groan echoes around the kitchen.

"There you go baby. That's what I like to hear." I pull her underwear off and I run my finger through her slit. She's drenched, so fucking wet already, and I smirk. "Looks like I'm not the only one who likes when you play with knives."

Depraved thoughts I've never dreamed of before race through my head. I wonder what it would be like to fuck her with the handle of one. I wonder what it would look like with her cum all over it, how it would taste when I licked it clean, and smug satisfaction rolls through me.

My teammates have no fucking clue I'm the furthest thing from a prude.

"I like you," she says. I push a finger inside her pussy and am rewarded with a whimper. "And anything you do. That includes playing with knives."

"Yeah? Are you going to like it when I get you almost to the point of an orgasm then stop like you made me during girls' night?"

"That's not —"

"Not fair? You're getting my hand all wet, sweetheart. We're past fair."

"*Fuck*. What else are you going to do to me?"

"Are you going to like it when I make you eat dinner because taking care of you is another one of my kinks?" I kiss her, making sure to bite her bottom lip. "'After, we're going to your room and we're going to try something new. Something else I think you'll like, and I'll finally let you come. And when all of that is said and done, I'm going to put you in the shower and wash your hair because I'm not going to sleep until you know just how much you deserve to be treated right.'"

"Hudson. You are —"

"Shh, Maddie." I put a hand low on her stomach and add a second finger inside her. I use my hips to push her legs wider, and she leans back on her elbows, giving me the perfect view. "*Fuck*. Look at your pretty pussy. I'm going to like torturing you."

A laugh falls out of her, but it's quickly replaced with a moan seconds later. I move the hand on her stomach to around her back so I can help keep her upright when she reaches for her chest, squeezing her breasts.

"It's not going to take me long," she warns, and I don't tell her I'm minutes away from coming myself. My briefs are soaked with pre-cum, and my cock aches. "Guess I really want to try some of that pasta."

It's my turn to laugh. I put my mouth on her neck, kissing her there. "Your sarcasm is one of my favorite things about you."

"What else do you like?"

"Your perfect fucking tits. Your smile. Your hips when I hold them and fuck you from behind. How you do this small laugh right before you come and the way you whisper my name when something feels really fucking good."

I add a third finger to her tight pussy. She cries out but I kiss the sound away, only pulling back so I can tell her how good she's doing. How perfect she feels and all the ways I want her when we get to her room.

Madeline writhes on the counter and pinches her nipple. She yanks her

sleeve to the side so she can touch herself under her bra, and when I pull my fingers out from inside her, circling her clit with a slow and steady circle, her breathing turns sharp.

“Please let me come,” she whispers, and her legs tremble. “I want to come, Hudson.”

“No, sweetheart,” I say. When she lifts her hips off the counter, desperate for more friction, I have to bite down on my cheek to keep it together. “I promise I’ll let you come soon, okay?”

Her sigh is irritated, and when her eyes flutter open, she narrows them at me. “You’re cruel.”

“Is this okay?” I brush a piece of hair from her sweat-soaked forehead and cup her cheek. “If you don’t like this, if you’re uncomfortable with it, I’ll get you off right now.”

“No.” Her nipples are hard under her shirt and she groans. “This is the hottest thing I’ve ever done. It’s more than okay.”

“Yeah?” I stroke along her collarbone and smile. “You’ll tell me if you don’t like it?”

“I will.” She puts her hands on my shoulders, dragging her nails down my back, and I shiver. “I like everything we’ve done in the bedroom, but this...” She gnaws on her bottom lip before talking again. “I *really* like this. I didn’t know if I’d be into something so... dominating. Especially because you’re the kindest man I’ve ever met. But it’s so hot.” Her head lolls to the side and a shiver racks her body. “I like seeing this possessive side of you. I like thinking it’s a part of you only I will ever see, and I want more of it.”

I’m not a vanilla guy in the bedroom, but I’m not as rowdy as some of my teammates. I usually go off what the woman wants: wrists tied up and some spanking every now and then. This aggressiveness is new for me, something I’ve been wondering if I’d be into, and holy hell do I like it as much as she does.

“Take off your shirt. And your bra,” I tell her, rolling with what feels good. When her mouth curves into a wicked grin, I know I’ve said the right thing. “Sit down and I’ll bring you a plate.”

“Yes, chef,” she murmurs, and she makes a show of pulling her shirt over her head. Of unclasping her bra and letting her breasts spill free. She cups them and pushes them together, her eyes on me when I have to grip the counter to keep from touching her. “You always know how to make me feel good.”

It's almost impossible to walk away from her, but I do. I busy myself with making her a plate and cutting three slices of garlic bread. I ignore my cock and focus on her, sitting beside her at the table so I can keep a hand on her thigh just because I want to.

She's naked and perfect and mine, all fucking mine, and that makes up for the pasta that's gotten cold.

"What do you think?" I ask, twirling a bite of spaghetti around my fork. "Grade my food, Maddie."

"It's delicious." She takes a bite of garlic bread and sighs. "I'm really proud of you, Hudson."

That makes me want to puff my chest out.

A good dinner and getting to finger fuck her pussy?

It's a night of wins.

"Thanks. I know I'm not going to be replacing you anytime soon, but I'm glad to know I'm self-sufficient now. I can put together dinner for Lucy and me without being afraid of burning this whole place down."

"You did really well, sweetheart." Madeline touches my cheek, and I grin at her praise. "I can't wait to see what you make next."

We talk while we eat. I tell her about the team we're playing the day after tomorrow. She mentions Lucy has a show and tell day next month and is hoping I could come visit her class.

I keep on hand on her bare thigh the whole time, dragging her chair until it's right against mine. My cock is still hard, and this is the single hottest thing I've ever done in my life.

When Madeline takes her last bite, she leans back in her chair and puts her hand over mine.

"What's this new thing you want to try?" she asks. "Does it involve my ass?"

"No. Do you want it to involve your ass?"

"Maybe. I've never done that before."

"We'll table it for another time." I scoot back and grab our empty plates. "Can you wait for me in your room?"

Her eyes twinkle and she glances up at me. "How do you want me to wait for you?"

"On your bed. Against the pillows. But don't touch yourself."

"This sounds fun." She stands, and I can't help but drag my gaze down her body. She really is a fucking dream. "I hope you're not going to make me

wait too long.”

“I’ll be there soon.” I kiss her forehead and move to the sink. “Don’t worry.”

With another smile she heads down the hall toward her room. Just before she disappears, I grin.

“Hey, baby?” I call out, and she looks at me over her shoulder. “Do me a favor? Grab that vibrator I know you keep in your bedside table. And make sure it’s charged up.”

FIFTY-FIVE
MADELINE

I DON'T KNOW what's gotten into Hudson tonight, but I love it.

And when he mentions my vibrator? I almost combust. I don't know how he knows about it, but I can't wait to find out.

I'm practically shaking as I pull out the toy and set it next to me on the bed. I lean against the pillows and spread my legs, anticipation and lust settling low in my stomach.

This is my first time experiencing orgasm denial, and as frustrating as it was in the moment, I know it's going to pay off when he gets in here. I'll be shocked if I last longer than a few minutes thanks to the buildup we had in the kitchen.

Footsteps make their way down the hall, and I sit up. I rest a hand on my chest, teasing myself when Hudson walks in.

His eyes bounce to my breasts and he blows out a breath.

"Do you want me to stop?" I ask, and his throat bobs.

"It kills me to say no, but I'm going to say yes." He walks toward me, his gaze moving to my vibrator. "I have a confession to make. It's a secret I've been keeping for you for months."

"Um." I lick my lips, nervous. I'm open minded when it comes to sex, and I don't know where this is going. "Okay. What is it?"

"I heard you getting off one night."

"What?" My mouth drops open. "When?"

"Months ago. I heard your vibrator through the wall, and I jerked off

while you got off.”

“Holy shit.” I reach for him, and he climbs on the bed with me. “Why didn’t you say anything? Or join in?”

“We weren’t there yet.” Hudson sits next to me and picks up the toy. “I thought about the noises you make when you come for goddamn weeks.”

I can’t believe I missed out on watching him spit in his hand and stroke himself. I can’t believe I missed out on watching him finish when I did, all while not touching each other.

“You should’ve come to my room. Or stood in the door and watched.”

“Trust me, I was tempted.” He clicks on the toy, and a shiver runs through me. His thumb runs over the head of the toy, and he sits up on his knees. “Can I get you off with this, Maddie? And then fuck you?”

“Do you think I’m going to argue with that? I’ve never been this wet before.” I blush at the moisture on my thighs and the small damp spot on the sheets. “If you use the toy, I might make more of a mess than I usually do. I-I really like the stimulation.”

“Yeah?” Hudson trails the toy over my chest and circles my breasts. I close my eyes and sigh when the vibrations roll over my nipples. This is exactly what I do when I’m alone, and my body is already responding to the sensations. “I’d like to see you make a mess. I’d like to help clean you up.” His words turn me on, and when he drags the silicone down my stomach, I’m already stifling a groan. “Fuck, baby. You do like it, don’t you? Open your legs so I can see. Can you hold under your thighs?”

He doesn’t need to ask, because I’m already spreading my legs. I’m gripping my thighs and lifting them off the mattress. I’m sinking into the pulse against my clit, and I feel like I’m weightless.

“Right there,” I say, licking my lips when he keeps the toy exactly where I want it. “God. It’s even better when someone else does it.”

“You’ve never used a toy with a man before?” Hudson clicks up the speed, and my back jolts off the bed with the increase in pressure. “He never got to have you like this?”

“No,” I whimper, Hudson’s possessive side making me feel a certain way. “Just you.”

“Better make sure I do this right then.”

When I glance down at him, he’s studying the toy and sliding a hand down his briefs. He gives himself a few strokes, the tendons in his forearms flexing. His face is red, and he looks thoroughly wrecked even though I

haven't put a hand on him.

"You can fuck me with it," I say, gasping when the intensity bumps up again. "That's what you heard me do when you listened."

Hudson turns the toy and slowly pushes it inside me. The vibration stays against my clit, and I'm overwhelmed by the feeling.

"When you fuck yourself, what do you think about?" he asks, and he's positioned himself on his stomach between my legs. "Do you think about me?"

"I do," I admit, giving my nipples a quick pinch.

The things I've fantasized about are filthy: him walking in and finding me using a toy then punishing me. Him watching while someone else tries to touch me then taking over because he knows he can do a better job.

"Fuck, Maddie."

He kisses the inside of my thigh and moves his mouth to my pussy. Adjusting the position of the toy, he angles it so he can circle my clit with his tongue, and I'm certain this is heaven.

I let myself enjoy this bliss. I let myself embrace my sexuality and the years I've spent trying to figure out what I might like in the bedroom.

It's this right here.

Hudson looking up at me. His lips covered in my arousal and his hand pinning me to the mattress. The way he finds the spot inside me that makes my toes curl and how he stays there, only pausing to tell me how good I taste and how he hopes I ruin the sheets when I come.

I'm so close, just on the brink of an orgasm, when I feel him grinding his hips against the mattress.

"Do you like this, Hudson?" I ask, threading a hand through his hair. "Do you like to watch me get fucked?"

"I'm so hard, Maddie." He groans and buries his face between my legs. "Tell me what you need to come, baby, because I need to get you there so I can have my turn with you."[BT1]

"One speed higher," I say, moaning when he increases the vibrator one more time. "And your tongue. Please."

"I like that you need me." Hudson licks my pussy, and watching him run his tongue along the edge of the toy so he can taste me is mind-blowing. "So fucking sweet."

His words, combined with the pressure inside me and the weight of his tongue against me, is what sends me over the edge.

My entire body reacts, and I cry out, holding his head in place so he doesn't stop too soon. It's the most intense orgasm I've ever had, and I swear my vision goes fuzzy when he keeps the toy inside me.

Tears roll down my cheeks, but I circle my hips. I chase the friction and high until I'm totally spent, and when he finally clicks the vibrator off, relief and contentment floods my bones.

"Oh my god." I groan and try to straighten out my legs, but everything is heavy and aching.

"Are you doing okay?" Hudson rubs his thumb along my hip bone, and I glance down at him. "Was it too much?"

"It was perfect."

Everything with him is perfect. It always is.

His cheeks are red, and he's still staring between my legs. "You—" He licks his lips and grins. "You squirted a little when you came. I didn't know if that... did that feel good?"

"I did?" I touch the sheets under my ass and cover my face with my hands. "Oh my god. I've never done that before. I'm sorry. That's —"

"The hottest thing I've ever seen," he finishes for me. "Look at me, Maddie."

When I lower my hands, he's smiling from ear to ear with messy hair and a mark on his neck.

"Hi," I whisper.

"Hey, pretty girl." Hudson kisses my thigh then sits up on his knees. "Don't be embarrassed. That was a first for me, and we're going to find out how to make you do it again. I liked it."

"I liked it too." I swallow and lick my lips. My attention moves to the front of his red briefs and his hard cock straining against the fabric. "Stand up, Hudson."

He tosses the toy on the mattress and does so without a second thought. He stretches out his legs and looks at me. "What next, sweetheart?"

Take off your underwear," I tell him, and his mouth quirks up.

"Yes, chef," he tells me, then he hooks his thumbs in the waistband of his briefs. Shoves them down his thighs and kicks them away. "Want me to get on my knees and beg?"

"No." I scoot to the end of the bed and stand. "But I'm going to."

His laugh is sweet, and when I kneel in front of him, he touches my chin. "You don't have to."

“And if I want to?”

“Then suck away, Mads. But I’m going to stop you before I come. While I love to watch you swallow, that’s not where I’m finishing tonight.”

I grin. “Fine by me.”

I kiss his stomach and tilt my head to take the head of his cock in my mouth. Salty pre-cum leaks on my tongue, and I hollow out my cheeks so I can put more of his length in my mouth.

I love how well we know each other’s bodies now. I love how we can read body language and know what each sound means. From the way he’s panting, Hudson is *loving* this.

“Goddamn.” Hudson cups my cheek and groans. “You’re too good at this.”

I never used to like giving head, but I like to give it to Hudson. I like watching his thighs flex and his hips buck when I drag my tongue up his shaft. I grip the base of his cock and stroke him up and down, smiling against him when he hisses.

I pop him out of my mouth and spit on his head, using the saliva to help jerk him off.

“Look how hard you are,” I say, and I trace one of his veins. “I’ve barely touched you.”

“I could’ve finished just watching you come.” He whimpers when I take him in my mouth again. “It doesn’t take much when it comes to you.”

“Do you want to fuck me?”

“Please, Maddie,” Hudson begs.

I give him one more lick and then stand, walking to the edge of the bed where I sit on the mattress. “Condoms are in the drawer.”

He practically sprints to my bedside table, yanking the drawer open and grabbing a foil packet. He opens it and rolls it down his length, blowing out a breath when he makes his way back over to me.

“HOW DO you want it tonight, Mads?” he asks, holding his cock in his hand. “Rough? Slow?”

“I want you to fuck me like I’m yours,” I say, and his face softens. “Like you’re going to stay with me until the end of time. However that looks... that’s what I want.”

Hudson nods and points to the pillows. “Get on the bed, sweetheart.”

We adjust our positions so he’s on his back. I throw my legs on either

side of his and hold myself above him. When I look down, he reaches up to cup my cheek. I turn my face and kiss the inside of his palm.

Without words, I lower myself onto him. We groan in unison, and he grips my hip so tight I know I'm going to have a mark in the morning. I'm slow to take every inch of him, getting used to the stretch and being so full.

When he's fully buried inside me, I bend to kiss him. My tongue brushes against his and his hands roam over my back, keeping me close to him as he lifts his hips to tries and get another inch deeper.

I pretend like each thrust is an *I love you*. I pretend like each time our eyes lock, he's whispering those three words to me, because that's what this feels like. A promise of forever and why he's nothing like the man of my past.

Hudson grunts when I sit up then slam back down on his cock, riding him like he's going to steal my last breath.

It's brilliantly messy in the best way, the kind of intimacy I wasn't sure existed, and when he sits up so he can kiss my chest and my neck, I know the only thing that would make this better is coming undone with him.

"I'm close, sweetheart," he whispers, licking away a bead of sweat from my breast. "But I don't want to go without you."

"Me, too." I close my eyes when he touches my clit and pleasure builds in my belly. "That's perfect."

"You're perfect." He presses his thumb against me and I moan. Ecstasy starts to pull at my spine, and it doesn't take any more than that. "I've got you, Maddie. Now. Forever. I promise."

Tears prick my eyes, and I'm not sure if they're from the overwhelming sensation of feeling *so good* or the weight of his words. Maybe it's both, because I welcome the bliss. I ride the wave, electrified when I feel him pulse inside me and spill into the condom as I combust.

Our staggered breaths match each other, and it takes a minute for our movements to slow. He stops thrusting into me and I stop rolling my hips. My eyes flutter open and Hudson is already looking at me, awe etched on his face.

"That was..." I gasp for air and exhale. "The best moment of my life."

"The standard is going to be unbelievably high from now on, isn't it?" He rubs his hand up and down my back, and I sigh. "How are you doing?"

"You're god's gift to women," I say, and he chuckles against my chest.

"Flirt," he murmurs, and when he tips his chin to look at me, there is

wonder in his eyes. “You know what happens now?”

“Round two?”

“Those were the most intense two hours of my life, sweetheart, and I’m a professional athlete. I’m going to need a minute before we go again.”

I giggle then wince when he gently pulls out of me and lifts me off his lap. He sets me on the mattress and lies on his back.

“What happens now?” I ask as I shimmy down the sheets and rest my head against his chest.

“When I have enough oxygen in my lungs, we’re going to take a shower. I’m going to wash your hair and wrap you in a towel, then we’re going to fall asleep until I wake you up in the middle of the night to do that again. In the morning, we’ll pick up Lucy and grab some doughnuts on the way home. Thoughts?”

“Wow.” I smile and close my eyes. “Sounds like you want to keep me around. How long is all this spoiling and pampering going to last?”

“Forever, if you’ll let me,” he says, and my heart skips a beat. “And then some.”

“Okay,” I say, and his hold on me tightens. “Forever sounds really nice.”

FIFTY-SIX
HUDSON

"I APPRECIATE you pulling double duty today," Madeline says from the stove. She flips the eggs she's making in the pan and grabs a bowl of green peppers. "Show and tell and then a playoff game? You've got a busy day."

"Happy to do it." I pop a bite of toast in my mouth and polish off my orange juice. "What time do I need to be at Lucy's school?"

"It starts at one. I know you have morning skate, so if you're a few minutes late —"

"I'll be there at twelve fifty-nine." I smile and hop to my feet, giving the crust left on my plate. "What should I bring? My jersey? My Stanley Cup ring? Do kids even care about that stuff?"

"Bring whatever you want," she tells me. "Seriously. You're already making her whole year by agreeing to come by. Anything else is extra."

I make a note to text our equipment manager on the way to the arena to see if we can sign two dozen pucks. They're small enough for the kids to take home, and I like the idea of them having something tangible to keep from my visit.

"Y'all are coming to the game tonight, right?" I ask, and Madeline beams.

"Of course we are. Who cares if it's a school night?" She grabs a plate from the cabinet, doling out the eggs for herself. "Lucy has a new jersey she's excited to wear, and so do I."

"It better not be Maverick's." I walk around the island so I can kiss her forehead. "You know how jealous I get."

“Yeah.” She tugs on my shirt and brings my mouth close to hers. “I do. But you’re hot when you’re jealous. It kind of makes me want to find out who your biggest rival is and wear their jersey to the arena.”

“Easy there, romance reader. I don’t have any rivals, so you’re stuck wearing mine.”

“There are worse things in life.” Madeline smiles and kisses the corner of my mouth. “Have I told you today how grateful I am for you?”

“You did. When I handed you a coffee at six and you pulled the covers over your head. Is that still the case, Galloway?”

“Yeah. Seems like it.” She pauses, putting her hand on my cheek. “I don’t know what Lucy and I did to deserve finding you, but I’m so glad we did. Thank you for loving her like she’s yours. Thank you for treating us right. Thank you for giving me hope that good things are worth the wait.”

I smile and turn my head to the side. I want to scream out that I do it because I love her. That I’m head over fucking heels for her and would do anything she asked, but I know how this story goes.

She needs to be the one to say it first, not because I doubt her feelings for me, but because I love her so unbelievably much, the last thing I want to do is scare her away.

I’m patient. I’m perfectly content never hearing it. Madeline shows me she loves me in so many other ways, like how she stitched a pink ribbon for breast cancer on the inside of my jersey. In the way she sends me photos of her, Lucy, and the dogs whenever I’m away so I don’t get homesick.

The words would just be extra.

“There’s never going to be any doubt in your mind when I’m around, Maddie.” I kiss her forehead and pull away. “You still haven’t heard anything from Fark, have you?”

“Nope. My lawyer made a note of his behavior in case something like that ever happens again. I know it won’t, but I have to be safe. I have to protect Lucy. I’m kind of glad I saw him, though. It really proved how *happy* I am without him. I’ve learned how to…” Madeline swallows. Her eyes meet mine. “To have those deep feelings again. That I’m capable of them. That I *want* them.”

It’s the closest she’s come to an *I love you*, and it makes me feel like I’m on top of the world. So does her smile, and I swear to all that’s holy I don’t need anything else in life besides her.

“Do I make you happy?” I ask, voice low.

“You make me so happy, I could burst,” she whispers. “You make me so happy, I’m terrified because good things like this don’t last forever.”

“Hey.” I hold her to me, kissing the top of her head. “With us they do.”

“Yeah.” Madeline nods, resolute. “I think you’re right.”

“I’m going to head to the arena. I’ll see you in a few hours?”

I love you.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

“You sure will, Bombshell.” With a wink, she dives into her breakfast. “I’m already counting down the minutes.”

I DIDN’T THINK I’d be more nervous to stand in front of a bunch of first graders than our playoff game tonight, but here we are.

I’m pacing up and down the hallway, anxiously waiting for Madeline to slip out of the classroom and welcome me in.

I’m even more nervous I’m not going to be able to answer the kids’ questions in the ways that I want. Madeline told me there will be plenty of help with interpretation, but it feels like it’s my job to show up prepared, and I feel *really* fucking unprepared.

Before a fresh wave of panic can set in, the classroom door swings open. Madeline grins at me from the entryway, and I instantly relax.

“Hey.” She beckons me forward, and seeing her helps me take a deep breath. I match her grin with one of my own. “Sorry to keep you waiting. We were getting the snacks set up for after show and tell. There was a graham cracker incident, but all is well now.”

I laugh and adjust my bag of gear on my shoulder. “Is it safe to come in?”

“Yeah. The kids are so excited to meet you.”

“The pressure is on, isn’t it?”

Madeline touches my hand, smiling again. “You’re going to be great.”

“Thinking about playing in front of twenty thousand fans in a few hours doesn’t have me stressed out. But this does. I’m sweating through my shirt.” I touch my Stars T-shirt and grimace. “Disgusting.”

“They’re six, Hudson.”

“You know how ruthless kids are.” I step into the classroom, and twenty heads turn and look at me. I wipe my hands on my jeans and clear my throat.

Hi, everyone, I sign.

I've been working with another student at Gallaudet in anticipation of today. They've helped me learn all the phrases I'll need to know for the questions the kids might ask, but it feels like everything has gone out of my head.

All of the kids wave back. Lucy jumps to her feet and runs toward me, throwing her arms around my legs. I drop my bag and lift her up, holding her against my hip.

Hi.

Hiya, Luce. Is this your classroom?

That's my chair over there. Do you see my drawings on the walls?

I glance around at the dozens of pieces of artwork plastered on every available surface. I spot one that looks like it might be hers, complete with three stick figure people and two dogs.

My goddamn heart smiles.

They are perfect. I set her down. Lucy's teacher smiles at me, and Madeline pats the stool in front of the classroom.

Come on over, Hudson, she signs, and I'm doing my best to not shit a brick.

With a nod, I take a seat on the plastic stool. I unzip my bag and set a puck on my lap. *Does anyone know what sport I play?* I ask, and a dozen hands fly in the air. I point to a girl in the second row, and she gives me a toothless grin.

Ballet!

Madeline holds back her laugh next to me, and I can't help but chuckle.

Almost. I hold up the puck and show it off before handing it to Madeline to pass around. *I play hockey.*

The kids ooh and aah over the puck, and someone else raises their hand.

"Will you help me?" I ask Madeline out of the corner of my mouth, and she puts a hand on my shoulder.

"Of course I will." She smiles at the boy, and he starts to sign. I can only pick up a few words. *Hockey. Defense. Champion.* When he puts his hands back in his lap and looks at me expectantly, Madeline slips into SimCom. *"Jesse wants to know if you've always liked playing hockey, what position you would play if you didn't play defense, and if you go to Disney after winning the championship."*

Good question, I sign slowly. *I love hockey. I've been playing since I was*

a kid. If not defense, I'd be in goal. I like blocking shots. I take a second to try and process the translation between the two languages. No one rushes me, and I'm grateful for the chance to get this right. *I did not go to Disney. That would've been fun.*

I move to the next kid who asks me about my favorite players and who on the team I like the most. Another says their dad likes me but he prefers Riley instead, and I let them know he's a great choice. Madeline jumps in and helps interpret, giving me an encouraging nod when I answer and not getting upset if I use the wrong words.

I put my bag in the middle of the room and the kids rifle through it, pulling out the pucks I brought for everyone and an old pair of gloves. One girl holds up a stick that's taller than her and asks me to show her how to hold it the right way.

Two boys beg me to arm wrestle, and I make a show out of losing so everyone knows they're strong.

"Hey." Madeline appears at my side with a bottle of water an hour later. She hands it over, and I down half of it in three gulps. "How're you doing, champ?"

"Good, yeah. These kids are something else. Lots of energy. It's also giving me an idea that we need to make our summer camps more accessible. I'm sure there are some students at Gallaudet who skate. I'm going to talk to our community outreach folks and see if we can hire a couple of the college kids to come up and assist us so we can get more campers involved." I finish off my water and toss the empty bottle in the trash can. "They all deserve a chance to play."

"I'm pretty sure you're the most amazing man I've ever met." Madeline loops her arm around my waist and rests her cheek on my shoulder. "I like you very much."

I love you, I think.

I love you so much, my wasted heart is finally healed because of it.

I turn to kiss her forehead. She's smiling when I look down at her, and it's truly a magnificent thing.

"I like you very much too, Maddie. I hate to leave, but I need to get going. I should try to get a nap in before the game and —"

Lucy appears in front of me holding my gloves to her chest. ***Someone tried to take these!*** She frowns and shakes her head. ***I told them they aren't theirs.***

Thank you, Luce. I smile and she hands over the gloves. I'm about to leave because I have a game tonight.

That's okay. I'm going to eat a cookie.

She looks between Madeline and me. She signs something, and Madeline's cheeks turn pink before she answers.

"What's going on?" I ask, nervous when Lucy claps excitedly.

"*Lucy asked if you and I... special friends.*" Madeline uses SimCom to explain her blush. "*I told her we care about each other very much, more than friends do.*"

"Could you cover your eyes for a minute, Mads? I want to have a private conversation with Luce," I say, and she laughs, obliging.

Mommy looks silly.

She does, doesn't she? Can I tell you a secret, Lucy?

Sure. She grins. ***I love secrets.***

I love your mom. Very much. I'm going to tell her soon. Do you think that would be okay with you? If I was around more?

Like a dad? My friends say their daddies love their mommies. I've never had a daddy.

Yeah. I swallow. Like a dad.

Yes, she tells me with tears in her eyes. ***That would be okay. Mommy and I love you, too.***

I'm glad. I nod and tug on Madeline's hand, letting her know it's okay to look. "*We're all good.*"

"*I don't like sneaky secrets,*" she teases, but her face softens when Lucy pats my knee and heads for the snack table.

"Guess our relationship is out in the open," I say. "Glad to know I'm your special friend, Mads."

"Shut up." She elbows me. "You're so much more than that. You're..."

The love of my life.

My everything.

"I know," I say, and she blinks at me with wide eyes. "Slow. And whenever you're ready. I'm there, but I'm a patient, patient man, sweetheart."

"Thank you. We can't wait to cheer for you tonight."

"I can't wait to see y'all." I kiss her forehead. "I need to run. I'm leaving the car so you can take it back to the condo when you're finished here."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

With a squeeze of her hand, I head for the door. I look back, finding Madeline smiling at me, and I hear those same three words.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

It might be a big game for us tonight, but I don't care.

I'll have those two in the stands, which means I already won.

FIFTY-SEVEN
MADELINE

APRIL TURNS TO MAY. The Stars are playing unbelievable hockey, winning their first round playoffs series in four games and earning an extra few days off before the next round.

Lucy is thriving at school, happy and settled and over the moon with the friends she's made this year.

Hudson and I are *good*. Every day we're together, I come dangerously close to telling him how much I love him. It almost slipped out two nights ago when he was braiding my hair, wanting to learn how to style the long strands so he could help Lucy if she ever asked.

I chickened out, snapping my mouth closed and pretending like I had to hiccup.

From the smirk he tossed my way, I think he knows what I'm trying to say.

I like that he's not rushing me, though.

He's letting me do this on my terms, and I love him even more because of it.

I wake up to an empty bed on Sunday with sunlight streaming through the curtains. I pop up on an elbow and look around, wondering where Hudson is.

We don't sleep separately anymore. Now that Lucy knows about us, he stays with me every night.

We just make sure to lock the door.

We fell asleep wrapped around each other last night, my leg thrown over

his and his hand on my waist. I woke up in the middle of the night and kissed down his chest, smiling when he groaned and wrapped his fingers in my hair.

I tap my phone, shocked to see it's past eight. It's later than I normally sleep and I sigh, stretching my arms over my head. I'm reluctant to climb out of the warm sheets, but life must go on.

Before I can stand, a knock on the door makes me pause.

There are footsteps. A laugh followed by a softer giggle I'd recognize anywhere. I check to make sure my pajamas are back in place after Hudson took them off me last night and grin.

"Come in," I call out, and the door flies open.

Lucy charges to me and jumps on the bed, arms wrapping around my neck.

Happy Mother's Day, Mommy!

Oh, thank you, sweetheart.

I kiss the top of her head, laughing when she leans against me with such force, we tumble onto the pillows. I glance over at the door, finding Hudson there. He's holding a tray stacked with plates and a cup of orange juice. There's a single flower in a small vase, and when he smiles at me, I can't help but smile back.

"We brought you breakfast." He walks into the room and Lucy scoots over so he can join us on the bed. "Lucy and I made pancakes and bacon. With a side of mashed potatoes because they're your favorite food." He sets the tray in my lap, and I notice two cards next to the plates. "Happy Mother's Day, Maddie."

"Thank you," I whisper, wiping under my eyes. "How early did you all get up to do this?"

Early! Lucy tells me.

"We were in the kitchen by six thirty." Hudson wraps an arm around me, pulling Lucy and me close. He's gotten more open with his affection lately, and I like that he's showing Lucy the right ways to be treated. "I let you sleep in so you didn't see our surprise."

"It's the best surprise ever." I grin and open the card from Lucy. There's a drawing inside, a heart made of her handprints and what must be a whole bucket of glitter. "Wow. This is beautiful."

We made it in art class at school. Ms. McNair told us to write our favorite things about our moms, and I wrote how much you love me. Lucy taps the card, and I see her list also includes things like my long hair and the

cookies I bake. ***I said I have the best mom.***

“You’re so sweet. I love you, Lucy. Thank you for making me a mom.”

I love you too, Mommy. I’m going to go play with the doggies.

She slides off the bed after giving me another hug. Her little legs take her down the hall, and I glance at Hudson.

I don’t miss the way his shoulders seem heavy, how he almost hangs his head. There’s a smile on his face, but it’s strained. I reach over and take his hand in mine.

“I got you something,” I say, and he frowns.

“You got *me* something? For Mother’s Day?” he asks.

“It’s small.” I lean to my right and rifle through my bedside drawer. I find the package I’m looking for and hand it to him. “You told me your dad used to buy your mom flowers whenever she had a hard day, so I got some seeds for you. I thought we—sorry, you—could build a flower bed on your balcony and plant the seeds. You could have flowers whenever you want, and it could be like your mom is here with us all the time.”

He takes the seeds and runs his fingers over the letters on the packaging. “You... you did this for me?”

“I’m sure today must be hard for you, and I wanted to do something to make it less hard.”

“I—” Hudson closes his eyes and lets out a breath. He clutches the seeds like they’re the most important things in the world to him, and when he glances at me, a tear rolls down his cheek. “Thank you,” he whispers. “This is perfect.”

“I’m so glad you like it.” I take his hand and run my fingers over his knuckles. “There’s something else I want to say to you.”

“I love you,” he says all of a sudden, and I freeze. “I love you so much. You and Lucy are the greatest things to ever happen to me, and I... I love you so much it *hurts*, Maddie, to think about my life without you in it. I... I can’t hold it in anymore. I know I said I’d be patient, but you need to hear it and —”

“I love you, too,” I blurt out, a sob escaping me with the four words. “I love you so much, and I’ve loved you for so long. Even when I didn’t know what the feeling was. You’ve done so much for me and for Lucy and... I just want to make sure you’re sure. That this is really what you want, because there’s not going to be a wedding. There aren’t going to be more kids. It’s going to be the three of us, and I want to know if that’s enough.”

“Enough?” He takes the tray from my lap and shoves it on the bedside table. “Sweetheart. You are *everything* to me. I want *you*, and I don’t give a shit about anything else.”

“You’d be okay without a wedding?”

“I don’t need one.”

“What if you want to be a dad one day down the road?”

“Lucy is a gift, and I’d be a lucky guy to be in her life as a father figure.”

“No one’s loved me in a very long time, and I’m not sure it’s going to be easy with all my baggage,” I whisper.

“Loving you is easier than anything I’ve ever done. It’s like breathing. Something that comes naturally, because I don’t have to think about it. You’re just... there. Perfect and wonderful and mine. Made for me, I think.”

I think he was made for me, too.

I’ve dreamed about what would’ve happened if Clark and I stayed together. If we worked out and he didn’t run, but in every version of that dream, I come up short of a happy ending. We would’ve split up eventually because of something else.

When I think of Hudson and me fifteen years down the road, I think of how happy I’ll be. The ways he’ll make me laugh and all the ways he’ll show me how much he cares.

It’s the most perfect image. True romance and everything anyone could ever want in life.

“Can you—” Another sob racks my body, and he’s there in an instant. Scooping me in his lap. Kissing the tears away. Being patient and wonderful, and I know he’s *always* going to be there. Steady, sure. Unrelenting. “Can you say it again?”

“Yeah.” Hudson’s smile is soft and slow, the beautiful kind I’ve felt in my soul from the second I first met him. “I love you, Madeline Galloway. I’ve loved you from the moment I laid eyes on you. I love how strong you are. How wonderful of a mother you are. I love your sarcasm, but I also love when you slow things down. You make me feel things I’ve never felt before. And if there’s ever a doubt in your mind, I want you to ask me, because that means I’m not doing a good enough job of showing you how fucking *gone* I am for you.”

“God.” I hiccup then laugh, fresh tears falling. “That was like a fucking poem, Hudson.”

“It’s true.” He moves my hair away from my forehead, kissing me there

next. “Every word.”

“I love you. I think I’ve loved you for months, but I finally let myself accept it, you know? I’m sorry it took me so long to get here.”

“You’re right on time, sweetheart.”

I sigh. My tears turn happy, elated, and optimistic about the future. I’ve never felt this confident about anything in my life.

“What do we do now?” I ask, glancing up at him.

“We get Lucy back in here. We tell her I’m not going anywhere anytime soon, and then we’ll go get some dirt so we can plant some flowers. But only after you eat your breakfast, Mads.”

I roll my eyes, reaching for the food. “Bossy.”

“Bossy, yeah, but also obsessed,” Hudson says. “Just like I was when you made that chicken curry at Piper and Liam’s.”

“Are you sure you love me and not my cooking?” I tease, squealing when he rolls himself over me, mouth inches away from mine.

“Yeah,” he murmurs, a grin to rival the sun. “When I’m with you, I’m the most sure I’ve ever been about anything in my entire life.”

FIFTY-EIGHT
MADELINE

THE STARS HAVE a horrible game five in the Eastern Conference finals.

All the players had an off night, but Hudson struggled the most. Liam got pulled in the last minute of the third period, an act of desperation by Coach Saunders to do *something* to change the outcome, but Hudson let a puck sneak by him. The other team scored an empty net goal, and that was that.

Now they trail the series three games to two, and I can see the disappointment on Hudson's face when he gets home. He shrugs off his suit jacket and tosses it on the couch. He runs a hand through his hair and sighs when he sits on the barstool in the kitchen, scratching Gus and Millie's ears with an exhausted frown.

His shoulders are curved in, making him look small and weak. He's hanging his head, and I can't focus on cooking anymore. Not when he's hurting, so I shove the cutting board away. I walk around the island, and I give him a hug.

"I'm sorry tonight didn't go well," I say gently, not quite sure how to navigate this situation. The Stars had the best record in the league, and they only lost seventeen games all year. The trouble the Detroit Owls are giving them this series is surprising. "Are you hungry?"

"No." He squeezes my hip before pulling away, and I'm glad to know he's still in there under all his sadness. I brush a lock of hair out his face, and he sighs. "But thank you."

"You need to eat something." I slip my apron over my head and tie it

around my waist. I move to the fridge and pull out the rotisserie chicken I picked up yesterday. “And if you don’t tell me what you want, I’m going to decide for you.”

“That’s fine,” he mumbles, and I hate how defeated he looks. Like the loss is entirely his fault, and not the result of the team playing poorly all around.

“You’re going to get brussels sprouts,” I warn, and even that doesn’t make him laugh.

“It’s late. You should go to bed.”

“I’m not tired.”

“I really don’t want anything.”

“Too bad.” I grab the cutting board and my chef’s knife. “Cooking is one of the ways I take care of the people I love, so I’m going to put a plate in front of you, and you’re going to eat it. Because I love you, Hudson, no matter what the score was tonight.”

Knowing he’s watching me—he’s *always* watching me—I spin my knife in my hands, just how he likes. When I glance up at him, the hint of a smile pulls at his mouth, and he crosses his arms over his chest.

“I know what you’re doing,” he says.

“I’m not doing anything,” I say innocently. “I’m making you food.”

“You’re bossy.”

“I have to be when you’re being stubborn.” I pull the chicken apart and cut the meat into small pieces. “Do you want to talk about it? Or should we talk about something else?”

A soft laugh escapes him. “That’s what my mom would always ask after a loss.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. As for tonight... I’m disappointed. We had the chance to take the series lead, but now we’re going to be fighting for our lives. I should’ve been more aware of my surroundings. I should’ve tracked the puck better, and I should’ve moved left, like my instincts told me, instead of switching to the right.”

I nod and pretend like I understand what these words mean. “And Liam could’ve stopped the two goals the Owls had in the second period,” I say, and the ghost of another laugh falls out of him. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. You... you’re doing exactly what my mom would do with me after a loss.”

“I am?”

“Yeah. I have a habit of blaming myself when things go wrong, and she’d always pull out a piece of paper. She’d go through minute by minute and tell me all the other mistakes that happened during the game—the ones I didn’t make—and remind me I might’ve messed up, but I didn’t do it alone.”

I’m going to spend the rest of my life disappointed I’ll never get the chance to meet Sarah Hayes. If I could spend just thirty seconds with her, I’d tell her how good of a job she did as a parent. How strong and self-aware her son is without being cocky or overbearing.

I’d tell her how he loves everything in his life with his whole heart, and he holds himself accountable when the situation calls for it. I’d let her know he’s emotionally mature. Breathtakingly beautiful. Passionate and proud, humble and gracious in moments of defeat.

I set the knife down. I wipe my hands on my apron and walk to him. My fingers curl under his chin, and I tilt his head back until we’re looking at each other.

“I’m so proud of you,” I say. “That doesn’t change when you win or lose, either. I’m always going to be proud of you, Hudson. And so is Lucy. She even made you a card.”

“She did?” He perks up, and I tap the folded note to the left of his elbow. He opens it up, huffing when he finds a stick figure and the words GO HUDSON GO written across the top of the paper. “She’s a goddamn artist, isn’t she?”

“I like that you’re not wearing any clothes, but you do have on skates,” I point out.

“I love you.” He sighs again and rests his forehead against mine. “Thank you for the pep talk and telling me to get my head out of my ass.”

“I never said that.”

“No, but I heard the undertones.” He gives me his first real smile of the night, and all is right in the world. “I’ll be okay. When things like this happen, I forget who I am besides a hockey player, and it makes me think I don’t have anything else going for me. Like my livelihood is tied to wins and losses. Which, yeah, winning is nice. It keeps me here in DC and the paychecks coming in, but tomorrow I’ll remember it’s not the end all be all.”

“It’s funny you say that.” I nudge his hands out of the way and sit in his lap. “You see yourself as a hockey player. That’s, like, fifth on the list of ways I’d describe you.”

“What would be one through four?” he asks with a hint of amusement.

“A loving best friend. A gentle romantic partner. A teammate.” I take a second to collect my thoughts. “A father figure,” I add softly, and he wraps his arms around me. “The people who love you—me. Lucy. Maverick and the boys. Your dad. Your mom—we see you as so much more.”

“What did I do to deserve you?”

“You mean besides being the best guy in the universe?”

“Hush.” He rests his chin on my shoulder. “I’ve waited a long time for this, Maddie.”

“What? To have someone sit in your lap? Your Instagram DMs tell me you could’ve had this whenever you wanted.”

“I meant you. I didn’t know if my heart could take losing my mom. There were so many days where I pretended I was okay. Where I’d smile and laugh at practice with the guys then come home and cry myself to sleep because I was so fucking sad. I haven’t been sad since meeting you, though. You’ve... you’ve poured love into the cracks I’ve tried so hard to fill myself, and I think I’m finally whole again.”

“Maybe you weren’t ever broken,” I whisper. “Maybe you just needed someone who could help put the pieces back together. And I’m glad I could be the one to do it.”

“Thank you,” he murmurs, voice thick with emotion. “For loving me. For lifting me up when I’m feeling down. This game won’t matter in twenty years, but you will.”

“I don’t know anything about sports, but this could be a turning point for you. You can gather all the emotions you’re feeling and turn into a beast on the ice. Is that a thing?” I ask.

“Maybe. They’ll call me the Comeback Kid.”

“Oh, I like that. But I’m sorry to be the one to break it to you, hockey guy. You’re not a kid anymore.”

“Shucks.” He kisses my throat, his lips warm on my skin. “I’ll think of something else.”

“Are you okay? We can talk about the game more if you want. I’ll nod and make it seem like I understand what you’re talking about.”

“No.” Hudson smiles and points at my knife. “I want you to do your trick again.”

I groan, pretending like it’s a big deal, but inside, I’m grinning. “Fine. But I’m going to need to hear the word please.”

“Please, Maddie,” he says. “For me?”

“I’d do anything for you,” I tell him softly. I spin the knife again, and I love how his attention makes me warm and happy. “And on your worst days, I’m going to be right here, whenever you need me.”

“I love you,” he says, looking brighter than before, and I’ll never get tired of hearing it.

FIFTY-NINE
HUDSON

“I THINK I’m more nervous to meet your parents than I am for game seven of the Stanley Cup Finals tonight.” I rifle through my gear bag and try to find my mouthguard. “Sorry I’m only going to get a few minutes with them before I have to head to the arena.”

“Pretty sure playing in one of the biggest games of your career is a valid excuse for not having hours to spend with them.” Madeline rubs the counter with a paper towel for the tenth time in five minutes. “And they’re going to love you.”

“Yeah? Is that why you’re still cleaning the same spot?” I grin and zip up my bag before rounding the island and wrapping my arms around her. “Are you sure they’re not going to think I’m an idiot because I hit a puck for a living?”

“What? No.” She frowns and touches my chest. “They don’t care about that. You could be unemployed and it wouldn’t matter. You love me. You love Lucy. And that’s what is important to them.”

“Damn, Galloway.” I slide my hands in the back pocket of her jeans, squeezing her ass. “You’re going to make me get emotional over here.”

“Shut up.” Madeline kisses my jaw and pulls away. “And stop feeling me up. They’ll be here any minute.”

“Yes, chef,” I murmur, grinning when her cheeks turn pink.

Lucy runs into the kitchen and I lift her off the ground. She giggles and sticks her hands out to the side like a helicopter, and I spin us around until I

start to feel dizzy.

Are you excited your grandparents are coming to visit, Luce? I ask her, and she nods.

Grams and Gramps are the best. They let me eat cookies before lunch.

They do? We're going to get along.

There's a knock on the door, and I set Lucy down. She takes off, and I reach for Madeline's hand.

"I love you," I tell her.

"I love you too." She gives me a wide smile and pulls me into a hug. "And I'm serious when I say my parents will adore you."

"Did they like Clark?" I ask, teasing her.

"No." Madeline snorts. "My dad thought he was a pretentious bore."

"I love your dad already."

The front door opens, and I do one final check around the kitchen to make sure it's neat and organized. I fix my shirt, smoothing my hands over the front and hoping there aren't any wrinkles.

Two people who look just like Madeline walk into the kitchen with Lucy holding their hands, and I grin at them.

"Mr. and Mrs. Galloway. It's an honor to meet you." I step toward them and offer Madeline's dad my palm. "So glad y'all could make the trip out here."

"Doug." Madeline's dad shakes my hand, giving me a warm smile. "And this is Julie. Thanks for having us."

"We've been wanting to visit for a while, and I'm glad it finally worked out." Julie reaches for me, hugging me instead of going for a handshake. "Your place is beautiful, Hudson."

After a round of hellos and hugs with Madeline and Lucy, everyone settles at the kitchen table. I hand out drinks and a cheese plate Madeline put together. When I take my seat, Lucy jumps into my lap and rests her head on my chest. Her eyes close, and I think she's seconds away from falling asleep.

"How was the flight?" I ask.

"Long. The person behind me kept kicking my chair," Doug says. "I almost turned around and gave him a piece of my mind."

"Dad." Madeline rolls her eyes. "It's a confined space with the traveling public. Sometimes you just have to deal with it."

"Your game is tonight, Hudson?" Julie asks, ignoring her husband's complaining. "And which number is it?"

“It is. Game seven of the Stanley Cup Finals. This is for all the marbles. Whoever wins this, wins it all. It’s going to be tough, though. Los Angeles didn’t have their best player the first six games, but he’s back tonight. It’s going to make things interesting.”

“Hudson scored a goal in the last game,” Madeline says proudly. “A one-timer.”

“Wow.” I toss a grin her way. “Eight and a half months living here, and you finally learned the term? I’m proud of you, Maddie.”

“I’ve been studying up.” She sticks out her tongue and turns her attention to her parents. “We have the guest room set up for you all. Tomorrow is Lucy’s first grade graduation, which will be rough depending on how tonight goes. I thought I could show you around DC after the ceremony.”

“We’d love that,” Julie says. “I can’t believe how big Lucy’s gotten since September. She looks just like you, Madeline.”

Madeline smiles and glances at her daughter sleeping against my chest. She nods and reaches out, taking her small hand in hers. “Doesn’t she? She’s starting to act like me too with her mannerisms and the way she holds herself. Everything is moving too fast.”

“What did you do for Mother’s Day? You sent me a picture of some flowers.” Julie smiles at me. “Did you get those for her, Hudson?”

“I did. My mom loves—loved—flowers, and I wanted Madeline to know how celebrated she is. We’re going to start growing some flowers out on the balcony, and I can’t wait to be able to pick some and give them to her on a random Tuesday afternoon,” I say.

“You were raised right, son,” Doug says, and Madeline nods in agreement.

“He really was. I planned on a casserole for dinner tonight,” she says, switching gears, and I’m grateful I don’t have to share the story about my mom so soon into meeting Madeline’s parents. “I’m sure you all are tired after your travel day, so I can have it ready in an hour and a half, then we can get ready to head to the arena.”

“Sounds good to me.” Julie yawns, and I stand, moving Lucy to my hip. “Do you mind if I lie down for a few minutes? That plane ride wiped me out.”

“I’ll put Lucy in her room then show you to yours. Y’all are next to each other,” I say, and Julie follows me. “And leave the bags. I’ll grab them in a minute.”

“You’re sweet, aren’t you, Hudson?” Julie smiles as I lead her down the hall. “I can’t thank you enough for hiring Madeline and taking her and Lucy in. You changed her life, you know. Not just with cooking, but with other things too.”

“Ah.” I nod, a blush creeping up my cheeks. “They changed my life too. I always pretended I was happy, and then they came along. I finally learned what it really meant to be happy, and it wouldn’t have happened without them.”

“She’s been through a lot. I know you know that, but I can’t tell you how much it means to me to see you step up and help with parts of her life you don’t have to be a participant in.”

“I wouldn’t consider it stepping up because I’m happy to do it.” I nudge Lucy’s door open and carefully put her in bed. “I’m lucky I get to be involved. I want to be involved.”

“Madeline told me about your mom.” Julie gives me a sad smile. “I hope you know she’d be proud of you.”

“Yeah.” I nod. “I do.”

THE ARENA IS the loudest I’ve ever heard it.

Our hometown crowd is fueling us on, invigorated after we clawed our way back to win the Eastern Conference finals. They’ve been supportive in all the games we’ve had at home in this series, too, and now we’re minutes away from the season being over.

Piper grabs me for an interview before I can take the ice for the last time this year, and I smile when the camera turns on.

“Hudson. We’re heading into the final period of game seven of the Stanley Cup Finals. You’ve been here before. What are you feeling right now?” she asks, holding out her microphone.

“Nerves.” I laugh. “And not wanting to be complacent. We have pressure on us because we want to repeat last year’s result, but we can’t get cocky. We have twenty minutes left, and that’s it. We need to focus.”

“Speaking of focusing, what are some areas you all are going to work on as we head into the third period?”

“Teamwork and not being selfish. When we get excited, we all want to

take a shot, even if it's not the best available shot. We need to look for the open man."

"Thanks, Hudson. Enjoy the rest of the game."

"Great job, Little P," I tell her, joining my teammates back on the ice.

We fight like hell for the first eighteen minutes. Los Angeles is brutalizing us, and how we've kept this game tied is beyond me. They're more aggressive, winning each face off and shooting down the ice like a bullet.

We've had some shots on goal, but we can't get anything in the net. On our end, Liam's been unstoppable, sacrificing his body to dive after dive to keep us alive. If we pull this win off, I'm buying him a really nice fucking gift.

With sixty seconds to go, the Bulls work their way down the ice. My chest is heaving, and I motion for Riley to track the player on his left side. I extend my stick, reaching for the puck but coming up an inch short. I curse, taking off after my opponent as he charges for our goal.

The defender pulls back, but before he can get a shot off, I steal the puck from between his skates, passing it off to Maverick to the delight of the crowd.

I know I shouldn't, but I turn my attention away from the ice for half a second. I look to the row of seats where Madeline and Lucy are. Her parents are next to her, with Duke on the other side.

She's watching me, her hands on her chest and sitting on the edge of her seat. I see her whispering something to herself, and when she notices me watching her, she breaks out into a wide grin. She stands and turns around, showing off her sparkly jersey with my name across her shoulders.

That lights a fire in me. Gritting my teeth, I move down the ice. I accept a pass from Riley before dropping the puck back to Maverick and applying pressure to the defense. There's twenty seconds left on the clock now, time ticking down when Maverick passes it back to me. Dumping it back to Ethan will give Los Angeles a chance at a breakaway with no one back to help protect Liam, and I can't chance it.

I exhale, gripping my stick and guiding the puck to my right. I look up at the rafters, a beam of light guiding me, and I smile.

"For you, Mama," I whisper.

I pull my stick back to my waist. I hit the puck as hard as I can, getting it off just before the defender can steal it from me. It hits the left side of the

goal, a bounce off the post before crossing the goal line under the goalie's knees as the buzzer sounds, ending the game.

"LET'S FUCKING GO," Maverick screams, jumping on me.

I tumble to the ice, laughing as my body is nearly crushed under the rest of my teammates.

"BACK TO BACK, BABY," Grant yells, and there's a stick pressing into my ass.

"CHAMPIONS," Ethan bellows, and confetti falls in my eyes.

It takes me five minutes to get back on my feet. The second I'm upright, I'm charging for Madeline. I'm banging on the glass and motioning for her to walk to me.

"You did it," she yells when she makes it to the boards. She puts her hand on the barrier between us, and I see tears in her eyes. "Holy shit, Hudson. You are the Comeback Kid."

"Get Lucy and walk to the tunnel. I want to bring y'all out here," I yell back.

"What?" She laughs, head shaking. "No way."

"Get your ass over here, Galloway, so I can celebrate with my girls."

She buries her face in her hands for half a second before she sprints up the stairs, picking up Lucy and hustling through the masses of people celebrating our win. I met her at the tunnel, watching her flash her VIP badge, and grab a stick off the ice.

"*Hold onto this*," I sign, and they grab it. I guide them to the center of the rink where my teammates are. Riley scoops up Lucy and puts her on his shoulders, and Madeline gives me a tight hug.

"I'm so proud of you," she whispers. "And your mom is so proud of you."

"That goal was for her. Felt like the perfect way to end the best year of my life." I take off my helmet and throw it on the ice. I cup Madeline's cheeks and kiss her forehead. "God. I love you, Maddie."

"I love you too, Hudson, but you should be with your teammates. You all have worked so hard this season. I'm in the way."

"No." I grin at her, on top of the fucking world. "You're exactly where you should be."

EPILOGUE

Madeline 18 months later

THE ENERGY in United Airlines Arena is electric. It's a loud, palpable thing I feel in my bones and a noise that echoes to a ringing in my ear. The crowd's enthusiasm is typical, the usual intensity they always show their hometown team, but there's nothing exciting about the game today.

It's not the Stanley Cup finals.

It's not even the playoffs.

For all intents and purposes, this day in December isn't anything special. It's a date other people would overlook, but not me. It's been circled in my calendar for weeks now, and excitement ripples through me when I think about getting home later tonight.

"Hey." Hudson touches my hip. I tilt my chin to look at him in all his gear before he takes the ice. He's exactly the same as he was two years ago when I met him for the first time. He has the same smile, the same dimple. The wrinkles around his eyes are a little deeper, but he still has the same ability to sweep me off my feet with a single glance. "What are you doing down here, Galloway?"

"Wanted to see you before you went out there and kicked ass." I flash my VIP badge. "And to show this off."

He grins and loops his arm around my waist. "The guy who manages the lounge keeps asking when you're going to apply for the executive chef

position. Is that something you're interested in?"

"Nope. It's nice to take a break from cooking professionally, and I'm not sure I'll ever go back to doing anything other than a private or personal chef gig. I like the freedom it gives me, and with Lucy growing up and close to double digits, I don't want to miss a second of the life the three of us have together."

"Grant loved the enchiladas you made for team dinner, by the way." Hudson kisses the top of my head and hugs me close to his chest. "And speaking of loving things, have I told you yet today how much I adore you? How much I fucking love you?"

I bury my face in his jersey. It smells like sweat and laundry detergent, but I don't care. I like being in his arms. "I love you, too."

The honeymoon phase with Hudson hasn't faded. We're just as happy, just as stupid about each other as we were when we first confessed our feelings.

I've stopped waiting for the other shoe to drop. I'm learning that when you're with your soulmate, when you're with your perfect other half, you don't have to be afraid. You don't have to worry if they're going to leave when the going gets tough because they show up for you, day in and day out, and remind you how much they care.

"Let's go, Hayes," Coach Saunders says from the locker room, and he sounds extra pissy today. "Save the PDA for later."

"You got it, Coach." Hudson grabs my chin and kisses me. He ignores the cat calls from his teammates, and when he pulls away, I'm breathless. "Are you wearing my jersey under that jacket, Mads?"

"Don't know." I step away from him and slip my coat halfway down my arms so he can see the top of my white jersey. "Look for me in the stands to find out."

"Tell our girl I love her too, will ya?"

"I will. We'll see you after the game, Hayes."

With one more smile flashed my way, he disappears into the locker room, and I make my way to our seats. Hudson bought us a suite at the start of the season, something wildly unnecessary but something Lucy loves, and I find my daughter sitting in a plush leather chair overlooking the ice. We still stand by the ice during warmups, and every now and then Piper will sneak her down to watch the end of the game from the tunnel so she doesn't miss any of the action.

Hey, kid, I sign, and she waves.

Hi, Mom. Duke is here. He's saying hi to someone, then he'll be in, she tells me.

Hudson wanted me to let you know he loves you.

Lucy grins. ***Does he know about my present?***

Nope. We need to get through the game, then you can give it to him.

I hope he likes it, she signs, and I squeeze her shoulder.

He's going to love it.

Duke, Hudson's dad, makes his way into the suite, and he gives us both a big hug. He falls right into conversation with Lucy about the skating lessons she's taking, nodding along while she explains what she learned this week. He gives her a proud smile when she mentions the deke she pulled on one of the best boys on the team during a scrimmage, and he tells her anything boys can do, girls can do better.

I'm not surprised he's been learning how to sign. The first time we met, he mentioned how important it was to Hudson for him to be able to communicate with Lucy, too, and the two FaceTime every other week and hold their entire conversation in sign language so they can practice with each other.

Every time I think Hudson can't get any better, he does something so selfless and so profound, my heart nearly falls out of my chest.

What a lucky girl I am to be loved by someone as beautiful and wonderful as Hudson Hayes.

The puck drops, and the Stars come off the face-off with aggression. They've been battling a three-game losing streak after trying to find their rhythm with a new starting lineup, and I know how badly they want a win tonight.

Lucy and Duke sign about the plays, pointing out areas of improvement and who's a half second late to the puck. I watch Hudson, still in awe of his skating abilities and how effortlessly he glides across the ice.

The first period ends with a 0-0 score, and when intermission starts, my phone dings in my purse. I pull it out and find a text from Hudson.

BLOND BOMBSHELL

Can't see you, Galloway.

Can you stand during the next period and show off my jersey?
Please and thank you.

ME

Are you allowed to be on your phone right now?

BLOND BOMBSHELL

I won't tell if you don't.

I laugh and make sure I'm on my feet when the players come back out for the second period. When Hudson glances at me from down on the ice, he pulls off his glove with his teeth and gives me a thumbs-up.

He doesn't seem to mind the ribbing the guys give him after.

Maverick scores, and the crowd cheers. He finds the camera after he does and pulls out the necklace tucked into his jersey, proudly showing off the little charms with the initials of Emmy and their daughter to all of America.

With two minutes to go in the third and the score tied, Ethan breaks up a play and steals the puck from an Austin Rockets player. He passes it ahead to Ryan Seymour, who slaps it across the ice to Hudson. Evading one defender then another, Hudson circles the goal before making his way back toward center ice. Before he can cross the line, he rears his stick back. He lines up a perfect shot and flicks the puck into the net, just to the left of goalie's pads.

His teammates surround him and congratulate him with helmet taps and one-armed hugs. When he breaks free from the celebration, he skates over to our side of the arena. He takes off his glove and holds up an *I love you* that makes me put a hand on my chest.

Lucy waves and jumps up and down. She answers with an *I love you* of her own, and I'm still not sure how I ended up in love with a man who publicly acknowledges my daughter.

I couldn't dream up a better partner if I tried.

When the buzzer sounds at the end of the game and the Stars win, Duke hugs Lucy and me tight. He promises he'll be back up for Christmas in a few weeks, and he whispers in my ear how much Hudson is going to love his gift.

I'm nervous on the drive home. When Lucy and I get back to the condo, she heads straight for the dogs while I fix the pillows on the couch next to the Christmas tree.

Mommy, Lucy asks. ***What's that?***

I look up to where she's pointing and smile. *That's mistletoe, baby. When you stand under it, you have to kiss whoever is near you. It's a Christmas tradition.*

She walks over to me and plants a kiss on my cheek. ***I love you.***

I love you too. Want to get your gift? He'll be home soon, and we can have it ready for him.

Lucy runs to her room, and I smile as I watch her go. My smile gets even bigger when the front door opens and footsteps echo down the hall.

"Merry Christmas," a voice says from behind me, and I grin at Hudson over my shoulder. "You found my surprise."

"Looking for an excuse to kiss me, Hayes?" I walk to him and trail my hands down his suit jacket. "You know it's only the first of December, right?"

"Guess that means I have twenty-five days to kiss you. Any objections?"

"Not a single one. I think I'm going to like spending Christmas with you."

"You and Luce spent Christmas with me last year. And the year before that." He drops his palms to my waist and squeezes my hip. "Best Christmases of my life, if we're being honest."

"I have a feeling this year is going to be even better," I say. He doesn't know about the envelope Lucy is grabbing from her desk drawer. He's clueless about the adoption papers she begged me to file so Hudson could legally be her dad. He's been in that role since they met, and I can't imagine another man ever holding the title. "But just because of the cookies I'm going to make tonight."

"Cookies?" Hudson's whole face lights up, and he kisses me in the gentle way I love. "Now you're speaking my language, Maddie."

"I thought your love language was food."

"I think my love language might just be you," he says, and leave it to him to make me feel like I'm on top of the world in the middle of our condo on a random Thursday night. "And Lucy. My favorite girls in the entire world."

"You're our favorite, too." I rest a hand over his heart. "And speaking of Lucy, she has a present for you."

"Yeah?" He kisses my forehead and pulls me onto the couch. "Where is she?"

Hi, Lucy signs as she makes her way to the living room. **Great game tonight.**

Thanks, princess, he replies, beaming. *Do you know what kind of shot I scored with?*

A slap shot, she tells him, and he nods, impressed. I don't know why he's surprised about her knowledge; he's teaching her everything he knows about

hockey in hopes she'll play in the PWHL one day. ***I'm going to start learning how to do those.***

They're the most fun shot you can take. Hudson pats the couch, and she sits between us. *Your mom says you have something for me.*

Yeah. Lucy clutches the envelope tight to her chest. ***I know it's not Christmas yet, but I couldn't wait.***

That's how Hudson feels about Lucy's present too. He adopted her favorite dog from the shelter where we volunteer every month. He was planning on giving him to her on Christmas morning, but every day that passes, he gets closer and closer to ruining the surprise and bringing Bartholomew home.

Lucy's already nicknamed him Barty.

I'm excited. Hudson smiles. *Can I see it?*

She nods and hands him the envelope. I wrap my arm around her, and she rests her head on my shoulder.

We watch Hudson open the envelope, pulling out a stack of papers. His eyebrows wrinkle when he sees the Superior Court of the District of Columbia's logo at the top of the page.

"What is this?" he asks me, and I nudge his knee.

"Read it," I say.

His mouth moves as he reads the first couple of sentences, and I see the moment understanding dawns. The papers fall from his shaky hands and land in his lap. He looks up at us with wide eyes.

"It's an adoption petition," he says slowly, signing at the same time.

Lucy wants you to be her dad, I explain, and Lucy nods along beside me. *You're her favorite person in the world. She wants to be a part of your family, and she wants to have you be a part of ours. Legally. Officially. In every sense of the word.* I take a breath and stop signing. "I know this is a big step. You don't have to say yes right away—or at all. We're not married, and —"

"This is the easiest answer of my life." Hudson glances at Lucy and signs, *Are you sure?*

Yes, Lucy answers, and she lunges for him. He holds her in a hug and buries his face in her hair. ***I love you,*** she adds when she pulls away to look up at him.

I love you too, Lucy girl. Hudson looks at me, and his eyes are wet with tears. "Thank you."

I wipe my own eyes and sniff. "I didn't do anything."

"You did. You came into my life, and it's been the biggest blessing I could ever ask for. I was so fucking lonely before you and Lucy got here, but look at us now." He switches back to signing. *I'm the luckiest guy to have such amazing girls. Get me a pen and let me sign. I would've said yes on day one.*

Lucy claps, and I can't help but sob.

My life has taken such a drastic turn from where I thought I'd end up, but I'm so grateful. The bumps in the road were worth it, and I know every day is going to be the best day from here on out, because I have him by my side.

Hudson puts a hand on my thigh and squeezes. "Are those happy tears?"

"So many happy tears."

"Glad to hear it." He pulls me close, and the three of us huddle together. *I love you, Maddie. And I love you, Lucy.*

We love you too. I sigh and close my eyes. "You're stuck with us, Bombshell."

"Good. There's nowhere I'd rather be."

COMING SOON

The DC Stars will be back with more stories soon!
Here's who else you can expect to get a book, and a little about each one.

Riley (injury rehabilitation, boy obsessed, forced proximity)
Coach Saunders (one night stand, player's sister, age gap where he's older)
Grant (off-limits woman, age gap where she's older, secret relationship)
Ethan (accidental pregnancy, forced proximity, it's always been you)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chelsea is a flight attendant and romance author who writes fun, fresh, and flirty love stories with plenty of spice. When she's not making fictional characters banter for twenty chapters before they finally kiss or serving chicken or pasta on an airplane, you can find her trying to pet as many dogs as she can.

Stay up to date by signing up for her newsletter: <https://authorchelseacurto.myflodesk.com/newsletter>



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