



mile high

LIZ TOMFORDE

WINDY CITY SERIES
BOOK ONE

Mile High

LIZ TOMFORDE

OceanofPDF.com

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MILE HIGH

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*To my mom-
For being the most loving woman I know.
I wish every girl could have a mom like you.*

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CONTENT WARNING

Your mental health is important. For content warnings, [click here](#).

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PLAYLIST

1. **Planez** - Jeremih feat. J. Cole
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3. **Swim** - Chase Atlantic
4. **You Got It** - VEDO
5. **Feels** - Kehlani
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9. **Love Lies** - Khalid & Normani
10. **Close** - Nick Jonas feat. Tove Lo
11. **Every Kind of Way** - H.E.R.
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16. **Love you anyway** - John K
17. **Medicine** - James Arthur
18. **Say You Love Me** - Jessie Ware
19. **Half a Man** - Dean Lewis
20. **This City** - Sam Fischer
21. **Always Been You** - Jessie Murph
22. **Get You the Moon** - Kina feat. Snøw
23. **Hard Place** - H.E.R.
24. **Best Part** - Daniel Caesar feat. H.E.R.

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ZANDERS



“I love road games.”

“I hate road games.” Maddison pulls his suitcase out of the back of my Mercedes Benz G-Wagon, my newest purchase, before shrugging on his suit jacket.

“You hate them for the exact reason why I love them so much.” I lock my car, throw my keys in my bag, and take a deep breath as Chicago’s crisp fall air fills my lungs. I love hockey season, and this week is the start of hockey season on the road.

“Why, because you have girls lined up waiting to see you in every city we visit? Whereas the only woman I want to see is my wife who is here in Chicago with my daughter and newborn son.”

“Exactly.” I pat Maddison on the shoulder as we enter the private airport entrance here at O’Hare International.

We show our IDs to the security before being let out onto the tarmac. “Did we get a new plane?” I stop in my tracks, cocking my head at the new bird with our team logo on the tail.

“Seems like it,” Maddison absentmindedly adds, looking down at his phone.

“How’s Logan doing?” I ask in reference to his wife, whom I know he’s texting right now. He’s obsessed with her. He’s never not texting her.

“She’s a badass, man.” Maddison’s voice drips with pride. “MJ is only a week old, and she’s got his schedule down.”

No surprise there. Maddison's wife, Logan, is one of my closest friends and probably the most capable person I know. They're my only friends who have kids, but their family of four has become my extended family. Their daughter calls me Uncle Zee, and I refer to their kids as my niece and nephew, regardless of the lack of blood ties between us. Their dad is my best friend and practically my brother at this point.

Which wasn't always the case.

Eli Maddison was once my most hated rival while we were growing up. We were both raised in Indiana, playing travel hockey for two different teams. He was the golden boy who got everything he ever wanted, and it annoyed the shit out of me. His life was perfect. His family was perfect, and mine was anything but.

Then he went on to play for the University of Minnesota while I played for Ohio State, and our childhood rivalry turned into a heated five years of college hockey. I had some family stuff going on at the time, and I took all my anger out on the ice. Maddison ended up being the recipient of my shit when I threw him into the boards with a dirty hit early in our college years. I fucked his ankle up enough to pull him out of his sophomore season and, subsequently, the NHL draft.

Ironically enough, I also had to sit out my sophomore year, thanks to a few classes I was failing.

He hated me for it, and I hated myself for a whole lot of other reasons.

Then I started going to therapy. Religiously. I worked on my shit, and by our senior year, Maddison and I were the best of friends. We still played for different teams, but we respected each other and found common ground through our mental health struggles. He dealt with anxiety and panic attacks, and I dealt with so much bitter anger it would result in panic attacks simply because it would consume me, blinding me from reality.

And as fate would have it, Eli Maddison and I landed on the same team here in Chicago, playing professional hockey for the Raptors. This season is the start of my seventh pro year, and I couldn't imagine playing anywhere else.

Which is why I need to make sure I get re-signed when my contract is up at the end of the season.

"Scott, did we get a new plane?" I ask one of our team managers, walking ahead of us.

“Yeah,” he calls over his shoulder. “All the Chicago pro teams did. New charter company. New plane. Some big deal they signed with the city.”

“New plane. New seats... New flight attendants,” I suggestively add.

“We always had new flight attendants,” Maddison chimes in. “And they all tried to sleep with you.”

I smugly shrug my shoulders. He’s not wrong, and I’m not ashamed. But I don’t sleep with women who work for me. It gets messy, and I don’t do messy.

“That’s the other thing that’s new,” our team manager shouts back. “Same flight crew for the whole season. Same pilots and same flight attendants. No more random crew members coming on and off our airplane, asking for your autographs.”

“Or asking to get into your pants.” Maddison shoots me a pointed look.

“I didn’t mind.”

My phone dings in my suit pant pocket. Pulling it out, I find two new messages waiting for me in my Instagram DMs.

Carrie: *Saw your game schedule. You’re in town tonight, I see. I’m free, and you better be too!*

Ashley: *You’re in my city tonight. I want to see you! I’ll make it worth your while.*

I go into my Notes app, finding the note titled “DENVER,” trying to remember who these women are.

Apparently, Carrie was a great lay with a fantastic rack, and Ashley gave one hell of a blowjob.

It’s going to be hard to choose where I want my night to take me. Then there’s the option of going out and seeing if I can widen my Denver roster with some new recruits.

“We going out tonight?” I ask my best friend as we ascend the stairs onto our new plane.

“I’m grabbing dinner with a buddy from college. My old teammate lives in Denver.”

“Ah shit, that’s right. Well, after, let’s grab some drinks.”

“I’m having an early night.”

“You always have an early night,” I remind him. “All you want to do is hang in your hotel room and call your wife. The only time you go out with me is when Logan makes you.”

“Well, I have a one-week-old son, so I can guarantee that I’m not going out tonight. I need some sleep.”

“How is little MJ?” Scott asks at the top of the stairs.

“Cutest little shit.” Maddison pulls out his phone to show off the countless pictures he’s sent me over the week. “Already ten times more chill than Ella was as a newborn.”

Stepping in front of them, I walk into our new plane, taken aback by how amazing it is. It’s completely brand new with custom carpet, seats, and our team logo plastered everywhere.

Bypassing the front half of the plane, where the coaches and staff sit, I make my way to the exit row, where Maddison and I have sat for years now, ever since he became Captain and I became Alternate Captain. We run every aspect of this team, including where we sit on the airplane.

Veterans sit in the exit row, and as your seniority on the team falls, the further back you sit, with rookies all the way in the last row.

“Abso-fucking-lutely not,” I quickly state, finding our second-year defenseman, Rio, sitting in my seat. “Get up.”

“I was thinking,” Rio begins, his goofy-ass grin taking up his entire face. “New plane, maybe new seats? Maybe you and Maddison want to sit in the back of the plane with the rookies this year?”

“Fuck no. Get up. I don’t care if you’re not a rookie this season. I’ll still treat you like one.”

His curly hair falls over his dark green eyes, but I can still see them shining with amusement as he tests me. Little fucker.

He’s from Boston, Massachusetts. An Italian mama’s boy who likes to test my patience. But almost every time he opens his damn mouth, I end up laughing. He’s pretty fucking funny. I will say that.

“Rio, get out of our seats,” Maddison commands from behind me.

“Yes, sir.” He quickly stands, snagging his boom box from the next seat over, and hurries to the back of the plane where he belongs.

“Why does he listen to you and not to me? I’m ten times more intimidating than you.”

“Maybe because you take him out whenever we’re on the road and treat him like your little wingman, whereas I’m his captain and keep the line clear.”

Maybe if my closest friend would come out with me, I wouldn’t have to recruit a twenty-two-year-old to be my backup when we’re out on the

town.

Throwing my bag in the overhead bin, I take the seat closest to the window.

“Fuck no.” Maddison stands, staring down at me. “You had the window last year. You’re in the aisle seat this season.”

I look at the seat directly next to mine then back to him. “I get motion sickness.”

Maddison bursts into a fit of laughter. “No, you don’t. Stop being a little bitch and get up.”

I unwillingly move to the next seat over, each row on this plane only having two seats on either side of the aisle. A couple of other long-time vets sit in the row opposite us.

Pulling my phone out, I reread the messages from the girls in Denver, contemplating how I want my night to go. “Would you go for a great lay, a mind-blowing blowjob, or take your chances with someone new?”

Maddison completely ignores me.

“All three?” I answer for him. “I might be able to swing that.”

Another text comes through. This time it’s a group message from our agent, Rich.

Rich: *Interview with the Chicago Tribune before the game tomorrow. Play it up. Make us that money.*

“Rich texted,” I tell my captain. “Interview tomorrow before the game. Wants us to play up our little schtick.”

“What’s new?” Maddison sighs. “Zee, you know you have the short end of the stick on this one. Whenever you’re ready to let people know you’re not the dickhead they all think you are, you let me know, and we’ll stop the act.”

This right here is why Maddison is my best friend. He might be the only person, other than his family and my sister, who knows I’m not the bad guy that the media makes me out to be. But my image has its perks, one being that women throw themselves at the self-proclaimed “unlovable bad-boy,” and our contrasting personas make us both a ton of money.

“Nah, I’m still enjoying it,” I tell him honestly. “I gotta get that renewed contract by the end of the season, so until then, we have to keep it going.”

Ever since Maddison came to Chicago five years ago, we’ve created this storyline that the fans and media eat up. We make a shitload of money for the organization because our duo puts fans in the seats. The once-hated

rivals turned best friends and teammates. Maddison has been married for years to his college sweetheart, and they have two kids together. I have nights where two different women come over to my penthouse. We couldn't be more different from the outsider's perspective. He's hockey's golden boy, and I'm the city's troublemaker. He scores the goals, and I score with the ladies.

People eat this shit up. We play it up for the media, but the truth is I'm not the piece of shit people think I am. I care about a lot more than just the women I take home from the arena. But I'm also confident in who I am. I like having sex with beautiful women, so I'm not going to apologize for it. If that makes me a bad person, fuck it. I make a hell of a lot of money from being the "bad guy."

As I scroll on my phone, I spot a figure in my peripheral, but I don't look up to see who is standing in front of me. Though from my sightline of vision, I can tell the curvy frame belongs to a woman, and the only women on board are flight attendants.

"Are you—" she begins.

"Yes, I'm Evan Zanders," I cut her off, keeping my eyes down on my phone screen. "And yes, that's Eli Maddison," I add with exhaustion. "Sorry, no autographs."

This happens almost every flight. The new flight crew drools over meeting professional athletes. It's a bit annoying, but it's part of the job, being recognized as much as the two of us are.

"Good for you. And I don't want your autograph." Her tone is entirely unimpressed. "What I was going to ask is, are you ready for me to give you your exit row briefing?"

Finally, I look up at her, her blue-green eyes piercing and pointed. Her hair bounces with chestnut curls, unable to be tamed. Her skin is a light brown, speckled with soft freckles across her nose and cheeks, but her expression could not be less impressed with me.

Not that I give a fuck.

My eyes wander her body. Her tight work uniform hugs every curve of her full frame.

"You do realize you're in the exit row, right, Evan Zanders?" she asks as if I'm an idiot, her almond-shaped eyes narrowing.

Maddison snickers next to me, neither one of us ever hearing a woman speak to me with such disdain.

My eyes form into slits, not backing down, a little shocked that she just spoke to me that way.

“Yes, we’re ready,” Maddison answers for me. “Go for it.”

She gives her spiel, and I zone out. I’ve heard this more times than I can count, but it’s some legal thing they have to tell us before every flight, I guess.

I scroll on my phone as she speaks, my Instagram feed littered with models and actresses, half of which I’ve dated. Well, *dated* is probably the wrong word.

Maddison nudges me. “Zee.”

“What?” I absentmindedly reply.

“She asked you a fucking question, man.”

Looking up, the flight attendant stares down at me. Her expression full of annoyance as her eyes wander down to my phone screen, a half-naked woman on full display right there on my feed.

“Are you willing and able to help in an emergency?” she repeats.

“Sure. I’ll take a sparkling water, by the way. Extra lime.” My focus shifts back to my phone.

“There’s a cooler in the back row for you to grab it yourself.”

My eyes dart up once again. What’s with this chick? I find her name tag—a pair of wings with “Stevie” in the center.

“Well, *Stevie*, I would really like if you brought it to me.”

“Well, *Evan*, I would’ve really liked if you paid attention during my safety demo instead of assuming I wanted your autograph like some little puck bunny.” She condescendingly pats me on the shoulder. “Which I don’t, and I’m not.”

“You sure about that, sweetheart?” My smug smile overtakes my face as I lean forward in my seat, closer to her. “Could be worth a pretty penny for you.”

“Gross.” Her face contorts with disgust. “Thanks for listening,” she says to Maddison before taking off towards the back of the plane.

I can’t help but turn around and watch her in shock. Her round hips sway, taking up more space than the other flight attendants I’ve seen on board, but her little pencil skirt dips in at the waist.

“So, *Stevie* is a total bitch.”

“No, you’re just a total asshole, and she called you on it,” Maddison laughs. “And *Stevie*?”

“Yeah, that’s her name. It was on her name tag.”

“You’ve never known a flight attendant’s name before.” His tone is laced with accusation. “But clearly, she could give two shits about you, my friend.”

“At least she’s off the plane next flight.”

“No, she’s not,” Maddison reminds me. “Same flight crew for the whole season. Remember what Scott said?”

Fuck, that’s right. We’ve never had the same girls on board for an entire season.

“I like her already, only because she doesn’t like you. This is going to be fun to watch.”

I turn around to peek into the back of the plane just as Stevie’s gaze finds mine, neither of us backing down or breaking eye contact. Her eyes are probably the most interesting pair I’ve ever seen, and her body is perfectly full, with plenty to grab onto. But unfortunately, her pretty outside that I like is tainted by the attitude I don’t like.

She might need a reminder that she’s working for me, but I’ll make sure she understands. I’m petty that way. I’ll remember that little interaction for as long as she’s on my airplane.

STEVIE



“That guy is an ass.”

“Which one?” My new coworker, Indy, cranes her neck to look down the aisle.

“That one, sitting in the exit row.”

“Eli Maddison? I’ve heard he’s like the nicest guy in the NHL.”

“Not that one. The other one. Sitting next to him.”

Though the two men occupying the exit row seem like good friends and probably have a lot in common on the inside, they’re polar opposites on the outside.

Evan Zanders’ hair is black and tightly faded to his scalp, seeming like he can’t go more than seven to ten business days without getting a fresh cut. At the same time, Eli Maddison’s brown mop falls messily over his eyes, and he probably couldn’t tell you the last time he saw his barber.

Evan Zanders’ skin is a flawless golden brown, and Eli Maddison’s is on the paler side, topped with rosy cheeks.

Evan Zanders’ neck drips with a gold chain, his fingers decorated with fashionable gold rings, while Eli Maddison wears only one piece of jewelry. And it’s a ring on his left ring finger.

I’m a single woman. Of course, the first thing I notice is a man’s hands, especially the left one.

One thing they definitely have in common is that they’re both fine as hell, and I could bet good money on the fact they know it.

Indy peers down the aisle again. Thankfully, we're in the rear of the airplane, and everyone's backs are to us, so no one can see how obvious she's being.

"Are you talking about Evan Zanders? Yeah, he's known for being a dick, but do we care? It's like God decided to take a little extra time and sprinkle a bit more 'sexy' into his genetic makeup."

"He's an ass."

"You're right," Indy agrees. "His ass was sculpted by God himself too."

I can't help but laugh with my new friend. We met a few weeks ago when we went through job training together, and I don't know much about her yet, but so far, she seems great. Not to mention gorgeous. She's tall and slender, her skin sporting a natural sun-kissed glow, with blonde hair running smoothly down her back. Her eyes are a warm brown, and I don't think she has a stitch of makeup on, simply because she's stunning without it.

My eyes trail down her uniform, noticing how perfectly smooth it lays on her thin frame. There's no gaping between the buttons in her white collared shirt, and her pencil skirt shows no creasing the way mine does from everything it's trying to hold in.

Immediately feeling self-conscious, I adjust my snug uniform. I ordered it last month when I was a few pounds smaller, but my weight has always fluctuated.

"How long have you been doing this?" I ask Indy as we wait for the rest of the team to board the plane so we can take off on our first trip of the season.

"How long have I been a flight attendant? This is my third year. But I've never worked for a team before. How about you?"

"This is my fourth year and my second team. I used to fly for an NBA team out of Charlotte, but my brother lives in Chicago and helped me get this gig."

"So, you've been around athletes before. This is nothing new to you. I'm a little starstruck, to be honest."

Been around athletes. Dated one. Related to one.

"Yeah, I mean, they're just normal people, like you and me."

"I don't know about you, girl, but I don't make millions of dollars a year. Nothing normal about that."

I definitely don't make anything near that, which is why I live in my twin brother's insane Chicago apartment until I can find something on my own. I don't love living off him, but I don't know anyone else in the city, and he's the one who wanted me out here so badly. Plus, he makes ridiculous money, that I don't feel all that bad mooching off him for a free place to sleep.

We couldn't be more different from each other. Ryan is focused, put-together, driven, and successful. He's known his path since he was seven. I'm twenty-six and still trying to figure it out. But regardless of our differences, we're the best of friends.

"Are you from Chicago?" I ask my new friend.

"Born and raised. Well, in the suburbs. How about you?"

"I grew up in Tennessee but went to college in North Carolina. I stayed there when I got my flight attendant job. I just moved to Chicago a month ago."

"Newbie to the city." Indy's brown eyes shine with excitement and a bit of mischief. "We've gotta go out when we get back home. Well, we gotta go out when we're on the road too, but I'll introduce you to all the best spots in Chicago."

I shoot her a grateful smile, thankful to have such a cool and accepting chick on my plane this season. This industry can be cutthroat, and sometimes the girls aren't the nicest to each other, but Indy seems genuine. She and I are about to spend an entire hockey season on the road together, so I'm even more thankful that we get along.

Unfortunately, I can't say the same for the other flight attendant. Over the two weeks of training, Tara, the lead flight attendant, seemed anything but welcoming. *Territorial* might be a better word for her. Or bitchy. Either or.

"I have to admit something," Indy begins in a whisper, brushing her wispy blonde hair out of her face. "I don't know shit about hockey."

A giggle slips past my lips. "Yeah, me neither."

"Okay, thank God. I'm glad it's not a job requirement. I mean, I know who they all are because I did my FBI-level investigation of them on social media, but I've never seen a game. My boyfriend is plenty versed in the sport, though. He even gave me a hall pass if needed."

"Wait, really?"

She brushes me off. “As a joke. I’d never do that. If anything, *he’d* want a hall pass for one of them. He’s in love with watching sports, following athletes, all of it.”

Before I can tell Indy that I have someone at home that her boyfriend might fanboy over, the jerk from the exit row starts walking down the aisle towards us.

I can’t lie to myself and say that Evan Zanders is not a beautiful man. He looks like he just stepped off a runway with the way he’s walking towards me right now. His cheeky smile can’t hide his perfect teeth, and his eyes are the definition of a hazel dream. The tailored three-piece suit he’s rocking has a slight herringbone and screams that he doesn’t leave the house unless he’s dressed to impress.

But he’s a pompous asshole who assumed I wanted his autograph and stared at photos of half-naked beautiful women while I was trying to explain how I could save his life in case of an emergency.

I mean, the likelihood of him needing to know anything I was trying to explain is slim to none, but that’s not the point. The point is, he’s an arrogant athlete that’s in love with himself. I know his type. I’ve dated that type, and I’ll never do it again.

So, I stop admiring and turn around to distract myself with something meaningless in the galley, but his presence is overwhelming. He’s the type of man that everyone notices when he walks into the room, and that just annoys me even more.

“Okay, Miss Shay,” Indy whispers my last name with a nudge.

I look back at her, but she motions towards Zanders. Turning around, I glance up at him, his piercing eyes locked on mine. The most arrogant grin slides across his lips as he stands in the small entryway of the airplane’s back galley. He puts both arms up against the barrier, causally blocking Indy and me in.

“I need a sparkling water with extra lime.” His focus is lasered in on me.

It takes everything in me not to roll my eyes because I just told him where he could find one. There’s a big fancy cooler not even a foot away from him, stocked with all kinds of drinks for a reason. Athletes are essentially famished after their games, and since we do a lot of overnight flights post-game, the plane is set up like an all-you-can-eat buffet with

food and drinks tucked in every crevice you can find, ready to be snatched and consumed.

"It's in the cooler." I motion to the last row of seats, right beside him.

"But I need *you* to get it for me."

The arrogance.

"I'll get it for you!" Indy pipes up with excitement, eager to do a job she doesn't need to do.

"No need," Zanders stops her. "Stevie here will get it for me."

My eyes narrow at him as his sparkling teeth finally show because he happens to find himself hilarious right now. He's not. He's annoying.

"Won't you, Stevie?"

I would like to tell him to fuck off and not because I don't want to do my job, but because of the point he's trying to prove. He's trying to tell me that I work for him. But just because he's our client doesn't mean he can be rude and expect me not to be rude right back.

I hesitate, not wanting to make a bad impression in front of my new coworker on our first day. I couldn't care less what this guy thinks of me, but I'd rather not look like a total bitch in front of Indy.

"Of course, I will." My voice comes out too high, but neither of these people knows me well enough to realize I'm faking it.

Zanders shifts, giving me the slightest opening to slip past him, and that alone makes me self-conscious. I'm not the smallest girl, and I'm not trying to embarrass myself by being unable to squeeze past him. A bit of my internal self-doubt surfaces before I catch it and replace it with the mask of confidence I've trained myself to wear. But Zanders moves a bit more out of the way, thankfully giving me space.

I take one step, literally one step out of the galley, past Zanders to the cooler that he was so close to, he was practically touching. I open the lid and pull out the first drink I see, which is a sparkling water. This would've taken him less than three seconds to do, but he wanted to prove a point.

As I pull his water from the cooler, I sense him looming over me. He's tall as hell, probably around 6'5", and over my 5'6" stature, he overpowers me. He barely leaves me enough space in the aisle to turn around, and when I do, I'm greeted with his chest right in my face.

"Thank you so much, *Stevie*." He says my name in the same condescending manner that I did earlier as he lazily takes the bottle out of my hand. His long fingers slightly graze mine, all the while his hazels stare

at me. His empty hand reaches up, adjusting my wings on my shirt, straightening out my disheveled name tag.

His eyes hold mischief, amusement, and a whole lot of arrogance as they dance between mine, but I can't, for the life of me, find the will to break eye contact.

My heart rate picks up, and not just because only a few layers of fabric separate his hand from my chest, but because I don't like the way he's looking at me. It's intense and focused. Like I'm his new task this season.

His task to make my job a living hell.

"Extra limes?" Indy interrupts, holding out a napkin piled high with lime wedges.

Zanders' gaze breaks its stare as he looks back to Indy in the galley, and an audible breath of relief leaves my lungs when his attention leaves me.

"Wow, thank you so much." Zanders' tone holds far too much joy as he takes them from her. "You're great at your job—"

"Indy."

"Okay." He brushes her off, his attention finding me again. Bending down slightly, he makes us eye level. "Stevie. Great work," he adds in farewell before taking off towards his seat.

I stand up straight, composing myself as I smooth my uniform once again and push my untamable curly hair out of my face.

"Please fuck him," Indy begs when it's only the two of us in the galley again.

"What?"

"Please, please, please fuck him and then tell me every little detail."

"I am *not* sleeping with him."

"Why the hell not?"

My brows furrow. "Because we work for him. Because he's in love with himself, and because I'm pretty sure he has sex with just about anything that has a vagina, and I doubt he knows their name when he screws them."

And I don't fit the typical model-esque mold these guys go for. I don't get chosen by men like that, but I keep that insecurity to myself.

"Well, he knows your name."

"Huh?"

"He knows your name." She bends down close to me, making herself eye level, the same way Zanders did. "Stevie," Indy whispers in a seductive tone before breaking into a giggle.

“Get out of here.” I playfully push her away.

As soon as all the passengers are boarded and the cabin doors are closed and armed, Indy and I lock up the galley, ensuring everything is secure for takeoff. And as we do, the most magical, beautiful thing that has ever happened in my four years of flying occurs.

Simultaneously, every one of the suited-up hockey players stands from their seats and begins to strip down until the only thing that’s covered is their junk.

“Sweet mother of—” I drift off, unable to speak, my eyes bugged out of my head.

“What. Is. Happening?” Indy asks in the same daze, her mouth gaped.

The entire back half of the airplane is filled with naked men, toned asses, and tattoos everywhere I look. Indy and I don’t even pretend to act like we aren’t staring. We are staring, and you couldn’t pay us to look away.

The players all carefully lay their suits flat in the overhead bins, being sure not to wrinkle them on the flight to Denver before they re-dress in more comfortable and casual clothing.

“Like the show, ladies?” one of the players playfully asks, breaking me out of my daze. His dark waves dance in front of his deep emerald eyes.

“Yes,” Indy answers without hesitation.

“Well, enjoy. Happens every time we take off and land. We have to wear suits on and off the plane for the media, but whenever we’re on board, we get to do whatever the fuck we want.”

That wasn’t the case when I flew a basketball team. They walked on and off the plane as casually as they could be, so this is new.

“I can come back there and give you guys a better view next flight.”

“Rio, stop being so damn thirsty all the time!” another player calls out.

“This is the best job,” Indy adds, her stare still locked on the half-naked men.

“I love hockey,” I decide without a second thought.

STEVIE



Throwing my suitcase on the opposite bed in my hotel room, I plug my charger into the wall, powering my phone. I forgot to charge it last night, so it died halfway through the flight to Denver.

As I'm waiting for it to light up, I strip off my god-awful uniform, hang it in the closet, and dig out my comfiest sweats. I'm all about comfort. Give me sweatpants, leggings, and oversized flannels every day for the rest of my life, and I'll die a happy woman.

The polyester/wool mixture of my flight uniform is stiff and unflattering, and my first mission after every flight is to get it off as quickly as possible.

My phone dings on my nightstand, and without looking, I already know who it is. It's the only person I can't go a day without speaking to—my best friend. Ryan is the only person who chooses me first, above everyone else, day in and day out.

His name with the twin dancing emoji next to it confirms who I already knew it was.

Ryan: *How was your first flight?*

Me: *It was good! Hockey boys are nice—for the most part.*

I leave out the fact that I'm working for the NHL's biggest diva this season.

Ryan: *Those Canadians, am I right? But you know you miss flying basketball.*

Me: *Idk Ry, have you seen a hockey man's ass?*

Ryan: *Proud to say I have not and never will.*

Me: *Speaking of basketball, are you ready for your game tonight?*

Ryan: *Absolutely. Gonna miss having you in the stands, though. I need my good luck charm.*

Ryan's basketball season and my flying season have always overlapped, and now that I'm working with hockey, their schedules are the same. I haven't made too many of his games since he went pro, but I always make sure to watch him however I can. I'm his self-proclaimed good-luck charm, but seeing as the Chicago Devils haven't had a winning season in three years, I don't think my charm is working too well.

Me: *I'll be watching. There's a sports bar a few blocks away. I'm sure they'll have it on TV.*

Ryan: *Or you could watch it from your hotel room...alone.*

A laugh slips from my lips. Ryan knows he has no control over who I spend my time with, but he may be the most protective brother of all time.

Me: *Too protective.*

Ryan: *I'm your older brother. It's my job.*

Me: *Three minutes older.*

Ryan: *Still counts. Gotta get to the arena. Be safe. Love you, Vee.*

Me: *Love you. Kick ass.*

As soon as I exit out of our messages, I redownload my Tinder app. I never use the apps when I'm home, but one of the perks of spending a good amount of time on the road is the casual hookup with a stranger.

I feel more confident in bed when it's someone I know I'll never see again. I don't worry too much about how my body looks or how soft I feel under someone random. I get to let loose and feel good with the sole purpose of getting off, knowing they'll never lay eyes on me again.

I swipe right on a few attractive men, but I swipe left on even more who are too handsome for their own good. And Denver's men seem to be more beautiful than other cities I visit, so I swipe left on more than usual, making sure I don't get connected with someone I find to be too attractive.

I deal with enough insecurities on my own that I'm working to overcome. I don't need to add batting out of my league just to get laid.

So, I stick to men I find attractive enough, but not so much so that their typical type are girls who may as well be on the covers of magazines.

Within a matter of minutes, almost everyone I swiped right on matches with me, giving me a boost of confidence. Shopping through my options, I

land on a guy who lives outside of the city, with his bio reading, “Just looking for a hookup.”

I love the honesty, and that’s precisely what I’m looking for too.

As I’m drafting my extremely charming and witty opening line, there’s a knock at my hotel room door.

Dropping my phone on the bed, I throw a sweatshirt over my head before squinting through the peephole, finding my other new coworker, Tara, on the other side.

“Hey.” I swing my door open with a smile.

“Can I come in?” she asks without much expression on her face, which makes me worried. But also, I just worked an entire flight with her, and not once did she smile unless it was directed at one of our passengers.

“Of course.” I usher her in. She takes a seat in the chair at the desk as I plop myself back on the edge of my bed.

“How was your first day?” Tara asks.

Oh, okay, so she is being nice. “It was great. Everyone seems really cool.”

“I heard you’ve worked with professional athletes before.”

“Yeah, I was flying a basketball team out of Charlotte the last few seasons, but this is my first time working for a hockey team.”

I assumed that would start a conversation about my past work experience, as most people flip out with excitement when they learn I worked for a professional basketball team, but instead, it leads her into the real reason she’s here—to try to intimidate me.

“Well, this isn’t your last job, so I want to reiterate some rules.”

And here we go.

“First of all,” Tara begins. “I’m the lead flight attendant, which means this is my airplane, my crew, and my hockey team. I don’t care that you have experience in the athletic charter business. I’m the one in charge here.”

“Of course,” I respond without a second thought. I know these types of girls. I’ve worked with them before. They want to be seen, they want to be known by the clients, and I’m not one for a power struggle. I couldn’t care less who’s in charge on the airplane. I’m just here to do my job. Get in, get out, and get paid. That’s all this is to me—a job.

“I’ll be up in the front with the coaching staff all season while you and Indy run the back of the plane with the players. But I want to reiterate.

There will be no fraternizing with any of our clients—players, coaches, or staff. If you do, you'll be fired. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I confidently state. She's trying to intimidate me, but that's not going to work.

"I'm in charge here," she continues. "Anything the team needs goes through me."

"Sounds good."

"I don't know how your last job worked, and I don't care. Anything goes down with you and someone on board, especially a player, you're fired."

Does she not realize she already said that? Also, why is she so worried about me? They're not my type, and I'm not theirs.

"Got it."

"Glad we're on the same page." She stands from the desk and begins to head towards my door. "Oh, and Stevie." She turns back to face me, her expression filled with the most faux concern I've ever seen. "Maybe think about getting a bigger uniform. The one you wore today was awfully tight, and I don't want the guys on board getting the wrong idea."

A lump in my throat forms as she exits my room. I know it was tighter than I wanted it to be, but that's just because my weight fluctuates all the time. I wasn't doing it on purpose. I wasn't trying to wear a body-hugging outfit in an attempt to lure in some attention. But my body isn't a size two, and everywhere you could possibly find a curve, I've got some.

On the other hand, Tara's uniform was tailored to hug her narrow frame, and the top couple buttons were unnecessarily undone, causing the cleavage from her pushup bra to be front and center. It was especially noticeable when she would bend forward in front of someone's seat to ask what they wanted to eat or drink, but you don't see me saying anything to her.

Regardless, Tara throwing my biggest insecurity in my face puts a damper on my night, and I suddenly have no desire for anyone to see my naked body, regardless of the fact I'll never have to see them again.

An alert pings on my phone. A message from that guy on Tinder asking what my plans are for the night, but I don't respond. I delete the app entirely, over the whole idea.

Instead, I change into a pair of leggings, an oversized thrifted tee, and a flannel, finishing my outfit off with my Air Force Ones. I grab my purse, sling the strap across my body, and head out the door to the bar I found a

few blocks away so I can watch my brother's home opener of the season. All while I am scarfing down on a burger and a beer.

Two beers.

Probably three beers.

Fuck it, let's not put a limit on it. However many beers it'll take to make me forget about how shitty I feel.

The walk is nice with Denver's October breeze blowing my wild curls away from my face. This bar is unexpectedly packed tonight. It's a Monday night, and none of Denver's teams are playing, so I didn't expect a sports bar with wall-to-wall TVs to be as crowded as it is. But I thankfully find a solo seat at the bar and sidle up, making myself comfortable to spend the next three or so hours watching my brother's game.

"What can I get you?" The bartender leans forward a little more than necessary. But he's easy on the eyes, so I let it slide.

"Do you have an IPA on draft?"

He gives me an impressed glance. "Sanitas' Black IPA. Twelve or sixteen ounces?"

What kind of question is that? "Sixteen, please."

As he comes back with my perfectly poured beer, he places it on a coaster and leans over the bar once again. "Where are you from?" A flirtatious smile plays on his lips.

I look over my shoulder, not entirely convinced the hot bartender is talking to me.

Finding no one behind me, I turn back to him, his blue eyes locked on mine. "Chicago currently. Just in town for work."

"Oh yeah? How long are you in town for?"

"Only the night."

His shy smile is now a full-on devilish grin. "Glad you found my bar top for your one night in town. Anything you need, I'm your guy. I'm Jax, by the way." He puts his hand over the wooden countertop to shake mine.

"Stevie." I place my hand in his, noting the veins and muscles of his forearms that continue up under the sleeve of his black button-down shirt.

Suddenly my original plan for the night doesn't sound all that bad.

"Actually, I do need something from you, Jax."

"Anything." His eyes twinkle with mischief.

I lean forward, crossing my arms on the bar top and bringing my most flirtatious grin, wearing my mask of confidence once again. "Can you put

that TV”—I gesture to the large screen directly behind him—“on the Devils and Bucks game? It’s on ESPN.”

His eyes narrow, but his lips tilt even more. “Beer and basketball girl, huh, Stevie? What do I have to do to keep you at my bar top all night?”

“Depends how many beers you pour me.”

He lets out a deep, sexy laugh. “Your glass will never be left empty.”

The skin around my eyes crinkles with satisfaction. This is what I needed—a little attention from a cute guy, my brother’s game on the screen, and a beer in my hand. I feel better already.

“And I’ll take a burger when you get a chance.”

“Damn, Stevie,” Jax exhales. “Stop making me fall in love with you.”

He shoots me a wink over his shoulder before redirecting his attention to the computer where he places my food order.

My food has taken a little longer than I thought it would, but I don’t mind. The bartender’s attention and the first quarter of the basketball game keep me plenty occupied. Not to mention my second beer.

Tara’s little remark about my uniform is less so at the forefront of my mind, though I realize now why it bothered me as much as it did. It’s not just because that’s an insecurity of my own, but how she said it was very similar to how my mother talks about my body.

It’s never direct. It’s always backhanded because how dare a Southern lady speak so directly. They don’t do that. I understand that my mother is a perfect Southern belle with an overactive metabolism, but that’s not me. And it’s never been me. I’ve got big tits, a big ass, and an even bigger desire never to become the kind of woman she is.

I love her, but she’s judgmental. I’ve never felt like enough in her eyes. I grew up playing with the boys because my twin brother was my best friend, and he was much more fun than any debutant ball or pageant my mother was so adamant about me participating in.

When I was in college, I refused to rush a sorority, which almost did her in. It’s big in the South, and my mother’s entire side of women have all attended the same University in Tennessee and rushed the same sorority.

I'm a legacy. It would've been easy for me, but I don't want to be anything like them.

And once she realized she lost the battle of me being a real proper Southern woman, her attitude towards me quickly shifted to disappointment. Her attention was no longer focused on how great I'd be in Southern society and instead, how different my body looked from hers.

Unfortunately, it's become ingrained in me, making me believe something is wrong with the way I look. My shape became more womanly the older I got. But my mom, she's not used to curves, and in her mind, I'm overweight. But I don't know what she expected. Her husband, the other half of my DNA, looks nothing like the ginger hair, freckled, thin-framed side of my mom's family.

I want to be proud that I'm half of a remarkable man, but it's hard when my own mother is disappointed in the way I turned out. And for some reason now, it seeps in more than it used to.

As the bartender places my burger down in front of me, a quick regret paces through my mind. The more I think about my mother, the less appealing this food sounds. Maybe I should've ordered a salad with the dressing on the side. Maybe my uniform will fit a little better tomorrow if I eat that instead.

"If you don't start eating that burger, I'm gonna scarf it down myself," Jax, the bartender says, pulling me out of my self-doubt trance.

"I don't share food," I tease, pulling my plate closer to me.

His chest heaves in a laugh as he pours me another IPA, placing it next to my previous one that's still half full.

This guy is good. And there's a good chance he's going to get lucky tonight. If not from me, then by one of the beautiful women filling this bar and desperate for the attention of the hot bartender. But at this rate, I wouldn't mind it being me.

My eyes stay glued to the game on the screen as Ryan starts the second quarter. He's leading the team in assists tonight, as he should. He's the point guard and the best playmaker in the league.

The Devils run a motion offense on their first time down the court as Ryan gets open for a three in the corner. His teammate kicks the ball to him, and he sinks the shot.

"Fuck yes, Ry," I ring out, much louder than I intended.

“Devils fan, huh?” Jax asks, his eyes panning to the TV then back to me. “Stevie, I hate to break it to you, but this might be the end of our love affair.”

I laugh mid-chew. “You don’t have to be a Devils fan. Just a fan of number five.”

“Ryan Shay? Who isn’t a fan of Ryan Shay? Best point guard in the league.”

“Damn right he is.” I pop a fry in my mouth. “And he’s my brother.”

“Bullshit.”

I continue to eat, not needing to convince him one way or another.

“Are you for real?”

Before I can respond, someone in my peripheral view holds an empty glass in the air for a refill, drawing my attention.

My gaze immediately falls on two guys from the plane. The one holding his glass up is the player with dark curly hair who promised a peep show next time he changed on board. Rio, I think his name is. And the other one is the person I was happiest to see get off the plane.

Evan Zanders.

I unintentionally roll my eyes.

Fully dressed up to the nines, he probably took three times longer than I did getting ready as he brings his whiskey glass to his full lips, resting them on the rim before he takes a drink. He doesn’t see me, and he’s not doing it to be seductive to anyone in particular, but the guy naturally oozes sex.

It’s really fucking annoying.

I immediately turn back to the bartender. “I need my check and a box, please.”

“What?” he asks, confused, his eyes darting back to my full beer.

Tara’s warning of fraternization rings through my mind. The idea of finishing my food, beer, and ending my night with this hot bartender between my legs sounds fantastic. But not as fantastic as keeping my job.

If it were anyone else from the plane, I might stay and hide in the crowd while I finish watching the game, but the fact that it’s Evan Zanders, of all people, makes me want to leave even more. He was exhausting all flight, ringing the call light for absolutely anything he could think of, and if one of the other two girls went to see what he needed, he always sent them back for me.

He's going to make my season on the plane a living hell. I don't need him intruding on my time off too.

"I need to get going," I tell Jax. "Can I get the bill?"

"Is everything okay?" He's clearly confused, and I don't blame him. I spent the whole time flirting with him, both of us having an unspoken hope of where our night would end once he's off work.

But he's an attractive guy with a bar full of women. He'll be just fine finding a warm body for the night.

"Just gotta get going. Sorry," I finish with an apologetic smile.

Jax brings me a box and my check, leaving off all my drinks from the bill. I quickly transfer my food and hand my credit card off to be swiped, but it's too late.

Before my card makes it back to me, two large hands land on the bar top on either side of my body, caging me in. His fingers are long and slender, decorated with gold rings. Every knuckle is tatted, including the back of his hands, and his nails are cleanly manicured. I keep my eyes glued to the ridiculously expensive watch on his wrist as he leans down behind me with his lips close to my ear.

"Stevie," Zanders says in his smooth velvety voice. "You following me?"

ZANDERS



Maddison stuck true to his word and went straight to bed after meeting with his friend for dinner. On the other hand, I refuse to call it a night at nine thirty, especially because it's the first night on the road of the season.

I live for this. I get plenty of action at home and thoroughly enjoy my summers in Chicago, but there's a different kind of thrill when it comes to pussy on the road. The unknown of who it'll be, the excitement of where it'll happen, the satisfaction that I don't have to see them ever again if I don't want to. That's how I like it.

Which is why I didn't reply to either of the girls from Denver who slid into my DMs earlier. The thrill was gone. It was no longer exciting.

"Another round?" Rio asks.

I quickly examine my half-full whiskey glass, knowing I don't need another. I try to keep my limit to two during the season, especially the night before a game. It's one thing to stay up late and get laid, but I'm not dumb enough to get fucked up and play hungover.

"I'm gonna nurse this one." Raising my glass to his, I take another small sip.

Rio proceeds to lift his hand towards the server, signaling for a new drink—his third of the night. Which, if I'm still around by the time he tries for a fourth, I'll make sure to stop him. I'm not the captain, but I am the alternate, and even though I fuck around, I still have responsibilities to make sure my guys are ready to go when it's game time.

As I'm deep in thought about how this is my year to win it all—the Cup and the new extended contract I need to earn by the end of the season—the sexy server comes by with Rio's fresh drink. But she doesn't look his way while she places his beverage in front of him.

No, she keeps her sultry gaze locked on me.

"Can I get you another one?" She leans her elbows onto our high-top table, casually pushing her tits up even more. My eyes fall directly on them. "It's on me."

And my mind doesn't miss the connection of where I'm looking and what she just said. I wouldn't mind those being on me either.

Somehow, I tear my attention away from the slit in her cleavage that's doing all kinds of things to my imagination. "Self-inflicted two-drink rule." I raise my glass to show her my final drink of the night.

"That's a shame." She bites her lower lip, leaning in closer to me. "I was hoping you'd still be here when my shift was over."

That was easy. I haven't said two words to her before this, but she's hot as hell, and her long raven hair is gonna look awfully pretty wrapped around my fist tonight.

I lean onto my elbows, my face only inches from hers. "Just because I'm not drinking doesn't mean I'm leaving."

"I'm Meg."

"Zanders."

"I know who you are." The corner of her lips lifts upward. "I'm off at midnight, and my place is only ten minutes away."

"My hotel is right across the street," I offer.

"Even better." She licks her lips, and my eyes trail the movement. Those are gonna look even prettier wrapped around a different part of my body.

I fuck a certain way—no lovemaking, no soft and slow. No kissing if I can help it. I'll explain the rules, and if she's into it, cool. If not? Someone else will be.

A quick shift of chestnut curls draws my attention in the distance. My eyes follow the movement, instantly recognizing the honey strands intermixed among the mass. The owner of the wild hair spent the entire flight waiting on me, hand and foot, getting me absolutely everything I could possibly think to ask for, down to a tissue out of the bathroom.

I'm a dick, but it was fun.

Stevie hastily puts her credit card in the bartender's hand as she stands from her seat, ready to bolt. She's dressed much more casually than her work uniform today, but even with the oversized flannel, I can see just how nice her ass is from here.

I'm an ass guy.

And a tits guy.

She's got both, but her disdain for me turns me off from the rest. Or challenges me, I'm not sure yet.

"Zanders," Rio snaps me out of my trance. "She's talking to you." He suggestively nods towards the waitress who is currently offering up her body to me.

"Yeah?" I absentmindedly ask, my eyes still flickering to the flight attendant at the bar.

"Are you going to wait until my shift is over, or can I get your number?"

"No numbers—"

"Meg," she reminds me.

"You can find me on Instagram." My eyes dart back to Stevie at the bar, her foot tapping with either impatience or nerves. I can't quite tell.

Without another thought, I stand from my seat, my feet carrying me her way.

"Zanders!" Rio calls out in shock.

I'm a little surprised at myself too. That waitress is a smoke show, but the most fun I've had in a long time was torturing Stevie on our flight today, and I want to do it again. I'm sure that waitress will still be waiting for me when I get back. I did practically nothing so far, and she's already offered up her bed for the night.

I quickly approach Stevie from behind, my tall frame overpowering her as I cage her in, placing my hands on the bar top next to her small ones that are decorated with dainty gold rings.

"Stevie." I bend down close to her ear. "You following me?"

The steam almost rolls off her red cheeks. Standing this close to her, the rosiness of her face is more evident than it was today. Her skin is a pretty shade of light brown, but it's contrasted by pink cheeks and freckled skin. Another thing I didn't notice was the small gold hoop in her nose or the numerous gold rings that decorate her fingers and ears.

She nervously spins the one on her thumb. “Seems like you’re following me,” she retorts.

She refuses to turn around, most likely because I have her locked in, and she’ll be faced with my chest, as she was today on the plane when I bombarded her. But I hope she does. I like seeing her falter and flustered. After her little arrogant show during the security briefing, I had a blast putting her in her place, reminding her of who she works for.

But still, she doesn’t turn around, so I lean to the side, resting an elbow on the bar top, until finally, she faces me, doing the same thing.

“My hotel is right across the street, so what’s your excuse?”

She nods towards the TV. “Closest sports bar I could find. I needed to watch this game.”

“And yet you’re leaving before halftime?”

“I can watch the rest in my room.” She frantically glances around the bar, looking for that sleazy bartender, I’m sure.

“What’s the rush?”

“Truthfully? I don’t want to be in the same bar as you. You’re kind of a dick.”

My head falls back in laughter, and a confused but playful smile dances on her lips.

“Well, I think you’re kind of a brat, so it is what it is.”

I search her freckled face, looking for any sign of offense, but there isn’t any. Instead, a bit of amusement shines in her blue-green eyes, which makes me like her a little bit more. But not too much more. I can’t imagine most people would react this way if they were called a brat right to their face.

My stare wanders her frame. Even though her shirt is oversized, I can still make out the shape of her tits and waist. Her outfit is causal and thrown together, whereas mine was planned and prepped.

“You sure you have to go?” the douchebag bartender asks Stevie as he places her credit card and receipt on the bar top in front of her.

“I do.” Her tone is laced with regret. “Thanks for the drinks, Jax.”

Jax? Even his name screams, *I’m a tool*.

“Yeah, thanks, Jax,” I add his name on in a condescending tone. “But you can go now.”

“Excuse me?” both Stevie and the bartender say at the same time.

“You can go now,” I repeat, brushing him away with a simple motion.

Jax looks from Stevie back to me, his expression full of confusion before he shakes his head and walks away.

“Why are you such a prick?” she asks, her tone full of disgust.

Well, that’s a loaded question, so instead, I deflect.

“*That* guy is a prick.”

“No, that guy was nice, and we had good banter. You just ruined it.”

“You weren’t going home with him anyway.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you’re leaving with a full beer still on the counter and half a game left to watch.”

She shifts the two receipt slips on the bar top. “He left me his number,” she smugly adds, nodding towards the receipt on the bar. “And the night is still young.”

Without thinking, I grab it from the bar and rip it into pieces that would be too small for her to put back together. And I’m not quite sure why I did that other than I like pissing her off.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Doing you a favor, Stevie. You can thank me later.”

“Fuck you, Zanders.”

I pause for a moment as I study Stevie’s face, noting the real anger spewing off her.

“Your little bartender boyfriend was grabbing that waitress’s ass”—I nod towards a blonde server at a table—“every time they passed in and out of the kitchen. Then when she wasn’t looking, he was making out with that waitress”—I motion towards a different one, this one with brown hair—“by the bathroom. Now I’m not opposed to multiple women, but at least I make sure they know about each other. This guy is a tool.”

“You’re lying.”

“I don’t lie.”

Stevie’s eyes flicker with disappointment before regaining their faux confidence. “Well, maybe I don’t care,” she challenges.

“You care.”

“You’re an ass.”

“We’ve been over this, Stevie. I already know.”

I take a twenty-dollar bill out of my wallet, placing it down for her tip. This guy shouldn’t be getting a cent from her or me, but I especially don’t want her over-tipping when he was being a sleaze all night.

"I have my own money."

"Good for you." I condescendingly pat her shoulder. "Okay, now spill."

"Spill what?"

"Why are you following me? Are you in love with me already, Stevie? Slow your roll, sweetheart. It's only been one day."

She lets out an arrogant laugh. "You're in love with yourself."

"Someone's gotta be." The statement holds way more truth than she realizes.

Her eyes flicker back to the television screen above the bar. "Are you a Devils fan?"

She ignores me, keeping her attention locked as the time clock winds down into halftime.

"Huh?" she absentmindedly asks as the Devils' point guard takes a shot at the buzzer but misses, causing the game to go into halftime tied. "Dammit."

"You're a Devils fan," I repeat, this time as a statement and less as a question. But I don't like that she ignored me the first time. I'm not used to that.

"Yeah. Something like that." She swings her purse strap over her shoulder and across her chest, separating her tits. My eyes fall right to them. Her body is banging, full of curves. She should show it off, not cover it up with baggy and oversized clothes that seem like they've seen better days.

"Well, now that you've successfully cockblocked me," Stevie begins. "Can I go?"

My attention darts back to the raven-hair waitress, her eyes lingering on me as she marries two ketchup bottles. She's trying to be seductive about it, but it's kind of weird the way she's smirking at me from across the room as she hits the bottom of the ketchup bottle with the heel of her hand.

My phone dings in my pocket, breaking my uncomfortable stare, and I find a message from my older sister, Lindsey.

Lindsey: *Hey, Ev. Not to put a damper on your first road game of the season, but Mom got ahold of my phone number. I don't know how, but she's called three times already trying to get ahold of you. Long story short, don't answer any unknown callers. Miss you, little brother.*

My lips fall open as I continue to stare at my phone screen.

I haven't heard a peep about my mom in two years since she showed up at one of my games and begged me for money. To which I, of course, said

no. She had gotten ahold of my phone number, called nonstop, and finally showed up in person. I can't keep my whereabouts private, my game schedule is plastered online, but she's one of the reasons I'm so selective about people having my phone number. I've had to change it more times than I can count.

"Are you okay?" a soft voice asks.

"Huh?" I look up, finding Stevie's blue-green eyes gentle and concerned.

My confidence has faltered at the moment, and there are only a select few I break down my walls in front of. The flight attendant with an attitude is not one of them.

"I'm fine," I snap, feeling seen.

"Damn, never mind."

The bar suddenly seems overcrowded and hot. I'm not claustrophobic, but it currently feels like I might be. I close my empty fist. My palms are clammy as a rush of warm air hits my cheeks, my vision slightly blurring. I attempt to take a breath, but there's no air in the room.

Fuck. I haven't had one of these in years.

Without a word or a second thought, I bolt out the front door of the bar.

Once outside, I glance in both directions, looking for some space. The streets are crowded with people, most of which have turned their attention to me. Usually, I live for the stares, the cheers, the recognition. But tonight, I need to get as far away from anyone with eyes as I can.

Jogging across the street, I instinctively turn down a few blocks, having no idea where I'm going, but relying on my panic-stricken body to find a quiet space.

A park comes into view, but people are taking up all the benches in sight. I find a large tree with a big enough trunk to hide behind. Without thinking twice, I sink my ass to the grass, my expensive-as-shit Armani pants instantly cooling from the wet ground.

Inhale. Exhale. Anchor yourself.

Where am I? Denver. A park.

What color are the benches? Blue.

Why am I feeling this way? Because my mother is a gold-digger who left her children and husband for someone with more money. Because my mother is selfish as fuck, and now she wants *my* money. She doesn't want me. She doesn't love me. She just wants my money.

Rage seeps in again. The only thing that brings on panic attacks for me is blind rage, but I can't let it control me. The near-decade of therapy has taught me that. I can't let the panic win. I can't let my mother win.

Why am I feeling this way? Because she doesn't love me. Because she chose money over my sister and me. But it doesn't matter because *I* love myself.

That's what therapy has taught me—to love myself. And I do. Unapologetically and without question, I love myself.

Someone's got to.

Inhale. Exhale.

The panic is gone. I no longer feel hot and flustered, unable to breathe. I fought it off. I didn't let it get me. I stopped it before it really started.

Letting out a deep breath, I drape my elbows on my knees and drop my head between my shoulders.

I completely bailed on my tab at the bar, but Rio can cover me. I'll get him back next time. Pulling out my phone without re-reading my sister's text, I respond.

Me: *Thanks for letting me know, Linds. Love you. Please visit soon.*

I've only ever loved a handful of people in my life, and those people are the Maddisons and my sister. That's it, and that's all I plan on. That's all I need.

Lindsey: *Looking at my calendar now! I'll get something on the books as soon as the office slows down. Please do me a favor and stay out of the penalty box this year.*

Me: *That's what they pay me the big bucks for. I'm the asshole from Chicago who doesn't give a shit about anyone, remember?*

Lindsey: *Sure.*

She finishes with a crying, laughing emoji because she knows me. I'm not that guy, but that's what I let people believe. It's easier that way. I don't get hurt that way.

ZANDERS



“Here we are with the notorious duo from the Chicago Raptors, Eli Maddison and Evan Zanders,” the reporter from the *Chicago Tribune* states. His voice is wafting through the speakerphone as we sit in a random conference room in Denver’s arena, pre-game.

I look over to Maddison, the only other person in this room. “*Notorious duo*,” I silently mouth.

Maddison rolls his eyes, but his chest heaves with a quiet laugh.

“Maddison, congratulations on your newborn son.”

“Thanks, Jerry.” My best friend leans forward, so the phone in the center of the conference table finds his voice more clearly. “My wife and I are stoked to add another to the Maddison family.”

“And Ella? How’s she liking being a big sister?”

“She loves it,” Maddison laughs. “She’s a fiery little one, and she’s stoked to have a sibling to boss around in the future.”

“Well, we can’t wait to see you, your wife, and the kids at the next home game in Chicago.”

This is typically how the conversation goes. Reporters start off with all sweet, sentimental stuff with Maddison, then move on to me.

“And EZ,” Jerry begins, using my nickname.

“How we doing, boss?”

“Doing good. Doing good. Not as good as you are, I assume. Your mug was plastered online last week with your latest flavor leaving the arena after your home opener. Someone we should know about?”

Why these reporters feel the need to constantly talk about my sex life is beyond me. But my persona perceived in the media makes me a hell of a lot of money, so I let it slide. Though, I have no idea who he's referring to from last week. At a certain point, they tend to blur together.

"Come on, Jerry," I tease. "It's me you're talking to. When has there ever been someone you need to know about?"

"My bad," he laughs. "I almost forgot I'm talking to Evan Zanders here. You probably haven't cared about a woman for more than twenty-four hours since your mother."

My eyes dart to Maddison's at the mention of my mother. No one knows about my family situation outside of my family and his. I pay good money to my PR team to keep it that way.

Maddison gives me an apologetic half-smile.

"Sounds about right." I force a laugh into the speakerphone, hating the way the words taste as they come off my tongue.

"Jerry, let's talk hockey," Maddison quickly changes the subject.

"Yes, let's. You two have quite the team behind you this year. How do we feel about the Cup?"

"This is our year," Maddison states.

Nodding in agreement, I add, "No doubt about it, we believe the group of guys wearing a Raptors jersey this year has the potential to be holding the Stanley Cup by the end of the season."

Maddison and I look across the conference room table at each other, laser-focused. When it comes to hockey, and especially this season, we don't fuck around. This is our year to win it all. At twenty-eight, Maddison and I are both going into our seventh NHL season, and we finally have all the pieces to bring it home.

"Zanders the enforcer, do you think you'll ease up on the penalty box minutes this year?"

"Depends." I lean back in my chair.

"On?"

"If these other teams play clean, I will too. But if you come after my guys, I'll be the one you're answering to. The penalty box doesn't scare me. That's what I'm on this team for, to protect my guys and make sure they don't get hurt. But judging by my last six seasons, I can't imagine this year being any different."

"You do love yourself a good hockey brawl," Jerry laughs.

Well, he's not wrong there.

"And what do you have to lose?" he continues. "You throw your punches, get your minutes in the box, then leave with a different woman on your arm each night. We all know you, EZ. You don't give a shit about anyone other than yourself. And that's why Chicago loves you. You're the biggest asshole in the league. But you're our asshole."

Maddison leans back in his chair, his brows furrowed, and arms crossed over his chest. He shakes his head in frustration, but he knows how this works. We've been doing it for years.

I take a deep breath, plastering on a smile even though the reporter can't see it. "You got that right!"

"The city's golden boy and Chicago's unlovable bad boy," Jerry adds. "My favorite headline to use when it comes to you two."

We continue to talk about the team and our goals for this season, but every few questions revert to me and my personal life. Talking about the women I leave the arena with, my photographed nights out in the city, drinking and partying. Though, I always remind him those nights are never before a game.

Anytime Maddison or I try to shift the conversation to Active Minds of Chicago—our charity foundation supporting underprivileged young athletes that don't have the mental health resources they need, Jerry steers the conversation back to me and my bachelor lifestyle.

I get that this is the image I've built for myself over the last seven years, and it's the reason my paychecks are as big as they are, but I would really like to advertise our charity work too. It's the one thing in my life that I'm genuinely proud of.

Maddison and I started building the foundation back when he first moved to Chicago. We both needed to start donating our time and money to charities, so creating this organization made sense. We've rallied professional athletes from around the city to share their own mental health journeys in an effort to try to break the stigma surrounding the topic in athletes, especially male athletes. We raise money through monthly events to cover the costs of therapy sessions for kids who might not be able to afford it but need the help, as well as reach out to doctors and therapists who are willing to donate their time.

I can't imagine how different my life would be if I had these kinds of services when I was younger. A lot of the anger and abandonment I felt

could've been expressed through words instead of dirty plays on the ice.

"Thanks for your time, Jerry," Maddison says once all the probing questions have been asked. He ends the call on the conference room phone.

"We aren't doing this shit anymore."

"We have to."

"Zee, they make you look like a prick. You can't even talk about Active Minds without them changing the subject to who you're fucking or fighting." Maddison stands from the table in frustration.

I'm frustrated too. I don't give a shit if they want to talk about my personal life, but it would be nice if the media would mention the good things I do for the community too. Most people don't know I'm half the face of our foundation. They assume that it's Maddison's charity because it fits the whole nice, family guy image. It wouldn't make much sense for the media's narrative that I'm this asshole who doesn't give a shit about anyone but also happens to be the co-founder of a charity for underprivileged youth suffering from mental illness.

"We aren't doing this anymore. I'm tired of everyone thinking you're this dick who doesn't have feelings. The way they talk about you, Zee..." Maddison makes his way to the door of the conference room, shaking his head.

"I don't have feelings," I quickly counter. "At least not until June when I'm holding that Stanley Cup and a new extended contract in my hands."

"You don't have feelings?" Maddison asks, unconvinced. "You cried while watching *Coco* with Ella. You have fucking feelings, man. You should start letting people know."

"Don't use *Coco* against me! That shit was sad!" I stand from my seat, following him to the locker room to get suited up for our game. "That song at the end? It gets me every time."

As soon as my ass hits my seat on the airplane for our flight home, I melt into it with a sigh. That loss was brutal, and I played like shit. I wasn't focused tonight, and I take full responsibility for that.

I didn't expect for us to take an L so soon. In fact, I figured we would go at least ten games without putting a tally in the loss column. That's how

good we are. But tonight just wasn't our night.

It's a long season, though. We'll be fine.

My phone dings in my pocket, and I pull it out as the rest of the team boards the plane, finding two texts waiting for me. I reluctantly open the first one from my agent.

Rich: *EZ, my guy. I had a girl waiting for you outside of the locker room tonight, and you blew right past her. It would've been a prime time for the media to get some pictures of you two leaving the arena. What's up with that?*

In frustration, I stretch my neck and blow out a deep exhale. I can get my own girls, and it happens plenty without Rich setting it up for me. The media gets the whole man-whore thing. I don't need to act it out. That was evident by our pre-game interview with the *Chicago Tribune* when we couldn't get two words in about hockey or our charity.

After the shitty loss and hearing about my mother twice in twenty-four hours, I wasn't in the mood to add fuel to the fire. Most of North America knows that I'm a playboy. Taking a night off isn't going to change my image and therefore lose me my contract next season.

Ignoring Rich, I move on to my next text. My expression completely shifts, contrary to the frustrated one I've been sporting all night.

"Your wife texted me." I nudge Maddison to show him the text and picture Logan sent me.

It's the cutest fucking thing I've seen in a while. My unbiological niece, Ella Jo, is posted up about two feet away from their TV, her necked craned and her eyes glued to the screen watching our game. The big-ass bow somewhat tames the crazy hair on her head, but the best part is the jersey she's wearing. She's sporting number eleven, with "UNCLE ZEE" stitched right there on the back.

Logan: *Do not show my husband this. He will kill me for letting her wear this, but I thought you'd get a kick out of seeing your favorite girl wearing your number.*

"What the fuck?" Maddison says in shock, seeing his three-year-old daughter decked out in someone else's jersey other than his.

Three little dots dance along my screen before another text from Logan rolls in.

Logan: *And since you love to piss my husband off, I assume you're showing him right now.*

She knows us both way too well.

Logan: *Hi, baby. I love you. Please don't kill me.*

Maddison finally laughs.

"If Ella was wearing that shit tonight, it's no wonder we lost." A smug smile slides across his lips as he leans back and laces his hands together, contently resting them on his stomach.

"Dick," I mutter with a smile.

"Asshole."

"Are you guys ready for your exit row briefing?"

I send Logan a quick response, thanking her for the picture of Ella in my jersey before I give Stevie my full attention.

This is my newest tactic to get under her skin. She wanted my attention last time? Well, from now on, I'm gonna hang on every word she has to say, and it's going to be awkward as fuck.

"Yes, please!" I tuck my phone away and cross my hands in my lap, sitting forward in anticipation.

Her head jerks at my eager response, her brows furrowed as she looks at me, puzzled.

Maddison snickers next to me, knowing exactly what I'm doing.

"Okay..." she drags out the word in confusion.

Stevie continues to explain how the window exit works if we need to use it in case of emergency, though she's much quicker this time than last. I assume because she'll be repeating this to us every flight for the remainder of the season.

I enthusiastically nod at every little thing she has to say, but whenever her blue-green eyes find mine, they narrow in annoyance.

"Are you willing and able to help in case of an emergency?" she asks both Maddison and me.

"Yes," Maddison quickly answers.

Me? Not so much.

"Question," I begin. "How exactly do I open the window again?"

Maddison shakes his head, but his chest moves with a silent laugh.

Stevie takes a deep breath, I'm sure in frustration, before she repeats what she's already told me. "Remove the plastic placard, pull the red handle inward, and release. The window will lock against the aircraft."

I nod my head repeatedly. "I see. I see. And when do I open it?"

Stevie inhales sharply, and I can no longer contain the sly grin on my lips. This shit is fun.

“When instructed by a crew member to do so.”

“And how—”

“For fuck’s sake, Zanders! Are you willing and able to help in case of an emergency or not?”

I can’t help but break into a laugh. I already feel ten times better than I did when I left the arena.

Thankfully, a smile pulls at Stevie’s mouth even though she’s trying to contain it. She presses her full lips together, trying to bite it back, but finally, a laugh escapes her.

“Yeah, I’m willing and able,” I resign with a big-ass smile on my face as I lean back in my chair.

She shakes her head in amusement. “I need a new job,” she mutters before walking away.

After the airplane doors are closed, Stevie comes back up to the exit row, standing a few mere inches from me in the aisle. Her blonde coworker is up at the front while the third flight attendant speaks over the PA system.

Stevie starts doing the safety demonstration, showing how to use your seat belts and oxygen masks if they happen to fall from the ceiling. No one else is paying attention, but I keep my eyes laser-focused on her.

She can sense my stare, and her cheeks are becoming flush under her freckles.

“This aircraft is equipped with six emergency exits,” the flight attendant says over the PA system. “Two forward door exits, two window exits over the wings, and two door exits in the rear of the aircraft.”

“You’re doing great, sweetheart,” I whisper.

Stevie shakes her head, her lips pressed together.

“Flight attendants are now pointing out the exits closest to you,” the speaker system echoes throughout the airplane.

Stevie uses her index and middle fingers on each hand to point out the exits in the back of the plane, then does the same, motioning towards the window exits in the middle of the plane, where I sit. But when she points to the window exit on my side, she tucks her index finger in and points to the window with only her middle finger, clearly flipping me off.

I can’t hold back my laughter.

There's a smug, satisfied smile on Stevie's lips, as there should be. Her unwillingness to back down or give in to my charm, the way most women do, is officially intriguing, with equal parts frustrating.

"Zee!" is the first thing I hear as soon as I walk into the Maddison's penthouse the next day, quickly followed by a sweet little three-year-old throwing herself at my legs, wanting me to pick her up.

"Ella Jo!" I lift the crazy-haired girl, holding her tight. "How's my favorite girl?"

"Only girl," she counters, pushing her little fingers into my cheeks.

Damn right she is.

"Present?"

"Ella!" Logan calls from down the hall in the nursery. "That's not how we ask for things from your uncle."

I give little EJ a pointed glance as I try to hold back my amused smile, needing to have Logan's back on the whole parenting thing. But Ella could ask for absolutely anything from her other two uncles or me, and there's no way in hell any of us are saying no.

She lets out a little huff to correct herself before her sweetest smile overtakes her lips, her dimples popping out like you wouldn't believe. She cocks her head, tilting it and bringing her shoulder to her rosy cheek. "Present, please?" She bats her lashes.

A rumble of laughter shakes in my chest. I adjust her on my hip before digging my hand into my pocket.

When Ella was one, I started buying her a onesie-type thing from each city her dad and I played in, not that she knew or remembered that. But it was a fun way to make sure I got to come over and see my baby niece after each road trip. They've all been handed down to her little brother, MJ, now.

Last year when she was two, I switched to postcards. She liked all the bright, pretty pictures on the front, and she was easily entertained by a piece of paper.

This year, she's three, and we are upgrading to magnets.

Pulling out the little magnet with the Colorado flag on it, I watch as Ella's deep green eyes shine with excitement.

It's a fucking magnet, but she looks like she was just given a winning lottery ticket.

"Wow!" she exclaims, and I can't help but laugh again.

She might not have asked for her gift in the most polite way, but the way she's treasuring this little rubber magnet in her tiny hands makes up for it.

She flips it over, examining it with a massive smile on her lips.

"It's for the fridge," I explain. "I'll get you one from every city we play in."

She excitedly nods her head and squirms in my grasp, wanting to get down. I set her on her feet as she scurries to the refrigerator. She sits on her knees, putting the magnet on the bottom of the fridge, where only she can reach, before tucking her tiny fists under her chin, admiring it.

"What do you say, baby?" Logan comes shuffling into the kitchen with newborn MJ in her arms.

"Thank you, Uncle Zee!" Ella practically yells from the floor in the kitchen.

"You're welcome, girly."

As Logan walks by, I pop a kiss on her cheek as she places her sleeping and swaddled son in my arms, not even asking if I want to hold him. She already knows the answer. Sometimes (most the time), my reasoning for coming over has nothing to do with spending time with my two closest friends. I come over to see their kids.

"How are you feeling, Lo?" I ask one of my best friends, who is less than two weeks post-partum.

"I feel good." She wears a bright smile as she takes a seat on the couch, tucking her legs underneath her.

I take the opposite side of the couch, careful not to wake MJ in my arms. This baby sleeps like a rock, though, so I doubt I could anyway. "You look good."

"Zee, you better watch it!" I hear Maddison's amused voice from somewhere down the hall.

"Sooooo good!" I call out just to piss him off.

"If you weren't holding my son, I'd kick your ass." Walking into the living room, he picks up his daughter on the way over to the couch. "But she does look good," Maddison continues. "Ella Jo, doesn't your mama look pretty?"

“So pretty,” Ella sighs before resting her head on her dad’s shoulder, seeming sleepy.

Maddison walks around the back of the couch behind Logan. “I think it’s someone’s nap time. I’ll be right back, baby.” He gives his wife a quick kiss.

Before he carries Ella off to her room, he rounds the couch to me and bends down, puckering his lips. “Be right back, baby.”

“Frick off.” I shove his face away from me with a laugh.

My eyes flicker to the floor-to-ceiling windows behind Logan. “Damn, sometimes I forget how much you guys can see into my apartment.” Squinting my eyes, I can spot my marble kitchen island from here.

Logan turns around, looking out the windows and across the street. Facing me again, she can’t hold back her blushed smile as her dimples pop out.

“Trust me. We don’t forget. Do you know how many times Eli or I have caught you with someone in your kitchen? Why do you think we installed these drapes?” She motions towards the extra-long black-out curtains currently pushed to the wall, letting the sunshine through. “I’m surprised I haven’t gouged my eyeballs out yet.”

“You know how many women would kill to have your guys’ view? Just appreciate the show.”

“So gross,” she giggles.

I laugh right along with her before noting the shift in her expression.

“Eli said your mom got ahold of your sister.”

I let out a heavy sigh, but I’m also kind of thankful for this topic change. Logan is sort of my makeshift therapist, regardless that I have a licensed one I see once or twice a week. I tell Logan almost everything, and I’ve needed to get this off my chest since that night in Denver.

“Yeah, Lindsey said she’s been blowing her up nonstop, trying to get in touch with me.”

“I’m sorry, Zee. Is there anything we can do?”

“I don’t know. Just hope she doesn’t show up again or get my number, I guess.”

Logan stays silent for a moment before her eyes dart to me then back to the ground. “Have you told your dad?”

Have I told my dad? I haven’t told my dad much of anything since I left his house for college. He isn’t exactly the most caring or supportive man

these days. I don't think he could give two shits about the fact I'm a professional athlete, making millions of dollars a year. Which vastly contradicts my mother's current intentions for wanting to worm her way into my life.

He wasn't always this way, though. In fact, when I was a kid, we couldn't have been closer. My dad was at every one of my travel hockey tournaments. We would talk sports all day, he'd help me work on my technique in the backyard, and he was always on my ass about my grades, knowing I needed to keep them up in order to qualify for a scholarship.

My dad is an overall good person, but he buried himself in work as soon as my mom left us. Maybe he was trying to be the man she wanted, or at the least make the kind of money she wanted, hoping she would come back to him, I'm not sure. But he abandoned me like my mother did, just in a different way.

He no longer cared about my grades or came to watch me play high school hockey. Instead, he would stay late at work, distracting himself from his broken heart. By the time he would come home, I was usually in bed after microwaving something to eat for dinner. Lindsey was already off at college at the time, and I had never felt so alone.

That's when the panic attacks started. That's when the anger started. That's when the constant reminder that no one loved me started. That's when I realized no one had ever loved me enough to stick around.

It wasn't until years later, when I was in my third year of college, that I started going to therapy and working on my shit. I realized it was no one else's responsibility to love me. So, I started loving myself. No one else was going to.

"Zee," Logan softly says.

"Hmm?" Pulling myself out of the daze of my past, I softly stroke MJ's swaddle with my thumb as he sleeps soundly in my arms.

"Have you told your dad that your mom has been trying to reach you?"

I shake my head, shooting her a half-smile. "I don't want to bother him with it." Which is code for, *I don't want to talk to him more than necessary*. But I don't say that. Logan is big on me and my dad repairing our relationship. She lost her own parents at a young age and would kill to have another conversation with her dad. I feel like a complete prick anytime I tell her I have no desire to speak to mine who is alive and healthy.

"Okay." She ends the conversation with that, giving me a sad smile.

I look down at the sweet boy in my arms, thankful to have this family as my own, blood ties or not.

“Hey, Zee,” Logan says from across the couch. “We love you a whole lot.”

Somehow this girl always knows what I need to hear, the same way her husband can read me like a book. Sometimes I’m not great at admitting what I need, regardless of how blunt and honest I can be. But I’m thankful to have these people know me so well.

“I love you guys too.” Which are the only people I’ve said those words to, besides my sister, in the last decade of my life.

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STEVIE



Evan Zanders is a dick.

But I think I'm starting to figure him out. It's only taken three short road trips, but here we are.

He's going to do everything in his power to get under my skin, but as long as I give him shit right back, I think I'll be okay.

Once the aircraft doors are closed, blocking out the Detroit chill, I do my usual safety demonstration, standing in the exit row. Tonight, like most nights, is a red-eye flight, and the players are too distracted to watch or care about what I'm doing with a faux oxygen mask or seat belt.

All but one.

I'll give you one guess.

That's right, Evan Zanders' hazel eyes burn into me, watching my every move as I do my job, just as they have for weeks now.

As I pack up the little safety demo bag, my favorite part of the flight begins. Only today, it's not my favorite part, because today, I'm stuck in the exit row as every player stands and begins to undress.

A quick panic races through me as I attempt to find a way to escape, needing to get to the safety of the galley in the back on the plane, but it's no use. Everywhere I turn, someone is undressing. I'm trapped by the most perfectly formed and almost entirely naked bodies.

And the most notable? The one standing directly in front of me, giving me no room to move?

Evan Zanders.

Zanders overtakes the space in the aisle, next to his seat. I try to turn around and make a dash to the front of the plane, but apparently, the coaching staff is getting out of their suits tonight too. Understandably so, we are flying an overnight flight back to Chicago. But I'm left with no escape plan whatsoever.

My wide and fear-stricken eyes find Indy's in the front galley, where she was doing the safety demonstration. Instead of a look of sympathy, she shoots me a wink and two thumbs-up before hiding away behind a partition, leaving me to the wolves.

The naked wolves.

Turning back, my eyes immediately lock with Zanders'. How could they not? First of all, they're gorgeous, all hazelly and shit. Secondly, he's literally a foot away from me. He could move back if he'd like. He has the space to do it, whereas I don't. But no. He's twelve inches away from me as he seductively peels off his tailored suit jacket.

Again, I don't know if he's trying to be seductive or if he just naturally looks like he's about to star in an adult film, but I have a feeling it's the latter.

"You good, Stevie?" Zanders asks with a glint of mischief in his eye.

"Yep," my voice breaks. I clear my throat. "Yep. Good. Great."

Turning my head away, I rub my neck as Zanders' long fingers, decorated with gold rings, take their sweet time unbuttoning his collared shirt.

I can feel his stare on me as I keep my eyes locked on the window exit. Partly to keep my eyes off him and partially to plan out my escape.

The plane isn't taxiing that fast on the runway yet. I'm sure the road rash I'd endure from the jump out the window onto the asphalt would burn a whole lot less than Zanders' gaze.

In my peripheral, a body full of flawless brown skin comes into view. And for some damn reason, I can't help but look.

Zanders' entire upper half is bare. His shoulders are wide and broad, but his body narrows at the waist. He's cut like a freaking superhero. Even his muscles have muscles.

I watch as the light catches on the thin gold chain around his neck before my eyes meet his.

He couldn't be more amused.

"Like what you see?" He smirks.

Yes, he has the audacity to fucking smirk.

“Can I...” My damn voice comes out ten octaves too high. I clear my throat again as Zanders’ chest heaves in a laugh. “Can I get past you? I need to get to the back of the plane.” *And away from you before I have a heat stroke from staring at your annoying gorgeous body.*

“I’m almost done,” he tells me, not breaking eye contact as he swiftly undoes his belt.

I swallow. Audibly. Like I’ve been without water in the desert for too many days.

Who knew my job would come with a personal striptease?

His long fingers unfasten the zipper of his pants, allowing them to drop and pool at his ankles.

His too-tight black boxer briefs are the first thing I see, right before my wide eyes are drawn to the giant bulge in the front. I’m not kidding. It’s huge. And he’s not even hard. It’s no wonder girls are throwing themselves at him. This thing should have its own area code.

“You enjoying yourself?”

“Hmm?” I mumble, entirely entranced by the literal anaconda in his pants.

“You like what you see, Stevie?”

“Yes,” I state in a daze. “What? No. Absolutely not.” I quickly turn to face the side of the airplane, staring at the emergency exit window, which is looking more and more appealing by the second.

Zanders’ evil laugh echoes through my ears, and I can’t seem to keep my eyes from finding his body once again.

I start at his ankles, noting the black swirling ink that takes up his entire left side. It wraps around his leg, traces his ribs, and covers his arm. The black ink doesn’t contrast too much against his rich skin tone. Instead, it complements it. It looks right on him. I don’t know how else to explain it.

“Want to try that answer again?” Zanders asks, making no real effort to put his sweatpants and T-shirt on. His naked body takes up the entire aisle and his hands rest on the headrests on either side, caging me in. “You like what you see?”

I plaster on my most smug expression, having no plans to inflate this man’s ego more than it already has been. There’s only so much oxygen on an airplane. I don’t want his ego to suffocate the rest of us.

You know, safety and all that shit.

“Ehh,” I say with indifference, crossing my arms over my chest, my stare unyielding as it locks with his.

“Sure thing, sweetheart.”

Zanders slips his white tee on over his head, his observation only breaking with mine for a second when the fabric covers his face. Then he steps into a pair of gray sweatpants as I try my very best to keep my focus away from the snake in his briefs.

And gray sweatpants? Come on, man.

“You got a little...” He wipes the corner of his mouth, trying to tell me I’m drooling from looking at him.

I’m ninety percent sure I’m not, but I also wouldn’t be surprised if I am. However, I refuse to check.

He’s stupid pretty.

His hazel eyes challenge me, holding my attention, daring me to swipe at my lip and check for possible drool.

“I hate you,” I remind him, attempting to hold my ground, which makes him fall forward in arrogant laughter, holding his chest.

When Zanders stands up straight again, I move to slip past him, needing to get out of this fucking aisle, but he stops me by holding on to the seat across the way, his arm blocking me in.

“I’ll take a sparkling water.” His deep rasp sends a shiver up my spine.

Swallowing, I turn my head towards him, playing with fire. His face is only inches from mine, and it’s fine as hell. I can practically feel the warmth of his lips from here. Or maybe that’s the temperature from his burning gaze.

“There’s a cooler in the back for you to get it yourself.” I push his arm out of the way to move past him, maybe a little harder than necessary, but he’s making me flustered, and I don’t like it. I don’t like when my confident mask is taken off.

“Extra lime, Stevie Sweetheart!” he calls out with a satisfied laugh as I roll my eyes.

But I can also feel the blush heating my cheeks.

I got him the damn sparkling water.

I've also gotten him a refill, a pillow, and a bag of chips—all of which he could've easily grabbed himself. We leave them accessible for a reason.

My only hope is that the flight attendant call light above his head burns out and stops working. With the rate he's pressing it, I wouldn't be surprised.

Once again, the blue light shines in the back galley, indicating that a passenger needs our assistance.

An audible grunt leaves my lips. I just made myself a grilled cheese. It's perfectly melted, and I'm only a few bites in.

Indy laughs. "Looks like your boyfriend needs you again." She motions towards the exit row, where the light above Zanders' stupid flawless face is lit up. "I'd go check on what he needs, but we both know he's going to ask for you once I get there."

I roll my eyes, stretch my neck, and try to plaster on my best bullshit flight attendant smile as I step out of the galley, but as I do, Tara hurries her way to Zanders, which is fine by me. If someone else wants to take care of the diva himself, I'll gladly pass on the responsibility.

"Tara's got it," I inform Indy as I step back into the galley—our safe haven.

"Twenty bucks she comes back here and tells you that Zanders wants to see you."

"I don't make enough money to be throwing it away on losing bets. This is the third trip of the season, and not a single flight has gone by where he's spoken to another one of the girls.

Tara clears her throat as she stands in the space between the galley and the aisle. "Evan Zanders needs something from you."

"Do you know what he wants?" I ask with caution. Regardless of the fact I'm not actually fraternizing with the guy, his obvious task at making my job a living hell this season might be gaining too much attention around Tara, and I need to be careful. Well, Zanders needs to be careful.

"Nope. He said he needs something that only you can get." Tara's lips are pressed in a hard line as she turns away, walking back to the front of the airplane where her workstation is.

I can't quite tell if she's frustrated that I'm getting attention or if she's upset it's not her, which sounds ridiculous as I say it. Anyone who would want the attention Zanders is giving me, making my job way harder than it needs to be, is out of their mind.

“Go take care of your boo,” Indy teases.

“Shut up.”

The entire team is busy scarfing down their dinners as I walk through the aisle, so thankfully, no one is paying attention to me as I make my way to the exit row.

“Need something?” I ask Zanders in my sweetest tone, which isn’t all that sweet. *Sweet* isn’t really a word I’d use to describe myself.

“I don’t like my dinner.” He looks down at his plate where his perfectly cooked filet mignon remains mostly untouched.

“Okay? Can I get you something else?”

“Can you make me a grilled cheese?”

“Really? You eat that kind of stuff?”

“Aw, sweetheart. You’re watching out for my diet?”

“Actually, no. I don’t really give a shit,” I state with honesty as Maddison almost chokes in startled laughter next to him. “Just curious. But you could’ve asked the other flight attendant to make you one when she came over here, you know.”

He glances towards the front of the airplane, where Tara’s perfectly thin frame is standing, watching us.

“Yeah, but something tells me when it comes to food, I trust your opinion more than hers.”

What the hell does that mean? Is that his way of judging my body? Is that his way of saying he knows I eat that kind of junk on a regular basis and can probably make a good one? I mean, he’s not wrong, but still.

I harshly swallow, suddenly feeling claustrophobic on this airplane. The space is too small. I’m exposed in the exit row for everyone to see. I don’t want anyone to look at me in my embarrassment. My uniform hugs my body, and I feel it digging in at my hips, my chest, and under my arms. Everyone can tell that it doesn’t fit me correctly. I know it. The first thing they see is a body that carries a few more pounds than I’d like it to, and I was an idiot to think maybe these guys wouldn’t judge me for it.

I was wrong, and my mask is completely off at this point. I hate feeling this vulnerable.

“Stevie?” Zanders says with amusement in his voice. “You going to do your job and make me a grilled cheese or what?”

Snapping out of my trance for a moment, I nod my head in silence before taking off towards the galley, needing to hide.

“Stevie?” Zanders questions as I hurry down the aisle, but I don’t turn around.

I make his sandwich, but I don’t bring it out. In fact, I don’t go out into the aisle again until we land in Chicago and everyone else is off the airplane.

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STEVIE



The Chicago Raptors have a home stand, which means I have some time off work this week. And even better, the Chicago Devils have the night off, so I finally get to spend some time with my brother.

Though, I've yet to see him today. He had a shoot-around this morning, then a press conference this afternoon, but we're going to the movies tonight. A little twin bonding moment, if you will. I've stayed curled up on the couch in his amazing apartment, waiting for him to get back from the arena.

I'm not kidding. This apartment building is insane. It was built about four years ago, and Ryan moved in a year after that when Chicago picked him up. He's not on the penthouse floor, but he's a couple of levels below it, and the view is epic from his almost 180-degree porch. We can see most of Chicago from here, including Lake Michigan.

But the view isn't all that pretty today, simply because it's been pouring rain all afternoon. I'd typically be at the shelter on my days off, but the dogs aren't getting their afternoon walks because of the weather, so they didn't really need my help.

Instead, I've stayed curled up on the couch, wearing my comfiest and ugliest sweatpants.

The three quick road trips were a good way to get my feet wet for this season because our next trip is much longer. And it starts in Nashville next week. Most everyone loves a stop in Nashville, I'm sure. However, all it does is make me feel anxious.

I grew up right outside the city, and I was thankful to get out and go to the University of North Carolina when I did. There's just something about being in Nashville that makes me feel like I'm not good enough.

I'm not blonde enough. I'm not tall and skinny enough, but I'm not short and petite enough either.

At least that's how I felt growing up, and going back there has been hanging over my head ever since I took a job with a hockey team. It's a stop on the NHL schedule, whereas I could avoid a hometown visit when I worked with the NBA.

Ryan is lucky. He doesn't have to go back there multiple times a year for his games. Though he would be welcomed back with a parade, I'm sure. He was a local high school celebrity, and I was his twin sister that girls were nice to in order to try to get close to the star basketball player.

Regardless, I still have a couple of friends from high school, and though we aren't super close, we are close enough that I should probably tell them I'll be in town next week.

"Hey, Vee!" Ryan calls out as he walks through the front door.

Popping off the couch, I look at him with wide, eager eyes. "Did you get me one?"

"No 'hello'? No 'my dearest brother and favorite person in the entire world, how are you?'"

I scrunch my nose in disgust. "Gross, no."

"Yes, I got you one." He tosses the tinfoil-wrapped hot dog in my lap. "But you know I can afford to feed you a little better than a five-dollar street-meat hot dog for dinner, right?"

"Don't judge me. The United Center's street-meat is the best." I eagerly unwrap my dog, finding it piled high with grilled onions and peppers, doused in mustard. Just the way I like it. "What time do you want to head out?"

"Head out where?"

My head snaps back to him in the kitchen. "To the movies. We're still trying to get to the seven o'clock showing, right?"

"Oh, fuck, Vee. I completely forgot that we made plans tonight." Guilt overtakes his face. "I have a date."

"Oh." Which is a pure surprise. Because well, my brother doesn't really date.

"I can cancel."

“You have a date?”

“Yeah, but I’m going to cancel.”

“No, don’t do that.”

My brother hasn’t dated since he’s been in Chicago. He’s too focused on basketball and his career to add women into the equation. In fact, he practically refuses to date, so even though he’s probably hoping I’ll help him get out of it, there’s no way I’m going to enable his singleness.

He’s the absolute best person I know, and he deserves to be happy, even though he thinks the only answer to that is basketball. Unfortunately, his first date in three years aligns with the only plans we’ve been able to make in weeks. Now that it’s basketball and hockey season, we won’t be seeing each other much.

“Can I make it up to you? We can go as soon as I’m back from this series of road games,” he eagerly offers.

“I’m leaving for Nashville the day before you’re home, but don’t worry about it. We’ll hang out eventually.”

Ryan comes behind the couch and wraps his arms around my shoulders. “Please tell me not to go.”

“You’re going. Who is she anyway?”

“Our team’s GM’s niece.” Ryan takes a seat on the edge of the couch. “She’s going to some big movie premier, and our general manager called in a favor.”

“So, you *are* going to the movies.”

A subtle laugh heaves in Ryan’s chest. “Apparently, she needs some kind of PR overhaul, and who better to show up with than straight-laced, boring Ryan Shay.”

“You’re not boring, Ry.”

“I’m pretty fucking boring, Vee.”

“Well, maybe you’ll actually like her?”

“Not my type. This is strictly a business transaction.”

“How do you have a type if you don’t date?”

“Uncle’s money? That shouldn’t be anyone’s type.” Ryan quickly shakes his head in disapproval. “Speaking of dates, there’s this big charity gala coming up that I need a date for.”

“Perfect, ask your brother-stealing famous movie star girlfriend.”

“You’ll go with me, right?”

“Sure. If I’m not on the road for hockey.”

“You’re not. It’s one of your players’ charities. Active Minds of Chicago. Take my card and buy a dress for it. It’s black-tie.”

I tilt my head around to look at him, my eyes narrowing. “I have my own money. And besides, I’d rather find something secondhand.”

Ryan pulls his head back. “No way. Vee, you know I think your thrifted style is great, but you cannot wear a dress from a thrift store to this thing.”

“Why not?”

“Because that room is going to be filled with the highest-paid athletes in Chicago. You’ll stick out like a sore thumb.”

That statement quickly solves our debate. That’s the exact kind of attention I don’t want.

“Fine. You can buy me an expensive-ass dress to wear around your rich-ass colleagues.”

A satisfied smile slides across his lips. “Take the black Am-Ex when you go.” He gives my shoulders a quick squeeze before swiftly snatching the hot dog from my hands and taking a giant bite.

“What the hell?!”

“Fuck, that is good. I’ll have to get myself one of those next time.” He wipes the mustard from the side of his mouth. “So, Nashville, huh? You gonna tell Twiddle Dee and Twiddle Dumb you’re coming back to town?”

“If you mean Hannah and Jackie, then I’m not sure yet. Haven’t decided.”

Ryan rummages through the kitchen pantry, looking for something to snack on. “Don’t. Those girls are evil.”

“They’re my friends.”

“They’re not your friends, Vee. They’re mean girls.”

I let out an exhausted breath. My brother is right, but they were my closest friendships in high school, no matter how much I felt left out from our trio.

“Speaking of mean girls...have you talked to Mom?”

Ryan shoots me a death glare over his shoulder. “Mom is *not* a mean girl.”

“Not to you. You are the favorite child after all.”

“No, I haven’t talked to her. But you better tell her you’re coming back to town. She’s going to want to see you.”

No, she’s not.

“Yeah, of course, I’ll tell her.” I avoid my brother’s stare before he figures out the truth that I hadn’t planned on letting my mom know I’ll be back home. I would love to see my dad, but my mom? Not so much.

“Speaking of that gala...” Ryan takes a seat on the armrest of the couch, eyeing me cautiously. “Brett hit me up today.”

“Why?” I quickly snap.

My brother inhales a deep breath. “He wants to visit. Come to that event.”

“Visit? Here? Like Chicago?”

Ryan pulls his gaze away from mine. “I told him it wasn’t a good idea. He didn’t know you were living here, but he’s really struggling right now, trying to find a job in sports. Every big team in the city will be at that charity gala. It’s a good place for him to network.”

There’s a shortness of oxygen going to my lungs and subsequently my brain from hearing Brett’s name. The last person I want to think about is my brother’s college teammate—my ex.

We dated most of college, but there were multiple periods of time when he would end things with me because he had other options. Then, he’d come crawling back when he was bored, only to keep me on an endless roller coaster of trying to be good enough to keep his attention.

And I was the idiot who took him back. Every. Single. Time. He was my weakness. I loved him, and all I wanted was for him to want me back, but he didn’t. Not really.

I was there to fill to void. To be a warm body in his bed while he continued to look for better options. I didn’t realize it at the time, but my confidence in myself took a huge plummet from constantly feeling like I wasn’t enough for him, and of course, it was the same time my mother started to make comments about the way I looked.

Then, in our senior year, when Brett found out he was offered a spot at training camp with a pro basketball team, he dropped me quicker than you can say, “I’ve been using you for three years,” which is essentially what he said without saying those exact words.

I remember it all, clear as day. I was waiting for Ryan outside of his locker room at UNC, but little did I know my brother was in the middle of an interview out on the court while the rest of his teammates were shooting the shit behind a thin door that was anything but soundproof.

“What about Stevie?” one of the boys had asked when they learned about my boyfriend’s new opportunity.

Brett’s response? *“What about Stevie? She was there because I was bored, but I’m going pro. Do you know the quality of women that are about to throw themselves at me? You think I’m going to stay with Shay’s sister when I have better options?”*

And that was that. That was the final straw on my end. He’s reached out a couple of times over the years, especially after he got dropped during training camp of his rookie season, never once making it onto a professional NBA team. But that day outside of the locker room was the day it clicked. I was never anything to him, and I’ve been carrying that weight of knowing I wasn’t good enough ever since.

Ryan has no idea how bad it was. Brett is his college teammate and was once one of his closest friends. Though, the heartbreak my brother saw me endure had him keeping his distance from his old friend without even knowing the full details.

Not to be dramatic, but he fucked me up.

And this, ladies and gentlemen, is why I will never date an athlete again. They’re shallow, only caring about the trophy on their arm. And I am no one’s trophy.

“I told him it wasn’t a good idea,” Ryan adds, pulling me out of the past and back to the present. “But I feel like maybe I should help him out? Get him in contact with some media networks? I don’t know. I feel bad for the guy.”

Ryan wouldn’t feel bad if he had any idea what his old teammate said about me. In fact, he’d probably kick his ass.

“I’ll tell him not to come.”

“No.” I shake my head. “He’s your college teammate, Ry. It’s cool. But could you find him somewhere else to stay?”

He shoots me a thankful and understanding smile. “You going to ever tell me what happened between you guys?”

“We broke up. Simple as that.”

“I would like for you to tell me one day.” He walks behind the couch, shaking my curls before taking off to his room to get ready. “Love you, Vee.”

The distaste for Ryan’s college teammate lingers in my mouth as I finish the rest of my hot dog before falling back on the couch and hiding under my

giant weighted blanket for the night.

I spend my evening in my coziest sweats. Albeit they're also my rattiest, but who am I trying to impress? I'm alone in this giant apartment, in the heart of a city where I still don't know too many people yet. I consider texting Indy to see what she's up to, thinking maybe it would be a good chance to get to know her better, seeing as we are about to spend the majority of the next six to eight months on the road together. But the weight of this blanket and the fact that I really don't want to get off this couch keeps me from doing so.

Thankfully, the rain has stopped, so when I get the mental strength to pull myself off this sofa, I'll head out and spend the rest of my night loving on my favorite guys. And gals.

Of course, I'm talking about the dogs at SDOC—Senior Dogs of Chicago.

It's a rescue a short walk from here, where older dogs wait to get adopted to a loving home where they can live out the rest of their days. I started volunteering there the day after I moved to Chicago. I did something similar back in North Carolina when I was in college, and it's become sort of a passion project of mine.

If I could live off taking care of these animals and giving them the love that no one else will, I would. But unfortunately, it's a nonprofit barely surviving off slim to no donations. So those of us who volunteer do so because we love the animals.

And I relate to them.

Not necessarily the senior thing. I mean, I am only twenty-six, but the idea of not being someone's first choice. I get that.

These dogs are passed up for puppies, left to live the rest of their short lives in a shelter. I'm not going to be dramatic and say I get passed up by every man I meet because that's not the case. But after that conversation about Brett, I remember all too well how it feels to be the backup choice. So, for these sweet senior dogs who just want a warm home and someone to love, I make them my first choice.

And if my twin brother weren't allergic to dogs, I'd have an apartment full of them.

Surfing the channels to find something decent to watch, I stumble upon the Raptors game. There are only two minutes left in the final period, and Chicago is up 4-2 on their opponent. Seems like an easy win for them.

Their stadium is packed to the brim, the way it is when I get to watch Ryan play in person.

I don't know much about hockey, but I suppose I should learn now that it's my job, so I watch the final two minutes. And in those last minutes, all I learn is that there's a thing called icing—like cake. But I have no idea what it means. Though, they call it twice.

They do some sort of announcements of the best players for the game, and low and behold, Evan Zanders gets the first star, which apparently, is a good thing.

"How are you feeling tonight, Zanders?" one of the announcers asks.

He lifts his jersey to wipe the sweat off his brow before his hazel eyes lock with the camera, shooting his signature megawatt smile. It's all attractive and smug and shit.

"I feel good. Good win for the boys tonight."

"Congratulations on being named the first star of the game. Are we celebrating with someone special tonight?"

I've watched plenty of professional games, and I've never heard a question like this, though, from the bit I've learned about Zanders' reputation, most of the media seems to only care about who he's being a dick *to* or who he's putting his dick *in*.

His lips slide up into a smirk, looking right back to the camera. "A couple of special someones."

Gross. I lift the remote and shut off the TV.

Grabbing my laptop, I delve into the FBI-level stalking that Indy already did. If I'm going to be stuck on an airplane with these guys, I may as well figure out who the hell they are.

Rio is the first name to pop up. There's not much information about the green-eyed defenseman, but he's clearly the team clown. There aren't many pictures of him where he's not wearing his goofy smile or carrying his old-school boom box.

I don't find much about the other guys on the team except where they went to college, their home countries, and a few images that pop up from

my Google search with them and their girlfriends or friends.

The team captain is a different story. When I click on Eli Maddison's name, an endless list of websites comes up. His old university, the teams he played for previously, and most notably, the charity he's the founder of. The name sounds familiar—Active Minds of Chicago.

As all the pieces connect, I realize that the gala I'm going to with Ryan is a charity event for Maddison's organization to support kids and teens suffering with mental illness.

There are also plenty of pictures online of him and his family. His wife looks vaguely familiar, but I can't quite place her, though her red hair stands out to me, and I'm almost positive I've seen this woman before.

There's also an endless supply of pictures of Maddison with his daughter, including a clip of her bombarding a press conference last year that took over the internet.

It's clear that Maddison is the family guy on the team.

Contrary to that is Evan Zanders. There's about as much information on Zanders as on Maddison. However, there's no family represented on Zanders' Google search. But there are countless images of him leaving the arena with a different girl on his arm, no two pictures having the same woman. And below those photos are numerous headlines, including:

"Chicago Raptors' Evan Zanders out at the club until 4 AM."

"Number eleven, ejected from game for fighting. Facing fines."

"Evan Zanders. Chicago's resident bad boy."

Jesus. Cliché much?

Unintentionally, I roll my eyes, finding exactly what I knew I would before I close my laptop and toss it back on the couch.

Standing, I whip my curls into a quick bun, throw on an oversized sweatshirt, and slip into my Air Force Ones. Before I hit the door, I grab a bag of dog treats from the console table and take a quick glance in the mirror.

I look like a hot mess.

My sweatpants are stained, the fabric so thin from being overly worn, and my hair is untamable. I don't have a touch of makeup on, and there's a good chance there's dried mustard on my chin from my hot dog earlier. But these pups don't care, and neither do I.

Grabbing my phone, purse, and keys, I leave the apartment and slip into the elevator.

I'm excited to see all my furry friends who I haven't seen for days at this point. And that's the thing with some of these older dogs—you don't know how much time you'll get with them. You just have to give them as much love as you can because you don't know how much longer they have on Earth.

I ride the elevator alone down to the lobby floor as the low hum of violin strings pours out from the speakers and fills the metal box. As I said, my brother's apartment is bougie as hell, and only the extremely wealthy live here. I'm sure the kind doorman has a mini heart attack anytime he sees me enter or exit wearing my baggy flannels, oversized T-shirts, and dirty sneakers. Though, he's always polite and never says a word.

The elevator stops on the main floor, and as soon as the doors open, I step out, walking smack dab into something solid.

"Jesus," someone says, holding me steady with a heavy arm. "You good?"

My head feels a little wobbly from vibrating off a chest of pure muscle, but I can see perfectly clear.

My eyes trail the stranger's body, noting the contrast between my dirty sneakers and his shiny dress shoes. His legs are thick, but his suit pants are perfectly tailored to fit his strong thighs. His crisp white shirt is practically see-through, showcasing his tatted skin, and when my gaze falls on the thin gold chain around his neck, I realize who I ran into.

My body, thanks to the warmth flowing through me from the unexpected contact, knows too.

I lift my eyes slightly higher, hazel irises staring back at me as the most mischievous grin slides up his lips.

"Stevie," Zanders says. "You following me?"

ZANDERS



“Stevie,” I begin. “You following me?”

Her eyes trail down my body, checking me out as I do the same to her.

Her chestnut curls are plopped on top of her head in a wild mess, and her clothes are drowning her figure. Dark lashes frame her blue-green eyes, and her face doesn’t show a stitch of makeup, minus...is that mustard on her chin?

She’s only inches from me, right where she barreled into my chest, my hold keeping her steady. Without thinking, I use the pad of my thumb to softly wipe the yellow from her face. As I do, her mouth falls open, and her eyes dart to mine, holding my stare for a moment.

Stevie clears her throat and takes a step back, away from me.

“Seems like you’re following me,” she retorts, keeping her eyes anywhere but on me as she crosses her arms over her chest.

“How am I following you?” I mirror her stubborn actions, crossing my arms in the same manner. “My best friends live here.”

Finally, her eyes dart to mine, cocking her head in confusion.

“Eli Maddison,” I explain. “His family lives in this building. Penthouse floor. But their elevator is being worked on.” I motion across the lobby to the private elevator for the Maddisons’ level. The only one I use to avoid run-ins like this.

Realization covers Stevie’s face. “His wife has dark red hair?”

Logan’s signature color. “Logan. Yeah.”

Stevie nods as if all the puzzle pieces are being put together for her.

“So, clearly, you’re following me.”

She scoffs. “I live here. If anyone is being a stalker, it certainly isn’t me.”

“Sure thing, sweetheart.” I brush her off, not believing her. Not to sound like a rich asshole, but this building, as well as mine across the street, cost an arm and a leg to own. She’s a flight attendant. I highly doubt she makes enough to live here.

“Why the hell do you keep calling me ‘sweetheart?’”

An evil laugh slips from my lips. I thought she was smarter than that. “You don’t get it?”

“Get what?”

“My nickname for you. It’s ironic. I’m not sure you have a sweet bone in your body, sweetheart.”

She holds my eye for a moment, contemplating her response. And if it were anyone else, I’d expect to be cussed out or maybe even smacked, but not with Stevie. She’s kind of a wild card in that way. She can take the shit-talking just as well as she can dish it out.

Instead of a negative reaction, uncontrollable giggles fall from her lips, her chest heaving. “Oh, that’s pretty good, actually.”

I can’t help the smile that overtakes my face from seeing this wild girl, dressed like she might not have a place to call home, unable to contain her hysterical laughter in the middle of this all-white pristine lobby, marble floor and all.

She looks entirely out of place, and I kind of fucking love it.

“You’re such an asshole,” she laughs.

“I know.” I smile right back at her.

I let her catch her breath before asking again. “Okay, really, though. What are you doing here?”

She inhales deeply, a smile still covering her lips. “I already told you. I live here. Well, my brother lives here, and I’m staying with him.”

“Your brother? Who is your brother?”

I’d have to know him. This city is big, but not that big. Anyone who can afford to live in this complex is some kind of high-roller or athlete, bringing in millions of dollars a year.

“No one you’d know.” Stevie brushes me off. “I got to go. Have a good night.”

She sneaks past me, swiftly darting out the lobby doors. I watch her leave before quickly glancing back at the elevator in contemplation. I'm meeting up with Maddison and Logan tonight, planning to have a late-night celebratory drink on their porch now that the rain has stopped.

But instead, I find myself turning on my heel and jogging out the lobby doors to chase after a flight attendant who seems hell-bent on getting away from me.

"Wait!" I call out, busting through the front doors.

She stops in her tracks and turns my way, looking disheveled as fuck, and I have no idea why I'm chasing after this girl right now.

"Where...uh. Where are you going? It's after midnight."

Why do I give a fuck is the better question.

Stevie looks down the street in the direction she's headed. "Just running an errand."

"Where?" *Again, why the hell do I care?* "Chicago is not a safe city to be wandering around by yourself at night."

"Only a block over. I'm fine."

Stevie turns away from me, hastily continuing on her way.

Rolling my eyes at her in frustration, I jog to catch up and gently grab her elbow, turning her back to face me. "Stevie, wait."

As she turns around, my fingers slide down, skimming her light brown skin and softly holding on to her forearm.

She looks down at my hand before glancing up at me. "Yes?"

Yeah, Evan, what? What the fuck are you planning to say? Why do you keep chasing this chick who clearly wants to get away from you?

I retrieve my hand from her arm, trying to form a sentence. Since I've known this girl, I've had a blast getting under her skin and flustering the hell out of her. However, tonight, I'm the one who's lost their charm and can't speak in proper sentences.

Thankfully, she speaks before I have to. "You smell like sex."

I straighten up a bit, a satisfied smile tugging at my lips. "Thank you."

"That wasn't a compliment."

"Sounded like one."

She rolls her eyes. "Can't really fault you. You did say you were going to celebrate with a couple of special someones tonight."

My brows shoot up at that statement. "You watched my game?"

"I watched the last two minutes of your game."

“I looked hot as fuck in my jersey, yeah?”

“You’re in love with yourself.”

“Someone’s got to be,” which is always my response to that statement.

A couple walks past us on the street, all the while staring at me and whispering. It’s fairly early in the season, and I haven’t done anything too scandalous in a bit that the paparazzi aren’t following my every move at the moment. Still, it’s hard to go many places in the city without getting recognized. Not that I mind the attention. I like the fanfare for the most part.

“But no, there were no someones,” I explain, though Stevie never asked for an explanation. “The ‘special someones’ I was referring to celebrating with tonight is Maddison’s family. His wife is one of my best friends too, and if I time it just right, I might be able to catch their newborn son waking up to get fed.” I motion up the building, referencing their penthouse.

“Oh,” she awkwardly laughs. “It came off completely sexual on camera.”

“The media is going to spin it that way anyway.” I shrug. “May as well play it up.”

“Yeah, the media does seem to have a certain view on you. At least that’s what it seems like online.” Her eyes immediately go wide as if she said something she shouldn’t have.

“Stevie, sweetheart. Did you Google me?” I ask with far too much amusement in my tone.

She relaxes her shoulders, her casual and confident demeanor coming back real quick. “I Googled everyone on the team. Don’t get your panties in a twist, thinking I was just looking at you.”

“And what did you find when you Googled me and only me?”

“Nothing I didn’t already know.”

Oh.

I love my reputation, everything about it. The people who matter to me know my media persona is just that—a persona. But I like everyone else thinking I’m some unlovable piece of shit. It works well for me. Women throw themselves at me because of it.

But for some reason, with this flight attendant with an attitude, I don’t think I like that. Clearly, my reputation doesn’t do it for her. But if she liked me, even a little bit, it would make it a lot more fun to mess with her on the airplane, which is still my mission for this season. But she kind of can’t

stand me, it seems, and everything I do on board just makes her like me even less.

I think I want her to like me, though. Like on a human level.

“Don’t believe everything you see in the media. It’s a lot of smoke and mirrors to push the narrative my PR team wants them to push.”

“So, you’re saying you don’t leave the arena every night with a new girl? And you actually give a shit about someone other than yourself?”

My brows shoot up at her directness. “Is there something wrong with leaving the arena with a new girl each night?”

“Not at all,” Stevie quickly states, which throws me off. I figured she would say yes. Most women don’t wholly support the whole “man-whore” thing. “But you said it’s not as it seems. It seems like that’s pretty accurate to the picture they’ve painted of you.”

“Well...” I rub the back of my neck, suddenly feeling put on the spot. I don’t often feel the need to explain myself or my actions, but for some reason, I want to. “Believe it or not, there are times when I walk those women out of the arena, hoping the media takes pictures, then I put them in a cab and send them home.”

Stevie’s brows shoot up, taken aback.

“But then, yeah, there are times they come home with me. My image makes me a shitload of money. Doesn’t hurt to play into it, and the benefits aren’t half bad either.”

An understanding laugh heaves in Stevie’s chest.

Damn, she really is pretty, and her lack of judgment is attractive. Regardless of her sometimes-shitty attitude or the stained and tattered sweatpants she’s wearing, that have seen better days.

Stevie eyes me for a moment, a memory flashing in her eyes before her smile falls. “I gotta get going.” She quickly turns away from me.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” I once again jog to stop her. These shoes are Louboutins. No one should be running in Louboutins. “What just happened?”

Stevie pauses for a moment and my attention falls to her thumb as she nervously spins the ring that lives there.

“The other night,” she begins. “What did you mean when you said, when it comes to food, you trust my opinion more than the other girls?”

I furrow my brows in confusion.

“When you wanted me to make you something other than your dinner you didn’t like. You said you trusted my opinion over my coworkers when it came to food.”

Oh, that. I forgot she got all weird after I said that.

“Yeah, what about it?”

“What did you mean by that?”

Clearly, I’m lost here.

“I meant what I said? That I trust your opinion about food more than those other girls.”

“But what did that mean?” she presses.

I take a deep breath, trying to figure out what the fuck she’s talking about. Women, I tell you. They’re all a little nutty.

“Look, Stevie. I’m a simple man—”

“No, you’re not.”

“Okay,” I laugh. She got me there. *Simple* probably isn’t the best word to describe myself. I don’t leave the house without a planned and prepped ensemble. “Direct. I’m direct. There’s no hidden meaning when I say something. I don’t lie. I don’t bullshit. What I said, I meant.”

“Got it.” Once again, she turns away from me, but I stop her with a hand on her arm.

“I’m missing something here. Mind filling me in on how I offended you?”

Stevie sticks the end of her disgusting hoodie string in her mouth before continuing to twirl the gold ring on her thumb. “Well, you told the girl who isn’t a size two that you trust her opinion about food more than the girls who are a size two.”

“Okay?”

“You see how I could take that as a way of you judging my body?”

Whoa, what?

“What?” I ask in shock, my eyes wide. “Is that why you got all weird and hid in the back the rest of the flight? You thought I was talking about your body?”

Stevie stays silent, her eyes pulled away from mine.

“First of all, that thought has never once crossed my mind. Your ass and tits are insane, though,” which pulls a laugh from the wild-haired girl.

“And I don’t know what those other girls eat, but my comment had nothing to do with your clothing size or your body. All I know is when I ran

into you at the bar in Denver, the burger you had ordered looked amazing. Then when I got up to use the bathroom on the airplane on the way home from Detroit, I saw you scarfing down on that grilled cheese you made, and I wanted one too. What I said had nothing to do with your body, just your taste buds. We like the same kind of food.”

A blush rushes up and covers Stevie’s freckled cheeks. “Oh,” she squeaks out, seeming embarrassed for overreacting.

“And if you really want me to be direct about your body.” I give her a once-over, clearly checking her out. “It’s banging. You should start showing it off. These sweatpants are atrocious, though.”

Finally, a relaxed laugh echoes from Stevie’s mouth and into my ears. It sounds nice.

“But for real, do you shop at the thrift store or something?” I yank at the tattered fabric on her leg that might fall apart if I pull too hard.

Stevie quickly looks down at her outfit, if you want to call it that. “Yes,” she states without hesitation.

“We don’t pay you enough? I can do something about that.”

“No,” she laughs. “I just like buying secondhand.”

Now that, I don’t get. Granted, I have a tailor who custom-makes half of my clothes, and the other half is designer, but used? No, thank you.

“Do you shop at Louis Vuitton, Prada, and Tom Ford?” she asks.

“Yes.”

Stevie laughs. “I know. I was kidding. I can tell you only wear designer. You’re a pretty one, Evan Zanders.” She adds a condescending pat on my chest.

“Aw, sweetheart. You think I’m pretty?”

She playfully rolls her eyes. “Stop calling me ‘sweetheart.’”

“Never.”

Her soft gaze locks with mine, both of us silent but unwilling to tear our eyes off one another.

After a beat, Stevie starts walking backward, heading off in the direction she was going before I chased her down, but she still faces me. “You know, Zanders. Now that you mention it, you guys *don’t* pay me enough. I think a raise is in order.”

I keep my lips pressed together in a hard line, trying to hold back my smile, but she got me there. I really walked my ass right into that trap. “You gonna start being nice to me on the airplane if I do that for you?”

She takes a moment, cocking her head in contemplation as she continues to walk away from me. “Doubtful.”

The smile is out. I can’t really hold it back any longer.

“You gonna start being nice to *me* and stop being a needy little fucker with that call light?” she asks with a knowing grin.

“Fuck no. You may as well put your running shoes on next flight. I’m gonna be running your ass up and down that aisle for me.”

I can hear her laugh all the way from here, though she’s already halfway down the block. “I’ll be sure to stretch before you work me!” she calls out, turning away from me.

Granted, she didn’t intend for that to come off sexual, but now all I can think about is working her in a different way and how much fun I’d have throwing around that curvy body. Stretching or not, she still wouldn’t be able to walk properly the next day.

Not to be a creep, but I watch Stevie until she gets to her destination the next block over. And I do so simply because Chicago’s crime rate is out of this world. It has nothing to do with the way her ass moves or her hips sway behind those god-awful sweatpants that really need to be thrown in the garbage.

ZANDERS



“Did you see today’s headline?” Maddison puts his phone right in front of my face.

The tabloid reads, “*Evan Zanders, new week—new woman.*” And below that is a giant photo of me leaving the arena last night with the chick I invited to my game.

“You gonna tell them that you had a cab waiting for her outside your building, and she never even made it inside? And that instead of taking her upstairs, you came over to our place so you could read your niece a bedtime story?”

“Let them believe what they want to believe.”

“You mean, let them believe what *Rich* wants them to believe,” Maddison retorts.

“I just have to play the game until the end of the season. Rich thinks that Chicago won’t re-sign me without the bad-guy-doesn’t-care-about-anyone-other-than-himself persona, so I gotta keep playing into it.”

“Yeah, sure. Because Chicago won’t re-sign you for being the best defenseman on the team and one of the best in the league, and they’re definitely not going to re-sign you for being a Norris Trophy finalist three of the last four seasons.” Maddison’s voice drips with sarcasm. “They’re for sure only going to re-sign you if you continue to pull an astronomical amount of pussy.”

“With how much money is on the line, it’s not worth the risk to find out otherwise.”

Without thinking or needing absolutely anything, my hand darts up, pushing the flight attendant's call light. The ding radiates throughout the cabin as the blue light shines above my head.

"Zee, leave her the fuck alone." Maddison shakes his head. "We land in Nashville in fifteen minutes, and you haven't stopped pushing that button all flight."

"I can't. I promised myself I would make Stevie's job a living hell this season. I can't back out on a promise."

"You're so full of shit."

"What are you talking about?"

"Zee, you are the most unapologetic and blunt person I know, but you're lying to yourself if you think you keep pressing that damn call button because you want to make her life harder."

"Why else would I be?"

Maddison's head falls back on the headrest with a condescending laugh. "Since when did you become so dense, dude? You want to sleep with her. It's fucking obvious."

Well, shit. Yeah, I know that, but I was hoping I was a bit more subtle about it.

I realized it last week after I ran into Stevie outside the elevator in Maddison's apartment building. Regardless of how tattered and worn her sweatpants were, I couldn't stop imagining peeling them off her then burying my head between her legs.

Our flirty banter quickly straightened out my confusion. Her attitude and resistance to me are no longer teetering on the side of frustrating. It's all intrigue and need at this point.

When Maddison's private penthouse elevator got fixed, but I continued to use the public one in hopes that maybe the curly-haired flight attendant would run into me again, that's when I knew my plan for this season had changed. It's no longer about teaching her a lesson and reminding her of who she works for. It was about getting her to like me and hopefully getting her to want to sleep with me too.

But it would be more suspicious if I didn't make her life on board a living hell, so I've continued to do just that all flight. Plus, I don't shit where I eat, which I've been trying to remind myself. So, fucking my flight attendant isn't really an option, regardless of how much I've been thinking about it.

“What now?” Stevie asks in frustration as she presses the light above my head to turn it off.

Yeah, Evan. What now?

I don’t need a single fucking thing, but it’s like that light has been a magnet, and I can’t keep myself from pressing it, knowing that every time I do, a sexy flight attendant with a bit of an attitude gets delivered to me.

“Um...” I stumble. “I want...” Think. Of. Something. You idiot. “I want —”

“He *wants* to sleep with you,” Maddison chimes in from the seat next to me.

Actually, I want to smack my best friend in the back of the head and tell him to shut the fuck up, but we aren’t in middle school, and that’d make things too obvious.

Not that subtlety is my specialty by any means. I’m not shy about the things I want, but this one thing, this one woman, I shouldn’t want and can’t have.

Turning my head towards Maddison, I hold eye contact, unblinking, telling him I’m going to fuck him up as soon as we are off this plane.

All he does is fall into a fit of laughter, finding himself exceptionally hilarious.

When I turn back to Stevie, there’s a world of amusement dancing in her blue-green eyes as she tries to hold back her smile. “How about something I can actually get you?”

“Am I going to see you in Nashville?”

What. The. Fuck. Is wrong with me? *Am I going to see you in Nashville?* I sound like a desperate fucking loser needing to pin down some plans as if I don’t have endless options at my fingertips.

Nashville is a prime city for me. My Instagram is already flooded with messages from my Tennessee roster, and I can guarantee that if I want, my dick will be buried deep inside one of them tonight.

“Great question,” Stevie retorts. “You seem to follow me everywhere I go, so I can only assume you’ll pop up at whatever bar I’m at tonight.”

Maddison’s head snaps to me, a confused look covering his face. I may have failed to mention that I’ve seen Stevie outside of the plane a couple of times. And regardless of that information, he still knows I want to fuck her. So, that’s great.

I'm currently entirely tongue-tied for the first time in my life, but thankfully the pilot saves me by coming over the PA system and calling for the flight attendants' landing check. Stevie takes off to the back of the plane to take her seat.

"Zee..." Maddison's tone is entirely serious. "Don't do it."

"Don't do what?" There's a sickeningly sly smile creeping across my lips. I'm not great at acting dumb, and right now is no exception as my best friend rolls his eyes at me.

"For her sake, do not sleep with her. She works for you, and she's going to be on this plane for the entire season with us. That shit gets around the locker room like wildfire. You know that. For her sake, keep it in your pants, man."

Taking a deep breath, I nod my head. "I don't shit where I eat," reminding both my best friend as well as myself.

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STEVIE



I'm so close. My toes are curled, my legs are spread wide, and my head is pushed into the pillow of my hotel bed. My vibrator buzzes in my hand as my body squirms beneath it, on the brink of getting off. My eyes screw shut as my handheld best friend continues to work its magic over my sensitive nerves.

There's not a work trip I take without this thing. And it's been a while since I've really gotten off, so this overdue orgasm is about to rip through my body. I can feel it.

I'm so close. So fucking close as I visualize someone else doing this instead of the bright purple rubber toy in my hand.

Michael B. Jordan. Yes.

Liam Hemsworth. Yes.

Oh my God, I'm right there.

Evan Zanders. No.

No. No. No. Please no.

But it's too late as my entire body contracts, and my mouth falls open as I come, visualizing that Zanders is the one making it happen. His tattooed skin and hazel eyes are all I can see as I hit my high. His gold chain around his neck. His corded back muscles. His long fingers and perfect teeth. No. Fuck no.

Once I finally come down, I throw my vibrator across my hotel room in frustration and betrayal. Did I seriously just come to the image of Evan Zanders fucking me?

Yes. Yes, I did.

Have I been able to picture anyone else all week, ever since I saw the outline of what he's sporting in his sweatpants on our flight home from Detroit?

No. No, I haven't.

Which is why I was overdue for an orgasm. I haven't come all week. I've stopped myself anytime his stupid pretty face came into my mind, and I've been sexually frustrated since.

"Stevie!" a couple of girls squeal, accompanied by several knocks at my door.

Shit. Is it nine already?

I grab a pair of sweatpants from my suitcase and struggle to step into them, attempting to get dressed while also stumbling over to the door. I pull them over my ass before I swing it open.

"Ahhh!" both Hannah and Jackie shriek as they engulf me in a hug.

This reception is a little unexpected. I haven't seen or talked to my old high school friends in quite a while but felt the need to tell them I was coming to town. We have an ongoing group chat, but it's typically just a conversation between the two of them. When I told them I was coming back to my hometown, they insisted we get together for a night out.

"Hey, guys." I hug them back, or at least attempt to, but they're pinning my arms to my body.

"Please tell me that's not what you're wearing." Hannah pulls away from our embrace, eyeing my body up and down.

"Of course not." I look down at my loungewear. "I gotta change real quick, and we can go."

Checking out my friends' outfits, I'm glad I brought something out of my comfort zone to wear. Hannah is decked out in a sequin minidress, and Jackie's cropped top shows off her toned midsection perfectly. I'd rather go out in my oversized T-shirt and baggy jeans, but this town already makes me feel like I don't fit in as it is.

"Is that your vibrator?" Hannah questions, staring at the purple toy on the floor.

"Uhhh..." I hesitate, grabbing it and shoving it back into my suitcase. *Wear your mask of confidence. Own it. It's not like they know you just came to the mental image of one of your clients fucking you.* "Sure is," I confidently state.

A lot of women use vibrators. There's nothing to be ashamed of. It keeps you from making some poor choices when you have this thing at your fingertips.

I grab the outfit I planned to wear tonight out of my suitcase before slipping into the bathroom to change.

"So..." Jackie begins, speaking loudly so I can hear her behind the bathroom door. "How's Ryan?"

I roll my eyes, thankful to be locked in the bathroom so she can't see me. Jackie, like every girl in high school, was eager for my twin brother's attention. He never did anything with her, knowing she was my friend, but every time she brings him up, it feels like she has ulterior motives behind her questioning.

"He's good." I quickly brush her off as I slip on the miniskirt I brought for a night out. I thrifted it last week and love the way it hugs my hips and ass. Typically, I would never wear this outfit, but something about being back in Nashville makes me feel the need to dress the part. To try a little harder.

I finish my look off with a pair of heels and a body-hugging long-sleeved top.

Not so surprisingly, Zanders' words from last week have been playing on repeat in my mind.

"Your body is banging. You should start showing it off."

I can't help but smile at myself in the full-length mirror.

Leaving my sweatpants and sweatshirt on the bathroom floor, I head back into the central part of my room.

"Oh." Hannah stops in her tracks, checking me out, her eyes flickering up and down my body.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just didn't expect you to wear something so...*tight*. That's not like you."

And suddenly, there's goes that bit of genuine confidence. I try to put the mask back on, but it's almost impossible to do so in my hometown.

"Should I change?" Though, I have no idea what I'd wear. I only brought one outfit to go out this week.

"No, you look fine," Jackie chimes in. "But you're going to straighten your hair, right?"

My eyes dart back and forth between Hannah and Jackie, noting their perfectly smooth bleach blonde hair. The difference between their texture and mine was a huge insecurity in high school. People teased me for my wild curls, so much so that I straightened my hair almost every day in hopes of controlling them and looking like my peers.

But as I got older, I learned how to take care of my natural texture, and I haven't straightened it in years.

"No. I'm wearing it like this." I push my hair out of my face. Grabbing my purse off the bed, I head to the door. "Where are we going first?"

"Whiskey Town."

I quickly shake my head. "I don't think that's a good idea. It's right across the street from the arena. There's a good chance some of the hockey team will be there."

"We know." Jackie smiles with mischief. "That's why we're going there first. We want to meet some of your new hockey boys." She knocks her narrow hip into mine.

"We can't. I can get in trouble for that."

Hannah rolls her eyes at me. "Stevie, it's fine. No one is going to care if you happen to end up at the same bar as some of the guys on the team."

"No, you guys don't get it. I can literally get fired for fraternizing with them."

"Then don't fraternize," Jackie states with a casual shrug. "But just because you can't hang out with them doesn't mean we have to avoid them. The least you can do is introduce us."

I should've seen this coming. I should've known better. I should've listened to my brother's warning and realized that the only reason Hannah and Jackie were so eager to hang out with me was that I happened to work for professional athletes, and they thought I would be their hookup.

But no. Screw that. I just don't know how to get out of the situation now that I'm in it.

Once outside, Hannah and Jackie walk about five feet ahead of me, eager to get to the bars on the main strip in Nashville. There's a good chance some of the team will be at a fan-favorite, Whiskey Town, but if not, I'm sure my friends from high school will make us bar hop until we find them.

I can only hope that Tara isn't out tonight. If she's out on the town and I so happen to be in the same bar as the team, I'm screwed.

Indy texted me when we got to our hotel rooms, telling me to have fun and asking if I wanted to grab brunch with her tomorrow. I quickly said yes, and now I wish I would've never told Hannah and Jackie I was back in town. I would've much rather had a night on the town with my cool and kind coworker.

"How do we look?" Jackie asks as she and Hannah quickly primp themselves right outside the bar.

"Great," I absentmindedly answer without looking at them.

We show our IDs at the door, and the two of them quickly scan the scene as soon as we step inside. "There's an empty table," Hannah says, pointing towards the back corner of the crowded bar. "Stevie, grab us two vodka-sodas while we snag a table back there."

Hannah and Jackie loop their arms around each other, taking off to the far corner of the bar. They look exactly the same from behind—long blonde hair, tan legs that lean on the spectrum of orange, and short and petite frames.

Glancing down at myself, I look nothing like them, and being back in this city constantly reminds me that I don't fit in. That I don't look like the girls I grew up with. That I don't fit their construct of "pretty."

I feel invisible as I attempt to squeeze past the people crowding the bar. No one is even waiting for a drink or ordering a new one, yet no one yields some space for me.

I hate this night already.

I don't know if I've ever felt as self-conscious as I do in this moment. It's as if I'm all too aware of the area I'm occupying, with other bodies swarming around me. It's as if I need to apologize for existing in this space. For being the size I am. For not being small enough to squeeze past the crowd without bothering anyone.

Eventually, a couple starts aggressively making out. They're pressed together so closely that it makes just enough room for me to sneak up to the bar top.

The bartender laughs as I sigh in relief, sidling up to the counter. "What can I get you?"

"Can I get two vodka-sodas with lime and an IPA?" She grabs a couple of glasses by her well. "Your *biggest* IPA."

A smile forms on her lips as she exchanges the smaller glass for a much larger one. As she turns to the tap, I look up to scan the room, feeling a pair

of eyes on me.

Hazel eyes.

Hidden in the back corner of the bar, Zanders pulls his beer to his lips, his eyes shining with amusement and his mouth tugging up in a smile behind the glass bottle as he stares at me.

“You following me?” he silently mouths from across the bar.

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ZANDERS



“**Y**ou’re buying all my drinks tonight,” Maddison reminds me as we grab a table in the back of an overly crowded bar across the street from Nashville’s arena.

“Deal.” I keep my head down, and Maddison keeps his hat pulled low, both of us trying to fly under the radar. “Rio, you’re buying tonight,” I call out to my younger teammate.

Maddison shakes his head at me with a low chuckle.

“Again?” Rio whines over the live band filling the bar with country music. “But I always buy. I’m not even a rookie anymore.”

“You’re still the rookie until we find a new one we like.”

He takes off towards the bar without another word.

Maddison’s thumbs are moving a mile a minute, texting someone on his phone. “Logan?” I ask with assumption.

“Yeah.” He lets out a content and happy sigh.

I can’t even give my best friend shit for being completely pussy-whipped by his wife. Honestly, I’m just happy I got him out of his hotel room for once. He’s my closest friend, but I’ve never been able to relate to him in only wanting to sleep with one woman for the rest of my life, let alone spend every waking moment thinking about someone the way Maddison does Logan.

He dreads life on the road and loves being home, whereas I have no reason to look forward to home other than his family. I look forward to a different city each night.

Rio quickly comes back, his hands full, the necks of beer bottles laced between each of his fingers. A hot little redhead follows right behind him, her hands full to the brim with shots.

“No,” Maddison quickly interjects, turning to Rio. “No shots. We play in less than twenty-four hours.”

“Don’t look at me, Captain,” Rio says. “These generous women at the bar bought us a round. Wanted to wish us good luck tomorrow.”

I look over Maddison’s shoulder to the two girls sitting at the bar top, both hot as hell, as they hold a couple of shot glasses up to us in cheers.

“One won’t hurt.” I grab a shot glass filled with clear liquid.

The chick with copper strands rests her elbows on our high-top, sticking her tits out as she leans in close to Maddison.

“I’ll drink both of ours. I don’t mind,” she seductively offers with a wink.

Maddison, Rio, and I burst into laughter as the redhead furrows her brows in confusion.

I get that there are athletes out there who don’t give a shit if they’re married or not. They’ll sleep around on their partners, especially on the road. Maddison is not that athlete. The guy’s got his ring finger tattooed with his girl’s initials, for Christ’s sake.

“That’s not going to get you anywhere,” I tell the sexy ginger, referring to her hitting on my best friend. “You may as well turn your attention over here.”

Her focus zeroes in on me, quicker than you’d believe, as we connect our shot glasses and throw back the tequila simultaneously.

“Another?” she asks, batting her eyelashes.

I glance up at Maddison, who is clearly uncomfortable. I promised him a boy’s night, at least starting out. Besides, he won’t last long before he decides to sneak back to the hotel and call his wife. Maybe I’ll work on expanding my Nashville roster once he goes.

“Not tonight,” I tell her, referring to more than just another drink.

“I’m Rio!” my teammate bursts, finding an opening to get a little attention.

“Rio...I like that name.” She nods towards the bar for him to follow her back to her friends.

My teammate quickly stands from his seat, his green eyes shining with excitement.

“Have I taught him nothing?” I ask Maddison, watching Rio behind his shoulder, looking thirsty as fuck and not for more alcohol. “We don’t chase women. Women chase us.”

“*You* don’t chase women. Women chase you,” he corrects with a laugh. “Don’t lump me in with your bullshit.”

“Fair.”

A couple of petite blondes take the table directly next to us, trying to make eye contact as they sit. Maddison doesn’t notice, but my gaze drags up and down both of them. They’re cute, but their fake tan is leaning dangerously close to Oompa-Loompa status, and the desperation for attention radiates off them. I quickly avert my focus back to my table, uninterested in either of them.

“What’s the plan for our delayed Halloween? Has Ella decided what we’re going to be yet?”

An amused smile forms on Maddison’s lips. “Yep.”

“And?”

I don’t know if anything will compare to last year when two-year-old Ella Jo decided she was going to be The Hulk for Halloween, and therefore our crew took on the rest of the Marvel characters as we walked our block in Chicago. It was quite the sight for our neighbors to see my little niece decked out in green paint with her parents and three uncles dressed to the nines right along with her.

I’m pretty sure it’s as fun for us as it is for Ella to go all-out as much as we do. It’s been our tradition since she was born to coordinate in group costumes. Even when we miss Halloween because of road games, like this year, we make sure to make it up sometime in November.

“She’s going to be Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*.”

“Oh, hell yes. I call dibs on being the Beast.”

Maddison shakes his head to tell me no.

“What? I have to be the fucking teacup or something?”

“Ella said she doesn’t want to do *Beauty and the Beast*. Apparently, the theme this year is Disney princesses.”

I almost choke on my beer, and Maddison’s laugh is deep and full.

“Fine,” I resign, knowing I’ll do anything for my favorite three-and-a-half-year-old. “I call dibs on the Little Mermaid then.”

“Have you met my kid?” Maddison asks rhetorically. “She’s already assigned all of us. And if you think my wife, with red-ass hair, is going to

let you be Ariel, you're mistaken."

I can't help but laugh. And not only because it's going to be fucking hilarious to see us all dressed up like a bunch of princesses roaming the streets of Chicago on Halloween. But because we're having this conversation in the middle of a crowded bar in Nashville, surrounded by women who would love nothing more than our attention. However, all we can talk about is my best friend's spunky daughter, who we'd all do just about anything to make happy.

"So, who am I?"

"You, my friend, are Elsa."

"Elsa?!" I interject. "Fuck *Frozen*."

"The little miss spoke." Maddison puts his hands up. "She makes the rules."

I shake my head in disappointment. "Fucking Elsa? Little EJ is killing me." I'm going to have to have a conversation with my niece about that one.

Pulling my beer to my lips, my eyes immediately get drawn to the chestnut curls bouncing around by the bar. I'd recognize them anywhere. In fact, I thought about the owner of that wild mane far too often this week.

How does this keep happening? It's like the universe wants to test me.

Stevie seems overwhelmed at the bar as she orders herself a drink.

Is she by herself again?

I press my ass into my seat, willing myself to stay put. But all I want to do is go over there, buy her drink, and maybe mess with her a bit. I like seeing her get flustered, though lately, she seems to be the one flustering me.

Maddison's gaze follows mine as he turns to see who it is that holds my attention.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" he asks. "Did you tell her to meet you here? Zee, what the hell are you doing, man?"

"I didn't tell her shit. This keeps happening. It's like the universe is begging me to fuck her."

"You're an idiot."

"I'm kidding." Sort of. "But she's kind of hot, right?"

"We aren't talking about this." Maddison shakes his head. "She works for us."

Deciding to stay silent on that one, I keep my stare on the flight attendant across the room.

“Would it really be the worst thing in the world if we hooked up? I mean, it’d just be one time. To get it out of our systems.”

“*Our* systems? Like you and her?” Maddison laughs condescendingly. “You mean *your* system. Last I checked, she’s not a fan of yours whatsoever.”

“Everyone is a fan of me.”

Maddison peeks over his shoulder to the bar then back to me, shaking his head. “You do you, man. But that girl is going to be on our plane all year. You’re going to fuck her and never think about her again, and she’s going to fall for you, like they all do. But the difference is this time, you’re going to have to see her on the plane after every single road game.”

I kind of like the way that sounds—seeing her after every game.

Attempting to hide my smile, I bring my bottle back to my lips and take a swig. Finally, Stevie’s blue-green eyes meets mine.

“*You following me?*” I silently mouth across the bar to her.

“You’re so fucked,” Maddison quietly reminds me.

Stevie quickly averts her attention away from me, and it takes everything in my body to stay seated and not go over to her. She keeps her head down as she makes her way through the crowd, her hands full with three drinks.

She’s either extremely thirsty, or she’s not alone tonight.

As soon as she walks around the bar top, my dick comes to attention, waking up real quick. She looks incredible tonight, tight little skirt pulled taut around her ass. Her legs are naturally bronzed, her thighs are thick, and those heels she’s got on add a few inches to her stature.

Glad she took my advice about showing off her body. She’s a fucking smoke show, and I don’t think she has any idea.

My mouth gapes as she walks my way, partly in shock that she’s willingly coming over to me and partially in awe of how sexy she looks tonight. Her little outfit is vastly different than the sweats I saw her in last week. These clothes show off every dip and curve in her body.

But she doesn’t come to me. Instead, she keeps her focus anywhere but me and stops short at the table next to us with the two desperate girls who haven’t pulled their attention away from our table. She quickly turns to her blonde friends, pretending as if she has no idea who I am.

Setting the drinks on the table, she takes the seat facing away from me, and instantly, like a magnet being pulled, I stand from my chair.

“Leave her alone,” Maddison quietly scolds. “If she wanted to talk to you, she would’ve come over here.”

Fuck, he’s right. I retake my seat. When did I become such a desperate motherfucker? But also, why doesn’t she want to talk to me?

Just being honest here, I’ve never had someone refuse my attention, and now that I know my intentions, I think the chase is making me want to sleep with Stevie even more.

I try to focus on my conversation with my best friend as we both nurse the beers in our hands, but I’m having a hard time. It’s as if I have selective hearing tonight, and all I can focus on is the flight attendant to my left and her two friends.

If you want to call them that.

Over the last thirty minutes, all I’ve heard is them cutting Stevie down. She might not notice that these girls are not her real friends, but it’s pretty evident to me. They’ve mentioned her hair being all over the place, which I must say is ten times more amazing than either of their stringy bleached strands. They’ve underhandly made comments about her body, which makes me real sensitive about that topic for her after Stevie got upset last week.

Her body is ridiculous in the best way possible. It’s thick and curvy, and yeah, there’s a bit more to hold on to, but that’s definitely not a bad thing.

At one point, when one of them comments about wanting another drink and Stevie needing to be the one to go grab it, my eyes dart over in a scowl, unable to hide my annoyance.

Blondie number one takes my eye contact as some sort of open door instead of the “shut the fuck up” eyes I was trying to make.

“Those guys are on the team you work for, right?” she asks Stevie, keeping her eyes on me. I’ve looked away from her, but I can feel her stare. “Introduce us.”

“No,” Stevie says in a hush, though since she’s all I’m focused on right now, I can hear her perfectly clear. “I mean, yes, they’re on the team, but leave them alone. They don’t want us bothering them.”

I wouldn’t mind Stevie bothering me.

“You mean they probably don’t even realize you work for them. Do they even know your name?” The two blondes burst into grossly high-

pitched cackles.

These girls are brutally mean, and I have no idea why the hell Stevie would hang out with them.

“Probably not,” she says, though I know she realizes that’s a lie. I’ve called her “Stevie Sweetheart” more times than I could count.

It’s strange seeing this side of her, the side where she won’t stand up for herself, because in the time I’ve known her, she’s had no problem putting me in my place.

Without thinking about it any longer, I stand from my seat, finally fed up with these girls for Stevie’s sake. But still, I need to play it cool. Or as cool as I can. I really feel like I’ve lost some of my fucking game this week.

I casually turn towards the restroom, even though I don’t need to use it. As I walk by Stevie’s table, I gently run my hand over her shoulders, trailing my touch across the back of her exposed neck. I brush my fingertips against the goosebumps peppering her skin before giving her a light squeeze.

Fuck, her skin is soft.

“Hey, Stevie girl,” I toss over my shoulder as I walk by, my lips lifting on one side. “Good to see you.” I turn to face her, slowly walking backward to the restroom, my smirk all charm as I keep my focus on her pretty freckled face.

She runs a hand up her neck, exactly where I touched her as her cheeks turn a rosy shade of pink.

I spot the look of surprise and confusion on her friends’ faces. Fully satisfied, I turn back and walk down the hall towards the bathroom.

As I’m waiting in this ridiculously long line for the bathroom that I don’t even need to use, my phone vibrates in my pocket.

Maddison: *You’re so fucked.*

He’s not wrong.

Maddison: *I figured that was my cue to go. Tab is closed. See you tomorrow.*

Even though I don’t need to piss, I do so anyway. I can’t exactly turn around right away and head back to my table. My not-so-stealth cover would be blown.

On my way out, I keep my head low, hoping to go unrecognized as I pass by a trio of dudes dressed like dumbass cowboys. And I’m not talking

about authentic cowboys. I'm talking about "I'm in the South for the first time in my life, so I bought a pair of cowboy boots" cowboys.

"I call dibs on sparkly dress," one of them says, nodding towards Stevie's table.

"I get the other blonde," another chimes in.

"Fuck that," the third one argues. "You're not leaving me with the big girl."

It takes everything in me not to turn around and punch this fucker in the face. I know he did not just talk about her that way. He doesn't know shit about her. Well, I don't really either, but I do know she's ten times sexier than either of her desperate friends. And she's got the attitude to back it up. Why wouldn't he want her?

Obviously, he's got a tiny dick. It's the only explanation. If he can't handle a woman's body, he may as well say that instead of cutting her down to make himself feel better.

Oh fuck.

I'm so fucked. It's decided. I need to sleep with her before my balls turn the deepest shade of blue.

The threesome of frat bros takes off towards Stevie's table before I have the chance to.

Maddison is long gone by the time I make it back to my seat, and Rio is still batting his eyelashes at the girls at the bar. My beer is empty, and I'm not going to drink another the night before a game, but I can't get myself to leave while Stevie is here surrounded by five of the shittiest people on the planet.

Trying to be sly but surely failing at it, I keep my selective hearing locked on the table next to mine, peering over every once in a while. Stevie's two friends are entirely entranced by frat bro Chad and frat bro Brad while leaving her to the biggest asshole of them all.

He's clearly uninterested and not even trying to be subtle about the fact that he got "stuck" with her as he sits a good two feet away and refuses to make eye contact, even when she's speaking.

I fucking hate this for her. I'd hate this for anyone.

I also hate the way I can't stay put.

Standing from my table, I go right over to hers.

"Holy shit, you're Evan Zanders!" the one who refuses to give Stevie the time of day announces. "Can I get an autograph?"

I pause for a moment, letting him get his hopes up. “No.”

Looking down at the curly-haired girl next to me, I push her locks away from her face, and without thinking, I lift her chin to look at me. My tatted hand surrounds her cheek as I rub my thumb against the flushed and freckled skin. Stevie’s piercing eyes are blazing into me with confusion as her mouth gapes open. Not that I blame her. *I* don’t even know what I’m doing.

“Ready to go?” I ask, my eyes locked and focused on her blue-green ones.

She doesn’t answer. She just sits there in a surprised daze as the five onlookers share the same shocked expression.

“Thanks for keeping her company,” I tell the group as I lace my hand with Stevie’s, ushering her to stand and follow me out. They might not note the sarcasm in my voice, but I sure as hell do.

She drags behind me, still in a confused trance, so I wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her body into mine, essentially guiding her outside. I can feel the group’s eyes on our backs, so I lean down and kiss the top of Stevie’s head to really sell the act.

I’ve never kissed a chick’s head before, and I’m not going to lie, it felt kind of weird.

STEVIE



“What...” I stumble, still in a confused stupor. “What are you doing?” I pull my body away from Zanders’ once we make it outside the bar. Part of me liked the weight of his arm on my shoulder, but most of me is beyond confused as to what is going on.

Zanders seems almost as stunned as I am by his little public display as he stands frozen right in front of the busiest bar on the main street in Nashville.

The buzz of live music echoes from every honky-tonk on the street.

“Holy Shit! It’s EZ!” someone yells, pulling out their phone and snapping a picture of the star hockey player.

“Zanders!” More pictures, more flashes.

“Fuck,” Zanders mutters under his breath, dipping his head down, trying to hide a bit.

“Is this your newest?” a random onlooker asks. My head snaps in his direction when I realize he’s referring to me. “She doesn’t look like your usual type.”

My eyes widen at the statement as my body warms, embarrassment flushing me. I can feel the weight of a dozen sets of eyes on me, not to mention the endless flashes of camera phones.

As quickly as possible, I turn in the opposite direction and run, needing to get away from this scene.

“Stevie, wait!” Zanders calls out, chasing me down. And because he’s tall as fuck, and his legs are practically tree trunks of muscle, he catches up to me in no time.

“Stevie,” he says again, gently pulling my arm back to follow him down a dark alley behind the bar. “Come here. Shit. Stop running away from me all the time.”

I yank my arm from his grasp, entirely flustered by this whole situation. “Can you not say my name out loud while all your fans are taking pictures? I don’t want to be plastered online next to all your puck bunnies.”

Realization hits me as I turn away from him, pushing my hair away from my face. “Oh shit. I’m so screwed. I’m so, so, so screwed. I’m going to get fired.”

“What are you talking about?” Zanders asks.

“I can’t be seen with you.” I motion towards his stunning body that’s barely outlined thanks to the small light hanging off the building above his head. “I’m going to get fired.”

I begin to frantically pace the small alley, afraid to go back on the main strip, worried his eager fans will be there ready to take even more pictures.

“Stevie, chill.” Zanders pulls my hands away from my hair as the cold metal of his gold rings shocks my flushed hands. “Why would you get fired?”

“Those pictures,” I blurt out. “I can’t be seen with anyone on the team. I’ll lose my job if I’m caught fraternizing.” My tone comes out frantic, the words stringing together.

“Wait, really?” Zanders’ face is covered in surprise and maybe a little bit of...disappointment? “You can’t hang out with us?”

“No! Oh God, no.” Concealing my face with my hands, regret floods me as I continue to pace the narrow alley. I should’ve never come out tonight. The whole evening has been terrible since Hannah and Jackie showed up at my hotel. Neither of them gave a shit that I was with them. They just wanted to use me as an in with the people I work for. The guy wearing those cowboy boots that I could tell he purchased today couldn’t even treat me like a human. I was in no way, shape, or form attracted to him, but I was trying to be friendly by holding a conversation, though it was clear he didn’t want to be stuck with me.

And now those pictures. Oh God, those pictures.

Looking up, I find Zanders frantically texting away on his phone. “What are you doing?”

“I’m handling it.”

“Handling what?”

“Those pictures.” He puts his phone back in his pocket. “My PR team is on it. Anything that makes it online will be taken down just as quickly.”

“They can do that?”

“I pay them a lot of money to do shit like that, so yes. It’s taken care of.”

Taking a deep breath, my shoulders drop in relief. “Thank you.”

The last thing I want is to be associated with Zanders’ reputation by people thinking I’m another one of his random hookups, but more than that, I can’t lose my job. It’s not even because it’s something I love doing or feel passionate about, but because of its flexible schedule, I get to spend any time I’m home doing what I *am* passionate about. And that’s spending all my free time at the dog shelter. I can’t think of too many other jobs where I can be home and off work for weeks at a time.

“What happened to the whole ‘you never lie’ thing?” I ask out of nowhere, still utterly confused and completely flustered by what just happened. “Whatever that was in there seemed like a lie to me.” I motion towards the bar.

Zanders shrugs. “Sometimes, a small white lie is necessary to get what I want.”

“Get what you want?”

“Yes. Get what I want. And what I wanted was to get you away from those people. They’re not your friends if that’s what you thought.”

“I know they’re not. I just...I have a hard time...” Me explaining that I have a hard time making genuine friends because most everyone I meet wants to use me to get close to my brother would involve me telling Zanders who my brother is, and I don’t want him to know yet. “Never mind.”

Zanders stays quiet, allowing me to continue if I want, but instead, I furrow my brows in confusion, my eyes narrowing into slits as I stare at the beautiful specimen in front of me. “Why are you being nice to me?”

Zanders pops his shoulders, shyly looking away from me, which seems new. This guy doesn’t have a shy bone in his body.

“Last I checked, you’ve been trying to make my job miserable all season, and we can’t stand each other,” I continue. “So, why look out for me?”

That bit of shyness instantly shifts as Zanders’ hazels dart to mine, full of hunger. “You think I can’t stand you?” He takes two leisurely strides

towards me as if he were stalking his prey. “If I can’t stand you, why can’t I stop pushing that damn call light on the plane, knowing you’ll show up right to my seat?”

Um, because you’re hell-bent on making my job a living nightmare.

“If I can’t stand you”—he takes another step forward, closing in on the gap between us—“then why can’t I get you out of my head? Why can’t I stop wondering what you might taste like?”

His eyes fall to my lips. Said lips part to say something, but words have evaded me.

“If I can’t stand you”—Zanders inches forward, leaving absolutely no room between our bodies, his large frame overpowering me—“then why has my only thought of every minute of every day for the last week been me wondering what it would feel like to fuck you?”

He stands over me, his eyes darting between mine, trying to read me, but I have no idea what I’m thinking right now.

“I really want to fuck you, sweetheart,” he softly adds.

My mind floods with disbelief, but at the same time, a jolt of genuine confidence runs through me. This guy, who every girl in North America would probably throw themselves at, is choosing me. Sure, he’s choosing me simply for one night, but still, I didn’t expect that.

Regardless, I’m not losing my job over an athlete who will forget I exist as soon as it’s over.

“Well, I can’t stand you,” I say in hopes it’ll help me put the boundaries back up.

Instead, a deep chuckle comes from his smirking lips before he bites down on the bottom one. “I don’t believe you.”

His thumb traces my cheekbone, but even though his touch ignites my entire body with warmth, I don’t take back my statement.

“Besides,” he continues. “Let’s say that is true, and you can’t stand me. Hate sex is the best sex anyway.”

I keep my focus glued to the gold chain around his neck, knowing I can’t look him in the eye. Behind the shiny metal, the black swirls of his tattoos blend with the deep shade of his skin. It’s all so perfectly distracting.

“What do you say, Stevie?” Zanders lifts my chin with a single finger, pulling my distracted gaze back to him. “One wild night.”

His lips are lifted into a sinister smirk, a devil’s promise in his eyes.

Do I want to? Hell yes. Should I? Absolutely not.

His reputation is the first red flag, reminding me of the promise I made to myself—that I'd never hook up with an athlete again. They're bombarded by groupies, jersey chasers, just hoping for their turn. But God, you can bet he knows exactly what to do, and nobody has properly gotten me off in a while. Sure, there's the purple toy back in my hotel room, but imagine the real thing.

I want to say yes. My vagina wants me to say yes. *Say yes, Stevie. It's only one time.*

"No," my brain speaks for me. "I'm good." Followed by a condescending pat on his chest as I take a step back and away from him.

There's no genuine confidence in what I'm saying or doing right now. It's all an act because I'm freaking the fuck out.

Zanders' lips tilt in an amused grin. He raises his chin slightly as his mischief-filled eyes stare down at me, and I'm pretty sure me saying no is precisely what he expected. He likes that I don't give into him, but I'm starting to like it less and less.

"Open offer," he says, taking a step back and casually tucking his hands into his pockets. "You just let me know when you're ready to give in."

Never sounds good. Never is what my brain wants me to say.

"How about never?"

"Never?" he repeats, brows lifting as he tests me.

I swallow. "Mm-hmm."

"So"—he takes slow commanding steps towards me once again, but this time I retreat at the same pace until my back hits the brick wall of the bar behind me, his muscular body pinning me to it—"you never want me to kiss you?" His lips are lingering just above mine, and I can almost feel their softness and warmth from here.

Contemplating for a moment, my eyes dart to his lips as he sweeps the bottom one, wetting it with his tongue.

I continue to be mesmerized by the movement as I shyly shake my head to tell him no.

Well, that's a bald-faced lie, Stevie.

My heavy breathing and rapidly rising chest are vastly contradictory to the slow, steady inhales and exhailes flowing through Zanders' body. Though we're pressed together so tightly, you might not know where I stop and he starts if it weren't for our entirely different pace in breaths.

His body is large and commanding, suffocating in the most delicious way.

There's a firm pressure resting right above the apex of my thighs, causing my entire body to ache, finally feeling what I've only been lucky enough to see.

He tucks my messy curls away from my face. The pad of his broad thumb gently trails the shell of my ear, ghosting over my endless gold earrings as an unwelcome shiver of need runs up my spine.

"And you never want me to touch you?" he softly asks.

My mouth falls open, needing to fill my lungs with oxygen, but this outdoor alley is currently depleted of any.

Touch me? I want him to touch every inch of me, but if my body's current reaction to feeling him with his clothes on is any indication, I don't think I could handle his bare touch.

"No," I whisper the lie, though the crack in my voice conveys the exact opposite of my words.

Zanders' lips slightly lift in amusement, but he recovers quickly.

He removes his fingers from my ear and neck, placing them in his pockets. "Okay, sweetheart." He takes a step back from me, giving me room and doing exactly as my words said, even though I didn't mean them.

And now my body aches for the pressure he left empty.

"But when you decide to stop lying to yourself, you're going to have to beg me to fuck you..."

I stay silent, completely frozen in this moment.

"On your knees," he adds, his gaze trailing every inch of my body. His attention lingers slightly longer on my mouth, his statement referring to it.

He takes another step back from me, the tension easing in the air. Zanders takes a deep breath, ultimately shifting from the devil dripping in sex to a perfect gentleman as he holds his arm out for mine to loop around.

"Now, let me walk you back to your hotel."

I cautiously eye him with distrust.

He playfully rolls his eyes. "I'll stay a good block away from the front door so your coworkers don't see me."

That's not what my pointed glance meant, but let's add fraternization to the list of why Zanders walking me back to my hotel is a bad idea.

"I just want to make sure you get home okay."

His soft smile is sweet and genuine, so I loop my arm around his, allowing him to guide us back to my hotel. He takes quite a few back streets and alleys, which he says is to avoid any fans, though I do note it adds a good twenty minutes on to our walk together.

And the whole time, my body burns with a need I've never felt before.

Zanders stays across the street as I walk into the lobby of my hotel. As I open the door, I glance back over my shoulder at him. His 6'5" frame is commanding in his tailored-to-fit outfit, and his posture is stiff as he watches me. I offer him a small wave before dipping into the hotel and refusing to look back at him, worried I'll change my mind about tonight.

When my head hits my pillow, I can't help but ask myself, "What the fuck just happened?"

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STEVIE



“Did you have fun last night?” Indy asks before inhaling her plate of vegetarian biscuits and gravy.

“Uh...” I hesitate. “It was definitely interesting. I’ll say that.”

I match her massive bite, filling my mouth with all the carbs I can manage from my favorite local spot in my hometown. Every item on the brunch menu is to die for, and it’s a must anytime I’m back in Nashville.

I’m sure I’ll be regretting this meal when I’m visiting with my mother in a few hours and have to unbutton my jeans in order to sit down and breathe, but it’ll be worth it.

“What was interesting about it?”

Hmm. Let me think. Maybe that Evan Zanders, walking sex ad, told me he wants to fuck me. Right after he saved me from my inconsiderate high school friends who haven’t stopped blowing me up since his little PDA stunt last night.

Or maybe how he pinned me to the wall with his massive body, the bulge in his pants doing all sorts of things to me when it was pressed against the apex of my thighs.

Or how all of a sudden, this sweet side came out of the self-proclaimed “bad boy of Chicago,” when he insisted on walking me back to my hotel.

Interesting might not be the right word for last night. Confusing? Thrilling? Shocking?

I would love to spill all the details to Indy, seeing as I’ve been a ball of emotions since, but we’re coworkers, and the accidental interaction Zanders and I had last night is a fire-able offense.

“Seeing my old high school friends was interesting. They’re not the nicest, and I think last night was the closure I needed on our friendship.”

“Really?” Indy uses her napkin to wipe the edges of her lips. “That sucks, Stevie. You don’t deserve friends like that.”

“All good.” I shrug it off because it is all good. I’ve needed to cut ties with Hannah and Jackie for a while, and their blatant comments that they assumed were backhanded were my final straw. In the back of my mind, I always knew they kept me around as a connection to my brother. I just didn’t expect it to continue in a different capacity because of my new job. Ryan would be pissed if he knew about it. Which is precisely why I’ll keep that to myself, as I do most things my brother would get upset over.

“How was your night?” I ask.

“It was pretty uneventful. I wanted to go out, but I’m still new to this whole private charter thing, and I’m not going to lie, that speech Tara gave us about fraternization was terrifying. I figured locking myself in my hotel room was a safe bet.”

My stomach drops at the thought of Tara’s constant warnings and badgering about staying away from our clients when we’re off the clock. Clearly, I’m not doing a great job of that, no matter how accidental my run-ins with Zanders have been.

“Do you happen to know what Tara did last night?” I cautiously ask, looking down at my plate, and nervously pushing my food around. What if she was out last night? What if she saw me last night? What if she saw *us* last night?

This morning, I scoured the internet for any sign of a leaked photo of Zanders and me outside the bar, but his PR team certainly did their jobs, cleaning up any possible evidence of our interaction.

“Probably doing the exact thing she told us not to do. I’d bet money she was running around looking for the guys from the team last night, acting desperate as hell.”

My eyes dart up from my plate, amusement sweeping across my features as I look at Indy’s wide eyes and gaping mouth.

“Oh fuck.” She quickly slaps her palm over her mouth. “Did I say that out loud?”

A moment of silence falls between us as we look to each other, testing the waters, unsure of where we each stand on the topic of our coworker. Until finally, I double over on my side of the booth, laughing my ass off.

Eventually, Indy joins in, both of us silent due to how hard we are cracking up right now.

“She’s such a hypocrite.” I wipe away the tear that’s pooled at the corner of my eye.

“Oh my God,” Indy sighs in relief. “I’m so glad we’re on the same page because I’ve wanted to ask you for weeks.”

“She’s worried about us fraternizing with the players, but she’s so thirsty when she’s in the aisles talking to them, doing the exact thing she told us not to.” I smile, thoroughly enjoying the boost of serotonin from that laugh attack. “But regardless, it’s not worth the risk of losing our jobs.”

“Is it not?” Indy questions, cocking her head to the side. “I think I might put my job on the line for a night in the sack with one of those hockey boys.”

I eye her for a moment, wondering if she knows something I’m not ready for her to know yet. Or maybe ever.

“Figuratively, of course.” She points to herself. “Loving boyfriend and all that.”

“Of course.”

Indy has made it clear over the past few weeks how she’s in it for the long haul with her live-in boyfriend, Alex. She’ll constantly joke about the temperature rising when the hockey boys start stripping on the airplane or how she’d risk her job for a single night with one of them. But from what I know of her relationship, she loves Alex way too much to risk *him*.

“But if I were single and a certain alternate captain for a certain hockey team from Chicago who just happened to ooze sex appeal continually hit on me, I might risk my job for that.” Indy suggestively looks up at me from across our booth.

“Zanders is not hitting on me when he constantly rings the call light. He’s just torturing me.”

“Mm-hmm,” Indy hums. “Torturing you to get your attention because he wants to screw you.”

I stay silent on that front. Indy doesn’t even know about our interactions outside of the plane, yet she still knows the truth.

“A night in bed with God’s gift to womankind is worth the risk, I’d say.” Indy knowingly raises her eyebrows before taking another bite of her brunch. “And just so you know, figuratively speaking, if you ever did want

to break the whole flight attendant/hockey player boundary thing, your secret would be safe with me.”

I give her a thankful smile, but not big enough to confirm or deny her statement.

“Figuratively, of course,” she adds before taking another bite of her food.

When I pull up to my parents’ house, twenty minutes outside of Nashville, my stomach instantly drops with nerves. I couldn’t tell you the last time I was home. Over the last few years, holidays have been a hit or miss between Ryan’s and my hectic schedules, paired with my blatant attempt to avoid this city.

“Hey, lady,” my driver says from the front seat. “I have another ride. You have to get out.” Understandably so, I’ve been sitting in the back of his car for a couple of minutes now, nervously spinning the gold ring on my thumb and contemplating bailing altogether.

“Sorry.” Inhaling a deep breath, I exit his car and smooth out my top, feeling extremely uncomfortable. And not because I’m still full from brunch, but because I chose an outfit entirely out of my comfort zone. I own a whopping one top my mother would approve of, so here I am wearing the monstrosity.

The blush pink blouse is all frills and lace but still wrinkled as shit from being in my suitcase. Yes, I’d like to ease the inevitable remarks my mother will have, but I clearly don’t care enough to worry about an iron.

My Uber driver takes off as soon as I close the car door, and I’m about two seconds away from chasing him down on foot and begging him to drive me back to my hotel.

“Vee!” my dad calls out, swinging the front door open, his arms stretched wide. “There’s my favorite daughter!”

“I’m your only daughter, Dad.” I smile, making my way to his open arms.

“That you know of,” he teases as he wraps me up in his embrace.

Man, I missed him. He’s the sweetest, but unfortunately, a visit with him comes with a visit from my mother, and that’s something I can’t handle

on a regular basis.

“I love this new job of yours, bringing you home, but what in the world are you wearing?”

“Just trying to make this as painless as possible.”

He pulls away, his hands still grasping my arms, offering me an apologetic smile. My brother might not see how my mother treats me compared to him, but my dad has noticed. It’s been a tough spot for him, trying to have my back while also loving his wife, regardless of her shortcomings.

“Stevie, welcome,” my mother says as soon as I walk into the front door.

The house is spotless. The way it was growing up, when we knew visitors were coming over. Had to keep up impressions. Glad to know I’m categorized as a visitor now.

She gives me a quick and awkward embrace before eyeing me up and down, the disapproval evident on her makeup-caked features. She strokes my hair, attempting to get it to lie down in a more manageable state, but my curls spring right back up.

“Take a seat.” She motions towards the dining room table. “Would you like something to drink?”

“We have some sweet tea,” my dad chimes in with excitement. “I made it fresh this morning.”

“That’s an awful lot of sugar, Neal.”

“I’d love some, Dad. Thank you.”

My mother’s dainty, pale hands smooth her apron before ghosting the pearls around her neck, clearly trying to bite her tongue and resist saying something direct. My Southern mother would never. Bless her heart.

“How’s your brother?”

Of course, her first question would be about my twin brother and not me.

She takes a seat across from me at our dining room table, which is set with elegant place settings as if there were going to be a dinner party tonight, but I know there’s not. It’s all about making things look as pretty as possible at all times.

“He’s good. Busy with the season starting, but good.”

“Is he seeing anyone?”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t think so.”

“He’s got time,” my mother says with the wave of her hand. “He’s only twenty-six. No need to be rushing into anything. He’s such a catch, that boy.”

My dad returns from the kitchen, placing my tea in front of me, followed by a kiss on the top of my head before taking a seat next to my mother.

“How about you, Vee,” he asks. “How are you doing? How’s the new job? How’s the shelter?”

“I’m good. The job is good. Busy schedule.” I quickly nod my head. “And I love the shelter. The owner is the kindest woman who is just really grateful for any help she can get. I wish I could be there full-time and help out. The building is pretty run-down and could use some updates, but the little money that gets donated barely covers the cost of food and medication for the dogs, let alone anything else.”

“Are you seeing anyone?” my mother interrupts.

“Um. No. Not right now. Anyway, the dogs are so sweet and so adorable, and they just want someone to love them.”

My dad is all ears as I continue my rant, pride evident in his brown eyes, clearly happy that I found something that makes me so happy. My mother, on the other hand, not so much.

“There’s this Doberman named Rosie, and she’s an absolute sweetheart, but you know, she looks a little intimidating. She’s been there so long at this point, and potential owners pass her up without giving her a second glance.”

“What about Brett?” my mother asks of my ex. “I always liked that boy. Maybe you should reach out to him and see if he’s seeing anyone.”

“Theresa,” my dad quietly scolds, trying to rein her in, but that’s not how the power dynamic in their relationship works.

“Brett is my ex for a reason.”

“Well, Stevie,” my mother not-so-innocently says. “You’re not getting any younger, darling.”

Yeah, I’m not getting any younger, but I’m also the exact same age as her son, who she just said has plenty of time.

“I saw Hannah and Jackie last night,” I avert the conversation.

“Oh, did you? How beautiful is Hannah now? I saw her mom last week at church, and did you know her little sister qualified for Miss Teen Tennessee this year? I was thinking about seeing if she wanted any of the

old pageant dresses I bought for you. You know, since they've never been worn, and they wouldn't fit you now anyway."

And there it is. I was waiting for her to mention my weight or size. I'm surprised she lasted a whole twenty minutes.

"That's a great idea," is all I can manage to say. I'm too tired of it all at this point to play into my mother's game. "This tea is really good, Dad."

Looking over to him, his brown skin pinches between his brows as he shoots me an apologetic smile.

"Glad you came to see us, Vee," he says. "You probably have to get going, though. You have work soon, right? Headed to Philly tonight, yeah?"

My dad is the best, trying to give me an out from this visit. My showtime for work is still hours away, but I need to get out of this house.

"Yeah, I should get going." I stand from my seat as my parents do the same.

"Stevie, darling. Brush your hair before work, please." My mother quickly and awkwardly hugs me goodbye.

You don't brush curly hair, is what I want to say. Because how dare my hair be big and bold instead of smooth and styled like hers.

"Will do," is my answer instead. It's just not worth it.

"You look beautiful, Vee," my dad reassures, holding on extra tight. "And I'm so proud of you and everything you're doing with work and volunteering. I'm so happy you found something you love so much."

"Thank you, Dad."

He eyes my mother before looking back at me. "Let me walk you out." He swings his arm over my shoulder as I order a ride back to my hotel from my phone. As soon as we're outside and the door is closed, he turns towards me. "Don't listen to her, honey."

"How can I not? It's constant. She doesn't let up."

"I'll talk to her."

"What good is that going to do? You've talked to her for years, and she's still like this. There is nothing I can do to make her happy!"

"You know how she is, Vee."

"Yeah, Dad, I do. But that's not a good enough excuse anymore." My car pulls up just in time, so I give him another quick hug goodbye. "Love you," I toss over my shoulder as I walk down the walkway to my car in frustration.

"I love you, my beautiful daughter," he adds just as I get inside.

I offer him a small wave as my car drives away from the house I never want to visit again.

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ZANDERS



I like playing against Nashville. Their crowd is rowdy as fuck, and I live off that shit. Most athletes enjoy the buzz at their home games, earning cheers from the stadium full of loyal fans wearing their team colors. I, on the other hand, thoroughly enjoy the hate of being on the visiting team.

I call it road-ice advantage.

You want to “boo” when I step onto the ice? No problem, I’ll throw your star forward into the boards for that.

You want to call my teammates names or make up stupid fucking chants that make no goddamn sense just to taunt us? Please do. It’ll fuel me to skate even faster and hit a little harder.

You want to scream at me and hit the glass while I enjoy my well-earned penalty box minutes? Music to my ears, baby.

Just another reason I love life on the road.

“Turn that up!” I shout to Rio from across the visiting team’s locker room. “That’s my song!”

Rio does as I ask, adjusting the volume on his old-school boom box that he carries everywhere with him and filling the locker room with one of my favorite hype songs.

I stay seated in my locker stall, fully suited up for our game as the music focuses me, getting me ready for the next sixty minutes of hockey.

Pulling out my phone, I find a text waiting from my sister, Lindsey. Her schedule is almost as insane as mine. She’s the youngest lawyer to make partner at her firm in Atlanta. She’s thirty years old and a fucking badass.

So, I appreciate any time she takes out of her busy schedule to reach out. And I'm thankful it's not about my mom the way her last text was.

Lindsey: *Happy National Siblings' Day. I didn't even know that was a thing. Good luck tonight, eleven!*

Attached to her message is a link to an Instagram post I'm tagged in.

One of our local sports networks made a post with a bunch of pictures of different athletes around Chicago and their siblings, with the caption, "Happy National Siblings' Day to our favorite brothers and sisters."

The picture of Lindsey and me after one of my games is a good one. So much so that I screenshot it, adding it to my minimal camera roll. It's mostly filled with selfies that Ella Jo took of herself on multiple occasions when she's stolen my phone.

Swiping over, they also posted a photo of Maddison and his brother. After that, a few guys I know in town with their siblings—some play for the Devils, a couple for Chicago's pro baseball team, the Windy City Wolves, and one for our football team, the Chicago Cobras.

But the last photo on this post is the one that catches my attention the most. It's a picture of the point guard for the Chicago Devils, number five, Ryan Shay. But that's not what I find so surprising. It's the curly-haired flight attendant at his side, tucked under his arm.

Stevie.

I quickly press the "tag" button, but the only name or account that pops up is Ryan's, so I click on it. Going to the list of people he follows, I type in her name.

And there she is—Stevie Shay.

I had no fucking clue that Stevie is Ryan Shay's sister. Sure, their skin shares the same light brown tone and freckles, and their eyes are the same bright blue-green. But putting that together would've been nearly impossible. And she clearly didn't want me to know. Otherwise, she would've told me who he was the night I ran into her outside of Maddison's apartment or when I found her watching his game at the bar in Denver.

Now it completely makes sense why she lives across the street from me. Her brother makes ridiculous money.

Stevie's Instagram account is private, of course. The only thing I can see is her thumbnail picture which is the view from an airplane window with the sun setting right outside. Her bio reads "probably out of town..." with an airplane emoji after that.

Without thinking twice about it, I request to follow the wild girl.

I feel good getting off the bus and onto the airplane after beating Nashville with ease. Or I should say I feel good about the *game*.

What I don't feel good about is the fact that Stevie still hasn't accepted my follow request on Instagram. It's been hours. I'm sure she's seen it.

Last night when she turned down my proposition, I kind of loved it. Also, I figured she would. She doesn't give in to me easily, which makes this chase all the more fun. It keeps me on my toes, which very rarely happens anymore. But I wouldn't mind her giving in a little bit, even if it's as simple as accepting my stupid follow request on Instagram.

"EZ!" one of the rookies calls out from the back of the plane. I begin to loosen the tie around my neck when he asks, "Get laid by a Southern little thing last night?" loud enough for the entire plane to hear, including a particular flight attendant who happens to be walking down the aisle as we speak.

I'd assume the girls on board are used to our foul mouths at this point. The airplane is an extension of the locker room for us.

As I stand in the aisle next to my seat, I attempt to lean back, out of the way for Stevie to walk by, but let's be honest, I'm not moving all that much. It's a tight squeeze for anyone to walk through the fifty guys that just boarded the plane and have yet to sit, so I'll pretend that I'm trying to be a gentleman as I "get out of the way."

She refuses to look up at me as she makes her way from the back of the plane to the front, but when Stevie walks by me, I place my hand on her lower back and guide her as she squeezes through.

And when her ass brushes the front of my pants, my hand grips her hip as her body stiffens under my touch before she continues on her way.

"Zanders!" the rookie calls again, earning my attention. "C'mon, man, I need details!"

"Just because you can't get laid, Thompson, doesn't mean you need to hear every detail of Zee's sex-capades," Maddison chimes in, trying to help me avoid my teammates' inquiries of what my night looked like.

Not that Stevie and I hooked up, and he knows that, but if and when the time comes, I really am going to have to keep that under wraps from the rest of the boys—which is something I’ve never done before.

“I don’t kiss and tell,” I call back to Thompson from my seat in the exit row.

The entire plane falls silent for a moment before hyena-level laughter takes over the cabin.

“Bullshit!”

“Did you take a hit to the head tonight?”

“That’s your favorite thing to talk about, EZ!” are just a few of the shouts that come from the back of the plane from my teammates. And I don’t miss the heckles from the front of the aircraft where the coaching staff sits either.

“I know you got some action last night,” Rio cuts in. “One second, you were at the bar, and the next, you disappeared. The only time that happens is when there’s a chick involved.”

My eyes dart to Stevie, who is trying to distract herself with meaningless tasks towards the front of the plane as people continue to find their seats. She won’t look at me, but her freckled face has some extra color.

Little does Rio know that I actually got turned down, which hasn’t happened to me since I hit puberty. Last night, the only action I saw was my right hand when I had to jerk one out after walking Stevie home. I had a hard-on pretty much the entire time, from when I pinned her up against the wall to when I took care of it in the shower.

Maddison turns around to face the rest of the guys. “How about instead of wondering where Zee put his dick last night, you guys think about how the fuck you’re going to fix the thirty-eight percent you two averaged in face-off wins tonight.”

“Yes, Captain,” Rio and Thompson say at the same time, the back of the plane finally letting go of the interrogation of how my night went.

For most of the flight to Philly, I’ve kept looking down at my phone, hoping to see that Stevie has accepted my follow request.

Shocking news...she hasn't.

I even went to use the bathroom at the back of the plane, and when I did, I saw Stevie sitting in the back galley scrolling on her damn Instagram feed.

My Instagram has been flooded, however, with plenty of girls in Philly. I'm still holding out hope that Stevie will figure it out and have one wild night with me, but in case she really doesn't want to, I have options.

I always have options.

Once the lights are out, and most of the boys are passed out asleep for our red-eye flight, I make my way back to the galley again.

"Need something, Zanders?" Stevie's blonde coworker asks. Indiana, I think is her name. Or some shit like that.

"Hmm," I hum in contemplation, trying to make my presence known, trying to get the wild one's attention. But Stevie doesn't acknowledge me standing behind her and blocking the entrance to the galley. Instead, she continues to mess around on her phone with her back to me.

"You know what," her coworker says. "I think I'm going to go find Tara and distract her for a little bit."

That earns Stevie's attention as her eyes dart to her coworker. My brows shoot up just the same. Blondie over here is pretty intuitive because I know there's no way in hell Stevie told her anything. Not after her freak-out last night, thinking there might be some leaked pictures of us "fraternizing."

The flight attendant sneaks past me, adding a knowing pat on my shoulder, before leaving me alone with Stevie.

"Do you need something?" Stevie asks, still looking down at her phone and not facing me.

I slyly glance back over my shoulder at the rest of the plane, just to make sure no one is paying us any attention. The back galley is relatively dark, so I doubt her coworkers could see us from the front.

With most people asleep and her coworkers distracted, I take slow, leisurely steps to stand behind her, mere inches from her body.

I like being this close to her. I can almost count the freckles that decorate her nose and cheeks from here, plus she smells really fucking good. I'm a bit of a clean freak, but some of my teammates could really use a lesson in the hygiene department.

Stevie stiffens at my movement but refuses to turn around and face me. Placing my hands on the counter in front of us, on either side of her, I cage

her in.

I can see the pulse in her neck quickening, but Stevie continues to try to play it cool.

“Need something?” she casually asks, her eyes still down on her phone screen as it sits on the counter in front of us.

I’m not going to make some big deal that I know she’s Ryan Shay’s sister. For some reason, she didn’t want to tell me, so I’m going to keep pretending that I have no idea. Not that it matters either way. If anything, that little fact will put Stevie and me in the same place more than the universe already has. Ryan is a big name in Chicago sports, the same as me. We do a shit-ton of city events together.

“Just one thing,” I whisper, my lips mere inches away from her ear and the tiny gold earrings that decorate it.

This moment is too much of a prime opportunity to pass up. Stevie’s phone is right there on the counter in front of us, unlocked, as she tries to keep herself preoccupied by scrolling on it.

Standing behind her, I take control, find her Instagram app, open it, and immediately go to her follow requests.

There’s only one—me.

“I’ll just pretend like you didn’t see this.”

I watch as the small smile lifts at the corner of her lips.

I accept the request for her. Then, without hesitation, I press the little blue button that says, “follow back,” adding Stevie to my ridiculously long list of Instagram followers.

Closing the gap between us, I make my chest flush to her back. “When you change your mind.” My tone is low, my lips ghosting the shell of her ear. “This is how you’re going to get ahold of me.”

I watch as Stevie’s body slightly trembles from a shiver, but her eyes stay glued down at her phone, avoiding eye contact with me.

“Got it, sweetheart?” I ask, needing the confirmation that I’m not crazy. That this is a two-way street. That she wants a night with me as badly as I want one with her.

The air is thick with tension and anticipation as I wait for Stevie’s response. The very subtle, almost nonexistent nod of her head is my confirmation, telling me that’s it’s going to happen, and it’s probably going to happen soon.

She ever so slightly melts into my body, her head resting on my chest. Leaning forward, I press into her as much as I can, needing to feel her, and needing her to know just how fucking badly I want her.

Stevie pushes her ass out subtly, rubbing against me, her hips moving in a small torturous circle, and I can only hope that the low groan I accidentally release is too quiet for anyone else to hear.

“Hey, Stevie?” Rio asks from behind me, startling us both.

The interruption causes Stevie to jump back and away from her phone, her ass rubbing against my dick even more. A quiet hiss escapes my teeth from the sensation, and there’s no chance in hell of hiding the hard-on I’m sporting because of it.

“Can I get a Gatorade?”

Rolling my eyes, I quickly turn to face the side of the airplane where the exit door is, needing to hide the fucking rock forming in my sweatpants.

“Sure thing, Rio.”

What the hell? She’s never that nice to me when I ask her to do her job.

“It’s in the fucking cooler, Rio!” I say much too loudly, completely frustrated. “It’s right there, man.” I motion over my shoulder to the giant white cooler less than a foot away from him. “Right fucking there.”

When Stevie’s eyes lock on the action happening in the front of my pants, her face sweeps with amusement. “Oh. So, you do know where it is?”

“Do not mess with me right now, sweetheart,” I warn, trying to readjust myself without my teammate seeing what I’m packing. But apparently, my warning isn’t all that stern because all it does is cause Stevie to chuckle to herself, fully satisfied with the effect her body has on mine.

STEVIE



I've almost successfully made it through this fourteen-day road trip without giving in to Zanders. But let me tell you, the purple vibrator I keep in my travel bag has really had to put in the work these last two weeks.

Every flight we are on tempts me that much more. At this point, even the way he asks for his stupid sparkling water makes me want to jump his bones.

I need to get laid, and I don't think just anyone will do.

I locked myself in my hotel room in Philly, Buffalo, and Jersey. And here I am in DC, lying in bed, refusing to leave my room. I just have to make it through tonight, and we'll be back on a flight to Chicago tomorrow evening.

And I'll be home free.

At least for the time being.

I've succumbed to ordering my food via delivery apps to avoid leaving the safe space of my hotel. With our track record, I already know that if I so much as step outside, I'll run into Zanders. The universe is testing me, willing me to give in.

And fuck, do I want to.

But I can't. And not just because of my job, but because of the promise I made to myself. After Brett essentially used me for three years in college, I said I would never date an athlete again. And that means not sleeping with one either.

Right? Or is that some kind of loophole? That sounds like a loophole. That sounds like a *really* tempting loophole.

Since that night in Nashville two weeks ago, I couldn't even tell you how many times I've gotten off to the image of Evan Zanders. Thinking about his beautifully sculpted body and the massive heat he's packing down below has me clenching my legs together, trying to resist. I don't think I've masturbated this much in my life, yet the ache and need are still there.

Reaching for my purple vibrator on my nightstand, I place it under the sheets and between my legs. The heavenly buzz fills my room as my favorite toy gets me even more wound up. It's not going to take much. I'm almost there already.

Zanders devilish grin is playing in my mind, including the way I'd imagine his flawless body rolling on top of mine.

The image of his chiseled arms holding himself up above me while he thrusts in and out at a torturous pace. His chain that I wouldn't mind hitting my chin as it dangled over me. And his voice—velvety, smooth, and confident. I bet that boy talks dirty in bed too.

I want him to talk dirty to me.

Buzzzzzzz. Yes. So close. I'm right there. My chest is arched off the mattress.

Buzz. Buzz. Silence.

What the hell?

Looking down at the toy in my hand, I press the power button again and again, but it's no use. It's dead. And I didn't pack my charger. I've never needed it on a road trip before, but then again, I've never gotten off this many times in a two-week span.

Are you kidding me? As if I wasn't already pent up enough as it is.

My fingers. Those work.

Gliding my middle finger down my lower stomach until it grazes my clit, I push myself into my hand. Rubbing, teasing, circling.

Okay, this will do, but I wish it were someone else's fingers doing the work. Someone else's long, tatted fingers that just so happened to be decorated with gold rings.

Stop, Stevie. You can't go there.

My phone dings on my nightstand, distracting me from the brink of my orgasm.

You've got to be kidding me. Tonight is not my night.

Unintentionally, I roll my eyes as I reach over to get my phone, and when I see whose name interrupted my moment, an audible grunt leaves my throat.

My ex of all of people is hitting me up, completely out of the blue, while I'm trying to get off to the image of the one person I shouldn't be fantasizing about.

Brett: *Hey Stevie, long time no talk.*

Yeah, it has been a long time, as in not since I overheard you telling your teammates that as soon as you thought you were going pro, you were planning to drop me for the better options you assumed you had.

Brett: *I talked to Ryan the other day about coming to visit. I didn't know you were living out in Chicago now, but that's awesome! And you're flying with the Raptors? What is Evan Zanders like in real life? He's my favorite player in the NHL. I'm planning on taking you to dinner when I get to the windy city. Talk soon.*

Kill me right now. Kill me right fucking now. No way in hell am I going anywhere with Brett, and there's absolutely no chance I'm going to introduce him to Zanders of all people.

Tossing my phone to the other side of the bed, I resume my position with my fingers between my legs, but it's no use. The moment is gone.

Fucking Brett.

With a huff, I sit up, my back to the headboard, thoroughly pissed off that my ex had the audacity to text me so casually like that. He thinks I'm going to crawl right back to him the way I did countless times in college? He thinks he can keep treating me like his backup option, and I'll be waiting for him? I don't want to be anyone's option anymore.

I want someone to choose me.

Do you know who's been trying to choose me for two weeks now? Brett's favorite player in the NHL, that's who.

In a moment of absolute frustration, pent-up aggression, and a sprinkle of pettiness, I reach for my phone and open Instagram. Without overthinking it, I go to Zanders' profile, where 3.6 million people follow the defenseman. He, on the other hand, only follows 128.

And I am one of those 128.

My thumbs hover over my phone screen as I internally battle with myself about whether or not this is a good idea. I mean, I know it's a terrible idea, but right now, it feels worth it.

It's just one night. One night of hot, very much needed, hopefully filthy, sex. Just one night.

The usual wit I carry in my back pocket for my opening lines on the dating apps is completely thrown out. Zanders is a different breed of man, something I'm not used to. I want to send something clever, spicy, and maybe a bit elusive, but instead, the flirty message I send is... "*Hey.*"

Fucking brilliant, Stevie.

Not even thirty seconds later, those three gray dots dance along my phone screen as Zanders types his reply.

His message in response is not "hey." It's not "how are you?" It's nothing fluffy or soft, testing out the situation. No, because it's Zanders. The guy drips arrogance. He knows what he wants, and he always seems to get it.

Case in point, me only lasting two weeks before giving in to him.

The message he sends in reply? An address. Simply an address. Nothing less, nothing more. And for some reason, I find that really fucking hot. He's not playing games. He knows why I'm reaching out.

My Uber driver pulls up to a club on 18th street in downtown DC. Following Zanders' instructions, I head to the third floor, but when I get there, a bouncer stops me, barricading the entrance.

"Name?"

"Oh." I look over my shoulder at the line beginning to form behind me, wanting to enter the dark club in front of me. "I must be in the wrong spot." Reading the message from Zanders, I ask the bouncer, "Is this 18th Street Lounge?"

"Name?" he repeats.

"Uh, Stevie?"

He scans the clipboard in front of him, his eyes dragging down the names before moving out of the way and directing me inside. "EZ's in the back corner."

My head is on a swivel as I enter the dark club, looking around. This place is packed, even for a Saturday night, and it's hard to see through the crowded space. The music is so loud and overbearing that I'm about two seconds away from turning around and going right back to my hotel.

"You following me?" someone yells over the music.

Chasing the sound, my eyes wander to the corner of the club to what looks like a VIP area. It's sectioned off from the rest of the room with red

velvet ropes, and the reserved space is littered with beautiful women.

Really, they're stunning. Tall, thin, all different beautiful skin tones and hair colors.

What the hell am I doing here?

"Stevie." Zanders stands from the couch, finally coming into view. "Hey."

I walk towards him as he removes multiple grabby hands from his body before meeting me partway. He nods towards the security guard in charge of the velvet rope, ushering him to move it and let me inside.

"Come here," Zanders says, loud enough for me to hear over the crowd as he grabs my hand and guides me to follow behind. His fingers lace between mine as a pulse of electricity flows up my arm.

He leads us to the very back of the dark VIP section, earning some privacy and fewer vibrations from the pounding music coming through the speakers.

"Is anyone else from the team here?" I nervously ask.

"No, just me."

Looking around the room to be sure, I nod, thankful he had the foresight not to invite me to a place that would be packed with my clients. This thing I'm about to do is bad enough. I don't need everyone on the airplane to know about it. Especially his teammates. I hear the way they talk about their hookups, and even though I'm about to be one, I'd rather no one else know.

"Ready to do this?" I look at him with pleading eyes, needing to get this started before I chicken out or come to my senses.

"Whoa there. Eager, are we?" Zanders laughs. "At least buy me dinner first, sweetheart. I've never felt so used."

His humor breaks my nervous tension as a small laugh escapes me. That is until I look behind him at the countless model-esque women who are currently giving me the death glare for taking away their jersey for the night.

"You have quite the room full of options."

He doesn't turn around. Instead, he keeps his focus on me. "I always have options."

That puts a bitter taste in my mouth as I look anywhere other than at him. Especially since less than an hour ago, I heard from the guy who always reminded me that's all I ever was—an option.

“But I’m glad my first choice showed up.”

Zanders’ hazel eyes are soft yet full of fire as he looks down at me, causing some of the nerves to disappear. His words fill me with the bit of that confidence I need to do this tonight.

“What made you change your mind?” he asks, softly brushing my curls away from my face with the edge of his thumb.

“Honestly?”

“Always.”

“My vibrator died, and I didn’t pack my charger with me.”

Zanders studies me for a moment, questioning my authenticity before his deep laugh leaves his chest and fills my ears. “You really know how to keep a man’s ego in check, Stevie girl.”

I can’t help but smile right back at him. It’s all good. Tonight is going to be fun.

“Should we go then?”

“Eventually,” Zanders says. “But first, we’re going to hang here for a bit.”

Shifting behind me, his large hands splay over my hips, urging me to walk forward. But he stays close, his chest at my back.

“Where is here?” I ask over my shoulder as Zanders leads us to the private bar in the corner of the VIP section.

“Here is one of my favorite stops on the NHL schedule. A pair of brothers I went to college with own this lounge. One does the business side of things, and the other’s band headlines every weekend. He’s crazy talented. I think you’ll like his music.”

“This music?” I furrow my brows in question, referring to the atrociously loud bass vibrating the entire room.

“No. This music is shit.” Zanders releases me from his hold when we reach the bar. He casually leans one arm on the counter, effortlessly looking hot as hell. “But when Nicky’s band comes on, you’ll get it.”

“What can I get you, Mr. Zanders?” the bartender asks.

“She’ll take a beer.” He motions towards me, and I have no idea how the hell he knew that. “IPA, yeah?”

“Yeah...”

“And I’ll take the same.”

Instead of interrogating him on how he knew my drink order, I question, “What are your other favorite stops on the NHL schedule?”

“Fort Lauderdale is always a good stop because, after about twenty cities of bitter cold, South Florida is a perfect seventy degrees in the middle of winter. You’ve been there before with other teams you worked for, I’m sure.”

I shake my head to tell him no. “Miami, yes. But I’ve never worked for a hockey team before.”

“Well, we all stay right on the beach when we’re there, so it feels like a mini-vacation during those trips. And New York City is a good stop, too. But I’d have to say that Columbus is my favorite on the schedule.”

“Columbus?” I ask in surprise. “Like Ohio?”

“Ohio State is in Columbus. I went to school there, so my old college teammates usually come out for the game. It’s the closest thing to home besides Chicago.”

“So, you grew up in Ohio? You have family there?”

“Indiana, actually. My dad is still there, and my sister is in Atlanta, but Maddison’s family is more so my family at his point, so I guess Chicago is home because that’s where they are.”

The bartender interrupts, putting our beers on the counter in front of us. But I’m thankful for the pause because this conversation is starting to get a little too personal to have with someone who is supposed to be just a one-night stand.

“Where are you looking forward to stopping this season?” Zanders asks before pulling his beer up to his lips.

Before I can keep the conversation going, the obnoxious house music cuts out, and a group of guys takes the stage, setting up their instruments.

“Let’s go.” Zanders laces his fingers with mine. When I look down at our intertwined hands, I almost can’t even see my own because of the size difference. But I do notice his veiny forearms that are corded with muscles, though the grip he has on me is vastly contradictory to that. He’s gentle as he guides me out of the VIP section and in front of the stage.

“Big EZ.” The lead singer bends down, connecting his fist to Zanders’.

The space around us quickly fills, bodies pushing into one another and crowding the stage.

Zanders pulls me in front of him, my back to his chest as he puts both hands on the edge of the platform just in front of us, creating a safe barrier where no one can touch me, regardless of how many people are thrashing around, trying to get a good spot for the show.

As the first tune fills the lounge, I completely understand why this is one of Zanders' favorite places to stop. This band's sound is a unique blend of R&B and soul, and the lead singer's voice is deep but soft, blending perfectly with the instruments behind him.

Two songs in, and the crowd has relaxed, the melodic harmonies flowing through the room and chilling everyone out. So much so that Zanders no longer has to use his giant arms to block me in, protecting me from the mass of people.

He picks up his beer from the edge of the stage, leisurely bringing it to his lips as my body involuntarily sways to the beat of the music. Zanders' other hand releases the platform in front of us before ever so slightly finding my hip bone and holding me to him. His large hand splays over the top of my jeans, his palm grazes the lowest part of my stomach, and his fingers rest dangerously close to the spot between my legs.

I inhale a shaky breath. This is the first time Zanders has ever really touched me, and after fantasizing about it for weeks now, the nerves are starting to take over.

It doesn't startle me, though. We both know why I came here tonight, so instead of staying frozen in place, the way I am now, I lean back against him, continuing to sway to the music lightly.

I refuse to worry about the consequences that tonight is going to bring. Instead, I focus on the sexy as sin man behind me whose body is going to absolutely wreck mine tonight.

At least one can hope.

By songs eight and nine, our beers are gone, glasses discarded, and nerves wholly abandoned. Zanders rests both his hands on my hips. His thumbs have found their way under the hem of my shirt and against my flesh. The cold metal of his rings ignites my skin, and just for tonight, I try my hardest not to worry about a man touching my stomach. Though, I can feel myself holding my breath and slightly sucking in every once in a while.

Play it cool. Wear your mask of confidence.

On song ten, I've completely forgotten I'm at a private concert in a club. All I can focus on is the giant man behind me, whose minor touches are driving me absolutely insane.

Zanders' hands glide to my hipbones, pushing my ass into him. His fingers trace upward, slightly brushing my rib cage before sliding down my

forearms and interlacing with mine. His nose nudges against me as his lips graze against the soft skin under my ear, but they don't connect, and I'm not going to lie, this little teasing session is doing me in.

"Kiss me," I quietly request, far too out of breath.

He doesn't respond with words but slightly shakes his head against me.

"Touch me," I plead.

"Not yet, sweetheart. You know the rules." He releases me, refusing to touch me, but I continue to lean back against him.

Of course, I remember his little rule he made outside of the bar in Nashville, telling me that when I changed my mind, I would have to beg him to fuck me...on my knees. But I'm not going to lie, I kind of thought he was all talk.

Clearly, he's not.

"Asshole." I roll my eyes, even though he can't see me.

Zanders' chest rumbles behind me. "Such dirty words come out of that pretty mouth of yours."

He moves my hair out of the way as his lips ghost my ear, igniting my whole body. "Are you ready to show me what else that mouth can do?"

Our bodies couldn't be closer. I arch my back, grinding my ass into him as the music continues to fill the lounge, but I can hear the low groan he releases perfectly clear. For the first time since I've known Zanders, the hoard of people that surround him, constantly wanting his attention, doesn't bother me. Because just for tonight, his attention is solely on me.

"Stevie, sweetheart," Zanders whispers again. "If we don't go now, I'm going to end up fucking you in a dark corner of this bar, and I need you in my bed. So, once again, are you ready to beg for it?"

I confidently nod my head, my eyes still glued to the band in front of me.

"Then let's go." He urgently takes my hand in his and leads us out of the crowded room, back to his hotel.

STEVIE



Zanders keeps my hand in his, essentially pulling me into the hotel lobby. His strides are long and quick, equally as ready as I am to get to his room.

“Oh shit,” he quietly curses under his breath, pulling me to stand behind a pillar with him, shielding our bodies from anyone else to see. “One of my coaches is down here.”

A shot of adrenaline courses through me as if I wasn’t already buzzing enough. But also, a bit of thankfulness, that even though this is just a one-night stand for both of us, Zanders has the decency to make sure I don’t lose my job over it.

When the main doors open and close, Zanders looks over his shoulder at the empty lobby. Once again, he takes my hand in his, pulling me to the elevator. His legs are much longer than mine, so I have to run just to keep up with his quick walk.

He presses the number for his floor before frantically pushing the button to close the doors, all while he continues to peer out into the lobby. As soon as the metal doors shut, he turns back to me, hunger in his hazel eyes.

He takes a calm but confident step towards me as I hold on to the handrails at my side, trusting them to keep me upright because, with the way he looks right now, stalking towards me, I’d assume my knees are about to give out from his dangerous gaze.

“You know, Stevie.” Zanders corners me in the elevator. “If you hadn’t been so stubborn that night in Nashville, I could’ve kissed you by now.”

The pad of his thumb drags across my lower lip as his eyes trail the movement, mesmerized by the whole thing. “I really like this mouth of yours.” His hand covers my jawline before his thumb tugs my chin down, causing my mouth to fall open. “I’m gonna really like fucking it too.”

Holy shit.

He moves in closer, his nose nudging mine and his mouth mere centimeters from my own. But he doesn’t come any closer than that. He stays there, torturing me while sweeping his bottom lip with his tongue.

“Kiss me,” I breathe out. “Please, Zanders.”

His full lips lift in a sinister smirk. “I knew I was going to like hearing that smart mouth begging for me.”

Before he can bend down and press his mouth to mine, the elevator dings, and the doors open on his floor.

“Let’s go so I can hear it a little more.” He lightly tugs on the bottom of my shirt as he walks backward, a victorious grin playing on his lips.

Zanders unlocks his hotel room for me, allowing me to enter first. And when I do, my mouth falls open from how nice it is. I suppose I should’ve realized from the luxury lobby with marble flooring or the violin strings playing in the elevator, but to be honest, I’ve been pretty distracted by a 6’5” hockey defenseman who’s going to absolutely destroy my body in bed tonight.

The flight crew stays in nice enough hotels, but nothing like this. Not even close.

My eyes fall on the multiple pristine suits that hang in his closet. Zanders always dresses to the nines, so no surprise there. Then my gaze flickers to the bathroom, where more products line the counter than my local Sephora—again, not shocked in the slightest.

The click of the door pulls me out of my daze as I turn back to face him.

He slowly steps towards me, unbuttoning the top of his shirt, allowing his tattoos, gold chain, and ridges of muscle to come into view.

“This is a one-time thing,” I remind both him and myself as I stay frozen in place in the center of the room.

His chest heaves in a silent laugh as he continues his slow stride. Another button comes undone. “Sounds fan-fucking-tastic.”

“And we are never speaking of this after tonight.”

“I wouldn’t dare.” Another step. Another button. “But what are you going to tell your coworkers when you can’t walk tomorrow?”

Oh God. He's got a point. "Maybe that'll keep you from pressing that damn call button all flight."

"Not a chance. I can't wait to watch you limp down the aisle of that airplane, knowing I'm the one who did that to you."

He stops right in front of me as he unbuttons the last on his shirt. It falls open, showcasing his beautifully built body, covered in black ink and gold jewelry.

Suddenly, a jolt of nerves hits me again as I cross my arms over my covered chest. This man, who looks like every girl's wet dream, has been with the most beautiful women in the world, and now he's about to see me. Naked.

"Are you sure about this?" Zanders pushes a corkscrew curl away from my face.

My eyes bounce between his, trying to read him. Sweet and cautious aren't really his style, so this concerned question is a little strange, regardless that he can probably read my body language like a book right now.

"Because I'm about to ruin every other man for you."

There he is.

My thighs squeeze together at the thought. "Doubtful," I challenge.

My confident mask is back on as I reach for the belt on his pants. I know the rules, and even if I didn't, I've been salivating at the thought of having him in my mouth.

As soon as my fingers grasp the zipper, Zanders stops me, placing his hands on mine. When my attention darts up to him, I notice that his arrogance has disappeared, replaced instead with uncertainty.

Zanders' calloused fingertips slide under my shirt, digging into my waist. He takes two commanding steps forward as I go back with him until my shoulder blades hit the hotel room wall.

He takes a long, laborious inhale, defeat clear on his features as one of his hands cups my face, his thumb alone covering my jaw. His other hand stays on my waist, keeping me pinned against the wall. His touch is assertive and controlling but somewhat tender in a strange and unexpected way.

Gold flecks shine in his eyes as they bounce between mine, looming over me. "Fuck the rules," he breathes out. "We both know you'll be crying out my name plenty tonight."

And with that, the small space between us is filled when Zanders urgently presses his mouth to mine. His lips are soft and full, meeting every wet, hot glide with a more demanding one of his own. Inhaling into each other, my arms sling over his shoulders, pulling him closer to me, and when he slips his warm tongue into my mouth, a desperate whimper escapes my throat.

Because holy hell, this guy can kiss.

The effect of his lips finally touching mine, as well as the dominant hold he has on me, shoots through every nerve in my body. Its rush ignites every tip of my fingers, flowing through my chest, and most notably, to the apex of my thighs.

His hot mouth works perfectly against mine before finding its way to my throat, nipping and soothing. And I don't know if I've ever needed someone's touch as much as I do right now.

He pins me to the wall with his hips as I subconsciously push mine into him, feeling him grow against me. I coax him by rubbing, writhing, arching my body, and pulling a throaty growl from the man who always seems to be in control.

Zanders' grip leaves my face and waist, urgently sliding around to my ass, traveling south, and lifting me up as if I were as light as a feather.

A quick self-conscious thought travels through my mind as he carries me to the couch with my legs wrapped around his waist. But Zanders shows no strain from holding me up as he sits down with ease.

Straddling him, I can feel his hardness beneath me, even through my jeans. Lining myself over his length, I continue to move and grind, rocking my body, trying to ease the ache.

Both my hands slip around the back of his neck as my nails scratch his scalp. "Mm," Zanders hums into my mouth. "I like that."

I keep my mouth on him as I roll my hips, earning some much-needed friction on my clit, and grinding down on the rock-hard erection he's hiding in his pants.

Hiding probably isn't the right word. From what I can feel, there's not much hiding going on.

"Fuck," he groans. "I like that even more."

My chest fills with confidence. I can do this. "What else do you like?"

Zanders' lips tug up slightly on one side. "I'd like to see what that mouth of yours can do, other than talk back to me."

My palms run the length of his chest, pushing his shirt over his broad shoulders. “You like when I talk back to you.”

Zanders tries to hold back his knowing grin by kissing me again. He fills his palms with two handfuls of my ass before he slaps it, then nudges me off his lap.

I slip off him before taking a step back. When Zanders stands, he peels his arms out of his shirt, leaving it on the couch and towering over me. Keeping his hooded eyes locked on mine, he undoes the zipper on his pants before nodding towards them and silently telling me to finish the job.

Biting down on my lower lip, I get on my knees in front of him, minuscule under this powerful man. My fingers hook into his pants, tugging them down. They’re tight around his ass and thighs, hockey player problems, but when they get past the majority of his muscle, they pool around his ankles.

He watches every movement with vigilant attention.

As Zanders kicks his shoes and pants to the side, all I can do is keep my stare at the giant package behind his tight briefs. I’ve seen him in as little clothing as he’s in right now, every time we’re on the airplane, but I was hoping that he was a show-er, not a grower. Judging by my current view—he’s both.

I flatten my palm against him through the fabric, causing Zanders to hiss an inhale from the sensation. Stroking his length over the material, I peer up at him through my lashes.

“Don’t tease me, sweetheart.” Zanders runs the pad of his thumb across my lip in a warning. “Stop fucking playing with it and take it out.”

Returning my attention south, I grip the elastic waistband of his briefs and pull them down. When his dick bounces to its full size right in front of me, the first thought that rushes through my mind is how the fuck is this supposed to fit inside my mouth, let alone anywhere else?

I can feel my eyes widen as I grip his base, my fingers having trouble connecting due to the size. It’s thick, decorated with veins. And for a dick, I’ve got to say it’s pretty fucking beautiful.

“Open your mouth,” Zanders commands.

I do as I’m told, wetting my lips, then taking him in my mouth. A breathy moan escapes him and fills my ears, coaxing me. Sliding my tongue down his shaft, I take as much of him as I can. What doesn’t fit, I use my hand.

“Good girl.” Zanders gathers my curls in his fist, holding my hair out of the way. “Now, open your throat.”

All the blood in my body rushes to the spot between my legs as I push my knees together, hoping the friction will ease the ache caused by his words.

I continue my pace, my head bobbing, my lips sucking, and my hand stroking. I take him a little deeper, and as I do, I look up with watery eyes. Zanders’ commanding gaze is mesmerized on every move I make.

“Keep doing that. Fuck, you’re so good,” he encourages, his thumb brushing over my cheekbone as his hips thrust into me. “So fucking good.”

He continues his movements and I take as much of him as I can.

“I like when your mouth is too busy to make your smartass remarks.”

My eyes narrow into slits as I continue to blow him, but Zanders wears a satisfied grin as one of his brows lifts in a challenge.

My tongue circles the tip of his cock in a rhythmic pace before my lips run down the length. Sucking my cheeks in, my hand reaches up and cups his balls. I stroke the thin skin as Zanders falls forward, bending at the waist and having to hold on to my shoulders just to keep upright.

Sliding him out of my mouth, a gratified smile rises on my lips before I take a deep, earned breath. “If I can’t talk, then neither can you.”

“*Fuck.*” He shivers when his breath returns, his eyes closed, attempting to compose himself.

Zanders is still bent over, holding on to my shoulders for balance. “I was right about you, sweetheart. There really is nothing sweet about you, huh?”

He wipes the moisture from my mouth using his thumb, and as it trails over my lips, I take it in, sucking and stroking it with my tongue.

His eyes darken as he removes his thumb from my lips, replacing it instead with his mouth on mine. Tugging on my hand, he forces me to stand from my knees.

I cannot believe this flawless naked man is standing right in front of me. His arms are corded, decorated with bulging veins and black ink. His legs are thick, cut, and tatted. His abdomen is chiseled and lean, and there’s a V of muscle that points straight to the most perfect cock I’ve ever laid eyes on.

Seriously, this thing deserves some kind of medal.

“Let me see you,” he says, barely audible. He gently tugs at the hem, motioning to my top, but he doesn’t pull it up. He waits for me to let him.

Heat rushes to my cheeks as the nerves return. Am I ready to do this? Am I ready to let him see me? I’ve come this far, but what if he doesn’t like what he sees. I would have to live with that embarrassment for the rest of the season, having him on board after every game on the road.

“Hey, you okay?” he softly asks, his fingers hooked behind my neck and his thumb gently skimming my jaw. “If you want to stop, we can stop.”

My eyes dart to his. The combination of badgering and gentleness between us is sending me for a loop, keeping me on my toes.

Shaking my head, I hold on to his bare hip, pressing my fingertips into his flesh and pulling him into me.

Zanders takes a step towards me, his erection pressing into my stomach, reminding me that I really don’t want to stop.

I put on my mask of confidence and reach for the hem of my shirt before lifting it up and over my head. As I toss it to the ground, my eyes fall back to him, but his attention dances all over my body.

His fingertips softly trail my ribs, drawing small invisible designs into my skin as he explores me. His hand reaches behind my back as his eyes dart to mine. Holding my gaze in approval, he unclasps my bra with a swift motion of his wrist.

Keeping my head down, I slip my arms out of each of the straps, letting my bra drop to the ground between us. My boobs are two completely different sizes, and without the help of my bra, they hang fairly low due to their weight. Typically, I don’t care in the heat of the moment, but I’ve never been with someone as perfectly formed as the man in front of me.

Both of Zanders’ hands take my breasts, his large palms engulfing and squeezing them, making my nipples hard from the attention.

His hands are masculine and strong, but his black ink and gold rings have never looked better than they do touching my skin.

“Holy shit,” he breathes out. “You’re unreal, Stevie girl.”

When my eyes dart up to his, the only thing I can see in those hazel irises is pure lust: no judgment, no dissatisfaction, just carnal want and need.

When I think about it, Zanders has never made me feel self-conscious. Not intentionally anyway. It’s always my own self-doubt seeping into my mind that does the trick.

And judging by his dick that's standing at attention, I'd say the only person worrying about the way I look is me.

I stand a little straighter as his nimble fingers quickly find the button on my jeans, undoing them. The zipper falls before he pushes the denim over my hips and down my legs. Standing in only my lace panties that are already soaked, Zanders skims his hand over his jawline, shaking his head in admiration.

"What do you want, sweetheart?"

What do I want? I want him. I want to get lost in this for just one night. I want him to make me feel everything I need in order to ease the unrelenting ache I've had for the last two weeks. I want him to use my body however he sees fit.

His eyes lock with mine, waiting for an answer, but for once, I find myself a little speechless.

Zanders takes a commanding step forward, his palms on my hips, pressing my bare back against the textured wall on the far side of his room. One hand finds the wall beside my head, and his other glides against the skin of my abdomen, traveling south.

My stomach tightens from both the cold texture of his rings and the sensation of his fingertips on my flushed skin. Finding its way between the lace of my underwear and the warmth of my flesh, his middle finger skims against my clit, before burying itself in the wetness pooling between my legs.

A whimper escapes me as I fall forward, my forehead to his chest.

"Oh my God," he rasps, his finger now warm and wet. "Fucking soaked."

My legs begin to shake, but with Zanders' aggressive hold on me, there's no way I could fall.

"Stevie girl, what do you want me to do?"

As if he doesn't already know, but clearly, this man likes to be begged.

As he waits for my answer, his lips work their way down my neck and chest, taking one of my breasts into his warm mouth, sucking and flicking. At the same time, his middle finger enters me, curling forward, and causing my knees to buckle.

"*Fuck me*," I cry out. "Please, Zanders."

His lips form into a devilish smile against my taut nipple. Pulling out from my warmth, he stands up straight before slowly taking his entire finger

in his mouth, tasting what's left of me on his hand.

Zanders picks me up, wrapping my legs around his waist, his dick sliding against the wetness seeping through the fabric of my panties.

"Only because you asked so nicely," he adds with a kiss before tossing me on the bed and quickly climbing on top of me.

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ZANDERS



Stevie's back is flat against the bed, her nails digging into the flesh at my back, as I grind my hips down onto her, rubbing my dick against her leg, needing to feel the friction. And as I do, I kiss her lips one last time.

Don't get me wrong, I fucking love making out with this girl, but kissing is too intimate. Doing it while in the act does something to these chicks' brains where they attach themselves, thinking it's more than just a fuck—even though I make that loud and clear every time. So, I keep the intimacy to a minimum. Tonight is about getting off so I can finally stop fucking my hand to the image of this curly-haired girl as I have for the last few weeks and move on. Tonight is unattached sex to get it out of our systems.

As I leave her lips for the final time, Stevie reaches over, tugging at the lamp on the nightstand and turning off the only light left on in the room.

Without looking up at her, my mouth works over the warm skin of her neck as I reach out and turn the light back on.

I bite and suck on the soft flesh on her chest, being sure to leave my marks low so she can cover it up with her work uniform tomorrow. And as I do, she reaches over and turns off the light once again.

"What are you doing?" I finally ask, lifting my face to look at her.

"Turning off the light."

"Leave it on. I want to see you."

"No," she says, standing her ground, her gaze pleading with me.

I'm not an idiot. In fact, I would say I'm highly aware of both my own feelings as well as others. A near ten years of consistent therapy will do that to you. Even though I don't give a shit most of the time, I can read other people like a book.

So, I'd be lying if I said the girl in my bed was completely confident in her body. The lack of eye contact while she was getting naked and the arms crossed over her chest were pretty loud and clear.

She's an interesting combination of insecure and confident, the same as I am, but in entirely different ways.

But from what I know of the wild flight attendant, she wouldn't want to be treated with kid gloves. So, I'm not going to. I'm not going to avoid the parts of her body she's insecure about just to keep the attention off them. Instead, I'm going to touch every inch of her while I fuck her so hard she probably won't even remember her own name, let alone what she doesn't like about her body.

Even with the lights off, I can see that her nipples are pretty little peaks, begging for me, so I take her in my mouth, pulling a soft whimper from Stevie's lips.

To be honest, I like everything that comes out of this girl's mouth. Whether that be a gentle moan of pleasure, my name as she begs, or one of her smart-ass quips she can't help but fire back at me. I like knowing that whatever is coming out of her mouth is because of me.

My breath swirls against her skin as I work my way down, lower and lower, my lips ghosting the delicate fabric of her panties. Stroking myself in one hand, I use the other to hook into the waistband of the lace, pulling it down slightly, ready to bury my face between her legs.

But Stevie places her hand on mine, stopping me. "You don't need to do that."

"I want to."

"No, you don't," she laughs.

My brows furrow. "Yes, I do."

She looks anywhere but down at me. "Well, I... I don't really like it."

I keep my stare on her, willing her to make eye contact with me. Finally, her blue-green eyes connect with mine, allowing me to read her like a fucking book.

She's lying.

Maybe she's self-conscious about having my face between her thighs, or maybe someone else made her feel like it's a chore, but that's definitely not the case for me. Or maybe she's never had someone who knows what the fuck they're doing while they're down here. Regardless, she told me no, so it looks like I'm skipping this meal tonight even though I've been starving to taste her for weeks now.

Lifting up, I hold myself on one of my elbows, hovering over her. "I need you to be comfortable with me."

"I am," she quickly blurts out. "I am."

"Well, then we need to get some things straight." Her throat moves in a deep swallow from my words. "I've been thinking about this for weeks now. I don't often wait that long for the things I want, but seeing you naked in my bed with this"—I cup my hand over her wet panties—"ready for me...*fuck*. I can't wait to fuck you. But I'm not going to do it if you keep talking shit about your body."

"I didn't say anything—"

"In here." I lightly tap the side of her head.

I watch as guilt forms on her features.

"You're mine tonight, and all I see is this insanely sexy body ready for me. These tits"—I take a handful—"that I want to bury my face in all night. These thighs"—I squeeze the underside of one—"that I would love nothing more than to use as cheek warmers. And this"—I dip my fingers into the soaked lace fabric—"this pussy that is so fucking warm and wet." Sliding a finger between her folds, I slip it inside her, causing Stevie's back to arch and a whimper to leave her throat.

"This is all mine tonight," I continue. "And I'm not going to let you talk shit about what's mine. So, I'm going to need you to stop, or we aren't doing this."

Stevie doesn't answer, nerves evident on her face.

I push my erection into her leg, letting her feel how hard I am. "I'm not kidding, Stevie. I'll go take care of this myself, just as I have countless times over the last few weeks if you don't start being nice to yourself."

"You haven't hooked up with anyone else over the last few weeks?" Her brows crease with confusion.

Dropping some of my weight, my chest lies flush on top of her bare tits. This isn't a position I'm used to—too intimate. I'm not into eye contact or

shit like that when it comes to sex, but this is before anything has really started, so I'll let it slide.

"No," I tell her honestly. "I'm not kidding when I say I've been thinking about fucking you for weeks now. You're all I've been wanting."

Stevie's eyes widen with surprise.

"All of this." My hand roams down her stomach, squeezing her leg before snaking around and cupping her ass. I hide my face into the crook of her neck, my words muffled against her skin. "So please let me have it."

"Shit, Zanders. I didn't know you were so obsessed with me." A slight smirk lifts on her lips, a bit more confidence replacing the previous uncertainty.

Stevie's soft hand runs the length of my rib cage before digging her fingers into my lower back and causing my dick to thrust against her. My eyes hood over as I repeat the movement, finding some much-needed friction.

"I'm going to fucking destroy your body tonight and hopefully some of those insecurities that don't make any goddamn sense right along with it."

The knowing grin that was lifting on her lips falls, her mouth gaping in shock instead.

"Can I fuck you senseless, sweetheart?"

Words have evaded the usual quick-witted girl, who instead silently nods in agreement.

"Good." I stand at the foot of the bed, my fingers finding the waistband of her panties. "Lift your hips for me."

She does as I say, and as the lace drops to the floor, I can't help but admire the view. Even through the darkness, I can see the soft brown folds of her pussy glistening from here.

"So pretty," I breathe out as my fingers find her, circling her clit and causing her to writhe beneath my simple touch.

I want to fucking devour her. I want to bury my face so deep between her legs, I'll have to come up for oxygen eventually, but she told me no, so until she takes it back, it's not going to happen.

Not that she needs much of a warmup. She soaked already, and my fingers have slipped inside of her multiple times with ease. Hopefully, she's able to take everything I have to offer. It's a lot for most women. In fact, most times, I have to hold myself back more than I'd like, but I have faith that Stevie can handle it.

Leaving for a moment, I grab a condom from my bag while Stevie watches me roll it on.

"I'm clean, by the way." Not that she asked, but I get my shit checked on the regular and figured she should know.

She bites down on her lip as she stares at my condom-covered dick, salivating from where she lies on the bed. "Me too."

"Turn over." Stroking myself, I watch as she does what I say, getting on all fours. "Such a good girl," I add with the slap of her ass. "Now, hold on to the headboard."

Her slender fingers, decorated with tiny gold rings, hold on to the bed frame as she spreads her knees, giving me a perfect view.

I've been imagining this for weeks now. What her pussy would look like, feel like, but my imagination was absolute shit compared to the real thing. Skimming my palm over my jaw, I can't help but shake my head in satisfaction. Because it's real fucking pretty.

With my fist wrapped around my cock, I climb onto the bed, sitting up on my knees with Stevie's ass right there, her legs spread for me. I dip two fingers into my mouth before grazing them over her core. When they disappear inside of her, Stevie's head drops between her shoulders as she pushes into my hand, finding a rhythm.

"What do you want, sweetheart?" My focus is locked on my disappearing fingers, mesmerized by the whole thing.

"I want you to stop calling me 'sweetheart.'"

My lips lift on one side, unable to hide it. "Not a chance. Besides, I have teammates on either side of these thin walls. You want them to hear me call you by name while I'm coming inside of you?"

Stevie doesn't answer but instead moans at my words as she continues to roll her hips, meeting my fingers in pace.

Removing my fingers from her pussy, I wrap a fist around the base of my cock, tapping it against her clit. "Is this what you've been wanting?"

I slide my length against her folds, watching the condom coat with her arousal.

"Yes," she begs. "Please, Zanders."

"Then take it." I grip her hip, line myself up, and push into her. I go somewhat slowly, letting her adjust to my size as I watch her knuckles turn white, holding on to the headboard.

"*Oh my God,*" she cries.

My eyes roll back as she fully takes me, my fingertips curling into the skin on her hips as I try to hold myself back for a moment. "So good," I encourage, but holy fuck, that doesn't do it justice.

Great. Perfect. Five-star pussy is more like it. It grips around me, and I have to focus on not coming like a fucking teenager going through puberty.

Stevie's head has dropped down, her chestnut curls running all over as she adjusts to having me inside of her. After a moment of pause, she pushes her ass back into me, needing the movement.

My first thrust is half speed, pulling a breathy, "Yes," from her.

Putting a little more force behind the act, I pull back before pushing into her again.

"Oh my God, yes." Stevie's back arches, her ass up in the air.

It's a real nice ass if I do say so myself. It's plenty soft for my hips to ram into, and it bounces around every time I enter her. Filling both of my hands with it, anchoring myself, I thrust into her again, this time causing the bed to knock into the wall behind it.

"Do you like that, sweetheart?" Because fuck, I know I do.

"Mm-hmm," she whimpers.

"You're doing so good, taking all of me."

Quickening my stride and finding a rhythm, I continue rolling into her. She's fucking tight and does a perfect job at meeting me in pace, pressing her ass into me, asking for more. I bend over, my chest flush to her back and my lips to her ear.

"You like me, huh, Stevie girl?" I whisper, so no one else can hear her name.

"You're annoying," is followed by a needy cry, causing me to laugh.

"You think you could handle more?" I thrust into her again, this time even harder, watching her eyes roll back in pleasure.

"Is that all you got?"

She fucking loves pushing my buttons, even in bed, apparently. Which is fine by me. Give me a challenge, please.

Pulling out of her, I leave her empty.

"No," she whines, her body trembling as she reaches behind her, trying to grab me. "No. I'm so close." Her thighs clench together, needing to fill the empty ache.

"What do you say?"

"Please!" she begs, desperation filling her voice. "Please, Zanders."

Fuck. I don't know if I've ever heard a better combination of two words in my life.

Wrapping one of my forearms around her middle, I hold on tight, needing to keep her upright. As my other hand covers her mouth, I fill her once again, giving her everything I got.

She screams into my palm, her eyes screwing shut as I pound into her.

"You like that," I state because I don't even need to ask.

She repeatedly nods her head as my hand keeps her quiet.

Over and over again, I fill her from behind, the consistent tempo causing my balls to tingle already. I keep my lips to Stevie's ear, whispering dirty words as I watch the euphoria take over her pretty features.

One of my hands moves to her tit, massaging, kneading, and rolling her nipple with my thumb. My other hand focuses on her clit, circling, flicking, and getting her ready to come with me.

That is, until Stevie releases the headboard, takes my hand from her tit and instead, guides it to her throat.

I can't help but smile against the skin of her shoulder as I lightly choke her, all the while I'm fucking her from behind.

This girl is an absolute wildcard. One minute she's insecure about what she looks like, and the next, she's asking me to choke her as I fuck her, her body at my disposal. But I guess that's a little bit like the relationship we have with each other—moments of softness, surrounded by a shit-ton of banter and teasing.

"Shit," I hiss out. "I really like fucking you, sweetheart."

"Stop calling me 'sweetheart.'"

The humor isn't lost on me that I'm choking and fucking a girl that I ironically call "sweetheart."

"Never," I laugh.

Leaning back, my ass on my heels, I pull her with me, so she's sitting in my lap and on my dick. Her back is flush to my chest as one of her hands reaches over, palm curving around my neck, needing to anchor herself.

I liked her body before tonight, but now, feeling it in my hands and on my cock, and knowing I can throw her around a little bit and not break her, I think I might be its number one fan.

"Are you going to come for me?" My lips ghost the shell of her ear.

Another whimper leaves her lips as she rests her head back on my shoulder, her eyes closed, and her lips parted in pleasure. Her freckled

cheeks are flush, and her soft brown skin is glistening with sweat.

"I really want you to come all over me, Stevie. You're doing so good."

I continue to bounce her on my cock as cries fill the hotel room, some from me and some from her. One of my hands is still circling her throat, and the other is circling her swollen clit.

Her body begins to tighten and contract as her pussy squeezes me.

"Please come all over me," I beg.

As I thrust into her a few more times, hitting that spot that causes her entire body to shake, I watch as the orgasm rips through Stevie, taking over.

"Zee," she cries, her fingers pulling at the gold chain around my neck, needing to grasp something.

That name is something only my favorite people use, and you'd think it'd cause me to pause. But instead, hearing her say it as she comes all over my cock, does nothing but bring my own release.

"Fucking hell—" I call out, trying to hold myself back.

And just then, I do something I've never done before. Two of my fingers leave her throat, turning her chin to face me. Pressing my mouth to hers, I come inside of her, needing her to swallow my cry of her name, so my fucking teammates don't hear it through these thin-ass walls.

Our mouths move and gape together as we ride out our highs, Stevie ever so slightly continuing to bounce on my dick. Her fingertips dig into the nape of my neck, pulling me into her as I kiss her with everything I have left. I hold on to her slightly damp body, refusing to let this end just yet.

There's a whole lot of eye contact I didn't plan for as we both come off our highs.

"I needed that." Stevie rests her head back on my shoulder, her eyes closed as she catches her breath.

Her pretty freckled face is glowing from her orgasm, and her lips are swollen from my assault. She drops herself to lie on the bed, completely satisfied and content, her curls sprawled across the white sheets.

"No, you needed *me*," I rephrase with a slap of her ass.

Quickly standing from the mattress, I head into the bathroom, discarding the used condom in the trash before looking in the mirror. The usual gloat and ego are missing from my post-sex glow. Instead, stress is evident on my face.

Because I liked that way more than I should have.

I always like sex, who doesn't? But that felt like I just had a hit of something I'm going to continually need in order to curb my quickly growing addiction.

The way she can keep up with me, both in bed and with words. Fuck. I thought I ended the chase, but now I think I may have started a whole other game that I'm never going to win.

Did that kiss fuck with my brain instead of hers? And why do I want to cuddle up next to her soft body before round two?

Heading back into the main room, I promptly plop my naked self onto the bed next to her, but before I can pull her body into mine, she slips off the mattress and ducks into the bathroom, which is fine. She'll be back in a second.

Stevie's glowing bronzed body comes strutting out from the bathroom a couple of minutes later, and I fully expect her to come right back to bed with me. Every chick tries it, but this is the first time I actually want someone to hang around and relax with me while I get ready for another round.

But instead of coming to me, she heads back to the couch, finding her discarded clothes on the floor.

Leaning up on my elbows, my bare-naked frame on full display, I furrow my brows while watching her redress. "What are you doing?"

Stevie slips her legs into her jeans, rebuttoning the waistband. Which is the exact opposite of what I want her to do.

"Getting dressed."

"Why?"

A small laugh escapes her as she reclasps her bra, taking away my perfect view. "Because I can't exactly get into my Uber naked, now, can I?"

"Why are you leaving?" I restate my question. "You can stay here."

Um...what?

"We said this was a one-time thing," Stevie notes, thankfully ignoring the last part of my statement as she pulls her shirt over her head.

"I was thinking more like a one-*night* thing. With multiple orgasms packed in there."

"Look, Zanders, that was fun." Stevie ties up her dirty-ass Nikes. "But you're my client. I work for you so that probably wasn't the best idea."

I've spent this entire season so far trying to remind Stevie that she works for me, and now she decides to get it through her head? Right when I want her to forget about it?

"See you tomorrow." She turns towards the door.

Jumping off the bed, I cup my dick, unable to throw any clothes on while I chase her out the door.

"Wait!" I yell, following her into the hallway. "At least let me take an Uber with you. It's two in the morning."

Stevie continues down the hall towards the elevator. "Zanders, I'm a big girl. I can handle getting back to my hotel." She steps into the elevator, pressing the button for the lobby.

I awkwardly run to catch up with her, all while trying to cover my cock with my hand. I have large hands, but I have a giant dick, and my version of covering it means it's practically flailing around.

Stepping into the threshold of the elevator, I hold open the metal door with my free arm. "At least send me a message when you get back, so I know you made it okay."

Stevie eyes my naked frame, a knowing smirk rising on her lips as I desperately stand here, needing something, anything from her.

"I'll be fine."

"I swear to God, Stevie. I will scream your name so fucking loud right now, every single one of my teammates will know you're here if you don't —"

"Okay!" she cuts me off. "I'll send you a message when I get back to my hotel."

I eye her a moment, trying to figure out what the hell went wrong in the time I made her come all over my dick to now, but I can't read her. I really want to lean down and kiss her goodbye, but she seems hell-bent on getting away. I'm used to her running away from me, but I thought after tonight, maybe she'd stop.

Stepping my bare ass just a foot back, I let the elevator doors close with the wild flight attendant inside, but right before the metal doors close completely, I watch as Stevie leans her head back on the wall, regret covering her features.

What the fuck just happened?

Once she's gone, the realization hits me that I'm butt-ass naked, and I just ran out of my hotel room without a key, allowing the door to close

behind me.

Shit.

I've never chased someone trying to leave my room. Typically, I'm getting dressed and begging them to go.

Glancing around the empty halls, I start my walk of shame to my best friend's room across the hall from mine.

Knocking doesn't do the trick, so I pound on the door with my free hand, needing to wake him up.

"What the fuck?" Maddison swings the door open, his mop of hair disheveled and his eyes barely open, laced with sleep.

"Oh my God," he laughs, looking me up and down. "This is too fucking good."

"I need to use your phone to call the front desk. I locked myself out of my room."

"Wait right there." Maddison turns back to his room, barely able to walk due to the hysterical laughter overtaking him. "The boys are gonna need to see this." He holds his cellphone up, snapping a picture of me in the hallway as I cup my dick and flip him the bird with my other hand.

"Fuck you," I mutter, letting myself in his room.

STEVIE



Last night was a huge mistake.

And by huge...I mean *huge*. Pun intended.

And not because of the excuse I gave Zanders about him being my client or whatever bullshit I was spewing. But because he was right. He may have ruined every other man for me from here on out.

I think he may have even ruined my vibrator from here on out too, and that's just a damn crime.

When I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror last night, that's when it hit me.

That was the best sex I've ever had. It blew every other one of my experiences out of the water. For the first time, maybe ever, there wasn't a single self-conscious thought. Zanders' constant praise took care of that. We had a wild unspoken connection I didn't expect and, frankly, didn't want.

And that's the problem. It was supposed to be one and done. But all I wanted was to get back in that bed and do it over and over again until I couldn't think straight.

But I couldn't. I couldn't get attached to him or his award-winning dick. He's everything I've wanted to avoid since college—arrogant, egotistical athlete with beautiful women lining up for a turn. And I made the mistake of jumping into that line, unable to hold my ground against him.

He's just looking for his next lay, but I've got to say, the boy knows what he's doing between the sheets.

"You totally got laid last night," Indy teases. "You're lit up like a fucking glow stick, Miss Shay."

"I did not." I try to keep my voice hushed. We're in the back of the airplane, and the boys are trying to sleep on our overnight flight back to Chicago.

"You totally did," she giggles. "Was it a Tinder boy?"

Turning away from Indy, I mindlessly start cleaning the spotless countertops in the back galley. "I did *not* get laid last night."

"You didn't?"

That deep velvety voice doesn't belong to my coworker. No, it belongs to the stunning man who absolutely railed me last night.

I've avoided walking the aisle for more than one reason on this flight. One being I didn't want to see Zanders and have every explicit detail of last night flood my mind. And the second being, he was right. I have a stupid limp because of his stupid, huge dick.

Looking over my shoulder, Zanders leans against the partition separating the galley from the rest of the plane, a cocky little smirk playing at his perfectly full lips.

Asshole.

"You're limping a bit, Stevie. Did you roll your ankle or something?"

I hate him.

"Oh my God," Indy says much too loudly. "Oh. My. God." Her head is on a swivel looking back and forth between Zanders and me, her cheeks flushing a lovely shade of rose.

"You two finally fucked," she whispers as quietly as possible before her mouth hangs open.

"No!" I exclaim louder than I meant to. "No, we did not."

Zanders being the arrogant man he is, doesn't deny anything. Instead, he stays silent and shrugs his shoulders nonchalantly.

"Nice work." Indy's statement isn't directed at me. No, it's at Zanders, which I love.

"Do you guys have a pillow I could snag?" Rio pops his head into the galley over Zanders' shoulder, asking Indy and me.

"Rio, get it yourself, man." Zanders motions towards one of the overhead bins where the pillows are stored. Which is ironic, seeing as Zanders has never once gotten himself a single thing on this damn airplane.

"I can get it for you," Indy offers.

"Thanks, Indy." Rio's green eyes sparkle when he says her name. He runs a hand through his curly black hair, pushing it out of the way, and is

he...flexing as he does it?

Indy steps around Zanders, leaving the security of our galley and leaving me alone with the man I've been trying to avoid all flight.

"You didn't send me a message last night." He ducks into the galley, getting in my space. My eyes quickly dart up the aisle, checking for Tara's whereabouts, but she seems plenty busy flirting with the coaching staff up front.

"Why didn't you send me a message that you got back to your hotel?" He takes another step closer, his chest only inches from mine.

I crane my neck upward. "I didn't think you were that serious about it."

"Are you fucking kidding me? I was up all night checking my Instagram, waiting to hear from you."

"Well, here I am." I know I'm being a brat right now, but I'm trying to distance myself from everything I felt last night, and I don't know how to do that other than to pretend to be unattached. I fully expected Zanders to be the same, so his genuine concern is a little shocking.

"What the hell happened last night?" he whispers. "I thought we had fun?"

"We did. And when it was over, I left."

Zanders' hazel eyes bore into me with confusion. I'm not trying to make him feel bad, but I need to protect myself here. He got what he wanted, as did I. He'll be onto someone new tomorrow. Hell, he might even be onto someone new as soon as we land around two AM.

"Do you regret it?" His question is soft and low, a bit of sadness laced in his tone.

Ah, fuck. Why does this man, who was choking me and screwing me senseless last night, look like a sad puppy dog right now? I kind of want to hug the giant defenseman. He seems more vulnerable than he intended to be.

"I'm sorry if we did something you didn't want. I didn't mean to—"

"No," I cut him off, shaking my head. "No, I don't regret it."

It's a lie, but not for the reasons he's thinking.

A relieved sigh escapes him as he reaches up with his index finger, delicately moving a single curl from in front of my eyes.

"Are you shitting me?"

Zanders' hand retreats quicker than you'd believe as both of our heads snap to Maddison standing in the threshold between the galley and the rest

of the plane, his large frame blocking us from anyone else's view.

"You're the girl from last night?" Maddison's tone is hushed, his brown eyes wide, pleading for me to say no.

But I don't.

"Stevie, I had faith in you," he whines.

"Go sit the fuck down," Zanders adds.

"He ain't shit, huh?" Maddison continues. "I've heard he's got a tiny dick and has no idea what to do with it. Terrible in bed."

"Fuck you," Zanders spits, but there's a laugh that follows it.

I can't help but giggle, knowing his teammate has probably seen what he's packing in the locker room, the same as I saw it last night. "Tiny" is the exact opposite of what's going on between his legs.

"Stevie, I'm disappointed. I'm going to need you to keep giving him shit regardless of this." Maddison motions between Zanders and me. "Because it's quite literally my only entertainment on this fucking airplane."

With that, he turns to walk back to his seat, leaving his best friend and me alone once again.

"So, you don't regret last night?" Zanders doesn't waste a second before asking again, concern evident on his face.

"I don't regret it, but it shouldn't happen again."

"I was thinking quite the opposite. I was thinking it *should* happen again. Like every single time we're on the road."

"We can't. Zanders, I'll get fired if anyone finds out about last night."

"The blondie already knows!"

"Let me rephrase that. I will get fired if that one finds out." I motion towards the front of the plane.

"The bitchy one? You're worried about her? Sweetheart, I can keep a secret."

"What happened to the whole 'I don't lie' thing?" Cocking my brow, I hold his eye, testing him.

His hand grips my hip, fingers curling, pulling me into him. His assertive touch ignites my whole body, but I push the fire down, needing to extinguish it.

"This lie would be worth it." He wets his lower lip before pulling it between his teeth, his gaze locked on my mouth.

Swallowing hard, I take a large step back. Well, as large as I can manage in this tiny galley. Zanders' hand falls from my hip as I pin my arms across my chest, needing to use them as a makeshift barrier.

"It was a one-time thing."

Zanders shakes his head, not buying it. "It was a one-time thing until it's not."

He turns to head back to his seat, leaving me alone in the galley. But before he goes, he quickly looks back, his eyes raking down my body, taking in every inch. "Because one time sure as hell wasn't enough for me and I don't think it was for you either."

I squeeze my thighs together, my face flush with the memory of last night.

"Oh, and I'll take a sparkling water."

Rolling my eyes, I tell him for the thousandth time, "It's in the cooler."

"Extra lime, Stevie Sweetheart." Zanders' overly smug face wears a satisfied smile as he saunters his way back to his seat.

STEVIE



“Rosie girl, when are we going to get you adopted?”

Of course, the question is rhetorical, seeing as Rosie is a beautiful black and tan five-year-old Doberman who can’t answer me.

I give her one more scratch behind the ears before locking up her crate for the night as Rosie’s big body curls up on the fleece blanket I thrifted for her last week. She’s plenty comfortable in her crate, which makes sense. She’s lived here for an entire year already.

I’ve only lived in Chicago for a few months, but from what Cheryl, the shelter owner, told me, I’m Rosie’s favorite.

Most people think she’s scary from the outside, but Rosie is a sweet softie on the inside, with plenty of love to give, as long as it’s for the right person.

“You really should take that sweet girl home with you.” Cheryl stands behind me as I stay sitting in front of Rosie’s crate, watching her fall asleep.

“If only I could. Twin brother is still allergic.”

“Ehh. I think I’d trade the brother for the dog.”

“I contemplate it sometimes,” I tease. “I can close up for you tonight.”

Cheryl brushes me off. “Stevie, you are twenty-six years old, and it’s a Saturday night. I’m sure you have better things to do than hang out here with an old lady and some old dogs.”

Cheryl may be a sixty-something-year-old widow, but there’s nothing old about her. She’s still got a total pep in her step and works insane hours

at the shelter. And that's because she loves this place and these dogs, as do I.

Senior Dogs of Chicago is a nonprofit that Cheryl and her late husband founded, rescuing dogs from kill shelters or taking in abandoned pups that families had the audacity to give up once their family pet got too old for them.

Don't get me started on it. I don't cry too often, but it happens every single time an older dog gets dropped off by its owners for some god-awful excuse or another.

How do you not choose the one who has loved you unconditionally?

The building has started to get run-down ever since Cheryl's husband passed away, and unfortunately, most people still choose to buy puppies over adopting an older animal. The donations are slim to none, barely keeping the doors open and keeping food in the dogs' bowls.

My brother Ryan is our biggest donator, and I think that's because he feels guilty I can't bring any of them home.

I'd spend all my time here if I could, but unfortunately, it doesn't pay the bills. Not that I have many, I don't even pay rent. But, when I do move out, I need to keep my paying job to make ends meet.

"Seriously, Stevie, go have fun!" Cheryl takes a seat at the front desk, slides her glasses up her nose, and begins to organize the pile of bills I'm afraid she doesn't have enough money to cover.

Do I tell Cheryl that my version of fun is putting on my softest pair of sweatpants and curling onto the couch to watch movies, seeing as Ryan is playing in a road series and Indy is on a date with her boyfriend? No, I keep that little fact to myself. I let her think she's living vicariously through me, but to be honest, Cheryl probably has a more exciting life than I do.

Or does she? Because it was just a week ago that I was having the best sex of my life with the most notorious jerk in the NHL.

"See you tomorrow." I give Cheryl a quick wave before ducking out of the shelter for the night.

Pulling out my phone for the quick walk back to the apartment, I check the score from the Raptors game. They had a rare afternoon start time, and I've become oddly invested in hockey since I started flying the team around less than two months ago.

The headline that pops up first is a winning score of 4-2 against Anaheim.

The second headline has Zanders' face plastered below it with a stunning woman beside him, walking out of the arena together.

This is Chicago's fourth game since we've been back in town, and this is the fourth woman he's been pictured with.

No surprise there.

I knew what I signed up for when I reached out that night in DC, and I wouldn't say I'm necessarily jealous over it.

Okay, that's a lie. I am jealous, but only because I cannot stop thinking about that night. It was so good and so needed, and I was right—my vibrator hasn't done shit for me since.

Zanders' words have been ringing in my mind all week. "*Because one time sure as hell wasn't enough for me.*" I don't think it's enough for me either, but that doesn't change that it can't happen again. And there's no way in hell I can be his road hookup. I don't know why he'd even suggest it. The guy has women clambering for him in every city we visit, and that clearly includes the one we live in too.

More headlines go on about Zanders and the fight he got in this afternoon during the game, the fine he has to pay for hitting his opponent a little too hard and a little too dirty, and even more about the reputation he wears as a badge of honor—the reputation I can't stand.

Shoving my phone in my bag, I ride the elevator up to my apartment in silence. Well, silence minus the piano keys serenading the metal box. I'm sure Ryan's neighbors have questioned if I actually live here on more than one occasion when I come in wearing my baggy flannels and not-so-white sneakers, covered in dog hair with *my* hair in a big curly mess.

When I make it home, I find an envelope hanging on Ryan's front door with our house number printed on the outside. I remove the tape, unlock the door, and throw my keys on the console table inside.

Slipping off my shoes, I take a seat at the kitchen island and open the envelope. There's a few fun-sized pieces of candy, all individually wrapped, as well as a letter inside.

Hey, Neighbor,

We have a three-year-old daughter who didn't get to have Halloween with her dad because he was on a work trip. We're planning to make up for it tonight by going door-to-door trick or treating.

If you're willing to participate and make our daughter's night, please leave your front door light on, and we'll come by between 6-7 PM. If not, no worries! We hope you enjoy the candy instead!

*From your neighbors,
-The Maddisons*

Well, that might be the most precious thing I've ever heard of. We flew from Philly to Buffalo the night of Halloween, so I know exactly the work trip this note refers to.

Part of me wants to turn off the outside light because, as far as I know, Maddison doesn't know I live in his building, and maybe I could keep him from finding out who my brother is for a bit longer. But most of me wants to make sure his daughter has a good Halloween, with plenty of stops to trick or treat.

I spend the next hour or so on the couch, mindlessly scrolling for something to watch when I hear a small knock. Quickly hopping off the sofa, I grab the candy from the envelope and open the front door.

The cutest little girl with bright emerald eyes and wild Brunette hair stands on the other side, a pumpkin-shaped basket in her hand. Her puffy yellow dress tells me exactly who she is, and the rose embroidered on her satin gloves confirms it.

"Trick or treat!"

"You must be Belle." I bend down to make myself eye level with her, watching as the deep-set dimples in her cheeks sink even further into her porcelain skin with a smile.

"Stevie?"

My head snaps up at Maddison's voice, finding a hallway of full-grown adults, primarily men, dressed as Disney princesses.

"You live here?" Maddison asks with genuine curiosity, though he's wearing a light blue dress with puffy sleeves, styled with a black choker necklace, so I have a hard time not just laughing in response.

"Stevie?" The woman dressed like Ariel turns to ask him. Judging by the red hair and the pictures I've seen online, it's his wife, Logan. "Like..." She puts her hands out as if they were the wings of an airplane, and Maddison wiggles his brows suggestively, nodding in confirmation.

"Oh, I see," Logan adds with a knowing smile and an even more understanding tone.

Clearly, Maddison told her about Zanders and me.

Speaking of the 6'5" defenseman, all eyes shoot to the back of the group, where a huge man with black inked tats and gold jewelry stands, wearing an icy blue sparkly dress and a long blonde braided wig.

"Hey." Zanders grins, his eyes locked on mine.

I try to hold back my laughter, I really do, but this man who is known to be the city's biggest playboy and probably has more enemies than fans is wearing what's supposed to be a floor-length dress, though it hits just below his knees.

But he's doing it on a Saturday night in the middle of November to make sure his best friend's daughter has a good Halloween.

And that sweet act is the last thing I expected from the notoriously hated hockey player.

"Have you lived here the whole time?" Maddison's question pulls me back to reality, realizing that I was right. Zanders didn't tell him that I was his neighbor.

"I moved in at the end of August."

Logan turns back to Zanders. "*That's* why you never use the penthouse elevator anymore."

"Lo..." Zanders' eyes are wide, his voice stern in warning, trying to stop his best friend's wife before she completely throws him under the bus.

Maddison wraps both arms around his wife's shoulders from behind, the two of them utterly amused, laughing with each other at their friend's expense.

"So, you're Belle?" I return my attention to the sweet girl who this night is really about.

"I'm really Ella."

"Ella? That's a beautiful name. You didn't want to be *Cinderella*? You made your dad be her instead?"

Ella starts giggling at my question. "No." She shakes her head, proudly pointing at her chest. "Belle is smartest. Like me."

"Ahh." I give an understanding laugh. "Well, I think you made the right choice." I cup my hand around my mouth, whispering, "Belle is my favorite, anyway."

"What about Elsa?" a deep voice asks from the back of the group.

When I look up at Zanders, he shrugs his shoulders as if he isn't being a little desperate for attention right now.

Playfully rolling my eyes, I return my focus to Ella, taking the candy her parents provided and adding it into her already very full basket. “Well, Ella, I hope you have so much fun with your family tonight.”

Her little hand motions me closer. She puts a satin-gloved hand up to my ear, cupping her lips. “I like your hair,” she whispers.

I make the exact same motion back to her. “I like your hair, too.” Her hair looks as un-tamable as mine. We wild-haired girls have to stick together.

“What do you say, baby?” Maddison pipes up.

“Thank you!” Ella waves before taking off down the hall towards the next apartment door.

A shorter man dressed like the chick from *Brave* follows closely behind, but judging by the ginger brows he’s rocking, the curly red wig isn’t too far off from his natural hair color. Next is a tan guy dressed like Jasmine, mid-drift showing and all, who is carrying a newborn baby, Maddison’s son, I’m assuming, followed by a teeny-tiny girl in a Snow White costume, complete with a pair of black Doc Martens.

Maddison rests his chin on his wife’s head, looking like a needy little puppy, as the two of them linger by my door with Zanders.

“She’s cute.” I watch Ella’s brunette hair bounce along with her excited strides.

“She’s three going on thirteen, but we’re big fans of hers regardless. I’m Logan, by the way.” She reaches her hand out to shake mine, a kind smile on her lips. “I hope the boys aren’t making your job too hard.”

“Not this one.” I motion to the man hanging on her. “This one, on the other hand, is a bit of a diva.” Turning towards Zanders, my voice is laced with humor, even though the statement is extremely true.

“I’m not that bad,” Zanders whines.

“Yeah, he can be a real pain in the ass.”

“Lo!”

“But we love him anyway.” Logan shoots Zanders her sweetest smile before turning back to me. “It was so great to meet you.”

“You too.”

“See you, Stevie,” Maddison tosses out before walking away with his wife tucked under his arm.

Zanders somewhat sheepishly steps up to my front door once all his friends are out of earshot and down the hall.

“You following me?” I tease.

He knowingly shrugs his shoulders. “Hey.” A small smile plays at his full lips.

“Hey.” My eyes rake down his body, unable to hold back their amusement.

“Sexy as fuck, I know.”

“That’s one way to describe your...*dress*. I knew you were pretty, but I didn’t know you were *this* pretty. And that gash really sells the look.” I motion towards the cut on his right cheek, which I’m assuming he earned during his game today.

“I told him to keep it away from the money maker, but you should see the other guy.” Zanders stands straighter, smugly running a hand down the sparkly blue fabric covering his chest. “He messed with the wrong ice queen.”

A laugh heaves in my chest as I cock my head to the side. “How did you get stuck with Elsa? All your other friends at least looked like their characters.”

“You don’t think the blonde wig works with my skin tone?”

Zanders chuckles as I raise a single brow in answer.

“Ella picked our costumes. Said that people think Elsa is mean the way people think I’m mean, but that we’re actually both really nice.” He holds his hands up in defense. “Her words, not mine.”

The more I get to know the Chicago defenseman, the more I think Ella might be right.

She really is the smartest.

“I see you’re walking better these days.”

Rolling my eyes, I don’t honor his statement with a response. Instead, I try to cover my blushing cheeks by sticking the end of my hoodie string in my mouth and locking my eyes on the ground.

“And we still haven’t thrown out those disgusting sweatpants, I see.”

Mouth gaping in mock offense, my head snaps up to look at him. “If you’re so concerned with my loungewear, you can buy me new ones.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“Don’t worry. They’ll be coming off soon. I’m about to get in the shower.”

Zanders’ hazel eyes hood over. “Are you really trying to turn me on while I’m wearing a fucking dress, sweetheart?”

“Everything turns you on.”

“*You* turn me on.”

Swallowing hard, I pull my gaze from his.

“How have you been?” Zanders’ question is soft and completely sincere, taking me by surprise.

“Good?” My brows furrow in confusion as to why he cares.

“Good. That’s good. That’s great even.” His words come out flustered, and I’ve never seen this confident man so flustered before.

Looking him up and down, it makes me wonder why the headlines never cover this part of his life. What would the buzz be if people knew Chicago’s playboy was spending his Saturday night in a dress that his best friend’s daughter picked for him?

And that little thought makes me wonder what else they’re not publishing in news articles about him. He did say he pays his PR team a pretty penny to push the narrative he wants, which clearly isn’t this version of him.

But why not?

“You can see my apartment from here.” Snapping out of my trance, I follow Zanders’ line of sight behind me to the large windows encasing my apartment. “Right there. The top floor.” His voice is soft, his mouth close to my ear. Bending down, he points out the back window to the tall building across the street.

“You live across the street?” I can see his entire apartment from here, and holy hell, it’s nice.

“Now you know where to find me when you’re ready for a repeat of last weekend.”

There’s that sultry voice I’m used to. His tone drips with sex. How is that even possible?

Turning back to face him, Zanders doesn’t move, his lips sinfully close to my own. His stare bounces between my mouth and my eyes, as does mine, before I step away, creating some space between us.

Somehow even wearing a sparkly dress and a platinum wig, he can still turn me on.

Stupid award-winning dick.

“Seems like you’ve been plenty occupied this week,” I retort, needing to put some walls back up. But I don’t know why the hell I would say that.

Zanders loves his reputation. Me rubbing it in his face makes me sound like a jealous, petty jerk.

Instead of wearing the gloat I'd assume he'd have, his face falls surprisingly. "Don't believe everything you see on the internet, Stevie girl."

A moment of awkward silence lingers between us before my lips lift in an apologetic smile.

Disappointment covers his features as he turns away from my door, needing to meet up with his friends. "See you around." He shoots me a half-grin, but there isn't much joy behind it. More so sadness, reminding me that I'm a complete jerk.

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ZANDERS



“**Y**ou boys are looking good this season.”

Leaning back on the brown leather couch, I lace my hands behind my head. “It feels like we finally have all the right pieces in place to make a real run at it.”

“Eli’s game-winning goal last night,” Eddie, our mutual therapist, begins. “Boy, that was pretty.”

“Yeah, he made sure to show me the replay more than a few times over drinks last night.”

Maddison always plays better at home than on the road, so it’s no surprise he’s leading the league in points after our two-week home stand. But Eddie knows Maddison as well as I know my best friend, so there’s no need to spell it out. He’s always on top of his game when his family is in the arena.

I, on the other hand, thrive on the hate from visiting stadiums. I’ve become accustomed to being my own support system in every aspect of my life, hockey included.

“How are you feeling about Christmas?”

That question causes me to pause. I’ve tried to avoid thinking about the dreaded family holiday, but of course, Eddie was going to ask. He’s been my therapist for almost a decade now. Our weekly sessions are typically just a conversation between two friends, but Eddie being Eddie, always knows when to find the root of something deeper going on. And him knowing every single sordid detail of my family history, it’s no surprise he brought this up with Christmas around the corner.

But I made a promise to him and myself eight years ago that I would be nothing but honest in our sessions. Brutal honesty has translated into every aspect of my life, and I've got to say, it's incredibly freeing. It's what's helped me to overcome a lot of the inner demons I was battling when I was younger.

"I'm dreading it. I don't even know what we'll talk about. Lindsey won't be there to act as a buffer, and I wish I would've bailed and made up some excuse instead."

"This could be a good chance for you and your dad to talk, Zee. He's clearly making an effort by visiting you."

"That's what Logan said."

"Yeah, well," Eddie laughs. "Logan should probably rethink her career and join my field."

Since we were in college, Maddison and I have shared the same therapist, and Eddie has jokingly offered to pay half his salary to Logan for keeping our heads on straight when we aren't in his office.

"What's holding you back from having an honest conversation with your dad? You do a great job at it with everyone else in your life."

"I'm not angry at everyone else in my life."

"Why are you angry with your dad?"

"Eddie, you know why."

"Remind me." His favorite tactic. He knows exactly why and doesn't need recapping. He just wants to see if *I* remember why.

"Because he abandoned me the same way my mother did. At the same fucking time. He buried himself in work, and I was left alone with no one."

"Have you ever asked him why he did that?"

"I don't need to ask. I know why. He didn't love me enough to be the dad I needed."

Eddie's inhale is deep and resigned. "What do you think, since the two of you will be alone this weekend, you ask him about what happened in those last years of high school?"

Quickly shaking my head, I tell him no. "I don't care anymore. I've distanced myself from the situation, and I love myself enough that I don't need his love or anyone else's for that matter."

"Zee." Eddie's head falls back against the gray headrest of his chair. "For the love of God, please tell me that after eight years of us working together, you realize that's not true."

Silence overtakes the pristine counseling office that's been my safe haven for years now.

"Do you not think you're worthy of love?" Eddie pushes his rimless glasses up the bridge of his nose, his ankle slung over the opposite knee, and his hands folded together. If you opened up your dictionary to the word *therapist*, I'm pretty sure you'd find a picture of Eddie in his fucking sweater vest.

Clearly, I'm avoiding his question.

"Do you not think you're loved?" he rephrases.

"I think a few people love me. Maddison, Logan, my sister. But I don't know if anyone else would love me if they saw the real me."

"Who is the real you?" Again, Eddie knows this answer.

Rolling my eyes, I remind him. "Someone who cares about his best friends. Someone who is mentally strong because I've worked hard for that. Someone who only gets in fights on the ice because I'm protecting my people. Someone who actually spends more time being an uncle than I spend with all the women people think I'm with."

Eddie continues to nod, all the while scribbling notes on his pad of paper, just as he has for the last eight years.

"Someone who's afraid to lose the image portrayed for him because people love *that* guy. I don't know if they'll love the real guy, and I don't know if I'm willing to find out."

"You've always been my most honest client, Zee, but you've been lying to the entire world about who you are. For someone who never lies, that's a pretty big one."

"Eddie," I awkwardly laugh. "It's Wednesday morning. Getting pretty heavy for a Wednesday morning."

"It's therapy. What did you expect?" Of course, he won't let me deflect with humor. He knows me better than that.

"Do you want to be loved?"

Damn. He's hitting with all the hard questions today. I haven't had enough caffeine for this. Hell, I haven't had enough *whiskey* for this.

"I think I took that option off the table for myself a long time ago."

"Zee, you're twenty-eight. You could be eighty-eight, and still change directions. Do you want to be loved?"

Silence.

"Do you want to be loved?"

Outside street noises fill the quiet office as I stay mute.

“Zee, do you want to be loved?”

“Yes! Fuck.” Throwing my head back on the couch behind me, I close my eyes, scrubbing my palms over my jawline.

Eddie isn’t a typical therapist, at least not to me. He’s kind of like a life coach at this stage in our relationship, and it’s real fucking annoying.

But the truth is, I do want to be loved, and that’s scary to admit. It’s a lot easier to say you don’t want to be loved when no one loves you.

“Do you want to be loved for who you are or for who people *think* you are?”

“For me.”

“Then why haven’t you let anyone know who that is?”

“Because I’m scared.” And there it is. The root of it all. I’m fucking terrified for my fans or anyone else to see the real me. The persona I’ve worn for the last seven years in the league has signed my massive checks. I’m afraid to lose it. I’m afraid to lose my contract. I’m afraid to be released by the team and city where my best friends live.

My own parents didn’t love the real me enough to stick around. Why would I expect anyone else to?

“Being vulnerable and authentic is scary, man. Terrifying. But to the people who matter to you, the ones you’ve shown your true self to, they love you unconditionally. Why not let others love you unconditionally too? At least give them a chance to.”

Damn, my chest feels tight. And not like a “panic attack” tight, but like a “that hit me like a ton of bricks” and “I know he’s right” kind of tight.

“You’re right.”

“God, that feels good to hear.” Eddie wears a satisfied smile. Smug bastard. “How about this week you work on being your authentic, vulnerable self with someone who only knows the media’s version of EZ and not the real Zee. Maybe your dad?”

“Not my dad.”

“Okay.” Eddie puts his hands up in surrender. “But someone. Someone who thinks they know the real you but has no clue. Show them who you really are.”

“And if they don’t like the real me?”

Eddie ponders a moment. “Then I’ll double my donation to Active Minds, and I’ll donate four sessions a week to your kids instead of just the

two I planned on.”

“Deal,” I say quicker than he could take his words back.

If being vulnerable with someone gives me a chance to add four more weekly sessions to the quickly growing hours we’ve gathered from doctors and therapists around the city, then I will.

The clock on the far wall reads ten after the hour. “We went over again.”

Eddie shrugs his shoulders. “You can afford it.”

Standing, we hug each other. As I said before, we’ve been doing this shit for eight years. Eddie is an integral part of my life and a real friend. He’s family, which is why he calls me by the name the most important people in my life use, and not by the one my parents gave me.

“You’re coming to the gala next month, right?”

Eddie walks me to the office door, opening it. “Of course. I couldn’t be prouder of you and Eli. I remember when you two were just a couple of arrogant little shits in college. Now, look at you.”

“Now, we’re two arrogant grown-ass men.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Black-tie,” I remind Eddie, pointing an accusing finger at him.

The black-tie dress code was my idea. But fuck it. I love having an excuse to dress up. Not to mention, I look fine as hell rocking a tux.

“I’ll send you the bill for that too.”

The small café below Eddie’s office is my typical stop on a Wednesday morning. After our sessions, I’m always drained. I grab my usual black coffee with two sugars and continue the short walk back to my apartment complex.

The late November chill hits me as soon as I walk outside, so I pull my beanie lower to cover my ears. The streets of downtown Chicago are bustling with bodies, needing to get from point A to point B, and thankfully, with the combination of keeping my head down and them being too busy to notice, I go unrecognized.

Turning the corner two blocks from my place, I stop in my tracks, causing the traffic of people to have to move around my body as I take up plenty of space on the sidewalk.

And I’m rooted in place because just ahead, there’s a head full of chestnut curls, though today they’re thrown in a bun with a yellow bandana

wrapped around them. Stevie is sitting on the chilly cement curb, knees to her chest and head in her hands.

The amount of space that girl has been occupying in my head lately is a bit concerning. What I thought was going to be a one-night stand has turned into me endlessly hoping for a repeat round, but over the last few weeks and the few short road trips we've had since I saw her on delayed Halloween, Stevie has kept her distance.

It's annoying.

Even from a block away, I can see her back slightly vibrate before she looks up and frantically wipes her cheek.

No, no, no. I don't do crying. Correction—I don't do chicks crying. Especially ones that I've been with before. Comforting adds to the intimacy factor I'd like to stay away from, but apparently, no one told my feet that because without realizing it, they've carried me right to the sad flight attendant sitting on the curb.

Stevie's head is buried back in her arms, not knowing I'm standing next to her as I eye the ground in contemplation. My pants cost more than some people's weekly salary, but here I am, sitting my ass on a disgusting curb in the middle of disgusting downtown Chicago.

"You following me?" Nudging my shoulder into hers, I hope the humor will dissipate whatever the hell is going on right now.

It doesn't.

Stevie looks up from her folded arms, her blue-green eyes rimmed in red. Her freckled nose is swollen and pink, and the sadness she's wearing couldn't be more obvious.

"Oh God." She turns away from me, using the sleeve of her oversized flannel to wipe her nose and cheeks. "You should go. I don't need you to see this."

"Are you okay?"

"Yep." She inhales a deep breath, trying to compose herself, her face still turned from me. "Totally fine."

"Well, thank God. Because how embarrassing would that be for you if I caught you crying on a curb."

Bringing my coffee to my lips, I hide my smile as she turns back to look at me, the two of us sharing a laugh. And her laugh sounds nice. A lot better than the sniffing she was trying to hide.

This time it's my knee nudging into hers. "What's going on?"

She readjusts the tiny gold hoop in her nose that got messed up when wiping it on her shirt sleeve. “A dog died.”

“Your dog?” My heart drops a bit for her.

“No.” She shakes her head, throwing a thumb over her shoulder.

Craning my neck around and upward, I read the sign on the run-down building behind us. SDOC—Senior Dogs of Chicago.

“I volunteer here, and one of our dogs died. He was twelve, and it was time, but it makes me sad that he was here and not at home with someone who loved him.”

Oh, fuck. This isn’t good. Stevie’s nickname is ironic because she’s never shown a sweet side to her. Not once. And now, sitting on this curb, she decides to tell me she’s actually a total sweetheart? I don’t know if I’m ready for that to be true.

“Well, did *you* love him?”

“Of course. But it’s not the same. He deserved his own home with a warm bed and an owner who loved him. They just want someone to love unconditionally, but instead, they’re stuck here.”

Unconditional love. What’s going on with the universe today that those two words are being thrown my way twice before noon?

“Have you ever been in love?” Stevie’s eyes are wide and curious, her question completely sincere.

Suddenly my chest feels tight, and words have evaded me because the topic of love should not be up for discussion with the last chick I had sex with.

“Not that kind of love.” Stevie playfully rolls her eyes. “We all know you’re already in love with me.”

There she is. A bit more of her wild energy takes over, the sadness leaving from the air around us.

“Come on, Armani.” She stands from the curb, holding her hand out for mine. “You’re going to fall in love today.”

“These pants are Tom Ford, sweetheart.” I put my hand in hers, letting her believe she’s helping me up, but she’s not doing shit as I stand from the curb on my own.

“Well, they could be from Walmart for all I care. It doesn’t matter the brand name. They’re about to be covered in dog hair.”

Typically, that’d be a hell no for me, but instead, I find myself wearing too big of a smile and following the curly-haired girl into the run-down

building behind us.

The small entryway is bright and cheerful, each wall a different color. But you almost can't see the paint due to the countless Polaroids overtaking the wall. New owners with their new dogs, smiles as big as could be, reminding you of the happy times this building has seen.

A large desk sits at the end of the entryway, and when I turn the corner, my eyes widen in shock. The next room over is littered with dogs. Some big, some small, some sprawled out on the countless dog beds, others being playful with each other.

But the thing I notice most of all is the way Stevie lights up when she opens the small gate separating the entryway from the pups. When she steps inside, her smile overtakes her face as a handful of older dogs come right to her, sniffing and licking, tails wagging.

They clearly love her as much as she loves them.

"You okay?" An older woman stands on the far side of the room. When Stevie nods, the lady shoots her a half-smile before taking off behind a door, leaving us alone.

"Come on, fancy pants." Stevie opens the gate for me. "They aren't going to bite."

Them biting me is not what I'm worried about. I'm a big and commanding guy. Most dogs fear me, not the other way around.

What I *am* worried about is seeing this sweet side to Stevie. I'm not sure if I'm ready to know this part of her exists. I've already been too distracted by her body that I can't get enough of, not to mention her smartass mouth. I don't know that I can handle finding her soul attractive too.

Setting my coffee down on the front desk, I enter the large room full of dogs. The space is bright and eclectic, with all different colored rugs covering the floor. Big pillows are thrown about, and even more dog beds are positioned around the room. The far wall is lined with crates, where a couple of pups have decided to chill, regardless of their crate doors being open for them to come out and play.

A few dogs rush me, sniffing my legs and shoes. Not as many as the number surrounding Stevie right now, but still more than I assumed. I thought they'd be intimidated by my commanding presence. But it seems like they're just excited to have a visitor.

"That's Bagel." Stevie motions to the Beagle sniffing my Louboutins.

"Bagel the Beagle? Genius."

“He got here last month, but he already has a new home.” Stevie’s voice drips with excitement and pride. “He gets picked up tomorrow.”

Plopping herself on one of the plush floor pillows, she sits crossed-legged as dogs rush her face, licking and sniffing, tails moving at a mile a minute. She doesn’t shoo them away. Instead, she embraces all their love and gives it right back to them in the form of belly rubs and scratches behind their ears.

Once they’ve settled from the commotion, most of the pups leave, going back to whatever they were doing before we walked in. Stevie turns my way, lifting a questioning brow when she notices me standing still by the gate before she motions to the ground.

Fuck it. This entire outfit is either going to need to be thrown out or dry-cleaned anyway. Stevie’s secondhand flannels and baggy jeans are making a whole lot more sense right about now.

I take a seat across from her with enough room between us that I can stretch out my long legs. A couple of dogs sniff my ears and head, but they’re unbothered by my presence for the most part.

“So.” Looking around the brightly colored room. “What is this place?”

A small white dog finds its way onto Stevie’s lap, curling up between her legs. “This place is a rescue shelter for senior dogs. Well, it’s for all dogs, really. But we advertise for senior dogs because they’re usually not chosen first, and we want them to be.”

“How often do you come here?”

“Whenever you guys are playing at home. I try to come here as much as possible when we aren’t traveling.”

Looking up from the dog she’s snuggling, she shoots me her most genuine smile. Her freckled cheeks aren’t as flush as they were when she was crying outside, and her blue-green eyes are much more bright and clear.

To be honest, in the couple of months I’ve known her, I’ve never seen her this happy. She sure as hell doesn’t look this excited to be on the airplane with us.

“Why don’t you work here full-time? You clearly love it.”

And why am I suggesting that? As much as I wanted her off the plane two months ago, I can’t imagine traveling without her to drive me insane—in more ways than one.

“Because unfortunately, adulthood costs money, and they can’t afford to pay me here. They can barely afford to keep the doors open.”

I tried to avoid lingering my stare on the cracks forming on the walls or the water spots in the corner of the ceiling, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t notice them. Not to mention the baseboards that could use a fresh coat of paint or the squeaky hinges on the front door that should probably be replaced.

“Not enough adoptions going on?”

“We survive off donations. Our adoptions don’t cost much because we don’t want to deter people from adopting. But even so, I don’t think many people know this little building is even here. Or if they do, it seems like they’d still rather buy a puppy than bring an older pup home.”

A big yellow lab mix comes over, licking my ear. It’s pretty gross, but instead of wiping it away, I scratch his wiry hair under his collar, pulling a content groan from the big guy.

“That’s Gus. Cheryl, the woman who was in here earlier, she’s the owner of the shelter, and that’s her dog.”

“He’s a big guy.”

“He’s a lazy guy,” Stevie laughs.

“How many do you have at home?”

Her pretty smile falls slightly. “None. My brother, the one I live with, he’s allergic.”

“Well, that’s a shame. I figured the only reason you keep wearing those disgusting sweatpants is because you’re at home cuddling with dogs all day.”

“Ha ha.” Stevie’s forced laugh is followed by a small genuine one.

Her cute giggle draws the attention of a black and tan Doberman who was sleeping in their crate. The giant dog, which admittedly looks a bit scary even to me, exits their crate, pulling a deep stretch, ass in the air.

The Doberman’s pointy ears and piercing eyes fixate right on me, and I’m not going to lie, for a moment, it looks aggressive as hell, like it wants to bite my head off. And I’m not sure being on the ground, face level, is the best idea.

Stevie follows my line of sight. “That’s Rosie. Don’t let her fool you. She’s the sweetest thing in the world. She just looks intimidating, but she’s not. She’s a marshmallow.”

Rosie takes two small steps, her head slightly surveying the room.

“And I’m her favorite.” Stevie opens her arms for Rosie to come greet her.

Instead of going to her, Rosie takes a few slow intimidating strides towards me.

She walks right between my open legs. Her yellow-brown eyes are determined and focused, staring lasers at my own. I don’t care what Stevie said about her not being intimidating. Rosie is intimidating.

That is, until she falls into my lap, burying her head into my thigh before flipping over onto her back, legs flailing in the air, asking for belly rubs.

I can’t help but laugh as both my hands massage her belly. “You’re her favorite, huh?”

“I hate you.”

Rosie’s big head turns to look up at me, her intimidation tactic wholly gone. She looks a little in love, and I think I might be too.

“How long has she been here?”

“Almost a year. Last Christmas, she was dropped off when her owners had a baby, and they decided to give Rosie up. Said they were worried about her being around kids, which is total bullshit. She would never even hurt a fly.”

Snaking my arm under her, I wrap Rosie up like a baby. She uses my bicep as a pillow while I give her scratches until she eventually falls asleep.

Big softie. Her previous owners are assholes.

“She is a marshmallow.”

“She’s kind of like you,” Stevie notes, pulling my attention back to the curly-haired flight attendant. “You’re pretty soft on the inside too, Mr. Zanders.”

“Please. I’m scary as fuck.”

“Sure thing, Elsa.”

Looking back at the giant Doberman sleeping in my arms, I can’t help but wonder who the hell wouldn’t want this dog and why the fuck she’s at a shelter. She’s perfect.

“Hey, Zanders?”

“Hmm?”

“That’s what it feels like to be loved.”

STEVIE



I only had a few quick work trips between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Those were spent avoiding the exit row as much as possible and locking myself in my hotel room in an attempt to avoid Evan Zanders. Spending time with him isn't the problem per se, but every time I'm around him, I feel like a dog in heat, wanting to jump his bones.

Somehow though, I successfully evaded him.

However, if I would've seen Zanders at the shelter with Rosie before those work trips, I'd be telling a different story. That day last week, seeing him around all my favorite pups, I had never been more attracted to him than I was at that moment.

And for the second time since I've known him, my attraction had nothing to do with the way he looks and everything to do with the sliver of his heart he showed.

"Vee, you ready to go?" My dad's voice pulls me out of my daydream.

Looking around the family box at the United Center, I hadn't noticed that the previously crowded space had essentially cleared out in the final minutes of the game. The Devils are about to pull off a dominant home win, and I'm sure most family members are eager to see their players outside of the locker room on this Christmas Day.

Slinging my cross-body bag over my shoulder, I follow my dad out of the suite and down the hall to the locker room's private back entrance for family members. My mom is at least ten feet ahead of us, eager to see her beloved son, but I'm trying to ignore the fact she's never been that excited to see me.

It's been years since I spent Christmas with my family. It's a basketball holiday, so when I was flying for the NBA, I was on the road, my work being the perfect excuse to avoid a get-together with my mother. But the NHL takes the day off, so here I am.

"Do you know any of these guys?" My dad wraps his arm over my shoulders as we walk down the long private hallway in the United Center, the walls plastered with photos of the two professional sports teams who play in this building—the Devils and the Raptors.

"Some of them."

My dad stops us in front of this year's team photo. "Who is that?" He points to the curly-haired, green-eyed goofball.

"That's Rio," I laugh. "He's kind of like the class clown. He's a defenseman, and he carries this old school 90s boom box around with him everywhere he goes."

"And this one?" He points to number thirteen.

"That's Maddison. Team captain. Star forward and really nice guy. His family lives a few floors above Ryan, actually."

"And him?"

My dad's finger taps on the one player I'm trying not to look at. In fact, I've tried to avoid looking at him all day, but as the alternate captain, his face is plastered all over this arena. Not that he minds. Knowing Zanders, he probably volunteered for the photoshoot.

Clearing my throat, I pull my gaze away from number eleven. "That's Evan Zanders."

"Well, what's he like?"

"Arrogant. Show-off. In love with himself. Takes more time getting ready than most women. Gets in a lot of fights on the ice."

Loves his niece. Softer than he lets people know. Makes me feel good in more ways than one.

"Mm-hmm, I see."

"See what?"

"You like him."

"No, I don't." Snapping my head around, my dad looks down at me with a knowing smile. "I can't stand him, actually."

A deep laugh rumbles in his chest. "Vee, I love you, but you're a terrible liar. You have a crush."

“I do not have a crush. I work for him.” Which is something I’ve been trying to remind myself for weeks now, ever since that night we hooked up in DC.

“Okay.” My dad lets it go with that, but the slight smirk he wears as we continue our walk to Ryan’s locker room tells me that he doesn’t buy my lie.

“Ryan!” my mother squeals as my sweaty twin brother comes walking into the family waiting room. She’s far too excited, acting as if she didn’t already see him this Christmas morning.

“Hey, Mom.” He squeezes her in a hug, my mother’s face lit up and beaming, the way it usually is when my brother is involved. He’s her pride and joy, and I’m, well...I’m here.

“Great game, son.” My dad is next to hug the superstar, and even though he’s equally as proud, it has nothing to do with him being a famous athlete. My dad only knows about basketball from watching Ryan growing up, but he’s not a “sports guy.” He just loves his kids and is proud of anything we do.

Ryan swings his arm around me, his sweaty armpit landing on my shoulder. “Well, you’re disgusting. Good game, though.”

“Thanks, Vee.” He pops a kiss on the side of my head in his brotherly way. “I’ll just shower at home. Let’s get going. I’m starving.”

“Ryan, I love your apartment building,” my mother says, as she has every single time she’s walked into it over the last three years.

“It’s Vee’s apartment, too.”

“Well, for now,” she mutters, and I take a deep, resigned breath, continuing to hold my tongue.

“Merry Christmas.” Our doorman opens the lobby door, ushering us inside from the cold. “Miss Shay, you received a package. It’s in your kitchen, and your dinner has been delivered.”

My brows crease in confusion. The only people who would send me a gift are here with me, and we’ve already exchanged Christmas presents this morning. But before I take off to find out what it is, I slip our doorman the

card Ryan and I signed and stuffed with cash. It's mostly from my brother, but I threw in what I could afford.

I've quickly grown to appreciate our doorman, simply because he doesn't treat me like an outsider living in this building, even though I clearly am.

"Merry Christmas."

He shoots me a wink before I hurry to meet up with my family in the elevator, eager to eat the Chinese takeout we ordered on the way back from the arena.

The wafting smell of chow mein noodles, broccoli beef, and orange chicken invade my nostrils as soon as I walk into our apartment, but before I can indulge, I snag the perfectly wrapped gift box from the kitchen island and slip into my room to change.

I've been wearing body-hugging jeans all day, but I've been dying to take them off. Some days I don't mind tight denim, and some days if there's any part of fabric touching my skin, I could murder someone. That's why I'm always in sweatpants or baggy jeans. I don't care if they're not the most flattering things in the world. They're comfortable and make me feel good. My body fluctuates almost daily. Having tight stuff in my closet that might fit one day and not the next just fucks with my body image.

The sky-blue wrapped box holds my attention as I change into my comfiest sweats. The chill of the apartment causes me to dance into them with urgency, but when I slip my left foot in, my toe gets stuck on one of the many tiny holes in the seam, causing me to trip over myself, ripping the entire bottom half of my pants.

I hit the ground with a loud thud, my pants halfway on.

"Vee, you good?" my brother calls out.

"Good." I blow a deep breath, moving a curl from the front of my face.

My insane logic wants to yell at him for stealing all the athletic genes while we were in the womb and therefore ruining my favorite sweatpants. This is Ryan's fault, really.

Rest in peace is the first thought that passes through my mind when they hit the bottom of the trash can.

The second thought is how happy Zanders will probably be, but I push that image away. Thinking about Evan Zanders while I'm not wearing any pants is a bad idea and has happened way more often than I'd like to admit.

Exchanging Ryan's jersey for an oversized crewneck, I take a seat on the bed, eager to find out who the hell gave me a present. There's no card on the outside, just perfectly crisp edges of light blue wrapping paper, orange ribbon, and a matching bow.

The box inside is some designer brand, though I don't know which, but it's clear from the quality of the box alone that this gift is too expensive.

And now I know exactly who it's from.

The simple piece of cardstock, lying on top of the fancy folded tissue paper, confirms it.

Stevie-

Does me buying you pants qualify me to get back in your pants?

Kidding...sort of.

Merry Christmas,

-Zee

(Please get rid of those disgusting sweatpants. No one needs to see those.)

The smile on my face is painfully big. Zanders doesn't seem like the type to buy presents for his past hookups, but he's also surprised me in more ways than one since that night.

My hand grazes the soft black fabric of the top pair. It might be the most lux material I've ever felt, which is a very Zanders thing to find. Of course, he bought me designer sweatpants. I don't even want to know how much they cost.

And not only did he buy me one pair, he bought me three in all different sizes.

This guy is the strangest mix of cliché and unpredictable that I've ever met, and he has me constantly guessing which version of him is the real one.

The box smells a little like him, like maybe it was sitting in his apartment for a few days before he wrapped it and sent it over.

I'm not going to lie, my heart flutters more than I want to admit. This is thoughtful as hell and as random as it may seem to an outsider looking in, it's not. He's given me shit about my sweatpants ever since the first time I saw him off the airplane, and him not only remembering, but also picking something he knows I'll be comfortable in, as much as he compliments when I show off my body, makes me feel...understood.

The crush I lied to my dad about earlier seems more and more unmistakable.

But just as bad of an idea.

There's nothing that can come from this situation other than me eventually getting my feelings hurt, but I decide just for today, I'll ignore that reminder and bask in Zanders' thoughtful gift.

The material feels like straight-up butter as it glides over my thick thighs. And I shaved my legs this morning. Well, my lower legs because I'm too lazy to do the whole thing, so the soft fabric feels extra lovely and creamy.

I didn't know you could feel bougie while wearing loungewear, but here I am, feeling bougie as hell.

Although he got me different sizes, I can make all three pairs work, so the other two get their own shelf in my closet, and Zanders' note gets its own spot in the top drawer of my dresser where my brother won't find it.

Ryan is protective as it is, but if he finds out that I slept with someone with Zanders' reputation, he'll be beyond disappointed.

"Who was it from?" my dad asks as I shuffle to the kitchen table wearing my brand-new fancy pants.

My eyes dart to Ryan, who seems just as curious.

"Uhh...a Christmas gift from someone I work with."

Not a lie.

"That's awesome, Vee. I'm so glad you're making friends here."

Yeah, that's one way to describe Zanders.

Taking a seat at the dining room table, I fill my plate with a little bit of everything until you can barely see the white porcelain underneath all my food. Ryan and my dad pop up from their seats to grab themselves fresh beers, and my mother uses it as a prime opportunity.

"That's an awful lot of food, Stevie. There's so much added salt." Her voice is hushed, quiet enough that my brother and dad can't hear. As I mentioned before, Ryan is protective but rarely recognizes that the person I need protection from the most is our own mother.

As soon as my brother and dad come within hearing distance, her faux innocence is back as she brings her cloth napkin to her mouth, dabbing the corners of her perfectly lined lips.

"I'm glad you guys could all make it to the game." Ryan takes a seat, clearly out of the loop to my mother's antics, before putting a fresh beer in

front of me. As soon as the glass touches the table, I grab it and chug half of it without taking a breath.

“Me too, Ryan. We are so proud of you.”

The beer is thick as it runs down my throat, but it’s my mother’s words that almost cause me to choke. Could it be any more obvious who her favorite child is? I swallow the cold liquid, but I do so with an exaggerated eye roll.

“Do you have something you want to say, Stevie?” My mother places her hands in her lap, cocking her head while looking at me, testing me to speak up.

Don’t ruin Christmas. Don’t ruin Christmas. Don’t ruin Christmas.

“Nope.” Pushing my food around my plate with my chopsticks, I keep my focus away from the judgmental woman sitting across the table from me.

“Do you not think we’re proud of you?”

Well, that sincere question is a little shocking. My eyes dart across to my mom’s blue-green ones, expecting her to keep surprising me by telling me she *is* proud of me.

“We are so proud of you, Vee,” my dad cuts in, but I already know he feels that way. I want to hear my mother say it.

“Mm-hmm,” she hums, which sounds a lot more like a disagreeing hum than an agreeable one.

Dinner continues, and I stay quiet. Anything I want to talk about—the shelter or the funky little thrift store I stumbled upon last week, are all going to be met with my mother’s disapproval, and I don’t want her to taint the things I love. She can hate on my body or my job that I’m not all that passionate about, but the things that bring real joy to my life, I don’t want her to touch those.

As the three of them are deep in conversation, my mother enthralled with Ryan’s life here in Chicago, I pull out my phone, thinking maybe I should send Zanders a message on Instagram to thank him for my new loungewear.

And I kind of want an excuse to talk to him, too.

You’d think something as simple as sweatpants wouldn’t be that big of a deal, but just that small piece of being comfortable during this uncomfortable family dinner means a lot. Plus, Zanders made my gift

entirely about me, besides the price tag that is very Evan Zanders. Vastly different than the pair of nude pumps my mother gave me.

I don't have his number, and he doesn't have mine, but access to his DMs is enough to connect to the famous hockey player.

I figured his Instagram would be showing off his extravagant Christmas, but there's nothing on display. Over the last six weeks, since I started following the Chicago defenseman, he almost always has something posted to entertain his fans. He's rarely quiet, so this is strange.

"You done, Vee?" Ryan stands over me, his hand on my plate, ready to clean up the table.

"Uh, yeah."

"You didn't eat anything."

"Not hungry," I lie.

He bends down, looking over my shoulder at my phone. "Is that Evan Zanders' Instagram?"

Fuck.

"Nope." Exiting out of the app, I hide my phone in my lap.

"I can't stand that guy." Ryan continues to the kitchen, hands full of dishes. "He gives a bad name to Chicago sports."

"Have you ever even talked to him?" My tone has too much of a bite as it comes out of my mouth, and Ryan catches on right away.

"I don't need to. He gets plenty of coverage in the media. I know exactly the kind of guy he is."

"Well," my dad interrupts, wearing a sly grin. "Vee actually knows the guy. So, why don't we ask her? What do you think about him, Stevie?"

All eyes turn towards me, and suddenly I feel like my family can read every inappropriate thought I've ever had of Zanders. Too many vivid details from that wild night in DC flood my mind, causing heat to creep up my cheeks.

"He's fine."

"*Fine*, huh?" One too many brow pumps come from the old guy at the table.

"Thank you for that, Dad, but can you not?" Turning back to my brother, I add, "He's not as bad as you think. The media doesn't do a very good job at portraying him, but there's more to him than just the bad boy stuff."

Ryan's eyes are lasered in on me, doing that twin thing where he tries to read my mind.

"Or so it seems." I casually shrug, keeping my head down as I scurry to the couch, needing to avoid my brother's stare and his mind tricks.

"Brett's coming to town," are the words Ryan uses to change the subject.

Well, thank God I didn't eat because it'd be coming back up right about now.

"Oh, is he?" my mother bursts. "Stevie, did you hear that?"

"Heard it."

"That's so exciting. I love Brett. What's he doing here?"

"There's a charity gala coming up, and all the major sports teams in the city will be there. He needs to network, so hopefully, I can introduce him to some people I know. Get him a job here."

"Here?" Quickly turning around, my eyes widen with bewilderment.

"Yeah, here. I told you about him coming a few weeks ago."

"I know, but I didn't think that meant he would be trying to work here. *Live here.*"

"I think it's great," my mom interrupts. "Brett is such a handsome boy. Stevie, you should be grateful he's coming to town. Maybe he will give you another chance."

What the hell? "I don't want another chance!"

Oh shit. *Don't ruin Christmas. Don't ruin Christmas.*

"Vee, you don't need to give him another chance if you don't want to," my sweet dad adds.

My mother, on the other hand? Mortified that a woman would be so loud.

"What went down between you two?" my brother asks.

My eyes ping-pong between all three of my family members, not wanting to spill the details and embarrassment of how I realized I was being used for three years by my ex-boyfriend.

I love my brother, but some things are better left unsaid. Me sleeping with the most notorious playboy in the city, for one. The other is that his friend is a piece of shit and made me feel like an unworthy option for years. But he doesn't even see that our mom makes me feel like garbage, let alone his former college teammate, so what's the use in elaborating?

“Nothing.” Quickly shaking my head, I stand from the couch, needing to get out of this apartment and fill my lungs with some fresh air.

My eyes dart to the large sprawling windows on the backside of our apartment. Chicago’s Navy Pier is brightly lit up for Christmas, but my gaze is glued on a tall, built figure across the street sitting on the front steps of his apartment building.

Zanders.

“I’m going for a quick walk.”

“Now? It’s late.”

Slipping on my coat, I tuck my feet into my Nikes before reassuring my dad. “I’m not going far. I just need a minute.”

Grabbing two fresh beers out of the fridge, I make my way downstairs and outside to see the only person who has made me feel good today.

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ZANDERS



“S top being a little creep and come sit down.”

My sister’s words pull my attention away from the sprawling floor-to-ceiling window in my penthouse and back to the table where she and my dad sit, post-Christmas dinner.

“I’m not being a creep, Linds.”

Okay, that’s a lie. I am being a creep, but I saw Stevie’s family walk into her apartment building a bit ago, so I know she got my gift, and yet, I still haven’t heard from her.

Maybe she didn’t like it? I already felt like an idiot buying her something. Let alone buying her fucking sweatpants.

Who buys a girl sweatpants for Christmas?

Also, who buys a Christmas present for their last hookup?

I do. That’s who. Fucking idiot.

“Then why have you been looking back and forth between your phone and that damn window every five seconds?”

“Linds, can you not call me out like that, please?”

Taking a seat across from my dad and next to my sister, Lindsey tries to snag my phone out of my hand. But I’m a professional athlete, so I’m plenty quick to hold that shit above my head and out of her reach.

“Why are you being so weird tonight?” Her hazel eyes sparkle with a knowing glint.

“I’m not. Chill out.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Her mouth falls open in disbelief.

“What? Fuck no. Have you met me?”

“Yes, Ev, I have. Do you have a girlfriend? Is she hot? Would I be into her?” Lindsey’s grabby hands try to pull my arm down, wanting my phone, but I keep it far away from her.

For a thirty-year-old lawyer, when it comes to chicks, she really turns into a teenage girl.

“I don’t have a girlfriend. She’s...a friend. And yes, you’d think she’s hot.”

Lindsey stops trying to attack me for my phone and instead stills. “I never think your little puck bunnies are hot.”

“She’s not a puck bunny, and she’s not like my usual hookups.”

“So, you *have* hooked up?”

“What a lovely Christmas,” my dad pipes up with sarcasm, which is about the most he’s said to me tonight, and I don’t even know if those words are directed at me. “I’ve got to take this.” He holds his phone up before slipping into my guest room.

“Who the fuck is calling him? The only people who call him are you and me.”

“No,” my sister corrects. “The only person who calls him is me. Would it kill you to be friendly to him tonight?”

“I’m not *not* being friendly. We just don’t have shit to talk about.”

“Evan, he came all the way to see you.”

“To see us.”

“To see *you*. This was planned long before yesterday when I found out I could grab a red-eye flight to make it in time. Would it kill you to make a little effort back?”

I know she’s right, but that doesn’t make up for the fact that he and I haven’t said more than a few generic words to each other over the years. I’m still mad at him for the way he handled things when my mom left. If Lindsey didn’t make it last minute, you’d be hearing crickets in my penthouse.

“I don’t know what to talk to him about. He doesn’t care about hockey. What else am I supposed to bring up? The fucking weather?”

“He does care about your hockey. He’s always filling me in on your stats when I call.”

“Well, he doesn’t say shit to me, so I don’t say shit to him.”

Lindsey rolls her eyes at my immaturity before changing the subject back to the wild flight attendant who has been taking up way too much of

my brain space lately.

“Let me see a pic. I bet I could steal her from you.”

“Pfft. No shot.” That sounded like bullshit even to me.

My sister is almost more of a player than I am. She pulls as much pussy, if not more, and tries half as hard for it. She stole more than a chick or two from me growing up.

But I’m not pulling all that much pussy these days. In fact, I haven’t had sex since that night in DC. What’s the point? After knowing what it feels like to have a partner who can keep up with me, why would I want less?

Unfortunately for my right hand and me, Stevie hasn’t given in to a repeat round.

But ever since that day at the dog shelter, I don’t know that I’m all that interested in just another session in the sack. I kind of what to hang out with her, too. With our clothes on.

Without is cool too.

Whatever.

“Ev, do you like someone? For real?”

“No, Linds. I don’t.” My sister’s smile is lifted and knowing. “Fuck. I don’t know.”

“Holy shit. What is going on?”

“Nothing is going on. We hooked up once and it kind of fucked with my head, and I haven’t been too tempted to crawl into bed with anyone else.”

“Evan...” My sister’s eyes are big and proud. “You *like* someone.”

Exhaling a deep, resigned breath, I hide my face in my hands. “I know.”

“Can I see her?” Lindsey’s tone has shifted drastically from the teasing she was doing a moment ago. Now there’s just pride and excitement in her voice.

Pulling up Stevie’s Instagram, I show Lindsey my favorite picture on her page. But I also make sure to hold it away from my sister so she doesn’t accidentally double-tap it. Knowing her, she’d do that shit on purpose.

This photo of Stevie, standing on a bridge overlooking a river, with her back to the camera, is beautiful and natural, her chestnut curls waving in the wind. Her face is turned back over her shoulder, showcasing her freckles and blue-green eyes. She’s in her typical attire of baggy jeans, dirty Nikes, and an oversized flannel, though it’s blowing away from her body, and she just looks really...pretty.

Fuck. What the fuck is wrong with me?

“Damn.” Lindsey’s eyes go wide. “She’s nothing like your typical type. She also looks way too cool for you.”

“She might be.”

“She’s hot, that’s for sure, and look at that ass.” My sister leans in closer, examining my phone.

“Absolute dump truck.” My voice drips with pride, but I don’t know why. It’s not like the owner of that ass is mine, though I kind of want her to be.

“So, what’s the deal with you two?” Lindsey relaxes back in her chair, bringing her red wine to her lips.

“There is no deal. She works for the team and—”

Lindsey’s wine gets spit right back into her glass. “She works for the team? Please tell me this isn’t some forbidden kink of yours.”

“It’s not. I actually find it really fucking annoying that she could get in trouble for it. Anyway, she’s a flight attendant for the team plane.”

“She’s your flight attendant?” Lindsey bursts into a disbelieving laugh. “Fuck, this is good.”

Rolling my eyes, I continue. “It was supposed to be a one-time thing. Get it out of our systems.”

My sister nods in understanding.

“But I like being around her. She comes off self-assured with a bite, but she’s actually kind of sweet, and I don’t think she gets how pretty she is. I think all her confident bullshit is an act.”

“Asshole on the outside, softie on the inside. Sounds like someone else I know.”

“I bought her sweatpants for Christmas.”

That causes my sister to pause. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

I shrug. “It’s kind of an inside joke. I thought it was charming, but she hasn’t said a word, and I’m worried I freaked her out.”

“If a girl I slept with once bought me sweatpants for Christmas, I’d have to think long and hard about going at it a second time with her.”

Well, shit.

My sister’s phone buzzes with an email. “Are you kidding me? Do my clients not realize it’s Christmas?” Standing from the table, she heads into the third room here. “I’m billing double for this.”

With the central part of my penthouse empty the way it typically is, I peek out my window once again and back to my phone, but still, there’s

nothing. Well, nothing from Stevie. There is a text from Logan asking me to come over for dessert before the kids go to bed, which is a perfect excuse to get out of here.

Before I can bolt for the door, my dad comes back into the dining room after his phone call.

“Who was that?”

He looks at his phone then back to me. “Just a friend.”

Nodding, I stay silent, the way I usually am around my father. There’s not much to say other than me telling him how angry I am for how he abandoned me when I needed him most, but I probably shouldn’t ruin Christmas with that, so I stay silent. Just like I have for the last twelve years.

“What time is your flight tomorrow?”

“Eight in the morning.”

“I can get you a driver.”

“I’ll grab a cab.”

Another nod. Another moment of awkward silence.

“The team looks good. You’ve been playing well.”

“You’ve actually watched?” Fuck. That question was clearly a jab at him and came out exactly how I meant it.

My dad’s head jolts back a bit like he was hit physically and not just with words. “Of course, I’ve watched, Evan.”

“I figured you stopped watching a long time ago. Like twelve years ago.”

What the hell is the matter with me? I’ve been able to keep this anger under wraps for a long time. I don’t know why I can’t contain it now.

“Just like you stopped being involved in any part of my life twelve years ago.”

Holy fuck. Stop. Talking.

“I was in a dark place then—”

“Oh, you were in a dark place? *You* were in a dark place? I was sixteen years old, and my mother left me, and then you did too!”

“I never left!” His voice matches mine.

“You may have still lived at the house in Indiana, but you fucking left. You buried yourself in work.”

“Of course, I did, Evan. That’s why she left me. Left us. I was trying to make up for it.”

“You stopped coming to my hockey games. You stopped being my dad, and the only reason you give a shit now is that I’m in the NHL and could potentially win the Cup this year. You’re as much of a gold-digger as she is, Dad.”

I don’t even believe those last words that came out of my mouth, but I don’t care. I’m angry, and for the first time in a long time, I don’t know how to control it.

“Who the hell do you think you are, talking to me like that? I didn’t raise my son to speak to people this way.”

“You stopped raising me a long time ago.”

“Evan—” My dad’s tone is utterly defeated, his lips turned down at the corners.

“Ev, what the hell?” Lindsey stands in the doorway between the room she was working in and the living room, staring at me in complete shock.

“I gotta go.” Standing from my seat, I slip my arms through the sleeves of my coat before tucking my ears into my beanie. I can’t look at my dad sitting at the table because too much guilt is rushing through me. Anger too.

“It’s Christmas. Where are you going?”

“To the Maddisons.” Ducking into the hall, I slam the door behind me and take a deep breath.

Fuck. That wasn’t supposed to happen. I wasn’t supposed to care anymore. I don’t need my dad to love me. I love myself, and that’s enough.

My body is bouncing with energy as I ride the elevator down to the lobby, and when the cold Chicago wind hits me as soon as I step outside, it does nothing to calm me down. I’m still fueled and fired up.

Needing to chill out before seeing Ella and MJ, I take a seat on the front step of my apartment building, my entire body slightly shaking, not because of the bite in the air but from the adrenaline coursing through me.

It’s been a long time since I’ve been unable to articulate my feelings in a level way. Anger rarely takes over, but I couldn’t help it tonight. I don’t know how he doesn’t see what he did.

At the root of it, I want him to apologize, and I want him to be the dad he was while I was growing up. I miss that man. I miss our relationship, and I hate admitting that I need him to love me like he used to.

The oxygen around me doesn’t seem to want to fill my lungs as I discreetly as possible try to inhale a deep breath, but it doesn’t work.

I thought I loved myself enough to stop caring about anyone else's affections.

"Merry Christmas," a soft voice says.

Looking up from my crossed arms, Stevie stands at the base of my steps with a beer bottle outstretched.

My lungs fill up with air.

"Merry Christmas." A thankful smile finally slides across my lips. "You following me?" I teasingly ask.

"You looked like you could use this." Placing the beer in my hand, she takes a seat next to me, her knees up to her chest to keep some warmth in.

"You have no idea." Cheersing her bottle with mine, I take a long swig of the cool amber liquid before dropping my head between my shoulders, needing to compose myself.

"Are you okay?" Turning her head to face mine, Stevie's blue-green eyes are concerned and sincere.

I hold her stare for a moment, realizing that blue-green doesn't suffice as an adjective to describe her eyes. The blue is more of a turquoise, the kind you'd find in the brightest, cleanest part of the ocean. The green rims the outside, and it's dark as if you're looking through a forest of redwood trees.

And I'm thankful for the distraction they bring me as they pull me into their mesmerizing abyss.

"Yeah, I'm good."

"Well, thank God because how embarrassing would that be for you if I found you crying on the steps."

Those pretty eyes glitter with mischief before she hides her knowing smile behind her beer, taking a sip. But her humor brings a much-needed reprieve to my night.

"Thank you for my gift." She nudges her shoulder into mine.

"Do you like them?" My eyes wander down her legs, noting her new sweatpants.

"I love them. Way too expensive, though."

"I'm rich, sweetheart."

"I know."

"So, where's my present?"

"Right here." She motions down her body, which earns a quick, interested brow arch from me. "Nope. That came out wrong. I meant

my *presence* is your present.”

“Sounds good to me.” I scoot another inch closer to her, but still not touching, though I really want to be. “How was your Christmas?”

She looks at me momentarily, searching my face. Maybe wondering if she wants to divulge, I’m not sure. “It was shitty.”

“What happened?”

Stevie takes a long swig before shaking her head. “Just some family stuff. My mom is kind of the worst.”

“Hey, mine too!” The excitement in my tone has nothing to do with sarcasm. She really is terrible, but my enthusiasm causes Stevie to laugh.

“Does your mom make underhanded comments about the way you look or disapproving statements about the direction you’ve taken your life?”

My brows furrow. Screw her mom. The first part of that question has me fired up once again. I know Stevie deals with some body image issues, and I’ve become real protective over that.

“My mom left, so she’s not around to say anything.”

“Shit.” Stevie pauses. “Sorry, Zanders. I shouldn’t have asked that.”

Staying silent, I keep my eyes glued to the steps below me. Stevie is trying to be open with me. Probably best not to make it about myself. “What about your life does she have an issue with?” I shift the conversation back to the pretty girl sitting on the steps next to me.

“Honestly, I’m not sure. I’m not sure if she even knows why. But she constantly compares me to my twin brother, and compared to him, anything I do is pretty unimpressive.”

“Why? Because he’s a professional athlete?”

Stevie’s head snaps to mine. “How did you—? How long have you known?”

“Since I found you on Instagram a couple of months ago.” My grin has no apology in it.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Truthfully? Because I don’t give a shit that Ryan Shay is your brother. And I figured you’d tell me if you wanted me to know.”

Her pinched brows soften. Tilting her head, she shoots me a thankful smile.

“So, why didn’t you want me to know?”

Stevie’s shoulders pop in a shrug. “I just thought for once, it’d be nice not to be known as Ryan Shay’s sister. I wanted people to like me for me

and not for my sibling.”

“I like you for you.”

Fuck. What is up with me today that I can’t keep my goddamn mouth shut?

Stevie playfully nudges her shoulder into mine. “I know. You’re practically obsessed with me.”

Thank God for her teasing. I’m not ready for her to know how hard I’m crushing on my flight attendant just yet.

But I like this. I like talking to her.

I’ve never talked to a girl I’m attracted to. I always keep it surface level and physical because that’s all I want.

But this. I want this.

“I don’t get how your mom could be unsupportive. I mean, you have a full-time job. You found something you’re passionate about on your off days, and you get to travel the country with the sexiest man in Chicago.”

That causes a laugh to vibrate through her.

Her smile is really fucking pretty.

“She’s a traditional Southern belle and expected me to be too, but I wasn’t into the pageants or the sororities. I’m sure she’d assumed I’d get married to my college boyfriend and knocked up the second we graduated, and I don’t think she finds having a job or working at the dog shelter all that impressive. She expected me to live my life the way she did.”

“She sounds jealous.”

“She’s not jealous,” Stevie laughs. “She’s disappointed.”

“I don’t know, Stevie. It sounds like she got stuck doing some boring shit while you get to go live the life you want and do the things you love.”

“What I really want is not to have to fly anymore so I can spend all day every day with the pups.”

“Oh no. I need you to keep flying.” Bringing my beer to my lips, I take a swig. “Who else is going to get me everything I need on board?”

Stevie rolls her eyes. “Literally any other flight attendant on the airplane.”

“So, what did your mom say when you told her to fuck off?”

“Yeah, I didn’t do that.”

“And why not? You have no problem putting me in my place. Why does your mother get to walk all over you, and why did you let those girls in Nashville get away with it?”

She shyly pops her shoulders, keeping her eyes averted from mine.

“Stevie...” I coax.

She releases a deep, resigned exhale. “I don’t know. Sometimes when I don’t feel the greatest about myself, I let others treat me that way too.”

“You don’t let *me* treat you like that.” Not that I would.

“That’s because I always feel good around you.”

That makes my chest swell with pride. “People like that are going to treat you like you’re not enough or you’re not worthy, but that’s their own insecurities coming out. They’re bullies, and they’ll stop when you make them stop. If you start loving yourself, their words will no longer have meaning. You’ve got to start standing up for yourself, Stevie.”

She shoots me an understanding smile. “I’m working on it.”

Not so slyly, I scoot another inch closer to her on the step, but I’m still not touching her.

Not until she tells me she wants me to.

“How’s Rosie?”

Stevie’s face lights up. “She’s good. She misses you, though.”

“I’ll have to go see her soon.”

Her expression melts, her smile soft. “How was your Christmas?” Stevie finishes off her beer, setting the bottle down beside her.

“It was all right. I may have ruined it, though.”

Crossing her arms on her bent knees, she rests her cheek on them, facing me. “How so?”

“My dad is up there.” I motion upward. “And we don’t have the best relationship, but I just said some shit I’ve been keeping bottled up for a long time.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Searching her face, I hesitate. Not many people know this part of my life. I keep my circle small due to the fear that people will either take advantage, wanting to sell the story to the media, exposing the side to me that I don’t want people to know about, or just not like me for who I really am.

“Fuck it.” I chug the remainder of my beer, needing a little liquid courage. “My mom left us when I was sixteen for a man who made a shitload more money than my dad did. I have an older sister, Lindsey, who was away at college at the time, so it didn’t affect her in quite the same way it did me.”

I keep my eyes ahead of me, unable to look at Stevie in my vulnerability.

That is until she scoots closer to me, her thigh and shoulder touching mine. Her hand dangles between us, crossed over her knee.

I melt into her touch, noting absolutely no judgment on her face.

“My dad and I were close growing up, but when my mom left, he buried himself in work and with my sister off at school and my dad never home, it felt like he abandoned me in the same way my mom did. We’ve barely spoken to each other since.”

“Shit,” Stevie breathes out.

“And for the first time in twelve years, I just went off on him upstairs.”

“What did he say?”

“That he worked more because he was trying to make up for her leaving. But I never gave a fuck about how much money we had. I just wanted him around. I wanted him to love me.”

“I’m sure he does love you, Zee. Maybe he was grieving her leaving in his own way. Maybe...I don’t know. Maybe he had his reasons.”

“There’s no reason to abandon your kids.”

Looking over to Stevie, her blue-green eyes hold mine, unwavering, confident in this conversation.

“You just called me ‘Zee.’ You rarely call me anything other than my last name.”

“Yeah, well, there are certain times when calling you ‘Zanders’ seems a little weird.”

My eyes shine with amusement. “Like when you called me ‘Zee’ as you came all over me.”

Stevie’s mouth falls open in mock shock, smacking me on the shoulder. “Jesus. Here we are having a moment, and you just want to talk about sex.”

“We’re having a moment, huh?”

“Well, we sure as hell aren’t anymore. Moment has passed.”

Chuckling under my breath, I cross my arms over my knees, resting my cheek on them and mirroring her. Our hands dangle next to each other but don’t touch.

“Your mom is missing out.”

Stevie’s words make my chest swell, and my eyes sting a bit.

“She left me for money, and now I make more money than the man she left us for. Ironical, huh?”

“That’s not what I’m referring to. I’m not talking about how much money you make or who people think you are. I’m talking about who you really are. She’s missing out on that.”

“And you think you know who I really am?”

“I think I might be starting to figure it out.”

Her hand is right there, mere centimeters from my own, but I’m not really a hand-holding guy. In fact, I’ve never sentimentally done that. So instead, I hook the tip of my middle finger around hers, and touching her even that much feels nice.

“Hey, Stevie?”

“Hmm.” Her head leans on her arms, facing me.

“I like talking to you.”

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ZANDERS



“Another game, Zanders. Another game, you left the arena alone. What the hell is going on?”

With my phone held tightly to my cheek, I plug the opposite ear, attempting to block out some of the noise from the busy tarmac here in Phoenix. But regardless of the airplane engines buzzing or my teammates shuffling past me to get on our plane, I can still hear Rich loud and clear. His raised and frustrated voice helps with that.

“Rich, I’ve told you plenty of times to stop setting up girls to wait for me outside of the locker room. The media gets the narrative. They don’t need more pictures with more chicks to help sell my image.”

“Really? Because you haven’t been pictured with anyone since mid-November, and I need to know what’s going on. You refuse to leave the arena with anyone. You haven’t been caught out on the town. So, what is it? You need to fill me in.”

For fuck’s sake. I want him off my back. This season is the first time I’ve realized how over the whole “unlovable bad-boy” image I have. And I haven’t been pictured with anyone since mid-November because that’s when Stevie commented on it while we were trick or treating for Ella. I haven’t slept with anyone since her, but I didn’t like her thinking I had. So, I decided to make it loud and clear that it’s been her and only her.

“Nothing is going on, Rich. I’m just tired of it all.”

Maddison pats me on the shoulder as he shuffles around me, heading to the airplane stairs. “*You good?*” he silently mouths, turning around to face me as he continues to the plane.

I nod in agreement, but there's a whole lot of frustration when I roll my eyes. Maddison knows what's up. He's been trying to convince me to fire Rich for weeks now. But firing your agent during a re-signing year, no matter how frustrating he is, is career suicide.

Turning my back to the plane, I continue to pace the tarmac as my team boards the aircraft.

"Tired of what, Zanders? Tired of making millions of dollars a year? Tired of having people fawn all over you? Tired of women throwing themselves at you?"

"Yeah, kind of."

"What is going on with you? You're doing this now? You're five months away from a possible re-signing with the only team you want to play for in the NHL. You want to throw that away? Be my guest. Chicago pays you the money they pay you because of the image you and Maddison bring to the table, outside of just hockey. But I'll find you another team who will probably pay you a whole lot less if that's what you want to do."

"Pay *me* a whole lot less or pay *you* a whole lot less?" I mutter under my breath.

"What was that?"

I contemplate giving him a piece of my mind about how I know he only cares how big my paychecks are because he's getting a percentage, but I don't. I keep my mouth shut.

"Nothing."

"Who's your date to the gala?"

Now, that's a question I've asked myself multiple times over the last few weeks. The only person I want to take is Stevie, but there's going to be too much press there. I know she couldn't go with me due to that pesky fraternization rule. But regardless of that, I don't even know if she'd *want* to go with me.

"No one. I'm going alone."

"Fucking hell, Zanders. No, you're not. There will be too much media there for you to be alone. I'll set you up with a date if you don't want to find your own."

"No, Rich. I'm holding my ground on this one. That night is way too important to me to be faking it with some fucking puck bunny for some pictures. We're not messing with Active Minds. Do what you want with my

image when it comes to hockey, but if it starts affecting the foundation or the kids, then I'm out."

Silence lingers on the line between us.

"Fine. But you have five months to amp back up to the Evan Zanders Chicago knows and loves, or I can guarantee you, you'll lose your contract and be on a plane to bum-fuck nowhere playing for a city you don't want to be in."

The line goes dead.

Dick.

"EZ!" Scott, our team manager, calls out from the top of the stairs, right outside the main door of the airplane. "You ready?"

Looking around the tarmac, I realize I'm the last to board the plane. I hustle up the stairs just as the lead flight attendant closes the door behind me.

"Everything good, man?" Maddison lightly knocks me in the chest as I take my seat next to him.

"Rich is fucking killing me."

"Fire him."

"I can't. That'd be worse for my career than what he's threatening me with now."

"Which is?"

"The usual. Chicago not wanting to re-sign me if I fuck up our little duo we have going. That if people start to figure out that I don't give a shit about owning the persona the media has me made out to be that the fans won't want me."

"That's bullshit, and you know it."

Actually, I don't know it. Rich is on the money with one of my biggest fears that if people figure out I'm not the EZ they've grown accustomed to, they won't love me anymore.

"I swear to God he's way too obsessed with your personal life that I wouldn't be surprised if he's getting a payout from the tabloids or newspapers to leak information about where you're at or who you're with."

Shrugging, I stay silent. At this point, nothing would surprise me, but regardless, it all feels real defeating, like I'm stuck with this image for the rest of my career.

"Zee," Maddison says, slightly under his breath. "Rich works for you. You're in control here. As much as he likes to make you think you don't,

you hold all the power.”

Nodding in agreement, I lean my head back on the headrest behind me, drained. As if the grueling overtime win wasn’t wearing enough on my body, that phone call with Rich has taken its toll on my mind.

I want to stop with all the stupid games. I want to leave the arena alone without anyone questioning me. I want Chicago to re-sign me with no doubt of what I bring to the organization. I want Stevie to be allowed to hang out with me. I want Stevie to *want* to hang out with me.

I also really want to kiss her.

And tonight, I’m real tired of not doing the things I want to do.

“I’m gonna call Logan quickly before we take off.” Maddison turns towards the window, dialing his wife. “Happy New Year, baby!”

Oh, did I not mention it was New Year’s Eve, and we have a red-eye flight back to Chicago that will have us flying somewhere over Kansas at midnight?

Because it is, and the only girl I want to kiss when the clock strikes twelve just so happens to be on this airplane. But I can’t touch her. Not here, and maybe not at all.

“How’s Logan?” I ask as Maddison hangs up with his wife.

“She’s good.” He smiles to himself. “She got her dress for the gala.”

I stay silent, knowing what’s about to come.

“I can’t wait to take it off her.”

Shaking my head, I can’t help but laugh. Giddy motherfucker.

“Rich is on my ass about taking a date.”

“Then do it. We both know who you want to take, so why don’t you ask her? She’s right there.” He nods towards the back of the plane. “Here, let’s do it now.” Maddison’s hand reaches up to the flight attendant call light above his head, but before his fingers reach it, I swat them away just in time.

“Don’t.” My voice is quiet yet stern. “She can’t go with me.”

“Why not?”

“Because there will be way too much press there, and she’s not allowed to fraternize with us.”

“That’s fucking dumb.”

“Tell me about it.” I exhale a resigned sigh as I lean back in my chair once again. “Besides, I don’t know if she’d even want to go with me.” My

voice is as hushed as it could be. “As far as I know, our little hookup was a one and done for her.”

Speaking of the sexy devil herself, Stevie comes to the exit row for the safety demo, showing the back half of the airplane how to use the safety equipment, just as she does before every flight.

“Let’s ask her.” Maddison leans forward in his seat to speak to my favorite flight attendant.

“Don’t you dare.” Once again, my volume is low, but my words are punctuated.

Stevie’s gaze narrows at us before resuming her safety demonstration. She keeps her eyes forward, holding the faux seat belt over her head, but speaks to Maddison and me. “Why do you two over there seem even more in love with each other than usual tonight?”

Maddison’s lips lift in a sneaky smirk. He opens his mouth to speak, and his eyes twinkle with amusement as he looks over at me, testing me.

“Don’t you fucking dare.” My voice is as quiet as I can make it. “If you say anything, I will end you. Then I’ll marry your wife just to spite you, and your son will grow up calling *me* Daddy.”

“Oh, fuck you!” Maddison isn’t trying to be quiet at all. “Stevie, Zee wants you to be his date to a charity gala in Chicago, but he’s too chicken shit to ask and doesn’t think you’d want to go with him.”

“I fucking hate you. We are no longer friends.”

Maddison sits back in his seat, his smug as fuck grin resting on his lips as Stevie’s cute giggle echoes from the aisle.

If my cheeks could change color, I’d be blushing like a little girl right now as I turn back to look at her. Thankfully, nothing about her expression seems all that thrown off. If anything, she’s purely amused by my ex-best friend and me.

“I can’t.” Which are the words I knew she’d say but hearing what I already knew doesn’t suck any less.

Also, that doesn’t clarify if it’s that she can’t because of her job or if she can’t because she doesn’t want to.

“That’s what I told him.” My smile feels tight and forced, but I’m trying to act as nonchalant as possible.

“No, I mean I can’t go with you.”

Yes, thank you, Stevie. Please bruise my ego a little more, sweetheart.

“Because I’m already going.”

Well, that causes my head to snap up real quick.

“With my brother.”

Oh. I didn’t think of that. Of course, Ryan Shay will be there. All the big names in Chicago sports will be.

Oh, this could be good. The hopeful glint in my eyes and the slight lift at my lips says precisely that.

This could be perfect.

I’ll be at the gala solo, and no one will be able to question why Stevie is there since she’ll be there with her brother.

Yeah, this is fucking perfect.

“Who’s your brother?” Maddison’s brows furrow in genuine confusion as he looks from Stevie back to me.

Stevie’s eyes connect with mine for a moment in confusion before they soften, realizing that I didn’t even tell my best friend. Sorry...ex-best friend. But of course, I didn’t. She was keeping it a secret even from me, so it’s not like I’m going to go around spilling her business.

And like I said, I don’t give a shit that Ryan Shay is her brother.

Except right now. Right now, I’m real stoked that he is because he’s going to get the girl to the gala, and that’s all I could ask for.

“Um...” she hesitates. “His name is Ryan Shay. He plays basketball for Chicago.”

“Shut the fuck up.” Maddison’s mouth drops open.

“Okay,” Stevie laughs.

“Wait. You’re for real? Your brother is Ryan Shay?”

She nods, continuing to chuckle at Maddison’s excitement. But knowing him, more than anything, he’s excited to tell his wife and brother, who are huge basketball fans.

“Yeah. He owns the apartment in your building. I’m staying with him at the moment.”

“Holy fucking shit. My wife is going to lose her mind.”

Looking up at Stevie standing in the exit row, I shoot her an apologetic smile for my guy fanboying over her brother, but she doesn’t seem all that bothered by it. She’s more so amused. Maybe what I said to her, that I like her regardless of her sibling, sunk in.

“By the way, my wife Logan was excited to meet you that day we went trick or treating,” Maddison adds, bringing it back to Stevie, which I’m thankful for.

“She seems great.”

“She’s the fucking best.” This time it’s me chiming in, and Maddison wears a soft smile at the statement.

“The fucking best,” he agrees.

And apparently, we’re best friends again.

“Well, I guess I’ll be seeing her at the gala then. And both of you too?” Her eyes dart to me.

Of course, she’ll be seeing us both. Does she not realize that this gala is a fundraiser for Active Minds of Chicago, the charity that Maddison and I are co-founders of?

“Save me a dance?” My tone comes out a bit too desperate and hopeful but fuck it. I am.

She playfully raises a single brow before her counteroffer. “Stop pushing the flight attendant call light?”

“See, those two things don’t really seem equivalent at all.”

“How badly do you want a dance?”

My lips lift in a knowing smile. The answer to that? Real fucking badly.

I don’t respond because I don’t have to. She knows. That playful smirk sitting on her full lips tells me just that, and the light squeeze she gives my shoulder as she walks by reaffirms it.

“Wipe that stupid grin off your face,” Maddison laughs.

I continue to smile, way too happy about this situation. “Can’t help it.”

“You know you legitimately like her, right? I’m not sure if you’re aware, but you do.”

A content sigh leaves my lips. “Yeah, I know.”

Most everyone is asleep a couple of hours into our flight. I’ve dozed off here and there, but for the most part, I’m awake.

Somehow my internal alarm wakes me up anytime Stevie walks down the airplane aisle, and I open my eyes just in time to get a perfect view. Whether it’s her amazing ass as she walks up front or her stunning face as she shoots me a soft grin each time she walks to the back.

It’s a ten out of ten either way.

The plane is pitch black minus the slight glow of light coming from the front and back galleys so no one can see that my head is on a swivel, constantly checking the rear of the plane, looking for an opening to talk to Stevie alone.

Talk.

Kiss.

Either or.

But it is almost midnight, and I wouldn't mind starting my year with her.

"You're awake, huh?"

My head snaps back to the dark area around me, finding one of the other flight attendants standing by my seat.

I don't know her name, but it's the one that has a problem with Stevie fraternizing with us. With me.

"Uh, yeah. Can't sleep."

She bends down, crouching next to my seat, and making herself eye level with me. "Can I get you anything?"

"Nope. I'm good." My eyes dart to the back galley again, but I can't see Stevie, though I know she's back there. Indy, as Stevie reminded me of her name, stands in plain view in the rear of the airplane, her eyes flickering to my seat, watching.

"Any New Years' plans?" the third flight attendant asks.

"You're looking at them."

"You haven't been out much while on the road. There haven't been any tabloid shots as of late."

"Um, yeah. Not really into going out these days."

"Well, that's a shame because I was hoping—"

"Hey, Tara," Indy interrupts. "One of the pilots needs one of us to swap him out so he can use the lavatory. If you want to go into the cockpit, I'll watch the front and cover the door."

"Oh." Tara stands, brushing her skirt smooth, and acting as casual as can be as if she wasn't dangerously close to teetering that fraternization line she's so strict on Stevie about. "Yeah, we should do that."

Tara turns on her heel, her shoulders straightening out and her resting bitch face coming back real quick as she heads towards the front of the plane.

Indy follows behind, but before she's too far ahead, she shifts to look at me over her shoulder, shooting me a knowing wink. Turning back to realize the galley is empty sans one curly-haired girl, I offer Indy a cheeky smile before she's up and out of sight.

Blondie is the captain of this ship, apparently.

As quietly as possible, attempting not to wake any of my teammates, I sneak my ass down the aisle to the back of the airplane, where I know Stevie is hiding away.

"Hey," I softly say, unable to hold back my way too hopeful grin when I find Stevie alone. I place my hands on either side of the partition, separating the galley from the rest of the plane, casually blocking us from anyone else.

"Hey." Her cheeks instantly flush under her freckles.

"Happy New Year."

Stevie checks her watch. "You've still got a few more minutes."

"So, this gala..."

"Yes?"

"You're going."

"Yes," she giggles.

"That's cool." Nodding my head like an idiot. "Or whatever."

"Or whatever." Her smile is bright, clearly recognizing I'm way too happy about this.

I take a step into the galley, and Stevie's expression instantly shifts. Her feet retract back, keeping the same distance between us.

The playful smile on her lips is gone, most likely because mine is too. I can feel the fire and want in my eyes as I corner her by taking another step forward. Only this time, she has nowhere to go, so her back hits the wall behind her as her mouth drops open. But still, I keep about a foot between us, not bombarding her space too much.

Not until she tells me she wants me to.

"And if you weren't going with your brother, would you be going with me?" My voice is low and thick.

Stevie doesn't respond, but I watch her throat bob in a swallow as the pulse in her neck pounds against the delicate flesh.

"If you couldn't get in trouble, would you be going with me?"

Again, she doesn't respond, her pretty eyes filled with all the words she wants to say but won't.

“Say yes,” I whisper. “Tell me you’d go with me. Tell me you *want* to go with me.”

I need her to say yes, not just to inflate my ego, but because I need to know I’m not crazy. I need to know that she feels it too. That she likes being around me just as much. That she likes talking to me just as much. That she likes fucking me just as much. That she likes teasing me just as much.

“Happy mother-fucking New Year!” Rio yells from his seat, waking up the entire plane and startling me, causing me to jump back from the flight attendant who could get in trouble for our position.

Rio blasts his boom box as loud as possible, music blaring through the aircraft as cheers and shouts echo throughout the airplane. I peek down the aisle, seeing all my teammates wake up, a few of them dancing to the loud as fuck music.

Stevie slips her hand in mine, bringing my attention back to her as she hides in the corner of the galley for no one else to see, her back pressed against the wall.

She tugs the fabric of my shirt, bringing me to stand only inches in front of her. My palms find the wall behind her on either side of her head, caging her in.

I’m painfully aware that my chest is rising and falling more rapidly than it should, but this girl has had me off my game for months now, and I’m nervously breathing like there might not be any oxygen left on board soon.

What is she going to do? What is she going to let me do?

Looking up at me behind those dark lashes, Stevie’s eyes bounce between mine. There’s a touch of uncertainty in those blue-greens. Like she’s not sure what’s she’s doing. Like she’s not sure if she can say it.

But she seems like she wants to say it.

Say it.

“Yes.” She bites her bottom lip. “I wish I could go with you.”

“Good Day” blares through the aircraft, wafting from the boom box speakers as my mouth lifts on one side. My tongue slyly wets my lips as Stevie’s eyes trail the movement, asking them to come closer without saying a word.

And when she hooks two fingers into the gold chain around my neck, bringing my mouth to hers, I know it’s going to be a good day.

It’s going to be a good fucking year.

My mouth covers hers, needing, wanting, taking everything she has to offer.

Her hand curves around my neck, pulling me in, her metal rings cooling the heat of my skin. I lean into her, pushing her up against the side of the aircraft, needing to get as close as I can, needing everything.

My hands leave the wall, and instead, cup both her cheeks as her lips part open, her tongue sweeping in and finding mine. She's soft and warm, and for someone who has never been one for intimate kissing, I can't imagine not having this moment.

Her hips rhythmically push into mine with want, and the moan that leaves my throat is loud, but thankfully Rio's music covers up my desperate and hungry sounds.

The plane is getting louder, the boys are getting rowdier, and I need to stop so I don't get Stevie in trouble.

But, fuck, I don't want to stop.

So, I don't.

My tongue explores her, swiping and tasting, our lips moving in perfect sync, not missing a beat, like we were made to do this with each other.

Finally, and unfortunately, Stevie pulls back slightly, breaking the connection. But the content smile she's wearing on her swollen lips holds no sign of regret—just satisfaction.

Fuck, I like kissing her.

Keeping my tatted hands covering her jaw, I lean my forehead on hers, both of us trying to fill our lungs with the oxygen we deprived ourselves of for a little too long.

"Happy New Year," I whisper into her lips.

"Happy New Year." She smiles.

The amount of eye contact going on right now would've been alarming a few months ago, but I can't find the will to look away.

I want it.

I want her.

She holds my stare, both of us equally content in this place.

"I'll take a sparkling water," I softly say, ruining the moment because I have to before someone comes back here.

My cheeky smile is filled with amusement as Stevie playfully pushes my chest away.

"Get out of here," she laughs.

Finding myself exceptionally hilarious, I chuckle right along with her before I head back to my seat. I take one step out of the galley before changing my mind and quickly turning back to steal one more swift kiss, away from anyone's sight.

“Extra limes, sweetheart.” I linger right above her lips.

“I hate you.”

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STEVIE



“**Y**ou look beautiful, Vee.”

Ryan turns his head my way in the back seat, giving me a soft and proud grin as we wait in the line of cars out front of an all too extravagant building.

“Thank you.” I nudge my shoulder into his.

“No, thank *you*. If you didn’t agree to be my plus-one to this thing, I would’ve been screwed. Do you remember my GM’s niece? The one I had to help out with that movie premiere? She hasn’t left me alone since, and our General Manager asked me to bring her tonight, but thankfully, you had already said yes.”

“Sounds like true love. I’m sorry to have stood in the way.”

“Please. Basketball is my only true love.”

“Romantic.”

Running my hands down the sky-blue satin of my gown, I take a deep breath. The price tag on this dress almost made me sick, it was so expensive. But as soon as I put it on and my brother saw the confidence run through every nerve in my body, he checked out and paid for it before I was even out of the dressing room.

Confidence has been an interesting word lately.

I couldn’t tell you the last time I felt it consistently, but I have as of late. As much as I don’t want to admit it, Zanders’ attention has done a number on my self-confidence—in the best way possible.

I know he doesn’t completely know me, but the parts he’s seen, make me feel seen. He knows the right things to say, and not in a blanket

statement this-is-what-girls-like-to-hear way. But in a way that they're catered just to me. He makes me feel good, whether that's his small lingering stares, the sweet gift on Christmas, or the hot as hell kiss on New Year's.

He makes me feel good.

The New Year's kiss was my fault, and probably shouldn't have happened, but I couldn't help myself. I'd been fighting our physical connection for months now, and for just a moment, I wanted to give in. I wanted to feel wanted.

But that kiss felt like a step in the direction I promised myself I wouldn't take.

I've been teetering with the idea that maybe I can keep it casual by doing the road hookup thing with him. Truthfully, I have no idea what's going on between us, so to protect my heart, I've been trying to convince myself that's all it is for Zanders—a physical pull. Because allowing myself to believe it's anything more than that opens me up to getting hurt.

The potential damage he could do, judging by the way I feel about him already, scares the shit out of me.

The guy doesn't date, he rarely repeats his hookups, and he sure as hell doesn't do relationships—at least he never has before. But I have to be okay with that because I want to be around him.

I like talking to him.

I like that he lets me see hidden sides to him.

I loved sleeping with him, and I like the confidence he gives me.

Though, at this moment, as we pull up in front of endless flashing cameras, thanks to the mob of reporters trying to get a taste of every big athlete in Chicago attending Maddison's fundraiser, the confidence is replaced with nerves.

"You're good, Vee," Ryan quietly says, reassuring me before his door opens.

As my brother steps out of the car and onto the red carpet, flashes illuminate the night sky so brightly you'd assume it was mid-afternoon instead of eight in the evening. The shouts and cheers for my twin's attention cause my throat to dry up, knowing I'm about to step out next to him.

I hate this.

Maybe our driver can pull around back and drop me off there instead.

I'm about two seconds from asking him when my brother reaches back into the car, holding his hand out for me to grab.

Shit.

Swallowing hard, I place my hand in his, allowing him to help me out of the car. Ryan shields me as much as possible as I keep my head low, but I can't really hide. There are too many people.

My heart races the further I get down the carpet, but at the same time, I know the only way to get away from this attention is to reach the entryway door in front of me. So, I keep moving.

"Ryan Shay!" reporters call out, wanting to get my brother's attention.

"Ryan Shay, are you on a date?"

"Who is your date?"

I get that my brother is never pictured with women because he doesn't date, but gross.

The doorman opens the main entrance, and Ryan ushers me inside before turning back to the mob that itches for his attention. "I'm here with my twin sister, so you can all relax," he laughs. "Let's have a good night for a good cause. Thank you."

Always diplomatic, he offers the crowd a wave and a kind smile before following me inside.

"You okay?" My protective brother leads me to the coat check.

Nodding in agreement, I shrug off my winter coat, checking it in as Ryan does the same.

Thankfully, he cleared up who I was, so here's hoping that keeps my picture off the internet tomorrow. I can barely handle the judgment from my own mother, let alone thousands of savage internet trolls.

As soon as we're led into the main ballroom, my eyes widen in shock. The lighting, the music, the crowd—it's all so beautiful and overwhelming to see this many people support Maddison's charity foundation.

"Shay!" a few of Ryan's teammates call out, urging us over to the small high-top table they're standing around.

"Little Shay." Dom, Ryan's teammate, looks me up and down as I approach. "You look smoking hot tonight. Very bangable."

"Watch it," my brother warns.

"For someone else," Dom corrects. "Someone who is not your twin brother's teammate, and maybe someone who is cool with having their dick cut off."

“Good to see you, Dom.” Laughing, I hug the big man. My brother’s pro teammates are all pretty awesome, which is vastly contradictory to how I feel about his college ones.

One college one.

One college one who is going to be here tonight.

“Am I allowed to give your baby sister a glass of champagne? Or is that grounds for getting my ass beat too?”

“I’m no one’s baby sister. Hotshot over here”—I motion towards my twin—“is only three minutes older.”

Ryan drapes an arm over my shoulders. “You’re still my baby sister, but Stevie is more of a beer girl. I’m gonna go grab us a round.”

Ryan takes off, leaving me with his teammates. As I said, they’re cool, but I have absolutely nothing to contribute to their conversation about last night’s double-overtime loss. So as the giant basketball players tower over me, rehashing their failed game, I allow my eyes to wander the room.

The space is stunning, with soft lighting, low music, and a wall full of auction items. Art, game tickets, and memorabilia, all donated to raise money for Maddison’s charity.

The guests are stunning, dressed to impress. Gorgeous women in extravagant gowns drape the arms of Chicago’s most prominent athletes. Tall, built men overtake the room, all wearing their best tuxedos. Everyone is just so...beautiful.

Working my gaze around the room, a sudden magnetic pull brings my attention to the space between two of my brother’s teammates. There in the distance, across the room, a pair of hazel eyes watch me.

Zanders.

God, he looks good. He’s surrounded by countless people begging for his attention, but his focus is set on me.

A soft smile rests on his full, very kissable lips before he silently mouths our favorite phrase, “*You following me?*” from across the room.

A laugh escapes me as I hold his eye contact, a blush heating my cheeks. Zanders wears an all too giddy grin, matching mine.

“Little Shay, what’s so funny?” Dom asks.

Bringing my attention back to the group of guys I’m standing with, I shake my head to tell them nothing. I’m not ready for my brother to know about my hookup with Evan Zanders, and filling his teammates in, is a disaster waiting to happen.

“Who’s that with your brother?” Dom motions towards the bar.

Without turning that way, I already know who it is. The pit in my stomach knows too.

After all these years, the idea of seeing Brett tonight has been weighing on me for weeks now. We have such a sordid history, and something about him will always remind me that I’m not enough. But at the same, I’ve always wanted to be. No piece of me wants to be with him now, but part of me wants him to want me for once.

I know that sounds fucked up, but this push and pull we had for years, more so him pulling away and me chasing to be enough, messed with my self-worth like you wouldn’t believe.

I just wanted him to choose me, and now years later, I feel like I need to prove I’m worthy of being chosen.

So, here I am, my wild curls as straight as an arrow. My clutch resting in my hands held over my stomach, trying to hide the curve there.

What is wrong with me? Why do I care?

“Little Shay, who is that?”

Finally, my eyes slide over to the bar finding Ryan with his old college teammate—my ex-boyfriend.

Ryan has two beers in his hand, one for me, I’m assuming, when Brett’s eyes meet with mine.

My stomach drops.

I want to run and hide, but I also want to stay put and prove to him something that doesn’t need proving.

That I’m enough.

“Ryan’s college teammate,” I absentmindedly answer.

Brett’s smile lifts when he sees me before he pats my brother’s shoulder, picks up two flutes of champagne, and heads my way.

I can’t keep my eyes off him. He looks good. He’s just as handsome, though his body has slightly changed due to the lack of basketball in his life.

And even these few moments of being around him again, I know I can’t do it. I can’t be in the same city as him. I already feel like I’m not enough.

“Does Shay know that you’ve banged his college teammate?” Dom’s tone is amused but somewhat fearful for the man walking my way.

“Yeah. The three of us were close friends, and he’s my ex-boyfriend.”

“Oh shit.” Dom grabs his champagne glass from the table, motioning to the rest of his teammates. “That’s our cue.”

The big guys take off as Brett approaches me with a champagne flute outstretched.

“Stevie, you look amazing.”

“Yeah, I know.”

A low chuckle escapes Brett’s lips. “Where’d my humble Stevie go?”

Humble? I think he means insecure.

Lifting the flute a little higher, he waits for me to take it.

“I don’t really drink champagne,” I remind him.

“You can tonight. Come on. I haven’t seen you in years. Have a drink with me.”

Reluctantly, I take the glass from him, never being great at saying no to this man.

“How are you?”

“I’m good,” I quickly answer, nodding. “You?”

Bringing the bubbly liquid to my lips, I slightly grimace. It’s just so fucking sweet. I want a beer.

“Doing better now. Ryan has a few people he wants to introduce me to tonight, so if all goes well, I’ll be working in sports again, and even better, I’ll be living in the same city as you.”

Brett reaches out, stroking a piece of my smooth and straight hair, running it between his fingers. “I love when you wear your hair like this.”

I turn my head away from him, not sure if I like him touching me again. But also, not sure if I don’t.

“Stevie, I’m so happy to see you,” Brett says out of nowhere. My eyes dart to his, completely confused. We haven’t dated in years. We haven’t spoken in years. He’s just out of options.

“Don’t say that,” I beg. “Not after the things you said.”

“What are you talking about?”

Does he really not know? Does he not realize that I heard him tell his whole team, sans my brother, that he had been using me for our entire three-year relationship? That he was moving on to better and hotter things as soon as he turned pro?

“All I know is suddenly my girlfriend fell off the face of the earth, and I never heard from you once we graduated.”

“Your girlfriend? Or the girl you were using to fill the time until you could move on to better things?”

“Stevie, what are you talking about?”

“I heard you!” My voice raises slightly, anger bubbling. “That day in the locker room. You told the entire team that you were only with me because you were bored and that you were going pro and would have endless options at your fingertips. I heard you.”

“Are you shitting me, Stevie? That’s why you’ve avoided me all these years? That’s locker room talk.”

Wait. Was it? Was I exaggerating this whole time about the words he said about me?

My brows furrow in confusion. Even if it was locker room talk, that’s exactly how he treated me for years—like I was an option, and he was waiting around for a better one. So, no. I’m not wrong.

“You need to get over it.”

My eyes dart to his. “Get over it?”

“Yes, get over it. You’ve avoided me for years. You’ve avoided my messages. But now we’re about to live in the same city, and I know you still have feelings for me. You always have. So don’t be like this just because you overheard some locker room talk.”

I have nothing to say because I’m not sure he’s wrong. *Feelings* probably isn’t the correct term, but maybe I have something to prove. That I’m better than the situation he put me in.

“Your family loves me. They’ve always wanted us together, and now I’m here. This isn’t over, and you know it.”

“It is over.” My tone has no conviction whatsoever.

“No, it’s not.”

“She said it’s over,” a commandingly strong and confident voice says behind me.

I can feel Zanders’ presence, and having him back me up, causes my spine to straighten, to stand a little taller.

From behind, Zanders reaches over me and pulls the barely tasted glass of champagne from my hands, leaving it on the table, before he slips a beer into my grasp instead.

“Holy hell!” Brett exclaims, a nervous laugh bellowing from his stomach. “Evan Zanders! I was hoping to meet you tonight. I’m Brett.” He reaches out for the defenseman to shake his hand, but Zanders refuses.

“Good to know. Can you give me a moment alone with Stevie?”

Brett fumbles, his hand retreating to his side. “Uh, sure thing.” His brows knit together. “Stevie, we’ll dance later.”

“No, you won’t.” Zanders’ large hand grips my hip from behind, staking a claim. The metal of his rings digs into my hipbone with his commanding touch, and I can feel the annoyance radiating off him.

Even though the touch is small, Brett catches it right away.

“Does your brother know?”

“Does my brother know what you said about me?”

Zanders’ grip on me tightens, his fingertips bunching the satin fabric, and the heat searing off him.

“No, does your brother know about this.” Brett nods towards the giant man behind me.

“There’s nothing for him to know.”

Zanders’ hand slips off me, making me miss his possessive touch, but still, he stays firmly rooted behind me, and having him here gives me the confidence I need.

“I think you should go, Brett.” I end the conversation with that.

“We’ll talk later.”

“I don’t—”

“We *will* talk later.” His tone is pointed and angry as he looks down at me then up to Zanders. But even though he’s trying to be demanding a-hole, I can see the intimidation in his eyes.

Good.

He always intimidated me in a way, so seeing the roles reversed, thanks to the sexy as sin man behind me, feels good.

Brett takes off, and Zanders slides around, facing me, with his eyes locked on the back of my ex-boyfriend.

“Who the hell is that?” Zanders casually leans one arm onto the high-top table next to us, looking like an absolute snack I want to devour.

Sweet baby Jesus, he looks good. Like real good. His tuxedo is all black, the entire thing tailored to fit every muscle of his body. His tatted hands extend past the cuffs, and his fingers are still decorated with his rings—just the way I like them.

“Stevie girl.” Zanders lifts my chin, causing my wandering gaze to lock with his. “I’m going to need you to stop drooling over me for a second and tell me who that is.”

My eyes narrow being called out like that, but he's not wrong.

"That is my ex-boyfriend."

"I hate him."

"Shocking," I laugh.

"What did you mean your brother doesn't know what he said about you? What did he say about you?"

Zanders' hazel eyes are pointed and focused, urging the words out of me, but my brother is right there, over his shoulder at the bar, and now is just not the time.

"Can we talk about it later?"

"Will we? Will you tell me later?"

"Yes, I will." Which is true. I find myself being completely open and honest with Zanders, and I like talking to him. So yes, I will tell him if he cares to ask again.

Following his eyes with mine, I watch him take in every inch of my body. And I let him. I feel no need to cover up or turn to a more flattering angle when it comes to him.

"You look..." Zanders loses his words as his stare bounces between my breasts then lingers on my exposed leg, the one the thigh-high slit can't cover.

"You're beautiful, Stevie." His tone is soft and authentic. "Unreal." He shakes his head. His hazel irises make their way back to mine as they dance all over my face, taking me in.

"This dress is...yeah. Wow. Makes the green in your eyes disappear. They're just blue tonight."

Why is he saying it like that? It's making my heart flutter and my lungs shrink.

"Your hair is pretty like this." He doesn't touch me. Instead, he nods towards it. "But I miss your curls. They're your signature."

A small smile lifts at my lips. I love my curls too, and here I am straightening them to impress someone who didn't care to choose me.

The way Zanders is looking at me doesn't feel sexual. It feels like he's seeing me, and it's throwing me off.

Zanders is physical. Sex. Attraction. These are the things I know as fact. But his expression right now is soft, like he's in pain from attempting to hold himself back as he takes me in.

Clearing my throat, I pull my focus away from him, needing to not feel the things he's making me feel right now. "This is amazing, the turn out for Maddison's foundation."

Zanders' brows crease in confusion. "Stevie, you know that—"

"Vee," Ryan interrupts, holding a beer in each hand. "Where'd Brett go?"

Ryan's blue-green eyes bounce between Zanders and me.

"I'm not sure." I motion towards the defenseman. "Ryan, this is Evan Zanders. Zanders, this is my brother, Ryan."

"Hey, man, nice to meet you." Zanders stands up straight before putting his hand out for Ryan to shake.

Ryan returns the greeting. "Yeah, I know who you are."

Fuck.

The tension is thick between the three of us, no one saying a word, and Zanders is clearly unimpressed with my brother trying to play hardball.

"Should we go find Brett?" Ryan turns towards me. "The three of us haven't hung out since college."

"I don't want to." My eyes dart to Zanders', silently asking him to stay quiet.

Zanders leans his elbow on the high-top, crossing one foot over the other, looking casual as can be and not intimidated by my brother in the slightest.

"Well, we should go get a fresh drink at the bar then." My brother attempts another excuse to get me away from the defenseman, but this one is a terrible try, seeing as I have an almost full drink in my hand and another fresh one waiting for me in his.

Zanders lets out a knowing chuckle before standing up straight. "Ryan, it was nice to meet you." He pats my brother on the shoulder.

"Stevie..." Zanders slides his hand on my waist, splaying it over my rib cage and not giving a shit that my brother is two feet away, watching. "Save me that dance." His warm lips graze my cheekbone, placing a soft kiss there before he takes off, leaving my twin and me alone.

"Vee," Ryan whines. "No. Please no. Not him."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't lie. You like *him* of all people?"

"I don't...*like* him." Keeping my eyes off my brother, I add, "But I don't not like him either."

“Stevie, that guy goes through women like it’s his job. He’s a fucking media personality that gives Chicago sports a bad name.”

“He’s not like that. There’s a lot more to him that outsiders don’t see.”

“And you’re not an outsider?” Ryan’s question might sound condescending to anyone else, but I know my brother, and with the worried expression he’s wearing right now, it’s simply just a concerned question.

“I don’t know. I think maybe I’m not. I think I might know more about him than most people.”

Ryan exhales a deep, resigned breath. “You’re an adult, so you can do what you want, and I trust your opinion, but Vee...I can’t see anything coming from this other than you getting hurt.”

His eyes are filled with worry and concern but no judgment.

Ironic, really, that his old college buddy is here and has been ten times worse to me than Zanders has ever treated me. But Ryan doesn’t know how Brett treated me the same way he doesn’t know how Zanders treats me—like I’m important.

“I love you, and I’m worried, is all.” He shoots me an apologetic smile before swinging his arm over my shoulders.

And that little reminder that he’s worried reminds me that maybe I should be too. That feeling the things I’m feeling, or trying not to feel, is exactly what I promised myself I wouldn’t do after things ended with Brett and me.

And that’s having feelings for another athlete, especially one who is in the spotlight as much as Zanders is.

“Sorry to interrupt.” A gorgeous, tall woman slides up next to my brother, standing real close and not caring for my space one bit. “But I wanted to introduce myself.” She cuts in the area between Ryan and me, her back to my face.

Jesus. Maybe she should plaster “jersey chaser” on her forehead.

“I’m Rachel.”

“Ryan.” My brother holds out his hand to shake hers, but she holds on a little longer than necessary.

This bitch Rachel looks over her shoulder, her eyes connecting with mine, then back to scan the crowd as if she could get caught for being over here.

“I know who you are.” She turns back to Ryan. “I’ve seen you at a few city events, and I’ve always wanted to introduce myself.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you.”

“You too.” She flips her hair over her shoulder, smacking me in the face with it. “I’ll be here all night, so come find me.”

She takes off but looks back, shooting my brother a wink.

“Absolutely not.”

Ryan laughs. “What, you can sleep with people I don’t like, but I can’t?”

“We aren’t...never mind.” Ryan doesn’t want to hear that. “And that chick is...no.”

“Just giving you shit. I’m good off that.” Ryan turns his back, leaning his forearms on the high-top table and clinking his beer bottle with mine. “We should make a twin pact where neither of us date.”

“Ha ha. Funny. Coming from the guy who doesn’t date.”

His eyes twinkle with mischief before he brings his beer to his lips.

“We aren’t dating either so that you know. Zanders and I.”

“So, what are you doing then? Because it sounds to me like the biggest d-bag in the city is fucking with my sister.”

I don’t know how to answer that, but before I can attempt, Maddison approaches our table.

“Hey.” He smiles, his hand intertwined with his wife’s.

“Hey, Stevie,” Logan adds with a slight wave.

“Hey, guys. Logan, you look beautiful. Green is your color.”

“I can say the same about you and blue. You look great. Are you two having a good time?”

“Yes. This place is amazing.”

Maddison and Logan’s eyes bounce between Ryan and me before I realize they haven’t been introduced. This is strange. Usually, my brother is the one everyone knows, and I’m the tag-along sister.

“Oh, my bad.” I turn towards my Ryan. “Ryan, this is Maddison, he’s the captain for the Raptors, and this is Logan.” I motion to the beauty with red hair. “They live in our building. And this is my brother, Ryan Shay.”

Logan’s cheeks turn a slight shade of rose. “I was going to come over here and pretend like I don’t know who you are, but the truth is, I’m a huge fan.”

Ryan laughs. “You’re married to the captain of the best hockey team in the league right now, and you’re a fan of mine?”

“Bullshit, right?” Maddison adds with sarcasm.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Logan begins. “I’m a hockey fan now, but basketball is my first love.”

Ryan clinks his bottle with Logan’s champagne flute. “My kind of people.”

“Well, we wanted to come over and say thank you guys for coming,” Maddison cuts in. “And Ryan, I saw you donated your family tickets and a one-on-one coaching session to the silent auction. That’s awesome, man, thank you.”

“Absolutely. Glad I could help out. This foundation you created is pretty fucking cool.”

“Well, actually, it’s not just me—” someone interrupts Maddison mid-sentence, whispering in his ear.

“That’s my cue,” Maddison says. “Be right back, baby.” He kisses his wife before following the man who interrupted him.

“Good luck!” Logan calls out before sliding around the table to stand next to me, both of us facing the stage where Maddison is headed.

“Shay!” Dom calls out from the bar.

Ryan knocks my shoulder. “You good?” I nod in response. “Nice to meet you, Logan.”

“You too,” she says before my brother takes off to hang out with his teammates.

Maddison takes the stage with the guy who swept him away.

“Who is that?” I ask Logan, only the two of us left at the high-top table, less than ten feet away from the stage.

“That’s Rich.” Logan rolls her eyes. “He’s Eli and Zee’s manager, and he’s the worst. I mean, he’s made the boys a ton of money, but morally, I’m not a fan.”

Watching Zanders take the stage with Maddison, my brows knit in confusion. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, they’re just going to do a welcome speech and thank everyone for coming out.”

“Zanders too?”

“Of course.” Logan lightly laughs. “He’s half of Active Minds. He and Eli started the foundation together four years ago.”

My lips slightly part. “What?” My stare is glued on the beautiful man on the stage as he gets prepped with a microphone.

“You didn’t know? He didn’t tell you?”

Shaking my head, I tell Logan no.

“He’s the person who got Eli into therapy back when we were in college, and he’s really passionate about helping kids find the support they need too. If it weren’t for Zee, I don’t know that Eli would be the man he is today.”

Fuck.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I’m not ready to know this side of Zanders. I’m already fighting off my feelings. I don’t need to know he’s entirely self-aware and an activist when it comes to mental health.

My mouth feels dry as I try to swallow, so I chug the rest of my beer, needing the liquid as well as the courage.

“People meet him, or they hear about him in the tabloids or news, and they think they know him,” Logan continues. “They think they need to change him. Women try to change him. People assume he needs some huge development as a person, but the truth is Zee is an amazing guy, and he always has been. He’s the best friend to us, he treats our kids as his own, and he’s extremely protective. He loves hard and cares about his people like you wouldn’t believe. So, there’s nothing about him that needs to change. He just needs someone to accept who he is and appreciate what he brings to the table. He’s always going to be arrogant and unapologetic and blunt as hell, but those are things that make him who he is. He just needs someone to see who he already is and meet him there.”

My eyes stay glued to the stage as Maddison and Zanders approach the front, but my heart is beating a mile a minute.

“He needs someone to protect him too.”

Don’t blink. Don’t blink. Don’t blink.

There’s a bit of moisture forming at the corners of my eyes, but I don’t know why. I just feel overwhelmed at this moment, learning about a massive part of who Zanders is.

One thing I find solace in when it comes to Zanders is his inability to lie. I’ve been lied to more times than I’d like to admit, but with Zanders, it’s been entirely freeing knowing that he’s going to say exactly what’s on his mind. But here he is, lying about who he is, and regardless of him lying to hide an amazing part of his life, it throws me off in an unexpected way.

Why doesn’t he let people see this side to him?

“Why didn’t he say anything?” I whisper, but my question is too quiet for Logan to hear.

I’m wholly glued in as Zanders and Maddison give their welcome speech. And during that speech, I learn all about the turning point in their lives that caused both the boys to get into therapy. And although Zanders doesn’t refer to his mother as the reason he felt so angry twelve years ago, I know she’s the reason why he felt abandoned.

They touch on their bond and how they were once hated rivals growing up, but their journey to find mental freedom is what caused them to connect and grow the friendship they have now.

They speak on behalf of some of the kids in their organization who have benefited from the donations they’ve collected over the years and where tonight’s donations will go.

But even after their speeches, I still have one major, looming question. Why doesn’t Zanders let people see this side to him?

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ZANDERS



“Can I buy you a drink?” Leaning over Stevie, I rest an elbow on the bar with a perfect sightline down her cleavage.

I’m not trying to look, but I’m not *not* trying either.

“It’s an open bar,” she laughs.

Holding up two fingers to the bartender, I point towards Stevie’s almost empty beer, asking for another round.

And as I do, my gaze falls back on the pretty flight attendant at my side. She’s stunning as she always is, but seeing her all glammed up and dressed to the nines, the way I typically am, she’s on a whole other level tonight.

This sky-blue dress plays perfectly off her light brown skin, and it hugs every one of her curves that I’ve become all too obsessed with.

But at the same time, I miss her wild curls and her baggy thrifted clothes because, at the end of the day, that’s who she is.

“You’ve been avoiding me.” I take a swig of my fresh beer.

“Your entire team is here, and I don’t want to get in trouble.” Her voice is hushed, reminding me once again that this thing between us, whatever the hell it is, is forbidden.

Which is why over the last four hours of this gala, I’ve kept my distance, knowing there are far too many news outlets here reporting on our night. But that doesn’t mean I haven’t tried to steal a passing look or two, but Stevie’s blue-green eyes rarely met mine.

Leaning on both elbows, I bend down close to her, wanting to get even a small touch of her skin but also attempting to make it appear as if I’m just grabbing a drink at the bar.

“So, ‘Vee’, huh?”

“It’s a family nickname.”

“My family nickname is Zee. Vee and Zee. Aren’t we fucking adorable?”

A small laugh escapes her.

“Do I get to call you ‘Vee’?”

A single, perfectly sculpted brow lifts. “Will that keep you from calling me ‘sweetheart’?”

“Not a chance.”

I earn another laugh.

“You can call me ‘Zee’ if you want.” My voice is quiet and not so confident.

Her eyes dart to mine. “Do you want me to call you ‘Zee’?”

I shrug my shoulders, shyly nodding.

She bites down on her lower lip to hold her smile back, and my eyes trail the movement. And just that little seductive act turns me on like you wouldn’t believe.

Moving closer, my lips ghost her ear. “But I’d rather you scream it.”

Pulling back, I watch as her eyes go wide then fall to my lips before shifting her focus from me once again.

What the hell is going on?

“Are you okay?”

She swallows deeply, nodding her head.

“What’s wrong?”

She turns my way, her entire face softening. “Why didn’t you tell me that half of this organization is because of you? I thought it was Maddison’s this whole time. Everyone thinks that.”

Shrugging, I pull my beer back to my lips. “I tried to tell you a couple of times, but I knew you’d find out eventually.”

“Zee...”

My eyes dart to hers as a small smile takes over my lips. I like hearing that name come out of her mouth.

“Why don’t you let people see the real you?”

“It’s a long story. It’s hard to explain.”

“I want to understand,” she says. “Because right now, I’m confused as hell about who you are.”

“You know who I am.”

“Do I?”

Does she? Sure, she’s seen more than most people, but she doesn’t know everything. She doesn’t know why I put on an act for everyone else. She doesn’t know that I’m afraid.

She’s seen the asshole, player, rude, arrogant side plenty. And I’ve only shown her bits and pieces of the uncle, the caring, the loving, the protective side. It’s no wonder she’s confused.

“Go on a date with me.”

“What?” she asks with a startled laugh. “Zee, I cannot. *We* cannot go on a date.”

“Why not?”

“Because...because I work for you, and I’ll get fired if anyone saw us together.”

“I’ll make sure it’s a private place.”

“Zee, you don’t date. Stop being ridiculous.” She tries to laugh it off as if it’s a joke.

“Go on a date with me.”

I would add a “please” to the end of that, but I already sound desperate, begging like this. But let’s be honest, I am.

“You said you just wanted to hook up again.” She slightly shakes her head in confusion. “This was just physical, and it was supposed to be only once.”

“I changed my mind.” I turn around, leaning my back against the bar so I can look at her. “Stevie, go on a date with me.”

“I don’t...I can’t.” Her words stumble out of her mouth without conviction, and I’m not sure that she wants to say them or even that she even believes them, for that matter.

So, I change my tactic. Because even though I know there’s a big part of her who doesn’t understand me or thinks that I’m suddenly changing my mind by wanting a date with her, I have a feeling there’s an even bigger reason why she’s saying no.

And he just so happens to be the guy hanging around her brother all night.

“What happened with your ex-boyfriend?”

“Why are you so fucking observant,” she nervously laughs.

“Eight years of therapy, sweetheart.” I quickly tuck her hair behind her ear to see the earrings that decorate it, but I make my movement quick as to

not get caught. “What did he say that your brother doesn’t know?”

Nervous eyes bounce between mine before she releases a shaky exhale. “It’s not even what he said about me. I guess it’s how he made me feel.”

“How did he make you feel?” I keep my tone soft and my eyes locked on her, making sure she knows no one else in this room matters.

“Like I was an option, and not even the first one. Like I would only be his pick if he didn’t have better opportunities waiting for him. I just... I didn’t like feeling like I didn’t matter. I wanted him to choose me.”

I turn around, so we both face the bar again, my shoulder touching hers and our hands grazing, holding our respective beers. Our mutually ring-covered fingers look good next to each other, so I reach one out, skimming hers because that’s all the physical comfort I can offer in this room with too many eyes.

“And your brother, who seems like he’s protective as hell, by the way, he’s still friends with him?”

“Ryan is trying to help him get a job with a sports network here.”

“Here? Chicago?”

Nodding, Stevie continues. “Ryan doesn’t know the details. I haven’t told him. He and Brett played basketball together in college, and they were equally loved on a campus that worshipped the team. Everyone wanted a piece of them, but I just wanted to be chosen by the guy I was in love with, you know?”

I stay silent, coaxing her to continue.

“We were together for three years, and not once did I feel like I was good enough for him. He constantly ended things with me if he had other options he wanted to pursue, then when he was out of said options, he would come crawling back. And I was the idiot who always took him back. I just wanted to be chosen.”

I hate him. Partly for how he made Stevie feel, and partly because he once had what I want so badly and treated her as if she didn’t matter. As if she wasn’t his first option.

She nervously twirls the ring on her thumb before I place my hand over hers, stopping it. The motion causes her to finally look up at me.

“You’re not an idiot. You’re not crazy for wanting to be wanted. For wanting to be loved.”

A deep swallow bobs in her throat.

“And you’re not an option, Stevie, because besides you, there’s no other choice.”

Her entire face relaxes, melting in front of me. “Don’t say that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m trying not to like you.”

Her honesty makes me laugh. She’s used the phrase “I hate you” all too often since I met her.

“Well, good luck, sweetheart, because I’m a fucking gem.”

In my peripheral, Rich motions me over for another fucking interview.

Rolling my eyes, I place my attention back on Stevie. “I have to get back to work, but don’t forget you still owe me a dance.” I give her hand one last sly squeeze before leaving her at the bar.

“Who is that?” Rich’s focus is lasered on Stevie’s back.

“Don’t worry about it.” I continue walking past my agent in hopes of pulling his attention away from my favorite flight attendant.

He doesn’t need to know about her. Not tonight and maybe not ever.

To say I’m annoyed that Rich hasn’t let me enjoy my night is an understatement. He’s pimped me out for interview after interview, and I just want to get one fucking dance in. One dance with one girl to end my night.

But before I can make that happen, a certain point guard of a particular basketball team stops me.

“We need to have a conversation,” Ryan says, blocking the path to his sister with a hand on my chest.

He’s only an inch or so shorter than me, so I barely have to look down at him with smirking lips. “Do we now?”

“Don’t be a dick.”

Reluctantly, I follow him to an empty high-top table hidden in the corner. “I’m kind of known for being a dick, in case you haven’t heard.”

“Oh, I’ve heard. And that’s what we need to talk about.”

“All right, let’s go. Give me the big brother speech.” I lean down on my elbows, allowing him to be taller than me.

And even though this is annoying, I respect it. How could I not? The guy is just looking out for Stevie.

“What are you doing with my sister?”

My lips lift, trying to hold back my laughter. “You sure you want those details?”

Ryan is fuming at the moment, nostrils flaring, so I drop it down a few notches.

“I’m not messing with her if that’s what you think.”

“That’s exactly what I think.”

“Well, that’s not the case. I’m not using her for some agenda. In fact, I’m doing the exact opposite. I’m trying to keep whatever the hell it is under wraps. I know the kind of shit that gets put on the internet about me, and I’m not going to let your sister get wrapped up in that.”

“What is it? Between you two, what’s going on?”

“Truthfully? Nothing. We’re friends, but I’m not going to lie to you. I like her. A lot. And if she’d give me a shot, I’d really like to see where it could go.”

Ryan’s brows are creased in confusion, not believing me.

“And I’m not going to ask your permission or some shit like that if that’s what you want.”

“I don’t want Vee wrapped up in your reputation, Zanders. I’m not going to sugarcoat it, I think your whole persona in the media is a fucking joke, and you give a bad name to athletes in this city.”

“You said you weren’t going to sugarcoat it,” I whine with sarcasm.

Rolling his eyes, he continues. “My sister cannot handle the type of attention you get, and I don’t want her name in the tabloids next to yours, do you understand?”

Nodding, I remain silent, allowing him to continue.

“I finally get to have her in my city, and I swear to God if you screw that up...” He shakes his head. “She’s an adult who can make her own choices, but I really don’t fucking like this one.”

Just then, I watch as Stevie’s ex-boyfriend leads her out on the dance floor. She doesn’t seem like she’s too eager to get away, but at the same time, she doesn’t seem entirely stoked to be out there with him either. The usual confident fire that girl wears around me is missing from her face.

“That right there...” I nod towards the dance floor, referring to Stevie and her ex. “You bringing that guy around your sister again? That’s a choice *I* don’t fucking like.”

“Brett? You don’t even know him.”

“Do *you*? Because from what your sister has told me about their relationship, I don’t think you know him as well as you assume.”

Ryan keeps his eyes on the dance floor. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m going to let your sister decide what she wants you to know.”

That’s probably more than I should’ve said, but maybe that will give him a bit more pause about bringing that prick around Stevie again.

“Ryan.” He turns my way. “You seem like a good guy, and you clearly love your sister. I want you to know that I respect your concerns, and knowing the reputation I’ve earned, I understand why you’re worried about her.”

His expression softens, dropping the tough-guy act a notch by offering me a half-smile.

“Whatever is going on between her and me is way out of my comfort zone, but I’m going to try my best to keep her name out of the media if she decides to give me a chance.”

“EZ.” The DJ steps up to our table. “Sorry to interrupt, but you wanted to know when it was time for the last song of the night.”

I stand up straight and head towards the dance floor to take over, but before I get too far, I turn back to the point guard. “And Ryan, you forgot to say, ‘If you hurt her, I’ll kill you.’”

A silent laugh rumbles in his chest. “If you hurt her, I’ll kill you.”

“Noted.”

I weave through the crowded space, almost every guest occupying the dance floor for the final song on the night. Patting Maddison on the shoulder as he dances with Logan, I slip past him, happy that the space is as packed as it is. Me getting my dance with Stevie shouldn’t ring too many alarms.

My eyes immediately fall on Brett’s hands sitting far too low on Stevie’s waist as I step in, stopping them in their movements.

“Can I cut in?”

Please, why am I even asking? I’m cutting in, regardless if this kid likes it or not.

“We’re in the middle of something.” Brett tries to stand firm, but he’s intimidated as fuck. I can see it in his eyes.

“Brett, I promised Zanders a dance.” Stevie’s voice is soft and kind, but I’d rather her tell him to get lost.

“So, you can go now,” I add.

“Dude, all the tabloids are right about you. You’re a fucking prick.”
Brett’s face is covered in disgust.

“Thank you so much for that detailed observation.”

Stevie’s head drops down, her hand slapped over her mouth, trying to cover her giggle.

“Look, I know that you’re trying to use her brother for some kind of in to work in Chicago sports, but do you know who has more ties in this city than Ryan Shay? Me. So, I’ll let you leave this gala in one piece if you go now. Otherwise, I’m known for putting on a show, and I can guarantee you’ll never work in any of the sports networks in this city by the time I’m done with you.”

His eyes dart to Stevie’s, asking her to take back the words for me, but she doesn’t. Instead, she holds his stare, not backing down.

Good girl.

He turns towards her. “Think about the things we talked about. Please?”

Brett leaves with that.

Returning my attention to the stunner in blue, I hold out my hand, asking for our dance.

Lightly laughing, she puts her hand in mine, but it’s not enough. I take her other hand as well and drape them around my neck before sliding my palms down her soft arms, grazing her rib cage, then settling them just above her ass.

I pull her in close, not leaving any space between us as her fingers grip at my neck, playing with the back of my chain. And the DJ really did me a solid by playing a slow song, so I get to have her body pressed up against mine for at least the next three to four minutes.

“What happened to standing up for yourself, Stevie?”

“I suck at it.”

A silent laugh heaves in my chest. Yeah, she does, but she’s trying.

“What did he mean, the things you guys talked about?” Moving Stevie around the dance floor, I keep my lips close to her ear, speaking quietly.

“I wouldn’t say we talked. More like *he* talked. He doesn’t like you.”

I release a deep, hefty laugh. “Yeah, no shit.”

“And my brother doesn’t like you.” Her tone is soft and cautious, and now I realize where this is going.

“But do *you* like me?”

Stevie pulls back slightly, her blue-green eyes locked on mine. “I don’t want to.”

I don’t love the words, but fuck, do I love the honesty. And that’s the thing, she’s always honest with me, and I can’t ask for more than that.

“And why’s that, sweetheart?”

“Because you scare me.”

Nodding, I don’t respond with words but keep my hands resting on her lower back as we slightly sway around the dance floor.

“Your reputation scares me,” she whispers, leaning her forehead on my chest.

That one is a punch to my gut, but at the same time, I’m not surprised in the slightest. I brought this on myself when I created this storyline seven years ago. In my defense, I never thought there’d be a woman I wanted in my life, so I didn’t see the harmful effects it could cause later on.

“I’m sorry for saying that,” she squeaks out, hiding further into my chest.

Stroking the hair away from her face, I lean my lips right there on her temple.

“Don’t be sorry, Vee. I get it.”

I swallow hard but fuck. This hurts more than I expected.

“All I’m asking for is a chance,” I add in a hushed voice. “To prove to you that I’m not the person everyone thinks I am. That what you see in the media isn’t true. That the guy you saw tonight, the same one you saw wearing a fucking dress on Halloween, and the same one you talked to on Christmas—that’s me, Stevie.”

She leans back, and her eyes are soft, locked on mine, wanting to believe me.

“Just...please, go on a date with me. I’ll explain everything.”

She pulls her gaze away. “Zee—”

“Stevie.” I cup her face, forcing her to look at me. “I like you. I know that doesn’t sound like anything coming from a grown-ass man, but fuck, I like you so much, and it’s fucking terrifying. You scare me just as much as I scare you.”

“Why?” She shakes her head in confusion. “Why me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Of all people, why me? You can have anyone you want.”

Is she serious? Yes, of course, she is because this beautiful woman has more insecurities and self-doubt than she deserves, even though she tries to hide it. If anyone should feel unworthy, it's me. I'm the one with the shitty reputation hanging over my head.

"I don't want anyone else, Stevie. There isn't anyone else. Don't you get it? You're the only choice. You've been stuck in my fucking head since October. Ever since that day you decided to put me in my place on that airplane."

She finally chuckles, hiding in my chest again, so I lean down, my lips ghosting her ear as I continue.

"I don't see you the way you see yourself. I think you're good, and sweet, and hilarious, and fucking stunning, Vee. And I just want a chance."

She stays silent, so I add, "You want to be chosen first? Well, so do I. So, choose me."

Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd be begging someone to give me attention, to want to spend time with me, but here I am doing just that but finding it entirely worth it.

Stevie's grasp tightens around my neck, pulling me closer, but I don't think I can get any closer than I am right now. Our bodies are pressed together as we move along the dance floor, and our voices are quiet enough that only the two of us can hear.

But this song is almost over, and I'm not ready to let go.

"This was supposed to be just physical," Stevie says. "It was supposed to be just sex. Why can't we keep it to that?"

"It's past that, and you know it." She remains silent, so I say something I've never said before. "I want more than just sex."

The song slows down, fading out, and I know the moment is almost gone.

My hands roam her waist as her hold on me tightens. My head is leaning into hers, my lips resting on her cheek. I want to kiss her. I want to pull her away from my chest and kiss her so fucking hard she forgets everything she's worried about when it comes to me.

"Kiss me." That's her saying it, not me.

"Go on a date with me."

I feel her chest rise with a deep inhale. "Take me home with you."

I can't believe I'm about to say this, but instead of saying yes, I plead, "Go on a date with me."

“Zee.” She pulls back, and just like that, the song is over as well as the night.

Immediately I’m swarmed with people, shaking my hand, saying good night. It’s overwhelming, to say the least, but all I want is a different answer from the girl who seems to be drifting further away from me as tonight’s guests bombard my space.

My gaze continues to flicker to the beauty in blue, but eventually, my attention is pulled to the mass of people I have to thank for coming out tonight.

And when I look back to where she was standing, she’s gone.

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ZANDERS



“That’s a fucking bullshit call, and you know it!”

“Zee, chill the fuck out!” Maddison grabs the back of my jersey, keeping me from getting any closer to the blind as fuck referee.

“Slashing. Chicago. Number Eleven. Two minutes.”

“Fuck that!”

“Zee, get your ass in the box and shut the hell up!” Maddison pushes me towards the opposite side of the ice, where I’m about to spend another two minutes out of the game—my third penalty of the night.

Chicago fans slap the glass, trying to get my attention, but I don’t look in any direction other than straight ahead towards the ice.

This game sucks.

Well, the boys are playing great—all but me. I’ve been making sloppy plays, delivering dirty hits, and overall being more of a deterrent than a help to my team.

I may as well get my ass thrown out and do the boys a favor.

Starting a meaningless fight sounds fan-fucking-tastic, seeing as I’ve been seething for an entire week now and needing to take it out on someone. Dirty fight on the ice? It’s what people expect. What’s the point in proving them wrong?

The reason for my week-long shitty attitude is strictly because I haven’t seen or heard from a particular curly-haired flight attendant since the gala. I wouldn’t say Stevie is avoiding me since we haven’t had any road games,

and she doesn't have my number, but still, if she changed her mind about letting me take her on a date, she knows how to get ahold of me.

And clearly, she hasn't changed her mind.

It sucks having feelings. It's terrible when they're not reciprocated. I've never had that issue. I've never liked someone, and whatever my intentions were with a woman, they were always returned.

I sound ridiculous. Twenty-eight years old and making a big deal about *liking* someone. But it is a big deal to me. I've never felt more than just a physical attraction to someone before. But with Stevie, I'm attracted to her body, mind, mouth, and heart.

And she's out of reach because of my fucked-up reputation.

"Eleven, you're up," the penalty box usher reminds me. As the last fifteen seconds of my two-minute sentence winds down, I stand from the bench.

As soon as that plexiglass door opens, allowing me onto the ice, I beeline it straight for Tampa's star forward, delivering a dirty blow and throwing him into the boards while the puck is nowhere near his stick.

And when Maddison shakes his head at me in disappointment as I'm thrown out of the game and escorted into the locker room, I yell over my shoulder, "Doing you boys a favor!"

A quick rinse does the trick before I suit back up, grabbing my keys and wallet from my locker. The third period still has ten more minutes of gameplay, but I need to get out of here. The team can fine me for missing our post-game meeting and press conference. I don't care.

"Zee," Logan's gentle voice stops me in my tracks as I open the back exit of the locker room. She stands opposite the hall. "Are you okay?"

Gaze dropping, I nod. A very unconvincing nod, I'll admit.

"No, you're not," she sighs. Opening her arms, she takes a step forward and covers me in a hug. Well, as much as she can. She's tall for a woman, but I'm huge. Regardless of my size, I sink into the embrace of one of my best friends. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," I say into her hug. "I'm just pissed off right now, I guess."

"At Stevie?"

"No." Shaking my head, we pull away. "At myself. It's my fault I'm in this fucked-up situation where she can't figure out which side of me is real."

Logan gives me an apologetic half-smile. “I think deep down she knows, but Zee, you’ve got to understand besides my family, everyone in the world thinks you’re this certain guy. And yeah, you made that decision years ago to further your career, but that’s not you. So, stop playing into it. That shit you pulled on the ice”—she motions towards the rink—“that’s not the real Zee. That’s the bad-guy EZ that doesn’t exist, so stop playing into it. Maybe that will clear things up for Stevie.”

“Lo, she knows more about me than I ever planned on allowing someone else to know. And she still thinks I’m some piece of shit. What the hell am I supposed to do with that?”

“No, she doesn’t.” Logan shakes her head. “Look, I didn’t talk to her much last week at the gala, and I don’t know her, but I think she’s confused about why you put out this media persona to the world. Give her a little grace. Eli was the most selfish person when we met, and if he kept acting that way towards everyone else in public but was sweet just to me behind closed doors, I think maybe I’d be confused too. His real change happened when he started to love everyone around him, not only himself and not just me.”

Oh God, she’s right. She’s always right.

“I’m not ready to be honest with everyone yet.”

“Okay, but you can be honest with her. You need to tell her everything. Tell her about your family and tell her why you choose to let the world view you the way you do. If you really like her, Zee, I think you need to tell her everything.”

Looking down, I keep my stare locked on the floor. “I do really like her.”

Logan doesn’t respond, and when my gaze darts back to hers, I find wide eyes and lifted brows.

“What?” I ask with caution.

Her green eyes sparkle with a knowing glint. “I never thought I’d hear you say those words,” she giggles. “But they sound good coming from you.”

“Oh God.” I playfully roll my eyes. “I’m turning into Maddison, aren’t I?”

“Little bit. Speaking of my husband, I need to get back to the game.”

I open my arms to hug her again. “He’ll kill me if I’m the reason you don’t see one of his hundreds of goals.” My tone drips with sarcasm.

“We both know he’ll show me the replay over and over again, even if I do see it in person.”

She gives me a tight squeeze, her playful tone shifting. “Zee, you deserve to be loved unconditionally, but you have to lay all your cards on the table in order for that to happen.”

I hug her a little longer, both of us silent. “Love you,” I remind her before taking off down the hall, feeling a bit lighter and knowing what I need to do. “Hey, Lo?”

“Hmm?” She turns around to face me at the opposite end of the hall.

“Get the fuck out of finance. You really should be a therapist.”

Her playful laugh echoes off the walls of the narrow hallway before she heads back to the rink to watch the final few minutes of the game.

After a couple of days of mulling it over, my shitty attitude began to shift. Logan was right, I do deserve unconditional love, but there’s someone else who deserves it too.

As soon as I walk into the Maddisons’ apartment, I’m greeted with the bare back of my best friend, his son strapped to his chest as they bounce around the kitchen.

“Hey, man,” Maddison shoots over his shoulder.

“Hey, Zee,” Logan adds after I pop a kiss on her cheek as she sits at the island.

Making my way around the kitchen, I cup the back of MJ’s swaddle as he sleeps on his dad’s chest, kissing the top of his head. Then for good measure, I add a kiss to Maddison’s cheek.

“Zee.” He holds his spatula up in warning. “Get your nasty-ass lips away from me.”

“There’s fresh coffee,” Logan offers.

Pulling a cup from the cabinet, I pour myself my daily caffeine fix.

“You staying for breakfast?” Maddison asks.

“Nah, I can’t. I gotta get some things done this morning, but I have a favor to ask. Can I steal your daughter?”

Both Maddison and Logan turn my way, frozen. Brows furrowed by both my best friends, Logan asks, “Want to try that again?”

“Can I steal your daughter for the afternoon?” I correct.

“Oh, yeah.” Maddison brushes me off, going back to preparing breakfast.

“Of course,” Logan adds. “What’s the occasion?”

“Well...” I take a sip of my coffee as I lean back on the kitchen counter. “I’m going to adopt a dog, but I need to make sure she’ll be okay around Ella first.”

A knowing smile slides across Logan’s lips. “Is there a certain place you’re adopting her from? Maybe where a certain flight attendant volunteers?”

“Maybe.”

“Zee, you got it bad,” Maddison laughs.

Okay, not entirely wrong.

“I’m not adopting to impress Stevie. I was thinking about what we discussed, Lo, and I do want to be loved. So, why not a dog? Especially one who just wants someone to love them in return. I’m a single guy, I have a huge place, and I can afford to have someone watch her while we’re traveling.”

“What’s her name?” Logan sits forward in excitement.

“Rosie. She’s a five-year-old Doberman, and from the time I’ve spent with her and what Stevie has told me, she’s a total sweetheart. But she’s been at the shelter for over a year because she’s a little intimidating, you know? I have the means to take care of her, and she deserves to have someone love her, so why not?”

“Zee, you’re making me swoon. Baby, what happened to all the dogs you were going to get me?” Logan asks her husband.

“That was before you were going to give me babies.”

“Maybe, if you take a break from making babies, you guys could get a dog?”

“Watch your mouth,” Maddison warns, causing Logan and me to burst into laughter.

“Uncle Zee!” Ella runs into the kitchen, sliding across the floor in her socks. “I made you this.”

She holds out a piece of paper as I pick her up off the ground.

“For me?” I ask, examining her work. The simple coloring page is scribbled with green and purple crayons, not a single part staying within the

lines. She might not be the next great artist, but fuck, she's cute. "It's beautiful. Thank you."

A proud smile overtakes her little lips.

"Hey, you want to go see some doggies with me today?"

"Doggies?" Eager green eyes go wide.

"Lots of doggies."

She quickly nods before squirming in my grasp, asking to be put down. As soon as her feet hit the floor, she races to her room, which I assume is to get ready.

"I'll take that as a yes."

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STEVIE



“G us, buddy, I need to wash that blanket.”

Attempting to pull the dirty fleece blanket out from underneath him, the big guy rolls onto his back, sprawling out and letting me know that the laundry is going to have to wait for another day.

I resign, giving him belly scratches instead.

The bell over the front door catches my attention, but Cheryl is at the front desk, and she can greet whoever is walking in, so I bring my focus back to the lazy as hell yellow lab on his back.

“Mr. Zanders, welcome back,” Cheryl says, causing my spine to stiffen and my stomach to be filled with nerves.

I haven’t seen or talked to that beautiful man since the gala over a week ago, and that’s because I’m scared. I’m scared that he truly is nothing like the preconceived notions that follow him around indicate. I’m scared that he’s good. No, I *know* he’s good. I think I knew that before the charity gala, but it was confirmed when I learned that Active Minds was as much his creation as it was Maddison’s.

But I have no idea why he puts on a front for the rest of the world, pretending to be someone he’s not. He claims never to lie, but that seems like a huge one, and if he can lie about that, is he lying about his feelings for me?

I’m scared, plain and simple.

“And who do we have with us today?” Cheryl asks.

“This is Ella,” I hear Zanders say.

“Hi!” a small voice rings out, making me silently laugh as my heart aches.

I stay quiet, unsure if I want Zanders to know I’m here.

“Are we here for Stevie or Rosie today?” Cheryl asks, blowing my cover.

And why does she sound so comfortable with him? She’s only ever seen him once, and that was a quick moment from across the room.

“I get a choice today? How about both?”

That causes my cheeks to warm and my stomach to flip again.

As I walk around the barrier that blocks the dog’s playroom from the entryway, I quickly try to clean myself up. The last time Zanders saw me, I was in a gown with professional makeup on my face. This time, I’m covered in dog hair, my hair hasn’t been washed in five days, and I’m wearing my usual flannel and baggy jeans.

But as soon as I turn the corner and see Zanders staring at me like I’m the best thing he’s ever seen, I let those insecurities go, just as I do any time I’m around him.

His hazel eyes are soft as they bore into me, and I can’t help but be happy to see him. I’ve missed him, as strange as that is to admit.

My throat bobs in a deep swallow. “You following me?”

A content smile pulls at his lips. “Hey, Stevie girl.”

My cheeks heat as they do whenever I hear him say that name. Or “sweetheart” or just about anything else he might think of to call me.

I stay silent, still in shock that he’s actually here. But he’s wearing overly expensive shoes, his outfit is perfectly coordinated and tailored, and his watch shines the way only the over-priced ones do. It’s definitely him.

“EJ, I don’t know if you remember from Halloween, but this is my friend Stevie.”

That brings me back to reality, my attention shifting to the little girl holding his hand, her wild brunette hair falling out around the beanie on her head.

“Hi.” She waves at me across the room.

“Hey, Ella. What are you two doing here?” I direct the question at Maddison’s daughter but fully expect Zanders to tell me what the hell is going on.

“We gonna see doggies!” she excitedly answers.

“Is today the day?” Cheryl interrupts.

Brows furrowed, my head snaps back and forth between the stunning man decked to the nines and the owner of the shelter.

"I think so," Zanders says, wearing his perfect megawatt smile. "I want Ella to meet her first, though."

"What are you guys talking about?"

"You haven't told her yet?" Cheryl's eyes are wide with surprise before they shift to amusement.

Finally, I open the dog gate, letting myself into the front room. "Tell me what?"

"I'm adopting Rosie."

My mouth drops open, eyes softening as I look at him. "What?"

"I'm adopting Rosie," Zanders repeats with a laugh.

Tears sting my eyes, and I can feel my nose turning pink. "What?" I ask again, my voice cracking. "Why didn't you tell me?"

His laugh is light and airy, but his gaze is soft and genuine, watching me struggle to keep from crying. "Because, sweetheart, I didn't want you to think it was an attempt for me to win you over. To be honest, it has nothing to do with you."

"He's been coming here every week to see her," Cheryl adds.

Tilting my head as I look at him, I can't hold back any longer before I take three quick strides and wrap my arms around his neck. "Thank you," I say into his chest.

He keeps Ella's hand in his, but his free arm wraps around my back as his large hand gently strokes my rib cage. He doesn't say anything. Instead, he holds me, placing a kiss on the top of my head.

"Okay." I step away from him, wiping at my face. I take a deep breath, composing myself. "This is a good day. I need to stop." I follow that up with an awkward laugh.

Zanders' palm reaches out and cups my face, pulling me into him again. I melt into his chest as his body relaxes around me, his fingers threading into my curls as he holds me to him.

His fist tightens around my hair, tilting my face to his. "I missed you," he rasps.

His heavy-lidded gaze darts to my parted lips.

"Here she is," Cheryl rings out.

I pull away from Zanders as Rosie is led into the front room on a leash. She tugs away from Cheryl, wanting to get to the giant defenseman. As

soon as Zanders bends down, Cheryl lets go, and Rosie runs right into his outstretched arms before flipping on her back, her butt moving a mile a minute.

“There’s my girl,” Zanders laughs.

He spends some time loving on the black and tan beauty, and my heart swells like you wouldn’t believe.

“They’re always like this together,” Cheryl whispers to me.

“Why didn’t you tell me he might be adopting Rosie?”

Cheryl knowingly shrugs her shoulders.

“Ella, this is Rosie,” he says.

He uses his body as a giant barrier between Rosie and Ella, giving them a moment to get accustomed to each other. Ella giggles as Rosie sniffs her hands, but she doesn’t move to touch her. She waits until Rosie gives her the go-ahead. Finally, when Rosie’s butt starts shaking back and forth, she licks little Ella’s hands repeatedly.

Zanders moves his body out of the way as Rosie falls onto her back in front of his niece.

Ella laughs, rubbing Rosie’s tummy. “I like her!”

“Yeah, I think we can check off ‘great with kids’ for her.” Zanders keeps his hazel eyes locked on his two girls.

I want to kiss him. I want to grab him by his button-down shirt and kiss him until I need to stop for air.

“So, are we doing it?” Cheryl asks.

“We’re doing it.”

Cheryl’s smile beams with excitement for the Doberman who has stayed here a year too long.

We head back to the front desk after introducing Ella to all the dogs and watching Zanders get comically covered in dog hair.

“So, I think I can have all her records and everything ready to go tomorrow,” Cheryl says to Zanders. “Is tomorrow a good day for pickup?”

“Tomorrow is perfect.”

“I’ll just need a phone number from you.”

Zanders hesitates.

“I think we can skip the phone number,” I interrupt, knowing how private Zanders is. Ryan is the same way, not giving out personal information to strangers.

“That’s okay,” Zanders says. “But can I give it to Stevie? Does that work?”

A mischievous smile pulls across Cheryl’s lips. “Yeah, that works just fine.”

“Sweetheart.” Zanders holds his hand out, bringing my attention back to him. “Your phone.”

In a small wave of shock that Zanders wants to give me his number, I swallow, pull my phone out, and hand it over.

I watch as his ring-covered fingers type in the ten digits with precision before adding his name.

Zee (Daddy) Zanders

I shake my head, laughing, holding my hand out to take my phone back.

But Zanders being Zanders, can’t help himself from adding an eggplant emoji next to his name. Then he tacks on a single heart before handing it back with a satisfied smile.

“And typically, we do a home visit before adoption, but since Stevie knows you, we can skip over that.”

“No!” Zanders interrupts. “I think we need a home visit. That seems important.”

He’s so full of shit. I know exactly what he’s doing.

“Stevie, this seems like a home visit you should do,” Cheryl says.

Looking over at Zanders, he wears a cheeky smile as I shake my head in disbelief.

“It’s not a date,” I remind him.

He holds a hand over his chest, mouth gaping in mock offense. “How dare you accuse me of tricking you into a date.”

The devilish grin he wears tells me that’s precisely what he’s doing.

“And the last thing is the adoption fee,” Cheryl adds. “It’s fifty dollars.”

Zanders lets go of Ella’s hand before digging into the inside pocket of his long wool coat. He pulls out a checkbook, sets it on the desk, and fills out a check.

As he fills it out, I watch with a content smile as Rosie sits perfectly calm on one side of Zanders with Ella standing at his other, patiently waiting for her uncle.

“Oh,” Cheryl awkwardly laughs, holding Zanders’ check in her hands. “You filled this out wrong.” Her cheeks are flushed. “It’s fifty dollars. This

says fifty-thousand.”

Zanders tucks his checkbook away, stepping back to Ella and putting his hand on her head. “Oops,” he casually says, letting me know that nothing about that was a mistake.

“Well, we don’t want to waste a perfectly good check.” Zanders shrugs. “May as well cash that one.”

“What?” Cheryl laughs uncomfortably. “Oh no. I can’t accept this.” She holds the check out, wanting him to take it back.

“Please take it,” Zanders begs. “As a donation.”

Cheryl’s head cocks to the side, her lips tilting downward. “Thank you.” She rounds the desk to give him a hug.

Zanders wraps his arms around her but shoots me a soft smile over her shoulder.

I think I might be done for.

“Well,” Cheryl huffs, trying to wipe her eyes slyly, but I know she’s having a hard time. This shelter needs so much, and Zanders’ donation will take care of a lot of it. “We better get your picture on the wall.”

Cheryl grabs the Polaroid camera from below the desk as Zanders crouches down next to Ella, with Rosie sitting perfectly in front of them.

“Vee, get over here,” he calls out, waving me over.

“Oh, I don’t think—”

“Get over here. I need all my girls together.”

Pressing my lips together, trying to suffocate the way it feels to hear him refer to me as one of his girls, I take the space next to him, crouching down.

Zanders wraps his arm around me, his other one around Ella, pulling us both in close. My hand conveniently finds the inside of his muscular thigh as I rest it there while Cheryl takes the shot with Rosie right in front.

“Perfect,” Cheryl says after a moment when the black image shifts.

I reattach Rosie’s leash to lead her back for her last night here as both Zanders and Ella give her scratches and kisses goodbye.

“So tonight then?” Zanders asks me. “Seven o’clock?”

“Not a date,” I remind him. Or remind myself. I’m not too sure anymore.

He holds Ella’s hand, leading her to the front door. “Absolutely not,” he laughs. “See you tomorrow, Cheryl!”

As soon as he's outside, he bends down for Ella to climb on his shoulders. He holds her feet as Ella rests her crossed arms and chin on his beanie, the two of them walking home.

And the only thought that crosses my mind is that I'm entirely done for.

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ZANDERS



“Oh my God. You’re nervous,” Logan laughs.

My head snaps around, brows furrowed, as I scoff at the FaceTime call set up on my kitchen island. “I am not nervous.”

“You’re sweating bullets, buddy.” Maddison’s ugly mug cuts into the phone’s frame.

“Well, I’m not *not* nervous either.”

“Zee-baby has a date,” he teases.

“It’s not a date,” I correct, brushing my hands down my chest and smoothing my suit. “Stevie specifically said it wasn’t a date. Like multiple times.”

Maddison squints through the phone screen. “So, your table being set with candles and flowers is because this isn’t a date?”

Turning back to my dining room table, set with brand new plates, linens, and cutlery, which was all bought today, I realize my guy might be right. Not to mention the candles waiting to be lit or the giant vase of roses in the center.

“Is it too obvious?”

Both Logan and Maddison burst into laughter through the phone. “Zee, you have a private chef coming, for Christ’s sake.”

“Fuck. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing. I’ve never done this before.”

“Just be yourself,” Logan soothes. “That’s what tonight is about.”

“What if she doesn’t like the real me?” Leaning my forearms on the counter, I keep my focus on my two best friends through the phone screen,

needing a little encouragement.

“Then she doesn’t know what she’s missing,” Maddison adds. “But I’ve been around you both for months. She likes you. She just doesn’t like the act you put on, so cut that shit out with her.”

“Zee,” Logan interrupts. “Tell her everything.”

“I will.”

Looking back at the table set to perfection, realization hits me. This isn’t Stevie.

“Hey, guys, I gotta go. Love you both.”

“Love you, Zee.”

“Good luck, man. Love you,” Maddison finishes before I hang up our video call.

As soon as we’re disconnected, I call the private chef I hired to cancel. Then I place a few different food delivery orders. Taking everything off the table, I replace it all with two regular plates, paper napkins, and a coaster for beer at both my seat and Stevie’s.

I make sure Rosie’s crate, leash, and toys are perfectly where they need to be because even though tonight is more than just a home visit, there’s still that aspect to it.

Since Christmas, I’ve been visiting Rosie once or twice a week, but I purposefully kept it quiet from Stevie, partly because I didn’t want to break her heart if it didn’t work out and partly because it had nothing to do with her.

Adopting is for Rosie, but selfishly it’s for me too. Rosie just wants to love and be loved, as do I.

Pacing my living room, I keep my eyes glued to the floor-to-ceiling windows on the far side, looking like a creep as I wait for Stevie to leave her building and head over to mine. It’s still a bit before seven, but the nerves are sinking in.

I’ve never done this. I’ve never had dinner and conversation with a girl I had feelings for. Who am I kidding? I’ve never had feelings, period. This is all fucking terrifying and nerve-wracking.

I have no idea where we’ll stand after tonight. Will we go back to Stevie simply working on the airplane my team charts? Or will she give me a chance to prove that I can be more than the guy in the tabloids?

More than anything, I hope it’s the latter because I’m showing someone who I am for the first time in a long time, and I don’t know if I can handle

being abandoned for it again.

My phone rings on the kitchen island, pulling me out of my worry. Jogging over, I quickly answer the unknown number, eager to talk to the girl I haven't been able to stop thinking about.

"Stevie?" I quickly answer with an all-too excited smile.

The line is quiet, with no response.

"Stevie, can you hear me?" Plugging my opposite ear, I listen harder.

"Evan?"

My stomach drops to the floor. I want to throw up. I want to hide. I want to chuck my phone against the wall, hearing this woman's voice. The woman who left me when I was sixteen.

"Mom?"

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STEVIE



I've been a ball of nerves all day. I have no idea what's going to happen tonight. I don't know what he's going to say, what I'm going to say, or where things will stand after it's all over.

What I do know is that I'm wearing some awfully see-through panties under all my winter layers in hopes that Zanders will be seeing them and subsequently tearing them off.

A physical relationship would be easy. It's what I think I can handle and what he wanted initially, but now he won't give it up without something more. But something more with him scares me.

Everything magnifies with him. If I thought I was broken after Brett, that's incomparable to the potential level of destruction Zanders could leave in his wake. On the flip side, what I thought was love with my ex, isn't even on the same playing field of where my feelings could go if I open my heart to the possibility of Zanders.

It's all terrifying.

As I ride the private elevator up to Zanders' penthouse, my throat is thick with nerves. The building is stunning and pristine—money in the form of walls. The exclusive hallway off the elevator to his place is clean and modern but cold.

Swallowing down the instinct to run, I knock two times on the large mahogany door of Zanders' penthouse, but after a minute, there's no answer.

I give him another moment before I knock again.

Still, no answer.

Pulling out my phone, I dial, inevitably giving him my number. His phone is loud enough that I can hear it ring in his apartment, on the other side of this door, but it continues to go unanswered until I reach his voicemail.

I give the door one more loud knock, just to be sure, but still, there's no answer.

I'm not going to lie. My heart is pounding, and not because I think something might be wrong with him. The guy seems unbreakable. Untouchable. But even though Zanders was persistent about tonight, did he change his mind? Is he regretting asking for more already?

My cheeks are flush, and my stomach is twisting with embarrassment as I turn back to the elevator to go back home, but halfway down the empty hall, I stop in my tracks. If he wants to bail on me, he can say it to my face. He's so adamant about me standing up to people? Well, that's precisely what I'm going to do. Besides, of anyone in my life, I'm somehow able to stand up to him without fear or worry.

Without overthinking it any longer, I take confident strides back down the hall, twist the knob, and surprisingly open the unlocked door. But as soon as I walk into his penthouse, I instantly regret it.

It's intimidating, dark, masculine, and just very much him. The ceilings are high and expansive, making it feel like they never end. I'm in a space I shouldn't be privy to without him.

"Stevie?"

Snapping my head around, Zanders stands down the hallway in nothing but a towel hanging low on his hips. A bit of moisture lingers on his golden-brown skin as steam rolls off in the air around him. The shadowed concaves of his muscles are even deeper thanks to the low lighting in the dark hall.

"Shit." He tightly holds the towel around his waist as he takes a couple of steps down the entryway, coming into view. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear the door, and I lost track of time."

The closer he gets, the more evident his exhaustion is. "Are you okay?" I ask, brows furrowed, and any frustration towards him wholly abandoned.

He gives me a sad half-smile, telling me he's absolutely not okay. "Yeah. I'm sorry about that, but I'm really happy you're here."

I walk into him, wrapping my arms around his waist, before pressing my cheek against his warm, wet chest. He sighs into me, snaking his free

arm around my shoulders and holding my body to his. I can feel every muscle in his tight frame relax around me before he rests his head on mine.

I don't know what's going on, but he's upset.

"You let yourself in," he quietly notes.

"I was coming to yell at you for forgetting about me."

"As you should." His body vibrates from a silent laugh before he squeezes me even tighter. "But I could never forget about you, sweetheart."

I run a soothing hand up and down his bare back.

"Can you give me a minute? I'll be right out, but I should get some clothes on."

"I don't mind you naked."

Another laugh shakes my body as Zanders relaxes. "Make yourself at home. There's beer in the fridge."

He runs a hand over my curls, brushing them out of the way before he walks his gloriously stunning body around the corner and back to his room.

Alone in his space once again, but feeling a bit more welcomed, I take my coat off and hang it on the hooks by his front door before kicking off my snow-covered sneakers that are far too used to be worn in his clean place.

I wander into the kitchen, needing that beer Zanders offered, and when I open the fridge, I can't help but smile to myself when I find one of the shelves lined with multiple different IPAs. Instinctively, I know the plethora of options is solely for me.

I'm good with any and all, so I pop the top of one and take it with me on my self-guided tour.

Zanders' penthouse is stunning. Dark wood, concrete, black metal, and low lighting decorate the masculine area. It's moody, expensive, and intriguing. It's one of those places you get inspiration from in a magazine or featured on a Pinterest board. Not a single thing is out of order. It's very much him, and I look entirely out of place.

Passing by the long hallway Zanders ducked down, I turn the opposite way, finding his living room. His couches are large and deep-set, his television is massive, and his pictures are perfectly coordinated in black and white.

The images are mostly him and Maddison's family, but there is one of him and who I would guess to be his sister. Zanders has mentioned her once, and they look eerily similar. Though, I do notice not a single photo

has his dad present. I know they have a rocky history, as he does with his mom, but I guess I didn't realize his relationship with his father was as lacking as it is in these photographs.

There's a photo of him and Ella that I can't help but pick up and admire a little closer. Their relationship melts me every time and was the first thing that made me question if there was more to the notoriously hated defenseman.

"You snooping, sweetheart?" Zanders' deep voice vibrates through me as my cheeks heat from being caught in the act. He stands behind me, so close that I can feel the warmth of his body before he rests his chin on my shoulder. "That's one of my favorites."

"You guys are close, huh?" I keep my focus on the photo in my hands of the adorable wild-haired girl and her uncle.

"She's my favorite person."

"More than Maddison?"

"I like her ten times more than her dad." His tone has sarcasm embedded in it, but I'm not sure that he's joking.

I replace the frame to its original spot before turning around to face him. My eyes wander his body, noting his casual sweatpants and hoodie. Granted, I can tell they're expensive as hell, but the only time I've seen him this dressed down is when he's getting ready to sleep during an overnight flight on the airplane.

And my mouth can't seem to close seeing him so informal and carefree.

"What? Did you expect me to be wearing a three-piece suit in my own home?"

"Kind of, yeah."

As much as Zanders looks absolutely fuckable in his perfectly tailored suits, he looks adorable in his comfy clothes, and I feel much less intimidated being in his expensive home when he's as dressed down as I am.

"But you look good like this too."

A knowing smile lifts on his lips. "Vee, I always look good."

Not wrong, but no need to tell him that, and thankfully, a knock at the door keeps me from having to respond.

"That should be the food. Or at least some of it." Zanders heads towards the entryway, expecting me to follow.

“Some of it?” I question, two steps behind him. “And food? What happened to this not being a date?”

Zanders turns to face me, walking backward and wearing his annoyingly cheeky smile. “You only eat when you’re on dates?”

Five knocks later, and Zanders’ poor doorman getting his workout in for the day, deep-dish pizza, Chinese takeout, sushi, burgers and fries, and two burritos cover the dining room table.

“What the hell?” I let out a nervous but confused laugh, looking at the expansive table entirely covered in takeout.

A bit of shyness emanates off Zanders. “I wasn’t sure what you’d be in the mood for, so I kind of got everything.”

My head tilts at his thoughtful gesture. “Everything sounds perfect.”

That shyness shifts to pride before he turns towards the fridge to get two fresh beers. Zanders pulls out the seat at the head of the table for me before he takes the one next to it as we both pile our plates full of all the best takeout in Chicago.

I don’t think I could feel more comfortable sitting next to this man, eating junk food and drinking beers in his stunning penthouse.

“So, I have some questions,” I begin. “Dog questions.”

I don’t, actually. Zanders will be great with Rosie, but I’m still lying to myself about this being a home visit and not a date.

“Shoot,” Zanders mumbles, mouth full.

“She has a place to go when you’re on the road?”

“When we are on the road,” he corrects. “Yes. One of the guys on the team has a dog-sitter they trust, and she’s down to add Rosie.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you’ve been going to see her?”

He casually shrugs, looking away from me. “Because I didn’t want to get your hopes up just in case. And like I said, it wasn’t about you.” His eyes dart to mine, soft and truthful. “The donation, though, that was for you.”

I try to fight back my smile, not wanting him to see how much every little thing he does has begun to affect me, but I can’t.

“Thank you for that, by the way. It was ridiculous and over the top, but you have no idea how much that’s going to help.”

His leg nudges mine under the table before he slightly wraps it around, wanting to touch me in some way.

“And you have everything for her ready to go?” I continue.

Who am I kidding? Of course, he does. This man is beyond prepared at all times.

“Yep. The last thing is her collar, but it’s getting delivered tomorrow. Wanna see?” He pulls out his phone and enlarges a photo on the screen, showing me.

“You got her a Louis Vuitton collar with metal spikes on it?”

His brows crease in offense. “Have you met me? Of course, I did.”

“People are going to think she’s intimidating with that on.”

“Good. Let them. We both know she’s sweet, but I’m fine with everyone else thinking she’s a badass.”

I bring my attention back to my plate, muttering under my breath, “You do love giving people the wrong impression, don’t you?”

My eyes dart to his with regret, tension thick in the air between us as we remain silent.

Zanders leans forward, holding my eye contact. “Do you have some more questions? Maybe unrelated to Rosie? Maybe some questions about me? Because I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

I swallow hard as I study his stunning face. His eyes are soft with understanding, and there’s no evidence of judgment or irritation from my previous statement.

“Why do you put on an act? Why don’t you let people see how good you are?”

His eyes avert to his plate. “Well, that’s a big question to start with.”

I cross my legs on my chair and turn it towards him, giving him my full attention. “We have a five-course dinner to get through. We have plenty of time.”

A relaxed smile lifts on Zanders’ lips. He looks back to me, hesitating for a moment before pushing his plate away.

“When I got picked up by Chicago seven years ago, I already had a bit of a reputation from my college days. Chicago was looking for an enforcer, someone to protect the other guys on the ice, and I fit the bill. Then the following year, I kind of ran with that narrative, but it wasn’t until the next season when Maddison got traded, and we ended up signing with the same agent, that things really took off. Rich had this whole idea of setting up this storyline for us. Maddison is the golden boy in hockey. Everyone loves him, and the opposite of that is me—everyone’s favorite player to hate. We

bought into the whole thing, and we've both made an absolute killing off our little duo. And I'm not going to lie. I fucking loved every minute of it."

I nod in understanding, knowing how much Zanders loves his reputation.

"Until this year," he continues. "There was never anyone in my life to be negatively affected by my media persona until now. Until you, and the fact that it's made you view me differently than who I really am and has you scared, fucking kills me, Stevie. If I could go back seven years ago and change it all from the beginning, I would."

"Why don't you change it now?"

He lets out a deep, resigned sigh. "This is who I am in hockey now. I'm in the middle of a re-signing season, and this brand I carry is what Chicago wants. They're not going to pay me without it. At least, that's what Rich thinks."

"So, that's it? It's all about money?"

Guilt forms on his features. "No, actually, it's not."

"Then what is it, Zee?"

He doesn't answer, his eyes bouncing everywhere but refusing to look at me.

"I'm scared," he mutters under his breath.

I scoff in disbelief. "You're not scared of anything."

His eyes dart to mine, full of honesty. "I'm terrified of a lot of things. You included."

He takes a long swig of his beer. "I'm afraid that if everyone sees the real me, that maybe they won't like it. Maybe they won't love me anymore. Maybe Chicago won't want me, and this is where my best friends are. I don't want to play somewhere else. People love the shit-talking asshole who spends a ton of time in the penalty box then gets pictured being a playboy, but are they going to love me if they find out I'd rather talk about Active Minds than who they think I'm fucking? Are they going to still love me when they find out I cry at Disney movies with my niece? Are they going to love me if they find out I can't stop thinking about my flight attendant who still thinks I'm some piece of shit?"

That causes me to pause. "I don't think you're a piece of shit, Zee. I think you're too good for most people, but you never let anyone see that, and I don't get why you'd want to hide it. You usually don't lie, but you lie about what a good man you are? It doesn't make sense."

“Because Stevie!” His voice is raised, but he’s not yelling. He’s frustrated beyond belief, but not with me. “I’ve been myself before, and that wasn’t enough. My own fucking mother left me, for Christ’s sake!”

I try to breathe, but I can’t. Understanding floods me. It’s all making sense that his fear of not being worthy of love comes from his mom—the woman who left him.

“It hurts a whole lot less to be hated when you’re not being yourself than it does not to be loved for who you are,” he continues. “As much as I tell people I enjoy the hate, I want to be loved more than anything, but I’m not ready to risk rejection yet.”

I, too, have been myself and wasn’t enough. In fact, I’ve felt that way most of my adult life. This man, who seems like an impenetrable brick wall of intimidation, is actually extremely soft and scared, with more feelings than he wants to admit.

“I only trust a few people to be myself with. I’m not ready to trust everyone in the world with who I am. *That* is what scares me, Stevie.”

I place my hand over his with my brows pinched to keep from getting emotional. “You trust me?”

Zanders’ hazel eyes are soft as they read mine. “What do you think, sweetheart?”

“Why?”

“Because at this point, the risk of losing whatever this might be by not being myself with you is a lot scarier than showing you who I am. I like you, Vee, and I’m being completely honest and vulnerable here. I just want the chance for you to want me. The real me.”

The food is cold on my plate, but I don’t care. I’m not hungry anymore. I’m full from Zanders’ words that give me more hope than I could’ve imagined. He trusts me enough to be honest and vulnerable with who he is. Why can’t I trust that he’s not lying about how he feels about me?

Standing from my chair, I go right over to his, taking a seat across his lap. Slinging my arms around his shoulders, I bury my head in his neck.

“You cry at Disney movies?” I tease, my breath ghosting his skin.

He wraps his arms around my waist, holding me to him. “Fucking sob.”

“You don’t seem like a crier.”

“I cry at a lot of things. I just don’t let people see it. I cried before you got here, actually.”

I lift my head from his shoulder. “Why?”

He gives me a small half-smile. "My mom called me."

"What?"

"I hung up on her the second I realized who it was, but then it caused a full-blown panic attack that I couldn't get out of. My whole body was locked up, and I started crying like a fucking baby on the bathroom floor. I got in the shower to try to wash it all away, and that's why I didn't hear you knocking."

"Jesus, Zee." I graze a soothing palm over his cheek, seeing way more of this man than I ever expected. "Are you okay?"

He cautiously nods. "I'll be all right."

Silence lingers between us. I didn't know anything about Zanders' mental health or the fact that he was passionate about helping others navigate their own journeys until the gala just over a week ago.

Falling back to his shoulder, I quietly ask, "What made you start Active Minds?"

His hand snakes around, resting on my hipbone and his head leaning on mine. "Because I didn't want other kids to suffer the way I did and still do sometimes. Not having control over the way your mind affects you is one of the worst feelings in the world. You feel trapped and helpless. I wish I would've gotten into therapy the second my mom left, but mental health wasn't really talked about with men, and I wanted to break that stigma and give kids access to the help they need. The help *I* needed but didn't know how to ask for."

My heart aches with understanding, seeing everything he is. I run my hand across his chest before curving it around his neck. "How could you think people might not like you when this is the heart you have?"

"Do *you* like me?" He lifts his head, urging mine from his shoulder as well. There's no hesitation in his question. His tone is pleading, needing to know the answer.

"I don't want to."

"But do you?" Hope. So much hope as he looks at me.

I don't know how to answer that without laying all my cards on the table about just how much I like him. He's good, too good. It's just taken me months to see it. It's taken months for him to peel back every layer and show me who he is. But this, the real him, I like him way too much.

"I hate you, remember?"

We share a knowing smile.

“Stevie girl, do you like me?” He pushes a corkscrew curl away from my face so he can see me.

My eyes dart between his and his lips. Unable to keep myself from him, I lean forward, closing the gap between us, pressing my mouth to his. He gives into me for a moment before he turns away, breaking the connection and shaking his head.

“Don’t.” He closes his eyes as if he’s in pain from stopping me. “Don’t do that unless there’s more that comes with it, and I don’t mean physically.”

“What do you mean?”

I know what he means.

“You know what I mean.” His eyes are focused and pointed at me. “I want more than just sex with you. I want you. All of you. I just want a chance.”

Opening up myself to him in that way is absolutely terrifying, but how could I not want him after everything he’s shown me? He’s been trying to choose me over and over again, and all I’ve ever wanted was to be someone’s first choice.

My pause causes defeat to fall across Zanders’ face as he looks away from me, his lips pressed in a hard line.

I use my index finger and thumb under his chin to bring his attention back to me. “Don’t hurt me.”

He searches my face, trying to read me as hope overtakes him. “I couldn’t.”

“If there’s ever a time where you don’t want this anymore, where I’m not your first choice anymore, tell me.”

The corners of his lips lift upward. “You’ll always be my first choice. Have been since the day I met you, sweetheart.”

“Be honest with me.”

“I will be. I am.” He cups my face, leaning his forehead on mine, his expression shifting. “But I’m not ready to be honest with the rest of the world yet.”

I nod against him. “You can play everyone else, but not me. Screw it. I’ll even support your made-up persona as long as you’re not that guy with me.”

“So, you like me?” His smile is eager and excitable.

I can't help but laugh at this giant man asking such a childish question.
"What do you think?"

"Say it. Stroke my ego, Stevie."

I laugh into him, my head falling to his shoulder before I look back.

"You like me," he coaxes, his lips only inches from mine as he stares at my mouth.

"Kiss me."

"Say it, and I'll do a whole lot more than kiss you, sweetheart."

Fire burns in his hazel eyes, knowing he wants everything just as much as I do.

I playfully roll my eyes. "Yes. I like you, the most arrogant man in Chicago."

I watch as the weight falls off him, his eyes bright and his smile pompous as hell. "I think you mean the *sexiest* man in Chicago."

"As I said...the most arrogant man in Chicago."

His smug smile makes its timely appearance. "Fucking knew it. I mean how could you not? I'm fucking great. I'm—"

"Shut up." I slap a palm over his mouth. "Shut. Up," I laugh.

His amusement shifts to desire as I drop my hand. He stands, wrapping my legs around his waist and carrying me as if I weigh absolutely nothing. "How about I make *you* shut up?"

He presses his mouth to mine, taking away any words I could say, as he carries me to the kitchen island, sitting me on top.

"I'd rather you make me scream," I retort, already far too out of breath.

A devilish smirk spreads across his mouth, mischief dancing in his eyes. "Now that I can do."

ZANDERS



I don't know if I've ever felt so light in my life. I feel seen, chosen, and accepted by someone I choose just as much.

Sitting Stevie on top of my kitchen island, I stand between her legs and kiss her hard, my mouth endlessly exploring hers. To my defense, she's equally as eager, legs wrapped around me, heels pushing into my ass, needing me closer.

Moving from her lips, I skim mine across her jaw and down her neck, pulling a soft moan from Stevie's throat.

"Zee, wait," she whispers, but at the same time wraps her arms around my shoulders, pulling me into her.

"No more waiting." I continue my assault down her neck and across her chest, pushing her flannel shirt over her shoulders, leaving her in only her tank top, and exposing more of her bronze skin.

"Zee," she soothes, cupping my cheeks and pulling my face to look at hers. Concern dances in her eyes. "We should talk about your mom. We kind of skimmed over that."

I'm good without that. The last thing I want to do right now is think about that woman. I spent a solid twenty minutes stuck in a panic-stricken headspace because of her today.

I shake my head. "Vee, I really don't want to."

"Are you sure? You know you can talk about her with me if you want to."

I can't hold back the small smile creeping across my lips. For the first time in a long time, I feel perfectly safe and protected, spilling every little

detail of my life.

"I know. But I feel good. I feel great even, and I'd rather fuck my girl than talk about the gold-digging woman who gave birth to me."

Stevie drapes her arms over my shoulders, a single brow lifting. "Your girl, huh?"

I hide away in her neck. "You're so lucky."

Stevie's body shakes in a laugh. "You're the lucky one."

Wearing far too big of a proud smile, I pull away from the crook of her neck. She never talks about herself this way, but confidence sure sounds good coming from her.

"Hell yeah, I am." Leaning into her, I find her mouth once more, tasting, sweeping, my tongue exploring.

A large part of me can't believe I get to do this. That she's willing to give me a chance regardless of my shitty reputation, but I'm not trying to question it. I just want to appreciate her and the moment.

Cupping her face with one hand, my other palm anchors on the kitchen island as I urge Stevie back to lie down. I climb right on top of her, my sweatpants doing absolutely nothing to hide how eagerly ready I am to change the fact that I haven't had sex in over two months.

My phone interrupts me by dinging with a text, but I ignore it. Instead, I continue to feverishly make out with the pretty girl on my counter until it dings once again.

Growling in frustration, I lift my body from Stevie's and lean over her, grabbing my phone.

Maddison: *Close your fucking curtains.*

Maddison: *Don't ignore me, asshole. Close your fucking curtains.*

Laughing, I kiss Stevie's lips once more before peeling myself off her.

Standing in front of my window, I spot Maddison across the street in his living room, hands on either side of his black-out drapes. He shakes his head at me in disapproval before violently shutting the curtains. But before he goes, he slips his hand between the material and the glass, shooting me a thumbs-up.

My giddy ass can't help but smile as I close my own drapes.

"Oh God." Stevie leans up on her elbows. "My brother can see in here, huh?"

"Probably."

“Thank God he’s out of town, but we are never opening those drapes again.”

I find my way to stand between her legs. “Fine.” I unbutton the top of her jeans. “Then you’re never wearing clothes again.”

Placing her hands on mine, she stops me from undressing her. “Can you turn off the lights?” Her blue-green eyes are pleading.

Releasing the zipper, I run both palms down her jean-covered thighs. “Do you trust me?”

“Zee—”

“Stevie, do you trust me? Because I trust you to know everything about me, so do you trust me to see your body? I’ve seen in the dark, I’ve felt it in my hands, and I want nothing more than to worship it with the lights on.”

She releases a deep, resigned sigh, the stress from her face dissipating. “Of course, I trust you.”

“Good.” I unzip her jeans. “Because I’m about to eat you out like you’re the last goddamn meal on the planet.”

She takes a breath, lying back, and from the stiffness in her body, I can sense her nerves.

Pausing my movements, I lean over her. “But only if you want me to. We aren’t going to do anything you don’t like or feel comfortable with, but if you’re worried about it being something *I* don’t like, that’s not the case.”

“I just...” she stumbles. “I think it feels good, but I...I’m just kind of self-conscious about it.”

Brows furrowed, I ask, “Someone made you feel that way?”

She shrugs her shoulders, looking away.

Hatred fills me for every man who has ever been before me, and not just because they’ve had a taste of what’s mine, but because they made her feel anything less than the stunning woman she is.

“Well, Vee, I’ve been dreaming about burying my head between your legs since around the time we met, so I want to. But if you don’t, then we won’t.”

She hesitates, contemplating her decision. “I want you to,” she quietly admits.

A sneaky smile lifts on my lips as I slip my sweatshirt off over my head. My palms engulf her thighs, thumbs exploring. “If you want me to stop, say something. Otherwise, I don’t plan on coming up for air until my lips are covered in your cum.”

“Jesus.” She falls back onto the kitchen island behind her. “You have no filter.”

I pull her hips to me, off the edge, rolling my pelvis against the spot between her legs. A soft needy whimper escapes her throat as she arches her back, repeating the motion.

Finding the waistband, I swiftly peel the jeans off her thick thighs, needing to feel her warmth instead of the denim. But when her pants hit the floor, I’m stuck in a trance, mesmerized by the dark purple see-through thong that does absolutely nothing other than make my dick strain against my sweatpants.

“Um...” I stumble before swallowing. “These are...yeah...*fuck*.”

Flattening my thumb against her, I skim the mesh texture, wetting my hand and causing Stevie to arch into me.

“Did you think something was going to happen tonight when you picked these out, sweetheart?”

“I was hoping,” she moans, writhing under my touch, needing more friction.

Glad we’re on the same page with that because I’ve been hoping, praying, dreaming of this.

Lifting her hips, I peel off the flimsy plum fabric, dropping it to the ground. A breath hitches in my throat when her soft brown pussy comes into clearer view, already glistening with her arousal.

“God, you’re beautiful.”

My fingers skim against her clit, circling, and the sight of Stevie’s almost bare body with her curly hair sprawled on my kitchen island causes my cock to grow painfully hard.

“Keep your hips off the edge.” I get on my knees, draping her legs over my shoulders. “Good girl, just like that.”

Placing soft lingering kisses on the inside of her thigh, I keep my eyes glued to her, watching as Stevie twitches underneath me. Her body is rigid and stiff with nerves, but I know how to settle her.

An orgasm or two will loosen her up, but more than that, constant praise does the trick.

My mouth trails against her skin, licking and skimming her soft legs, causing Stevie to wiggle in anticipation. When my mouth lines up with her pussy, I can’t help but admire it for a moment before sinking in. I’ve been thinking about this for months, and the moment is finally here.

“Goddamn.” My voice is deeper and darker, and the word comes out almost like a breath of relief.

Without wasting another moment, I flick her clit with the tip of my tongue, causing Stevie to buck her hips into my face. Covering her with my lips, my tongue laps her folds, teasing and tasting.

She’s sweet. So fucking sweet, giving her nickname a whole other meaning.

“You taste so fucking good,” I remind her, my lips vibrating against her core.

She whimpers, her heels pushing into my shoulder blades as her fingers grasp for anything she can find.

She likes it. She wants more.

Her head is thrown back in pleasure, but she needs to watch this.

“Eyes on me, Stevie girl.”

She does what I say, looking down, blue-greens pleading for me to continue.

My tongue finds her entrance as her fingers dig into my scalp, scratching my skin in that heavenly way. Her hips meet my tongue in pace as her heavy breaths, needy moans, and my fucking name leave her lips and fill the kitchen.

I lap, flick, and circle, all the while I keep my eyes on the pretty flight attendant who has no control over her own body. Her mouth has fallen open as she watches me, no longer concerned about my face being between her legs.

“Please,” she begs. “Please, Zee, don’t stop.”

I smile against her, hearing her plead my name. Begging gets me off the same way praise does her.

“How are you so fucking perfect, Stevie? So goddamn perfect.”

I continue my movements but pick up my pace and pressure as her thighs tighten around my cheeks. I focus on her clit as she jerks and twitches, her nails digging into my scalp.

Sucking and circling, my favorite girl’s entire body tightens and contracts on my kitchen island, back arching and her arousal coating my lips while she cries my name. Slowing down my pace, I continue to taste her as she comes off her high, her body going limp around me.

Licking up everything she has to offer, I place a few soft kisses on her inner thigh before standing over her with far too much pride and arrogance

on my face.

“That...” she takes a deep inhale, trying to control her breaths. “Yeah, that’s going to need to happen again.”

That’s what I like to hear. And not only because making her come is quickly becoming my favorite pastime, but because she’s comfortable with me in a way she never thought she would be.

“Any-fucking-time you want.” I skim my palms over her bare legs before pulling her arms forward and bringing her sedated body to lean on mine. “I’ll have you for all three meals of the day.”

“Mmm,” she hums into my chest.

Laughing, I pick her up off the island, carrying her tired body with her legs wrapped around me, her pussy resting on my bare stomach. “We aren’t done yet, sweetheart, so don’t go falling asleep on me from just one orgasm.”

“I know.” She wraps her arms around my neck. “It’s my turn.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

Her head snaps back, away from my chest, to look at me.

I kiss her scowling lips. “I haven’t had sex in more than two months, and if your very fuckable lips come anywhere near my dick, I’m not going to last ten seconds.”

She chuckles in my grasp. “Mr. Zanders, I never took you for a two-pump chump.”

“Well, Miss Shay, I never thought there was going to be a sassy flight attendant who came into my life and caused me to be abstinent.”

A soft smile overtakes her lips. “You didn’t have to wait. I never expected that, and it wouldn’t have changed anything for me. It wouldn’t have changed how I feel about you.”

“I know,” I reassure her, carrying her to my room. “But why would I want anyone else after I’ve had you?”

She buries herself into my chest as her arms tighten around my neck. “The praise kink is really doing wonders for my vagina, Zee.”

“I can tell. You’re soaking my stomach.”

“I’m not apologizing for that.”

Laughing, I kiss the side of her head. “As you shouldn’t.”

Entering my room, I flick on the light before placing Stevie on my bed. Her chestnut curls sprawl against my expensive sheets as her curvy body settles into the lux mattress.

She melts into it, getting comfortable. "Oh my God. I'm never leaving this bed."

"Please don't."

"Really, though, how rich are you?"

My head falls back with a laugh. "Pretty fucking rich."

"Your penthouse is so fancy. I feel out of place."

Climbing right on top of her, Stevie's legs spread around me. I lay my giant body on her, our chests flush as I kiss her slow and deep, holding her and stroking my thumb against her cheekbone.

"You're fucking beautiful, and you're in the exact right place. My fancy penthouse looks a hundred times better with you in it."

"Even with my dirty Nikes and baggy jeans that you hate?"

"Especially with those." I nudge her nose with mine. "And I don't hate them. I just like giving you shit. But seeing you all dressed up at the gala, I realized how much I missed your thrifted style because that's you. And I like you."

Her face softens, cocking her head before her sassy brow lifts in a challenge. "Can you still fuck me as if you hate me, though?"

Wild fucking girl.

"First..." I kiss her lips, trailing my mouth against her jaw, grinding down on her. "I'm going to show you just how much I like you." Pushing my hips into hers, I hide in the crook of her neck. "Then I'll fuck you like I don't."

"Mmm, variety."

Her hands run the length of my back as she tilts her hips, lining herself up with my dick and asking for friction. I gladly give it to her, ready to get these fucking sweatpants off so I can bury myself inside her.

Stevie's soft hand dips into the waistband, finding my cock and stroking it.

"Fuck." My face falls to her chest. "You feel so good."

She bends both knees on either side of me, continuing to grip me with the perfect amount of pressure. "Zee, I need you."

I push into her hand again, but at the same time, I have to focus on not coming from feeling her bare skin on mine. Lifting myself off the bed, I quickly jog into one of the guest rooms down the hall, needing a condom. I don't keep them in my room because my bed is typically reserved for sleeping, but I'll need to clear some space in my nightstand after tonight.

As I re-enter, I watch Stevie peel off her tank top as she sits up on my bed, leaving only her bra in place. It's a deep shade of plum, all sexy and revealing, but still, it covers too much.

"Off," I command, nodding towards her tits.

Her brows shoot up in challenge. "Off," she retorts, motioning towards my pants.

I love when she's a smartass to me. Initially, it was equally annoying as it was intriguing, but now it makes me crazy in the best possible way.

"You do the honors, sweetheart." I take two leisurely strides to the bed as Stevie sits on the edge, spreading her legs as I stand in front of her.

Her eyes lock on mine as she unclasps her bra, letting it fall to the floor, all the while her confident gaze watches me admire her. This is a complete one-eighty from the last time she undressed in front of me, and I couldn't be happier that it is.

I swallow hard, seeing all of her as she sits naked on my bed, right in front of my rock-hard dick.

Stevie slips her fingertips into my pants, pulling them down, and when my cock bounces to its full glory right in front of her mouth, I realize what a terrible idea it might have been to have her undress me.

Her stare is fixated on it as she licks her lips, but before she can touch it, I hold the condom out between my index and middle finger, asking her to take control. Because honestly, if she touches my bare skin with either her hand or her mouth, I'm going to come.

As she rolls it on, I can't help but watch, loving the way her ring-covered fingers barely connect around the size of my cock. Shockingly enough, my ego still has room to inflate, and seeing her hands look minuscule compared to my dick, does just that.

Tilting her chin up, I cover her mouth with mine, urging her back against the bed. She finds the pillow, resting her curls on it, as I climb right on top of her.

I kiss every inch of her lips, jaw, neck, and chest, taking one of her pretty brown nipples between my teeth. Stevie arches her back, pushing her tits into my face. I bury myself in them, kissing and grabbing anything I can get my hands on before I make my way back to her mouth.

I nudge her legs with my knee, opening them around me.

I'm about to do something I've never done before, and that's have sex with a fuck-ton of eye contact and intimacy, but I've never wanted anything

more.

With our faces pressed together, I rub my body against hers. The soft curves are a welcome reminder of what I've been missing and dreaming of for two and a half months.

"Put it in, sweetheart."

I kiss her temple before her blue-green gaze connects with mine, saying plenty more than you'd assume from the silence between us.

Pulling back my hips, both of our attention shifts south, watching as Stevie's hand finds me and lines me up before guiding me inside.

She whimpers into my ear, a heavenly echo that flows through my entire body as I slide in deeper and deeper. Once I'm all the way in, I have to pause, steadying myself and giving us both a moment to adjust to the feeling and fullness.

Our chests rise and fall in sync, and I've never felt more connected to someone than I do at this moment. I can't explain it, but for the first time in my life, I get it.

My knuckles grip the sheets around us, turning white with restraint when thankfully, Stevie's fingernails scratch against the skin of my shoulder blades, her hips pressing up, needing movement.

I pull back before I drive into her, deep and slow.

"Oh my God, Zee." She holds on to me, her arms keeping me close as I continue my torturous pace. "You feel amazing."

"Sweetheart," I laugh, lifting to look at her. "My ego is already fucking huge, and I'm trying not to come in under thirty seconds, so leave the praising to me, please."

Her smile is soft and cute, so I press my lips to hers before I thrust forward again, filling her. Her moans are breathy, laced with need, like music to my ears.

I can't help but watch as her full lips part, her ocean eyes locked on mine, and her tits bouncing against my chest with every intentional push. The amount of eye contact would've been alarming a few months ago, but now, I can't look away. I need to see my effect on her. I need her to see her effect on me.

"I like you so much, Zee," she whispers, stroking a hand down my face, her eyes soft and with so much sincerity.

My forehead falls to her chest as I continue my movements, needing to hide a bit.

Her words are something I didn't think I would ever hear, especially with the meaning behind them. They fill me with the hope that maybe one day there will be even more between us. That maybe one day I will love this woman, and maybe somehow, she will find a way to love me.

I didn't think that was possible before her, but maybe my future isn't as bleak as I once assumed.

My breath swirls with her damp skin. "You have no idea how much I needed you, Stevie."

She tilts her cheek against mine, her hand cupping the back of my head, holding me to her. "I needed you too."

I pull back to look at her, her eyes begging for me. "But what I really need is for you to give me more. So, I want you to fuck me so hard you smack me in the face with that chain around your neck, please."

My head falls to her shoulder in laughter. "My wild fucking girl." Kissing her lips, we chuckle into each other, putting the emotional stuff on pause.

I wrap my hand around the base of her throat, lightly choking her, the amusement between us shifting. "Then I want to hear you beg my name like a fucking prayer, Stevie girl."

She whimpers, arching off the mattress and pushing her hips into mine.

And with that, my thrusts are deeper. Punishing. Unrelenting. The base of my spine is buzzing, ready to come, but I concentrate on making sure she gets there first.

"*Oh my God,*" she cries. "Right there. Don't stop, Zee. Please, don't stop."

I don't stop. I continue my same pace and pressure as I watch the euphoria take over her pretty freckled face. Her lips have fallen open as her eyes connect and hold my attention, making me lost in them the way I usually am around the aqua-eyed beauty.

Two more heavy thrusts and Stevie's nails dig into my ass, her walls tightening around me and her back arching off the mattress. I come right with her, thankful I could somehow hold back until she was ready.

Her name comes off my lips, sandwiched between a few breathy curse words before she captures my mouth with hers. Her hand cups the back of my neck as we unconsciously continue to move together. Eventually, my heaving body falls limp on top of hers as she gently strokes my back. I

continue to kiss her softly until both of our breathing slows, and we melt into the bed, holding one another.

“We’re going to do that all night.”

She laughs below me. “Yes, please.”

Leaning up, we hold each other’s eye for a moment before I nudge her nose with mine and capture her soft lips once more. “Mine,” I murmur against them.

“So very caveman of you.”

“Mm-hmm,” I hum. “Mine.” I kiss her mouth. “Mine.” My lips move to her throat. “Mine.” I thrust my hips against hers.

Taking her hand, I pull her thumb between my lips before using my teeth to gently remove the gold ring she always nervously spins. But I don’t replace it. Not on her hand, at least. Instead, I slip it onto my empty pinky finger, claiming it. And her.

“Mine,” I repeat.

Looking up with eager eyes, I wait for what she has to say.

She curves her hand around my neck, pulling my lips to hers. “Yours,” she confirms.

STEVIE



A heavy arm holds me tightly to a firm chest as my eyes blink open from sleep.

Not that I slept much, if at all.

After our first round, Zanders and I hopped in the shower, which quickly led to a rough and filthy second round, regardless that we were trying to get clean. Then sometime in the middle of the night, when he woke up with my ass firmly nestled against his dick, the third round of soft and slow ensued.

Condoms were quickly abandoned when I told him I was on the pill, and even though the amount of sleep I got was slim to none, it was deep and restful thanks to Zanders' expensive as shit mattress and the fact that my body was absolutely demolished by the defenseman next to me.

Zanders' hand rests on my lower stomach as I sleep on my side, facing away from him. And I'm not going to lie, I sucked a sharp inhale when he first touched me there, but just as I've done since I met the man behind me, I let it go, remembering he really doesn't give a fuck that I have a little extra on that part of my body.

"Morning." His voice is hoarse and raspy but fucking beautiful to my ears. He swings one giant tree trunk of a leg around me, pulling me closer.

"Morning." I turn around to face him, my naked body pressed against his.

Zanders' smile is soft and genuine as he gently plays with my hair. "Your hair is amazing."

I roll my eyes. "I don't even want to know what it looks like. Curls getting wet in the shower then dried in bed is a terrible combination."

"Don't forget to add that they were wrapped around my fist too."

"Ah yes, how could I forget."

"I don't know," he sighs. His hand trails to my ass, taking a handful in his grasp. "I'm never going to forget anything about last night. In fact, I'm not sure I'll be able to shut up about it."

I hold on to his middle, resting my arm there. "You have to. This has to be a secret."

His face falls slightly before recovering. "I know." He grips the underside of my thigh, pulling me up to straddle him.

Clearly, we need to discuss this and figure out where our boundaries lie outside of Zanders' penthouse, but all I can concentrate on is how much I wouldn't mind round four with the beautiful naked man below mine.

Crossing my hands over his chest, I rest my chin there, my knees bent on either side of his hips. He continues to look at me like a whole new man. Soft and sweet, though I think maybe he always was this person. He just didn't let anyone see.

"The amount of attention you get is overwhelming," I mutter under my breath.

He tucks my messy curls away from my face before shooting me an apologetic smile. "I know."

I shyly smile right back at him without saying another word because there really is nothing else to say about it. It's who he is.

"For the first time, maybe ever, I wish no one knew who I was." He grazes his fingertips along my bare back. "But, Stevie, just because we're keeping it quiet doesn't mean I don't want people to know about you. If it weren't for your job or my fucking contract re-signing, I wouldn't shut up about you."

I hide my stupid giddy smile in his chest.

"So don't think for a second I'm keeping this quiet for any other reason than that."

There's a hidden meaning behind the words he's saying, and I pick up on it right away, so I lean up and kiss him for that.

"I like having you in my bed."

"I like being here." I check the clock on his nightstand, letting me know that I'm going to be late for the video call scheduled for my dad's birthday.

“But I need to get going.”

I push my naked body off him, but he grabs me, keeping me in place. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. New rule. You’re not allowed to run away from me anymore.”

“I’m not. But I need to get home so I can call my dad.”

“Your phone is here. Call him here.”

“I need my laptop. It’s a three-way call with Ryan too.”

“I have a computer, Vee. Stay here. Please.” His tone is pleading, his eyes are begging, and I’ve never seen this arrogant man so desperate and needy. In fact, I have to keep myself from laughing at this unexpected side of him.

“Okay.” I melt back into his body. “I’ll stay.”

He takes two handfuls of my ass, pushing me into him. “Morning sex and breakfast.”

“Breakfast, yes.” I pat his chest, getting off him before starting something I don’t have time to finish. “Morning sex, no. I don’t have time.”

“I’ll be quick.”

A condescending laugh escapes me. Something tells me there’s nothing quick about the way Zanders fucks. Even when it’s “quick,” it’s most likely detailed and comprehensive, making sure every part of my body would be given his full attention.

And any other time, I wouldn’t dare complain, but Ryan is on the East Coast for work, and we need to get this call going before his morning shootaround.

“Fine,” he resigns. “Afternoon sex, then.” We both climb off the bed, his flawless tatted body pulling mine in, my back to his chest. “I bought you some clothes yesterday. They’re in the bottom drawer for you. Or if you’d rather wear something of mine, you can take anything you want.”

He places a soft kiss on my bare shoulder before quickly pulling on a pair of sweatpants. But before he leaves me alone in his room, one large hand lands firmly on my ass.

“For fuck’s sake, Vee.” He throws his head back in defeat before heading towards the kitchen. “Your ass is insane!”

Alone in his room, the realization begins to sink in. Did that really happen last night? My head is light and dizzy, and my chest feels like it’s

filled with air, ready to pop. It's as if I'm floating around, and my feet can't touch the ground, but in the best way possible.

In the most amazing way possible.

I really like Zanders, and that's terrifying. But being scared feels a lot better than not giving in to what I want.

Opening the bottom drawer of Zanders' oversized dresser, I find multiple pairs of sweatpants, leggings, and cotton shorts. A few different sweatshirts, some with hoods, some without. A plethora of T-shirts and flannels, but the thing that every single one of these articles of clothing has in common is that they're brand new with tags still attached.

It's thoughtful as hell and not because he spent money on me. Zanders throws money around like it's nobody's business. But because he bought everything in about five different sizes. There are pants in here that I could never squeeze into in a million years, yet there are some that would be so big I'd be swimming in them. But the point is, he went out of his way not to guess my size and get it wrong. It's happened to me before, and that shit is embarrassing. Instead, he got every size across the spectrum so I could pick what I feel most comfortable in.

It reminds me of the Christmas gift he got me. Three pairs of sweatpants in three different sizes. And the more I get to know Zanders, the more intentional I realize that was.

I'm not going to lie. I'm about two seconds from tears because I've never had someone understand the struggle of having clothes bought for them. Most of the time, it's awkward when assumptions are made and things don't fit correctly. Then there's this guilt associated with being unable to wear said gift.

So, this, this makes me feel overwhelmingly seen.

I form a pile of the clothes that I'll never be able to wear, either because they're too big or too small, and put them to the side so I can make sure to donate them later today. I won't be able to get use out of them, but someone else will, and Zanders doesn't exactly seem like a "returns" guy.

Taking all the pieces and sizes I picked to keep, I replace them in the bottom drawer, claiming that small bit of Zanders' penthouse. But instead of getting dressed in something he bought me, I hesitate. He gave me permission to wear something of his, which sounds nice.

I've never worn a guy's clothes before. Not in a cute way, at least. I've never been able to because men's clothing is cut straight up and down, but

I'm all curves. Their shirts and hoodies always get too tight around my midsection, and their pants can't get around my ass and hips. But Zanders is a huge man with thighs thicker than mine, so maybe it'll work.

Rifling through his drawers, I find a T-shirt and a pair of basketball shorts, and I can't even explain the little jolt of victory that flows through my chest when they slip on with ease. I'll probably never tell anyone this because it seems so small and unimportant, but for the first time in my life, I feel the way all the other girls did when I was growing up, and they got to wear their boyfriends' hoodies or jerseys to games.

I find Zanders standing shirtless over the stove, his gold chain and tattoos doing all sorts of things to me at this morning hour.

"Now, don't get too excited about breakfast. I have no idea what I'm doing, nor have I ever cooked for someone before."

I bury my head into his back, wrapping my arms around his waist. "I'll be happy with anything."

He gives me a soft grin over his shoulder, but when his stare finds his clothes on my body, that smile grows.

I grab his hand, spatula and all, holding it up to examine it. "You should probably take that off before you get in the shower again." I nod towards the ring of mine he's wearing on his pinky finger. "Mine aren't as nice as yours. That'll for sure turn your finger green."

He turns his head, putting his lips on mine. "Sounds like I need to replace all yours one day."

"That's not what I meant. I don't need you to spend money on me. I already have my brother doing it too much."

I turn to walk out of the kitchen, but Zanders grabs me by the waist, pulling me into him. "Maybe you should let us. I've never had someone to spend my money on other than myself and the Maddisons, but it sounds nice."

Turning to face him, I tilt my head. "I don't give a shit about your money, Zee. I don't want you to think that has anything to do with my feelings for you."

I don't want you to think another person is using you for your money the way your mom is trying.

He laughs it off. "Sweetheart, I fucking know that. You choose to wear secondhand clothes, and your brother makes millions of dollars a year. No part of me thinks you're using me for my money."

Rolling my eyes, I melt into him, realizing how ridiculous I probably sound.

“It’s actually one of the things that made me realize I liked you,” he continues. “I don’t give a fuck that your brother is famous, but it was nice to see that you weren’t impressed by anything material when it came to me. I couldn’t use that part of my life to impress you, and that was something I was used to doing.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, you sap. Fine, you can buy me new jewelry. But I want the expensive shit.”

Zanders’ deep laugh echoes off the kitchen walls. “Deal,” he seals with a kiss. “My laptop is on the table for you.”

Opening his computer, I make myself comfortable at Zanders’ dining room table.

“You’ll come pick up Rosie with me today?” he asks from the kitchen.

“I don’t think I should. It’s her first day with you. I don’t want her to get attached to me when she’s your dog.”

That causes the giant shirtless defenseman in the kitchen to keel over in laughter. “Vee.” He pauses, unable to speak. “Rosie is obsessed with me. You’re old news.”

Mouth gaping in mock offense, I shoot him a deadly look, but unfortunately, he’s not wrong. “Asshole.”

He shrugs it off, finding himself hilarious.

“Regardless, I think your guys’ first day together should be just the two of you.”

“Fine. If you insist.” He makes his way to me, coffee in hand. “Holy shit.” He pauses at the dining room table. “I don’t even know how you like your coffee.”

My eyes crinkle with amusement. This is cute and a whole new side of him I get to discover. “With alcohol preferably, knowing my mother is going to be on this call.”

“Alcohol it is.” He comes back with a bottle of Baileys in his hand, pouring the creamy liqueur into my black coffee.

“I was kidding.”

“I wasn’t.”

While I sit in the waiting room of our video chat, my knees bounce with nerves. I no longer have the gold ring on my thumb I can spin, so instead, I

awkwardly fiddle with the hem of Zanders' shirt I'm wearing while my eyes bounce around the room.

I was in this room for quite a while last night, but I somehow missed the vase of red roses hidden in the corner by the window.

"Zee!" I call into the next room over. "Are those flowers for me?"

He peeks his head around the partition, eyes on the vase. "Oh no. Not for you because last night was not a date. Not in the slightest." His cheeky smile is adorable.

"Morning, Vee," my brother says, popping onto our video call.

Zanders shoots me a wink, calming some of my nerves and leaving me alone with my family.

"Happy Birthday, Dad," is the first thing I say as soon as he and my mother pop onto the screen.

My dad is dressed down as they sit in their living room, but my mother is decked out with a full face of makeup, her hair perfectly styled, and her outfit smooth and fitted. I would expect nothing less, even at this early hour.

"Happy Birthday, Dad," Ryan adds. "Sorry, I have to make this so quick. I need to catch the team bus soon."

"No problem, I know you're both busy. I'm just happy I get to see my two kiddos."

"Ryan, are you ready for your game tonight?" My mother bursts with pride.

"I think so. It's slotted for ESPN. Are you guys going to watch?"

"Of course, we are." My mother beams. "We wouldn't miss it for anything."

"Vee..." My dad sits forward, eyes squinting. "Where are you? That doesn't look like your apartment."

My eyes dart to Zanders as he walks into the room with a plate in his hand, but he makes sure to stay out of view of the camera.

"Uhh," I hesitate. Regardless of my parents being allowed to know who I'm dating, I don't want them to. I don't want my mother to ruin this. "I stayed at a friends' place last night."

That causes Ryan to choke on his own saliva, knowing I'm full of shit. I'd pay good money that he knows exactly where I am even though I didn't tell him.

Zanders places my breakfast on the table behind the computer, so no one sees him before he gives me a shy, apologetic grin and heads back to the kitchen. That breakfast he was working on is nowhere in sight. Instead, two pieces of our deep-dish pizza from last night cover my plate, which works for me. Zanders might not be great in the kitchen, but where he lacks in domestic skills, he makes up in other ways.

The five-hundred-mile distance between Chicago and Nashville couldn't be more needed as I feel my mother's disapproving gaze through the computer screen. I can sense her blue eyes analyze my clothing and makeup-less face before they linger on my disastrous morning hair.

I chug my boozy coffee and stuff my face with cold pizza as she does.

The conversation is relatively quick and painless, keeping the attention on my dad and his plans for the day, but when my mom asks me to stay on the call when my brother needs to leave for his morning shootaround, the nerves kick into high gear.

"How are you doing?" she asks.

My brows furrow in confusion. This is weird. My dad isn't even in the room anymore to fake it for. "I'm good...."

My mother sits up straighter. When it comes to me, I rarely see her beaming smile, but it's on full display today. "Brett called me the other day."

"Oh God." I bury my hands in my face. "Why?"

"He was hoping I could talk to you about giving him another chance, and Stevie, I really don't understand why you wouldn't."

That motherfucking fuckface. What a little bitch. He went to my mother of all people, who he knows I have a rocky relationship with, in order to use her to manipulate me into giving him another chance. Because for the first time ever, I said no to his games, so he went to my mother instead.

Dick.

"Mom, I didn't like who I was when I was dating Brett, so that should be reason enough for me not to get back together with him, and I'd rather not explain all the sordid details."

"Well, Stevie, you're not getting any younger."

Can she stop with that bullshit line? "Why the hell does age matter?"

Oh shit.

"Excuse me, young lady. Do not raise your voice at me. And age matters because of children and marriage and all the other things I would

have hoped you'd accomplish by now."

I can't stop now, and I don't care.

"Are you kidding me?" My voice is shaky and raised, causing Zanders to pop his head around the corner, checking on me. "Maybe I don't want kids. Maybe I don't want to get married. Maybe I don't want to do any of the things you've expected of me."

"Well, that's clear. You certainly haven't done a single thing I expected of you."

"You're right, Mom. I'm such a disappointment, aren't I? Because I'd rather volunteer at a dog shelter than stay home and play Stepford wife. Or because I'd rather shop at a thrift store than wear whatever shit you and all your pretentious friends wear. Or maybe I'm a disappointment because I don't want to marry the guy who used me for three years while he was bored. I'm sorry I don't want to be his option anymore, Mom, but I'm done with both of you making me feel like I'm not enough. I'm really done with anyone who makes me feel that way."

"Stevie, I—"

My mother can't continue because Zanders quickly walks behind the computer and closes the laptop on her.

"What are you doing?!" I'm still fired up, the energy flowing through my bones. I want to keep going. I want to say everything that's ever been on my mind. I have no idea where this is coming from, but now I can't stop.

"I'm stopping her." Zanders' voice is calm and centered. "You said what you needed to say, and from what I could tell, anything she had in rebuttal, I wouldn't want to hear. Until she learns how to speak to you, she's not going to. At least, not in my house."

I take a few deep breaths, calming myself. Or at least trying to.

"Are you okay?" he softly asks.

"She's such a bitch."

A laugh heaves from his chest. "Yeah, she is. But are you okay?"

I exhale a long deep breath. "Yeah, actually, I am. That felt good."

"Hell yeah, it did. That's my girl."

I would like to say I don't know where this newfound confidence came from, but that would be a lie. It's thanks to a 6'5" hockey player covered in tattoos and gold jewelry who doesn't let me forget my worth.

"I just want her to accept me for who I am, and the fact that her approval, or lack thereof, bothers me so much is infuriating."

“Not to get all preachy on you, Vee, but the right people, the ones who deserve to be in your life, they’re going to accept you for exactly who you are. That’s something I’ve quickly learned lately.”

My head tilts to the side, my expression softening and my previous anger dissipating. “I accept you for who you are.”

He scrunches his nose before taking the seat next to me and urging me from my chair, guiding me to sit across his lap. “I know you do.” That comes with a quick kiss. “And I accept you, but more importantly than all of that, at some point, *you’re* going to need to accept yourself.”

Ugh, this man. “Okay, Mr. Almost a Decade of Therapy.” I hide away in his neck, my voice muffled against his skin. “I do accept myself.”

He pulls away, forcing me to look him in his hazel eyes. “Do you?”

Nodding, I quietly add, “I do actually, yeah. I’ve started to accept that my body is different than the girls I grew up with, and that’s okay. And I’ve embraced my curly hair compared to what I thought I once wanted. I’ve just spent so much time with people who made me feel like I wasn’t good enough or I didn’t look the way they wanted me to that I didn’t think I was allowed to like it. But I’m starting to.”

The softest, most proud grin spreads across Zanders’ lips as he looks at me.

“Not all the time,” I continue. “There are a lot of days where I’m still uncomfortable in my skin, but that used to be every day. That’s not the case anymore.”

He moves the mess I like to call my morning hair away from my face. “Progress, Vee.”

“Progress,” I agree.

“One day, I hope you can fully appreciate the body you’re living in because, sweetheart, it’s smoking hot, and my dick has never been happier.”

“Jesus.” I fall back with a laugh. “You’re the worst.”

“You’re obsessed with me. Admit it.” He covers my neck and cheek with kisses. “Hey, I’m getting a new number, so I’ll text you with it later, okay?”

“Because of your mom?”

Zanders’ expression goes blank and rigid before he nods in agreement.

“Do you want to talk about yesterday?”

“Not really, no.”

I shoot him an understanding smile. “Okay.”

Zanders hesitates, searching my face before taking a deep breath. “I had a panic attack because I was so angry with her for everything. For calling me, for leaving me when I was a teenager, for trying to come back into my life because of my paychecks. I don’t have them often, but if I get really upset and I can’t think straight, sometimes I fall into them.”

I keep my arms wrapped around his neck.

“Does that freak you out?” he cautiously asks. “Maybe I should chill out on telling you absolutely everything. That’s a lot to put on you.”

My brows crease in confusion. “What? No, of course not. I think it’s probably the most attractive thing about you, your openness towards your mental health.”

“More attractive than my smoking hot bod, or, as you moaned multiple times last night, my award-winning dick?” His smile could not be more smug.

“Almost as attractive as your humble personality,” I deadpan. “And your mom is the absolute worst, Zee.”

“So is yours.”

I rest my head on his shoulder. “Look at us,” I tease. “Trauma-bonding.”

His body shakes below mine in a silent laugh. “Yesterday, I realized I think I’m mad at her for hurting my dad, and to be honest, I’ve never thought about it from his perspective before.”

“Have you talked to him?”

“Not since Christmas. Don’t get me wrong, I’m still angry with him, but not as angry as I thought. I’ve been selfish, thinking it was only me who got hurt when it was his wife who left him too. I’m confused about how I feel even as I say it.”

I lightly scratch the skin under his tightly faded haircut. “Progress,” I repeat his earlier words.

His hazel eyes shine in understanding. “Progress.”

He hides his face in my neck. “What do you think about maybe coming to my games?”

“Zee,” I tease, pulling his face away and making him look at me. “So official. Are you asking me to go steady?”

“Yes.” He pops a kiss on my lips.

“Do you really think that’s the best idea? I don’t want anyone to see me.”

“Maybe not, but I’ve never had someone to come cheer for me besides my sister, and it could be nice.”

Understanding floods me. “Then I’ll be there.”

“Yeah?” He beams with hope.

“Yeah, but I need to sit away from the ice where no cameras could catch me in the background. We need to be smart about this.”

“Okay.” His smile is giddy and childish, his perfect teeth unable to hide. “I’ve never had someone to give my season tickets to. I’ll make sure they’re away from the ice. You just make sure your sexy ass is wearing my jersey.”

“Eh, I don’t know about that. I was thinking about rocking number thirty-eight.”

“Rio? Fuck no! You’re only allowed to wear number eleven.”

“Bossy.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” His laugh is dark and condescending as he picks me up, carrying me back to his room. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

“Eleven is just such a boring number.”

“You’re asking for it now, Stevie girl.” He tosses me on his bed. “Besides, nothing boring about being number one twice. Why do you think I picked it?”

An understanding laugh flows through me. “It’s all making sense.”

He lies down on the bed, patting the mattress next to his face. “Come here. Put your knees on either side of my head and sit right here.” A single index finger bounces against his lips.

“What?” I release a startled laugh. “Absolutely not. I will suffocate you.”

“Sweetheart, death by pussy is the only way I plan on going, so get over here. If I don’t make you come at least twice before my game tonight, I don’t think we’ll win.”

Playfully rolling my eyes, I contemplate for a moment before an excited smile takes over. “If this is your form of punishment, remind me to piss you off more often.” I get naked and quickly climb over him, my knees on either side of his head as I use the wall in front of me to steady myself, allowing me to hover over him.

“I love when you piss me off, and I said sit. Not hover.” He pulls my hips down, his mouth finding my clit. His talented tongue works its magic and the only thought that flows through my mind is, how the hell did I get so lucky?

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STEVIE



Zee (Daddy) Zanders: *I grabbed your bag, and I'm parked around the corner.*

Me: *I told you that you don't have to wait for me. Indy can drive me home.*

Zee (Daddy) Zanders: *I'm the sexy one in the Benz. See you when you're done.*

"Ready to go?" Indy grabs her flight bag as I follow her down the aisle of the empty airplane. We give the pilots a wave goodbye before descending the stairs and taking off towards the parking lot at O'Hare International airport in Chicago.

"Actually, I figured out a ride. But thank you. I'm sure Alex is stoked that you're coming home early."

"I can't wait to see him." Indy's eyes sparkle with mischief.

"I shouldn't expect to hear from you until our next road trip, huh?"

"Exactly." She shoots me a knowing wink as we walk to her car. "This is me. You're sure you're good?"

"Yep. My ride will be here in a minute," I lie.

I offer Indy a wave as she drives out of the parking lot before I sneak around the corner to the empty players' lot where a blacked-out Mercedes G-Wagon is parked. Zanders leans against the driver's side door, hands in his suit pant pockets, and one ankle casually crossed over the other.

"You following me?" the defenseman asks from across the lot.

"Yes. You didn't have to wait for me to finish cleaning up. All your teammates left over an hour ago."

“I’m either going to be waiting for you here or at home, so may as well give you a ride while I’m at it.” Zanders snakes his arm around my waist, his palm finding my ass as he pulls me into his chest. “Besides, your ass was tempting me that entire flight in this tight little skirt, and I didn’t want to give you the chance to take it off before I got to see you.” He gives me a smack and a squeeze as he bends down and presses his lips to mine.

Leading me around the hood of his car, he opens the passenger side door, ushering me inside.

“Well, thank you. Ryan was excited to pick me up because we’re both finally off this weekend, but since our flight got moved up, he’s still in the fourth quarter of his game.”

Zanders buckles his seat belt and starts the engine before his palm engulfs my thigh, holding me while he drives. “Even more reason for me to take you home. It’s my only time with you all weekend. Just going to be Rosie girl and me.”

He gives me his saddest, most guilt-trip-filled eyes, and I can’t help but laugh. “I was with you all week. You snuck me in and out of your hotel room in every city.”

“And?”

“And you can go forty-eight hours without me.”

Zanders scoffs as if that’s the most absurd thing he’s ever heard.

Mr. Unattached has really turned into Mr. Needy these past few weeks.

Right outside the airport, he pulls off to the side of the dark road before killing the engine.

He turns my way, his expression sifting, getting all soft. “This is my favorite year on the road.”

My heart beats a little faster, knowing there’s way more meaning behind those words.

“I can’t believe I’m lucky enough to have you at home and when I travel,” he continues, squeezing my thigh.

I lean back on the headrest, loving this new side to him.

“And one day, because of you, I’ll get to join the mile-high club.”

Okay, there he is.

I fall forward in laughter. “Ahh, I see. That’s the only reason you wanted to get with me, huh?”

“Exactly.” He smiles.

I place my hand on his, intertwining our ring-covered fingers. “The mile-high club is actually pretty inaccurate. When we fly, we’re more like seven miles in the air, not just one.”

“Fine. We will join the *miles* high club.”

I continue to laugh, but Zanders seems deadly serious. “Like hell we will, Zee. Remember how we’re trying to make sure I keep my job?”

“I’ll be quiet.”

Another condescending laugh leaves my lips as my forehead drops. “I’m sorry to break it to you, but neither of us are exactly quiet. And on top of that, you have to duck just to use the lavatory on the plane.” Tilting my head, I shoot him an apologetic smile. “It’s not gonna happen.”

“You’re crushing my dreams here, Vee.”

“I know,” I soothe, gently running my palm against his tightly faded cut. “I’m sorry.” Again, I have to keep my lips together because he’s acting like a child who got his toy taken away just because I won’t fuck him at my place of work. “We could pretend, though?”

“Yeah?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You’ll wear your uniform?” His hazel eyes sparkle as they rake down my body.

“Sure.”

Holding eye contact, he reaches his hand down to the other side of his seat. There’s a slight buzz as he inches backward, away from the steering wheel.

“Now?”

“Mm-hmm,” he hums, a devilish little smile pulling at his lips.

“Here?” I look around the street. There’s not a single streetlight lit or passing car. And I’m not going to lie, I’m kind of game.

“The thought of you riding me while wearing your flight attendant uniform in my G-Wagon is making me painfully hard, Vee.”

My eyes wander to his crotch, and like always, he’s telling the truth.

Without another moment of hesitation, I climb over the center console of his car, straddling his lap. I keep most my weight off him, holding myself up on my knees.

He catches on right away, and without saying anything, he pushes me down, forcing me to sit.

A deep red leather that looks like it costs more than my year's salary covers the interior of his car, and if I were him, I'd be worried about ruining it. But Zanders doesn't seem to care in the slightest.

My skirt rides up and bunches around my waist as his hands grip my thighs, fingertips trailing upward, tingling my skin.

"I'm so into you. It's ridiculous," Zanders breathes out.

Leaning forward, I cup his cheeks, bringing his lips to mine. "That makes two of us."

"I'm serious, Vee. You don't get how perfect you are to me."

My face flames, so I hide my head in the crook of his neck, my arms draping over his shoulders and subsequently the headrest of his seat.

Zanders presses lingering kisses to my freckles, working his way across my jaw. As his lips find my ear, he bites and tugs, causing my hips to grind down against him.

The soft whimper that escapes me coaxes him to continue.

He nibbles, licks, and sucks his way down the column of my throat until the satin scarf tied around my neck that I have to wear as part of my uniform stops him. His hands slide up my back, keeping me pressed to him as he uses his teeth to unknot the fabric around my neck.

As his tongue finds mine again, I grind harder, needing friction, and taking control.

A deep guttural growl leaves him as his palms find my arms, sliding down and guiding my hands around the headrest behind him. As I concentrate on easing the ache between my legs, Zanders takes my satin scarf and secures my hands, tying me up.

I pull my lips away from his, my eyes filled with confusion but a whole lot of excitement as I try to pull my elbows in but can't.

"Sometimes I let you think you're in control, but not this time."

The heat radiating off this man is palpable, so I shyly nod in agreement, really playing up the whole innocent thing.

Keeping his eyes glued on mine, his hand slips between my legs, touching me over my uniform pantyhose.

"You're soaking wet, Stevie girl."

"Mm-hmm," I whimper, grinding my hips down on his hand, needing him to touch me.

"You know, when I picked up your bag earlier, something was buzzing inside."

My eyes widen with embarrassment, knowing exactly what he heard. Let's just say I don't travel with an electric toothbrush.

He reaches into the back seat where our bags are. "And I found this."

As I assumed, he pulls out what used to be my favorite travel companion, but now that I have my boyfriend on the road with me, I don't use my purple vibrator quite as much.

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Um... I'm sorry you found my vibrator?"

"No. I mean, why haven't we used it?"

"We?"

"Yes, we. I don't mind a little assistance if it means getting you off a little faster and harder."

"Really? That's not some weird blow to your ego or something?"

"Pfft," he scoffs. "Sweetheart, I have no trouble getting you off all on my own, so no. Ego is fully intact."

My eyes dance between his and the toy in his hand as he palms the spot between my legs once again causing my hips to roll against him with need.

"One day, you're going to show me exactly how you like to use this on yourself. But tonight, I'm going to give it a try."

Swiftly and without hesitation, he rips my pantyhose and pushes my underwear to the side, his long fingers gliding against my clit.

My head drops to his shoulder as I ball my fists, eager and impatient to grasp something, anything.

"So perfect, sweetheart." His fingers continue swiping, rolling, teasing.

My body warms from his unwavering attention and constant praise, and a shiver rolls through me when the buzz of my vibrator fills his G-Wagon. Zanders places it on my swollen clit, and I can't help but cry out, my body writhing in his lap.

"Let me see you," he coos, his lips to my ears.

I lift my head, back arching. Zanders uses his free hand to move my curls out of the way as the vibration of my favorite toy continues to destroy my sensitive nerves.

"God," he breathes out. "You should see yourself, Vee. Fucking unreal."

I push into the toy, wanting more, but also frustrated that my hands are tied up, and I can't make him feel as good as he's making me.

Suddenly one of his long, tatted fingers slips inside of me, curling forward, as my body tenses from the sensation. He feels divine as always, maybe even more so, but not having any control of what I can grab onto is driving me mad. I'm at the edge. My skin burns with the building pressure, my belly stirring with warmth, and when he plunges a second finger inside of me, keeping the vibrator pushed against my clit, that's when I lose it.

Right there in his Benz, I fall apart, having absolutely no control of my body.

Falling forward, my chest heaves against his as he pulls his fingers out. They're coated in my arousal, and as always, he tastes what's left of me on his hand.

Without wasting a second, he tosses my vibrator onto the passenger seat. Unfastening his belt and zipper, he pulls out his smooth and thick erection, stroking it in his fist.

His hooded, lazy eyes trail every inch of me as he wets his lips with his tongue, continuing to touch himself and allowing me to come off my high.

As my breathing slows and steadies, I push off my knees, hovering over him. My mouth finds his as he slides his cock against my folds, giving me a warning of what's to come. I don't have control over much right now, with my hands tied up, but I have control over this.

Dropping my weight, I sink onto him, filling myself completely.

He whimpers at the sensation.

Our mouths gape against one another as we both adjust to the fullness. After a moment, I roll my hips, grinding my clit against his pelvis, needing the friction.

"Fucking hell, how do you feel this good?" His head falls back.

I can't get over seeing him this way. *Mine*. I've never had the confidence to claim something so perfect, so craved. But with him, I feel conceited as hell, knowing I'm the only one who gets to have him.

Rough hands grab my hips, moving me up and down at his needed tempo.

My body is buzzing at the brink of another orgasm, and the lack of control over anything is equally frustrating as it is freeing.

"You're doing so good, Vee. So good."

I'm doing absolutely none of the work here, but the constant praise does the trick as it always does, and the raspy desperation of his voice has my entire body hot.

“Yes.” His chest heaves against mine. “Come all over me, baby.”

Calloused fingertips skim the delicate skin of my throat as his palm circles the base, choking me.

He rocks me a few more times, one commanding hand on my waist, and the combination of his perfect size and the continual compliments has me coming around him. I try to pull my arms in, needing to hold on to something, but it’s no use. My body falls apart once again.

As my cries echo around the car, Zanders’ stomach tightens, his thrusts getting sloppy. A deep groan escapes him, followed by a gravelly *fuck*, as he spills into me, pulling my lips to his as he does.

“Your body is my favorite thing on this planet.” He takes a deep, earned breath.

“And wearing your hand around my throat like a necklace is my favorite piece of jewelry.”

His mouth slightly gapes. “Jesus Christ, I’m obsessed with you.” His hazel eyes admire.

Using my knees to push myself up, he slides out of me as his cum drips down my thigh. Zanders’ gaze is glued to it, watching it trail down my leg.

“You’re my personal version of heaven, Stevie girl.”

STEVIE



“**R**y, let’s go! I’m starving.”

The morning sun beats down, warming my brother’s apartment as I wait for him on the couch.

“I need a few more minutes.” Ryan finally emerges from his room without a shirt on, a bag of ice wrapped to his shoulder. “I have five more minutes on this session.”

“How’s the shoulder?”

“Absolutely fucked. Utah’s center hammered into my arm last night.”

“Well, good thing you have the weekend off to rest it.”

“Finally, get some time with my sister.” He takes the couch opposite me. “I feel like we see each other even less now that we live in the same apartment than we did while you were still in North Carolina.” He shoots me one of those dopey, sad half-smiles.

“I miss you too, Ryan.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Can you tell me what happened with Brett?”

That causes me to pause, my stomach slightly hollowing. “We broke up. Not much more to the story.”

“That’s not what Zanders made it seem like.”

Shit. Zee wouldn’t share all the dirty details I wanted kept private, would he?

“What did he say?” I cautiously ask.

“Nothing more than he didn’t want me bringing Brett around you anymore. So, is that him just being a weird territorial boyfriend, or is there something bigger behind it? Because you’ve told me for years that it was a simple breakup, and now, I’m getting the impression that there’s more to the story, and that makes me feel like a real shitty brother for not knowing.”

Averting my eyes from him, heat rushes my cheeks. “It’s embarrassing, and he’s your friend. You’re so busy with basketball and your career that I don’t want to put you in the middle and make your life harder.”

“Vee, are you kidding me? I’m never too busy for you. You’re the most important person in my life. You’re my best friend, and if you think I’d even question having Brett’s back over yours, you’re out of your goddamn mind.” Kicking his foot up, he nudges my knee. “Please tell me what happened.”

Pulling my legs up, I cross them under my body before reaching for the gold ring on my thumb—a nervous habit of mine. But it’s currently sitting on Zanders’ pinky finger, so instead, I anxiously pull at the strings of my boyfriend’s hoodie that I’m wearing.

“Do you know that Brett and I broke up countless times over the three years we were together?”

Ryan’s brows crease. “What?”

“We did. I mean, *he* did. He broke up with me more times than I could count because there were other girls he wanted at any given moment. Then when he got bored, or I don’t know, lonely, he would come crawling back to me, and the constant need to be good enough for him beat down on my self-confidence like you wouldn’t believe. It got to the point I felt so shitty about myself that I was thankful to him each time he wanted me back. *Thankful*, Ryan.”

My twin’s freckled face is red with anger. “Why would you not tell me?”

I pull my gaze away from his, continuing to fiddle with the string of Zanders’ sweatshirt. “I think the first time it happened, I was just really sad. The three of us were such good friends, and I finally felt like I had a place in college. I didn’t want to ruin it. Then when the pattern began of him leaving and coming back, I didn’t want you to know because I knew you’d cut him out of our lives, and in a fucked-up way, I wanted him still.”

“Fuck yeah, I would’ve cut him out of our lives!” Ryan sits forward, his voice rising. “Just like I’m going to do right now. Fuck, Vee. You should’ve

told me. I should've had your back on this. Fuck that guy."

He stands from the sofa, pacing the living room. "I roomed with that motherfucker on every road trip in college. He looked me in the eye and told me he loved you all the while he was screwing you over. I trusted him. And now he's using *me*. He thinks I'm going to help him get a job in this city?" A condescending laugh escapes him. "Fat fucking chance."

"Well, if it helps you feel better, I think Zanders already took care of that."

Ryan pivots towards me, studying me. "Good." He takes a deep breath, settling back on the couch. "Is there anything else? You may as well spill it all because I'm cutting ties with that piece of shit."

Biting my lip, I hesitate laying it all out there, but complete and utter honesty feels real good. Zanders has had the right idea all along.

"There was a game towards the end of your senior year. I was waiting for you outside the back entrance for the locker room, but I didn't know you were out on the court getting interviewed. It was the day Brett got an invitation to training camp."

Ryan nods, seeming to remember precisely the game I'm referring to.

"That was the last day I talked to him because that was the day it all clicked. He told the boys, and I quote, 'Do you know the quality of women that are about to throw themselves at me? You think I'm going to stay with Shay's sister when I have better options?'"

"He said that?" Ryan's lips purse in a scowl.

"Word for word. Trust me, it's been ingrained in my brain ever since."

"And you didn't tell me because you didn't want me to go away for murder, is that it?"

A laugh heaves in my chest. "Partly."

"Vee..."

"I don't know, Ryan. Things have been different since you got drafted. It's not your fault, but I never compared our successes when we were younger. Then in college, it became a bit more obvious that I was there because you had a full ride. And when you went pro, it's like we were on two completely different tracks in life. You've accomplished these insanely amazing goals, and I'm just...a flight attendant. You have so much on your plate, and you're ridiculously impressive, and I didn't want to be the annoying sister that needed more help because her boyfriend sucked."

Ryan's head drops down between his shoulders before he looks back up, his blue-green eyes a bit glossy. "You think that?"

I shyly pop my shoulders.

"Vee, you're my best friend and my favorite person on this entire planet. I've never once compared us, not once. I'm so impressed by you every single day. For doing the things you love, for not staying in Tennessee and settling for the first guy you met like so many of the people we grew up with did." He pauses. "For not doing the things Mom expected you to do."

My eyes dart to his and I have to bite my lip to keep it from trembling.

"I've never wanted you to feel like you're in my shadow, Stevie, because that's just not fucking true. I wanted you at UNC with me because you're my best friend. I wanted you in Chicago because you're my best friend. I make enough money to have you here, but that's not me feeling burdened or shit like that. That's me being selfish, wanting my sister in my city and having the means to do so."

He nudges me with his foot again. "Don't keep things from me anymore. I'm going to have your back no matter what."

A grateful smile slides across my lips. "Love you, Ry."

"Love you." He begins to unwrap the ice on his shoulder. "Anything else you wanna throw out there? I'm all ears."

"Yes," I surprise myself by admitting.

"Mom stuff?"

My chest rises with a deep inhale. "Yes."

"Tell me."

"You don't have to agree with me, and I don't expect you to pick sides or anything like that, but I just want to let you know that I'm creating some boundaries, and currently, I have no desire to speak to her. Not until she can do it without her underhanded comments."

"It's really that serious?" he gently asks. "I know you always say things about Mom being a mean girl, but I thought it was just a weird mom and daughter dynamic."

"Honestly, Ryan. She does it when you don't hear, and she rarely does it around Dad anymore, but she's made me feel like absolute shit since college. She comments on my body and volunteering and my lack of a relationship all the time, and I can't do it anymore. Our relationship has done a massive number on the way I think about myself, and I have to start standing up for myself."

A soft, understanding grin slides across his lips. "Lack of relationship? You haven't told her about Zanders, huh?"

"Hell no. Anything important to me now, I keep away from her."

"He's important to you."

"Yes. Besides you, Zanders is the most important to me."

A moment of silence lingers between us, understanding covering my brother's face.

"I'm not trying to put you in the middle of it, but I'm just letting you know that when she calls or visits, I will not be here for that."

"Then she won't visit," my brother plainly states.

"What?"

"She won't visit. She's not invited here. This is your home too, Stevie, and anyone who makes you feel shitty about yourself is not invited into our home or in our lives. I'm not okay with that."

"Ryan, you don't need to cut her off because of me. That's not what I'm asking."

"I know. And I'm not cutting her off, but like you, I'm creating boundaries. Once you're comfortable with her again, if ever, then she can be in our space, but until then, no."

"You'd do that for me?"

"Of course." He shakes his head. "I don't know what else I need to say to convince you that I have your back. And that includes your relationship with Mom. It's perfectly okay to create boundaries when someone isn't treating you the right way."

My shoulders sag. Why did I not trust my own brother to understand me all these years? But at the same time, I didn't trust myself enough to stand up for what I needed.

"Thank you."

He leans back on the couch, casually crossing one ankle over his knee. "So, Zanders," he begins. "I can only assume the confidence to stand up to Mom is coming from him."

"He makes me feel really good, Ryan. He treats me like his first choice every day, and I've never had that. He constantly reminds me that I'm...I don't know...that I'm worthy of being chosen."

A soft laugh rumbles in his chest. "And here I thought I was going to hate the guy."

"So, you don't hate him?"

“How could I? He’s had your back the way I should’ve. I don’t know him, but from what you’ve told me, maybe I had the wrong impression of him all along.”

“You did.” I quickly nod. “Everyone does.”

The buzzer on our door rings as our doorman’s voice wafts through our apartment. “Miss Shay, there’s an Indy in the lobby. Says she’s your friend.”

My brows furrow in confusion. Indy knows I’m spending the weekend with my brother, and she couldn’t wait to get home to Alex. So why the hell is she here?

As soon as she steps off the elevator, it becomes perfectly clear. Her brown eyes are swollen and puffy, streaks of dried mascara decorate her cheeks, and her naturally sun-kissed blonde hair is a tangled mess. She’s not in her uniform, but it’s clear from her face she’s still in last night’s makeup.

“Indy? What’s going on?” I usher her through my door.

“I’m so sorry for interrupting your weekend with your brother,” she cries. “I didn’t know where else to go. My parents are in Florida looking at retirement properties, and I can’t go to my apartment.”

I wrap her up in a hug, her tall and thin frame melting into me. “You don’t need to apologize,” I soothe. “What’s going on?”

She sucks in a few short and broken breaths. “I found Alex with someone else.”

I pull her away from my body. “What?”

She frantically nods. “Last night. When we landed early, I was trying to surprise him, but I found him in bed with someone else.”

“Indy.” My head tilts with sympathy. “I’m so sorry. He’s a piece of shit.”

“I know!” She throws her hands up. “I’ve been so good to him for six years, and we’ve known each other our whole lives. How could he do this to me?”

“Come here.” I usher her to the couch. “Where did you stay last night?”

“In my car,” she whimpers. “I grabbed what I could out of our apartment and drove to my parents’ place before I remembered they were out of town.”

“Oh, Indy.” I run a soothing palm down her arm as she frantically wipes her face, trying to regain her composure.

“Can I stay here?” She sucks in a deep inhale. “Only for the night? Until my parents are back?”

“Of course.” My head darts to my shirtless brother in the kitchen. “Ryan, Indy is going to stay with us for the night.”

Indy’s eyes follow mine, finding my brother. She quickly cleans up her face. “Who are you?”

“Um...I’m Ryan.” He offers her an awkward wave. This has got to be uncomfortable for him, having a random crying girl in his living room, not to mention he’s shirtless right now.

“Why? Who?” Indy turns towards me then back to my brother. “Why are you hot?”

That causes a relieved laugh to escape me, but my brother awkwardly chokes on his saliva in response.

“Indy, this is my twin brother, Ryan. Ryan, Indy.”

“Jesus,” she huffs out. “What kind of voodoo did your parents do while you two were in the womb for you to both be so attractive?”

“I’m going to put a shirt on.” Ryan’s quick strides take him to his room.

“Are you okay?” I turn back to my friend.

“No,” she honestly admits. “I’m not okay, and I don’t know that I will be for a while. I’m sorry to come here like this, but I had no idea where else to go.”

“Stop apologizing. You’re my friend. Of course, you should be here.”

“I need a single girls’ night out. I need vodka and dancing. You and I, tonight.” She sits up straighter with excitement, even though her pretty face is stained with old makeup. “Single girls’ night in Chicago.”

“Well.” I slowly nod my head. “You see. About that. The thing is...”

Indy’s brows are pinched in confusion, waiting for me to get to the point.

“The thing is, I can’t exactly have a single girls’ night because I’m not single.”

“Excuse me, what?”

“I’m not single,” I repeat a little slower this time.

“Yeah, babe. I heard you, but I need an explanation.”

“I have a boyfriend,” I say with caution, speaking to the girl who just lost hers after six years.

“If he’s not a giant hockey defenseman who drools over you every single flight, I don’t want to hear about it.”

A knowing smile slides across my lips. “He’s a giant hockey defenseman who drools over me every flight.”

“Shut up!” Indy lights up, looking like a completely different woman than the one who walked in here. “You and Zanders are together? Officially?”

“Yeah.” I release a content and happy sigh. “That arrogant ass is my boyfriend.”

“Oh my God! Yes! I love this! I love this for you. I love this for him. Shit, I love this for me! I don’t know who I’m more jealous of. This is amazing, Stevie.”

I try to hold back my smile, especially with Indy’s current relationship situation, but I can’t.

“Are you happy?” she softly asks.

“So happy,” I admit. “But that feels like a shitty thing to say right now.”

“Stop.” Indy brushes me away. “Just because my relationship went up in flames last night doesn’t mean we shouldn’t celebrate yours. Okay, no girls’ night out. Girls’ night *in*. Movies and ice cream and whatever else girlfriends do on a Saturday night.”

“Ryan will be home. Is that okay?”

“Sure.” She pops her shoulder. “What girls’ night is complete without a little eye candy?”

“Gross.”

ZANDERS



“Really, Vee? This is where you decide to take me?”

“Yeah. What did you expect? For me to charter a private jet, fly you to New York, and take you to Saks?”

I jolt back. “Jesus, woman. Talk about a wet dream.”

Stevie playfully rolls her eyes, pulling my hand to follow her in. “Come on, fancy pants. You said I could pick anywhere to take you shopping as long as you get to do the same.”

I stop in my tracks, right outside the thrift store, eyeing the building. “But here? Sweetheart, we can upgrade a bit, don’t you think? I’d even go to Target over this.”

Her brows furrow in disgust. “Don’t talk about Target that way, like it’d be a chore to go. You should be thanking Target for just existing.”

Rosie sits perfectly at my side, both of us equally as hesitant to step through the doors.

“Please, Zee.” Stevie’s blue-green eyes are wide and pleading. “This is where I want to shop.”

Let’s be honest, I’d go fucking dumpster diving for this girl, but giving her shit is one of my favorite pastimes.

“Rosie, please tell Stevie that she’s going to owe me a very long, very naked shower after this.”

Stevie rolls her eyes once again. “Rosie, please tell your dad that he sounds like a pretentious a-hole right now.”

“Vee...” I narrow my eyes. “Rosie can’t speak.”

Her eyes close in frustration. “You’re the most annoying man I’ve ever met.”

Chuckling lightly, I bend down, pressing my lips to her scowling ones.

Thankfully, this side of town is relatively quiet, and the people here could give two shits about who I am. Maybe they don’t even know. I’m not sure. But the idea of that, of going through life without the attention, sounds nice. Especially now that I’m dating someone who I would like to spend every waking moment with, including mundane trips to the grocery store, weekends at the dog park, or simply stopping for gas without worry that there might be too many eyes watching.

One day, though. I’m holding out hope.

As soon as Stevie opens the door, my eyes burn from the quick adjustment of the dreary Chicago winter outside to the brightly colored walls inside.

“I stumbled across this place a couple of months ago, and I love it.”

Following Stevie inside, a pungent unidentified scent attacks my nostrils. “What the hell is that smell?”

Stevie stands straighter, inhaling a deep breath through her nose, a giant smile resting on her lips. “*That* is the smell of thrifting.”

“Interesting.” I follow her down the aisle of completely uncoordinated options, keeping my arms in tight, being sure not to touch anything.

Every wall is a different shade of orange and yellow, but you almost can’t see them due to the mass of clothing stuffed on racks, overtaking the shop.

I watch as my girl excitedly sifts through the racks with detail, no article of clothing left untouched. Don’t get me wrong, I have zero plans of shopping here, but watching her be this happy and excited does something to me.

I’m a fan of all sides of her, but “passionate Stevie” has to be my favorite. That side of her always comes out at the dog shelter, and it’s here again today.

She pulls a pair of jeans off the hook that seem to be about two sizes too big, which is exactly how she likes them. Holding them up, she examines them for a moment before turning to Rosie and showing her. Rosie cocks her head as if she has any idea of what’s going on before Stevie decides against them and puts them back on the rack to resume her search.

“Why do you like thrifting so much?” I ask from behind her.

“I like it for a lot of reasons.” She shuffles through the rack. “It’s fun to try new styles without breaking the bank. It keeps money out of fast fashion, and sometimes you find cool, unique pieces you’d never be able to find somewhere else.” She picks up a sweatshirt that looks decades old, worn in all the right places. The logo on the front of an old high school is barely legible from being so distressed.

She hooks it on her arm to keep as she continues her search. “But mostly, I think it’s cool to give a piece of clothing a second life. You have no idea where some of this has been. Maybe someone wore this dress the night they had their first kiss.” She pulls a floral dress off the rack. “Or maybe”—she excitedly grabs a collared shirt—“maybe someone was wearing this when they got their dream job. All of this”—she sweeps her hand, motioning across the racks—“has a story, and maybe it’ll be what I’m wearing when something important happens in my life too.”

Casually, as if she didn’t just completely give me a new point of view, she turns back to continue shopping.

I look down at my own outfit—my black wool coat, black tailored slacks, and black Louboutins, registering it as the moment I felt a little harder.

From behind, I wrap her up, pulling her back to my chest before I cover her freckled cheeks with kisses. Holding on to her, I sway with her in my arms.

“You’re something else, Stevie girl.”

“I know.” She melts into me. “I’m the fucking best.”

My body rumbles with a silent laugh as I leave my chin resting on her shoulder, one hand holding her to me and the other absentmindedly scratching Rosie’s head at my side.

“You need to go find something,” she reminds me as she continues her search.

“Fuck no. Vee, it’s one thing for me to *stand* in here, but it’s an entirely different thing to actually buy something.”

“Those are the rules. You let me buy you something at my place, and I let you buy me something at yours.” She turns around to test me.

I hold her stare, not backing down.

“Fine.” She shrugs casually. “You don’t have to buy something here, but then you’re not getting me anything later.”

Well, that's not going to work. I've been planning my shopping day with her for weeks now.

"Fine," I resign. "I'll let you buy me one thing, and shoes are off the table."

A cute giggle echoes through her as we go in search of something for me to get.

I'm trying my very best not to let Stevie know how stoked I am on our thrift store find. Hidden deep in the racks was an old-school Chicago Devils windbreaker from the nineties. It's completely legit, still in pretty good shape, and I can't wait to wear it to one of her brother's games when the time comes that we can be in public together.

But it's my turn to take her shopping, and I'm pumped. I've had this planned for a bit and made sure my jeweler closed the place down so no one would spot Stevie and me together. I've spent enough money with him over the years that he was happy to do it.

This side of town is closer to our places, so I dropped Rosie at home. The streets are filled with fine-dining restaurants, high-end designer shops, and art galleries. Lewis is a highly sought-after jewelry designer with high-profile clients, so thankfully, he has a private back entrance for us to use.

"Zee, this is already way too extravagant."

A condescending laugh escapes me. "Have you met me, sweetheart?"

As soon as we're inside, Stevie stands behind me, tucking her hand into mine, a bit of intimidation covering her face.

"Hey, Lewis," I call out with a wave as we head towards the glass cases showcasing his work.

"EZ, my man." He connects his fist with mine. "Good to see you. Have we decided what we're shopping for today?"

Looking back at Stevie, her blue-green eyes wander the glass cases with fear.

"Have you decided what you're shopping for today, Vee?"

She quickly shakes her head. "Nothing."

"Those aren't the rules," I remind her. "You bought me something at your place. Now I get to buy you something at mine."

“Zee, I spent fifteen dollars on you.”

“And I’m going to spend a little more.”

“I’ll go grab your other piece while you two decide what you’re shopping for,” Lewis cuts in.

“Other piece?”

A sly smile slides across my lips. “I got Ella her first chain.”

“Like yours?”

“Similar. Smaller, obviously, and more feminine.”

I watch as Stevie melts in front of me.

“But what are we getting *you*?”

“Really, Zee, this is too much.”

“We made a deal.” I swing my arm over her shoulders, pulling her into my body, my lips quickly ghosting her forehead. “You bought me something, so I get to buy you something. Pick which of your jewelry is your favorite to wear, please. We’re going to upgrade it.”

“My favorite jewelry to wear?”

“Mm-hmm.”

A sneaky smile overtakes her lips, but before she can answer, I respond for her. “Besides my hand.” She drops her shoulders to whine that I got to that one before she could. “For real, though. What are we upgrading today?”

Stevie contemplates, and I can almost see her wheels turning as she goes over her jewelry in her mind. Her nose ring, her plethora of earrings, her stacked necklaces, and lastly, her—

“Rings,” she finally states. “My rings are my favorite.”

I had a feeling, which is why I brought her here instead of just buying her something. I knew she’d need to get sized for new rings.

She grabs my hand in hers, holding it up to examine it. “And we’ll upgrade this one too, right?” she asks, referring to the gold ring of hers I’ve been wearing on my pinky since she decided to give me a chance.

I’ve thought about it, mainly because it’s become worn and faded, leaving a small ring of green on my skin, seeing as the only time I take it off is when I’m playing hockey. But there’s no chance in hell I’m upgrading this. Stevie’s hands might drip in 24-karat gold after today, but this five-dollar beat-up ring is hers, and therefore it’s mine.

“Nah.” I bring our intertwined hands to my mouth, peppering kisses on hers. “This one stays.”

Stevie's eyes are wide with excitement as Lewis sizes her, customizing a new set of rings for her. Some fingers will be stacked with two and others just one. And the more the realization sinks in that she won't have to replace these every few months like her old ones, the more detail-oriented and particular she becomes, knowing she'll have these for as long as she wants.

"And the thumb?" Lewis asks.

Stealing Stevie's thumb ring was because I wanted a piece of her, but partly because twirling it was a nervous habit, and maybe somewhere subconsciously in my mind, I assumed that if she didn't have it as a crutch, she'd be less anxious. Maybe her confidence would take over.

"No thumb ring," she states with certainty.

A proud smile overtakes my face as I stand behind her, watching from above, my hand casually holding her hip.

"Thank you," she whispers when Lewis heads off to make a few adjustments. "But I think you may have created a monster." Stevie holds up her hand to examine her brand-new designer jewelry. "A bougie monster."

"My favorite kind." I pepper her neck and shoulder with kisses from behind. I like bringing her to the expensive dark side, but let's be real. Stevie, at her core, will always be the thrift-store-loving, shelter-volunteering, baggy-jeans-and-dirty-Air-Force-wearing girl that I'm obsessed with.

"You go first," I tell Stevie when we're a block away from my place. There's a ton of people out today for some reason, and the area in front of my building is packed.

"I wish your building had a back entrance."

I give her ass a little squeeze before sending her on her way. "You'll be all right. My doorman knows who you are."

Watching as Stevie keeps her head down, I stay a fair distance away. With no issue, she slips through the crowd, my doorman opening the large glass lobby door and ushering her inside.

Waiting another minute to separate us, I eventually make my way through the mass of bodies with my hands in my pockets, my head down

towards the ground, and my winter layers covering me up.

But it's no use.

"EZ!"

"Evan Zanders!"

"I knew he lived here!" someone calls out as I'm rushed and bombarded right there on my front steps.

"Can I get an autograph?" someone else begs, and I do my best to sign as many as I can as I continue my quick strides towards my door.

Over the last couple of months, I've been attempting to separate my bad guy hockey image from my real-life one. If Chicago wants me to be a dick on the ice and protect my guys when needed, I'll gladly fill that role. But the more I've settled into a relationship and recognize the way it feels to have Stevie like and want the real version of me, the more I want to be that guy to the rest of the world. And I hope that's enough to get re-signed by the only team I want to play for.

I offer a quick wave over my shoulder to the mob outside as my doorman ushers me into the lobby.

"More people come by here every day," he says. "The further you guys get in the season, and the higher you guys rank, the more everyone wants a piece of you, huh, Mr. Zanders?"

"I typically love this shit, but this season, not so much." My eyes wander past the glass doors where fans are pointing and waving like I'm some kind of animal in the zoo, here to do tricks for them.

And for the first time in my career, I wish no one was looking at me.

"Miss Shay is upstairs."

I give him a thankful pat on the shoulder before riding my private elevator to my floor.

"Zee, you've got to stop feeding me." Stevie stretches out on the couch, trying to get comfortable. "My pants aren't going to fit soon. Shit, even your pants aren't going to fit soon."

She's not wrong. Regardless that I work out every single day and burn more fuel than the average person, Stevie and I get takeout almost every night, and I fucking love seeing her all happy while we scarf down on our

favorite junk food. There's not many other choices when I'm a shit cook, and we're staying in hotels every night on the road.

"I like feeding you, though." I take a seat on the couch, urging her head up before Stevie drapes her chestnut curls over my lap, resting on my thigh. Rosie joins in, jumping on the sofa opposite my girl, curling up with her big head on my lap.

"I can't even think about food right now," Stevie groans. "But if I were able to think about food, I'd tell you we need to try that pizza place on twenty-eighth, then I want to try that new taco truck that parks down on the pier on Tuesdays. Then after that, we should check out that new Indian restaurant that's opening up next to the arena."

My laugh shakes both Stevie and Rosie in my lap.

"Make a list." I hand her my phone, unlocking it. "In the Notes app, let's start a list of all the takeout we want to try."

Stevie perks up with that. Taking my phone, she opens the app to create a new folder, but before she does, she pauses, her thumbs ghosting over the screen.

"What is this?"

She scrolls down, every city we visit in the NHL listed in my notes.

I'm not one to lie, especially to her, so I don't. "I used to keep a list of the girls I would see in those cities so that when I was back in town, and they hit me up, I would know who they were."

Stevie stills before reacting exactly how I expected.

My girlfriend bursts into a fit of laughter, right there on my couch. "You're shitting me!" she howls. "Oh my God, this is ridiculous. Zee, you really were a little man-whore."

"Little," I scoff. "Nothing little going on here, sweetheart."

"Well, at least you were an organized and honest fuckboy." She wipes the corners of her eyes. "Can I read them?"

"Sure."

She scrolls through them, contemplating which to open first, an utterly amused smile on her lips.

"Oh, Nashville. This one is going to be a long list." She stops on her hometown and clicks on it.

I watch as Stevie's blue-green eyes narrow in confusion, her mouth slightly parting and her amusement shifting to sentiment.

"You can even read them out loud, Vee."

She swallows. “Stevie. Curly hair and amazing ass. Won’t sleep with me, but I hope she changes her mind.”

Scrolling to the Denver tab, she clicks on it. “Stevie. Has an attitude. Likes basketball and is down to eat burgers.”

She exits out, finding Washington DC next. “Stevie,” she continues. “Best sex of my life.”

She keeps going to Calgary. “Stevie. Snuck her into my hotel room to watch movies with me all night.”

San Jose. “Stevie. Insane blowjob in the shower. Wore my T-shirt to bed.”

Next, she finds Vancouver. “Stevie. Came to my game. My favorite person to hang out with.”

Finally, she looks up at me. “What is this?”

“I told you. It’s the list of girls I see in those cities. It’s a little different now, but the concept is still the same.”

She focuses back on my phone, opening Los Angeles and then Seattle, finding them both blank. “There’s nothing in these.”

“That’s because we haven’t been there yet.”

She drops my phone on her stomach before crossing her arms over her face to hide. “Jesus. How are you real? Even when you’re caught being a fuckboy, you’re caught in the cutest way possible.”

She looks up at me, her eyes a little glossy.

“You’re my first choice, Vee. My only choice.” I brush her curls away from her freckled face. “Whether that’s in Chicago or any other city. It’s just you.”

She sits up, pulling my neck down at the same time her warm lips close around my mouth. I trail kisses across her jaw, cheek, and temple as she buries herself into my shoulder. My arm snakes around her, holding her tight as I continue to pet a sleeping Rosie on my other side.

“I’m obsessed with you, Zee.”

“That makes two of us.”

After a few minutes of stroking Stevie’s side, I feel her body get heavy in my grasp as she starts to doze off. Resting my head on hers, I can’t help but feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

Never in my wildest imagination did I think I would have this. I never thought I would feel as protected to be myself as I do with this girl. She

allows me to be blunt, honest, and unapologetic and does so with absolutely no judgment along the way.

I never thought I would have my own family, but between the Doberman on her back who has quickly become my sidekick, and the curly-haired flight attendant under my arm, I'd venture to say I've got a little family of my own.

And as that realization sinks in, I'm hit with the reminder that I've *had* a family.

One that I miss.

"Vee?" I whisper, testing to see if she's still awake.

She shifts, wrapping both her arms around my neck and burying her head in my chest. "Mm-hmm?"

I hesitate before blurting out, "I miss my dad."

She stills in my grasp before tightening her arms around my neck. "You should tell him that."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Stevie grabs my phone from the couch, holding it out for me. "When you miss someone, you should tell them."

She slides down, settling her curls onto my lap once more, her eyes closed, leaving me with my phone in my hands. "And if he says something you don't like, I'll let you buy me ice cream, and we can bitch about it together."

A soft laugh leaves me as my thumb hovers over my dad's contact. The last text we exchanged was him telling me his plane landed in Chicago on Christmas.

The anger is still bubbling in my chest, but it's no longer directed at my dad. It's solely towards my mom. Sure, I hold frustration towards him, but the anger has dissipated.

Instead, it's longing.

Longing for the relationship we once had. The relationship I didn't think we would have again. But lately, I've felt like maybe I can be honest with him and tell him I need him. Maybe he'll need me too.

Without hesitating any longer, I type out my message.

Then I delete it. It's too wordy and complicated. I don't know what to say. I don't know how to express everything I've felt over the last twelve years.

So, I don't.

Instead, I tell him how I'm feeling at this moment.

Me: *I miss you.*

I thought the weight would lift off my chest, but instead, the anxiety swarms around my lungs, causing me to be short of air when I see those three gray dots dance along my screen.

Dad: *I miss you too, Evan. I know you have a lot of things you need to say, and whenever you're ready to say them, I'm ready to listen.*

Exhaling a deep, shaky breath, I drop my head back on the couch behind me until my phone vibrates again.

Dad: *I love you.*

My eyes burn with tears from seeing those three words. Words he and I haven't spoken to each other in twelve years. I try to hold it in, but eventually, my body shakes with a silent sob. I didn't know how badly I needed to hear that from him until now.

I want to respond, but I'm not ready. Besides, the tears have blurred my vision so much that I couldn't, even if I wanted to. Setting my phone down on the coffee table in front of us, I drop my head back, trying to control my breathing and stay quiet, so I don't wake Stevie.

Using my thumb and index finger, I hold the bridge of my nose, my eyes screwed shut, trying to stop the tears from falling.

Stevie grabs my other hand, lacing her fingers with mine and resting our intertwined hands on her cheek. "I'm so proud of you," she whispers, her eyes still closed while she lets me have a moment.

The burden of anger and hatred that I've carried around for the last twelve years feels exponentially lighter on my shoulders. There's a confusing mix of fear leaving my body and assurance taking over as I allow myself a minute, taking deep breaths and regaining my composure.

My eyes wander to the beauty in my lap, my wild thing who has a fucking heart of gold and makes me want to show mine.

Stevie holds her hand in mine as she rests, so I spin one of the new rings on her finger, admiring the way real gold plays off her light brown skin.

"Thank you for my new jewelry," she quietly mutters.

I stroke her curls away from her face, absentmindedly playing with her hair as I scratch Rosie's belly with my other hand. "You're welcome, Vee. Thanks for being my girlfriend."

She softly laughs, turning to sleep on her side. "You don't have to thank me. It's the best decision I ever made." I stroke her cheekbone with my

thumb as she starts to fade back to sleep. “Thank you for choosing me,” she adds in her sedated state.

Her lashes flutter from my touch, hiding her blue-green eyes. Her full lips are slightly parted, and her freckled cheeks could not be more adorable.

“It’s the best decision I ever made.”

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STEVIE



“Do you feel like you’ve figured out how hockey works, now that you’ve been to plenty of these games?” Logan takes the seat next to me as she makes it back to our row after visiting Maddison down at ice level.

“I think so.” My head is on a swivel, taking in the sights of the United Center. I’ve been coming to Zanders’ home games for weeks, but I always find it fascinating how quickly they transform this building from a basketball court into a hockey rink. I was just here for Ryan’s game last night. “I have the rules down for the most part. And as far as our team goes, your husband scores the goals, and the guy I’m dating sits his ass in the penalty box for being a dick.”

A small chuckle escapes her. “Seems like you’ve got it figured out for the most part.”

“You don’t have to keep sitting with me at every game,” I offer, giving her an out. “I know my seats are kind of far away. I’m just worried about anyone seeing that I’m here.”

“I’m happy to get to sit with you.” Logan nudges her shoulder into mine. “Eli just needs our little pregame ritual, but after that, he’s focused on the game and not where I’m sitting. I’m excited that you’re here. Now I don’t have to hang in the family box with the other WAGS.”

I take a long swig of my beer. “WAGS?”

“Wives and girlfriends,” she explains. “Not all of them are my kind of people. Some are cool, but some of them are clearly dating for money or

status or whatever else they're getting out of it, so I'm excited to have you join. I need someone to hang out with at team functions."

I give her a half-smile, not elaborating.

"When you can, I mean. Once you guys are out in the open and aren't keeping it a secret anymore."

I genuinely don't know when that will be or what the future of Zanders' and my relationship will look like, so instead, I'm not going to stress about it while I try to enjoy the moments. And in this moment, I get to watch the sexiest man I know do what he does best.

"I'm stoked you're here, Stevie," Logan quietly says. "And I'm so happy that you're happy and that Zee's happy. He's one of the best people I know, and I'm glad that you're able to see him for who he is. That's hard sometimes when there's so much of his media personality on display for the world to see."

I keep my eyes on the giant defenseman, watching him warm up. Regardless of his size, he's smooth as he glides along the ice.

"Well, it's hard to ignore how great he is the more I'm around him. He's kind of annoying like that. He just had to worm his way in, huh?"

Zanders' attention finds my admiring gaze as he skates closer to the plexiglass encasing the ice. We aren't down near the rink, but we're still close enough that I can see the soft smile slide across his lips as he looks at me.

"I've never seen him like this," Logan softly notes with pride, almost under her breath.

Zanders pulls his jersey away from his chest, shaking the fabric, and referring to the matching one I'm wearing. I mirror his action with the number eleven uniform I have on as his megawatt smile comes into view, holding my stare.

That is until Maddison comes up behind him and smacks his helmet, probably giving Zanders shit for acting as soft as he does around his own wife.

"No Ella today?" I shift my attention back to Logan.

"She's here, running around somewhere. Eli's parents are in town, so she's with them. You'll meet them tonight. They're the best."

"You didn't have to change your birthday plans just for us, you know."

Logan brushes me off. "I'm happy to. I love having you as part of the group."

Pressing my lips together, I fight back my all-too giddy smile. For the first time in my life, I have friends who want my company for me, and not for the shared last name of my sibling.

It feels good.

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ZANDERS



Having Stevie at my game, wearing my jersey does a whole lot of things to my possessive side. Outside of my sister, I've never had someone at the arena for just me. I have no idea how Maddison has done this, game in and game out since college. Having my girl here steals all my focus. My eyes keep wanting to wander up to the seats to see how pretty she looks with her curly hair and the Raptors' jersey across her chest, regardless that I've had the same view for weeks now.

I almost can't believe I get to have her here, and it's as if I need to keep checking to make sure it's actually true.

"Last shift, Rio, let's go!" I yell out as my blue-line partner and I take the ice for the final shift of our afternoon game.

The boys have been playing great, earning the most points in the NHL for February, which has translated into the month of March. But more than earning another two points for today's win, once the final buzzer goes off, we'll have secured a number one seed in our division for playoffs, something that hasn't been done in the Raptors organization for years.

Buffalo's goalie has already left the ice, giving them a six-on-five advantage. But regardless, we're already up two goals with the final seconds on the clock winding down. And once Rio causes a turnover, shooting the puck down the ice and scoring in the empty net, the celebration begins.

As the buzzer sounds, the guys pile on our goalie for his shutout win. The United Center fills with shouts, cheers, and music blaring for our team.

We were the first organization in the league to secure our playoff spot, and now we're guaranteed home-ice advantage as long as we're in it.

The giant mob of my teammates makes their way to the bench, hugs and glove bumps exchanged with the coaching staff before heading down the tunnel to the locker room. But before I make it off the ice, Maddison jumps on me.

"Zee, baby, let's go!"

I wrap my arms around him. "Holy fuck, we did it!"

We hold on for a moment before taking a second to look around the arena, where red, black, and white cover the stands.

Since Maddison got here five years ago, it's been our mission to change the culture around this team. We've consistently made the playoffs but haven't lasted long. We've been good, but we've never been great. This year though, this year we're great.

And this year, we have a real shot at the Cup.

As soon as I open the door to the Maddisons' penthouse, Rosie rushes in like she owns the place, just as she does every time she comes over here. She sniffs the couches and toys, looking for Ella, I'm sure, before she gives up and goes to Maddison for love instead.

"Hey, man. Where is everyone?" I close his front door behind me.

Maddison bops around the kitchen with MJ strapped to his shirtless chest as he prepares Logan's birthday dinner. Bending down for a moment, he gives Rosie the attention she's so desperately asking for.

"My parents had to swing by the office after the game, but they'll be here soon, and my brother should be up any minute."

Taking MJ out of the wrap my best friend is wearing, I grab a seat with him at the kitchen island as Rosie sits attentively next to Maddison, hoping he might drop something while he cooks.

"I told Stevie I was on the way. She should be up here soon."

"Oh, she already came up. She left with Logan and Ella to go get their nails done as soon as we were back from the game."

"Wait, really? She came by herself?"

I kind of assumed Stevie would've been intimidated to come up alone before I got here, knowing Maddison's place is going to be packed with Logan's friends and family soon. But at the same time, I love that she feels confident enough to do it on her own, especially around my people.

Maddison eyes me from across the kitchen island.

"What?" I ask.

"You do know that she and Logan have sat together at our home games for weeks now, right? They're friends. And Zee, I hate to break it to you, but lately, Ella talks about Stevie more than she talks about you."

"You're lying."

Maddison holds his hands up in defense. "Ella asks Stevie to do her hair at every game, and your girlfriend lets my daughter scroll through her pictures of all the dogs at SDOC. So, good luck beating that, my friend."

Okay, I'm happy that my people like Stevie, but there's no need for them to like her more than me.

Holding MJ in one hand, I pull my phone out and text Stevie with the other.

Me: *I heard my niece might like you more than me. We can't be having that, sweetheart.*

Stevie Girl: *Not my fault that I'm way more fun than boring Uncle Zee.*

Me: *Boring? I'll show you boring.*

Stevie Girl: *Can't wait.*

The smile on my face is painfully big as I stare at my phone screen.

Me: *What color are you painting your nails?*

Stevie Girl: *Go hang out with your best friend.*

Me: *What color?*

Stevie Girl: *Why does it matter?*

Me: *Because I'm going to be seeing them wrapped around my dick later. I feel like I should have a say.*

Stevie Girl: *You're ridiculous.*

I shoot Stevie a hundred dollars via Venmo with the caption "Red, please," but she denies it, sending it right back.

Stevie Girl: *You're not paying to pick my nail color.*

I send the Venmo payment again.

Stevie Girl: *How much do you think it costs to get your nails painted?*

Me: *I don't know. \$100? Red, please.*

Stevie Girl: *Fine, this will cover Ella's too.*

Me: *Make sure she knows her favorite uncle paid.*

Stevie Girl: *Don't worry, I already told her it was from me.*

Me: *When you get here, I'm gonna have to take care of that attitude you have today.*

Stevie Girl: *Looking forward to it.*

Me: *You drive me insane, and I miss you, so hurry up.*

Stevie Girl: *Ditto to the drive me insane part. And the miss you part. Great game, by the way. I'm so proud of you.*

Me: *Thanks, Vee. I can't wait to celebrate with you.*

"So," Maddison says, pulling my attention back to him. "Have you told Stevie you're in love with her yet?" He tries to hold back his knowing chuckle but fails miserably as his chest begins to vibrate with laughter.

"Don't," I warn, not ready to think about the word that has scared the shit out of me my entire adult life.

"Where's Lindsey? Logan said she never showed up at the game."

"There were major delays getting out of Atlanta, I guess. She's still coming, even though I told her not to worry about it, but I think she wants to meet Stevie. Her flight lands any minute."

"Wants to *meet* Stevie? Or wants to *steal* Stevie?"

"Probably a little bit of both."

I help Maddison get the lasagna in the oven, and by help, I mean I hold his son so he can cook, just in time for all of Logan's friends and family to come over. Their nanny is the first to arrive, but he's more so just one of their best friends from college that they pay as their nanny so he can live in the same building as them and help with the kids when they need it. Maddison's parents and brother are next, followed by Logan's best girl from college.

"Uncle Zee!" Ella bursts through the door, running right at me. "I got yellow!" She holds her hands up, showing me her tiny little nails painted the color of sunshine, topped with gold glitter.

"Wow. Those look beautiful, EJ." I pick up my niece, placing her on the opposite knee of her brother.

"Stevie bought me them."

"Oh, did she now?" My pointed gaze finds my girlfriend walking through the front door, acting all innocent and shit.

Stevie comes behind me as I sit in a high-top chair at the island, snaking her hands across my chest before wiggling her freshly painted fingernails in

front of me.

They're blue.

I stare at them for a second, and I'm not going to lie, they look good next to her light brown skin and gold rings, but she picked this color to test me. I know it.

"Ella Jo, I've got to talk to Stevie alone for a second." I pick up my niece before putting her on her feet. At the same time, I hand MJ off to his mom.

"Happy Birthday, Lo." I pop a kiss on Logan's cheek as I drag Stevie behind me, her cute laugh echoing off the walls.

She knows what she's doing.

Opening the bathroom door at the end of the hall, I usher her inside. Her face is equally smug as it is excited as I follow her in and urgently close the door behind us.

"What is this?" I pick her up, placing her on the sink counter, standing between her legs.

"What? You don't like my nails?"

"This isn't what I asked for."

Stevie giggles at my faux disappointment. "I didn't ask for your opinion. And besides, do you really think that the color of my nails is going to change whether or not you like how it looks with my hand around your dick?" She holds out her hand, admiring it. "I think blue will look just fine."

Keeping her eyes locked on mine, she unhooks the clasp on my pants before unzipping me. Sitting up straighter, she brings her mouth to mine, but my lips fall open when she finds my cock. Stevie takes it out, trailing her tongue against my bottom lip at the same time.

"I don't know, Zee. I think blue looks pretty good. What do you think?" She gives it a soft tug, quickly causing all the blood in my body to rush straight to my dick.

Looking down, I'm mesmerized by her bronzed fingers, gold rings, and sky-blue nails as they stroke my cock at the perfect pace.

"Mm," I hum. "Yeah...yeah, blue works."

She softly chuckles as she continues stroking me, her mouth working over the sensitive spot below my ear. My palms find the glass mirror behind her, anchoring myself. My head falls to her shoulder as I continue to push into her hand, watching myself move in and out of her fist.

“Congratulations on your game,” she softly says, kissing and sucking on my neck.

“Don’t stop,” I plead. “Fuck, Vee, you feel so good.”

My chest quickly rises and falls as the mirror behind me fogs over thanks to my heavy breathing. Fuck, she feels amazing, stroking me at the perfect pace. Her legs wrap around, heels pressed into my ass as she cups the back of my head with her free hand, holding me to her.

“Blue looks so much better than red.” She continues to touch me, pulling a needy whimper from my throat. She lifts her knees on either side of my body, trying to ease the ache between her legs as her back arches, pushing her tits into my chest.

“I’m going to fuck you so hard when we get home. You’re not going to be able to speak after I’m done with you, let alone tell me what color you painted your nails.”

I can feel myself throbbing in her grasp, ready to come—

“Hey, Linds!” Logan calls out down the hall, causing Stevie to stop her movements, frozen on the counter.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I whine, my head falling to her shoulder.

“We’ve got to get out of here.” Stevie’s eyes are wide as she quickly releases me.

I look at the hard-on I’m sporting, wanting to cry out from how painful the buildup is, needing a release, but of course, right now is the moment my sister decides to make her fucking entrance.

Stevie really did have the right idea with the blue nails because right now, I’ve got some majorly blue balls.

“Zee, your sister is going to catch us in here together,” Stevie panics. “This can’t be how I meet her for the first time.”

“Relax.” I push her curls out of the way. “She’ll think you’re ten times cooler if she catches you giving me a handy in the bathroom.”

“Stop.” She laughs, swatting me in the chest as she stands from the sink. She smooths her shirt, then wipes her lips. “Do I look okay?”

I cup both her cheeks, resting my forehead on hers. “You look fucking perfect, Vee. Like you always do. Don’t worry about Lindsey. She already likes you.” I press my mouth to hers, hoping to calm her down.

But it does fuck-all to calm me down. I still have a giant hard-on that needs to be tucked in my waistband. Motioning towards it, I remind her,

“You’re going to need to take care of this real soon, though.”

She palms me through my pants, causing me to hiss from the sensation. “Deal.” She seals it with a kiss before heading out to the hall before me.

I wait a moment, making sure the action happening in my pants is hidden enough before I follow her out.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. You would,” is the first thing Lindsey says when I turn the corner.

She stands down the hallway, in front of the main entrance, with her suitcase in tow.

“Hey, Linds.” I walk behind Stevie, placing my hand on her lower back. “This is my girlfriend—”

“Stevie!” Lindsey bursts, quickly rushing her and engulfing her in a crushing hug. “I’m so excited to meet you. You have no idea.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” she laughs.

Maddison and Logan stand at the end of the hall, watching the entire interaction with knowing smiles on their faces. I scratch the back of my head before holding my hands up to remind my sister, “I’m here too.”

“Cool,” Stevie deadpans.

“Great,” Lindsey adds.

My sister holds on a little longer before she finally looks up at me, rolling her eyes. “Jesus. Always needing attention.”

She lets go of Stevie to hug me, but my hug lasts a whopping two seconds.

She hooks her arm around Stevie’s, taking off with her. “You got my bag, Ev?” she calls over her shoulder.

I stand with my two best friends as the three of us watch my sister kidnap Stevie, taking her to the couch and excitedly chatting on about God knows what.

“So, does everyone like my girlfriend more than me? Is that how this works?”

“Yes,” Logan answers without hesitation.

“Welcome to the club, my man.” Maddison adds a pat on my shoulder before taking my sister’s bag to stash away from the front door.

Sometime after dinner and birthday cake, I find myself alone with Logan and Maddison once again as we collectively clean up the dishes in the kitchen. Between Ella and Lindsey, I've barely seen Stevie all night. They've stolen her away from me more times than I can count.

But I've got to say, I can't help but love the way all my favorite people love her. She's so special, and sweet, and hilarious and hasn't recognized her worth due to the company she kept. People were in her life to get closer to her brother. Then there's her mother, who always made her feel like she wasn't enough. But here, with these people that are my family, she's more than enough. She's welcomed and wanted.

I wrap my arm around the birthday girl. "Thanks for being so cool to Stevie. She's never really had good friends, so it means a lot."

Logan's head melts into my side. "That's wild to me because we all really like her."

"Yeah, I think it was more so she didn't do a good job of standing up for herself when people would try to use her friendship to get closer to her brother. She's starting to figure it out, though." My admiring gaze finds my girlfriend in the living room with Lindsey.

"Zee." Logan nudges me. "She's great. But more than that, she makes you like who you are, and that makes me love her."

I watch as my girl and my sister sit on the floor of the living room together, a glass of wine in Lindsey's hand and a beer in Stevie's. Rosie is passed out next to Ella on the couch, who is currently in a sugar coma due to the chocolate birthday cake still smeared across her mouth.

"What are you two talking about?" I find my way to the living room, taking a seat on the couch as I pull on Stevie's hand to join me. She climbs on my lap, tucking her feet under my leg, and offering her beer for me to take a swig.

"Stevie is trying to convince me to adopt a dog," my sister announces.

My girlfriend's smile is wide and not so innocent.

"Oh yeah? And how's that going?"

"She wants us to go by Senior Dogs of Chicago in the morning."

Stevie's laugh is quiet, but I detect the mischievous undertone in it. I know what she's doing.

"Then I hope you're ready to take a dog back to Atlanta because I went there *once*, and I was done for." I motion towards the Doberman, happily sleeping on her back next to my niece.

“I’d be so into it if I were ever home, but I live at the office these days. Stevie, how many do you have at home?”

Her freckled cheeks turn a slight shade of rose. “Oh, I don’t have any of my own. I live with my brother, and he’s allergic. But I get to volunteer at the shelter and love on them every day, so that’s a win.”

I pull her into me. “Besides, Vee is over at my place almost every night anyway. Rosie is as much her dog as she is mine.”

Stevie brushes me off, shaking her head. “It’s okay that I don’t have my own,” she tells my sister. “As long as I get to help them all find their forever homes, it’s okay that it’s not with me.”

I swear, everything that comes out of this girl’s mouth has me falling a little more.

She’s an interesting mix of soft and firm. Insecure and confident. Bold and shy. But regardless of the duality of her personality, her heart is always tender and open.

“Ev, the headlines have been ridiculous lately,” Lindsey changes the topic of conversation.

Stevie’s focus bounces anywhere but me or my sister, her body stiff and uncomfortable as she sits on my lap.

I run a soothing hand up her back. “They’re just looking for anything because they haven’t caught me out on the town partying or leaving the arena with anyone.”

Stevie awkwardly adjusts. This has been a bit of a sore subject for her lately. I can handle people shitting on me, but she has a hard time reading the lies, regardless that this was something we agreed upon until I can get my contract extended.

“Did you see the one yesterday about you having a secret love child, and that’s why you haven’t been photographed out?” Lindsey’s head falls back with a laugh.

“I do have a child.” I rub Rosie’s belly. “She’s just not a secret.”

I was hoping to pull a little smile from Stevie’s lips with that, but it’s no use, so I wrap my arm around her hip and pull her into me a little more.

“It’s sucked lately,” I admit. “Having to hide this and keep Rich off my back about everything else. More and more people camp outside my building, and getting Stevie over from across the street has been harder to do.”

“You guys should just move in together,” Lindsey casually states.

Stevie coughs up her beer, turning into a sputtering mess.

Glad we're on the same page with progressing at a normal pace regardless of everyone around us assuming we're going to move at the speed of light.

"Linds, if you could try not to make my girlfriend choke, that'd be great." I lean my lips in close to Stevie's ear, whispering, "That's my job."

Her mouth falls open, swatting me in the chest.

"Damn. I still can't believe you have a girlfriend." Lindsey shakes her head. "But at some point, you've got to put a stop to all the media crap, Ev. Your fans love you, and they'll be stoked to know you're happy. They've had fun with your unlovable bad boy bullshit because that's all you've given them. But you're going to need to show them who you really are and give them a chance to love *that* guy."

"That's what I've been saying," Stevie agrees under her breath.

"And if they don't like the real you, well then I'll fucking sue them. I'm a lawyer. I can do that."

My sister's humor relaxes the three of us, so much so that there's finally a smile back on Stevie's face.

I know Lindsey's right. Stevie, Logan, and Maddison have all been preaching the same thing, but it freaks me out to change it up and show my true colors this close to a re-signing date. I'm only a couple of months away. I can deal with the bullshit narrative until then.

I just hope Stevie can too.

STEVIE



“**Y**ou wanna close your mouth, or are you planning on mopping up the galley floor after the flight?”

Indy’s words bring me out of my daze as I quickly shut my mouth, wiping the corners of my lips for good measure.

“If anyone should be drooling, it’s me. I’m the one working with my imagination here, wondering what’s below all these tight briefs. At least you’ve experienced it.”

My stare stays locked on the exit row as my shirtless boyfriend lays his suit flat in an overhead bin. “Trust me, Indy. I’m drooling *because* I’ve experienced it.”

As the boys change into their comfortable clothes for the flight to Fort Lauderdale, Indy and I remain hidden in the back of the plane.

“Is he the best sex of your life or what?”

“Oh, hands down. No comparison.”

“You lucky bitch.”

A content sigh leaves my lips as I watch Zanders’ beautifully built body pull his sweatpants on. The other guys are changing in the aisles as well, but my focus is lasered past them, staring at the alternate captain with gold jewelry and black inked tattoos.

He must sense my gaze on him because suddenly, Zanders’ head turns my way, his hazel eyes finding mine. Expression melting, he gets all soft and gentle, his smile tugging on his lips, and I can’t help but shyly grin right back at him.

That is until he seductively grazes a single finger down his lips, tugging on the bottom one as it trails south over his chest and stomach. He continues to look at me, acting all alluring, but in reality, he just looks like a giant dork.

Thankfully, Maddison smacks him in the head before Tara catches him looking at me while he's not wearing any clothes.

"How are you doing since...you know?"

"Since I walked into my apartment and found my boyfriend of six years mid-thrust into some other chick?" Indy asks. "Yeah. Great. I'm great."

Clearly, she's not great, judging from the bags under her eyes or the pale color of her typically suntanned skin. Not to mention that her uniform is drowning her frame thanks to her lack of appetite.

It's been a few weeks since the night she caught Alex cheating, but that's nothing in comparison to the years she spent loving him. There's no time clock on healing heartbreak, regardless of how things ended. Your heart doesn't suddenly detach just because you want it to.

In the same way, there's no time clock on how quickly your heart can grow attached to another. It happened to me far faster than I would've imagined. To be honest, it happened a lot quicker than I had hoped, but now there's no turning back. I'm in too deep. I'm drowning in feelings I didn't know I could experience, but at the same time, I have no desire to come up for air.

"What do you need from me?" I turn toward my coworker.

"I need a night out. I want to get drunk and not think about this bullshit for like two minutes. And I know it's not the best coping mechanism"—she holds her hands up in defense—"but therapy takes a lot more time than it does for me to throw back a shot of tequila."

Keeping my lips pressed together, I attempt to hold back my laughter, but thankfully Indy bursts into giggles before I do. She's been upset and hurting more often than not lately, but every once in a while, I get a glimpse of my typically fun, happy friend.

"I think that's a great idea. Let's do it tonight. Ryan's team is in Miami this weekend, so a few of them are either coming up or we can go down to them. Is that okay?"

"Are you shitting me? Is that okay? Do you think I have any complaints about partying with a room full of giant basketball players? I don't know a

single thing about that sport except they're huge and known to be great with their hands."

"Okay," I laugh. "I meant I wasn't sure if you were cool with hanging out with Ryan after that night—"

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I'll never be able to make eye contact with your brother again after I spent the entire night sobbing in his living room with snot bubbles coming out of my nose before crying into a tub of Ben and Jerry's, but the rest of his team doesn't have to know what a hot mess I was."

Zee (Daddy) Zanders: *Jesus, Vee. Can you come fuck me right now? You in that uniform? It's giving me G-Wagon flashbacks.*

All the blood in my body shoots straight to my cheeks but also to the spot between my legs, as my mind floods with thoughts of that wild night. Regardless, I don't text back, needing to focus on my job.

Two minutes later, the blue light shines in the back galley as a ding echoes throughout the cabin. Looking up the aisle, the matching call light shines above Zanders' head.

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

"Go take care of your boo," Indy teases, but there's less sarcasm hidden behind the phrase than the last time she said it.

"He doesn't even need anything," I whine, stepping into the aisle as I head to the exit row.

"Yes?" I ask Zanders as I turn the light off over his head.

His cheeky smile is on full display.

"You don't need anything, do you?"

"You didn't text back, and I needed to see you," he whispers, his head on a swivel as he glances from the front of the plane to the back, making sure we're in the clear. "You look so pretty."

Maddison snickers in the seat next to him. "Sorry." He shakes his head, laughing. "Stevie, you do look great, but I can't get over how much this guy sounds like me."

"Shh," Zanders hushes over his shoulder. "I'm busy being a couple."

He brings his attention back to me and I crouch down next to his seat, making us eye level.

"I heard your brother's team is in town tonight."

"Yeah, I'm either going down to Miami, or he's coming up. I'm not sure yet."

“He’s coming up. Some of our guys are friends with their guys, so everyone is getting together.”

“Oh.”

“Is that not okay?”

“Well, no, not really. I can’t hang out with all of you.”

“I think it’s the perfect excuse. You can’t get in trouble for fraternizing when you’re just spending time with your brother.”

“And what about Indy? I was going to take her out tonight.”

“See if she’s cool with hanging out with the team, and if so, I’ll make sure the boys keep it quiet. If she doesn’t want to, that’s okay. I’ll steal you another night.”

I shoot him a grateful smile for understanding and not asking me to cancel my plans. “You guys feel good about this series?”

Zanders turns to Maddison, both of them sharing a look of humble confidence. It doesn’t often happen between the two arrogant men, but they’re good at keeping their heads level when it comes to hockey and the prospects of this post-season. And with the first round of playoffs already underway, they need to be.

They’re already two games up on Florida, and two more wins on the road will give them a first-round sweep.

“We’re ready,” Zanders confidently states before he looks up the aisle, clearing his throat, his eyes turning cold.

He doesn’t need to explain what’s happening. I already know.

“Sparkling water, you said?” I ask just as Tara walks by us.

“Extra lime,” Zanders adds as I hurry back to the galley.

The fresh ocean breeze blows my curls away from my face, and the warm sand slides between my toes as Indy and I step onto the beach right outside our hotel. South Florida’s evening temperature is perfectly warm, which is a nice reprieve after spending the last six months traveling to some of the coldest cities in North America.

“You’re sure you’re okay with this?” I ask my coworker as we make our walk over to one of the beach-front bars on the main strip in Fort Lauderdale.

“I’m good.” Indy shrugs. “I mean, I lost my apartment and my boyfriend. If we get in trouble and I lose my job, I’ll just add that to the list.”

Her tone has sarcasm embedded in it, but I don’t think she’s kidding. She’s been down and defeated these last few weeks, and keeping her job is relatively low on her priority list.

Fitting, really, because that same concern has been rapidly dropping for the things I find to be important in my life while being allowed in public with my boyfriend is quickly rising.

“And I have no shame in throwing myself at a professional athlete,” she continues. “I’ll lose my job and let him pay for all the shit I can’t afford, like moving out of my parents’ house.”

I slip my arms through hers, eyeing her with a bit of worry. “Let’s go get you a drink and some attention from men who are ten times more attractive and successful than your ex.”

My brother’s teammate, Dom, rushes me the second we walk into the bar, a beer outstretched in his hand. “Little Shay! I got you a drink.” His attention slides to my left, finding my stunning blonde-haired friend. “Holy hello, ma’am.”

“Dom, this is Indy. Indy, this is Ryan’s teammate, Dom.”

Dom’s moment of shock shifts, transforming back to his typical swaggered-out self. “What am I buying *you* to drink?”

Indy eyes the beers in his hand, one for him and one for me. “Alcohol,” she says, stealing a bottle from his hold and chugging it as quickly as possible.

Dom’s eyes widen in shock as he watches her. “I’ll um...I’ll go buy you another one, little Shay.” He scratches the back of his neck in bewilderment.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not sure that I’m drinking tonight.”

I hadn’t made that decision until now, but seeing Indy in this state and knowing Zanders plays tomorrow and is probably taking it easy tonight, the more I’d rather stay sober.

We follow Dom to the rest of his team, but the high-top tables scattered around the bar consist of an equal mix of Chicago’s basketball and hockey players. A few of the guys from the Raptors give a questioning look to my coworker and me, never once seeing us outside of the airplane or in different clothing other than our uniforms. But when my brother stands,

taking two quick strides and wrapping me up in a hug, that's when the eyes of the boys I work for begin to practically bug out of their heads.

I figured tonight would be the night everyone found out that my brother is the point guard for Chicago's basketball team, and surprisingly, I don't really care. The insecurities I once held about people using me to get closer to my sibling aren't as strong anymore. Or at least, I now know how to spot the differences and stand up for what I deserve.

Regardless, too many eyes are staring at me in confusion as silence overtakes the somewhat crowded bar.

"You guys can all chill the fuck out," Zanders calls out to the rest of his teammates as he stands at a table in the back with Maddison and Rio.

"How do you know Ryan Shay?" one of the younger guys, Thompson, from the Raptors asks.

Standing next to my brother, it's got to be easy to figure out. Ryan's eyes match mine. His skin shares the same tone and freckles, and the hair that's not tightly faded on my brother's head is as curly as mine is. Sure, his 6'3" frame overpowers me, but still.

"Are you related to Ryan Shay?" another guy questions in shock, mouth gaped.

"No," Zanders pipes up once again, casually sipping on his water. "He's related to her. Can you guys stop acting like a bunch of little fanboys and leave them the fuck alone?"

A few questioning glances get tossed to the back of the bar where he stands, which makes me worried that the secret of my brother being who he is won't be the only one uncovered tonight.

The bar of thirty or so athletes resume chatting amongst themselves and trying their best to pretend like they're not freaking out a little bit.

My gaze wanders back to Zanders' as he softly smiles from across the room before he falls back into conversation with Maddison and Rio.

"Can I get you a drink?" Ryan looks down at my empty hands.

"I'm okay. Ryan, do you remember Indy?"

He turns towards my coworker. "Oh. Yeah. Hey."

"Hey," she repeats, equally as uninterested. Or embarrassed, I'm not quite sure.

Ryan pulls his buzzing phone out of his pocket. "Shit," he mutters before declining the call and hiding his phone away once again.

"What?"

He shakes his head to tell me nothing, but I know something is up.

“Ryan.”

He exhales a sharp breath. “Some of the old college guys made the road trip down from North Carolina for the game tomorrow. I got them tickets. Brett is with them.”

“Ry, what the hell?”

“I know, I’m sorry. I told them Brett wasn’t invited, but apparently, nobody listened to me because he’s here. He’s in town.”

“No shit!” Rio’s arms swing over both Indy’s and my shoulders. “It’s a playoff miracle. You two are out with us?”

I shrug out of his grasp, leaving him to hang on my friend before I look back to Ryan with worry plastered on my face about the bomb he just dropped.

“You guys look so hot. I mean so...beautiful. Pretty? What do girls like to hear?”

A light laugh is shared between Indy and me.

“We like to hear that our tab is covered from you buying all our drinks. Let’s go, Rico Suave.” Indy pulls him to follow her to the bar.

Rio turns back my way. “*Oh. My. God!*” he silently mouths, green eyes wide and way too happy.

“Interesting,” Ryan notes.

“Rio? Oh, he’s harmless. He’s practically a golden retriever.”

“I meant your friend. Indiana? The one who was crying to Celine Dion at three AM.”

A large hand slyly grazes my lower back, fingertips digging into my hip, but I don’t stiffen from the touch.

“You following me?” Zanders bends down, lips ghosting my ear.

Turning to face me, his hazel eyes rake down my frame, taking in every inch before he pulls his bottom lip between his teeth.

I stare right back at him, wishing I could touch him. Kiss him. Hold his hand. Just about anything, really, but all I can do is look. So, I fucking look.

A white linen shirt has the privilege of gracing his upper half, the top few buttons undone, exposing his deep skin and gold chain. His pants are a shade of olive, the lightest pair I’ve ever seen him wear, but they look expensive as hell, nonetheless. This is different, seeing him in something other than his typically all-black structured outfits.

“Okay, just because you two are dating,” Ryan whispers for only the three of us to hear. “Doesn’t mean I need y’all to eye-fuck in front of me.”

“Can’t help it,” Zanders says without hesitation, his attention locked on me. “She’s stunning, and last night she did this thing with her—”

I quickly slap a palm over his mouth before regretfully pulling my hand back. My eyes dart around the room, but it doesn’t seem like anyone saw me touch him so casually.

Ryan’s eyes screw shut, attempting to unhear what Zanders started to say. “She’s still my fucking sister, man. And if this is how you two act while you’re trying to keep it a secret, I don’t even want to know what it’s going to be like when you’re finally public.”

That thought hasn’t crossed my mind in a while, mostly because I haven’t allowed it to. It gets my hopes up, and at the moment, that dream is too far off to wish for now. Zanders needs to get re-signed. And the only way that’s going to happen is for him to maintain his hockey playboy image. At least, that’s what his agent believes.

I can only hope that once the papers are signed, he will no longer care about keeping up appearances, and hopefully, by then, I’ll have thought about finding another job.

Zanders looks down at my hands. “Can I get you a drink?”

“I’m not drinking.”

“Why not?”

“Well, because you’re not drinking, and I’m hoping you’ll take advantage of me later, but I know you won’t if you’re sober and I’m not.”

His lips begin to lift mischievously, dirty words on the tip of his tongue, but Ryan cuts in before Zanders has the chance to speak up.

“Still here and still your brother.”

“I’m going to go pretend like I don’t know what you taste like while I hang with Maddison until he decides to head back to his hotel room.”

“Still here,” Ryan deadpans.

Zanders’ hazel eyes get all soft and sweet. “You’re beautiful, Vee.” He turns to my brother, knocking fists. “Good to see you, man.”

My boyfriend goes off to hang with his friend, and I can’t help but watch his backside walk away from me. Perfect hockey ass.

“Giddy as fuck,” Ryan laughs, swinging an arm over my shoulders.

“You should try it sometime.”

“Nah. I’m good.”

“And ‘good to see you, man’? What the hell was that bromance?”

“We share the same arena and locker room. We see each other around. Don’t make a thing out of it.”

“Are you guys...*friends*?” My eyes are wide, a smile overtaking my face.

“Don’t be weird about it.”

“Indy, please love me,” Rio whines, his arm hanging on her.

“Rio. No,” she laughs, five margaritas in. “You’re still a baby. I would destroy your life. I would destroy anyone’s life right now.”

“You can destroy my life. I’d be perfectly okay with that.”

“Your boy is a little desperate tonight,” I whisper to Zanders as we stand at a table opposite Indy, Rio, and my brother.

“Every night,” Zanders sighs, leaning his shoulder into mine. “I tried to teach him, but he’s learned nothing.”

“I think his eagerness is part of his charm.” My entire upper arm presses into Zanders’, the only form of touching we can publicly do with too many eyes around us.

He shifts on his elbow, fully facing me and blocking out the three people across from us. “So, what’s *my* charm?”

“Your charm?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Well, your humbleness, clearly.”

“Clearly.”

“Your giant dick, obviously.”

“I see we’re done with the sarcasm bit.”

“But other than the obvious stuff, you make me like me, and I haven’t felt that in a long time.”

Zanders’ brows pinch together. “Vee, you can’t be saying stuff like that when I can’t kiss you for it.”

“Well, it’s true. I like who I am with you.”

“For fuck’s sake.” He looks around the crowded bar before his eyes fall back on me, leaning down and whispering, “Later tonight, I’m going to

show you just how much the man you've made *me* likes the woman you are."

"Indy, you're single now. I've been single since...always," Rio continues to beg, pulling our attention back to the table. "I don't see the issue."

"The issue is you need a teacher, which will be some chick's kink, I'm sure. But it's not mine."

"Oh, come on, Indiana," my brother chimes in. "You can teach him how to belt 'My Heart Will Go On' at three AM and keep everyone in an entire apartment building awake."

Indy's brown eyes turn dark. "First of all, my name is not Indiana!"

Oh, she's drunk.

"And excuse me for having feelings, Mr. I-Had-To-Hide-In-My-Room-All-Night-Because-There-Was-A-Hot-Girl-In-My-Apartment-And-I'm-Afraid-Of-Them."

Ryan's mouth has fallen open. "Trust me. I am *not* afraid of girls."

"I said *hot* girls." Indy grabs a clear liquid shot off the table, pounding it back. "Like me."

My brother's light brown skin has lost some color, slightly fearful of the woman on another level tonight, but not a single thing Indy said was incorrect.

A bartender shows up with a shot for Zanders, nodding towards a couple of beautiful women perched up at the bar. "From them."

All five of us look their way, but they keep their eyes locked on my boyfriend, fingers waving.

"Holy shit, man," Rio admires. "Go over there."

I uncomfortably adjust, Ryan and Indy's eyes watching me.

"I'm good." Zanders brushes off his teammate.

"C'mon, man, let's go. And take me with you. There are two of them. You can share."

"Nah, Rio. As I said, I'm good." Zanders passes the shot off to Indy, who throws it back without hesitation.

"You're boring this year, EZ. You rarely go out anymore. At least last season, I was able to pull your extras."

"Pull?"

"Okay, maybe not pull, but at least I was able to occupy them while you were busy with their friends."

That earns a laugh from the group, including me.

“Not really into it anymore, sorry, Rio.” Zanders’ ring-covered fingers hold his water, as mine do the same, centimeters from his. He slyly reaches out, stroking his index finger over mine and making sure I’m okay.

But honestly, I’m good. Why wouldn’t I be? I got the guy, and all he’s done since we’ve gotten together is remind me that I’m his only choice. So, there’s no jealousy happening on my end. More so arrogance.

Indy is offered a few more drinks when we migrate our way over to the bigger table in the back of the bar, where plenty of both my brother and boyfriend’s teammates sit. At this point, it’s pretty clear Indy is wasted, and I’m happy I stuck with water and can help her home when the time comes.

“I still can’t believe you didn’t tell us you’re related to Ryan Shay,” Rio drools. “I’m a professional athlete, but Ryan Shay? Even I’m fanboying.”

“Honestly, Rio,” my brother pipes up from the seat next to me. “Stevie is much more interesting than I am. Trust me. You have the cooler one of the two of us on your plane.”

“EZ, you’re up, man!” Thompson calls from a few seats down, motioning towards another table of women. They’re beautiful, with bodies barely covered thanks to the Florida heat.

Their focus is locked on Zanders at the head of the table, something I’ve become accustomed to, but this is the fourth time tonight one of his teammates has tried to test him, and it’s getting kind of old.

“I’m good. Just like I said the last three times,” Zanders reminds them before chugging back his water.

“But why not?”

Zanders hesitates in his seat, his eyes quickly darting to mine before averting back to the guys. “Because I’m not partying tonight. So, I’m good.”

“Yeah, you never drink during playoffs, but that hasn’t stopped you before. Come on, EZ! Give the tabloids something to write about!”

Unfortunately, Maddison is already back in his room, so he can’t help Zanders out of this one.

“Zanders, let’s go! Teach us your ways!”

Zanders’ jaw tics in annoyance.

“EZ, boy! Do what you’re best at!”

“Let’s see it! We want a show!”

“For fuck’s sake! Let it fucking go!” Zanders’ palms land harshly on the wooden table as silence overtakes the rowdy group. “I have a fucking girlfriend, okay? And she’s right there.” He motions towards me, completely fed up and frustrated. “So please, for the love of God, shut the fuck up.”

My cheeks heat from the attention. Mouths gape in shock, eyes are wide, and brows shoot up from every guy around the table. Quiet voices stir, mainly from the hockey team, as stares bounce between Zanders and me.

He shoots me an apologetic smile, throwing his hands up in defeat.

Those whispers among the boys grow to shouts as both the rowdy hockey and basketball guys start clapping and cheering.

“EZ has a girlfriend!”

“And it’s our Stevie of all people!”

“Have you guys fucked on the plane yet?”

“Okay, that’s my sister,” Ryan interjects.

Zanders’ moment of frustration has dissipated from his face, replaced with a boyish smile that makes me melt.

I can’t imagine how freeing it must feel for him to tell people, and not only that but for his teammates to be happy for him. Maybe that’ll give him the boost of confidence he needs to know that whenever he decides to show the rest of the world who he truly is, they’ll still love him too.

“If any of you say shit, I’ll fuck you up,” Zanders warns, his typical commanding presence coming back real quick. “Stevie will get fired if word gets out. So, don’t let it.”

“No fucking way,” Ryan sharply curses under his breath from the seat next to me, his eyes glued to the door.

My gaze follows his to find a few of his old college teammates walking into the bar, most notably my ex.

Zanders must spot the blank look on my face because he trails my stare, and as soon as he turns around to the entrance, he takes off with lightning-quick strides.

“Oh no, no, no,” I mutter as I climb over the guys to my side, needing to get out of this booth before Zanders gets to Brett.

His muscular body is large and intimidating as I chase after his back.

“Evan fucking Zanders,” Brett taunts as soon as I grab the back of Zee’s white linen shirt, attempting to restrain him.

Zanders continues straight to the door, and I'm only slightly slowing him down by holding on to his shirt, but it doesn't much matter because apparently, my boyfriend wasn't the one who I needed to stop.

In a blink of an eye, Ryan charges past us, elbow cocking as he swings one heavy fist into my ex's face.

The crack isn't all that loud, but it silences the entire bar as Zanders and I pause dead in our tracks.

Brett grasps at his nose, the blood streaming past his fingers and onto the floor. "What the fuck, Shay!"

"That's for my sister, you fucking piece of shit. And if you come around again when I tell you not to, the next hit you take will be for me." Ryan turns towards his old college teammates. "Get him out of here."

My brother's anger is palpable, his chest rising as he turns back towards the table. "Fucking prick," he mutters under his breath.

As Ryan passes by my boyfriend and me, Zanders holds his fist out, to which my brother proudly pounds.

Indy stops him in his path, halfway from the entrance to the table. "That was hot," she drunkenly admits right before she keels over and releases every drink she had tonight all over Ryan's shoes. "Oh God." She slaps a palm over her mouth in embarrassment. "But that wasn't."

STEVIE



As soon as I get Indy back to her room with a glass of water and some Advil on her side table, I sneak back downstairs to meet Zanders on the beach. His overpriced shoes hang in his hand, and the bottom of his lightweight pants are cuffed to keep from dragging in the sand.

Thankfully, the shoreline is deserted this time of the night, allowing us some rare privacy outside of his penthouse. The only lights are those coming from the oceanfront hotels, but they're not bright enough to illuminate the beach.

Carrying my sandals in one hand, I place my other in Zanders'.

"Let's go farther away," he suggests as I follow, my toes sinking into the sand.

The ocean breeze is perfectly cool, taking an edge off the Florida humidity.

"I can't believe I spilled everything at the bar." Zanders shakes his head. "I got frustrated, and I'm just tired of people not knowing about you."

I swing my hand over, holding his forearm while my other fingers intertwine with his. "That wasn't ideal, but I get it. You've got a lot of pressure on you to be someone you don't want to be. Do you think the team will stay quiet?"

"They're mostly afraid of me, so yeah, I think they will be."

He squeezes my hand in his as we continue to walk down the empty beach, farther away from the lineup of hotels.

"Are you still okay with it? Us being a secret?" He looks down at me, hazel eyes full of concern.

“No,” I tell him honestly. “But this is what has to happen for now. I need my job, but more importantly than that, you need to get re-signed.”

“I called my PR team while you were upstairs. Just in case anyone else heard anything at the bar that could end up online. I also told them I was the one who punched Brett, so if that comes up, Ryan’s shiny image should stay perfectly intact.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

He pops his shoulders. “Kind of a win-win. It pushes forward the narrative Rich is trying to sell and keeps Ryan from looking like a bad guy. Plus, it probably makes my girlfriend swoon that I’m protecting her brother.”

I knock my hip into his thigh. “It does.”

“This spot looks good.” Zanders tosses his shoes to the side.

He takes a seat, legs spread wide with his hand reaching out, asking for me to sit.

“Look at you, sitting your ass in the sand and not complaining about dry-cleaning.”

His chest vibrates in a laugh against my back as I relax between his legs. “I’ve recently learned that sometimes the clothes don’t matter all that much. Just the memories you make in them.”

“Sounds like something an incredibly bright and wise woman would say.”

“She’s all right.”

Zanders’ arms snake around my shoulders, holding me to him, his warm lips working their way up my neck and across my jaw. I melt into him as the ocean waves crash along the bank, filling the silence around us.

“I miss Rosie,” he whines against my skin.

Keeping my lips pressed together, I try to suppress my smile. Rosie is exactly what Zanders needed, whether or not he realized it. She’s become his partner, always at his side and willingly giving him the unconditional love he’s not great at asking for but needs.

She’s a good reminder that there’s someone who needs him, someone who relies on him. And she’s a reason for him to miss home. Zanders might not have realized it, but seeing his best friends build a family around him, even though they always include him, probably left him wanting his own connection to Chicago. And now he has one.

“Did you get any pictures today?”

“Yes.” He beams. “Do you want to see?” But he’s already got his phone unlocked and scrolling before I can respond.

His chin rests on my shoulder, and even though I can’t see his smile, I can picture it perfectly as his thumb swipes, showing off today’s photos of his black and tan girl.

His poor dog-sitter was bombarded with multiple messages a day during Zanders’ first few road trips as Rosie’s owner. Eventually, they compromised that at least one picture a day would assure the overprotective dog dad that his girl was in good hands.

Did I ever think I would be looking at pictures of Rosie sprawled out on a luxurious dog bed or sunbathing on a chaise lounge while her overly expensive dog collar shines in the sun? No. Not in a million years. Especially since she spent an entire year at SDOC, but that intimidating girl is as sweet as can be, and it just took an equally intimidating boy to see it.

“I still can’t believe you got her that collar.”

“She’s got a chain just like her dad,” he boasts before spinning one of the rings on my fingers. “All my girls got some drip.”

I hold his tattooed hand in mine. “All but you and this pinky.”

“This is my favorite one, Stevie girl.” He allows me to spin the ring that’s lost all its shine. “Because it was yours, and you’re my favorite.”

His phone begins to ring in his grasp right there in front of me, his agent’s name plastered across the screen.

“Fuck,” he sharply exhales before pushing decline.

“You can answer. I’ll be quiet.”

“I don’t want to hear it from him right now. He’s either going to berate me for staying out of the public eye the last few months or praise me for getting in a fight I didn’t actually participate in.”

I can sense him staring at his phone from behind me, expecting it to ring again. And when Rich’s name fills the screen once more, Zanders declines it without hesitation, tucking his phone away.

“Get naked.”

“What?” I ask in shock, head snapping back to his.

“Get naked. Or at least get down to your bra and underwear.”

I pause, not saying a word, sitting in confusion.

“If you’re telling me you’re not wearing any panties right now, we’re about to have a real different conversation where the only words exchanged are ‘good girl’ and ‘daddy.’”

A laugh escapes me. "You wish I'd call you 'daddy' in bed."

"Yes, I do."

"Why am I getting almost naked?"

"Because you're about to follow me into the Atlantic Ocean."

He stands from the sand behind me before walking around to face me. There's not much light, just the slight glow from the moon, but it's enough to see him remove his shirt and pants before reaching his hand down for me.

"Come on, sweetheart. We both know your favorite thing to do is follow me."

I playfully roll my eyes, allowing him to pull me to my feet. "I've never once followed you. I'm still convinced you had some sort of tracking device on me so that you could show up wherever I was and ruin my night." My clothes fall onto the sand with his, leaving me in only my bra and underwear.

His warm palms squeeze my ass before traveling south, lifting me and wrapping my legs around his middle. "I think the universe knew we needed to run into each other all those times. We both know you were too blind to notice the devastatingly handsome man in front of you." He pops a kiss on my lips as he carries me into the ocean. "And I was too blind to know what I needed most in life was right there on my plane."

"My plane," I correct.

"Sorry, can't hear." He works his mouth against my neck as he steps further into the surprisingly warm ocean.

As the water surrounds us, I begin to feel light in his grasp, floating but still wrapped around his neck and waist as Zanders stands in the shallow end. The moonlight plays off the water's surface, giving me just enough light to see the beautiful man in front of me.

Silence lingers between us, but not in an awkward way. In a peaceful way. As if we're both right where we belong, and there are no words needed to fill the void or break the quiet. It's content.

"Stevie?" Zanders whispers into the silence.

"Mm-hmm?"

"You are. You know that, right? You're what I needed most in life."

There's a slight flutter in my chest, and it's not that he doesn't say these things often, but sometimes the words hit differently. And when the man who has everything in life, who has every option the world has to offer at

his fingertips, tells you you're what he needed most, well, it's hard not to let those words affect you.

Tightening his hold, Zanders presses me into his body, our chests flush. Staring into those hazel eyes, I'm not sure if he understands how much he's done for me. He's changed my life because he's changed my perspective. He reminds me that I'm worthy of being chosen, and having that confidence changes everything. Every situation, every circumstance is viewed through a new lens.

"You're my best friend," he continues.

Brows raising, I ask, "Have you broken the news to Maddison yet?"

"Sometimes I think he might like his wife more than me, so he can just deal with it."

Chuckling, I lean forward, pressing my lips to his. "You're my best friend too, Zee. Which is a huge development because just six months ago, I convinced myself I hated you."

"You never hated me." He brushes me off.

"I wanted to."

"Why?"

Why? Because hating you was a whole lot less scary than acknowledging that one day, I was going to love you.

"Because you were everything I didn't want. Athlete. Arrogant. Too many options to choose from."

"Sex-god. Model good looks. Charming as hell," he continues for me.

"And I think I just hated the fact that I didn't hate anything about you."

"Well, I never hated you, Vee. You drove me fucking nuts, though, I will say that."

"Me?" I laugh. "Why?"

"Because you didn't give in to the bullshit. You didn't like the persona that everyone else did, and that scared me. The idea that maybe someone wouldn't buy the lie scared me. Plus, you had a quick comeback for everything I had to say, which was new. You drove me nuts because I didn't hate you at all. I liked you way too much."

"I like you way too much, too."

We spend some time floating in the warm water, and when we make it back to the beach, we find Zanders' phone flooded with texts and missed calls from his agent. He takes a seat on the sand once again, only wearing

his soaking wet briefs as he begins deleting everything his agent sent without reading a single message or listening to any of the voicemails.

His brows are furrowed in frustration as he stares at his phone, and I don't know how to help. I don't know how to ease his worries when I hate Zanders' media persona as much as he does. If it were up to me, he'd stop it all. He'd let people see the real him and allow them to love him, but I don't know how this all works. I'm an outsider looking in, and Zanders seems to believe the only way to stay in Chicago is by being this unlovable bad guy, so I'm trying to be supportive regardless of how much it hurts to hear the lies about my favorite person.

I take a seat with him, straddling his lap, forcing him to look at me instead of his phone. His pinched brows begin to soften, the frustration in his eyes melting away before he leans forward, burying his head in my neck.

"I'm so tired of it," he mumbles against my skin.

"Are you ready to stop?"

He nods.

"You have to have faith that Chicago and their fans want you for your skill, regardless of the extra publicity you bring the team."

"And what if they don't?"

I cup his cheeks, pulling his face to look at me. "What if they don't?"

"Then I go play somewhere else."

"How does that make you feel?"

"Scared. I don't want to be alone."

"Would you be alone?"

"Yeah. The Maddisons are all in Chicago. He's locked in and not going anywhere, maybe ever. Maddison will probably end up retiring a Raptor. I'd be alone."

That one is a punch to the gut. I was referring to me when I asked if he'd be alone. Because the truth is, I think I'd follow him anywhere if he asked me to. But clearly, that wasn't his thought process.

His phone rings again, Rich's name plastered on the screen.

"Answer it."

"I can't deal with him right now."

"He's going to bug you all night if you don't, and at least right now, I'm here."

He searches my face for a moment before accepting the phone call.

“Evan Zanders, what the actual fuck is going on?” Rich yells through the speakerphone.

I already didn’t love the idea of this guy, but hearing him talk to my boyfriend this way confirms my suspicions that he’s an absolute piece of shit.

“Hey, Rich.”

“Can you tell me why our PR team is scouring the internet right now, taking down multiple allegations of you having a girlfriend?”

Shit. Clearly, more than just our group heard Zanders at the bar.

The frustration is back on Zanders’ face, so without thinking, I bracket his cheeks and bring his mouth to mine. His full lips smile into our kiss as his agent continues to attack him on the phone.

“Do you have a fucking girlfriend, Zanders? Is that what’s going on with you?”

He continues to kiss me, his mouth too occupied to answer as he pulls my body into his, rolling my hips against him. Thanks to our thoroughly wet and almost naked bodies, I can feel him quickly growing beneath me. He flips us over, my back to the sand as he grinds his body on mine, hitting my sensitive nerves at just the right spot.

My back arches as an accidental whimper slips from my throat. I quickly slap a hand over my mouth, my eyes widening in horror, hoping his agent didn’t hear me.

Zanders silently laughs as he rolls his body onto mine again. “Those little noises drive me fucking crazy,” he whispers before his teeth lightly sink into my shoulder.

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Absolutely not,” Zanders lies, his cheeky smile hidden against the skin of my neck as he works his hot mouth down my throat. “No girlfriend. No way.”

“Then why tonight of all nights is that being plastered online?”

“Fuck, I don’t know, Rich. If you’re so concerned with my personal life, you can deal with it.”

He goes right back to kissing my body and working me up, his hot mouth teasing the skin of my chest as his lips move south.

“Maybe I should let the rumors spread. Maybe then you’ll see what kind of damage you’re doing to the image we’ve worked so hard on creating.

Maybe then you'll understand what I've been trying to warn you about all season."

Zanders pauses right above my belly button. "Rich, I don't give a shit anymore."

"I'm doing this for you, Zanders! Your paychecks are the size they are because of what you and Maddison can offer Chicago other than just your talent on the ice. They're paying for the whole package! They're paying for the Maddison and EZ contrasting duo bullshit. So why the fuck would you risk that all in a re-signing year?"

"I highly doubt that Chicago won't re-sign me just because their organization isn't plastered in the headlines along with my name."

That's right. That's my guy.

His fingers slip into the sides of my panties.

"Oh, really?" Rich lets out an evil laugh. "Then why haven't I heard a single word about a new contract from Chicago when the season is almost over?"

That causes Zanders to pause, pulling his hands away from me. He sits up straight, grabbing his phone and bringing it closer to his ear.

"Wait. What?"

"I warned you," Rich continues. "I told you that Chicago wanted their resident bad guy, and this year you've done a complete one-eighty. I'm not surprised in the slightest that they haven't reached out."

Zanders' mouth falls open in shock, his eyes dull and blank.

"I fucking told you, Zanders. Now I need to put in some work and figure out our options."

His agent hangs up the phone with that.

Any joy or life that was in Zanders tonight is now gone as he sits in shocked silence. The moonlight allows me to see his chest rapidly rise with anxious breaths as the reality of his biggest fear covers his face.

"Zee—"

"We should go," he quickly says. "You should get back to your room before we get caught. This was reckless, being out here in public."

He stands from the sand, unable to make eye contact as he redresses.

I can physically feel the distance he's creating, and I don't know how to stop it or ease his fears when the reality is, he may have just lost his contract. How do I ease that worry? I can't. Not when I'm the reason it's happening.

Zanders stays a block away as he watches me walk into the lobby of my hotel, my clothes and hair still wet from our dip in the ocean.

The quick walk to the elevator is a blur as my chest fills with worry and my mind clouds with fear. Fear for Zanders' career. Fear of the unknown of what that means for us.

"Stevie?"

My head snaps around as I stand outside the elevator, finding Tara sitting on the couch in the lobby, one leg crossed over the other, her hands in her lap.

"Why are your clothes wet?"

I can feel the blood draining from my face, caught in the moment. Thank God that Zanders is out of sight, but Tara's suspicious stare tells me she knows something is up.

"I took a dip in the ocean."

Not a lie.

"By yourself?"

"Yes," I answer much too quickly. "The water felt nice. You should give it a try."

She stays silent as she studies me, and thankfully no more words can be exchanged because the elevator dings on the lobby floor.

"Have a good night." My voice is too high, and my tone is too sweet, but it doesn't work to ease the tension between us.

"Mm-hmm," she suspiciously hums as I step into the elevator.

ZANDERS



A first-round sweep helped clear my head a bit, but the thought of Chicago not extending my contract has been lingering in the back of my mind since that night in Florida. I'd been careless with my private relationship, relying on the fact we hadn't been caught yet and hoping the consequences wouldn't be as bad as we had imagined if we were.

But the reality is starting to hit, knowing there's going to be a breaking point somewhere in the near future. Either I'm not going to be playing for the Raptors after this season, or Stevie won't be working for them.

There's no other way around it, and right now, I'm not ready to face those decisions. The only reason I've enjoyed the road this year is because she was with me.

So, we've stayed quiet, avoiding each other on the plane and only interacting when we're in the security of my penthouse. Stevie has still been coming to my home games, but we've taken extra precautions while at the arena—she sits in only secluded, private areas, not waiting around after the game and just meeting up at home.

But the thing that's had me most concerned is how quiet Rich has been. I haven't heard from him since the night he broke the news that Chicago hadn't reached out about a new contract yet. Rich is never silent. He's always scheming, working on something that will make us both a shit-ton of money, but lately, it's been crickets from him.

After a season full of my friends encouraging me that Chicago would re-sign me regardless of all the added bullshit I bring to the table, I started

to believe it. And that was a mistake.

It's hard to focus on the most important weeks of my career, sitting a series and a half away from the Stanley Cup Finals, when my future is up in the air. It's hard to concentrate on the here and now when I don't know where I'll land after it's all over.

But just because Chicago hasn't offered a new contract yet, doesn't mean it's off the table, so for the next few weeks, while we continue our path to the finals, I'm going to focus on what I can bring to the organization, hockey-wise. And that's one of the best defensemen in the league and the best on a team that's only nine wins away from winning it all.

As soon as I open the front door of my penthouse, Rosie rushes in, searching for my girlfriend. My dog is as chill as they get, so on days I have a pre-game morning skate, like today, I bring her to the rink with me and let her bop around the locker room, getting love from all the guys.

Stevie whines about losing her cuddle buddy that early in the morning, and I'm still not sure if she's referring to my dog or me, but for my ego's sake, I like to assume she means me.

I follow Rosie to my bedroom, expecting to find chestnut curls sprawled across my pillowcase, waiting for me to come back and join, but my bed is empty, with no pretty flight attendant in sight.

Through the silence, a soft whimper echoes from the bathroom connected to my room, so I follow the sound.

The bathroom is dim, only a slight glow coming from the lighted mirror where I find my girlfriend standing almost entirely naked in front of it. She has a pair of black leather pants pulled up past her thighs, but nothing else hides her bare body. When Stevie finally looks up, and I catch her reflection in the mirror, that's when I notice the sadness covering her features.

Her blue-green eyes are rimmed in red, her freckled cheeks are a flushed shade of deep rose, and her full bottom lip slightly trembles as she looks at me.

"Vee, what's going on?" I take two slow strides to stand behind her, meeting her in front of the mirror.

She quickly wipes her eyes. "I didn't know you'd be home so soon."

She takes a deep breath, attempting to compose herself before she turns around and tries to slip past me. But I catch her before she can get away, pulling her into me as she buries her head into my chest.

Running a soothing hand up and down her back, I ask again, “What’s going on?”

“I’m just having a rough morning,” she mumbles into my shirt.

“What happened?”

Her back rises in my hold, taking a deep inhale. “I wanted to dress up for your game tonight, but my clothes aren’t fitting.” A strangled breath shakes her body. “One of your teammates’ girlfriends had shirts made for tonight, and Logan snuck me the one with your number on it. I was going to hide it under a jacket or something else, but it doesn’t fit.”

Burying a hand into her curls, I hold her to me, allowing her to feel what she needs to feel.

“I’m just having a bad day, is all.”

“That’s okay, Vee. You’re allowed to have bad days.”

For a few moments, she hides in my chest before composing herself and pulling away. She offers me a half-smile as she wipes her face. “I’ll be all right.”

Studying her for a beat, it’s evident that she’s not all right in the slightest. The way Stevie feels about her body is different every day, and that’s perfectly fine, as long as she’s overall on the path to accepting herself, which she is. The bad days will ebb and flow.

My hands find the waistband of the pants that won’t close, fingers digging in and pulling them down her legs. As she steps out of them, I toss them aside before turning on all the lights in the bathroom, brightening up the space.

“Come here.” I usher her to stand in front of the full-length mirror, completely naked. Staying behind her, I allow her body to take up the frame with my hands holding her upper arms.

“Zee.” She looks away from her reflection, a quiet whimper leaving her lips.

“Vee, look at yourself, please,” I urge as gently as possible.

Her sad eyes wander back to the mirror as a slight frown ghosts her lips.

“Tell me what you like.”

“Nothing.”

“Stevie…”

She takes a sharp breath before studying herself in the reflection. “I like my hair.”

Brushing her curls out of the way, I trail a line of kisses across her bare shoulder. “I love your hair. What else?”

Examining herself in the mirror, she finally blurts out, “I like my eyes.”

Crossing both arms around the front of her shoulders, I tell her, “I love your eyes.”

She stays silent, looking at herself in the mirror.

“What else?” I coax.

Glancing at herself up and down, she shakes her head to tell me nothing.

That breaks my heart, but I know it’s not the truth. Stevie is just having a bad day, but that’s okay because I have an endless list of what I love about her body.

“Okay.” I kiss the side of her head. “Then look in the mirror and tell me what you *don’t* like.”

Brows furrowed, she finds my gaze in the reflection, confusion covering her features.

“If you have such a short list of the things you like, then tell me what you don’t like.”

I watch as Stevie internally battles with herself, not wanting to say any of it out loud.

Her stare wanders the length of the mirror, and her tone is soft, her volume almost inaudible as she finally whispers, “I don’t like my thighs.”

My palms cover her bare legs as goosebumps decorate her light brown skin. “I love your thighs.” I squeeze them in my hands. “I especially like when they’re warming my cheeks as I’m going down on you.” That pulls a small laugh from my typically wild girl. “But my favorite is when you’re sitting in my lap, facing me, and your thighs straddle my legs. I like getting to see you.”

Stevie’s head cocks to the side, her brows pinching together.

“What else don’t you like?”

Blue-green eyes wander her reflection. “I don’t like my stomach. I wish it were flatter.”

“I love your stomach.” Both hands graze over it. “I love that it’s soft and that I have something to hold when we’re cuddling. Or fucking.”

She tries to hold back her slight smile. “I don’t like my boobs.”

“Stop.” I jolt back, slightly offended. “That can’t be true. Those are two of my favorite things.”

Finally, a small laugh escapes her. “I don’t like how they’re two different sizes.”

“Vee, that’s because you’re human. And I don’t pick favorites between them.”

Her gaze continues to work the length of the mirror. “I don’t like my stretch marks.”

I find the ones she’s staring at. “These?” I ask as my fingertips trace the jagged lines on her hips. “You don’t like that your body can adapt? Because I think that’s pretty fucking cool.”

“Well”—she looks down, admiring—“I like them a whole lot more when you’re touching them.”

Sharing a soft laugh, I hold her as we look at each other in the mirror.

“You don’t have to love your body every single day. That’s unrealistic to expect, but I’ll be here loving it for the days you can’t.”

“It’s just hard right now during playoffs, with all your teammates’ wives and girlfriends matching every game. They’re all perfect, and I look nothing like them.”

“What makes them perfect? Because of their clothing size? That doesn’t make someone perfect. And regardless of size, looking like everyone else is boring. You’re stunning, Vee, and what makes you different is what makes you stand out. In the best way possible.”

She offers me a slight smile through the mirror.

“Do you think I look like the guys I grew up playing hockey with in Indiana? Fuck no, I don’t. And now, in the league, my peers don’t look like me. But look at us together.” I nod towards our reflection. “You can’t look at us and say we don’t fit in. We go together perfectly.”

Her blue-green eyes gloss over in the reflection. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Zee.”

Oh, fuck. My heart. The words. The girl. It all makes my heart race and for my lungs to be short of oxygen.

“Same here, sweetheart.”

I pepper kisses on the side of her head as I watch a smile pull at her lips through the mirror. And though I love every single curve on her body, that one right there is my favorite.

STEVIE



“Are you done with your part of setting up the plane?”
“Hmm?” I absentmindedly ask my coworker, keeping my eyes glued to my tiny phone screen.

“Are you done with your part of setting up the plane?”

Tara’s sharp tone causes my head to snap up and look at her. Her brows are lifted, eyes pointed, and arms crossed over her chest. “Yes. Everything is done. Just waiting for the game to end.”

Tara’s disapproving stare bounces from my face down to my phone and then back again before she slips past me to the galley.

Rolling my eyes, I slide into the nearest seat as I continue to watch the game on my phone—round two, game six, and currently seven minutes into the overtime period. Chicago is ahead three to two on this series against Vegas, and if they pull out the road win tonight, we’ll be headed for round three, only one series away from the Stanley Cup Finals.

“How are they doing?” Indy falls into the seat next to mine, but before I can answer, a deep throaty moan slips from her. “Holy shit, these seats.” She melts further into the lux leather. “No wonder the boys all pass out the second they get on the plane. These seats are amazing.”

“Overtime,” I tell her, wishing I could laugh along with her right now, but I’m far too stressed. “Seven minutes in. First to score wins.”

My index finger absentmindedly ghosts over the skin of my thumb, wishing I had my gold ring to spin.

“How’s Zanders doing?” Indy’s whisper is as quiet as can be.

“He’s doing well. He’s played a shit-ton of minutes tonight, though.”

“Oh, there’s Rio!” Indy points out as number thirty-eight hops the boards, and I know when Rio takes the ice, his blue-line partner is right behind as number eleven joins him in the game.

Zanders’ shift is spent primarily on the offensive end as Chicago controls the puck. Maddison gets a good look in front of the goal as the announcers’ voices raise, assuming he’s about to score, but one of Vegas’ defensemen picks it out of the pocket, clearing it out of their zone and extending their season’s life a little longer.

But before it makes it past the blue line, Rio pops his stick out, keeping the boys onside for another play.

The puck bounces around the team in white, exhaustion evident in their sloppy passes and slow maneuvers. Thankfully, Vegas is equally as careless, everyone on the ice just as tired from the lack of a shift change.

My heart is racing as I squirm in my seat, unable to calm myself down as I keep my eyes glued to the tiny screen in my hands.

The puck makes it back to Zanders as he quickly looks to pass it off but instead, he winds up, letting loose on a slap shot from the blue line in hopes it’ll find one of his teammates in front of the goal.

But it doesn’t find one of his teammates. Instead, it flies past the goalie, finding the back of the net and pulling out the overtime victory.

“Oh my God!” I yell out. Indy jumps up from her seat, screaming with me as we hold each other in a hug, jumping around and cheering.

“I don’t know what’s happening, but I know it’s good!” Indy adds.

“It’s really fucking good!”

“Since when do you two care about how the team does?” Tara suspiciously asks, cutting into our celebration.

Indy and I freeze, releasing each other as we stand a little straighter, smoothing out our uniforms.

“Uh...” I hesitate. “We should all care. The longer the season, the more flights we have, and the more money we make. Right?”

Tara’s gaze works the length of my body, clearing not believing me. “Sure.”

The boys are the rowdiest I’ve ever seen them as they fill the plane for our flight back home to Chicago. Rio’s boom box is blaring music, the team is in high spirits, and there are constant cheers as each player walks onto the plane.

But the plane gets its loudest when the giant defenseman with gold jewelry and a fitted three-piece suit who scored the game-winning goal walks on board.

My cheeks hurt from smiling so much, infinitely proud of him for continuing to show that the headlines and attention he brings the organization are about more than just his personal life. He has the talent to back up all the shit-talking, and he has the skill to earn a huge extended contract based on ability alone.

As he makes his way to the exit row, the cheers continue. The boys overflow in the aisles, not yet ready to settle down into their seats. Zanders' smile is widely excited as he throws his bag into the overhead bin above his seat, until finally, his head snaps back to the galley, finding me.

"Yeah, I'm going to get out of here before I see something I wouldn't mind seeing but probably shouldn't." Indy ducks into the aisle, getting lost in the crowd of hockey players.

But in exchange, Zanders emerges in the back galley, need burning in his hazel eyes. His large hands splay against my rib cage as his commanding steps push me against the side of the plane. He bends down, feverishly bringing his mouth to mine.

His lips are soft but urgent as he kisses me with hunger, stealing my breath when his tongue sweeps in. His powerful body pins me to the back of the airplane, one hand cupping my face, the other squeezing my ass, and just for a moment, I allow myself to get lost, forgetting where I am.

Finally, he pulls away, his chest rapidly rising and falling as we both attempt to fill our lungs with the oxygen we've been missing.

"You're going to get me in trouble," I remind him, but I'm starting to care less and less about that being true.

"Just wanted to celebrate with you." He wears a genuine smile before taking off towards his seat.

"Okay, even I felt that one," Indy admits, fanning herself off when she steps back into the galley.

"Tara—"

"Too busy kissing ass up front to notice."

My phone dings on the galley counter.

Zee (Daddy) Zanders: *I can still taste you.*

“It feels good to be playing my best right now.” Zanders closes the passenger side door of his car behind me. “With the contract up in the air, I’m glad they’re seeing everything I have to offer. It wouldn’t make sense for them not to re-sign me.”

Pulling both our bags out of the back of his G-Wagon, Zanders slings them over his shoulder before draping his other arm over me. The chill in the evening air cuts right through my coat, regardless that it’s spring in Chicago, so I pull it a little tighter as we walk out the detached garage of Zanders’ building.

“Do you want to go first, or should I go?” I ask my boyfriend as we turn the corner to his building, stopping a fair distance away, the way we typically do.

We survey the front, where more and more fans have been camping out as the playoff run continues, but surprisingly enough, the front steps and surrounding street are empty.

“Looks like we’re in the clear tonight.” Zanders’ arm slides off my shoulders, his fingers intertwining with mine as he wears a proud smile, the two of us walking to his apartment together.

“I think we should get breakfast delivered tomorrow. That way, we don’t have to leave the bed,” Zanders suggests as we take his front steps. “What do you—”

“Evan Zanders!”

“EZ, over here!”

Flashes of light bounce off countless cameras as a hoard of paparazzi jump out from their hidden places.

“Zanders, who is she?” another reporter yells.

“Head down!” Zanders urges, trying to cover me with his body as we run up the steps to his front door.

“Evan Zanders, who’s the girl?”

Voices are yelling, shouting, asking for attention from the hockey star, and the lights and flashes from their cameras are distracting and hard to see past. All I want to do is get to that door and away from the crowd.

My feet are desperately trying to run away, frantic for some reprieve from the attention, and I could not be more thankful when Zanders’ doorman ushers us inside.

But the flashes don’t stop, and I can hear their shouting through the floor-to-ceiling glass walls.

Zanders holds his suit jacket over me, trying to block me from the media as we run to his elevator. “For fuck’s sake! Get them out of here!” he yells over his shoulder to the lobby staff.

As soon as we’re safe inside the four metal walls of the elevator, I fall back to the wall behind me, my body buzzing with adrenaline. My heart is racing from the scare, but more than anything, the possible repercussions are what terrify me the most.

“Are you okay?” he anxiously asks, running a gentle thumb across my cheekbone as his eyes search my face.

I nod, unable to speak.

Zanders paces the elevator as he pulls out his phone, looking for a signal, but it’s not until we reach his floor that he gets one.

As soon as he opens the door to his apartment for me, he tosses our bags to the side before dialing his agent.

All three attempts go to voicemail.

“Fucking, Rich. Answer your goddamn phone,” he mutters into the device, pacing the kitchen with nerves. “Rich!” Zanders shouts into his voicemail. “We have a fucking problem, and I need you to handle it before anything gets online. Call me back.”

Hanging up, he frantically texts away, his thumbs moving at the speed of light. “Don’t worry. It’ll be fine.” But I can’t quite tell if he’s trying to assure himself or me.

Too many minutes pass as a knowing gut feeling flows through me. I take a seat at his kitchen table, opening his laptop. Heading straight to Google, I type out his full name.

As I assumed, pictures are already plastered online of our encounter outside as headlines cover my home screen.

“Mystery woman with Chicago’s Evan Zanders.”

“Who is she?”

“Want to know where Zanders has been hiding all season? Well, now we know.”

“It’s too late,” I tell him as he continues to urgently type away on his phone.

“What?” he absentmindedly asks.

“Zee.” My tone is sharp and focused, pulling his attention. Zanders’ brows crease in frustration as he looks at me, eyes dark, telling me he

knows how bad this is going to be for us. “It’s too late. It’s already out there.”

OceanofPDF.com

ZANDERS



Last night was a nightmare.

The worst possible thing that could've happened, happened.

Well, almost the worst thing. The only saving grace from our encounter outside was that no one got a shot of Stevie's face. The only pictures floating around the internet show the back of her, though my face is in plain view. Thankfully, Stevie's coat covered her work uniform, but her signature chestnut curls are on full display for the world to see and speculate over.

There are no questions, wondering if this is just another one of my hookups. By me trying to cover her and the look of utter shock on my face, it's clear that she's more important than that. "Girlfriend" was plastered next to our picture pretty quickly last night.

I barely slept.

Rich hasn't reached out yet, and he and my PR team did fuck-all to help me out when I needed them most.

But the worst part of all isn't the possible implications it'll have over my contract extension or Stevie's job. The worst part is the internet trolls hiding behind their keyboards while filling message threads with hateful words about my girlfriend.

Right now, my biggest worry isn't about my future with Chicago hockey. It's not about losing my image. What's consuming my every thought is that I'm allowing my favorite person to be put on blast because people love to talk about me.

I've become overly protective of Stevie, especially with how she thinks about herself and her body. Now, because of me and my fucked-up image, endless comments cover the internet, tearing her down and reaffirming the internal dialogue that she already struggles with.

It was one thing when the cruel words were her own and the small company of shitty people she kept, telling her she wasn't enough, but when the entire internet decides to do it? I'm afraid my voice isn't loud enough to drown out the noise.

And of course, because people use the internet to spread hate, the comments aren't happy for me or excited to learn who it is I'm dating. They're disgusting and attacking, delivering low blows, and I'm worried they're going to work.

After Stevie's breakdown in the bathroom last week, this is the last thing she needs.

I should've known better. I did know better. We had been more careful, more cautious, and without thinking twice about it, I told her to walk into my building with me, hand in hand, and now we're in this mess because of me.

I was on top of the world after our win, but everything came crashing down only hours later.

My penthouse is dead quiet. No televisions in the background or music playing. Only silence. The stillness is eerie, as if we both know there's going to be a shitstorm to deal with as soon as we speak of it.

I'm on my third coffee of the morning as I bring another fresh mug into my bedroom for Stevie. I've been up, pacing the living room and scouring the internet most of the night, but the last time I left her in here, she had finally fallen asleep.

However, this time when I enter my room, I find Stevie awake with her back to me, still lying in bed. She's got Rosie tucked under one arm as she scrolls on her phone with her other hand, and even from across the room, I recognize the images plastered on my screen. They've become ingrained in my mind from staring at them all night.

And the confirmation she gives me that she's been reading the hateful comments as well is when she tries to wipe a tear without being noticed.

"Vee, please don't look at that," I plead as I take a seat next to her on the bed. Placing her coffee on the nightstand, I gently take her phone from her hands. "You don't need to read that stuff."

“Why are people so mean?” Her voice is weak, almost inaudible.

“I don’t know, baby, but I don’t want you reading that.”

“Has your agent called?” Hope. So much hope shines in her red-rimmed eyes.

“No, not yet.” Exhaling a long deep breath, frustration flows through me. Rich is on my ass all the time, and now he decides to stay silent? When I need his fucking help? “Anything from your coworkers?” I run a soothing hand over her leg.

“Indy texted me to check in, but nothing from Tara.” She nods her head, reminding herself that’s a good thing. “Yet.”

Studying her, I can’t seem to find the fire my girl typically emanates. “Vee, are you okay?”

Her shoulders lift, a sad half-smile pulling at her lips.

Silence lingers between us, neither of us quite sure what to say.

“Can I even leave the building?” she finally asks.

“Yeah. Security cleared the area, but I’m going to have someone walk you out when you decide to go.”

“I think I’m ready to go.”

My heart drops. “You want to leave?”

She nods, pulling her gaze away from mine, but I can still see the sadness swimming in those blue-greens. “I want to go talk to my brother.”

Of course, she does, but I wish she wouldn’t. I wish she’d stay here and talk to me. Tell me how she’s feeling. Tell me if she’s ready to be out in the open, but she doesn’t need to tell me because it’s evident on her face.

She’s not ready for this. She can’t handle the negative attention that comes with being associated with me, and I don’t blame her.

“Okay,” I resign. “I’ll let you get ready then.”

Stevie meets me by the front door after she’s showered and dressed. It’s not lost on me that her signature curls are slicked back into a bun, and her sweatshirt has a hood so she can hide on the walk to her apartment.

Exhaustion covers her pretty features thanks to the cruel words beating down on her, and I couldn’t feel more at fault than I do right now.

She shouldn’t be hurting this way. Her deepest insecurities wouldn’t be reinforced if it weren’t for me.

She’s hiding because of me.

“It’ll be okay.” I wrap her up in a heavy hug, holding on a little longer than usual. Because the truth is, it is going to be okay. One way or another,

I'm going to make it better for her.

Her hand snakes around to the back of my neck, pulling me down to meet her. Her lips are soft, but there's an edge of desperation in her kiss, and I'm not sure why. I'm not sure why this one feels different.

"I'll call you later." I search her face as the words leave my mouth, looking for some kind of reprieve from the knot in my stomach, but it doesn't work. She seems like she's on the edge of a breakdown.

I keep my eyes on my girl as Stevie walks down the hall to the elevator. Her head hangs low as she pushes the button, but it isn't until I see her back begin to vibrate that I take a few quick strides and pull her into my chest.

"Vee, come here."

Her desperate cry is the most painful thing I've ever heard, knowing I'm the one who caused this. She's hurting because she's with me. People think they have the right to say hateful things about her because she's with me.

Pulling her face from my chest, I cup her cheeks, thumbs wiping the fresh tears from under her swollen eyes. Her brows pinch together as she swallows hard, and the utter defeat that covers her face fills my chest with guilt.

How do I beg her not to listen to them? How do I remind her that the only person's opinion that should matter is her own?

The elevator stops on my floor as the words stay stuck in my throat.

I'm sorry.

Please don't listen to them.

Who cares what others have to say about you?

But the words don't feel right. They feel hypocritical because I should be reminding myself of the same thing. The nasty comments online aren't just about Stevie. They're about me too. And I'm having an equally hard time reminding myself that the only opinion of me that matters is from the people closest in my life.

Stevie steps into the elevator, facing me. Part of me wants to hold my arms out and keep the doors from shutting. Pull her out of there and force her to talk to me. Make sure she knows how important she is. Assure her that she's worthy. But at the same time, she asked for a moment alone.

I remain still behind the threshold as the metal doors close. Stevie stays standing tall for a moment until she sinks back onto the wall behind her, burying her head in her hands just as the elevator shuts with her inside.

My throat is thick with guilt as I walk back into my apartment. My eyes are burning from seeing her this way. I've seen my girl hurt before, but this is different. She's as confident as she is insecure. It just depends on the day, the moment, the people she surrounds herself with. But right now, at this moment, the insecurities are breaking her down like I've never seen.

Rosie's whimper adds to the pain as we stand at the window, watching Stevie walk safely across the street, unbothered.

The anger begins to build, taking away from the overwhelming concern. This is as much Rich's fault as it is mine. If he would've answered my fucking phone call last night and taken care of it the way I pay him to, then we wouldn't be in this situation.

I grab my phone, assuming I'm going to call and reach his voicemail for what feels like the hundredth time today when I find a text waiting for me.

Rich: *Call me. Now.*

Rosie curls up on the couch, eyeing me as if she can sense something is wrong while I pace the living room. Holding my phone tightly to my ear, I wait for Rich to answer.

"Zanders, what the fuck is going on?"

"I could ask you the same goddamn thing! Where the hell have you been all night?"

"You don't get to yell at me when you're the one who fucked up."

"*I fucked up? I fucked up?*" I blow out a condescending laugh. "If it weren't for this bullshit image you forced me to buy into all these years, I wouldn't be in this mess. People wouldn't give a shit that I have a girlfriend. Do you know how fucking weird that is? I'm the only guy in the league that makes headlines for having a fucking girlfriend."

"This *bullshit* image has made you millions of dollars. Then millions more on top of that. And you've enjoyed every second of it. Don't lie, Zanders. You're not very good at it."

"I want out. I don't want to do this anymore. I want to live my life in peace and play hockey."

"You don't get it, do you? There is no out. This is who you are to the hockey world. This is what people want."

"Things can change. Fans can change their opinion. *I've* changed. Just because I'm not fucking a new girl every night or getting into fights every chance I have, doesn't mean people aren't going to want to watch me play."

“You sure about that? Have you read the comments online? The message boards are littered with comments about you. And trust me, Zanders, it’s not as easy as you think. You’re selling a brand, a lifestyle. They want EZ. What you bring to hockey is more than just the sixty minutes you’re on the ice. You bring a persona. Someone fans can vicariously live through. People pay the money they do to support you because they can come watch you knock heads on the ice, leave with a new chick on your arm each game, all while making a stupid amount of money that they like to watch you flaunt around. Then they go home to their sad little lives, all while wishing they could step into your shoes. No one gives a fuck that you have a girlfriend. They just don’t want you taking away their fantasy.”

“That’s not my responsibility.”

“Yes, it is! That’s quite literally part of your job. You make the kind of money you do because of it.”

“You really think Chicago won’t re-sign me because of a few comments online? That’s bullshit.”

“Have you read them? If you think Chicago, who is already close to maxing out their budget for next season, by the way, isn’t going to consider the opinions of fans who financially support the franchise, you’re wrong. Chicago expects you to play dirty, cause an uproar, and fill the stands with fans eager to see the jerk from the tabloids. And it’s more than a few comments. It’s tens of thousands, Zanders. It’s not good.”

Have I read them? A few, but I was more concerned with the ones about Stevie than I was the ones about me.

“I warned you this was going to happen. I told you all season long,” Rich continues.

Those words ring an alarm in my mind. Too many connections. Too many coincidences.

“Rich, how did the reporters know where I live?”

He hesitates for a moment. “You’ve had fans camped out for weeks. You thought the word wouldn’t get out?”

“Yeah, but the timing, and they were hiding. It seems set up.”

“You think I did that?” He breathes out a condescending laugh. “I want the opposite of this. I want the old EZ back. I want the guy who would be an easy sell to Chicago. This is the last thing I wanted.”

“I need you to pull the pictures offline.”

“Too late.”

“Fuck that, Rich! The comments about her are fucking brutal. Do it. Now.” The desperation in my tone doesn’t go unnoticed.

“It’s too far circulated. There’s no way. And I’d be less concerned about the comments regarding your little girlfriend and more worried about the ones addressing you. The best advice I can give you right now is to get back to the guy people love to hate.”

Looking up to the ceiling, I throw my head back in defeat. “I don’t want to be hated anymore.”

“At least they’re talking about you. At least we finally have their attention. That’s what we want. That’s what we need for a new contract. Honestly, at this point, Chicago might be off the table. I’m starting to look where else we can move you.”

“That can’t be true.” My words are rushed, frantic. “I’ve been playing my best hockey. We’re one series away from the finals.”

“Then why haven’t I heard from them? I told you all season the kind of guy they wanted. They already have Maddison as their golden boy. They want the duo that’s been selling tickets for the last five years. If you’re not going to do it, they’ll find someone else. Someone a lot cheaper too, I’m sure.”

“I don’t give a fuck about the money. I just want to stay here.”

“If you want to stay in Chicago so badly, you know what you need to do. And you only have a couple of weeks left to do it.”

If it weren’t against regulation for me to reach out to the Raptors’ upper management myself, instead of going through my agent, I’d call them right now and ask what the fuck is going on. But unfortunately, for legality reasons, I can’t.

“I need to go so I can deal with this mess.” Rich hangs up the phone with that.

The anxiety buzzes through my body as I take a seat on the couch next to my dog. Rosie buries her head under my arm, dropping on my lap, but my knees won’t stop bouncing, so she immediately gets off and instead lays on the couch next to me.

The websites I spent hours on last night are the same ones that pop up first again today.

The notorious photo, the one that’s plastered online, is the back of Stevie and me, racing up the stairs of my building. My face is turned over

my shoulder, looking like a child who just got caught doing something he wasn't supposed to. Stevie's chestnut curls are bouncing the way they typically are, and her long coat covers her button-down shirt and uniform skirt. But the jacket still outlines her shape.

The comments won't stop flooding in. It's endless. It's cruel.

The words they use to describe her are ones you wouldn't want your worst enemy to read, let alone the person you care about the most.

It's all out of jealousy and hate. I know this, but I don't know if Stevie does. She couldn't even see that her own mother was jealous of Stevie's life. How the hell is she going to decipher that from strangers online? And there aren't just a few comments. There are thousands on thousands shaming her, calling her names, ridiculing her.

All because she's with me. People have always talked shit about me, and now that she's associated, it's as if people think they have the right to do it to her as well.

This photo is just the back of her. It's just a figure in a coat. They can't see her blue-green eyes that make me weak in the knees every time the corners of them crinkle from her laughter. They can't see the freckles that decorate her cheeks, the same ones that create patterns and shapes I've memorized. They can't see her smile that melts me every time it beams.

On top of that, no photo will ever show her wit. Her sense of humor. Her wild charm or her overwhelmingly open and kind heart. No picture will ever show how sweet she is.

But it doesn't matter because the endless hate thrown her way is because she's with me. I watched her light dim this morning because she's with me.

She shouldn't have to experience this.

Shifting my attention to the other comments of concern, my stomach drops just from reading them. They're exponentially worse than they were last night. Initially, it was only speculation in the comment section, wondering if this is where I've been all season, commenting on the change they've noticed.

But of course, internet trolls feed off one another, and the things they're saying have gone from bad to worse.

"No wonder Zanders is so soft this season. He's busy playing fucking house."

“The only thing I liked about him was seeing what hot girl he was fucking, but nope. I’m good now.”

“No wonder Chicago hasn’t re-signed him. This comment section is speaking the truth. He’s old news.”

“Such a little bitch.”

“Chicago isn’t going to re-sign him, but I don’t want him coming onto my home team either.”

I was wrong. I thought I could have it all. I thought I could play both ends, being the asshole the hockey world expected while being my authentic self behind doors. But it didn’t work, and now I’m going to lose my contract because of it.

I knew deep down fans didn’t want the real me. They wanted the showman, the extravagant, the fighter, the playboy, but even though I thought I was doing a good job at continuing to wear that mask in public, I clearly wasn’t. No one was buying it. No one believed my lie.

This reputation is going to follow me for my entire life. It’s who I am. It’s who I’ve always been, and I made the mistake of thinking maybe I could change it. I thought as soon as my contract was extended, I could drop the act. But no one wants the real me. No one is paying to support the real me.

I used to thrive off the hate. I used to crave it, but now it’s like a heavy burden on my shoulders, stunting me. And this time, it’s not just me and my name getting dragged through the mud.

Ryan’s warnings flood my mind.

“I don’t want Vee wrapped up in your reputation.”

“My sister cannot handle the type of attention you get.”

He was right. Why am I doing this to her?

There’s no out for me, but there can be an out for her.

No one is ever going to love me for me, and at this point, I may as well be the man they love to hate.

STEVIE



My heart aches for Zanders. The things people have been saying about him are so hard to read. Just because he's a famous athlete doesn't mean he's not human. It doesn't mean he can't get hurt.

All day, the internet has been criticizing him and reenforcing his biggest fear—that his fans won't love him once they learn there's more to him than the notorious troublemaker.

Thankfully, by now, I think he knows that's not true.

While the comments are hurtful towards Zanders as an athlete, the comments directed at me are disgustingly cruel but solely about my body.

These people don't know me. They don't even know what I look like. All they saw was my shape, hidden behind a coat, but because my boyfriend is well-known, they think they can shame my body for not being the same as the women they were accustomed to seeing him with before.

I'm not going to lie. It hurts.

The words are ones that I've said to myself for years. They're ones that my passive-aggressive mother and shallow friends have thought but never voiced. But when tens of thousands of strangers reinforce the negative thoughts you've been working so hard to clear from your mind, those words become cement, finding every crevice, settling in, and affecting every thought.

I have a famous brother, and I hid from his spotlight for years because I knew I couldn't handle the attention. But the spotlight found me, and as much as the comments hurt, I've grown enough over the last six months to

compartmentalize them to a certain extent. Hurt people hurt people, and a lot of what they're saying really isn't about me.

Don't get me wrong, they've been echoing and repeating in my head all day, but at this point, there's nothing I can do but try to move forward.

"Any luck?" Ryan asks from the couch opposite me. His laptop is open, fingers typing and scrolling away.

"There's nothing local." I squint at my own computer screen. "There are companies based in Boston and Seattle, but that's about it for flying."

"Well, that's out of the question. You're not leaving Chicago."

Separately, we continue to search the internet for local job postings. I left Zanders' place this morning because I wanted my brother's advice. As someone who is accustomed to the limelight, I needed his guidance on what to do next, and as soon as I got home, Ryan and I jointly concluded that it was time for me to start looking for a new job.

Even though no one knows I'm the girl from the photo, it's only a matter of time before my name is released. It might not be today, and it might not be from last night's picture, but eventually, it'll come out. Zanders and I can't live in secret for his entire career.

I turned my phone off as soon as I made it back to the apartment, knowing I couldn't handle reading any more of the nasty comments online. The ones about me are horribly mean, but those about Zanders hurt worse, and reading ugly words about your favorite person is a special form of torture I don't want to experience again. I've been frustrated with his reputation, and things have become progressively more disheartening over the last few weeks. But it all came to a head this morning, and I couldn't help but let out my emotions from being overwhelmingly sad for him.

Zanders is tough. He's got a thick skin, and he's been doing this for years. But this is all new to me, and I'm not sure how much longer I can handle people being blinded from what a huge heart that man has.

I want nothing more than for him to open up to the world and tell the truth. If they don't like him because there's more to him than they assumed, and if they don't want to root for him because he's more fun to root against...well, that says more about them than it does about Zanders.

"What are your thoughts about getting out of the airline industry altogether and doing something else?" Ryan peeks over his computer screen.

“I’ve thought about it, but I don’t know what else I’d do. I don’t really want to work a nine-to-five job because then I’ll only be at the shelter on the weekends. That’s what I love about flying. I could be off for days or weeks at a time.”

“Has your coworker reached out? The one in charge.”

“I’m not sure. I turned my phone off as soon as I got home.”

“Then you might be in the clear. You have some time to figure it out. If the team keeps winning, there’s only a couple of weeks of the season left. You might be okay until summer, and even if you’re not, you know I’ll help you out with whatever you need.”

“They’re going to keep winning,” I assure him.

My words are more so a reminder to myself than to Ryan. A lot of today’s concerns have been how those disgusting comments will affect Zanders during the last couple of weeks of the most crucial season of his career. He’s so close to the finals. He’s so close to a new contract. I don’t want him to doubt himself when he’s playing so great.

And even if he has to keep up appearances for the end of a season until Chicago gives him a new contract, we’ll just deal with it. We’re so close to the end.

“Maybe I can get you a job with my team?”

“Absolutely not.”

Before Ryan can argue, a knock at the door draws our attention. We both look towards the entryway before our questioning glances find each other again.

“I’ll get it.”

“Look out the peephole before you open the door, Vee.” Concern laces Ryan’s voice. After everything that happened last night and this morning, he’s been more protective than usual. But our building is as secure as it gets. It’s not like a random reporter is standing in the hall, waiting to interrogate me.

Looking through the peephole, the most stunning man stands behind the wooden barrier with a hood over his head and his shoulders sagging. But even if I couldn’t see his face, I’d recognize him anywhere. His commanding presence makes him hard to miss, even though his posture is a bit defeated at this moment.

“Zee, what are you doing here? Did anyone see you come up?” My head is on a swivel as I open the door, checking the empty hallway behind

him, but as my attention makes it back to Zanders, my heart sinks.

His hazel eyes I've become accustomed to seeing shine are dull and pulled away from mine. His cheeky smile that melts me every time it comes out is nowhere to be found.

"I tried to call, but your phone went straight to voicemail." His tone is much softer than usual. "Can I come in?"

Stepping out of the way, I widen the opening for him to come inside. As Zanders enters, he keeps his head low, unable to look at either my brother or me. My eyes dart to Ryan's as we share a quick, unspoken conversation.

"I told Dom I'd meet him for a quick shootaround, so I'll leave you guys to it." Ryan stands from the couch, grabbing his gym bag and darting for the door.

"Ryan," Zanders interjects before pausing a beat. "I'm sorry about the headlines."

My brother nods in understanding before closing the door behind him and leaving us alone.

"Zee, what happened?" I run a soothing hand down his arm, but his eyes screw shut from the contact, making the knot in my stomach grow.

He doesn't answer.

I take a seat on the couch, needing to make myself more comfortable for this uncomfortable conversation. "Do you want to sit?" I pat the seat next to me.

He shakes his head without saying a word, all the while refusing to look at me.

"Zee, what's going on? You're scaring me."

Finally, his hazel eyes give way, finding mine and allowing me to see the endless world of guilt within them as his brows crease with regret.

My throat is tight, and my stomach seems hollow. It hurts already.

"Don't," I warn. "Please don't."

He inhales a deep breath. "Vee—"

"No," I desperately cut him off. "You can't do this."

"Vee, you know how much you mean to me."

"Stop. Please don't do this," I beg.

He hesitates before averting his attention to the wall. "You and I...we just—" He shakes his head, unable to get the rest of the words out.

"Because of the pictures? We'll be more careful. I'll...I'll be more careful."

“It’s not just the pictures.” Zanders squeezes his eyes shut, and when they reopen, all emotion is gone. He stands across the room from me, staring off, unable to make eye contact. “Let’s be honest. We knew there was going to be an end to us eventually.”

“What? No, we didn’t know that! *I* didn’t know that!” I stand from the couch, the desperation taking over. “Not once did I think there was an end to us, Zee.”

“Come on, Stevie. You knew who I was the whole time. This is always going to be me. You had the right impression when we first met. I thought I could change, but I can’t.”

“Is this because of what people are saying online?”

He quickly shakes his head.

“Then what is it? Because just this morning you said that everything would be okay. You promised it would be okay.” I cover my mouth to silence whatever strangled noises are trying to break free. “Please, don’t do this.”

“I just...I can’t do this anymore.” The man standing in front of me is not the same man I spent the last few months falling for. I don’t know where he is, but he’s not here.

I don’t know the right words to say. I don’t know the right words that’ll stop this. “Did I do something wrong?” my voice squeaks out.

Finally, he shows a moment of emotion. Pain covers his expression as his eyes screw shut, turning his body slightly away from me. He shakes his head as he swallows, unable to speak.

“Can I fix it?”

Slowly shaking his head again, he bites down on his lip, keeping his eyes on anything but me.

“Look at me!” I desperately yell from across the room. “If you’re going to break my heart, at least watch while you do it.”

His hazels find me, allowing me to read him for the first time since he started this conversation. He’s lying. He doesn’t often lie, so he’s real shit at it when he tries. And right now, he’s lying.

“Did your agent say something?”

No response. Zanders doesn’t shake his head. He doesn’t say a word because I’m right.

“What happened? Is it because you’re with me? Are you not going to get re-signed because of me?”

“It’s not because of you,” Zanders finally speaks. “But I can’t do this anymore.”

“Why?”

He releases a deep, resigned sigh. “I don’t have an answer for you, Vee —”

“Don’t call me that,” I snap. “You don’t get to call me that while you do this.”

Another sharp breath. “Stevie, I’m not trying to hurt you.”

“Well, you’re doing a terrible job.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, but you’re going to continually get hurt from being with me.”

“This is because of what people are saying online, isn’t it?” I blow out a condescending, knowing laugh. “You’re doing this because of what *strangers* are saying.”

Again, he doesn’t respond, giving me the answer.

Every single part of my body aches. My heart hurts. My lungs are shallow. My eyes burn. The man who lifted me up with his words, who has been so adamant about reminding me that I’m enough, that drowned out everyone else’s noise, is now listening to what others have to say.

Swallowing, I attempt to hold back the emotions that want to escape, but they’re on the verge, and it’s getting too difficult to restrain them. “Are you embarrassed by me?” my voice cracks on the last word, making it almost inaudible.

Finally, Zanders’ stoic expression melts as he takes a quick stride towards me, his tone frantic. “Stevie, absolutely not—”

I hold my hands up in front of me, wanting to maintain my distance and keep him from coming any closer.

“The last word I would ever use to describe the way I feel about you is embarrassed.” His eyes are pleading for me to believe him. “I was so proud to be with you.”

Was.

“Why are you doing this?”

Again, he doesn’t answer as he stays still, staring at me, silently begging me to accept it.

“Answer me!”

“Because I can’t change! I can’t change who I am or how people view me. This reputation is going to follow me around for the rest of my career,

and I refuse to bring you down with it.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“I’m telling you the truth!”

“No, you’re telling me a *version* of the truth. But the real truth is, you could start being honest about who you are. You could stop with the act, but you won’t because you’re afraid you’ll end up on a different team. You’re worried that if you let fans see the real you, they won’t like it, and Chicago won’t re-sign you, is that it?”

I don’t know why I’m asking. I already know.

I shake my head at him in disappointment as a disbelieving laugh escapes me. “You’re a coward, EZ.”

His eyes dart to me. “Do *not* call me EZ. That’s not me.”

“Is it not? Because that’s the role you seem hell-bent on playing. Easy to manipulate. Easy to control.”

Zanders’ act completely crumbles in front of me. The emotions he typically wears on his sleeve have been hidden since he came over, but finally, they make an appearance. He’s defeated, and for a man that commands every room, he’s small in this apartment.

“Stevie, I’ll be alone if I have to move teams.” His powerful voice breaks. “My family is here, and I’ve lost my family before. I’ve been alone, and I can’t go through it again.”

“You never would’ve been alone. I would’ve followed you anywhere.”

Confusion colors Zanders’ face. “No, you wouldn’t have. Ryan is here. The shelter is here. There’s no way you’d leave.”

“I would’ve followed you anywhere, but you never asked.”

Guilt is evident in his expression, as if he’s rethinking his decision. A shocked breath hitches in his chest as his eyes stay locked on mine.

Zanders slowly steps my way, and this time, I let him. I don’t stop him when he opens his arms and wraps them around my shoulders with his crushing hold.

Burying my head into his chest, I inhale his scent, trying to memorize it for when he goes, but at the same time, I hold out hope that it’ll be unnecessary because there won’t be days without him.

His soft lips slowly dot kisses up my neck and across my jaw, each one burning my skin with the thought that it could be the last time I feel them. His kiss lingers slightly longer on my cheek as I melt into his touch, needing him to want me. Love me.

Choose me.

I need him to change his mind. Part of me is convinced I can feel him changing his mind in the way he's holding me. Like he'll never let go, and I'd be perfectly okay with that.

He places one more desperate kiss on the corner of my lips, and I know that's it.

"I'm sorry, Vee," he whispers as my heart shatters, any hope I had, lost.

With that, he lets go, turning his back on me to walk out of my apartment.

"Why'd you let me fall in love with you?" I call out from across the room as the tears begin to fall down my cheeks without permission.

That causes Zanders to pause partway to the front door, his back to me.

"You said I was your first choice, and I believed you."

Zanders' back vibrates with a strangled breath before he quickly wipes his sleeve across his face and leaves my apartment.

As soon as the door closes behind him, every emotion I wasn't doing a good job of hiding comes flooding to the surface, overwhelming me as I curl up on the couch, allowing the pain of what I just lost to wash over me.

STEVIE



I should've called out sick from work today. It wouldn't have been a lie. Heartbreak has settled into my body, and I think it might be the worst sickness of all.

I've been dumped before, sure, but this is different. Past relationships were nothing in comparison to the one I had with him. I'm in an unexpected stage of grieving as I try to heal from losing someone who is still alive. Someone who still lives across the street from me. In a way, I think it might hurt worse than losing someone to death. Those losses don't necessarily choose to leave you.

But Zanders did, and now I have to grieve that he's no longer in my life because he chose not to be.

I want to hate him. I want to despise every little thing about him because hating someone is so much easier than loving them when they don't love you in return.

But I do love him, and that's the worst reminder of all.

My heart has never hurt as much as it has the last few days. I can feel the pain through every nerve in my body. There's not a thought in my mind that isn't clouded with him. With us. It's as if my entire being can't associate that he's no longer a part of me. That he doesn't want me.

My bed has never felt so empty, and my nights have never been so restless as they have been without Zanders and Rosie by my side. My food has never tasted so bland, and the days have never felt so long. Time is supposed to heal all wounds, but it's moving in slow motion. How am I supposed to heal when minutes tick on like hours?

I think about him constantly, and I miss every little thing about him. I miss the confidence he instilled in me. I miss his smile that could melt me on sight. I even miss the extra twenty minutes I would spend waiting for him to finish getting ready after I was already done.

But most of all, I miss how much I thought he loved me, and I wish I could've been enough to make him stay.

He hasn't reached out, not a single phone call or text. It was a clean break for him, but for me, it turned my entire world into a spiraling mess, and I don't know how to start cleaning it up again.

"You ready for this?" Indy gently asks as we wait in the back galley as the team boards the plane in Chicago.

My dull and tired eyes zone out, staring towards the entrance. "Not even a little bit."

Round three, game three is tomorrow night. It's the first road game since Zanders ended things, and we're headed to Seattle. Surprisingly, for the first time in my life, I wish I was on my way back to Nashville instead.

There are some memories tied to that city that I'd rather not revisit. It's the place where things began to shift for Zanders and me. Nashville tends to make me feel like I'm not enough, and right now, that's the last thing I need to be reminded of. Trust me, it's been my most constant thought. But more important than any of that, Nashville is where my dad is, and sometimes a girl just needs her dad.

"Wow," Indy breathes out. "He looks like shit."

Her words pull me out of my zoned-out daze, causing me to snap out of it and look up. Right there in the exit row, Zanders stands, unmoving, his eyes locked on me.

He looks dim, as if any light in him has burned out. I never thought I'd say this, but he does look terrible.

Zanders holds my stare, and the longer he looks at me as he stands motionless in the aisle, the more the unshed tears begin to burn my eyes. But I refuse to cry here at work, and I refuse to let him see how much he broke me.

His brows are creased, the corners of his lips turned down. His signature three-piece suit is wrinkled, and both the jacket and vest are unbuttoned. He needs a haircut and a shave, but regardless of how disheveled he looks, I can't tear my eyes off him.

His face has been ingrained in my mind for days. It's the only thing I see whether my eyes are opened or closed, and now that he's in front of me, I refuse to look away.

But unfortunately, Tara pops in front of me, ruining my line of vision.

"I know it was you."

My heart sinks. "What?"

"In the picture. I know that was you."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Cut the shit, Stevie. I've had a suspicion for a while."

My throat is thick as I try to swallow down the truth, looking for a lie to cover it up. But my life has been nothing short of a colossal clusterfuck the past few days, and at this point, I don't care about much anymore.

"What are you going to do? Fire me off suspicion? Go for it."

Tara's head jerks back slightly, seeming surprised I'd offer myself up like that. "Once I get confirmation, I will."

"Sounds great." My voice is even. "Now, if I can get back to my job, that'd be wonderful." I point up the aisle. "Looks like everyone's on board, so we should get going, don't you think?"

Tara fixes her posture, standing up straighter as she tries to study me. "Do the exit row briefing," she commands, turning her back to us and heading up the aisle.

"Do you want me to do it?" Indy offers.

"No." I push my shoulders back. "It's my job. I can do it."

Wearing my faux mask of confidence I haven't had to fake in quite a while, I make the trek to the exit row. I sense eyes on me, but I try to ignore the stares. There's no way in hell these guys haven't seen the nasty comments online, and they all know I'm the girl from the picture.

It's embarrassing, to be honest, but I'm just trying to get through the day.

Keeping my eyes on the ground, I address Maddison and Zanders. "Are you ready for me to brief you on the exit row?"

"Stevie," Zanders says in a breath of relief, asking for my attention.

"Are you guys ready?" I ask again. This time, my eyes find Maddison, begging for him to answer so I can get this over with and hide in the galley once again.

He feels terrible. It's evident in the way he's looking at me, so finally, he nods his head to allow me to begin.

Zanders' eyes burn into me the entire time as I repeat the exact same emergency briefing I've given them all season. I'm almost positive they both have this memorized, but Zanders watches, hanging on every word, begging for me to look at him. I can't, though. It hurts too much.

This used to be fun. It used to be the perfect excuse to see him right before every takeoff, but this time I hate it.

"Are you willing and able to help in case of emergency?"

I look to Maddison first. "Yes," he answers, his eyes bouncing to Zanders, clearly uncomfortable sitting in the tension between his best friend and me.

Refusing to glance at Zanders, I keep myself distracted by staring off to nothing, waiting for him to say yes.

He knows the rules. He has to say yes before I can leave, but he stays silent, so I repeat, "Are you willing and able to help in case of emergency?"

"Stevie." His tone is laced with desperation.

"Are you willing and able to help in case of emergency?"

"Can you look at me?" he softly asks, sitting forward.

I don't care that his tone is sad. I have to do my job right now, and he's not letting me. He's the one who broke up with me, and here he is, forcing me to stand in front of him. It's a unique form of torture.

"Please look at me," he begs.

"Can you answer the question?"

In my peripheral, I watch him slump back into his seat, defeated. "Yeah. I'm willing and able to help."

That's all I need to hear, so I take off, ready to get back to my space of safety. But today, there's not a single place on this plane that feels like a refuge. It's smaller and more cramped than it's ever been.

I only make it two steps before Zanders grabs my forearm, willing me to stop. Unfortunately, I wasn't prepared for the physical contact, and his touch burns my skin, reminding my body how much it misses his.

Looking down at his hand, the first thing I notice is my old, tattered ring on his pinky. Why is he still wearing it? I want him to take it off because there's too much meaning behind it being on his hand, but at the same time, I hope he never does.

Another mistake I make is drifting my gaze north. His hazel eyes are glossed over yet hopeful for my attention. His brows are furrowed, begging

for me to stay and talk to him. His Adam's apple bobs in a thick swallow before he opens his mouth to speak, but I stop him before he can.

"Do you need something? A drink? A pillow? Something to eat? You know, since I'm just your flight attendant now."

Maddison's head falls back to his headrest as if my words affected him.

Zanders' face shows the physical hurt my words cause, but most of me doesn't care. He hurt me. It's only fair for him to feel a tiny morsel of what I'm experiencing.

That's a lie. I love him too much to wish him pain, but in self-preservation, I don't know how to make myself feel okay at this moment. Or any moment, really.

"Sparkling water, I'm assuming?"

Exhaling a sharp breath, he rapidly blinks and shakes his head until finally, he releases my arm and allows me to leave.

Keeping my stare focused on the back galley, I will my feet to carry me there as quickly as possible, attempting to hold my poker face until I can hide.

"You're a badass," Indy compliments as soon as I step into our workspace. "But if you want to take a second to cry, I'll cover you."

"Okay," my voice breaks. "Maybe for just a second."

I spent the rest of the flight to Seattle hiding in the back. Rio popped his head in at one point, making some joke about Zanders and me hooking up behind everyone's backs all year, but when I didn't even crack a smile, he realized his mistake.

It seems, besides Maddison, no one on the team knows that we broke up. I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing, but I'm trying not to read into it. At the end of the day, we're over, so grasping at straws to give myself a little hope is only going to draw out the heartbreak I'm convinced is going to last a lifetime.

Being in my work uniform reminds me of the compliments Zanders would shower me with while wearing it, so as soon as I'm in my hotel room, I peel it off, changing into my comfiest sweats. Which, of course,

reminds me of him as well. I didn't even pack the ones he gifted me, but it doesn't matter.

The view from my hotel room overlooks Seattle's Great Wheel, right there by the water, but as beautiful as the whole thing is, it reminds me of the Navy Pier in Chicago. And that reminds me of Zanders' apartment, which in turn reminds me of Zanders.

I hate that my brain associates him with every bit of my life in Chicago. I wish I didn't think about him every second of every day. But that city is filled with him, and I don't know how to clear him out. He's inundated every part of my life.

In my heart, Chicago represents Zanders, but so does almost every city in North America that we've visited together.

Turning off all the lights in my room, I bury myself under the covers of my bed, needing the darkness to bring me some sleep. It's only three in the afternoon, but sleeping allows my mind to shut off so I've been sleeping the days away, hoping it'll help pass the time more quickly.

My phone rings on the nightstand, illuminating my pitch-black room, and I could not be more thankful to see my dad's name across the screen. I'm pretty sure an audible breath of relief leaves me as soon as I answer the phone.

"Hey, Dad."

"Vee! How's my girl doing?"

"I've been better."

A small moment of silence lingers between us. My dad found out all about my relationship with Zanders around the time we broke up. Though, a part of me thinks he's known since he visited at Christmas.

"Ryan called. He was worried about you flying out for playoffs. He wanted me to check on you."

"That's nice of you both, but I'll be okay."

It might not be true, but I'm manifesting.

"Well, I promised your brother I would check in. So, what room are you in?"

"What?"

"What room are you in? I'm outside your hotel."

Eyes widening, I pull my phone away from my ear to look at it, though I don't know why. It's not like he's on FaceTime and can prove he's in Seattle. I'm just in a state of shock.

“Really?” My voice cracks, feeling just a speck of hope for the first time in a while.

“Yeah! Let me up!”

As soon as my dad knocks on my door, I rush him with a crushing hug, needing the joy he always brings into my life.

“I missed you too, Vee.” His big bear hug holds me close before he shows off the six-pack of IPAs in his hand. “And I brought beer.”

“Thank God. I knew I liked you for a reason.”

My dad pops the top on two before handing me one and taking a seat on the couch opposite me.

“So, what’s going on?”

I breathe out a condescending laugh. “Where should I start?”

“Where do you want to start?”

I take a long swig, trying to choke back any emotion that attempts to surface. “Zanders broke up with me.”

“So, do we hate him now or what?”

That pulls a laugh from me. “I’m still deciding.”

“Did he give you a reason, or was this out of the blue?”

“I don’t know. He gave me a reason, but I don’t know that I believe him.”

My dad stays silent, allowing me to continue.

“He said he’s never going to be able to change and that I knew all along who he was, but I don’t think that’s true. I think he’s scared to show his true colors because the reputation he’s earned in the NHL is quite the opposite of what a good man he is. He’s due for a contract renewal, and he doubts himself. You know how important contract years are with Ryan, but this is different. Ryan doesn’t have to lie about who he is to make money, but Zanders feels like he has to.”

“And having a girlfriend doesn’t fit that image,” my dad states, understanding the whole situation with ease. “Does he want to change?”

My shoulders pop in a shrug. “I thought so. I was positive he would be honest about who he is once he got re-signed, but I don’t think that’s the case anymore. It seems like he’s convinced himself this is the only way to keep fans invested in his career.”

“How does that make you feel?” My dad takes a long swig of his beer.

“It makes me feel like shit.” My head drops back, eyes screwing shut, needing to hold in the tears that want to fall. “In the time Zanders and I

were together, he made me feel like I was his first choice. I've never been anyone's first choice, and now it feels like it was all a lie. And it's not that I want him to choose me over his career, but there could've been another option, and he didn't even try to find another way."

My dad hesitates, eyes darting around the room before they fall back on me. "I saw the headlines. Do you think maybe he was trying to protect you? Because that makes a lot of sense to me. I don't know the guy, but from what you've told me of him, he's known to be protective of the people he cares about."

"Maybe, but I don't need him to protect me. I'm sick of it, actually. Ryan does it too much, and maybe Zanders is doing it too, but I can stand up for myself. Those comments about me online were disgusting, and people are trash, but they didn't upset me nearly as much as the way people were talking about him. I wasn't even thinking about myself in that situation."

My dad cocks his head, pride evident on his face.

"What?" I cautiously ask.

"You love him."

"Geez, Dad." I bury my face in my hands, needing to hide my burning tear-filled eyes. "Don't remind me."

He squeezes my arm. "I'm sorry. I've just never seen you like this. I know your heart hurts, and I'm not trying to disregard that. I'm just not used to seeing you so sure of yourself. I like it."

It's something Zanders instilled in me, to be sure of myself, to stand up for myself, but is all that gone now that he is too?

"Mom doesn't like it."

My dad's lips press together as he attempts to hold back. "I didn't want to bring her up in case you didn't want to talk about her."

"She's been calling me nonstop."

"I know."

Silence lingers between us as we share awkward glances. It's been nice not being subjected to the backhanded comments and the disapproving looks, but at the same time, I don't know that I want my mom out of my life forever. I want us to have a better relationship. I want us to have the relationship we had when I was younger, and she thought I was going to follow in her footsteps. It wasn't until I became an adult that my choices

began disappointing her and our relationship suffered, but I do wonder if one day she could find the ability to be supportive again.

“Is she okay?” I finally ask.

My dad takes another long swig of his beer. “She’s coming to some realizations, and they’re hitting her pretty hard. She had a tough time seeing those headlines and knowing they were about you. But I’m not going to sit here and say she doesn’t deserve to feel the way she’s feeling.”

“They only said exactly what she’s been saying for years.”

“That’s my point. I think seeing them written down in front of her face, and coming from other people, woke her up to what she’s been doing to you.”

My dad’s words don’t have much emotion behind them, and he’s a somewhat sensitive guy who cares about his family more than anything, but the way he’s talking about my mom feels detached. It feels different.

My brows furrow. “Are you guys okay?”

His eyes leave mine. “I don’t know, Vee. This isn’t something you should discuss with your kids.”

“Well, if it’s about me, I think you should tell me. I’m an adult.”

“Things have been a bit strained, but I don’t want you worrying yourself about it.”

I sit up straighter. “Well, now I am. I don’t want you guys to have problems because of me.”

His chest moves in a sigh, his brown eyes glossing over slightly. “She’s a good person, Stevie. She’s just been lost these last few years, and she hasn’t been a good mom to you. I know that, and deep down, she knows that too. It’s hard watching her hurt you when she wasn’t always like this, you know. She was a really good mom to you when you were younger.” My sweet dad’s voice breaks before covering his mouth with his palm.

“I know, Dad.” I squeeze his arm. “I remember. I just wanted her to be proud of me the way she used to be, but I’ve given up at this point.”

He nods in understanding. “You never met your grandmother, but she was a real piece of work.” He releases a breathy laugh that has no humor in it. “She treated your mom exactly how your mom has been treating you. The only difference is you got out. You formed your own path and didn’t do every little thing she expected you to do. But your mom, she had some big dreams she put on hold to try to please her own. We got married much younger than we planned because her mother was pressuring us. She went

to a college her mother chose for her.” My dad nudges me as if he’s silently asking, *Sound familiar?* “Now, I’m not going to put words in her mouth, but I think there’s some jealousy going on, and instead of being proud of you, the way a loving mom should be, she’s envious. But you know, I think she’s starting to see it, and the realization is hitting her that she treats you the exact way her own mother did. Who, by the way, she resents still to this day.”

I stay silent, absorbing this new information. I’ve never known much about my mom’s past or how she was raised. Her perfect little mask is hard to see behind.

“I’m not trying to make excuses for her,” my dad continues. “But generational trauma isn’t easy to break, and for the first time in a long time, I have a bit of hope that she might be able to learn and grow from this.”

I can physically see the emotional toll it’s taking on him, trying to be an empathetic husband while also standing up for his daughter. No part of cutting my mom out of my life was supposed to affect him or their relationship, but of course, it did.

Holding my beer out for him to cheers, I add, “Well, maybe something good can come out of those stupid headlines after all.”

He connects his empty bottle with mine. “Maybe.”

“I think I need another beer after that.” Standing from the couch, I grab two more from the counter.

“Speaking my language.” He takes a swig of his fresh one. “So, tell me everything else. How’s work? How’s the shelter?”

“The shelter is great. I love being there. The owner is the best, and the dogs are so sweet. As far as work goes, I don’t know how much longer I’ll have a job, so there’s that.”

“Do they know it was you in the picture?”

“Officially, no, but it’s only a matter of time until my name is released, and I’ll be out of a job.”

“When Ryan called, he mentioned there’s a couple of airlines hiring, and one happens to be out here in Seattle.”

“Yeah, but that’s off the table. I can’t leave him in Chicago. Not after he worked so hard to get me out there in the first place.”

“He wanted me to encourage you to look into it.”

That causes me to pause. “Wait. Really?”

“Yeah. If you want to.”

“Why didn’t he say something to me?”

A knowing laugh heaves in my dad’s chest. “Because it’s Ryan. You think that guy could look you in the face and tell you to move across the country without him choking back tears? That kid is a brick wall of emotion unless it comes to you.”

When that job posting popped up last week, I didn’t think twice about it. Moving away from Chicago was off the table. Zanders and I were still together at that point, and I never thought Ryan would suggest I leave the city. But nothing has helped me feel better. Nothing has helped soothe the broken heart that’s been wearing me down. Maybe a two-thousand-mile distance will jumpstart the healing process, and at this point, I’m desperate enough to try anything.

I just want to feel better. I don’t want to walk out of my apartment and see Zanders’. I don’t want to think about him every time I’m at SDOC when I notice a small repair that his donation paid for. I don’t want to relive finding him on his steps on Christmas any time I pass his building. I don’t want to think about how much he loves his niece whenever I inevitably run into them while Ella is on his shoulders. I don’t want to remember that for the first time in my life, I felt a genuine connection to friends whenever I see the Maddisons in the lobby of my apartment. I just want some reprieve from everything I lost.

My whole life, I’ve been waiting for someone else to choose me, and I constantly let myself down, holding out for others’ approval. But why am I waiting around for someone else to make me a priority when I can do it myself?

I can choose myself.

“I want to,” I say with confidence. “I want to go apply tomorrow.”

ZANDERS



“F our penalties, Zee?” Maddison throws his sweat-soaked jersey in the collection bin sitting in the center of the visiting locker room.

“Ask me if I give a shit.”

In case he couldn’t tell by the void look on my face or the dried blood on my lip from one of my fights tonight, the answer is “I don’t.”

Any other day, Maddison would give me his usual Captain lecture about letting the team down by giving Seattle so many power plays. He’d remind me that we just lost on the road, and now we’re only up by one game in the third round of playoffs. He’d tell me to get my head out of my ass and straighten out my priorities.

But he doesn’t say any of that because he knows where my priorities lie. I’m not thinking about hockey. I’m not thinking about my contract. I’m just thinking about the girl who’s missing from my life because I didn’t want my reputation to hurt her anymore.

Maddison’s eyes stay locked on my pinky as I unwrap the athletic tape from around Stevie’s ring that I’ve refused to take off the last three games. It’s thin and delicate enough I’ve somehow gotten away with wearing it, the refs assuming my finger is taped for medical reasons. But I’ve worn it, clinging to it like some sort of lifeline. As if having it on my finger symbolizes that she’s still in my life.

But the way she was looking at me on the plane yesterday, as if I were a stranger she wanted nothing to do with, reminded me that I’m not. I’m not in her life anymore. So, I’m going to wear this fucking cheap-ass ring until

the metal disintegrates around me because it's the only part of her I still have.

Maddison's apologetic gaze cautiously finds me before he looks down at my finger again.

"I don't want to talk about it," I remind him as I grab a towel and head to the showers.

Suited back up in my pre-game fit, I follow the boys out of the locker room to the bus waiting for us through the back entrance of the arena. Plenty of eager fans greet us with outstretched posters and pens, secluded behind the roped-off barrier on our short walk. Most of the guys take their time, signing autographs and snapping pictures with fans, but I keep my headphones over my ears and my emotionless gaze locked on the bus ahead of me.

Opposite the fans, reporters line the walkway, cameras flashing, calling out our names, and hoping for a piece of nothing they could contrive into something. It takes all my willpower not to lift my hand and flip them off as I walk by. To be fair, it'd pair perfectly with the image Rich wants me to project, but it's enticing because I partially blame them for my life going to shit just days ago.

Chicago wanted their resident bad guy again? Well, here he is. I'm back to my typical dirty fights, not giving a fuck about anyone else, including the fans who are begging for my attention. They got what they asked for, so if they could hurry up with my fucking contract extension, that'd be great.

"Zanders." My arm gets pulled back, causing my focused stare to leave the bus, finding a small hand holding on to my forearm. The hand belongs to a chick wearing a flirtatious smile. I pull my headphones away from my ear, wondering what the fuck she wants and why she thinks it's okay to touch me so casually. "I'm Coral."

I pull my arm from her grasp. "Great," I deadpan before continuing to the bus.

She chases me down, the heels of her shoes clicking against the cement before she grabs me again. "No, I'm *Coral*. Rich sent me."

Yanking my arm from her more firmly this time, I warn, "Don't fucking touch me."

Confusion and a touch of embarrassment cover her face as she looks around, chuckling a small laugh while she fixes the hem of her dress.

"I don't give a shit who sent you. Do not touch me again."

“Okay.” Maddison cuts between her and me, swinging an arm over my shoulder and leading me to the bus. He uses his body to shield mine from the cameras, but even if they didn’t see the interaction, they sure as shit heard it.

“I can’t do this anymore,” I quietly say for only Maddison to hear.

“I know, man.”

Two in the morning, and I can’t sleep. No fucking surprise there. I’ve barely slept all week, thanks to an empty bed and Rosie whimpering in the middle of the night from Stevie’s absence. To be fair, Rosie isn’t the only one awake, hurt from missing her.

It’s like part of my soul is gone, and I don’t know how to survive without it. Everything I did, I did because I chose to put her first. It wasn’t fair to her to put her through the wringer just because she’s associated with me. She shouldn’t have to endure the criticism and hate because she’s with me. She’s too good and too sweet and too kind to have to live with that kind of hate continually finding her.

I was trying to put her first, and I assumed that would make things easier to digest. Since I did this for Stevie, I figured I would be able to handle the heartbreak I brought on myself.

But there hasn’t been a moment of reprieve. Since the second I walked out of Stevie’s apartment when I threw up on the side of her building from doing something no part of my body wanted to do, all the way to this very moment, the pain has become exponentially worse.

Grabbing my glass from the coffee table in my hotel room, I take a swig of the whiskey I poured an hour ago. I have a strict no-drinking policy during playoffs, but I’ve done plenty of things this week I never thought I’d do, so having a drink after a game seems pretty tame in comparison to the other choices I made.

Two in the morning, and I’m sitting on a couch in Seattle, drinking warm whiskey and scrolling through every picture I have of her while reading every text we’ve ever exchanged, needing to fill the hollow void in some way. I screenshot every one of Stevie’s Instagram photos the night the paparazzi found us before we jointly decided to unfollow each other as a

way to keep her name out of the press. I've stared at those images this week more times than I could count.

A quiet knock on my door sounds, and like the sad fucker I am, a moment of hope flashes through me, thinking it might be her. But even though we may be in the same city, she'd never come and find me, and I don't blame her one bit.

Maddison stands on the other side of my door, looking as exhausted as I do, his brown hair disheveled and his eyes laced with sleep.

"Can I come in?" he asks as I open the door. He eyes the whiskey on the table between us. "What happened to your no-drinking rule?"

"Been doing a lot of things I never thought I would. Figured having a drink was nothing in comparison."

"Pour me one then." Maddison nods to the bottle.

I grab another crystal glass and pour some warm amber liquid into it. Cheersing, he takes a swig.

"This is disgusting."

"I know." Taking the seat on the couch, I lean forward, draping my elbows on my knees with my head hanging low.

"You've got to stop punishing yourself."

My head snaps up. "You think me being too lazy to go get ice is a form of punishing myself?" I blow out a half-hearted laugh.

"That's not what I'm referring to, and you know it."

"If you're here to talk about Stevie, I don't want to hear it. It's two in the fucking morning, so you should go."

"I don't really give a fuck what you do or don't want to talk about. I can't sleep because my best friend is in the worst shape I've ever seen him, so yeah, we're going to talk."

I lean back on the couch, casually crossing one ankle over my knee before taking a swig of my warm whiskey. And I do it all while wearing a smug as fuck grin, silently saying, *Good luck getting me to talk, asshole.*

"I fired Rich."

Well, that'll do it.

"What?" Leaning forward, I place my glass back on the table before I accidentally drop it in my state of shock.

"I fired Rich," Maddison repeats. "I've been wanting to do it for a while, and that shit he pulled on you with the paparazzi was my final straw."

“We don’t even know if that was him, though.”

“You know that was him. He’s been getting a side cut for tipping off the press for years. I can’t prove it, but we all know it’s true. It’s the only thing that makes sense for why he wants your name plastered in every headline or why reporters always seem to find you.”

I know he’s right. Deep down, I’ve always known, but it’s never affected me all that much. This time, though, it was too far, and not only did it hurt me, but it hurt the person I care about most.

“I know things are different for you right now with needing a new contract, but Logan and I jointly decided for me to cut ties.”

“He’s never fucked with you, though.” My brows furrow in confusion. “You’ve been successful off exactly who you are.”

“Zee.” Maddison exhales a weary breath. “You’re our family, man, so him fucking with you is the same as if it weren’t happening to me.”

My head drops down between my shoulders as I attempt to hide the glossy film covering my eyes before I nod my head, unable to speak.

Firing your agent is no small feat. Most athletes go their entire career working with the same agent, as long as said agent keeps making you money. Maddison has been extremely successful in the time he worked with Rich, so him doing this for me is not a small act of loyalty by any means.

“You know I can’t do that right now,” I remind him. “Firing Rich would essentially tank my entire career. I’d have to represent myself, and teams can’t talk to me while I’m in season.”

“I know. You’ve got to do what’s best for you, but I want you to know where I’m at. I’m over the whole game we’ve been playing into. You’re as good of a man as me, if not better, and I’m tired of people not knowing that. I’m sorry for playing my role all these years by allowing fans to think I was any better than you. Fuck, you’re a huge reason why I am who I am now.”

A sly smile creeps across my lips as I look at him, needing to break up the serious tone of this conversation.

“What?” he cautiously asks.

“You gonna try to kiss me now after that love confession or what?”

“Dick.”

“Asshole.”

I hold my glass out for him to connect his own. “That means a lot, man. Thank you.” Settling back in my seat, I exhale a deep, resigned sigh. “Regardless of Rich being a prick, I still can’t be myself. Chicago fans

don't want me. The small glimpse they saw had them trolling the internet and talking shit."

"So go play somewhere else where the fanbase will support you."

My head jerks back, eyes narrowing.

"You saw a small portion of shitty people online trashing you," Maddison continues. "Overall, I think any fanbase will be stoked to have the real you, Chicago included, but if you think they truly don't want you or that you can't be yourself there, go play somewhere where you can."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

Why is he asking? He knows the answer.

"Because your family is in Chicago. I'm not leaving you and Logan. And I'm sure as shit not leaving Ella and MJ."

"Zee." Maddison sits forward, his tone completely serious. "It doesn't matter where you are or what team you're playing for. You're always going to be a part of our family. You don't need my permission to go, but if for some reason you think you do, well, you have it. I just want you to be happy. We all do."

My chest tightens. It's something I knew, but it helps to hear it reaffirmed. Especially now, so close to the end of the season, not knowing if it's my last one in Chicago, and not knowing if I'll be leaving them in a few short months.

I nod my head repeatedly, unable to speak, emotions thick in my throat. When I look up at Maddison, it seems he's having the same issue, his brown eyes glossed over as he rapidly blinks.

"Oh fuck." I laugh to break the tension, squeezing the bridge of my nose with my thumb and pointer finger. "We're pathetic."

"You're my brother." Maddison's voice breaks as he wipes at his face. "Where you live isn't going to change that. My family will always be yours, but for the first time in a long time, you've got your own family. I can't watch you throw that away because you're worried about having to move away from us."

"I can't take Stevie away from Chicago."

"Did she say she wouldn't leave?"

I shake my head. "Quite the opposite, actually. She said she'd follow me anywhere, but I don't want to take her from her brother or the dog shelter. That'd be fucked up."

“Zee, for once in your life, stop trying to protect everyone around you. She’s trying to give you an out of this persona you’ve played into. She’s telling you she’ll move wherever you need. Let someone else have your back for once.”

“Fuck, Maddison.” The tears are flowing now. Granted, they’ve barely stopped all week, but I usually do it in private. “I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing.” My voice cracks. “I was trying to shield her from all the celebrity bullshit, but I can’t even think straight. I miss her so much.”

“Why would you break up with her then?” he gently asks, though I can tell he’d much rather curse me out for my mistake.

“As I said, I was trying to protect her from everything.”

He stays silent, allowing me to continue.

“I was trying to protect her from me,” I add in realization.

Looking up at him, it’s clear he knew this as his lips lift in a sad smile.

“I left her before she could leave me.” A disbelieving breath escapes me. “What the fuck is wrong with me?”

“Nothing is wrong with you, Zee.”

“Yes, there is!” I yell in frustration. “I was so sure she was going to break up with me after seeing all that shit about me online that I did it before she could.” I bury my face in my hands. “I thought she was going to abandon me just like every else did.”

I had three fucking sessions with Eddie last week, and he couldn’t tell me what I was doing? It took a middle-of-the-night conversation with my best friend and some warm whiskey to figure out I’m still dealing with shit from my fucking mother?

“Stevie loved you even when you were trying to show her your worst. But your best? Who you really are? You have to trust that she loves you enough to stick around.”

“She doesn’t love me.” I shake my head, quickly brushing him off.

“Bullshit.” Maddison laughs condescendingly.

“She doesn’t.”

“Zee.”

I try to look up, but it’s difficult to make eye contact. Maddison can’t and thankfully never will understand me in this way. He has family love, and he has soulmate love. He’s never been without it to understand the mindset I’ve had to create for myself just to survive.

No one has ever loved me. No one could or ever would love me, so I had to love myself enough to make up for it. What he's asking of me, to trust someone else to take on that responsibility, is too big a task.

I heard what Stevie said when I was leaving her apartment last week, but in all honesty, I thought that was a tactic to get me to stay or to take it all back. My own mother couldn't love me. In what world would I expect someone else to be able to?

"Zee," Maddison repeats. "My kids love you. My family loves you, and you believe it. So, why the fuck can't you trust that Stevie loves you too?"

I stay silent, too many emotions, memories, insecurities flowing through me to allow words to come out. Love is a scary idea, and I've spent my entire adult life convincing myself I don't need it. That I can love myself enough so I don't have to seek it from others, but that fragile belief has quickly started crumbling since Stevie's been gone.

"You love so hard, but you need to start believing you *are* loved."

Fuck.

"Trust me from experience," Maddison continues. "All of this"—he motions around the hotel room—"the fame, the money, the fans. None of this is worth it if she's not a part of it."

I nod in agreement but have no idea how to fix it. I don't know how I could dream of fixing things with Stevie when I need to mend so much of the past that haunts me and holds me back.

"She can't handle the media bullshit anyway. She stayed away from it with Ryan, and here I come into the picture." I shake my head, remembering why I ended things, why I gave her an out. "She doesn't deserve the kind of hate you get from being associated with me."

Maddison rolls his eyes. "Why don't you let her decide what she can and can't handle."

I narrow my gaze before breaking the heavy tension. "You're spending too much time with your wife, getting all wise and shit."

"I've learned a thing or two over the years," he laughs.

"Say something hockey-related in case someone sees you leaving my room so we can say we weren't just crying and drinking whiskey."

"That'll give them some headlines, huh?" Maddison stands from the couch. "You're going to get your shit together and are winning on Thursday. Then we're going home and winning this series in five in Chicago. And next, we're winning the fucking Stanley Cup."

I stand with him, putting my hand in his, swinging the other around his back, and tapping his shoulder with my fist. “Deal.”

“You’re the best guy, Zee. You deserve good things, but you’ve got to accept them when they come into your life.”

I nod my head, agreeing but still trying to convince myself.

“I love Eddie, but for fuck’s sake, fire him and put me on retainer!” Maddison laughs to himself in the hall as he heads back to his room.

For the first time in days, I laugh. I smile. My mind has clarity.

But as I lay in bed with the blackness surrounding me, I pull a couple of pillows into my side, needing to hold something like the sad fuck I am. It’s something, but it’s not her, and my muscle memory misses the feel of her in my arms every night.

Anxiety runs through every nerve in my body, flowing through every fingertip, refusing to allow rest to find me. My throat is thick as I attempt to swallow, and my lungs are shallow as the realization hits me.

What happens when you learn you need love, but then you don’t have it?

STEVIE



My dad's flight left a couple of hours ago, and I already miss him. But after a few days away from Chicago and Zanders, even though I knew he was in the same city as me, the fog began to lift from my mind. Clarity started to take over, and at this point, the only thing keeping my feet moving forward is the overwhelming determination to put myself first.

Zanders might not have chosen me, but from here on out, I'm going to.

Since the version of happiness that I want, the one where Zanders is in my life again, is off the table, I'm going to choose the next best thing. And that's a life far away from him where I can walk outside my apartment and not see his. Where I can go to the dog park and not wonder if I'll spot Rosie. Where I can work on an airplane without him being one of my passengers.

It might not be my happiest life, but it will be happy enough, and the overwhelming need to feel a spark of joy in my life is the only thing driving my decisions.

As the final seconds wind down on game four in Seattle, I want to cheer on the plane with Indy, but even though I truly am so happy for Zanders, my exhausted body doesn't have it in me to celebrate. And on a selfish note, part of me hates that I won't be on board for the finals if and when that series comes.

Though, no one else knows that yet.

From the second I stepped onto the plane tonight, I've taken it all in, knowing it's the last time I'll be on board.

The back galley where I met one of my closest friends floods me with memories of Indy and me having way too much fun this season, all while staring at half-naked hockey boys and getting paid for it.

Rio's seat where I thought I had lost my hearing a time or two from walking past his blaring boom box.

That damn cooler, stocked to the brim with drinks, including sparkling water that Zanders refused to get himself.

The exit row where I saw him for the first time.

The trip where he caged me in and undressed in front of me, which I didn't mind one bit, though I protested at the time.

All the flights he and Maddison would make me laugh while I tried to give the security briefing.

But all those memories are just a culmination of one—this is where I fell in love with him, and for my own sanity, I need to get away and try to forget.

The headlights from the team buses shine through the aircraft windows as they pull up planeside, causing my heart to beat so fast I can feel it drumming through my whole being. But that's nothing in comparison to my body's reaction to seeing Zanders board the plane first.

He's never first. He's usually towards the end of the crowd, leisurely taking his time, but not tonight. Tonight, he's the first one off the bus and onto the plane, and as soon as he steps foot in the aisle, his eyes dart to the back where I stand. I attempt to hide, wanting to get this final flight over with, but his stare burns into me.

He's dressed to impress as always, and tonight he looks a bit less haggard than the last time I saw him. Without a moment of hesitation, his strides pick up pace, quickly passing the exit row and continuing to me.

"Oh shit," Indy mutters next to me, but I'm stuck in a daze, eyes locked with his, watching him charge in my direction.

I should move or hide or anything, really, but I can't. My feet feel as if they're stuck in cement, holding me captive to whatever is about to happen.

I don't want to talk to him. After forty-eight hours of clarity, I don't want to talk to him and have him remind me he doesn't want to be with me. The message was loud and clear. But at the same time, he's the only person I *want* to talk to. He's the only person who could make me feel better, even though he's the one who caused the pain.

Heartbreak is a real bitch like that.

“Stevie.”

Oh fuck.

“Can I please talk to you?” he pleads, hazels soft but begging.

I release an exhausted breath. “Zanders—”

His eyes widen from hearing me say that name as I watch his throat bob in a deep swallow before I correct myself.

“Zee, I’m just trying to do my job. Please just let me get through the day.”

The seats around him begin to fill with the rest of the team, and I don’t want to cause a scene. I want to get through this flight, staying under the radar and allowing everyone to forget I exist the second I’m off this plane.

“Please,” he continues. “I just need—”

“Zanders.” This time it’s Indy cutting in for me. “It’s not about what *you* need. She doesn’t want to talk. Let her do her job.”

Zanders’ face drops with guilt, the pain evident in his features. But I don’t want him to hurt. I’m not mad at him. I just want to move on.

“We’ll talk next flight,” I offer. “I need some more time.”

A tiny spark of hope overtakes him as he quickly nods, unknowing there won’t be a next flight. Not for me anyway. But as much as he hurt me, I can’t handle seeing him upset. Selfishly, this lie will get me through this final trip.

“Next flight?” he begs for reassurance.

We hold eye contact, and I try to remember it all. His hazel eyes that shift green in the sunlight. His lips that have touched every inch of my body. His gold chain around his neck that I’ve grabbed to steady myself a time a two. His heart that stole mine. His honesty that shocked the hell out of me before I really knew him. His thoughtfulness that not many people know exists.

I try to remember him.

Even though it hurts to the point I’m not sure how my body is still functioning, I’m grateful for the life he gave me. The confidence he instilled in me. The love he showed me I could experience. It’s hard to be mad at someone when the best part of your life was thanks to them.

A solo curl falls in front of my eyes, and Zanders’ hand darts up to move it out of the way, just as he’s done countless times before. But he stops inches short, his arm retreating when he remembers that he can’t.

I want him to touch me, but I'm afraid it'll hurt too much to remember the way he feels.

His chest moves in a deep inhale as he composes himself and offers me an apologetic smile before turning back to his seat with his head dropped low between his shoulders.

"I can't do this," Indy admits. "I cannot do this. This isn't right. You guys are supposed to be together." She falls back to the wall behind her in agony. "It's clear as fucking day. I'm more upset over this than my own breakup."

"It's okay." I squeeze her arm, shooting her a reassuring grin. "It'll all be okay."

Indy doesn't know that I'm moving to Seattle to take a new job or that this flight is my last, but I'm trying to enjoy my last few hours with her as my coworker, so I'll keep it to myself for now.

"I'm going to go do the headcount or something productive, so I don't wither away in my sadness back here." Indy steps out of the galley and into the crowded aisles. "If my knee accidentally finds Zanders' balls as I walk by, is that okay?"

Well, I never thought I'd have to say this to her, but, "Stay away from his balls, please."

"Fine. But everyone else's balls are up for grabs." She pops a shoulder. "And yes, I meant that exactly how it sounded."

Rio's head turns back with that, eyes wide with interest. "I'm up for gr —"

"No." Indy quickly charges past him.

Keeping myself occupied with anything I can find in the back galley, I hide away, counting down the minutes until I can get off this airplane. Once the wheels are off the ground, it's two hundred and thirty-seven, to be exact.

"Stevie." Maddison's tall frame overtakes the small entryway to the back galley. He quickly glances behind him to make sure no one else is listening before refocusing his attention on me. "Don't give up on him."

I sigh a defeated breath. "Maddison—"

"Please. I know I shouldn't get involved, but he's so messed up over this. I've never seen him in worse shape."

"He broke up with me!" I burst before regaining my composure and volume. "He did this, and I need to start moving on."

Maddison's apologetic gaze holds mine. "You know who he is, and I know who he is, but sometimes he forgets. He's battling with some demons right now, but please. Don't give up on him. Not yet."

How do I tell his best friend that I've never given up on Zanders, and I never will? But I have given up on *us*. When I took a new job and booked a flight to go back to Seattle next week to find an apartment, I gave up on us.

But I can't say that all right now, so I slightly nod my head while averting my eyes away from Maddison's.

He heads back to his seat with that, and I spend the next four hours hiding in the galley and trying to enjoy my last flight as much as I can, even though the man I'm in love with and who broke my heart sits less than thirty feet from me.

And as I watch him walk off the plane when we land in Chicago, I wonder how many more times I'll see him in person, if any.

"How much longer do I have you?"

"A month. Maybe two. I'm heading back to find an apartment next week, so it depends on that."

"I don't want you to leave," Cheryl reminds me. "If I could pay you to work here and convince you to stay, I'd do it in a heartbeat."

Sitting on the floor with one of our newly surrendered pups, I shoot Cheryl a grateful smile. "I'm going to miss it here."

That's the understatement of the year. This shelter has stolen a huge part of my heart over the last nine months since I moved to Chicago. It's the place where I feel most needed, where I'm the happiest, where I feel like I'm doing something worthy of my time. It's never been about the money for me, but I need an income to live off, and I need a fresh start to begin healing my broken heart.

If I could take the shelter and all the dogs with me to Seattle, I'd do it in an instant.

I wish I could take everything that's my life in Chicago, minus the heartbreak, and bring it with me, but at this point, choosing to make myself feel better is more important than missing all my favorite parts of this city.

“You know,” Cheryl continues. “You won’t be living with your brother in Seattle.” She looks down at the pup in my lap suggestively. “Maybe it’s time for your own.”

The pug mix is shaking in my lap, dropped off only twenty-four hours ago, so I continue to pet his coat, hoping to calm him down. “Once I get settled, I’ll be back in Chicago to catch some of Ryan’s games. Maybe I can take one with me then.”

Sensing Cheryl’s eyes on me, I keep my focus locked on the dog in my lap. “Stevie, are you sure you want to go?”

“Yes.” I force a smile. “It’ll be good for me.”

The bell over the front door rings as my brother comes charging in.

“Ryan?” I question from my seat on the floor, never once seeing my allergic brother step foot in this building and knowing something is majorly wrong now that he is.

“Vee.” His blue-green eyes stare down at me with an apology. “Your name got released.”

The room around me stills. I’m sure the dogs are still roaming around and playing, but I can’t tell. My attention is locked on Ryan as I try to register what he just said, hoping I misheard him.

“Are you sure?” Pulling my phone out, I frantically begin typing my name.

“Evan Zanders’ girlfriend. Flight attendant for his team.”

“Caught cheating on Shay,” is accompanied by the picture from the game outside of Seattle, where another girl grabbed his arm. I know it’s not true, but it’s not fun to look at.

“Devils’ point guard Ryan Shay’s sister dating Raptors’ defenseman Evan Zanders.”

Each article is paired with the picture of the two of us rushing into Zanders’ apartment, the one that quickly circulated the internet last week and caused an onslaught of hateful comments. But now, there are plenty of other photos of me included. Ones with my face clearly shown.

Good thing I quit my job two days ago because I’d be fired right now if I hadn’t.

“There are paparazzi and reporters outside of our building,” Ryan adds.

I sit in stunned silence. I just went through the horrible comments last week. I’m not ready to do it again.

Gus, Cheryl's dog, leisurely approaches my brother before rubbing his entire golden body across his shins. "Can I walk you home? I need to get out of here." Ryan scrunches his nose, on the verge of sneezing.

Standing from the ground, I take our newest shelter pup, who finally fell asleep, and pass him off to Cheryl. "I'll be back tomorrow," I reassure her before following my brother outside.

He holds out a long trench coat, one I wear on rainy days, but today it's a warm seventy-eight degrees, so my brows furrow in confusion as I look back to him.

"In case you wanted to hide."

Glancing down at my outfit, my tank top is cropped and tight, showcasing my shape, including a few inches of my bare stomach. I have a flannel wrapped around my waist. My hair is thrown in a curly mess on top of my head, my jeans are baggy, my sneakers are dirty, and overall, I look very much like myself.

And that realization causes me to snatch the jacket from my brother and cover up, regardless of the warm weather.

"Stay behind me," Ryan reminds me as we turn the corner to our building.

The base of our steps is flooded with people, cameras in their hands, waiting for anything.

"Are you sure they're not here for you or Maddison or something?"

Ryan looks over his shoulder with an apology. "No, Vee. They're not here for us."

My eyes dart to Zanders' building, where his front steps are clear for the first time in weeks, everyone instead camping in front of the one I live in.

We slyly approach, trying not to draw too much attention.

"Just move quick," my brother whispers. "Ready?"

Not even a little bit, but it doesn't matter because they're going to see us when we turn the corner in three, two, one...

"Ryan Shay!" the first one calls out.

"Is this your sister?" Flashes from cameras, shouts from the crowd, trying to gain our attention.

"Quite the work perk, huh?"

"Stevie, over here!"

Ryan covers me, allowing me to stand between him and the building as our doorman opens the main entrance to the lobby and guides us inside. My

brother quickly steps to the side, blocking the cameras from me as I rush in.

“Keep your head down,” Ryan adds once we’re inside and headed to the elevator, but I stop in my tracks, right there in the middle of the all-white pristine lobby that’s always made me feel out of place compared to the other people who live here.

But I don’t care anymore where I should and shouldn’t fit in or what people have to say about the way I look or dress. I don’t care that strangers don’t like the few extra pounds I carry through life. This is me, and I’m tired of allowing others to dictate where I’m allowed to feel accepted.

I finally accept myself, so everyone else can just get on board.

“Vee, let’s go,” Ryan urges, motioning me towards the elevator he holds open.

Glancing over my shoulder to the crowd outside, I can hear their shouts through the walls. I slip out of my long trench coat with haste before dropping it to the ground and charging back to the door.

“Stevie!” my brother yells, but I continue towards the horde of reporters.

Adrenaline courses through my bloodstream as I throw open the door, the flashes from their cameras becoming blinding and their shouts deafening.

“Miss Shay!”

“Stevie, over here!”

“How long has your relationship been going on?”

“Does your airline know?”

“I’m not going to answer any questions,” I raise my voice over the crowd. “I have nothing to say other than this is me.” I open my arms out wide, unable to hide. “Take your pictures, post it where you want. I don’t care anymore.”

I take a deep breath as the realization of what I’m doing hits me. “I might not look how you want me to, but you know how many women look like me? The words you say online about my body affect not only me but them too. So, I’m done hiding because I’m afraid of what you have to say.” I hold my arms out to the side, putting myself on display. “This is me, and if you feel the need to comment on it, well, that says a whole lot more about you than it does about me.”

The reporters remain quiet, some jotting down on their little notepads and others snapping photos.

“And this is weird, you know? Caring this much about who I am. A picture isn’t going to tell you anything. I’m a sister, a daughter, and a friend. I’m a human with feelings and emotions, and treating me like I’m not, treating these athletes like they’re not, is sick. These guys you idolize are humans. They’re just trying to play a game they love, and some of you are more concerned about their personal lives away from the sport. Let them live. Let *me* live.”

Turning back to head inside, I take one step before changing my mind. “Oh, and if you’re going to keep following me around, I’ll let you know I volunteer down the street at Senior Dogs of Chicago, so if you’re wanting to stalk me there, I fully expect you to plan on taking some dogs on walks. We need all the volunteers we can get.”

The crowd stirs with a light laugh, causing any remaining pressure on my chest to lift. They can spin this however they want. I’m not afraid of what people have to say anymore.

My eyes flicker above the mob of reporters to the other side of the street, finding Zanders standing on his steps in shock, watching me. He’s fully suited up in his signature game-day suit with his car keys dangling in his hand, but he’s frozen in place.

Finally, a proud grin lifts on his lips as he keeps his stare locked on me.

“Are you and Evan Zanders still seeing each other?” one of the reporters asks, drawing my attention back to the group.

I hesitate, not ready to admit it out loud.

“As I said, I’m not answering any questions.” I duck inside the lobby without giving another glance to the man across the street.

“Who the hell are you?” Ryan proudly laughs, swinging his arm over my shoulder as we head towards the elevator.

Taking a deep breath, the burden of self-loathing that I’ve carried for years begins to melt away, and I could not feel more free than I do at this moment.

“I’m just me.”

ZANDERS



Fucking badass.

Stevie slips into her building after leaving the crowd of paparazzi and reporters speechless on her doorstep, and I could not be prouder of that girl.

Standing up for herself, showing the world who she is and not because I wanted her to or because someone else pressured her. But because she owns it and isn't trying to hide anymore.

Every fiber of my being wants to chase after her and beg her to talk to me. Ask her to let me explain where my head is at and tell her how miserable I've been without her. But she asked for time, and she promised we'd talk next flight, so until then, I'm going to deal with the things that are holding me back from being the man she deserves.

Her confidence electrifies me with some of my own as I slip into my Benz and allow my phone to connect to the speaker system in my car. As soon as I pull out of the parking garage, I dial Rich, filling the space with the ringing from his phone.

"EZ, I'm still working on your contract and dealing with the Maddison bullshit. I don't have much to tell you yet."

"You're fired."

A moment of silence lingers in the car. "Sorry, I didn't hear you correctly. Are you in your car?"

"You're fired, Rich."

He bellows a condescending laugh. "No, I'm not."

I flash my blinker before turning out of my garage and pulling up to the side of Maddison's building, not saying another word about it.

My silence gains Rich's attention. "Zanders, you're making a huge mistake! You're less than two weeks away from needing a new team, and you're firing your agent? No one will sign you. You'll be lucky to play overseas."

Leaving Chicago is a massive fear of mine, and I have no desire to do it, but I won't allow Rich to hear the concern in my voice.

"Then I'll play overseas," I say as casually as possible.

"Organizations can't talk to you while you're in season. They can only talk to your agent. You know this, right?"

"Yep."

"Which means teams cannot talk to you without me," he repeats.

"Yep."

"So, you're willingly making the biggest mistake of your career. Do you know how much money I've made you over the years?" Rich's typically commanding tone becomes frantic. "I made you!"

"No, Rich." I casually lean back on the headrest as I wait for Maddison, cautiously eyeing the paparazzi outside his building that thankfully can't see through my tinted windows. "You made a media persona and slapped my name on it, but I'm not that person anymore, and I'm not sure I ever was. If Chicago doesn't want to sign me for my talent, then I'll find somewhere that will, but you're not making another dime off me. And good luck tipping off the paparazzi for a cut now that we have no ties."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You leaked Stevie's name, didn't you?"

He doesn't need to confirm. As soon as I stepped out of my building and saw the crowd in front of hers, I knew.

"Please don't tell me you're throwing away your career, throwing away your multimillion-dollar contract for some pussy. For your flight attendant. I get the fantasy, I really do, but don't be so fucking stupid, Zanders."

"Don't fucking talk about her." I sit up straighter, looking out the windows of my car, hoping no one can hear me. "I should've fired you years ago."

"You're going to regret this."

"No, Rich. I really won't. I'll have my lawyer draft up the paperwork."

"Zand—"

I hang up the phone with that, just as he's done to me so many times before. Then I shoot Lindsey, my lawyer, a text to let her know what went down.

I'd be lying if I said I felt at ease with my decision. I don't. Anxiety is crawling through my body, reminding me that I'm royally fucked without an agent as I try to assure myself that it's the right move. Hockey-wise, it's career suicide, but for my life outside the rink, it needed to happen.

I have only a couple of days until my next flight when I get to see Stevie, and I need to be able to go to her with more than just an apology as I beg for her forgiveness. I need to show her that I'm trying to change the things in my life that have held me back when I explain why I did what I did—and firing Rich as my agent was at the top of that list.

Lindsey: *About damn time. I'll have the paperwork for you by tonight. Also, when are you planning to talk to her?*

Rolling my shoulders back, I attempt to relax, but the thought of this impending conversation has been filling my body with panic since I told my sister my plan. But I need to stay relaxed, not just because tonight's game determines if we go to the Stanley Cup Finals, but because that woman has caused me too many panic attacks over the years, and I refuse to award her another.

Me: *She'll be here tomorrow.*

Lindsey: *Proud of you.*

Finally, Maddison slips out of the lobby with his head low and covered as reporters snap photos of him. He picks up pace as soon as he's outside, turning the corner and hopping in my Benz. I press my foot on the gas, taking off before anyone else sees us.

"What the fuck? Were they that bad for you?"

"They weren't waiting for me, and sorry to burst your bubble, but they weren't waiting for you either." I turn on my blinker, merge onto the expressway, and head towards the arena. "Stevie's name got released a couple of hours ago. They were waiting for her."

In my peripheral, I can see Maddison's mouth fall open. "Shit," he hisses under his breath. "How'd she handle that?"

A proud smile slides across my lips as I keep my eyes on the road ahead of me. "She fucking owned it."

"Was it Rich?"

“Had to be.” A long pause of silence lingers between us. “I just fired him.”

Quickly, my eyes bounce to Maddison sitting in the passenger seat, stunned silent. Finally, a deep, startled laugh heaves from his chest.

“Fuck yeah, you did!” He shakes my shoulders in celebration. “He’s back! Let’s go!”

“Okay, okay,” I laugh. “I’m driving.”

Maddison settles into his seat with a content sigh. “You know you’re pretty fucked for next season without an agent, right?”

“I know.”

“What are you going to do?”

A sly grin lifts on the side of my mouth. “I guess we’re gonna have to go out with a bang. We’re going to win the Stanley Cup right after I win my girl back.”

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STEVIE



My toes tap with nerves against the white marble floor as I wait for my Uber to arrive. My suitcase is on the smaller side, just enough to get me through a five-day stay in Seattle. I'm not sure how long it'll take me to find an apartment, especially one I can afford, but I figured I could use the extra time to explore my new city, and being away from Chicago, where no one knows me, will be good.

There's no crowd stalking me outside my apartment today, which is a bit surprising, seeing as Zanders and the team won at home last night, clinching their spot in the Stanley Cup Finals. But now that they've got their pictures and there's nothing left to hide, it seems like reporters couldn't care less about who I am.

Chicago's first Stanley Cup berth in eight years overtook the headlines, and even though I didn't look, I'd assume anything about me or our relationship was just a footnote in comparison.

"Doesn't look like you're heading to Pittsburgh," our doorman notes, referring to the team traveling there tomorrow, his eyes locked on my suitcase in tow.

"Not this time." I offer him a small smile before averting my attention back to the glass doors, waiting for my ride.

He stands next to me, his hands folded behind his back. "You know, Miss Shay. I see a lot. I hear a lot, and I keep a lot of secrets. But you'd have to be blind not to see how much you're going to hurt that boy if you don't tell him you're moving."

My eyes dart to him. "How'd you know?"

“Been doing this job for forty-seven years. I pick up on things.”

Before I can respond, a figure across the street catches my attention. Her slender frame. Her shiny black hair, styled in a sleek low bun. The overly expensive purse that hangs on her arm.

“Excuse me,” I absentmindedly add to our doorman before leaving my suitcase in the lobby with him and darting outside.

“Lindsey!” I yell as I look in both directions before running across the street to catch up with her. “Lindsey!” I shout again, but she doesn’t turn around, continuing straight for Zanders’ building.

“Lindsey,” I add one last time, lightly grabbing her arm before she heads up his front steps.

She turns around to face me, confusion plastered on her face.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” My arm retreats. “I thought you were someone else.”

Her hazel eyes are strikingly similar, not to mention her cheeky smile.

I shake my head, not believing myself.

“How do you know my daughter?” she asks.

My eyes widen at that. What is she doing here? Does Zanders know she’s here? She can’t be here, not right now. Not when there’s so much on the line for him.

“What are you doing here?” I harshly ask.

Her entire body rolls with attitude. “Excuse me?”

“I know who you are. You’re Evan’s mom. What the hell are you doing here?”

Her gaze works the length of my body, taking in and judging every inch. My oversized and thrifted clothes are unimpressive to her, I’m sure, especially compared to her designer purse and shoes. She clutches the handles of her expensive bag with her manicured hands, grasping onto them like they hold all the value in the world.

She looks like Zanders, but at the same time, they’re nothing alike.

“I don’t know who you think you are”—her brows furrow in disgust—“but he invited me here.”

What? Why the hell would he do that? And this week of all weeks?

She turns her back on me, heading up the steps in her red-bottom heels that have seen better days.

“You missed out, you know!” I call out, causing her to stop partway, turning towards me. She stands steps above me, looking down. “He’s amazing, your son. No thanks to you.”

“Who the hell do you think you’re talking to?” She leisurely steps down in my direction as if she’s stalking her prey.

I stand tall, shoulders back. “I’m talking to the woman who left her sixteen-year-old son because his dad didn’t make enough money to buy her shit. That’s you, in case you were confused.”

Her eyes narrow with a suspicious stare. “Mind your business. This has nothing to do with you. This is between my son and me. I don’t even know who you are.”

“Is that supposed to be surprising?” I release a condescending laugh. “No shit, you don’t know who I am. You’ve been AWOL the last twelve years.”

“You—”

I hold my hand up, cutting her off. “I’m not done. Your son might not be able to see it or say it to your face, but he’s better off without you. Who does that? Who leaves their teenage kid then comes back around when he’s making more money than she could ever dream of? You left him! He just wanted his mom to love him and you fucking left. But the joke’s on you because he’s the best person I know, and he became that man all on his own with no thanks to you. You have no idea what you left behind.”

I turn away from the woman who gave birth to Zanders, but I’m only halfway back to my apartment before I change my mind and face her again. “Stop coming around for his money. You’re just embarrassing yourself. You did him a favor by leaving.” I add two middle fingers for a bit of dramatic flair before I duck into the lobby of my building to wait for my car once again.

ZANDERS



Stevie flips my mother off with both hands, and I can't help the sickeningly satisfied smile I'm wearing as I watch from above, out my penthouse windows.

I'm all too obsessed with that wild girl, and it's hard to explain the swell in my chest from knowing she still has my back, regardless that she's not ready to talk to me yet.

But that sense of pride quickly shifts to panic when I watch my mother disappear below me into the lobby of my apartment building.

I've been thinking about this for days, constantly practicing the words I want to say to her. But regardless of how ready I felt when I booked her flight or paid for her hotel, at this moment, all that preparation has flown out the window.

My sister tracked down her phone number last week, and all morning my thumb has been hovering over that same contact, wanting to cancel this meet-up altogether. Panic has been racing through me, anger too. But I couldn't cancel. I've needed to face this woman since I was sixteen, but it wasn't until now, realizing that my past with her was holding back my future, that it became an urgent necessity.

I can't even count the number of messages I typed to Stevie, telling her what I was about to do, needing her help, wanting her to be there for me. But I didn't send a single one. How selfish would that have been? Her desperate and pleading face, her strained and cracked voice have all been ingrained in my mind since that day I broke up with her. I couldn't ask for

her help when I did that, when it's all my fault. So, I'm going to get through this on my own while knowing it's a step to help me win her back.

As I'm pacing my living room, finally, the speaker by my door rings.

"Mr. Zanders, I have a..." my doorman hesitates. "A Mrs. Zanders here?"

She's still using that name? Convenient.

Inhaling a deep breath through my nose, I exhale just as slowly. "Yeah, thank you. You can let her up."

It's less than two minutes later that I hear the elevator stop on my hall, and another fifteen seconds after that, her knock echoes through my penthouse, causing an unwelcome shiver to run up my spine.

Fidgeting with the watch on my wrist, I then adjust the collar of my shirt, unable to get comfortable. I contemplated dressing down, but I'm treating this as a business meeting, so a button-down shirt and slacks it is. Regardless, it's not my attire that's making me feel itchy and claustrophobic right now. It's the woman standing on the other side of the door.

But this is my home, and this is my life. I'm in control here. I'm successful and proud of what I've created for myself. No thanks to her. I won't allow her to make me feel as unimportant as she did the day she left.

With another calming breath, I straighten my spine and reach for the handle, swallowing my nerves as I open the door.

"Evan," my mom says with pride. "It's so good to see you."

She holds my stare, her smile forced with hidden intention, and having this woman standing in front of me, I sense myself crumbling, turning back to that hurt sixteen-year-old boy she left.

Her eyes are as I remember, mirroring my own. Her hair is styled to perfection, but her light brown skin has aged over the last twelve years. She showed up at my game two years ago, but I only saw a small glimpse of her before security escorted her away. I hadn't noticed the details.

Her clothes are designer, seasons old at this point. Her shoes and bag are worn beyond belief, reminding me why she left in the first place—for money. And why she's most likely back now—for more.

"Can I come in?" she asks, breaking me out of my daze.

I move aside, allowing her into my home. It feels wrong, having her here. She brings a cold energy, fake and almost venomous as she enters, vastly contradictory to Stevie's bright aura, wild spirit, and sweet nature.

But I have to remember I'm doing this all to better myself and get that girl back.

"Wow." My mother takes in the space, head spinning. Her eyes may as well be shining with dollar signs. "Your penthouse is amazing. How long have you been here?"

"Just over six years."

She nods, silently appraising every little thing and reminding me that nothing has changed. "Can I have something to drink?"

"I have water."

She lightly laughs. "A spritzer or even champagne would be fine."

I roll my eyes, heading to the kitchen, leaving her to find the living room. My fridge is stocked with IPAs and sparkling water, neither of which she's getting.

"Your neighbor with the curly hair is something else," she calls out from the living room, and I can't stop the smile spreading across my lips. "Quite the attitude on that one."

I have no plans to explain who Stevie is. It doesn't matter because the woman sitting in my apartment will hold no value in my life after today. She doesn't need to know about the most important piece of all.

Putting the glass down on the coffee table in front my mother, I take a seat in a chair perpendicular to her.

"What is this?" She eyes the glass as if she's shocked I didn't pop a bottle of bubbles specially for her.

"Water."

She forces that fake smile again before taking a sip. "I'm so glad you called me, Evan."

God, I hate that name when she uses it.

Clearing my throat, I adjust my watch once more before spinning the rings on my fingers. My mother eyes me, watching the whole thing, probably calculating how much all my jewelry costs.

But as my thumb absentmindedly traces the ring on my pinky, I remember why I'm doing this.

"I called you because we need to talk."

"I was hoping—"

"I need to talk," I correct.

Her hazel eyes widen before she adjusts her shoulders. "Please do."

"Why'd you leave?"

Her chest vibrates with a sharp breath. “Evan, can we leave the past in the past and move forward? That’s what I want most in the world, to move forward.”

“No. Why’d you leave?”

She shakes her head, looking for something, anything to reason her abandonment. “I sacrificed a lot when I was with your father.”

“Like what?” I challenge, not letting her get off the hook with vague answers.

“I sacrificed the life I envisioned for myself. The things I wanted.”

“Material things. Your family wasn’t enough for you.”

“Now, that’s not true.”

“It is. You chose money and bullshit material things over your kids.”

She stays silent, having no argument.

“Do you know what it felt like, being sixteen years old, getting out of hockey practice, and sitting in the parking lot waiting for you to show up? All my friends were driving off with their parents, and I sat there waiting. Dad showed up two hours later, and when we got home, all your things were gone. Who the fuck does that?”

“Evan, I want to move forward.”

“So do I!” I yell from my seat, causing Rosie to jump up from her dog bed before sitting attentively next to me. “That’s why you’re here, Mom. I want to move forward, and I’m holding on to so much anger for what you did that I can’t. You were the one woman who was supposed to love me unconditionally, and you didn’t.”

I pause, allowing her to tell me I’m wrong. To tell me that she did love me. That maybe she didn’t love my dad enough, or maybe she didn’t love our small town in Indiana, and that’s why she had to leave, but that it was never about me.

She doesn’t say she loves me.

“So, where do we go from here?” she asks instead. “How do we move forward?”

“We don’t. *I* do.”

Her brows pinch in confusion.

“I brought you here so I could look you in the face and tell you that I’m done. I’m done holding on to the anger and hurt you caused. I’m done hiding your name from the press because I’m afraid people will find out about you. And I’m done letting your inability to stay when I needed you

most hold me back from the people who want to be in my life. People who would never abandon me the way you did.”

She sits there, emotionless as a jolt of pride flows through my body.

Tilting my head back, I close my eyes, a slight smiling sliding across my lips. Every muscle in my body relaxes, feeling the physical effects of my words.

“I came out here, expecting you to want me to be in your life again.”

“No. You came out here, expecting me to *pay* to have you in my life again, but guess what, Mom. I’m not sixteen anymore, and I don’t give a shit about you.”

Her lips part, falling open. “That’s why you brought me all the way here? You flew me here for this?”

“Yep.”

She stays silent in shock.

“Let me guess. You thought I’d fly you out here, pay for you to stay close by. Put you in your own box suite at my games.”

Her act completely dissolves in front of me. “I thought you wanted me in your life again. I thought you flew me out because you missed me!”

I shake my head. “No, I’m good.”

She’s getting flustered on my couch, fidgeting and looking around the room, eyeing every little thing that may be of value. As if she’s cataloging what she expected to gain from me.

“You don’t want to be in my life again anyway, Mom. Admit it. You were hoping I was still that sad teenage boy who missed you and would do anything to have you back. You thought I would give you whatever would make you stay. You don’t love me. You don’t want me. You want the things that come with me.”

Stevie runs through my mind first. The person who means the most to me, who has never taken anything from me, yet I want her to have it all. Next is my dad, who I blamed for my mother’s absence. That man worked double-time to make up for her lost income, so I wouldn’t have to stop playing hockey. I always thought he abandoned me the same way she did, but in fact, it was the complete opposite. He stayed and worked more so my life wouldn’t have to change.

Those are the people I want to give everything to. Not the woman across from me.

My eyes fall on her purse. It's designer, but at least a decade old at this point, and all the pieces fall into place. "When did he leave you?"

I have no idea what the man she left us for looks like, though I've tried to picture him for years, wondering what she saw in him. He breezed through town for work, taking my mother away on his private jet. But deep down, I know exactly what she saw in him. She saw dollar signs, enough to leave her family.

My mother's shoulders straighten, holding faux confidence as if the reason she's here has nothing to do with the bankroll that left her. "Six years ago."

Figures. Right after I got into the league, she started trying to worm her way back into my life.

"Do I have any siblings I should know about?"

She exhales a disbelieving laugh. "No."

I nod repeatedly. "Okay. Don't call me again."

Her hazels dart to mine. "Are you serious?"

"Deadly."

I watch as the wheels turn in her mind. "I know how secretive you are from the press. I know things they'd love to know. Things they'd *pay* to know."

She's desperate now, grasping for straws.

"Go for it. I'm not hiding anymore. You want to tell them what a terrible mother you are and throw yourself under the bus, be my guest. I kept you hidden because I was embarrassed that my own mother couldn't love me, but there's nothing for me to be embarrassed about. I'm enough. Lindsey is enough, but it's you who places value on all the wrong things. When you go, who is going to be there for you? Your purses? Your shoes? Your money? That's a sad life, Mom, and I'm not angry at you for it anymore. I feel bad for you."

How the hell did this woman cause me so much panic over the years? She's not worth it. She never has been. The desperation is seeping out of her, and it's pathetic. In fact, looking at her now, I feel nothing. She means nothing to me.

"You know I blamed Dad for you leaving? You weren't here for me to be angry at all these years, so I was angry at him instead. But that man stuck around and worked his ass off for Lindsey and me. You did him a favor by leaving. He deserves so much more than you."

“Evan—”

“You should go.” I stand from my chair, Rosie at my side.

My mother hesitates, her brows lifting in disbelief. She gathers her bag and smooths out her top as she stands. I lead her to the door, sensing her following behind reluctantly.

“Your flight leaves at two, and you’ll be checked out of your hotel in an hour, so I’d hurry and pack your things if I were you.”

“What?” She stands in the hallway outside my apartment in shock.

“Thanks for not loving me enough to stay, Mom. It made it a lot easier to recognize the people who do.”

I close the door on her partway, but change my mind.

“Oh, and you should really retire that bag. Outdated if you ask me.”

Okay, that was petty as fuck, but I couldn’t help it. Closing the door, I lean back on it, feeling the freest I have in twelve years.

Once I pass security, I essentially run across the tarmac at Chicago’s O’Hare airport, racing towards the plane. I’ve been dying to talk to Stevie while trying to respect her boundaries of needing time.

The Stanley Cup Finals start tomorrow with game one in Pittsburgh, and I’ve been itching to get this road trip started for reasons outside of hockey. It took everything in me not to call her after my mom left yesterday, but we’re going to have three days in Pittsburgh together, and I’ll be able to explain it better in person anyway.

I hope she’s proud of me. I think she will be.

Coaches, staff, and my teammates litter the aisle as I wade through the crowd to my seat in the exit row. Standing on my toes, I look over the boys’ heads and into the back galley for Stevie, but there are too many people in my way.

Taking my seat, my knees bounce, anxiously waiting for her to come do the safety demo. Everything will be okay. It has to be.

“Jesus.” Maddison plops into his seat next to me. “You fucking sprinted out here.”

“Sorry.” I look towards the back galley again but find no sign of Stevie. “I get to talk to her today, so I’m just anxious.”

“Don’t worry,” Maddison reassures. “She’s going to understand. Just tell her everything.”

After Stevie’s name got released, I was worried she’d be fired. But she’d tell me if she had, and I haven’t heard a word from her yet.

“Are you two ready for me to brief you on the window exit?”

Finally.

But looking up, it’s not my curly-haired flight attendant wanting our attention. It’s not Indy, and it’s not that bitchy one either.

“Who are you?” I harshly ask.

“I’m Natalie.” She offers a kind smile, the innocence radiating off her.

“Where’s Stevie?”

Her brows furrow. “Who’s Stevie?”

Who’s Stevie? What the hell?

My eyes shoot to Maddison, but he’s equally as confused as I am. Jumping from my seat, I dart towards the back galley, shoving my teammates out of the way when I have to.

“Where is she?” I ask Indy with desperation.

She inhales a deep breath, eyes unable to meet mine.

“Indy, where the fuck is she?”

Finally, she looks up at me, her gaze full of sympathy. Unable to answer, she simply shakes her head.

“Did she get fired?” I frantically ask, my voice rising. “Did that chick really fire her when her name got released?”

I take a quick step towards the front of the plane, ready to give that lead flight attendant a piece of my mind, but Indy grabs my arm, holding me back.

“She didn’t get fired. She quit after our last flight. Before her name was even released.”

What? There’s no way. She promised she’d talk to me today. She wouldn’t lie to me.

Would she?

“Did you know?” My throat is tight, my eyes burning as I desperately look at Stevie’s coworker.

Indy shakes her head. “She didn’t tell me until after we landed. I had no idea.”

I melt into the wall behind me in disbelief. Is this really happening? Why wouldn’t she tell me? Why’d she let me believe I still had a chance?

She was the best part of this season, and now in the final hours, she's gone.

I need to see her. I need to talk to her and apologize. Tell her about my conversation with my mom. Take responsibility for breaking up with her because I was scared. Beg for her to understand.

I need her, but she's not here, and I'm not sure I can wait three more days until we're back in Chicago.

"One more thing you should know," Indy says, regret lacing her tone. "She took a new job. She's moving to Seattle."

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STEVIE



Two days in, and the apartment hunt is a bust so far. Anything nice and in a good area is out of my price range. I'd have to commute or live in a dump, neither of which I want to do. Truthfully, I don't want to do any of it. I don't want to be here, which makes finding a place to live all the more difficult.

My mind is on Chicago, and my heart is in Pittsburgh.

Zanders and the team are there, and I didn't realize I would feel this much disappointment in missing the finals, but I do. This whole season, traveling with them, watching them climb the ranks and win series after series, made me feel like I was a part of it. And now, with the final series underway, I'm across the country, over two thousand miles away, completely out of the loop.

What was the vibe when the guys got on board this morning? Were they nervous? Excited? Focused? What song did Rio blast as he walked down the aisle to his seat?

How is Zanders doing after he saw his mom yesterday?

I want all the answers, and I could easily get them if I replied to one of Zanders' endless texts or phone calls. He hadn't reached out once since he ended things, but I'd imagine when he got on the plane this morning and realized I wasn't there after I said I would be, his plan went straight out the window.

My hotel room is cold, bleak, and dark, but the city right outside is lively and bright, bursting with people. When I stepped outside earlier, the

fresh ocean breeze filled my nostrils with its salty scent as well as a waft of fresh coffee and flowers.

I don't want any of it.

I want the smell of Zanders' penthouse right after breakfast gets delivered because neither of us knows how to cook. I miss the scent of SDOC right after everyone's weekly baths when the whole building smells like shampoo. I'd even take the waft of my disgusting brother coming home from practice over this.

I want Chicago, but I'm here.

I guess I should go outside and explore my future city, but instead, I'm lying in my bed, mid-afternoon, watching my phone as Zanders' texts continue to roll in.

I haven't seen his name on my screen in far too long, and I missed it.

I miss him.

Zee (Daddy) Zanders: *Stevie, please answer.*

Zee (Daddy) Zanders: *Can you call me?*

Zee (Daddy) Zanders: *Vee, I'm freaking the fuck out right now. Will you please talk to me?*

Once again, his name flashes across my phone as Zanders' handsome face fills my screen with a picture of one of our lazy mornings together. The photo is one I snapped. He's in bed, shirtless, eyes closed but awake with a knowing smile on his lips.

Every part of me misses every part of him and our lives together.

Which is precisely what causes me to answer my phone.

"Stevie?" His voice is sad and broken.

I hold the phone tightly to my ear, closing my eyes from hearing the pain in his tone.

"Please don't go," he begs.

I don't know what to say to that, so I stay silent.

"I thought you were going to be here today. I thought you got fired, but you quit? Stevie, I'm begging you, please don't move. I need you."

I sink into my mattress, the phone held tightly to my ear. Taking a deep breath, I let Zanders' words wash over me. It's something I wanted, needed to hear, but didn't believe I ever would again. The only thing he's said to me since we broke up is that he wanted to talk, and in that time, not once did I allow myself to get my hopes up for more. Why would I? The last thing he said was goodbye.

“What about what *I* need?” I gently ask. “Zee, you broke up with me. You couldn’t expect me to sit around and wait, hoping you’d change your mind.”

“I was just trying to protect you,” he softly admits, defeat evident in his voice.

“I know. I figured that out, but it doesn’t hurt any less, knowing you’d let me go so easily.”

“I didn’t want you to have to deal with the ugly parts of being in my life.” His voice breaks. “I was trying to protect you.”

“You can’t protect everyone from everything. You should’ve trusted that I could stand up for myself. *You* taught me to stand up for myself.”

Silence lingers between us. “Do you want to be in Seattle?” he finally asks. “You don’t even like flying all that much. What about the shelter? What about Ryan?”

“I just want to feel better.”

“I miss you so much. I can’t even function properly.” He sucks in a sharp breath. “How do you sound so okay?”

“I’m not. I’m nowhere near being okay, but what am I supposed to do? Wait around, hoping you’ll want me one day?”

“I’ve always wanted you, Stevie.”

“Then why’d you let me go?”

I can hear him swallow down his emotions through the phone. “It felt like everything was crashing down on us, you know? I was so messed up the day everything came out. I had no control over what people were saying about you. I was trying to fix something, anything. I didn’t want you to lose your job.”

“I didn’t care about my job!”

“Well, I did!” He calms his voice. “Vee, for the first time in my life, this season, the road felt like home because you were with me, and selfishly, I wasn’t ready to lose that. I needed to know you’d be there with me.”

My throat is thick, keeping me from responding. My eyes are burning from tears I’ve refused to shed for days, but also, I’m angry that he would make that decision for me.

“And I was afraid that you were going to leave altogether.” His voice is soft, almost inaudible. “Everything was so good, too good, and the last time I felt that comfortable relying on someone to stay in my life, she left me.”

Everything hurts. His voice hurts. The emptiness hurts.

I never would've left him. If Zanders asked me to be in his life forever, I would've said yes in a heartbeat, but I don't necessarily blame him for reacting how he did. In his most formative years, the woman who was supposed to stay and love him didn't, but I'm not her.

Regardless of my understanding, I have to look out for myself. He left me when all I wanted was to be allowed to love him and maybe have him love me in return.

"Did you really invite her over yesterday?"

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?"

He takes a deep breath, filling his lungs. "Yeah. I think I am. I cut ties with her. I should've done it a long time ago, but I wasn't ready until now."

A pause lingers between us. "I'm proud of you, Zee."

"Yeah?"

"Of course, I am."

"I was going to tell you about my mom and everything else today. I just needed to talk to you."

"Well, you're talking to me now."

"Can I come to you? Maybe I can get on a plane between games one and two. Maybe I can skip the press conferences and media stuff." His tone is frantic, words rushing together.

"You know you can't do that. No one would allow you to do that."

"I can't lose you, Stevie."

The buzz from the air-conditioning unit fills the room with its white noise, helping to drown out the silence.

"You left me," my voice cracks. "I never would've left you."

"Please, I'm begging you, don't leave me now."

"Zee, look at it from my point of view. You spent months building me up, being proud of me, making me proud of myself, then the second anyone found out about me, you ran. Do you know how terrible that makes me feel? I just wanted you to choose me, choose *us* regardless of what people had to say."

He stays silent on the other end.

"Do you know what it feels like to watch someone walk out the door after you begged them to stay?"

Once again, he doesn't answer.

The memories of my words flash through my mind. *Why'd you let me fall in love with you?* It was humiliating the first time he walked out after I said it, but what's another round of embarrassment?

"It was simple. I wanted you to love me."

His silence is deafening, telling me everything I need to know, causing my heart to shatter all over again.

"I wanted you to let me love you, but you can't, can you? I don't think you know how to trust someone else to love you unconditionally."

"Vee," he finally speaks. "I just..."

The quiet line lingers between us for far too long.

"I don't know how to do that."

My eyes close from the pain vibrating through my entire body, confirming what I already knew. As much as I love him, how could we live a life together where he doesn't believe that I do?

"Good luck tomorrow night."

"Stevie—"

I hang up before he can say anything else.

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ZANDERS



Three days of torture. Three days of unanswered calls and texts. Three days of wondering how I fucked up the best thing to ever happen to me. Three days of asking myself why I can't trust her to love me the way she says she does. Three days of wishing I wasn't so fucked up from my past that I could take what she's offering because it's everything I need.

But my most constant thought over the last three days has been, how the hell am I going to get Seattle to pick me up when I don't even have an agent?

I don't want to leave Chicago. I don't want to leave Maddison and Logan or my niece and nephew. I'm only a two-hour drive from my dad's house, and my sister is a quick flight away.

But I can't lose Stevie. I might not understand my trust issues or my fear of love, but one thing I know for certain is I can't lose her.

I'm beyond desperate right now, needing to see her, needing to talk to her, needing to heal myself. Needing to feel anything other than the giant aching hole in my chest that only she can fill, but I don't know how to fix any of it.

Even at two in the morning, fans line the airport gate, eager to greet us after coming home with two road wins and only needing two more to win it all. Shouts and cheers echo from the enthusiastic crowd, all wearing their red, black, and white waiting to get a glimpse of us stepping off the airplane in Chicago.

But I don't care. Sure, I'm grateful for their support, and I'm stoked that we're dominating this series so far, but the only reason I've been playing as well as I have been is because I need to pull off a miracle and somehow be able to choose where I land next season.

"Zee, hold up!" Maddison shouts while doing his captain duties, waving to the crowd, thanking them for coming out. "I drove you."

"Well, hurry up. I need to go."

I throw my suitcase in the bed of his truck before jumping in.

"You're not going over there right now. It's two in the morning."

"Yes, I am. I need to see her. If she wants to move across the country, then okay. Fine. But I need her to say it to my face."

"What if she does want to go?" Maddison pulls out of the private parking lot, heading home.

"She doesn't." Shaking my head in disbelief, I stare out the passenger window. "There's no way in hell she wants to leave her brother or the shelter. This is my fault. She doesn't want to go. She just wants to get away from me."

Maddison barely parks before I'm out of his truck and running into his building. I don't use his elevator, of course, because I'm not going to his apartment. Stopping a few floors below the penthouse, I quickly knock on Stevie's door.

She doesn't answer, but it's after two in the morning, so no surprise there. I call. No answer. I text. No answer. She's going to hate me, but I need to see her. I've been counting down the minutes since we took off from Chicago when I found out she wasn't on board.

I continue to knock, trying not to pound on the wooden barrier, but fuck am I tempted.

"Go away," I hear from the other side, but it's not Stevie's voice.

"Ryan, open the door."

"Fuck you."

Okay, I deserve that.

I don't leave. I stay standing, waiting, allowing him to look at me through the peephole until finally, he cracks the door open.

"Zanders, fuck you. Go home."

"Please, just let me see her." My tone is frantic, pleading.

"She's not here." He tries to close the door on me, but I use my arm to block it from shutting completely.

My eyes are boring into his, begging for some information. Ryan must feel bad for me or something because he gives me a once-over before letting out a resigned breath and opening the door.

“She’s still in Seattle.”

Still? It’s been days. “When is she back?”

“I don’t know. A couple of days, but it’s not your concern anymore.”

“Yes, it is!” My voice is much too loud for this early hour. “This is all my fault.”

“Well, at least you’re right about that. I’m going to bed, so you can leave now.”

I put my arm in the way of the door once again. “What can I do to fix it? I know you don’t want her moving there any more than I do, so please, Ryan. What the fuck do I do?”

He contemplates, looking me up and down, probably wondering if he should willingly help the man who broke his sister’s heart. But finally, his shoulders slack, giving in.

“She’s gone through life believing she’s the second choice, and you go ahead and reaffirm that by choosing your fucking playboy persona over her? What the fuck is that?” His voice begins to rise with anger. “She hated the limelight when it came to me but was willingly going to live in it because she wanted to be with you, and you break up with her the moment anyone learns about her? Come on, man. Don’t be so dense. That was fucked up. And now she’s about to move two thousand miles away because of you.”

“You encouraged her to go!”

“You didn’t see her that day! I just wanted her to feel better, but even though she’s acting like she’s okay, she’s not. Your playboy bullshit was more important than her, so you can go ahead and fucking fix it.”

He’s right. I can be mad all I want that Ryan suggested she move, but at the end of the day, I caused this. We were happy, and I ruined it.

“I fired my agent.”

His head jerks back. “What?”

“I was tired of playing into it. You’re right. I did choose my image over your sister. I fucked up, and lost her, so I fired my agent.”

“Aren’t you in a re-signing season?” His brows are creased with confusion. “You’re throwing your career away.”

He doesn’t need to remind me. I already know.

“No one wants you to lose your career over this, Zanders.”

I pop my shoulders in a shrug, trying to remain as casual as I can. My career isn't at the top of my priority list to fix right now.

“Jesus,” he releases a startled laugh. “You really do love her.” Ryan closes the door on me, but before it's completely shut, I hear him say, “You should probably figure out a way to tell her that before it's too late.”

The atmosphere is nuts for game three of the Stanley Cup Finals. The United Center is packed, every seat and standing-room ticket sold. We were down 3-2 coming into the third period, but Maddison scored early, and one of our rookie wingers pulled off a miracle of a shot, giving us the one-goal advantage and a three-game series lead.

As the final seconds wind down, I can't help but feel overwhelmingly emotional.

This city has been everything to me over the last seven seasons. Sure, I had to play into a character I didn't want to be, but overall, the time I spent in a Raptors jersey has been the best of my life. This is the first and only organization I've played for. My best friend landed here shortly after I did, putting us on the same team for the first time in our lives. I've built a family here, a home, and potentially after tonight, I only have one more game in this building.

I don't want to count a win before it happens, but it's hard to believe we won't clinch the series in game four when we're playing in our own arena. The way we've been communicating, scoring, our goaltending. Home-ice advantage. In my gut, it's going to happen with a series sweep. I know it.

Home games were a disadvantage to me only months ago, being in this building and knowing I didn't have anyone here for me. On the road, at least I knew no one else had their fan base cheering them on or waiting for them to come out of the locker room. But here, it's a constant reminder that I'm alone.

That is until Stevie started coming to watch me play earlier this season. Knowing she was in the crowd or hiding away, waiting for me to come out suited up after our games, did something to my confidence. I had someone

to play for that wasn't just me. The boost I got from being the hated visitor was nothing compared to the love I felt at home games with my person.

But I'm alone again. The ticket I left for Stevie never got picked up, and the only family here for me isn't mine at all. It's Maddison's.

I close Coach's office door behind me before making my way back to my locker stall.

"Everything good?" Maddison asks from the locker next to mine.

"Yeah, but I'm not going to be at practice tomorrow. I got the okay to skip."

"Zee, we're one game away from potentially winning it all. What the fuck do you mean you won't be at practice tomorrow?"

I dump my used jersey into the bin sitting in the center of the locker room before leaving my skates in my stall to get sharpened.

"I have something more important I need to do." Finally, I make eye contact with my best friend, as he stares at me dumbfounded. "Trust me. It's going to prepare me for this game more than any practice ever could."

The drive back to my hometown takes just over two hours from Chicago. I've lived only two hours away for the last six years yet have only made the drive twice in all that time. Once was for Lindsey's birthday, and another was when my dad hurt his back on the job and wound up in the hospital.

Two hours away may as well have been a hundred. It didn't matter if I was just down the street or across the country. I was too angry to come back here. I was too angry to see him.

That misplaced anger has kept me from a relationship with my dad for twelve years, but allowing Stevie into my life opened a part of me I had shut off for far too long. I crave love in my life again. As scary as it's been to realize that's what she was offering me, I know deep down, it's true. Stevie loves me—*loved* me—and I've been so afraid of allowing anyone to love me that I pushed her away. I pushed my dad away too.

I went by the house first, but his truck wasn't in the driveway. It didn't take long for me to drive around my tiny hometown until I found it parked in the lot of the only sports bar in town. My dad doesn't even drink, but he's big into shooting pool, so I'm not too surprised to find him here after work.

The last time I talked to my dad, Stevie was with me, and I wish she were here again. The weeks without her have revealed how deeply she was embedded into every part of my life. Everything was better, easier, more fulfilled with her, but I didn't notice at the time because she infiltrated my life so flawlessly. I guess I always needed her to fill the gaps but didn't notice they were hollow until she was gone.

Locking up my car, I head inside. I don't even try to hide or keep my head low as I enter. This town is small. I made it big in the NHL. Everyone knows who I am, yet it's not like the fanfare I receive in Chicago. Here, people are just proud of me.

The small run-down bar quiets as I enter, not that it was all that loud to begin with. Less than twenty patrons are inside, and almost all their eyes are on me. I stand out most everywhere I go, but here, in my hometown, my Tom Ford pants, Balenciaga sweater, and Louboutins may as well be a flashing neon sign.

"Well, look who it is," the bartender announces to the hushed bar. "Mr. NHL himself gracing us with his presence." He bows dramatically. "To what do we owe this honor?"

"Good to see you, Jason," I laugh while knocking fists with my old high school teammate as he stands behind the bar. "Is my dad here?"

"Pool table." He nods towards it.

I head in that direction before I hear him yell from behind me, "You winning us the Cup tomorrow or what?"

Turning around, I face him, wearing a knowing smile. "Planning on it."

The only pool table in the place is hidden in the back room. My dad and I used to come here on the weekends when I didn't have hockey. We'd hang out and have a couple sodas while he taught me how to shoot a pool cue, so I know exactly where to find him.

"Mind if I join?"

My dad glances up from his perfectly lined-up shot. "Evan?" He stands up straight, the pool stick at this side. "What are you doing here?"

His jeans are worn-in around the knees, and his work boots are completely scuffed and discolored at the toes, telling me he came here right from the construction site. My dad is a blue-collar man who works back-breaking jobs to provide for his family. His kids are both extremely successful in their respected fields, yet he continues to put in hours, offering

his blood and sweat, regardless of how many times Lindsey has volunteered to retire him.

“I wanted to see you.”

My dad stands still in shock.

“I was hoping we could talk.”

He finally nods his head. “We can talk.”

I walk around the table opposite him, both of us keeping our eyes on the random pool balls scattered around the table and not on each other.

“Re-rack them,” my dad suggests.

I do as he says, lining up the balls for a new game. I sense his confused stare on me all the while, and it follows me as I pull a cue off the wall.

When I turn back to face him, he quickly pulls his eyes away from me. “Go ahead and break.”

A small smile slides across my lips. “You can’t just give me the break.” I pull a coin out of my pocket, holding it up and reminding him this is how we always used to do it.

His chest vibrates with a small laugh. “Tails.”

Flipping the coin, I grab it from the air and slap it down on the back of my hand. “Tails it is.”

We stay silent as my dad breaks, tension thick in the air between us. But it’s not a negative form of pressure. It’s just that we both know there are a lot of things about to be said.

One of the striped balls falls into the far-left corner, giving him another shot.

We remain silent as he lines up again.

Four more shots alternate between us before finally, as I’m lining up my stick, I look up at him.

“I saw Mom.”

His eyes dart to mine. “What?”

I lean my pool stick against the table as I stand up straight. “I invited her over last week.”

His face drops with sympathy. “Oh, Evan. Are you okay?”

I nod, unable to speak.

“What did you two talk about?”

“We didn’t really talk. *I* talked. At her.”

He stays silent, staring at me. My dad’s eyes are an interesting shade of gray, the skin around them wrinkled from age and years spent in the sun.

They hold a thousand questions as he looks at me, though he doesn't verbally ask a single one.

"I've been so angry for so long," I remind him. "I took all that anger out on you because you were here, and she wasn't, but you didn't deserve any of it. She had way too much power over my life, and I was tired. I wanted my control back."

Those gray eyes of his turn a bit glossy. "You had every right to be angry at me. I'm the reason why she left."

"No, you're not. Mom is the reason Mom left, but you stayed, and I haven't been able to thank you for that."

He keeps his head down.

"I'm sorry for holding it against you all these years. I was selfishly so hurt that I couldn't see what you were doing at the time. I felt abandoned by both of you, but you were gone because you were working more, making sure my life wouldn't change. Hockey isn't cheap, but I never missed a tournament because of you. You covered Lindsey's LSATs. You made sure I had a good place to live. I never went hungry. I had everything I needed, and I haven't thanked you for that."

He nods, keeping his eyes on the ground.

"So, thank you, Dad."

He quickly uses his calloused fingertips to wipe under his eyes.

Finally, my dad looks up at me. "I know I wasn't the same dad to you that I was before she left, but I tried. I really tried, Evan."

"I know."

"I was hurting in my own way, but at the same time, I felt guilty that I wasn't enough to make your mother stay. I was the reason she left you, so sometimes it was hard to be home and see you. I thought you hated me, and I didn't blame you one bit."

Fuck, now my eyes are burning. "I never hated you, Dad. I needed you then, and I still do now."

The rugged and sometimes cold man looks up at me from across the way, his face fallen soft and his masculine walls torn down as his eyes pool with tears.

"I love you, Dad."

The words feel right and needed and long overdue as they come off my tongue. I haven't said them to him in twelve years. I haven't said them to

many people in the last twelve years, and the physical relief I watch that man experience makes me upset that I didn't say it all this time.

"I love you too, Evan." He quickly nods his head, trying to collect himself.

Walking around the table, I hug him hard as he holds me just the same. "I'm sorry I couldn't say it before."

"It's scary sometimes. I know that." His voice is soft with understanding.

We hold on a little longer before finally releasing each other.

"I was scared to let anyone love me for a long time," my dad continues. "I was scared to love anyone else, too."

"Are you still?"

He shakes his head. "Not anymore."

I keep my suspicious stare on him.

"What? Don't look at me like that."

"Dad, do you have a girlfriend?" I tease.

He pops his shoulders. "Maybe."

"What?" A disbelieving laugh escapes me. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"It's new. Kind of. She was a good friend to me for a lot of years, and she waited for a long time for me to be ready to let someone else into my life. Right before Christmas, I stopped being an idiot."

A proud smile slides across my lips. "Can I meet her soon?"

"I'd really like that."

Any previous tension in the air is long gone as I grab my pool cue and line up my shot again.

"So, is there a reason you needed to come here and have this conversation the day before the biggest game of your life?"

I take my shot, not sinking a single ball, so I wait for my dad to take his turn, but he doesn't. He keeps his attention on me, waiting for my answer.

There's a long pause between us.

"Why didn't you follow Mom when she left?"

"Because some people aren't worth following."

I nod in understanding.

"And some people are worth following to the ends of the earth."

Keeping my burning eyes glued to the table in front of me, the emotions attack every one of my senses, wanting to surface.

“Do you have someone worth following?” he softly asks.

I let out a sharp breath. “Yeah. I think I do.”

“Do you love them?”

I nod, unable to speak.

“Then don’t let them go, Evan. I know loving someone is scary, and letting someone love you, especially after everything we’ve been through, is even scarier. But I promise you, with the right person, it’s worth it.”

It’s terrifying to trust someone to not leave me empty and hollow after I give them all of me. But regardless of never telling Stevie how much I love her, I’m just as empty and just as terrified from her absence.

“All these years, I played this bad guy who fans love to hate, and I enjoyed it because I knew they hated a made-up version of me. I didn’t want to give anyone the opportunity to hate the real me, but it also kept me from letting anyone love the real me. But I think someone loved the real me, and I may have lost her.”

“Have you told her you love her?”

I shake my head with guilt.

“Then I think it’s time she knows.”

A pause lingers between us. “Dad, I don’t know where I’ll be playing after this season. No team is as close as Chicago, but I was hoping you’d let me start flying you out for games. I miss having you at the rink, and I know you need to work and—”

“I’ll be there.”

I offer him a grateful smile, pulling a ticket out of my back pocket. “Will you come watch me win the Stanley Cup tomorrow?”

“Look at you, Ev.” He shakes his head in disbelief, a giant smile on his lips.

“Is that a yes?”

He laughs. “Hell yeah, it’s a yes.” He snatches the ticket from my hand, looking it over in awe. “I’m so proud of you.”

I give him another hug.

“Can you introduce me to her tomorrow?” he asks.

“If I can get her to the game.”

STEVIE



“Ryan!” I wheel my suitcase inside. “Are you home?”
“Yeah,” he mumbles from his bedroom before dragging his feet into the living room. “Did you change your flight? Why are you home so early?”

His eyes are laced with sleep, barely open, but he pulls me into a hug.

“I caught a red-eye. I was ready to be back.”

He stretches his arms towards the ceiling, still waking up. “And maybe you didn’t want to be away from Chicago? Especially tonight?”

Casually, I pop my shoulders, keeping my eyes away from his.

“Did you sign on an apartment?”

I stay silent.

“You know you don’t have to go if you don’t want to. I don’t want you to unless you feel like that’s the best place for you. You can stay here, rent-free. Zanders probably won’t even be in Chicago next season anyway.”

My eyes dart to his. “What are you talking about?”

“He doesn’t have an agent or a new contract.” His tone is far too casual.

“What do you mean he doesn’t have an agent?”

Ryan’s brows crease in confusion. “He fired him. Didn’t he tell you?”

What the hell? “No!” My volume rises with desperation. “Why would he do that?”

My brother hesitates. “I uh...I think you should talk to him about it.”

“He can’t fire him! He needs to sign somewhere. He needs to sign in Chicago. He doesn’t want to leave.” My words rush together. “How do you

know?”

He shoots me an apologetic smile. “He came by looking for you right when they landed from Pittsburgh.”

Of course, he did. He called nonstop after our conversation, but I didn’t answer. After he told me he didn’t know how to let somebody love him, there wasn’t much more to say. But something about that talk, in addition to everything else I love about that man, kept me from signing an apartment lease in Seattle. I couldn’t do it yet. It’s such an official big step to make without seeing him first.

“And he’s come by every night, looking for you, Vee.”

“What happens if he doesn’t have an agent?”

“Teams can’t talk to him without representation while he’s still in season. He’s going to have to wait until the finals are over and just hope that not every organization has filled their roster yet.”

I plop onto the armrest of the couch. “This is all my fault.”

“No, it’s not, Stevie. This is on Zanders. He made his choices, and now he’s dealing with the consequences. But I’m not going to sit here and tell you that this has nothing to do with you. I think losing you opened his eyes, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

The last thing I want is for Zanders to lose his career over me. In fact, that was the one comfort I had, knowing that his local fanbase loved him before me and they’d love him again after.

“Vee.” My brother’s tone is gentle, almost cautious. “Do you want to forgive him?”

I bury my head in my hands, hiding my face. “Yes,” I mumble against my skin, hoping he doesn’t judge me for it. “Does that make me pathetic?”

Ryan quietly laughs before draping an arm over my shoulders, pulling me into his side. “Not at all.”

“You don’t think this is like the Brett situation all over again?”

“No way. Fuck that guy. There’s a huge difference. You took Brett back after he left because you were trying to prove to yourself you were good enough to keep him, but if you take Zanders back, it’s because he’s been working on himself to be good enough to keep *you*.”

Ryan heads to the kitchen, powering up the coffee maker. “But what do I know? I don’t date.”

I take a seat at the island opposite my brother. “It’s off-season. Maybe it’s time you put yourself out there again. You’ve got to start moving on,

and dating isn't a distraction when there's nothing to distract from."

He shoots me a deadly glare that says, "*We're talking about your problems, not mine.*"

"Off-season is more important than the regular season. You know that. I'm doing two-a-days all summer. And love you, Vee, but watching you have your heart broken isn't exactly a glowing recommendation for getting into another relationship."

My mouth falls open in faux shock before I grab a dishtowel off the kitchen island and throw it at my brother's head. "Jerk."

There's an envelope with my name on it attached to the fridge, and I don't notice it until Ryan pulls it off and slides it across the island to me.

"What is this?" I stare at the white envelope, recognizing the handwriting scribbled on the outside.

"A ticket for the game tonight."

"Zee dropped it off?"

"Last night."

I keep my eyes locked on the envelope in my hands.

"I think you should go."

My attention darts to Ryan.

"I think he loves you but doesn't know how to say it, and if you feel the same way, you should go. You'll never forgive yourself for missing this game." He takes a sip of his fresh coffee. "And that's all the great advice I have for this time of the day." Ryan leaves me alone in the kitchen and heads back into his room.

Cautiously, I open the envelope in my hands, pulling the ticket out. A blue Post-it Note sticks to it with a simple, pleading message.

This season means nothing without you.

Nothing matters without you.

Please come tonight.

-Zee

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ZANDERS



I barely slept.

Tonight is the night that my life-long goal might be fulfilled. I've only dreamt of winning the Stanley Cup since I learned what it was. Any kid that throws on a pair of hockey skates considers this moment, but only a few experience it in their lifetimes.

My most significant life achievement can happen tonight, and I can't help but think about what brought me here.

My dad made ends meet, ensuring my hockey tournaments were paid for so I wouldn't miss out. I was heavily scouted my sophomore year of high school, even in my tiny Indiana town. The full-ride scholarship I earned to Ohio State University. The semester I failed two courses and missed my sophomore season, resulting in almost losing said scholarship.

My best friend, who I met when I was seven and hated until I was twenty-two. Senior Showcase, the weekend we put our hostility aside and realized we had more similarities than differences.

The night I got called up to the league and the phone call I made to Lindsey, who was screaming with joy on the other end.

My first two months in Chicago where I was scared shitless to be the rookie on a team full of veterans. My first full season in the NHL when I spent an ungodly number of minutes in the penalty box.

The year Maddison got traded here, and pieces began to fall into place. We started building a team around the two of us. But the last six seasons, we fell short, barely making playoffs some years while others, we lost in the first round.

And this season. This is the season my entire life changed. The first road trip of the year shifted everything. A curly-haired flight attendant with an attitude put me in my place and became everything I never knew I needed. She exposed the missing pieces in my life while simultaneously putting them all together.

I shed unnecessary burdens while repairing relationships I've missed. I decided to stop playing into the persona fans love to hate. But most importantly, this year, I did the one thing I was most afraid of. I let someone love me for me, and I can't imagine a more picture-perfect ending than holding the Cup above my head with her by my side.

My dad followed me back to Chicago last night after shooting two more rounds of pool. Lindsey's flight landed around ten this morning, and the two of them are staying in a hotel in the city for a few nights. They're both in the arena for the first time in my pro career, and I'm overwhelmed with a sense of comfort from knowing I have fans here solely for me.

The media has been insane, following our every move since we returned from Pittsburgh after games one and two. Maddison and my sordid college history has been making national headlines as a feel-good story about rivals turned friends who are now only one win away from becoming Stanley Cup champions.

Stevie's name has circulated slightly, but our team's impressive playoff run has shadowed her and our relationship, which is for the best. I'd rather the media not figure out what's going on between us before I do.

I've gone by her apartment every day since I've been back, but she hasn't come home yet. I don't know if she's even in Chicago today, let alone in the arena, but I can't think about her right now.

For the next couple of hours, my entire focus needs to be on the three periods of hockey I'm about to play, which is why I got her a ticket out of my vantage point. I can't be looking for her all night, and I know if I see an empty seat, it'll throw me off.

My dad and Lindsey are up in the family box with Logan and the rest of the Maddisons, but I want to be present if and when Stevie meets my dad, so I got her a ticket in general seating instead.

Even though it's not confirmed if she's back in Chicago, I have to believe she is. I can't imagine she'd miss this.

Maddison takes a seat in his locker stall next to mine, both of us suited up for the game and ready to get this underway. He leans his elbows on his

knees, eyes locked on the ground. “You ready?”

I nod, equally as focused as my best friend. “Are you?”

“Yeah.” He stays silent for a moment. “This might be our last game together—”

“Can we save this for after we win the Cup?”

He lightly laughs. “Yeah. For sure.”

“You know, for the little golden boy who got everything he ever wanted, you really turned out to be the best friend I could ever ask for.”

His chest heaves in a silent laugh. “For being the piece of shit I thought you were, you really turned out to be one hell of a guy.”

I hold my fist out as he connects his.

“But I still think you’re an asshole,” he reminds me.

“And you’re still a dick.”

The United Center is deafening as we skate out of the tunnel. Flashing lights illuminate our path as we step onto the dark ice, but the announcers, fans, and blaring music drown out each other so much so that the only thing I can hear is my own thumping heartbeat. My short breaths don’t do much to fill my lungs as I glide across the ice for warm-ups, but I can’t help it. This is the most nervous I’ve ever been for a game.

Logan meets Maddison down at the glass just as she does every game. I usually give them shit, but I’m too focused tonight.

“Eleven!” the referee shouts. “Take your ring off.”

Confused, I look down at my hands, my gloves sitting on the bench as I take a drink of water. I already took all my rings off, including my chain. They’re sitting in my locker stall as we speak. But then I see it. Stevie’s tiny ring, barely visible on my pinky finger, that I completely forgot to tape over. It’s too late now. The ref already saw it.

“No,” I argue.

He skates up to me, confused. “What?”

“I’m not taking it off.”

“Then you’re not playing.”

“Whoa. Whoa. Whoa.” Maddison leaves the glass, quickly skating over to the referee and me. He puts his body between us. “He’s playing. He’ll take it off.”

Maddison grabs my jersey, dragging me to skate with him back down the tunnel, hidden from anyone else’s view. “Take the fucking ring off your finger.”

“No.”

“Zee, stop being ridiculous. Take it off your fucking finger.”

I don’t respond, but I also don’t make a move to remove it.

Maddison softens his approach. “It doesn’t mean anything, man. Stevie will forgive you. I know she will. Just give me sixty minutes of hockey, then we’ll figure that out afterward, yeah?”

I stay silent.

“Did you know I have a note that Logan wrote me in college during Senior Showcase that I still read before every game? But even if I didn’t have it with me or forgot to read it, it doesn’t mean she loves me any less. It’s just a symbol, and you’re holding on to that ring because you think it’s all you have of Stevie right now.”

It takes a moment of reflection, but finally, I give him a resigned nod and unwillingly slip Stevie’s ring off my finger. I look around for somewhere safe to put it, not able to head back into the locker room.

“I mean, I’m not a monster. Tie it to your fucking laces and tuck it in your skate or something.”

I level him with a look. “Fucking sap.”

He unapologetically pops his shoulders.

The national anthem, starting announcements, and pre-game rituals fly by in an instant, and without realizing it, we’re in the first period.

Nerves are high on our bench. Passes aren’t connecting, transitions aren’t smooth, and line swaps are mistimed. On the other hand, Pittsburgh is playing like they have nothing to lose because, well, they don’t. Down 3-0 in the finals while playing on the road has everyone betting against them, and they’re playing like it. Their hits are hard, shots are firing nonstop, and they’re skating fast and loose.

They score twelve minutes into the first period, giving them the 1-0 lead.

During the first intermission, our coach lectures us on playing scared and reminds us that we’re back on a plane to Pittsburgh tomorrow for game five if we don’t win tonight. I want to win at home, we all do, and the last thing I need is to get on that plane and remember Stevie’s not there.

That’s the first time she pops into my head during the game, and I shake her off, needing to focus once again.

I draw a penalty early in the second period when one of the Pittsburgh forwards high sticks me, splitting my cheek as red pours from my skin and

onto the ice.

I barely feel it. Too much adrenaline is coursing through my veins to notice pain. But it gives us the man-advantage, and one of our second-year forwards scores in the first twenty seconds of the power play, tying the game and settling the boys' nerves.

The period consists of equal shots on goal, Rio and I holding off Pittsburgh's top line. They do the same to Maddison and his wingers.

We end period two tied 1-1.

The third and hopefully final period begins quiet—no chirping, barely any talk on the ice, nerves back and evident on both sides. For Pittsburgh, it's the fear that this is the end of the season. For us, it's the realization that this could be it. We can win the Cup in these final twenty minutes, and that's scary as hell.

Momentum trades off between our two teams. Shifts are short, giving our tired legs their much-needed rest. Pittsburgh fires off a shot with only three minutes left, and it buzzes past our goaltender's glove, but by some miracle, it hits the crossbar instead of flying into the back of the net.

The crowd gasps in fear, everyone on their feet. I'm not going to lie, the scare causes my heart to skip a beat.

Two more shifts, and time is winding down in the third when I hop the ice for my turn. Maddison and our top line got on ten seconds ago, so we have our best players for this final run.

Pittsburgh's center bodies past me to our goalie, and by a miracle of a save, the puck bounces off his pads, and I sweep the rebound off the boards and out of our zone. The ricochet lands on Maddison's stick while keeping him onside, and he uses his speed to zip into our offensive zone.

He's the fastest guy on the ice, and it shows when he lands in front of Pittsburgh's goal in a blink of an eye. And with just under a minute left in the third, he goes five-hole, the puck finding the back of the net as he lights the lamp with the potential game-winning goal.

My stick is on the ground as I charge at him, throwing my body on his, pinning him to the boards. The rest of the boys follow suit as our home crowd erupts, hands slapping the glass and sirens blaring.

We make our way past our bench, knocking gloves before Maddison grabs my shoulders, eyes boring into mine. He's holding back his smile, as am I, but we both know he just scored the Stanley Cup-winning goal on my assist.

I try to stay focused for the last sixty seconds, especially when Pittsburgh pulls their goalie, giving us a man disadvantage, but I can't help my eyes wandering to the clock, watching the final seconds wind down.

Ten... Nine... Eight...

I propel my stick out when one of their forwards fires a shot, and somehow, I gain control, so I push the puck towards their empty net. It's wide. We're called for icing, and the refs gather the puck, bringing it back to our defensive zone.

Maddison lines up for his potentially final face-off of the season with four seconds left as the crowd erupts in anticipation. As I lean over, I attempt to take a breath, needing to collect myself, but I can't. My chest is light, my pulse is racing, and my mouth is dry. I can hear everything, see everything, feel everything.

The puck drops.

Three... Two... One...

We just won the fucking Stanley Cup.

My gloves hit the ground instantly, stick abandoned, helmet off. Warmth flows through my body as I attack our goalie with the rest of my team, dog-piling until we're a mess of red jerseys on top of one another.

I can't make out words. There's a shit-ton of yelling and cheering, a couple of guys crying in this mess of a pile as red and black confetti begins to rain down onto the ice, covering us.

We fucking did it.

After a grueling season, we did it. After twenty-two years of skating, early morning practices, conditioning, broken bones, torn muscles, wanting to quit more times than I can count, I did it. Every second of effort, sacrifice, and hard work is vindicated, culminating at this moment.

Two fists grab my jersey, pulling me onto my feet as Maddison throws his body into mine with a crushing hug. "Let's go, Zee baby!"

I wrap my arms around him. "We fucking did it, man!"

We hold on for a little longer before we're attacked by more bodies, more teammates, more coaches, but there are no words for this moment. The moment I achieve the one thing I could've only dreamed of as a kid, and I get to do so with my brother at my side.

Logan's red hair captures my attention only a second after it catches Maddison's. He races to her, barely allowing the seat usher to open the plexiglass before he's picking her up and not letting go.

The smile on my face is painfully big as I watch my two best friends together. Logan's green eyes are rimmed in red with happy tears as she tries to hide in Maddison's neck, but it's then that it hits me.

Stevie.

The whole family box is guided onto the ice, but Stevie's not with them. She didn't sit with them, but I need her here. This is the moment I've been waiting for. I need to tell her how much I love her, and I need the whole world to know too. She felt rejected when people found out about her, so it's only right she feels chosen with that same attention.

"Scott!" I yell to one of our team managers as he's celebrating on the ice. I pull him away from someone else mid-hug. "That ticket you got for me. You know Stevie, from the plane? My girlfriend, she's sitting there. Can you bring her down?" My volume is loud enough to hear over the crowd, my tone pleading.

He quickly nods, noting the urgency on my face as he takes off into the crowd.

Turning around, Lindsey attacks me in a hug.

"Congrats, Ev!" she shouts into my ear. I lift her up, swinging her around. Setting her back on her feet, she holds me out at arm's length with an overwhelmingly proud smile on her lips.

My dad's hand slides around the back of my neck, pulling me into him. He's almost as tall as I am, but I have quite a few inches over him in my skates. Regardless, I bend down, hiding away in his hug.

"Proud of you, son." He pats me hard on the shoulder while continuing to hold me.

"Love you, Dad."

Reaching out, I grab my sister, the three of us hanging on in a hug. All the tension in my body releases, having my family with me, having them here to celebrate after everything we've been through.

"I love you both."

I look up, past them, searching for any sign of Stevie, but there's nothing yet.

My knees get knocked from behind, almost causing me to lose my balance. Peeking down, I find a pile of wild brunette hair and little hands holding on for dear life around my legs.

I pick my niece up with ease, hoisting her onto my hip. Her tiny hands squish my sweaty cheeks together. "You win, Uncle Zee!"

I can't help but laugh.

My eyes find Maddison again as he shares a long moment with his dad, brother, and stepmom before his eight-month-old son, MJ, is passed to him. He peppers kisses on MJ's golden cheeks, all the while keeping Logan tucked under his arm.

Looking around, there's still no sign of Stevie.

Maddison's gaze darts to his daughter and me. "EJ, I think your dad wants to celebrate with you." I skate over to him before handing her off.

He covers her in kisses before he skates off with his two kids, taking a victory lap around the rink.

"I'm so proud of you two," Logan reminds me. She throws her arms around my neck.

"Love you, Lo." Pulling back, we hold eye contact. "Is she here?"

Logan offers me an apologetic smile. "I'm not sure. She didn't tell me one way or another."

My brows crease as reality starts to set in. I was so confident Stevie was going to be here. There was no doubt in my mind that she would be. We were going to win. I would tell her how much I love her, how much meaning she brings into my life, beg her to love me back. Remind her that none of this is worth it without her, but she's not here.

Everything I did over the last couple of weeks, I did because I needed to be the man she deserves. I needed to face some old demons, repair a relationship, and overall be ready for her. I *am* ready, but she's not here.

"Zee." Logan brings my attention back to her. "Take the moment in. Live it up and worry about everything else tomorrow. You're still here, in Chicago. You have us. Your freaking dad is here!" She pushes my chest with pride. "Stevie loves you. I know she does, but be selfish in this moment and celebrate with your teammates."

I nod in agreement when finally, my eyes land on Scott, standing behind the plexiglass. Urgently, I skate over to him.

"She wasn't in that seat!" he yells over the crowd. "I'm sorry, man."

My heart drops. I'm not sure it's healthy to experience every emotion I have in the last five minutes—the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. I thought she'd be here. I convinced myself she would be.

Maddison makes it back from his skate with his kids, and he somehow manages to hold MJ in one hand with Ella on his back as he wraps Logan up in his other. He buries his head in her neck, and like the emotional man

he is, his body begins to vibrate, and I'm almost certain he's shedding a few tears. That guy has been through it when it comes to his career and family, fighting to make it while taking some major losses along the way. But he's here. He did it, and he has his people right alongside him.

And for the first time in a long time, I'm jealous of my best friend. He has it all. He has what I want. I never saw his life as one I desired until this year, but it's perfectly clear to me now. I want what he has, but she's not here.

That's when it hits me.

Stevie has given up on me.

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STEVIE



“Excuse me!” I try to squeeze through the packed aisles, needing to get down to ice-level. “Excuse me!”

It’s no use. It’s too loud, too many celebrations. Too many fans are eager to get as close to the glass as possible, wanting a glimpse of the new Stanley Cup champions. The rows have emptied into the walkways, locking me into the mass of red and black jerseys.

“Excuse me. I need to get down there.” I push my way through but quickly get shoved back.

I can barely see the ice from where I’m standing, but I need to see him.

My seat was fairly high up, making the task of getting down to the ice before the crowd took over an impossible feat. Standing stranded in the middle of a mass of fans, confetti shoots from the ceiling, startling me. It’s then, stuck at a standstill twenty rows up, that I give in, realizing that I’m not going to make it down there for their celebration.

But I need to see him.

Slipping into the nearest row, I climb onto one of the folding seats to give myself a better view of the ice.

Maddison pulls Zanders off the pile of players lying on the ground to hug him, and my chest swells. Everything Zanders has dreamed of achieving is culminating in this one moment, and I couldn’t be more proud of him if I wanted to.

That is until I see a man who is almost as tall walk onto the ice. Hair just as tightly faded and skin a bit deeper than Zanders’, wearing his son’s jersey with their last name across the back.

I've never seen his picture, but I know that's Zanders' dad, and witnessing him here, the two of them hugging, fills me with an overflow of emotions.

On the one hand, I'm so thankful that they have each other in a moment they'll both remember for the rest of their lives.

And on the other hand, a spark of hope ignites within me that if Zanders can allow his dad to love him again, maybe one day, he'll be able to believe that I do too.

Ella attacks him by the knees, and the smile on Zanders' face lights up my entire body, but I'm finding it exceptionally hard to breathe since my chest is filled with so much pride.

Watching Zanders with the most essential people in his life reminds me how much he needs to stay in Chicago. He needs to re-sign here with Maddison and his family. This is where he belongs.

Of course, it still hurts knowing he doesn't believe that I love him, but the past few days since I talked to him last, I've questioned if maybe I can look past that. Zanders reached out to his dad. He cut off his mom and agent. He's clearly working on repairing the damage that brought him to the point of not accepting another person's love. Maybe that's good enough. Perhaps progress in that direction could be enough for me.

While we were together, Zanders treated me like he loved me, which was all I needed. I can only hope that when he looks back, he realizes I truly have loved him all along.

I want nothing more than to be on the ice right now, to celebrate him, to make sure he knows I'm here, but things are so up in the air with us that it's not the right time to figure it out. This moment isn't about me, and I want him to enjoy this win with his teammates and family. He deserves every second of recognition.

But one way or another, I'm going to see him tonight.

"Miss Shay. It's so good to see you again." Zanders' doorman opens the main entrance to the lobby for me.

"You too." I point towards the elevator. "Is it okay if I go up?"

“Of course. You’re always on the list. Mr. Zanders isn’t back quite yet, though.”

“That’s okay. I’ll wait for him up there.”

I have a key to Zanders’ place, but instead of using it, I take a seat on the floor in the private hall outside his elevator leading to his door. Things are too unsettled between us for me to be waiting inside, but I need him to know I was at the game, and I need him to know how proud I am.

And not just because of hockey. Actually, not because of hockey at all, but because I can see how much work he’s doing in other parts of his life, and he deserves to know I recognize it.

The minutes tick on as I wait for him, and any slight sound has my attention darting towards the elevator, hoping for him, but he never comes.

The post-game ceremony and celebrations take time, but it’s going on one in the morning. I assumed he’d be back by now.

I call him. It goes straight to voicemail.

I text. It remains unanswered.

It’s not that we need to talk and figure things out tonight, but he deserves to know I was at the game, supporting him as I always will. On the biggest day of his life, I don’t want him to question whether or not I was there for him.

The floor becomes unbearably uncomfortable around two AM, so after one more unanswered phone call, I finally give in and head back to my own place for sleep.

I’ll have to see and congratulate him another day.

ZANDERS



“This is the most hungover I’ve ever been.”

“No,” Maddison disagrees. “This is the most hungover *I*’ve ever been.”

Logan silently laughs to herself as she parks in the players’ lot of the United Center, and I could not be happier that the car finally stopped moving. I’ve been focusing on not throwing up all morning. The car ride didn’t help.

“You two need to get your shit together.” Logan reaches into the back seat, handing me a black coffee before she does the same to her equally struggling husband sitting on the passenger side. “Take some ibuprofen, chug some caffeine, and put on your best Captain and Alternate Captain smiles. The whole country is about to see you two on TV.”

Swallowing down a joke about her being our mom after too many nights out, I throw back the painkiller with a swig of coffee.

Last night was insane, in the best way possible.

I slapped a kiss on the Stanley Cup, held it over my head, then took a champagne shower in the locker room. The boys all went back to Rio’s, where the celebration continued until the early hours of the morning. We didn’t sleep much if any, and we left his place looking like a frat house the day after a kegger. It was one of the best nights of my life.

The only thing missing was Stevie, but I took Logan’s advice and lived it up with my teammates for one last time.

The effect of chugging endless bubbles is catching up in the form of nausea and a splitting headache, but I need to pull it together for our

champion's parade. Not only will all of downtown Chicago see us as we drive by, but media outlets will be airing it throughout North America, so I'm hoping the hype from the crowded Chicago streets is enough to cure my hangover.

Thankfully, Logan stopped by my apartment and brought me some fresh clothes this morning after picking up Rosie from her dog-sitter so she could join in on the festivities.

The parking lot is littered with double-decker buses to ride during the parade. Families and friends overtake the outdoor area, wearing their players' jerseys, but the boys from the team stick out like sore thumbs. Each and every one of us is showcasing the effects of last night's celebration.

But regardless of how shitty I feel, I'm going to take it in. We just won the Stanley Cup, and it's time for the city to celebrate as a whole.

Over the next hour, we're briefed on the parade route, who is riding with whom, and thankfully the ibuprofen and coffee have kicked in enough that I'm feeling more human and less on the verge of death.

My dad and Lindsey show up, both wearing my jersey, and Maddison's parents and kids arrive shortly after. The two of us are assigned to the lead bus, and the whole crew piles on with Rosie and Ella leading the way, followed by a cameraman from one of our local news stations who will film the entire thing.

The double-decker bus is covered in the Raptors logo with my name and number plastered on one side and Maddison's on the other. The top deck is an open space with no seating, allowing plenty of room for all of us to mingle while waving to the crowd below.

I'm stoked to have these people here, my family and Maddison's family, but all of us being together makes Stevie's absence all the more evident.

"You okay?" Lindsey checks in, running a soothing hand down my arm.

"I'm good," I push out. It's not a lie, but it's not the absolute truth either. The biggest victory in my life feels a little...empty.

"I'm sorry she wasn't there last night, Ev."

"Me too." I force a smile, not yet ready to dive into the meaning of Stevie's absence.

I nudge my arm into my sister's. "Hey, I'm going to need you to take pictures today. My phone was doused in champagne in the locker room last night and called it quits."

“No problem.”

“Uncle Zee?” Ella taps on my leg.

“What’s up, girly?” I pick her up, slinging her on my hip.

“Where Stevie?”

My heart breaks a little more. Ella has asked me this almost every time I’ve seen her over the last couple of weeks, but this time hurts the most. Having my closest people here to celebrate, but Stevie not being present, seems so final and definitive.

I was far too hopeful that she would forgive me or see the progress I’ve made and maybe give me another chance, but more than that, I needed her to know I love her. Stevie going through life, thinking I don’t, is the most unsettling part of all.

“She’s not here, EJ.”

“She coming?” Her emerald eyes are pleading for me to say yes.

I offer my niece an apologetic smile. “I don’t think so.”

Ella’s sweet smile drops before she leans her head on my shoulder. “I miss her.”

Fuck, that one hurt.

“Me too.”

I swallow down the emptiness and regret as we pull out from the United Center and lead the parade through downtown Chicago.

The streets are packed with fans overtaking the sidewalks, all wearing the team’s gear. The cheering is nonstop, the music is bumping, and the fans are on another level with their signs and foghorns.

Last night’s win wasn’t just for the team or me. It was for the city I’ve loved over the previous seven seasons. Even if the fans can’t love me for who I am, I thoroughly enjoyed putting on a show for them throughout my career. This city has become my home, and I’m going to miss the hell out of it.

Ella climbs onto her dad’s back to wave to the crowd below. Lindsey snaps pictures of the whole thing, documenting it for us, and I pick up Rosie’s sixty-five-pound Doberman body to show my girl off to the fans.

My dad joins in, wrapping his arm around my shoulders, but he doesn’t look down at the fans below us. Out of my peripheral, I can see his stare focused on me, pride evident in his gray eyes. I can’t imagine him missing this. I just wish I wasn’t so blind and stubborn the last twelve years that we had to miss out on too much time together.

I'd like to think I don't live with regrets because everything happens for a reason. Twelve years of a strained relationship with my dad makes me appreciate his love and support far more than I ever could've realized. Letting my mom control my panic and anger made the freedom from her all the more liberating. The confinement I felt with Rich as my agent made firing him all the more vindicated.

But I regret breaking up with Stevie. Sure, I probably wouldn't have faced my mom, fired Rich, or reconciled with my dad if I hadn't, but pushing away the first person to ever really love me has been the biggest mistake of my life.

I continue to wave, plastering on my biggest celebrity smile, as I try to focus and live in the moment, but as soon as the bus turns the corner onto the next street over, Rosie begins pawing at my leg, wanting my attention.

The parade is only moving a couple of miles an hour, but I hadn't realized where we were. The endless sea of fans wearing black and red distracted me from our location. We're close to my apartment, but more importantly, we're a few buildings over from SDOC.

"Stop."

All eyes turn to me, utterly confused.

"Stop. Stop driving!"

"Zee, you good?" Maddison asks with confusion, but I blow past him to the front of the bus.

I need to see her.

"Stop the bus!" I yell down to the driver, frantic and urgent, but he can't hear me.

The excited crowd drowns out my plea, but Logan notices and races down the internal stairwell causing the bus to halt quickly.

Rosie charges full speed down those same steps, and I follow behind. There's an endless squeal of bus brakes behind me, the parade coming to a complete stop, but I don't care. Everyone else can wait.

Logan stands at the base, wearing an understanding and proud smile on her face. "Go get her," she encourages with a squeeze to my shoulder.

The crowd stirs with excitement, noticing me off the bus, but I frantically weave through the mob of fans as I head straight for the little run-down building behind them.

They try to stop me, wanting pictures or autographs, but I keep moving. I need to see her.

She may not have come to my game, and she may have given up on us, but she needs to know how much I love her. Even if she doesn't feel the same anymore, she deserves to know.

Multiple camerapeople follow me, and I'm glad they do. After everything I've put Stevie through, the least I can do is make sure the whole world knows how much I love that girl.

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STEVIE



I didn't get much sleep last night. After waiting in Zanders' hallway until two in the morning, I wandered back to my place for some rest, but I only had a few hours until I needed to get up. I wanted to get to the shelter early this morning to check on the dogs.

Since six AM, fans have been crowding the sidewalk outside our little run-down shelter. They're loud and for a lot of pups, the yelling, cheering, and blaring music can be scary, especially when you're in a new place and not in the home you were used to.

Thankfully our group of senior dogs has been primarily unaffected by the outside noise, but regardless, I'm glad to spend the day here. It's a good distraction from the fact I haven't been able to see Zanders yet.

Cheryl and I didn't plan for business today. We just came by to check on the dogs. The sidewalks are too crowded, plus the entire city is closed up and celebrating the boys' championship.

For the first time all day, the bell over the door rings, but as I walk around the partition to greet them, Rosie comes barreling into her old home, rubbing her body against my shins as she softly whimpers, begging for my attention.

I haven't allowed myself to think about how much I miss her, but now that's she's here, I can't avoid it. When Zanders broke up with me, I not only lost him, but I lost her too.

I bend down, making myself level with her, scratching behind her ears and giving her all the love I haven't been able to offer in the last few weeks.

"Rosie, what are you doing here?" I rhetorically ask.

That's when it hits me.

I look up, and there he is, standing just inside the doorway.

Taking him in but not believing that he's here, I slowly stand. He's as handsome as he always is, fresh faded cut, gold jewelry, and perfectly fitted clothes. His hazel eyes bore into mine, staring at me from across the room as my chest flutters from his unyielding gaze.

The crowd is frantic outside, the noise level almost deafening. Local news stations have their cameras rolling, a couple of them managing to follow him inside, but I can't focus on anything other than Zanders.

I cannot believe he's here right now.

Cheryl slips past me out of the room as I continue to mindlessly scratch Rosie's head as she sits at my side.

Zanders and I standoff, holding each other's stare for far too long, silence stretching between us.

I swallow. "You following me?"

A light laugh flows through him. "You have no idea, Stevie girl."

Our matching smiles ease the tension in the room until his brows crease with worry, eyes pleading with mine. "Do you love me?"

The question catches me off guard so much so that I can't speak. He knows I do, but I didn't expect him to ask so directly. It's Zanders, though. I should always expect direct.

"Because I love you, Stevie."

What?

"I've always loved you. I just didn't know that's what it was at the time. I've never had someone to love, and no one has ever loved me the way you do." He pauses for a deep breath. "You might be done with me, Vee, and I wouldn't blame you if you were, but I can't let this end without telling you how much I fucking love you."

Is this really happening? My throat is dry, my mouth parched, and my heart is racing faster than it probably should. Words I was convinced I'd never hear him say are now flowing freely from his lips.

"The biggest mistake I've ever made was letting you go. I told myself I was doing it to protect you, but I was scared. No one had ever loved me enough to stick around, and I was tired of being left, so I did it before you could. But Stevie, there hasn't been a second that's gone by that I haven't regretted that decision. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. Always will be."

Zanders vulnerably stands across the room from me, cameras filming his genuine words, but in a state of shock, I remain silent.

His throat bobs in a deep swallow before continuing. "I thought the scariest thing would be losing Chicago, losing my fans, but I was wrong. The scariest thing is losing you. All this time, I thought I needed an entire city to love me, but the reality is I just need you one person to. I need *you* to love me. You've always been my first choice, Vee, and I lost sight of that for a moment, but I promise you, you'll never have to question your place in my life again."

I open my mouth to speak, but he doesn't let me.

"If you want to be in Seattle, then I'll try my hardest to play in Seattle. If you want to move somewhere else, then I'm coming too." He releases a heavy sigh. "Stevie girl, I'll follow you anywhere."

Before I can interject, he frantically continues.

"I used to love life on the road, because for a moment I could forget I didn't have anyone at home. But the only reason I enjoyed traveling this season is because you were there. I had the best part of home with me. I fell in love with you while we were a mile high in the air."

"Miles," I finally interrupt.

"What?"

"*Miles*. Like seven miles in the air."

His lips tug in a smile, but he holds it back. "Sweetheart." He closes his eyes with faux frustration. "I'm kind of having a moment here."

My chest heaves in a silent laugh. "I'm sorry. Please continue." I motion for him to do so.

"Thank you." His lips press in a hard line, but he's fully amused. "Anyway, as I was saying. I fell in love with you while we were *miles* high in the air, and I'm begging you to love me back."

My face softens in understanding.

"I'll believe you, Stevie. I promise I will. Whatever you say, I'll believe you." He pauses. "Do you still love me?"

A moment of silence and hesitation lingers between us. Zanders' eyes plead with me to love him back, and how could I not? I've never stopped. I just wanted him to let me.

And now, not only is he letting me, but he's begging me to.

Taking a few quick strides, I wrap my hand around the back of his neck, pulling him down to me. His lips are as I remember, soft and warm, but he's

frozen in place, unmoving as if he doesn't believe this is happening.

Finally, after a beat, he catches on, his mouth melting into my own, taking everything I have to offer. His hands slide around my lower back, the metal of his rings pressing into my body with his commanding touch. His tongue traces the entrance to my lips, which I quickly give him access to, and it isn't until the cheers from outside grow exponentially louder that we separate, but barely.

I inhale a breath through the small part in our lips, needing to fill my lungs with oxygen.

He rests his forehead on mine, whispering his desperate question once more. "Do you still love me, Stevie?"

I look up through my lashes. "Of course, I do. I've always loved you. I just wanted you to let me."

He closes his eyes, and when they reopen, it's as if the weight of the world has fallen off his shoulders. "I thought you gave up on me. After you didn't come to the game—"

"I was there."

He pulls away slightly to get a better look at me, his hold keeping my body tight to his.

"I tried to get to the ice, but there were too many people. I waited for you at your apartment instead."

His brows soften with understanding. "I stayed at Rio's. We all did. I never came home."

"I called."

He lightly laughs. "My phone broke."

A smile lifts on my lips. "I could never give up on you. I love you."

He pulls me in, hiding away in my neck. "I love you so much, Vee."

I run a gentle hand up the back of his neck and scalp, basking in the words I didn't think I would ever hear.

He holds on a little longer, and a little tighter before his head pops up from my shoulder. "Cheryl." I turn around to see the shelter's owner, watching us with so much pride on her face. "Can I steal her for the day?"

She clasps her hands, tucking them under her chin. "Please do."

"I need you with me out there." Zanders moves a rogue curl from in front of my face. "There are a lot of people outside. Are you okay with that?"

I stand confident. "It doesn't bother me anymore."

Zanders' smile is soft but proud. "That's my girl." He cups my face, his lips finding mine for a moment.

Slipping his ring-covered fingers through mine, Zanders leads me outside past the reporters and through the maze of fans with Rosie behind us both. There are way more people out here than I anticipated, all eyes on us.

"There's our girl!" I hear from one of the buses. Looking up, I find Rio leaning over the railing of his bus, his signature boom box held over his head with music blaring.

"Stevie!"

"We missed you, Stevie!"

"Get it, EZ!" continues from the line of buses with all the hockey boys I worked for this year standing on the top deck, watching.

Zanders quickly guides us to his bus, allowing me to climb the stairs first, and as soon as I step onto the top deck, I'm attacked with a hug. It takes a moment for me to register that Lindsey is the one holding on to me as tight as she can.

I wrap my arms around her back as she squeezes my neck. "I'm sorry my brother was an idiot."

We both shake with laughter until she pulls away, holding me at an arm's distance, a thankful smile on her lips.

"Stevie!" Ella attacks my legs, so I bend down, making myself eye level with her. "You do my hair?"

"Absolutely."

The bus begins moving, the parade continuing.

Maddison and I share a quick wordless conversation from across the way. He offers me a thankful smile before Logan wraps me up in a hug.

Zanders' hand finds the small of my back. "I want you to meet someone."

He guides me to the almost as equally tall man standing with Lindsey. "Vee, this is my dad. Dad, this is my girlfriend, Stevie."

My eyes burn a bit, but I hold it in. Of all the progress Zanders has made, this is by far the most important. His dad always loved him, as did I, but he had a hard time believing us both.

And now he does.

"It's so nice to meet you," I tell his dad, brows pinched together.

He releases a breath of relief. “Oh, you have no idea how happy I am to meet you, Stevie.” His tall frame bends down, arms slinging around me. “Thank you,” he quietly whispers for no one else to hear.

Words stick in my throat. I can’t speak, so instead, I quickly nod into his hug.

We share an understanding smile before Zanders’ arms are around my shoulders once again, my back to his chest.

He urges me forward to stand at the railing with him, all of Chicago’s hockey fans below us, and at this moment, it hits me that this is the first time we’ve been in public together without hiding. And for someone who was afraid of the recognition that followed Zanders around, I don’t mind the attention one bit.

I want everyone to know he’s mine.

He peppers kisses along my neck and shoulder as I find my worn-out ring on his pinky finger, spinning it before repeating the exact phrase he used the morning he took it.

“Mine.” I melt back into his touch.

His hold tightens. “And you’re mine, sweetheart. None of this”—he nods below us—“was right without you. You’re my first and only choice, Vee, and never again am I going to make you feel like you’re not.”

This is all I’ve ever wanted, to be chosen by the person I care about the most. I had friends in school who only chose to spend time with me because of my brother. I’m a twin, and I was still my own mother’s second choice. I’ve had a relationship where his first pick was anyone but me.

But here, with the person I value more than anyone else, I’m chosen.

“All right, you two,” Maddison interrupts, teasing us. “This is a family-friendly event.” Though, his own hand rests on his wife’s ass.

Zanders flips him off with one hand and uses the other to hook around the back of my neck, capturing my mouth with his once again.

“Fucking love you,” he murmurs against my lips. “I’ll follow you anywhere, Stevie.”

I put that conversation on pause and instead nudge his nose with mine and kiss him once more.

“Linds!” he shouts back over his shoulder. “Let’s pop those bottles of champagne! We won the Stanley Cup, and I got my girl back. Now we can celebrate!”

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ZANDERS



“We need to get you some new Forces.” I open my apartment door to let Stevie in first, but Rosie finds her way in before either of us can.

“No, we don’t.”

“Vee, they’re supposed to be white. Yours are...not.”

She kicks them off with a bit of an attitude, leaving them at my front door before strutting towards the living room. “You’re too pretty for your own good. You know that?”

I chase after her, wrapping my arms around her waist from behind. “You love me.”

She giggles in my grasp. “Yeah,” she sighs. “I do.”

The parade was fun and all, but I’ve been waiting to get her back home all day. My place has a different energy when she’s here. It’s brighter, more fun. It’s a home when she’s inside, and I truly don’t plan on ever being without her again.

I just don’t know what that will look like. I don’t know where I’m playing next year. I don’t know if Stevie signed on a place in Seattle. Everything is still up in the air, but the most important thing is that I got my girl back, and we can figure out the rest together.

“Vee, we should probably talk about what’s next.”

“Later.” She walks backwards into the living room while peeling the flannel off her shoulders, dropping it to the ground.

From across the room, my eyes go wide, my mouth falling open. I’ve only been able to fantasize about the memory of her over the last few

weeks, but now, here in my apartment, I have the real thing once again.

My eyes quickly dart to my windows, ensuring the curtains are closed before my stare immediately falls back to my girl. Stevie unbuttons her jeans, all the while her blue-greens are locked on me.

“Rosie!” I call out to my room, where she’s probably passed out on her dog bed, exhausted from an exciting day. “Stay in there. Your mom is about to make your dad real happy.”

Stevie silently laughs as she pushes the denim over her hips and ass. My lingering gaze slowly works its way up her thick thighs, over the soft skin of her belly, and to her tits that I’m all too obsessed with, hidden behind a tank top that’s so tight it may as well have been painted on.

I can feel my eyes hooding over as I take slow, leisurely steps towards her, my hands out in front of me, ready to touch and love on the body I’ve missed far too much over the last few weeks. But as soon as I reach her, she takes a step back, maintaining a distance from me.

She wears a sly smile on her lips, her eyes shining with amusement as she shakes her head to tell me no.

“Stevie,” I draw out. “I haven’t touched you in weeks.”

She lifts a single brow. “I know.”

“I *need* to touch you.”

She shakes her head in silence before peeling the tank top off, leaving her in only a pair of light blue panties and a matching bra. They’re doing all sorts of things to my imagination, the color playing perfectly off her bronze skin and ocean eyes.

That’s when it hits me. “Is this my punishment?”

She pops a shoulder. “Just want to make sure you’ve learned your lesson because you’re never breaking up with me again.” Her smile is sinister and wicked, lifted on one side.

“Oh, sweetheart.” I take a step forward, but she mirrors it, retreating. “I’ve learned my lesson. Trust me. I’m never making that mistake again.”

“I just want to make sure it really sinks in, you know?”

Finally, she moves towards me, hands on my hipbones, walking me backward. Looking down, I’m mesmerized by the slit in her cleavage, the way her tits bounce with each step, and I want nothing more than to touch every inch of her body. I need it in my hands, in my mouth.

The back of my legs hit the couch as she pushes me to sit down.

“No touching allowed. You can watch.”

Fuck me.

She keeps her eyes locked on mine as she reaches behind her and unclasps her bra, letting it fall to the floor.

“Okay, confidence,” I encourage.

She lightly laughs before her ring-covered fingers graze over her tits, pinching her nipples and forming them into little brown peaks.

“Fuck, Vee,” I murmur in a daze. “Goddamn perfection.” I relax back into the couch, stretching out like a king on his throne.

She sways her hips slightly as she stands in front of me, giving me a show, her hands trailing down her soft skin and hooking into the waistband of her underwear.

I swallow, internally begging for her to pull them off, needing to see her pretty brown pussy I haven’t been able to taste in far too long.

She plays with the fabric but keeps them in place.

“Don’t tease me. Take them off.”

She does as I say, slowly shimmying them down her thighs until they pool around her ankles.

My naked girl stands there in all her glory, endlessly more confident than the first time I saw her bare, and I love that for her.

Judging by the erection I’m sporting, I love it for me too.

The slit between her legs is already glistening with her arousal, making my cock painfully stretch against my zipper. I give it a quick adjustment to try to reduce the ache.

She slowly shakes her head. “No touching.”

“Stevie,” I whine. “You can’t stand there looking like that and not let me touch anything. You’re torturing me.”

“That’s the point. But if you follow the rules, then I’ll give you what you want.” She stalks towards me. “Eventually.”

I resign, sinking back to the couch behind me, my arms out wide, resting on the top of the sofa, hoping it’ll keep my hands from finding her. “It’s a good thing I love you.”

Her smile is soft. “Yeah. Good thing.”

She climbs onto the couch, legs straddling mine, but she stays up on her knees, not touching me or providing the much-needed friction my dick is begging for.

Her hands roam her body, feeling every bit that I’m desperate to touch. Her fingers trail her stomach, inching south, as I follow their path in a

trance. Her other hand cups her tit, playing with it, rolling her nipple, but I'm too focused on the one moving down towards her clit.

Her middle finger grazes it, pulling a soft whimper from my girl's throat.

"Jesus Christ," I breathe out, mesmerized.

She rubs against herself, her body rocking on her fingers.

"Fuck, Vee. Does that feel good?"

"Mm-hmm." She bites down on her lip, eyes watching me. "So good."

"Look at you. Fucking unreal, Stevie girl."

I don't think I've ever been so turned on in my life as my hips begin involuntarily rocking, begging for the friction she's denying me.

Fully clothed, I sit on my couch as the girl I'm in love with straddles me, touching herself for only me to see. Other than this being absolute torture, I don't know how the hell I got so lucky that this is my life.

She rubs slow leisurely circles through her wet folds, her pussy hovering inches over me. Her eyes get all innocent and soft. "Tell me what you want to see."

Good God.

My head falls back as I scrub a hand across my jaw in disbelief before taking a deep breath and focusing on her once again. "Slip a finger inside. Let me see you make yourself feel good."

She removes her hand from her clit and instead holds her glistening fingers in front of my mouth, asking for more lubrication. I take them between my lips, sucking off her arousal, twirling my tongue around them, and coating her fingers with me instead.

Stevie pulls them from me, rubbing them against herself once more before her middle finger disappears.

She falls forward with a moan, keeping herself up with one arm on the back of the couch, her tits right in front of my face, begging for me to take them in my mouth.

This little show is going to kill me.

Sitting up on her knees, she continues to fuck her hand. Her curly hair has fallen in front of her face. I need to push it out of the way to see her, but I also really want my reward for following her rules.

Her movements are mesmerizing, one glistening finger moving in and out at a torturous pace.

"Add another finger for me, Vee."

She drops her head back, exposing her face. Her freckled cheeks are flushed, her pretty eyes hooded, but her lips lift in a mischievous smile as another finger disappears inside of her.

“Such a good girl,” I breathe. “So good at listening.”

She slowly pumps her fingers.

“Move them faster for me.”

She picks up the pace, her fingers bringing her to the edge as her palm pushes against her clit. “It feels so good,” she whimpers.

She’s fucking perfection.

I need to touch her or myself, something to ease the ache of my dick being overly confined. I want to join her, and this is pure torture. If I hadn’t already learned my lesson, her fucking herself and not letting me join in would make it sink in.

My hands clench into fists, trying to restrain myself, needing her to give in soon.

She writhes against her own touch, her body quivering, having a hard time holding itself up.

“God, you’re fucking gorgeous. Make yourself come, baby.”

She continues her movements, rolling on her fingers, soft little moans and cries flowing freely from her lips.

“Let me see you come, Vee.”

“Zee?”

I have to swallow, trying to control myself from hearing her call my name while she looks like this. I lick my lips, watching her in a daze. “Mm-hmm?”

“Will you help me finish?”

Fucking hell. She doesn’t have to ask me twice. My hands are around her with no time wasted, squeezing her ass. I stand, picking her up before turning around and tossing her back on the couch. Falling to my knees, I spread her legs wide, throwing them over my shoulders before my warm tongue is flat against her core.

“*Oh my God,*” she cries, head falling back.

I didn’t know I earned a new nickname, but she can call me that anytime she wants.

I tease her swollen nerves, flicking my tongue at a torturous pace, but unlike her, I’m going to let her come because, selfishly, it’s one of my favorite things to watch.

Looking up, I keep my eyes on her rapidly rising chest, her contracting stomach, her flushed and freckled cheeks. I continue to lick, suck, and kiss, finally having a taste of the girl I've been missing for far too long.

I slyly undo my belt and zipper while my tongue continues to work her up. Grabbing my cock out, I give it a few needed tugs. The relief is almost too much, just having it out of its restriction, but there's no way in hell I'm letting myself come before I'm buried deep inside of her.

"Zee, I'm so close," she whines, her entire body tightening.

I grab the back of her knees, pushing them up as I continue to fuck her with my mouth, making her come all over my tongue and letting her ride it out against me.

Her chest heaves, and a content smile slides across her lips. Pure euphoria takes over her freckled face, and I don't know if I've seen anything hotter in my life than that little performance.

My naked girl lays limp, sprawled out over my expensive-ass couches. I stand up, looking down at her, while I'm still entirely clothed, minus my dick in my hand.

Her hazy eyes fall right to it.

"Quite the little show you put on, sweetheart."

She bites her lip, nodding.

"You know you're going to have to pay for that, right?"

She doesn't respond but keeps her focus on my cock as it moves in and out of my fist.

"Is this what my girl wants?" I nod towards my crotch. "It's all yours, Vee."

Dropping to her knees in front of me, she swiftly yanks my pants down my legs.

I take a fistful of her hair, tilting her head to look at me. "Are you going to show me how well you suck it?"

She innocently nods as she takes my cock in her mouth, swirling her tongue around the tip before pushing me so deep she chokes a bit.

"Just like that. That's my girl."

Gathering her curls in my hand, I involuntarily thrust into her. "I fucking love you," I blurt out, barely having enough breath to speak. My head falls back, eyes closed as I concentrate on not coming in two seconds flat. "Oh my God, I love you."

Stevie bobs her head, taking almost all of me in her warm mouth as I stroke her cheek. “My talented girl.”

I continue to encourage, but when she sucks her cheeks in, running her lips down my length, I have to pull out of her, so I don’t finish too soon.

My chest heaves, needing oxygen as I stay bent over, fisting her curly hair, and trying to regain my composure. But eventually, I straighten, slipping my shirt over my head, making myself as bare as she is.

“Get on the couch and open your legs. I’m going to fuck you until you can’t walk.”

An excited smile takes over her face as she backs up on the sofa, shifting her body, so I have space to climb on too.

I nudge her legs open with my knee, fist my cock, and center myself, but then I look down and see her. And just like that, I’m under her spell as I always am.

My voice is soft, almost gentle. “I love you, Stevie.”

She giggles, lying naked on her back. “You just went from ‘daddy’ to ‘baby’ real quick.”

My brows jump. “Call me ‘daddy’ again.”

She playfully rolls her eyes, swatting me in the chest. I fall on top of her, smiling into her neck and letting her hold me for a moment.

She softly rubs the length of my back. “I love you so much,” she whispers.

“Can you tell me that again?”

“I love you, and I’ll remind you as often as you need.”

Stroking the side of her face, I move her hair out of the way so I can see her a bit better. “I missed you so much, Stevie, and I’m sorry.”

Shaking her head, she brushes me off. “Look at all the good things that came out of it.” She pauses, letting her words sink in. “But don’t ever pull that shit again.”

Our mutual smiles shift the tone once more. “Never.”

My mouth find hers, soft and gentle as I line myself up and slowly push into her.

Our lips gape against each other as we hold eye contact, but fuck, she feels amazing. I’ve taken care of myself to the memory of her far too many times over the last few weeks, but nothing compares to this.

I keep my strides slow and consistent in tempo, both of us moving together until I lean up on my elbows, getting better leverage to pick up my

pace and force.

I circle my hand around the base of her throat as the chain hangs off my neck, dangling over her, but she doesn't seem to mind, completely lost in the moment. I pound into her, almost punishing, but I can't get over how beautiful she looks beneath me, her tits bouncing with every intentional thrust.

Her curls are sprawled beneath her, soft golden strands peppered throughout the chestnut waves. Her lashes flutter, but when her blue-green eyes connect with mine, I almost lose it.

I'm not going to last long if I stay in control.

Keeping my dick inside of her, I slide my arms under her back, lifting her curvy body as I take a seat on the couch. Her soft thighs straddle mine, her tits right in my face.

"Ride me, sweetheart. Show me what you can do."

She rolls her hips on me as I lean back on the couch, hands folded behind my head.

"Holy fuck," I breathe out, closing my eyes and feeling it all as she bounces on my dick. "How are you so good at this?"

She continues her movements, grinding and rolling. I lean forward, taking one of her pretty brown nipples in my mouth and filling both hands with her ass as I begin bouncing her quicker. I'm getting close, and I know she is too.

Her arms wrap around my shoulders as she hides in my neck, leaving her body at my disposal.

"You feel so good," she cries, hidden away as she begins to quiver and shake.

"Keep going, Vee, you're doing so good. Use me. Don't stop. I need you to come all over me."

She doesn't stop. She continues her movements until finally, she falls apart as her orgasm rips through her, leaving her with absolutely no control of her body.

I pull her mouth to mine as I hold her hips tight, thrusting upward into her a few more times, her pussy clenching around me. I come undone right along with her as we ride our highs together.

"I love you," she reminds me between heavy breaths, her arms wrapped around my neck, lips ghosting mine.

A smile slides across my face. I've never had someone say that to me in this way, but I've also never wanted anyone to. But with Stevie, I wouldn't mind hearing it every day for the rest of my life.

I cup the back of her head, holding her to me. "I love you, too."

We stay in silence for a few moments as we mutually come down from our highs, and I can't hold back any longer when I blurt out, "Did you sign on an apartment in Seattle?"

"Zee," she laughs. "You're still inside of me."

"I know, but today is my first day of the off-season, and I can finally talk to teams, so if you're going to be in Seattle, I need to make some calls and see what I can do."

She lifts off my dick slowly, adjusting, so she's sitting across my lap as I hold her.

"I didn't sign on an apartment, but I do have a job lined up, ready for me."

"Is that where you want to be?"

She slowly strokes the side of my face. "I want to be wherever you are. I can get a job anywhere. Even if it's not one I like all that much. What's most important is that you get on a team."

"I want you to do something you like, though."

She pops her shoulders. "You were right. I really don't enjoy flying all that much, and as long as I have time to volunteer with some pups, then I'll be happy."

My lips find her forehead, lingering there. "It's going to be weird not having you on the road next season." I lightly rock her in my arms. "But at least I'll have you at home."

She releases a content sigh, resting on my shoulder.

"I mean it, Stevie. I need you at home. I want you to move in with me."

She looks up at me, brows furrowed.

"Even if we're only here for the summer, I want you to move in. And when we leave Chicago, I want to live together. If I can't have you on the road next season, I need you every second of every day while I'm home."

A blush rushes up to her freckled cheeks, and an excited smile spreads across her lips that she tries to suppress. "I'd like that."

"Yeah?" I ask with a bit of disbelief. I haven't lived with anyone since college. I've learned to appreciate my own space. Not anymore, though. I want nothing more than to be suffocated with Stevie's presence.

“Yeah.” She brings her smiling mouth to mine.

Cupping her cheeks, my tongue finds access to her mouth as things pick up speed, my body ramping back up for round two, but the buzzer by the door rings, interrupting our moment.

“Mr. Zanders?” my doorman’s voice wafts through the apartment. “I have a Scott here for you. He says he’s a team manager.”

Stevie and I look at each other in confusion. She quickly climbs off my lap, letting me get to the door, where I push the button to speak into the system.

“Um...” I hesitate before looking back at my naked girl on the couch. She quickly nods, telling me to let him up. “Yeah, send him up.”

Stevie holes up in my room as I slip on a pair of sweatpants and meet Scott at my front door.

“Sorry to barge in like this.” He throws his hand in mine before I motion him inside. “But you weren’t answering your phone.”

“It broke after the game last night.” My face pinches in confusion. I just saw Scott at the parade a couple of hours ago. He could’ve talked to me then. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, but I was hoping we could talk.” He looks over at the couch, searching for a place to sit before his eyes fall on the scattered clothes discarded throughout the living room. “Oh, you would,” he laughs.

I offer him a look without apology. “You’re the one coming over the day I get my girl back. What did you expect to find?”

“Touché.”

Scott takes a seat at the dining room table as I pull out a couple of sparkling waters for us.

“So, what’s up?”

“Well, as you know, the season ended yesterday. We legally haven’t been able to talk to you yet, and we were planning to give you a couple of days to enjoy the win, but after you mentioned signing your free agency over to Seattle on national television, we didn’t think we could wait any longer.”

“Wait any longer for what?”

“Zanders, you’ve been an essential part of our organization over the last seven seasons, and we love having you in Chicago. I thought the least you would do is have a conversation with us and turn down our offer before you signed somewhere else.”

“Scott, I’ve waited for a contract renewal all season. What are you talking about?”

“We made an offer back in October. We’ve been waiting for you to sign all season, so it was a bit of a shock to us when you brought up leaving our team in front of the cameras. We’d thought you’d at least tell us first.”

“I didn’t want to leave. I’ve been working all year, waiting for a new contract from you guys.”

Scott’s head jolts back in shock. “It’s been on the table since our first home game. Your agent kept coming back to negotiations, saying you didn’t think the salary was high enough for you. I know it’s not a raise, but it’s what you’ve been making, and we’re tight within the budget cap. We can’t offer more.”

Fucking Rich.

I run my hands over my face in disbelief. “Scott. I never saw a contract. I swear. I would’ve signed it the second I did. I didn’t care about the money. I just wanted to stay here.”

“Your agent was coming back to us monthly, saying you weren’t happy with it still.”

“That’s why I fired him. He’s greedy. He wasn’t working on a higher salary for me. He just wanted a higher commission for himself.”

“We want you back. We always have. This is Maddison’s and your team.”

Is it? I’d like to believe that, but it’s always been Maddison’s authentic self and my media personality running this team. I don’t know that this city wants the dynamic to change.

“I don’t know, Scott. I don’t want to play into the narrative that Maddison and I have had since he got here. I’m tired of it. I know it fills the seats and all that shit, but I can’t do it anymore. I want people to know I’m half of Active Minds. I want people to like me for me, and I don’t think that’ll happen in Chicago.”

He pauses, hesitating. “Have you been online today?”

“Phone’s broken.”

Scott pulls out his own, quickly typing on it before showing me his screen. “Besides people being obsessed with you and Stevie over that little love confession on national television, Chicago fans are freaking out because you said you’re leaving. Everyone wants you here, Zanders. I know those headlines from a few weeks ago were shit, but those are nothing in

comparison to the amount of love people are pouring out for you today.” He hands his phone over. “Take a look.”

He’s right. Message thread after message thread fills the screen with fans desperate for me to return wearing a Raptors jersey next season. There’s also an outpouring of support for Stevie and me that I can’t wait to show her later, but as far as hockey goes, there’s not a single comment from local fans wanting me to leave.

However, there are fans from other teams commenting about how much they’d love to have me in their city, including a countless string from Seattle’s fanbase.

Multiple people mention Active Minds, noting they didn’t realize I hold an equal place with Maddison. There are pictures of my dad and me from the parade. Comments about Rosie being adopted, plus so much coverage of SDOC from our moment inside earlier today.

“Wow,” I exhale, handing the phone back to Scott. “I didn’t realize.”

“Chicago wants you. We always have. We can change the narrative, Zanders, but we as an organization already know the kind of guy you are, and that’s why we want you. The locker room loves you, and we enjoy the hell out of having you on the team. Whatever we can do to make it happen, we want you back.”

A long silence lingers between us. “I can’t make any decisions until I talk to Stevie.”

“Of course.”

“But if I do sign, it’ll be under one non-negotiable condition.”

“Anything.”

“Everything okay?” Stevie asks from my bed, where’s she’s sprawled out, wearing only my T-shirt.

I wander over to her in a disbelieved daze. “Chicago wants to sign me.”

“What?” She sits up with excitement.

Laying down, I swing my leg over her, pulling her in. “Apparently, there’s been an offer on the table all season, but Rich didn’t say anything.”

“Fucking Rich.”

“What do you think I should do?”

She delicately traces her fingertips across my cheek. “What do you *want* to do?”

“I’m not sure.”

She lightly laughs. “Yes, you are. You don’t want to leave Chicago, the same way I don’t. Your family is here. You can’t look me in the eye and tell me that Uncle Zee would be okay moving away from Ella.”

My head falls back. “God, no. She’s already four. What am I going to do, only see her over the summers until I retire?”

“Exactly. If Chicago is offering you what you want, take it. This is your home.”

My face softens. “You going to let me officially make you ‘Auntie Vee’ or what?”

“You better.”

We share a moment, holding eye contact as Stevie delicately traces her fingertips along my jaw.

“If you want a fresh start on a new team, I’ll follow you anywhere, but I can’t imagine you being happier somewhere other than Chicago. This is what you’ve wanted all season.”

“Yeah, but I’ve been preparing myself, mentally detaching.”

“I think that’s good enough, Zee. When we first met, leaving Chicago was your biggest fear. Now, you’re ready to go if you need to, but just because you’ve grown enough to know you’ll be okay somewhere else doesn’t mean you have to leave.”

“Do you want to stay here?” My tone is laced with hope.

“Ryan is here and the shelter. If I have a say, then yes, I want to stay.”

“You always have a say, Stevie. This is *our* decision, not just mine.”

“Are they offering you what you want?”

I nod to tell her yes. “But I told them I’d only sign under one condition.”

“What is it?”

EPILOGUE

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ZANDERS



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Four Months Later-October

“Zee, we have to go. You’re going to be late for your game, and we still need to stop by SDOC.”

I wrap my arm around Stevie, pulling her in, so her head is lying on my chest and not just my bicep.

“A few more minutes.” I delicately twirl a single curl between my forefinger and thumb. “I’m not ready to leave. This will be my first time without you since June.”

Rosie’s sweet amber eyes look up at me, resting her head on my stomach as I hold my two girls in bed for a little longer.

“It’s only for three days.”

“Don’t remind me,” I whine. “I can’t believe I used to like road games.”

Stevie laughs, turning my chin towards her. “I don’t know when you became this giant needy man.” She presses her soft lips to mine. “But it’s adorable.”

“That was about a year ago when I met you, sweetheart.”

She toys with the rings on my fingers, lingering a little longer on the one I stole from her. “It’ll go by quickly.”

“What are you going to do while I’m gone?”

“I don’t know. Probably have a girls’ night with Logan, Ella, and Rosie.”

My head jerks back. “Without me?”

“We’ll try not to make you too jealous.” She pats my chest. “I’m going to Ryan’s game tomorrow. I’ll be at the shelter on Friday. Then I have our family therapy session on Saturday.”

I slightly turn as I tuck her hair behind her ear. “How are you doing with that?”

“I’m good. It’s going well. It’s not like I never wanted to have a relationship with my mom again, but it couldn’t keep going as it was.”

I offer her a proud smile. I thought I would have to create some boundaries for her, but Stevie has been able to do it all on her own.

Her mother continued to reach out all summer, but Stevie kept her distance. It wasn’t until late August that she started mentioning opening that line of communication again. My biggest worry was that her mom would have easy access to say whatever she’d like. But Stevie surprised us all

when she suggested they could start speaking again only if it was during family therapy sessions that always included either her brother or dad.

This will be week four of their sessions over video chat, and she seems good with it—happy even. The therapist was a referral from Eddie, and every Saturday afternoon, after Stevie gets off the computer, she looks lighter, as if more and more of that toxic relationship is disappearing with each passing week.

I wasn't stoked about it, that's for sure, but Stevie's dad, Neal, came to visit a few times this summer and eased me into the idea. He might be one of the best guys I know and just wants his family to be whole again, so I can't blame him for trying.

"Okay, Zee. We have to get up. We're late." Stevie is off our bed before I can stop her.

I give one more deep scratch to Rosie's head before I usher her off so I can stand. I trade my T-shirt for a button-down, tuck it into my suit pants, and throw on my blazer. Heading into the living room, I gather anything I forgot to pack—headphones, phone charger, sunglasses. After staying in Chicago all summer, I almost forgot how to travel. Either that or I just don't want to.

"Don't forget your dad is driving in on Sunday morning with his girlfriend, and we have MJ's birthday party that afternoon," Stevie calls out from our bedroom.

"I know. I got MJ's gift from us already."

Stevie pops her head out of the bedroom, brows pinched in confusion. "No. *I* got MJ's gift from us already. What did you get him?"

"I found this cool little Prada tracksuit in his size."

Stevie bursts into laughter.

"What?"

"Zee, he's turning one."

"Sweetheart, I've got to start them young. What did you get him?"

"A few books and some toys. Things he can play with." She says it slowly as if the words need to sink in.

"Well, you put your name on that gift, and I'll put my name on mine. We'll see which one MJ likes better."

She playfully rolls her eyes, heading back into our bedroom, but before she's too far, I hear her say, "You don't need to label yours. They'll have no problem figuring out who bought Prada for a one-year-old."

If shit-talking is a love language, then it's ours, and I thoroughly plan on bantering with my wild girl for the rest of my life.

My once dark and masculine penthouse now pops with color. When Stevie moved in four months ago, she not only brought her bright energy, she brought her favorite thrift store finds too. They don't exactly match my décor, but they're hers, so I'm happy they're here. They brighten up the place the same way she does.

Rosie leisurely walks into the kitchen to find me, so I bend down, giving her all the love I won't be able to provide over the next three days. As much as I hate that Stevie isn't on the road with me this season, I'm stoked Rosie can stay home and not have to schlep back and forth to her dog-sitter.

"Ready to go?" Stevie casually asks, walking into the living room.

I stand from the ground, spotting her across the room, and my mouth falls open, eyes going wide. "Damn, Vee. Look at you."

She gives me a little twirl, showing off her skin-tight black jeans and cropped Raptors tee with my name and number on it. She looks incredible. However, she's still wearing her dirty Nikes, regardless of the new ones I bought her, which are still sitting in the back of her closet.

"You like?"

I hold her hand above her head, spinning her again. "I love. You're stunning." My hands find her ass, pulling her into me. "I'm going to miss you so fucking much."

She slings her arms around my shoulders, placing a kiss on my lips. "I'm going to miss you. Call me as much as you'd like."

"Oh, I'm going to blow your phone up for three days straight, Stevie girl." I tap her ass a couple of times. "All right, let's do this."

I park my Benz right in front of SDOC, though the outside is barely recognizable from the business it was a few months ago. The paint is fresh, the sign is new and eye-catching, and the roof has been fully repaired.

When I decided to re-sign with Chicago, it was under one non-negotiable term—that the Raptors organization would fully financially support Senior Dogs of Chicago.

It was a bigger win than I could've imagined for all parties included. The money funneled into the shelter is a write-off for the team, so it was no skin off their back, but once they learned about Cheryl and the dogs, they eagerly jumped at the chance to help. The donated funds have completely

renovated the once run-down building and provided brand new blankets, toys, and beds for the dogs. All medication and food is paid for, and for the first time since Cheryl's husband passed, she doesn't have to worry about the next months' rent. Everything is covered.

But selfishly, my favorite part is that Cheryl was able to hire Stevie full-time. After our moment on national television, the shelter's popularity rose at an insane rate. Chicago locals flocked to SDOC to adopt, not knowing a place like this had existed, and Cheryl needed all the help she could get.

Now, dogs average less than a month in the shelter, just long enough to get caught up on their medical needs, before they're swooped up and adopted to new loving homes.

The team has thoroughly enjoyed getting involved. A couple of the guys even adopted their own dogs this summer, and because the boys have really connected to the cause, the organization agreed to bring our partnership to home games too.

Starting with tonight's home opener, Stevie will be coming to all our local games with one of the shelter pups. Between intermissions, they'll have a cameo on the jumbotron with SDOC's information plastered right along with them, and I can't imagine they'll be living at the shelter much longer after 23,000 Raptor fans see their sweet face on the big screen.

I might not have Stevie on the road this year, but I'll have her at every home game, and even more, I'll know she'll be in Chicago doing something she loves.

"Who are we bringing today?" I open the front door so she can enter first.

She bounds in excitedly. "Teddy. The little terrier mix who was dropped off in early September."

"Oh, hell yeah. I love Teddy."

Stevie quickly turns on her heel, her eyes wide and eager. "Or we could adopt him?" Which is her suggestion any time a new dog gets abandoned.

I have a hard time saying no to her, especially when it comes to this. We fostered all summer, anytime a dog was having a difficult time at the shelter, but she eventually found homes for them all. One day, though, I wouldn't mind another, or even an apartment full of them.

"But I think we're going to have a line out the door to adopt him after tonight," she adds before I can respond.

Cheryl brings Teddy out, his hair perfectly groomed, wearing a little Raptors bandana, ready for the game. She passes him to Stevie as Teddy covers my girl in excited kisses.

“Have you shown him yet?” Cheryl asks.

“Shown me what?”

Stevie wears a knowing smile, shifting Teddy in one arm before sliding one of their adoption forms across the front desk.

“What is this?” My eyes wander the page.

“Remember how I was telling you that some of the dogs would make great therapy animals? Well, with the funding from the team, Cheryl was able to hire a specialty dog trainer, and we’re going to do it.” Stevie points to the last paragraph on the page. “This says if you happen to adopt a dog in the therapy program that they must attend a certain number of Active Minds events throughout the year. We thought it would be awesome for both the kids and the pups.”

“What? Vee.” I stare at the page as words evade me. “Are you kidding me?”

She shakes her head to tell me no, her smile bright and her blue-green eyes shining.

“I don’t know what to say. This is unbelievable. Thank you. Thank you, both.”

Quickly blinking, my eyes stay glued on the words, unable to look at either of them.

Rosie has had a significant impact on my life, including my mental health, which is one of the reasons I was so adamant about the Raptors supporting this place. I can’t imagine how beneficial it would’ve been to have an animal to help calm me down when I was younger. This is going to be incredible for the kids at Active Minds.

Stevie runs a soothing hand down my bicep before leaning her head on my arm. “I love you.”

I stare at the form, dumbfounded as Stevie showcases her sweet heart once more. “I love you, too.”

“Okay,” Cheryl cuts in. “You two are going to be late. Send me pictures of Teddy on the big screen!”

The United Center has become my second home as I go into my eighth year in the league, but I think I'll be spending more time here this season than I ever have before. Between my games and Ryan's games, I may as well move in.

Leaving directly for the airport after tonight's home opener has been looming over me for weeks. I'm not all that excited to face the reality of Stevie not being on the plane, but there are too many good things happening for her in Chicago for me to wallow in self-pity. One being that for the first time in her twin brother's professional career, she can attend every one of his home games because she's not traveling during the same season.

Stevie is pumped about it, and I know he is too.

"Zee, you ready?" Maddison slips his suit jacket back on after our first win of the season.

I grab my wallet, phone, and keys to follow him out of the locker room.

Fans line the barriers outside, wanting a picture, an autograph, or even just a glimpse of the latest Stanley Cup champs. And I appease them. It's all part of my new image where I'm completely and utterly myself.

Shockingly enough, fans like me more now than when I was putting on an act.

Maddison's and my new agent is a family guy who understands the kind of people we are. He doesn't pressure us into keeping up appearances and only brings us opportunities that we'd be comfortable with. Both he and the Raptors organization have prioritized showcasing Active Minds, and the charity has gotten a ton of recognition over the past few months once people learned I was an equal founder.

It's nice to have not only a new agent who is in my corner but an entire hockey franchise. I finally feel like I can be myself without being punished for it.

Rich's client list is teetering dangerously close to zero. He, of all people, knows the paparazzi loves a good scandal, and word travels fast. Once other athletes got wind of the shit he pulled with me, not telling me I had a contract offer on the table, they started firing him one by one.

But Rich missed out because the duo Maddison and I have now is endlessly more popular than the one we played into for years. Who would've thought Chicago fans would love the dog-dad, stay-in-on-the-weekends-with-my-girl, happy, and authentic version of myself?

But don't get it twisted. I'll still throw hands on the ice if you come at my guys. One thing that will never change is how endlessly protective I am of my people.

"Uncle Zee!" Ella runs at me once I finally make it to the players' parking lot, past the fans. "What you get me this year?"

I pick her up, carrying her to where her mom and Stevie wait. "Hmm. I don't know. You're four now. I think we should upgrade. What do you want from each city we visit?"

"Maybe like a new outfit or a doll."

From magnets to dolls. Quite the upgrade.

"You want a doll from every single city we visit? That's a lot of dolls."

"Yeah," she plainly states, popping her shoulder as if thirty-one dolls is an entirely reasonable ask. Her emerald eyes go wide as she looks over my shoulder. "Hi, Daddy!" She squirms out of my grasp, running over to him instead.

I pop a kiss on Logan's cheek and give MJ a little tickle on his belly to hear his new laugh before finding Stevie waiting by my Benz parked next to Maddison's truck.

I swing both my arms around her shoulders, swaying.

"Good game." She runs a hand down the length of my back. "That fight was pretty sexy. Did things to me."

"I know, right?" I show off my face, turning it from side to side. "Look at this money-maker. Untouched and still as flawless as ever."

She playfully rolls her eyes, but she's used to my mouth by this point.

"How'd it go with Teddy?" We both look down at the overly excited terrier on the ground, wagging his tail so fast you can barely see it.

"Great. Cheryl said her inbox is full of people wanting to set up a time to come by and meet him."

"Rio said he's interested."

"He should call SDOC after your flight. He and Teddy would actually be a good match. They remind me of each other."

Teddy stares at us, eagerly wanting some attention. "I can see it."

I melt into Stevie, hiding my face in her neck. "I don't wanna go," I mumble against her skin.

"You'll be fine," she laughs. "Tell Indy I said hi."

"I cannot believe you convinced her to move in with your brother. That's a disaster waiting to happen."

“I think it’ll be great.”

My girl is as terrible of a liar as I am. “I’ll tell her you said hi.”

“We’re going to have to celebrate her promotion when you guys get back.”

“No more Tara, huh?”

“Nope. Fired for fraternization. Would you imagine that?” Stevie tries to hide her satisfied smile, but I hear it in her tone. “Indy is in charge now.”

“You know, Stevie girl.” I pull back, eyeing her. “You’re not a flight attendant anymore. You can’t get fired, and I remember a little something about a mile-high club I’ve been dying to join.”

“Miles,” she corrects. “But I’m not having sex on a public airplane.” She pats my chest condescendingly. “Sorry about it.”

I lift a single brow. “If you don’t think I’d charter a private jet to make this happen, you clearly don’t know me very well, sweetheart.”

“You’re ridiculous.” Her blue-green eyes shine with humor.

“You love me.”

“Hell yeah, I do.”

“All right, man,” Maddison cuts in. “We gotta get to the airport.”

“It’s just a few days,” Stevie reminds me. “I love you. Have fun with your teammates.”

Hooking my hand behind her neck, my thumb skims her jaw. I pepper kisses up the column of her throat, dotting her freckled cheeks before I urgently press my lips to hers. We both smile into the kiss, acknowledging I’m acting overly needy right now, but fuck it. I am.

“I love you, Vee.” I seal it with one more kiss before heading off with Maddison, my suitcase in tow.

“When are you going to make it official?” he teases once we’re out of earshot of the girls.

I playfully roll my eyes while climbing into the passenger seat of his truck. “Not everyone gets married the second they meet their person.”

“Yeah, but you’re not everyone. So, what’s the deal? You popping the question or what?”

“Lewis is working on her ring.” My sly smile lifts on one side of my mouth. “Getting her fingers sized all those months ago was the perfect cover. It should be ready soon.”

“It’s extravagant as fuck, isn’t it?”

“Have you met me?”

Maddison pulls out of the parking lot as I keep my focus out the passenger window, watching my girl.

“Welcome to the club,” he says. “Leaving home absolutely sucks.”

Stevie waves goodbye, her smile as soft and sweet as she is, and I can’t believe how lucky I am that I get to come home to her.

I never thought I’d say this, but, “I hate road games.”

THE END

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Born and raised in Northern California, Liz Tomforde is the youngest of five children. She grew up watching and playing sports. She loves all things romance, traveling, dogs, and hockey.

She herself is a flight attendant, but when she's not traveling or writing, Liz can be found reading a good book or taking her Golden Retriever, Luke, on a hike in her hometown.

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