

SEATTLE SCORPIONS SERIES

Frozen OVER



RUTH STILLING

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Frozen **OVER**

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TRIGGER/ CONTENT WARNINGS

You should be aware that while this book is a work of fiction and is, of course, a happily ever after, Frozen Over does contain themes of the following:

Sexually explicit content, strong language, emotionally manipulative behavior from a former love interest (not the main characters), some neglectful behavior from a parent, reference to cheating (not between the main characters), minor themes of athlete mental health (with off-page therapy).

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*Don't let anyone ever tell you that you can't have it all.
Because you can.*

Here's Zach Evans.

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PLAYLIST

Miss Americana & The Heartbreak Prince – Taylor Swift

Delicate – Taylor Swift

A Sky Full of Stars – Coldplay

LUNCH – Billie Eilish

BIRDS OF A FEATHER – Billie Eilish

The Boy is Mine – Ariana Grande

Dangerous Woman – Ariana Grande

Hands To Myself – Selena Gomez

Wildest Dreams – Taylor Swift

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CHAPTER ONE

MAY

ZACH

I'm nobody's fool. Well, not anymore, anyway.

The trouble is, I can't change what's already been and gone, and as much as I'd like to rewrite history, there's fuck all I can do to reverse the bad decisions I've made.

Those that led me to where I'm headed right now, a fucking paternity test center where my latest bad choice has resulted in the need to swab my mouth to find out if I am, in fact, the father of the child my ex-girlfriend is carrying.

Frankly, it's a miracle we've even reached this point since she's spent the better part of four months trying to convince me there can't be anyone else since the timeline doesn't stack up.

I approach the entrance and grip the metal door handle tightly, fueled with frustration as I swing it open and walk through. There shouldn't even be a timeline to work out.

Oh right, yeah, except she slept with the former New York Blades defenseman and official NHL asshole himself, Alex Schneider.

Amie is as crazy as she is stupid if she thinks I'll take her back. I'm here for one reason and one reason only—to find out if I'll be a dad and my Amie-sized mistake will mean she's a part of my life forever, or if I get to

walk away for good. If it's the former, I'll step up and be the father my dad has always been to me. But if it's the latter, I'm hightailing it out of Seattle and back home to spend the offseason rehabilitating and keeping my head down and out of harm's way. We didn't make the playoffs which fucking sucked, but at least I have extra time to recover from what has been the worst six months of my life.

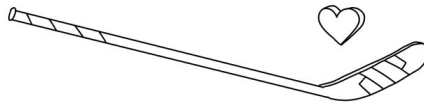
I drop onto a cream leather couch in a stark white room and await my fate. Apparently, doing the test face-to-face means the results will be back in only two days. That, and like hell am I taking a home test.

Yeah, okay, Amie. Let's do it from home because I trust you not to tamper with the results.

"Mr. Evans?" a small woman dressed in a white coat calls out across the room.

"That's me," I reply, a slight tremble to my tone. So this is the woman I'm entrusting with the next eighteen years of my adult existence.

One thing I do know for sure: whatever happens, I'm celibate for life.



I SWING my truck into my apartment parking lot and throw my head back in my seat.

Two days. Forty-eight hours of torture, waiting to hear the results. The pocket of my jeans vibrates, and I pull out my phone.

MAGNIFICENT MORGAN

How did it go, man?

Magnificent Morgan? *Really?* Otherwise known as Jon Morgan—my best friend, teammate, and the center and captain of the Seattle Scorpions. I need to change his name in my phone, or better yet, put a password on the damn thing so he can't keep updating his contact. He might not be single anymore, but he's still a cocky asshole.

ME

Magnificent Morgan? Stay out of my contacts.

Did you get your mouth swabbed or what?

Yep, now two days of hell.

Popped the question yet?

Yep. Put my big boy pants on and asked and it's a yes!

My phone buzzes again seconds later.

Picture of Felicity beaming, her ring-clad hand outstretched in front of her.

I smile down at the image of the gorgeous engagement ring sitting very proudly on the hand of the greatest thing that could've ever happened to my best friend. His life is changed forever. His now fiancée, Felicity Thompson, soon-to-be Morgan, is one in a million, and the lucky son of a bitch nailed her down. Despite the shit show that is my own life, their happiness can't help but seep into mine.

Too bad it won't happen for me because I'll never put myself out there again.

Congrats man. Never doubted you'd lock it down.

Thanks, buddy. We're back in Seattle in a couple of days, and I'll be around with tacos and beers.

Sounds good. I can eat my feelings no matter what happens.

Damn right. Has Amie been in touch?

Not yet, which must be some sort of record.

Not today, but it's still early.

Keep yourself busy. See if you can beat my score on Warzone. You've been trying for three months. What's another two days?

I assume you're forgetting my ranking on FIFA. Anyway, no can do. I'm packing up my shit and getting ready to head back home. As soon as I see you, I'm flying out the next day. Whatever happens, I need to be back and away from here. If the baby's mine, then the news will inevitably break, and there's no way I'm gonna be in town when it does.

Fair enough, buddy. Just take it easy. I've got my phone if you need me.

I close out the messages and pull up my mom's contact—I need to let her know I plan to come back home for the offseason. Thankfully, I closed on a property in Cocoa Beach six months ago, so I don't have to live with

my parents. The house was supposed to be a second place for Amie and me to escape and spend time with my family.

“Hey, sweetie, how are you doing?” Her bright voice filters down the speaker.

After the incident last December in New York involving Schneider taking me out against the boards where he gave me a spinal concussion and broke my jaw and tibia, I was holed up in the hospital for several days. Sure, I wound him up saying the baby was mine and not his, but the pre-meditated hit effectively ended his career. He was handed a twenty-five-game ban, a massive fine, and when he came to the end of his contract with the Blades, they didn’t renew it. He’s now a free agent, and no one wants to take him in.

I had no choice but to break Amie’s cheating and pregnancy to my parents at that point.

“I’m good,” I lie. Mom’s already stressed about me as it is; she doesn’t need to know I’m practically vibrating with tension. “All the tests are done, so now we wait.”

She blows a heavy breath down the phone. “You need to keep yourself busy, especially since Jon is away getting engaged.”

“Yeah, he popped the question, and she said yes.”

“Oh, fantastic news! It’s about time that boy found someone.”

My stomach knots. I might be almost four years younger than him, but at thirty-one, I honestly thought I’d have met the one by now. Instead, I’ve had a string of unsuccessful relationships. Amie is the first one to cheat on me, but I’m starting to wonder where I’m going wrong and what’s so unlovable about Zach Evans. I’m not a hookup guy. I can count on one hand the number of women I’ve slept with who weren’t my girlfriend.

“Yeah, me too, Mom.” My tone is as deflated as my slumped shoulders. I rarely let life get on top of me, but there’s no denying these past few months have tested me to my limits.

“Oh honey, it’s going to be okay. We’re here for you whatever happens.”

“Yeah, ‘bout that. I’m thinking of heading back home for the offseason—I need to get the beach house up straight and work on it. Thought it might give me the break I need.”

“So, you’re not selling it?”

I run a palm across my face in thought. “Nah, I don’t think so. Yeah, it was for her too, but I love that place. It’s peaceful and secluded. I want to get to work on it. It’ll be a full summer job.”

“Okay, if that’s what you want. Just don’t push your body too hard—you need to be kind to yourself after that hit. But gah! I’m looking forward to seeing you so much. It will be great to have you back home.”

I think about home. Mom and Dad live only a ten-minute walk from my new place, and most of my old school friends are in the Cocoa Beach area. Some of them I’ve kept in touch with over the years.

This is a good plan. Whatever happens in the next two days, I can at least be around the people I trust most for the next twelve weeks.

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CHAPTER TWO

ZACH

The hardwood flooring in my apartment has almost fully disintegrated.

I've been pacing it for the last two days. After I finished packing to head back home, I fell down an internet rabbit hole—desperately trying to work out how likely the baby is to be mine. The trouble is, I'm relying on a very unreliable Amie. More lies than truth leave those pouty red lips. The only decent thing to come of this whole mess is the spell she had me under has finally been broken, and I see her for who she really is.

A scheming bitch.

Today is allegedly results day, and I've had my email on auto-refresh. I'm tempted to call the clinic and find out what's taking them so long. It's only ten in the morning, but seriously, how long can this shit take?

I pause my pacing when I hear a knock at the door. Swinging it open, I find Jon on the other side. It's good to see him, and jeez, I need the distraction.

"You look like hell. Has your shaver broken?"

I cast a hand across my chin. Yeah, I'm letting myself go. "Too busy refreshing my email." I turn and walk toward my living space; my apartment is completely open-plan, so at least I've had plenty of room to do laps. "Why didn't you use your key, and why are you here so early?"

Jon steps in and shuts the door behind him. “Haven’t got your fob on me, and Felicity needed to head back early. Her boss has a disaster case on his hands and wants his best team. I swear all she does is work and study for the bar.”

“She’s driven that’s for sure,” I reply.

“Definitely, and it’s fucking hot,” he says, smoothing a palm across his mouth.

I hold up a hand. “Yeah, alright man, I don’t need details on what makes your cock twitch. We all know you get it more than you ever did when you were out fucking anything that moved.”

Jon’s shoulders shake with silent laughter. If I said that to him last year, his reaction would’ve been totally different. His anxiety filled playboy days are way behind him, and I’m fucking proud of how far he’s come, with help from his wife-to-be.

“How are you holding up?”

I shrug and collapse on my couch. “How do you think?”

“Well, judging by the state of this place and the state of you—not great. How about I help?”

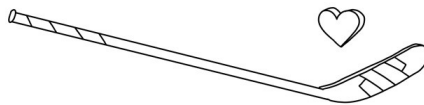
“Not sure you can, but thanks for coming over early.”

“When was the last time you ate a decent meal?”

Truthfully, days ago. My stomach’s been too anxious to digest anything.

He takes my silence as my answer. Rising from the usual couch he sits on when he comes over, he thumbs over his shoulder to my door. “Come on. Let’s grab pancakes and talk some shit; I’m good at that.”

I really don’t want pancakes, but fresh air might do me some good.



TWENTY MINUTES later we’re down at the pancake house. I’ve lost count of the number of cheat days we’ve spent here. A stack of blueberry pancakes is set in front of me. Usually, I have an appetite that if hockey hadn’t worked out, I could’ve made a career out of competitive eating. At six foot five and with an in-season weight of two hundred forty pounds, I make the ideal defenseman and enforcer and have the appetite to match. But as I take my first bite, I know I’ll barely finish half.

Jon points his fork at me from where he's inhaling his boring maple syrup and butter stack. "If you don't eat that, I will. Your body's still healing from the hit, and it needs energy. Not eating isn't going to change the outcome."

"I think I preferred you when you were less sensible."

"Yeah, this straight-talking British girl whipped my ass into shape."

I've got a fork of blueberry pancakes halfway to my mouth when there's a ping. Jon pauses and looks at me, and I know it's the email.

Pulling my phone out the pocket of my hoodie, I hand it over. "You read it, but if it's another text from Amie asking me to meet her to talk, just delete it."

"You sure, buddy?"

I rest my elbow on the table and drop my head in my hands. "Yeah, because I think I'm gonna hurl."

There are a few beats of silence, and I don't know what he's doing. I can't see his face since my eyes are covered by my palms. The seconds feel like decades.

Finally, I feel a hand land on my shoulder and slowly, I turn my head. Jon comes into focus; he's standing over me with a beaming smile. "It's over man. It's not yours."

Don't get me wrong, I want to be a dad someday, but never like this and like hell with a girl like Amie. Although with the way I'm planning to be celibate, that might be hard. The news that's just been delivered floats in the air, refusing to sink into my consciousness. "Sorry, come again?"

"I said, you're not the dad."

It isn't me. I'm fucking free of her.

On instinct, I jump out of the booth and grab Jon by the waist, lifting him off the floor. With a one-inch height difference and a ten-pound weight advantage, I've always had the physical edge. "Yeah, yeah, alright, man. I'm stoked for you and all, but can you just, you know, stop cuddling me in public?"

My phone pings again right as I set him back down.

NUMBER ONE GK

Any news?

Really? Has everyone been messing with my contacts?

It's Jensen Jones, our crazy Canadian goalkeeper. He's the finest in the league, and we're blessed to have him playing for the Scorpions. He's also incredibly humble...

ME

I'm sorry who is this?

Might as well fuck with him.

There can be no doubt as to who the best keeper is. Have you heard? Come on, I'm a mess.

Yeah, and it's not fucking mine. Found out two minutes ago.

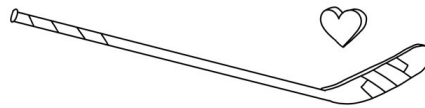
Halle-fucking-lujah.

This calls for drinks and celebrations.

I look up at Jon. "Jensen wants to head out tonight to celebrate."

He drains the last of his coffee. "You know how I feel about going out, but hell yeah. One last blowout before you head home."

You're on.



NIGHTS OUT ARRANGED by Jensen should come with a hazard label.

My head is pounding.

I'm still in last night's shirt, but thankfully, I managed to remove my shoes and pants. My memory is hazy, but the last thing I recall was Jensen relaxing on a loveseat with two leggy blondes sprawled across him while Jon sat opposite, shooting daggers at any girl who looked his way. I wasn't far behind him—don't touch me; don't even look at me.

My flight home leaves midday. My bags have been packed for days, so all I need to focus on is getting my stomach to stop retching, and eyesight would be good.

I grab my phone from the nightstand and inwardly groan, the home screen is loaded with messages from Amie.

AMIE

I haven't heard from you since the results were confirmed.

I know you aren't the dad.

I swear, I thought you were.

Hello?

Zach, why are you ignoring me?

Let me guess, you're out getting drunk and laid.

Fuck you.

I keep scrolling down on the thread and notice she texted me again two hours later.

Look, I'm sorry for what happened.

I still love you.

She really is a piece of work. The only reason I kept lines of communication open with her was because she could have been carrying my child, and I'm not a dick who's about to shrug off my responsibilities. But since I got solid proof I have none, I tap on her contact and hit "block." I spend the next five minutes finding her on every social media platform and even bring up her email hitting "block" on that too.

Goodbye, Amie.

Good luck raising a child with Alex asshole Schneider. I really feel for that kid. Doesn't stand a chance with parents like them.

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CHAPTER THREE

ZACH

The Florida heat hits me square in the face as I exit the airport, and I scan the pickup lane for Mom's silver Range Rover Evoque, her dream car that I bought for her last Christmas. If you're earning eight figures a year and can't treat your mom, then what are you doing with your money?

"Over here, honey!" She leans out the driver's window just a few cars down.

Dumping my suitcases in the trunk, I jump in the passenger side and kiss her on the cheek. "Hey, Mom."

"Good flight?"

Turbulence and hangovers don't mix. "Yeah, it was fine."

She pins me with a concerned look. "You look washed out."

"I'll be fine. I got the news I needed. I just need to catch up on sleep."

"Why don't you stay at our house for a couple of nights? The guest room is all made up."

I love my parents, but I need my own space. "Thanks, but I just want to get started at the house."

Mom joins the freeway and glances over at me. "Okay, but at least stay for dinner."

I'm close to my parents, always have been, so moving to Seattle was tough. I was drafted early but opted to go to Tampa Bay College and study engineering, but as I entered my senior year, the Scorpions called me up, so I moved to the West Coast.

It's only fifteen miles from the airport to Mom and Dad's place, and it passes with a barrage of questions about Amie along with her angry rants about the way she treated her son. "Your dad and I never liked her, Zach. She was trouble right from the beginning."

We pull up in the long gravel driveway. Mom and Dad have lived here since I was born. It's a small, three-bedroom home with a modest backyard. I offered to buy them something bigger, but as it's only me and no other siblings, they don't see the point. My dad, Andrew, is a house painter and decorator, and my mom, Rachel, works at the local library, so I wasn't brought up with money. The least I could do was pay off their mortgage, and I did with the fat signing bonus I received from the Scorpions.

I grab my bags from the car when Dad races outside, his arms outstretched. "Son, it's great to see you. Welcome home."

"Hey, Dad, good to be home."

"Your mom tells me you're back for the offseason and to work on the beach house."

We make our way up the porch and step into the entryway; the familiar scent of home hits me immediately and warms my chest. "Yeah, I want to get it fixed up. Thought it might be good for me."

"I'd say you're right, and I can give you a hand."

"Sounds good. I was going to ask Luke if he wanted to help."

It's been a while since I caught up with my high school buddy and oldest friend, Luke. We were inseparable when younger and played hockey together, but then I went off to college, and he stayed behind to work for my dad.

"You can ask him now," Mom chimes in. "Is he still here?"

Dad nods. "Yeah, we were just finishing up distributing this week's jobs."

Stepping into the living room, I find him scrolling through the TV channels. "Hey, buddy."

Luke's head snaps up to mine as he rises from the couch and brings me into a hug, clapping his hand on my back. "Evans, good to see you. It's been a while."

“Too long,” I reply.

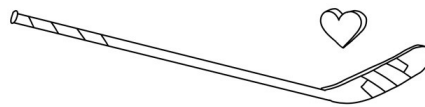
“Are you staying for dinner tonight, Luke?” Mom shouts from the kitchen, which is divided by an archway.

“Nah, thanks, Rachel—first barbecue of the season.” Luke turns to me. “You wanna come? There are a few people going.”

I shout back to Mom. “I’m back for three months—plenty of time to cook for me.”

“Tomorrow night then,” she replies.

I turn back to Luke. “Yeah, why not.”



I DIDN'T EXPECT this reaction.

Standing in the empty white kitchen of the beach house Amie and I were supposed to use as our second home, it all comes back to me. The hope I had for a happy future with the woman I thought I loved. The ring I planned to put on her left hand when I surprised her with this place. Life fucking sucks sometimes.

Making my way through to the living room, I cast a quick glance around. There's one gray couch the previous owners left and a small wooden coffee table in the center. The place isn't big; it's only a two-bedroom. I bought it for its position and privacy, as it backs directly onto the vast beach. The bonus is that you get a perfect view of the rocket launches from Kennedy Space Center.

I remember spending nights lying on the soft white sand, watching the latest launch with my friends. Luke was into it, but his ex-girlfriend, Luna Johnson, was obsessive. Long after all our other friends had left or gathered around a campfire drinking, she'd talk my ear off about the constellations, but mostly about aerospace and the mechanics of the latest launch. To be honest, most of what she said went in one ear and out the other, but I couldn't help the way her animated face drew me in. Maybe it was her passion and love for something I found so endearing.

I've kept in light touch with many of my old friends, Luna included, but heading to tonight's barbecue is like taking a step back in time to when I

was eighteen and about to leave for college. It's a comforting feeling of déjà vu.

Moving through to my bedroom, or what was supposed to be *our* bedroom, a king-size bed sits alone and against washed-out blue walls. They're uneven and need work, like most of the house. But it's the flooring and porch that need most of my attention. I'll be pushing it to get everything completed in the three-month window I have. Whether I'll flip it and sell it afterward, I don't know. I just know it'll be a welcome project while I distract my mind from the events of the past six months.

I stand staring out of the glass doors overlooking the beach when my phone begins to ring.

Jesus, I need to update his contact.

"Hey."

"Is it still showing as Magnificent Morgan?"

I roll my eyes, even though there's no one to witness it. "Yes."

"Good. I assume you made it back to the Sunshine State?"

"Yeah, I'm standing in my bedroom right now, thinking how much work there is to do."

"I'd love to help, man, but you know me and DIY. I'll probably make it worse."

I chuckle. "Yeah, probably."

"So, what have you got planned for your first night back?"

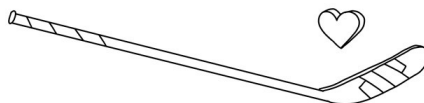
"I was about to grab a shower, get changed, and head to the beach. I'm meeting some friends there. You remember Luke, right?"

"Oh yeah, works for your dad?"

"Yeah, well, he invited me to a barbecue, and a few of my old school buddies should be there."

"Cool, be good for you to relax. Just don't go breaking any hearts this summer, alright?"

I laugh at the thought of a summer romance. "Not likely."



BY THE TIME I make it down to the beach, it's close to ten in the evening. The barbecue is almost out, but I couldn't not show my face. I need the

distraction and a chance to see some friendly faces.

I immediately recognize Luke, who's cooking what remains of the food, and I make my way over to him, hoping to grab something to eat since the last thing I ate was on the plane. "Any burgers left?"

"Not much but that and a couple of wings," he replies. "Grab a plate, and I'll load you up."

He begins piling my plate as I turn to look at the group of friends twenty feet from us, sitting around the bonfire. Hudson, a former high school and later college friend waves in my direction, and I lift a hand to wave back. I recognize a blonde girl sitting next to him; I think her name is Hayley. She was a couple of years younger than us, but I saw from her social media that she now runs a successful florist in the area. There are a few more people all laughing and joking, but I don't recognize them.

"How often do you have these barbecues?" I say, turning back to Luke.

He lifts a shoulder. "Whenever we can but not all that often. Hudson's wife sometimes comes along, but the numbers have dropped off since most now have children."

I remember they used to be almost every weekend when we were at school. When I've made it home in between seasons, I've never stayed long enough to meet up with everyone, maybe a night or two at most, and so I'd spend my limited hours catching up with Mom and Dad. Jon came back with me a couple of times, and we grabbed a beer with Luke.

"It's cool you kept it going. I'll have to bring some of the hockey guys over one day. We don't exactly get beach barbecues in Seattle."

"Yeah, why not. Tell Jon congrats, by the way. I saw on social media he got engaged to his girlfriend."

"Yeah, I will. Thanks for the food." I thumb over my shoulder. "I'll head over and join the others."

"Zach?!"

At the sound of a soft but sweet voice, I turn back around to face Luke and see a small figure racing up behind him.

As she approaches, the light from the barbecue captures a mass of auburn hair, followed by dainty features and freckles—so many freckles. Her smile reaches her ears as it accentuates the light blush on her cheeks.

Luna.

Other than on socials, I haven't seen her for at least three years, the last time being when I came home for the holidays and we went out for New Year. She's always been incredibly pretty, but somehow, she's grown prettier with time. She's her own brand of unique—from her unpredictability to her smile and pixie-like features. She's feisty too, an endearing kind of unfiltered. She says what she means, and I wonder if, over the years, she's held onto her genuine qualities. Living and working in a world surrounded by pro athletes and money, I've found this to be a rarity.

"Luna," I say with a smile. I set my plate down on the camp table next to the grill and hold out my hand for her to take. But she completely ignores my gesture and launches herself at me, throwing her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist.

I stand there, rooted to the spot. Her familiar vanilla scent washes over me as memories of the hours we spent on the beach as teenagers come crashing back.

She rests her head over my shoulder and tilts her face toward my ear. "There's no way I'm shaking your hand. You might be super rich and famous, but you're still Zach to me."

My hands rest low on her back and through her T-shirt and cut-off denim shorts, I feel her body heat radiate through mine.

All too aware of our position and the company we're in, I take a tentative glance at Luke. His eyes are ablaze as he pins them on us and takes a swig of his beer. The light is dim, but I don't miss the way they flash with an unmistakable emotion, and it's definitely unappreciative.

Luna split up with Luke just before we headed to college. I remember he took it hard; they were dating for two years, and from what I'm seeing right now, he's never gotten over her. I know he's dated since, but he's never married. Neither has Luna.

I set her back down, and it's then that I remember just how much I tower over her; she must be only five-four at best, and her slight frame accentuates her petite exterior.

Her coffee-colored eyes scan over my body, taking me in. "I see you added to your tattoo collection."

I pull at the sleeve of my T-shirt. Why the fuck am I feeling shy? "Yeah, full arms now."

"And hands." She takes my left hand in her small grasp, and I feel the contrast of her smooth, soft palms against my calloused skin. The contact

sends a shot of something through my body, catching me entirely off guard.

Turning my arm around, she studies the ink, stopping when my forearm comes into view. “Nice, seems fitting you added a scorpion.”

“Yeah, got it last year.”

A throat clears from behind us, and I glance over Luna’s shoulder to see Luke pointing to my plate. “Food will be cold in a minute, buddy.”

Shit, yeah.

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CHAPTER FOUR

LUNA

I haven't seen him in almost three years. The boy, well man—*definitely man*—who has always captured my attention and made me giddy.

With my legs wrapped around his waist and my arms circling his neck, I know I've overstepped. Sure, we've spoken and exchanged texts over the years, but I very much doubt he expected to be launched at.

Tone it down, Luna.

That's what my mom has always said to me. I know I'm too much for most people, and that's probably why I've struggled to make friends. And even though I can be a bit much, aside from college, I've never left Cocoa Beach. I'm a home bird at heart, sticking to what I know. Routine and familiarity bring me comfort, and at thirty-one, I doubt I'll change.

Zach Evans is a hunk of a man. Just watching him on-screen in his hockey gear does something to me. It always has. From when he played in high school to the moment he signed with the Scorpions, I've been mesmerized by him. All six foot five inches of muscle, largely covered in tattoos with his floppy light brown hair. Ugh, and don't even get me started on those turquoise-blue eyes.

Just one more minute, Zach.

I know I should probably climb down from my perch on his hips, not least because my ex-boyfriend is standing right behind us. But I figure I can stretch this out for a second or two longer while I take him in, his woodsy scent having always been addictive.

When I was dating Luke, I found Zach attractive, but I guess I never allowed myself to think much beyond that. It wouldn't have been fair to Luke. Zach and I have always been friends. When he went off to college in Tampa and I headed to Texas, I realized just how much of an impact he had on me and how much I missed him. I missed his laid-back personality. He kept my frantic mind grounded. He didn't care if I said everything that was on my mind; he always had time for every word. And the way he'd let me talk at him about the stars, even if he had no clue what I was babbling about—he gave me space to be who I am.

Which is why my full self is on display right now as I grab his hand and check out his latest tattoos. Zach Evans carries an air of mystery, and it fascinates me. I know he has layers, and I can't lie and say I'm being exclusively deep—I've thought about what lies beneath those tailored black shirts and thigh-hugging shorts a time or two.

Luke points to Zach's plate. "Food will be cold in a minute, buddy."

I feel myself flush because I definitely overstepped, and it was never my intention to make anyone uncomfortable. Slowly, I back away, keeping my back to the group of friends behind us and my eyes on Zach. "I'll see you by the fire."

Before he can answer, I turn and stride over to where Hudson and Sarah are talking and sink into the cool, soft sand, inwardly cursing myself at how that went. Luke mentioned a couple of days ago that Zach was coming home for the offseason, and since then, I've been reminding myself to act casual and unaffected.

Mission accomplished, Luna.

"How about a s'more?" Sarah, my old school friend but now more of an acquaintance, leans across Hudson and hands me one.

I take the treat from her and devour it in one bite. "Thanks, I hope you have more than one left for me."

Hudson winces. "Snooze you lose, Luna; we couldn't hold out forever."

I shrug. "Better late than never."

I would've been here much earlier if it wasn't for the ton of marking I had to pile through. Sometimes, I wonder why I chose to be an art and

design teacher, or a teacher at all. I sold my soul to long nights and early mornings, helping my students master their craft. But it's rewarding, even if underpaid and exhausting.

Running sand through my fingers, the soothing sensation helps to calm my nerves. I've never been good in social situations, opting to stay home and make best friends with my couch and movie collection.

Hayley, *one of my favorite people from school*, stands from her position on the opposite side of the fire. She fixes her mini skirt before making her way over to Zach, flicking her hair like she's in some sort of shampoo commercial.

I've never liked her. Yeah, she's gorgeous, and at twenty-eight, she still emanates prom queen vibes, but I've seen it all before, and it doesn't impress me. Beauty's skin deep, and she's shallow. Kind of a bully too, as some of the girls in her year discovered, and unfortunately, she never changed.

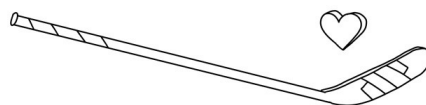
She's definitely Zach's type, though. A blonde runway model with slim, long legs and a pouty mouth. She reminds me of his ex-girlfriend, Amie. What a delight she was, and a freakin' stupid bitch. When news broke of his split with Amie, Zach told me she cheated on him. I mean, *really*. It doesn't get any better than Zach Evans.

"Didn't take her long," Hudson drawls from behind me as I watch Hayley wrap an arm around Zach's waist and plant a kiss on his cheek. He brings her in for a hug, and I want to say he looks awkward, but there's a fair chance I'm seeing only what I want. "She's always had the hots for him, and now I guess he's fair game," he tags on.

"He isn't a piece of meat or a fat bank balance," I snipe back, knowing full well Hudson wasn't suggesting he was. But it pisses me off that this is exactly how Hayley sees him—a good-looking meal ticket.

"Woah, okay, girlfriend," Hudson mocks. "What's got your panties in a twist?"

I throw down the sand I've gathered in my hand and blow out a long breath. "Nothing."



ZACH

“Oh, you’re too funny!” Hayley swats at my chest once more and throws her head back in faux laughter.

I didn’t say anything funny. In fact, I haven’t said one amusing thing since she approached and interrupted my conversation with Luke about my plans for the beach house.

“Well, if hockey doesn’t work out, maybe I’ll consider a career in stand-up,” I reply, bringing the beer bottle to my lips. I should at least try and be polite since I’ll likely run into her again over the next three months. “How’s the flower business going?”

“Amazing!” she squeaks. “Ah, maybe you should stop by and see my store. I could hook you up with a couple of arrangements.” She pauses and smooths a palm over my chest *again*. “That is...if you need them for a special someone.”

Christ, this is cringeworthy. Even Luke’s made himself scarce.

“No special someone,” I reply in a deadpan fashion before turning to the group in desperation. “Maybe we should join the others?”

I look over my shoulder to catch Luna’s illuminated face fixed on me. As quick as lightning, she whips her head away and stares back into the campfire flames. I’ve barely seen her tonight, and that’s kind of disappointing. We haven’t really spoken since I told her about Amie, and even then, that was all about me.

“Yeah, maybe,” Hayley responds. But I’m already on my way over to the campfire when she catches up to me. “I’ve got some s’mores if you’re interested. I don’t mind sharing.”

I love s’mores. “Thanks, but I’m not a fan.”

As we reach the group, Hayley grabs my hand and leads me to her side of the campfire, opposite Luna. “Well, come sit next to me; we’ve still got so much catching up to do.”

I’m about to pull my hand away and politely decline her invitation when Luna stands and brushes sand from her fair and freckled legs. They’re nice legs, slender yet shapely, and I wonder if she still goes swimming in the ocean like she used to.

“I’m going to head home,” she calls out to the group. “Early start tomorrow.” She grabs her sandals with one hand and smiles sweetly at me.

“Nice to see you, Zach. Welcome back.”

“Yeah, nice to see you too.” There’s a dejected look on her face, and for Luna that’s rare. She’s always been sunshine through and through. But I don’t get a chance to add anymore because, like a shot, she’s across the beach and out of sight.



“Do you want this all delivered, sir?”

“Yeah, please. I don’t think I’ll get it on my truck.”

The woman behind the counter rings up my final bill. I’ve spent a small fortune on supplies for the beach house, but an inspection of the floorboards this morning shows they’re rotten. Plus, I’ve allowed for a full replacement of the front porch.

If I can’t mend my own heart, at least I can bring this place back to life.

I climb into my truck and wind down the window. My F150 is old, but she’s a keeper. The most loyal girl I’ve got aside from my mom. I bought her when I turned seventeen and kept her here when I moved away, but my dad’s kept her ticking over the years. Cranking the engine, I pull out of the hardware store parking lot and head back to my place. I need to swing by the grocery store since I arrived last night with the bare minimum of supplies, but that can wait—I’ve been desperate to run along the beach since the minute I got here.

Pulling up in my driveway, I immediately see a pink package set on the front porch. Heading up the rickety stairs, I notice it’s wrapped in a white ribbon with a small card tucked inside. I pull out the note and open it up.

Zach,

Just thought maybe you haven't had time to head to a store yet, so here's some breakfast.

Hope to see you soon.

Luna x

The chilled package contains waffles and pancake mix, bacon, eggs, syrup, coffee, and milk. Jeez, I don't think anyone's ever done something like this for me before. I wonder how she knows where my beach house is, but I guess Luke must've mentioned it since I've owned it for months.

I pull out my phone and scroll to her contact.

ME

You delivered me breakfast? Thank you.

LUNA

I remember you like waffles and pancakes. But there's other options too, just in case. Enjoy!

I pause over the keyboard. Should I?

I do. There's enough here for two if you want some.

Ah, I'd love to, but I'm at work. Just stopped by and dropped the package off.

Okay, but I owe you breakfast.

You don't owe me a thing. Welcome home.

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CHAPTER FIVE

LUNA

It's been nearly two weeks since the barbecue, and I haven't seen Zach at all—not even around our small town. Even though he's been away for years, having him back and so close by makes me want to find excuses to bump into him.

“Miss Johnson, can I have a quick chat?” Principal Michaels calls down the hallway, breaking me from my daydream. It's five on a Friday, and all I want to do is get home and take off my bra.

“Sure thing,” I call out with as much enthusiasm as I can muster.

I step into his office and close the door with a click. “What can I do for you, Ted?”

Ted's a character I've always struggled to read and an intense workaholic. I'm not a hundred percent sure he even goes home on the weekends.

He folds his hands in front of him and leans back in his chair as I take a seat opposite. “We're looking for a new head of the arts department, and from what I'm seeing, you're the prime candidate. It's more hours, but it does come with a salary increase. I've seen the progression your students are making under your tuition, and I'd like you to take the reins overall.”

He sits forward and clasps his hands together on the desk, holding eye contact. “How does that sound?”

I swallow thickly. I half expected to be hauled in here to explain why a dozen of my students’ papers are being handed back late from marking. Never this, never a promotion. “That, um, that sounds like a great opportunity. Thank you.”

A wry smile crosses his face as he leans back in his chair once more. “Excellent. I’ll be in touch about the next steps, but you’re doing a great job, Luna.”

Standing up, I grab my bag. “Thank you. Have a nice weekend.” I tear out of the office and make for the parking lot, my veins beating with adrenaline at the news.

Climbing into my car, I crank it, my phone connecting to the Bluetooth, and I dial Mom’s number. She answers in a flustered tone. “Hey Luna, I’m just in the middle of something. Is it urgent?”

Like a balloon left in front of a fire, I deflate. She’s always “too busy.”

“I-I was just calling you to let you know that I—”

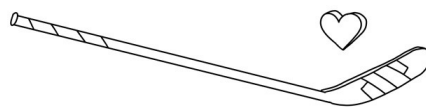
“Can it wait, honey?” she interjects.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. We can talk later.”

“Okay, bye!”

She’ll never change. My mom has always been the same when there’s a new guy on the scene, and the latest man in her life is taking all her time. I’m happy for her, and I’m a grown-ass adult, living in my own place, but sometimes, I wish there was room for me too.

My intention was to drive home and collapse in a heap of comfort food, but a last-minute diversion has me heading away from my house and toward the beach. I only swim in the ocean first thing in the morning, but that’s not why I’m going—it’s been too long since I saw him, and my curiosity has won out.



THE SAND WARMS my feet as I make my way down and toward the ocean. I can see Zach’s beach house, which is a good two hundred yards away, but I can’t make out any movement on the veranda.

The lapping waves feel soothing as they wash against my tired, aching feet from the busy week at school. Summer break is fast approaching, and I can't wait to have each day to myself for the next two and a half months. A chance to do things like this and not stalk Zach. *Definitely not.* Because that's just plain weird, Luna.

As I keep walking along the relatively peaceful shoreline, there are a few families packing up from their day at the beach, and it's not lost on me that now I'm in my early thirties, I'm still no closer to having a family of my own, which is something I want. One day. When you're an only child and your parents separate, it limits the size of your family in a big way. A family I've craved my whole life.

A tall broad figure is in the distance, running at a glacial pace across the sand.

Oh. My. God. It's Zach, shirtless and dressed only in a pair of Scorpions training shorts.

As he moves closer, he clearly recognizes me and starts waving. His thick, muscular, tattooed upper body glistens with sweat, and when he gets twenty feet from me, I can see *and appreciate* the destination of those droplets. They trickle straight down below his low riding waistband, where a dusting of brown hair begins and leads to places I'm sure many women have dreamt about, *including me.*

"Hey," I say, keeping my tone as unaffected as possible. But really, all I want to tell him is how his name rhymes aptly with *snack* since that's exactly what he is.

He lifts his backward cap from his head and runs a hand through his sweat-soaked hair before replacing it. *Jesus.*

"Hey, didn't expect to see you down here tonight. Is there another barbecue or something?"

Zach casts his eyes over my body, and it's then I realize I'm still wearing my not so beach-appropriate black work pants and white blouse.

I feel my face flush with heat. "Oh no, not tonight. Sometimes I come down here to unwind after school. Nice way to round off a week."

And sometimes I come down here to see you.

He eyes me and smiles. His full lips are addictive, and his straight white teeth shine in the sunlight. It's hard to tell where the ocean ends and his eyes begin, since on a bright day, like today, they both shine the same

color. I'm not sure if I was staring, but I forcibly look to the ground, just in case I was.

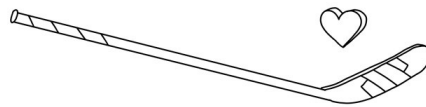
"I've just finished my run, but how about I make us something to eat? I'm sure I owe you food after that breakfast drop off."

I look back up and meet his gaze, and I can tell he genuinely wants to spend time with me. "Yeah, why not. And you can show me around your place!"

We fall into line as I try desperately not to show my physical reaction when he swings an arm around my shoulder and leads me in the direction of his beach house. "You know you're all sweaty, right?" I prod at his tattooed arm.

Zach low chuckles and glances down at me. "Call it payback for wrinkling up my new shirt and shorts when you wrapped yourself around me the other week."

Maybe I should feel a hint of embarrassment at the reminder of the way I dived right for him, but I don't. Instead, I feel butterflies that he actually remembered.



"I THINK I CAN MAKE A FRITTATA," Zach says from his position at the fridge. He has his head inside, looking at what's available.

I laugh. "I guess these days you have a private chef."

He turns back to the counter, his arms loaded with various ingredients. "Yeah, well that and Jon. At this point, I could just pay him instead; he stocks my freezer weekly."

I set my juice down on the coffee table in front of me and kick off my work shoes. "You guys are still pretty close, huh?"

He nods. "Very. He's my brother. We've had our moments, but we're close. When you're on the road sharing hotel rooms or at practice practically twenty-four seven, it brings people together."

"Yeah, I guess," I reply, drawing out the guess because I can't relate to that. Neither the friendship thing nor the traveling. I've been on vacation to Europe, but mostly with my mom.

“Dammit, what goes in the base again?” Zach says from his position at the counter as he scrolls through his phone, clearly looking for instructions.

I can’t help but burst out laughing as I make my way over to him and take his phone. “Come here, you big dope. It’s not that difficult. You’ve been spoiled in this luxury lifestyle of yours.” I nudge my shoulder into his side. I’m that small in comparison. He towers over me, and I kind of like it. A lot.

“And you’re still just as bratty as ever,” he retorts, grabbing several vegetables and a pan ready to begin sautéing.

“You do know frittatas are for breakfast, right?”

“I do. But since they’re the only ingredients I have, and the only thing I *thought* I could make, sticking to frittata rules isn’t exactly an option.”

I look up at him and quirk an amused brow. “*Thought* being the operative word.”

He shakes his head and laughs. “I’ll make you wear this fucking frittata in a minute.”

If that involves putting those tattooed hands on me, then be my guest.

Zach continues chopping vegetables with a blunt knife, but the way he seems determined to finish what he started is seriously endearing. The way he checks and fights people on the ice, you’d never believe he was such a softy off it.

A few struggling minutes later, we finally reach a point where the frittata is ready to be plated.

“Do you like cooking?” he asks from across the island, “Because this isn’t half bad, and I never had you pinned as a chef.” He takes another mouthful, humming in appreciation.

“It was fifty percent of your work, but I guess I’m not bad. It doesn’t really interest me though.”

His lips twist to the side slightly. “So, it’s still space and how we get there?”

I take another sip of juice and smile around the rim of my glass. *He does remember.*

“Yeah, mostly the constellations right now, but astrodynamics still fascinates me. I watched the latest Falcon Heavy launch just before you arrived here.” I arch a brow. “Those side boosters get me every time.”

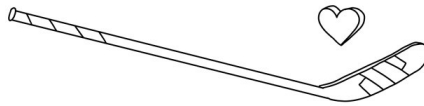
Zach drops his fork to his plate and laughs. “You’re so random. I literally have no idea what’s going to come out of your mouth next.”

I pin him with a playful glare. “Says the man who chases a biscuit around a slippery surface for a living.”

His lips shake with the laughter he’s trying desperately to hold back. “I reckon your sass alone would be enough to fuel a mission to Mars.” Then he stands and rounds the counter before rubbing a rough hand through my slightly frizzy hair as he passes. “You’re like my pocket rocket or something.”

My body tingles all over.

But I’m not sure if it’s from his physical touch or the way Zach Evans just gave me a nickname.



ZACH

“So, how many bedrooms has this place got?” Luna asks. We’re sitting on the small couch in the living room, and with my size taking up most of it, she might as well be on my lap. Her proximity and sweet vanilla scent are doing things to me that friends never should.

I push away the thoughts before they have time to bloom. “Just two, but only one is usable at the moment. I don’t see the point in buying furniture when I need to rip the entire floor up since it’s rotten in most rooms.”

“Sounds like a big reno. Will you sell it afterward?”

“Unlikely. Yeah, I bought it for A—” I stop myself from saying her name. She’s out of my life, and there’s no point going over old ground.

“Amie?” Luna finishes for me before scoffing. “She didn’t deserve you.”

I nod slowly. “Yeah, especially after she cheated and got herself pregnant.” Luna doesn’t know about the potential pregnancy and paternity test results. I planned to keep the whole thing to myself and a couple of friends, but the words leave my mouth faster than I can stop them. “I recently found out the baby isn’t mine.”

Her mouth hangs agape at the bombshell I just dropped. “That fucking bitch.”

“Something like th—”

Luna wraps her arms around my neck, almost straddling me in the process, and the way my dick twitches, I know I need this to stop fast because one, I’m not entertaining women, ever. Two, this is my friend, and my dick is being a traitorous asshole. And three, she’s my friend’s ex—a friend who clearly still has feelings for her.

Luna Johnson is off-limits for all kinds of reasons.

She takes a calming breath before she speaks again. “If you want to talk about it then I’m here. But I wouldn’t blame you if you just want to forget she ever existed.” She looks around the beach house. “I say renovate this place and keep it. Just because she fucked you over doesn’t mean you should sell it.” Pulling away from the hug, I drop my hands that involuntarily made their way to her lower back.

Offering me one of her bright smiles, she continues, “It’s perfectly positioned and will be a great place for you to visit and unwind in the offseason.”

Luna stands and walks toward the sliding glass door that leads out onto the veranda. The sun is starting to set and shines a gorgeous glow on the horizon. Opening the doors and stepping out, she makes her way to the edge and rests her arms on the railings. “You can’t give up a view like this.”

I come to stand next to her and inhale the refreshing salty breeze. A lock of her auburn hair dances in the corner of my vision, and I take in the way the retreating sun complements her features perfectly.

Even if nothing else works out this summer, I know I’ve rekindled an invaluable friendship with a very special woman.

A few more beats pass as we listen to the crashing waves before Luna speaks again. “I don’t know if your dad and Luke plan to help you with this place, but I have time. I know I’m not exactly great with DIY, but I can paint, skim, and use a hammer.”

“You have teaching,” I reply, slightly taken aback by her offer.

“Nah-eh, summer break starts next week, and other than some lesson planning, I’m a free agent.”

“Well...I’ll need to get some stepladders,” I say, trying to keep my face as straight as possible.

She shoots me an unamused look. “And I’ll be able to reach all the places your oversized ass can’t get to, so it’s the perfect combination.”

I lean my forearms on the railing and nod to myself, my gut telling me this is a great and a terrible idea all at once. “Okay, Rocket; you’re on.”

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CHAPTER SIX

LUNA

It's the first day of summer break, and it's nice to wake early, head to the beach for a morning swim, and then go over to Zach to help with the house.

Am I any good at DIY? Abso-fucking-lutely not.

Was it an excuse to see more of him? You bet it was.

Did I jump straight in without thinking? Of course you did, Luna.

Sure, I can paint a beautiful canvas, but I might've exaggerated the skimming and hammering part. Really though, how hard can it be?

It's six in the morning when I dump my change bag on the sand and begin stripping down to my swimsuit. The ocean is calm today, with only a slight ripple in the waves, and even for an early June morning, I can tell it's going to be a hot day.

I gather my long, sometimes unruly hair into a messy bun. I prefer to keep my hair down most of the time, but since it reaches the lower part of my back, it's a nightmare to swim with it like that.

I'm a strong swimmer. My dad taught me when I was younger. Before he left Mom and got himself a new family in New Zealand, he'd bring me down to the beach and help me master strokes quickly. Since then, it's kind of stuck. I'm not into the gym or running around the neighborhood, but

swimming is peaceful, and call me weird, but I like the water to be cold. The shock of it against my warm skin feels invigorating, and they say it's good for the mind. I do my best thinking here.

Thirty minutes later, I'm spent. It's hard work swimming against the tide, even with hardly any waves. It's still really early morning, and I hope Zach is up. Otherwise, I may be waking him...but I can see how that might come with some benefits.

I walk out of the ocean and immediately welcome the slight breeze as it floats across my skin. For saying I'm a Floridian, I'm as pale as they come, and my fair skin is a stark contrast to my deep red plunging swimsuit.

Reaching for my towel, I hear my phone ring and grab it from my bag. Zach's contact flashes across the screen.

"Hey, I'm just on my w—"

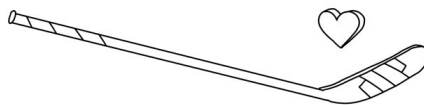
"I know where you are. I'm watching you. I—I mean not like that. I was just, eh never mind. Just look up."

I can't hide my amusement at his awkwardness. I look up to see Zach at least a hundred yards away, standing on his veranda, a cup of coffee in one hand, his phone to his ear in the other. He's in nothing but low-slung gray sweatpants and a backward black cap. Sweet baby Jesus, he doesn't play fair. Okay, he needs to cover his bottom half, but with every woman's kryptonite? And was the backward cap really necessary?

I wrap my towel around me quickly, feeling like my very average body is on full display. "Can I grab a shower in your bathroom before we start? I need to wash all the salt off."

There are a few beats of silence, and for a moment, I wonder if the call's been cut.

But then he speaks again, his tone low and slightly gravelly. "Yeah, sure."



ZACH

I knew her body was hot; it would be impossible for any guy not to notice.

Luna doesn't wear skimpy clothes, but her legs and tight ass hadn't escaped my attention in the past. Even in high school, I caught myself checking her out once or twice and felt like an asshole for doing it; she was Luke's girl.

But what I've just seen down on the beach? I couldn't tear my eyes away. Luna Johnson is smoking hot. I've seen a lot of stunning women in my time, but, fuck me. It's kind of apt she has this obsession with space because goddamn, she is out of this world. Her full breasts, the way her waist dips but then leads to her perfect round ass and grabbable thighs.

What the fuck possessed me to call and then *fucking tell her* that I'd been watching? I step back into my living room and inwardly groan at the level of cringe. My still hard dick won't back down and, in these sweats, I need to grab some boxers to at least try and hide my level of appreciation. I strip down and throw a pair on. Ideally, I'd take myself to the shower and sort this out properly, but she's on her way over, and the last thing I need is for her to catch me jerking off.

Get a grip, Zach. She's your friend, and you don't do relationships or hookups. Maybe that's why I'm reacting this way? I haven't gotten laid in months. Not since Amie back in December, and it's not like I plan to change that any time soon, so my dick will have to get used to my hand.

I throw my sweatpants back on and grab a shirt just as there's a knock, and I make my way to let her in, all while practicing my poker face.

"Luna Johnson reporting for service." She gives me a little salute and steps through the door.

"Have you had breakfast?" I ask, falling in behind her on the way to the kitchen.

She dumps her bag on one of the stools. "Not yet, but I could go for a coffee?" She leans forward on the counter, the low-cut beach dress she's wearing doing nothing to hide her cleavage. I take off in search of coffee, anything to busy my hands and distract my eyes.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I'm halfway through stirring creamer into our drinks when there's another knock on the door. "Do you want me to get it?" Luna asks.

"Nah, it's good." I set her drink down and head for the door.

Swinging it open, I find Luke standing on my porch. "Hey, man."

Shit. I have his ex, who I'm ninety-nine percent sure he still has feelings for based on his behavior at the barbecue, sitting at my kitchen counter, dressed in a wet beach dress and swimsuit.

He slides his hands into his jeans pockets. "Hey, I was just checking in to see how the renovations are going. Do you still need a hand?"

Luke looks off to the side, and it's then that I notice Luna's car parked in my driveway. It's barely seven o'clock...*fuuuuck*. This doesn't look good.

He turns back to face me, and I lean against the door frame, arms folded against my chest and taking up a casual stance. Honesty is the best policy, I guess. "She's here to help me out with painting since she has some spare time on her hands with summer break."

His brows knit together in confusion. "Paint? I don't think I've ever seen Luna do any DIY." He laughs, "She called me over last month to hang a print."

Fuck me, this is awkward. But I don't like the way he's mocking her apparent lack of skill. "I think she just wants to busy herself and took pity on the huge job I've got here."

"Mm-hmm," he responds. I can't tell if he's mad, sad, or indifferent. The guy has a better poker face than me, that's for sure.

He looks down and scuffs the ground with his sneaker. "Anyway, I was just checking in." He turns to walk away and back to his truck where it's parked along the sidewalk, but then stops and faces me. "You know where I am if you need me."

Jesus, I feel like an asshole, and I haven't done anything wrong. "Thanks, man. Stop by sometime for a beer?"

"Sure, why not." He climbs back into his truck, cranks the engine, and takes off down the road, reminding me of all the reasons why swearing off any type of romantic attachment is absolutely the right thing to do. I've had enough complications to last me a lifetime.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LUNA

“I started ripping up the floor in here and laying new boards, but I need to grab more materials to continue with the job. I'm going to check out color choices for the bedrooms, so I'll run to the store later.”

Zach's been off this past half hour since he answered the door. I swear I heard Luke's voice, but I can't understand why that would cause an issue. I'm over here helping out a friend. I jumped in the shower, and he started going through all the tasks he still has left to do. But he's been, I don't know...strange?

“The kitchen was recently replaced by the previous owners, and the walls are good in there, so I figured we could get away with just painting if you want to make a start?” He turns to me with a hesitant smile.

“Yeah, sure. I guess it needs prepping, the walls wiping and taping up?” That's literally the extent of my knowledge when it comes to DIY.

Zach lifts a curious eyebrow. “You've done this before?”

“Well, duh.” I nudge him in the ribs with my elbow. “I own my place and wanted to make it homely but couldn't afford to pay someone, so YouTube was my friend. Miss Independent here.” I point at the middle of my chest with pride.

His brows now furrow. “Luke didn't help you?”

“No? He’s still a friend, I guess, but he’s not my boyfriend anymore, and I don’t like asking for favors.”

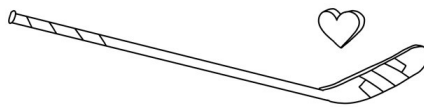
“Yeah, sure. Makes sense.” He claps his hands together and nods through to the kitchen. “I’ll show you where everything is and then head to the store.”

“I could come and help pick out colors? That is my forte after all!” And it is. My place is a mixture of pinks, yellows, and oranges—they work perfectly, if I do say so myself.

Zach shoots me a wary look from over his shoulder. “I’m not going for bright colors though; I want a moody feel.”

“To match your personality?” I retort quickly, skipping over to grab my purse.

“Precisely.”



I LOOK DOWN at the worn leather seat in Zach’s truck as we make our way to the hardware store. “You know, I’ve always been kind of surprised you don’t drive expensive cars. Do you have a Ferrari in Seattle?”

He signals right and quickly glances over at me, but I can’t see his eyes behind his aviators. “No. I have an F150 there too. You’ve always known I’m not materialistic. Money means fuck all. Some people spend it, some people save it, but most of mine goes to my Hockey Now foundation. Others need it more than I do. Bottom line, we all enter and leave this world in the same way. When I think back to how Mom and Dad poured every penny into my career and went without themselves, the least I can do is pay it forward and help those less fortunate and share the same dreams as me.”

“So, you put all your money into the charity? I thought the galas did most of that?”

“Oh yeah, they do. Not all of my money goes to the foundation, just a large portion. I’ll change my truck when I need to.”

He hasn’t changed at all since high school—still the same grounded, straightforward, and modest Zach. He never had time for the “popular” kids at school and wasn’t impressed when the latest prom queen hung off him. He, of course, made prom king every year.

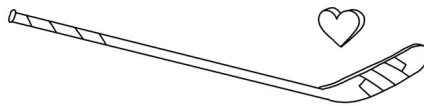
“You’re still the same Zach, aren’t you? I wish we’d kept in closer touch over the years. I know we live across the country, but I should’ve called you more, texted you more than every once in a while.”

He finds a space in the store parking lot and puts the truck in park, his left forearm resting over the steering wheel. With his right hand, he reaches over and plucks gently at my bright pink T-shirt and smiles down at my neon Converse and denim shorts. “We kind of kept in touch, but yeah, I’m sorry I wasn’t more present in yours and everyone’s lives back here. I’m happy to see you’re still the crazy, bright, fun-loving Luna I always knew.”

He pulls off his glasses, and I see the warmth in his turquoise eyes as they cast down my legs where his gaze lingers a touch longer than normal. Is it possible he’s attracted to me? I’ve never seen him look at me in that way. Or maybe I’ve never noticed.

The traffic and noise from the outside world are drowned out by the long stretch of silence between us as we study each other. It can only be a few seconds, but the way he looks at me, I could bottle it to last a lifetime.

Finally, he breaks eye contact and reaches into the center console for his wallet. “Come on, Rocket. I need your big strong arms to carry all the shit I need to buy.”



ZACH

There’s not a fucking chance in hell I’m painting my bedroom sunshine yellow.

“I don’t care if that’s the latest trend, it’s not going on my wall. Gray is.” I reach across and swipe two moon-gray paint swatches from the shelf, ready to head over and have the paint mixed. “Look, at least it’s *moon* gray,” I say tapping the swatch.

Luna rolls her eyes. “So, you want to sleep in Eeyore’s ass.”

“I’m sorry, *what?*”

“In his ass? He’s gray and miserable, and so is your new bedroom.” She nods at the swatches I’m holding. “I’m not putting *that* on your walls.”

My lips tremble, trying to hold back the laughter fighting to break out. I’m not going to give her the satisfaction of winning this round of tit-for-tat. “Whatever. It’s mainly going on my ceiling, so you won’t be able to reach, even *with* stepladders.” I had no intention of putting it on my ceiling but I know it will piss her off even more than just the walls. So it looks like it’s going everywhere, for fuck’s sake.

I walk back toward her and rest my other arm on top of her head. She makes a great leaning post. “Come on; I want to pay and be out of here today. If you’re a good girl, I’ll even grab us lunch on the way home.”

“Oh, let’s do pizza. I’m craving it after my morning swim.”

Probably not the best idea since I’m now sticking to a strict nutritional plan to help with rehabilitation and building strength. But she’s doing me a solid, and watching her smile with excitement helps me forget the shit I’ve been through these past few months. If I’m totally honest, I’ve barely thought about the injuries I’m carrying or Amie since the moment I got home, or more accurately, from when I started hanging out with Luna.

We make it to the checkout, and somehow, I’ve acquired three new houseplants and a sundial for the veranda. I’m likely to kill the plants within a week and never use the dial, but again, if it makes her happy.

The cashier rings up my total. She’s pretty and blonde and a hundred percent my type as she eye fucks me over the counter. It’s clear she knows who I am, but I’m not about to draw attention to myself, and most people in my hometown leave me to go about my business. It’s another reason why I love it here.

I pull out my black AMEX when I notice Luna shifting uncomfortably. “Put it on this please—”

“Becca!” she squeaks. “We went to high school. You were in bio-chem with me. I sat two rows behind you.”

I have no recollection of her whatsoever, but I do remember the girls who sat in those seats being the bitches of Eastbourne High, where we all went.

“Oh, yeah. Hi.”

Luna takes one of the plants carefully off the side and holds it in her arms. “Hi, Becca,” she says, looking down at the ground. There’s a story there for sure, and I don’t like the way it’s clearly making her feel.

Once finished checking out, I come up alongside Luna who's a few paces ahead and striding through the parking lot—the leaves on the plant bouncing with each step she takes. “What’s the story with Becca?”

“Nothing. I’m just not *Becca*’s biggest fan.”

I unlock the truck and start loading up the bed. “Why not?”

“Don’t you remember? I mean, I get it was over a decade ago, and she wasn’t exactly terrible to me personally, but she was to a lot of my friends back then. People like her don’t realize the long-term damage they do when they’re mean at school.”

I guess she’s right, but I wouldn’t know since most were crawling up my ass. It was only ever Luke, Luna, and a few others on the team I let get close to me. “Well, hopefully, she’s changed her ways now.”

“Yeah, let’s hope so.” She takes the now empty cart but stops and turns over her shoulder, a sincere look in her deep brown eyes. “Zach?”

“Yeah?”

“Just be careful to make sure people want you for the right reasons. I mean, you can obviously do whatever with whomever you want, but I just don’t want to see you get hurt again.”

My heart squeezes, catching me right off balance, and I have no idea what to do with that. Without thinking anything through, I react on instinct. Slamming the tailgate shut, I walk the few paces over to her and swipe the swirling auburn hair from her forehead, replacing it with a chaste kiss. “Thank you for looking out for me, Rocket.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

LUNA

I'm spent. My arms ache, my legs ache, even my fingers ache. Plus, I've devoured my body weight in pizza for lunch, and I just made us both grilled cheese with a tossed salad. I. Am. Done.

Zach pats his rock-hard stomach through his fitted, black T-shirt. "The nutritionist is gonna be stoked when she finds out what I've eaten today. You're a bad influence."

I wave a hand in front of me. "Ah, you probably worked it all off anyway. Plus, you run and work out every day. Live a little, Evans."

Kicking my feet up on the tiny couch, I rest my legs across his lap. He has one arm along the back and a bottle of beer in his hand.

He looks down at my bare feet and purple, manicured toes and raises a brow. "Comfortable there, Rocket?"

"Yep," I reply, popping the p. "Just missing the foot massage."

He leans forward, sets his half-empty bottle on the table, and turns his head to look at me properly. "Seriously? You want me to give you a foot rub? I've been ripping up the spare bedroom floor all day." He wiggles his inked fingers in front of me. "You might have pretty toes, but these bad boys are tired."

"Pretty toes?" I laugh. "Is that some kind of backhanded compliment?"

“They’re genuinely pretty toes.” Taking me completely off guard, he runs a finger along the top of my right foot. “I could probably get both of your feet in one of my shoes.”

I pull my foot away quickly. It’s insanely ticklish. But the shot of electricity his touch evokes travels way further through my body than normal.

A smug grin pulls at his lips. “You’re ticklish aren’t you.”

“No.”

“Don’t lie; no one likes a liar.”

“I’m n—”

I don’t get time to finish my lie because he’s on me, pinning my legs down with one muscular arm. I’m no match for him, but I give it my best shot to break free from the torture.

“Woah, you’re wild!” he barks out.

“I’m not above using violence!” I scream as I continue to thrash around, my fits of giggles beginning to exhaust me. His calloused palms and fingertips make the sensation even more unbearable.

“Give it your best shot, Rocket.”

He’s laughing now, and despite my crazed state, I notice the gorgeous smile breaking out across his face—one I haven’t seen in so long, its absence clear even from social media posts. He looks light and free and everything I want for the man who deserves it all.

Temporarily distracted by the happiness radiating off him, I stop kicking. When he notices, he stills his hands too, until all we’re left doing is staring at one another for a moment too long and for the second time today.

It might be the fun we found earlier, even in the most menial tasks like painting. Or it could be this moment right here that makes me believe that pulling my legs off his lap and rising to my knees is absolutely the right idea. As I place my left hand against his chest, he never breaks eye contact with me. And when his eyes fall to my mouth, I take a chance on something I’ve thought about doing since freshman year. I hover over him as he sits on the couch, but he doesn’t say no. His tongue swipes across his bottom lip, and I close the space between us entirely. His lips are soft and full as they move over mine. His breath teases my skin as it sends waves through my body, pooling at my heat.

The way I want him.

The way I’ve always wanted him.

I let out a soft whimper that seems to ignite him as his hands come under my ass, lifting me to straddle his lap. He deepens the kiss, his tongue peeking out to caress mine.

Oh, holy fuck can he kiss.

I want to do nothing but kiss him forever.

I'm drowning in his touch when he pulls back, and the loss I feel is instant. My hand flies to my slightly swollen lips, the feel of his facial hair still dancing across my skin.

"Shit, fuck. We shouldn't have done that." Zach squeezes his eyes shut.

It's like all the ties to my blissful suspension are cut, and I come crashing down to earth with a bang. "W-what? Why?" Surely, he felt the undeniable pull between us. I can't be imagining it. I still have the goosebumps as evidence.

"You're my friend, Luna, and I'm...I'm not in a good place right now. I can't give you whatever it is you think I can. I'm fucking broken, torn up and damaged, and I'm not about to get involved with anyone only to hurt her. Especially not you." He runs his hands up and down my sides in a soothing motion, like that's supposed to alleviate the total embarrassment and rejection tearing through me. "You mean too much to me."

I pull back off his lap and come to stand in front of him between his slightly parted legs. Crossing my arms over my chest, I fight back the tears threatening to break free.

God, I feel like such a freakin' idiot.

What was I thinking? I totally misjudged this. Of course, Zach Evans sees me as a friend. I couldn't be any further from his type. "Okay, I understand. I'm really sorry. I don't know what I was—"

"Hey, it's cool, Luna; it's fine. I'm flattered. Really, I am." He comes to a stand and wraps his arms around me, resting his chin on top of my head. "I shouldn't have kissed you back. I guess you've been a lifeline for me since I've been home. The one good thing, caring for me, looking out for my best interests." He lets out a heavy sigh. "We just got carried away." Pulling back, he places a hand on each of my shoulders, looking me in the eyes as he swipes a piece of hair from my cheek. "We're good, right?"

I nod and fight to stay strong. He doesn't need to see the truth, that it couldn't be any further from "good." I can save that for when I get home. "Yeah, sure."

I glance at my watch. It's not even late, but I need out and away from the painfully awkward atmosphere I've created. "I am going to get going though. It's late, and I have chores at home. I'm sure you probably want to relax, and, yeah. I'll see myself out."

"Luna."

I'm already halfway to the kitchen and grabbing my bag from the counter when he calls my name in a defeated tone. I feel sick to my stomach at the way I once again humiliated myself and overstepped. I swear to God I could barf right here—that would round off my embarrassment perfectly.

Feeling dizzy and my head spinning out, I pause in the archway separating the kitchen from the living room and see Zach still standing in the same place, his shoulders slumped, his hands shoved in the back pockets of his jeans.

I fight to wear a smile, as strained as it may be. "I get it; it's fine. I'll be over tomorrow, and we can get back to it and forget any of this ever happened."

I'm out the front door and racing to my car, trying to stay upright as waves of nausea continue to overtake me. I need to get home and hide under a mountain of blankets because, honestly, I don't think my heart can take hearing another word.

CHAPTER NINE

ZACH

Where the fuck is she?

I take another sip of coffee and pull out my phone. I set it down and head for the veranda once I see I still have no notifications. It's past eight, and by now, Luna would've finished her morning swim and be set up and painting my kitchen, giving me shit about the boring color going on the walls.

But she isn't anywhere to be seen, and I know it's to do with what happened last night.

I've never had a kiss like it. Honestly, I'm not even sure if I've ever kissed anyone before I kissed Luna last night. The charge between us made every other time seem nothing more than a blip on my radar. The moment our lips connected, it was like an atomic bomb had landed right in the middle of my life. I can still feel the way she moved on my lap, the squeeze of her thighs around me, and her soft, sweet mouth on mine. The whimper she made at my touch has replayed over and over in my head, invading my dreams.

So I freaked out.

I remembered all the reasons I was steering clear of getting involved with someone. But pulling away from her cut deeper than I ever imagined,

and seeing the look in her eyes? A look that I put there. I never want to be responsible for making her feel that way again. I never want her to feel hurt like that by anyone. Light like hers is supposed to illuminate the entire world, and it needs to be cherished. Just another reason why my gray, miserable ass should stay well away.

My head whips around when my phone buzzes across my coffee table. Stumbling over the frame of the sliding doors, I race toward it and pick it up. As much as I love her, Mom is not the name I was hoping to see.

“Hey, honey! Just checking in to see how the renovations are coming along. I was thinking of stopping by this weekend when I’m off work.”

“Yeah, sure. Things are progressing.” The kitchen is halfway to being fully painted, and when I look at the half-finished walls, a wave of uncertainty passes through me, wondering if it will be me who finishes Luna’s neat work. “Still got a lot left to do.”

“You can always call on your dad and Luke you know. He stopped by yesterday.”

My stomach clenches as I recall what Luke saw yesterday morning.

“Yeah, how is he?” I reply, trying to sound casual.

“Well, to be honest, he seemed distant. He mentioned he’d offered to help you. Maybe you should take him up on it. It could be a chance for you to get close again.

You two were inseparable when you were younger.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Mom pauses for a moment. “Is everything alright? Maybe you need to come over here, and I’ll make you some dinner. You’ve had a really stressful time.”

I haven’t been over to see my parents in a week, and guilt racks through me. I barely see them during the season. “Tell you what, Mom, come over on Saturday, and I’ll show you the place and then take you for lunch. I’m guessing Dad’s working.”

“Ah, that sounds wonderful! Yes, he is. We can have Mom and Zachy time.”

Rolling my eyes at the pet name she’s used since I was in diapers, I check the time. It’s now half past eight. She’s not coming over, is she?

Panic races through me. “Mom, I gotta go.”

“Sure, sure, I get it. Bye, honey. See you Saturday!”

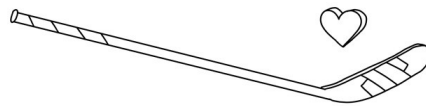
“Bye.”

I disconnect the call and immediately scroll to Luna's contact which, at some point, I changed to "Rocket," and a wry smile pulls at my lips; the name suits her perfectly.

The phone rings and rings, and with each second that passes, my heart drops lower in my ribcage until I'm connected with her voicemail, her cheery voice singing down the line.

I've fucked this completely, haven't I?

Not giving it a second thought, I shove my feet into my sneakers and grab my keys from the side. I can't remember exactly where she lives, but somehow, I still remember the street the taxi dropped her off on that New Year's night. If she's home, hopefully, her car will be in the driveway.



IT DOESN'T TAKE me long to identify her place; I see her bright-blue, beaten-up Toyota right away.

Pulling up along the sidewalk opposite her house, I realize this may come off as needy, or possibly obsessive, but I need to know she's okay with me, with our friendship, with...us.

Her house is small with a cute front garden and a bright-pink picket fence. It's on-brand for Luna. I can imagine her painting that in the summer, and a smile traces my lips once more. She seems to have that effect on me. Her porch and front door are painted in the same color, but when I step up the couple of steps and knock loudly, waiting for a good minute before knocking again, the smile I was wearing instantly vanishes as I realize something's not right. I knock again, even harder this time, but there's still no response and no sound of movement either. I try the door, but it's locked.

Shit.

Stepping down from the porch, I round her house and walk down the driveway until I'm met with her locked side gate. I don't think much of it, or who might be watching, when I take a couple of steps back and run at it, clearing it in a single leap. At least my upper body is strong, the hundred daily push-ups and resistance training I've been doing paying off. And there's no twinge in my leg as I land either.

I've never been inside or in the back of Luna's place. She bought it and moved in after she finished college, and I was already in Seattle, but I'm guessing there's a way to get in around the back, since there is for most places. I fucking hope so anyway because every instinct is telling me I need to.

I'm relieved but still kind of worried when I try the sliding patio door, and it opens easily. Her house is unsecured; why didn't she lock it? Did she just forget because she was upset when she left my place last night? Another wave of guilt rattles through me as I remember the look on her face as she turned and fled through the front door.

Her small living area is the first room I enter. It's decorated in peach, yellow, and soft pink; there's no doubt that I have the right house.

"Luna?" I call out into the open space.

No answer.

So I make for the stairs, assuming they must be through the living room because to the left is her small, white and pink kitchen.

"Luna!" I call again but more frantically as I take the stairs three at a time.

Finally, I hear a soft, almost pained, moan filter from one of the rooms, and fuck if it doesn't break my heart when I try the first door and see her sprawled across her bed.

She's wearing an old college T-shirt and tiny sleep shorts, but my eyes don't linger on her flawless body for long when I see how pale she is. Her disheveled deep-auburn hair accentuates how sick she looks.

"Zach?" She tries to lift her head but fails after only making it a couple of inches, and it drops back down onto her pillow. "S-stay a-away from me. I think I have a stomach flu." She retches forward and slams a hand over her dehydrated lips.

Finally, she moves it away. "You're going to catch it, and for real, I've never been this sick. I f-feel like death."

Like hell am I going to leave her in this state. Her room is in a real mess, like she's been ill all night and not had a chance to clean up. Half-empty glasses and medication are strewn across her nightstand, and when I approach her and place the back of my hand along her forehead, she's on fire. Her prominent freckles have faded, but the heat radiating from her body is enough to power a thousand blocks. I take one of her contrastingly

cold and clammy hands in mine. “I can’t leave you, Rocket. Not like this. Tell me—what do you need?”

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CHAPTER TEN

LUNA

“A new body right about now would be great. Do you have one?”
Through my puffy, blurry eyes, I see Zach hovering over me, a soft smile on his lips. “They ran out of stock, but I can get you some Tylenol. You’re burning up, baby.”

His hand sweeps across my forehead again and...wait, did he just call me...

Jesus, I’m hallucinating now.

I shake my head. “I can’t keep anything down, and I’m out anyway.”

He sucks in a sharp breath and takes a seat next to me on the bed, the mattress dipping with his weight. Holy mother, he smells good enough to eat. I think he’s the only thing my retching stomach would never reject.

“I’ll go to the drugstore. What else do you need?”

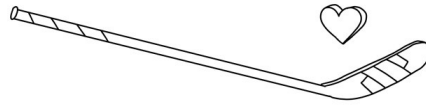
Fighting back another wave of sickness, I groan and find some strength to answer. “Just Tylenol...thanks.”

“Okay, I’ll be back. Just stay in bed.”

Popping an eyelid open, I pin him with a look that says, “Do I look like I’m about to run a half marathon?”

“Still giving me shit even when you can barely move. That’s my girl.”

I try my best to find a victory smile, but even moving my mouth is too much at this point. So I close my eyes and roll back over, desperately searching for sleep and a reprieve from my banging head and aching muscles.



I DON'T KNOW how much time passes when I hear the front door and then movement downstairs in my kitchen, which sits directly below my bedroom.

It must be at least fifteen minutes later when my door creaks open, and Zach appears in my doorway holding a tray of toast and jam, another plate of scrambled eggs, and a fresh fruit salad. As he approaches, he sets it on the bed and reaches into the pocket of his hoodie, fetching out the Tylenol. He points to the glass of fresh orange and water and shrugs a shoulder, grimacing. "I can't cook for shit as you know, and I didn't know what you'd want, but at least take these." He hands me two capsules and then sits at the end of my bed, waiting for me to swallow them.

I pop them into my mouth and chase them with a small gulp of water, surveying all he's done for me. "Thank you; you didn't have to."

"Have you been sick again?"

I shake my head. "No, thank God."

"You might have a chance at keeping them down then."

I reach toward the tray and tear a small piece of toast, popping it into my mouth and chewing it slowly, praying it stays down to give me some strength. "I'm sorry to let you down with the house today."

He can tell I can't manage much more, so he picks up the tray and sets it on the floor, then scoots closer to me, his turquoise eyes softer than ever. Checking my fever, he nods. "I couldn't care less about today, Luna. I was just terrified you'd never want to see me again after last night."

The way his warm, calloused palm feels against my skin instantly soothes all the aches settling into my bones. His touch is the best medicine I could ever buy, a bespoke balm made just for me.

But I push those feelings deep down because they won't serve me. "I would've been back. Like I said, we can move on like it never happened. I

just got home, and the next thing I know, I'm heaving and running the worst fever I've ever had."

Zach shifts uncomfortably on my bed, like something I just said doesn't sit right with him. He looks down at my shirt and shorts and then at my matted hair. "Do you think you can manage a shower? It might make you feel better."

I still feel like hell, but keeping the medication, water, and toast down may be helping as I rise up onto my elbows. "I can give it a try."

I swing my legs out to the side and immediately feel light-headed, but Zach takes my hand and puts an arm around my waist, steadying me as I get to my feet.

"Were you going to ask anyone for help or try and fight through this yourself?"

I blow out a humored breath. "Do what I've always done, and just get on with things."

"What about your mom?" he asks.

I feel sick enough without the reminder of her constant absence. "Can we not?"

"Not what?"

"Not do this right now. My head's spinning, and I feel like I could still puke at any moment."

Opening the door to my bathroom, he helps me inside and pulls back the curtain to the shower. "Okay, Rocket." He looks at my bath and raises a slightly uneasy brow. "Do you want me to run you a bath or...help you into the shower?"

"Shower. But I've got it from here," I say, reaching for the hem of my shirt and not thinking, *or caring*, about what he sees.

He lurches back and toward the door. "I'll be right outside." He hastily closes it behind him, but I don't miss the way his gaze lingers on my exposed stomach.

I'm in slow motion, and it feels like hours pass as I climb into the shower and set the water running before I scrub myself and wash my hair. Normally, I'd condition it since it's unruly and tangles easily, but today, I've run out of energy, and my arms ache unbearably as I wrap a towel around me. But I do feel slightly better and less dizzy from the shower, so it was a good call from Zach.

I walk back into my bedroom slowly and find him sitting on the edge of my freshly made bed, scrolling through his phone. My eyes bug out. “You changed my sheets?”

When he looks up from his phone, his eyes flare at the tiny pink towel wrapped around my naked and half-wet body. “Uh.” He brings a tattooed hand to the back of his neck and grips it, averting his eyes from me. “Yeah, I found some in your closet and thought maybe it would help freshen you up. Fresh sheets are literally my favorite thing, especially when I’m sick.” A slight flush crosses his cheeks, and damn if it isn’t adorable. This man is adorable. Kind, warm, incredibly thoughtful, and it's doing nothing to help me get over the feelings I know I need to move past.

I move across to my dresser and grab my brush, knowing if I don’t tame my unruly hair soon, then I’ll be practically ripping it out at the roots later. I pick it up and go sit on the bed next to him, all too aware I’m still wrapped in a towel but equally too exhausted to care. Slowly, I begin to drag the brush through the unconditioned strands, but it's too knotted, and I give up with a defeated huff.

“I can do that for you.”

I look at him in disbelief. “Brush my hair?”

“Yeah, you kinda look like you’re struggling a bit there.”

I hand him the brush and slowly scoot my body around so my back is to him. He begins gently working out the knots and smoothing my hair out down my back. The way his huge hands caress my head and hair so gently is an incredibly sexy juxtaposition to the rough and fierce way they move when he’s on the ice. The number of times those hands have beaten down on another player in fights.

After a long minute, I feel the bed shift from behind and then again as he gathers my hair in his hands and begins to...braid it?

“Are you braiding my hair?” I ask, turning my head slightly.

He chuckles. “Yeah, but keep your head still because I’m about as good at this as I am at cooking. If you leave it down then it’ll just get knotted again in bed.”

How in the hell am I supposed to rewind the clock on my emotions when he’s doing things like this? Everything about him is everything I want but can’t have. I need to change my approach to our friendship before I fall irrevocably for the man who just wants to keep me as his friend.

My heart twists at the realization, and as he finishes the braid, I look down at my towel still wrapped around me. “I need to chan—”

Zach shoots to his feet. “Shit, yeah, sorry. I’ll head downstairs. I need to make a couple phone calls anyway. You want anything from the kitchen?”

I shake my head and fight to keep my face from showing any signs that the last couple of minutes have left wounds that will undoubtedly turn into scars across my heart.

“No thanks.”

He nods, his eyebrows slightly pinched together before he turns to leave.

“Zach.”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. I’ve never had anyone...yeah... just, thank you.”

“Don’t mention it, Rocket.”

Then he’s out my door and down the stairs in a flash. I grab a fresh sleep set from my dresser and crawl back into bed, pulling the covers over my head. The nauseated feeling in my stomach makes a full return, but this time, it’s clear it has little to do with the flu.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ZACH

“Whistler? Why the fuck there?”

Jon yawns and then whispers something, I assume to Felicity, though I can't hear it, and I'm not sure I want to. Those two are kind of sickeningly in love. Nice if you can find it. I think I'm more likely to wake up and be fluent in Italian than I am to find it for myself.

“Vancouver isn't using it for training this year, and Coach wants us there in July for an offseason team-building week. Good chance for the rookies and new trades to settle in.”

I lean forward on the veranda, coffee in hand, watching Luna complete her morning swim routine. As pervy as it is, I can't seem to stop myself. It's been a week since she recovered from the stomach flu, and this is the first time she's been well enough to get in the ocean. To be honest, I kind of missed it. I missed her smile, but mainly I just missed her.

“So, you thought you'd call me at seven in the morning to tell me?”

“We're headed to the airport in a minute. We're flying back to the UK to see Darcy for a week and taking Jack with us, so this is the only time I'll get.” Jon has all but adopted Felicity's two teenage children Darcy and Jack. Darcy is due to start college in England this September, and he's grown close to her son Jack, who I hear is an NHL star in the making,

especially since Jon started on the coaching staff for Seattle University. Honestly, I don't know how he finds the time, but he's a committed family man now. And I'm fucking proud.

I take the last few sips of coffee and track Luna as she exits the water. She's wearing a royal-blue bikini today, and man is it doing things to my dick.

I turn and head for the living room, knowing I need to divert my attention and stay in the friend zone—my daily mantra.

"Try not to punch anyone again." By *anyone*, I'm referring to Felicity's ex-husband and total douchebag narcissistic prick, Elliott. To be honest, with the way he treated her, I'm impressed Jon hasn't buried him six feet under.

A growl rumbles from his chest. "He's going nowhere fucking near her. The only thing he'll get to see is the massive fucking rock on her hand, reminding him that she upgraded to someone who treats her right."

I chuckle, still trying to get my head around the one-eighty my best friend and former prolific playboy has undergone in a year. "So, July tenth we're all meeting? In three weeks?"

"Yeah. It'll be good to see you, man. I guess you'll be climbing the walls by then, ready to get back and see me. I know how easily missed I am."

I think about the week I'll spend away from Luna and how quickly the offseason's already passing by. I've barely thought about Seattle or anyone back there, which surprises me. As do the next words that leave my mouth. "Not really, buddy. I've been kind of preoccupied, which has been nice."

The line goes silent for a hot minute before Jon speaks. "Call me crazy, but am I totally off base when I say you being preoccupied is to do with a girl?"

Something shoots through me—excitement, fear, happiness...I don't know what it is, but it's there. I shift from one foot to another as I pour myself another coffee, knowing all too well I'm going over my daily caffeine allowance before eight a.m. I don't lie to anyone, let alone my best friend.

"You still there, man?" Jon breaks the silence.

"Yeah, I'm here." I pause and run a hand through my hair, knowing any minute, Luna will waltz through my front door, ready to start today's tasks.

“She’s an old friend, and the friendship has kind of grown into something, I don’t know...complicated.”

“Complicated? So, you want to fuck her.”

Jesus, playboy ways die hard.

“Yes, no, maybe. It’s complicated. I’m not doing relationships or sex of any kind, and she’s...she’s kind of off-limits.”

“Off-limits how?”

“Off-limits because of my self-imposed sex hiatus. Off-limits because Amie left me fucked in the head over trusting anyone ever again.” I draw a deep intake of breath and continue, finding it oddly therapeutic to say all this out loud after weeks of it building inside me. “Off-limits because it’s Luna Johnson and there’s history there, history that—”

“Oh, woah. Bro, shit.” I don’t need to finish; he’s already connected the dots since he’s met Luna before. “The cute redhead? The one who dated your former high-school buddy, Luke?”

“How do you remember all this?”

He laughs, and it’s kind of evil-sounding. “Because, my friend, despite me being wrecked that night, it didn’t take a fucking genius to see the eyes you were giving each other. It also didn’t take a genius to see that her ex was still head over heels for her.”

I throw the hand that’s not gripping my phone with white knuckles in the air. “Well, why didn’t you point it out back then?”

“Not my business. Plus, you never mentioned it. We got back to Seattle and fell back into a routine. Then you met Amie, and I guess the rest is history.”

I lean forward on the counter. “I’m spending nearly every day with her. She’s helping me with this place, painting and plastering. She’s even helping me paint my fucking bedroom today. I know... I know it’s dangerous, but I can’t seem to stay away. I’m so scared of losing our friendship. She means a lot to me.”

He blows a breath. In a low but serious tone, Jon begins to lay it all out. “Remember when I was pussyfooting around Felicity and shit scared to push things further?”

I think back to the multiple conversations we had last year. “Yeah?”

“Well, all I’m saying is you told me women like her don’t come around too often, and if it’s what I want, then I need to put myself out there. Put myself on the line. I needed to lock it down.”

“Yeah, I get that, but you were fucking gone for her, over the edge man. I wouldn’t say I’m gone for Luna.”

“You’re gone for her.”

I stand up straight, panic rising within me. “What?”

“You were into her three years ago, and you’re still agonizing over her now. You can’t stay away from her; you sound like being friends with her is the best yet most torturous thing you’ve ever experienced.” He laughs. “You just sound a lot like me.”

Shit. Am I? “We have a strong bond; that’s all.”

“Keep lying to yourself, buddy.”

Frustration swells within me. “Yeah, well it’s not like I can do anything about it anyway.”

“Why not?”

I scoff. “Luke. Ruining two friendships for sex.”

“One, they were together fucking years ago. Two, it’s nothing that can’t be solved by talking to him before you do anything. Three, it’s not just sex. If I thought it was, then I would be telling you to back the fuck off because all the above wouldn’t be worth it just to get your dick wet. You’re making excuses to be around her. You don’t even want to come see me and the team in Whistler.”

I groan and drag a hand down my face. “I was supposed to come home to get away from complex bullshit like this.”

I imagine if he were standing next to me right now, he’d be patting a sympathetic hand on my shoulder. “Look at it this way. If she’s your girl, then maybe you just made your life far more straightforward than you could ever imagine. The moment I knew Felicity was it for me, nothing else really mattered. Life has never been so easy.”

The door clicks open, and my eyes shoot to the entryway. “I gotta go, man.”

He full-on belly laughs, the fucker. “She’s just got to your place, hasn’t she?”

“Yes,” I reply in a hushed tone.

“Remember, when you give it to her for the first time it’s best if you—”

I cut the call. As much as I appreciate his initial words of wisdom, I’m not about to take a sex pep talk from him while the woman in question stands in my kitchen, looking like a fucking dream in a tasselly, barely-there, tie-dye, soaking-wet beach dress.

I look up and force a smile as Luna walks toward me and dumps her bag down on the counter then strides over to the coffee maker. Her gorgeous, toned legs are on full display as her ass sways, and I can just about make out the outline of her bikini bottoms.

Stop fucking staring, Zach.

“Morning, grumpy. Shall we get started?”

Fucking hell.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

LUNA

“I got it!”

A small victory as I smash another nail into the floorboard and it goes in straight for the first time. Standing, I punch the air like I’ve just discovered the secret to eternal happiness. “Yes!”

“You’re a pro.” Zach strolls over from where he’s been fixing the hallway wall and gives me a high five.

He’s on edge, I can tell. But I’ve tried to move past it and keep the air easy between us. Since I told myself that nothing would or could happen with him, as much as it hurt, I’ve been able to relax into our friendship more. Sure, him walking around in nothing but a pair of athletic shorts and sneakers, his ripped, tattooed chest on full display and flexing as he works on the house, has about killed me at times. But I’ve surprised myself with how much I’ve enjoyed knuckling down and powering through the renovations.

It’s nine in the evening when we finally put down our tools, and Zach turns to me. “We were supposed to paint my bedroom today, but I think it can wait. I’m not about to start moving the bed at this hour.”

I yawn as the back of my hand covers my mouth. “Yeah, I guess I should get going.”

He looks over his shoulder toward the kitchen. "I've got some left-over chili Mom brought over yesterday if you want to stay. I can reheat us some."

I cock my head to side, "Aww. Such a mommy's boy."

Something flashes in his eyes as he takes a step closer. I can smell his woodsy cologne, making my knees weak. He leans down until our foreheads are only centimeters apart. "I might be many things, but I'm definitely no mommy's boy, Rocket."

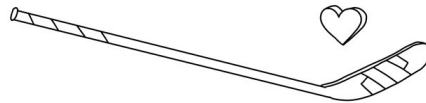
A delicious shiver shoots straight to my core. I've never heard him speak like that before, his voice is deep and oh-so sexy. Reaching up on my tiptoes, I close the space between us a little more. "No?"

He shakes his head, his pupils blown slightly. "No. I'm not a very good boy."

Oh. Holy. Hell.

He pins me with a shit eating, definitely-made-you-wet grin and stalks off toward the kitchen.

What the fuck just happened, and where did *that* Zach Evans come from?



FOR A CHANGE, the stars are bright in the clear night sky; it's been overcast the past few days. So when I commented that Ursa Major is visible tonight, and it's one of my favorites, Zach pulled the small couch out onto the veranda so we could watch the constellation.

"I think you could do with some permanent furniture out here," I say, leaning back and tucking my feet under myself.

"Yeah, I'll put some on order." He leans back too, staring up at the sky. "Where's Orion's Belt?"

I chuckle. "That's only visible during the winter months, typically from January through April. Some say it's possible to see it during the summer in the southern hemisphere and others claim they've seen it across the globe all year round, but I haven't. Especially with my telescope. That thing's seen better days."

He stays quiet for a few beats as the soft evening breeze and sound of ocean waves cast a peaceful feeling across me.

“I haven’t seen many barbecues since that first one we went to when I arrived back.”

I shrug. “They’re few and far between. It’s normally Luke who arranges them, but he hasn’t been around as much.”

I feel Zach tense a little, his arm pressed up against mine. “Yeah, he’s busy with Dad, I think.”

“I’m not a massive fan of them anyway. I only went to the last one because I heard you’d be there.” The words tumble from my mouth before I can stop them, and my entire body heats at how much I’ve revealed. Even though I kissed him, somehow telling him I was only showing up to see him feels more intimate.

He turns and pokes me lightly in the ribs. “Yeah? I didn’t know I was that special to you.”

I shrug nonchalantly, trying to backpedal as best I can. “Must’ve got you confused with another Zach, but I’m kind of stuck with you now.”

He wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his chiseled body. I feel the heat radiating from him through his thin, fitted, black shirt, and I lean so my back is flat to his chest. One of his arms comes around me, and before I can register what I’m doing, my fingers lightly trace the tattoos decorating his tanned skin.

“What does this one mean?” I point to an intricate illustration of a tiger just above his elbow.

He looks down and straightens his arm out in my lap, his chin resting on my shoulder. “That’s a Sumatran Tiger. One of the rarest and most endangered species.”

“Does this one have a meaning?” I remember that not all his tattoos do; some he got because he simply loved how they looked.

“That one? Yeah. Mom always said I was a Sumatran. A rarity and a fighter.”

“I can see that. On the ice for sure.”

“Yeah. Too many fights to count.”

I turn to face him, his sparkling turquoise eyes framed by thick, dark lashes as they search mine. “I know you’ve always defended everyone out there, but CTE is a real thing you know. There are only so many blows your head can take. I know...” I pause and consider my next words carefully, I

don't want to upset him. "I know you're fully recovered from the spinal concussion from the hit in December, but it's the fights I worry about. It's the long-term damage they might be causing."

He draws in a huge breath, sucking me back into him further. "Yeah, I know. But it's what my game is built around. The fear factor. People are answerable to me. Plus, if I can rile them up enough to get a penalty, we get a power play. It's all tactical. I'm there to protect the smaller guys like Jessie."

I press my lips together. "So, who's looking after you? Who's got your back out there?"

His brows raise at that, like he wasn't expecting me to push hard on this, but I do. Because I care. "Don't worry about me, Luna. I can take care of myself."

I pick at the purple nail polish on my fingers, deep in thought at the way he's just brushed it off. But I decide not to push it further and instead lighten the mood.

Turning to him, I plaster on my trademark bratty grin. "Aww, mommy's boy can *definitely* look after himself."

He wiggles his fingers in front of him, mimicking my smile. "Don't push it, Rocket."

I roll my eyes and lean back into him. "Ugh, I'm way too tired to be tickled right now."

He shifts behind my weight, as I feel his palm move over my hair. It's soothing, and my eyelids flutter shut in response, not only because I'm exhausted but also because of the way his touch makes me feel.

"What about your mom? How are things?"

I pinch my lips together as the easiness I felt a moment ago disappears. "There's not much to say. Not much has changed. She's still the same serial dater."

"Do you see your dad?" He continues smoothing my hair, but I'm not sure he's aware he's doing it. Normally, Zach is hesitant with the way he touches me, but tonight... tonight he's different. Like his inhibitions have lifted, or maybe a switch has flicked, who knows. I just know I can't afford to let my mind read too much into anything with him.

"No. We speak every now and then. You know he has younger children and a new wife now though, so I guess his priorities are elsewhere."

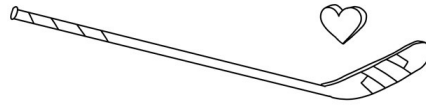
"I'm sorry they aren't more present in your life."

Me too.

“I’ve gotten used to dealing with things alone.”

“I guess we’re both kind of used to fighting our own battles.”

I shift further into him, relaxing even more. “Yeah, I guess we are.”



MY EYELIDS ARE heavy as I drift in and out of a semi-conscious state when Zach startles me, both his arms now wrapped around my waist. “Shit, it’s past one in the morning. We must’ve fallen asleep.”

I bolt right up as the blankets pool at my waist. “Oh, shit. I better get going.” I stretch up, but my body is exhausted, like a lead weight, having spent all day and most of the night working hard.

“You shouldn’t drive when you’re this tired, Luna. It’s kind of dangerous. I can take you back.”

I arch a brow at his dazed and heavy eyes. “Pot.” I point at him. “Meet the kettle.” I point at myself.

Looking around, he scratches his chest, clearly contemplating. “You can stay here if you want. I can take the couch.”

“You’re joking, right? You can barely get one leg on this thing. I can take the couch.”

He frowns. “Like hell.”

“Well, I don’t see many more options.” I get up to grab my keys and bag. Yawning and stumbling slightly on my way over to the kitchen.

“Just stay here. I have a king-size bed. We can make it work, as long as you promise not to steal the blankets in the night.”

Share a bed? Oh shit. This is not part of *Operation Get Over Wanting Zach Evans*.

So that’s why my next words make *complete* sense. “Yeah, okay. No harm, I guess.”

ZACH

Luna steps out of the bathroom across the hall, my eyes laser focused on her as she makes her way down in one of my Scorpions shirts. I lent it to her since she had no sleepwear, and I figured sleeping in just underwear or naked probably wasn't the right way to go. Even if my dick argues it absolutely, one hundred percent is.

She looks fucking sensational wrapped in my old training shirt, and for a brief moment, I imagine what she'd look like in my jersey.

Like a fucking dream.

My cock hardens further.

Not fucking now.

I watch as she slips under the comforter and turns to face me, her auburn hair cascading across the crisp white pillow. She's fucking breathtaking. Inside and out. It's like there's an aura around her that radiates light and happiness and makes everything, even the most mundane parts of life, shine with wonderment.

"You don't snore, do you?" she asks, shifting the covers under her chin and staring at me with a slight tinge of nervousness in her coffee-brown eyes.

I pin her with a playful glare, trying to relax her, *and perhaps myself*, as best I can. "Not that I'm aware of. Do you?"

"No."

"So, you don't snore, but do you snuggle?" Fuck, do I want to snuggle her. My heart thumps against my ribcage as I wait for her answer. I've never been this nervous around any woman before. But then Luna isn't just any woman to me, and the way my body responds to her tells me my head isn't playing any tricks.

"I mean, I haven't shared a bed with anyone in a long while, but I guess. I'm definitely a touchy-feely person."

My heart thumps harder at the thought of touching her, but still, the fear of ruining our friendship holds me back. I feel like I'm standing at a crossroads, my heart screaming to take a left and dive headfirst into whatever this is, just like I've always done with women. I trust Luna more than I've ever trusted anyone before, and I know she's nothing like Amie. But despite that, my head keeps slamming the breaks, reminding me of all the complications I'll potentially invite into my life, and after this past six months, fuck knows I can't deal with anymore.

Jon's words continue to ring in my head. The bombshell he dropped about me wanting her, even if I wasn't prepared to admit it myself. It's like that ten-minute conversation has opened the floodgates to my feelings. I was questioning everything before he said it all out loud. But now it's out in the open, and it's harder to ignore or even deny.

I want Luna Johnson in my bed, and not just because it's the only one available to her tonight.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LUNA

I crack an eyelid open, and as the light filters through the blinds on the patio doors, it takes me a moment to realize where I am. At Zach's, wrapped in his sheets.

The last thing I remember was him pulling me into his chest and snuggling me from behind, but we did nothing more than that. The ache inside me wanted to kiss him so badly. His heavenly scent enveloped me all night, and it's highly doubtful that it being the best night's sleep of my entire life is coincidental. I wonder if he felt the same way or if, for him, it was simply sharing a bed as friends and out of convenience. Probably the latter.

Don't let yourself get wrapped up and carried away, Luna. Look what happened last time you tried to kiss him.

But this morning, his side of the bed is empty. I can hear movement coming from the kitchen, so I whip off the covers and swing my legs around, grabbing a tie from the nightstand and throwing my hair up into a messy bun.

I pad through to the kitchen, where I find Zach making a fresh pot of coffee. All the while, he's tracking my movements as his eyes ascend my bare legs.

“Ah, that smells good,” I say, climbing onto one of the stools at the counter.

The heated look in his eyes makes it hard to know where I stand with him. One minute, I know I’m firmly in the friend zone; the next, he looks at me like *that*. A look I know isn’t reserved for his friends.

Clearing his throat, he grabs the pot and raises it slightly, offering me a drink. “Sleep well?”

I smile sleepily and stifle a yawn. “Better than I can ever recall.”

Setting a cup in front of me, he automatically adds the two sweeteners he knows I like. “Yeah, me too. Turns out you don’t snore, but you do steal the covers. Just so you know.”

“Oh, is that so? And I was just about to compliment you on giving great snuggles.” I take a sip of the piping hot coffee and eye him over the rim.

His eyes darken slightly at the flirtatious tone I can’t seem to help. “I aim to please.”

Determined to break free from my fantasizing and ultimately futile trance, I set down my mug and slap the countertop, sliding off the stool to make my way back to the bedroom. “Well, mission accomplished because I’m rested and ready to paint that bedroom of yours. But first, I need to grab my things and head back home to get changed. I’m desperate for a—”

But before I can get any further, I feel a hand gently tug at my arm, pulling me back until I flip around and crash against his chest.

I look up to find Zach’s eyes hooded and searing straight through me as heat pools in my core.

Jesus.

He brings a hand under my chin and for a long moment, he stares at my mouth before he wets his lips on reflex.

“Zach, I, it’s okay. We agreed to carry on as we were. I’m okay with that.”

The biggest lie ever.

“Are you, Rocket? Are you okay with it? Because I’m starting to think I’m not.”

Butterflies swarm my chest, and dizziness invades my head as I struggle to remain standing. His admission washes over me in a frenzy of need. I can’t find words to explain how I feel. I simply stare up at his gorgeous, masculine face and chiseled jaw.

“Fuck it.” His lips crash down against mine as he kisses me with a level of passion I didn’t think was possible. Our height difference is soon countered as he hauls me up into his arms, and I immediately wrap my legs around his waist, feeling how hard he is beneath his sweatpants.

I’m pulsing, throbbing, desperate to feel and explore his body. There have been years of crushing on him from afar, and now he’s finally kissing me with everything he has. It’s overwhelming in the best way possible.

He pulls back slightly and then sets me on the counter, coming to stand between my parted legs. The collar of his training shirt is so big it hangs over one of my shoulders, and all I have on underneath is my pink spotted underwear. My peaked nipples are visible as they press against the cotton fabric.

“Fuck. You taste so fucking good, and you look like a dream dressed in my shirt.”

His thumb traces along my bottom lip before his mouth crashes against mine once more. His tongue sweeps across the seam, and I part for him until his large, calloused palms are cupping my face, dwarfing me in size.

He’s delicious.

Breaking from our kiss, he gently strokes my cheek. “What do you want from me, Luna? Because right now, I don’t know what I have to give. But I know whatever that is, I want it to be with you.”

I know his toxic relationship with Amie has left him broken, unable to trust and start anything serious with anyone else. But I also know keeping him at arm’s length hurts even more. It’s unbearable when he looks at me like this.

“I want you,” I say without hesitation.

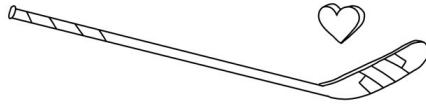
He smiles against my mouth as he places a soft kiss on my lips. “In what way do you want me? Be specific.”

Our chests are heaving as we pant and gasp for air. “I’ll take whatever pieces you can give me today, and I hope that one day, I’ll have enough to make you whole.”

I watch the column of his throat work as he swallows down my words. “You’re so fucking special, you know that? I don’t want to hurt you.” He drops his face to the crook of my neck. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be whole again. Or ready for someone else.”

“You will, and I know you won’t hurt me.” I think we both know there’s a chance he might, but after weeks of torture, that’s a risk my head and

heart are willing to take.



ZACH

Every vow I've made to myself disintegrates with each pass of my lips against hers.

It's hard to remember why I thought it was a good idea to stay away from Luna Johnson. The way my body reacts and molds to her tells me that there can never be anything wrong with this feeling.

Except I've been here before. Throwing myself into something headfirst before I've even had time to think things through, and this time, it's Luna's heart on the line.

I want to haul her into my arms, march her to my bed, and keep her all to myself for days. I want to know all the ways her body can wrap around mine. I want to fuck her hard, slow, from behind, with her on top. I want to take her in every way she'll let me.

But if I do, I might as well throw a hand grenade right into the center of our friendship and watch as the bonds we've built blast us apart, and all for what? To satisfy my need for her. I'm terrified I'll never be able to give her what she deserves, and that's the fucking world. Not a broken-up shell of the man I am now.

Life fucking sucks sometimes. Jon might be right when he says I have feelings for her—the way her lips light me up is a testament to that. But that doesn't mean the stars have aligned. I know she wants more, and I know her gentle soul will take everything I can offer, and like hell if I wouldn't hand it over gladly.

"You're in that head of yours, aren't you?" she whispers softly.

Still standing at the counter between her legs, I press my forehead against hers and nod. "There are so many potential complications. But also so much I want to say and do with you."

She exhales slowly, and her breath feels like a warm blanket to my worries. "I'm not going to hurt you."

I know. At least, I know not deliberately and never like Amie. But how many broken hearts started out with the best intentions?

"You can trust me, Zach."

I squeeze my eyes shut as I absorb words I've heard a thousand times before, the last being from the woman I was sure I was going to marry. Far more is riding on what I have with Luna. Amie was a stranger before she was my girlfriend, but Luna? She's already a part of my world I could never live without. "If we do this... if I pick you up and lay you on my bed, our friendship will never be the same. I can't lose you."

"Then don't lose me."

My heart races wildly as I consider everything working against us. "I live nearly three thousand miles from you. Do you know how intense the hockey schedule is? Aside from these three months of the offseason, I barely get an afternoon to myself. If I'm not in Seattle, I'm on some team plane across a different part of the country. You deserve to have someone present in your life. Too many people are absent when they should be hanging on your every word. *I want* to hang on your every fucking word."

She shifts slightly on the counter as my hands fall to her smooth, bare thighs, and my fingertips dip under the hem of the old shirt she wears like it's worth a million dollars. "That's just logistics. I know it will be hard, but—"

"You don't know *how hard*, Rocket. I'll never see you. Look how often I see my parents. Plus, my life looks very different in Seattle to what it is here." I take another deep breath, knowing however I put what's coming next, I'll no doubt deliver it badly. "I can't deep-dive into something. I'm a fucked-up mess, and I need to be better for you."

"There's no one better for me."

Tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, I know that's not true. "He's still got feelings for you."

She balks and pulls back from my touch entirely; the loss feels instant and ice cold. "Who's got feelings for me?"

"You know who. Luke."

She scoffs. "Are you serious? We broke up over a decade ago."

"You might be over it, but I know a struggling guy when I see one, and he's still into you."

She crosses her arms protectively over her chest, just as she did that night when we first kissed, and I reach up and pull them apart, wrapping them around my waist. I know I'm sending all kinds of mixed signals, but right now, my actions can't seem to override my messed-up mind. "It's bro code. I'd be moving in on a friend's girl."

Her voice is sharp and tinged with frustration. "I'm *not* his girl anymore. In fact, Zach, I'm not *anyone's* girl. I'm free to be with who I want, free to see who I want. This bro code stuff is bullshit."

I place my hands on the cold counter on either side of her and lean forward, my forehead resting against her chest. "I get that I just... I don't want to hurt anyone."

She brings her hands to the top of my head, sliding her dainty fingers through my hair. "We can't be responsible for everyone's feelings all of the time. He knows why I split with him, and he knows we can never go back there."

I kiss the edge of her jaw because, apparently, I can't keep my hands off her. "What happened? I know it ended just before college. He was torn up."

"I ended things with him because I knew I wanted..."

"Knew you wanted what?"

She shakes her head. "Never mind."

"Knew what, Luna?"

Removing one of her hands from my hair, she places her soft palm against my bare chest, her touch spiking my pulse. She pushes me back and drops down from the counter, looking up at me. "It doesn't matter."

"It does."

"No, it doesn't. And just for the record, I never want to hear about 'bro code' again. I'm my own person, and things ended years ago." She looks around at my partly redecorated beach house. "We're running out of time before the end of summer, and you only have six weeks before you need to be back in Seattle. We need to get moving."

I wince slightly. "Actually, I have five weeks left here in total. I need to be in Whistler for a week with the team on July tenth."

"See, no time at all." She reaches up and pats my shoulder, pretending like these past ten minutes haven't affected her when I know they have. I hope they have, because I'm a fucking mess. "Now, I need to head back home, grab a shower and fresh clothes. Then I'll be back to paint your room in that cheerful shade of gray you insist on."

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LUNA

“This color is even worse on the wall.”
“I think it's stylish,” Zach counters.

I laugh, stumbling back and almost knocking the paint can behind me over as I do. “Stylish? Since when are you a designer.”

Zach turns around to face me from where he's currently sanding the bedroom door frame, *in nothing but athletic shorts again*. “You should see my apartment. Open-plan, hardwood flooring, sleek, modern. I did most of it myself.”

“Did you now?” I quirk a brow. “Well, maybe one day I'll get to see this interior masterpiece.”

He stops sanding and, this time, turns toward me fully. “Yeah, maybe. Certain rooms are my favorite.”

We've been flirting like crazy all afternoon, the sexual tension and late-June weather threatening to burn an inferno. It seems like our kiss this morning combined with Zach listing all the reasons why we shouldn't cross friendship boundaries have driven him to the point of insanity. Or it could be the pink spandex shorts and matching sports bra I deliberately wore. Who knows.

If he's going to waltz around in low-slung black shorts and nothing else, then two can play at that game.

"What rooms would those be?" I squeeze the dripping paint brush tight in my hand, the ache between my thighs growing with every minute we remain suspended in this charged atmosphere.

He juts his chin toward my brush. "You're dripping everywhere, Rocket."

"Am I? I hadn't noticed."

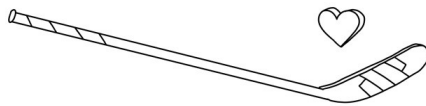
He low chuckles and angles his head up toward the ceiling. "Shit. Ladders. I knew I forgot something."

If there's one thing I am, it's resourceful. "I mean, I could always paint it...on your shoulders?" I pause. "If you're fully healed and everything."

He laughs harder. "Luna, my back healed months ago, plus you're tiny. I bench press over double your weight as a warmup. What I'm concerned about is getting covered in paint."

I prop my other hand on my hip, a playful smile tracing my lips. "Sounds like it could be fun. If you can handle me."

"Oh, I can definitely handle you, Rocket." He drops the sander and flips his hands toward me, inviting me up. "Climb aboard."



"THE IDEA IS to paint the ceiling. Not me," Zach huffs out.

I can't stop laughing. We've been at this for an hour now, and Zach's upper half and shoulders are almost completely covered in moon-gray paint. "Stop making me laugh then, and I'll concentrate better."

"I'm glad we did this before we replaced the floor."

"We put the sheets down; it's fine," I say, pushing the roller along the ceiling. "But my arms feel like they're gonna fall off."

"Want to come down and have a break?"

"No, there's only this bit left, and then we can finish up. I just need my paint replenished please." I point toward the tray on top of the covered nightstand.

"Always so bossy."

Zach keeps his hands firmly on my thighs as we walk over to grab the tray. The way his fingertips feel as they grip me tightly makes me think of other circumstances where he'd grip me like this, and the thought pools between my legs.

"Just trying to get the job finished this side of the holidays."

"Careful, Rocket. I have perfect access to your feet, and now that I know your weakness, I'm not afraid to exploit it." I feel a fingertip lightly trace the sole of my left foot, and I squirm.

In protest, I drag the roller across his left cheek. "Oops, sorry. Total accident."

"Oh, no you didn't."

We're in hysterics as he pulls me off his shoulders, fighting me for the roller as my body slowly drags down his until we're face-to-face, and I laugh even harder when I see the state of him.

At this point, he's more moon gray than he is tanned olive skin. "You know, I think this color's growing on me." I'm shaking with laughter as I continue to thrash the roller around, desperately trying to keep it from his grasp.

"Yeah? Well, I'm starting to really fucking hate it."

I get one final swipe across the front of his chest. "Too slow, Evans."

I squeeze my eyes shut as the tears pool but open them again as I realize he's no longer laughing. Still gripped tightly to him, our faces are so close I can see his pupils are blown wide.

Silence passes between us for the longest moment, and I drop the roller to my side, letting it fall to the covered wooden floor with a thud.

"I want you so fucking badly that it's killing me."

Goosebumps break out across my entire body. "Me too," I whisper back.

He rubs his nose gently across mine and smiles, paint smearing between us. "I'm fucked up, but it's the only thing I know for sure. I want you."

"Then take me."

"I can't promise it will all work out. I can't give you more than this right now."

"I know," I say, my voice breathy. Every muscle in my body contracts under the weight of his gaze. "But you're safe with me."

His mouth crashes to mine as he carries me to the bed covered in paint-spattered sheets. He lowers me gently to the mattress, never breaking eye

contact with me for a second as his gaze burns into my body, lighting me up from the inside.

“I need to see you.” He kneels between my legs as I raise up onto my elbows. “Take this off.” He bites down on his bottom lip as his hand comes to the zipper on the front of my sports bra, gently dragging it down to reveal my breasts. “Your tits are fucking perfect; your body is a fucking dream. I can’t decide what I want to taste first.” He sucks in a sharp breath as he sees how wet I am, soaking through my shorts. “Tell me, what should I taste first before I fuck what I know is going to be the prettiest, tightest pussy I’ve ever seen?”

I could fall over the edge before he’s even touched me. I always dreamed he’d be dirty in bed, but his mouth...God. I really hope he’s as filthy with his tongue as he is with his words.

“Taste my pussy.”

“Fuuuuck, I am so glad you said that. I’m starving for you.” His tongue finds mine, and I fall back onto the bed fully as he hooks his fingertips in my shorts and slowly peels them down.

Once I’m bare, he drops to his knees on the floor and tugs me gently until only my top half remains on the bed. “These hot as fuck legs should be spread over my shoulders permanently so I can eat your sweet cunt whenever I want. Because baby...” He slides his tattooed fingers through me, and I cry out with pleasure. “This body really is out of this world.”

His fingers are large and thick, entering me at once. It’s been so long since I’ve been with anyone, and by the size of his hands, I know he’s going to be huge. “Oh fuck, that feels so good.” I gasp, and as he begins to finger fuck me hard, stars dance at the corners of my vision. I can already feel an orgasm threatening to explode.

“You’re so fucking wet. Are you going to gush in my mouth, Luna? I fucking hope so.” The scruff of his jaw scrapes deliciously along the insides of my thighs as he places hot, open-mouthed kisses leading all the way to my apex. “Look at me, baby. Watch me taste you for the first time.”

With my legs still on his shoulders and Zach on his knees, he continues to scissor into me with his hand. And when his flat tongue finds my clit, running hot circles over it, I come undone. I unravel into his mouth as he sucks every drop of what I have to give.

He looks up from between my parted thighs, his mouth and chin covered in my essence as his lips curl up into a wickedly sexy grin. “Jesus,

baby, I think you just squirted in my mouth. Are you a squirter?" He brings his fingers to his lips and sucks on each one in turn. "So sweet, sweeter than I could've ever imagined."

"I've never squirted before."

"Are you going to soak my bed through whenever I fuck you? Which is going to be all the fucking time."

"Let me see you," I rasp, stars still dancing in my eyes.

Coming to a stand at the foot of the bed, his lips tip up, sexy confidence oozing from every pore. "You want to see me?"

I nod my head as he slowly pushes his shorts down. And as I take in what leads from his deep v, I know my fantasies could never do justice to the real thing. He's everything.

Oh. My. God.

He's huge. And when his cock juts up just below his navel, I realize he's pierced. From the base to halfway up what must be at least nine inches of pure sex. Four bars form the most impressive, but also kind of intimidating, Jacob's ladder. Each bar is secured with a small bearing on either side.

I look up at him as he kneels on the bed between my thighs and begins pumping himself from root to tip. "Y-you're pierced and absolutely freakin' huge."

He leans down and tentatively brings a finger under my chin, a soft look in his eyes. "Trust me, baby, these piercings will rock your world." He holds my gaze for a moment longer as he continues to palm himself. "Do you want me like this? We can move at whatever pace you want."

I consider holding back, but that's never been my style. "I've been waiting and hoping for this for as long as I can remember. I want you inside me."

Zach crawls over my body and comes to rest on his forearms, bracketing me in. We're face-to-face as he kisses the corner of my mouth. "Condom?"

I want to shake my head and tell him I need to feel everything, but instead, I nod. Amie took advantage of his trust and I don't want to do anything that will make him uncomfortable. "I'm on birth control but yeah, if you want, of course."

His eyes flash with something that resembles relief as he smiles down at me and softly kisses the bridge of my nose. He quickly reaches across into the nightstand and pushes the dust sheet to one side before pulling the draw

open. Grabbing a condom from the box, he sits back on his heels and sheaths himself with skill, never taking his eyes from mine. “Fuck knows why I have these since I never expected to be in this position again, but lucky for me, I do.”

I’ve always found condoms to be a total mood-killer, but the way he expertly rolls it down his cock sends a jolt of need straight through me.

Zach hovers over once more as he explores my collarbone and moves up to my pulse point with his tongue, sucking and biting before soothing away the sting.

I’m so close to coming again, I can feel the throb beating in my core. “You should know I’m small, and well, you’re not. I think you might break me.”

He chuckles slowly. “I’m going to be your perfect fit, and for the record, I think we might ruin each other. But I’m not about to break you, Luna. You mean too much to me.”

Slowly, deliciously, he eases his way inside my pussy, stretching me out so much it burns. When he’s fully seated and even through the condom, I feel the ridges of his piercings as they move inside me, touching places I never knew existed. “Oh shit, Zach! I think I’m going to come again.”

“Come for me. Soak my cock.”

I’m a writhing mess as he moves his hips and fucks me through my orgasm. He’s so good in bed. I’m completely overwhelmed as he nips at my breasts. It’s the most sensational experience of my life to be with the man I’ve wanted for so long and to know right here, in this moment, he wants me too.

I’m powerless to prevent the lone tear that trickles down my cheek as Zach continues to take my body in a way I never thought possible. I never thought anyone could make me feel this wanted, this desired.

Noticing, he swipes it away but brings it to his lips. “Are you okay, baby?”

“Better than okay.”

“Me too. But just know, I’m not going to last long with the way you’re gripping my cock.”

“Come for me, Zach.”

“Oh I will. Once I’ve given you the best orgasm of your life.”

He continues to thrust in and out of me as he rises to his knees and brings one of my legs over his shoulder to change the angle, and fuck if that

doesn't make me scream. "Come with me, Luna. Milk me dry."

I crash over the edge one final time as his hips begin to move erratically, hitting so deep it sends us both into heavenly oblivion.

Zach comes on a roar. "Fucking you is my new favorite thing." He collapses onto the bed beside me, pulling me up and onto his gorgeously tanned, tattooed, and paint-smeared chest. "And I can't wait to see how many ways I can do it."

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ZACH

Genuinely, I think I'm one of the luckiest guys alive when it comes to how I make a living.

I was blessed with talent in a sport and parents who gave everything to support me and make my dreams come true.

So it feels alien to arrive in Whistler, ready for a week on the ice with teammates I consider more as family, when really, all I want is to be back in my small two-bedroom beach house, rolling around in the sheets with an auburn temptress who blows my fucking mind.

It's been several weeks since Luna and I first slept together, and honestly, I've lost count of the number of times I've fucked her. I don't think there's a surface in that house I haven't taken her on, and the craving I have for her sweet body only gets stronger each time I enter her. I've always had a high sex drive, but with Luna, she's fucking incredible, and I don't think I'll ever get enough.

That also scares the shit out of me. I set boundaries when it came to sex and women to protect my heart and sanity. But in a few short weeks, she's crashed through them all, and I can't deny that beyond the sex, I'm romantically wrapped up in her.

I just can't fall, and neither can she. Because if we do, we'll break each other.

"Yo, Zach!"

Pulling up in the team hotel's parking lot, I look up to find none other than Jensen Jones striding toward me. Suitcase trailing behind him and dressed in our post-game suit, I scan down to a flash of patent red and roll my eyes. "The fuck is on your feet?"

He stops around ten feet away and looks down, examining what are no doubt loafers worth more than my truck back in Florida. "These? These are the height of fashion."

I shut the trunk on my rental and throw on a baseball cap. "They're the height of something."

"Listen, when you're ready to come to me for runway advice, let me know."

I don't respond but throw my arm around his shoulders as we walk up the ramp toward the hotel lobby. "Good to see ya, man."

"Yeah, you too. How's Florida? Getting the break you need?"

Warmth floods my chest. "Yeah, definitely."

"How's the house coming along?"

"We just finished stripping and painting the veranda and had outdoor furniture delivered. It's coming together."

Jensen stops in his tracks on the way to the check-in desk. "We?"

Shit, did I say we? "Yeah, I have a friend helping me with the work. Moving it along before I go back to Seattle."

"Cool." He turns to me, waggling his eyebrows as he collects his room key from the woman working reception. "Whoever it is sounds *super* helpful."

He misses nothing.

Again, I don't respond but take my key too. "Who you sharing with?"

We make our way to the elevator. "A recent rookie trade. Jon thought I'd be a good fit."

"Does he also dress like he's in the circus?"

Jensen punches the button to take us up. "I'm not dignifying that question with an answer. You look well though, man. You look, I dunno, lighter?"

I feel it. "Yeah, I'm good, thanks. Just looking forward to getting back on the ice, and I've got some time booked in with the trainer to go over my

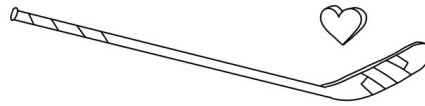
conditioning.”

We make our ascent to the fourth floor, where we’re both staying, when Jensen turns to me, eyeing my leg. “You’ll be ready for the season, right? I need my key defenseman back. We got crushed without you.”

Flashbacks of the hit I took in New York race through my mind. Truth is, I don’t recall all that much, but I do remember the pain I was in when I came to. But the broken ribs, tibia and a spinal concussion had nothing on the fucking devastation Amie put me through mentally. Those few months spent in recovery and at home, trying to work out what the fuck I was going to do with my life, come crashing back and steal the space in my lungs as I fight for air. It’s the first time in weeks I’ve felt like this, and I wasn’t prepared for it.

“Zach, man?” Jensen places his hand on my shoulder and lifts his finger at the open elevator doors. “Where’d you go back there?”

I shake my head to rid the weight of my feelings and hope the memories will follow. “Sorry, just got a bit caught up there.” I come to a stop in front of my hotel door and swipe the key card. “Physically, I’m fine. I’ll be ready for the season. No worries.”



“HOW’S IT FEELING, MAN?” Jon skates alongside me. It’s nice being back on the ice, even if it is just a free skate.

I think that was the hardest thing about taking the hit from Schneider. Not the pain, but the fear I’d never make it back. Waiting to hear what my fate was and whether I’d walk again was the longest time of my life. Not to mention the way I acted toward my best friend at the time. Man, I felt like a total jerk, blaming him for the way I behaved during that fateful game in New York. I threatened him with our friendship and told him I’d never forgive him if he told Coach Burrows what was going on in my personal life. He was right though; I was in no state to play. It’s like that year with Amie morphed me into someone I’m not. It’s amazing how we can blindly search for happiness with the one person who sucks it right out of you.

“Yeah, good. No ache, no pain at all. Just a matter of building up strength and fitness. You said Tina is arriving soon, right?” Tina is our

strength and conditioning trainer. A few of the guys sustained bad injuries toward the back end of the season, and she's heading over to help us review our offseason plan and make sure we're on track.

He nods. "Yeah, only for a couple of days though. I want this week to be about rookie integration and getting everyone together. Take the piss out of Jensen—the usual."

Skating backwards, I burst out laughing. "I can't believe you told him it was compulsory to arrive in a post-game suit."

"Any excuse for that boy to dress up. He'd have turned up in a tux if I'd asked."

"Fuck off." Is all we hear as Jensen skates past us with one of the fastest wingers in the NHL, Jessie Callaghan.

We both double over in hysterics.

Finally pulling myself together, Jon pins me with a look that promises a thousand questions. "What's the score with you know who? Any more developments?"

I swear to God my cheeks flush. I haven't clued him in on any of our texts or team chats, and I guess he's been waiting for this week to pump me for information. "Yeah, you could say that."

He comes to a complete stop in front of me, throwing up ice all over my sweats. "You're seeing each other?"

I look down at my wet bottom half. "My pants are soaking."

"Are you seeing each other?" he parrots.

"Not exactly, no."

He arches an unimpressed brow. "You're just fucking her?"

My stomach threatens to empty straight onto the ice. "No! Fuck no. I'm not just fucking her. She means more than that."

"So, what exactly are you?"

"I don't know. We're just enjoying the summer, I guess." What the fuck else can I say?

"But you're into her, right?"

"You know I am."

He shrugs his shoulders. "I don't get it then. Just take the leap."

"You think I'm ready to take on another relationship? Never mind a long-distance one where I barely get to see her. You know how the season is."

Jon scratches his chin. “Yeah, it’s rough. I just...I dunno. You’re back to your normal self. It’s been a while since we’ve seen you smile, and since you arrived yesterday, one’s been permanently plastered to your face.”

I smile, again. “What exactly are you trying to say?”

His lips press together in a line. “You’ve always given it to me straight.”

“Yeah, I have. No point sugar-coating anything.”

His hands come to his hips. “I think Luna might be your Felicity.”

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ZACH

ME

Just me hoping and praying my house is still gray and white and not pink...

ROCKET

Unfortunately, yes.

Phew.

How's Whistler?

It's okay. Good to see the boys.

The temptation to tell her I miss her, to lay it on the line and tell her I'm struggling to keep away, pulls my fingers across the keyboard. But no sooner am I typing the words do I hit delete. Being away from her for a week is nothing compared to the months apart we'd face when I'm back in Seattle and on the road, and she's back at work.

I think I might have most of the interior painted and finished for you when you get back.

You have been busy. I might give you some time off as a reward for being a good girl.

Oh yeah? No idea what I'd do with my free time.

I can think of a couple things...

You do keep me very busy. I don't have much else to keep me occupied though.

"Texting Luna?" I look up to find Jon walking through the door and dumping his key card down on the hotel bed.

"Yep."

"Man, she's got you all caught up."

I raise a brow and ignore him. He can talk.

I was suggesting time off, not time away from me.

Oh. Well in that case, I'll gladly accept some vacation time.

Destination being my bed.

Funnily enough that's where I am right now.

Jesus. My cock instantly hardens. She's staying over rather than going back home. The thought of her in my bed while I'm away feels like something we'd do if she were mine and there weren't thousands of miles between us.

Think you can stay there for the next eight hours while I fly back?

Tempting...but I need to get some sleep so I can be up early to take my car to the garage.

My eyebrows pull together. What?

Why? What's happened?

Ugh, she's broken down on me again. Third time this year.

I'm back in two days. I can look at her for you. Sounds like it's a recurring problem.

You know about cars?

Studied engineering at college, baby. Plus, I like to mess around with engines. Seriously, if you can wait, let me sort it for you, and in the meantime, use my truck. My keys are on the counter in the kitchen.

Why are you so sweet to me?

Because you turned my life around. You make me smile.

Only to you. And I'm just fixing your car and lending you mine. I can be far sweeter than that.

Oh, I know ;-)

“Are you taking Luna to the gala next month?” Jon breaks me out of my trance.

I close out the text thread with Luna and head straight to order and replace the tools I know I donated when I moved to Seattle but will need to fix her car.

“I haven’t mentioned it to her yet. Why?” But the thought of taking her as my date to the annual Hockey Now gala appeals. A lot. Her in a hot-as-fuck dress, pressed against me all night. Supporting me while I make the public speech I dread so much.

Jon types something into his phone. “Because Felicity wants to meet her.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You told her about Luna?”

He shrugs. “It’s only a matter of time between you two. I’m just helping things along.”

“You told her that Luna is my girlfriend?” Saying it out loud is far less daunting than I thought it would be.

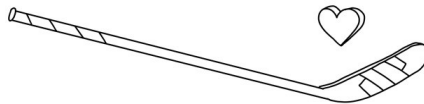
“No. I just told her what I told you. That she’s the one.”

I drag my hands down my face. For fuck’s sake. Reformed playboy turned hopeless romantic matchmaker. “You do know it’s rare to meet your soulmate, let alone it be the first woman you actually date. Most of us never meet the one, if she even exists at all.”

“Call it what you want, Zach. Just don’t piss my wife off. I said you’d be taking her, and she’s excited.”

I quirk a brow from behind my hands and eye him. “Wife?”

He smiles sweetly. “For all intents and purposes, yes. Plus, I’m kind of addicted to saying it.”



“SO LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT.” Jon leans back in the large booth of the bar we’ve been sitting in for the past three hours, slowly getting trashed. It’s

the final night in Whistler, and we all planned to go out, have some drinks, and then turn in for an early night.

A couple of beers turned into a few, and from nowhere, two bottles of tequila appeared along with two brunettes and a blonde. I can't say I'm surprised it's played out this way, but I am shocked to see none of the girls sitting on Jensen's lap.

"So, you've never fucked in public?" Jon announces.

Our starting forward, Jessie, takes a sip of his beer and shrugs. "Nope. We're not all playboys."

Jon shoots him a pointed glare. "Was."

"Sorry, bro—was," he replies and half winces.

My alcohol-hazed brain is half tuned into the conversation and half focused on the uncomfortable way Jensen is shifting in his seat, staring down at his phone. He's been quieter than usual this entire week, and that's not hard to notice since, normally, you can hear him from anywhere. But tonight, I can tell something is off, and as soon as the conversation turns to weddings, he looks like he'd rather be anywhere but here.

I'm sitting at the edge of the booth, so I grab my beer and walk around until I'm on Jensen's side, taking a seat on the vacant chair beside him. I don't think the brunette currently perched on our rookie defenseman's cock will be needing it.

"What's going on, buddy?"

I look down at his phone right when he swipes out the screen and closes down a picture of a blonde. I don't get a good look at her, but I can tell he doesn't want me to see.

"I just hate today."

Confusion must be written all over my face. "What have you got against riding the gondolas and getting wasted with your friends?"

He runs a hand through his glossy, black hair. "No, not *today*. The date. I fucking hate the *date*."

I definitely look confused. "July sixteenth?"

He pockets his phone and grabs another shot, downing it in one. "Yeah."

I want to ask more, and just as I open my mouth to do exactly that, the brunette whose seat I stole decides she wants it back and slides onto my lap. Her blonde friend joins Jensen on his.

"He's taken!" Jon shouts from across the table, tipping his glass at the chick running her nails over my chest. My best friend's eyes are ablaze as

he shouts again. “He’s fucking taken!”

“And I’m not in the mood,” Jensen adds, standing straight up from his chair, the blonde almost falling from his lap and onto the floor. “I’m calling it. I’ll see you in the morning.” He points to the rookie defenseman he’s been sharing a room with. “And I don’t want any unwelcome guests tonight.” He turns and strides off, thrusting the bar door open with a flat palm.

I want to go after him, but first I need to peel my very unwelcome visitor from my lap. The thought of any woman other than Luna touching me makes me feel nauseous. “He’s right. I’m taken.” A lie, but it’s a useful card to play, nonetheless.

She turns her head to me. “What? I thought you and that blonde influencer were history. She played away, right?”

Oh fuck off. I push my chair out and mimic Jensen’s earlier move as I stand to my feet and push her off me like her presence is burning my skin. She might as well be, as an unbearable sensation creeps through me, clawing at my insides. Shame, humiliation, anger, and irritation. “You know nothing about my life. Now get the fuck off me.” My voice is cutting and harsh as I spit out my response. I know I’ve overreacted, but there’s only so much I can take. That shit stings.

“Zach, man. You, okay?” I hear Jon call as I make for the exit as quickly as I can.

“Fine. I’m going back to the hotel too,” I reply over my shoulder. Then I’m heading back to the safety of Florida but mainly a pair of coffee-colored eyes.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LUNA

I check my watch for the third time in as many minutes. I can't wait for him to get home. This week has felt longer than the thirteen years that have passed since we left for college.

I'm sunbathing on the lounge Zach bought me, reading my latest romance book. Yes, I'm a romance girlie and proud. When I hear the rumble of an engine, I immediately know it's the Uber dropping Zach off.

Don't go crashing into his arms again, Luna. Play it cool this time.

The front door creaks open, closely followed by the roll of a suitcase across the tiled entrance. Quickly, I pop my earbuds in and flip to the audiobook, pretending like I haven't been waiting to see him since the moment he walked out the door a week ago.

I've no idea where he is in the house or if he's even spotted me out on the veranda since the blinds are drawn, but the hum of anticipation buzzing through my body senses his proximity.

I'm only two minutes into the chapter when one of the buds is removed from my ear, and two hands come under my shoulders, turning me over onto my back.

I look up to see Zach's flawless face and body, clad in his trademark athletic shorts and a black short-sleeve shirt. His eyes are hooded and dark

as he drinks me in from head to toe. The bright pink and very revealing bikini I *accidentally wore on purpose* no doubt aids my cause.

Leaning down to whisper, his lips brush along the shell of my ear, and I feel a tingling sensation all the way to my toes. “There’s a lot of families on the beach right now, and the things I want to do to you are definitely not PG.”

I pull the other bud out my ear and rise onto my elbows until our faces are so close that I can swallow the intensity in his words. “What are you waiting for?”

Apparently, nothing. He scoops me up, and I wrap my legs around his masculine and toned waist. My body ignites as I feel the dampness spread between my thighs, telling me how much I’ve missed him, even if I would never say the words out loud. What if he doesn’t say them back? What if he didn’t miss me in the same way? What if this really is a summer fling to him? That’s what he’s told me all along. That’s what this is.

But as our tongues glide together, I’m determined to enjoy whatever time I have left with him. At this point, my heart is just collateral damage in my quest to satisfy how much I need him.

I don’t think I’ll ever be satisfied.

He throws me onto the bed, and it feels deliciously dominant. Ripping his shirt from behind his head in one movement, he pushes his shorts and boxers to the ground and my mouth waters at the sight of his cock. I’m yet to have it in my mouth since he’s made every part of the sex we’ve had about me, but I can’t wait to change that up, and soon.

I go to untie my top from behind my neck as I watch him crawl over my body. “Leave that for me.” He pushes the flimsy material apart on each side and exposes my breasts. I’ve always thought of them as average in size and appearance, but the way Zach sucks and feasts on my nipples, it makes me feel like the most desirable woman alive.

He drags his hot wet tongue down my stomach and over my navel until he begins kissing and caressing the sensitive flesh just above my bikini bottoms. My hips fly off the bed as I arch into his mouth. “Ohmygod. That’s...”

“Unbearable?” I let out a needy whimper, my whirly brain unable to respond, but he finishes for me in the sultry tone I’m obsessed with. “Good.”

“I just, I need to....”

His tattooed hand falls between my thighs, yanking my bottoms to one side and exposing me. “Jesus, baby, have you come already? You’re so fucking wet.” He swipes a finger through me, and I buck uncontrollably. I swear, people on the beach might not be able to see, but they can definitely hear what he’s doing to me. The effect he has on my body and mind.

“No. But I need to come.”

He laps at my wet center and then fucks into me with his tongue. “I want you to want it more.”

I cry out. “Do you want me to beg for you?”

He hums against my pussy, the vibrations shooting through me, almost toppling me over the edge. “The feisty Luna Johnson, begging for a release. I can get on board with that.”

I half whimper, half laugh. “I’ll hate you forever.”

“Oh, hate on me, Rocket. That sounds like far more fun.”

He continues to take me right to the very edge before pulling back and kissing between my thighs.

The minutes crawl by in a state of ecstasy and desperation until I can take no more. “Zach, make me come. I’m begging you.”

“There’s a good girl.” He pulls up from between my legs and flips us over in one easy motion. Sitting on top of his resting dick, I can already feel the hard ridges of his piercing against my soaking wet pussy. His cock pulses against me as he brings his hand behind my head, pulling me down until our lips brush against each other. “I want you to fuck me hard. Fuck me like you can’t get enough of me, just like I’ll never get enough of you. I want you to explode for me, Rocket.”

All I want to do is take him inside me bare, but I hesitate, not wanting him to get carried away in the moment. “Do you want to wear...”

He pulls back slightly, searching my eyes, and I can see the thoughts racing through his brain. A couple more seconds pass before he reaches around and pulls a condom from the nightstand and sheaths himself quickly.

I rise on my knees and hover over him until his cock naturally drops to my entrance, and slowly, I lower down. I can barely move, barely speak, as he impales me.

Finally, when he’s all the way inside, I find my voice. “The way those bars feel inside me—it’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before.”

He pulls me down and kisses me deeply, smiling into my mouth. “You’re like nothing I’ve ever seen, felt, or been with before. These

piercings, this cock. It's all made for your gorgeous body.”

I unravel for him so fast, feeling the way I come all over his cock. He grips my hips tightly, his fingertips sinking into my flesh as he fucks me back in the same way I ride him. Desperate to keep myself steady, I grip the metal bed frame as it crashes against the freshly painted wall, marking it up. It can bust through for all I care. When he's gone and back in Seattle, it will serve as evidence that this moment really happened. That what we shared this summer was a hundred percent real.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ZACH

I'm totally exposed.
Like, literally.

And cold. My raging boner is on full display and not a single inch of duvet is left on me. A certain redhead has stolen it, her cute body wrapped in it like some sort of cocoon.

It's almost six in the morning, and I need to get in a light run and work out before more families pile onto the beach. But first...I reach across and tug the bedding from underneath Luna, causing her to roll onto her back, her long eyelashes resting against her flawlessly freckled complexion. Fuck, she's beautiful, and way too good for me.

Whipping the covers over my head so they envelope us both, I hover over her, holding my weight on my forearms. Her eyes flutter open as I place a gentle kiss against her collarbone. "Morning sheet stealer."

She wraps her legs around my waist, both of us still naked from a night of barely letting each other sleep, and I feel my already hard cock press against her entrance, desperate for more.

She smiles up at me. "You know I don't play by the rules."

I run my hand through her disheveled hair. "I messed your hair up good last night."

She shrugs her shoulders, throwing her arms around my neck. “It’s messy most of the time anyway, so better for it to be like this for a reason.”

If it’s possible, I harden even further at the memory of how it was wrapped around my fist last night while I fucked her from behind. I need back inside her. “Are you sore? I know we went at it hard last night.” I bury my head in the crook of her neck and inhale her sweet vanilla scent. “Fucking awesome, by the way.”

Luna brings her hand between us, searching for my dick. She drags it a couple of inches lower until it’s back at her entrance. “You’re huge, so yeah, I’m definitely aware of what we did. But I want to do it again.”

I want to fuck her raw, want to rid any last remnants of the damage Amie caused, but I can’t. I’m not ready. As I reach for protection and roll it over me, I look down at Luna and pray she knows this has nothing to do with her and everything to do with my past.

Each time we’ve had sex, it’s been frantic and desperate, and even though I’m far from sated, this morning feels different. Her large, deep-brown eyes encapsulate everything she is—gorgeous, kind, genuine, and deep.

My mouth works ahead of my brain as I let the words slide off my tongue. “Come to the Hockey Now charity gala with me.”

My hips rock slowly over hers as she grips me tightly. “In Seattle?”

Sweeping her hair to one side, I kiss her pulse point, knowing it’s likely to send her over the edge. She moans in pleasure and the deep sense of satisfaction knowing I did that to her rolls through my body, gathering at the base of my spine. I’m so close to coming, yet I’ve barely moved at all.

“As my date. I want you to come with me. Come back with me before school starts.”

“I, umm. Your date?”

“Yeah. Let me take you out.” I kiss the underside of her chin and chuckle. “Ply you with champagne.”

She laughs excitedly. “Yeah, why not.”

I know she wants to ask more about what it might mean to be my date, and honestly, I wish I had answers too. Answers to everything hanging over us, including the expiration date this summer has.

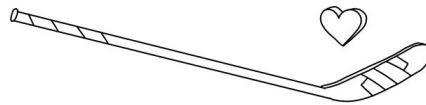
A long moment passes as we stay buried in each other’s bodies and thoughts.

“You’re in your head again, aren’t you?”

I roll my hips once more and bring a hand to her cheek. “I’m good, Rocket. Are you okay?”

She nods her head and tightens her grip around my waist. “Yes. But don’t fuck me slow.”

Her statement is loaded, I know it is. Going slow invites too many emotions we both can’t afford to take hold. Instead, we’ll let them simmer beneath the surface and pray we can keep the lid tightly shut. For both our sakes.



I’M BACK from my morning run, and Luna’s still down at the beach swimming when my phone starts buzzing on the coffee table.

Half expecting it to be Mom since she normally calls at this time, I race over and grab it, hitting accept. “Hi M—”

“Zach? Zach, it’s Amie. Don’t hang up. Please.”

Everything inside me revolts. I haven’t spoken to her in weeks, maybe months, and the sound of her voice scrapes through me like nails down a chalkboard. I take a seat on the arm of the couch. “Hi.”

Silence.

“You blocked me. Mature, Zach. Real mature.”

Holding the phone to my ear, I drop my head between my shoulder blades. “Lose this number, Amie.”

“You don’t even want to hear what I have to say?”

I squeeze my eyes shut at her patronizing voice, so many memories. “There isn’t anything else to say.”

Her tone turns soft. “So you don’t think about us at all? What we had.”

I rise to my feet. “No, I don’t, Amie.”

“You aren’t at your apartment. You haven’t been for weeks.”

I catch myself mindlessly pacing the length of the house. I’m wound up like a coiled spring, ready to fire off. “Why are you coming around to my place?”

“To talk. Where are you?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

She puffs out a frustrated breath. “I heard you’re back home in Florida.”

“Amie, you’re heavily pregnant with another man’s baby. Go make a life with Schneider. Don’t call me; don’t message me. Just—”

“Shacked up with some girl.”

What? How the fuck did she find out about Luna, although it doesn’t surprise me she does. My need to protect her ignites. The best hope I have is to deny everything because the moment Amie gets her claws into something, she won’t let go.

“I’m going to say this once and once only.”

“What’s that?” she drawls.

“Fuck. Off.”

I hit end on the call and immediately block that number too. I’d like to think she’ll take the not-so-subtle hint to exit my life, but honestly, I’m not so sure.

My spiral is interrupted when the front door opens, and Luna strides in wearing a tiny beach dress and pink sandals.

Gathering her salty hair into a top bun, she eyes me and then shifts her gaze to the phone I’m gripping so tightly I’m surprised it’s not dust. “All okay?”

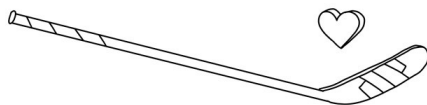
I stride over to her, throwing it on the couch as I go. “Screw working on the house today. Let me take you out, do something fun.” I pick her up with ease since she’s so light.

She smiles and brings her hands to the nape of my neck. “Yeah? What do you have in mind?”

“Somewhere cool.”

“Well, I need to take a shower because I smell kind of salty.”

Marching her toward the bathroom, I hold her with one hand and undo the tie on the back of her bikini with the other, letting the straps fall around her delicate shoulders. “I can help you with that.”



LUNA JOHNSON in the Kennedy Space Center Rocket Garden is like a kid in a candy store.

“Saturn 1B gets me every time. It launched the first crewed mission of the Apollo Program, and at 1,600,000 pounds of thrust, it is huge.” She

chases over to it, pushing her phone into my hand. “Take a picture.”

I fight back the urge to joke about pounds of thrust, even though if Jon were here, he’d be disappointed at the missed opportunity.

She poses, her hand out to the side pointing to the huge object like it could somehow be missed, and I laugh. “I swear I’ve seen your picture next to this one on socials.”

Her deep-auburn hair reflects in the sunlight, and I can’t help but admire her body in the tiny pink denim shorts and NASA T-shirt she insisted we stop by her place and pick up when I told her where we were headed. “Not from this angle you haven’t.”

Taking the picture, I hand her back the phone, and she inspects the shot. “Hmm, not bad.”

I lean down until my lips brush the shell of her ear, and a rush of delight surges through me when I notice the way her skin pebbles in response. “Try fucking stunning.”

Tipping her head back, she eyes me carefully, the apple of her cheeks blushing slightly. “Thank you, but I was referring to the angle of the H-1 liquid-fuel engine.”

Fuck me, this girl. She’s all kinds of cool. Forgetting where we are for just a moment, but not giving a crap either, I lean down and place a gentle kiss on the corner of her mouth. The place I’ve become obsessed with.

Still not giving a shit if I’m recognized or if photos will be taken, I grab her hand and intertwine our fingers, the feel of her tiny palm against mine mimicking the soothing feel of the warm summer sun. “Come on, Rocket. Where to next?”

We’re sitting eating lunch in the café when I feel my phone buzz in the pocket of my shorts.

JON

Message from the wife: Bring Luna to Seattle a couple of days before the gala. We’re taking her shopping.

These two are insufferable. Luna’s busy flipping through pages of the latest program, so I quickly type out a response.

ME

Two things. One, I never confirmed she was coming. Two, shopping for what, and what’s your game plan?

JON

Technically that's three. Is she coming to the gala?

ME

Yes. But that's not the point.

JON

That's precisely the point. You asked her, and Felicity and Kate are going shopping for dresses, etc. so they want to include Luna.

That's kind of sweet but also terrifying. I also didn't know Kate Monroe, Felicity's best friend and colleague, was going.

ME

I didn't know Kate was going.

JON

Attending as a senior staff member for Preston & Preston.

Preston & Preston are the latest corporate sponsor for Hockey Now, and both Kate and Felicity work there as lawyers. Fucking awesome lawyers. Terrifying lawyers.

ME

Is she bringing a date?

JENSEN

No.

What the fuck? I check the top of the chat to see it is, in fact, a group chat involving us three.

ME

So, my love life is now the subject of a group chat?

JENSEN

I don't really know why I'm here to be honest...

JON

Your wingman game is slipping Jensen.

ME

I'm kind of busy, so to cut to the chase, I'll ask Luna if she wants to go shopping.

JON

Busy...

JENSEN

Can I leave this chat?

JON

No.

I close the chat. I think our captain's had enough encouragement for one day without me telling him I'm busy on a day out with Luna.

My phone buzzes, *again*.

I roll my eyes. Jeeez, I'm not sure who's worse with these two.

FELICITY

Please could I have Luna's number?

ME

It's been thirty seconds since I told Jon I'd ask her...

FELICITY

So plenty of time.

I look up to see Luna still reading the latest article on Mission Psyche.

"How do you feel about makeovers, shopping, and cocktails?"

Her eyes narrow but the twinkle in them is clear. "In relation to?"

"The gala. Jon's wife—I mean fiancée—wants your number."

She flips the page and smiles. "I'm up for that."

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

LUNA

I wasn't exactly thrilled at the prospect of painting the porch this morning, but it definitely comes with benefits.

Benefits that include a shirtless Zach Evans, my car, him lying on a creeper so he can slide underneath, plenty of tools, and an oil change. Go figure. Suffice to say very little painting is getting done. It's amazing how useful sunglasses can be, providing an excellent opportunity to pretend like you're focused on one thing when you are entirely distracted by another.

"She's all set." Zach rolls out from under the car and rubs his hands down his ripped and now oil-stained jeans. Riding low on his hips, the deep set of his v is on full display.

How many ways can I break my car over the next two weeks?

Dropping my paintbrush, I head over to check out his handiwork.

"It was a simple fix in the end. The seal on your head gasket was spent." He points to what must be the gasket. "I replaced it. Your car was leaking oil everywhere." He rubs his tattooed hands on a white rag.

I don't think I've ever been as turned on.

I lower my sunglasses and pull my bottom lip between my teeth. "That just went completely over my head, I can't lie. But thank you."

He runs a rough hand over the scruff on his jaw and smirks at my flushing cheeks. "Something affecting you, Rocket? Look at it as penance for walking around here in tiny bikinis and shorts for the past seven weeks."

Before I get a chance to reply, I'm scooped up and set on the now-closed hood. Looping my fingers in the waistband of his jeans, I pull him closer. "The house is almost complete."

"I couldn't have done it without you."

I smile up at him, knowing time is running out this summer. School starts back in a couple of weeks, and by that point, Zach will be in pre-season training. "For what it's worth, I really enjoyed it. It's been the best summer ever."

Something flashes through his eyes, but I can't pinpoint the emotion. "We still have some time left."

I want to spend every minute of that time with him, soak in every second, and imprint every memory as deeply into my mind as possible. But letting my heart overtake my brain is dangerous, and for the first time in my life, I know I need to hold back. The realization hits me hard and fast, right here at this moment. I feel like I'm falling through the floor.

I'm flying without a net, and when Zach inevitably returns to Seattle, only to be surrounded by women, I need to be prepared. I'll go to the gala; I'll be his date and spend time with his friends. But I need to pull back, and I need to do it now. I know my heart has fallen as far as I can let it go, and the tether to rein it back in is at full stretch. My gut doesn't lie, and it's telling me I've gone as far as I can go.

I let go of his belt loops and sit back on my hands. "I have to focus some of my time on schoolwork and class prep now."

His full lips press together in a thin line. "Why do I get the feeling that you're pulling back on me?"

If I pretend like I'm not, then he'll call me out on it. He knows me too well. "I guess because I am."

"You don't need to, Luna." His hand flies up to cup the right-hand side of my face.

I press my palm over it and lean into his touch. "I do." Tears sting at the edges of my vision, and on instinct, I push my sunglasses back up my nose to cover the evidence.

But Zach pulls them off completely. Searching my eyes, he slowly nods his head in understanding. I wonder if that's because he feels the same way,

or if he's simply giving me what he knows I need.

"Where do we go from here?" he asks, strain pulling at his voice.

I hadn't given it much thought up until now, when the realization that I need to step away hit me like a ten-ton truck. "I'll come to the gala with you, and I'm looking forward to meeting your friends. But I can't sleep with you anymore. I can't share a bed with you again, and we need to go back to being just friends, nothing else."

Each syllable rips at my throat as I push the words out that need to be said. I need to protect my heart and, in doing so, maybe his too.

"Fuck, Luna. Where's all this coming from?"

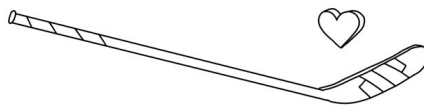
"You know where. At the start of this summer, you made it clear that this had an expiration date. That if we got involved, it was just for now. I took what I could and dove in with both feet, but you head back soon to your very different life and a career you've worked so hard for, and I have a promotion in mine to pursue. For once in my life, I have to listen to my head."

I feel like I've just drawn a pistol and shot myself clean through the chest. The pain is welcome though, reassuring me I'm making the right decision—if I carry on down this route, it will be a thousand times worse when he inevitably leaves.

I imagine if I could see that pain, it would look something similar to what's behind Zach's eyes. "You don't have to come to the gala. But damn it, I want you to."

"I want to. I want to support you and your foundation. We're still the same friends, remember?"

He takes a step back from me, and I slide off the hood. "Yeah, Luna. Nothing's changed."



FELICITY

Okay, ladies, we're three days out from Operation Get Glam For The Gala.

KATE

I have the cocktails covered.

FELICITY

Excellent. I've booked us in at three boutique stores to try dresses. Then over to The Golden Ivy for lunch, then cocktails. On the afternoon of the gala, can we all meet at mine and Jon's for hair and makeup? I booked a beautician because, personally, anything beyond mascara and lip gloss, and I'm out of my depth.

KATE

You know I could've helped you.

FELICITY

I know, I know. But there's nothing wrong with a bit of pampering once in a while.

ME

I second Felicity. I have no clue what I'm doing. Even at thirty-one.

KATE

Well, you know I've always got you girls.

FELICITY

And we love you for it!

KATE

Okay. I'm just going to come out and ask. What's the score with you and Zach?

Wow. Kate doesn't hold back. Kind of refreshing, and somewhat familiar...

FELICITY

Side note, Luna—she's always this direct.

ME

We're just friends.

KATE

Uh-huh. Are we heading down the same route as Felicity and Jon? History repeating itself. If we are, just know I was exhausted the first time.

FELICITY

You can talk.

KATE

I'm sorry, you'll have to be more specific.

FELICITY

Luna, just to fill you in. Kate has the hots for Jensen Jones, otherwise known (specifically and exclusively to her), as JJ.

KATE

That was last year and before he was an asshole with that slutty redhead.

No offense to redheads (Luna).

ME

He cheated on you?!

P.S. None taken.

KATE

No. We'd have to be dating for that to happen, and I can confirm we are absolutely NOT dating.

FELICITY

She's totally over it as you can see.

KATE

I am. Anyway, whatever. Back to Luna and Zach...

I love them already.

ME

Honestly, only friends.

FELICITY

So, Jon's been talking shit. I swear to God, he fancies himself as some sort of dating agent.

ME

Huh?

FELICITY

My crazy fiancé. He seems to think you two are destined.

KATE

Can I just step in here and say that Jon was a fuckboy twelve months ago. Set eyes on Felicity and chased her until she fell head over heels. He now thinks every relationship is like this.

I laugh, hard.

FELICITY

There are no lies in the above statement.



I'M FINISHING up packing my bag for a three-night stay in Seattle when there's a knock on my door.

Heading down the stairs, I know exactly who it is just by their knock.

"Hey, darling." Mom pulls me into an embrace as soon as I open it.

"Hey." She barely ever comes over, so her just showing up like this takes me by surprise. I have an hour before I need to be at the beach barbecue. I would pass it up, but since Zach will be there, I'm not.

It's been weird this past week, staying away from him when we've lived in each other's pockets for most of the summer. On the occasions I've stopped by to help him finish up the house, I've sometimes felt like he wanted to say something about us. I know I have. I know I've wanted him to take me to bed again. I've wanted him every minute he hasn't been holding me. I thought that ripping the Band-Aid off meant the pain was harsh at first but would quickly die down. So why does it feel like it's getting worse?

My mom breaks my trance by waving a hand in front of my face. "I'm here with the wine and snacks." She picks up a grocery bag and waggles it in front of her.

"Oh, yeah, that's really sweet, but actually, I have to go out in like an hour." I look down at my watch and wince. "More like forty-five minutes."

Her face drops. "Oh, I thought maybe we could catch up. Maybe tomorrow night?"

I wince, again. "I'm in Seattle from tomorrow until Sunday night before school starts back on Monday."

"Oh. Why?"

I turn and walk through to the kitchen, and Mom follows after me. Opening the wine she bought and handing her a glass, we take a seat at my kitchen table. "I'm going to see some friends."

"Friends?"

Yes, Mom, I do have some.

"Yeah, well, through another friend."

She takes a sip of her wine, a puzzled look across her face. "I didn't know you knew anyone from Seattle."

“He’s from here but lives there now.”

“He? Who?”

I shrug and turn my back, heading toward the refrigerator and pull out the salad I prepared for the barbecue. “Zach Evans.”

I swear I feel a spray of chardonnay as it hits the back of my neck. “As in the NHL player? As in who you went to school with?”

“Yep,” I say, coming back to join her at the table. I touch the back of my neck to check it didn’t actually get sprayed with wine. “We kind of re-connected this summer, and he invited me to attend the annual gala for his hockey foundation.”

“How long have you been seeing him?”

“I haven’t. We’re friends.”

“Okay, I’ll rephrase. How long have you been sleeping with him?”

“I’m not.”

She cocks her head to the side and throws me a look all mothers seem to have mastered, a look of *please*.

I down the rest of my wine in one gulp. “I stopped sleeping with him a couple of weeks ago. I took a step back. We’re at different places in our lives, and he’s just out of a bad relationship. Something more wouldn’t work, especially with the long distance.”

No matter how amazing it could be.

She raises a brow. “You’re wise. Take it from a more experienced woman. Men break your heart in exchange for sex.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

ZACH

“Well, I think the place looks incredible now that it’s all finished.” Mom sets a coffee down in front of me.

“Thanks. It turned out better than I thought, the flooring especially.”

“Are you still planning to keep it?”

I nod and sit back on the couch. “Yeah, I don’t need to sell it.”

She looks unsure. “I understand that, honey, but after you leave tomorrow, when will you be back again? Realistically you’ll get to spend no time here.”

This is the part where I could tell her I plan to give the key over to the girl who rocked my world this summer and who I wish I’d woken up to this morning. To be honest, I’m surprised Luke hasn’t said anything about her helping me with the house. I’m pretty sure he’s been avoiding me, but I can’t say I’ve been seeking him out either. I will see him tonight at the barbecue for another awkward exchange though.

“I’m proud of you. For the way you’ve recovered and moved on with your life. What she put you through.” Mom’s grip on her cup intensifies. “That woman.”

“Yeah. It’s been easier to move on than I thought it would be.” I shrug. “I think I was so pissed at her that I didn’t feel the loss.”

“She wasn’t a loss, that’s why. Anyway, I’m just relieved she’s out of your life.”

If only that were true. Amie’s been blowing up my phone from various numbers for the past couple of weeks, and that, combined with the absence of Luna, has been tough. Every time I delete a text, another one comes through from an unknown number, but I know who it is.

UNKNOWN

It doesn’t have to be over.

Everyone makes mistakes, and I’m sorry.

And when I don’t reply, her true colors show, reminding me of all the reasons I’m right to block her.

So, you think you’re above me now or something?

Too busy fucking someone else. Maybe I should do the same...

Go fuck yourself, Zach.

If it carries on, Mom will likely discover Amie hasn’t left me alone after all. Especially when I text her with my new number.

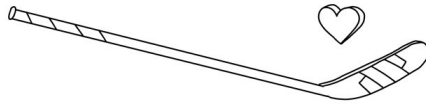
I slump back further onto the couch. At least I have these next few days in Seattle with Luna. Staying out of my spare bedroom and resisting the urge to pull her into my arms is going to torture me in ways that will make the end of this summer feel like a walk in the park. I wish I could bring it up with my mom, tell her everything that’s been going on between us this summer. But how am I supposed to explain something I don’t understand myself?

“Are you all set to leave?”

“Yeah, all packed.” I check the time. “I have to take off to the beach.”

She smiles. “It’s fitting you end the summer in the same way you started it.”

Recalling the way Luna leaped into my arms on that first night, I smile back. “Yeah. I’ll swing by before I head to the airport tomorrow.”



“OKAY, but can we talk about that hit you took last season.” Hudson shakes his head. “Fuck, that was intense. You’re all healed now though, right?”

I’d like to never talk about that hit again. I’m also way too distracted with the way Luke’s hand is curled around Luna’s shoulder to fucking think straight.

“All set for the pre-season.” All this guy seems to care about is talking to me about hockey. I’m more than just three twenty minute periods.

“Cool, cool.” He hands me another beer, and I take it, gladly. Tonight is a fucking horror show. Watching the way Luke is coming onto Luna, like he’s staking a claim or something. Any excuse to get her on her own, and I swear to God, if he leans forward and whispers in her ear one more time, I’m going to lose my shit.

Only I whisper in her ear and tell her she looks stunning.

“It’s a pity we didn’t get a chance to reconnect this summer.” Tonight just got a whole lot worse as Hayley approaches, flicking her long blonde hair to the side. She drags her long fingernails across my lower back in an inconspicuous manner designed for no one else to see.

“By reconnect I assume you mean fuck?” I say, bringing the bottle to my lips.

Her mouth hangs open like I just said something shocking to her. I’m being an asshole, but I’m so fucking tired of playing games and turning a blind eye to how I’m touched in this way. Jon was right when he lost his shit last season in Colorado.

I shrug. “Just saying it out loud.”

She twirls a piece of hair around her finger and bites down on her bottom lip. “If that’s an invite, there’s still time.”

I want to double over and laugh, but instead, I steal another glance in Luna’s direction. Torturing myself is a new hobby. Bringing my attention back to Hayley, I look her in the eyes for the first time. The buzz of the alcohol and the frustration of tonight compels me to make a claim laced with fiction. “Actually, I’m kind of seeing someone.”

She cocks her head in confusion. “I thought that blonde and you were through?”

“We are. It’s someone new.”

“Oh, really. Anyone I know?”

I smile. The lies leaving my tongue feel sweeter the more I say them. “No.” I down the rest of my beer in one gulp and toss the empty bottle in the makeshift recycling bin. “I have a few people to see. Take care, Hayley.”

Before she can respond, I’m across the beach and heading straight for the only person I want to speak to tonight.

“That’s great, Luna. I’m so proud of you,” is the first thing I hear as I sidle up alongside her and Luke. He’s got his hand planted on her back as he refills her wine.

In the soft light of the flames, I can see her eyes are slightly glazed. She’s had too much to drink. Concern rips through me; she never drinks much. How many times has he refilled her cup?

“Hey,” she says as a dazed smile breaks out across her face.

“Hey. You having a good time there?” I ask in the lightest tone I have, tipping my chin at her drink.

“Yep,” she replies, popping her p.

“Luna was just filling me in on her promotion at work,” Luke interjects, and I don’t miss the tinge of smugness to his smile, like he’s revealing something I don’t already know.

But does he know all the ways she can come undone for me? Does he know when she comes hard that the tips of her ears turn a cute crimson? I wonder if he knows she’s my date to the gala on Saturday night?

“Yeah. Luna mentioned it. It’s awesome.” I reply.

Silence stretches between us. Perhaps if I hover here for long enough, he’ll stop touching her and fuck off.

Luke’s eyes narrow slightly at me. “Back to Seattle tomorrow then, buddy?”

I side-eye Luna, who’s staring down into her wine. A cloud of guilt settles over me. I don’t want to be the reason she feels awkward, and my asshole behavior is doing just that.

I work to keep my tone light. “Yeah, the place is finished, so I’m all set to head back and start pre-season.”

Luke nods and turns to Luna, his hand traveling down another inch on her back. My blood boils, knowing she won’t like it. I also know she won’t

want me to call him out—she likes to do that herself. “Speaking of renovations. I can still hang those prints if you want me to.”

“Oh, she’s got that down herself,” I cut in.

Being an asshole again, Zach.

Luna’s eyes twinkle at me in amusement, and fuck if it doesn’t trip me out. “Thanks, but Zach’s right, I’ve been laying floorboards all summer. Me and a hammer are like this.” She holds up a hand and crosses her pointer and second finger over.

Luke balks slightly, clearly not liking her response. “Huh, okay. But if you change your mind, I’m not working tomorrow—day off. I can come over and sort them if you need. You’re probably swamped with schoolwork now.”

Shit. He doesn’t know she’s out of town with me for the next few days.

Luna quickly throws me a look that screams “please don’t say anything.”

I got you, Rocket.

Shoving his hands in the pockets of his shorts, Luke finally relinquishes his hold on Luna’s back. “It’s getting late, and I guess we’re finished up with the food.”

He begins clearing everything and then grabs a bag, striding down the beach to toss it in the trash.

I reach over and take Luna’s wine and set it on the table in front of us. “Walk with me?”

The urge to take her hand in mine threatens to overwhelm my entire thought process as we make our way down the shore. She looks gorgeous in a pale pink tasseled dress and a cute turquoise clip pinning her long hair up.

It feels like forever passes when she finally speaks. “Everything feels weird between us.”

I puff out a breath. “It’s just an adjustment period, that’s all.” The lies just keep coming tonight.

“I’ll meet you at the airport tomorrow. I should probably make my own way there since I’ll be flying back alone.”

“Okay.” I come to a stop and turn to her, the pieces of hair framing her petite face blowing in the breeze. “You’re still sure you want to come?”
Please say yes.

“I mean, yeah. If you still want me there?”

I want her everywhere.

“Luna, me asking was simply to check if *you* still want to come. I’ll take whatever time together we can get.”

The corners of her mouth tip up slightly. “Me too. Especially since you’re paying for me to fly first class.”

I throw my head back and laugh. Looking around, I notice there’s no one but us. The warm glow of the fire is still burning, but everyone has gone. “How about some late-night swimming?”

“What? Now?”

I reach behind my head and pull off my shirt. “No time like the present.”

“I don’t have a swimsuit.”

“Minor detail.” I haul her over my shoulder and charge for the water, barging my way through the waves as I go.

Her tiny fists beat on my back as water splashes up all around us. “Put me down, Evans!”

“Never!”

“I mean it. I won’t come to the gala!”

“Oh, playing hardball now, eh? Okay, you win.” I throw her into the water, laughing hysterically as she comes up for air, completely drenched.

“Asshole.” She sends a wave of water my way that hits me square in the face.

“Let’s not play these games. You know it’s dangerous to poke the bear.”

She quirks a soaked brow. “You act like the tough guy, but I know what’s underneath that hardened hockey player exterior of yours.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, like a Tootsie Pop or something. Hard on the outside, soft in the center.”

“You’re like popping candy,” I counter.

“Well, it is delicious.”

“Definitely delicious. I love the way it crackles on my tongue.”

I tower over her as I come to stand so close, I can smell her sweet scent over the salty ocean. I’m thrumming with the need to reach out and take her in my arms.

Against the moonlight, I see her cheeks flush at my innuendo that was one hundred percent deliberate. “Zach, I, we should—” She thumbs over her shoulder toward the shore.

Just one more minute, Luna.

I bring my hand up to her cheek and stroke my thumb along her jawline. “I know we *should* do a lot of things.”

Her deep eyes dance as she looks up into mine. Goddammit, why does it have to be this way? “Why can’t the stars align for us, Rocket?”

In response, her breath catches in her throat. It’s the first time I’ve admitted we could be something more if things were different. Because other than the distance, I’m running out of reasons why we can’t.

Her eyes dart to my mouth, and I lean in closer, desperate to taste her again.

“The *fuck*?”

My head whips up to where the cutting voice came from, and I find Luke standing around twenty feet away. His hands are on his hips, and even in the dark and from this far away, I see the flames burning in his eyes. His chest heaves with anger. “I. Fucking. Knew. It.”

My hand is still on Luna’s cheek as we both stare at him, rooted to the spot and pressed together.

“You come back for the summer, and I barely see you. But now I know for sure— you’ve been too busy screwing the girl I...” His hands ball into fists at his sides. “Haven’t you got enough women on speed dial? You had to move in on her. Fuck her and then leave her.”

“I’m sorry but *what the fuck* are you talking about?” Luna lurches away from me, charging toward Luke as her tiny frame cuts through the water, parting as she goes. “Who the fuck do you think you are? You do NOT own me!” Her feet hit the sand, and she takes a couple of steps closer, and he takes a couple back. “Let me guess, next you’ll say he broke ‘bro code’ or something equally misogynistic and ridiculous.”

I can’t help it. A proud smile breaks out across my face.

That’s my Pocket Rocket.

“Why the fuck are you smiling?” Luke spits, pointing at me.

“Me?” I point to myself. “This isn’t about me. This is about Luna, and she’s right. She can be with whoever she wants.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ZACH

I got fuck all sleep. Tossing and turning all night, I knew this morning I had to go and straighten things out with my old school buddy.

I can't fly back to Seattle and leave it like this. No way. He's not only one of my oldest friends but also my dad's employee.

Last night Luke was raging, and even though he's out of order for thinking he has any sort of claim over Luna, I need to make sure things aren't left in an awkward place for her. She lives here and will see him around town. This is my shit to clean up. Luke is, or possibly *was*, my friend.

It's early morning when I pull up outside his place, so I'm shocked to find him already in his garage, working on a piece of furniture.

The door of my truck slams shut, and Luke's head shoots up to see who it is. He eyes me for a second, a cold look on his face, and then gets back to work on the table he's sanding down—almost as if I weren't here.

The walk up his drive feels long and uncomfortable, and as I get closer, he leans across and switches on a radio, turning the volume up high.

I reach over and turn it straight back down. "We don't want to wake the neighbors. It's barely seven."

He scoffs. "I've got nothing to say to you, Zach."

“Yeah, well I’ve got plenty.”

“Shame you didn’t have ‘plenty’ before last night, huh? Or maybe that wasn’t the first time.” He looks up at me, his eyes slightly narrowed and his lips pursed. “You could’ve had anyone, fucking *anyone*.”

I shake my head in disbelief, he still can’t see the error in his ways. “But I stole your girl, right? Give me a break man. She hasn’t been your girl for over ten fucking years. Did you get pissy with all the other guys she’s slept with since you split?”

His eyes blow wide with rage, and he comes to a complete stop, dropping the sander. “You fucked her?”

I work to keep my tone calm. “We’ve slept together, yeah.” Saying I fucked her doesn’t fit with what we shared this summer. She wasn’t just a fuck. No way.

“How many times? How long?” he spits, his anger ready to boil over.

I scratch at the back of my neck. “That’s not really any of your business. Like I said, she’s not your girl.” I exhale a slow, deflating breath. “She’s not mine, either.”

“So, what, you hookup with her and then fuck off back to Seattle.” He shakes his head with disdain. “She’s worth more than that man. She’s not some cheap fuck you get after a game.”

I have no clue how I’m keeping it together. He’s way out of line and clearly knows nothing about me if he thinks I have a different woman in my bed each night. “I came here to talk to you about what you saw last ni—”

“What I saw was you making out with Luna. I’m glad I didn’t arrive five minutes later.” He rounds the table and comes to stand opposite me. We’re only a couple of feet apart as I watch the anger pour off him in waves. “Why didn’t you just tell me that day I came to your door and her car was parked in your drive?”

“Because at that time, nothing was happening between us.” My voice raises slightly higher. “And you want me to ask for your permission now? Because that’s what it sounds like. Like you’re some sort of fucking gatekeeper to your ex-girlfriend.”

“I’d have been the better man and spoken to you first.”

“When things started to happen between us, I said to Luna that I was worried how this would sit between us.” I shove my hands in my pockets and recall the conversation we had when I was kissing her on my kitchen counter. That day feels like a long time ago. “She reminded me that you

guys were over a decade ago, and she didn't appreciate being owned, and me going to you to seek permission under the guise of 'bro code' was exactly that." I puff out a breath. "She's right man. I'm not saying I wouldn't have ever told you, but it wasn't going to stop me from being with her. I never intended for you to see us."

He nods, but it feels like my words have passed him by. "You're together?"

Why is it that I want to say something way different than what I'm about to say? "No. It's a complicated situation."

He laughs darkly. "Yeah, no shit. So, you head back to Seattle this morning and what, leave her here to watch you hook up with a different woman each week? Nice one. You're not the Zach Evans I used to know."

I hold up a finger in front of him, my hand trembling with building rage. "One, I don't sleep around. Not that there's anything wrong with that, and I have plenty of great friends who do, but that's not me." I hold up a second finger. "Two. She's coming back to Seattle with me for a few days to attend the annual gala for my foundation." A third finger joins the others. "And three. I said *it's complicated*. She's got her life here, and I'm buried knee-deep in a mile-long contract with the Scorpions. I didn't come here looking for love. I actually came here for the opposite. Life isn't that clean cut."

Luke's eyebrows shoot to his hairline. "Looking for *love*?"

Shit. Did I say that?

I don't respond as the silence continues to stretch between us.

"You're head over fucking heels for her," Luke finally says.

I pull off my cap and run a stressed hand through my hair. "Whatever I am, I'm in deep, and I can't do a thing about it. I can't have a relationship with her from nearly three thousand miles away and see her every holiday. She's got her life and an awesome career here." I blow out a humorless laugh. "She's got her own mind, and I'm not hearing that she wants to uproot and move to the West Coast."

Arms across his chest and his tongue poking into his cheek, he shrugs, an amused smile on his face.

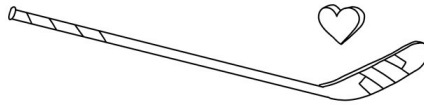
Yeah thanks, *buddy*.

"I can see why it's complicated." He claps his hands together and circles back around the table, picking up his sander. But before he gets back to work, he looks up at me once more. "I appreciate you coming over here to

set the record straight, and I guess this is the final confirmation I need that there's no going back for Luna and me. Good luck for the new season."

He holds out a hand, and I walk the couple of paces to shake it. "All the best, Luke."

I guess that's all we can offer each other for now.



LUNA

"This is how the other half lives. I guess I could get used to it."

I recline my leather seat once we hit full altitude, and the belt signs go off. Zach smiles and brushes the top of my hand lightly with his fingertips before I begin flicking through the in-flight entertainment.

He brings his bottle to his mouth, taking a sip of water. He's back on a strict regime now that pre-season is upon him. "I don't fly first that often. We have a team plane to travel for road trips."

"Do you still share hotel rooms too? That always blows my mind. These big NHL stars earn millions of dollars but don't have separate rooms," I muse.

"Yeah, it's good for team bonding and has kind of stuck. I share with Jon. Technically as the alternate captain I should probably share with a rookie, but they don't always follow the rules."

I tilt my head and pinch my brows together. "What rules?"

The look on his face tells me he's regretting saying that, but I'm too curious to grant him a reprieve, so I remain silent, wondering if he'll elaborate.

"Most players don't like their teammates bringing girls back to their room. Some of the rookies get smashed and forget."

"Most players?" My voice is a tad incredulous, which I don't mean.

He folds his arms across his chest. "Some don't mind sharing."

"Oh." What else can I say? I mean, I knew it was a possibility. These guys have a lot of women throwing themselves at them. The thought of that

happening to Zach makes me feel nauseous.

He reaches across to me and lightly runs one of his tattooed fingers down my arm, zapping me with waves of energy I feel each time we touch. “I don’t sleep around.”

I act indifferent, though I’m far from unaffected. “I’m not judging. Everyone is free to be who they are.”

He nods. “I know. I just want you to know. You might see me tagged with someone on social media, but that doesn’t mean anything has or will happen.”

I hate this conversation. It’s like he’s preparing me for when it *does* happen. When I head back home in a few days, I know I’ll want to hide under a rock. I don’t think I can stomach any of the images or videos, innocent or not. His lifestyle is a far cry from mine.

“You know that, right?” he clarifies.

“Yeah, of course.” I try to sound as convincing as I can.

But he can be with whomever he wants, and technically, so could I, even if the thought alone makes me want to rip my heart out.

He rubs a palm over his face.

I quickly change the subject. “Luke messaged me earlier. He apologized for going off at us last night. He said it sucked, but he was out of line. Did you speak to him or something?”

Zach downs the rest of his water and nods, replacing the cap. “I stopped at his place on the way to the airport.”

“What did you say?”

“In short, what I told him last night. That he doesn’t have any hold over you. I was sorry he saw what he saw, but you two were over a long time ago.”

My heart rate picks up—*he defended me*. “Thank you. But he didn’t see anything last night. We were just messing around in the ocean.”

A disbelieving smile traces his lips. “You really believe that Luna?”

No. “It’s what I have to believe.”

He nods and leans down, pulling at the lace on his sneaker and then retying it as he clears his throat a couple of times. I know he’s buying a minute to gather himself and push back our reality. This summer is almost done, and somehow, someday, we have to move on with our lives, just as we did before.

I feel my eyes sting with unshed tears, and I blink rapidly to push them back.

Grabbing a menu card from the pocket of my seat, I throw him my best teasing smile. “They have a frittata on the *breakfast* options.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

LUNA

Wow. Zach's place is crazy. Coming away from my tiny town and arriving in Seattle is change enough, but this, this is so much more. He even has his own frickin' elevator.

His entire penthouse apartment is a huge open-plan expanse of monochrome and solid dark wooden flooring. I've never once considered how much money Zach makes, beyond what's thrust in my face by the media. Standing here though, I realize why certain women come after him in the way they do. But in their pursuit of his fortune, they miss everything that truly makes him rich: his kind and beautiful heart.

"All okay, Rocket?" Zach emerges from the hallway, where he took my suitcase and put it in one of his spare bedrooms.

"Yeah." I grip the strap of my purse tightly, feeling slightly overwhelmed as I glance out of the vast floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking downtown Seattle.

"Hey, it's just me." He comes to stand in front of me, running his calloused palms over my shoulders.

I tip my chin up at him and smile. "I know. I just...I don't know what I was expecting, but this is. Wow, Zach. You really did good."

He closes his eyes and rests his forehead against mine, my body pulsing with need at his proximity. "I know what we said on the plane, but I really want to take you to bed."

My heart skips. I want it too, so badly. "I can't."

Slowly, he nods against me. "I know. I just need to be honest; this is killing me too. More than you could imagine."

Maybe coming to Seattle was a mistake for both of us. Attending the gala is one thing, but staying in his apartment like this can only lead to more than both of us can handle. "I can stay in a hotel if it makes it easier?"

He balks. "No. Don't talk crazy. I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry."

Placing a gentle kiss on my hairline, he pulls away and strides to his kitchen. "Hungry?"

"Not really. I'm going to go unpack and take off my travel clothes."

I'm not sure you could call this a spare room since it's as lavish as the rest of Zach's apartment. The huge king-size bed is adorned in crisp, expensive white bedding, and the white wooden bed frame is modern and sleek. The ensuite bathroom is just as impressive, with a spa tub that could swallow my entire place whole.

Zach shouts through from the kitchen. "How about we watch a movie? I have some game footage from last season I need to go over, but I can do that while you're out with the girls tomorrow."

I unzip my hoodie and step out of my sneakers, which I realize I should've taken off at the door, but I was kind of distracted. "Hmmm, well that depends on what type of movies you're into. I'm not about to invest two hours of my life that I can never get back on some terrible comedy."

He comes into view and leans against the door frame, and as he crosses his arms over his chest, his biceps bulge against the fabric of his sleek shirt.

Not helping.

"You don't like comedies?"

"I said I don't like *bad* comedies."

"The Hangover?"

I tap my chin. "Passable."

He pushes off the doorframe and takes a step toward me, his arms still crossed over his chest. "*Step Brothers?*"

"Oh yeah, that's a good one."

"Bridesmaids?"

I screw my face up. "Nah, there's better out there."

He's only a couple of feet away from me when he bends down to my height, a smirk spread across his gorgeous, tanned face. "Just a side note for future reference. Never, ever, say that in front of my best friend."

"Why?"

"He claims there's no finer movie that's ever been made, and he really means it."

I snicker, walking over to my case to begin unpacking.

As I push back the lid, Zach's mouth hangs open at the way I've rammed everything in. "Woman, have you packed for four nights or four weeks?"

I begin unloading everything but the kitchen sink. "I started overthinking what I needed. For example, what do I wear tomorrow when I'm out with Kate and Felicity? Then there were the shoes to go with the dress I somehow need to afford for this gala. So, I packed all my favorite heels, hoping at least one pair will match what I choose."

"You didn't need to worry about that."

"Oh, trust me, I did. There's no way I'm bringing this event down." I begin hurriedly searching through my bag. The anxiety over being Zach's date and all the eyes on us sends me into a small panic. I'm used to the quiet, secluded life. That's my comfort zone.

"Luna, you could turn up in a trash bag, and you'd still be the most beautiful woman in the room."

I flush but continue inspecting the contents of my bag. "I highly doubt that."

"And you really don't need to worry about buying a dress and shoes. Anything you want, I'm taking care of it."

I lift my head up to tell him *absolutely not*. But he's already disappeared. A minute or so later, he returns, his black leather wallet in hand. "Here, take my credit card. Buy whatever you want. Buy twenty dresses and a million pairs of shoes. It's yours."

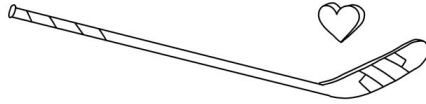
He holds out his black AMEX, an expectant look on his face. "Zach, I can't take this. I refuse to spend your money."

He takes my hand and puts his card in my palm. "Take it. Let me treat you."

I slip the card into the front pocket of his jeans. "No. Thank you, and truly, it's really kind. But I've always had my own money and got by on what I have. I'm not about to start riding on yours."

“You can be really stubborn sometimes, you know that?”

“And it’s one of my best qualities.” I wave a hand in front of me. “Now, I need to put away my panties in private.”



“WHEN DO you start back for pre-season training?”

Zach is sitting on the opposite end of the couch, stretched out with his arms folded behind his head, looking every bit incredible. He could’ve at least passed up the gray sweatpants. It’s taking everything in me to focus on *Step Brothers* and not casually stare at him.

“Light conditioning starts tomorrow. I’ll get a couple of hours in the gym with my trainer.”

“I’ve always imagined it’s quite scary, you know—ice skating.”

Holding his arm outstretched, he pauses the movie and prods me lightly with his foot. “You mean to tell me you’ve never been on the ice?”

I shake my head. “Nope, why would I?”

He shrugs. “True. I just automatically assume everyone has been ice skating.”

“Do you enjoy what you do?”

Zach turns his head to look at me, his eyes narrowing in thought. “At thirty-one, I’m starting to feel it more physically. After-game care is becoming more important, and recovery is taking longer. Taking that hit last year has set me back, but how much I don’t know.”

I cock my head slightly to the side. “But you’re all healed now, right?”

He shifts, and I can tell he’s uncomfortable, but not physically. “It’s hard to explain.”

I look down at my bare wrist, checking my non-existent watch. “I’ve got time. Four days to be precise.”

He chuckles and sits up straighter. “I’ve never taken a board like that. I’ve been hit hard before, and I’ve been in more fights than...you know I’ve been in a lot of fights.”

I mimic his movements and sit up straight. “You’re worried about the effect it’s had on you mentally?”

He scratches at his chest, his eyes crinkling at the corners in thought. “Maybe. He could’ve easily killed me. The way I hit the boards, I was lucky it didn’t break my neck.”

I haven’t seen the footage. I couldn’t. When I heard how potentially serious it was, I called every hospital in downtown Manhattan I could think of, desperate to get an update on his condition. In the end, I had to rely on news outlets and social media to keep me in the loop. As soon as I knew he was awake, I couldn’t get to my phone quick enough to call him and check he was okay.

“I know,” I say in a hushed tone.

“We play not really thinking how dangerous our sport is, but that day kind of brought it home. I want a life after my career. I’m expected to walk back onto the team and pick up from where I left off—throwing my weight around and protecting others. But you’re right with what you said, Luna.”

“What’s that?”

He draws in a deep breath and exhales slowly. “Who’s got my back out there?”

I have.

“Jon’s your best friend and the captain. Maybe you should talk with him. Tell him how you feel.”

He scoffs. “Once the stoic hardass Zach Evans—now scared shitless of the ice.”

“Well, that pisses me off,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Why?”

“Just this ongoing need men have to pretend like everything’s okay when it’s not. If it’s bothering you, then say something. It doesn’t mean you’re any weaker or less than. If anything, it shows your strength.”

Zach’s eyes soften against the glow of the still TV, and his handsome face visibly relaxes, almost like it’s what he needed to hear. Maybe validation or simply an understanding ear. “You’re so fucking special, Luna. You know that?”

It feels like my entire body liquefies.

Brushing off the deep meaning, I circle my face with my finger. “Not just a pretty face!” I pull the thick blanket Zach got me up under my chin. I’m not cold, but somehow, it feels like a shield from all the thoughts I know I can’t have. “Talk to Jon tomorrow.”

Zach hits play on the movie. “You going to share that blanket?”

Lifting the corner up to invite him to join me, I know I'm treading on dangerous ground. We both are. "If I must."

The couch is huge, so when Zach slides in behind me, propped up on one arm to watch the TV, every muscle tightens. He's not pressed against me, but I feel the way his warm body radiates through mine. I can smell his heady scent. He exhales slowly, and his breath caresses the nape of my neck, sending tingles all the way down to my toes.

I was the one who took a step back from being physical, but I don't think either of us has successfully switched off our feelings. I know Zach will never touch me again unless I ask him to. Instead, we'll walk the tightrope between friends and lovers until one of us breaks, or—and as sick as this makes me feel—he falls in love. And if that day ever comes, which it probably will, I know I'll have to take a step back from him altogether.

The thing is, from now until that time, I'm powerless to resist him. Even from very different worlds and nearly three thousand miles away.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

LUNA

The following morning, I squeeze into the back of Felicity's green Mini Cooper. She's pulled up along the sidewalk outside Zach's apartment building.

Felicity turns her head and drops her sunglasses down her nose, eyeing me. "Oh my God! You're even more beautiful in the flesh. Isn't she stunning, babe?"

"You're definitely on the upper end of the Smoking Hot scale," Kate replies.

I feel like an animal in a zoo, being gawked at by visitors. "Thanks."

I've not had many friends in my adult life, so being out with two of the most stunning and successful women I have ever laid eyes on is kind of intimidating.

"You could both model." I won't deny I've looked them up online, and they were stunning then, but in real life, Jesus. I can one hundred percent see why Jon pursued Felicity in the way he did. If I were a guy, I'd give my right nut even to talk to her. Her emerald eyes are hypnotic. Kate is straight out of *Glamour* magazine—her long, silky blonde hair, beautiful blue eyes, and flawless bone structure are like a work of art. These two women must have men, and the rest of the world, wrapped around their fingers.

“At forty, I need to keep up appearances,” Felicity says in her pure British accent. I’m obsessed. It’s like I’ve stepped onto the set of *Bridgeton*.

“Wait, what? You’re forty? No way. Not buying it.”

“She is. Trust me. I’ve seen the evidence *and felt it*,” Kate replies, a slightly pained tone to her voice.

“Ugh, I’m still getting over the hangover now. I’m convinced even one month on, my liver is still pissed at me.”

I burst out laughing. “Yeah, I’ve been there a few times.”

“Life begins at forty,” Felicity chimes. “Aside from my beautiful son and daughter, I know mine certainly did.” Even from the back seat, I can see the smile spread across her face. That’s pure happiness right there. Perhaps one day she can teach me her secrets.

“She’s ridiculously in love with the guy of every woman’s dreams,” Kate drawls. “It’s kind of nauseating.”

I catch sight of the beautiful engagement ring on Felicity’s left hand as she turns the wheel to make a right. “Wow, that’s some rock. It’s probably worth more than my house.”

“Right? He’s a keeper,” Kate sings as she scrolls through the playlist on Felicity’s phone.

“Don’t get me wrong, this is a cute car. But I’m surprised he hasn’t insisted on upgrading it to some huge SUV,” I say, looking around the Mini.

Kate selects the next song and sucks in through her teeth. “Oh, she went there.”

“Went where?” I ask with confusion.

“The car saga. Jon has now attempted to replace Felicity’s car on at least four separate occasions. At one point, he had a Range Rover Evoque delivered to her parking space at their apartment and her Mini taken away. This girl here...” Kate points to her best friend. “...called the dealer and insisted Martha be returned and the ‘ridiculous wagon’ be picked up immediately.”

Ohmygod, a girl after my own heart. “What did he say?” My voice is barely recognizable as I giggle through my sentence.

“Who, Jon? Ugh, he wasn’t surprised. It’s this ongoing tussle we have. He’s a car man and refuses to get in Martha Mini. Partly because he can’t actually fit and partly because he thinks she’s far too small and unsafe for me to drive in America where everyone’s cars are either huge SUVs or trucks. He’s convinced I’ll be squished.”

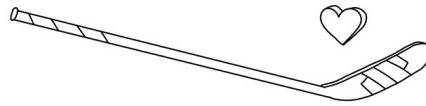
“He sounds dreamy.” And a lot like Zach. I wonder if all hockey players are like this.

Felicity eyes me through the rearview mirror. “He is. But don’t tell him I said that. His head is big enough.”

“Oh, park over there, babe. Martha will fit nicely in that space,” Kate squeaks.

“Case in point,” I say as Felicity throws the manual Mini into reverse. “There’s no way you’d get a whopping Range Rover in there.”

Kate turns in her seat, her gorgeous blonde hair thrown over her shoulder. “Girl, we love you already.”



THE FIRST BOUTIQUE was not only crazy expensive but none of us liked the dresses. I cried with laughter as Kate strutted around in something that made her look like an angel on top of a Christmas tree.

“You also look like one of those knitted women who sit on top of a loo roll.” I had no idea what Felicity was talking about, but it seemed accurate.

Now, I find myself standing in a new dressing room, staring at my reflection. Kate picked out a long, black, figure-hugging dress with straps that cross over at the back in multiple places. The front scoops down into a sweetheart neckline. At first, I screwed my face up at the color. I never wear black. But she insisted it would make my fair complexion pop and show off all my best assets, including my round ass and “huge tits.” And as I turn from side to side, inspecting it from different angles, I think she might have a point.

Pushing the curtain back, I step out into the dressing room and hold my hands awkwardly at my sides. Multiple heads turn my way, including two staff members who I swear gasp slightly. Being the center of attention is not something I’m used to or ever really welcomed. I might be a little crazy at times, but I’m an introvert at heart.

“Well, fuck me.” Kate drags her gaze all the way up my body, her eyebrow arched high.

Felicity faces the other way, inspecting the rack of dresses we picked out to try next, and when she turns, she stumbles back into them. Blinking a

couple of times, she waves a hand in front of her. “I think we can return the rest of these because you look like you just stepped out of Buckingham fucking Palace.”

“Really?” I say, still a bit unsure. “These shoes are higher than I’m used to.” I poke my foot out in front of me. The black strappy sandals must be pushing five inches.

“Really. Zach is going to lose his shit,” Kate replies.

Rolling my eyes, I bring my hands to my hips. “I told you—we’re just friends.”

“That’s what they all say, honey,” a middle-aged brunette member of the staff pipes up from across the room.

“Anyway, have you seen the price of it?” I whisper. “I can’t afford this!”

They both shoot each other a knowing glance.

“What?”

“You don’t need to worry about the cost, Luna,” Felicity replies.

I check the tag again. “At two thousand dollars, I’m pretty sure I do. And that’s not including these shoes by...”

“Gucci,” Kate finishes.

Felicity digs through her tote bag and fetches out a black card, and I see the name “Evans” stamped across the front. “It’s a drop in the ocean to these men.”

Oh no. *Not a fucking chance.*

They can both clearly tell from the look on my face that I’m unimpressed. “Just let him get it for you.”

I turn and head back toward the dressing room. “I can’t. He’s not my boyfriend, and how did you get that?”

“Semantics,” Kate drawls.

I’m about to draw the curtain when Felicity scoots in after me, taking a seat in one of the plush pink chairs. “Close the curtain please, babe.”

I take a seat on the bench opposite and begin untying the straps on my heels. “He isn’t my boyfriend. And let’s just say, for a second, that he was. I can’t take his money. I’ve earned every single penny I’ve ever spent.”

“That’s understandable, babe. But I’m here to tell you that with hockey players, they go after what they want. I pushed Jon away for months before he finally wore me down.” She laughs sweetly. “I’ve lost count of the number of times he’s bought me extravagant gifts. I like to fend for myself

financially too, but it doesn't mean to say you can't accept something occasionally. It makes them happy."

"But Jon was your boyfriend, and now you're marrying him. It's very different."

"Look, I haven't seen you two together *yet*. But from what Jon tells me, Zach is head over heels for you, like totally gone. I don't know if it's you pushing back on this, but at least let him do this one thing for you. Justify it in any way you like." She pauses. "Repayment for the help you gave him over the summer, whatever. But take it from me, just because a man buys you something does not mean he automatically owns you. Not the right man, anyway."

I stand from the bench and begin unzipping my dress.

She watches me cautiously. "I know this is probably none of my business, and you can tell me to shut up, but I see something in you. You care about him, don't you?"

Don't cry, Luna. Fight it back.

I swallow thickly and focus on the awkward zipper. "Yes."

"What happened over the summer?"

I look up at her, not sure how much to divulge. This is the first time we've met face-to-face, but there's something about Felicity and Kate that tells me my female secrets are safe in their hands. "We got close. Too close maybe."

Giving up on the zipper, I dump myself back down on the bench and twist my hands together in my lap. "I've known him since we were in high school. Back then it was a crush from afar. Yeah, we hung out in the same groups, but he was always the unattainable cool kid. I was the uncool girl with brilliant grades."

She stays quiet, listening intently.

"When we left for college, I split up with my ex. I knew it wasn't right to keep stringing him along, and from there, I've been with a couple of guys but nothing serious. I stayed in loose contact with Zach. I'd text him to say congratulations on his Stanley Cup victory, and he'd message me occasionally to check in. But it really was just once in a while. I never forgot about him though. Never stopped wondering how he was really doing underneath all the glitz and glam of the NHL." Like weights being lifted from a huge bag on my back I've carried around for years, my words make me feel lighter with each second that passes. "Like some sort of

weirdo, I'd check his social media. I stopped after a bit though, seeing him with women on each arm. Sometimes they'd capture him making out with one. I know he isn't a playboy but, jeez, the way they throw themselves at him. It was too much to take. So, I closed the lid on that box and buried it deep in my feelings. Then he returned home this summer, and I don't know. It all went from there."

I wipe at a tear trickling down my face, and Felicity hands me a tissue. "Do you have everything in there?" I say pointing to the bag.

"Pretty much."

I feel my shoulders sag. "We slept together a lot. It was the best time of my life. But a couple of weeks ago, I pulled back and put us firmly in the friend zone."

She nods in understanding. "Are you still in the friend zone?"

"I guess? At least, I'm trying to be. We kind of need to be."

"Because of the distance or because you don't want him in that way?"

I push out a disbelieving laugh. "Oh, I want him. But our lives are very different. For starters, we live thousands of miles apart, and he has a stacked schedule, so he'd never see me, and I have my career back home. I'm also not sure I could live in this life—the crazy hockey one. It's too much already, never mind being scrutinized by the public and media. I'm a home bird, and I have my mom in Florida. Then there's the small matter of—"

"Amie?"

"More like the damage she inflicted on him. I don't think he'll ever trust again."

She shakes her head. "Yeah, Jon's right again, goddammit."

"Sorry, you lost me."

"After everything he's been through and even with all the distance between you both, he's doing everything he can to keep you beside him. He can't let you go."

My stomach twists; I need out of this tight dress so I can breathe.

Her emerald eyes meet mine. "Come on, babe. Let's put that stunning dress on his card and go grab a cocktail or two. I'm the DD, and Lord knows, I think you've earned them."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ZACH

Ice baths are not the one.

I didn't like them when I was in college, and I hate them even more now.

"Getting older isn't fun." I turn to Jon, who looks just as impressed with the "therapy" as I am.

"I've got four years on you, rook. Wait until you can't bend your knee the next morning."

"I kind of like them." Jensen gets into another bath beside me. "The shock makes you feel alive."

I lean back and squeeze my eyes shut, fighting through the discomfort as it freezes my bones. "You sound like Luna."

"How many times is that now?" Jessie shouts across to Jon.

"Half a dozen at least. No wait, seven with this one."

I remain motionless, hoping that perhaps my lack of reaction will deter them.

"The wife messaged me earlier; she said Luna has a dress."

I do respond to that. "Yeah? Did she manage to convince her?"

A huge grin spreads across his face. "Yep. You're four thousand dollars lighter and also in the doghouse."

I knew I would be when I swung by their place earlier this morning to slip Felicity my card. A sense of satisfaction settles over me, knowing I finally managed to treat her. I want to do it again and again and again.

“Kate got something too, Jensen.”

“Good for her,” he shouts back to Jon and then climbs out of the bath.

“You haven’t finished your time, and I thought you liked freezing your balls off,” Jon quips.

“Nope, all done.”

He throws a towel over his shoulders and strides through the pool area, swinging the locker room door open with force. It’s like a flashback to the bar in Whistler, but each time he’s even more pissed.

I look to Jon. “What’s eating him?”

“Honestly? I’ve got no idea. Things haven’t been right with him in a while. He killed it in light practice this morning though.”

“Yeah, angrily killed it. Scared the shit out of me,” I reply.

“Zach Evans, scared? Come on now.” The alarm on Jon’s phone goes off. “Time’s up, buddy. Thank fuck.”

This is my chance to talk to him about last season. Like hell am I going to coach with it. Burrows is still pissed at me for playing in that mindset back in New York. I open my mouth but immediately clamp it shut when his phone starts ringing.

“Hey, Angel.”

Wrapping my towel around my waist, I make for the locker room. There’s nothing worse than being a third wheel in a conversation.

“Yo, Zach, wait up,” Jon calls after me.

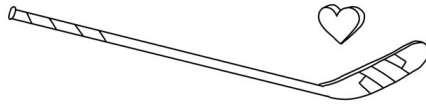
Holding his phone face down to his chest, he stands there, his junk barely covered with the smallest underpants known to man—it’s nothing I haven’t seen before but Jesus, have a bit of dignity. We all know you have it downstairs.

“Yeah?”

“They’re over at Riley’s Bar, introducing Luna to the Scorpion’s hangout. Want to join them?”

“Yeah, sure.”

He goes back to the phone right as I push through the door. “Yeah, count us in.”



RILEY'S IS PACKED as it always is.

We find the girls sitting in the large back booths away from most of the crowd, and as soon as I lock eyes on Luna, I breathe a sigh of relief. She looks happy, relaxed, and like she's known the girls for years.

Sliding into Luna's side, I automatically rest my arm along the back behind her head, and I don't miss the way Kate inspects my every move.

"Give me some lovin'." Jon slides in next to Felicity and pulls her into his arms, burying his face in her neck. "Missed you, Angel."

"Oh, and here comes my lunch."

We all turn to Kate as Jon cocks a brow at her.

"What? It's been all of four hours since you last saw her."

He grabs a French fry from the plate in front of Felicity and points it at Kate. "We'll make a believer out of you yet."

"I very much doubt that." She pauses and spins her empty cocktail glass around a couple of times, staring down into the bottom. "And anyway, who's to say I'm not seeing someone."

We all stop what we're doing. Luna pauses at sipping her drink.

"What?" Felicity eventually speaks first.

"I'm seeing someone. No big deal."

"Who? What? Where from?"

"One at a time, please. He's a lawyer, and no, he doesn't work with us. I met him in college, and we recently reconnected at a wedding for our mutual friends." She flushes slightly and leans back in the booth. "I kind of really like him."

Felicity belts out the classic wedding march and Luna bursts into laughter, the sound squeezing at my heart.

"That'll be you soon, Angel." Jon turns and plants a kiss on the side of her neck.

"Have you set a date?"

Felicity's eyes light up at Luna. "Yes! We have, but I'm not saying just yet. We need to make sure the registrar can do it first."

"Why don't you bring this guy to the gala?" I ask Kate.

A flash of excitement crosses her face. "I didn't want to impose, and you haven't met him yet, so I thought maybe I shouldn't."

"Bring him. I think we need to put a face to this...what is his name?" It's my foundation. What the hell if the organizers moan.

"Tom."

"Yeah, bring Tom. Tell him to bring his wallet too. We need all the donations we can get."

"What type of lawyer is he?" Luna asks.

She's fit right in with the group, like she was always meant to be here. Jon shoots me a glance from across the table, and I know he's thinking the same.

"Litigation, like me."

Felicity's tone is stern. "And how come I'm only hearing about this now?"

Kate shrugs. "I wanted to see if it was more than just sex."

I practically spray my beer across the table but halt when I see the way Felicity is looking at Luna.

She knows.

Retracting my arm from behind her head, I bring it to rest at the top of Luna's thigh. She visibly relaxes under my touch and fuck if that doesn't do something to me. Leaning into her ear, I whisper quietly. "Everything okay, Rocket?"

She nods while the others continue their conversation. "Yeah. Thank you for the dress and shoes. You really didn't have to."

"I can't wait to see you in them." Her skin pebbles, and my urge to move my mouth just a few inches lower and kiss where I see her response is overwhelming.

"Did you have a good practice?"

Physically yes, but mentally not so much. "Yeah, it was good."

I look over to see everyone still engrossed with Kate's news. "I have a late session tomorrow, and the ice is free afterward. How about you join me? I can help you learn to skate."

Turning her head slowly, her eyes go wide. "I don't have any skates."

"You do. I got you some today, and I put them in for sharpening overnight. I'm particular about my blades."

"You bought skates for me now?"

"Yeah. You kind of need them to learn."

“Aren’t you just full of surprises today.”

God, I could flirt with her all day, if it didn’t make my dick so hard in public.

“Did you get a chance to talk to Jon?”

“Not yet. I’ll try again tomorrow.”

“Don’t leave it too long. It’s like getting back on the horse. The sooner you do it, the better.”

I smirk at her analogy. Fucking ride me, baby. *Please.*

“Are you all set for the new school year, Luna?”

She turns to Felicity, and I look up to find Jon fixed directly on me. I can already see how tomorrow’s practice is going to play out.

“Yeah, I caught up with all my lesson plans just before coming out here.”

“She’s head of Art and Design. Got a promotion at the end of last year,” I confirm, pride swelling within me.

“Oh wow. That’s really impressive. You must be a really gifted teacher,” Felicity replies.

“I love what I do. It doesn’t pay great, but I love my kids, watching them grow and develop. It’s really rewarding.”

“You’re right to follow your dreams. Do what makes you happy,” she agrees.

Luna nods. “What are your kids studying?”

“My son, Jack, is just entering his sophomore year studying kinesiology. My daughter, Darcy, is back home in England about to enter her first year and is reading English Literature.”

“And Jack’s making some waves in division one,” Jon adds.

I sit up. “Is he now?” Last I heard he was good, but Jon doesn’t praise anyone without merit. Even future stepchildren.

He nods, a serious look on his face. “He’s going to be the starting forward this season, mark my words.”

“Think he’s got what it takes?” I sit back, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Maybe. Word on the street is a few teams have started to notice him. Could be that he moves into the AHL first. He’s got something though, along with the dedication.”

“Gets that from his momma!” Kate shouts across the table.

Jon smiles at his fiancée. “Sure as shit isn’t from his dad.”

“Damn straight,” Kate retorts.

Luna turns to me, lowering her voice. “What’s the story with Felicity’s ex?”

I lean back toward her ear. “In a word. Asshole.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ZACH

Jon's wide open when I send the puck toward him during our three-on-three practice drill.

It's intense for early pre-season, but Coach Burrows wants to start feeling out the team as soon as possible, especially given the trades that arrived during the offseason.

Jensen is screaming instructions at me—nothing new there—but I feel one length behind the entire team. I'm conscious that these types of drills are especially effective at exposing weak links in the team, and right now, I feel like one of them.

"Alright, wrap it up for tonight, but Evans, I want to see you in my office, stat!"

"Got it, Coach."

"What do you think he wants?" Jon skates alongside me on the way off the ice.

I grab my Gatorade from the bench. "Likely to ream me out for my game. I was already on his shit list from last season."

"I wasn't gonna say it, but you aren't yourself out there. Wanna talk about it?"

Luna would be screaming “yes” at me right about now. Taking a deep breath, I stop in the player hallway and turn to my best friend. “I think I have a hangover from the hit in New York.”

“As in?”

I run a hand roughly through my hair. “I could’ve died that day.”

His face pales slightly, and I know he’s recalling the hit as it played out, but I have no memory from the moment since I blacked out. “But you didn’t.”

“Another angle and it could easily have been more than my career.”

Jon drops his head between his shoulders and nods. “I get it, man. What do you need from me?”

At this point, I don’t know. “I guess, I just wanted to tell you I’m still trying to work through the effects. I didn’t expect it to impact me like this. It’s like when I’m going in on a player, I’m hesitating for that split second. I’m in my head about what might happen.”

“That’s understandable, but I would talk to Coach. It’s not something you should carry alone.”

“He already thinks I’ve lost my way.”

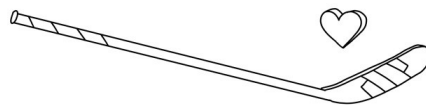
“Nah, he’s more worried about you than anything. He’ll appreciate the honesty, and you can work through everything. You got this, bro.” He claps a hand on my shoulder. “Felicity’s on a long-distance call with Darcy tonight, so that’ll take three hours.” He laughs. “Want to head back to your place and watch the Dallas footage? First game of the season, might be good to get it in early.”

I scratch at my chin, “I’m meeting Luna here in half an hour.”

“You are?”

“I’m teaching her how to skate, or at least just helping her not fall on her ass every five seconds. She’s never been ice skating before.”

With one hand on the locker room door, there’s a knowing look in his eyes. “Just admit it to yourself already. You’re gone for her.” He low chuckles and shakes his head. “Let me guess, you even bought her skates.”



LUNA

Butterflies swarm my stomach as my Uber pulls into the ice rink's parking lot. I'm nervous, but at least I can arrive in style. Zach booked me an exclusive ride.

I know this isn't a date, but it still doesn't stop me from feeling like a nervous wreck. I'm also about to spend ninety percent of my time on my ass with a guy I can't stop thinking about. It's kind of vulnerable and definitely embarrassing.

Walking through the maze of hallways, the rink is easy enough to find using the instructions Zach texted me. He also made sure I had the codes to get in. But as I push through the doors, all the lights are out, and there's no one here.

My body nearly leaves its skin when I feel a hand land on my shoulder. "Hey, it's just me." Zach walks over to the switchboard and flips on the lights, illuminating the vast expanse of ice. "Sorry, I got held up in Coach's office."

"That's okay. I was a few minutes late anyway." I continue to stare out at the twinkling white surface. It's been so long since I visited a rink. Probably the last time was when I watched Zach in high school, and I've never been when it was empty. "It's like stars, but on the ground. It's kind of beautiful."

"It's definitely a beautiful sight."

A hand threads through mine, and when I look up, I find Zach's gaze fixed on me, and the butterflies resume their dancing.

"Come on, Rocket. Your skates are ready. First lesson, lacing them up."

Zach pulls me toward one of the benches and kneels in front, pulling out a pair of gleaming white figure skates from underneath. He shrugs. "I figured you'd want these rather than the hockey ones."

I nod and chuckle. "You'd be right."

Carefully, he laces my skates moving from one foot to the next. The silence between us is therapeutic as I watch him work in a particular way.

"Before each game, Jon and I have this routine. I re-lace my skates, and he works on his stick, taping it up."

"He tapes his stick?"

"Yeah, the tape helps control the puck when it makes contact."

“Do you tape yours?”

“Yeah, pretty much every player does. It’s just Jon is obsessive. It’s more about routine than anything. Hockey players have superstitions.”

“Did you speak to him? You know, about how you’re feeling.”

I watch the top of his head as he nods. “Yep, spoke to both him and Coach.”

“And?”

“Jon got it. Said he would always have my back and that he’d help me work through it.”

“And Coach?”

He laughs. “He was more concerned, thinking it hadn’t affected me at all. He said players don’t take hits like that and just bounce back. It’ll take time to build my confidence. He’s going to build a plan with our team psychologist to help with visualization and flashbacks.”

“That sounds great. It’s awesome you have so many supportive people behind you.”

He comes to a stand and holds out his hand for me to take. “Yeah, it really is. Thank you for pushing me to speak up.”

We walk toward the rink, and chills run down my spine—I’m not sure if it’s the ice or his proximity. “I’m just another person in your corner, Zach.”

He steps onto the ice and turns to face me, holding out both hands. “You’ll never be ‘just’ anything in my life, Luna.”

Tentatively, I step onto the slippery freezing surface, and my shoulders lock as I feel my left skate slowly slipping underneath me.

“Keep your knees soft and your body relaxed; I got you. You aren’t going to fall.”

I think it might be too late for that.

Zach takes complete control, gliding us into the middle of the ice. I keep a tight grip on his hands as he continues to skate backwards. In his thick black hoodie and gray sweatpants, he looks glorious, navigating the ice like it’s his second home. “You belong out here.”

A brief smile pulls at his lips. “Have you ever been somewhere where you can clear your mind of everything?”

I think about my home and Cocoa Beach at night under a clear night sky. “Yes.”

“Well, this is where I do my best thinking. There could be twenty thousand people in this arena, but I only hear one voice. My own.” He

continues to circle the rink with me in tow, my wobbly legs like Bambi. “Would it be weird to say it’s calming, even during games?”

“No. I think wherever you’re most comfortable is where you’re grounded.” My voice quakes, and I shiver. Wow, this place is colder than I expected; I should’ve worn more layers.

Pulling his black Scorpions beanie from his head, he keeps one arm looped around my waist as he tugs the hat onto my head, almost covering my eyes in the process. “Is that better?”

“Yeah, thank you.” Just as the final word leaves my mouth, my right leg slips to the side. In slow motion, but with exactly zero grace, I tumble to the ice.

Zach wraps a strong arm around my waist and breaks my fall before I hit the surface. “Soft knees, remember.” We come to a stop right in the middle of the rink. His arm is still looped around me, and my body is pressed against his. “You look cute in my hat.”

All I can smell is him. He wraps around me like a hot summer night. It’s hard to remain upright when I’m this overwhelmed. “Yeah? Black is my new color.”

“Black? You’ve never worn anything black before.”

I smile cheekily. “Well, Saturday night I will be.”

Zach’s hand tightens slightly around my waist. “That’s the color of your dress?”

I nod slowly. “Kate picked it out.”

Biting down on his lip, he holds my gaze for a moment too long. Too long for me to resist, and automatically I swipe my tongue across my bottom lip.

His eyes immediately fall to my mouth, a look of pure need in them. “If I kiss you, will you pull back?”

My heart thunders against my ribcage. “I should.”

“Should is different from want.”

“What we want and what we should do are two very different things, Zach.”

He drops his forehead to mine as both his hands come to rest on my hips. “After you fly home on Sunday, when will I get to see you again?”

School starts the next day, and then his hockey season starts in October. “Not for a while.”

He blows out a long breath. “Let me kiss you.”

“For what reason? So we can head back to your place and sleep together again, only for me to leave two days later? I can’t be friends with benefits.”

He balks at my terminology. “You’d never be just that to me.”

“By definition, that’s exactly what we’d be. We need to move on from this summer.”

His face contorts, still resting against mine. “I don’t know if I can, Rocket.”

“What choice do we have? You have your life here in Seattle, and I have mine across the country.”

Our lips are centimeters apart, and I feel the warmth of his breath against my cheeks. “Will you date other people?”

I want the ice to melt from underneath my feet and swallow me whole. “Do you want the honest answer or the one I think you want to hear?”

He reaches up and brushes a calloused thumb over my cheek, looking me straight in the eye. “I always want your honesty, and you’ll always have mine.”

I swallow hard in a desperate attempt to push down the lump forming in my throat. “Right now, I can’t see past what we shared. But one day, maybe. What about you?” I ask the question, but I really don’t want to hear the answer.

Like a lead balloon, I watch the column of his throat work hard to digest my response. “I can’t see past you and what we have. I know I made a lot of promises to myself three months ago. But if you were here in Seattle, and if you thought the hockey lifestyle was something you wanted, then I’d be standing here asking you to be my girlfriend.”

My legs almost give out from underneath me, but this time, it has nothing to do with my balance on the ice. “Y-you want me to be your girlfriend?”

He moves his hand to the nape of my neck, and I tip my head up to look him in the eyes. “If the stars were aligned, then yes. I feel a lot of things for you. Things that scare the shit out of me, but I can’t keep ignoring them. They’re here to stay, and I’m tired of pushing them down.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t need to say a thing. If things ever change for you, and you think you could live your life here with me, then know that I’ll be waiting.”

My hands shoot up, and I run my fingers through his soft brown hair. “I need time. I know I’d need to move my life, but I need time to think

everything through. It's all happening so fast, and I—"

"I'm not asking for an answer, Rocket. I'm just showing you my cards. And your name is written all over each one."

My heart thunders, beating so hard I can hear it in my ears. "Do you still want to kiss me?"

He brings his lips closer to mine once more. They were so close before, but they're millimeters now. "I want you to be my girlfriend, so for me, kissing you is the equivalent of breathing."

"Then kiss me."

I expect his lips to crash to mine, but they don't. Instead, his palms come under my thighs, and I wrap my legs around his waist, keeping my hands planted at the back of his head. Slowly, and with his lips moving languidly over mine, he skates us to the edge of the rink and sets me down on top of the boards in front of the player's bench.

Pushing my legs apart, he slides between them. "How about this? From now until the day I hope to call you mine, I'll only kiss and hold you. I won't go any further until you tell me you're ready."

"But won't that be torturous for you?"

He laughs and kisses the corner of my mouth in that same spot he always does. "Yes, but we go at your pace."

"Okay."

"Okay, Rocket." He kisses that spot once more.

"What's so special about there?" I point to where he kissed.

His eyes shine with warmth. "I know I shouldn't have one and don't tell the others, but it's my favorite freckle."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

LUNA

I'm concluding that all NHL players have private elevators.

Tapping in the code Felicity sent me, I drum my fingers nervously on the golden railing along the back wall as I wait for it to reach the penthouse.

The doors open out into a palace. Seriously, Felicity could probably pass as a member of the British royal family living here. The lavish apartment has gloss, gray tile flooring as far as I can see and beautiful sleek black light fittings. But as my eyes cast across the walls of the lobby, my heart squeezes. There are canvases of Jon, Felicity, and who I think are her children and his family scattered all around. Above the stone fireplace in the living room sits a huge print of them both. It looks like it was taken at a professional shoot. Felicity's wrapped in Jon's arms, their faces close together, and that stunning engagement ring is on full display. I don't need to be an appreciator of art to know these two are in the deepest kind of love that could ever exist.

"Luna? We're in here!" A British accent breaks me from my staring session as it filters down the hallway. "Second room on the left!"

I follow the direction of the voice, passing through the stunning kitchen and dining area until I enter a bedroom and find Felicity and Kate talking to

two makeup artists and a hairdresser.

“Hey, girl! You’re up first.” Kate kisses me gently on the cheek and points to an empty chair in front of a dresser.

“All I can say is this place is madness. Like, wow,” I say, walking over to the chair and taking a seat. One of the makeup artists comes over first and begins setting out all her equipment and products.

“Thank you. It’s really Jon’s place; he styled it. But it feels more homely now that we have our pictures up.”

“It’s perfect,” I reply, placing one arm and then the other into a robe.

“I’m Cathy, and I’ll be doing your makeup today, and this is Hannah; she will take care of your hair. So, what sort of look are we going for?”

“Sexy as hell,” Kate responds, taking the seat next to me, ready for her hair to be fixed.

I snort. “I’m not sure that’s possible but give it your best shot.” I stare at my reflection for a beat and think about my black dress. I’ve always worn light makeup and bright colors, but tonight is different. I want to feel different. I need every ounce of confidence I can muster. “Maybe a smokey effect?”

Cathy smiles in response. “You got it. I think that will look awesome and suit your huge brown eyes perfectly.”

“I have *huge-eye* envy.” Felicity chimes from across the room where she’s pouring glasses of champagne for us all. “They’re like looking into two big mugs of hot chocolate.” She hands Kate and me a glass and then offers one to the ladies working. “We had some fizz left over from my birthday party, and I thought, why the hell not?!”

I take a sip of the drink and feel the bubbles dance on my tongue. “Champagne is so tasty.”

Kate holds her glass up to me and smiles. “To newfound besties.”

I’m not sure if it’s the alcohol or her addressing me as her “bestie,” but my body swarms with warmth. “To besties.”

Felicity walks over to the nightstand, fiddling with a control above it. “Ed Sheeran?”

“Hit me with him!” Kate replies.

I look across at her. “Is Tom coming?”

Her lips tip up at the corners as she eyes me through the mirror. “Yep. It’s our first time out as an official couple.”

“You’re officially dating?”

Her face fully illuminates. “Yes! It’s been a few weeks now, and he wanted to move it to the next stage.” She taps her chin in thought. “I think he’s the first ‘boyfriend’ I’ve had in maybe five or six years.” Her eyebrows knit together slightly. “But it’s nothing serious. We’re exclusive, but I’m not planning on marrying the guy or anything.”

Felicity comes to sit on the other side of me, examining the different eyeshadow palettes. “Kate doesn’t do serious relationships.”

Kate nods her head harshly to indicate her agreement, and then quickly apologizes to the hairdresser trying to pin her hair.

Keeping my eyes firmly fixed in front of me, I decide now is as good a time as any. “Zach told me last night that if distance wasn’t an issue, and if the hockey lifestyle was something I wanted, then he would ask me to be his girlfriend.”

On hearing my revelation, Felicity’s mouth hangs open, but then it quickly snaps shut as she reaches forward and grabs my half-empty champagne flute. “Top up?”

I burst out laughing. “I’m a lightweight, so I’ll pass.” I take a deep breath and exhale slowly as Cathy finishes up the first smokey eye.

“What did you say back?” Kate asks.

“I knew he wanted more,” Felicity adds.

“I said I needed time. It’s not like the distance is going to change anytime soon. I’d be uprooting my whole life, and he can’t exactly move to Florida.”

Felicity closes one of the palettes and shrugs. “He would if he could.”

I turn to her. “You think?”

“One hundred percent, yes. If he wasn’t tied into a contract, I think he would. Zach’s the kind of guy who would do anything for those he cares about most.”

She’s not wrong.

She crosses a leg over and sits back in her chair, drumming her pale-pink fingernails on the arms. “But I don’t think this is purely about distance, and it’s certainly no longer about his issues or fear of commitment.”

Kate nods knowingly. “It wouldn’t be just your job and hometown you’d be giving up. It would be your privacy too.”

“I’ve lived my entire life barely being noticed. I don’t mean that in a self-pitying way,” I clarify. “What I mean is I’ve never had eyes on me. Before you two, I didn’t have any real friends. My family isn’t close at all,

and I'm an only child. I'm used to heading to the store on a Sunday with no bra on." I laugh. "Plus, let's just say for one minute that I went through with it all. There would be weeks, probably months at a time, when I wouldn't see him. It's not that I don't trust him, but I'd be in this big city, in a new job, and on my own. I'd be away from the only home and people I've known my whole life."

"I agreed with everything but the part where you said you'd be on your own," Kate replies. "You would have us, so you would never be by yourself."

I throw her an appreciative smile. Turning to Felicity, I wonder how she does it. "How do you cope with it all?"

"It's hard. It was really hard at first. The adjustment, the speculation. The media passing comment on my age and being older than Jon." She laughs darkly. "At one point they questioned whether I was pregnant and had entrapped him that way."

"Wankers," Kate drawls, which draws a laugh from Cathy and her colleague.

"My bestie's turning British." Felicity giggles and then she returns her focus to me. "But it's slightly different for me. I was already set up and living in Seattle when I met Jon, and as much as he hates to talk about it, he only has a season or two left in the NHL, and then he'll likely look at retirement options. Hence why he's doing so much in the coaching space right now. Zach is four years younger and has much longer to go. In theory, anyway."

I nod. "It's a big decision. I want to make everything work between us."

"Is he worth it? As in, do you feel strongly enough about him to make that step?" Kate asks in a soft tone.

"I do. I've liked him for a long time, and my feelings have only gotten stronger. But what if I make the jump and it's not right for me, or I can't cope with the lifestyle? What if I give up my career working somewhere I'm happy and valued only to move to a school where I'm not? I just got a promotion too. Then there's my house, and my—"

Felicity places a palm on my knee. "You're absolutely right. You need time to digest everything. You need time to work out what's best for you both." She smiles sweetly. "I think when you have your answer, then you'll just know. There won't be any doubt. Have a little faith in the process and enjoy the time you do get to spend with each other."

I nod but feel the growing frustration at the situation. “I feel like I can’t win because the time we spend apart will be so rough.”

Kate sucks in a sharp breath. “And based on how you look in that dress, he’s definitely gonna pine.”

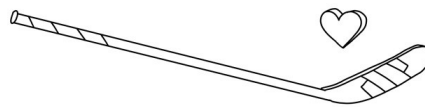
I smirk and check out my reflection. “This makeup is amazing.”

Cathy beams. “It looks even better than I thought.”

“Now time for hair.” Hannah comes to stand behind me. “Are we going for relaxed waves or something more formal?”

“I prefer my hair down.” It falls all the way to the small of my back, and when it’s styled properly, it’s probably my favorite feature.

Wrapping one of my strands around her finger, she twists her lips to the side, clearly running through a style in her head. “I was really hoping you’d say that.”



ZACH

Like a bride on her wedding day, Luna has refused to let me see her dress, makeup, or hair, wanting me to see it “all together.”

Glancing down at my watch, I know we’re pushing it for time. I doubt the event organizers will appreciate the founder of Hockey Now being late to his annual gala.

Stepping toward her bedroom door, I knock gently. “You ready to go?”

“Yep, just two seconds!” Her voice is slightly raised and panicky.

I begin walking over to grab my wallet and keys when the door to her bedroom opens. “Okay, I think I’m all set.”

Fuck. Me.

I have no words to describe the insane level of attraction I feel toward her on a normal day, but at this moment, she’s a goddess. Her smokey brown eyes and the long, flowing dress that outlines the perfect curve of her full breasts are sensational. Her gown is floor length and hugs every part of her flawless body, and when she spins around, showing me the way the

straps cross over all the way down to the lower part of her back, I bite down on my fist, unable to contain my reaction. “Luna. Wow. I—Um, yeah. Just, wow.”

I fumble over my words and my feet as I make my way across to her. Wrapping my hands around her beautiful hips, I lean down to whisper in her ear. “You make me feel like I’m sixteen all over again.”

Whispering back, I feel her breath on the shell of my ear as it sends tingles throughout my body. “You liked me in high school?”

I nod slowly. “I always thought you were gorgeous.”

“Well, I won’t lie, but I’m surprised.”

I throw my head back and laugh. “I’m not blind, but I was shy.” My laughter fades out. “Then you got with—”

“Luke?”

“Yeah.”

She nods. “Remember that time in the kitchen? You asked me why I split with him.”

I nod slowly.

“Well...” her voice shakes, and I can tell she’s anxious. “I ended it because whenever I was with him, I thought only about you.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, her truth lighting me up but killing me all at once. How the fuck am I supposed to let her board that flight tomorrow? Anything but her right by my side is too far for my heart.

I rub my nose against hers. “The way I want to lay you down and kiss you all night.”

She smiles sweetly at me and fuck if its not the most beautiful sight. “But our car will be outside and you have a big speech to deliver. She reaches up and carefully straightens my bow tie. “Come on Evans, let’s go raise a shit load of cash.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

LUNA

“No need. Thanks, though.” Zach leans forward from our seats in the back of the limo and places a hand on the driver’s shoulder. He pushes open his door and walks around to my side, flashing cameras following his every move. Opening my door, he holds out a hand, and I slip my palm into his, slowly rising to my feet and finding my balance in these crazy-high heels. The cameras continue to flash from where the media is lining the red carpet entrance. It’s blinding, overwhelming, and like nothing I’ve ever experienced before.

Zach leans down and whispers in my ear, the shimmer of his breath sending goosebumps across my skin. “I don’t need to enter that building to know you’re the most stunning woman here tonight.” He leans down and kisses just below my ear. The noise from the crowd erupts, mimicking the way my body screams at the contact. “Fuck it. You’re the most stunning woman. Period. Just relax for me, Luna; imagine we’re back home on the veranda, and you’re giving me shit.”

I let out a nervous giggle as he interlaces our fingers and turns confidently toward the press, raising a hand as he acknowledges other high-profile guests and those screaming questions at him.

Panic races through me. I haven't prepared or even thought about the questions.

"Mr. Evans!" one reporter shouts above the rest. "Is this your new girlfriend?"

Zach smiles and gently squeezes my hand in comfort. "If only I were that lucky."

Turning his attention to me, the reporter smiles. "A woman who keeps *the* Zach Evans waiting. Tell me your name."

Zach holds up a hand. "Okay, buddy, let's talk about what we're here for tonight."

Frozen in place, my eyes dart around, the conversation between Zach and the reporters passing me by in a blur as I fight to stay in touch with what I'm seeing. The glitz and glam are more overwhelming than I could've ever imagined. Zach moves his hand from mine to the small of my back as we make our way down the line of reporters and photographers, and I fight to maintain a plastered-on smile. It comes so naturally to him, but for me, I'm almost certain they can tell I don't belong here, in this world.

"Hey, babe!" Like a beacon in a stormy sky, Felicity comes to stand next to me. Wearing an emerald dress that pools around her chest, hugs her tiny waist and full hips, and rides high on her right thigh, she looks every bit the goddess her fiancé describes her as.

"You look absolutely stunning."

She chuckles. "Thank you. It's just a dress from a high-street store in London, nothing too fancy or designer."

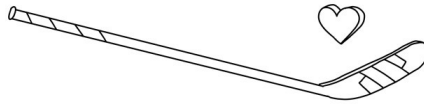
My eyes nearly bug out of my head. "It looks like a Prada to me."

"Angels look spectacular in anything," Jon chimes in, placing a chaste kiss on top of Felicity's head. She looks up at him and smiles.

Turning to me, he offers a reassuring smile, and I know he can tell I'm way out of my comfort zone. "You look stunning, Luna. No wonder you've got my AC all twisted up."

Zach pauses his conversation with one of the reporters and whips his head toward Jon. Scanning down my body with a heated look in his eyes, he throws me a cheeky wink and then looks back at his friend. "You really blame me?"

Jon's shoulders shake, and he leans down to speak to me as Zach goes back to the media. "He's like a puppet on a string. And I'm here for it."



“I CAN ALREADY TELL this is your foundation,” I say to Zach as we enter the main room.

He leans down to hear me over the music. “Oh yeah, and why’s that, Rocket?”

“Because everything is gray. Well technically gray and silver, but still, there’s a lot of gray on display.”

Guiding us over to our table, where I immediately spot Kate and what must be Tom in deep conversation, he laughs. “Trust you to notice. It’s the colors of my foundation.”

I lift a shoulder as I set my clutch down, and he pulls out my seat. “Just saying what I see. It’s gorgeous though, really special.”

Across the walls, there are prints of children I assume the Hockey Now foundation has helped. Some of the pictures include Zach, but one in particular catches my eye, and I point to it. “Who’s that?”

He smiles broadly. “That’s Lucas. He was eight when his dad passed away in a car accident, leaving him and his family in turmoil. He’s an incredible winger, but without his dad around, his mom was struggling to pay for hockey and find the time to work, care for the rest of his family, and get him to and from practices and games. She reached out to Hockey Now via his school, and we were able to offer a grant. He’s a talented kid with a bright future.” He smiles and wraps his arm around the back of my chair as we take a seat. “He’s eleven now, and I can already tell he has a solid shot at a full ride in college if that’s what he wants.”

My senses tingle with emotion. “Wow, that’s quite something. To be able to support the dreams of young people like that.”

Bringing his face closer to mine, he opens his mouth to reply when Kate shouts across the table, “So, this is Tom. Sorry...” She giggles. “I meant to introduce him, but we got a little distracted.”

“Welcome to the group, Tom.” Jon raises his glass from where he and Felicity are sitting a few chairs down.

“Thanks; it’s a pleasure to be here,” Tom responds before getting right back to eye fucking Kate.

Zach casts his gaze around the room and then turns to Jon. “Where’s Jensen?” He looks down at his watch. “He should be here by now.”

“Right here. Sorry I’m late.” A tall, dark-haired guy comes to stand behind our chairs. He’s handsome, like *really* handsome.

Is it a prerequisite for signing with the Scorpions that you have to be hot?

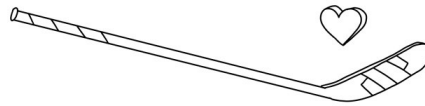
“All good, man?” Zach asks, looking up and over his shoulder at his teammate.

Keeping his stare firmly fixed on Kate and Tom, he takes a sip of his drink and then looks at Zach. “Yep. Got caught on a call with my agent.” His eyes flick back to Tom, and I don’t need to be a mind-reader to work out there’s a story there somewhere.

Leaning toward me, Zach rests his hand on my upper thigh, the warmth of his palm radiating throughout my body. “I need to set up for my speech, but what can I get you to drink?”

Thinking back to the champagne we had at Jon and Felicity’s, I still feel slightly light-headed. “Maybe an orange juice?”

Chuckling, he stands from his chair. “You got it, Rocket.”



“LAST YEAR we raised an incredible amount of money which has already changed the futures of over a hundred kids and their families. Ice hockey should be accessible for everyone, no matter your background or ability.”

Zach casts his eyes out across the crowd as they clap in support. His attention finally lands on me, sitting only ten feet away from the stage. “I want to thank everyone who has turned up tonight, everyone who donates, and finally on a more personal note, I want to thank one of my closest and oldest friends for showing her support and agreeing to be my date to tonight’s event. I have some incredible people in my life, and I’ve never been more grateful for her than I have these past few months.” He raises his glass as everyone mirrors his gesture. “So, let’s get this year’s auction going and raise a record amount.”

Rejoining the table, Zach comes to sit back down next to me. My face still feels hot from his personal speech. “I hope you don’t mind me

mentioning you. I just want you to know how stoked I am you're here with me tonight."

I place my hand over his on the table, and I watch as a smile pulls at Kate's lips. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

"Oh shit, man." Jon breaks our trance as he flicks through pages of the items for tonight's auction. "You put your first Scorpions jersey up."

Zach nods. "Yeah, it's signed too. I have plenty and figured this would fetch a few dollars."

Jon cocks a brow. "Yeah, I'd say a few *thousand*."

"What have you donated?" Kate turns to Jon.

He leans back in his chair and smiles. "My signed gloves from our Stanley Cup win."

Felicity screws her nose up. "I bet they smell delightful."

Jon pulls back in mock hurt. "Everything about me smells incredible, Angel." He points across to Jensen. "And if you think they smell bad, our boy here wanted to donate his cup. I managed to talk him out of it though. That's gotta be a public safety hazard."

"Ew, gross," Kate responds.

"Hasn't always been your reaction," Jensen says from across the table as the rest of us fall silent. He pushes his chair back and goes to leave before turning back once more. "Does anyone want anything from the bar?"

The auction has been underway for the past half hour, and hundreds of thousands have already been raised. Jon's gloves went for over thirty thousand dollars alone.

"I think people will go crazy for your jersey," I say turning to Zach.

I can tell he's relaxed a little since we arrived, surrounded by his friends and with beers flowing. Raising a suggestive brow, he pins me with a heated stare. "Would you go crazy over it?"

I get it. I know the obsession hockey players have with their girls wearing their jerseys. So even though I'm not his girl, I decide to play along with the flirtation. "Oh yeah, definitely. I could even get up on stage and model it for you if you like."

With his beer to his lips, he almost drops the full glass in his lap. "That's a very kind offer, Rocket. But you see, the thing is..." He sets his glass back down on the table and turns fully toward me, resting one of his dress shoes on the rung connecting two legs of my chair. "How I want you to model my jersey is almost certainly not appropriate for this event." The

look in his eyes tells me he's imagining how inappropriate it would be right now. "Besides, there's no way anyone else here will ever get to see what should be for my eyes only."

He runs the back of his hand gently down my thigh, igniting my whole body until heat pools at my core. For once in my life, I'm speechless, and by the smug smile pulling at his lips, it's clear Zach knows just how affected I am by his words.

The woman running the auction then introduces the final item, and her assistant moves around the stage holding Zach's framed and signed jersey. "I think we can start the bidding at ten thousand dollars."

Paddles fly up across the entire room until soon the highest bid reaches fifty thousand. "Are there any more bidders in the room?" The auctioneer asks one final time. "This is for a great cause, and it's a once in a life—"

"Sixty thousand dollars." A high-pitched female voice rings out and all heads, including mine, turn her way.

Standing from her chair but sitting a fair distance away, the tall blonde waves her paddle in the air, eyeing the rest of the room. "Sixty thousand dollars for the original signed jersey of Zach Evans."

"You have *got* to be kidding me," Kate drawls from across our table.

"The *fuck* is *she* doing here?" Jon adds, an incredulous tone to his voice.

My heart drops. It's Amie.

Feeling the tension flowing from him, I spin around in my chair to see Zach's face twisted with anger. "How in the hell did she make it past security?" I bite out.

Amie is awarded the highest bidder, and the auction wraps up. All the while, our table remains stunned into silence—apart from Kate, who is clearly ready for a battle. "I swear to God that woman is the devil incarnate."

Zach stands from his chair and makes for a couple of employees in his foundation, clearly wanting answers as to how his evil ex-girlfriend has not only managed to gain access but successfully bid at the auction.

"Ah shit—she's coming over," Jon confirms.

I feel my entire body tremble with nerves. If she was here for Zach's speech, she'll know I'm his date, making me public enemy number one.

"She's clearly had the baby," Felicity offers.

I carefully look her way as she walks with purpose, her royal-blue gown skintight to her body. She can't have had the baby long ago, but her figure is perfect.

"Don't worry, babe. We have this handled," Felicity offers me in a reassuring tone.

"I'm good. Don't worry about me," I push out with confidence, feeling anything but at this moment.

"Hey, guys," she says when she finally reaches our table. She's standing behind Jensen's chair, and I almost double over in laughter as he mocks her face, knowing exactly what she looks like as she delivers her condescending greeting.

"I thought you took the trash out before we left your place?" Kate looks to Felicity.

I fight to keep my face straight as Amie looks to her left and directly at me, disdain pulling at her pouty lips.

I'm not a bitch, but seriously, what the hell did Zach see in her. All that beauty is marred by her god-awful attitude.

"How did you get in here, Amie? I can't imagine Zach invited you," Jon asks.

She tips her chin up at him. "I didn't need an invitation; my company is this year's main sponsor."

"Oh please," Kate drawls. "You took absolutely fuck all interest in it last year. Yet this year, your tiny health and fitness business is somehow the main sponsor?"

I know Amie owns a far from "tiny" health and fitness business; in fact, it's more like an empire. There's no doubt she's an astute businesswoman with a lot of financial clout and influence on social media. It's amazing what money can buy you access to if you offer enough of it.

She scoffs at Kate. "Girl, I don't even know who you are." She then looks to Felicity. "I've seen you around before, but tell me, are you still crying over that time in the bar bathroom?" She looks down at her engagement finger and points. "If ever there's a ring that screams, 'She forced me to marry her,' then that's it."

Jon rises from his seat, anger twisting his features. "Don't you dare speak to my *wife* and her friends like that. I'm not into threatening women, but since you barely pass as one, I'll make an exception."

Zach comes to stand behind my chair, resting his hands on my shoulders. "I don't need your sponsorship or your money, Amie. Get out and never come back. I never want to see you again."

She doesn't look up at him as she keeps her focus lasered on me. "You're right, Zach. You don't need the money. And neither do I. That bid was personal. After all, I doubt a random stranger would want that hanging on their wall if they knew the last time it was worn wasn't in your first game." She flicks her eyes up to him as she takes a sip of her champagne. "I hope you cleaned it up before you framed it. We got it *very* dirty that night."

I want to vomit, and I feel Zach's hands begin to shake with what I know is a mixture of rage and bitter memories.

I might be a trembling mess underneath, but I've about had my fill of this woman. I steel my shoulders and look her straight in the eyes. "From what I hear, Amie, it's highly likely there will already be one, *or maybe several jerseys*, you've worn framed and on some random stranger's walls." Leaning back in my seat, I take a sip of the champagne I decide I need after all. "It must be hard to keep track."

"I think I might be in love," Kate announces, a proud smile spreading across her face. Turning back to Amie, she points toward the exit. "Best get chasing those jerseys."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

LUNA

I might've done a good job of acting unaffected by the bitchiness of Zach's ex, but as we make our way back to his apartment, anxiety swirls in my stomach.

Every part of his life is on full display to the world, and with people like Amie around and knowing who I am, thoughts that I could end up plastered across social media and trolled scare the crap out of me.

"You gonna share what's going on in that head of yours?"

I turn to Zach in the seat next to me. He's chewing on his bottom lip anxiously. On reflex, I reach up and pull it from between his teeth and smile at him. "I don't think any of my thoughts are helpful right now."

His shoulders slump. "I'm really sorry you had to witness that." He blows out a humorless laugh. "In fact, I'm kind of embarrassed."

I frown. "Embarrassed? Why?"

His black dress jacket and bow tie are removed, leaving him in only a long-sleeve white shirt rolled up to his elbows. He folds his arms across his chest in a protective manner. "You must think I'm an idiot to get involved or even be attracted to someone like her."

"I would never think that. I mean, she's a bitch, yeah, that much is clear. But I would never think badly of or judge you. If I did, I'd be judging half

the population. We all get caught up in the wrong people at some point.”

His eyes search mine for just a moment. “Do you think I’m the ‘wrong people?’”

“Zach, why the hell would you ever think that?”

With an air of defeat, he goes to open his mouth, then clamps it shut again, taking a second before he speaks. “I thought when I found out that the baby wasn’t mine, I would be in the clear to shut her out of my life completely. Stupidly I thought I could hit a few buttons on my phone and block her from my life. It turns out, she’ll just turn up and ruin events and insult those who mean the most to me. That’s only one of the humiliating parts of this.”

“What’s the other?”

“People who treat you like shit eventually start to make you feel like that’s what you deserve. It just kind of sits, manifesting in your brain, you know?”

My heart cracks clean down the middle.

I want to rewind the clock to an hour ago, and instead of throwing an insult, I’d like to slap that smirk right off her face.

Reaching across, I cup the side of his face with my palm. “Zach Justin Evans, I want you to know that everything you are feeling is valid. The things she made you feel are valid because you are feeling them. But that doesn’t make them true. You hear me? Because they aren’t. You deserve the absolute best, just as you give to everyone else. Do you think Lucas would agree that you deserve to be treated like shit?”

He shakes his head at me slowly. “No.”

“Do you think Jon would think that?”

“No.”

“Exactly. And I can tell you ten out of ten, I never have and never will think that about you. This is all on her.”

A long stretch of silence passes between us as we ride in the back of the limo, the Seattle night sky and street lighting shining through the panoramic roof above us.

His lips feel warm and soft as I lean across and attempt to kiss those thoughts right out of his mind.

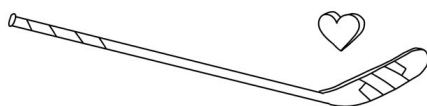
Pulling me into his lap, I sit across him, but I can feel his length pressing into the side of my thigh as he swipes his tongue across my bottom lip, caressing mine with long, languid strokes.

Pulling back, he pins with a look that reaches my soul. “I meant what I said. It’s when and if you’re ready to take the jump, I’ll be here waiting, for as long as it takes. But I don’t think I can spend another night, your last night here, with you sleeping in a different room.” He waggles his eyebrows at me in jest. “I promise no funny business, just me cuddling the shit out of you.”

My shoulders shake with laughter. “Okay, you got yourself a deal, but please, for the love of all that is holy, never waggle your brows at me like that again.”

“Why?”

“Because I think I just discovered the one unsexy thing you do.”



WHAT THE HELL do I wear to bed? I’ve been standing and looking at the two nightwear options I have laid out in front of me for what feels like hours. The question is do I go with a long old college T-shirt and play it casual or pink sleep shorts and a matching cami?

I’m definitely overthinking. What I wear doesn’t matter because I’m going no further than first base.

Grabbing my slightly tattered shirt, I head for the bathroom and brush my teeth, furiously scrubbing at them as I try to keep my mind from wandering to how freaking amazing it was the last time we shared a bed. Zach Evans is a sex god. Clichéd but true, and it’s going to take everything in me tonight to resist crawling over to him and asking him to fuck me, hard. Sure, it’ll be good for my body but likely bad for my head and my heart.

I replace the brush in its holder and check my reflection once more in the mirror. All traces of makeup are gone, but my hair has held its wavy style with minimal frizz. If only it could stay this way forever.

Exiting the bathroom, I walk a few paces across his hallway and creak open the bedroom door. The room is lit only by the TV he has on the wall opposite his bed. His bedroom is huge, and I mean enormous—you could fit a half dozen king-size beds in here and still have room for the rest of the furniture.

Zach sits up in bed, flicking through channels as he points the remote at the TV. His delicious, tattooed chest is on full display with the comforter pooled at his waist.

Stepping in fully, I turn and close the door behind me with a soft click. Nerves wrack through my trembling legs as I pad across to the opposite side of the bed and pull back the sheets to climb in. The effect he has on me is clear, and the way I'm going to miss him when I fly back home tomorrow is undeniable.

"What are we watching?" I ask, pushing myself back to lean against the cream headboard.

"I was looking for a movie you might find acceptable, but being honest, the pressure to deliver is getting to me, Rocket."

"What's your favorite movie?" I ask.

His lips twist slightly to the side in thought. "Not sure I have a favorite. I guess my favorite genre would be horror though."

"Ooof, I'm not great with scary movies. I watched *Wrong Turn* a few months back, and I didn't sleep for weeks."

He pauses scrolling and looks over at me. "Who with?"

"I was alone. Why?"

I know I don't miss the relief that floods his features when I tell him that I was alone. "That's kind of a hardcore horror to watch on your own."

I raise a shoulder. "It was a night of questionable decisions. I also went for just salted popcorn over my usual sweet and salted. I went to bed disturbed for a multitude of reasons."

Zach bursts out laughing. "I don't think there's a day that passes when you don't make me really belly laugh, you know that?"

"At your service." Leaning across, I take the controller from his hand and skip to the horror options. "Well, since I'm not alone tonight, I'm up for scaring the shit out of myself."

I shuffle back down the bed to get comfortable, and Zach does the same. You could cut the sexual tension between us with a knife.

"You're on the wrong side."

"I am?" I say, adjusting my pillows.

"I'm six-five and obviously want to cuddle you, but I make the better big spoon."

Wrapping his arms around me, he hauls me up and over his beautiful chest, until I'm on the opposite side and closest to the TV. His body

envelopes me in warmth as I feel his breath tickle my neck. He picks up the controller and clicks a couple of buttons, and then the starting credits to *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* begin.

He keeps one hand firmly planted on my waist as we begin to relax around one another. I'm not sure if it's subconscious, but his thumb slowly draws tiny circles over my T-shirt, and my skin heats in response. "You looked beautiful tonight, Luna. And I agree, by the way. I think black might be your new color. It's so fucking sexy, just like my girl."

His words shoot straight to my tightening core. Wow. Trying to keep myself together, I steady my voice. "You don't clean up too badly yourself, Mr. Evans."

His thumb stills. "Is that so?"

I turn my head slightly to the side to catch his shit eating grin. "You looked hot, but don't get carried away," I giggle.

He leans down and whispers in the shell of my ear. "Trust me, Rocket. You don't need to remind me of that. I've been repeating that exact mantra to myself since the moment you climbed into my bed."

His lips caress the sensitive flesh just below my ear, placing soft, closed mouth kisses all the way down the side of my neck. It's a sensory bliss that pools straight between my thighs. I can't help but let out a soft whimper as he pulls my hair to one side and travels across my collarbone, sliding the neck of my shirt down slightly with his hand.

"Does that feel good, baby?"

I whimper again, but louder this time. "It's so sensitive."

He pushes his hand under my shirt and rests his palm back on my hip, but this time, the only material between us is my underwear. Tracing his finger along the seam of my waistband, he continues to nip and suck.

I'm a puddle. A wet, hot mess. "Don't leave marks." I gasp. "I have school on Monday, and I can hardly show up wearing a scarf in August."

He kisses me again. "Sometimes honesty's the best policy, Rocket."

"Yeah? What should I say?"

A rumble comes from his chest. "Tell them you were about to leave the guy who's fucking crazy about you, and since he doesn't know when he'll see you again, he had no choice but to leave his mark. Just so there's no doubting that you're his."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

ZACH

I've got thirty minutes to make a twenty-minute journey, gear up, and be on the ice for practice.

I'm going to be late, and Coach Burrows is going to ream my ass for it. But there wasn't any reality where not dropping Luna at the airport was a possibility.

I need to soak up every minute with her.

I pull into the drop-off zone and kill the engine on my truck. I grip the steering wheel hard and look across at the girl I'm already missing, even though she's sitting two feet away from me. "When will I see you again?"

She keeps her head down, picking at her purple nail polish.

I take her hand in mine to stop her nervous fidgeting. "Luna?"

On a long exhale she responds. "I don't know, and this is part of the problem, isn't it? We just don't know. If we go back to the way we were before this summer, like we said we would, then in around three years?"

My heart sinks through the floor. "We both know things have changed between us, Luna."

On a whisper, her eyes are gentle and soft as she looks up at me. "I know."

Pushing my head back into the seat, frustration at our situation overwhelms me. “Am I going to lose you?”

She holds my hand tighter. “What do you mean?”

I squeeze my eyes shut and summon the courage to answer truthfully. “I know we don’t have a label right now, but while we work through everything and where we go from here, I’m saying I won’t be with anyone else. The thought nauseates me. I won’t touch anyone else. So I guess I’m asking if you’re still on the same page?”

“I won’t touch anyone else. I don’t want to.”

Relief floods my veins. “Okay, that’s good.”

“You need to get to practice.”

“Yeah, but I want you to have this.” Reaching into the pocket of my jeans, I fetch out the small ring of keys and open her palm to place them inside.

She looks down at them in wonderment and then brings her eyes back up to mine, a glossy sheen covering them. “A—Are these for the beach house?”

Closing her fingers around them, I nod slowly. “Take them. Use the place like it’s yours. It’ll make it a whole lot easier to go swimming in the mornings. You can do your schoolwork on the veranda. You put so much into it too.” I pause and blow out a breath, trying to find some humor in this dead-ass depressing situation. “Just don’t paint the walls yellow, yeah?”

“Zach I can’t take th—”

“You can, and you will, Luna. Please. This is fucking hard enough. Take the beach house, move in if you want. The stars and launches are much clearer from there.”

A lone tear slowly trickles down her cheek, and I quickly reach up and swipe it away, just as I did the first time I took her to bed. I can still feel her pressed against me as I slid inside her for the first time. With my heart still on the floor, it bleeds out at the sight of her upset. “Baby, don’t cry.”

A sob racks through her as she shakes her head. “Even if we put a label on us. This. It wouldn’t make any difference, would it? We’d still be thousands of miles apart.”

The temptation to get out of my truck and board the plane with her right now has me reaching to undo my seatbelt. “I have three more years on my contract. I could request a trade, and I will, if that’s what you want. I’ll fucking request it right now.”

“I just need time. You can’t leave everything you have here. You have a family in your teammates and friends.”

I don’t want to push her, but I need to know. “How long do you need?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I’m not sixteen anymore, Zach. I never expected any of this.” She motions between us. “My head is spinning out, and being brutally honest, I need to make sure I can handle living in your world. It would be going from zero to a hundred miles an hour. I’d need to find a place. I’d need to find a job. I’d need to leave my mom. I’d need to leave everything I’ve ever known and be thrust into the limelight. Last night was just a taste of what it can be like.”

She leans across and kisses me on the lips tenderly. My hands fly to cup her cheeks as I rest my forehead against hers.

Just one more minute, Luna.

Breaking our kiss, she reaches for the door handle and slowly pulls it open, and I fly out of my side and toward the back to grab her suitcase and help her into departures.

“You’re going to miss practice completely if you don’t get going.”

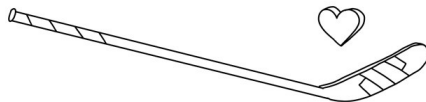
I don’t answer but instead pull her into me, holding her small frame against mine. When will I get to do this again? The possibility of never makes me want to hurl.

“Bye, Zach.”

I watch as she turns to leave, panic creeping up my spine. “Luna!”

She stops and turns. “Yeah?”

“Whatever happens. Even if we’re not in the same state. I just want you to know that you’ll always be mine. What we have from three thousand miles apart is so much more than I’ve ever felt for anyone else.”



LUNA

It’s late by the time I pull up into my driveway and kill the engine.

My home has always been my sanctuary, the place I've retreated to when things have gotten tough. But right now, staring at the darkened windows, it couldn't feel any less inviting. It feels lonely and bleak.

Come on, Luna; don't cry again. You knew this was going to happen. You knew you'd have to come home. You need to be at home to work through everything.

Wiping under my eyes furiously, I pick up my phone to text Zach and tell him I made it back safely. It's then I realize I left it in airplane mode. Shit. My mind has been all over the place, and it's been like this for hours.

As soon as I switch off airplane mode, text after text starts coming through, but mainly from Zach, Kate, and Felicity—all of them asking me to call them ASAP.

Clicking on the latest message from Zach, I open it up fully.

ZACH

Okay, now I'm going out of my mind. Please call me, Luna.

I begin typing out a response when a call from Felicity comes through.

"Hey. Sorry I forgot to take my phone off airplane mode."

"Babe, I just wanted to check in and make sure you're doing okay."

Okay, now I'm confused. She sounds frantic. "Yeah, I'm okay. Well, sort of, I guess. Everything really sucks."

"You are? I figured you'd be freaking out."

"I knew it was coming. I'd have to come home. School starts back tomorrow."

She sighs on the other end. "You haven't seen them, have you?"

I physically feel the blood drain from my face. "Seen what?"

"Babe, there are photos from last night all over social media."

"From the gala?"

"Yeah."

"Not ideal, but I guessed there would be at some point." There was a photography ban inside, but out on the red carpet, the media were free to release what they wanted.

"Yeah, um, it's not so much the photos, but what they said. I mean, it's not bad, it's just. I wanted to check and make sure you were doing alright. The media can be such assholes sometimes."

My hands shake as I put her on loudspeaker and bring up the internet. It doesn't take long to find the first photo of Zach and me. He's leaning down

to kiss my neck as we get out of the limo. But it's not the photo that makes me want to hurl—it's the caption above.

"Zach Evans's new girlfriend: cute, but not his usual type."

I keep scrolling to another that reads: "Who wore it best?" Underneath, there's a side-by-side shot of me and Amie taken at different points in the evening but stitched together. The comments underneath all discuss who's hotter, who's prettier. Some say Amie is a "whore," and my stomach wrenches once more when I read some comments talking about me being the exact opposite of what Zach would go for. Some also claim I'm a "rebound."

The tears start up again as they spill over my eyes and down my cheeks.

I *knew* this would happen. I *knew* I'd be compared to her. I *knew* I'd be thrust into the limelight and picked apart like some fucking object.

"Babe? Are you still there?" Felicity's voice cuts through my spiraling thoughts.

"Hmm? Yeah, yeah, I—I'm still here."

"You're scrolling through them right now, aren't you?"

"No." I lie.

"You are, and I know you are because I'd be doing the same. The thing is though, that's what they want. That's what they do. They say hurtful or contentious things to grab the headlines, to get people talking and commenting. It's all just clickbait, and it has no truth to it."

"It kind of does though."

"Does what?"

"Has some truth. I'm not his type." I turn the screen on my phone so I can get a better look at one of the pictures. "Amie is everything Zach goes for—tall, blonde, slim, even after a baby, long hair, blue eyes."

"You missed the part where she's a crazy bitch."

I huff out a pathetic laugh. "That doesn't matter to the media though. It's all skin de—"

I throw a hand over my mouth as a realization hits me. Throwing the door open on my car, the bile rising in my throat, I wonder if I am going to puke.

"Luna, are you still there?" Felicity shouts down the phone.

"School." One word is all I can manage.

"Babe, you're worrying me. What about it?"

"I never thought this through. The pictures, they're all over the internet. My kids live on the internet; every day, they're on social media. They will have seen the whole thing." Humiliation rips through me.

"Luna, you've done nothing wrong."

My phone starts beeping with an incoming call from Zach. I'm in no state to answer it, but I know he'll just keep panicking and calling until I do.

"Zach's calling me again."

"Take it but call me straight back—I need to know you're okay."

I disconnect one and answer the other. "Hello."

"Oh, thank fuck. I've been going crazy. Why didn't you call me back."

"Because I had my head up my ass and my phone in airplane mode for hours," I snap, immediately regretting my tone. He doesn't deserve that.

"You've seen the posts?"

"Yes." My voice cracks.

"Oh, baby, I really wanted to speak to you before you saw them."

I don't know how it's possible, but more tears emerge. I thought they'd have all dried up by now. "They're comparing me to your ex. They're saying I'm not your usual type. Some of the comments are so mean, and I knew this would happen."

"Luna, it's going to be okay. They'll wash over in no time."

"And what about the next time? And the time after that? I don't belong in front of a camera, Zach. I can't take being scrutinized and compared like this."

A long stretch of silence descends upon us.

He breaks it first. "I promise it's going to be okay. It's going to be fine. Right now, you're new to them. Something for them to fawn over. I know it sounds bad, and it is. That's the way they are, and honestly, it's made ten times worse because Amie is in the media more than me these days with her business."

"Exactly," I choke out. "She'll never let this go. She'll never let me, you, or us have peace. She thrives on attention, positive or negative."

"I know."

I drop my head and almost bash it on the partially open door, my body still twisted to the side, one foot in the car and the other on my driveway. I look up at my home, and the sanctuary and safety it brings come rushing back to me. I need to lock myself away for as long as it will take these pictures and posts to pass.

“I need some space.” I hate the way the words taste on my tongue. “I need space away from everything and everyone.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY

ZACH

It's the first game of preseason. We're up two-nothing against Nashville and on a power play.

No thanks to me—my head has been up my ass for weeks, but tonight, and out on the ice, even I can see I'm a fucking liability.

Jessie loses the puck and turns it over to Nashville. Their winger's tearing down the ice straight toward me.

I can feel my pulse in my throat as he bears down on goal, Jensen screaming at me to take him out. The Zach of last season wouldn't hesitate to check him to the ice.

But how can I be sure we'll both come off it uninjured? What if my hit isn't clean? One last roar from Jensen above the crowd, and I take off, heading straight for him. He tries to outmaneuver me, but it's no match as I drop my shoulder and Kronwall him, hard. Maybe too hard. I don't know. He hits the ice, and the puck spills out. Picking it up, I send it straight back up toward Jon for a breakaway. A few seconds later, he lights the lamp, and it's three-nothing.

"I thought I'd lost you in there for a second." Jensen taps his glove on the top of my helmet as we skate off the ice at the end of the second period.

The family box is tough to make out from all the way down here, but it doesn't stop me staring up at it every thirty seconds. I see players have their families watch them each match, Felicity and his brother Adam for Jon, Jensen's parents who frequently make the trip from Canada. Occasionally my parents make it over when they aren't working, but it's never bothered me before.

Until now.

We've barely spoken since she told me she "needed space" three weeks ago. The number of times I've hovered over her contact, typed out a text, and then deleted it before I hit send is too many to count.

I can't get her out of my mind. And the truth is, I don't want to either.

Turning my attention back to my goalie, I pull off my left glove as we step off the ice and make our way to the locker room. "Just messing with him, making him think he's got the better of me."

He puffs out a disbelieving breath. "Yeah, well can you not mess with me at the same time? I thought my key defenseman had checked out."

I swipe a bottle of Gatorade from the fridge and take a seat on my bench. We're in complete control of the game, but when Coach Burrows bursts through the door, you'd think we just got our asses handed to us.

Jon drops his head between his shoulders when he sees the look on Coach's face. "For fuck's sake."

"How the hell we are three up and still on for a shutout, I'll never know," he booms across the room. Turning to me, I know what's coming. "Evans, remind me again why I haven't benched your sorry ass? What were you doing out there in the final play? Waiting for a fucking written invitation?"

He knows what's been going on in my head lately and the effect the hit I took in New York last season has had. But that doesn't stop him from going all in. I've been seeing the team's psychologist for over a month, and he expects me to have made progress, but I haven't. Not even close.

"I wanted to make sure it was a clean hit."

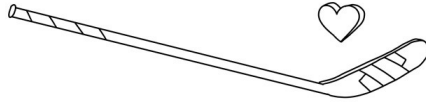
He scoffs. "A clean hit? He's carrying the puck and bearing down on goal. You check him to the ground and turn the puck over. It's the basics."

"Yeah, and that's what I did."

Rule number one. Never talk back to Coach.

Throwing his head up to the ceiling, he props his hands on his hips. "You're really pissing me off." Pointing at a rookie we recently traded from

Jon's former team in Colorado. "Holmes, you're up." He turns his finger on me. "Evan's you're out. I'm tired of giving out second chances. I'm not some kind of charity."



"WE GOING to talk about it or what?"

I twist the hardly touched beer glass around on the table. "Or what."

Jon leans back in the large booth. We usually go to Riley's after every game, especially after a win, but tonight, he's hauled me down here for a reason other than to celebrate. And now I know why.

"I don't know whether to start with your game or your head. But something tells me they're interchangeable."

"I'm seeing the team psych. I don't need another therapy session."

"Man, with respect, I'm not here to give you a lesson in visualization on the ice. I'm here to find out what's going on in here." He taps on his chest, motioning to his heart.

I push the glass away completely. I'm not interested in drinking. "Yeah, and there's the problem; there's nothing going on."

"Have you spoken to her at all?" he asks, swiping a hand over his mouth.

"Barely. I asked her how it all went with the start of school, you know, after the pictures. She hasn't been to the beach house though."

"How do you know?"

I feel my face flush. "Because the alarm hasn't been deactivated once."

His lips scrunch together as he fights it back. "Dude."

"Go on," I say, waving a hand in front of me. "Laugh. Get it all out."

He doesn't completely lose it, but his shoulders vibrate. "That's kind of creepy. What are you doing, lying in bed each night hoping you'll catch a glimpse of her on the security footage?"

My face burns.

"Fuck. You are, aren't you?"

"No. Yes. Ugh. Has Felicity spoken to her much?"

He quirks a brow. "Yes, she's doing okay but not since you asked last, which was yesterday." His tongue pokes into the side of his cheek. "You

can't go on like this, man. You're a pining mess. You two have got to work it out."

"It's down to her. I've told her how I feel and what I want."

"So that's it? You just back away and leave the ball in her court?"

A sour taste rises in my throat as I push out the next sentence. "If she doesn't want me, us, then she doesn't want it."

"Oh, come on, man." His tone is bordering on incredulous mixed with frustration. "Like it's that black and white."

"I can't force her to want me."

"No, you can't, but you don't need to. She does want you."

"Ha, yeah, looks like it."

"When do you plan on seeing her again?"

"I have no fucking clue."

"You've always given it to me straight, so I'm going to return the favor."

I look up from where I'm staring down at the dark wooden table.

"You're being a defeated asshole. You're acting like you've lost her, when the facts are, you haven't. I saw the way she looked at you at the gala—like you hung the fucking moon. Get your finger out of your ass and go to her or at least fucking call her. Just do something, for both your sanity and mine. I want my best friend back, but I need my AC for my last season."

My head whips up. *What?*

"I haven't said anything official yet, but I'm out of contract after this season, and my agent isn't going to negotiate renewal terms. I'm out. Whatever happens this year, I'm out."

"You're serious?"

"Deadly. I want to spend time with my wife, and this coaching thing, I'm actually pretty good at it." He smirks. "Alright, I'm fucking awesome."

"Modest as ever," I say, rising from the booth and picking up his empty glass, tipping it toward him. "Probably shouldn't, but on that bombshell, you want another?"

"Hit me," he says, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his phone, no doubt to send another text to Felicity.

Standing at the bar waiting to be served, I start mindlessly scrolling through the few texts I've exchanged with Luna over the past three weeks.

"Fuck it."

ME

I really need to talk to you. I can't keep my distance for much longer.

The next ten seconds feel like ten fucking years as I watch the dots dance across my screen.

ROCKET

It's past midnight here. Maybe tomorrow?

I totally forgot about the three-hour time difference. Head is firmly up my ass.

Shit, did I wake you?

No. Having trouble sleeping.

Same, baby.

What's wrong?

I know we need to talk, but I still don't have any answers.

I'm losing her. I fucking know it. Panic overtakes me.

If you need more time, then okay. But please, don't push me away, Luna.

I won't. I'm not.

It feels like you are.

Nothing. Not even three fucking dots.

I can get on a flight right now. There's no practice until Wednesday.

Don't be crazy.

Too late for crazy, baby.

Stay in Seattle. I promise, I'll call you tomorrow.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

LUNA

The days are getting cooler and shorter as summer gives way to fall.

The NHL season hit full stride four weeks ago, and slowly I've become more withdrawn from reality. I've barely checked socials, determined to bury my head as far in the sand as possible.

I haven't seen Zach in almost three months, and despite the way I've withdrawn, I can still feel him all around me. The want to be near him only grows stronger as does the lump in my throat each time my students tease me about dating a hockey player.

I wish it were that simple.

I wish I had all the answers.

I wish I could call him right now and tell him I want to try and make this work.

Because I do. With every piece of me, I want this to work.

But like I told him that day outside departures, I'm not sixteen anymore. I don't have a crush on the local hockey boy who sits in some of my classes and hangs out with the same friends. Instead, I'm a thirty-one-year-old woman who's fallen for a man who lives and works on the other side of the country. I've fallen for *him* and not his lifestyle. I've fallen for his friends

and the amazing people he has around him, but not the way every part of their lives is put under a microscope.

I sit at my desk at the end of the school week, grading piled high beside the cold cup of coffee I forgot to drink. I feel distracted and off-center. In the past, I've found refuge in my work, but not anymore. Peace has escaped me. I haven't even wanted to swim since it provides no relief.

The overwhelm and need to feel connected to him again wars with the part of my consciousness that holds me back from potentially hurting us both. The younger teenage girl would drop everything to be with the boy she likes. But the older Luna, the one who's trying to think things through, knows if I commit to moving to Seattle, then I'll be going all into the unknown, and I can't do unknown. The guilt of leaving my mom also eats away at me. We aren't close, but who else does she have?

I'm scared to make the jump, but I'm unhappy staying where I am. I hoped time would help show me the way and help me decide one way or the other. I hoped internalizing for a while would help me work out what was best for us both. But I just keep digging and muddying the waters.

I'd feel desperate if it weren't for the two girls I've come to love so much. I need them, so I pull out my phone to empty my heart once more. I thought they'd be sick of me and my upset by now, but each time I contact them, they're there and ready to prop me up.

ME

This really sucks.

FELICITY

Talk to me, babe.

ME

I would if I knew what to say.

KATE

For what it's worth, I think if space was going to give you answers, then it would've by now.

ME

I miss him.

KATE

I'd miss that butt too.

FELICITY

Not helpful.

KATE

Just speaking the truth.

FELICITY

This runs deeper than a nice ass.

KATE

Hmmm.....

FELICITY

Go and do something useful and make me a coffee.

Biatch.

KATE

You're closer to the kitchenette.

FELICITY

But I made the last one. Since you're not doing any work, and yes, I can see you've been scrolling on your phone for the past half hour—even from across the office. Go and pop the kettle on. Please.

KATE

You're so bossy these days. Poor Jon.

FELICITY

Sorry about that little interlude, Luna.

I catch myself smiling as the texts fly in between two girls who call me their “bestie.”

ME

That's the first time I've smiled in weeks.

FELICITY

Oh, hunny. For what it's worth though, I think Kate might have a point.

KATE

Takes screenshot as evidence

FELICITY

FFS. Oat milk, please.

But seriously, I do. Plus, if you think you're miserable, you should see Zach. This absence isn't doing either of you any good. I think you need to reconnect with what you shared this summer to help you work it all out.

I know he's struggling; he's not exactly hidden his feelings. It's as much being apart as it is not knowing how and if we can make this work.

Absence doesn't make the heart fonder; it fucking breaks it.

I slump in my chair and rest my elbows on the desk in defeat, holding my phone out in front of me.

ME

What do I do?

FELICITY

I think it's time to communicate with him. I think it's time to see each other again. I think you need to start taking some leaps of faith.

ME

Is that what you did with Jon?

FELICITY

If I'd listened to my fears, then I wouldn't be marrying the man of my dreams next year.

ME

I don't know when I'll get to see him again. His schedule is so stacked.

I know every movement the team makes this season, even if I don't follow it on social media. I always know where he is.

FELICITY

Start small. Call him. Or better yet, do something or go somewhere that reminds you of him, something you did together. Let your heart rule you for once, babe, because I don't think your head is doing you any favors.

KATE

I second this.

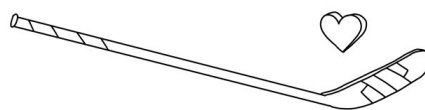
I leap from my seat and grab my bag and keys. Knowing exactly where that place is.

ME

I love you both so much.

FELICITY

Keep us posted.



MEMORIES INSTANTLY FLOOD MY MIND. The way I secretly checked him out behind the safety of my sunglasses. I smile as I remember dropping the breakfast package off on his first morning back in Cocoa Beach. I can still smell the fresh paint, clinging to the beams of the porch as I walk the few steps to the front door. I still remember the way he sat me on the hood of my car and kissed me. And I still remember the first time I told him I had to pull back.

Searching through the ring of keys, I eventually find the one to the front door and slide it into the lock.

It's been months since I was here. Too many good memories lie within these four walls. Memories that I've wanted to bury but cling onto all at the same time, and it's overwhelming.

Stepping into the kitchen area, I don't know why, but against the backdrop of the unlivd space, I notice a lone coffee mug that has been rinsed and turned upside down on the drainer.

Why is that there? It seems out of place when everything else has been put away.

The tiny couch still sits in the corner of the living room. The TV's perched on top of the small stand and the wooden coffee table I've sat countless drinks on top is still where it was the last time I was here.

I drop my bag on the usual stool tucked under the kitchen countertop and run my hand along the marble, stopping when I reach the place where Zach first picked me up and sat me down. That was the start of everything between us, the start of us sleeping together this summer. It was the moment the friendship we'd nurtured morphed into something more. I'm not sure if it's something I want to get back either. Because a friendship with Zach will never be enough.

I'd say it's all or nothing, but nothing seems impossible too.

The sun has almost completely set as I make my way out onto the veranda. The lounge Zach bought and set up for me is collapsed and stored in its all-weather box. He put that away, knowing I wouldn't use it again after I started staying at my place when I initially told him we needed to step back. I want to rip the lid off and rebuild it. I want to lie back down in my bikini and wait for him to return from Whistler. I want to pretend I'm listening to my audiobook as he makes his way through the house, searching for me.

Forcing my feet to carry me to the bedroom, I walk the few paces to the door and push down the handle.

I don't hate moon gray.

I've never hated it. In fact, I'd never paint it yellow because that would erase the memories I know I want to hold onto.

But it's not until I see the gouge in the wall from the headboard that I realize I want to make *more* with him. In whatever form they come and under whatever circumstances they happen, whether fleeting moments or long weekends, I need to make more memories.

Because for the first time in months, I *feel*. I have clarity. And I know what I want.

I promised myself when I was driving over here that I would walk through every room in the house. *It's not like there are many in this tiny place.*

The last room aside from the bathroom is the spare bedroom—the first room we worked on—and I wonder if he did much more with it since it was an empty shell when I left.

The door opens with a click, and instantly, I want to fall to my knees when I see a state-of-the-art telescope set up and mounted in the middle of the room.

He knew my current scope was on its way out.

It's a thing of beauty as I run my hand along the gleaming white optical tube. I know, without a doubt, I'll be able to see the International Space Station as it passes across the moon, something I've never been able to do.

My phone pings with a text.

ZACH

When you get to it, look up.

Oh. My. God.

He installed a huge skylight directly above the scope, which can rotate three hundred-sixty degrees.

My phone pings again.

ZACH

No matter where we are, we'll always be able to see the same stars.

I don't bother to hit reply or find out how he knows I'm at the beach house.

It doesn't matter.

All that does matter is speaking to him and hearing his voice.

"Hi," he says on a choked breath.

"Hey." My voice is shaky, thick with emotion.

"You found it then."

"You never told me."

"I wanted you to come back when you were ready." He puffs out a breath. "But I was starting to think that would never happen."

"It's amazing. I love it." My voice cracks, and tears stream down my cheeks. Again.

"Come back to Seattle. I need to see you, Rocket."

My heart trips out at the thought. "When?"

"Tomorrow? Hell, fucking now?"

A laugh bursts out. "I can't. I still have work; I can't just call in sick for two weeks."

"Then come for Thanksgiving. I have a couple of games; I'll get you tickets in the family box."

"Where will I stay?"

"Luna," he says in a disbelieving tone. "There's only one place you'll stay when you're with me. And that's my fucking bed, wrapped in my arms."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

ZACH

Three days, three whole days, and four entire nights of keeping her to myself.

Personally, I'd like to hole up in my apartment and not resurface for the entire time.

But the next best thing is that I get to have her in my family box, sitting next to our friends and cheering me on.

I'm stoked. No, I'm fucking thrumming with excitement and anticipation, waiting for her to walk through arrivals. Her plane landed half an hour ago, so I know the next flight to walk through these double doors is likely to be hers.

Three and a half fucking months without her near me was rough. But not having a whole lot of contact and trying to respect her space has nearly killed me.

Maybe the flowers were too much? I look down at the bright pink roses wrapped in even brighter pink paper.

They're too much; I look too needy.

Shit. Thanks, Jon, for convincing me it was "a hundred percent the right move."

I look left and right. Where do I stash them? Feels like a waste to throw them in the trash.

There's a tap on my shoulder from behind. "Zach?"

I swivel on my heel and lock eyes on her warm coffee gaze. The one I've craved for way too long.

My dream girl.

I know she is. I knew it before she left, but after pining for her for months, I'm damn sure.

"Oh, hey." I look back over my shoulder at the double doors. "I thought you would come through those."

She smiles sweetly and then looks down at the roses as I awkwardly hand them to her.

"You bought me flowers?" She tucks a lock of silky auburn hair behind her ear, and today, she has a tiny yellow bow pinning one side back. Fuck me, she's beautiful.

"Umm...yeah."

Christ, this is embarrassing. I'm going to murder Jon.

Taking the flowers, she reaches up on her tiptoes, planting a kiss on the underside of my jaw.

"Where's your suitcase?"

She shrugs. "I packed heavily last time." She loops her thumb under the strap of the large black carry-on bag she has on her shoulder. "Figured I'd rein it in a bit."

I take the bag from her and swing it over my arm.

"It suits you." She giggles, and it's then I notice the brightly stitched flowers along the side. "Why, thanks."

Interlacing her fingers through mine, it's like her life source breathes into me as I feel her skin for the first time in too long.

We walk out of departures and toward the parking lot. "I had trouble telling if it was you since your cap is pulled so low over your eyes."

"Yeah, hockey players aren't exactly bombarded in public, but I wanted to be anonymous." It wouldn't be a great start, Luna walking through arrivals, and I'm signing autographs and taking pictures. She'd likely freak out and board the next flight back to Florida.

"Makes sense."

Approaching my truck, I open the passenger door, and she climbs in. I can't help but stare at her tight, jean-covered ass as she hauls herself into

my F150.

“Stop staring at my ass, Evans,” she calls behind her.

“I wasn’t.”

“I can feel the heat on my cheeks! You were.”

So can I. Still the same spunky Luna.

Climbing into my side, I reach across and buckle her in. Her vanilla scent hits me as memories from this summer overtake my senses.

“Okay, maybe I was a little,” I admit.

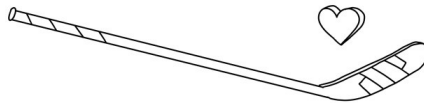
I crank the engine and put my sunglasses on. It’s a bright November afternoon. “Hungry?”

“Ugh.” She throws her head back in the chair. “Starving! The food on the plane was crap.”

I quirk an unsurprised brow. “Told you to let me buy you a ticket in first.”

She throws me a look. “I’m no kept woman.”

Laughing, I pull out of the lot and hit the freeway, feeling like despite the long and torturous time we’ve spent apart, ten minutes in her company, and it’s as if she never left.



LUNA

“Babe, every time you come to a game, you overbuy and then expect me to finish the snacks.” Felicity motions up and down her body as we sit side by side watching the first period against Dallas. “It’s a struggle holding onto my figure as it is.”

“I might’ve overestimated how much I can eat.” Kate winces.

“Eh, yeah.”

“Here,” I say, flipping my hands toward me. “Pass those nachos to me. I can look after them.”

Chewing around a mouthful of guacamole, salsa, and hot cheese, I point down to the rink. “Jon can move across the ice.”

“He sure can. Hard to believe he’s not a rookie with his speed.” Felicity smiles proudly.

“They all look so huge in their pads. Like some sort of Viking or something. Especially Jensen.”

Felicity side-eyes me.

“Shame there’s a dickhead beneath it all.” Kate crosses her legs and reaches over, stealing a nacho.

My brows knit together. “So, what’s the story there? We never finished that text convo.”

“Shall I go or you?” Felicity turns to Kate.

Kate waves a hand in front of her. “Be my guest, babe, I’m hitting the bathroom.”

She rounds the chairs and makes her way out of earshot.

“It’s a long story, and none of us are really sure what happened, but last season, pretty much around the time I met Jon, Kate and Jensen had a *thing*.” She pauses, taking a sip from her Icee. “Well, I say ‘thing’—more like they had the hots for one another, that was clear. One night after a big Scorpions win, they were getting cozy, and we were all convinced they’d hit it off. Next thing I know, Kate texts me saying they had an argument, and he left with another girl.”

I almost choke on my chip. “*What?!*”

She nods her head. “Kate thinks he slept with someone else. They weren’t together or even seeing each other, but it was strange.”

“I’ll say. So now they’re frosty?”

“You could say that. There’s no love lost, that’s for sure.”

“Have they ever spoken about it?”

“Not that she’s told me. Kate doesn’t let her emotions show, *especially* when it comes to men. But it definitely bothered her more than she’s letting on.”

“I get that. It’s a bit of a shitty thing to do.”

She doesn’t look all that convinced. “Thing is, Jensen’s a great guy. I just don’t see him doing something like that. I mean, if he did, then yeah, it’s not cool, but...I just think there’s more to the story. Not that it matters. Kate’s seeing Tom now.”

Sure as shit *looks* like it matters from where I’m sitting, but I don’t say any more.

Kate retakes her seat right as the first period ends.

It's really hard to see since we're so high, but my attention has been laser-focused on number sixty-six all game. He's played amazing, and the way he goes in on hits is hot as hell. I'm not sure I'd feel the same way watching him fight, but so far, no gloves have been dropped.

Zach pulls his helmet off and removes his mouthguard as he skates toward the side with Jon. It's zero-zero, and they're clearly talking tactics. Just as they get to the side, Zach stops and looks up toward me. His turquoise eyes pierce straight through me even from here. Lifting his hand, he waves and smiles, and the way my body heats straight through tells no lies. I want him.

"Oh, jumbotron alert!" Kate shouts.

I look over to see my face on-screen to at least twenty thousand fans as they all make the connection that their key defenseman is waving at me.

I want to slump back in my chair until I'm out of sight, but I fight through the embarrassment and wave back.

I turn to Felicity. "Will it always be this way? The moment he does something that involves me, all eyes are on us."

"There's always going to be attention, especially at games. I don't know whether it's a case of you get used to it, or they eventually move to the new shiny toy."

We're halfway through the third period when Dallas goes a goal ahead.

"Ah shit, Jon's gonna be pissed if they lose this," Felicity drawls.

I can already see Zach is pissed. Very little gets through him, but the Dallas winger slid around him like he wasn't even there.

My phone pings in my pocket, and I pull it out to see it's from Mom.

MOM

When are you home from Seattle?

I quickly begin typing out a response to let her know I only arrived today when I hear Kate suck through her teeth. "Uh-oh."

"Babe, you might want to take a bathroom break or something," Felicity suggests.

My head shoots up. "Why, what's happened?"

"A Dallas defenseman has just boarded Jessie. It was a dirty hit."

My gaze shoots across to see Jessie Callaghan lying on the ice, clutching his wrist.

"Yeah, Zach's not happy," Kate confirms with a wince.

I watch in horror as he rips off his gloves and helmet and rushes to the Dallas captain who put in the hit. In response, he drops his onto the ice as they begin circling, sizing each other up.

The player in orange and white throws the first punch which Zach skillfully dodges, leaning to the side. In return, Zach lays an uppercut that connects with the defenseman's jaw, and a spray of blood hits the ice. The home crowd goes wild. But Zach's not done; in fact, it looks like he's just getting started.

"Those two have a history." Felicity nods toward them going at it.

"I wouldn't know," I say, twisting my hands around nervously in my lap. "I've watched his games but never his fights."

Her eyes soften. "Are you sure you want to watch this?"

No.

Right at that moment there's an "oooh" from the crowd. I have no idea how he got there since I was only looking at my friend for a split second, but the next thing I see is the defenseman beating down on Zach, pummeling him into the ice. I watch as he brings his hands over his face, clearly protecting himself.

I leap from my seat, panic setting in. "Stop! Stop hitting him!"

Felicity quickly leaps from hers, Kate closely after, and they both shout with me.

The Dallas captain is clearly aiming for his head as eventually the ref intervenes, deciding enough is enough.

When Zach finally comes back into view, I don't need to be ice level to see how beaten up his face is as blood pours from him.

"Why didn't they stop it sooner?" I scream at anyone who'll listen.

"It's what they do; it's part of the game," Kate says softly as she and Felicity retake their seats.

I don't retake mine though. Ripping my jacket from the back, I grab my purse.

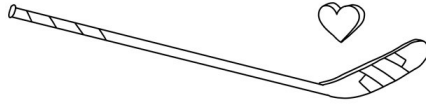
"Where are you going?" they both ask in unison.

"Something's not right. I can feel it." I point over to where Zach's skating off the ice to get treatment, his shoulders slumped. "I haven't watched his fights, but did that look normal to you? Does he normally just go down like that?"

"Well, no. He's normally the one handing it out," Kate replies.

I think back to the conversations I've had with him. His admission over being hesitant this season. "I need to go check on him."

Felicity grabs my hand. "I'll come show you where to go."



WITH THE HELP OF FELICITY, I make it past security and into the vast locker room. Pads, clothes, shoes, and bags are thrown across the floor, and I screw up my nose at the smell.

Men.

"Where is he?" I say turning to her.

She points to the left. "Most likely in the medical area, through there."

I make my way over and push the door open which leads to a sterile white hallway.

"I'll wait for you outside, babe."

"Okay, thanks," I say, turning back to her with an appreciative smile.

Behind a glass door, I find Zach. He's laid back on a bed while the team doctor finishes taping and cleaning up his eye.

When he notices me, he sits up and motions for me to enter. As I do, I know the doctor is not impressed with my presence.

"Family and girlfriends only," he snipes.

"She is my girlfriend," Zach counters.

The way that label sounds leaving his mouth...even if it isn't real.

"Fair enough." The doctor finishes up and then leaves, taking the tray of medical gauze and tape with him.

I come to stand by the bed when Zach reaches down and takes my hand in his, brushing his thumb lightly over my knuckles. "What are you doing here?"

"I had to see you. That didn't look normal out there."

He says nothing but comes to sit at the edge of the bed. I can tell he's feeling dizzy, and I want him to lie down, but I know he won't listen.

Pulling me between his legs, he's only wearing a pair of athletic shorts, and I can see some of the bruising coming out on his chest already. Even between the tattoos, it's obvious. "I'm good." He pushes a piece of hair

back from my face, and his eyes dance between mine. “You came to check on me.”

“Of course. I was worried.”

“The last time I got hurt, and I was in a hospital bed I was—”

“Alone?”

He nods. “Yeah.”

I hold his gorgeous face in my hands. “Yeah, well not anymore.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

ZACH

Luna stands in my kitchen stirring a pan of pasta sauce, shaking her hips to the beat of Taylor Swift's "Cruel Summer."

Goddamn, even with my swollen left eye, I can make out the way her perfect ass sways beneath the long pink T-shirt and leggings she's wearing.

"Food's nearly ready. How's your head?" She begins spooning the arrabbiata sauce over the homemade ravioli she got straight to preparing when we got back from the game.

I come to sit at the counter. "I'm good."

Walking the bowls and tossed salad over, she eyes my face carefully. "It looks so painful." She sets our food down and winces, bringing her hand to the corner of my eye and stroking the puffiness with her finger. "I think it needs more ice."

Wrapping an arm around her waist, I pull her into me. "Will you ever stop worrying about me?"

She shakes her head and grabs a cherry tomato, popping it into her mouth. "Nope. But I do want to know what happened out there. One minute you were dodging his punches, the next you were almost out cold."

"I hesitated. Adrenaline took me over there, ready to lay him out for injuring Jessie. Next thing I know, I'm running through all the worst-case

scenarios.”

She inspects the bruising on my left cheekbone. “The psych isn’t helping?”

I shrug. “I guess it’s not an overnight thing.”

She comes to sit next to me. “Give yourself some grace. You’ve been through a lot.”

“I’m not sure Coach sees it that way.”

“Yeah, well, he didn’t get attacked last season. Because that’s what it was. If you were attacked like that on the street, people would have a different opinion.” She picks up a piece of ravioli. “Tell him to come speak with me.”

I drop my fork and laugh. “There’s my Rocket Girl.”

“Don’t mess with the best.”

“This ravioli is fucking delicious, Luna.” I nudge my shoulder against her, flirting like hell.

She nods. “It is, isn’t it.”

My smile grows wider; she’s like sunshine on a cloudy day. “I missed you. You know that?”

Swallowing her mouthful, her huge brown eyes meet mine. “I missed you too. I’m sorry I didn’t message or call much.”

“I won’t lie—it sucked, big time.” And it really did. I need to ask; I can’t hold off much longer. “Where’s your head now?”

She purses her lips together and picks up her water glass, taking a sip. “Has anything changed for you? In the way you feel about me?”

A surge of electricity passes through me as I turn her stool to face me. I rest my palms on her outer thighs and bring my face closer to hers. I can feel the warmth of her breath across my face and the smell of her scent as I get lost in the beautiful pattern of freckles across the bridge of her nose.

“Yes,” I say, holding eye contact with her intently.

She swallows. “Oh, well, I guess that’s not surprising. I—” She stops talking and looks down at her pink socks.

Bringing my index finger under her chin, I know my face wears a shit eating grin from ear to ear as I return her eyes to mine. “I’m even crazier about you than I was before.”

I see the relief wash over her as her body visibly relaxes, and damn if that reaction doesn’t make me happy. “Me too.”

My hands wrap around her thighs as I haul her into my arms and stand. She wraps her legs around my waist, but I don't kiss her. I simply brush my nose against hers softly. "Are we going to try and make this work, Rocket?" My heart hammers against my ribs. "Let's just try and make this work, in whatever way we can. Because I don't think there's another second I can take without calling you mine."

Bringing her hands around the nape of my neck, she runs her dainty fingers through my hair. "I'm scared. I still don't know how it will look. Long distance or me living in Seattle. I just don't know."

Still holding her in my arms, I drop my forehead to hers. "Let me tell you what I do know. The way you're underneath every inch of my skin. The way you're buried deep in my bones. The way I only feel like I smile when you're with me. I want anything that looks like you in my life. I'll take any alternative to what I've been through these past three months. I'm in deep Luna; I know I am. In my head and heart, there is no other reality than one that involves you and me being together." On a deep breath, I pull back and ask the question I've been repeating in my dreams. "Let me call you my girlfriend? Because I'm not going anywhere, baby."

She blows out a breath, fanning my face. "If I say yes, then what happens next?"

"After these next few days? We'll work it out. I promise. But for the next seventy-two hours? I'm going to make you come in every way possible."

I swear I feel heat pool through her leggings as her thighs clench around my already rock-hard dick. "I want to be with you."

LUNA

Zach walks us over to the couch and lays me down.

In one swift motion, he pulls his shirt over his head, eyes ablaze with heat. His gray sweatpants hang low on his hips, and I ache at seeing the deep v protruding from his waistband.

I can see the outline of his hard cock as he crawls over my body, bracketing me in with his arms. His lips move across my nose and cheeks, placing soft kisses at specific points.

“What are you doing?” I ask on a giggle.

He smiles down at me. “Appreciating my favorite constellation.”

I melt. Right in this spot.

“What do you want, Rocket?”

Reaching down, I poke my hand beneath the waistband of his pants. “I want to relive the summer.”

His mouth slants across mine, and as his tongue massages into me, I know he’s smiling, mimicking the way I feel inside. “I’ll give you every spring, summer, fall, and winter.”

His hands fall to the tops of my leggings as he begins working them down my legs.

Pulling his lip between his teeth, he takes in my pink lacy thong. “I can smell your sweet scent.”

He continues to roll them down my legs and then moves to my shirt. I sit up and hold my hands above my head until all I’m left in is my underwear. Every part of my body tingles, from the tips of my fingers down to my toes. I pulse with need for him.

He’s on his knees between my legs, and I’m sitting up. We’re mere inches apart, my face at the same height as his waistband.

“Do you want me, baby?” He groans as I lower his boxers.

It’s been months since I touched him, but as soon as I see his long hard cock, I remember the way those piercings felt inside me, and the throb between my legs intensifies. The tip leaks precum, and in an instant, I reach down and swipe my tongue across it.

He throws his head back and groans, one hand falling to the top of my head, the other around the nape of my neck. “Are you going to suck my dick, Rocket? Are you hungry?”

Zach’s normally turquoise irises are more of a midnight blue as I look up at him and nod slowly, swiping my tongue over my bottom lip. “It tastes so good.”

I take him all the way, fighting back the urge to gag because I want him as far down my throat as I can. With my fist at the base of his impossibly long and hard shaft, I pump him in slow, torturous strokes.

He never loses grip on me, working his hips with my motions. “I love fucking your mouth, but don’t you dare make me come. The only place I’m unloading is in your sweet cunt. But oh my god, oh my god, that’s so good.”

Relaxing my jaw, I take him even further, hollowing out my cheeks as I suck him. Releasing him with a pop, I can't hide the devilish grin that spreads across my face. "What if I want you down my throat? What if I want to taste you?"

Something dark passes over his features. I knew he was holding back with me. I've heard his dirty mouth, but I knew Zach Evans was a bad boy in bed, and now that he's my boyfriend, I need to find out just *how* bad.

"If you're going to taste me, then it'll be while I taste you too. I'll fuck your throat until you're lost for words, and then I'll make love to you all goddamn night. Do not expect any sleep, Luna."

My breath catches in my throat as he hauls me up and over his shoulder. My ass in the air, he spanks me as he marches us to his bedroom. "You're a naughty girl; you've been handing out backtalk for months, and naughty girls get spanked."

He tosses me on the soft, white linen bed. "I love the way you throw me around."

His sweatpants and boxers pool at his ankles as he frees himself completely, and then kneels on the edge of the bed, pumping his cock and staring me down. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," I say, admiring the view.

"Show me that pretty pussy I've been pining for." He juts his chin toward me.

I hook my thumbs under the waistband of my thong.

"No. Not like that. Pull them to one side and show me how wet I made you. Show me how soaked you are."

I spread my legs and pull them to one side, showing him all of me. I know I've soaked my panties through. They've been like this all day.

Zach continues fisting his cock with hooded eyes. "Can you make yourself squirt?"

I shake my head. "Only you've managed that."

He smirks wickedly. "Maybe I can teach you how to do it someday. So, when we're apart, I know my girl is getting off just as I'd make her."

My legs begin to tremble. I'm going to come right now, just from his words.

He notices and walks on his knees across the bed, dropping onto his back. "Take them off then sit on my face, and I'll make you go off like the rocket you are."

I've never done this before, so tentatively I lower myself over his mouth.

Sinking his fingers into my soft flesh, he pulls me closer until I'm convinced he can't breathe. "You're so fucking sweet," he rasps, as the vibrations make me cry out. "Ride my face, dirty girl."

Resting my hands on his thighs, I ride his mouth as he pierces me with his tongue. He swipes me from front to back, and when he sucks my pussy into his mouth and groans, I can't help the way I scream from the sensation. I know I'm gushing all over him, soaking him through. But by the way he pulls me down harder onto him, I can tell he sees it as a challenge, to see how many times he can make me come like this.

Through my hazy vision, I focus on his dick. Leaning down, being sure to keep my pussy exactly where he wants it, I take him back into my mouth and suck, twisting my hand around his hard length. After a few strokes, I release him, and then I focus my attention on those beautiful piercings, teasing the bars with my tongue.

Zach's hips fly off the bed. Pushing my ass up slightly he smacks it, sending a jolt of pleasure straight to my core. "Greedy girl, you want those too, do you?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Then let me put them in your pussy."

In a split second, I'm underneath him as he hovers over me. The dark look in his eyes is still there, but now it's softer as he positions himself at my entrance, pressing in slightly. "You're still on birth control?"

"Yes."

Kissing across my nose in the way he always does, he starts to enter me slowly and without a condom. I gasp at the skin on skin sensation I've been craving with him.

He looks me dead in the eyes as he strokes my hair softly. "One day, I hope I won't need to ask you that question."

"What do y-you mean?" I think I know exactly what he means, but I want to hear the words.

"One day, I'll give you my baby. If that's what you want."

Butterflies overtake me as my entire body flutters. Why do I want that day to be soon?

"Yes, one day. I want a family."

Taking his free hand in mine, he interlaces our fingers above my head, his other guiding himself in, stretching me to my absolute limit. "With me?"

"With you."

On hearing my response, he smiles against my mouth as he kisses me gently. "Do you feel that, Luna? How much I've missed you? How much our bodies have missed each other?"

"Yes," I whimper.

"My dick has missed this pussy so hard. But my heart has been in fucking shreds."

I continue to stare into his glossy eyes, shining with unshed tears. "It's been screaming for yours because it's in love with you, Luna. *I'm* in love with you."

Fully seated, he begins moving slowly inside me, hooking my right leg up and over his shoulder to deepen the angle. "I never saw you coming, but you've blown my world apart in all the best ways." He kisses across my jawline, and my heart thumps clean through my chest. "I've never made love like this, and now I know why."

"Why?"

"Because I've never been in love before now."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

ZACH

Waking up in the perfect place, with the perfect girl wrapped in your arms, is like having an out-of-body experience.

She's my girl, and she's here with me.

For now.

With my spare arm, I grab my watch from the nightstand and check the time. That explains why it's still dark outside—it's barely seven a.m.

Luna hardly got any sleep last night since I took her on every surface in my bedroom. It doesn't matter how many times I slide inside her, I can't get enough. I don't think I'll ever have enough of anything about her.

Slowly, she begins to stir, pushing her ass back into me.

I'm so fucking tempted to roll her onto her back and wake her fully in the best way possible. But despite me going gentle with her all night, she's got to be feeling the effects.

"Morning, baby." Brushing her hair to the side, I kiss the nape of her neck.

She stretches out like a kitten, turning to face me and groans, burying her face in my chest. "Urgh, I feel like I've had no sleep."

We're completely naked, and I pull her on top of me with ease, wrapping my arms and the sheets around us. "That's because we haven't."

She smiles, leaning up to kiss me. “Best form of insomnia there is.” Groaning again, she rests her head back on my chest. “Shall we just stay here for the next two days?”

Stay here forever.

“You know I’m good with that, but we’re due over at Jennie and James’s place in a few hours.”

“Jon’s parents?” Luna sounds unsure. “Do they know I’m coming with you?”

My palm works in circles over her back. “They invited you. As soon as they found out you’d be here for Thanksgiving, Jennie was texting me.”

Her deep-brown eyes meet mine. “I’m nervous. I feel like I’m imposing or something.”

“Jon and his family are practically mine, and since you’re my girlfriend, you are too.” That label tastes almost as sweet on my lips as her pussy did last night. “Plus, Jennie is a killer cook, so prepare to be blown away.”

“Yeah, Felicity said she’s even better than Jon. Apparently, I can’t repeat that.” She giggles. “Is Kate coming?”

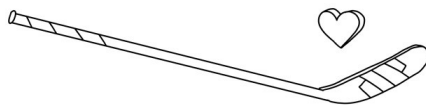
“Yep. A whole bunch of us.”

“Okay, maybe I’m not gate-crashing after all.” She rolls off me and onto her back, her long hair trailing across my stomach. “I wish there was a beach here. I could go for a swim right about now.”

She squeaks as I gather her up and into my arms, padding across the bedroom toward the ensuite. Nearly falling over the blankets still hanging from us, I lean down and open the door with my elbow. “How about a swim in my huge spa tub?”

Still clinging to her, because I can’t seem to stop touching this girl, I turn on the faucet, and steam instantly begins filling the room.

She sighs contentedly, kissing my cheek. “The benefits of a rich boyfriend.”



LUNA

MOM

Did you get my last text?

“How are things going, babe?” Felicity comes to sit beside me on the couch.

I look up from my phone. I forgot to reply to Mom yesterday. “Hmm? Oh yeah, just forgot to text Mom back.” I wince. “She won’t be impressed.”

Felicity smiles. “Just tell her you’ve been preoccupied with a gorgeous NHL player. Show me a woman who wouldn’t understand that.”

My brows pull together slightly. “I am not preoccupied.”

“Oh, please. I’ve been kept up all night by a hockey player before. It’s not hard to spot.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Yep.” Kate plops down on the other side of me. “Happy Thanksgiving, bitches.”

“You have such a way with words, Monroe.” Felicity laughs.

A moment later, Jon joins us, pointing through to the kitchen. “She’s outdone herself this year. That turkey.” He puts his fingers to his lips, imitating a chef’s kiss. “Perfection.” He stands in front of us sitting together on the couch and smirks. “Did I interrupt women’s hour or something?”

“Yes, actually. You did,” his fiancée responds.

He tips his glass in our direction. “It’s Thanksgiving, a time to be grateful, and I’m grateful for gossip. So spill the tea.”

“There isn’t any,” I say coolly.

“Ah, so that’s why Zach’s waltzing around the place like he’s won the Lotto or something,” he counters.

Catching the last of his sentence, Zach walks in and straight up behind Jon, wearing my favorite smile. “I did win.” Striding across to me, he picks me up and takes my seat on the couch, sitting me on his lap.

Jon’s mouth drops open, but it’s quickly replaced with a smile that pops his dimples. “Bro, you pulled your finger out of your ass.” He leans forward to bump fists with Zach. “Fucking finally!”

“Jon Morgan. On today of all days, you bring blasphemy into our family home.” Jennie pokes her head around the door.

“Can’t take him anywhere, Jennie,” Felicity replies.

“Liability,” James adds, his head appearing above Jennie’s.

Jon rolls his eyes and points over his shoulder, still looking at me and Zach. “Sorry about this bunch. They fancy themselves as a comedy

pairing.”

Zach wraps his arms around my waist and kisses the side of my jaw. “Are we gonna tell them or keep them hanging?”

I turn to face him, our lips inches away.

“I actually think you two are worse,” Kate drawls. “I can’t take all this lovey-dovey crap.”

“I don’t know.” Zach turns to Kate. “You and Tom looked cozy at the gala. Maybe that icy heart of yours is growing soft.”

She throws back the rest of her wine and waves her glass in the air. “He knows where I stand. I like him, but we’re just having fun.”

Jon clears his throat. “I’m still waiting for the tea.”

Just then, Jensen comes to join us, standing next to Jon. He nods around the group, and I don’t miss the way he lingers a second longer on Kate. “Yeah, spill.”

“You’re all a bunch of nosey bitches, you know that?” Zach’s hands tighten slightly around my waist. “But since you’ve been hounding us for months, you might as well know we made it official last night. We’re dating.”

I’m deaf. Felicity shrieks as she launches herself at both of us. Her effort puts mine on the beach to shame. “This is awesome!”

“Jersey moment tomorrow.” Kate winks over at me, and I feel my face flush.

Jensen shifts awkwardly, stuffing his hands in his pockets and looking down at the ground. The tension between those two is palpable, but it’s like the rest of the group glosses over it.

“Ugh, I’m not so sure that’s a good idea.” I already know it’s not a good idea.

“We can talk about it later,” Zach whispers reassuringly in my ear.

“Food’s ready!” James shouts from the kitchen.

Jon turns and then points to his brother, Adam, who’s making his way down the hallway and past the door with a bowl of greens. “Favorite sibling gets first dibs, bro.”

“Hopefully there will be some left for you then,” he replies over his shoulder.

I laugh, sliding off Zach’s lap and following everyone else to eat, but Zach pulls me back into him and waits for everyone to leave before turning

his turquoise eyes on me. He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. “Am I moving too fast?”

I place a hand on each of his huge muscular shoulders. “No. But I can’t deny I’m worried about what we do when I head back home after this weekend.”

Taking my hands in his, he interlaces our fingers and holds them at his side. “You mean everything to me, Luna. We’re going to work it out, and even if you live three thousand miles from me, I’ll look into trade options.”

My heart sinks. Living in Florida is not what I want for him. But honestly, the more time I spend in Seattle, the more I wonder if that’s what I want for me too.

“Come on. Let’s eat the best food you’ll ever taste.”

“You mean better than your frittata?” I jest.

His head whips around as he guides me toward laughing and voices coming from the dining area. “Here’s me being the loving, doting boyfriend, and here’s my girlfriend giving me yet more shit.”

We take the remaining two seats next to one another as huge plates of food start being handed around.

Quickly, I take out my phone to tap out a reply to Mom.

ME

I’m sorry, it’s been kind of hectic here.

MOM

You start seeing someone and suddenly fall off the face of the earth.

Rich.

I’ll be back in a couple of days. Is everything okay?

Not really, I think I’m getting sick. I was hoping you could run to the store for me. Might be a bit tricky from Seattle.

I look up and see everyone talking amongst themselves. It’s rude to be texting. So I hurry out a response.

Keep hydrated. When I get home, I’ll help you.

“Everything okay?” Zach offers me a bowl of buttery carrots.

“My mom. She says she’s getting sick and wants to know when I’ll be home.”

His forehead creases in confusion. “What like the flu?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

He huffs out a breath. “Seems a bit selfish. She couldn’t eve—”

“Luna, what do you teach?” Jennie chimes across the table, interrupting Zach without realizing.

I clear my throat. “Art and design in high school.”

“She’s just had a promotion to head of the department,” Felicity adds, smiling over at me.

“Oh, fabulous!” She looks between Zach and me then, her brow furrowing slightly, and I know what’s coming. I think we all do. “Are you looking to get a similar position in the Seattle area? I guess since you two are...” She points between us with her fork. “...together. You won’t want to have all that distance between you.”

From the other end of the table, Jon’s brother slowly exhales and shakes his head. “Read the room, Mom.”

Jon chuckles around his water glass. “Straight up and honest, bro.”

I turn back to Jennie when I feel a hand land on my thigh, and even though he doesn’t say it, I know he’s asking if I want to answer or leave it to him. I drop my hand on top of his.

“We’ve still got a lot to work out,” Zach replies.

“I say come live with me. I have a spare room and you wouldn’t need to pay rent, especially while you search for a job over here,” Kate suggests.

I feel Zach tense up against me. “Yeah maybe, Kate. Thanks.”

Other conversations resume, and I lean across to him and whisper, “That’s not a bad idea though, no? It’d solve my living arrangements and money.” I look down at the way he’s carving into his meat furiously. “I think the turkey’s cut.”

“You don’t need to worry about money, Luna.”

“I do if I don’t have a job.”

Dropping his voice even lower, he side-eyes me cautiously. “I earn twelve million dollars a year plus add-ons and sponsorship deals. I’ve got you.”

Stealing a piece of turkey from his plate and popping it in my mouth, I chew around it and quirk a brow. “And I make forty thousand a year and get by just fine. I don’t want to be kept, and if Kate can offer a place for a while, then that opens up at least some options.”

Genuine frustration passes across his beautiful features. “Yeah, I guess it does.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

ZACH

“What about *The House on the Haunted Hill*?” Luna suggests, still scrolling through movie selections.

I scrunch my face up. “Weak option.” It’s not bad, but I’m grumpy as fuck since our exchange at dinner. I like Kate, but like fuck do I want the woman I love moving to this city to be together and then not have her in my bed each night. But how do I tell her that? I only just told her I loved her, and she hasn’t yet said it back. It’s crazy because every girl I’ve ever dated has been full-on with me, but not Luna. I’ve fallen so hard for her, and I’ll wait a lifetime, but damn, I hope she says it back soon.

Gathering her feet onto my lap, I start rubbing her soles. Moaning, she throws her head back. Even when pissed at the situation, my cock responds to her.

“Up a bit.”

“You’re such a brat, you know that?”

She laughs and grabs the remote, selecting the movie anyway. “I know you like this one. I can tell.”

“Oh yeah?” I run a finger across her sole, and she squirms, pointing the remote viscously at me. “Yeah. You’ve been off all night. So, it’s more your mood than the movie.”

Goddamn her.

Taking the remote from her outstretched hand, I press pause and drop her feet. "Come here."

She rises to her knees and moves across the couch.

"Sit here."

Sitting across me, I readjust her so she's straddling me, and my dick strains against the zipper of my jeans.

Tucking her hair behind her ears, I look deep into her eyes, hoping to find answers. "If you move to Seattle, I'd want you here."

She pulls back. "As in, living with you?"

I nod. "Yes, Rocket. As in moving in with me."

Her face pales slightly, and my stomach twists at her reaction. "Don't you think that's a bit fast?"

"It happened for Jon and Felicity." I run my hands up and down her bare arms. "When you know, you know, right?"

She drops her head.

Panic rises in my gut. "You know, right? You haven't said it back yet, and I'm hanging in here." I blow out an uneasy breath. "But do you feel for me what I do for you?"

Lifting her head, she strokes her soft thumb underneath my still puffy and bruised eye. "I feel so much for you. But—"

I want to hurl. "But, what?"

"I don't know how to say this." She shifts on my lap, and I'm about three seconds from puking. "But what if I make the move here and then in six months' time, I'm not enough?"

My voice is incredulous. "*What?*"

"I'm having a bit of a crisis, I guess. What if I leave everything I've ever known, and in six months you meet someone else? Someone more you're..." She gathers her hair up furiously and then lets it cascade down her back, her vanilla scent wafting over me. "More your type."

That cuts really fucking deep.

"I'm not that shallow," I choke out. "You're every kind of beautiful."

She drags her palms down her face. "I know. I know. It's just the media, the press, Amie, the women you normally go for. They've got in my head. What if I'm a rebou—"

"No!" I shout, louder than I intend.

She pulls back from my raised voice and drops her head onto my chest. "I'm sorry."

I feel the dampness seep into my shirt as her shoulders tremble.

"Luna, what have I got to do to prove to you that I'm all in?" I wrap my arms around her and kiss the top of her head.

"This is on me," she pushes out through sobs. "This is all on the media too."

"Luna, do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Then believe me when I say there is no one else." I gather her up in my arms and walk her to my bedroom for the second night in a row. Pulling her sleep shorts down, I toss them on the floor, her cami following soon after. "Wait here."

Pulling open a drawer in my walk-in closet, I find what I'm looking for, and when I step back into the bedroom, she's perched on my bed in only her lacy underwear.

Damn she's fucking beautiful.

Holding the white jersey up in front of her, I speak as clearly as I can, desperate for the words to sink in. "I never want any other woman to wear my name again. Only you, Rocket. It's only ever been you." Walking across to her, she raises her arms in the air, and I slip it over her head. "I don't think I've ever seen anything more beautiful in my life."

A moment later, she's beneath me as I slip my hand under my jersey and push her thong to the side. Fisting my dick, I slowly begin to push inside, wiping any last dampness from her cheeks. I feel the way she squeezes around my cock and moans in pleasure as I slide all the way home. It's fucking bliss. "I came back to Florida, swearing off love for a lifetime. Everything had frozen over: my heart, my head, my fucking life. But you melted every part with your sunshine. I fucking love you, Luna Johnson."

Her eyes fill with tears once more as she brings my mouth to hers, kissing me as I move inside her. "I love you too, Zach Evans."

My heart thunders into my throat. "Goddamn, this feels awesome. My name on your back and those words on your lips."

"I'm going to come."

I smirk with satisfaction. "So soon, Rocket?"

"Yes. It's those fucking piercings."

"Should I get some more?"

“Yes,” she cries.

“Is that to more piercings or the way you just soaked my cock?”

“Both.”

Flipping us over, I’m now the one sitting on the edge of the bed, and she’s straddling me. But this time, I want her to feel the full benefit of those bars. “Ride me reverse cowgirl baby. Let them rub on your clit.”

She turns around and I steady her with my hands on her hips. “Oh my, oh my god. That’s amazing.” She throws her head forward as pleasure rocks through her body. Her response makes me throb harder.

“Fuck it, Luna. Fuck my cock.”

She rides me hard, and I bite down on my bottom lip, fighting off the urge to blow straight inside her. “You like riding me in that jersey? Those bars teasing your clit?”

“Yes,” she pants.

Between my piercings and cock, I know she’s going to unravel any minute, and I know it’s going to be powerful. “Let me know when you’re going to come.”

“Any. Minute. Now,” she squeaks out.

I stand and walk us across to the floor-to-ceiling window of my bedroom. Spinning her back around so she’s facing me, I slide back in and press her against the glass.

“People can see my ass!”

I laugh from where my face is buried between her sweet breasts. “It’s not your ass I want them to see—it’s my name. I want the world to know you’re mine.”

She moans loudly as I pound into her, her pussy strangling my cock.

“Ready, Rocket?”

“Yessss.”

Keeping her in place against the window, I drop to my knees, taking her pussy into my mouth. “Come for me, baby. Squirt on my tongue. I want to taste it all.”

LUNA

I wake alone in Zach's bed, but I can hear the faint mumble of voices from the kitchen.

Still dressed in only his jersey since he wouldn't let me take it off all night—*not that I tried*—I pad toward the sound.

"Oh, she's here now if you want to say hi."

I stop dead in my tracks at the sight of Zach sitting at his kitchen counter. He's dressed in gym gear and looks like he just got home from an early morning skate since they have a game tonight. He's on the phone, and I can't miss that voice—Zach's mom, Rachel.

Zach smiles and waves me toward him, holding the camera away from view.

Furiously I gesture up and down my body and mouth in a frantic whisper, "I can't speak to her wearing this!"

Zach's shoulders vibrate with amusement as he mouths back, "They know already."

Cautiously and looking like I just got out of his bed, which I have, I make my way over. Honestly, I've known Zach's parents since I was a teenager, but I haven't spoken to them in years. And now, here I am in his apartment, dressed in his jersey, and about to reconnect with them. But I guess we aren't a secret since I've been photographed with him on multiple occasions.

Rachel comes into view, her smile and twinkling blue eyes taking me in. "Luna, it's so good to see you." Her voice is soft and warm.

"Hey, Rachel," I reply shyly as Zach hauls me onto his lap, one arm wrapped around my waist, the other holding his phone outstretched so we're both in shot.

"Mom, this is my girlfriend. You remember Luna, right?" He kisses me on the cheek.

"Of course I do, honey! Luna, you are so beautiful. I could never forget those eyes."

Two minutes in his mom's presence reminds me of all the reasons why my boyfriend has the soul he does. Caring and beautiful.

"Thank you," I part mumble, still nervous as hell. "I guess you already knew we were involved from all the images and press."

She nods her head, still smiling. "I've been trying to get information from Zach for months, but finally, I wore him down!"

She's giddy as hell, but I kind of feel bad. All those months we were apart, and I was in my head, he had to deal with questions from his mom, wanting to know what was happening. I made that time about me and my needs, and I feel selfish for it.

"Will you be moving to Seattle?" she asks, and I feel my heart plummet further.

"We're working through the options," Zach replies. "Luna has her career there and her mom, so it's tricky, but we don't want to do a long-distance relationship if we can help it." His hand squeezes around my waist. "Although, I'll do whatever it takes to be with her. There's always the option of a trade for me, or at least speaking to my agent."

Rachel looks between us, empathy and understanding on her face. "I know you two can work it out." Focusing her attention solely on me then, she smiles once more. "I can see how happy you make my son; I know you can both work everything out."

Zach asks his mom about the library and his dad who's out working a job, but I find myself zoning out. It's true what he just said. My mom is in Florida, but as more time passes, I feel like my real family is here, in Seattle.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

ZACH

For the first time in months, no, maybe a year, I feel like my head is playing the kind of hockey my body has been desperate for it to find.

I'm fast, strong, and taking no shit.

Best of all? It's against the New York Blades, minus their psychopathic assistant captain, Alex Schneider. He was out of contract at the end of last season, and no one picked him up.

Fucking good. The guy was destined to kill someone.

At least this way he can spend more time with his new baby.

But even with his absence, the Blades are still dirty, being handed penalties throughout the first and second periods. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't partly responsible. I'm on my game tonight, and I've got my girl in the family box with my name stamped across her back. So yeah, I'm cocky as shit.

We're on another powerplay when I send the puck up to Jon, who dances between defensemen like they aren't even there. They may as well not be since we're three goals up. No wait, four. He lights the lamp with a crazy shot to the top left, one only he can pull off. I swear even their goalie gets down on his knees to worship the ice he skates on. He's a generational talent.

“The fuck are we gonna do without you next season, bro?” I clap him on the shoulder and knock my helmet into his, staring him straight in the eyes. “It’s too soon. You’re still the best player in the league, the fucking world.”

Over my shoulder, I know where he’s looking. “It’s time, buddy.”

“One more Stanley for old time’s sake?”

“It’s coming back to Seattle.” He juts his head up, and I smile over my shoulder at the girl who’s brought me back to life. “Talking of back to Seattle. Have you asked her to move in with you yet?”

Skating back to center ice, I can’t hide my shit eating grin. “I might’ve suggested it when I spilled my guts last night.”

“And?” he shouts as I skate backward and away from him, ready for the restart of play.

“And I’ll do whatever it takes to be with her. Just like you.”

He doesn’t say anything, just replaces his mouthguard, a knowing smile on his face.

LUNA

“That boy.” Kate points down to Zach, who’s fighting for the puck behind the net. “Is a boy obsessed.”

I smile around the straw of my Icee. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Listen.” She leans across to me. “There’s nothing he wouldn’t do for you. He’s caught the bug.”

My brows knit together as I steal another nacho from her tray.

“The same bug that infected Jon and my best friend,” she explains.

“So, tell me, what’s the score with Jensen? It seems like there’s something still eating at both of you.” Damn my unfiltered brain. Felicity’s eyes widen from the other side of Kate.

Kate cocks her head at me, but, thankfully, she doesn’t seem pissed. “What do you mean?”

“Just um...I don’t know, you seem a little on edge around each other.”

“I’m fine.” She flicks her hair to the side, her voice firm and seemingly unaffected. “It’s fine. I have Tom, and I’m sure he’s moved on too.”

Not awkward. Not at all.

Felicity looks over at me, a sympathetic smile on her face.

“Sorry if that was a bit intrusive. My brain’s in first and mouth in fifth sometimes.”

Kate turns to me, full-on belly laughing. “Girl, you’re looking at the queen of *come out and say it*.” She taps her cup against mine. “To girls who just say it as it is.”

I pull my phone out of my purse and drop Mom a quick message. The guilt of her being sick has been gnawing at me since she messaged yesterday.

ME

Hey, how are you doing?

MOM

So sick. I really need you home to help.

I’ve still got another two nights before my flight home. If I moved to Seattle, it could be months in between seeing her. My stomach twists at the thought of her reaction to me telling her I’m moving away. I still remember the way she mentally declined when Dad left.

I’ll be back in two days, and I’ll be right over. Maybe you could Instacart something?

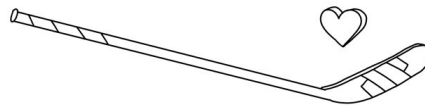
I sit waiting for a reply, but nothing comes through.

“Everything okay?” I look up from my phone to see Felicity in Kate’s seat.

“Hmm?”

“We lost you for a minute there.” She looks down at my phone.

I quickly pocket it. “Yeah, all fine.”



RILEY’S BAR is heaving as we step inside, but security quickly ushers Felicity and me to the private booths at the back. Kate left straight after the game to go meet Tom.

“This place is crazy.”

“Yeah.” Felicity laughs, taking my hand and guiding me. “It’s packed on game nights, but the boys like it since they get a private area, and they’re still kind of in the mix of it with the fans, you know?”

“Do you do this every time?” I shout over the noise to her.

She shakes her head. “No. It often depends on the result too.”

Suddenly, she stops about twenty feet from the private area. “Ah, shit.”

“What?”

She steps aside, allowing me to see past her and straight into the path of Amie and her friends. Most are up on the private dance area shaking their asses. Fine asses at that.

I turn to her. “Want to get out of here and text the boys?”

“Hell. No. That’s what she wants. We just ignore her.”

The side of my head burns from the way Amie’s eyes bore into me as we make our way to our designated booth. We order our drinks; I go to order a juice but get shoehorned into a cocktail, which takes a lot of convincing, and Felicity has a Cosmo.

“Do you think she knows we’re officially together?”

Taking a sip, she looks down at the jersey I’m wearing. “No chance.”

Laughter spills out of me. “Fair point. But do you think she’ll ever leave us alone?”

“I don’t know what the score with her and Alex Schneider is, but until she finds a new interest, probably not.” She eyes Amie discreetly over my shoulder. “It’s hard to believe she’s just had a baby.”

I’ve fought hard for the past ten minutes to attempt to ignore her, but curiosity gets the better of me as I try, and fail, to catch an inconspicuous glance at her.

“Yeah, she noticed.” Felicity winces.

“Is she coming over here?”

She shakes her head. “No, but it’s obvious what she’s thinking.”

I raise an inquisitive brow.

“Wherever you are, he is. Wherever I am, Jon is.”

My face scrunches with disgust. “Jon? She’s tried for him too?”

“Babe.” She smiles. “She’s tried for them all at some point.”

“I’m sorry? Who’s tried for them all?” A girl I don’t recognize walks up behind Felicity.

“And you are?” My friend peeks up at her.

“Bryony.”

Something like realization shoots across Felicity's face, but she quickly resets. "I've no idea who you are. Sorry. Can we help?"

"No. I just heard you trash-talking my friend and wanted to call it out, that's all."

"Are we really having this conversation?" Felicity retorts, rolling her eyes in my direction.

"Yep. Since you haven't got your men to defend you this time." Amie comes to stand alongside her friend. Both pout at us as if waiting for a fight.

I give them both my best unintimidated expression. "I don't need anyone to fight my battles."

Amie turns to me, casting her eyes over Zach's jersey. "Do you want to pose for another side-by-side photo shoot? They could post about who wore it better."

Another of her friends comes to stand at her other side and hands Amie a glass of something red.

"I think my students have more maturity than you. I'm not interested in your games." I pause and throw her a sarcastic smile. "Or a social media collaboration."

Felicity fights back laughter as she takes a sip of her cocktail and waves her hand out in front of her. "Run along now, children."

"Fucking bitch!"

Red wine hits me straight in the face, soaking into my hair and Zach's black-and-white Scorpions jersey. I'm stunned into silence and so is most of the bar as people reach for their phones to take footage.

"Bathroom, now!" Felicity pushes past Amie and grabs my hand. She pulls me along as quickly as possible, and luckily, it's only a few paces before we're out of sight. Tears prick in the corners of my eyes as Felicity slams and locks the door behind her.

"Don't cry, babe. We'll get you cleaned up and out of here."

"This is fucking humiliating."

"The only one who should be ashamed is her." She furiously points to Amie, who's no doubt loitering on the other side of the door.

"I can manage," I say, taking a brush and a pack of tissues out of my bag.

"Here." She digs into her big bag and pulls out a spare top. "I'm a size bigger than you, but wear this."

I take the black cami from her and smile. “Thanks. I think this is ruined though, right?” I pull at the hem of the wine-stained jersey.

“She’s a fucking bitch,” my best friend spits, and for a minute, I think her temper has finally snapped as she reaches for the door handle.

“Don’t,” I hurry out.

She turns back to me.

“Don’t give her what she wants: a scene.” I shock myself with my calm tone. Ordinarily, I’d be out there, but thoughts of what that could do to Zach and his career race through my head. He’s dealt with enough of her crap to last him a lifetime.

“Luna?” A familiar voice calls from the other side.

Felicity unlocks the door and pulls it open.

Zach stands on the other side in his post-game dress pants, shirt, and tie. He grips the edges of the door frame above his head tightly and then looks at Felicity, fire swarming in his eyes. He’s pissed. “Who did this to my girlfriend?”

“Who do you think?”

He drops his head between his shoulders. “For fuck’s sake. I’m so sorry, baby.”

“It’s fine. I have a spare top here, and I can put my hair in a bun, and then—”

“It’s not fine.” He pushes off the frame and stalks into the room, his eyes fixed on me. “It’s not fucking fine. No one treats my girl like this.”

“I’ll leave you to it.” Felicity slips out and shuts the door.

Zach runs a gentle hand through my soaked hair. “Fucking bitch. She’s lucky she’s a girl, or I’d bury her right now.”

I rest my hand on his chest, the warmth of his skin heating my palm, and his touch vibrating a need straight through me. “It’s okay. I’m okay.” I look down at his jersey. “I’m not sure this has been so lucky.”

Lust overtakes his features as he kisses me deeply, his tongue gliding against mine. “Take it off.” He tugs the jersey over my head and then wraps my hair in his fist, gently angling my face to his. “I’ll get you a thousand more to wear.”

“As long as they have your name on the back.”

Wrapping an arm around my waist, he picks me up with ease, sets me on the counter, and then leans across and turns the lock. “You can wear my name for a lifetime, but right now, I want you to scream it.”

He unbuttons my jeans and pushes them all the way down and then starts on his belt, unzipping his pants until they hang open at the front. “Feel how hard I am for you. How much I want you.”

I reach into his boxers and pull out his hard cock.

He leans in and sears me with a red-hot kiss, his hands flying to cup my cheeks. “Take off those panties and let me fuck you.”

Other than my black lace bralette, I’m completely naked as he pushes into me. His mouth is still on mine, and his hands are everywhere as we both gasp for air at the sensation.

“I want everyone in this goddamn bar to know how much I love you. Now, fuck this cock.”

He grabs my ass, sinking his fingertips into my flesh as he pistons into me repeatedly. I know I’m screaming, and the entire bar can hear, but I don’t care.

They can go right ahead and post about how crazy I am for Zach Evans.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

LUNA

ZACH

It's been twenty-four hours since I last kissed you, and I'm fucking desperate.

My students file out of the classroom as I pull out my phone and smile down at Zach's message.

"Miss Johnson, since you started dating one of the coolest players in the NHL, you've become the coolest teacher in the school."

"Nah, the entire state."

"Country!" another student announces.

"Yeah, well, this cool teacher hasn't forgotten that all project proposals need to be on my desk first thing tomorrow morning."

Collective groans fill my room as the last of my juniors leave.

Glancing back at my phone, I begin typing out a reply.

ME

It's not just your lips I miss.

ZACH

I'm about to board our flight to Colorado. You can't do me like this, Rocket.

If only I could...

Do you want me to turn around and catch a flight to you? Because I will. Getting kicked off the team is worth being inside you.

My core throbs at the thought.

Be a good boy and go play your away series. Not long until Christmas.

Speaking of. I'm gonna need you to keep your entire holiday free.

The entire two weeks?

Mom's barely speaking to me since I "left her when she needed me most." She'll lose her shit if I'm not home for the holidays.

I'm a needy boy.

Well, I'm a needy girl.

So fucking needy. So fucking greedy.

My phone vibrates in my hand, wiping the smile instantly from my face.

"Mom, I'm just finishing up here, and I'll be right over."

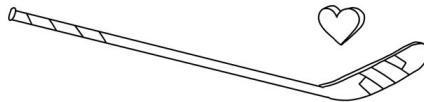
"You said you'd be over half an hour ago. I'm not getting any better Luna."

I pin my phone between my ear and shoulder as I frantically pack my bags and schoolwork. "It's the full-blown flu. It takes time."

"Can you stop by Walmart on your way over? I'll send you the list."

Hauling both heavy bags onto my shoulders, I almost topple over at the weight.

"Yes. Okay, you got it."



"IN HERE, LUNA." Mom's failing voice shouts as soon as I walk through her front door.

“One second.” I’m exhausted from chasing around after her since the moment I landed back home.

“Just bring the Tylenol in.”

“A please wouldn’t hurt,” I say under my breath.

“What was that?”

Maybe not so under my breath.

Walking into her living room, she’s strewn across the couch surrounded by tissues, cups, and empty plates. I inwardly curse at the mess, knowing it’ll be me who has to clean it up. The last time she was sick, she barely contacted me since she had Geoff, her now ex-boyfriend, to run around after her.

“You must be feeling a little better if you can eat something,” I say, gathering up the first plate and grabbing a bag to pick up the tissues. Chances are I’m going to get sick too.

“I barely kept anything down,” she replies, flicking through programs on the TV.

I watch as she finally settles on something and sits back on the couch, pulling a blanket over her.

“I’ve got a lot of schoolwork to catch up on, and my students have final projects due, so I might not be able to come over for the next couple of days.”

She pauses the TV and looks up at me. “You’ve barely been here.”

Guilt washes over me. “I’ll make sure you have everything you need.”

“What I need is my daughter.”

Guilt is momentarily replaced with frustration, her constant jabs wearing me down. “And where were you when I was sick this summer? Now I’m probably going to get sick again.”

She huffs out an unapologetic breath. “You no doubt had that boyfriend of yours to take care of you.”

I pause on clearing away the mess. “What’s this really about, Mom?”

She throws down the remote next to her and wipes her nose with another tissue. “I just think it’s crazy. You’re dropping your life and other priorities for something that’s destined to go south.”

“What?”

Mom’s face softens as does her tone. “Luna, sweetheart, he’s a world-famous hockey star with a line of women into next Christmas. This is a summer romance that’s spilled over into fall. You’re behind with your work,

and you're neglecting others all for a man who—" She pauses and purses her lips together, clearly having second thoughts on her next words.

"Who what, Mom? What exactly are you trying to say?"

"You know I think you're beautiful. You know I think any man would be lucky to have you. I'm just not convinced that he won't hurt you. He only just got out of a serious relationship, didn't he."

I don't say anything as I turn my back and stride into the kitchen, setting the dirty plates down by the sink. How could she be so cynical? I know I had my doubts about us at the start, but we've come so far. Zach is all I want, but why can't she see that?

"Luna. I'm sorry. I know it's not what you want to hear, but I'm just trying to protect you as your mom."

I walk back into the living room to find her flicking through channels again.

"I just think someone like Luke might be a better fit for you. Someone more aligned to you and your life."

"Zach isn't like that."

Mom looks up at me, a doubtful expression across her face. "They all are, honey."

My frustration bubbles over. I get it. She's been hurt by Dad. She's also had more failed relationships than most, but to tarnish the man I love without even giving him a chance—that hurts, especially from my own mom.

"I gotta head home. Get your own groceries next time," I snap and drop everything I was doing to make for the door.

"Luna," Mom calls after me, but I'm done. She's pushed me too far these past few days. The guilt over not coming back from Seattle, and now the cynicism over Zach. I'm pissed, and I need to get out before I say something I really regret.

She calls me once more before I slam the door shut and head to my car. I have a ton of schoolwork to get through, but instead of driving back to my place, I find myself heading for the beach house. Maybe the serenity will offer me the escape I need. Being there makes me feel closer to my boyfriend, and even after four months since he left, I find small traces of him here and there. He left a bottle of his cologne on the side in the bathroom, and I wonder if that was deliberate. Either way, it's replaced my usual lavender sleep mist.

Hauling my heavy school bags out of the car, I make my way up the porch and reach for the key when a very familiar voice chimes through the smart doorbell, and I almost fall back down the stairs in shock.

“Hey, baby.”

I peer through the camera. “Are you spying on me?”

“Yes.”

I laugh and slip the key into the lock.

“Hey, wait.”

“Hmm?”

“What’s the matter?” Zach’s voice comes out rushed.

“I—I’m okay.”

A moment later, my phone starts ringing in my bag, and I drop everything inside the hallway to search through it.

“Hi. Honestly, I’m okay.”

“Rocket, don’t lie to me. Your eyes are puffy and red. Tell me, who upset you?”

I walk into the kitchen, set my keys on the counter, and then make my way over to the sliding doors, stepping out onto the veranda. There’s a fresh breeze since the sun is setting, and it’s pushing December.

“Just something Mom said.” I roll my lips together to fight any display of emotion.

“Don’t play it off like it’s nothing.” He blows a breath down the phone.

“Hey, don’t you have a game tonight?”

“Nothing’s more important than you.”

Drawing in a steady breath, I’m ready to tell him the truth. Something I know he won’t like at all, when I hear a knock at the door and then the ring of the doorbell.

“Hey, hang on. Someone’s at the door.”

I pad across the living room and kitchen and then into the hallway and swing the door open. My phone still to my ear, I turn back to Zach. “Your mom’s here.” I smile at Rachel who’s beaming on the front porch with what looks to be a homemade pie in hand. “Hey, Rachel.” I say, stepping to the side to invite her in.

“Mom?” Zach asks in confusion.

“Yeah she—”

She leans into the phone as she passes. “Just welcoming the new lady in your life with a pie.”

Zach groans down the phone at me, and I inwardly chuckle. “She’s going to be all over you, I can tell.”

“Jealous?” I croon at him just as Rachel steps into the kitchen and out of earshot.

He sighs. “I’m jealous of anyone around you whenever I’m not. But...” He pauses. “I haven’t forgotten you know; I want to know what your mom said to upset you.”

“She was just being an ass over us. Saying you would get bored of me.”

“The *fuck*?”

I should’ve waited for a better time to tell him. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

He sounds like he’s pacing. “You don’t believe that bullshit, do you?”

I peer into the kitchen to find Rachel busying herself with the pie and organizing the dishes that I left on the side when I was last here.

Turning back to Zach. “No, of course I don’t. It just stings when your own mom doesn’t believe you’re enough for a man.”

“It’s fucking hurtful. To me and to you.” And I can sense his frustration building.

I squeeze my eyes shut, cursing myself for mentioning this now. “I need to go to your mom, but I’ll talk to you later.”

“Well, now I’m glad she’s there. Don’t listen to a word your mom says, okay? You are fucking everything to me.”

I nod, even though I know he can’t see me. “I know.”

“Goddamn,” he says, exasperation lacing his tone. “Why can’t people stop interfering and doubting me or us? I love you, Luna. So fucking much. Call me as soon as Mom leaves.”

“But won’t you be in a game by then?”

“Shit. Yeah. I’ll call you as soon as it’s over. I’m really sorry you had to hear that shit.”

“Hey,” I say, which has Rachel’s head whipping up toward me as I walk through the kitchen entryway. “It’s not your fault.”

He huffs out a breath. “I love you.”

I eye Rachel cautiously, knowing this is the first time she’ll hear it. “I love you too.”

A huge smile breaks out across her face as I end the call. “You got that far already?”

I smile back and walk toward the coffee maker. “We did. It’s been an intense six months. Coffee?”

She sets down the plate she was wiping and strides over to me, her arms outstretched and ready for a hug. “Screw the coffee—this calls for something stronger!”

I hug her back. Her warm embrace washes away the insecure feelings my mom planted only an hour earlier. Emotion overwhelms me as I continue to hug her back and bury my face in her shoulder.

She pulls back and looks me in the eyes. “Hey, honey, what’s wrong? This is a good thing, right.”

I sob and laugh at the same time. “Yeah, if only my mom saw it that way.”

Rachel pulls me over to sit down on one of the stools tucked under the counter, her frown turning sour. “What do you mean?”

I rub my palms on my pants nervously. “Look, I don’t want to cause friction between families. All Zach and I want is to be together, but my mom basically told me tonight that she thought Zach wasn’t the right guy for me.” I pause and look up at the ceiling, hating that I have to repeat this. “She thinks he’ll get bored or find someone else. She thinks I’m more suited to a hometown boy. Even though I’m in my thirties, she still thinks she can say stuff like that.”

Rachel clears her throat abruptly. “I don’t care what age you are. That’s utter trash.”

She reaches down and takes my hand in hers as she looks me in the eyes. “Do you want to know something?”

“Yes,” I croak out.

“Well. I know my son, and I’ve never seen or heard him this happy. I’m also not surprised to find you two together.”

My brows shoot to my hairline in surprise. “You aren’t?”

She smiles knowingly. “No. There’s always been something special between you two. I know you felt it. I could see it in your eyes when you were younger. The way you cast glances at him, always looked out for what was best for him.” She squeezes my hand tighter. “I’m so pleased he’s finally come to his senses and found the right kind of love.”

I can’t help the tear that escapes my eye and rolls down my left cheek. “If only things were simple, and I could up and leave and be with him in Seattle.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“My job, family, fear of the unknown, I guess. I’ve lived here my whole life.”

“Luna, sweetheart. There will be other jobs. Your family is right here and always will be.” She squeezes my hand again. “Plus, from what Zach’s said, you have a new family over in Seattle now too. Don’t overthink it. Just do it. Follow your heart in life, and I promise that while not everything is guaranteed to work out, you give yourself the best chance at happiness.”

We sit in silence for a long moment, the weighted truth of her words sinking into my skin. I know. Just like Felicity said I would. I know.

“I need to go to him,” I say.

She nods. “Do what you gotta do to finish up at work and go to him. And, Luna, just remember that you will always have a home here, with us.”

“I will probably have to sell my place to give me the funds I need to rent out there for a while, especially since I won’t have a job.”

Her brows knit together. “I know this isn’t everything, but hear an older, married yet still independent woman out here. My son is a millionaire, and he’s hopelessly in love with you. Let him take care of you since you’re the one moving to be with him. It will be what he’s desperate to do.”

Well, she’s right. I cock my head to the side and eye her. “Are you a mind reader or something?”

She chuckles and makes for the refrigerator. “I just know my son inside and out.”

“Luke was never the one.”

She turns around and eyes me carefully. “Nope, he wasn’t. And when you called it off right before college, as much as I care for him like a son, it hurt to see the way it destroyed him, but I knew it was the right decision for you both.”

I nod. “I feel like we’ve lost so much time. Years maybe.”

“Love isn’t that clear-cut you know. Only rarely do two people meet and that’s it. It took Andrew and me a while to work out what we wanted. He was with someone else when we first met.” She snorts slightly. “I kind of hated him at first.”

I laugh. “I never hated Zach. I just felt invisible.”

“You were with someone else, and he was fixated on hockey and his career. You’ve both done a lot of growing since then.”

“I guess. He’s still the same person though.”

“And so are you. You’re exactly what each other needs and, most importantly, wants. The heart isn’t built to be split apart and then co-exist on other sides of the country.”

“It’s not much fun.” I snifle a laugh.

“Well then, you have all the answers you need. Now!” she says, pulling the fridge door open. “I’m sure I spotted something fizzy and alcoholic in here earlier.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

LUNA

Trying to convince Zach that I was fine last night was like trying to stop the tide going out. He was pissed. So pissed that yet another person, let alone my own mom, was trying to come between us.

By the time we finished up on our call, it was already ten, and then I yawned my way through three hours of schoolwork, eventually crashing into bed at one in the morning.

Which is why I'm on my third cup of coffee by six a.m. Today, I'm going to resign from work, and I'm anxious—so anxious. I'm taking a leap of faith into the unknown with my career, but all night as I've tossed and turned, I've held onto Rachel's words of advice to follow my heart. But honestly, I knew deep down what the right choice was. I just needed a little push to get me there.

I haven't told Zach my decision, as desperate as I was last night, I'm hoping to surprise him once I know what my notice period at school will be. With the holidays just around the corner, I'm holding out that they won't ask me to work into January so I can fly out and stay out in Seattle. Excitement races through me at the thought along with the realization that no matter what I do, I'll probably never please my mom. I could stick

around here to be at her service when she needs, or until she finds a new man, and she'd still find fault in that.

I'd go for a morning swim despite it being freezing, but I can't find the energy. So instead, I rinse my cup out in the sink and head for the bathroom in hopes that a shower will help wake me up since the caffeine seems to have had zero effect so far.

The walk-in, rainfall shower Zach installed this summer earns him extra boyfriend points as I stand under the streams of hot water. I relax my mind and take the edge off the anticipation of sitting in Principal Michael's office later today.

I swear I must be seeing things when I look up and watch the handle on the bathroom door slowly turn and panic rises in me.

Who has a key?

What are they doing here?

Why are they coming in *here*?

I search frantically to grab a towel and cover myself as the door cracks open and a white Nike sneaker appears.

"Hello?" I squeak out.

A tattooed hand rests at the edge of the door. I'd recognize those tanned and beautiful hands anywhere. Instantly I feel lightheaded with excitement at seeing him, trying to process if it's really him or the caffeine tripping me out.

"W—what are you doing here?" I stumble over my words as he steps into the bathroom. He's dressed in black denim jeans, a black Scorpions hoodie, and a backward cap. As he takes me in from head to toe, a sexy smile pulls at his lips.

Steam fills the room as we drink each other in for a moment. It's only been a couple of days since we said goodbye, but the way my body thrums and my heart races in response to him, I know doing anything long-distance is going to kill us both.

The silence continues to stretch between us over the sound of the water streams as he lifts his hoodie over his head in one quick motion, taking his shirt with it. I pin my bottom lip between my teeth as I watch him unbutton and step out of his jeans.

He's hard, really hard. His boxer briefs can barely contain his huge cock as they're next to go, and all the while he keeps his heated stare on me.

Stepping toward me, he grips his cock and begins dragging his fist up and down, his piercings on full display.

He still hasn't said a word as he steps into the shower to join me. I step back, and the cold tiles are a chilling contrast to my overheating body. He lights a fire in my soul with the way he looks at me, and I imagine I do similar things to him.

My back flat against the wall, he places a palm above my head and leans down to whisper in my ear. "The first thing I was going to do when I got here was get you naked." He casts an appreciative glance down my body. "But you saved me the job, giving me more time to do exactly what I've been desperate to since you left."

"How did you get here? I thought you were on an away series?" I ask, still finding it hard to believe he isn't a hallucination.

"Red eye. We have two days off, and I'm meeting them in Cincinnati tomorrow night." He kisses the corner of my lip, his favorite spot. "Twenty-four hours with you."

Staring up into his addictive eyes I shake my head slowly. "Well, maybe right now, yeah. But last night, I made a decision."

He picks up a bottle of shampoo and squeezes some into his hands before running it through my long hair. "Yeah, what's that, Rocket?"

I pull his head down, putting my lips to his ear, an uncontrollable grin on my face. "I'm resigning from work today and moving to Seattle to be with you."

In an instant, his mouth is on me as he works his tongue into mine before he pulls back and runs his rough palms over the top of my head and down to the nape of my neck. "Move in with me, Luna. I don't want you anywhere else but with me—in our bed, in our home. I can take care of everything."

Recalling my conversation with Rachel last night, I kiss the underside of his jaw. "I don't want to be anywhere but with you. If you'll have me."

"Are you kidding me?" He hauls me into his arms, and I wrap my legs around his waist, bringing my hand down to his still-hard cock. With my back against the cold tile wall, I guide him inside me, and as he slowly sinks in, we both gasp at the way I squeeze him and the complete feeling of fullness.

"Are you fucking me like a good boy?"

He swipes his tongue across his bottom lip. “I’m going to come so hard in that pussy of yours.”

Pulling me away from the tiles, he holds my weight completely, hovering me over his dick. A cheeky smile traces his lips. “Do you want your cock back, Rocket?”

My core pulses with need. “Don’t play with me, Evans.”

He quirks a brow. “Better get used to games. You’re stuck with me now.”

Dropping me back onto him, I cry out with pleasure as he pounds into me repeatedly, holding me by the thighs. His abs and torso contract below me, and I can’t help but grin at the sight.

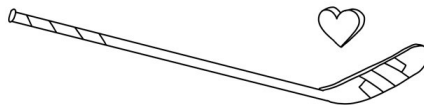
“Like what you see?”

“You’re so fucking hot.” I manage in a breathy voice.

“This is the only dick you will ever fuck, and I’ll sink it inside you every goddamn day.”

Clutching the back of his neck, I rest my forehead against his as a powerful orgasm rips through me. “I love you. So much.”

He kisses mine in return. “I can’t wait to have you brand my life. Paint every single wall in our apartment bright pink because you’ve removed any trace of gray from my heart.”



ZACH

“I’m betting this will be a decision you go on to regret.”

“And why’s that?” I look over at her sitting in the passenger seat of her car, which I offered to drive since she had no idea where I was taking her until now.

“Because pin bowling is a specialty of mine.”

I interlace her fingers with mine and throw her a pitiful look. “Baby, I haven’t forgotten how shit you were in high school. We put the barriers up for you.”

She looks down at our joined hands and then straight into my eyes, wearing a slightly twisted smile on her face as she cups the side of my jaw with one hand. “I joined the bowling team at college. Also.” She points at the tiny pink denim shorts she’s wearing. “You could've told me where we were going. I have half my ass out.”

I waggle my eyebrows as she swats me in the chest.

“Zachary Evans!”

Truth is, I wanted to bring her somewhere fun tonight since I won’t see her for three weeks while she finishes up her notice at the school. Plus, Principal Massive Dickhead Michaels was a complete asshole to her when she resigned this morning, leaving me wanting to re-route my morning run to his office and pummel him for upsetting my girlfriend. She didn’t cry, but if she had, I’d have definitely added in the extra three-mile round trip.

“Your wrath is worth it when I get to stare at your ass.” Leaning forward, I kiss my favorite spot and smile. “Speaking of ass, ready to get it handed to you?”

She raises a brow of determination. “Bring it, Evans.”



“FUUUUCK.”

Another fucking strike?

Strutting back over, she drops herself down on the booth next to me, hanging one of her legs over mine. “Best. Day. Ever.”

I reach forward and take her glass of Coke before she has a chance to take a sip, setting it down on the table in front of us. “You’re such a brat, you know that?”

“Mm-hmm. Is this only sinking in now?”

“Nah, I’ve known for a long while. It’s just now, I can actually do something about it.”

I reach down and squeeze her ass through the illegal pink shorts she’s wearing.

“I still can’t believe you thought I was hot in high school.”

“Like I said, I couldn’t do anything about it then either.”

The family playing on the lane next to us probably wouldn't appreciate me mauling my girlfriend in public, so I rein myself in and pass her drink back.

"The next three weeks are going to be torture." She groans, and the sound shoots straight to my dick.

Really not the time *or* place, Zach.

Pulling her into my side, I plant a kiss on top of her head. "It's going to drag like hell, but once it's done, I'll have you all to myself forever."

She chuckles softly. "Until the next away series."

"Yeah, it sucks to be away, but you can always come with me sometime and give the home fans some shit."

"Shit talking is another of my specialties."

I look up at the scoreboard, fucking fifty points more than me. She absolutely nailed my ass to the wall.

Standing, I hold my hand out to her. "Let's get out of here and make the most of the time we have left."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

LUNA

I race as fast as my legs can carry me toward the family box.

I've already missed the first period which wasn't helped by the new security personnel refusing me access to the suite since I "wasn't family." Surprising Zach a week earlier than we planned has gone anything but *to plan*.

"Babe?" A strong British accent calls from behind, just as I push the door open to the family box allocated to Jon and Zach.

I spin around to find Felicity standing twenty feet away, dressed in one of Jon's jerseys. She's flanked by her children, Jack and Darcy. I've seen so many photos, but to meet them in the flesh has me beaming. Jack is every bit the tall and confident college hockey player she described him as, and Darcy, yeah, wow, she has her mom's looks.

"Surprise!" I say, doing jazz hands.

She lurches forward, taking me into her arms. "Does Zach know you're here and wait, are you here, here? As in for good?"

"Yep. I kind of told a few white lies about when I would finish. My notice was two weeks instead of three." I look down at my watch and wince. "I was hoping to catch Zach before warm up, but my flight got

delayed, and then I got held at security until I pulled up an image of Zach and me at the gala to prove I was his girlfriend.”

“What?!” Felicity exclaims. “They should have your name on a list. Jon always sends tickets for his box because Adam loves them, and—” She stops in her tracks. “I’m getting carried away.” She holds out a hand in the direction of her daughter. “Darcy, this is one of my closest friends, Luna. And Jack.” She stomps her foot at her son, who’s casually scrolling through his phone. “Jack!”

“Huh?” He looks up at me. “Oh yeah, hi. Wait, you’re Zach Evans’s girlfriend, right?”

It still feels alien when people refer to me as his girlfriend, and I often wonder what my sixteen-year-old self would say. She’d likely lose her mind that she was about to move in with her high-school crush. Maybe all that manifesting back then paid off?

“Yeah, nice to meet you both,” I say. Darcy smiles and blushes slightly. She’s blonde but reminds me so much of her mom.

We begin walking toward the box when Felicity chuckles. “Zach’s going to get the shock of his life if he manages to catch a glimpse of you.” From all the way up in the box, I doubt he’ll notice, but it’s kind of nice to watch him play in secret.

We take our seats, and I look around.

“Kate couldn’t make it,” Felicity clarifies, reading my mind.

“Oh?” I reply in question.

“So last night she called me and said Tom’s taking her on a random weekend away.”

“Where to?”

“Some fancy spa a couple of hours south.”

I’m confused by the frown Felicity wears. “What’s the issue with that?”

“I think Kate and Tom want very different things.”

The players begin skating onto the ice as the noise of the crowd picks up and loud music starts to fill the stadium. When I see number sixty-six, my heart rate races. If I wasn’t so terrible at skating, I’d grab a pair and go to him myself.

I tear my gaze away and focus back on my friend. “I guess she’ll have to be honest with him then.”

“Yeah, not that she’ll have a problem with that.” Felicity claps for the boys as they get into position ready for the puck drop.

From the moment the second period starts, I know Zach is a different player. I've watched all his games religiously, but seeing him out there tonight tells me the hesitation and uncertainty that spilled over from the hit last season has subsided. He moves with the same purpose I remember from seasons before; he commands the ice like the Zach Evans we all love and the opposition fears. Pride flows out of me, and I watch my boyfriend with awe as he runs the show. I wonder if his control on the ice is a reflection of the stability he's now found in his life with me. I hope so.

Felicity leans in next to me. "You're in love with him, aren't you?"

I don't even hesitate. "A hundred percent. He's everything to me."

She squeals with delight. "Did it just come to you? Like you just knew you had to be here and together?"

I think back to the day of the gala when Felicity said it would happen that way. "You were right."

"And your mum? Is she on board? Not that it matters—you have all of us in your corner," she tags on.

I sigh deeply, my shoulders sagging. "No. Well, I don't think so. We've spoken a bit, but as soon as she found out I was moving to Seattle, she hasn't answered my calls."

"That's on her, you know?"

Right at that moment, Jon sinks the puck with a slap shot, making the score two-zero. "They'll miss him next season," I say, looking over at Jack, who's going wild with Darcy.

"They will. But it's time," she replies. "He's carrying a knee injury which is only getting worse."

We retake our seats, and my eyes find Zach again, swooning at the way he boards one of their players, but my mind travels back to Mom. "I know it's on her, but it still hurts."

"Of course it does. It's amazing how changes in our life can reveal things about people we thought we knew when, in fact, we know nothing about them at all."

"Why do you always know the right thing to say?"

"It's a gift," she says, sitting back in her seat and picking up her popcorn before offering it out to me.

I take a piece. "You're actually perfect, you know that? Sweet and salty popcorn is my utopia."

“Kindreds.” She winks. “Seriously though, babe. Let your mum come to you in her own time. Soon she’ll see the error of her ways and that Zach is every bit the man she would want for you.”

“And every bit the man she’s never had,” I add. “And if she doesn’t?”

“Then she’s a fucking idiot.”

I almost choke on my popcorn. “Don’t hold back there, Ms. Thompson.”

“Yeah, well. Kate’s not the only one who can put it straight.”

I look at her with heart eyes. “I’m in love with number sixty-six, but I think I might love you more.”

Tucking a piece of my hair behind my ear, she smiles sweetly. “This is absolutely the right decision for you and Zach. And, if it doesn’t work out, *which it will*, but if the world somehow implodes and it doesn’t, then we can always get hitched. It’s not too late for me yet.”

“I’m good with that. I think Jon might kill me though.”

She chuckles. “We set a date yesterday. I was going to text you and tell you. And...well, since you’re here early, how do you fancy joining Kate, Darcy, and me on Monday? We’re starting the hunt for *the one*.”

I audibly gasp, and Jack looks over. “They pushed it back to June thirtieth because the Scorpions are winning the playoffs this season.”

“Ohmygod! That’s still only six months away.”

My best friend’s face lights up. “I know.”

“So much to do.”

“Oh, I don’t need to worry about that. He’s taking care of it all. I just need to get the dress, apparently.”

“He.” I point at number twenty-two, flying across the ice. “Is planning a wedding?”

She smiles down at her fiancé sweetly. “He wants to take care of it all.”

I shake my head in awe. “He really is the love guru.”

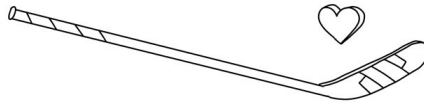
“Apparently, he has *very* specific plans.”

The Scorpions get another goal thanks to their insanely talented winger, Jessie Callaghan. He, thankfully, recovered from the wrist strain quickly. Zach skates across to congratulate him, removing his glove and bumping fists. That’s when Jessie points over his shoulder toward our box, and it’s at that exact moment that I know he’s registered I’m here.

He skates across the ice to the part nearest to me and removes his helmet. Pointing up at me, I’m sure I see a wide smile spread across his

face. The jumbotron flashes to him, which confirms exactly that. He kisses his palm, blowing it up toward me. The crowd roars as I watch him smiling at me through the screen. I know he can't see the jersey I'm wearing, but I can feel every single butterfly in my stomach as they dance around happily.

He's beautiful, and finally, he's all mine.



ZACH STANDS between my legs as I sit on his kitchen counter. My lips are swollen, and my cheeks are sensitive from the way we haven't stopped making out since we got back to his place.

Our place.

Our apartment.

Kissing my forehead, he stares down into my eyes. "I'm serious, you know; I want you to make this place exactly how you want it. Color it with all your brightness."

I look around at the beautiful interior. "Actually, I kind of like the monochrome feel you have going on."

He balks at my admission. "This is a joke, right? Where's the Luna who wanted to paint every wall in the beach house yellow?"

I shrug. "This is you. This place, it's a reflection of you. A part of the man I love."

He plays with a few strands of my hair, wrapping them around his tattooed fingers. "I want you to keep your place in Florida."

There's no way I can afford that with zero income. "Zach, that's just not—"

"Luna." He runs both of his huge palms down the sides of my face and then through my hair, sweeping it over my shoulders. "Let me take care of this for you. You're the one who's uprooted your career, your whole fucking life, so we can be together."

"But it's what I wanted too."

He parts my thighs wider, and I feel the way his hard cock brushes against the insides as he steps closer, making my core tighten with anticipation. I feel breathless. He makes me want everything, to experience everything. Just with him.

“You might’ve wanted it, but I was desperate for it, Rocket. Desperate for you. Just like I always am.”

“Well, I’m here now.”

He rubs his palms across the tops of my thighs. “Jon told me you’re going with the girls to help Felicity pick out a wedding dress.”

“I am.”

Leaning into me even more, every nerve ending fizzles at the way his lips brush my ear. “Luna Evans. Kind of has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”

My body tingles. “Sounds like it could work one day.”

Smiling against my mouth as he kisses me, his lips move gently over mine. “I fucking love you so much. Thank you for coming to me. Thank you for being the most incredible woman I know, and thank you for choosing me.”

“Never thank me. My world wouldn’t be complete without you in it.” I pause and hold his gaze. “You seemed more free out there tonight, no hesitation.”

“I was. I’ve been making progress with the psychologist, but in the end, I figured out what the problem was.”

“Oh yeah, what’s that?”

“Since last year, I’ve been living my life waiting for the next bad thing to happen. Waiting for the next mistake or bad decision. But with you by my side, I feel safe and secure. Asking you to be mine was the greatest decision I could ever make. Everything else just doesn’t seem that important as long as I have you.”

My pulse quickens at the intensity in his eyes. “You will always have me, Zach. Because you have always had me.”

“I’m in so deep with you, and I don’t feel any fear. All I feel is the way my heart beats for you—for us.” He reaches forward and places my hand over his heart. “Your name is etched into this. It’s my deepest tattoo, one that can never be removed.”

“Good. Because you’re stuck with me.”

He kisses me with an urgency we’ve never shared before, a desperation and promise of more. Tonight is the first night we’ll spend as a couple officially living together, and I want him to spend all of it inside me. I trace a fingernail over his chest. “Is it true what they say about hockey players after their games?”

He narrows his eyes playfully. "Be more specific."

"That they have a lot of pent-up adrenaline."

Wrapping my legs around his waist, he pulls me toward him until he presses against my core, our clothes the only thing stopping us from going further. "Oh, it's true."

I kiss him once more. "Then take me to our bed."

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CHAPTER FORTY

ZACH

“A thousand dollars says this will be Zach and Luna in the next six months.” Jensen stands eyeing himself in the reflection; his jet-black hair and deep-brown eyes complement his dress suit. I’d tell him he’s a good-looking guy, which he is, but his head is already big enough for the both of us.

“Do you think she’ll wear white?” Jon comes to stand next to him as they both pose, and I roll my eyes.

“Of course she will,” Jensen scoffs.

“I don’t know.” Jon fidgets nervously with his bow tie. “Once she gets something in her head, she’s like a bulldog. I just have this feeling she’s going to go with something different.”

Jensen turns, still eyeing him through the mirror. “Don’t get me wrong; I get that all of this is important and all, but as long as you both say, ‘I do,’ then that’s really all that matters.”

Panic races across Jon’s face. “What? You think there’s a chance that she won’t?”

“I don’t think that’s what he’s saying, bro.” I look over at them both as I inspect the choice of bow ties, which are really only black and gray. Jon wants to go black tie for their wedding.

Jensen remains quiet, which is not helpful, especially given the rising alarm on my best friend's face.

"Fuck, you don't think she's getting cold feet, do you?"

I walk over and place a palm on his shoulder. "Over a stud muffin like you? Fuck no. I'd marry you in a heartbeat."

He laughs. "Maybe we should do a switch. Felicity said she and Luna plan to marry if all this doesn't work out."

Jensen clears his throat, and we both look over at him.

"What? I didn't say anything?" He shrugs.

Jon tips his chin at Jensen. "What's going on with you anyway, man? You're what, thirty-two and still haven't settled down. Don't go my route; it's fucking lonely."

Jensen shifts from one foot to the other, running a hand across the nape of his neck. "Look, I'm happy for you both and all, but weddings and love, they aren't for me. A few dates and a fuck with a pretty girl are more my wheelhouse."

"So, you have no plans to settle, like at all, ever?" Jon asks, clearly struggling to get his head around Jensen's logic.

He shakes his head. "Nope. Sounds like a whole lot of trouble and heartbreak to me."

"Well, this is fucking cheerful when we're picking out suits for my wedding."

I nod. "Tell me about it. I hope the girls are having more fun."

Puffing out a breath, Jensen comes to stand beside Jon, his hands in his pockets. All three of us are now standing in front of the giant mirror in the dressing room, staring at each other. "I'm not here to put a downer on anything. I'm happy for you. She's everything you wanted *and* needed. You were a fucking wreck before you met her."

"Not helping," I chime in.

"But all I'm saying is, it's just not for me. The 'happily ever after' thing."

"I thought that once," Jon counters.

"Yeah, when you were a rookie, and then things changed for you. It's never changed for me, and I'm cool with it."

"Your sister gets married next year too, doesn't she?" I ask.

Jensen nods. "Yeah, summer is gonna be hell on earth wedding season."

"Add Zach's wedding to your roster as well."

I eye Jon. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"Does she not want to get married or something?" he replies.

I can't prevent the shit eating grin that spreads over my face as I recall last night, and the first time I gave her my last name, other than stamped across her back while I fucked her into oblivion. "She wants to get married one day."

"What's the delay then?"

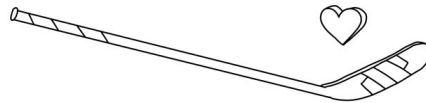
I physically turn to Jon. "I haven't even shipped her things from her place to ours yet. Plus, she's only just agreed to move in and uproot her life. Give me a fucking second, man."

Jensen snickers and eyes our captain. "You're unbearable these days. It's kind of disgusting if I'm being honest."

Looking at us both through the mirror he huffs out a frustrated breath. "Well, this entire experience of picking out wedding suits was really magical. Thanks. I'm going to settle up and go find my wife." He saunters back to the dressing room.

Jensen's shoulders vibrate with laughter. "Not quite."

He flips the bird over his shoulder. "Fuck off."



WALKING into one of our favorite Italian restaurants, my subconscious instantly searches for my girl, and when I land on her, she smiles back, illuminating me from the inside.

Seattle is in full holiday mode since we're only a week away from Christmas, but I feel totally unprepared. I haven't bought anything for her yet. Sexy lingerie, perfume, a spa day, skincare, none of it seems to make sense. Buying her a second telescope for our place isn't even a possibility, since I bought one for myself when I returned to Seattle just before preseason. Call me a simp, but each night I'd watch the stars, wondering if she was viewing the same ones.

I slide up next to her and wrap an arm around the back of her chair, planting a kiss at the corner of her mouth. "Hey there, Rocket."

"Hey. Get what you need?"

I eye Jon, who has his face buried in Felicity's neck, probably triple-checking she isn't getting cold feet.

"Yeah, got the suits. Any luck with the dress?"

"She found a couple, but nothing that said, '*the one*.' She did ask me to be a bridesmaid though. Kate's her maid of honor."

I knew she was being asked since Jon can't keep a secret to save his fucking life. "Oh yeah, that's awesome. Any idea about the color of your dress?" I lean closer to her. "Maybe black. You know how I feel about that color on you."

"Emerald." Jon shouts across the table.

Darcy's, Kate's, Jensen's, Luna's, Felicity's, and my head all dart to him. "You were asking about the color. It's emerald. Adam chose it."

Felicity pulls Jon in for a hug. Clearly, this is new information to her too. "I love it."

I turn back to my girlfriend. "That will look gorgeous on you."

She flushes slightly, and I follow it all the way down her neckline and past the hot-as-fuck, low-cut, red sweater she's wearing.

"What do you want to do on Christmas Day? I was thinking a movie binge followed by fucking you on every surface," I say low enough so the others can't hear.

"Yeah, I heard that," Kate says around the breadstick she's eating. She points the remaining half between us. "I'm reconsidering my award for the most sickening couple. You two are giving these two a real run for their money," she says as she points to Jon and Felicity.

"I second Kate," Darcy adds. "It's kind of gross."

Felicity scoffs. "Oh, excuse me, young lady! How many times have I had to scurry out of the room since your tongue is stuck down Liam's throat?"

Darcy blushes hard.

"Don't worry about it. We've all been there with our parents." Luna tries to reduce her embarrassment.

"Oh, have we now?" I say with one eyebrow raised. I'm joking, but really, I'm insanely jealous. The thought of Luna with anyone else makes me want to tear the world down. It also makes me want to haul her into the bathroom and fuck her just like we did at the bar. But that plan is soon put on hold as our food is brought to the table.

"What's the plan for searching for schools then?" Jensen asks Luna.

“Jeez, give her a minute, will you? She just moved across the country three days ago, and her things are in shipping containers,” Kate responds, giving Jensen an unmissable dead eye.

“Fuck me, I was only asking,” he replies with equal animosity before sitting back in his chair and taking a swig of beer.

Glossing over that exchange, Luna drums her purple fingernails on the table. “I actually saw an opening for an Art and Design position at the local high school only five blocks from where Zach lives.”

“We live,” I correct her.

“We live.” She smiles. “I might apply for that during the holidays. I have nothing to lose I guess.”

“Might as well. But there’s no rush to find anything,” I add.

“There is. I’ll get bored and then be even more of a pain in your ass.”

“You’re only a brat some of the time,” I say, leaning down to kiss behind her ear. Goddamn, I can’t keep my hands off her.

I don’t want to keep my hands off her.

“You know what, babe? I think you’re right. Those two *are the* couple to beat.” Felicity points at us both.

“Woah, woah, woah. Hang on a—” Jon holds up a hand.

But his protests are met with a garlic knot to the cheek courtesy of Jensen. I swear that guy has the hand-eye coordination of a god. “Give it a rest, guru.”

Felicity snorts a laugh and wipes the garlic butter from his face with her napkin. “Ignore them, petal.”

“Yeah, ignore them, *petal*,” I mock, taking a bite out of my ravioli, which incidentally is nowhere near the same level as Luna’s.

Narrowing his eyes, he pins me with a glare. “It’s not too late to reconsider my choice for best man.”

I point at Jensen with my fork. “The world’s greatest goalie is always an option.”

Kate snorts loudly, almost choking on her pizza. “I think not.”

“Why not?” Jensen winks over at her, and there’s a definite hint of flirtation to his otherwise sarcastic response.

“Because.” She pauses with her wine glass to her lips. “That would involve coming within ten feet of you.” She smiles sweetly as the rest of us busy ourselves with our meal.

I take another bite of ravioli but steal a glance at our goalie, who grips his beer glass so hard, I'm surprised it doesn't shatter in his hand.
Well, shit.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

LUNA

I hate wrapping Christmas presents.

Mostly because as someone who can paint and is good artistically, folding paper in a pretty way has always escaped me. And it pisses me off.

But I could wrap Zach's presents in a trash bag and I'd still love the process. In fact, I could wrap all these presents in front of me repeatedly: the "Boss Babe" flask I bought for Kate, the "Grow Your Own Garden" kit I got for Felicity, and the "I Love My Wife" coaster I got for Jon. Silly gifts but things that mean so much because of the people they're for. It makes me wonder how much my dislike of wrapping was born out of those I was gifting to rather than the process itself.

I pick up the box of skincare I bought for my mom. I was hoping to give it to her in person before I left for Seattle, but since she didn't answer my calls, I figured she wouldn't want me showing up on her doorstep. So I bought a duplicate online and mailed it to her. I know she got it, not that she messaged but because the tracking notified me.

Looking at the tree, her gift to me sits underneath it. I should really wait until tomorrow, but I also want to open it alone, and since Zach's out, I find myself walking over and picking up the perfectly wrapped gift in her trademark plain red paper with a gold bow.

But the thing is, my mom doesn't really know me at all, and this present just confirms that. I'm a creature of habit, someone who feels safe with what I know. Sure, I can be a little off the wall at times, but I'll never wear this perfume. She does though, and I know this because as I open the box and spray some into the air, Mom could be sitting right next to me.

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes. I've never cried as much as I have these past four months, but this time it's the realization that my mom and I will never be aligned. I'll never have that close bond so many daughters have with their moms, no matter how much I've clung to hope that we could be. I also feel guilty and ungrateful for hating the present. It's expensive, but it means nothing. No that's a lie—it does mean something. Just the opposite of what I wanted it to.

Placing Zach's and everyone else's gifts neatly under the tree ready for when we deliver them later tonight, when Jon and Felicity are hosting a Christmas Eve dinner, I pad into the kitchen and begin fetching out ingredients to make a frittata for lunch because, apparently, we don't eat them for breakfast in this house.

I'm busy stirring the base and singing badly to Shania Twain when there's a knock at the door.

Close friends and family use the elevator since they have the code, so immediately, I head to the bedroom and throw one of Zach's Scorpions hoodies on over my tiny crop top, and I switch out my sleep shorts for a pair of black leggings. The hoodie smells of him, and momentarily, I'm distracted by my borderline crazy urge to stand and inhale his scent and ignore the door.

But the knocking steps up to more of a thump.

"One second!" I shout from the other side as I take a deep breath and pull the door open with an ounce of trepidation.

Amie's satisfied smile is the first thing I note. That and the glamorous stroller parked next to her in the hallway. How did she get past security? I guess she probably has a history downstairs, so it wouldn't be hard to convince them.

"Santa is here to deliver your gift," she drawls. Turning the stroller around, she uses it as a battering ram, running it straight over my feet as she pushes past me and into the living space.

Flipping around, her snarky smile turns evil, and I know answering the door will probably be my biggest regret this Christmas. Whatever "gift"

she's delivering is not going to be one I immediately want to unwrap.

"Where is he?"

"Out," I say, inwardly wincing at the throb in my left foot.

"I can wait," she says, throwing herself down on the couch.

I peek over at the sleeping baby in the stroller. I can only make out his face since he's wrapped in blankets. But I know he's a boy since they have been all over social media. She named him Justin. When I read it the first time, I wanted to throw my phone against the wall, but I was too busy saving Zach's from the same fate. And the kicker—she then posted her "inspiration" behind the name: someone who will "always remain in her heart."

"I want you to leave." I stare down at her as she makes herself comfortable.

"You know, I forgot how amazing this couch is. I've spent so many nights on this thing."

"When he found out you were cheating, I assume?" I throw back, making my way to the kitchen to continue making the frittata. I want away from her, but at least I can still see what she's up to in the open-plan space.

"No." She laughs mockingly. "He really enjoys horror movies, and we'd be up alllll night watching them. I'd get scared, so we'd cuddle before he'd carry me to bed."

The blade from my knife slips down the bell pepper I'm cutting as I almost hit the floor at what she said. I thought those moments I shared with Zach were special. The movies, the fact that he'd hold me while I was scared shitless.

I narrowly miss my thumb as I blow out a relieved breath, and I look up to find her scrolling through her phone. "Amie. You need to leave. I guarantee whatever gift you have, he isn't going to want it."

Still looking down at her phone with delight, she stands from the couch and saunters over to me. "Oh, the gift isn't for him babes. It's for you. I mean..." She stands on the opposite side of the counter. "...technically, it's not a gift now, but in six months' time you'll probably thank me."

I don't respond. What the fuck is she talking about.

"Well." She blows out a resigned breath and sets her phone on the counter, pushing it across to me. "Ideally I wanted Zach to be here too since he's probably better at explaining all this than me, but I guess as you want me to leave, now will have to do."

As I pick up the phone, the screen is lit with messages, and as my eyes focus on what they say and who they're from, I want to hurl.

Back and forth, back and forth, messages between Zach and Amie. My heart screams at me to drop the phone and walk away, but my body defies it, my thumb continuing to scroll relentlessly. Some of them are pure filth, making it seem like they've been sleeping together for months since he got back to Seattle. Others are "I love you" and "I need to break things off with her, but I don't want to hurt her. I had fun over the summer, but it's not a long-term thing."

Don't cry. Do not cry, Luna. That's what she wants to see.

He wouldn't break me like this. Not Zach.

I know he wouldn't.

"I know what you're thinking." She leans her elbow on the counter and rests her chin on her palm. "Not Zach. He wouldn't do it to me."

With her other hand, her red fingernail taps the screen a few times, taking me all the way to the bottom of the conversation.

ZACH

Baby don't come over tonight. She's here, and a week earlier than expected. I promise I'll find a way to see you before Christmas. I miss you x

"There's no way. This is all fake." I steel my shoulders and push the disgusting lies back across the table.

Snatching the phone up, her voice is way sharper now. She narrows her eyes at me. Searching for any hint of weakness. "What are you saying? That I'm some sort of crazy person making this all up?" She scoffs. "I don't have the time or the know-how to create such a thing."

My head still at war with my heart, I work to convince myself she is exactly that. Twisted.

I point over at the stroller. "Aren't you concerned that your baby boy will be left without a dad when all this comes out? Because that's why you're here, isn't it? To out your affair and split me and Zach up. What happens when Alex finds out? He must be a pretty good dad, having all that time now that he doesn't play hockey."

She looks to the side and shakes her head.

"Huh?" I huff out aggressively. "All I see is someone screwing themselves over."

Still facing away from me, she stares off down the hallway that leads to our bedroom. The door is wide open, and I know she can see my clothes all over the floor when I rushed to get changed.

Casting her eyes up to the ceiling, she nods twice and then slowly her bottom lip starts to quiver.

Is she...crying?

"I'm not with Justin's dad."

I don't miss the absence of Schneider's name.

I should probably keep my nose out. But since she's trying to fuck with me, in our home, I have zero regard for her privacy. "Who is the dad, Amie?"

"You don't know him."

What?

"But I thought it was between Zach and Alex?"

"Neither of them is the father," she whispers.

"Amie," I say as calmly as I can. "Have you and Zach really been sleeping together?" Given her vulnerable state, I sense this is my best chance to get the truth.

Her head whips up to me, making eye contact for the first time in several minutes. A satisfied smile pulls at her lips. "Yes." Her voice is full of conviction, and her eyes give nothing away.

I bite the inside of my cheek so hard that I taste blood. So, I bite down harder, rage and bitterness overpowering me. Through clenched teeth and with my voice low so the baby, who's beginning to stir, can't hear, I say, "Then get out of this fucking apartment before I do something I really will regret."

"Oh, don't worry. I'm gone." Turning her back on me, she swaggers back to the stroller before turning to look at me once more. "Justin's due a feed anyway." She takes a bottle out of the side pocket of her diaper bag and hands it to him. "Welcome to Seattle, Luna."

And then she's gone. Out the door and leaving me in an apartment that twenty minutes ago was my happiest place on earth. The place my heart orbited. But now...now I feel like I'm floating with no tether to keep me safe.

ZACH

Frittata ingredients cover the counter when I walk back into the apartment.

I only went out for a couple of hours to pick up Luna's last present, but everything feels so different—the atmosphere, but mainly the fact that my girlfriend isn't here.

"Luna?"

Checking each room including the bathrooms, I come up empty. All her stuff is here, her sleep shorts are thrown on the bedroom floor, and my hoodie from the back of the chair in our bedroom has gone. Has she gone out? If she did, then it was in a real hurry.

Something doesn't feel right. I know on instinct.

Walking back through to the living room, I take a seat on the couch and pull out my phone but quickly stop scrolling for her number.

There's something familiar, like a feeling of *déjà vu*.

Amie.

I couldn't miss that strong perfume anywhere. It took weeks to wash it out of my bedding, and in the end, I gave up and tossed the lot out. A chill trickles down my spine as I start to piece together that Luna not being here has something to do with my ex-girlfriend paying her a visit earlier.

Frantically, I'm back to scrolling for her number and immediately I hit dial.

One ring.

Two rings.

Three rings.

Four rings.

And then I get her bright voice, but it's not the way I want it. I don't want her voicemail.

Shit.

I try calling again, but this time, I hear the faint sound of buzzing, and I stand to see her phone by the refrigerator.

Adrenaline kicks in harder than it has during any game. Do I head out searching for her or wait here and hope she comes back?

Is she okay?

"Fuck!" I feel like I've come full circle from earlier this year—pacing my apartment. What the fuck did Amie say to her this time?

I blocked her number months ago and ended up changing mine to stop her messages, which was a fucking nightmare updating everyone, but it was worth it for the peace.

But with no idea where my girl is and what fucking lies have been told, I pull up and unblock the one contact I never wanted to dial again. I know this is what she wants. But this needs to end. Today.

“Slightly later than I expected, but hi,” she purrs down the phone.

I’m fucking raging. “What the *fuck* have you said to her?”

“You mean she’s not there to tell you herself?”

I pull at the roots of my hair. “No. Fuck, Amie. Why are you doing this? First, you insult her, then throw your drink over her, and now this?” I shout. “You’re toeing a very dangerous line.”

“Oh? And what line would that be Zachary?”

Her patronizing tone only enrages me further. “You don’t get it, do you?” I’ve never used my position, platform, or contacts in this city against anyone, but I’m out of options. “I’ll go public with the way you treated me after our relationship ended. The way you’ve blown up my phone and harassed me for months, the way you’ve behaved toward Luna behind closed doors.” Fuck knows how, but the wine incident didn’t make it onto social media, or at least it didn’t start trending. Maybe others missed it; maybe Luna got out of the way of cameras in time. “I’ll dismantle your influencer platform and bury it six feet under in hours.”

“You’re threatening me?” she spits down the phone.

“No threats, Amie. Just promises. Now tell me, what the fuck did you say to my girlfriend.”

A long stretch of silence passes between us, and I’m certain she’s considering her options.

Better make the right decision Amie.

My phone buzzes in my hand, but I know it can’t be from Luna since I have hers in the other.

“Well?” I snap, running out of patience.

“I told her we were back sleeping together, and you wanted to get back with me.”

I’d already guessed it would be some bullshit like that, but it doesn’t stop the way my heart splits clean down the middle.

Why would Luna believe her word?

“And she bought that bullshit?”

“Not initially, but when I showed her all the messages we’d been exchanging, it made more sense.”

“Amie.” I shake my head in disbelief. “We haven’t spoken over the phone in months.”

“It’s easy to fake.” She laughs evilly. “I’m kind of disappointed that she fell for it so easily. She really has some insecurities that girl.”

“Why?” My voice cracks. “Why would you do that?”

“No one. And I mean NO ONE gets to reject me. I poured my heart out to you, begged for your forgiveness, and you couldn’t even pick up the phone. Then you go and block me from your life and change your number? I thought I meant more to you than that. I love you.”

My phone buzzes again.

“No, you don’t, Amie. You never did either. And you know what?”

“What?”

“Neither did I.”

A sob breaks down the phone. “Don’t say that.”

“It’s true. I thought I did, but honestly, I had no idea what love was until I met the woman you just fucked with. So let me put this to you straight and like I asked you months ago. Lose this number you now have, leave everyone I love and care about alone, and back the fuck out of our life. If I ever hear from you again, I’ll start talking.”

I hang up the call and take a deep breath, trying to steady the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

I check the text that came through.

KATE

Okay, so I’m assuming you haven’t made the biggest mistake of your life and done what Devil Girl is claiming. I have your girlfriend here. She forgot her phone when she raced out in a panic, and she wants you to know she’s okay.

BUT IF YOU HAVE. I SUGGEST YOU DO NOT COME TO MY PLACE. BECAUSE IT WILL NOT BE PRETTY.

I huff out a relieved laugh. Despite being threatened by the scariest woman on the planet, I know where I need to be to fetch my girl and sort out this whole fucking mess.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

LUNA

“Give the word, and I’ll get in my car and hunt her down.” Kate passes me a strong coffee. “I still think wine would be better.”

I wince at her. “I’ve kind of gone off that.”

“Yeah.” She laughs. “I can only imagine.”

Kate’s phone buzzes, and Zach’s contact flashes onto the screen. She snatches it up and smiles. “Mr. Boy Obsessed is on his way.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“Not to let you go anywhere. Tell me, did you and Felicity drug your men or something?”

A laugh bursts out of me. “No. Why, are you looking for a boy to be obsessed with you?”

“Nope.” She kicks her feet up onto the couch next to me. Kate’s place is quirky but serene and covered in house plants, a far cry from the contemporary and modern look I was expecting.

“You don’t think he did it then?” She changes the subject, deflecting away from herself as always.

“The messages seemed legit, but Amie isn’t. I know that much.” Truth is, I’m fighting with every ounce of strength to drown out the voice of self-doubt and insecurity that’s been eating away at me over our relationship for

months. I'm pushing away everything Mom said about him getting bored or moving on. I need to hear him out. We've come too far not to hear him out.

"I'm proud of you, you know that?" Kate leans forward and gently rubs my thigh with her hand. "In the totally no patronizing sense. I'm proud of you."

"For what?" I say, taking a sip of coffee.

"For doing what you've done. Moving your life, taking the leap. Doing what's right for you. For telling your mom to stick it, for not believing Amie...I can go on if you'd like?"

"Yeah, I guess it's been a ride, but I know in my heart, he hasn't cheated. I just feel it, you know?"

"No, I can't say I do know, but I can see it in you. He's your endgame."

My breath catches in my throat. Hearing that from someone like Kate, it makes it feel more real, like the validation my mom never gave us. "Yeah. He is."

"I think I'm the biggest winner out of all of this though."

"Yeah? How'd you figure that one out."

She puts down her drink and shifts over to me on the couch, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. "It takes a lot to break down these walls of mine. But you and Felicity, you are my girls, and you're everything to me. Because once I'm in with someone, I'm in. No getting away from me now."

She buries her face in the top of my head. "Damn girl, Zach was right. I'm going to need that vanilla thing you've got going on."

I laugh just as there's a knock on her apartment door.

She smiles at me and gets up from the couch, making herself scarce. "I've got a few more gifts to wrap."

Reaching Kate's door, I pull the bolt across and inhale deeply. I'm nervous, and I don't know why, but I am.

Zach smiles down at me, his hands in the pockets of his jeans. His backward cap matches his gray Scorpions zip-up jacket, number sixty-six stitched across his chest.

"You ran out on me, Rocket."

"I panicked." I wince. "I'm sorry."

Stepping inside, he softly kicks the door shut with his foot, his hands flying up to cup my face as he looks intensely into my eyes. "The fuck are you sorry for? I should be the one apologizing."

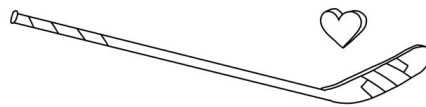
My stomach drops. "For w—what?"

He strokes under my eyes with his calloused thumbs and then softly kisses the corner of my lip. “For not seeing you sooner, for wasting so many fucking years without you fully in my life. For focusing on the wrong people. For not annihilating our friendship way before we did. Amie is talking bullshit. The only person I see is you. Forever.”

My knees wobble under the weighted meaning of his words. “She shook me up, but I know. I love you.”

“I orbit around you, Luna.”

I lean into his touch, to where I belong. “Take me home.”



“THAT WAS SERIOUSLY the best Christmas dinner ever,” I say, pulling back the sheets from our bed and climbing in.

“My boy has mad cooking skills,” Zach replies from the other side of the bed as he takes off his watch and shakes out his wrist.

“And Felicity? That Eton mess thing she made? I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

He smiles and climbs in the other side, wrapping me up in his arms. “They’re perfect together. But...” He reaches under my old college T-shirt and palms one of my breasts, rubbing my nipple between his thumb and forefinger. “...I think we top that.”

I gasp at the sensation. “You two are so competitive, like kids.”

“Oh, is that so? I can be mature and serious when I need to be.” Fire burns in his eyes as he hovers over me in bed.

Placing my hands on his shoulders, I pull him down to me and whisper in his ear. “Show me.”

Zach sits up on his heels and pulls me with him. He’s already naked and his hard length presses against my stomach, the piercings cold but delicious against my burning skin. “I can fuck you like you deserve. Or make love to you like the man who can’t wait to spend a lifetime together. You choose, Rocket.”

“I want to go slow. I want to feel everything.”

Lifting me up, he slowly lowers me back down on his cock, and the way I stretch to accommodate him will never get old. It’s like each time we have

sex my body responds like it's the first time, but my mind knows this is the only man who has or will ever love me this way.

Keeping his large hands on my hips, he rocks me over him. He's so deep, I know I won't last long. "I'm going to come any second."

He buries his face in my neck and nips at my collarbone. "I love it when all I can hear is you coming all over my cock."

The orgasm building breaks free and rocks through my body as I squeeze him. "Jesus, baby, that greedy pussy is hungry tonight."

Laying me down, I'm still coming when he hovers over me, propping one of my legs over his shoulder. "Can you give me another, Luna?"

"I don't think so. I'm too—" I squeeze my eyes shut, so sensitive from my last high.

"Give me another. Eyes on me as you come all over my dick."

Zach drives into me, his mousey hair falling over darkened blue eyes. He never takes them from mine, pinning me with a look that brands my memory.

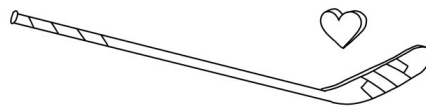
"There will never be anyone else. Only you. Only you and me, here in this bed with you wrapped around my cock."

Slowing his pace slightly, he leans up and rubs his thumb over my clit. "I love that you're bare for me. I can see every part of your perfect pussy when I play with it."

Between his cock and his fingers, I come undone for a second time. Stars dance in my vision, my climax that strong, that overpowering.

He chuckles as I pant and gasp through the greatest sex of my life. "I can't wait for the day we're doing this without birth control. When I'm inside you to give you everything we want."

I cup his cheek as he comes inside me on a roar. "Neither can I."



"WAS THAT YOUR STOMACH GROWLING?"

Tucked under his arm in bed, watching a horror movie, because Amie can go to hell, I nod gently and yawn. "Yep."

"You're kidding, right? We just had three courses, and now you want more?"

I look over at my phone on the nightstand, which reads eleven-thirty p.m. “I can wait; it's late.”

My stomach goes off again, and Zach sits up. “I can grab you something. You can't go hungry.”

“I'm fine, honestly.”

But he ignores me and stands from the bed, his naked rippling body on full display, making me grow even hungrier. Picking up some gray sweatpants, he throws them on and then leans over to kiss me. “You can have anything you want; we have everything in since it's Christmas.”

“Can I have Zach Evans on toast, please?”

“That's always on the menu, but what can I get you—French toast, waffles, pancakes.” He laughs against my mouth. “A frittata...”

“No because that means I have to come help, and I don't want to get out of this bed because I'm a lazy bitch.”

“Well, you don't have to. You can stay right here with Freddy Krueger.”

“Lovely. But seriously, I need to come and help.”

He shakes his head. “Nah. I can get you whatever you want, and tomorrow, I'm in charge of cooking too.”

He leans up, a proud smile on his face. I place a gentle palm on his chest. “Baby, I appreciate that and all, but don't you remember last time in the kitchen?”

He shrugs. “Yeah. So, I learned.”

I cock my head at him in question. “What?”

“I might've been taking some lessons.”

“From whom?”

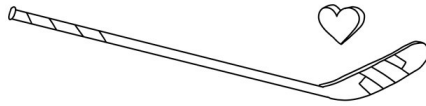
“Jon. It was hazardous, for sure. At one point, I think he wanted to knock me out with the frying pan, but yeah, we got there.”

“How long have you been learning?”

“Since I got back to Seattle.” He stands from the bed again. “Just in case I ever convinced you to be with me, there was no way I wasn't taking care of you.” He pulls the door open, and light from the hallway fills the room. “So, what'll it be?”

My racing heart must distract my mind from making a choice. “Surprise me.”

He throws me the sexiest wink I've ever seen. “And here you were thinking we're always juvenile.”



“FRENCH TOAST AND FRUITS, MA’AM.” Zach sets a tray complete with the best-looking French toast and berry mix I’ve ever seen on my lap as I sit up in bed. “It’s past midnight, so I figured you wouldn’t want regular coffee; I made decaf.”

“This is just what I need,” I croon, the first piece of toast already to my lips. I pause and look over at him, a proud grin spread across his face. “I mean, I know it’s only French toast, but damn, what is this sorcery?”

He laughs deeply and reaches into the pocket of his sweatpants, retrieving a small, flat, wrapped box. The wrapping is bright pink with a gold bow attached to the top, which is almost as big as the gift itself. “Technically, it’s Christmas Day, and I thought, why not do presents now?”

Taking it from him, I put the tray to one side as he comes to sit next to me on the bed. “If you don’t like it, then I can return it.”

“I’m going to like it, Zach. Because it’s from you.”

Peeling back the paper, I pluck the bow off, but when the box comes into view, I’m still none the wiser. It’s black with a gold star in the top right-hand corner.

I pop the lid and move the black tissue paper to reveal a stunning bangle bracelet. “It’s platinum and um—”

“Zach, is this?”

“The moon.”

Hanging delicately from the bracelet is a small but incredibly well-detailed charm of the moon. Flipping it over, it simply reads, “Luna.”

My breath catches in my throat as he reaches into the box and unclasps it. Holding out my wrist he fastens it and blows out a relieved breath. “You don’t know how many times I changed the measurements with the jeweler. I don’t think they ever want to see my ass again.”

I look up at him. “You had this made specially?”

“I think you’re pretty special Rocket.”

I shake my head in disbelief as I hold my wrist up and watch as the charm sparkles against the backdrop of the muted TV. “Thank you. It’s stunning.”

“Yeah, she is,” he whispers.

As I lean forward and kiss him, I notice his eyes are slightly glassy. “My turn,” I say, bouncing through to the living room and retrieving his gift from under the tree.

Looking down at the poorly wrapped gift in cheap blue paper, I know this is a fraction of the cost of mine and embarrassment overtakes me. I should’ve spent more, saved up for longer.

“This is actually really good,” he says, pointing to the plate of half-finished toast.

“Told you it was.”

Kneeling on the bed, I tentatively hand him the gift. “All I’m saying is it’s not in the same league as yours.”

“What were you just saying to me?”

“About it being from you?”

“Yeah,” he says, tearing it open in one motion. “Anything from you will always be my favorite possession.”

Flipping the frame over in his hands, he stares down at the picture. “Fuck, oh my...baby where did you find this?”

I feel the warmth spread across my cheeks. “Um, well, I’ve had it for a long time.”

His finger traces over the image of us both lying on Cocoa Beach. His youthful face wears a warm glow from the campfire only a few feet away. “We must be what, sixteen here.”

I shake my head. “Seventeen. It was the summer before we went to college. One of the last barbecues we had as friends.”

Zach held the camera up in the air, hovering it above us both. He’s laughing in the photo and smiling up at the lens, but I’m not. I’m staring off to the side. I remember it like yesterday. He took the photo before I realized, and when he asked me back then what I was looking at, I lied and said a shooting star above his head. Truth is, I was looking at him. I was always looking at him.

I open my mouth to tell him exactly that, that there was no shooting star that night, but I quickly close it. I’ve held onto this memory and picture for years, this little secret I’ve shared only with a teenage, and now adult, Luna.

Maybe one day I’ll tell him, but maybe I won’t.

Sometimes a woman likes to keep certain moments just to herself.

I lean across and kiss the underside of his jaw. “Merry Christmas, baby.”

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EPILOGUE

EARLY FEBRUARY

LUNA

“Great job today, Luna. The students were really engaged.”

“Thank you.” I turn to Principal Stevens and shake his hand.

“I think you’ll fit in great here at Wakefield High. If that’s what you want, of course, we’ve been very impressed with your approach and resumé and would like to offer you the position.”

Trying not to leap into his arms because I’ve learned along the way that it’s not always appropriate, I shake his hand once more. “This school is absolutely where I want to be.”

“Excellent! Well, we’ll have all the necessary paperwork drawn up and sent across to you for review, but suffice it to say, welcome to Wakefield.”

“I can’t wait,” I reply, trying to keep my excitement under control.

Turning on my heel, I begin walking down the hallway and past all the lockers. I love the feel here. I never thought I’d find a place like my last school, but somehow, this one feels even better.

Settling into Seattle has been far easier than I could’ve ever imagined, especially since Amie is officially out of the picture. Unfortunately for her, she didn’t heed Zach’s advice to stay out of our lives. She continued to turn up at our apartment, and when she posted on social media, spreading lies about how her relationship ended with Zach, trying to drag his name

through the mud, that was the final straw. His agent, the Scorpions media and press team, and his lawyer—Kate to be precise—all went about setting the records straight and saying what really happened. Amie seemed to forget that when you send manipulative and abusive text messages, there's a chance people might save them, you know, just in case. And the thing is, the general public doesn't like liars and neither do they like her sport and fitness brand anymore. I just hope she checks her behavior since she's a new mom.

My phone buzzes in the pocket of my coat as I step out into the frigid air. The sky is slowly turning dark, and Seattle is definitely experiencing a cold snap.

"You got it, right?"

"Yes!" I squeak out and then quickly turn around to check no one is behind me to witness my embarrassing happy dance.

"I don't like to say I told you so," Felicity replies.

"Yeah, go ahead, say it anyway."

"I told you so."

I pull out the key for my new car—a sunshine yellow Jeep Wrangler. Turns out Zach wasn't finished with his Christmas gifts and ordered me to sell my old one since it was "dangerous." That lit a fire under Jon, who has tried twice more to replace Martha Mini, but Felicity clings to her for dear life.

"Congratulations, babe," she sings through the speakers as my phone connects to the Bluetooth.

"Thank you. No more boredom at home."

"Have you heard from your mom?"

My excitement dulls. "Yeah, but she says she needs time to 'deal with it all.'"

She scoffs in disbelief. "What? To come to terms with the fact her daughter is happy and in love with the man of her dreams?"

"Yep," I say, cranking the engine and switching on the heated seats.

Felicity clears her throat, and I can tell she's biting back her frustration toward my mom. But being the positive person she is, she decides to move past it. "So, what do you have planned to celebrate?"

I look in the back seat and at the gleaming white skates Zach bought last year, along with the huge pink coat and matching earmuffs he said I'd need. "I think I'm going to break my neck and go skating."

She barks out a laugh. “What at the rink?”

“No, he told me to meet him at Lake Washington. I’m headed over there now.” I check the time and wince. “And I’m running behind.”

“Best I let you go then,” she replies in a giddy tone.

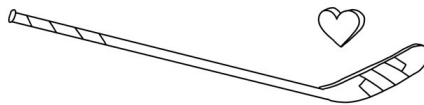
“You sound more stoked about this job than I am,” I say, pulling out of the school lot.

“It’s a big deal, babe. Make sure you celebrate hard. Even if it’s on a freezing cold lake in the middle of nowhere.”

“Hmmm you’re not selling it.”

“Just don’t fall on your ass. Enjoy! Mwah!” she says before hanging up.

I hit the freeway, needing to make time, and fast.



I THROW my car into park and hop out, pulling the back door open and grabbing my coat, gloves, and earmuffs.

God knows how I’m going to get these skates on.

“Need some help, Rocket?” My boyfriend makes me jump as he comes to stand next to me, his hands in the front pockets of his jeans.

He looks hot in a backward cap, don’t get me wrong. But Zach Evans in a black beanie is another level of delicious. His brown hair curls around the edges and frames his gorgeous face perfectly.

“If we want to get on there before midnight, then yeah, please.”

He pops my trunk and points to the bed. “Have a seat.”

With my feet dangling over the edge, I watch as he carefully laces up each skate. He doesn’t say much which is unusual for him, and he kind of seems nervous.

“Are you okay?” I finally ask as he removes the blade guards and takes a couple of steps over the verge with me in his arms.

Setting me down on the ice, he joins me as we glide out into the vast open space. There’s no one around other than fir trees and lights from surrounding buildings, but I can tell people have been skating earlier since there are blade marks crisscrossing all over.

“I’m good. Even better since you texted me to say you got it.”

“Yeah, hopefully, I’ll have a confirmed date soon, and I can start pulling my weight.” I nudge my shoulder into him, and he slides behind, wrapping me in his arms. His nose has turned slightly pink in the cold air, and I reach up and rub it with my glove.

Smiling down at me, he kisses my forehead. “You never have to worry about money. I told you that.”

“Thank you.”

Turning so he’s now skating backwards, he takes both of my hands in his. “You’re definitely steadier.”

“I have a good teacher.”

He smiles and looks up at the clear night sky. “They’re all out tonight.”

We come to a stop in the middle of the huge lake. “They are.”

“They’re aligned,” he whispers, and I’m not sure if it’s to himself or to me.

I squeeze his hand tighter. “Aligned?”

“Yeah, they’re all here. There’s even a full moon.”

I inhale a deep breath.

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” I say, a cheeky smile on my lips.

“Fucking howl.”

I push my bottom lip out. “Why not?”

“Because it will ruin the moment.”

My brows knit together. “What mom—”

“This.” Keeping his sparkling turquoise eyes on mine, Zach slowly drops to one knee, holding one hand in mine and sliding his other into the pocket of his long black coat.

“Zach, what are you doi—”

“Shhh.” He brings his pointer finger to his lips, and I see a tiny black velvet box buried in his palm.

“Can you keep yourself upright for a few seconds?” he asks in a breathy voice.

I nod, the words dying on my tongue.

Taking his other hand from mine, he hovers it over the lid of the box.

“Luna Rose Johnson. My Pocket Rocket. The woman who gives me more shit than anyone I’ve ever met. The woman who tells me just like it is. You drive me to the point of insanity sometimes.”

I sniffle a laugh, my swirling hair getting caught in the dampness of my cheeks.

“But insane feels like a great place to be because, baby, I’m fucking crazy for you. Crazy about how you take my breath away every morning. Crazy over wondering how I didn’t steal you as mine when we were younger. I’m crazy over the way you make my heart beat harder each day, and it drives me crazy trying to figure out how it even functioned before I called you mine. Truth is...”

He pops the lid on the box, revealing a pink princess-cut diamond set in a yellow gold band. My hand flies to my mouth, and I stumble, but quickly, his hand comes to my arm to steady me once more.

“The truth is, it didn’t. It was frozen in time. Waiting for me to wake the fuck up and realize what true love really is. It’s being crazy in all the best ways with the best person. The other truth is—” He plucks the ring from the velvet cushion, and I watch as the gorgeous diamond dances against the moonlight. “I got your ring measurements at the same time as your wrist.”

I’ve already pulled my left glove off before he’s even asked the question and he chuckles as he notices.

“So, yeah, I’d say they’ve finally aligned.” He blows out one last anxious breath.

“Be my wife.”

“Yes!” I shout, leaping forward and into his arms.

It’s a good thing he’s built like stone as he clings onto the ring grasped between his thumb and forefinger. “Let me put it on you.”

“Oh, yeah.”

I hold out my hand as he slowly pushes it onto my finger. It’s a perfect fit.

“Zach, it’s, it’s.”

“Is my fiancée lost for words?”

I nod, the sobs breaking free.

“You’d better find them, Rocket, because we’ve got some celebrating to do.”

Zach nods over my shoulder as I turn to look in that direction.

In the distance, I can’t miss the familiar outlines of the people I’ve come to love. I laugh as Kate helps Felicity along. “Kate’s got some moves on the ice,” I say.

“Sure has.”

I turn back to Zach as an admission forces its way from me. “I know I just got this job, but when you’re ready, I want you to know, so am I. My family is here, and I want to start one with you too.”

He drops to his knee once more, resting his forehead against my stomach for a second, and then he wraps his arms around me.

“When it comes to you, I’ve been ready forever.”

THE END.

Jensen’s story is coming fall 2024. Preorder his book to find out what happens next!

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Abby: Here's another novel to add to your collection. I wonder what sun lounger you'll read this one from. Thank you for believing in me and sharing in my exciting author journey.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ruth Stilling is an avid romance reader turned writer. Having spent many years reading about and dreaming of her ideal book boyfriend, she finally decided to create her own and to share him with the rest of the world.

Living in a small town in Derbyshire, England, Ruth is an introvert by nature and spends much of her time talking with her equally book-crazy friends from across the globe.

When she isn't writing your next book boyfriend, Ruth enjoys watching all kinds of sports and is an Aston Villa and Derby County fan. The outdoors is a real favorite, and if the British weather were kinder, she would spend all her time writing outside.

Ruth is a wife to her best friend and number one cheerleader, whom she married in 2015, and a mom to her beautiful son, who has shown her a new perspective on life—enjoy and celebrate who you are as a person and cherish those who are there for you through rain and shine.

Ruth is incredibly excited to share the rest of the Seattle Scorpions Series with you!

You can follow Ruth and keep up to date via Instagram and TikTok by searching @authorruthstilling

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