

WHAT

IF I

SEE

YOU



AN
ANAHEIM STARS
NOVEL

SUSAN RENEE

WHAT IF I SEE YOU



AN
ANAHEIM STARS
NOVEL

SUSAN RENEE

WHAT IF I SEE YOU

ANAHEIM STARS

BOOK FOUR

SUSAN RENEE





CONTENTS

1. [Griffin](#)
2. [Layken](#)
3. [Griffin](#)
4. [Layken](#)
5. [Griffin](#)
6. [Layken](#)
7. [Griffin](#)
8. [Layken](#)
9. [Griffin](#)
10. [Layken](#)
11. [Griffin](#)
12. [Layken](#)
13. [Griffin](#)
14. [Layken](#)
15. [Griffin](#)
16. [Layken](#)
17. [Griffin](#)
18. [Layken](#)
19. [Griffin](#)
20. [Layken](#)
21. [Griffin](#)
22. [Layken](#)
23. [Griffin](#)
24. [Layken](#)
25. [Griffin](#)
26. [Layken](#)

[What If It's Us Excerpt](#)

[Other Books By Susan Renee](#)

[KEEP IN TOUCH WITH ME!](#)

[About the Author](#)

What If I See You

Original Copyright © Susan Renee 2025

All Rights Reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of this book without the permission of the publisher or author constitutes unlawful piracy and theft. For use of any part of this book please contact the publisher at authorsusanrenee@gmail.com for written consent.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons living or dead is coincidental.

Except for the original material written by the author, all songs, and/or song titles mentioned, throughout the novel WHAT IF I SEE YOU, are the property of the respective songwriters and copyright holders.

Disclaimer: This book is intended for adult readers only and is not appropriate for minors. The story includes adult language and adult sexual content.

Editing by Brandi Zelenka, Notes in the Margin

Reader Team: Kristan Anderson, Stephani Brown,

Jenn Hager, Jennifer Wilson

Cover Design by Quirky Bird Covers

✿ [Created with Vellum](#)

To Kelli
I wouldn't know a thing about
cocks vs wieners without you.

CHAPTER ONE

GRIFFIN

“Flip the wiener, Ollenberg!”

“I’m doing it, Blackstone! I’m doing—”

“No, you’re not! You’re fucking it up!” he gripes, flustered and frustrated. “Hurry up before they flip their cock! Fucking flip the goddamn wiener already and make it stick this time!”

“Do you not see my eyes are closed?” I shout back, my adrenaline soaring to levels similar to when I’m on the ice. I slap my hands across the table trying to locate my wiener. “Help me find my wiener guys, because I can’t see for shit right now!”

“Got that right.” Ella laughs and claps her hands. “Scarlett is the queen of the cock! You get it girl! Wrap your hand around that girthy cock and flip the hell out of it!”

“Yeah,” Corrigan adds, snickering. “Double fist it so it doesn’t slip from your grasp and then you flip that cock like your life depends on it!”

Finally, my hand connects with the rubber wiener I flipped a few seconds ago and I grip it in my hands.

“Yes Griff! You’ve got it.” Harrison is so the better teammate when it comes to game night. Always supportive. Never a dick like the rest of us. “Now flip it! Flip it good!”

I toss the wiener lightly up in the air and hear the recognizable sound of the suction cup bottom hitting the tabletop. It’s followed by pats on the back and cheers from my teammates.

“FUCK YES! You did it, Ollenberg!” Bodhi exclaims.

“Knew you would get it done, man,” Ledger says, clapping for me.

“Finally,” Barrett chides. “A man should know how to stick his wiener by now, Ollenberg.”

“That was an impressive wiener grip,” Ella tells me with a conceding nod. When I open my eyes, I shrug a shoulder. “It’s nothing really. I’ve been practicing for this my whole life.”

She laughs. “Gripping your wiener or flipping it?”

“Don’t let him fool you, babe,” August says, wrapping an arm around his wife. “Griffin’s hand rarely leaves his wiener. The fact he let it slip a few times there was a rarity in itself.”

“No kidding,” I laugh with my friend and shake out my hand. “I was beginning to think someone pranked me by rubbing lube all over that wiener before I even touched it.”

Scarlett nudges Ella and murmurs, “Good idea. We better remember that for next time.”

I lean forward. “You’re not invited next time, Dayne.”

“What?” Ledger steps out from the kitchen with two beers in his hand—one for himself and one he’s holding out to me. “What the fuck for? I brought you a beer and everything?”

“Sorry, Ledge. I was talking to your cousin over here.”

“Yeah, your friend is a sore loser, Ledger.” Scarlett winks at me. She knows I know she’s kidding but at least she lets me hate on her for a few minutes.

I don’t really hate her. Scarlett Dayne is one of the sweetest, most hardworking women I know and Oliver is a lucky man to have her by his side.

One of the cellphones piled up on the coffee table in front of us dings, bringing our attention to the center of the room.

“Whose is it?” I ask.

“Mine, I think,” Corrigan says.

“Better answer it in case it’s Daddy dearest.” We all laugh but I’m pretty damn sure there are seven buttocks in this room that just puckered at the thought of Corrigan’s dad, who just happens to be our coach, showing up at our hangout. Don’t get me wrong. We love the guy, but that doesn’t mean we want to be playing Cock versus Wiener, or realistically named Chicken versus Hotdog, with him. Especially Bodhi. He’s a brave guy for standing

up to Coach about his relationship with his daughter. Things may have started out super weird for the two of them but watching them together these past several weeks has been fun. Corrigan is great and she fits in with all of us so well.

Okay, okay, maybe I'm just a tiny bit jealous, but who wouldn't be? Oliver and August and even Pickle-pants himself, Bodhi, have found partners who make them deliriously happy. It's cute and gives me the warm fuzzies even if I do want to throw up in my mouth sometimes watching them all lovey-dovey together.

"Oh nooooo!" Corrigan's brows pull together as she reads the message on her phone.

"Who is it, babe?" Bodhi asks, his hands around her waist.

"It's Layken." She sighs. "She lost her job."

"Wait." I scowl. "What? Layken from the hospital?" I've worked with her a few times. As the Development Coordinator for Pacific Children's charity foundation, she introduced herself to us several years ago when she took on the job. She's the reason Coach plays Santa for the kids during the holidays. We've always helped wherever and whenever we could and just last month we helped out with her Children's Art Auction. It was a huge fundraiser for the hospital. The largest they've had to date.

Corrigan nods. "Yeah. The hospital got bought out a couple weeks ago. She had a feeling that she wouldn't get to stay because the guy from University Hospital has seniority over her. She and her boss were both cut. Damn...this is terrible."

"Brandon Jeffries?" Harrison asks, but Corrigan shrugs and shakes her head.

"I don't know him. Is that his name?"

Harrison nods. "Yeah. The guy's about five years too late for retirement if you ask me. He hasn't done shit when it comes to community involvement in his fundraising for years. He merely writes to the celebrity agents and encourages them to have their clients make year-end donations. Tax write-off for them and a financial win for the hospital."

"How do you know this?" Corrigan asks?

"Because my agent calls me about it every year and asks if I want to donate and I always tell them no because I give my donation to Pacific Children's."

“Ugh, so there goes any fun for the kids who are actually stuck inside the walls of the hospital.” Ella frowns.

“And there goes my best friend’s job,” Corrigan mumbles. “What am I going to do without her?”

“Where is she now?” Bodhi asks.

She shrugs. “Heading home, I guess.”

“Nah. Tell her to come here,” I tell Corrigan. “She shouldn’t be alone when the world just shit on her.”

Corrigan turns to me, her eyes hopeful. “Oh, my gosh, are you serious? Because I don’t want her to be alone either.” Her shoulders fall. “Layken doesn’t come from the best home life. She doesn’t really get much love from her family so she’s kind of navigating life all alone. I love her so much. She doesn’t deserve this kind of shit sandwich.”

“Of course.” I shrug. “We all at least know who she is and we’re just hanging out. Maybe it’ll help distract her from her shit day. And besides,” I say, raising the bottle in my hand, “I’ve got alcohol. Just tell her to check in at the security desk and give her name. I’ll call down there and make sure they know to let her in. What’s her last name again?”

“Hobbs. Layken Hobbs. Thank you so much, Griffin. You’re the best.”

“That okay with you guys? I should’ve asked first. I apologize.”

Everyone around the room unequivocally nods. “Yeah, of course!” Scarlett says. “We’re good people and she’s good people, so...” She shrugs with a smile and Corrigan blows her a kiss.

“Thanks Scarlett.”

She sends a few more texts to her friend and then sets her phone back on the coffee table. “She’s on her way. Thanks again, Griffin. I really appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it. How do they say it? *Mi casa es moo casa.*”

Corrigan laughs. “Yeah something like that.”

“You know he’s just inviting her here to flirt with her and eventually get into her pants, right?” Ledger snickers from across the room.

I flip him off. “What the hell are you talking about Dayne?”

“Poor vulnerable woman meets flirty aloof hockey guy who promises a night to wash away all her hurt and anger. Come on. It’s not like you haven’t played that card before.”

Standing to reach for my phone I bring a hand to my chest. “Who me? Come on, Ledge. I may be a helpless flirt much of the time, but I would

never do that. She's Corri's best friend and she's had a shitty day. Any friend of hers is a friend of ours."

I don't miss the corner of Corrigan's mouth lifting and wonder what she might be thinking but push away the curiosity. "Plus, it's not like she doesn't know us. Surely we can help lift her spirits a little for the rest of the evening. I'm just trying to be nice."

"I think it's very nice of you Griffin. She'll appreciate it very much," Ella pipes in.

I raise my brows and cock my head at Ledger. "See?"

Fifteen minutes later, there's a knock at my door. I get up to answer it and Corrigan comes with me, no doubt ready to offer a welcoming hug to her best friend. I turn the knob and open my door and in tandem, Corrigan and I drop our jaws and stare at the crying wet mess of a woman standing before us.

Sometimes when it comes to women I think I'm Superman. I can get a woman to laugh or smile so easily thanks to my positive and fun-loving personality. But if there's a kryptonite to my Superman, it's a woman in tears. I'm too empathetic of a person to see anyone cry, let alone a woman. Anytime I see a woman crying I feel for them immediately and try to do anything to make them feel better.

But this?

Layken Hobbs standing in my doorway, the front of her literally soaking wet with mud dripping from her hair, her face, and her body.

Yeah. I don't know how to fix this.

But I instantly want to hurt whoever it was that did this to her.

"Oh no! Layken! What the hell happened?" Corrigan pulls her inside while I shut the door.

"Are you hurt?" I ask, sincerely concerned. Everyone in the living room is now watching.

"No. I'm fine," Layken squeaks, trying to rein in her tears but failing miserably. "I mean my ego is obliterated and my tits are a soggy mess but what's another sprinkle on top of my shit sundae anyway?"

Well, that's a way of putting it.

Also, I'm not looking at her soggy tits.

Rephrase: I'm trying very hard not to look at her soggy tits.

But she said soggy tits and now I really, really, REALLY, need to look at them.

Just a quick peek.

Won't hurt anyone, right?

Okay. Yep. They're a hot mess.

Wet. Muddy. Well-defined under her sopping blouse.

Probably very pretty when not covered in mud.

Actually, even splashed with mud they're pretty.

Wait. No.

She's crying.

Not funny, Griffin.

Okay all done looking at the soggy tits.

See?

Didn't hurt anyone.

Corrigan takes her hand and leads her inside. "What happened to you?"

Layken swipes at her tears, which only spreads the mud on her cheeks across her face. I don't bother to tell her it looks even worse now. "I parked around the corner and was walking down the sidewalk and out of nowhere this asshole driver got a little too close." She pauses and cocks her head, bobbing it this way and that. "Or now that I think about it, he probably did it on purpose because he's a pecker pinching wiener beater, but he drove right through a huge puddle on the road and it soaked me from head to toe."

Pecker pinching wiener beater...

She said that like it's a nickname she uses every day.

A girl after my own heart.

"Oh Lake, I'm so sorry," Corrigan tells her. "Let's get you cleaned up." She turns to me. "Do you have anything she can change into?"

"No." Layken shakes her head. "That's o—"

"Of course, I do. I've got a closet full of comfy pants and sweatshirts." I gesture to my bedroom. "If you don't care that they're not the most fashionable, and will be very oversized on you, I'll grab you a few things. And feel free to use my shower if you want to wash off. We can wash and dry your clothes while you're here."

"That's so kind of you, Griffin." She snuffles and my chest tightens.

"It's nothing. Give me two minutes and I'll have you all set up and ready to go."

I leave her with Corrigan and run back to my bedroom, quickly picking up any random dirty clothes on the floor and tossing them into my hamper and then I double check my bed to make sure it's completely made and

looks nice. Not that I'm trying to impress anyone, but I certainly don't want to come across as a slob or someone who doesn't care. Once the room looks presentable, I throw open my closet and sift through everything I have that could possibly fit Layken's body without sliding off her completely. Obviously, everything I have will be too big for her, but I find a pair of pajama pants with a tie on the front so she can adjust them and then I grab a t-shirt and one of my hockey sweatshirts so she can choose whatever she wants.

I lay the clothes out on my bed and then step into my bathroom to make sure it's presentable too. I pull out a couple clean towels and place them in the warmer for her and then meet them both back out in the living room where Layken is wiping her face with a paper towel.

"I've laid out a few things on my bed and there are towels in the towel warmer next to the shower if you want to jump in. I can show you where everything is."

Layken glances at me, her honey-brown eyes the shape of saucers. Her gaze reminds me of a sad lost puppy dog and I swear to God if she asks for a fucking pony right now I'll do all I can to get one for her. "Are you sure you're okay with that?"

"Absolutely." I smile at her and nod. "My house is your house. Whatever I can get for you so you're comfortable."

"Thank you, Griffin." Her voice is soft and meek. A change from the woman I've known to be peppy, confident, and witty on any regular day.

"You're welcome."

God, the urge to wrap her up in my arms and tell her it's all going to be okay is real, but I barely know her. We're not exactly good friends so hugging her like that would be weird. She follows me back down the hall silently except for the random sniffing, and for the first time ever, I'm struggling to come up with something to say.

For the love of Christ, say something, Griffin.

Anything.

Put the girl out of her misery.

"Maybe when you're done you can flip the cock."

What. The. Fuck?

Mother fucking hell, Griffin!

Anything but that!

Cringing, I turn to see her staring at me, one brow raised. I shake my head and palm my forehead, laughing nervously.

“Shit. I’m sorry. That came out all wrong.”

She chuckles. “You think?”

She chuckled.

I heard it.

She’s had a shit day but there, right there.

I made her laugh.

“I’m sorry. We we’re...it was a...this game...earlier...I forgot you weren’t here and have no idea what I’m talking about.”

With a speck of humor in her eyes, she twists her mouth. “I’m sorry, I don’t. But cock flipping sounds...interesting.”

“I’m really sorry to hear about your job.”

“Thanks,” she says with a shrug before she pushes back her shoulders. “I know at some point I’ll get to my when-one-door-closes-another-one-opens phase, but for now, it’s been a super fucking terrible day and I just need to wallow.”

“You have my full permission to wallow all you want. I’ll even give you a beer if you want when you’re done.”

“Got anything stronger than a beer?”

“Sure do. Vodka? Tequila? Bourbon? What’s your poison?”

“Vodka would be perfect.”

“Vodka it is. Towels are in that dryer right there,” I tell her, gesturing to the heated box next to the shower. Feel free to use anything in here. I hope you don’t mind the pajama pants.” I gesture to the ones I have on. “It’s kind of my thing.”

“I’m aware.” She smiles. “And it’s perfectly fine. Thank you again, Griffin. I really appreciate your kindness.”

“Of course. Anytime. If there’s anything else you need, just ask.”

I rejoin the group in the living room making small talk and then head to the kitchen to pour Layken a drink. “Corrigan, what does Layken like in her vodka?”

“Cranberry juice if you have it.”

I swing open the door to the fridge and smile when I spy a bottle of cranberry juice inside. “Yep. Got it.”

Several minutes later, Layken steps out into the living room, and my chest tightens all over again. Wearing a pair of light blue pajama pants with

cinnamon rolls all over them that she's rolled at the bottom and my hockey sweatshirt that is four sizes too big on her, she's the cutest thing I think I've ever seen. Her wet blonde hair hangs down past her shoulders and she's wearing a pair of black rimmed glasses that she didn't have on before.

She must wear contacts.

Christ, she's adorable in my clothes.

She wears those pajama pants like they were made for her.

Watching her from the kitchen, suddenly she's not Layken Hobbs, Corrigan's best friend.

She's Layken Hobbs, the cutest most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my entire fucking life and I think I could spend the rest of eternity making sure that smile on her face never fades.

CHAPTER TWO

LAYKEN

O h, my God!

I'm wearing Griffin Ollenberg's clothes!

He smells good.

Or at least his laundry detergent smells good.

Maybe it's his cologne, I don't know, but wearing his clothes has enveloped me in a scent I'm not familiar with so it must be his. It's earthy, maybe a little woodsy, and I don't hate it.

I'm sure it has nothing to do with the fact I have a tiny crush on him and have for a couple years now. On the outside, I'm feeling the wrath of this sucky-ass day that has left me jobless, but in this immediate moment, on the inside, I'm fangirling like nobody's business.

Because I just took a shower in Griffin Ollenberg's bathroom and now I'm wearing Griffin Ollenberg's clothes! Corrigan is never going to let me live this down.

The only thing that would have made this better would have been if Griffin had joined me in that shower and slid these clothes over me himself.

But let's not go overboard or anything.

I may have a little fan girl crush on Griffin, but I'm also an adult who very much appreciates that he's just a normal guy who has shown me kindness.

"You'll never amount to anything without a degree."

"Why can't you be more like your brothers?"

“Your father is so disappointed in you.”

My mother’s words always seem to cut through when I’m feeling vulnerable. I try so fucking hard to always be a good person. A hardworking reliable person who cares about others more than I care about myself. And I think I’ve achieved that kind of life, especially in my line of work. But on days like today, when it all goes to shit, it’s my mother I hear in my head instead of the proverbial positive energy I try to provide for others.

I feel mildly better after having a warm shower and pulling on comfier clothes than my work clothes, even if they are too big for me. I don’t mind.

Because like I said, I’m wearing Griffin’s clothes.

Griffin Ollenberg.

Professional hockey player for the Anaheim Stars and all-around cutie.

I’m wearing his clothes.

Beats spending the evening in muddy wet dress clothes.

“Nice buns,” Corrigan says with a wink when I step into the living room. She gestures to the cinnamon rolls on the pajama pants Griffin laid out for me.

“Thank you.” I give her a playful wink.

“Feel better?” Griffin asks, handing me a glass. “It’s vodka cranberry. Corri said it’s a fave.”

“Yes. Thank you.” I tip the glass all the way back and swallow it down like an old college pro much to Griffin’s amusement.

“Wow.” He grins. “Expect the unexpected when it comes to Layken Hobbs. Noted. Would you like another?”

I hand him back the glass. “Please.”

“Coming right up. Make yourself comfortable.” He steps toward the kitchen and then turns. “Oh, do you remember everyone? If not I can—”

“Oliver Magallan, Ledger Dayne, Harrison Meers.” I nod to each one seated around the room. “Barrett Cunningham, August Blackstone, Bodhi Roche, aaaand,” my eyes fall back to Griffin, “Griffin Ollenberg.” I smile. “You may not all know me, but I’ve known most of you for years. I’m a fan.”

“Okay.” He nods with another impressed smile. “Sometimes I forget we’re not just a bunch of average Joes who play hockey together once in a while.”

I snort. “Right. Average Joes who kick ass on the ice, you mean.”

The red-haired woman next to Oliver Magallan stands and offers me a handshake. “Well, we haven’t been properly introduced. I’m Scarlett Dayne. Ledger’s cousin and Oliver’s fiancée.”

“Pleasure to meet you. I’m Layken Hobbs. Friend of the coach’s daughter I guess.”

Murmurs of laughter scatter throughout the group.

“We’re really sorry to hear about the job, Layken,” Ella mentions. Everyone nods and adds their apologies as well.

“Yeah well, what are you going to do?” I shrug. “Somewhere someone is always getting the leg up, you know? Life isn’t fair, but I’ll get over it.”

“At least now you can focus on your writing,” Corrigan says.

Ella’s brows peak. “Oh, you’re a writer?”

I bob my head back and forth. “Well, I don’t know that I’d label myself as a full-blown writer or anything, but I dabble in contemporary romance books.”

“Don’t let her fool you,” Corrigan pipes in. “She’s already published three books. She’s on her way to stardom.”

“Ooh!” Scarlett nudges her fiancé. “You should hook her up with your sister, Oli.” She turns back to me. “Oliver’s sister is a book editor and she edits lots of romance books. I’m sure she has a few connections.”

“Cool.” I nod. “Maybe I’ll reach out one day if I ever get this next story finished.”

“Alright, I’ve got to ask.” Griffin smirks as he hands me another vodka cranberry. “Also, you might want to drink this one a little slower, I added a little more of the hard stuff.”

He winks but I roll my eyes teasingly and whisper, “Thank you, Daddy.”

The guys all laugh and Griffin’s cheeks pinken but he chuckles too as he takes a seat a few spots down while mumbling something about nobody ever calling him Daddy before.

“So anyway, your book...is it one of those porny types with all the sexy scenes?”

Corrigan giggles next to me and I can feel my face beginning to flush but I’m always ready for this question. People hear the word romance and automatically assume I write porn. “Is it erotic romance? No. Are there a couple sexy scenes in it? Of course.” I shrug. “I mean that’s part of romance, right? Girl meets boy. Boy kisses girl. Girl and boy fall in love.

Girl and boy eventually sleep together, etcetera, etcetera. Those mushy moments are the ones romance readers live for. They live vicariously through the characters they read about. That's part of the fun."

"I see. And your story, is it about a hot sexy hockey player? Because if it is, I've got a few ideas on someone to model for your cover photo." He wags his brows just as August Blackstone nudges him with his elbow.

"Yeah, me."

Griffin rears back. "What? I don't think so dipshit. If anyone is modeling for a cover, it's me." He turns back to me. "I mean, you know, if you want. My ass looks pretty good in photos."

Ledger and Harrison laugh, shaking their heads, and Barrett says, "Ignore Ollenberg. He has no shame."

"Not when it comes to my fine sculpted ass I don't."

"Well, it is about a hockey player actually." I tilt my head sympathetically. "But I've already got a cover ready to go."

"Damn."

"I'll definitely keep you in mind for future projects though."

"Deal." He smiles and turns to Barrett. "See? That's called making professional connections. If my hockey career ever comes to a sad end, I'll have ass modeling I can fall back on."

"Uh huh." Barrett nods. "You're so unbelievably wise, Griffin."

"I know man. Don't worry. I'll teach you everything I know."

My phone dings in my purse at the same time that Corrigan's dings on the coffee table in front of her. She glances at me, her brows drawing in, and then grabs her phone as I stand to get mine.

"What in the fucking Friday the thirteenth is this bullshit?" Corrigan mumbles as I pull my phone from my purse.

"What is it?" I ask before I glance at the text waiting for me. "You have got to be fucking kidding me."

My shoulders fall and there's a tightness in my ribs.

This cannot be happening.

Not today.

What else could possibly go wrong?

Maybe I shouldn't ask that.

"What's going on?" Bodhi questions.

Corrigan lifts her hand in a half shrug. "It's our apartment building."

Ella gasps. "Oh no. Was there a fire or something?"

“Water main break,” I say out loud, reading the same text Corrigan received. “Right outside our building that will have our water shut off for at least a week. Encouraging everyone to find alternative accommodations until further notice.”

“Oh shit,” Harrison says, leaning forward and placing his elbows on his knees. “That sucks.”

Yeah it does.

Where the hell am I supposed to go?

I meet Corrigan’s eye and she shakes her head. “Don’t worry about it babe. I’m sure we can both stay with Bodhi. He’s got room. You can have the guest bed.”

“Thanks Corri, but it’s fine. I’m sure I can find—”

“You can stay here.” The words tumble from Griffin’s mouth, causing everyone to turn his way. His eyes dart to everyone staring at him and then finally they stop on me.

Hoooooly shit.

Did he seriously just offer me the opportunity to stay here? With him?

“I mean, if you need a place to stay, that is.” He gestures around the room. “I’ve got more than enough space for two people and I’m rarely even here. In fact, we’re leaving tomorrow for Napa anyway so you would have the place to yourself.”

At the mention of Napa, Scarlett jolts out of her seat with a gasp. “Oh, my God! You should come, Layken!”

My head snaps to her. “What?”

“To Napa! Come with us! It’ll be so much fun!”

I shake my head. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“Oliver and I invited a bunch of people to get away during the All-Star weekend since none of the guys are playing this year. Just kind of a relax-and-unwind-from-hockey-life, drink-wine-and-have-fun kind of weekend. Come with us!”

“No, I couldn’t,” I say with a shake of my head. “This is your thing. I’d only be imposing.”

Ella and Corrigan jump up and stand with Scarlett. “Girl, listen,” Ella says with a hand on my shoulder. “You just lost your job and your living space has no water for at least a week. If that isn’t the universe telling you that you deserve a few days to live it up in Napa Valley with people who like you and want you to be there, I don’t know what it is.”

“Right.” Scarlett nods, smiling. “And when we get back, Griffin said you can stay here. That way you’ll be in our building and we can hang out even more. We’re always coming to Griffin’s place. It’s like our home away from home.”

Griffin nods when I peer around the girls to look at him. “It’s true. It must be the pajama pants. They just can’t get enough of my zest for life.”

His humor does make me smile.

And he’s very sweet for offering me his space.

“You’re really sure about this, Griffin? You can tell me to go sleep on Bodhi’s couch and I won’t even hesitate to do it.”

He lifts a brow and gives me a questioning glance. “Do you really want to spend the next week sleeping on a couch the two of them have fucked on probably more than once?”

I laugh. “As if you haven’t done the very same thing?”

He shakes his head proudly. “I’ll have you know that no such thing has ever happened on this fine fabric.” He smooths his hand over the faux suede gray couch he’s sitting on. “That’s what they make hotel rooms for, but those two monkeys?” He silently mouths the words, “They fuck everywhere.”

I glance at Corrigan who says, “I can neither confirm nor deny.”

Bodhi raises his hand. “Will confirm. Sorry but my girl is hot as fuck so...”

“Okay, okay.” I snort, glancing back at Griffin. “If you have the room, and you really don’t mind...”

“I don’t mind. Not even a little bit.”

I nod. “Okay. Umm, I guess I’ll take you up on the offer then. Thank you Griffin. Again.”

“And you’ll come to Napa, yes?” Scarlett pleads, grabbing hold of my hands.

“Uh, I mean, I guess I need to grab clothes or something so I can pack.” I glance at Corrigan. “Can we even get into our building right now?”

“Fuck it.” She shrugs. “Let’s go with nothing and shop for everything we need when we get there.”

“Whoa, what? Are you crazy?”

“What? It’s not like you haven’t done that a bajillion times before.”

I suppose I do have plenty of savings.

I could afford a weekend of fun.

“Yeah, but you don’t. You’re a planner. Right down to the shade of under—” She slaps her hand over my mouth.

“You don’t have to finish that last part, mmkay?”

I laugh. “Okay but be careful Corri,” I narrow my eyes, “you’re beginning to sound a lot like me these days.”

“If it helps at all,” Scarlett adds, “I know the owner of two of the boutiques there who have always given me discounts when I bring customers their way. We could let the guys go have some fun and we could shop as soon as we get there.”

Her brows wag along with Ella’s and Corri’s as they await my decision.

Scarlett adds, “And we can drink wine while we do it.”

It would be nice to get out of hell for just a few days.

Taking a huge breath, I release it, shaking my head with a smirk. “Why do I feel like this trip is going to be nothing but trouble?”

“Oh, it totally is. But only the best kind of trouble,” Ella assures me, giggling.

“Eeeeeek!” Corrigan squeals. “That’s a yes. She’s coming.” She pulls me into a huge hug. “This is going to be so much fun!”

Scarlett claps her hands excitedly. “Perfect! We’re all set then. The plane leaves tomorrow morning at nine.”

“KNOCK, KNOCK.” Griffin stands in the doorway to his guest bedroom; the room he graciously offered me while the water to our building is being fixed.

“Hey.” I smile at his coy expression. In all the time I’ve known Griffin, I’ve never known him to be shy. “You know this is your house, right? You don’t have to ask permission to enter your own guest room.”

He cocks his head, baffled. “I would never just barge in on you. What if you were...you know, indisposed.”

I choke back a giggle. “Well, I’m not so please come in.”

“I brought you a few extra blankets just in case.”

“Oh. Okay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I tend to keep this place pretty cool in the evenings. Helps me sleep.”

“Totally understand. Wouldn’t want that body of yours to overheat and swell.”

Staring at me, a smile spreads across his face and I’m immediately embarrassed. Palming my face, I shake my head. “Oh God. I meant, you know, your muscles and...like, your appendages...”

Appendages?

Wouldn’t want his appendages to swell?

“Seriously Layken? Appendages? Who even says the word appendages?” I argue out loud with myself glancing up at Griffin, his lips folded in to keep from laughing. “Ugh. You know, like your joints and stuff? Oh, fuck it. What the hell do I know,” I say, flustered with my own self. I flail my arms and sit down on the bed. “Ice is better than heat, right? So cooler temps make sense. Or maybe I’m just full of shit. Ignore me.” I wave my hands. “I don’t know a damn thing about being a professional athlete and taking care of that body, so I’ll just shut up now.”

Seriously Layken.

Can you sound any more stupid?

“It’s been a day and clearly I don’t know much about a lot of things. Maybe if I did, I’d still have a job right now.”

His smile fades and he steps quietly inside the room, placing the extra blankets at the foot of the bed and then taking a seat next to me. “You want to talk about it?”

I lift a shoulder and shake my head. “What’s there to talk about? I didn’t have seniority, so I lost.”

“Right.” He nods slowly. “So, you losing your job has nothing to do with what you do or do not know. You know that much, right?”

I try to scrape together a smile even though in this moment, I sort of feel that tightness in my chest that comes right before I start to cry. “Yeah. You’re right. It just sometimes feels like...” My voice trails off and I pick at a piece of invisible lint because if I say what I’m thinking, I will cry and I don’t want that.

“You’ll never amount to anything.”

He nudges me with his arm. “Sometimes feels like what?”

I take a deep breath and turn my face to look into his eyes.

His mesmerizingly blue eyes.

I know I’ve spent time ogling over Griffin with Corrigan and talking about my silly crush, but looking into his eyes now, I see nothing but

sincerity staring back at me.

A real person.

A person who at the moment oozes calm and comfort.

Someone I feel like I can trust with my very real emotions, so rather than hold them in and cry myself to sleep, I take a deep breath and let them out.

“Do you ever have those times where you feel like nobody sees you? Like no matter what you do or how hard you work nobody notices?”

“All the fucking time,” he tells me. I notice when his gaze slips from mine, as if his mind is somewhere far away for a minute and then he swallows. “It’s nice being on a team in that we all work together for a common goal, but there are many days I’m busting ass...on the ice or in the gym to help get the team to where we need to be, and it feels like every effort goes unnoticed.”

“Yeah,” I whisper. My chin quivers as I fight back tears. It’s late and I know I’m exhausted after an emotional day. I’m really not used to being this vulnerable.

“Hey.” His hand connects with my forearm, his touch oddly comforting as he slides his hand down my arm to grasp my hand. “You’ve got this, you know? And you’re not alone.”

I nod, allowing a few of my stray tears to sprinkle down my face. “Yeah. I know. I’m a badass bitch who will bounce back.”

It’s what Corrigan would say.

He reaches over to wipe my tears from my cheek with his thumb, a movement oddly intimate, though I don’t think he means it to be that way. “Even badass bitches have hard days,” he sympathizes. “It’s the way they overcome them that makes them so badass. And when we get back from Napa, I’ll gladly help you in your search for a new position or I can listen while you talk through what you want to do. Hell, I’ll help you come up with a bunch of super sexy stories to write if that’s what you want.” He points to his temple. “I’ve got all kinds of random shit stored inside here. I’m like a rolodex of ideas.”

His kindness puts me at ease and his now goofy expression makes me smile. “You know, I can only imagine what kind of romantic story Griffin Ollenberg might come up with so I may just take you up on that.”

He holds up his pinky finger. “Pinky swear?”

My smile widens. “You are someone who pinky swears?”

“Pfbt! Of course. A pinky swear is the biggest baddest promise of all time. I take them very seriously.”

“Alright then.” I hook my pinky around his. “I pinky swear.”

“Great.” He stands from the bed. “Let’s discuss story lines on the plane tomorrow. That is, if you don’t mind sitting with me.”

“Really? You’re serious?”

“Of course.” He shrugs. “Why not?”

“Uh...I’m...well, I’m me. And you’re...” My eyes drift up his body until they reach that questioning blue stare he’s got going on. “You.”

With all the sincerity in the world, Griffin shakes his head and says, “I’m just a person, Layken. And I wouldn’t mind sharing a seat with you on the plane if you’re interested.” He shrugs again. “But if you have some other hot date in mind then—”

“No.” I laugh, also shaking my head. “No, I certainly don’t have that. I’ll gladly sit with you, Griffin. I think that would be fun and Lord knows I could sure use a little fun right now.”

“Good. Sleep well. And if you need anything, I’m just down the hall.”

I watch him walk out of my room but stop him before he gets out the door. “Griffin?”

He turns. “Yeah?”

“Thank you. For everything.”

He gives me one more panty melting smile that if today weren’t such an emotional day, I’d be swooning over. “It’s my pleasure, Layken. Good night.”

Pretty sure you’ve got that all wrong.

The pleasure is all mine.

CHAPTER THREE

GRIFFIN

Shit, I like this girl.

From working with her a few times through the hospital I already knew she was dedicated to her job. She handles crowds of rich entitled people with ease but always with the intent of raising as much money for the hospital, and indirectly, the patients, as possible. She was good at what she was tasked to do and always fun to work with. But last night I learned that she's naturally adorable in my pajama pants, her smile can light up a room, and she's someone who doesn't only see me as a celebrity hockey player.

To her, as far as I can tell, I'm just a guy. A friend of a friend which makes me her friend too because that's the way she rolls.

And from just spending a few waking hours with her last night and again this morning I can't seem to get her out of my mind.

Nor do I want to.

I don't think much about hanging out with women I'm not close to for anything other than a quick fuck, so this is an oddity for me.

And I don't hate it.

"Okay what about this. A super fan from an opposing team comes to a hockey game on his own, because why the hell wouldn't you come to a game and support your team, and he gets in line to buy an all-beef hotdog. You know, one of those gargantuan things they sell at concessions?"

Her lips turn up into a smile even though I can tell she's trying not to think I'm full of shit. "Oookay..."

"Hear me out. And the girl behind the counter is all like, 'Here's your meat stick, sir.' And then it slips from her hands when she's passing it to the guy because let's be honest, wieners are slippery little suckers, and so the toppings get all over him and she gets all flustered and embarrassed. But he finds it endearing and cute and now he's a little obsessed with knowing her. So, he buys season tickets to the opposing team's games just so he can keep coming back to their arena and he gets in her line every single time just to be able to talk to her."

"Okay...that's actually kind of cute in a weird, twisted kind of way."

I tap the side of my head. "See? I told you I'm full of ideas."

"Don't flatter him, Layken," Ledger tells her from his seat across the aisle. "He'll become obsessed and he'll never leave you alone again."

"What?" I scoff, pinching my brows. "I'm not the one who's obsessed." I gesture my thumb toward Layken. "This girl insisted I sit here with her and practically begged me to give her book ideas. It's not me, man."

Layken laughs and teasingly punches my upper arm. "I did no such thing. You're the one who made me pinky swear."

"Oooh, he made you pinky swear?" Harrison asks, leaning forward in his seat to see her.

"Yeah. Why." Her eyes widen. "Is that bad? Is it like, a thing for him?"

Harrison laughs. "Totally a thing for him. Yeah. You're committed now. Just so you know."

"It's fine. She's obsessed with me anyway," I tease. "It's cute."

Her jaw drops. "What the hell are you talking about?"

I shrug. "I mean most girls don't go all out the way you did though with that whole losing your job routine and then pouring water all over yourself so I'd give you my clothes." I point to her. "You definitely got me there. That was a good one."

Her smile widens and she practically snorts. It's the cutest sound and it kind of makes me feel tingly inside. "You are unfuckingbelievable. Maybe you should sit somewhere else." She tries to push me out of the seat but I'm easily double her size. I'm not budging.

Okay. Flirting with her is fun.

There. I said it.

“And break your heart before we even get off this plane? Pffft. As if. Plus, I haven’t told you about Juicy Lucy yet.”

“I’m sorry? Juicy who?”

“Lucy. Juicy Lucy.”

Ledger rolls his eyes. “Oh, this ought to be good.”

“Who is Juicy Lucy?” Layken finally asks. “And if you even try to tell me she’s some girl you had a sexcapade with who like...squirts or something, you can pass me the barf bag right now because I swear to God I’m going to be sick.”

Everyone within earshot of Layken cracks up. Even me.

Grabbing hold of my chest, I wheeze. “Oh God, I can’t breathe!”

“What?” she says innocently through her own laugh. “I’m just saying... Juicy Lucy sounds like a squirty birdie.”

Ledger chokes on his drink while Harrison and August burst out laughing again.

“No, Layken. That’s not Juicy Lucy. Though that would be an awesome twist to my idea.” I wipe the tears of laughter away from my eyes and shake my head. “I was really just thinking of a girl who owns a juice bar in town...get it? Juicy Lucy?”

She bites the corner of her bottom lip. “Oooh. I get it.” Her cheeks pinken but she laughs with the rest of us. “Sorry. My mind jumped off a cliff, I guess.”

“Or right into the gutter.” I wink and give her a light nudge with my elbow.

“Well, I’m a romance author. What did you expect?”

“My, my, my, our little Layken here is a porny little perv.”

She smacks my arm. “Shut up. I am not.”

“Hey, Juicy Lucy could work next to Bendy Wendy, the town’s yoga instructor,” Ledger adds.

I point to him, lifting my brows in excitement. “Hell yes! Bendy Wendy!”

“And Sticky Nicky.”

Calming down from our burst of laughter we all turn our heads toward Harrison. “Who would sticky Nicky be?”

He bobs his head. “Well, maybe she runs the daycare in town. Or maybe she has a craft store and has some obsession with tape or glue. Or maybe she makes sticky buns for a living.”

Layken mumbles next to me, “And maybe at night she’s always covered in jizz so...”

Aaaand here we go again!

Every single one of us is now staring at Layken as she types notes into her phone. And then as if on cue, we all howl with laughter at the same time.

“Yes, I suppose that’s an option as well. You know, maybe you don’t really need my help. You seem to be doing just fine on your own, Hobbs.”

“Are you kidding?” She grins. Seeing her relaxed and happy makes me feel loads better after seeing her so down and out last night. “I would’ve never come up with Juicy Lucy without you, Griffin. Why have I not flown with you guys before? Is it always like this?”

Barrett turns from the seat in front of us. “Sadly yes.”

“He’s right,” Scarlett says from a couple seats away. “These guys are nothing but a bunch of teenage boys in a manly bodies.”

“What the fuck Scar?” I scoff, dropping my jaw and gesturing to Layken. “She’s the sicko who came up with a woman covered in jizz named Sticky Nicky.”

We all laugh again because that shit is funny.

“Yeah well I guess we have a lot to learn about our new friend, Layken, huh?” Scarlett says with a wink.

I smile down at her, watching with a sense of pride as she continues to type our ideas into her phone. “I guess we do.”

And I kind of want to know everything.

GAGE

Hi Griffin. I miss you. Love Gage.

ME

Hey little bro! I miss you too! You doing okay? I can’t wait to come visit for your birthday!

GAGE

Yeah. I am good. Mom is making my favorite smash burgers for dinner tonight. It smells good in here.

ME

😊 Good! That sounds fantastic! Give Mom and Dad a hug for me, okay?

GAGE

Yep!

“EVERYTHING OKAY OVER THERE?” August asks as the beers we ordered are placed in front of us. The women, as planned, are off shopping while us guys take a few hours to follow the Ale Trail, stopping at several breweries and micro-breweries in the surrounding area. This place is our third stop.

“Yeah. Just Gage checking in,” I tell him. The small pang of guilt I get whenever I hear from my younger brother settles inside my chest as it always does.

“Gagey!” Harrison smiles. “We haven’t seen him in a while. You hiding him from us or what, Ollenberg?”

“Nah. They don’t travel a lot during flu season is all. Mom would be beside herself if Gage got sick.”

He nods. “I get it. Well, we miss him. His high-fives are killer.”

I chuckle. “That they are.” A memory pops into my mind of Gage watching me play hockey in high school. He must’ve only been in the seventh grade at the time, but hell, if he wasn’t the biggest fan of our team at each and every game. He led every chant. Made everyone get up on their feet and was without a doubt the world’s proudest brother.

Another core memory slides through my mind and almost takes the air out of my chest remembering the very first time I wore pajama pants in public.

I wore them for him.

For Gage.

So, he wouldn’t feel alone.

I never wanted him to feel alone.

But what did I do in the end?

I went to college to play hockey and then I was drafted into the league.

I left home...and left him.

“You and Hobbs seemed mighty chummy on the plane.” Ledger’s words pull me from my reverie. He lifts his glass to his mouth, watching me as he sips his beer.

Harrison smirks. "I thought the same thing. Did something happen last night between you two that you want to tell us about?"

"Nope." I shake my head. "Absolutely nothing." They don't need to know every detail of her thoughts and feelings from last night. I'm certain she'd be embarrassed if everyone knew her business and I'm not that kind of guy.

Am I the kind of guy who will immediately try to help someone feel better when they're sad? Absolutely.

Am I the kind of guy who offered her a place to stay because I'm mildly curious about her and wouldn't mind getting to know her a little more? Admittedly, yes.

Am I the kind of guy who would take advantage of a woman's vulnerability? Never. I may be a flirt sometimes but I'm not a sleaze ball.

"We chatted for a few minutes. I could see she'd had a shitty day and wanted to make sure she was comfortable and not beating herself up. And then I made her pinky swear that she'd sit by me on the plane so we could talk more about her bookish life. That's it."

Ledger's brows raise and he nods slowly. "Wow. I'm impressed. You had a woman in your home last night and you didn't try to fuck her."

"You know, contrary to what you might think, I'm a pretty stand-up guy."

"You are definitely a pretty guy." Bodhi smirks next to me and I shove him playfully, almost knocking him off his chair.

"Fuck you, Pickle Pants. Don't hate me just because I'm pretty."

"Oh, I don't. I hate you for a hundred other reasons."

"Name five." My challenge makes Bodhi laugh at which point I give him a pointed look and say, "Yeah, I didn't think so. I'm the most lovable one here."

"Tell that to Ella," August says with a smirk.

"She'd probably agree with me."

August cackles and shakes his head. "You're right. She would. Fuck."

"So would Scarlett," Oliver adds. "You're too good Griff. Why can't you go fuck something up so we can think you're normal like the rest of us."

"What do you want me to do? Throw this beer across the room and cause a scene?"

“Well, no because that might implicate all of us and we’d make headlines for being a public nuisance.”

“Okay, what then?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs.

“You could drop your pants and streak through the vineyards,” Barrett suggests, chuckling at his own idea. “You’d be perfect for that job.”

“I think I’d have to be pretty damn drunk to do that, Bear. Sorry.”

Barrett raises his hand, signaling the waitress. “Another round for my friend here!”

“But seriously, you and Layken...” August suggests.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying you don’t look bad together. That’s all.”

“How come the minute I allow a woman to spend the night in my home you’re already giving us a marriage, two kids, and a dog?”

August laughs. “Jesus, I didn’t go that far. I never said anything about a dog.”

I lift a shoulder. “I’m pretty...she’s pretty. Together we’re pretty, pretty.”

Bodhi nudges me. “Want to know a secret?”

“Dude, bro...” I cringe. “If your secret is something like both Corrigan and Layken had X-rated playtime with you during one of your little fuck-me lessons, you sure as hell better n—”

“Nope.” He shakes his head. “Not my secret. I promise.”

Harrison leans forward. “Does it have to do with Layken?”

Bodhi nods.

I tap my hand on the table, contemplating what he may or may not have to say. Curiosity wins out. “Alright out with it.”

He wags his brows and quietly says, “I have it on good authority that Layken Hobbs may or may not have a small crush on you, Ollenberg.”

“What?” I lean back in my chair. “Me?”

No fucking way.

“Yes you,” he says. “Corri told me last night after we left. She knew Layken was in good hands and that she would be happy at your place because she’s loved watching you play for years. She said Layken’s made little comments about you from time to time so...you know. I’m just saying.”

Layken Hobbs has a crush on me?

It's been a long time since anyone has had a crush on me.

At least one I've known about.

"Interesting. I guess I'll just keep that info tucked away in my back pocket."

His eyes widen. "What? You're not going to make a move?"

"Hell no. I'm not going to take advantage of her like that. If something happens down the road, then it does, but otherwise, I'm just helping out the friend of a friend."

Ledger chuckles. "A very attractive, ridiculously cute, and well-humored friend of a friend."

Well, when he puts it that way...

I mean she did look adorable in my pajama pants.

What's not to like about her?

"I'm calling it right now." Barrett slaps a fifty-dollar bill down on the table. "Fifty bucks says Ollenberg will be in her pants by the end of the night."

"Oh yeah, I'm in on that too," Harrison laughs, laying a fifty on top of Bear's.

Around the table they go, each putting their money in the pot as I watch each of my friends have zero faith in me.

Shaking my head, I scoff at them all. "Bunch of wise-ass motherfuckers. You're on. I am perfectly capable of being the nice guy who does not need inside Layken's pants."

Hmm. Though I wonder what that might be like.

"LOOKING' good ladies!" Oliver whistles as the girls descend the stairs in our private chateau. After a few hours of sampling wines at one of the local wineries this evening, the ladies decided a nightclub is where they wanted to dance the night away so we all came back to our rooms to get dressed.

When I finish tying my shoe, I stand up straight and glance at the group of them and, "Whoa...Layken Hobbs, you look..." I rock forward and back just a bit. Maybe it's the four beers I downed earlier this afternoon or maybe it's just that Layken is an extremely attractive woman who just nearly knocked me over in shock because fuck. "You look...wow."

“Thank you, Griffin.” The corner of her mouth pulls up into one of those smiles that tells me she not only looks good, but she feels good. There’s an air of sexy confidence about her that wasn’t there last night. Granted, I haven’t seen much of Layken in a personal setting. Professional, sure. She’s always dressed to the nines for charity events and carries herself with a sophisticated professionalism. But watching her giggling with Corrigan and Ella and Scarlett as they waltzed down the stairs just now, she looks totally different even from the girl I sat next to on the plane.

Don’t get me wrong. It’s a good different.

A very good different.

A why-did-I-make-that-bet-with-the-guys kind of different.

She’s sporting a long sleeved, cream-colored mini dress adorned with gold and white sparkly swirls, with gold strappy heels that wrap around her ankles a couple of times. Her hair is styled in long golden waves and falls around her shoulders. Her makeup is minimal but enough to bring out the tiny flecks of gold in her otherwise brown eyes. She turns, posing for a picture that Oliver takes of them, and I notice her dress is backless.

There’s no way she’s wearing a bra with that dress.

Fuuuck me.

That’s hot.

Also, my hand is now itching to touch her skin.

For fuck’s sake, where is this coming from? It’s not like I’ve been thinking about Layken Hobbs all afternoon. I really haven’t been, but now? Hell. Now I’ll be lucky to pull my eyes away from her at all.

“Well, it’s settled,” I say, wrapping my arm around Layken and moving her away from the group. “We’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

She startles but giggles as she steps with me. “What? Where are we going?”

“To get you more clothes.” I rub my chin between my thumb and forefinger. “What do you think? Maybe some sweatpants and a turtleneck?”

“Griffin!” She laughs.

“Don’t Griffin me, woman. If I take you out like this, looking all hot and sexy, I’ll spend my entire night bouncing guys away from you left and right.”

Not to mention hiding a boner all night when I picture you with those strappy sandals resting on my shoulders.

She laughs and playfully swats at my arm. “No way, Jose. Let ’em bounce or let ’em in, cause this girl is going out!”

Let them in?

Fuck no, I’m not letting anyone in.

“That’s right she is,” Corrigan says, looping her arm around Layken’s other arm. “We are blitzed and ready for a fun night.”

Seriously. How the fuck am I going to control myself tonight when she looks like a goddamn supermodel?

Guess I’m playing bodyguard tonight because I’ll be damned if anyone is getting anywhere close to Layken Hobbs.

SHOTS.

The moment we get inside the darkened club thumping with R&B music Scarlett orders and hands out a shot to each one of us. Each glass is rimmed with salt and accessorized with a lime so I can only assume it’s tequila. She raises her shot glass and shouts over the music, “To love and friendship!”

“To love and friendship!” we repeat and tip our glasses, the liquid slipping down our throats. She slaps her shot glass down on the table in front of us and then grabs for the ladies in the group.

“Come on girls. Let’s dance!”

Scarlett, Ella, Corrigan, and Layken all take off for the dance floor, Layken tossing her purse my way before waving and trotting off with her friends. The rest of us shake our heads watching on from the roped off booths waiting for us. They dance through several songs as we order more drinks, clinking our glasses together and downing them one after the other. We joke about hockey and life, and we watch the ladies having fun, always keeping an eye on them to ensure their safety.

From the moment we pulled into town until now, we’ve all consumed a lot of alcohol. Even as we watch from our seats, the ladies take another shot before resuming their dancing. But as the music slows to a sultry mix, Ella, Corrigan, and Scarlett make puppy dog eyes at their men.

A chuckle rumbles through my chest. “You guys are fucked. Better get out there and dance with your women.”

Oliver stands and climbs over the rope in front of us. “Maybe I can get her into a dark corner and cop a feel.”

“There ya go, Champ.” I lift my glass in a toast and swallow back my drink.

And then my eyes fall on Layken. Standing alone and awkwardly swaying to the music.

She has nobody to dance with.

Barrett leans over next to me, his brows furrowed. “You’re not really going to let her stand out there all by herself, are you?”

CHAPTER FOUR

LAYKEN

I can't remember the last time I felt this good.

This free.

Like I don't have a care in the world tonight.

I'll probably have to make a sacrifice to the porcelain gods in the morning for this feeling but for now, I'll take it.

As the music slows, the girls couple up with their men, leaving me no doubt looking a bit awkward. I'm trying to decide if I care enough but right now, my brain is a little fuzzy. Honestly, it feels too good to give a shit what anyone else thinks.

"Hey." I turn in my spot a too fast and spin right into Griffin. His hands fall to my hips. "Whoa. You okay?"

I smile up at his gloriously beautiful face.

"Mhmm. Never better. Good God how are you so pretty?"

He grins back at me. "I get it from my mother. You're all alone out here. Did you want to dance?"

I run my hand through my hair that most likely looks like a rat's nest but again, do I care?

Alcohol says nope.

Do I want to dance with Griffin?

Sure.

But this music feels like sex on the dance floor and I don't really know Griffin enough for sex on the dance floor so instead, I offer, "Want to get a

drink?”

His smile tells me he knows exactly why I didn't say yes to that dance.

Or maybe he has gas.

Like I said...alcohol.

“Sure. Let's do it.”

“Great!”

We saddle up to the bar and he pulls a stool out for me before ordering. Two shots of tequila are placed in front of us. We pick them up, tap them on the bar, clink them together, and say, “To love and friendship” just like Scarlett did earlier and then we shoot them back.

“Did you guys have fun today? While we were shopping?”

“We did.” He nods, his eyes never leaving mine.

“What did you do?”

“Sat around and talked about how obsessed you are with me.”

For just a moment I think he's serious but as I watch him, his smile widens and he huffs out a soft laugh. “I'm kidding. We took the Ale Trail and visited a few breweries.”

“Ooh, that sounds like fun.”

“It looks like you're having fun. Dancing agrees with you.” I see his lips move but I don't hear what he says entirely.

“What?”

Smiling, he leans in closer, his cheek brushing against mine as he says in my ear, “I said dancing agrees with you. You were having fun out there.”

Nodding, I lean back a bit so I can see his face. “I think this trip was just what I needed.”

“Yeah?”

“Mhmm. No responsibility. No stress. Just...fun.”

“Fuck responsibility.” Griffin shakes his head. “Fuck it all.”

I slap my hand down on his thigh, not realizing just how rock hard his muscles really are. “That's right. Fuck it. Another drink?”

He motions for the bartender to drop two more shots, which we take the same way we did the first except this time, I miss my mouth and a little tequila slips down my chin. Giggling, I wipe my face with the back of my hand. “Oops.”

“So now that you're free from your job responsibilities, what do you want to do? Besides write porny books.”

I cock my head and give him a blank expression. “They’re not porny books and you know it.”

“I know. I’m kidding. But seriously, you have the time, so what are you scratching off your bucket list?”

“Hmm. My bucket list.” My brows pinch as I try hard to think about things I’ve never done in my life but far be it for me to come up with one fucking thing on that list. “I guess I don’t really have a bucket list. I’ve got more of a fuck-it list than a bucket list.”

He chuckles and this time I notice the small dimple in his right cheek and the way the lines around his eyes crinkle together when he smiles. It’s hot in that I’m-totally-drunk-and-would-probably-fuck-him-if-he-asked kind of way.

Oh shit!

I’ve never fucked a hockey player!

Would that be on a bucket list or a fuck-it list?

Griffin gives me a questioning glance, his brows coming together. “What are you thinking about in that cute little brain of yours?”

“Uh. Nothing.”

He laughs. “Why don’t I believe you?”

“Because you’re obsessed with me instead of the other way around, but you probably think I’m sitting here envisioning you naked...” I stick up my pointer finger. “Which I’m not, might I add.”

“But if you were...” he asks, humor dancing in his narrowed eyes. “How do I look? Good? Does my ass look alright?”

I perform a chef’s kiss and wink, appreciative that he’s nice enough to talk to me when he could be picking up any number of women tonight. “Perfection.”

“Good.” He smiles. “Good. Okay, so, you don’t have a bucket list. Maybe we need to help you create one. This is your time to do all the things you want to do.”

My brows shoot up in excitement. “Oooh yeah! That’s a good idea. I need to go do some things I’ve never done before.”

“Alright. Name one. We’ll go do it right now.”

“Now? Like right now?”

“Yeah. Why not? You have a hot date?”

“Well, I’m hanging out here with you, aren’t I?”

His sexy smile could melt my panties right off.

“Alright then.” He nods. “Have you ever been to Napa’s summer market festival?”

“Nope.” I tell him with a quick shake of my head.

He gestures with his head toward the door and offers me his hand. “Then let’s go. The night is young and there’s more fun to be had.”

Nodding, I hop down from my stool, allowing him to help steady me. “Yeah. Let’s do it.” I raise my hands as high as I can get them and proclaim, “Bucket list, here I come!”

Griffin pays our tab and then we say goodbye to our friends, well, those of them who are within eyesight, and then bust our way out of the nightclub, letting the chill of the fresh air slap us in the face. Throughout the small town-square there are booths and tents set up with vendors of all types as the area celebrates...well, hell if I know, but there are lots of people so it’s pretty busy out here.

“Where should we go first?” Griffin asks as I try to focus on anything that I haven’t done before. I see a sign for chocolate covered bananas and for some reason that gives me the giggles. Reaching up to Griffin’s face, I turn him so he can see the same sign I’m reading.

“I’ve never eaten a chocolate covered banana.”

“That’s a weird thing to have never done, you know.”

I shrug my shoulder. “Well, it’s on my bucket list sooo...”

“Alright then,” he laughs. “Let’s do it. My treat.”

“You’re a treat, indeed, Ollenberg.”

We walk over to the tented booth and Griffin pays for two chocolate covered bananas.

“You’re having one too?”

“Of course. You don’t get to have all the fun.”

I beam back at him. “Okay!”

He hands me one and we clink them together toasting, “To love and friendship.” Giggling because it’s the only toast we know at this point, we put the bananas in our mouths. Griffin takes a bite out of his, and my eyes grow big and round as he chews.

With his mouth full he asks, “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because you’re a man and you bit the penis!”

He nearly chokes on his bite. “What?”

“Shouldn’t you like, I don’t know, suck on it first?”

“Suck the banana?”

“Yeah. Suck it.”

“Suck it how?”

“You know...like an ice cream cone or something.”

“You suck ice cream cones?”

I giggle. “I mean a little, yes. Off the tip.”

“Fuck me,” he murmurs. With a little tip of his chin he says, “Show me.”

Huffing out a quick sigh, I push the tip of the banana into my mouth, running my tongue around it to taste more of that chocolate flavor. Griffin’s brows raise when I push the banana farther into my mouth, sucking on it a little harder before pulling it back out. His jaw drops and it’s then that I notice his pupils look completely blown as he watches me suck on the banana.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he mumbles.

His words make me laugh. “So much better than biting the banana, Griffin. You have to get the whole experience.”

“Apparently, I do.” He throws his arm around my shoulders. “Come on, Hobbs. If I watch you suck that banana all night, it’s going to be a sticky walk home. Let’s keep going. What else have you never done?”

We spend the next couple of hours doing all the things I can think of that I’ve never done. Griffin couldn’t believe I had never been ice-skating but when I assured him I had not ever had the experience, he took me for a spin on the little rink in the center of town.

He only fell twice.

Some hockey player he is.

Together we sing songs like “Don’t Stop Believin’” and “Every Rose Has Its Thorn” as loudly as we can because I’ve never sung in public.

Bucket list item complete.

We paint rocks at one tent because neither of us had ever done that. When we’re done we hide them along our walk for someone else to find because apparently that’s a thing.

We taste a few other wines because hello? When in wine country. Besides, alcohol releases our inhibitions.

And now, after all that, we’re walking along the quieter side of town where several booths are shutting down.

“What time is it?” I ask Griffin.

He pulls his phone from his pocket. “Almost midnight.”

“It’s so early!” I throw out my arms and loudly shout, “DON’T SHUT DOWN PEOPLE! WE HAVE BUCKET LISTS TO FINISH!” Just as I’m spinning in a slow circle, my eyes spot a little white building with cute colored stained-glass windows. The images of flowers and rings and bells in the window shine through the lights from inside. “Ooh, what’s that place?”

Griffin reads the lit sign on the front. “Marry Me Manor. Free flowers with purchase.”

“Ooh free flowers?” I turn to Griffin. “Have you ever been married, Griffin?”

“Can’t say that I have,” he answers, shaking his head.

“Me either. But it’s on my bucket list!”

Everything is on my bucket list tonight apparently because...alcohol.

“Pfitt!” Griffin laughs. “Are you saying we should...”

I shrug. “I mean...fuck it, right? You’ve never done it.”

“True.” He nods, looking back at the white building.

I point to myself. “And I’ve never done it.”

“Also, true.”

“And we could both die tomorrow having never been married.”

He thinks about it for a minute and then shrugs. “That would be a serious disappointment.” He holds his hand up for me to high-five. “To love and friendship?”

“To love and friendship!”

We step inside the small building and are smacked in the face with the scent of flowers. Who knows if they’re living or dead, but it smells very flowery in here, that’s for sure.

“Oh, look who is here!” a stout older woman says gleefully. She’s dressed in a pink floral dress with an overcoat that looks a lot like a bathrobe, but who’s judging? Her short white old lady hair reminds me of the Golden Girls as do the glasses hanging on a chain around her neck. “And just in time too! You’ll be our last wedding of the day!”

“Great. Do we get free flowers?” I ask her, gesturing to the window. “Because the sign said free flowers.”

“Of course, dear.” She shows us the group of bouquets lined up in a case in front of her. “Just choose your favorite color.”

“What’s your favorite color, Griffin?”

He studies the case and then says, “Uh, purple. I think.”

“Okay,” the woman nods with an approving smile. “Purple bouquet it is. A beautiful choice.”

Just to be clear none of the flowers in the bouquet are actually purple. They’re white but they’re tied together with a purple ribbon. In fact, all the bouquets are white but each have a different colored ribbon.

“How about rings, dears? Would you like rings?” She pulls out a few trays of jewelry for both men and women. “We have rings for twenty dollars and we have rings for much more.”

“Well, my girl here deserves the best, so whatever that is,” he says, pointing to a large diamond type of rock. “I’ll take it.”

I loop my arm through his and rest my head on his shoulder. “Aww, Griffin. You know just how to make me swoon.”

After he picks out a ring for me I choose one for him and then we’re signing a few papers before being led to a podium in a pretty pink room.

“Would you two like a wedding song? Something to come down the aisle to? I’m afraid the only song we have available right now is ummm...” she reads the file on her laptop and then glances at us. “‘Tainted Love’.”

Griffin and I burst out laughing and give each other another high five. “‘Tainted Love’, it is.”

He pats my ass and says, “Get your ass down that aisle and come back to me.”

“You got it big daddy.”

I hop down the aisle holding my precious purple and totally free bouquet and await the beautiful music. Rather than walking majestically down the aisle to my groom, I dance because hello...“Tainted Love”. I even make sure to twerk a little on those two big down beats much to Griffin’s amusement. He applauds me the entire time until I’m standing right in front of him.

The Golden Girl lady—what’s her name again? Doesn’t matter—reads a few words from her laptop about love and weddings and then has us hold hands to take our vows. Rather than hold hands though, Griffin hooks his pinky with mine to say his I-do. That means it’s serious so I do the same thing.

“By the power invested in me I pronounce you Mr. and Mrs....” She reads her file again. “Ollenberg.”

Griffin beams at me and exclaims, “Yeah baby! Mrs. Fuckin’ Ollenberg.”

Golden Girl laughs and says, “Go ahead and kiss your bride.”

Without another thought Griffin grabs my face and connects his lips to mine. We’re a little bit sloppy at first, but then he pulls back and stares at me for a second like he doesn’t understand how he got the candy but he likes the candy and wants more of it.

Also, I’m pretty sure I’m the candy.

“Again,” he says before he slides his hand into my hair, cradling the back of my head. He brings our lips together once more, only this time it’s so much more than a kiss.

His mouth opens against mine, his tongue darting into my mouth like he’s trying to swallow me whole. My entire body is engulfed in heat as he grips my hips, his warm fingertips pressing against the bare skin of my back. The tingling sensation weaving through my body makes me kiss him harder. Like I can’t get enough of him. I tilt my head, inviting him to get a better angle, and he takes full advantage, moaning against my mouth as his tongue swipes against my lips.

This is certainly no kiss-the-bride type of kiss. This is honeymoon night kind of kissing and phew! I’m enjoying every minute of it.

Golden Girl clears her throat just behind us and when we finally break apart, she holds up a key ring that says Marry Me Manor, a golden key attached to it, and says, “Perhaps you’d like to upgrade to the overnight package?”

Griffin’s already dark pupils stare at me, questioning what I want to do. “Wedding night?”

Feeling every bit of joy that has come from the past couple of hours I nod and loudly whisper, “I mean it’s not official till we fuck, right?”

“To wedding nights?” Griffin asks, raising his hand in the air.

I give him a hearty high-five. “To nights we won’t remember with friends we’ll never forget!”

Golden Girl takes our picture for our keepsake and then Griffin hands her his credit card to pay for our room. Once everything is signed and sealed, we’re holding hands and being led to a row of tiny bungalows behind Marry Me Manor. “There’s champagne and cookies in your room waiting for you. Enjoy.”

I clap my hands, squealing excitedly. “Ooh snacks!”

CHAPTER FIVE

GRIFFIN

Neither of us pay much attention to what the bungalow looks like when we step inside because we're nothing but hands and lips and moans and groans. It's definitely warmer in here than it was outside but that could also be due to the fact that my inhibitions, if I had any to begin with, have been out of sight for hours now, and my body is on fire for the gorgeous sexy woman standing in front of me.

Maybe I just need to get this out of my system and then I'll be good.

A one-night kind of thing.

The guys don't even have to know.

I can keep it a secret.

We can pretend this is Vegas, right? What happens here stays here?

Layken drags her hands down my chest, her beautiful brown eyes hungrily staring up at me.

"I've never had a husband before."

Grinning back at her, I tug on the front of her dress, right at her abdomen, pulling her closer to me so I can slide my hands across her bare back and feel her skin.

She has nice skin.

Smooth.

Warm.

Creamy.

"I've never had a wife before," I tell her. "Also, I like your skin."

She giggles. The shape of her mouth when she smiles makes me happy.
“You like my skin?”

“Mhmm.”

“I think I’d like your skin too. Do I get to see it?”

I lean down and brush my lips against hers and then grab her ass, my fingers playing just at the hem of her short sparkly dress. “You’re my wife now so you get to see whatever you want to see.”

Because alcohol equals zero inhibitions.

As if I had inhibitions in the first place.

“Good. Because I want to see every last inch of this sexy hockey body.”

“That’s right. I play hockey. I make money playing hockey. A shit ton of it too.”

Her eyes grow wide and her pupils darken. “I like a sexy guy with a shit ton of money. Can he fuck too?”

Can I fuck?

I chuckle to myself.

Sweetheart doesn’t know who she’s talking to.

“Honey, I can fuck better than anyone you’ve ever been with.” I thrust my pelvis against her body. “Are you ready for me to blow your mind?”

Somewhere in the recesses of my brain I’m asking myself what in the ever-loving hell I’m saying out of my mouth hole, but the other part of my brain...the part where I have zero control thanks to all the alcohol flowing through my veins right now, thinks I’m the sexiest, Rico Suave man this world has ever known.

Bet with the guys be damned.

Layken Hobbs is worth every bet I’ll ever lose.

Her smile widens and she licks her lips. Her hands slide down to my belt, which she somehow manages to pull apart, and then she unzips my pants and lowers herself to her knees.

Hell, yeah baby.

“I think I’d like to blow you first if you don’t mind.”

“I’m all yours wife.”

I kick off my shoes and she yanks down my pants and boxer briefs, freeing my stiff cock. Tilting my head back I inhale a deep breath as she slides her hands down my stomach knowing that any minute she’s going to wrap her hand around my huge dick and suck it into her mouth just like she did with that banana.

“Uh oh,” she says, giggling. “Looks like we need a husband fluffer on aisle one!”

What?

“Huh?”

I bow my head to see what the problem is and mother fucking shit fucker. My eyes are betraying me. Layken’s hand is wrapped around my dick alright. But it’s the very opposite of rock hard.

The nerve endings tingle as she squeezes me between her fingers and then she’s flinging it up and down in front of her face as if it’s the trunk of a baby elephant. “Weeee look how cute it is!”

Fuuuuuuck me.

My dick isn’t cute.

Oh God.

This isn’t good.

Be cool man.

Be cool.

Deep breath.

It’s fine.

You can get it there.

“It’s just the alcohol baby,” I assure her, cupping her face in my hand. “Keep those hands on my balls and give him a little kiss. He’ll be ready to rock in no time.”

Doing just as I instruct, she tickles my balls with her fingertips and rolls them in her hands which I’m not going to lie, feels fucking good.

“Just like that. That’s a good girl.”

She leans forward and strokes her tongue against the underside of my dick and I watch with relief and pleasure as it grows in her hand. “Yes, baby. I told you. He just needed a little love.”

A little harder now, she sucks me into her mouth, wrapping her tongue around me and flicking the head a few times.

“Fuck, that feels nice,” I groan. “I’ll admit, I had no idea how hot it would be to watch my wife suck my cock, but damn...it’s the best fucking thing in the world right now.”

Bucket list item—checked.

She moans with my cock in her mouth and I hiss in a breath through my teeth at the sensation. “You’re getting me close, babe.”

She pops off my cock and licks her lips before standing up and pulling her thong down her sexy long legs. "Good. Because I need to ride this horse to happy town."

"Fuckin' right you do." She turns to head to the bed and I spank her ass, making her squeal. She climbs onto the bed and before she has a moment to turn herself over, I catch her while she's on all fours and sink my head between her legs, twirling my tongue around her warm pussy.

"Oh my God!" She gasps as her body freezes in place and then relaxes against my face. "Oooh yeah. You didn't tell me you were a pussy chomper Mr. Ollenberg."

"Told you I would blow your mind, didn't I Mrs. Ollenberg?"

She giggles against me at the use of her new married name. "You totally did and I am here for it. Make me come, Griffin. Make me come hard so I can scream really loud and tell this town how great of a lover you really are."

The need to impress her with my skills overcomes me. "Yes ma'am. With pleasure."

I toss myself on the bed and pull her to me so she's straddling my lap. With a little bit of help from her, I pull her dress off, rubbing my hands over her beautifully naked body. Her tits hang in front of my face, her pretty pink nipples begging to be sucked into my mouth. Her breasts aren't as huge as others I've seen before, but I don't tell her that, because honestly, I don't mind one bit. She's sexy as fuck and she feels perfect in my hands.

I lean up to tug one of her nipples into my mouth but when she bucks against me her nipple slips from my lips and slaps me in the eye.

"Ah!" I lean back against my pillow, one eye shut, rubbing it with my hand as she giggles.

"Oops. Sorry. Slippery little sucker."

I smile back at her so she doesn't get embarrassed and place my hands on her hips. "No worries baby. How about you put my cock inside you so I can give you the ride of your life?"

Giving me her best sultry stare, she lifts up on her knee and wraps her hand around my stiff cock. She lines it up at her entrance and then lowers herself back down and bucks against me a few more times.

So warm.

Yessss.

Her eyebrows fold in and she looks at me, my expression mirroring hers.

Something isn't right.

"Wait...I think..."

"You're not in," she says.

"Yeah, I'm not in. Try again."

She lifts up again and lines me up lowering herself once more. I help her out by thrusting up inside her but the minute she moves against me—

"Oops, I think you slipped out again."

What the hell?

She takes a look between us and then cocks her head before glancing down at me, her cheeks flushed. "Aww, It's okay. It happens to a lot of guys."

Wait.

What?

I peer between us and swallow back my pride as I notice my poor little penis is napping.

Fuck.

"It's okay babe. He just needs a minute and then we'll be—"

God, my eyes are heavy.

Two minutes.

I just need two minutes and then it'll be fuck time.

"Yeah. We'll just take a quick break. It's fine," she assures me with a comforting smile. "I'll just lay here with you for a second and then we'll..."

THE INCESSANT DINGING next to me finally wakes me from my sleep. My eyes remain closed while I hit the snooze button on my alarm clock.

Except the dinging doesn't stop.

Because it's not the alarm clock I'm hitting.

It's my phone.

I pick it up and pull open my eyes just enough to try to figure out what the problem is.

What the?

One text after another pops up on my screen like a nonstop carousel.

AUGUST

Hey Griff. You two coming home soon?

AUGUST

Where are you?

AUGUST

Hello? Earth to Griffin! (and hopefully Layken)

BODHI

Hey. Corri wants to know when Layken is coming home and she's not answering her phone.

AUGUST

Yeah I want to know too. What the hell man?

BODHI

Hopefully it's because you guys are out having a blast that you're not answering your phone.

AUGUST

You would think one of them would for Pete's sake.

BODHI

So did they not come home last night? I still don't see Griffin anywhere.

LEDGER

Hey Griff! Did you kidnap Layken and leave town or what?

HARRISON

Did anyone actually check his room?

AUGUST

Yes dumbass. I checked his room. It's empty and the bed is made.

HARRISON

Did anyone check Layken's room?

LEDGER

For both of them? 🙄

AUGUST

Oooh do you think? #Imwinningfiftybucks

HARRISON

Wouldn't put it past him. #fiftyformetoo

BODHI

Corrigan says Layken isn't in her room and neither is Griffin. But her bags are still there.

HARRISON

Alright, so they must've stayed somewhere else last night?

AUGUST

They're not on the couches downstairs. And Ella checked the bathrooms after she puked in ours. #alcoholmuch

BODHI

LOL Corrigan did the same. #girlsandtheiralcohol

AUGUST

Alright Griffin, we need to know where you are, bud.

OLIVER

Hey. Thanks for waking us up asshats.

AUGUST

Sorry. I can't find Griffin and Layken.

OLIVER

So I gathered. I'm sure they're together somewhere.

BARRETT

Leave them alone. They probably got a room at Fucks-a-lot so they could do their thing without disturbing us. #winningabet

LEDGER

Fucks-a-lot? Why that and not Humpsie Daisy?

AUGUST

Jesus, Ledge. I just spit out my coffee at Humpsie Daisy.

LEDGER

#sorrynotsorry How about Rubber Neckers?

BARRETT

Quick-n-Easy?

LEDGER

Teabagginn. Hehe get it? Tea bag-lnn?

ME

Jesus Christ do you assholes have nothing better to do? What do you want?

HARRISON

He's ALIVE!!!

LEDGER

'Bout fucking time bro.

AUGUST

WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU BRO?

ME

I'm right fucking here. In my bed dumbass.

AUGUST

blinks Uuuh...try again.

"Where the hell is all that dinging coming from?"

"The guys are endlessly texting me. Sorry...wait..." I turn my head at the movement beside me and find Layken Hobbs lying in my bed. When her eyes meet mine, our befuddled expressions mimic each other.

"What?"

"What?"

She bolts upright in bed at the same time I do, both of us asking in tandem, "What are you doing here?" And then we both clutch our foreheads.

"Fuck. That hurts," I mumble, but it's worse for Layken.

"Oh God." She covers her mouth with her hand and jolts out of the bed, wrapping our bedspread around her. "I'm going to be sick."

"Wait, what?" I watch in shock as she staggers to the bathroom and hear every last sound as she lifts the toilet seat and vomits the contents of her stomach.

"Shit, Layken? Are you—"

She vomits again.

"Okay?"

Silence comes from the bathroom as I slip on my boxer briefs.

Why the hell was I naked?

Why the hell was I naked with Layken?

Padding to the bathroom so that my head doesn't explode, I peek inside and find Layken resting her head on her arm leaning against the toilet seat.

"Do you need some help?"

"What are you going to do? Spoon out my vomit for me?"

She doesn't see my weak sympathetic smile but it's there all the same.
"I could hold your hair back or something."

"Water?" she asks meekly.

"Right. Yeah. Water. I can do that."

I look around the bathroom for cups but don't see any so I step back into the bedroom and find two covered glasses next to two bottles of water.

Yes!

Grabbing the bottles, I carry one into the bathroom, unscrew the cap, and hand it to Layken. "Here you go."

"Thank you."

I watch with concerned curiosity as she takes a few small sips. When nothing else happens, I tell myself she's okay and then try my damndest to remember why we're both here right now and where, exactly, here is.

"My head is pounding," Layken says in a whisper.

"Mine too."

"I'll never drink that much alcohol in one night again."

I try to chuckle softly but even that hurts. "Probably smart."

"Where are we? And why are you here and..." She opens her blanket and peers down at herself. "Why the hell am I—" She gasps but then squeezes her eyes closed in response. "Oh God. Griffin...?"

My eyes grow wide. "What?"

"Did we?"

"Did we what?"

"I'm naked Griffin! And you're..." She gestures with her head to my nearly naked body. "You're in your underwear. So did we... Oh God, did we sleep together?"

I scratch my head as blurry visions fly in and out of my mind.

Walking into a floral room.

Layken twerking.

Us laughing.

Kissing her.

Oh shit. I kissed her.

It was a fucking good kiss.

Touching her.

"...blow your mind?"

"Blow you first..."

She's on her knees.

Unbuckling my pants.

Oh fuck. She...

Her mouth.

Her lips.

Her tongue.

"Oopsie..."

"Just a quick break..."

"Yeah I'll just rest for..."

Fuuuuuck...

"Griffin?" Her eyes are wide and she swallows hard. "What have we done?"

Just before I answer her my phone dings in my hand. I turn it over to see the text on the screen and nearly vomit when I read what it says.

AUGUST

Link to news article GRIFFIN BRO! YOU GOT FUCKING MARRIED?

"No," I mumble, shaking my head. "Can't be."

Layken turns on the floor, watching me in horror. "What?"

She lifts her water bottle to her mouth with her left hand and that's when I see it. The shiny diamond ring on her finger.

No!

I lift my hand to find a gold band around my finger.

"No way in hell."

My heart is racing and I start to sweat. My hands shaking, I tap the link to the article August sent and read the bold headline that says

HOCKEY STAR MARRIES IN SHOCKING PRIVATE CEREMONY.

I read a little farther, noting where it mentions my name and Layken's

"No, no, no. I'm just going crazy," I mutter, shaking my head. "Or I'm dreaming! Yeah. That's it. This is a dream. I'll wake up any minute and then—"

"GRIFFIN OLLENBERG!" Layken shouts, holding her head in obvious pain. "If you don't fucking tell me what's going on right fucking now I'm going to—"

“We got married.”

Her eyes find mine as my chest heaves and I try to make sense of this ridiculous situation.

Layken’s eyes narrow and she cocks her head. “We what?”

I wiggle my left hand in front of her face. “We got married Layken.” I step outside the bathroom looking for anything that tells me where we are. In seconds my eyes fall to the key sitting on the table just inside the door. I pick it up and take it back to the bathroom where Layken meets me at the door.

“See?” I tell her holding up the keyring that says, Marry Me Manor. “That’s why we’re here. We got married last night, remember?”

Recognition falls over her as the memories of last night come back to each of us little by little. She slowly lowers herself to the bed, her eyes flitting this way and that as she remembers. Her hand comes up covering her mouth as she mumbles, “Oh, my God.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, my God we...I...’Tainted Love’,” she says.

I nod. “Yeah.”

She points to me, her eyes like saucers. “And then you...”

“Yeah. I did. I’m sorry.”

“And then we...” She looks around the room, the covers strewn everywhere. Our clothes are lying all over the floor. And then her gaze goes straight to my junk.

“Oh my God...”

“Yeah, but Layken we didn’t...” I shake my head. “We didn’t really...”

“Right!” She gasps, pointing to my crotch again. “Because you...”

“I mean we were pretty drunk,” I laugh nervously not wanting my poor penis to take all the blame. “That doesn’t happen all the time.” I shrug my shoulder trying to save face. “I mean any other night everything would wor—”

“So, we didn’t really sleep together then?” she asks, her eyes pleading for the answer she wants to hear. And though I’m happy to tell her the truth knowing it will relieve her, a part of me feels some type of way that for the first time ever, a woman is happy that I didn’t fuck her.

“No. I don’t think we did.”

Her hand to her heart, she releases a sigh. “Oh, thank God.”

“Wow. Yeah. That stings a little, not going to lie,” I mumble, rubbing away the heaviness in my chest.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like—”

“No, it’s okay. I’m just...it’s not every day a woman is glad to have not slept with me.”

She cocks her head sympathetically. “I’m sure you’re very good.”

My responding nod may be a bit overenthusiastic. “Oh, I am!”

“Right. Yeah. I’m sure, but anyway...”

Anyway? How can she flip the subject so easily when we’re literally discussing my proclivity for sexual encounters?

“Okay so this marriage thing.” She waves it off like it’s no big deal. “I’m sure it’s not really a real thing. It was just for fun.”

Turning back to the table where I found the key to our room, I pick up a piece of paper that was underneath it. I read the top heading and then shake my head as I take a seat next to Layken on the bed.

“Uh, I’m not so sure about that.”

CHAPTER SIX

LAYKEN

Griffin hands me the paper he lifted from the table. At the top in bold print it clearly reads MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE – State of California.

Both of our signatures are written at the bottom plain as day.

I swallow back the instant nausea as Griffin says, “I think this might be the real deal, Layken.”

Oh God.

I think he might be right.

He clears his throat. “And there was, um, this article that went out this morning...”

I snap my head toward him. “Article? What article?”

“In Sports News Now,” he tells me, lifting his phone and showing me the headline. “August sent this over.”

HOCKEY STAR MARRIES IN SHOCKING PRIVATE CEREMONY.

“Fuuuuuuck,” I whisper loudly.

What do we do now?

How do we reverse this?

How can I make this go away?

Can't I just sign another paper and poof? Gone?

Wait...

Shit. I can't sign divorce papers!

My dad...

Shit...my parents...

"Don't come crawling back to us when you inevitably fuck up your life."

"If you think we're going to help you out of every fucked-up situation you get yourself into..."

"If you so much as think of doing something that will embarrass your father..."

My pulse races as a sudden dizziness starts to set in. My skin is clammy and my hands are shaky.

"Hey, hey, hey," Griffin says softly, noticing me about to have a panic attack. "Breathe. Breathe, Layken. In...and out." He does it with me.

"In...and out."

I follow his instructions focusing on his sapphire blue eyes.

"In...and out."

"Griffin?" His name is a squeak out of my mouth.

"Yeah."

"If we do anything to reverse this...problem," I say, referring to our newest nuptials, "the paperwork will go right across my father's desk and he'll know everything."

"What? Why? What do you mean?"

"My dad. He's a...a...a family court judge in Anaheim and because that's where we live that's where the paperwork will go and he'll be the one to have to sign off on it and I can't..." I try to breathe but the air in my lungs feels heavy. "I can't..." I shake my head patting my chest as if that will give me the extra air I need to breathe. "I can't..."

Griffin's hands cup my face and his eyes pierce mine. "Breathe, Layken. I need you to breathe."

Nodding adamantly, I inhale a deep breath, remaining focused on Griffin's expression as he tries to calm me down and then we exhale together. My phone dings on the nightstand next to where I slept but I don't stand up to answer it. Mainly because Griffin hasn't let go of my face just yet.

"I need to say something to you and I need you to hear me and not panic, okay?"

Oh God.

Nobody says that and expects you not to really panic, right?

I nod anyway.

“Our picture is in the article I showed you. That means by now, every sports fan in the world who reads Sports News Now knows I got married last night.”

“Yeah.”

“Right. So, if I turn around and file for divorce immediately, this could make those in the front office very angry. My career with the Stars could be on the line and I can’t let that happen. I have people who depend on me. Family who depends on me.”

“This is bad,” I whisper to him. “Griffin, I am so sorry.”

His brows furrow as he swipes his thumb across my cheek, as if he’s drying my tears, his movement soft and tender. “You have nothing to apologize for, Layken. I was an equal partner last night. This is just as much my fault as it is yours, so I’m sorry too. I’m sorry I got you into a potential mess with your family.”

Sighing, I drop my gaze to my fingers fiddling with the blanket still wrapped around my naked body. “Trust me, it won’t be anything new. Especially when they find out I lost my job *and* ran off and got married.”

“They don’t know about your job yet?”

I shake my head. “Hell no. They’re the kind of people you go to with a solution. Not a problem. I figured I would wait until I absolutely had to tell them.”

Fuck.

Mom was right.

This is going to embarrass the hell out of my father.

Because no matter how hard I try I’m nothing but an embarrassment.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” My eyes find his again. “We’ll get through this. There has to be a way through this. We can figure it out.”

Griffin cringes slightly, his brows folding in. “What if I have an idea?”

“Let’s hear it,” I tell him with a renewed sense of hope.

“It’s not the best idea, but it could work for the both of us for now.”

“Alright.”

“What if we uh...stay married?”

“What?” I rise up from the bed, my head still throbbing. “Are you crazy?”

He nods. "Yeah probably, but look, neither of us are in the position to simply end what we did without major repercussions. So why can't we just, you know, fake it for a while. Stay married. Tell people our plan was always to elope. At least that would give us time to figure out what the hell we do next."

"Fake it." I repeat his words, willing myself to comprehend what he's saying.

"Yeah."

"You're serious?"

"Do you have a better idea?"

Fuck.

He's right.

I know he's right.

And I don't have a better idea.

"And you're really okay with this? Being married to me?"

He shrugs haphazardly. "Yeah. Sure. I guess. Better you than some stranger I don't know, right?"

"Oh, and you know me?"

"I know you're obsessed with me, remember?" he teases with a half-smile trying to make our situation a little lighter.

I roll my eyes. "Right. How could I forget."

"Look, I know you're a great person and from the handful of times we've met and worked together you've been remarkably professional and extremely impressive. So...yeah. I'm okay with it. You were planning to stay at my place anyway for the next week at least so this will give us time to talk things out and figure out a solid plan. And besides," he says gesturing to me, "I've already seen you naked so..."

"Oh, my God!" I scoff, wrapping myself tighter in my blanket. My cheeks heat from embarrassment.

"Relax, Lake." He cocks his head. "Can I call you Lake? Seems like a nickname I'd give my wife. For what it's worth, you're a beautiful woman. You have nothing to be ashamed or embarrassed of. And though we find ourselves in a bit of a pickle now, I don't regret having a great time with you last night. Every minute was fun and light-hearted and maybe I needed the downtime as much as you did. So, what do you say?" He stands and faces me. "Will you do me the honor of being my wife for a yet to be

determined length of time at which point we'll figure out a way to amicably split?"

For as ridiculous as this morning has become, I can't help but take note of the professional hockey player standing before me in nothing but a pair of bright blue boxer briefs asking me to be his wife.

"You know my parents are going to insist on meeting you," I tell him with an ornery grin.

His smile mirrors mine. "Good. I'm great with parents."

"Not my parents."

"Ooh, challenge accepted. Don't worry. I can play the part of the love-sick husband who is head over heels for his new wife. Do you think you can pretend to like me enough to pull this off?"

I huff out a quiet laugh and roll my eyes for the second time this morning. "Oh please. Twist my arm and tell me I have to be in love with the hot hockey player."

"See?" He winks. "I knew you were obsessed with me."

"What are we going to tell everyone back at the chateau. They know this will all be fake."

He shrugs. "I think we tell them the truth and beg them to play along until we come up with a better answer. I can't lie to the guys. They're like family to me. Speaking of which, we should get over there. They're worried enough that we didn't come back last night and now that they've seen the article, I'm sure they're chomping at the bit to find out what's going on."

"Walk of shame, here we come, I guess."

"Hey." He steps up to me and places his hands on my shoulders. Even through the blanket I can feel his strength and warmth. "Are you okay? I know this is a lot and I want to be here for you. Whatever you need."

"Yeah. Thank you. I'm fine. I promise I'll be okay."

"I know you will." He smiles. "Because your super-hot sexy husband will make sure of it."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." I smirk. "Who the hell said anything about sexy? Or super?"

"Meh, don't worry. I'll change your mind."

THE MINUTE we walk in the door, we're bombarded with questions shooting at us from all over the living room.

"Oh, my God, Layken! What the hell did you do?"

"Yeah, Griff, what the fuck man?"

"Are you okay?"

"Tell us this is not true."

"Oh my God, you even have a ring?"

"Did you seriously get married? Like married, married?"

"Did someone force this decision upon you guys?"

"Is that thing real?"

"Yeah are we talking a blackmail situation here or what?"

"Do we need to get a couple lawyers involved here?"

"A lawsuit?"

"Has front office reached out yet? How mad are they?"

"It's reversible right?"

"How are you going to get out of this?"

Griffin removes his arm from around my waist, the faint protective feel of his hold vanishing by the second and holds his hands up. "Whoa, stop. First of all, let us explain and then we can...you know," he gestures with a roll of his hand, "answer questions."

The entire group takes a seat around the long dinner table off to the side of the kitchen and listens as Griffin and I talk about last night.

"We were just having fun," Griffin starts to explain. "We were knocking things off of this imaginary bucket list I created for Layken. Just wanted to get her mind off of her job and have some fun. But we drank. A lot. At the nightclub and while walking through the markets last night. Eventually we stopped in front of this little chapel type place..."

Free flowers with purchase.

Yep. That memory just popped into my head.

I wanted to go into that place because they offered free flowers with purchase.

And what do you know? We walked out married.

"Anyway, one thing led to another and..." I notice Griffin leaves out the parts about my twerking down the aisle to "Tainted Love"—yep, remembered that too—as well as us waking up naked in bed together. He takes a deep breath and releases an even deeper sigh. "And now here we are."

Most of the group is staring at us in absolute shock.

But not Scarlett.

That girl is wide-eyed and smiling, shaking her head in complete fascination. “Awe, man, if only you guys had live-streamed that shit! You would’ve had epic views and your wedding would’ve certainly been the viral talk of the world!”

I stop myself from rolling my eyes because the very last thing we needed to do last night was live stream our drunk-ass selves giggling through our marriage vows in a place called Marry Me Manor. But I forget sometimes that Scarlett makes a living going live for her followers to watch her every move. Viral numbers are what she lives for.

I mean besides Oliver, of course.

Good for her.

Me?

I’d rather be wrapped in a blanket on the couch with a book in my hands than twerking for all the world to see.

“So, this is real then?” August finally asks.

Griffin and I nod.

Ella is up grabbing bottles of water for everyone, passing them out around the table. When she reaches Griffin and me, she also hands us each a few Advil. “Does Coach Hicks know?”

Corrigan shakes her head. “If he does, he hasn’t said a word to me about it yet this morning.”

“Nobody has called me yet, either,” Griffin states at the same time that his phone dings in his pocket. He pulls it out and glances at the screen.

“My agent.” He pushes his phone back into his pocket. “I’ll call him later.”

Ledger takes a bottle of water from Ella and twists off the cap. “So, what are you going to tell him? What are you going to tell Coach? Or Scott Foley?”

“Who’s Scott Foley?” I ask the room.

All the guys answer in tandem. “General Manager.”

“Ah. Right.” I glance at Griffin, worry etching my forehead. “Will they really fire you? For getting married on a whim?”

“They very well could if I turn around and divorce you right away like this is all just a game. If I admit that I made a huge drunken mistake, they

could tell me they don't trust my professionalism and that I'm not reflecting the image of the team."

"Yeah but we've all done stupid shit before," August reminds me. He gestures to Bodhi. "I mean this asshat slept with Coach's daughter and didn't even fucking know it and he's still around to live another day."

Bodhi smirks and lifts Corrigan's hand to his lips, pressing a kiss across her knuckles. "We might have to call that extenuating circumstances though."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because although I was ready and willing to fight for her, I imagine it was Corrigan talking to Coach before the day he pulled me into his office that made him reconsider removing me from the team. He could've easily come to a different decision."

"Exactly." Corrigan nods. "But he knew damn well I would've walked right out of his life and he didn't want that."

"Alright," Harrison says, his arms outstretched on the table. "So, you guys need to stay married. At least short term."

Griffin nods. "Yes. That's the resolution we came to as well."

Corrigan gasps and points at me. "Oh, my gosh, Layken your dad."

"Right." I nod too. "He'll be furious."

Ledger's brows furrow. "What's up with your dad?"

"He's the family law judge in Anaheim," I explain, cringing. "If we divorce, our papers go right across his desk for signature."

Ledger grins. "Oh shit."

"Right," Griffin adds. "Look I don't want to cause any unnecessary trouble for Layken and her family and she doesn't want to be the cause of my potential removal from the team."

"Like we would fucking let that happen," Ledger resolves.

"Yeah." Corrigan shrugs, giving me a somewhat helpless expression. "I could probably talk to my dad and—"

I shake my head. "No. We don't want any of you trying to clean up our mess," I tell them. "This was our fault and ours alone. We don't want to bring anyone else into this. I promise we'll figure something out."

The last one to say anything, Oliver finally speaks up. "So, what do you two need from us."

Griffin sits up and pulls his shoulders back as if he's being interviewed by the press. "We need you to play along. For now. And not out us to the

press or to anyone in the front office. Layken is staying with me anyway thanks to the water main break outside her building so we've agreed the best thing for us right now is to stay married until we can figure out a way to amicably split that doesn't hurt either one of us."

"Easy enough," August says with a shrug. "So, the story is you've been together for a while now?"

"Ooh!" Ella's smile grows. "Secretly seeing each other like Bodhi and Corri."

"Right." I nod.

"Yes," Griffin says. "And we planned to elope this entire time since we were going to be in Napa surrounded by those we love anyway."

"Dude, Griff..." August tilts his head, cringing slightly when he says, "What about Gage? How's he going to react?"

Griffin bows his head. "He'll be devastated, I know. They all will be, but there's nothing I can do about it now. I'll have to talk to him."

I lean over and quietly ask, "Who's Gage?"

"My younger brother," he tells me.

"Oh." I sit back feeling a little caught off guard. There's an uncomfortable heaviness in my chest that wasn't there a moment ago. "I'm so sorry, Griffin. I didn't know you had a brother."

Are they close?

He said his brother will be devastated.

Because of me?

God, I don't want to fuck things up for him and his family too.

He leans his forearm on the table and turns to me. "You know for someone who's obsessed with me, it's disappointing that you don't know every detail about me." He tsks. "You're not very good at this obsession thing Layken Hobbs."

I catch Corrigan's surprised eye and nearly burst out laughing because we've talked now and again about the small crush I've had on Griffin Ollenberg since he joined the Stars. Somehow though, I manage to drop my jaw and scoff at him once again. "You know what? I was beginning to feel really bad about whatever this thing is about your brother, but just for that, I don't. And I'm not obsessed with you, you narcissistic asshole."

He laughs for the first time this morning, which eases the tension around the table. His genuine smile makes me smile, though I bite my bottom lip to hide it as best I can. "I know. I was only—"

“Oh, and another thing.” I place a finger over his mouth to shush him. “If you’re going to use my name, at least get it right. It’s Mrs. Ollenberg now.”

Everyone around the table joins in our laughter and Harrison, seated on the other side of me, pats my hand as it rests on the table. “I think you’re going to fit in with this group just fine. Welcome to the family, Layken.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

GRIFFIN

“So, you had a weekend, eh, Ollenberg?” The tone of my agent’s voice is not exactly lighthearted the following Monday morning. But I suppose I shouldn’t have expected anything less. “You want to tell me what’s going on?”

I can’t tell him the truth. I can’t tell him I got drunk off my ass and accidentally married a girl I only slightly know because she was cute and fun to hang out with and I couldn’t control myself. I know he’d have my back no matter what but I can’t risk him accidentally slipping and telling someone else. If that gets to the media, I could be toast, not to mention what it could do to Layken.

“I got married Felix.”

“So, I see. It’s all over social media.”

“Yeah, we, uh, didn’t tell anybody. Not even our families. Our friends were in Napa for the weekend and we decided to go for it.”

“Funny, I wasn’t aware you were even dating someone. And scrolling through your socials, there’s not one picture of the two of you together.”

“Actually, that’s not true. There are at least a few pictures of us together because I worked with her a few times at Pacific Children’s Hospital.”

“Riiiiight. That’s it,” he says. “I knew I had seen her face somewhere. So how long have you two been together?”

This is so not a casual conversation.

He’s interrogating me.

He's trying to figure out if I'm full of shit and this is a mess he'll have to clean up.

"A few months."

"A few months?" he asks, seemingly shocked, but I shrug him off.

"Yeah, but when you know, you know, you know?"

"Hmm." He's silent for a second and then asks. "Did you get a prenup?"

Fuuuuuuuck.

I squeeze my eyes closed and wince as I lean against my locker, glad he can't see my face. "About that..."

And that's his in. "What the ever-loving fuck, Griffin? You are worth millions and you're willing to just throw that away? You're ready to give half of that to some woman who works at the children's hospital if this relationship of only a few months doesn't actually last?"

"Actually, she doesn't work at the hospital anymore. They let her go with the merger."

"They let her...she doesn't..." He sighs. "What the hell are you doing, Griff? Be real with me, alright? Was this marriage some sort of forced thing? Did you accidentally knock her up?"

"What? No. It's not like that."

We have to have sex for me to knock her up and thanks to my dick being a dick...

"Did you two get rip roaring drunk and make one bad decision after another?"

Yep.

"No. Not at all," I snap back. "And I'll thank you for not talking about my wife that way. Layken isn't the kind of woman who wants me for my money."

She doesn't want me at all.

Especially after the most embarrassing lame dick night of my life.

At some point I'm going to need a way to prove to her that I have skills. I can't let her only impression of me in the bedroom be from our wedding night. I just need another chance.

"Trust me, big guy. Every woman wants money. Does she know how much you're worth?"

"What are you getting at, Felix?" I bark, frustration growing ever present. "Did I do something wrong here? Is there something you need me to do because all I hear coming out of your mouth is a bunch of bullshit and

I'm done listening to it. So, unless you actually need something from me—"

"No man, I'm sorry. I don't mean to be a skeptic. It's just not like you to run off and get married."

"Pretty sure that's why they call it running off and getting married. It's never expected."

"Look, I'm just trying to protect you. It's not too late to sign some papers. You know, just in case," he warns.

"Goodbye, Felix."

I don't wait for him to say goodbye before I disconnect the call and then lean my head back against the wall.

"You alright over there, Mr. Love and Marriage?" Oliver smirks from the bench a few lockers down.

"I'll be fine," I huff. "Nothing I can't handle."

"Felix is just doing his job. Cut him some slack. This was a shock to everyone."

I rub my hands down my face and rest my elbows on my knees. "I know. And I haven't heard from my family yet and I just know in my gut that's not good news."

"That was going to be my next question."

"I can't tell them the truth, Oliver, and that's going to kill me. My family and I...we're so damn close. They'll be crushed I did this without them."

He nods. "I get it. Charlee would be crushed if I got married without telling her too," he says, mentioning his sister who married Milo Landric, Center for the Chicago Red Tails. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Nah. It's fine." I sit up a little straighter, pulling myself together. I can't continue to look like this is a fucking struggle because in the grand scheme, nothing about my life changed except that I have a woman living with me for a while. And that was going to happen regardless of the piece of paper that says we belong together now. "I've just got to figure out how to tell my family."

"Good luck, man," he tells me before he heads to the gym. "I don't envy you."

"Yeah thanks."

He opens the door and then stops. "If there's any good news here," he says, turning his head back to look at me. "Layken seems like a really good

person.” He shrugs.

“Yeah. She is.”

“And she’s hot,” he adds with an innocent shrug and a smirk on his face. “But if you tell Scarlett I said that, I’ll knee you in those gorgeous award-winning balls of yours.”

He’s definitely right, there. I snagged myself a drop-dead gorgeous bride. One I don’t deserve, I know, but honestly, other than having to tell my family I fucked up, if that’s the way I decide to go, being married to Layken Hobbs doesn’t feel all that bad.

I could do much worse.

AN EXTRA-LONG AND arduous workout complete, I finish my shower trying to figure out how I’m going to tell my family I’m a married man now and I did it all without them by my side. Knowing I’m going to be the world’s biggest disappointment to not only my parents who have been dying to see me settle down but to Gage, who will be hurt the most. He’s talked about my wedding day for years with more excitement than I’ve ever seen. He’s always wanted to be my best man. He’s talked so many times about taking my wife for a spin on the dancefloor if for no other reason than to tell her all the stupid embarrassing things I did when we were kids.

I hate that I’m going to let them down.

“Ollenberg!” Coach’s voice rings out through the locker room. “You here?”

Aaaand with my name on his tongue, my balls just receded back up into my body. “Shower, Coach!”

“My office when you’re done. Be quick!”

“Two minutes!”

Barrett glances at me from his shower stall. “You in trouble?”

I shrug my shoulder as I rinse it under the water. “Probably. But what else is new?”

I joke but only because I’m actually nervous. I know in the grand scheme of things I did nothing wrong by marrying Layken. It’s not like running off and getting married is illegal, nor is it against the policy of the Anaheim Stars organization. But when Coach says your name with the tone

he just used minutes ago, I'll be lucky if my asshole unpuckers itself anytime in the next twenty-four hours.

Stepping out of the shower, I dry myself off and quickly dress in my casual shorts and a t-shirt, slip my feet into a pair of slides, and head for Coach's office. Hearing a few other voices in the room, I swallow back my nerves, remind myself I'm doing this for Layken and for me, and round the corner to step inside.

Where I run smack dab into Layken.

Shit.

I wasn't expecting this.

How long has she been here?

Why didn't she tell me she was coming?

Has she told him anything?

What did she tell him exactly?

Fuck, his eyes are on me now.

Watching me for a reaction?

And he's watching her.

"Hey babe!" Layken shoots up from her seat next to Corrigan and wraps her arms around me in a huge hug. As she squeezes me, she whispers ever so softly, "Relax and play along."

I wrap my arms around her and carry her a few steps inside Coach's office. "Hey, Lake. Missed you this morning."

She releases her hold on my body, but I don't let her go without pressing my lips against hers. Coach is no dummy. He'll be waiting to see if I kiss her. Thankfully, she doesn't bat an eye and kisses me right back.

I wish I could kiss her like I did a few nights ago.

I suppose something is better than nothing.

Also, I kind of like kissing my wife.

And I've got to hand it to Layken, she's very convincing.

"Missed you too, Griff. Mr. Hicks and Corrigan invited me to their weekly lunch date so I tagged along. Got to tell him everything about our surprise weekend."

I raise my brows at her mention of our weekend. "Is that so?"

Coach leans back in his chair. "Sounds like your weekend was a bit life changing, wouldn't you say, Ollenberg?" He gestures to an empty chair next to Layken and I take it after a brief hello to Corrigan who says hi and then excuses herself to find Bodhi while we chat.

“Life changing indeed, sir.” I smile at my wife and take her hand in mine, noting how soft and cool her grasp is against my clammy, fidgeting hand. I bring her hand to my mouth and kiss her knuckles. “I’m a married man now.”

“You are,” he says with a simple nod.

Guilt washes over me when I steal a glance at my new wife. I see the trepidation in her eyes. The exhaustion of having to cover for me—for us—while at lunch with her best friend’s father. There’s no way that was easy and I owe her one now. Sitting up straight, her delicate hand in mine, I square my shoulders.

“Is there a problem with getting married, Coach? Did I break some rule of conduct?”

His brows lift questioningly. “You did if getting married was some kind of stupid drunken mistake one of my players made while off the ice.”

“And what the hell would give you that idea?”

He leans forward, his elbows resting on his desk. “Oh, I don’t know, Ollenberg, perhaps it’s the fact that you haven’t mentioned being with anyone, to my knowledge, and then on a whim, you come back from a weekend off a married man. And not just to anyone, but to my daughter’s best friend.”

“Forgive me, sir,” I snap back, “but did you have any knowledge of your daughter sleeping with Bodhi Roche before you punched the hell out of him not too long ago?”

Coach’s face reddens and his jaw ticks as he stares me down, but I know I’ve got the upper hand here. “Yeah, I didn’t think so. Seems you’re not as observant as you think you are, Coach, so I’ll ask you to kindly reserve your judgement for somebody else because I don’t have time for this petty bullshit.” I feel Layken squeeze my hand, giving me her support, and that’s all I need to drive my point home.

“Why do you think I got involved with Pacific Children’s Hospital in the first place? It wasn’t you volunteering there and it wasn’t for Corrigan.” I glance over at Layken and find her watching me, eyes wide as she listens to my explanation. “The day Layken walked into my life was a day I’ll never forget and I’ve been crazy about her ever since.”

It’s not all a lie.

She walked into my home several days ago looking like the saddest puppy dog and seeing her in my pajama pants and sweatshirt, comfortable

and happy around our mutual friends, it was a core memory for me.

"I'd do anything for her," I say as I turn my gaze to her once more. This time she offers me a kind smile but doesn't say a word.

Coach sits back in his chair, his eyes narrowing as he silently studies the both of us. After a hefty sigh he shakes his head. "You really love this guy, Layken?" he asks, gesturing to me like I'm the biggest fuck-up and she would be stupid to be with me.

Squeezing my hand once more she looks at me and smiles before answering, "I'm obsessed with him."

HA!

Oh my God, I could kiss this girl right now.

"Ditto, babe." I beam back at her, seeing the humor in her eyes. "All the ditto."

Coach Hicks runs his hands up and down his face and then shakes his head. "What am I going to do with this fucked up generation?"

"With all due respect, sir," I add. "You only hate what you don't understand."

He waves his hand. "Right. Okay. Get the hell out of here you two."

I waste no time standing up, pulling Layken to her feet, and escorting her to the door, my hand on the small of her back. I guide her down the hall towards the locker room so I can grab my duffel bag and car keys. I think it's time to get the hell out of here.

"I knew you were obsessed with me," I tease. "It was nice to hear you finally admit it."

She stops ten feet from the locker room door and grabs my arm. Her eyes glisten with unshed tears. Suddenly I do feel like the world's biggest fuck up. I bring my hand to her cheek and swipe a lone tear from her face. "Lake, what's wrong? I'm sorry." I shake my head concern etching my brow. "I didn't mean—"

She blows out a breath and shudders. "I'm good. It's fine. I'm okay."

"Okay, but if you're not...it's—"

"Nope." She shakes her head and rocks from one foot to the other looking up at the ceiling like she's trying not to cry. "I'm good. Sorry."

Watching her with a mix of amusement and worry, I cock my head and ask, "What's going on?"

She finally stills and wipes the stray tears that have slipped down her cheeks. "I've never lied to that man before," she says. "Phew. It was both

easier than I expected and scary as fuck.”

I laugh but turn to face her, rubbing my hands up and down her arms. “Welcome to my life. But we can do this, Layken. Everything is going to be fine. I promise. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“How long do you think we have to keep this up?”

I shrug my shoulder trying to come up with a timeline in my head. “I don’t know. The end of the season, at least. If we go to the playoffs that’s at least May to June. Then, I don’t know, you can say I cheated on you or something.”

“What?” She gasps. “No way. I would never do that to you. A report like that could damage your career.”

“Well, I’m not going to let you look bad. No fucking way,” I tell her. “If it’s the price I have to pay for messing this up, then I’ll—”

“No,” she says defiantly. She wipes at the rest of her tears and stands tall. “Sorry. I don’t know where these stupid tears come from. I’m not always a crier. We’ll come up with some amicable excuse. Maybe I’ll find a new job in another town and I’ll have to move.”

The thought of her moving away makes my chest feel tight.

“I’m going to have to start looking for work now anyway.”

“Hey.” I lift my hands to her face, smoothing back her hair. “Let’s talk about this at home where we can be comfortable, okay? Too many prying eyes and ears around here. I just need to stop in and grab my bag and keys.”

She nods and then I take her hand in mine, not wanting to leave her alone to feel scared for even a second and push open the locker room doors. “Put your dicks away gentlemen, there’s a lady in the room.”

“Good because there’s a lady already in here!” Corrigan comes around the corner and wraps her arms around her best friend, effectively separating our hands. “You okay?”

“Yeah. We’re good.” She nods but the look on her face has yet to convince me that she actually feels good. Not that I can blame her, I suppose.

“Layken!”

“Hey Layken!”

“What’s up Layken!”

The guys welcome her into the locker room one by one and she smiles and says hello to all of them.

“How are the newlyweds?” August asks as Layken waits for me to grab my stuff.

“We’re fine,” I tell them so Layken doesn’t have to lie.

“And Coach?”

“Oh, don’t worry about him.” Corrigan waves her hand. “He won’t be a problem. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Thank you, Corrigan,” I hear Layken say. When I peek over my shoulder, Corrigan has her arm around her and for some reason I feel the weight of our worlds on my shoulders. Like this is all my fault.

But this isn’t just my fault.

We did this.

Together.

“I’m not going to let anyone hurt Layken. Not on my watch,” I tell the guys. “And that goes for Coach as well. I’ll figure this out.”

Layken gives me a soft smile though it doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

Ledger tsks. “So I guess that means we’re not consummating this marriage, huh?”

“How do you know we haven’t already?”

My head whips around faster than Linda Blaire in *The Exorcist* when Layken speaks up.

What the hell is she doing?

Ledger stands with his arms folded over his chest, his brows raised with curiosity. “Oh fuck. Okay. Well, tell me something, Layken, because I’ve been dying to know.” He leans toward her and murmurs loud enough for us all to hear, “Is he as good as he says he is? Because the guy never shuts up about his dick.”

Oh shit.

She could hang me out to dry here.

She could tell them all about the embarrassment that was our wedding night.

“You know, I’d love to tell you but kissing and telling is naughty and...” she glances at me and says, “naughty girls get nuttin’ but coal.”

There’s a mutual gasp among the guys around the room, including from me.

No. She. Did. Not.

My jaw practically hits the floor as the guys have a hearty laugh at her response. My face reddens knowing there’s only one reason she knew to say

those exact words.

She saw the Christmas Balls competition pictures from last year.

The WAGS of the Anaheim Stars came up with the idea this past Christmas to have a glittery balls competition between the guys on the team. So, one by one we decorated our balls with glitter and created masterpieces for Scarlett, Ella, and Corrigan to judge.

Obviously I was the clear winner with shiny black balls of coal, but I had no idea Layken had seen them as well.

I don't even have to question her because the moment my eyes find hers, she winks at me and grins proudly.

Well, I'll be damned.

Layken Hobbs has seen my balls.

I mean she saw my balls in the flesh in Napa but they weren't all glammed with glitter.

Something about that knowledge makes me feel amazing.

I grab my keys and duffel bag and slam my locker shut. "And with that, ladies and gentlemen, I'm taking my wife the fuck home!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

LAYKEN

“What do you mean you ran off to Napa for the weekend instead of buckling down and looking for a job?”

“Mom, I—”

“Of course, you would run off and do something stupid. As if getting fired from your job wasn’t bad enough.”

“But that wasn’t my fa—”

“But married, Layken? Really?” She scoffs. “Do you have any idea how embarrassed your father is at work? All we ever wanted was for you to find a stable husband and have a lavish wedding so he could walk you down the aisle like the proud man that he is.”

Really?

That’s all you wanted?

“I’m sorr—”

“But you had to go and take that from him too, huh?”

“Mom!”

“And I suppose now you think you don’t need a job or a name for yourself because you’ll just mooch off this man? Do you even have a plan?”

“Yes, Mom. For now, I’ll be working on my book while—”

“Oh, my God, Layken. Get your head out of the clouds!” she shouts. “Writing your books does not pay the bills. It’s not a stable line of work. It’s

not respectable. You need stability. You need structure. Did he make you sign a prenup?"

"What?" I rear back even though she can't see me over the phone. "No."

"Well, that's good at least. When he leaves you, you'll get a large sum of his money."

"Mom! I don't want Griffin's money! That's not why I married him."

Of course, this would be the moment Griffin walks through the door with dinner in his hands. I can feel his eyes on me while he sets our dinner on the small table in the corner of his living room.

"Oh? Then please, tell me, daughter, why you ran off with the man for the weekend and came back married to him?"

"Because I love him, Mom." My cheeks flush when I say the words out loud. It's weird saying it when I don't really mean it and I instantly feel guilty.

"Oh, I'm sure you do, Layken. I'm sure you do."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"And just when are we going to get to meet this mystery husband?"

"He's not a mystery Mom. His name is Griffin Ollenberg. Look him up if you want to. And I don't know when you'll get to meet him because he's in the middle of his season and we'll be traveling a lot."

"So, no time to visit your parents but you certainly had the time to get drunk and create a night of bad decisions for yourself."

Taking a deep breath, I pull my shoulders back and tell Mom exactly what she needs to hear. "Mom, marrying my literal soulmate was not a bad decision. I would make the same decision over and over again if given the chance so I suggest you get used to the fact that your daughter is married now. I'm sorry it wasn't in the cookie-cutter way you had always dreamed of, but thanks anyway for being happy for me. Now if you'll excuse me, my husband has dinner ready and I'm not going to disappoint him by letting it get cold. Goodbye, Mother."

I tap the button to end my call and toss my phone onto the couch. Then I blow out a breath and deflate against the cushions.

"Literal soulmate huh?" Griffin says with a sympathetic smile.

I raise my hand to silence him. "Don't even start with me."

"You should put all that in a book." He gestures in a circular pattern. "All that you just said. The cookie cutter stuff. That was good."

“Thanks, I guess.” It’s an odd feeling taking a compliment from Griffin. In any other instance, he’s right. I love reading books where the characters so easily profess their love for each other. And one day I hope to find my soulmate. The man who loves me for who I am instead of someone I’m forced to be to appease my parents. One day I’ll find my happily ever after, but I don’t think that day is today. I’m hardly Griffin’s type.

Not when there are gorgeous Barbie-type women willing to fall at his feet in any town he plays in.

He offers me a hand off the couch and I take it, letting him pull me to my feet.

“I meant it, you know. You’re good with words. You shot her down better than I would have had I been talking to my parents.”

We sit together at the small dining table and Griffin opens the box of tacos from one of our mutually favorite restaurants. The savory smell wafting through the air makes me salivate.

I grab a tortilla chip from the bag and dip it into the nearby queso. “Tell me about your family,” I say, popping the chip into my mouth and reaching for my first taco.

“I’m not really sure you want to hear what I have to say about my family.”

“Uh oh, why is that?”

He takes a bite of his taco. “Because my family and I are really close.”

I gasp and smile, “You are?”

“Yeah.” He nods, watching me curiously. “That doesn’t upset you?”

My brows furrow. “Heck no, Griffin! I think that’s amazing! You’re very lucky to have a family you’re close to. I imagine they love you very much. Have they always been supportive of your hockey playing?”

“Oh yeah. My dad would shoot pucks with me all the time. And my younger brother, Gage...” There’s a sparkle to his eye when he mentions his brother. “He would come to every single practice and every single game growing up. He was even the equipment manager for the team when I was in high school.”

My heart melts a little listening to Griffin talk about his family.

“That’s so sweet! So, Gage didn’t play hockey too? Is he a lot younger than you?”

He shakes his head. “Only two years younger and he didn’t play on my team, but he did play for the adaptive team for a few years.”

“Adaptive team? What does that mean?”

“Teams for kids with physical or cognitive disabilities.”

“Oh.”

That must mean...

I sit back watching Griffin, trying to gauge whether or not I’ve hit a nerve, but he takes another bite of his taco and glances at me before he explains, “Gage has Down Syndrome.”

“Oh. Okay.”

He nods. “Yeah. He’s high functioning but has enough of a delay that playing in the mainstream leagues would’ve been dangerous for him.”

“I totally get it. And you’re close with your brother, yeah?”

“Mhmm,” he says, stuffing the rest of his taco into his mouth. “I don’t really remember a time without him. We’ve been best buds our whole life.”

“I love that.”

“Do you have siblings?” he asks as I take a sip of my soda.

“One younger brother, and one older brother, yeah.” I nod. “They’re the perfect ones compared to me.”

“What?” His brows pinch. “What do you mean by that? How are you not a perfect child?” He raises his hand. “Present marriage situation excluded, of course.”

Picking at the toppings on my taco, I try to come up with the easiest way to answer Griffin’s question. “I’m the middle child between two brothers, for one. They were the sporty ones growing up. They participated in everything. They never needed to study but aced all their classes. Went on to ivy league colleges and stuck close to my dad’s profession. My older brother, Justin, is a judge in Oregon where he lives with his super-hot wife and super-attractive model-worthy kids and their golden retriever. And my younger brother Braylen, will be taking the bar exam this spring and hopes to work with one of the largest law firms in Dallas. He’s engaged to a senator’s daughter so he’s got everything going for him. And then there’s me.”

He turns himself sideways on his chair so he’s facing me now. “Why do you say it like that though? ‘And then there’s me’,” he asks, repeating my words.

“Because compared to them I’m the lazy screw up. I didn’t go to college at all and instead got a job with a non-profit right out of high school.”

“But there’s more to life than going to college,” Griffin says, irritation in his expression. “College isn’t for everyone and that’s totally okay. We wouldn’t have people working in trades if we didn’t.”

“I know that. And I know my parents know that, but that doesn’t mean they’re okay with one of their own children making that choice. My dad is a judge, which is an elected position, so my mom would do everything in her real-housewives type of power to give the appearance that our family was the perfect Anaheim, California, family. So, when I decided I didn’t want to go to college because it just wasn’t for me, she freaked the fuck out. Kind of shunned me from the family and refused to give me the time of day.”

“That’s fucked up.”

I nod. “Yeah. It was what it was. And at the time, I was happy to get out and be on my own, you know? I was finally free from the chains of my family.” I raise my fists to signify my freedom. “I moved in with a friend... it was this super shitty rundown apartment which means I knew my parents would never visit and then I found a job working for a local non-profit. I worked my way up in the organization I was with and then got lucky enough to win the job at Pacific Children’s. I was damn good at my job.”

“Is that where you met Corrigan then?” he asks, taking another bite of his food. “At the hospital?”

“Actually no. She was the one who told me about the opening. She used to volunteer at the organization I was working for. We kind of became friends through a mutual friend and that mutual friend moved away. Corrigan liked what I was doing for this company so much that when she heard about an opening at Pacific, she called me and told me about it. And then I got the job and the rest was history.”

“Wow.” He smiles, shaking his head. “Do you ever marvel at how cool it is that somehow the universe drops certain people into your life at just the right moments? Like whether you realize it or not, the people you meet or talk to or interact with each day have some sort of effect on your life in one way or another?”

“Like right now, for example? Like how the universe decided I needed to shack up with Griffin Ollenberg of the Anaheim Stars?”

He huffs a laugh and sits back in his chair, a look in his eye that I can’t quite place. “Yeah. Like right now. But I’m just Griffin. I’m just a guy who happens to play hockey. That’s all.”

I nod. "I think about it sometimes, yeah. For years though it was just that I knew I didn't go about my life the way my parents saw it going for me. I didn't go to college, I didn't get this fantastically high-paying job, I didn't marry for status and wealth." I shrug. "I just wanted to be normal. You know?"

"Normal, huh?"

"Yeah."

"And what exactly does that mean to you? Normal."

I dab at my mouth with my napkin. "I don't know. I'm a hopeless romantic so I kind of want the whole picture. The husband who is head over heels in love with me and isn't embarrassed to show it. And not because I'm the person he wants me to be but because I'm me. The girl who can dress up for formal charity events in sparkly tight gowns and dangerously high heels, and the girl who can spend the weekend in her husband's sweatshirt and no pants reading trashy novels. The girl who can speak in front of large crowds with poise and confidence and the girl who snorts when she hears a funny joke. The girl who can eat at any fine dining restaurant but still enjoy getting her fingers dirty when she accidentally..." I pull the tortilla chip out of the queso I just dipped it in, "...dips her chip too far into the queso and has to lick it off. I want the I-love-yous and the random touches when we're together and the kisses just because. I want the hot sex and the angry sex and the sad sex and the just-because sex. I want all the things. I want a real life with someone who wants to be with me as much as I want to be with him."

"None of that sounds bad at all. And maybe you lucked out." He chuckles. "I'm as normal as they come."

"Dude." I roll my eyes. "You're stupid rich and you play professional hockey. What part of that is normal?"

He shrugs. "Okay so not all of me is normal. But under this warrior-like body that I get paid to maintain, I'm just a normal guy looking for the same things you're looking for. We all want that quote-unquote normal life."

"I guess." He has a point. "You're an amazing player, Griffin. One of the best. I would never belittle that." I bob my head. "And you're not a douche. If I had to marry a hockey player, you're definitely not the worst choice."

"See?" He winks and nudges my leg with his. "You're a lucky girl being married to me. I'm not the worst choice!"

“Oooh yeah,” I snicker, playfully rolling my eyes. “So very lucky. I married the hot hockey player in a state of inebriation and I didn’t even get a good fuck out of the deal because his penis was broken.”

He slowly lowers his taco to his plate and picks up his napkin to wipe his mouth and oh, my God, I can’t tell if he’s going to rage against me or say nothing and pretend he didn’t hear me.

Hell, I shouldn’t have said anything.

Why can’t I keep my mouth shut?

I know he heard me.

Did I make him mad?

Embarrass him?

I’m just about to apologize for teasing him about the drunken state of his manhood on our wedding night when he smirks and then lunges straight at me.

“That’s it.”

He tugs at my arm, pulling me up out of my chair, and then quickly hoists me over his shoulder. “WHAT THE? Griffin!” I squeal. “Where are we going? Put me down!”

He slaps my ass but doesn’t answer me even when I rake my fingers up his back tugging at his t-shirt. Laughter emanating from my mouth as he carries me through his apartment “What are you doing? Where are you taking me.”

“You’re grounded!” he says, slapping my ass a second time.

“Obviously I’m not grounded or I would literally be on the ground but nooooo,” I whine, “I’m ass-up folded over your shoulder you big asshole! Put me down!”

“Butthole, huh?” He chuckles. “Those are some savage words coming from my wife.”

“How about nut waffle rectum fucking testicle beater?”

He laughs so hard he stumbles with me in his arms. “Listen Hobbs...if you want someone to fuck your pretty little rectum, I’m here to fulfill all husbandly duties as needed, but you better know what you’re asking before you use fightin’ words like that.”

He carries me into my room and tosses me onto my bed in a fit of giggles and then he hovers over me as if he’s about to kiss me, his eyes flitting between mine. A spark of excitement shoots through my body all the way to my toes at the thought of reaching up and pressing my lips to his.

God, it would be so easy. I swipe my tongue swiftly across my bottom lip and I don't miss the fact that he follows the movement. Just when I think he's going to lift off me he lowers his pelvis to mine and hooooooh shit I can feel him!

Ooh...

I can feel his erection between our bodies.

God, what would he do if I pushed my hips up from underneath him?

With a voice somewhere between a whisper and a growl, he says into my ear, "I think my cock works just fine and I'll be more than happy to show you any time you want. Just say the word, Hobbs."

I can feel my cheeks flush with heat and I hate that he can probably see that he's affecting me, so I say the very first thing that comes to my mind.

"And what word would that be, husband?" I tease him, raising one brow. "Flaccid?"

His smile widens and he bows his head, defeated. "She's savage and relentless, ladies and gentlemen, but that's why we love her."

He shakes his head, places a swift kiss on my forehead, and then says, "Layken Ollenberg, you've been a very naughty girl."

"Did I forget to tell you that Naughty is my middle name?"

"Yes." He smiles. "Yes you did forget. So, as your punishment, Layken *Naughty* Ollenberg, you sit here and think about what you did." He lifts off me and turns to walk out the door, but not before I hear him mumbling, "Telling my poor dick that he's broken. Who does she think she is? Don't worry, buddy..." He peers down at his crotch. "I believe in you."

Laughing as he walks out of my room, I shout down the hall, "Does this mean I don't get any more tacos?"

"NO! Your taco is mine now! And I will enjoy every second of eating it for you."

Pretty sure I enjoyed it very much the first time from what I recall of our wedding night.

"That's what he said!" I shout back.

"Fuckin' right he did!"

CHAPTER NINE

GRIFFIN

It's quiet in the apartment now since Layken went to take a bath. No reels playing on her phone and no brain stimulation music on while she types away on her laptop. I walk through the apartment locking the door and turning off lights and then pad down the darkened hallway toward my room. I hear water sloshing in Layken's tub, but a sound I'm unfamiliar with has me leaning my ear against the door.

A buzzing sound.

Is she shaving?

Can you use electric shavers in the tub?

I listen for another couple of seconds and that's when I hear it.

"Griffin..."

I almost answer her thinking she knows I'm standing right here but then she mumbles, "Oh, my God, yesssss."

The mysterious buzzing sound is no longer a mystery.

Mother fucking Christ.

My naughty girl is playing.

A proud smirk spreads across my face because I know what I did to her at dinner affected her. It affected me too. So much so, that hovering over her with a hard-on has been all I've thought about since. I wanted her to feel me. I wanted her to know how much she affects me.

I wanted her to know my dick isn't broken.

Evidence of how unbroken I am is currently causing a bulge in my athletic shorts and I plan on doing something about it as soon as I'm in the privacy of my room, but not before I play with my wife a little bit first.

Payback for calling my penis broken.

Standing by the door, I listen to her pleasure herself while I palm my dick through my shorts. She groans a little here, hisses a little there, so I wait for the perfect moment. Just as she starts to whimper a little more, I rap my knuckles on the door.

"Lake, you okay in there?"

There's an immediate splash of water that I can only imagine is her sitting up in the tub and bringing her legs together.

"What? Yeah! I-I-I'm good. Yep."

"Do you need a towel? I couldn't remember if I put some on the shelf in there."

"Yep. I'm good. Got a towel. Thanks."

"Alright well if you don't need anything else, I'm off to bed."

"Okay," she squeaks. "Night Griffin."

I smile at myself. "Goodnight, Naughty."

The moment I'm in my own room; I strip off my clothes and hit the shower. Grabbing a handful of shower gel, I palm my dick and tug at the base, feeling it swell in my fist.

"Fuck," I say silently as I bring my hand to the tile wall. I shift my other hand from the base of my cock to the shaft and pump up and down furiously because hell, this is only going to take seconds. Visions of a naked Layken on top of me in our honeymoon suite spin through my mind.

Her perfect tits.

The curve of her hips.

Her long-toned legs.

Her pretty pink pussy that I dove my tongue into like I was dying of thirst.

Her carefree smile.

The whimsical look in her eyes.

"Yes. Layken." My words are only a hushed whisper as I pump harder and faster and when I'm ready to come, I lean my forehead on the tile wall. My mouth wide open, I wordlessly spill all over my hand, my cum instantly washing away under the rush of the water.

Standing under the shower, catching my breath, I close my eyes and shake my head and murmur, “What are you doing to me, Naughty?”

“OH, Griffin, are you sure you’re not in any kind of trouble? You know your father and I are here for you, whatever you need.”

Her worry rips my heart out but I swallow back my weakness for my mother and answer her question. “No, Mom. I promise, everything is great. You’re going to love Layken. She’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

That’s not even a lie.

I’ve enjoyed every day that Layken has spent hanging out with me. Her cute antics and her sense of humor have been a fun addition to my everyday life. In just a short time I’ve grown accustomed to her being here. Now I look forward to seeing her.

“So, your first week of married life has been okay? I feel like we missed so much already.”

“Yeah. Things at home are great. We’re lucky to have gotten to do this during our bye week so we’ve had a few days when I haven’t had to travel. We both know how busy the season will get after these last couple days off.”

“I do know. You make sure you give your bride all the attention she deserves. It’s not easy being a hockey wife, I imagine.”

“I know. She’s a trooper. And my biggest cheerleader.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“How’s Gage, Mom?” I’ve worried a lot about him the past few days.

I hear her sigh on the other end of the line and my heart tears at what I’m certain she’s going to tell me. “Your brother is heartbroken, as you can imagine,” she admits. “You know he’s always wanted to be a part of your big day.”

“I know. I’m so sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean for any of this to hurt you guys. It was just something we thought about so we wouldn’t have to go through all the stress of planning a big wedding. When we saw the chapel in Napa we just decided to go for it. It was literally a spur of the moment thing.”

“Was it nice at least? Did you get any good pictures?”

Uh...fuck.

We need to take some pictures.

“Yeah. I took a few. I’ll show them to you when we see you guys. I’ll even bring you copies.”

“Love has a way of making you do crazy things, I suppose,” she says with a sigh. “Alright you’re forgiven. As long as you’re happy, we’re happy. But we’re going to have to talk about doing something for you guys to celebrate. Maybe a small party or reception or something.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Yeah, we can talk about all that. I’m sure Layken wouldn’t mind and maybe her family will want to celebrate too.”

“Have you met them yet? Layken’s family?”

“Not yet, no. I know her father is a family court judge here in Anaheim and keeps a pretty busy schedule but also,” I lower my voice even though I’m in my car and all alone, “Layken’s family isn’t like ours. She’s not as close with her parents and I get the impression that her parents are pretty cold with her. At least that’s what I gathered hearing her talk to her mom on the phone.”

“Oh nooooo.” The empathy in my mom’s voice is sincere. “Well, you bring that sweet thing home to us and we’ll love on her as if she’s our own.”

“I knew you would say that Mom. That’s why I love you so much. And I want to come talk with Gage, and I want you all to meet Layken of course. She’s so excited to meet you guys too. I talk about you every day. We have a string of away games coming up in a couple weeks so we’re not going to be around much, but I’m off on Thursday. Can we come visit? Maybe have dinner?”

“I think that would be nice,” she says. I can tell she’s grinning. I don’t visit during the season as much as I probably should. I don’t like to bring all the germs to Gage when I’ve been traveling a lot and when I have down time, I’m usually trying to rest as much as possible. “I’ll make your favorite.”

“I was hoping you would say that. I’ve had a lot of lasagna in my days traveling with the team but I have yet to taste anything better than yours, Mom.”

When I step inside my apartment I smile at the sight in front of me. Layken is seated on the couch, her legs bent and supporting her laptop on her knees so she can type. Her long golden hair is tied up on the top of her

head in one of those messy but cute as fuck top knot things. She's sporting her black rimmed glasses and is holding a pencil in her mouth as she works.

"Wow," I say, shutting the door behind me and dropping my duffel on the floor. "Do you always look so comfy when you work?"

"Mmm." That's the only answer I get from her. She's laser focused on the words in front of her and then suddenly her brows crinkle and she cocks her head. "Hmm." She looks up as if she's trying to picture something and then she sees me in the doorway and her eyes light up. "Oh! You're home!"

A soft laugh escapes me. "I am. I've been standing here talking to you. Did you not hear me come in?"

"Uh, no. I guess I didn't, but I'm so glad you're here! I need your help." I watch her untangle herself from her comfortable position and set her laptop down and then she's in front of me taking me by the hand and leading me down the hall.

"Okay. Where are we going?"

"To a doorway."

"A doorway?"

"Mhmm. Here." She stops in her bedroom doorway and then places her hands on my waist.

Oh hello...

"I need you pose for me. I need to see what this looks like so I can write it out correctly."

"Oh, uh. Okay. Pose how?" I lift my arm and flex my bicep. "Like you're coming to the gun show?"

She deadpans and shakes her head. "No. Gun shows aren't sexy unless I'm on my back looking at them hovering above me."

Noted.

"Oh. Alright tell me what to do."

"Okay so first of all, I need you to put your left arm up here, near the top corner of the door, and lean on that hand."

I follow her instructions and place my hand near the top of the door, my leg instinctively crossing over my other in a casual leaning stance. "Like this?"

She studies my posture, her lips twisting to the side. It's fucking adorable and if I'm being honest with myself, it's making me feel some sort of way that she's even looking at me at all. "Yeah like that except uncross your legs and act natural."

I do as I'm told and look to her for a nod of approval.

"Yeah. Okay, now I'm just gonna..." She shimmies herself between me and the doorway so her back is against the wall and she's gazing up at me as I lean into her.

Hot damn.

This is nice having her all up in my space.

Or maybe I'm in hers.

Either way.

She's adorably sexy in her black sweatpants and pink croppy t-shirt.

I dig the show of skin.

And she smells good too.

Like peaches and vanilla all rolled into one.

"Okay now, place your other hand on my hip."

Yes please.

"A little harder," she murmurs. "Like you're uh..." She clears her throat. "Like you're holding me in place."

I tighten my grasp on her hip, my thumb rubbing against the space between the waistline of her sweatpants and the hem of her shirt. In this stance I stare down at her, my eyes falling to her chest and then her hip before her eyes rise up to meet mine. Her big round brown orbs connect with mine in a way that has me thinking all kinds of fucking dirty thoughts and then she blinks.

"Okay, yeah," she mumbles. "Got it. One more thing."

Fuck, I kind of like when she takes control.

"You're the boss, tell me what you need."

"Okay so I'm going to pretend to step away, but I need your hand to come up to the side of my head like you're going to—"

"Like this?" Continuing my lean against the doorway, I let go of Layken's hip and push my hand into her hair, tugging on the hold I have and then cupping the left side of her face. I bring my head down so our lips are mere centimeters away from each other and holy shit...the way she's looking at me...

I can feel every breath she takes.

I can sense her heart rate picking up by the speed at which her chest rises and falls.

"Is this what turns all those book reading ladies on?"

“Y-y-yes,” she stutters breathily. “I think every woman wants a guy who isn’t afraid to invade her space just to get closer to her.”

“Is that how you feel too? Is that what your hopeless romantic heart yearns for?”

Her cheeks blush and she averts her eyes but answers, “I wouldn’t be opposed.”

She pulls the corner of her bottom lip between her teeth and nods and hell, I wish I knew what she’s thinking about right fucking now.

Me?

I’m thinking I kind of want to kiss her.

“Great. Okay.” She smiles up at me and pats my cheek. “Thank you, Griffin.” She starts to maneuver herself out from under me but I keep my hand in her hair and continue to hold her face as she tries to step away. She turns back toward me immediately catching my heady gaze, her breath hitching. I moisten my lips with the tip of my tongue and I watch her watch me. I’m still dying to know what she’s thinking.

Does she want me to kiss her?

Because I kind of really want to.

Does she want to kiss me?

Because I kind of wish she would.

Part of me thinks I could wrap my arm around her waist and pull her against me even in this leaning pose and kiss the hell out of her and she wouldn’t fight me. She’d kiss me back. But the skeptic in me thinks I’m not the kind of guy she wants. She wants the normal guy with the normal job and the normal amount of time to spend with her. She wants the hearts and the flowers and the lovey dovey stuff.

She deserves all that and more.

And I don’t know if I can be that guy because I’ve never tried before. I travel so damn much I don’t see how it would be fair to anyone I’m with to make them be exclusive. Hockey life is a busy life.

But Layken?

Fuck. Because of her, I’ve been thinking about it more often than I ever have.

“Griffin?” Her sweet voice brings me back to reality.

“We need to take some pretend wedding pictures for my mom,” I tell her. “I kind of told her we took some and that I would show her.”

The grin that spreads across her face instantly puts me at ease. “Easy enough. I can grab a bouquet of flowers and put the same dress on. If we find a neutral background she’ll never know the difference.”

“Yeah.” I nod. “Good idea.”

“When should we do this?”

“Uh...before Thursday. You free?”

“I’m a girl without a job, remember? Of course I’m free.”

“Well, I know you’re writing and I don’t want to take your time away from you but I was kind of hoping maybe I could take my wife out for dinner Thursday evening,” I tell her, smoothing my thumb across her cheek.

“Do you like lasagna?”

“I love it,” she answers.

“Good. It’s a date then?”

The corners of her mouth lift and internally I sigh in relief.

“Alright. Do I dress up or is it casual?”

“Casual.”

“So, pajama pants it is?” she asks with a cute as fuck little smirk.

“Pajama pants would not be frowned upon, but...” I rake my eyes down her body and then bravely answer, “For you? Leggings. You look great in leggings.”

She smiles. “Leggings it is then.” She reaches her palm to my cheek and then lifts up on her toes and kisses my other cheek. “Thank you for the help Griffin.”

And then just like that she’s walking away from me, back down the hallway to her laptop. Back to her work.

My body finally deflates and I stand against the doorway for a minute getting my bearings and wondering what the hell just happened between us.

Whatever it was...it felt fucking good.

CHAPTER TEN

LAYKEN

“Uh...” Griffin hands me one of his folded hoodies. “I brought this for you. In case you get cold while we’re out. It’s supposed to be chilly later tonight and...well, you know. I mean you don’t have to wear it. I was...just in case.”

“Aww, how thoughtful of you, husband.” I grin up at him and he laughs and then shrugs his shoulder.

“It’s what good husbands do, right? Keep their wives warm?”

I can think of a few other ways you could keep me warm...

“Yes. Thank you. I appreciate this a lot. I’ll give it back when we get home.”

“Keep it,” he tells me. “Looks better on you than me, anyway.” He passes me a quick wink as we reach the car and then says, “Thanks for recreating those pictures with me this morning.”

After we got all dolled up and found a few key spots to take some random wedding pictures, we came home and relaxed for the afternoon. Well, Griffin relaxed and watched a hockey game on the sports network while I did some editing. And by editing, I mean I sat on the couch and thought about getting myself off in Griffin’s bathtub the other night only to be edged by him before I could finish. And then I thought about his face so close to mine when I asked him to help me with that whole door lean thing.

Okay, okay I may have seized an opportunity and done that on purpose just to stir the pot a little.

I'll call it payback for the bathtime edging.

But then I didn't really expect to be as turned on by his touch as I was.

There's no way Griffin's bad in bed and with the tension between us last night I'm a little surprised he didn't crack. Part of me wants to try to break him. To see if he's attracted to me, or if our wedding night really was just two drunk people making one bad decision after another.

"Of course. We've got to appease the parents, right?"

"Always." He opens the passenger door for me and I slide inside.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He climbs into the driver's seat and blows out a breath. "You ready to have the best lasagna you've ever had in your life?" he asks as he reaches to turn on the car.

I pat my stomach. "I didn't wear my stretchy pants for nothing."

"Good." He chuckles. "You look amazing by the way. A lot more comfortable than this morning."

"I don't mind a heel now and then but you can't beat leggings and a t-shirt."

"Well, Naughty, you look great no matter what you wear."

Naughty.

It's a nickname I've not heard before.

And a nickname I never thought someone would ever have for me of all people.

But also, it's one I kind of like, especially coming from Griffin.

The way he says the word.

Naughty.

It makes me feel a little dangerous but a whole lot fun.

He backs out of his parking spot and maneuvers down the ramp and out of the garage.

"So where are we heading for this world's best lasagna?" I ask him.

He glances over at me and grins. "You'll see. Make yourself comfortable. It's a little bit of a drive."

A little under an hour later we're pulling into a driveway at the end of a cul-de-sac. My brows furrow and I look around at what seems like an ordinary neighborhood. Sure, the houses are roughly the size of tiny mansions but this is California. I would expect as much almost anywhere

we go. The last sign I remember passing said Highgrove, so I have to assume that's where we are now.

Griffin turns off the car and glances at me. "You ready?"

I click off my seatbelt still glancing out my window. "Yeah. Where are we exactly?"

"Home sweet home," he answers. "This is where I grew up."

My jaw drops and a million butterflies begin to flutter through my stomach. "Wait, are you kidding? We're at your parents' house?"

"Yeah. My mom makes the best lasagna you'll ever eat."

A feeling of dread washes over me as every worst-case scenario spins furiously through my mind.

What if his mom hates me?

What if his dad hates me?

What if his brother hates me?

What if they can tell we're not in love?

What if they call our bluff?

What if I'm forced out and have to find an Uber home?

I don't even know where we are exactly.

"Griffin!" I scoff. "You brought me to meet your parents and you didn't even tell me?"

Hastily, I yank down the passenger side visor to glance at myself in the mirror. Luckily my hair looks good because I styled it to take pictures with Griffin this morning but otherwise, I'm a mess.

Inside and out.

"I figured it was easier to just show up than it would've been to let you be nervous about it all day."

I mean...he might be right, but fuck!

I wasn't prepared for this.

"Ugh! Griffin! Look at me! I'm wearing leggings!"

His eyes slide over me from head to toe and then he smiles and brings a hand up to cup my face in his palm. "I am looking at you, Naughty. And you look amazing. I told you that."

"But what am I supposed to say to them?" I worry. "We didn't come up with a plan and I don't want to come across all flustered in front of your family. What if they don't like me?"

He laughs at me. "What's not to like? You're an amazing woman."

“Oh, I don’t know.” I flail my arms. “Maybe they’ll think I’m a self-righteous bitch or maybe they’ll think I’m a spoiled brat, or maybe they’ll think I’m a failure, or maybe they’ll think my appearance is terrible or maybe, they’ll simply hate me for marrying you without their blessing or invitation. Maybe they’ll blame me for everything like I-I-I...took you away from them on purpose or something.” My body is heating so much I start to sweat. “Maybe they’ll see me as some kind of gold-digger who tricked you into marrying me for your money.”

“Layken,” he says softly. “Hey...” He brings one hand to my face, his fingers lifting my chin so I’ll look at him, and the other hand slides across my thigh. His touch immediately centers me. “Relax. Take a deep breath with me.” He inhales smoothly as I take a deep, shaky breath and then we both release together. “My parents are not your parents, okay? There’s not one thing about you they’re not going to like. They’re going to love you. I promise.”

“But how do you know for sure?” I grasp his arm. “Tell me right now, do I resemble an old ex or anything like that?”

He chuckles. “Not even close. You’re a billion times more beautiful than any ex I could have ever had.” He watches me triple check my appearance in the mirror as I bite the corner of my lip. “Trust me, okay? I promise I won’t leave you alone. Just...” He glances at me again and covers my hand with his. “Be prepared. I told you Gage has Down Syndrome, right?”

“You did, yeah.”

“He’s a great guy. The best. But he can be affectionate. I mean, we’re a family of huggers but you’ll find that out pretty quickly.”

“I don’t mind hugs, Griffin.” God knows I didn’t get them much growing up which is why I’ve always made sure to give the kids at the hospital hugs every time I see them.

“Listen, if I’m affectionate with you and make you uncomfortable in any way, just, you know...give me a sign. Otherwise, you’re my wife who I’m madly in love with so I’ll treat you that way.”

Not knowing at all what to say because I have no idea what he means by affectionate, I concede. “Okay.” I nod several times reminding myself I can do this.

Worst case scenario they hate me and ask me to leave and I go home.
Home.

My place.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you, I got a notification this morning about my apartment building. The waterline is all fixed so I can go back home.”

The notification actually came well over a week ago but I’ve been busy writing and I’m not going to lie... I’ve kind of been enjoying having a roommate of the male variety. He’s great to look at, the perfect muse for my book, and he cooks too. But now I feel guilty for overstaying my welcome.

His brow furrows slightly, but then he nods and squeezes my hand. “Let’s talk about that later. You ready?”

“Yeah.”

I can do this.

We can do this.

“Let’s do this then.”

He gets out of the car and walks around to open my door, ever the gentleman, and then holds my hand as we approach the front door. He doesn’t say a word about how hard I’m squeezing his hand, and I’m grateful for that. We don’t even get the chance to knock before the front door swings open and a young man who has to be Griffin’s brother flies into Griffin’s arms.

“Griffin!”

“Hey Gagey!” Griffin says, wrapping his brother in a huge hug. He closes his eyes, a look of contentment on his face as they share a sincerely loving embrace. “I’ve missed you Gage.”

“I missed you too Griffin.” Their arms finally separate and Gage looks at me and smiles happily.

“Gage,” Griffin says softly, “I’d like you to meet my wi—”

“Hello. I’m Gage,” he says. “Griffin is my best brother.” And then just as Griffin explained in the car, he wraps his arms around me in a tight hug, which I happily return.

“Hi Gage. I’m Layken. It’s so great to finally meet you.”

“Want to sit by me at dinner?”

“Of course! I’ll sit anywhere you tell me to sit.”

He releases his hold on me so I follow suit just as an older couple appears in the doorway.

“Well, if you’re going to get married without us being there, at least you leveled up,” the man says, smiling at me and then winking at Griffin. “That’s a boy, Son. She’s a pretty one.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Griffin gives his dad a quick hug and then glances at me. “I’m pretty damn sure she’s the best part of me.”

I know he doesn’t really mean that, but something in the way he looks at me makes me shift on my feet and causes me to blush. How I could be the best part of anyone is beyond me. Especially if my mom has anything to say about it.

“Dad, I’d like you to meet my wife, Layken Hobbs Ollenberg.”

I offer Griffin’s father my hand. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, sir.”

He beams at me and opens his arms. “Oh, you can forget the handshake, sweetheart. I’ve been waiting for years to finally have a daughter, so I’d like to give you a nice big hug if that’s okay?”

Wait.

He’s not mad?

I huff a soft laugh, hiding my surprise. “Oh. Yeah. Of course.”

Mr. Ollenberg embraces me warmly and for the first time—I think ever—I feel like I might know what the Grinch felt like when his heart grew three sizes. My parents aren’t huggers. They never have been. I was rarely hugged as a child. In fact, standing here right now, I can’t remember even three times that I may have been hugged by either of my parents. So, being in the loving arms of a parental figure feels...odd. Odd but also...amazing.

My shoulders relax with every passing second and when he releases me and cups my face in his hands, much like his son does, and murmurs, “Welcome to our family, Layken,” I almost start sobbing right then and there.

“Thank you, Mr. Ollenberg.”

“Please,” he says with the warmest smile. “Call me Grant. Or Dad, if you prefer.”

I smile, choking back tears, and nod as he makes way for Griffin’s mother to join us. Griffin steps in, putting a quick arm around me, and says, “Mom, this is Layken.”

Griffin’s mom is already crying as she steps up to me with glistening eyes and a huge smile on her face.

“After all this time,” she says. “I finally have a daughter.” She throws her arms around me and squeezes me tightly, whispering, “Thank you so much for loving my son.”

“I...” I swallow the lump in my throat and simply squeeze her back because I have no idea what I’m supposed to say to that. I’m overwhelmed

with emotions I didn't expect to feel.

Gratitude.

Surprise.

Happiness.

Relief.

All of that mixed with a little fear and a little anxiety.

These people have every right to dislike me, to question me, to wish I wasn't here right now, but instead they're accepting me into their family like I've been a part of it for years and this was just the next natural step in the game of life.

And I'm not exactly sure what to do with that.

These kinds of things don't happen to me.

At least, they never have before.

Mrs. Ollenberg releases me and places her hands on my shoulders. "We are so glad you're here, Layken."

"Thank you, Mrs.—"

"Gail. Or Mom. Whichever you like, Layken."

"Thank you...Mom."

I don't miss the satisfied smile on Griffin's face, but I turn my head away and take a deep breath when Gail gestures inside the house.

"Please, come in, both of you. Make yourselves at home. Dinner will be ready soon."

Gage leads the way followed by his parents. I watch as his parents walk through their own doorway holding hands and quickly swipe a tear from slipping down my cheek.

"Hey," Griffin whispers, concern etched in his brow. "You okay?"

I nod and wrap my hand around his. "Yeah. Good."

"SEE? TOLD YOU," Griffin remarks, taking another huge bite of his dinner. "Best lasagna you'll ever have."

Swallowing my bite and dabbing the corners of my mouth with my napkin, I nod in agreement. "You definitely weren't lying. This is amazing!"

Gail smiles proudly. "Thank you, Layken."

“What’s the secret?”

She wags her brows. “It’s made with love because I know how much my boys enjoy it.” She laughs. “But next time you’re here, maybe I can show you.”

“Oh, my God! That would be so much fun! I’d love to learn how to be a better cook. I think I have about four meals in my wheelhouse, not including peanut butter and jelly.”

“Well, I imagine with Griffin’s schedule you guys aren’t home often for a lot of homecooked meals.”

“That’s very true,” Griffin pipes in. “But Layken makes a mean peanut butter and jelly. Don’t let her fool you.” He leans over and kisses my temple and for just a moment, tiny butterflies flutter through my chest at the gesture and I allow myself to feel the love and sincerity rolling off him.

And then I remember none of this is real.

“So, tell me what you do, Layken. Do you get to travel with the team a lot?”

“Um.” My brows furrow. “Actually, now, yes I do. I used to be the Development Director for Pacific Children’s charity foundation, but I lost my job when the hospital merged with University Hospital. The other guy had more longevity than I did so...” I shrug. “I have a little extra time on my hands at the moment while I look for something else.”

“Which she isn’t going to need because she’s working on a novel and it’s going to be a bestseller,” Griffin says. “I can feel it already.”

I stiffen beside him at the mention of my book. While writing romance novels might be a fun passion of mine, I get that it’s not for everyone. And the last thing I want to do is make a bad impression on Griffin’s parents if they think I write porn books like everyone else who thinks that when they hear the word romance.

“Ooh, that sounds very exciting! What kind of books do you write?”

“Uh, well this one is a sports romance.”

Gail’s brows lift and she gasps. “Oh, I was hoping you were going to say romance! I live for reading!”

“It’s all she does all day,” Gage says, rolling his eyes and smiling. “Every time I can’t find Mom I just go to her big blue chair and there she is reading again.”

“He’s not wrong.” She shrugs her shoulder. “That chair is my happy place most days.”

I laugh because I totally get it. “I don’t doubt it. There’s nothing better than falling into a good book, right?”

“That’s right.” She smiles. “Who do you like to read?”

“Ashton Jacobs is one of my favorites for sure.”

She gasps again. “Oh my gosh! I have every one of her books!”

“But did you know it’s not actually her books? It’s HIS books because Ashton Jacobs is a guy?”

“Nooooo.” Gail sits back in her chair shocked. “Are you serious?”

“Swear to God! I even got to meet him once when he came for a signing!”

“How did I not know this?” She gawks. “I am seriously out of the loop!”

“Well don’t you worry because I’ve got you now. We book lovers stick together.”

She leans forward. “Did you read the last one where the housekeeping employee falls in love with the owner of that swanky hotel chain?”

“Yes!” I squeal. “I couldn’t put it down!” I bring my hand to my chest. “And that part where she walks in on him trying to do his own laundry so she doesn’t have to do it anymore but he has no idea what he’s doing and—”

“And he asks her to teach him just so he can spend more time with her.”

My eyes bulge in excitement “Yes!”

Gail swoons. “So cute!” She puts down her fork and picks up her wine glass, lifting it in my honor. “Aaaand now I’m adding girls’ day to the bookstore with my daughter-in-law to my personal bucket list.” She giggles. “So what sport are you writing about? Football? Baseball?”

“Actually, it’s hockey.”

“Damn right it is,” Griffin affirms.

His parents get a good chuckle out of his response.

“Well, I do hope you’re being a great muse for Layken’s writing, Griff,” his mom says. “Especially if she’s writing about hockey.” He glances at me and I can’t help but think back to last night and asking him to help me with the whole doorway lean thing.

That was hot.

And I loved every minute of it.

And I absolutely wrote all about it.

I reach up and pat his cheek. “It’s nice to know I have him around whenever I have technical questions.”

“Always *up* for the challenge,” he answers, passing me a wink.

And now I’m not so sure he’s still talking about my books.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GRIFFIN

I knew they would love her.

I knew the moment they met Layken they would instantly adore her and shower her with love and kindness. Hopefully she genuinely feels it because even when the day comes that I have to tell my parents the truth about us, I know without a shadow of a doubt they'll continue to love her and welcome her into their home regardless of my mistakes or shortcomings.

Who wouldn't love Layken, anyway? She's one hundred percent kind with a side of gorgeous and a sneaky hint of sexy. Just enough to make me think dirty fun thoughts about her.

I already know she's got a fucking sexy body. That much I remember from our wedding night, but I still have no idea what she sounds like when she comes.

Had I not interrupted her in the tub the other night I could've found out, but it wouldn't have been the same. The more time I spend around Layken, the more I want to be the reason for her to make any noise at all. Thinking about it now, the mere thought of some other guy touching her, pleasuring her, making her body hum makes my stomach turn.

"You okay, Griff?" Mom asks as she dips her hands into the soapy water of the kitchen sink.

I clear my throat. "Hmm? Yeah. Sorry. Zoned out there for a minute."

Layken catches my eye and I give her a reassuring smile.

Yes, wife. I'm good.

Just thinking about your sexy body and what I'd like to do with it if given another chance.

Please Lord Jesus, give me another chance.

My dick is not broken and I really want to prove it to her.

"So, tell me, Layken," Dad says, passing her a plate to dry.

Because that's how Layken rolls. Sits down to dinner with my family, chums it up with Mom over book talk, and then grabs a towel to help with the dishes while Gage and I sit at the bar keeping them company.

More like looking like a couple of lazy asses.

"Did my son do a good job dating you?"

"I got the ring on her finger, didn't I, Dad?" I joke.

"Yeah but were you romantic in taking your beautiful wife on dates like I taught you?"

Before I can even open my mouth, Layken answers, "Griffin has been the absolute best at planning dates. He's better at it than any man I've ever dated."

"Is that so?" Mom perks a brow. "Tell us your favorite date, Layken. Let's see how good he is."

"I have two, actually," she says to my family. And now my interest is piqued because I have yet to take her on a date anywhere which means she's about to make something up on the fly. Or I'm about to hear her favorite date with some other guy.

Fuck.

That has to be it.

My chest tightens at the thought.

"The first of my favorite dates was actually our very first date because Griffin was super nervous."

"No way." Gage shakes his head laughing. "Griffin never gets nervous."

He couldn't be more wrong but that's okay. I'll let him keep thinking his big brother is the strong hero type.

"Well, he was nervous that night," Layken says, grinning at my brother. "He picked me up and drove us out to the beach to watch the sunset while the tide rolled in and it was the most breathtaking couple of hours I've ever spent with another human being."

Mom smiles as Layken tells her story.

“He brought sandwiches and sodas,” she tilts her head, “because he didn’t want to drink before a game day. So, we sat on the rocks and talked and laughed and watched the sunset. It was the most impressive display of colors I have ever seen. It was almost like mother nature planned the perfect sunset just for Griffin to be able to impress me.”

“And it worked, see?” I smirk at her.

“That it did. The ombre of colors from yellows to pinks to purples to dark blues...mmm.” She shakes her head, her eyes closing as if she’s picturing the very night it happened in her mind right now. “Amazing.” She opens her eyes. “But even more amazing than the color of the sunset was how great Griff was that night at conversation. He was so easy to talk to. He took a sincere interest in me and my life. It wasn’t just hockey, hockey, hockey. He asked questions so I knew he was paying attention and I did the same with him. And when the night was over, he took me home, kissed the living shit out of me, and breathlessly told me he really hoped I would see him again.”

Talk more about that kissing part.

I like that part.

“Thank God, you agreed.” I get up from my chair and kiss her lips like it’s something I’ve done for years, forgetting that it’s not something we’ve really done since our wedding night except for that moment in Coach’s office. She doesn’t back away from my advance though and kisses me back sweetly, her tongue poking out to lightly brush against my lips before pulling away with a blushing smile. The minute she backs away I want to tug her right back in.

I want to kiss her again. Really kiss her.

I want to get to know the feel of her mouth.

I want to fully know what she tastes like.

I want to swallow every satisfied moan she gives me.

I want to take her breath away.

Fuck.

What is happening to me?

“What’s your second favorite date, Layken?” Gage asks her.

“Oooh, the second date is by far my all-time favorite date ever and Gail, you’re going to love this.”

Mom performs a little excited dance and says, “I’m all ears.”

“So, it was a bookstore date, because of course,” Layken begins.

In tandem the rest of us answer, "Of course."

"But not just a walk-in-the-bookstore-and-buy-me-books kind of date." She wags her finger. "Ooh no. Griffin took me in there with this elaborate scavenger hunt planned for the both of us."

Mom is already swooning. "Aww."

"Yeah, I know!" The glimmer in Layken's eyes as she tells this story gives me that warm fuzzy feeling. "So, he takes us inside and has this little bag with tiny slips of paper. Each one has a different kind of book we need to look for. So, for example, one was our favorite kids book. I picked Russel the Sheep."

Mom takes one look at me and I nod as we both say, "Interrupting Chicken."

Gage brightens and says, "Yes! I loved Interrupting Chicken too!"

"So, we went through questions like pick a book that teaches you something you'd like to learn how to do. Or another one was finding a recipe you can cook together. Griffin found a homemade ramen recipe and we did end up doing that together on another date. But the question we had that made me fall for him and his adorable personality was the one that said find a book that can help you in the bedroom."

Mom glances up at me over her glasses and says, "Oh God, Griffin. What did you do?"

Layken starts to giggle and I can feel my face turn red because I have no idea what the hell Layken is going to say next. To respond to Mom, I simply shrug and pass her a wink.

And then hope for the best.

"So here I am looking for books with, you know...kinky stuff in it because I thought that's what we were both looking for and this goofball," she says, gesturing to me with her head, "finds Folding-A-Fitted-Sheet for Dummies!"

Mom and Dad throw their heads back in laughter and Gage covers his mouth giggling.

I simply shrug. "I mean I couldn't play all my cards at one time and Lord knows I can't fold a fitted sheet to save my life."

Dad gives me a fist bump. "Way to win that one, Son. Proud of you."

"Thanks Dad."

Mom wipes her forehead with the back of her hand still giggling. "Layken please tell me my son made up for being the ultimate doof to you

with that round.”

“Oh yeah.” she nods. “He totally did.”

“That’s right, I did. Because tell them about the last round.”

As if she knew I was going to set her up, she miraculously continues on with her story. “So, the last round was to pick a book that reminds you of your partner.”

Mom puts her hand on her hip. “And? What did he pick?”

Layken smiles at me and turns to Mom. “He picked up a book by Nicholas Sparks, handed it to me, and said, ‘My daddy said that the first time you fall in love it changes you forever and no matter how hard you try that feeling just never goes away’.”

My jaw almost hits the floor as my eyes bounce from Mom to Dad to Layken.

Wait...

How did she...

Mom and Dad glance at each other, a knowing smile between them. Dad leans over and kisses Mom’s cheek as they both say, “*The Notebook*.”

“Yeah!” Layken smiles. “How did you know that?”

Dad rubs Mom’s back. “That’s our special movie. Gail fell in love with the book when she read it and then I took her to see the movie when it hit theaters. I’ve actually quoted that line to her many times before.”

And he has.

I remember hearing him say it to her many times while I was growing up.

That is totally something I would’ve said to a girl because it’s what Dad would tell me after watching that movie. He said it’s how he always felt.

Layken swoons and turns to me. “You never told me *The Notebook* was a thing in your family!”

Trying to come up with the right words to say, I shrug a shoulder and tell her, “I didn’t want you to think I wasn’t being sincere if I said it to you too, because I meant it when I said it.”

“I know you did. You told me you loved me that day.”

I don’t know how the hell she came up with a story so perfect for our situation and told it so effortlessly but thank God she did. I think my parents are more than convinced. But just for added sugar on top of the Layken sundae, I add, “I knew you were the one that night.”

And just like that, the odd feeling in my chest is back again.

It's almost as if it never went away.

It lingers.

And then hits me again and again every time Layken is around.

"Hey Layken," Gage says, standing from his stool. "Want to go make a tikky with me?"

She cocks her head. "A tikky?" Her gaze moves to me and I wink and mouth the words tik-tok.

"Ooh yes! Yeah I would love to, Gage!"

And there goes my brother stealing my wife.

As I sit in the living room with Mom and Dad, chatting about the season and my new life with Layken, I watch her interact with my brother.

She's so damn good with him.

So patient.

Encouraging.

She treats him like the human being he is instead of the "Sped" he was teased for being as we were growing up. I lost count of the number of times I stepped in to fight for my brother over the years. Especially over the use of that derogatory word. Middle schoolers are cruel as fuck and the irony always was, Gage was smarter than all of them. We never treated him like he had Down Syndrome. To us, he was a normal kid who had a few delays here and there depending on what he was doing. He was a straight A student, but he wasn't as fast or coordinated as me at hockey so some things we just couldn't do together.

But I loved him fiercely growing up.

And I love him even more now.

"You know Gage has himself a girlfriend now too," Dad says softly as we watch Gage and Layken dance in front of his cell phone.

"Does he really?" I ask. "Why didn't he tell me?"

Dad shakes his head. "I don't know. You'll have to ask him."

Mom bobs her head. "I think he was genuinely excited to get to meet Layken today. He had been talking about the two of you all day before you guys pulled up. Mallory may have slipped his mind."

"Mallory is the girlfriend?"

She nods. "Mhmm."

"And does she..." I smooth my hands down my thighs. "Is she...?"

Mom nods again. "Yes. She has Downs too. She's a super sweet girl. Gets along very well with Gage. They're cute together. He met her at

work.”

“Good.” I nod. “That’s really good. I’m glad he has someone to keep him company. Hell, he deserves to be loved.”

“Speaking of deserving love,” Dad says, gesturing to Layken. “Son, you found a rare gem in Layken.” He’s all smiles talking about her. I can see the love and admiration in his eyes already. “She’s perfect for you.”

“She is.” I nod. I think I’m beginning to think those same thoughts myself although I know I’m just going to get hurt in the end if I continue to think that way. I want to smile and be the giddy lovesick boy that I know my parents want to see, but in reality, I know this thing between Layken and I will come to an end and I’ll have to break my parents’ hearts.

And Gage’s heart.

And there’s a very strong possibility I’ll end up breaking my own as well.

If only she were as interested in me as I am in her.

“I’m so sorry, Mom. Dad. We really never meant to hurt anyone by getting married so quickly we just—”

“Is she pregnant, Griffin?” Mom’s words punch me right in the gut.

“What?” I shake my head adamantly, my brows pinched. “No. Mom she’s not...No.”

I can’t admit that we haven’t even properly consummated our marriage yet and she’s talking about pregnancy already. Jesus fuck, I’ve never been more grateful that my penis wasn’t working on our wedding night when I think about the fact I could’ve knocked her up and damned her to a life I never even asked if she wanted.

“Just thought maybe there was a more concrete reason for the haste is all.”

“I promise you there isn’t.”

We were just very drunk and super stupid.

She gives me a reassuring smile but it’s coupled with that look that says she knows something isn’t right. “We love you both no matter what, Griffin. You know that. And hey...” She rubs her hands together. “I’m ready for grandbabies whenever you are.”

I huff out a laugh. “Oh, good Lord.”

It’s late when we finally say goodbye to my family and head home.

“Your family is really great, Griffin,” Layken says, reflecting on the evening. She’s all bundled up in my hoodie looking as adorable as ever. I’ve

watched her pull the collar up to her nose and inhale twice now, which makes me smile. “And oh, my God, that lasagna...mmm.” She rubs her stomach and leans her head back on the seat. “Soo damn good.”

“Right? I told you.”

“You did.”

“I think Gage is smitten with you.”

“Yeah?” She smiles. “He’s such a sweetheart.”

“Now don’t go getting any ideas about jumping ship and falling for my brother.”

“Oooh.” She giggles. “Now that’s a whole other tropey romance.”

“Really?” I turn my head for just a moment to glance at her. Her smile is beautiful even in the moonlight and now I wish I didn’t have to keep my eyes on the damn road the whole way home. “There are really books like that?”

“Oh, hell yeah.” She pats my leg. “But don’t you worry, I promise I won’t go running off.”

Tonight, I wish that were really true.

We talk for a while longer while I drive and then a peaceful silence falls between us. I want so badly to ask Layken what she’s thinking because I haven’t been able to stop thinking about how amazing she was with my family. Anyone looking in from the outside would’ve thought she had known us all for years.

Would they have seen the two of us as two people madly in love with each other?

I don’t know.

My dad and Gage seemed smitten. That much I can tell very easily. But my gut tells me my mom knows something is up though she never said anything to the contrary.

There were times tonight that I wanted to look at Mom and Dad and tell them the truth. I know they won’t be upset if I just come clean to them. Hell, Dad would probably have a good laugh, but too many people know about what really happened already. I don’t want to risk getting Layken into any further trouble with her family. Not only that but watching her with my family today made me feel things I’ve never felt before. Seeing her bond over books with Mom and dancing in silly videos with Gage, she’s everything I had always hoped for.

She’s the kind of girl I always thought I would fall for.

I know this pipe dream of a marriage can't really exist, but damn, what if it could?

"Do you think they liked me?"

Layken's voice cuts through my thoughts and brings me back to reality.

"What?"

"Your family. Do you think they liked me?"

I nearly choke on a laugh. "Are you seriously asking me that question?"

When she doesn't answer me I know that means yes.

"Layken, they adored you!" I assure her. "One hundred and fifty percent. You were a fucking natural with my family. They bought our story. All of it. I could feel it in my soul."

She smiles but doesn't say much. Then she leans her head to the side and watches out her window, nodding. "Good."

Not sensing the confidence in her statement, I narrow my eyes and steal a few glances her way. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm good." She answers one way but her sudden melancholy demeanor says otherwise.

"Hey," I say softly, sliding my hand over her thigh.

"Hmm?"

"What are you thinking about over there? You got really quiet."

She shrugs and shakes her head. "Nothing really. You're just..." She sighs. "You're really lucky. I loved meeting your family today. They were... I don't know...it was all so unexpected and not at all what I'm used to."

"But good, right? Good different? You felt good?"

I'd be heartbroken and dismayed if she said otherwise.

"So much good, Griffin," she says, her voice still a little off. "And I felt amazing the entire time. Like I actually belonged somewhere." She turns her head back toward her window and murmurs, "It makes me want to never introduce you to my parents."

"I'm sorry, Lake. I'm sorry things aren't the same for you."

"Yeah. Me too. Though until today, I didn't know what I was missing for all those years growing up."

Fuck.

Hearing her say that rips my heart out and I don't know what to say.

"Will you stay?"

Okay. I guess I'm saying that.

The words come out of nowhere and have Layken's head turning my direction.

"What?"

"Will you stay? At my place. Tonight?" I swallow the lump in my throat. "I know you mentioned when we got to my parents' that your building is open now and you know I'll drop you off there if that's what you want but..."

Her place was actually fixed a week ago.

I know this because Bodhi mentioned it to me when I talked about Layken and me one night. He assumed she had gone back home.

She's been so busy working on her book, I wasn't about to tell her to leave and if I'm being honest with myself, I really like having someone to come home to.

Fuck. I don't want her to leave me.

I like having her around.

I like her.

I like Layken.

I like my wife.

"You don't want me to leave?" she asks, her head tilting to the side.

No. I don't.

"I mean I'm not going to force you to stay, I just thought...you know... because we're married now and everyone knows we're together...I don't know, maybe it would be better if you stayed at my place. You know, for a while longer. For show and all."

Why do I sound so ridiculous?

And why is my chest getting tight?

"Right." She nods. "I suppose you have a point. People might talk if they see us living separately."

"Oh yeah." I nod adamantly. At this point I'll say anything to get her to agree with me. "They'll talk for sure. And we don't want that. It's not good when people talk. They say stupid things like..." I tap the steering wheel with my fingers. "Layken Ollenberg refuses to sleep with sexy hockey star husband or Hockey boy Griffin Ollenberg snores so loudly his wife has to sleep across town. And you know those rumors grow like wildfire."

Layken laughs and some of the heaviness in my chest settles. "You are such a goof. They wouldn't say that."

"No?"

“No!” She shakes her head. “They’d say something like Anaheim Star marries porn writer.”

A chuckle rumbles through my chest. “Oh, well we can’t have that.”

“Definitely not, so I guess if you’re okay with a roommate...”

More than okay with it.

“Yeah. I’d love to have you.”

Oof! Did that sound bad?

I’d love to have her?

Of course I’d love to have her.

Have her in my bed.

In my shower.

Over my dining room table.

Against the wall.

Bent over the couch.

Fuck.

“I mean I’d love for you to...you know, stay. If you want.”

“Alright. I guess I’ll stay. But would you mind if we stop at home so I can pick up a few things before the away stretch?”

“Of course. Is tomorrow morning okay or do you want to stop tonight?”

She shakes her head. “Nah, the morning’s fine.”

“Done.”

“Thank you, Griffin.”

“You’re welcome, Naughty.” I grin and then give her a quick wink feeling loads better now that she’s agreed to stay.

We pull into the parking garage and I turn off the ignition. Layken opens her door and climbs out of the car so I follow behind her until we reach the elevator just inside. She hits the number for my floor and the elevator doors close.

“Thank you, Griffin,” she says, turning toward me with a contented smile. “For everything today. I had the best time on our lasagna date.”

The butterflies in my stomach start to flutter all over again and when I glance down at her beautiful face, my body acts of its own accord and I do the one thing I’ve been thinking about doing all night. I cup her face in my palm, slipping my hand toward the back of her head, trace the edge of her jaw with my thumb, and press my lips against hers.

Catching her off guard, she gasps slightly as my lips brush her mouth. Her hand rests on my chest as she parts her lips inviting me to sweep my

tongue inside which I do without hesitation. When her fingers curl around a part of my shirt I bring my other hand to her face and tilt her head for better access.

She groans slightly and it's nearly my undoing.

Fuck.

And just like that, the kiss is over as unceremoniously as it started. Her eyes are still closed but when they open she's staring at me with both hunger and confusion.

"What was that for?"

Can't a man kiss his wife once in a while?

"Uh, that was, umm, a thank you kiss."

A thank you kiss?

Really Griff?

"A thank you kiss?" she asks. "Thank you for what?"

"Yeah. Uh, a thank you for today. I had a way better time than I anticipated and that's because I had you with me. So, yeah." I brush my thumb over her swollen lips wishing like hell I would be brave enough to simply carry her into my room and thank her all night long. "Thank you, Layken...for being my wife."

"You're welcome." She smiles. "Thank you for being my husband. And for the record, so far, you're pretty good at it."

The elevator doors open and I wrap an arm around Layken's shoulders. "Right back at you, Naughty."

But holy shit, I just kissed my wife.

And for better or worse, I'd like to do it again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

LAYKEN

“Will you be taking all your umm,” Ella clears her throat, “well, these?” She gestures to the now open drawer of my bedstand where an array of sex toys are stored for a rainy day.

Or a sunny day.

Or an overcast day.

Any day really.

Picking up on Ella’s tone, Scarlett turns from my closet to see what Ella is talking about. When she spots the open drawer, her brows spike and her mouth opens into a wide smile. “Oooh giiiiirl! Yes! She most certainly is taking every last one of those toys with her!”

My cheeks have to be as pink as the shirt I’m presently wearing. “What? No. I don’t need all those.”

“I beg to differ,” Ella says, motioning with her head toward Scarlett. She picks up my purple vibrator. “This one is great for any day!” She picks up the small bullet next. “And this little guy is great to use on him too!”

I cock my head, my brows furrowed. “Hmm. Do friends touch friends’ vibrators?”

In tandem, Ella, Scarlett and Corrigan answer, “Yes.”

I laugh. “Okay well, anyway you guys, we haven’t...” I shake my head, looking around the room at my friends. Ella waves off my comment.

“Yeah, but you will.”

“What?” I gasp. “What makes you say that?”

Corrigan laughs. “Pfft! Cause there is no way in hell you’ll be able to resist his charm forever.”

Scarlett stands with her hand on her hips. “You mean to tell me you’ve lived with him for several weeks—no, almost a month now—and you two never...”

I shake my head. “I can confirm we have never.”

“What about your wedding night?” Ella smirks.

Oh well...hmm.

We did fool around a little.

“Uh...”

Corrigan points at me and draws in a lengthy gasp. “Layken! You slept with Griffin on your wedding night?”

I tilt my head and cringe. “Welllll...”

“Holy shit!” Ella claps her hands and leaps onto my bed followed by Scarlett and Corrigan. “Tell us every fucking thing!”

“Actually, there isn’t much to tell.” I shrug, standing in front of them. “We didn’t actually go all the way. We had so much to drink that night that he uh...you know, he couldn’t...”

“Get it up?” Scarlett finishes my thoughts. “Are you seriously saying *the* Griffin Ollenberg, star player for the Anaheim Stars hockey team, couldn’t keep an erection long enough to plow his wife?”

“That’s...yeah.” I nod, cringing slightly. “That’s what I’m saying.”

With mouths hanging open they all stare at me completely flabbergasted. “And he never tried again after that?” Ella finally asks.

“Nope. He’s definitely flirted with me...and I with him, if I’m being honest. He tried to tell me his penis works just fine when I kind of teased him about it.” I think back to being with his family. “And then the other night...”

Corri’s eyes bulge. “What happened the other night?”

“Yeah girl,” Ella says, making herself comfortable. “Spill the tea. Don’t hold back. We have to know these things!”

“Why?”

She sighs. “Because at some point the two of you are going to fall in love and it’s going to be the cutest thing ever.” She lifts her arms in a shrug. “Come on, Layken! You literally write this shit for a living. You should know this. You should see it coming. In fact, it was you not too long ago who said it.” She repeats my words back to me. “It’s part of romance right?”

Girl meets boy. Boy kisses girl. Girls and boy fall in love. Girl and boy eventually sleep together, etcetera, etcetera..."

I shake my head. "I don't know though. I don't think so. I mean he hasn't really made a move."

"So, what happened the other night then?" Scarlett asks.

"Uh.."

Okay they got me.

"Well, we had dinner with his family and when we got home, he kissed me."

"He kissed you?" Corrigan nearly shouts in excitement, bouncing on my bed.

My head teeter-totters. "Yeah but it wasn't like this super romantic gesture. He said it was a thank-you kiss. For hanging out with his family and being so great with his brother and stuff."

Corrigan and Scarlett and Ella glance at each other and then fall into a fit of giggles as I watch in confusion.

"What? What's so funny?"

Corrigan takes my hand. "Layken, he likes you!"

"Yeah, he fucking kissed you, Lake! That was him making a move!" Ella adds.

"What? No." I shake my head "It wasn't like this super long kiss or anything."

Scarlett softly asks, "How was it? The kiss. Was it good?"

Soft lips.

Protective hands.

Warm body.

There wasn't a damn thing I didn't like about it.

"It was...breathtaking and addictive if I'm being honest."

"Yes!" Corrigan and Ella squeal in tandem and high five each other as the three of them show me their beaming smiles.

"So, you like him?" Ella asks.

Finally letting out a long sigh, my shoulders drop and I tilt my head, staring at my friends. "How do I even begin to answer that question?"

"Honestly and sincerely," Scarlett retorts with a shrug and a smirk.

"Honestly?" *I don't know.* "I mean, yes, I like Griffin. He's a terrific guy. Sexy as hell. A total muse when I'm writing. He's funny. He has a great sense of humor. He makes me laugh. He's a total ten."

“Buuuut?” Corrigan furrows her brow.

“But...” I lift a shoulder. “I don’t know. I just get this feeling that he doesn’t feel the same way about me. He’s way out of my league for starters.”

Ella scoffs. “Totally beg to differ but continue.”

“I guess I assumed if he was really interested, he would’ve made a move already, you know? Or he would’ve said something. I mean he’s Griffin fucking Ollenberg. He can pick up women everywhere he goes.”

Scarlett lifts her brow. “But does he?”

“Does he what?”

“Does he pick up women? Has he flirted with even one woman since the day you walked into his apartment that one night?”

Hmm.

Come to think of it...

I try to think back to any of the days since I knocked on Griffin’s door a wet newly unemployed mess. “I guess not. At least not that I know of.”

“And he kissed you last night after spending the evening with his family?”

I nod silently.

“And you don’t think that’s his way of telling you how he feels?”

I sigh again. “Well now that you put it that way,” I whine. “I don’t know. Maybe? I mean why can’t he be clearer? More specific?”

Corrigan laughs. “Lake, he kissed you! What do you want him to do, bend you over and impale you with his manhood without warning?”

Her question forces a laugh. “Okay maybe not without warning, but...”

“So, we need him to be a little more intentional,” Ella suggests, and I nod.

“That would be helpful, yes.”

Corrigan’s arches her brows. “And if he were to be more intentional, you would be open to those intentions?”

I feel like I shouldn’t be smiling but I can’t help it. “Yes?”

“Great!” Ella claps her hands. “I have the perfect idea.”

“Okay let’s hear it.”

She leans over and pulls a large rainbow-colored dildo with a suction cup on the end out of my bedside drawer, her eyes huge with humored excitement. “This.”

I cover my mouth with my hand to hide my giggles. “And what the hell am I supposed to do with that?”

“What it’s intended to be used for! Duh!” she says with a completely straight face. “You’re putting this sucker in your shower where it belongs.”

“Oh my God, seriously?” I jut my hip out. “Like I’m going to use that thing in my shower with Griffin around where he can see it.”

Corrigan bursts out laughing. “Honey that is exactly what you’re going to do. You’re going to put that thing in your shower like the trophy it is and let him see it!”

Scarlett gasps. “Oh, my God, yes! Corri’s right, Layken. Who cares if you use it or not? You have to display it in your shower and then make Griffin go in there to see it! Holy fuck he’ll shit a brick!”

We all have a healthy laugh over what Griffin would possibly say to my having an extra-large dildo suction cupped to my shower.

Ella wiggles the dildo in her hand. “But I bet it’ll give him plenty of dirty thoughts to drive him crazy. He’ll be picturing you using this thing every time he looks at you until he’s so frustrated that he can’t help but make a move.”

Scarlett slips her hand into her pocket and pulls out money. Holding it up she says, “I’ll give you fifty bucks right fucking now if you promise to do it and then tell us what happens.”

“I’ll give you fifty bucks right now if you make him go into your bathroom for some reason while we’re all there so we can see his reaction,” Ella adds.

Corrigan jumps up from the bed and grabs my hands. “Please, oh please, oh puh-lease let us be there when it happens!”

Scarlett’s eyes grow huge. Eyeing something on my dresser, she jumps up from my bed. “I have an idea!” She squeals and reaches for a bottle of nail polish remover before spinning around to show the rest of us.

“We’re putting this in the moving box along with a few of your nail polish colors. Tomorrow night when we’re all at August and Ella’s place, we girls will plan to do our nails.” She shakes the remover. “But leave this in your bathroom. And then you can ask him to come upstairs and get it for you.”

“Yes!” Ella claps her hands. “Then he’s bound to see this,” she says, still waving the dildo in her hand. “And we’ll all be able to see his expression when he comes back downstairs!”

The idea of playing with Griffin a little bit to get him to be more open with his feelings does sound exciting.

Will it work? I have no idea, but even if it doesn't...even if it turns out he doesn't feel the same way as me, seeing his reaction to a huge vibrating dildo in my shower would be funny as hell.

"Alright. It's a deal."

Corrigan wraps her arms around me. "That's my girl!"

AUGUST AND ELLA'S place is laid out similarly to Griffin's except that everything is the opposite direction since their apartment is on the other side of the hall one floor below us. From what the guys have said, the place, when August lived here by himself, was bland and plain without much personality to it. But since Ella has moved in, their space is a colorful array of textures and furniture that really give their home a fun eclectic vibe.

"Is it there? Where it's supposed to be?" Scarlett whispers from her seat on the couch. The guys are huddled around a couple boxes of Harold's Hotdogs, stuffing their faces while the ladies are hanging out in the living room. We're flying out tomorrow for the team's string of away games so tonight is our last hurrah for a few days while the guys, and Ella, are working.

I nod my head with the slightest of smirks. "Yep.

"In the shower or on the sink?" Corri asks, hiding her smile behind her glass of soda.

"Shower. With my nail brush. There's zero chance he'll miss it if I send him in there."

Scarlett beams and sits back against the couch cushions. "Perfect."

"I hear Kraymer took a skate to the face on their last game," Barrett says before taking a large bite of his hotdog. They've been chatting about their upcoming game against Boulder for the last fifteen minutes. "Doubt he'll even be playing."

"Are you kidding?" Harrison asks, amused. "If he knows you're in the net, there's no way he'll stay out of play if he can help it."

Barrett shrugs. "I guess we'll see. You could be right though. He's been itching for a goalie fight for a long time." He rolls his eyes. "The guy's a

dumbass.”

“We need more beer,” Griffin says, emptying the last of his bottle.

Ella shakes her head, smiling at the guys standing around the kitchen bar. “If there’s one thing you guys like to do during your time off, it’s drink,” she says and then cringes. “But also, I forgot to buy more when I was out today. I’m really sorry.”

“No worries, Ella,” Griffin says, pulling his key out of his pocket. “I’ve got some upstairs. Be right back.”

“Oh wait!” I wave him down trying my very best to keep a straight face. “While you’re up there would you mind grabbing my nail polish remover and nail brush from my bathroom?” I gesture to my friends. “We’re going to do our nails so we’re ready for tomorrow.”

“Sure thing. Drawer? Sink? Cabinet?” he asks.

I give the impression that I’m thinking about where my stuff is even though I know very well where I put everything. “Uh, the remover is on my sink and the nail brush is sitting in the shower. It’s yellow. You can’t miss it.”

“Got it. Be right back.”

“Do you need help?” I ask even though I know he’ll say no.

“Nope. I’m good. Back in a flash.” He smiles and winks at me and I return his smile as he walks out the door.

And then all of us take a sip of our drinks to keep ourselves from laughing.

Ten minutes later he’s still not back.

I bite at my bottom lip wondering what could be taking so long.

“Where the hell is Griffin?” Ledger asks another ten minutes later. He rotates his wrist to look at his watch. “He just lives upstairs. How long does it take to grab some beer?”

“Maybe he’s dropping a deuce,” Barrett suggests.

“Or he’s jacking off,” Bodhi says with a shrug.

“Or both,” Harrison adds much to the amusement of the rest of us. His eyes find mine and I’m instantly red in the face. If he only knew what Griffin was forced to see up there. “Sorry Layken. That was a little—”

“Griffin?” I shrug off his comment and smile. “You’re not wrong, Harrison.”

Just then the door swings open and a red-faced Griffin comes storming in with two cases of beer in one arm and the exact items I asked him to

retrieve in his other hand.

“Dude, where the hell have you been?” Ledger inquires as he crosses the room to set the beer on the kitchen counter.

“Busy.”

Ledger laughs. “Brewing this beer yourself or...?”

Griffin ignores him and walks out to the living room, his eyes finding mine. Instantly my skin tingles and my heartbeat rises. His face is flushed and the stunned look in his eye tells me he saw everything I wanted him to see. He blinks rapidly and then, standing stiffly in front of me, he hands me my nail polish remover and nail brush.

“Thank you,” I tell him, reaching for the items he brought to me.

His voice cracks and he clears his throat before trying again. “No problem.”

Watching him like any good wife would I cock my head and furrow my brow. “You okay?”

How I’m keeping a straight face right now, I’ll never know.

With a closed-lipped smile, he nods and answers, “Yep.”

“Okay. I appreciate it. Thank you.”

I notice when he turns back around he drags his hand over his face almost as if he thinks if he closes his eyes and reopens them, he’ll be able to forget about the oversized dildo suction cupped to my shower wall.

But I have a feeling that was a sight he’ll not soon forget.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GRIFFIN

“Good news!” Marlee Remington, the Operations Manager for the Stars, smiles happily at Layken and I as we wait for our hotel room key cards. She dangles two cards in front of us and giddily explains, “Since you two didn’t have a honeymoon I’ve booked you in the honeymoon suite for each night!”

She hands one card to Layken and one card to me.

Fuck.

I didn’t think about our hotel rooms.

I hope she’s not too upset with the idea of sharing a room together.

But also, I hope there’s only one bed so we’re forced to snuggle.

“Together, you mean?” The words fly out of Layken’s mouth before I can catch them.

I glance at her with an intensity that says *Don’t forget we’re married and this is what married people do* and then I laugh. “Really, Naughty? Are you trying to get rid of me already?” I playfully hook my arm around her waist and kiss her temple. “Marlee I hope the honeymoon suite has a doghouse because I must be in it already.”

Marlee’s gaze slides to Layken but she recovers from her near lethal mistake and laughs right along with me. “I’m just kidding, babe,” she says before kissing my cheek lightly. “But also, if you snore like you did the other night, I might make you sleep in the closet, because I did not sign up for that.”

Sure. Okay.

I'll take the blame.

But if you're going to dish it out...

"Pretty sure that was implied in that for better or worse part, but don't you worry," I wink at her, "I'll make sure to give you a good workout so you're good and tired and can sleep peacefully through the night."

Her jaw drops and she whacks me playfully on my upper arm.

"Griffin Ollenberg!" She gestures to Marlee still standing with us. "Marlee does not want to hear about how horny you always are or what you plan to do about it."

You're right about that sweetheart.

I'm always horny when you're around.

Especially with visions of you and the gargantuan sized dildo hanging out in your shower.

Holy hell that was an unexpected sight the other night.

And now it lives rent free in my head.

"It's fine," Marlee laughs, waving her hand. "I've been around these guys for a long time. I get it. They're horny toads. Really they're lucky they're nice guys or I would think they're all disgusting."

I scoff playfully as if she's insulting me but Marlee points at me before I can say anything, and tells me, "And if you really do snore that loudly, you sure as hell better take your girl to Pound Town before your head hits that pillow. She deserves that much for putting up with your crazy."

She sure as hell does.

And if I knew she felt the same way, I would give her the ride of a lifetime.

"Girl, preach!" I raise my hand and high-five Marlee, thanking her again as she walks away to hand out other room keys.

Layken merely chuckles and shakes her head. "Horny toad is right."

"Only for you, Naughty."

Phew.

That was close.

I lean down and grab both of our bags because my wife will never carry her own bag while I'm her husband.

"Ready?" I ask with a smirk coupled with a knowing look of relief.

Her expression mirrors mine. "Yep. Let's get out of here."

One room.

With Layken.

All week.

This ought to be fun.

“Oh, my God, I’m so sorry!” she exclaims when the elevator doors close in front of us. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

I chuckle and rub her back. “That was definitely a close one but you did great.”

The elevator doors open and we step forward to our suite. Since I have our bags, Layken unlocks the door with the card in her hand and then pushes the door open.

Just as I suspected.

There’s only one bed.

And I know it’s the first thing she notices.

The second thing she notices?

The couch is fucking tiny.

A little two-seater.

The only furniture in the room other than a king-sized bed along the far-left wall is a brown leather chair and a small table in front of an electric fireplace. Oh, and a jacuzzi bathtub.

Fuck me.

Bring on the newlywed bathtime!

Watching her eyes fall to the oversized tub, I can tell there’s not a snowball’s chance in hell she’ll want to get in there with me.

At least not while she’s sober.

“Wow! Look at that view,” I say, trying to pull her thoughts away from the elephant in the room.

Though smaller than I would have expected for a honeymoon suite, the space is rich with warm soothing colors and textures creating a sense of calm and relaxation all around. The bed faces a set of floor-to-ceiling glass windows and doors that give way to a private balcony. The snowy mountains right outside our door are breathtaking.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” I ask, opening the glass doors and breathing in the frosty air.

“It really is.” She nods, inhaling a deep breath letting the cold air sweep over her body. “It’s the perfect spot to curl up with a book in front of a warm fireplace and read all day.”

Trying to lighten the tension I cock my head, the corner of my mouth turned up. “I’m pretty sure this room wasn’t meant for book reading, Naughty.”

“Yeah well, it probably wasn’t meant for newlyweds who were so drunk they don’t remember much about getting married in the first place.”

Ooh.

Touché.

She turns back to grab her suitcase, taking another look around the room. Almost as if she closes and then opens her eyes again, a larger sofa or a second bed will appear.

Putting her mind at ease, I gently tell her, “Don’t worry, Lake. I’ll take the couch. You can have the bed.”

She lifts her head and her eyes pierce mine. “What?” She shakes her head. “No, no, no. That’s dumb. I’ll take the couch. You need the bed.”

I scowl. “Why do I need a bed?”

“Griff, come on,” she says, head cocked at an angle. “You have a game tomorrow. You need a good night’s sleep. I’m nobody here. I’m just a plus-one.”

The fuck?

Why would she say that?

“You’re not a nobody, Layken.” The fact she even thinks that makes me angry. “And you’re not just a plus-one. You’re my wife and my wife sleeps in a goddamn bed. End of story.”

She softens, her shoulders falling. “Griffin, you’re being—”

“A gentleman. Yes. I am.” I nod a bit exasperated. “Because how I treat a woman I care about matters, all right?” Gesturing to the bed, I plead, “Please. Sleep in the bed.”

I yank a pillow off one side of the bed and open the closet door to find a bag with two extra blankets and one extra pillow inside. Pulling the blankets from the bag, I use one to cover the tiny loveseat, ignoring the fact she’s probably riddled with guilt and worry while watching me.

And that’s the last thing I want to make her feel.

I don’t care if I’m sore in the morning.

Hell, I don’t even care if I have a bad game because of it.

“Griffin...”

“Relax, Naughty.” Finishing my make-shift bed, I step up to her and kiss her forehead and then smooth my hands across her shoulders and down

her arms. “Everything is fine. We can do this, right? We’re good. I’m really sorry I didn’t think about the room situation.” I cringe. “But we did sort of share a bed on our wedding night and lived to tell the tale. If we could do that, we can do this. I promise I’m not here to make you uncomfortable.”

She smiles meekly. “I know. You’re right. I’m sorry. I think I’m up in my head too much. I just don’t want to be a burden. This is your job. Your career.”

“And if I didn’t want you here, you wouldn’t be.”

“Well...” She lifts a shoulder. “I suppose it could be worse, right?”

Nodding, I say, “Yes. It could always be worse. I could’ve been forced to enjoy this view every morning by myself.”

Giggling, she rolls her eyes. “Tragic.”

That’s the Layken I like to see.

She’s fun when she’s sassy.

THIS COUCH MIGHT JUST BE HARDER than the floor.

Not to mention I’m the equivalent of a giant lying on piece of dollhouse furniture.

My body is going to hate me in the morning.

I know I could ask Layken to scoot over and share with me but she didn’t offer and I don’t want to make her uneasy.

I should’ve insisted on two beds but how would I ever explain that to someone who thinks Layken and I are happily married?

Ugh. I don’t see a way around it.

Pulling the other blanket up and over my body, I wriggle around until I find a comfortable spot. My arm rests above my head.

It’s warm in here.

I’m tired.

But I’m not.

I could scroll through my phone until I fall asleep but knowing Layken’s lying over there looking all cute as hell in her pink pajama pants with hearts all over them and a matching shirt has me reeling. I mean I know lots of people wear fun pajama pants, but it’s almost like we were meant to know each other.

Meant to get married.

Meant to fall in love.

Meant to be together.

And yet there's still so much I don't know about her.

"You still awake over there?" I finally ask.

"Yep," she answers. "Haven't turned the lamp off yet. You okay?"

"Yeah. Will you tell me a bedtime story before you fall asleep?"

Snickering, she rolls over and props herself up on her elbow so she can see me. Even in the dim light of the lamp, I can see her pupils darken at the sight of me without a shirt on.

Eat your heart out, Naughty.

I should've gone pantsless too.

Payback for the dildo invasion going on in my brain.

"A bedtime story?" she asks curiously.

"Yeah."

"What kind of bedtime story do you want?"

Smirking, I hold back my chuckle. "Well, if you're really letting me choose, I'd tell you to tell me the kinkiest story you can come up with Mrs. Juicy Lucy."

She giggles again and covers her face with her hand to hide her embarrassment. "Oh God."

"Okay, kidding, kidding. Really I was just wondering about your bookish life."

"What about it?"

"Tell me about it. How did you get into writing? What all do you do? I realized earlier when it crossed my mind that I never really asked a lot about it and I'm curious. Do you love it?"

The sincere smile that crosses her face gives me my answer.

"Okay, so that's a yes." I grin up at her.

"I do love it, yes."

"Because?"

"Because it allows me to be creative in a way I never imagined I would ever be able to do. Because it allows me to dream a little." She pauses, considering what to say next. "Writing allows me to literally make up a story about two people who fall in love and live happily ever after and who doesn't love a fun love story?"

"So, you really are a hopeless romantic at heart."

The corners of her pretty pink lips turn up. “Isn’t every woman even if she doesn’t want to admit it?”

“I suppose you could be right. Do you have a lot of readers? I mean... you’ve already published a few books, right?”

“Yep. There are three out there in the world with my name on them.”

“Three books,” I mutter, amazed. “That’s an incredible thing, you know? You literally wrote three books. *You* wrote them. They’re *your* words. And people will read them...I don’t know,” I shrug, “until the end of time maybe.”

The thought makes her smile.

“Maybe,” she murmurs.

I roll over and mirror her posture, propping myself up on my elbow too. I’m fascinated by this part of her life.

“So, your readers, are there a lot of them? Do you have some sort of groupies? The Hobb-Goblins or something like that?”

“The Hobb-Goblins?” She snorts and it’s the cutest fucking sound in the world. “That’s a very creative play on my last name. Why didn’t I think of that?”

I laugh with her. “Well? Do you? Are they like crazy fans?”

“Nah.” She reclines back on her pillow so I can’t see her face anymore. “I’m pretty much a nobody right now. I mean I get sales here and there, but no. No crazy fan club yet.”

That’s the second time she’s referred to herself as a nobody today or that she’s unimportant. I didn’t like it then and I don’t like it now.

“Are you saying those actually exist though? Crazy fan clubs?”

“Oh, hell yeah! Never underestimate romance readers,” she says. “When they love an author and their books, they love hard and fast. I’ve seen it happen many times.”

“How do you get people to know all about you? How do they even know you write books?”

“It’s all social media,” she answers with a heavy sigh. “It’s a long, arduous job making sure I post about them every day to as many social media outlets as possible. It’s a lot of graphic making and ad creation. I have a small email newsletter that I try to send out on a semi-regular basis.”

“A newsletter,” he repeats. “And what do you talk about in a newsletter?”

“Everything from snippets of my personal life in hopes that readers will relate to me, to a little behind the scenes look at my writing process, or short snippets of whatever I’m working on.”

“And you do all that on your own?”

“Yep,” I sigh.

“Why don’t you hire an assistant?”

“Because it doesn’t make sense to hire an assistant if my books aren’t making enough money to actually pay for an assistant. If and when the time comes that I can reinvest my royalties back into the business, then I can think about an assistant. But until then, it’s just me.”

“Damn...”

“Yeah,” she says before she blows out a breath. “It’s a lot. But it’s what I have to do if I want to stay relevant to readers. If I don’t stick with it, they forget who I am and then it’s like starting all over again every time I release a new book.”

“So, the trick is to build momentum. One book into the next?”

“Kind of, yeah.”

Wow.

She’s a rock star.

“You’re amazing, you know that?”

She scoffs. “Hardly.”

“Well, I think you’re amazing. You wrote a fucking book, Naughty. Not many people can say they’ve done that in their lifetime. And you wrote three.”

“Yeah...I guess you’re right.”

“You know I’m right.”

She’s quiet for a few minutes and I wonder if she’s fallen asleep.

“Lake?”

“Hmm?”

“What are you thinking about over there?”

“It’s stupid,” she says with a sigh. “But I was just thinking if only my parents saw it that way.”

“They don’t?”

“Are you kidding?” She scoffs. “They don’t give two shits that I’ve written anything. My mother probably thinks it’s all trash and prays to the God she doesn’t even worship that I’ll get over myself and come back to reality instead of playing in the world of make believe.”

Mother fuckers.

If I'm ever in their presence so help me...

"Am I ever going to meet your parents?" I ask. "Because I'm not sure I can promise that I would keep my mouth shut if they disrespected you."

"That's sweet of you, Griffin. I imagine at some point during our marriage you're going to have to meet them. I won't be able to hold them off forever. It's inevitable."

"Good," I state with confidence. "I can't wait."

Her voice drips with sarcasm. "Yeah. Me either."

Is she really writing a story about a hockey player?

I wonder what kind of story it is.

Does she think about me when she writes?

I'd totally be up for helping her with a few key scenes if she needed it.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks me when I don't say anything for a few minutes.

"Are you really working on a story about a hockey player?"

"Yes."

Man, I wish I could see her face.

"And is his name Griffin? Because I've been told that's a sexy name. Totally manly and all that."

Her giggle makes me smile. "Is that so?"

"Mhmm." I close my heavy-lidded eyes, feeling myself begin to drift off.

"Well, I'm sorry to say my character's name is not Griffin. It's Todd."

"Pbft! Griffin's totally sexier than Todd."

I swear to God before I actually fall asleep I hear her whisper, "Yes. Yes he is."

"WHAT'S the matter with you, Ollenberg?" August asks when he steps into the gym for our morning workout. "You're moving around this place like your grandmother this morning. Did you skip your pre-workout drink or what?"

"Nah. Just a little sore, that's all."

Ledger whistles from his seat at the stationary bike. "Sore, huh? Does that mean what I think it means?"

I chuckle and shake my head because they're about to be very disappointed in me. "Nope." I lean down to my duffel bag to find my stretch bands. "It means I slept on the tiny couch last night so Layken could have the bed. That's all."

Harrison cocks his head. "Wait, what? You slept on the couch?"

"Yep."

"What the hell for?" Barrett asks with a scowl. "It's fucking game day and now you're a knotted tight mess. She should know that."

"Hey." I stand up tall, stretch bands in my hand. "Don't talk about my wife like she's a cruel ass bitch. She knows it's gameday and she didn't want me to sleep on the couch either. I insisted."

Bodhi gives me a respectful nod and I'm grateful the kid gets it even though it's probably Corrigan who puts him in his place when it comes to her best friend.

Glancing quickly around the room, I notice the questioning looks on all the guys' faces.

"Oh, come on, guys. You didn't really think I was going to expect her to share a bed with me, did you? I'm not going to force myself on her."

"But you're married," Bear scoffs. "The least she could do is scoot over and give you a little space."

"I thought you guys were in the honeymoon suite," Ledger adds. "I heard Marlee talking about it."

"Yeah well this isn't California. It's Boulder. The honeymoon suites look pretty much like your rooms I imagine. Except instead of two queen beds, there's one king."

"The couch wasn't bigger?" Oliver asks.

"Nope just a loveseat. Then a table and chair and a fireplace. The view is killer though. Private balcony with floor to ceiling windows. It's really quite nice."

"That was kind of you to give your wife the bed, Griff," Oliver says.

Lowering myself to the floor, I stretch my legs out in front of me and hook my band over my feet. "I didn't do anything any of you guys wouldn't do if you were in the same situation."

August smirks. "You're still allowed to say it fucking sucks though, bro."

A regretful smile spreads across my face. “Oh, it definitely sucked. I am not meant to sleep on tiny furniture and my body is definitely hating me right now. But I’ll be fine once I get these stretches in.”

“YOU NERVOUS, MAN?” Bodhi caps my shoulder as I lace up my skate preparing to take the ice for practice.

Arching a brow, I stare at him. “Why the hell would I be nervous?”

“Because your wife is here watching you play for the first time,” he explains. “I just thought maybe that would make you nervous.”

Nervous?

Nah.

Excited?

Sure.

I’m a kick ass hockey player and I know it.

She’s been to home games over the last couple weeks but when we’ve had one-nighters away, she’s stayed home so she can get work done or look for a new full-time job. I know those things are important to her and I don’t want to take her away from being able to rebuild her life the way she wants it. But having Layken here now, watching me play, only adds fuel to my inner fire.

I pat Bodhi on the back and tell him, “I understand that might have made you nervous at one point, Pickle Pants, but I’m good. I can play hockey in my damn sleep. Come on, we’ve got a game to prepare for.”

And with that I step out of the tunnel and onto the ice.

And fall flat on my fucking face.

WHACK

“Fuck!”

What the?

The guys enter the ice, chuckling as they skate around me.

“Watch your step, Griff,” Ledger warns.

“Hey, yeah,” Harrison adds. “The ice is slippery, bro.”

“Wow, Layken must’ve done a real number on you, huh?” Oliver teases.

I take one second to glance up where the ladies are sitting and notice that they’re all watching me now.

Fucking great.

Because this isn't embarrassing as hell.

"Yeah thanks, assholes," I say as I bring my foot back to the ice and hoist myself up.

And slip and fall all over again.

"Mother fucker!"

I try again and again and again to get myself up and with each try, I slip and fall.

On my knees.

On my hip.

On my side.

It's like my legs are fucking jelly and my skates are...

Hold up...

My skates...

"I swear to God..."

Already seated on the ice, I slide myself over until I'm against the wall so I can sit up and inspect my skates. Sure enough, when I lift my foot up to inspect the blade, I find that they've been taped with clear tape.

"Son of a goddamn bitch," I mumble. And then I shout, "Alright, who's the fucking prick who taped my skates?"

The guys have a hearty laugh at my expense and then Bodhi skates over to me, blowing ice in my face when he stops himself. Then he bends down, smiles at me, throws me a fucking wink, and says, "Just wanted to say thanks for the pickle pants, Slippy Griffy." He kisses his glove and then taps my helmet before skating away to rejoin the team.

"Well played, Roche," I concede, shaking my head at my own misfortune and laughing at Bodhi's payback for the prank I pulled on him last season. "Well fucking played."

I toss my glove to the side and then rip the tape off my skates in order to steady myself on my feet. This time, I don't slip and fall.

Thank fuck.

I glance up at the ladies one more time and Layken smiles at me, her hand rising in a small wave. She looks really pretty today. Her golden hair hangs in curls past her shoulders. I've noticed she doesn't wear it down a lot, but when she does I really like it. I note what she's wearing today and then quickly realize I never gave her a jersey.

Dammit.

Why didn't I give her one?

The last thing I want is for her to wear anything tonight with one of the other guys' names on it.

Talk about embarrassment.

I make a mental note to make sure she's properly dressed before the game starts and then rejoin the guys to focus on today's game prep.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LAYKEN

I've been down through tunnels like these before in our home arena several times. Coming to hockey games with my best friend who just happens to be the coach's daughter does have its perks. But something about being down here this time feels different. And not just because we're in another team's arena. I've never given thought to having any type of relationships with any of Anaheim's players but now...now I'm married to one. And although he probably doesn't feel any different as today is just another day in the life of a hockey player, I find myself all kinds of nervous.

Nervous for him.

The idea that I could see him get hurt or banged up by another player has my chest tightening.

I don't like it.

And since he left for the arena this morning I've been feeling especially guilty that he spent last night on the couch. His body was way too large for that tiny piece of furniture. I shouldn't have let him do it. I should have told him sharing the bed was fine. He's right. We did it on our wedding night and survived just fine. We're both adults. I should have done better for him last night. If I'm honest with myself, I think I would have slept better knowing he was next to me than I did with him across the room all curled up and uncomfortable.

I won't make that mistake tonight.

On our way to wish the guys good luck, we stop in Ella's dressing room to say hello before she has to go be her best self as Lumin, the team's shooting star mascot.

"Hey girly!" Corrigan says when we step inside and find her half dressed in her Lumin costume.

"Hey guys! How was dinner?"

Corrigan hitches her thumb at me. "This girl barely ate a thing, but I thought the burgers at Molly's Pub were out of this world."

Ella tilts her head and glances at me. "Oh no, you okay Layken? Is the Colorado air getting to you?"

"Maybe something like that." I shrug nonchalantly.

"Nah, girl." Scarlett shakes her head, grinning at me with this I-told-you-so expression on her face. "Tell her the truth!"

Ella's eyes grow. "Uh oh. What does that mean?"

Corrigan hooks her arm around me. "Our little princess is nervous for her husband."

"Aww," Ella coos. "That's so cute!"

"Seriously though," I say to them all. "How do you guys handle the nerves on gamedays? I've never been nervous about any one of them before when I've come to games but today. Ugh. Like, what if Griffin gets hurt? What if his teeth get busted out or he breaks a leg or something terrible?"

The girls laugh at my expense and then Ella shrugs. "It's a fear you just get used to shrugging off, I guess."

"Says the girl who munches on cinnamon rolls every time she's nervous about something." Corrigan gestures to the box of cinnamon rolls on the table next to her stuff.

"Wait," I say, narrowing my eyes. "Cinnamon rolls? That's your nervous snack?"

"Yep. Don't ask me why. It's a thing and I don't even have a reason." She giggles, motioning to the ones on her table. "Those are a gift from August," she explains. "He brought them to me before my very first game and he's done it for every game since."

"That's so sweet of him." I smile.

"Yeah. He's pretty great. I get your fears though. I used to have them too. Hockey is a contact sport and everyone knows it can get rough but if it helps at all, I can tell you the guys are more than prepared each time they take the ice. They know the risks but they also know how to keep

themselves as safe as possible.” She shrugs her shoulder. “After that you just have to trust they know what they’re doing and have faith everything will be just fine. If you let your nerves get the best of you, you’ll never be able to enjoy the game.”

Nodding, I consider her advice. “I suppose you’re right.” I take a deep breath and try my best to shake my nerves away. “All right. Let’s go tell the guys good luck and then I need a beer.”

Corrigan laughs. “That’s my girl.”

We say goodbye to Ella and continue down the hall toward the locker room. Scarlett pushes on the door and then shouts, “Put your balls away gentlemen! The girls have arrived.”

Harrison spots me walking in with Corrigan and Scarlett and says, “Yeah, Ollenberg! Stop slapping your balls. Your wife is here to wish you luck.”

“That’s the perfect opportunity to have my balls on display though,” he says as I round the corner. My eyes find his and then they immediately drop to his body. He stands before me wearing the bottom part of his uniform without a shirt on. His immaculately sculpted chest and strong arms making my insides flutter for reasons other than fear of him getting hurt.

“Hey Naughty.” His soft husky voice is suddenly the most attractive sound I’ve ever heard and when he opens his arm for me, I step into it without question like it’s something we do all the time. He wraps his arm around me and kisses the top of my head as I bring my hands to his back and rest my cheek on his chest.

Wow, he feels...warm.

Strong.

Protective.

Loving.

Tender.

Amazing.

I would do just about anything to never have to walk away from this embrace.

“You okay?” he murmurs in my ear and I nod my head against his surprisingly soft skin.

“Mhmm. You?”

He inhales a deep breath and to my surprise says, “I am now.”

His comment has me biting back a smile.

“Aww, Griff,” Bodhi says from the other side of the room. “Your wife’s nervous for you.”

I step out of Griffin’s embrace, but he doesn’t let go of me when I turn around to show Corrigan that if looks could kill she’d be a dead bitch right now. She merely chuckles at my expense and shrugs. “What? It’s cute!”

“You’re nervous, Naughty?” Griffin asks, peering down at me with an amused smile. “For me?”

Rolling my eyes and trying to play off my unease, I huff out a breath. “Oh, my God, she’s making a way bigger deal of this than it is.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” he says with a knowing grin.

“Okay, yes! Yes,” I acquiesce. “I’m a little nervous, okay? I know I’ve seen plenty of home games and I’ve seen you play before but this is the first time I’ve gotten to watch you play a game that isn’t in our hometown and also as...well...”

“As my wife?” He smiles, knowing he’s got me right where he wants me.

I nod. “Yes. As your wife. And I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Aww. That’s so sw—”

“Because I don’t want to deal with your cry-baby drama when you need help taking a shit,” I say, playfully punching him in his stomach.

The guys laugh but he doesn’t even budge when I hit him because clearly his abdomen is made of fucking steel. Deadpanned, he looks at me and asks, “Is your hand okay?”

I burst out a laugh. “Fuck you, you—”

“Aww, she really does love me!” He beams, wrapping both his arms around me this time in a tight hug rocking us back and forth. “Don’t worry, Naughty. I promise you won’t have to help me take a shit.”

“Glad to hear it,” I say muffled into his chest.

“But a sponge bath on the other hand...” He chuckles and I pinch his side causing him to recoil.

“You wish, big guy. You wish.”

He shrugs. “Can’t blame a husband for trying.” He releases his arms from my body and says, “Hey I have something for you.”

My brows furrow. “For me?”

“Yeah.” He reaches into his cubby space and pulls out his game jersey, unfolds it, and pulls it down over my head.

Oh. My. God!

I'm literally wearing Griffin's jersey!

With his name!

And his number!

"But don't you need this?" I ask. "In case you haven't noticed, you're not wearing the top half of your uniform."

"Nah, I'm going out like this tonight." He chuckles when I give him my best get-real expression. "Kidding. I have several others and my wife should wear my name, right? I'm sorry I didn't think to make sure you had one before we left."

"Thank you, Griffin. That's very kind of you."

He leans down and whispers in my ear so only I can hear him. "I noticed you sniffing my hoodie the other night on the way home from my parents' house."

Fuck.

He noticed that?

My cheeks heat with embarrassment. "Oh."

"It was cute as fuck and I liked it very much," he confesses. "So, I wore this one most of the day and sprayed it with my cologne. Hope that's okay."

The smile that grows across my face is all the answer he needs. He smiles back at me, nodding his head. "Good. You look hot by the way. The leggings are killer but knowing you have my name on your back?" His eyes penetrate mine with a look of hunger and desire I haven't seen from him before. Like he's stripping me down right in front of his eyes and getting a good long look at his prized reward.

And I'm his prize.

I'm his reward.

I'm his.

He shakes his head. "It does things to me, Naughty."

It does things to me too.

I rise up on my tip toes and kiss Griffin's cheek. "It does things to me too, Griffin. Good luck out there, husband. Score one for me."

"I'll score them all for you."

Holy shit are we flirting?

We're totally flirting.

And I don't hate it one bit.

Corri and Scarlett say goodbye to Bodhi and Oliver and then Corrigan hooks arms with me on our way out of the locker room.

“What in the *Outlander*-season-one-episode-seven was that just now?”

A short laugh bursts from my mouth. I love how much she loves *Outlander*, but she may be a little obsessed. “What?”

“You know what!” She smirks. “You guys looked like you were standing naked in front of each other admiring each other’s bodies.”

I shrug a shoulder and grin a little too much before I say to her, “So what if we were?”

Scarlett giggles and loops her arm with Corrigan’s other arm. “Corri, I’m willing to bet all my husband’s money that Griffin Ollenbergs won’t be sleeping on the couch tonight.”

ANAHEIM IS DOWN by two at the start of the third period and it’s not because the guys are playing like shit. Both teams have been intense since the start, which has made for quite a fun game. Griffin took a few checks to the glass that made me jump out of my seat each time, but he recovered quickly and kept playing.

How they do that, I’ll never know.

Griffin’s down low in Boulder territory when August gets control of the puck and passes to him. He shoots the puck off his stick toward Harrison but it’s blocked by Boulder. Oliver battles on the inside and then the puck is loose. Boulder sprints for it but it’s still loose when August takes control again and shoots it toward Griffin who circles around the net and takes a shot.

“Dammit!”

Blocked again.

“Come on Griffin!” I shout through my cupped hands hoping he can hear me but knowing the chance is low.

The puck banks off the net and Griffin passes to Oliver who sweeps it to Harrison and then it’s back to Griffin again. He crosses back in front of the net this time, pivots his foot, and shoots the puck right between the goalie’s legs and scores.

I lift my arms over my head and jump up and down cheering in excitement as I shout, “Yes! That’s my husband! Way to go Griffin!”

How does he make it look so damn easy?

We watch as the guys surround him for a quick hug and a helmet tap and when he's free from his brothers on the ice, he turns and looks directly to where I'm sitting, lifts his hand, and points at me as he skates away.

"Aww." Corrigan brings her hand to her chest. "Oh, my God he just acknowledged you, Layken!"

As cocky as can be, I bob my head and smile as I say, "Well, I am his wife after all."

Scarlett laughs. "Listen to this girl. Not even married a month and she already knows how to play the game."

"Speaking of weddings..." I turn to Scarlett who is sipping her beer. "When the hell are you and Oliver getting married? Haven't you been together a few years now?"

She nods. "Yep."

"Okay...and? Do you need lessons on how to have a shot-gun wedding? 'Cause I got you girl if that's the case."

"Hell no," she says, shaking her head. "Our wedding will be an extravagant and over the top affair after the season is over because I want my new husband and his extraordinary bedroom skills all to myself for a solid few weeks before he has to get back to the ice."

"That's fair." I nod. "You guys both deserve it for sure."

The final period begins with another face-off, but this one Oliver loses and the puck is sent down the ice toward Barrett. Boulder's Sanderson shoots it to Chetlikov but Griffin and Harrison are on him in an instant defending their net any way they can. Chetlikov loses possession to Ledger who sends it to August. Harrison skates to the bench to end his shift and Bodhi jumps into the action, sprinting to defend Barrett. Chetlikov gets the puck again and shoots but the puck flies behind the net. Barrett pivots to retrieve it but Boulder's Henning is coming too fast and knocks Barrett right off his feet.

"What the fuck?" I shout, gesticulating my displeasure at their foul play.

Clearly the rest of the team feels the same way because Oliver starts a fight on the ice as Barrett slowly lifts himself back to his feet.

"Make them fucking pay Magellan!" Scarlett shouts.

Gloves and helmets come off and punches are thrown. Every player on the ice is packed into a small space around the net leaving Barrett vulnerable once again. Referees blow their whistles and send both Henning and Oliver to the penalty box but the adrenaline is pumping and the energy

is high. The entire arena is on their feet as the play continues with two less players on the ice.

Bodhi's got the puck and passes to Griffin but Boulder intercepts it by checking Griffin hard into the glass. He slips and falls on his side just as Ledger comes speeding into the zone fighting for the puck with Chetlikov. Sticks clash and bodies rock and I see Griffin lift himself to his knees and then raise his arm to get his stick and then without knowing what the hell is happening, I see him grip his wrist and bend over. When he lets go of his arm for a moment blood splatters on the ice.

"Oh my God!" I gasp, bringing my hands to my mouth. "What just happened?"

Bodhi circles around Griffin and helps him to his feet, his glove covering his arm, blood splattered down his jersey.

"He got cut, it looks like," Corrigan answers, watching on with me. Our eyes teeter between Griffin and the jumbotron hoping to see a playback.

"Where? Is he okay?" Bile rises in my throat as I look on in horror. "He's going to be okay, right?"

Bodhi and Ledger help Griffin off the ice and then he's swept down the tunnel and out of sight. There's a quick replay on the jumbotron that looks like Griffin lifts his arm to grab his stick at the same time Chetlikov leans for the puck. When Chetlikov lifts his right foot off the ice, his skate blade slices Griffin's arm.

Fuck!

Corrigan cringes. "Damn, I bet that one hurt."

"What do I do? Is he okay? It's just a cut, right?"

Scarlett nods with a sympathetic smile. "Yeah, babe. Just a cut. I mean it'll be deep and will probably need stitched but I imagine he'll be back in the game if he can get back."

To my surprise, Griffin only misses about two minutes of game play given Boulder's time out before he's back on the ice.

"No way did they stitch that," Scarlett says, huffing a laugh and shaking her head.

"This late in the game?" Corrigan asks. "You're right. He probably told them to bandage the hell out of it until the game is over."

Of course that's what he would do.

God forbid he miss his time on the ice.

Because my husband is a fucking beast.

But I hope he's okay.

"You know," Corrigan says, his brows arched, "Griffin's going to need a really good night's sleep after that tragic accident. His wrist is probably going to be super sore."

"Totally." Scarlett nods. "I imagine the only thing that would make that cut worse is having to rest his arm on the floor all night. Or worse, an uncomfortable couch."

"Yeah. I mean, what if dirt from the floor gets down into those stitches?" Corrigan asks.

Scarlett points to Corrigan. "Could get infected."

"Right?"

"Yeah."

I roll my eyes. "Oh, my God, you two! I hear you loud and clear, all right? I promise, I can take good care of my husband, thank you very much."

"Oh, we know you can." Corrigan says, smirking as she leans over and nudges me with her shoulder.

Scarlett nudges from the other side. "And you will."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GRIFFIN

“Son of a bitch,” I cringe when Darius Clayton, our athletic trainer, peels off the bandages I begged him to wrap around my left wrist so I could get back out to the game. He wasn’t in favor of my returning to the game, but there was no way in hell I was going to miss the last couple minutes when we were still down by one point.

Not that it mattered anyway.

We lost.

I guess we can’t win them all but then again yes, we fucking can.

And we should.

Darius whistles, taking a quick look at the result of getting sliced by a skate blade. “Yeah that’s going to hurt for a few days. Let me get this cleaned up and then it’s going to need a few stitches.”

He takes his time cleaning the wound and then numbs it a little before he starts stitching.

“Hey Griff, you all right, man?” August raps on the open door to the exam room.

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“Scared me there for a minute.”

“You’re telling me.” I huff a laugh. “If I had my head down any lower he could’ve gotten my fucking neck.”

It’s the first thing I thought of when Chetlikov’s skate made contact with my skin. It didn’t hurt the moment it happened, but once I was able to

tell myself it was just my wrist and not my neck, reality snapped back into place and it hurt like a fucking bitch. Once I got off the ice, I took one look at Darius in the tunnel and told him to wrap as much gauze around it as he could as fast as he could because I needed to get back out there. Stephens grabbed me a new pair of gloves and a fresh jersey, helped me out of my bloodied one and into a new one and off I went.

“August?” a female’s voice rings out from outside the door. “How’s Griffin? Do you know?” August leans out and gestures with his head in my direction. “Hey babe. He’s in here.”

Ella leans her head in, the rest of her still in her costume, her forehead creased with worry. “Hey! Heard you got cut. You okay?”

“Nothing my man Darius here can’t fix.”

Ella brings her hand to her chest. “Phew! I didn’t get to see what happened. Just heard you got hurt. Glad you’re okay.” Her smile grows and her brows wag. “Guess your wife’s going to have to take great care of you now, huh?”

“Hmm.” I grin. “Now that you mention it, I don’t think I can use my arm much so...yeah I think I’m going to need her help.”

“Ella!”

Speak of the devil...

I’d know Scarlett’s voice anywhere. And my guess is, where there’s a Scarlett, there’s a Layken.

“Have you seen Griffin yet? His wife is hellaworried about him.”

“Oh, my God, you guys,” my wife scoffs, but I can hear the tremble in her voice. “I am not hellaworried.”

Always trying to be the brave one.

I take one look at Darius and quickly say, “Whatever I’m about to do, just go with it.”

Darius doesn’t even get to respond before I’m screaming from the exam room. “Ah, fuck! That fucking hurts!”

“I know man.” Darius nods immediately playing along. “Just a few more. I’m sorry Griff. They fucked up your arm bad!”

Layken comes shooting around the corner and into the exam room, her eyes wide with panic. “Griffin? Oh, my God! Are you okay?”

Darius looks up at my gorgeous wife and tells her, “I’m stitching it up so you can say goodbye, but in my professional opinion, I think it’s going to have to be chopped.”

She stares at Darius unreactive and then cocks her head, glances down to where he's putting stitches in my wrist, and then looks up at my face.

And then she whacks my other arm.

"Son of a fucking bitch, Griffin Ollenbergl I thought you were seriously hurt!"

Everyone laughs. Even Layken breaks a smile but she shakes her head pissed that she fell for my bullshit. "I hate you all."

"Aww, don't be mad, Naughty." I pull her in and kiss her temple. "It was very sweet of you to worry, but I'm good. Just a scratch."

"A scratch?" she repeats, eyeing my stitches. "Somehow I think it's a little more than just a scratch."

"Don't worry." I lift my good hand. "I wipe my ass right-handed so all is well."

That gets her to laugh. "Thank God for that."

"All good, Griff," Darius tells me as he wraps my stitches in a plastic bandage. "You're good to shower but try to keep it from getting soaked if you can for the first twenty-four hours or so. After that..." I give Darius a glaring look that hopefully says *Dude, help a brother out!* And then he clears his throat, his eyes moving between Layken and me, and changes his tune. "Actually, you're good to shower now with this on, but keep your arm outside the water. Once you're at home though," he says, looking straight at Layken, "he may need a little help. It really is best to keep the stitches as dry as possible."

Yep.

That's what I needed to hear.

And that's what I needed my wife to hear too.

Before she can even argue with his suggestive instructions, I jump down from the exam table with a hearty, "Will do, boss," and grab Layken's hand, ignoring any possible perturbed eyeroll she might be giving the both of us.

"THAT CHETLIKOV WAS AN ASSHOLE," Ledger says, tipping back his small glass of whiskey. Not wanting to go out after the game, the team traveled back to the hotel where food was waiting for us. We chowed down on steak, baked potatoes, and salads and then some of us decided to grab a much-

needed drink in the hotel's bar. Lucky for us, this bar isn't the ritzy type with fancy seats and a stuffy atmosphere. This one is very much a relaxed sports bar with screens everywhere showing different sporting events from women's basketball to hockey to downhill skiing. There's a group sitting quietly in the corner booth, dressed up and likely coming from some sort of event, and there's a group of louder drinkers at a table behind us. I'm guessing they're college guys. Maybe a collegiate sports team of some sort.

The ladies wanted to change before coming down for a drink so I came down ahead of them with Bodhi, Harrison, August, and Ledger. Bear's off sulking somewhere since he tends to take our losses as a personal fail on his part, and Oliver is helping Scarlett with one of her vlogs.

"No kidding," Harrison says with a nod, replying to Ledger. "And honestly, Henning wasn't much better. Those guys were brutal. Much more so today than I remember them being in the past."

"Henning was just out to prove himself to the organization," Bodhi tells us, his arm resting on the back of Corrigan's chair at the bar. "They were talking about trading him and I don't think he wants to go. He likes it in Boulder."

"Yeah I heard that too," August says. "And I guess it doesn't surprise me that they upped their game this time around. Remember how much we kicked their asses last time?"

I chuckle. "Wasn't it like six nil the last time we played them?"

August nods. "Yep. Most boring game I've ever played I think. And they didn't have Chetlikov last time."

Movement to my right has me turning my head to find the ladies finally walking into the bar. Next to Ella, Layken looks adorably casual yet incredibly sexy in her black leggings and pink cropped sweater that hangs off her shoulder. I stare at the part of her shoulder peeking out from the fabric wishing I could lean down and run my tongue across it. She flicks her hair back behind her and I imagine myself wrapping the long silky strands around my hand and giving it a tug from behind her.

"Dude," August murmurs next to me. "You've got it bad."

I tip back the rest of my drink. "What?"

He laughs. "You've got the words I-want-her written across your forehead in big bold print."

"Psst, hey," Harrison leans forward beside August and says to me, "I don't know what August just said to you, but if it wasn't something about

how very obviously attracted you are to your wife, then can you pretend I said those words to you just now?"

Bodhi raises his hand. "Ditto that."

I glance back and forth between my friends. "What the fuck, guys?"

Ledger glances down the row at me and cocks his head. "Dude. Griff. Don't deny it." He smiles and huffs a soft laugh. "It's obvious. It was obvious in the locker room before tonight's game and it's even more obvious now."

They're right.

I know they're right.

There's no use denying it.

I haven't done the best job trying to hide it.

"Fuck." I run my hand through my hair, continuing to watch Layken as she laughs with the ladies while they order their drinks on the other side of the bar. Her big brown eyes find mine and somehow they pull me in like she's some magical mystical being and I'm her prey. "I'm attracted to my wife."

August pats me on the back. "Yeah man, we know."

"Yeah, but I'm..." I sigh. "I'm really fucking attracted to her."

"Nothing wrong with that, Griff," Bodhi adds.

Ledger lifts his hand to one of the bartenders and then slides his empty glass onto the bar asking for another. "Does she know?"

Uh...

I shrug my shoulder. "Honestly I don't know. I mean I try to say things around her but then I get fucking nervous because I don't want to say the wrong thing but also I'm me, you know?" I bring a hand to my chest. "I'm good at flirting. I used to pick up women on the regular and now...since the day she knocked on my door looking like this pathetically sad, but fucking adorable person, she's the only one I've wanted. The only female I've thought about in...weeks? A month?" I shrug again. "I don't know. However long it's been since she literally walked into my life."

Bodhi shakes his head. "She feels the same, man. I can promise you that."

"How the hell do you know that though?"

"Well first of all, we all saw the way she was looking at you in the locker room today," he recounts.

August adds, "Plus the way she was so worried about you after the game."

That was pretty fucking cute.

"And lastly," Bodhi says, "Corrigan told me as much while you guys were giving each other googly eyes in the locker room. I just didn't have the time to talk to you about it and I knew we needed to focus on the game."

"So, it's a thing then?" I ask him point blank, my brows arching in anticipation. "She's interested? She likes me?"

He nods grinning at me. "It's a thing. She's into you, man. She just hasn't said the words yet."

Thank you Jesus!

Let's go!

A wave of renewed confidence comes over me and I stand a little taller. "Well...all right then. This changes everything."

August cocks a brow. "It does?"

"Yep." I nod, watching her across the bar. "If my wife wants to play, I'll play."

Once the ladies have their drinks, they make their way around the bar. August, Bodhi, and I have empty chairs available in front of us for the ladies to sit in, but as Layken steps toward her awaiting seat, a man moves in front of her.

"Hey,"

Who the fuck is this guy?

Layken acknowledges the man and smiles. "Hi."

My gut instinct is to go ape-shit alpha on this guy talking to my wife. I can absolutely be the douchey she-belongs-to-me-type but she makes eye contact with me enough to let me know she's got this under control.

I know you do, Naughty.

And if you don't, I'm right here.

"If you don't mind my saying so, you've got the sexiest ass I've ever seen. Can I buy you a drink?"

What the fuck?

That's not how you do it buddy.

Plus that's my wife you're hitting on.

I take another sip of my beer listening to this play out, having no idea how Layken is going to respond.

Her brows arch. "Oh. You like *my* ass?"

The guy nods. "It's a beautiful ass."

She brings a hand to his cheek and smiles kindly. "Aww. That's so sweet of you. Thank you. I keep poop in there."

August, Bodhi, and I nearly choke on our drinks, mine dribbling down my chin hearing Layken's response. Corrigan and Ella look on in shock.

Oh shit!

She did not just say that!

Layken lifts her glass and tells him, "And I already have a drink, but thanks for offering. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to join my husband," she says, enunciating the word clearly. She winks at the guy. "He likes my ass too and he gets to enjoy it any time he wants."

Any other time I would be hanging on her every word about the things I could do to that perfect little ass she has, but this time, her words hit me differently. This time hundreds of emotions swirl inside my brain in response to two simple words.

My husband.

I'd like to join my husband.

She said husband.

She didn't say her friends.

She said husband.

As if we've been together for years.

It just rolled right off her tongue.

She claimed me.

She chose me.

The guy pivots and makes eye contact with me, his face turning a deep shade of red when he sees me standing so close. I lift my chin to acknowledge first that I know what he just did to my wife, and second, that I just watched her put him in his goddamn place all by herself.

My wife is fucking badass and I'm literally swooning over her right now.

He doesn't say a word, but admits defeat and nods respectively, his hands rising in defense before he retreats back to his seat.

When he walks away, Layken steps over to me rolling her eyes and chuckling at what just transpired. "Well, that was something, huh?"

Corrigan laughs and tells her, "Told you your ass looked amazing in those leggings."

Everyone gives her well-deserved kudos, but all I can do is stare at her, expressionless.

My chest is tight and my pulse is racing and I'm finding it hard to swallow. All I can think about right now is what it would feel like to kiss her right here, right now.

I'd like to join my husband.

The urge to claim her hits me like a freight train and it's taking every ounce of my self-control not to kiss the hell out of her in the middle of this bar in front of everyone.

She takes a sip of her martini and then winks at me before realizing I'm not smiling.

Bringing a hand to my chest, her grin fades and her eyes widen.

"Hey, you okay?" When I don't answer, because I can't think of the appropriate words in my head, she goes on. "I'm sorry about that. I didn't know he was..." She cocks her head, worried. "Oh, my God, did I say something wrong?"

"No." I shake my head, willing myself to smile at her, but I'm so fucking taken by her, I can't make my body do any of the things I want it to do. So instead, I force a deep breath and then weakly turn up my lips. "No. Not mad."

"Then what is it?"

I want you.

I think I love you.

You're perfect for me.

I want to kiss you.

Touch you.

Taste you.

Claim you.

Anything to just be with you.

I take a few more breaths, each one shorter than the last, as I try to decide what to say and how to say it, and then I grab her hand because I can't do this here. "Come with me."

I hand my glass to a bewildered Bodhi and tug Layken behind me as I walk out of the bar and around the first corner I come to where the area is vacant.

"Griffin, I—"

I swing around and back her up against the wall, my hips pressing into hers, our foreheads touching. One of my hands grasps her hip, my thumb feathering against the bare skin of her abdomen that peeks out of her cropped sweater. My other hand in her hair, my fingers wrapped around several soft strands.

“What’s going on?” She whimpers, her eyes trying to read mine. “Griffin, you’re scaring—”

“I’m going to kiss you Layken,” I blurt softly before taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly.

“I...I need to kiss you. N” I squeeze my eyes closed, trying to put the words together correctly in my head so I they come out right when I say them out loud. “No, I *want* to kiss you. But I didn’t want to do it in there.”

Her shoulders fall. “Wh-why not?”

Pulling my hand from her hair, I cup her cheek coaxing her gaze to mine. “Because I didn’t want you to think I was doing it just because people were watching. I’m not kissing you for them. I don’t want to kiss you for show. And I don’t give two shits about that guy in there because you did a damn fine job of putting him in his place and sending him on his way.” I gaze at her dumbfounded and in complete awe. “You chose me,” I say, a bit flabbergasted.

“You’re my husband,” she answers with nervous laughter. “Of, course I chose you.”

“But you didn’t have to,” I try to explain, knowing I’m word-vomiting and probably getting it all wrong. “I mean, you could have...we’re not...but we are...we never said...fuck, I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m doing. I get so fucking flustered when it comes to you. But I care about you and I’ve wanted to kiss you, like really fucking kiss you, for a long time. So, I’m going to kiss you because you chose me and I’m your husband and you are one hundred percent my smoking hot wife and,” I breathe, “because I fucking want to.”

She smiles, amused, and nods. “Okay.”

“Wait...” I back up a step and stare into her heated brown eyes. “Okay? Did you just say okay?”

She nods once. “I said okay.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

She’s giving me permission.

Right here in this hallway.

I know I should do this in a more private place.

I want to do it in a more private place.

But also, she's giving me fucking permission and if I don't shoot my shot now, she may not give me another chance.

My hand slips from her hip around to her perfect little ass holding her against me as she lifts her chin, her eyes closing in anticipation. Never in a million years will I be the guy who disappoints her, so I lean my head down and excitedly connect my lips to hers.

Her mouth is soft and warm. Her lips sweet, like the fruity martini she's been sipping. She curls her fingers against my chest, grabbing the material of my shirt like she fucking owns me, and hell...who am I kidding? She fucking owns me.

Her mouth parts and her tongue sneaks out and holy hell this woman can fucking slay me with the way she kisses. Wishing I could show that dumbass motherfucker in the bar who Layken belongs to, I take control of this kiss, pulling her against me as tightly as possible and dipping my tongue into her mouth. I sweep it across her lips and she meets me stroke for stroke. A spark of electricity shoots through my body and I moan against her as if I need her air to breathe. She groans into my mouth in response and suddenly my brain is an onslaught of one dirty thought after another. And then just as fast as I started this kiss, I force myself to pull back and end it.

Do not get a boner in the hotel lobby.

Watching Layken open her eyes though, I internally smile when I see how pink her cheeks are.

And how her chest rises and falls a bit quicker now.

And the fiery look in her enlarged pupils.

Hell yeah.

She's turned on.

"Well," she says, touching her swollen lips and gazing up at me, "if there's any doubt who I belong to now, then someone's not paying attention."

I'm not sure if her statement is about the guy who came on to her or if she's referring to me not picking up on her clues. Either way, it's fine.

I'm good.

"Do you ever have those times where you feel like nobody sees you? Like no matter what you do or how hard you work nobody notices?"

Layken's words from her very first night with me float back in my mind as I stare into her enchanting chocolate-colored eyes.

"What if I'm paying attention now, Naughty?" I rub my nose gently against hers. "What if I see you?"

She bites the corner of her bottom lip and glances up at me with a heated, wanting look in her eyes. "I want you to see all of me, Griffin."

Dear baby Jesus, please tell me that means what I think it means.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LAYKEN

We walk back into the bar slightly more flushed than when we left, much to the amusement of our friends, and hang out for about an hour. In that time, Griffin has been driving me absolutely batshit crazy with his slight touches.

I'll call them passive possessive.

Each pass of his fingers against my skin lights my insides on fire more than he realizes.

It's the brush of his thumb over my bare shoulder when he stands behind me at the bar. Or the feathering of his fingers along the side of my abdomen that nobody can see because I'm seated at the end of the row. It's the way he plays with my hair, the relaxing feel of him combing his hand through it but feeling claimed when he gives it a playful tug when nobody's watching.

It's a damn good thing I'm drinking and can blame my reddening cheeks on the alcohol because every time he touches me I want to turn around and beg him for more. Finally, around eleven-thirty, we say goodnight to our friends and head up to our room, his hand protectively wrapped around mine. He presses the key against the sensor and pushes the door open for me and then follows me inside.

I step over to the balcony doors, catching a glimpse of the snow-covered mountains glistening in the moonlight. With nobody on the slopes this late at night, it's a serene picture.

Griffin steps up behind me, his chest to my back, and wraps an arm around me, his palm sliding over my bare abdomen.

A crop sweater was the perfect choice tonight.

The warmth of his touch, the way he holds me with such tenderness but also a confident claim, it says all the things he doesn't say out loud.

He leans down and places three lazy kisses against my bare shoulder. "You couldn't have looked sexier in this outfit tonight if you tried, Naughty."

"No?" I ask, allowing my head to fall back against his chest.

"Hmm mmm." He kisses up my neck. "You were stunning and I wanted you all to myself."

"I know you did." I smile, watching him in the reflection of the window. "You couldn't stop touching me the whole time."

"I didn't hear you complaining."

I shake my head. "Not even a little bit."

He buries his face in my neck and inhales. "You smell so fucking good too. I can't stay away from you anymore. I don't want to stop touching you. I don't think I could if I tried."

"Well unless you're going to touch me while I pee and brush my teeth, you're going to have to, but..." I take his hand resting on my stomach and guide it up to my breast. The softness of his touch over the satiny fabric of my bra has my eyes rolling back in my head.

The sound that emanates from deep inside him is a menacing growl. "Fuck, Layken. What are you doing to me?"

"I'm not saying no, Griffin. Every time I'm near you I wish you would reach out and touch me. Claim me. Make me yours."

"So, my naughty girl wants to play."

"I do...so much."

I arch my back, pressing myself into his hold while simultaneously feeling how hard he is behind me. He chuckles when I wiggle my ass against him and pinches my nipple in response. My jaw drops and I'm the one gasping this time.

"Oh, my God."

"I'm no God, Mrs. Ollenberg," he whispers in my ear, his hand kneading my breast and rolling my nipple between his fingers. "But I am your husband and I have every intention of satisfying my wife before she sleeps tonight if that's what she desires. More than once if I have my way."

He pulls his hand slowly from underneath my sweater and then spanks my ass playfully.

“Do you want the bathroom first?”

“Yes please.”

I slip inside the bathroom, shutting the door behind me, and take care of business and wash my hands. I grab my toothbrush from my toiletry bag, forgetting that I squeezed the last of my toothpaste from my tube this morning, so I open the door to see if I can use Griffin’s.

He smirks. “Of course. It’s in my bag on the shelf.”

“Thanks.”

I pull down his black toiletry bag and unzip it, gasping at what’s inside. Next to his tube of toothpaste and bottle of cologne is the very same rainbow-colored suction-cupped vibrating dildo from my shower at home.

No. He. Didn’t.

Forgetting all about the toothpaste, I pull the toy from his bag and hold it up as I step out of the bathroom. The look on Griffin’s face tells me he’s been waiting for this moment probably since we got here yesterday.

“What is this?” I ask him, trying very hard not to grin.

He pops a brow and licks his lips before he says, “I think you know damn well what that is.”

“Allow me to rephrase, Mr. Ollenberg. Why do you have this in your toiletry bag?”

“Because Mrs. Ollenberg...” He stands from where he was seated on the edge of the bed and stalks over to me. His hand pushing back my hair as he speaks. “I haven’t been able to get the vision of you using that thing to pleasure yourself out of my head since the night you sent me into your bathroom looking for nail polish remover.”

“Is that so?”

“Mmhm.” His panty-melting smile is doing just that...melting my panties. For fuck’s sake I’m soaked for him already. “You knew damn well what you were doing that night.”

“Did I?” I ask coyly.

“Mmhm. So, I made damn sure to slip it into my bag when you were done packing just in case the opportunity were to present itself while we’re on the road.”

Narrowing my eyes, I gaze at his gorgeous face. “So, you’re admitting you stole my dildo.”

“Damn right I did. And I don’t even feel bad about it,” he murmurs with a shit-eating grin. “Now tell me what’s so great about this toy that it sits like a trophy in your shower.”

Lifting my chin, I give him the answer that I know will challenge him. “Well, you see, husband, Mr. Rainbow never goes soft,” I explain, giving him a sympathetic smile. “He’s ready for me anytime I want him.”

He swallows, biting back his smile, but I don’t miss the humor in his eyes. “Is that a slight on me? A reference to our wedding night?”

I shrug my shoulder playfully. “If the dildo fits…”

He takes my free hand and places it right over his crotch.

Holy mother of fucks...the size of him.

There’s no way he wouldn’t feel amazing inside me.

Stretching me.

Filling me.

Glancing up at Griffin, I watch his pupils dilate right in front of me. He inhales sharply when I give his bulge a squeeze and then with all the confidence in the world, he says, “You won’t be needing Mr. Rainbow tonight, Naughty. If a deep soul-shattering fuck is what you need, I’m right here. Use me.”

Holy Jesus.

Yes please.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Pinning him with a fiery gaze, I chuck Mr. Rainbow onto the bed where I can find it to put away later, and then I lift my sweater off and toss it to the floor. I rise up on my tiptoes to kiss him but he pins my arms to my sides and spins me around until the backs of my legs are hitting the mattress.

“I have one condition,” he tells me.

I let out a light chuckle and arch my brows. “So let me get this clear. You’ve been touching me all night, you’ve kissed my shoulder and my neck as well as whatever that assault was downstairs in the hallway, you touched my breasts just moments ago and I’ve already thrown some of my clothes off for you and *now* you have conditions?”

“Just one.” He nods, the heat in his eyes telling me he wants me as much as I want him.

Raising my chin, I lock eyes with my husband, frustrated that this might not work out to my liking. “Do tell Mr. Ollenberg.”

He swallows and his eyes drop, raking over my body as he speaks. "I don't fuck around, Layken. Not this time."

"What does that mean?"

"I've fucked around with women before. That's no secret." He shakes his head. "But I didn't care about them the way I care about you. I'm not fucking around with you," he says with the utmost sincerity. "I'm done playing make believe." He breathes. "I can't pretend that I'm not scarily attracted to you because I am. I fucking am."

If ever there were words that could turn me on it's all of his words.

His fingers slide along the waist band of my leggings. "There's nothing about you I'm not crazy about and I want you more than I've ever wanted anyone in my whole goddamn life." He swallows again. "But if you don't feel the same, that's fine. It's okay." He dips his hand below my pants, his fingers trailing through my now soaking wet center.

Jesus, fuck!

Yessss.

I gasp and tip my head back as he continues to whisper in my ear. "I'll pleasure you and this sexy little body anytime, anywhere, and I'll do it happily over..." He circles my clit. "And over again..." He circles again, my knees going weak. "As long as we both shall live."

"Griffin..." His name is a heated plea for more.

Please, God, so much more.

"But if you want my cock, if you want the soul-shattering fuck I'm offering you..." He plunges one finger inside me and then another, swirling them slowly as he hitches my leg against him. "Then you're mine. And I am yours. There will be nobody else because I don't share what's mine, Layken." He brings his face closer to mine, our lips merely centimeters apart, and then pulls his hand from my pants rubbing my arousal across his lips. His tongue swipes across them as he tastes me, his eyes closing in pleased enjoyment. And then they open again and he's staring at me as he repeats himself. "I. Don't. Share. What's. Mine."

Holy.

Fucking.

Balls.

The mere sound of his raspy baritone voice coupled with the knowledge that he wants me and only me sends a wildfire of lust through my body.

He wants me.

And I want him.

I don't know how this is my life but I'm going to enjoy it while it lasts.

Keeping his eyes locked with mine, I bring my hands to the zipper of his jeans and make quick work of tugging them down along with his black boxer briefs, freeing his cock.

His very large, very excited cock.

Mr. Rainbow, who?

"Lake, what are you—"

He doesn't get to finish his sentence before I'm on my knees sheathing the head of his cock with my mouth.

"Fuck." His chest rumbles when he groans. Watching me, his hand pushes through my hair to hold it back for me while giving himself the view he desires. I slide my lips down his length, rolling his balls in my hand, and swirl my tongue around his shaft, my eyes peeking up to find his. "Jesus, Naughty. You are a sight for sore eyes with my cock in your mouth like this."

I tighten my lips around him, pulling back and then sucking him back in, taking in his length until he hits the back of my throat. And then I do it all again.

"Fucking hell. Just like that," he says, encouraging me as I pleasure him.

I pick up my pace just a bit, driving him crazy as he wraps my hair around his hand and tugging it just enough to let me know he wants to take control.

And I'll let him.

Because when all is said and done, Griffin Ollenberg is mine.

To have and to hold.

From this day forth.

"Mother fucking hell..." Griffin breathes. "If fucking your tight cunt is anything like fucking this sweet mouth..."

The sound that comes out of me at his words is part whimper, part moan. What I wouldn't give to have this cock between my legs right now. Every lick, every suck, every pulse of his cock inside my mouth is soaking me. I'm dying for relief of my own but this cock is mine and I'll be damned if I don't claim his every drop to show him that.

I grab the base of his cock, squeezing it in my grasp and then quicken my pace, my lips working over his shaft faster, and with more pressure.

“Shit, Layken.” The sound of my actual name in the throes of passion brings a smile to my face. “You’re going to make me come, babe.” I slide a hand behind him, palming his ass cheek and pulling him into me, begging for the feel of the thrust.

“You want me to fuck your mouth, Naughty?”

“Mmmm,” I moan, my eyes meeting his, and grin. “Yes please!”

He tugs my hair back, lifting my head a few inches, and then thrusts his hips forward, pushing his hardened length to the back of my throat as I open wide for him.

“Fuck, Layken,” he growls. “I’m coming down that sweet throat and you’re going to swallow like a good fucking girl.”

I can’t respond with words, but I refuse to let up. My cheeks hollow as he thrusts himself between my lips at a frenzied pace until his balls tighten, his cock stiffens, and he explodes inside me, his cum filling my mouth.

“Ah, fuck. Shit.”

I swallow every last drop because he’s right, I am a good fucking girl, and then I gaze up at him and say the only word I need to say with his cock still in my hand. “Mine.”

He pulls me up and kisses me wildly, the taste of him all over my mouth. “Jesus Christ, Layken.” He shakes his head. “That was...you didn’t have to—”

“I wanted to,” I interrupt him. Proud of myself I tell him, “And now that I’ve licked it, and sucked it, and swallowed it, it’s mine. For better or worse. Until death do us part.”

I don’t think I’ve ever seen Griffin so relieved and happy since I’ve known him. “Thank God.” Combing his hand through my hair, he lowers his head and captures my lips with his in a lazy but hungry kiss. He brings his hands behind my back and unclasps my bra, letting it fall to the floor, and then he’s lifting me and tossing me onto the bed.

I giggle as he stands at the foot of the mattress, stepping out of the pants I helped pull down, and glance down at his impressive cock happy to see it at the ready again so quickly.

A far cry from our wedding night.

“That’s right, Naughty,” he says, reaching over the bed and hooking his fingers into my leggings, yanking them off with one fell swoop. “When I said you wouldn’t need Mr. Rainbow tonight, I meant it.”

“Glad to hear it,” I tell him. “Because I want you to fuck me like I’m yours.”

I worry momentarily about the stitches in his wrist and am about to offer to be on top, but he answers my internal questions when he flips me over with ease and then spanks me before pulling my legs toward the edge of the bed.

“It would be my pleasure. On your knees, Naughty.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GRIFFIN

Seeing her perky little ass in the air for me makes me feel like I'm the king of the goddamn world. My hand splayed between her shoulder blades, I push her chest to the mattress and slide my hands down her back and between her cheeks until I reach the glistening warmth between her legs. With two fingers I spread her open and stroke my tongue through her arousal, circling her clit as she whimpers in my hold.

"So, fucking sweet." I lean over her body, my fingers delving inside her, and whisper in her ear all the things I plan to do to her. "Once I grab a condom I'm going to claim this tight cunt once and for all, Naughty."

"No condom," she says breathily. "I'm your wife, Griffin. I'm clean and I've been on the pill for years. No condom."

"You're sure?" I ask her a bit taken aback. I've never been bare inside a woman before. I've always been responsible.

"Yes. One hundred percent. I want to feel you. All of you."

Fuck yes.

My dick just stiffened even more.

"In that case," I murmur giving her ass a quick spank. "I'm going to claim this pussy fast and I'm going to claim it hard and then with my cum inside you, I will spend the rest of this goddamn night claiming every last inch of your precious sexy body."

"Yes," she hisses. "Please, Griffin, don't make me wait any longer."

"I'd hold on tight if I were you. This might be a little rough."

She wiggles her pretty ass and I spank her one more time and then I line myself up at the entrance of her pussy and thrust inside her.

“Oh, my God!” she moans.

“Jesus,” I pant.

She’s so fucking tight.

Gripping me like a goddamn vise.

I give her a couple small thrusts, stretching her, feeling her, filling her, reveling in the pressured warmth against my veined cock.

“So, fucking good.”

She whines, grasping the sheets around her. “Griffin.”

“How does that feel, Naughty?”

“Like the best thing that’s ever happened to me. But I need more.”

“Good.” I smile behind her and then reach around her body to palm her breasts, my thumbs brushing over her nipples. “I need more too.”

She cries out as I drive forward, the sound of her voice a choked garble. “Oh, fuck! Griffin!”

We’re skin on skin.

The sound of our bodies slapping together surrounds us both as we reach for the high we’re chasing. A sound I will never tire of.

“Griff! Oh God! I can’t. It’s too...Oooh.” A loud extended groan rips through her throat as her pussy clenches around my cock, squeezing me.

“Fuck. Fuck. Naughty, I’m going to come.”

My mind turns to mush, as it regularly does when I’m with this beautiful woman, and my chest starts to tingle. There’s a spark in the base of my spine that shoots through my body as I continue thrust after glorious thrust. And then suddenly my balls are tightening and my jaw drops and I’m pulling her body up so her back is against my chest, my hands over her soft breasts and I’m coming so hard I nearly black out.

“Mine,” I pant, resting my forehead on her back and kissing her heated skin. “You’re mine, Layken Ollenberg. My fucking gorgeous wife.”

She sighs as I lower her body back to the mattress and rolls over so she can gaze into my eyes. “One thousand percent, yours.”

THE NEXT THREE days are some of the happiest I can remember being. The team continuing on our string of away games, we've crossed the country stopping in Atlanta, Boston, and Detroit. All wins for us, thank God. Though Layken stays behind at the hotel during the day so she can write, she comes to every game with the ladies, cheering us on and giving me the extra oomph I need to skate faster, play harder. And each night following our win, she and I have our own celebrations fucking for all hours of the night. I've gotten to know her body better than any woman I've ever shared space with and each time I get the opportunity to be intimate with her it's like I'm learning something new all over again.

Like the way she orgasms harder if she's on her back with her knees pulled into her chest. She likes that position. Or how she likes her nipples pinched when she's riding my cock on top of me. Or the way she sometimes rubs at her clit on her own as I'm fucking her because the stronger the sensation, the better the orgasm for her which in turn makes it fucking glorious for me.

We've snuggled every night afterwards, talking until neither one of us can keep our eyes open. She's touched every part of me, inside and out, and I've worshipped every part of her.

Our last game of the stretch is Milwaukee and then I get to take my wife home where I can begin to give her everything she could ever want. Everything she desires. Never in my wildest dreams did I see my life this way. With the wife of my dreams cheering me on when I'm on the ice and then celebrating with me all over again when we're alone. Layken is someone I know without a doubt I can be myself with when we're together. And I can't wait to tap into a new normal with her.

The team waits in the tunnel as Lumin, our team mascot does some sort of pregame competition with Pete the Parrot, the team mascot for the Milwaukee Pirates. The arena erupts with applause as Ella comes off the ice and into the tunnel. She gives each of us a high five and then pats August's ass and then it's game on for all of us.

There's no score in the first period but we regroup and come back to start the second period with an agenda we have every intention of following through on. After the second face off of the period there's back pressure from Milwaukee's offense but we work around them and take control of the puck. I drop it back, giving August and Ledger a little wiggle room to infiltrate their net before I pass. The puck shifts to Harrison and then back

to me and I send it down the seam but it banks off the net and flies toward Ledger who slides into position. He stops, spins a shot, and scores!

“Hell yeah!” I’m the first one of us to Ledger, wrapping my arms around him and patting his helmet. Way to fucking go, Dayne!”

“Let’s fucking go, Dayne!” Harrison beams. “We’ve got this. Keep it up.”

The next face off is won by Oliver and every one of us is sprinting down the ice trying to repeat our last scoring play. Oliver sends the puck to Ledger who shoots it across the ice to August, but Milwaukee’s right winger, Harlingson, flies by me and takes possession.

“Fuck!”

I’m on Harlingson’s tail as a battle for the puck happens against the wall. Oliver, Ledger, August, and now Bodhi are all vying to get their stick in the action in hopes of coming out victorious. Bodhi finally comes out on top, passing the puck across the ice to me, but out of nowhere I’m checked into the glass by one of their players so hard I lose my breath, hit my head against the glass, and fall in a heap on the ice.

Fuck!

I can’t breathe.

The action of the game plays on around me in a blur. I know I need to get myself off the ice, but I can’t get my body to move. I try to fill my lungs enough to get myself up but every breath feels heavier than the last. My chest stings every time I try to inhale.

Come on, Ollenberg.

Fucking breathe!

Why-why can’t I...

I can’t catch...

Fuck, I can’t breathe.

“Hey! Ollenberg’s down!” I hear Ledger shout before the whistle blows but even the pause in the game is no use. I can’t catch my breath and panic is washing over me.

“You alright, Griff?” Ledger’s down on one knee over my body trying to assess the situation and I can’t even tell him what’s going on. All I can do is look at him in sheer panic as I try everything I can to take a deep breath.

Ledger sees the fear in my eyes and grabs my arm. “It’s going to be fine. You’re okay. You’re okay man. I got you.” I see him waving his hand toward the bench and know he’s frantically waving for Darius.

In two seconds, Darius is at my side. "Talk to me Griff."

I make a motion to my chest where it fucking hurts and take teeny tiny breaths, anything to fucking keep myself alive. I don't want to black out.

This isn't how I go out.

This is just temporary.

I'm going to be fine.

But fuck! It fucking hurts!

Breathe dammit!

Darius rolls me slightly and somehow by the grace of God, I can gasp a deep breath and when I do, I scream in pain louder than I think I ever have on the ice.

Darius does a quick assessment and finally I can talk enough to tell him what's going on.

"My ribs. My lungs. Fuck, Darius."

"All right. I've got you, man. We've got to get you off the ice and into the exam room. Can you make it or do we need a stretcher?"

My mind immediately goes to Layken.

Her beautiful face.

Her smiling at me this morning after the orgasm I gave her.

And then her fear when I cut my arm a couple nights ago.

"No stretcher."

I don't want to scare Layken.

She's seen me get hurt twice now.

"Get me up. I'll make it happen."

Darius nods and then glances up at Bodhi and Ledger already at my side. They both help me to my feet and escort me, hunched over, off the ice to the applause of the arena. Knowing where Layken and the girls are sitting, I lift my arm in their direction in hopes they'll see I'm okay and tell Layken not to worry.

"Looks like you lucked out with a few bruised ribs," Darius tells me after a full exam and x-ray. "It appears when you got checked, he rammed right into your ribs and then you hit them again when you went down. The one-two punch did you no favors, Griff, I'm sorry."

I shake my head. "Hey, bruised ribs are better than broken ribs. I'll take it. When can I get back on the ice?"

Darius gives me a stern glance. "You're out for at least two weeks and then we'll reevaluate."

“Two weeks?” I scoff, wincing with the pain. “Come on, you’ve got to get me out there faster than that.”

He pins me with his stare. “You want broken ribs on your next fall?”

My shoulders slump and I let out a painful sigh. “No.”

“Then two weeks. And two weeks is the best possible outcome. It may be more. In the meantime, you’re not working out either. You can take an ice bath and you can walk and then you can relax as much as possible. Try to take deep breaths when you can. No strenuous exercise.”

I nod and start to climb down from the exam table when he puts his hand on my shoulder. “Griff?”

“Yeah boss?”

“That includes sex.”

Aww man.

Come the fuck on.

“You know I’m really starting to hate you, right?”

Darius grins, nodding his understanding. “I love you right back big guy. Thanks for making me earn my paycheck.”

Fucker.

“WE MADE IT.” Layken pulls into my parking spot and then puts the car in park before looking over at me with a tired smile. Adrenaline got me through leaving the arena and boarding the plane but once we got up into the air, the pain meds Darius gave me zonked me out pretty hard. Layken was clearly shaken when she saw me after the game but she didn’t panic. She asked Darius a few questions about helping me around the house and then took charge. Usually, a confident woman turns me on but right now I’m anything but aroused.

I’m pissed.

I’m pissed that we even went to Milwaukee.

I’m pissed at the asshole who checked me into the wall.

I’m pissed that my body couldn’t take the blow.

Really I’m just pissed with myself.

I should’ve seen it coming.

I should’ve been aware of my surroundings.

Maybe I could've gotten out of the way.

"Sit tight, I'll help you out." Layken pats my leg but I scowl at her and shake my head as I open my door.

"I don't need help," I mumble. "I'm fine."

She gets a good look at the don't-fuck-with-me expression on my face and quietly nods. "Okay."

I do all I can not to cringe at the pain of turning my torso to get out of the car.

Fucking ribs.

"I'll get our bags," she says, hopping out on her side.

She leaves me to get myself out of the car which I appreciate and moves to the back to grab her suitcase, my suitcase, and my gym bag.

"Give me one of those." I tell her when I slowly step around the back of the car.

She huffs a laugh. "Oh, not a chance, big guy. I've got this."

"Layken," I scoff. "You don't need to be carrying my shit. I can do it just fine."

"I'm sure you can," she says, ignoring me as she closes and locks the hatch and then proceeds to the elevators. "But you're not going to."

Watching her walk into the building with two suitcases, a backpack, and my huge gym bag makes her look like some sort of packrat. It also makes me feel like a fucking loser.

"Layken—"

"Mr. Ollenberg." She turns on me, her business-like stare reaching intimidation level. "Do you want to fuck me the way you've been fucking me these past couple days?"

My shoulders slump and I tilt my head, a hopeless feeling washing over me. "You know I do."

"Then let me fucking carry your bags and help you wherever I can so you can heal, all right?" I stare at her wide-eyed and taken aback. She's not usually this...demanding. "You don't have to do all this on your own, Griffin. I know you *can* do it, but you don't need to." She gestures to my body. "I can't fix bruised ribs and I can't heal stitched wrists, but..." she blows her hair out of her face, "but I can do this. I can carry shit and move shit and get you more shit whenever you ask for it, okay? I can do this. Please let me." Her gaze is pleading now and I suddenly feel bad for making her feel like I don't want her around.

We step onto the elevator and she punches the button for my floor.

"I'm sorry," I tell her, cupping her cheek. "I'm sorry, Layken. I didn't mean to be a dick."

"You're not a dick." She gives me a sympathetic smile. "And you're allowed to be grumpy. You took a beating out there today. If it had happened to me, I'd be a sad sack of potatoes right now and all I'd want to do is bitch and sleep."

I grunt a silent laugh but even that hurts. "Sounds about right."

"Just remember that I'm here to help you because I care about you, okay? Please don't push me away just because you're grumpy and hurting. I can't fix you, but I can help you." Her imploring eyes melt me and I give her the tiniest of nods. "Okay. Thank you."

She folds her hand over mine as the doors close. "You're welcome."

We ride the elevator in silence and I mull over my thoughts until the bell dings for my floor. I unlock my apartment door and hold it open wide enough for Layken to carry everything in. She drops my gym bag on the floor.

"I'll wash all that tomorrow," she reports.

"Okay."

She drops her backpack on the couch and then grabs our suitcases to deliver to our respective rooms.

"Will you stay with me?" The question comes out of my mouth like a worried little child when she returns to the living room. A tingling feeling shoots through my chest that has nothing to do with my bruised ribs.

She cocks her head at my question, her brows furrowed. "Did you think I was going to leave you here alone?"

I shake my head. "I meant will you stay with me, in my room? Will you sleep in my bed?"

"Oh." Her brows arched now, she considers my request. "Is that what you want?"

I pull her into my chest and she steps into me, tenderly wrapping her arms around me careful not to apply too much pressure. "Yeah, Naughty. It's what I want. As far as I'm concerned, I don't want you to sleep anywhere else but with me ever again." I smooth my hand down her hair and kiss the top of her head.

"I'll go wherever you want me to go."

"I don't want to fall asleep without you," I tell her.

Something about having her near makes me feel calm.

Wanted.

Loved.

“Okay. Then I’ll stay with you. Are you ready for bed now?”

I nod. “Actually yeah. I’m exhausted. Not sure how comfortable it’ll be but...”

She brings her hands to my chest. “Well, let me get you a few pain relievers and some water first and then we can figure it out together.”

Tipping her chin with my finger, I gaze down at the woman who is singlehandedly changing my life and press my lips to hers, my thumb tracing the edge of her jaw, my hand resting on the column of her throat.

“Thank you, Layken.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

LAYKEN

When I brought my body pillow into Griffin's room last night for him to use so he could comfortably sleep on one side, I didn't consider the fact he would deposit it on the floor and simply wrap himself around me instead.

But here we are.

I'm the human body pillow.

Griffin's head rests on my chest, his body encapsulating mine, our legs intertwined as he sleeps peacefully. I drag my fingers lazily through his hair as the events of last night's game play over and over again in my mind.

Trying to keep track of the puck.

Celebrating Ledger's score.

Watching the action was so much fun.

Until it wasn't.

Seeing Griffin checked into the wall wasn't like anything I hadn't seen before. He gets checked all the time. That's hockey. But the speed and force with which he was hit last night frightened the hell out of me.

Watching him fall lifeless to the ice scared the shit out of me even more.

Was he breathing?

Did he break his neck?

His arm?

His leg?

Was he bleeding?

Would he be able to get up?

And then when Darius rolled him over and he screamed, I swear the entire arena heard it.

Seeing him in so much pain was heart breaking.

Waiting for him outside the locker room after the game was hard because I knew he was in pain and would want to get out of there as soon as possible but I also knew the guys were worried about him too. And they're his family. But when he finally came out, and our eyes locked, his expression told me all I needed to know.

He needed me.

He wanted me.

He knew I would be right by his side and that's all that mattered to him.

And that's all that matters to me now.

Griffin's phone dings on the nightstand beside me. Hearing it reminds me that I took his phone last night and put it with mine so if he got notifications while he was sleeping they wouldn't disturb him.

He deserves to sleep.

His body needs the rest.

When the screen lights up, I lift the phone not to necessarily read the message but to at least see who's texting him. If it's someone I can talk to on his behalf, I'm more than willing.

MOM

I need to hug my son so we're on our way. Be there in about forty-five minutes.

MOM

We love you Griffin! ❤️

Oooh no!

They're coming here?

Shit!

My mind quickly goes through a mental checklist of what I might need to do to prepare before they get here. To Griffin's family, he and I are happily married and madly in love. And while this weekend did take a few steps toward that end path, we're still living this lie.

And now it's up to me to keep it going.

As quickly and smoothly as I possibly can, I slip from Griffin's grasp moving my own pillow into his arms as a replacement.

The most important thing I should do is move my stuff from the guest room in here to Griffin's room. If we're a happily married couple, there would be no reason for me to use the guest room. His mom didn't say if they were planning to spend the night or not so I should be prepared for either scenario.

Forty-five minutes is not a lot of time.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I slide on a pair of Griffin's pajama pants and then stop myself taking a deep breath.

Stay calm.

You can do this.

Everything will be fine.

There's more than enough time.

I shuffle down the hall to the guest bedroom and grab a sports bra to put on along with a fresh t-shirt and then I brush my teeth and pull my hair up to a messy bun. Reminding myself that Griffin's parents aren't like mine and won't care one bit if I'm dressed down, I get to work moving my stuff out of the room. With a handful of my dress clothes on hangers, I creep back into Griffin's room and open his closet doors.

Holy shit.

It's immaculate in here.

I don't think I've ever known a man, other than my own father, whose closet is as organized as Griffin's.

"What' cha doing Naughty?" Griffin's sleepy voice comes from the other side of the door.

"Moving in," I grunt as I shove his clothes over to hang mine. When I peek past the closet door, I find Griffin wide awake watching me. He looks a bit tired still but also amused.

He brings an arm up behind his head, his chiseled chest on full display, the dark purple bruising along the side of his torso making me wince. "Whoa. God Griffin, that looks..." I shake my head, the right words not coming to mind.

He tries to look down at it too but simply shrugs his shoulder. "Meh. It's just a bruise. I'll be fine eventually." He lifts his chin, gesturing to his closet. "You know it's only eight-thirty, right?"

"Yep." I nod.

He folds back the blankets and pats the empty space next to him. “Then why don’t you get your sweet ass back in this bed so I can cuddle with you for the whole damn day? I have nowhere I have to be so we could literally snuggle or eat food and watch television all day.”

I climb onto the bed, careful to steer clear of Griffin’s ribs, and kiss his lips. Not enough for him, he pulls me over his lap so I’m straddling him, but I respond with a pointed glare.

“Darius said no sex.”

“I know.” The sound that comes from his throat is a mixture of a sigh and a growl. “But I like feeling you on my cock.

His candidness makes me blush as does the tiny lift of his pelvis underneath me. “Griffin...”

“Naughty...” He chuckles but then winces, maneuvering his body to find a comfortable position.

“We’re not doing this. I don’t want to hurt you anymore than you already are.” I lift myself off of him but he grabs my hips and holds me down.

“And I promise you’re not. You’re perfect right here. I just want to look at your beautiful face.” He takes me in from top to bottom and smiles. “I like the messy bun look. You’re adorable.”

“And I like the whole chiseled abs adonis look you’ve got going on here,” I tell him, feathering my fingers lightly down his chest. I definitely don’t miss his eyes rolling back in his head or the “Mmmm...” that rumbles in his chest at my touch.

“But I need to tell you something.”

His eyes open and his gaze meets mine. “Okay.”

Cringing slightly, I tell him about the text message from his mom. “So, you’re parents are on their way. They’ll be here in about...” I glance at his alarm clock. “Twenty minutes or so.”

“Perfect.”

I lift my brows. “Perfect? You mean that doesn’t make you panic?”

He shrugs. “Why should it? They’re my parents. I’m sure Mom just wants to make sure I’m alive. They’ve seen me after much worse injuries, but I’m not surprised they want to see me. It must be a mom thing.”

I’m not sure my mom cares whether I’m alive or not...

“But...”

“Apartment’s clean,” he says, going through a mental checklist. “We can order food or Mom will most likely show up with something. There’s never a need to dress up. We keep things pretty casual so...” He runs his hands up my thighs, slipping his fingers into the waist band of the pajama pants I’m wearing and then tugs on them. “That gives me roughly...fifteen minutes for you to get up here and sit on my face so I can eat my breakfast.”

I burst out a laugh. “Get out of here. You are not even serious right now.”

With a wagging brow and a playful smirk on his face he responds, “Oh I’m dead serious.”

“But Darius—”

“Said no sex,” he finishes my sentence. “No sex with my cock, blah blah blah. No thrusting or getting myself out of breath.” He shakes his head. “But he gave no such parameters for my tongue, so get the fuck up here, Naughty. I’m starving.”

GRIFFIN’S the one who answers the door when his parents step off the elevator.

“Hey guys,” he says, welcoming in his mom, his dad, and Gage.

“There’s my boy,” Gail opens her arms and wraps them around Griffin’s neck in a tight embrace.

“Hi, Mom.”

“I’m glad to see you up and walking around. How bad was it because on the television screen it looked really bad.”

It looked bad from the seats too.

“It’s not that bad. Just a few bruised ribs.”

“You’ve definitely had worse than that before,” his dad reminds him as he steps inside and spots me in the middle of the living room. “Layken! How are you dear?”

He wraps me up in a warm hug as I respond, “I’m great. Thank you. I’m so glad you guys are here. How are you?”

“Oh, we’re just as dandy as ever.” He gestures back to Griffin’s mom. “Gail gets really antsy whenever Griffin gets injured. Always wants to

check on him and make sure he's okay."

"Well, in my defense," she says, overhearing our conversation, "Griffin didn't have a wife to help take care of him before. That's all."

"Oh, well I don't really feel like I've done much so far." I shrug but Griffin shakes his head in disagreement.

"Don't let her fool you, guys. Layken took charge before we even left the arena. She's taken very good care of me so far."

Griffin's dad places his hands on my shoulders and gives them a fatherly squeeze. "Thank you, Layken. We're so glad Griffin has you in his life."

"Yes, thank you, Layken. You make my mommy heart settle just a little bit more having you around." She steps from Griffin over to me and gives me a hug as well.

Gage on the other hand, gives his brother a nudge and then says, "Come on, let's see it."

"See what?" Griffin asks.

Gage gestures to Griffin's shirt. "Lift it up and let's see the injury. Is it badass?"

Gage is all grins. It's cute to see he and Griffin interact together like the brothers they are. Like bruised ribs are nothing. All part of the game.

Battle scars.

Griffin chuckles lightly and then lifts his shirt, his entire left side clouded in shades of black, blue and purple. Gage nods in appreciation and then gives his brother a high five.

"That's badass, bro."

Griffin smiles. "You think so?"

"Yep. I think badass is your middle name."

Hmm.

What is Griffin's middle name?

I should probably know that.

"Well," Gail says, rubbing her hands together and looking around. "What can we help you with while we're here?"

"Absolutely nothing, Mom," Griffin tells her, wrapping an arm over her shoulder. "I'm glad you guys are here and I have nothing on my agenda so you can relax and enjoy doing nothing right along with me."

She glances around the living room, her brows furrowed. "Layken, there aren't many things of yours around here. It's all the same décor Griffin's

always had.” She brings her hands to her hips. “Is my son not letting you decorate the way you want to? Because if he’s giving you hard time because you like pink or something...”

“Yep.” Griffin nods, saving me from having to answer. “That’s it. Layken’s a sparkly pink girly and I’m orange and blue all the way.” He holds his hand up in front of his mouth and loudly whispers to his mother, “Did you know she hates orange?”

He’s not wrong.

Orange is my least favorite color.

I am the pink sparkly girly type.

Probably another reason we don’t really mix.

Like how he’s a celebrity athlete and I don’t athlete at all.

Or how he’s a millionaire and I’m...well, currently unemployed.

“I don’t hate orange,” I remind Griffin, blushing, a bit embarrassed. “It’s just...not as shiny as pink. But to answer your question Mrs. Ollenberg, no, Griffin told me I could do literally whatever I wanted to the place to spruce it up a bit and bring a little of me into the space. I just wanted to live in it a bit first before I decide what feels right.”

My eyes move to Griffin who winks at me and then gestures in my direction.

“See, Mom? I can’t help it if Layken is a lazy mooch and hasn’t brought anything pink in here yet.”

My jaw drops and I laugh out loud at Griffin’s audacity, as does his mother. “Son, if you didn’t already have a set of finely bruised ribs, you certainly would now with a comment like that.”

Griffin steps over to me chuckling. “Nah, Lake knows I’m kidding.” He leans in and kisses my cheek, wrapping me in a hug. “She knows I love her.”

I kiss Griffin’s cheek in response and continue smiling on the outside even though on the inside I’m frozen in place with my jaw on the floor.

Did he just say he loves me?

I SENT Griffin out of the kitchen to visit with his family while I clean up dinner. He doesn’t need to be up on his feet moving around so much and if

that means I'm babying him a little, then so be it. He wants to get back out on the ice and I just want him to be happy. He doesn't get to see his family as often as he wishes, especially during the busy season and my heart hurts for him when I see how happy he is hanging out with them. I know he wishes he was able to see them every day. Especially Gage. It shouldn't take an injury and required time off for him to take the time to be with his family. Not when they're as close as they are.

Watching him laugh with his brother or talk hockey with his dad, those are all things I never experienced growing up. We never had the encouraging talks around the dinner table. If it wasn't a fight of some sort, it was my parents telling me what to do or what they scheduled me to do.

Or it was them telling me why my decisions were less than stellar. They never loved my group of friends. If it were up to them, I probably wouldn't have had much of a social life at all. At least not until they met Corrigan. My parents loved her, but only because they respected the fact she's a nurse, which to them is an admiral job. I guess someone in charge of making money for a hospital that provides care to children didn't mean shit to them. To them I was just a money grabber.

Griffin is blessed with a wonderful, loving family.

And watching him with them, it seems he never takes that for granted.

"Can I help you finish up in here, Layken?" Gail asks, walking into the kitchen and grabbing a towel.

"Oh, um, sure." I hand her a glass bowl I just finished washing and then she dries the other dishes I placed on the drying rack. "Thank you."

"Of course," she says with a smile. She moves around the kitchen putting dishes away as she dries them and I have to remind myself that she's been here way more times than I have and probably knows every single thing about Griffin's apartment.

Every nook and cranny.

Every piece of décor.

Hell, she probably purchased much of the stuff around here herself. I should've thought of bringing a few more things from my place here for days like this. The idea never once crossed my mind.

I'll grab a few things tomorrow while I'm out.

"You've been pretty quiet today, sweetheart," Gail mentions. "You okay?"

I turn my face to glance at her and she catches my eyes from underneath her glasses. I can tell from her expression it's a sincere ask. She's not trying to be nosey.

"Yeah." I sigh. "Just a lot on my mind today I think."

"Was this your first time seeing Griffin get hurt?"

Huffing out a laugh, I bob my head. "I mean, I had seen him get hurt a few times when I would watch him play. Little things, you know? I've seen him checked several times, obviously. And a few nights ago, with the skate blade to his arm. But yeah, this is the first big injury, for lack of a better word, that he's gotten since I've been around."

"Scary, isn't it?"

I nod. "Very. I don't think I'll ever unsee him lying lifeless on the ice. And I'll never unhear the scream when Darius rolled him over."

She nods too as I describe those moments to her. "Sounds about right. When Griffin was a kid he broke his ankle during a game. Got all tripped up and fell right on it. Even though I know it's not really possible, I swear to God I heard that bone snap in that moment. To me, it was the loudest sound I had ever heard even though in reality, I didn't hear it at all." She looks out past the half wall of the kitchen to the living room where the guys are watching television. "Grant had to pick him up and carry him to the car, uniform and all that day. The bone was shattered."

"Oh, my gosh! That's awful."

"He was devastated. Thought he would never play again." She inhales a deep breath and sighs with a loving smile on her face. "But six months later he was back on the ice as if it had never happened in the first place."

"Wow."

"When Griffin puts his mind to something, when he really wants it, he makes it happen. He's tougher than I give him credit for sometimes."

Gail goes back to drying some of the other dishes as I wipe down counters. A comfortable silence falls between us and then out of nowhere she says, "He loves you very much."

Her comment catches me totally off guard.

"What?"

She smiles, knowing her comment did exactly what she wanted it to do. "I can see it all over his face. The way he looks at you."

"You do?"

She nods. "I've never seen him look at a woman the way he looks at you." She shrugs her shoulder. "Maybe it's a mom thing. But we can tell. We know. There's a kind of love and longing in the way he looks at you. Like you own his world and he hangs on your every word."

He looks at me a certain way?

He really loves me?

He hasn't said those words to me.

Does she really know?

What does she mean by that?

Does she know everything?

There's no way Griffin told her and didn't tell me.

Guilt consumes me.

Griffin's parents are some of the most compassionate and loving people I know and we're lying to them. Okay, maybe not really lying, but we're not telling the whole truth either.

I don't know what to do.

I want to tell her.

I want to tell her everything.

She feels like someone I can trust.

But what if I'm totally wrong?

My mom's voice rings through my mind.

"If you think we're going to help you out of every fucked-up situation you get yourself into..."

"You'll never amount to anything..."

How can I have any real relationship with Gail if I'm not one hundred percent honest? And if I don't have a great relationship with her...what will Griffin think? He's head over heels for his family. Hell, I'm head over heels for them too.

"Gail?" I say with a huge lump in my throat and tears in my eyes. Hearing the vulnerability in my voice she turns to look at me. She lays a hand on my arm and tilts her head.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

I inhale a huge breath and look out at the man I've come to know over the past month or so. The man who has given me more love and kindness in such a short time than anyone has ever shown me before.

The man I'm falling for.

“I need to tell you something,” I murmur as to not pull the attention of the guys. “And it’s kind of a big something.”

Gail studies me for a moment and then narrows her eyes a bit before asking, “Is this a wine-drinking kind of conversation? I feel like maybe we need wine. What do you say?”

A smile spreads across my face because somehow even when the world feels like it’s about to swallow in around me, Griffin’s mom sees the trepidation on my face and works to put me at ease.

“Wine would be great, yes.”

She winks at me and turns to grab two glasses while I pick two different bottles of wine from the fridge. I pour a glass of white for myself and red for Gail and then we make ourselves comfortable against the counter to chat.

“It’s my fault,” I tell her. “Everything that’s happened in the past couple of months is my fault. Please don’t be upset with Griffin.”

“What do you mean?”

“The wedding...our marriage.” I shake my head. “Mrs. Ollenberg, we didn’t get married because we were in love.” I swallow. “We got married because I lost my job at the hospital and showed up here that night. The team was here and Corrigan Hicks is my best friend.”

“Coach Hicks’s daughter?”

“Yeah. She works at the hospital where I used to work.”

She nods, listening. “I see.”

“Anyway, it was this whole thing at the time. There was a water main break in my apartment building and we weren’t going to have water for about a week while the city did repairs and I was a hot mess of sadness and confusion and I didn’t know what to do and Griffin was gracious enough to offer me his guest room. And then the team invited me to tag along to Napa and Griffin was so kind to me. He just wanted to help get my mind off of losing my job and feeling down about myself. He wanted to help make me smile.”

Gail smiles. “Sounds like Griffin.”

“One hundred percent. But we both drank a little too much one night and we were walking through the festival markets at Napa and then we found ourselves standing in front of this little wedding chapel.”

“Uh huh.” She smirks. “And is this where you tied up my son and carried him into a chapel to say I do?”

My brows furrow. "What? Oh, my gosh, no. I would never..." I shake my head, my heart beating loudly in my ears.

She takes a sip of her wine. "So, you didn't force Griffin into anything then? He made the choice of his own accord?"

I consider what she's asking me. "Well, yes, but—"

She rests her hand over mine on the countertop and looks at me pointedly. "Then this is not all your fault, Layken."

"Wait..." I shake my head slowly wondering if the wine is really getting to me that quickly. "What?"

Gail smiles. "My son has done some very stupid things in his lifetime, Layken." She pats my hand and looks out toward the living room before glancing back at me. "But I don't think marrying you was one of them."

My eyes glisten and I try to blink back the tears to no avail. "Mrs. Ollenberg, I think I might be in love with your son."

"Oh, I know you are dear. And as I said before, he's crazy about you."

I swipe at my tears with my fingertips. "But how do you really know?"

"Ask me how many times he's brought a girl home to meet his family," she says, taking a sip of her wine.

My eyes flick to Griffin and then back to his mother. I don't even have to ask before she's shaking her head.

"Never?" I ask, bewildered.

"Not once."

"But...why?"

She shrugs her shoulder. "Because until you, he'd always told us he'd never found someone worth our time. He knew they weren't the one and didn't want to start a relationship between us and his partner that he knew wouldn't last." She drinks her wine slowly. "But you..." She smiles and nods her head. "You're good for him. And he for you."

"He's perfect," I say, absentmindedly watching him laugh with Gage over a video on Gage's phone.

"Oh, sweet girl, he's far from perfect and I can say that because I'm his mother," she laughs. "But sometimes...sometimes, Layken. Love shows up in the oddest of ways and always when you're least expecting it."

"So...you're not...upset?"

"Just the opposite actually." Her eyes sparkle and her grin grows wider. "I get a front row seat to watch you two fall in love and flourish together. Call me a hopeless romantic but I'm damn sure this will be better than any

romance book I could ever read.” She takes hold of my hand and gives it a loving squeeze and I just want to cry my eyes out.

Because I’ve never felt so loved in my entire life.

I squeeze her hand back and mouth, “Thank you, Gail.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

GRIFFIN

AUGUST

Hey Griff, how are you feeling?

ME

Still sore and now bored as hell.

HARRISON

LOL of course you are. You mean you're not playing Naughty Nurse with your new bride? 😏

BODHI

LOL at the name "Naughty". Isn't that what he calls her?

HARRISON

Oh shit! I forgot! I'm funnier than I think I am.

ME

Yeah a real comedian. And no, she's refusing to be my Naughty Nurse because she wants me to heal. But also, she's been frantically trying to get her book finished so she hasn't looked up from her computer much since yesterday.


BARRETT

Sounds like you need to get her attention.

ME

What do you want me to do, Bear? Walk around the apartment naked?

BARRETT

 If that's how you get your kicks, man. Sure. Pour a little glitter on those balls and chim-a-ring-cha.

ME

I think you're obsessed with my balls.


BARRETT

How can I not be? They just hang so...**licks lips**...perfectly.

OLIVER

LOL. Bear, you're a gross motherfucker.

BARRETT

Thank you. 

ME

Can I ask you something?

LEDGER

Just lie down with one knee slightly lifted and let her slide in so she's basically straddling that leg. Then once you're inside her, she can take control and ride like the wind.

OLIVER

Looks at Ledger


ME

Cocks head at Ledger

AUGUST

Where the fuck did that come from, Ledge?

LEDGER

What?  I thought Griffin was going to ask about sex positions. That's my favorite one.

ME

Uh...no. Not what I was going to ask.

LEDGER

Oh. My bad.

AUGUST

Do you need a cinnamon roll recipe Griffin? Because Ella's been baking all day...

ME

Lol. No. But you better walk one of those sweet ass buns up here when they're done. I can practically smell them from here.

BODHI

What do you want to ask Griff?

ME

Guys, I'm falling for my wife.

LEDGER

Perfect. See sex position description below. Let me know how she likes it.

HARRISON

Bow chica wow wow.

BODHI

I mean...we've already known this soooo....?

ME

Yeah but I think I'm like...really fucking falling for her.


BODHI

Corrigan just squealed and starting singing "Griffy luuuurves her. He super luuuurves her." I think she's a little over excited.

ME

But what if I do? Love her, I mean? What if I love her?

OLIVER

 What if you do? Have you told her yet?

ME

No. And I don't know if I should.

OLIVER

You're the only one who can answer that.

ME

What if she doesn't feel the same way?

AUGUST

Only one way to find out. What's the worst-case scenario for you?

ME

Honestly? That I tell her I love her and she laughs in my face.

BODHI

😬 Yeah, that's not going to happen. Have you seen the way she looks at you?

LEDGER

Roche is right, man. Also, Bear just farted and it smelled like ranch Doritos. I can smell it on the other side of the gym.

BARRETT

#sorrynotsorry it happens when I do squats.

BODHI

Even Corrigan just said no way will that happen. She's crazy about you. Pretty sure she wouldn't still be there if she wasn't. She does have her own apartment that she's still paying for you know.

ME

Fuck, that's right! I never even thought about that. She could be saving all that money. I'll make that right for her. I think I need to get her out of the house this evening. We've both been cooped up in here too long.

OLIVER

Still one week to go?

ME

😬 Probably. Time needs to fly fucking faster. I'm itching to get back on the ice.

HARRISON

Take your time man. We'll need you to be at the top of your game when you get back. If you take another blow too early you could break ribs and then you're out the rest of the season.

ME

I hear you. I want to be in perfect shape when we face off against Chicago.

OLIVER

Those damn birds 😊

ME

I think you mean those FAM birds. You are related to Landric.

OLIVER

Yeah, yeah, don't remind me 😊 Makes it easier for me to rip his feathers out on the ice when I'm not thinking about it.

Letting the conversation with the guys drift, I pocket my phone and take a few quiet steps into the living room to see what Layken's doing. From the other side of the room, I can see she's scrolling through a website so she's definitely not writing.

"Hey. What are you up to?" Stepping up behind her and rubbing her shoulders I can see she's scrolling through a job search website.

She visibly relaxes at my touch, her shoulders falling, but continues to scroll. "Looking for a new job. My old boss, Julia, sent me a few links to check out because she's been looking around too."

"Ah. Right. Forgot Corrigan mentioned you were both let go."

"Yep. They took the other team when we merged. So, she and I were both out. She was the best boss. And she believed in me when even my own family didn't."

The mere mention of her family not believing in her hits a nerve with me.

"So, you're looking for the same kind of job?"

She shrugs. "Yeah for now. It's one of the only things I'm good at."

There she goes again with the self-deprecation.

I spin her around on her chair so she has to look at me. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why do you think so low of yourself?"

She frowns, her cheeks pinkening with embarrassment. "What do you mean?"

I take her hand in mine, hoping she doesn't hear my comments as any kind of slight against her. "Charity work is not the only thing you're good at, Lake. I mean, yeah, you're great at that kind of work and I'm immensely proud of you for what you were able to accomplish at the hospital. They were stupid to let you go in my opinion. But on top of everything you did there, you also write and publish fucking books." I cup her face in my hands.

"Let me say that again. You wrote thousands upon thousands of words and strung them together in coherent inspiring entertaining thoughts and other people pay to read them. And you're doing it all over again. You have accomplished more in your life by seeing a project like that through in its entirety than many people who even think of writing a book. Do you know

how many people think about writing a book and never put pen to paper? Or how many start and never finish.”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“I don’t know the actual number.” I shrug. “But let’s say a fuck ton.”

She smiles at my encouragement.

“And you accomplished more than most of them because you actually fucking did it. You’re great with people. You’re kind. You’re compassionate. You’re a beautiful human being inside and out.” I shake my head, confounded. “But for some reason you don’t believe it about yourself. And I don’t understand why you seem to think you’re not—”

I stop myself before I finish my statement because I see the answer in her glistening eyes.

“Fuck.”

A few tears break the surface of her warm cocoa-colored eyes and slip down her cheeks. I swipe each one away with my thumbs.

“Your parents,” I whisper.

She closes her eyes for a moment taking a steadying breath and when she reopens them, more tears trickle down her face.

“My mother thinks I’m nothing, Griffin. She’s never loved that I didn’t follow in my father’s footsteps. Or my older brother’s footsteps for that matter.” She shrugs. “I’m the ugly duckling. I’m the kid who didn’t turn out the way her cookie cutter molded me to. I’m the one they don’t want. And now they don’t care what I do as long as I’m not an embarrassment to my father.”

Shit.

I can’t let them continue to berate her.

I can’t let them have any power over her.

She’s my wife and I need to protect her.

I want to protect her.

“I’m sorry Griffin,” she says with a snuffle. “All I ever wanted growing up was a family who enjoyed spending time together like my other friends’ families. I wanted to go on vacation with my family. I wanted to go to the movies with them or even miniature golf or bowling. Normal family type things, you know?” She shrugs, her face sullen. “I just wanted to be normal with a normal loving family only those aren’t the cards I was dealt. And you shouldn’t have to be distracted or bothered by my personal life.”

“No. We’re not doing this.” I shake my head defiantly. I reach down and lift her chin. “Layken you are my personal life. Everything about you is important to me. You owe your parents nothing. Do you hear me? Not one thing.” I lean down and press my lips softly to hers. “You’re my family now, Lake. And I refuse to allow you to see yourself as anything other than stellar any longer.” I tug on her hand. “Get your shoes on, you’re coming with me.”

Wiping her sleeve across her eyes dabbing at her tears, she asks, “Where are we going?”

“To see your parents. And then I’m taking you out.”

“Griffin...”

“Layken.” I take her hand in mine and place it on my chest, her helpless expression breaking my goddamn heart. “One question. And I need the most honest answer you can give me.”

“Okay.”

“Has anyone ever stood up to your parents in your defense?”

She answers with a scoff and an adamant, “Never. Who would’ve ever been in the place to do that? And besides...” She shakes her head. “It’s not anyone’s problem but mi—”

I stop her with a finger to her lips, shaking my head. “I’m going to stop you right there because that’s where you’re wrong, Naughty. It’s not just your problem. You’re my wife and it’s my job to protect you so it’s my problem too now. It’s my problem because I want it to be my problem. And I want it to be my problem because I see parts of you that you can’t see for yourself and it breaks my heart that you don’t always see it. And the one thing I refuse to do any more is let you think less of yourself because the people who manufactured you don’t know what it means to love and care for their family no matter what. So, I need you to trust me. Can you do that?”

She dries her eyes and wraps herself gently into my chest, her arms circling my waist. “I always trust you, Griffin.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

Layken types her address into my GPS and I follow the directions straight to the home where she grew up. It’s an affluent part of town but a little older looking than the newer allotments that have gone up in the past ten years or so. We pull up to the house and I can feel Layken’s tension. She shifts uncomfortably in her seat and plays with her hair, stroking the ends of

the long golden strands through her fingers. She clutches her hands in her lap and picks at her nails, so I calmly reach over and wrap my steady hand over hers.

“Hey.”

“Hmm?”

“I’ve got you. Okay?”

“Yeah.”

She’s not looking at me.

Not good enough.

“Lake?” I hook my finger under her chin and turn her face toward me and then I lean over and kiss her. “Trust me. I’m not going to let them hurt you. Never again on my watch. I promise you that.”

She nods and I open my door to step out of my car before walking around to help Layken out of her side. Still moving a little stiff, we make our way up the front steps to the door where I reach for and ring the front doorbell.

A woman looking almost identical to Layken except for a graying hair color and age lines that Layken doesn’t have answers the door. She glances at me and then her gaze moves to Layken and then back to me. She plasters on what I can tell is an obviously fake smile and says, “Layken! Baby! What a wonderful surprise! It’s so good to see you!” She moves to hug her daughter but Layken scowls and steps back. Her mother mirrors her expression and opens her mouth to say something but I squeeze Layken’s hand and then step slightly in front of her so her mother can look at no one but me.

Her smile falters and she purses her lips waiting for what I’m going to say. Realizing she’s not inviting us in, I grasp Layken’s hand and look her mother square in the face.

“Mrs. Hobbs, I’m Griffin. Griffin Ollenberg.”

“Oh, I know very well who you are, Mr. Ollenberg.” She huffs, folding her arms in front of her. “You’re the man who is exploiting my daughter probably for some sort of political or unlawful gain.”

My brows furrow as she continues.

“You took advantage of our daughter when she was the most vulnerable and now look at her.” She gestures to Layken standing semi-behind me. “You forced her into a marriage she didn’t even want, most likely using her for sex, and now she doesn’t even want to hug her own mother.”

“Oh, my God that is the biggest bucket of horse shit I’ve ever heard.” Layken scoffs, stepping out on the other side of me. “Do you even know what a hug entails, Mom?”

Her mother frowns. “Of course, I—”

“And let’s get one thing straight. Like I told you before,” she says, her body straightening, her chin rising the more confident she becomes. I squeeze her hand in mine to remind her I’m right here with her.

That’s my girl.

“I love Griffin. Do you hear that? I love him. With my whole heart. He didn’t make me do anything I didn’t want to do. In fact, it wasn’t even his idea to get married in the first place. It was mine.”

She rolls her eyes. “Well, as far as I’m concerned, the only smart thing you’ve done so far was not sign a prenup. So, when this crazy ass relationship you think you’re in is all over, you can at least walk away with enough money to live comfortably...until you fuck up again.”

Mrs. Hobbs takes the wind out of Layken’s sails so I tag myself back in. “As far as I’m concerned what’s mine is Layken’s. She can have every last cent I own if she wants it because I love her more than I’ve ever loved anyone. My love for her in the short time we’ve been together is more than you or Mr. Hobbs have shown her in her entire lifetime. You told her over and over again that her life would amount to nothing unless she took the path you paved for her, but that was a lie. She hasn’t amounted to nothing. She’s a goddamn rockstar who has changed not only my life, but the lives of so many children at Pacific Children’s thanks to her hard work and creativity and determination.”

Layken’s mother rolls her eyes. “You mean until she got herself fired?”

“That had nothing to do with her and maybe if you listened to your daughter for one damn minute you would know that.”

I lift Layken’s hand in mine and show her mother her ring. “Do you see this? This right here means I’ll spend the rest of my goddamn life making sure your daughter knows how loved and cherished and admired she is. I’ll support her in anything she wants to do whether that be helping a hundred organizations raise charitable funds, or writing the kinkiest smuttiest book she can write, or hell, maybe she’ll decide to give pole dancing lessons someday. If that happens, I’ll buy all the fucking poles and install them on every floor of my house. Because your daughter, Mrs. Hobbs, no thanks to you, is one mother fucking badass bitch who could run the world if she

wanted to. This girl can do anything she wants to do and be anything she wants to be because I'll be by her side loving her and encouraging her every fucking step of the way."

"What's going on here?" A man steps up beside Layken's mom. I can only presume that it's her father.

"For the love of fucking Christ." Mrs. Hobbs rolls her eyes again. "You guys have no idea what it means to be—"

"This will be the last time you see your daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Hobbs," I tell her parents, interrupting whatever kind of bullshit Mrs. Hobbs was spouting our way. "Because I'll be damned if I let her step back into a world that doesn't know love. Or kindness. Or basic human decency. You will never again darken her light because I will spend the rest of my days making sure she shines brighter than any star in the goddamn sky. And if and when the day comes that we bring children into this world, they will not know you. Your legacy will die with you. Because I believe the things you do for yourself..." I gesture to their fancy clothes and expensive home. "These things die with you and only you. It's the things you do for others, the imprint you make on their lives, their hearts. That's a legacy that will remain far after you're gone."

Mr. Hobb's brows lift. "What in the hell—"

"Layken is my family now."

I turn to Layken, arching my brows to ask her if there's anything else she wants to add, but she shakes her head and squeezes my hand and then turns to walk back to the car.

"Layken!" her mother calls after her.

"Fuck all the way off, Mom."

"But Lake!

"You too, Dad!" She raises her arm up and waves without looking back. "Thanks for believing in me. Fuck you both very much."

I smile as I follow Layken back to the car, opening her door for her and waiting as she hops in.

"You good?" I ask softly when she sits back and grabs her seatbelt.

She nods, releasing a big breath, and then beams back at me, her smile melting away any and all dark thoughts from my mind. "Couldn't be better."

That's my girl.

CHAPTER TWENTY

LAYKEN

Griffin drives us quietly out of my parents' neighborhood, one hand on the wheel and the other clasped around my left thigh. I'm not going to lie, it feels amazing. Like he's claimed me and is protecting me at all costs.

Layken is my family now.

That's what he said to my parents.

Nobody has ever stuck up for me in front of them before and I seriously don't know how to react. Am I glad they finally had someone put them in their place? Yes. Do I feel bad about how it all happened?

I probably should but I don't. At least not today. My parents spent years telling me that I'm basically worthless. They didn't respect what I wanted to do with my life. They continually tried to push me onto their chosen path. They never once saw me for who I am.

But Griffin sees me.

He's seen more of me than anyone else, my triumphs and my biggest insecurities.

And he still chooses me.

And for the first time in what feels like, well, ever, I feel like a weight has been lifted. I feel like I'm free to be me with no worries that my mother is going to call and rip me apart for my decisions. Because it's not my job to make them happy and I finally realize that, thanks to my husband.

Thanks to the man who loves me.

Thanks to the man I love in return.

He pulls into the drive-thru at Harold's Hotdog Diner and picks up an order he must have made before we left and then drives us to one of the nearby beaches. He opens the back door and grabs a blanket and then opens my door for me, helping me from the car. The beach ahead isn't private but at this time of the evening there aren't tons of people either.

"It's not a private beach," he says, leading us to an open spot not too far from the water. "But I thought people-watching might be fun."

"It's perfect." All smiles, I help Griffin lay the blanket down and then kick off my shoes and sit next to him to enjoy our food. "Thank you, Griffin," I say with a mouthful of food. "For what you did back there."

"Yeah? You liked how I backed into that parking spot? Pretty nifty huh? Learned it from my dad." My head snaps toward him and he gives me a wink and then says, "I'm just kidding."

I rock myself into his side, nudging him with my shoulder. "You know what I meant."

"I do. And you're welcome." He shakes his head while watching me. "But you never have to thank me for coming to your defense. You're my wife, and as long as I'm around nobody will ever hurt you again."

"I'm thanking you anyway..." I pause for a moment, chewing my bite. "For saying all the things I should've said a long time ago."

He shrugs. "I understand why you didn't. Or felt like you couldn't. They're your parents. I imagine in the grand scheme you don't wish them harm. They're still your family. You just..."

Want to be seen.

"You want to be seen. And understood. And most of all, loved."

He knows me so well.

"Yeah."

He takes another bite of his hotdog and then says, "I'm sorry if I overstepped at all. I didn't intend to say they'll never see you again. Obviously, you can see them anytime you want. I'm never going to hold you back. But..." He makes sure I meet his eye when he says, "Maybe the next time, whenever that might happen, I can be with you."

"I think that's more than fair, husband."

He smiles. "Good, wife. I'm glad to hear it."

We eat in silence for a few minutes, watching the waves crash and the people walk by.

A stalky guy in a suit and tie and no shoes walks past about twenty feet in front of us and Griffin gestures to him with his chin. “What do you suppose is that guy’s story?”

“Hmm...is this a trick question like I’m supposed to say something like maybe he gave his shoes to a homeless person and he’s just walking home?”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “Nope, not a trick question but also no. Don’t be so nice. See the worst in people for just a minute and tell me his story.”

“Mmkay.” I point to the few houses sitting at the top of the hill to our left. “So, he’s totally texting his wife right now telling her that he’s stuck in traffic and he’ll be home late but really he just banged one of the wealthy housewives that live in one of those houses up there after dropping off his taxes for her husband to file for him.”

Griffin nods, grabbing his bottle of cola. “And the lack of shoes?”

“Oh, he tossed those suckers in the ocean so he can tell his wife later that he also got mugged. See the breeze messing up his hair?”

“Mhmm.”

“That’s just an excuse for his sex-bedhead.”

“Impressive. I like it.” He laughs.

I point to a man nearly the size of Griffin with broad shoulders, thick calves and a tattoo sleeve on each arm. He’s shirtless, of course, and walking next to a beautiful woman with long black hair and dark sunglasses wearing an itty-bitty pink bikini. “What about those two?” I ask Griffin. “What’s their story?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” he says. “That guy’s a muffin.”

I snort. “A muffin?”

“Yeah.” He nods. “But not just any muffin. He’s like, the fucking best muffin you could ever have. Like the most awesome tasting muffin. You know the kind that you pick out of the glass case at the bakery but the assistant behind the glass goes to pick up the muffin behind the muffin and you’re like no, no, not that muffin! I want the one in front of that muffin. Yeah...he’s that muffin.”

“And the girl?”

“Serial killer.”

“What?” I burst out a laugh.

“Yeah but she’s super discreet and is never around to clean up the mess because there’s never a mess. She’s a waitress who poisons the food of every sixteenth customer who walks into her diner that day. So those people eat the food and then go home to their respective lives and keel over and die. Nobody knows what killed them and if an autopsy shows some kind of poison in their system, detectives can never figure out where it came from because the people poisoned come from all walks of life.” He shrugs like this story is straight off the evening news.

“Wow. That was better than me. Maybe you should be the one to write books.”

“Nah.” He wrinkles his nose. “I would suck at actually putting the whole story together, but I would totally be the guy to help build your storyline.” He sips his cola again. “Or, you know...if you need help with those super porny scenes. I’m your guy.”

I roll my eyes and slap him on his upper arm. “They are not porny scenes you big goofball.”

“Okay, okay, you’re right.” He leans over and kisses my lips and then nudges his nose with mine. “Maybe later we can create our own porny scene.”

“I like the way you’re thinking Mr. Ollenberg but you’re still on physical rest for another week.”

“Yeah?”

“Mhmm.”

“Good thing I’ve got a few ideas up my sleeve then, Naughty. For now, I’m going to watch you eat that wiener and then we’ll head to stop number two.”

A few ideas...

Porny ideas?

What could he possibly be thinking?

“OOOH, this is literally the best bookstore in this entire town!” I squeal, clapping my hands when Griffin turns into the parking lot. “Are we really stopping here?”

“Hell yeah, we are. My girl deserves a dream date. She’s getting her dream date.”

Dream date?

When did...?

“Wait...” My eyes bulge as I turn my head to face Griffin. “Are you... did you...?”

He chuckles as he pulls into a parking space. “You want to finish any of those questions, Naughty?”

“You took me to the beach this afternoon.”

He nods. “Yep.”

I gesture at the bookstore. “And now we’re...”

“Uh huh.” He smiles.

Holy shit.

He remembered?

His parents’ house.

“You remembered the dates? The ones I talked about at your parents’ house?”

“I remember just about everything you ever say, Layken.” He lifts his shoulder. “So yeah, when my wife tells my family about the two best dates I’ve ever taken her on, you better believe I’m going to come through and make good on those dates. You described them in such detail, it was pretty easy to plan. And besides, not everything about us has to be a lie.”

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay though?” My gaze falls to his abdomen where he’s still healing from his bruised ribs. “We’ve been out a while. If you’re sore it’s totally okay if we head home.”

He shakes his head. “Not a chance. I feel great.” He pulls a small purple sack out of his pocket and shakes it in front of me. “Plus, I came up with some doozies for our bookish scavenger hunt so if you’re game, I’m game.”

“Bring it on, husband. I’m totally in.”

“Alright then let’s go.”

Hand in hand we walk into the bookstore, the front tables teeming with the latest popular romance books that are talked about all over social media.

One day my book will be on these tables.

Griffin leads us toward the middle of the store and then pulls out the purple sack.

“You didn’t come in here yesterday and figure out where all these books are in the store so you can win, did you?”

He laughs. "Dammit. I wish I would've thought of that, but sadly, no. I did not. Plus, you haven't let me out of your sight this entire week so if I had done that, you'd know about it."

"True." I nod. "Okay then."

"I actually had the team write down the categories." He bobs his head. "Well, the team plus the wags."

"Oh, my God! I can only imagine what some of these are going to say."

He chuckles. "I know, right? You ready for the first one?"

"Wait, rules. What are the rules?"

"Oh yeah. Umm, we get five minutes to find a book that matches whatever each slip of paper says. When you have your book, we'll meet at a table at the cafe. Best one wins the round."

"Okay, who's going to be the judge?"

Griffin turns me and points toward the café. "See that little group of adults holding up books in front of their faces hiding from view?"

Oh, shit!

No, it is not.

I giggle knowing exactly who is seated around the table. "Yeah I see them."

In tandem, the group lowers the books showing their faces. Corrigan, Bodhi, August, and Ella are seated around a small table, each of them with a drink from the book store's café.

"Oh, my Gosh! What are you guys doing here?" I exclaim, walking over to them and wrapping my arms around Corrigan and Ella giving them huge hugs.

"We heard you might have had a bit of a day," Corrigan cringes.

Ella nods. "Yeah, so when Griffy here invited us to be a part of some fun, we were all for it. Plus, hello! We're hanging out in a bookstore. Best night ever, am I right?"

"Yeah, if we're hanging out in the porno portion of the bookstore." August winks.

"I'm partial to the cookbooks myself," Ella says with a shrug. "But whatever floats your boat."

"Okay, so these guys will be the judge," Griffin states. "Any questions?"

I shake my head. "Nope."

“Then let’s get started.” He holds the purple bag open for me and has me choose a slip of paper from inside. I pull one out and unfold it, reading it aloud for everyone to hear.

“Find a book you would want with you on a deserted island.”

“Five minutes,” Corrigan says, setting the timer on her phone. “GO!”

Griffin and I separate from each other. Having been in this store more times than I can count, I’m relatively familiar with where the different genres are located. I quickly find the resource section and look for a book that teaches me how to survive on an island thinking that would be the smartest choice.

I pull a few off the shelf and read their titles and then choose one of them to keep with me. I reshelve the others and then make my way back to the café surprised that I’m actually the last one back. Griffin stands with the group grinning at me as I step up to the table.

“How did you get back so fast?”

“You act like I don’t know what I would do if I ended up on a deserted island.”

“Alright, smartass. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

“You go first,” he says to me, hiding his book behind his back.

“Okay. I grabbed this one.” I lay the book down on the table titled *If You’re Ever Stranded on an Island*.

“Ooh, very wise,” Corrigan says.

“Very mindful,” Ella adds.

“Bodhi makes a come here motion with his fingers. “Let’s see it, Ollenberg.”

Griffin pulls his book from behind his back, but it’s not a book at all. “What the hell is that?” I burst out laughing.

“What?” He shrugs with a proud grin. “It’s a playboy swimsuit edition calendar. I’ve got to be able to keep track of my days somehow, right? Plus, it’s a win-win. I can look at this for, you know...self-care. So, I don’t go crazy living on a deserted island.”

August points to Griffin. “Points, bro. That’s smart thinking.”

“Oh fuck,” I laugh rolling my eyes. “This is going to be a tough win to pull off.”

“You can do it, Lake.” Corrigan winks at me. “You ready for another one?”



“Yep. Bring it on.”

Ella pulls a slip out of the bag this time and reads it out loud. “Find a book showing us a place you would like to travel to with your partner.”

August shoos us away. “Be gone! Go do your thing.”


While I’m looking for my book, my phone dings with an incoming text. I almost choose not to look at it assuming anyone who would want to talk to me is with me tonight. But wondering who could possibly be writing me is what has me pulling my phone from my pocket.

GRIFFIN

Your ass looks amazing tonight by the way.  

I lift my head and look around but Griffin is nowhere to be found.


GRIFFIN

Stop looking for me and find your book, Naughty. 

“Ugh! Where the hell is he?”

For a big guy over six feet tall, he’s awfully good at staying hidden in a bookstore. I shoot him a quick reply before glancing through the travel section.

ME

Wherever you are you’re turning me on. Stop it. 

GRIFFIN

Do you need a quickie in the corner?

ME

Do YOU need kicked off the team?

GRIFFIN

LOL. Alright I’ll save my licks for when we get home. Might cop a feel though.

God I love this man.

He’s the total package and right now, I’m the luckiest girl on the face of the Earth.

Finally finding a book I like, I return before Griffin does and when instructed, I turn my book around and show the group. “I think it would be fun to go to Scotland with Griffin because he would look damn sexy in a kilt.”

August and Bodhi nod their heads with approval and then ask for Griffin's book. He turns around a book about Hawaii.

"Oooh! Hawaii, huh?" I ask with wagging brows. "I could totally do Hawaii."

"Yeah, I want to go visit that resort that Quinton Shay's sister owns out there." He looks at the guys. "What's it called again?"

August smirks. "Kamana Wanalaya."

Griffin snaps his finger and points at August. "That's it! Yeah. I think that could be cool! And maybe Shay could hook us up."

Ella waves her hand in the air. "Group trip!"

Griffin and I go through a few more rounds finding books with numbers in the title, books that are blue, books with blood on the cover—that was a particularly humorous one as he chose a vampire book and I chose a book on how to get away with murder. We found recipes we'd like to cook for each other and how-to books on learning something we could do for each other. I chose *How to Sew* so I could learn to make Griffin some cool pajama pants. He chose *How To Make Her Squirt*.

Pretty damn sure I won that round either way.

"Okay, last one," August tells us, pulling the last slip out of the bag. "Ready?"

Griffin and I nod.

August unfurls the slip of paper and reads, "Find a book with a title that is also a sexual position or sexual reference."

"Oh, my God. Okay, but you all have to do this one too so get off your asses."

Bodhi leaps out of his seat. "Yes! I know exactly what book I'm picking!"

Corrigan sets her phone alarm. "Okay we all have five minutes and then we meet back here."

We all head out to find our book choice. Not wanting to watch where he goes, and not sure exactly what book I'm looking for, I pick a random aisle and look around to see what I can find.

"Woodworking?" I mumble to myself, rolling my eyes at the irony of the word.

I'm sure there's a funny reference to wood somewhere in this aisle.

Meh, not good enough.

I can do better.

Suddenly an idea pops into my head that has me sprinting for the children's section of the store. With about thirty seconds to spare, I find the book I'm looking for, pull it from the shelf, hiding it against my chest, and head back to the café.

Griffin and Bodhi are already waiting when I arrive at the table. Ella, August, and Corrigan are just seconds behind me right as Corrigan's alarm goes off. She stops the sound and then says, "Alright who was back first?"

Bodhi raises his hand and then proudly reveals his book choice. "I chose the classic *Moby Dick*. Literally says dick right in the title."

"Nah, I got you beat, Pickle Pants," Griffin tells Bodhi.

"Alright let's see it then."

Griffin turns his book around and I snort when I see the title.

"Holes?"

He nods, beaming from ear to ear. "Holes, baby. All the holes."

"That's pretty good. I'll concede," Bodhi tells him. He turns to August who reveals a copy of *The Dark Tower*.

Ella reveals *Lovely Bones*, and Corrigan shows off her copy of *Hop on Pop* which has us all cackling for all the highly inappropriate reasons.

"Alright, Naughty," Griffin says, gesturing to me with a nod of his head. "What did you find?"

"My best one yet, if I do say so myself." I take the popular kids book and turn it around showing everyone the front cover of *James and the Giant Peach*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GRIFFIN

“I cannot thank you enough for all of today, Griffin.” Layken lifts up on her tip toes and kisses my cheek before pressing her lips against mine.

I seize the opportunity to really fucking kiss her because hanging out with her tonight, being with our friends, even standing outside her parents’ house and defending my wife...it all felt so goddamn natural. Like this girl was created for me.

To be my friend.

My partner.

My lover.

My wife.

Tell her.

She moans softly against my mouth when my tongue swipes through her lips. Her hands slide up my biceps and fuck, my body lights up when she touches me. I pull back slowly, separating my lips from hers, and hold her face tenderly in my hands.

Just tell her.

“I’d do anything for you, Layken Ollenberg.”

“I know this is super random, but I realized earlier that we’ve been married for a while now and I don’t know your middle name.”

“My middle name is Alexander. What’s yours?”

She smiles. “It’s Elizabeth.”

“Layken Elizabeth Ollenbergl.” Her name rolls off my tongue several times in a row, each one more reverent than the last. “You’re initials spell Leo.”

Her brows lift and her lips turn up. “And I actually am a Leo. My birthday is in August.”

“Hmml.” I gaze into her innocent brown eyes. “It’s like you were meant to marry me and take my name then.

Dude, fucking tell her already.

She wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me again. “After being married to you, Griffin, I’m not sure I could ever be married to anyone else? You’re kind of perfect.”

My hands around her hips, I lift her onto the kitchen counter and stand in between legs. “Keep talking, please, shower me with all the compliments.”

“You aren’t supposed to be lifting!” she admonishes.

I sneak my hands under the hem of her shirt and slide them up her back. “Uh huh. Whatever you just said. Tell me more about how perfect I am.”

I take my time moving my lips up her neck and across her jaw. Her cheeks pinken as she tilts her head, granting me better access. “You’ve been more than kind.”

“Mhmm...” I kiss down the other side of her neck as I bring my hands to the middle of her back unclasping her bra with ease. She sighs against me.

“You see me for who I am and not who someone expects me to be.”

“I don’t expect you to be anyone you don’t want to be,” I whisper as I bring my hands around to her chest, my fingers brushing over two soft bare breasts.

Her head falls forward, our foreheads touching and she sighs. “Griffin...”

“Keep talking, Naughty. Tell me more.”

Anything to distract her while I pleasure her body.

“You...you know just how to touch me.” She gasps when I twist her nipples between my fingers. “Pleasure me. Claim me. God, you make me feel so...”

“So, what, baby? Do I make you feel beautiful?”

“Always.”

“Cherished?”

“Yes.”

“Appreciated?”

“Always.”

“What else? Tell me.”

“You make me feel so...loved.”

Yes!

I murmur into her ear, “Good. Because you are all those things and more.” I pull back and hold her face in my hands. Her large lust-filled eyes stare back at me.

God, she’s so beautiful like this.

Like she’s waiting with bated breath for me to say more so she can hang on my every word. I smooth my thumb over her cheek as she eyes me, her face like an angel, and smile at her in the most adoring way possible.

“Layken, I love you so fucking much I can’t even remember what life was like before you.”

She whimpers at my touch and then I’m lifting her shirt off her body and tossing it to the ground. “I love you so much, I can’t breathe when I think about what my life was like without you in it. I love hanging out with you. I love talking with you and laughing with you and fuck me,” I groan when I lean her back and tease the tight rosy bud of her nipple between my lips, kneading her other breast in my hand. “The sex, Naughty. I don’t think I can say it any clearer. I love playing with you.” I stroke my tongue over her other nipple and she moans louder this time.

“God, yes.”

“Pleasuring you is one of my favorite things.”

I lick her again.

“Tasting you.”

And again.

“Eating you.”

And again.

“Fucking you.”

“Griffin...”

“Shower with me, Lake.” I sneak my fingers into the bottom of her shorts until I reach the warm apex of her thighs and then I drag them across the front of her wet satin thong. “I want to wash you. Touch you. Make you feel good.”

“But Darius...” she starts but I shake my head.

“I promise I’ll be good. I’m good. I’m not as sore today and I won’t do anything too strenuous but fuck, Layken,” I groan as my fingers tug her thong aside and slide through her slick center. “I don’t want to keep my hands off you.” I step back and lock eyes with her. “I love you, Layken, and I want you.” I nuzzle her nose with mine and whisper, “Need you. Please shower with me.”

Without question she nods keeping her eyes locked with mine. “I love you too, Griffin.” She shakes her head. “So, damn much it hurts sometimes. I don’t know what I did to deserve you.”

My eyes fall closed as I sigh in relief. I don’t know what I’ve been so nervous about. I had a feeling she felt the same, but I really needed to hear her say the words.

“Thank fucking Christ.”

I help Layken off the countertop and then kiss her sweetly one more time. “I’ll lock up and meet you in there. And I’ll put some towels in the warmer.”

She heads to my bedroom and master bath while I lock the door and turn out the lights throughout the apartment. Then I make a quick pitstop in her bathroom to grab the one item I’ve been thinking about for the last week.

Tonight is the night.

And this is the sight I’ve been craving.

Layken’s standing in my marble shower when I walk in with two towels tossing them into the warmer. The water slips over her slender body, her hair like golden silk hanging down her back. She’s fucking breathtaking. So much so, I don’t join her at first. Instead, I stand outside the glass doors, leaning on the wall not three feet away and watch her under the shower head. Her eyes are closed as she revels in the warmth and relaxing pressure of the water.

Layken Elizabeth Ollenberg.

My wife.

My lover.

My friend.

Fuck, she’s gorgeous.

How on Earth did I get this lucky?

I never thought there would be a day that I would look at a woman and know without a shadow of a doubt that she’s my forever girl. My person.

The one I'm meant to share my life with.

But here I am.

That's what I see when I look at Layken.

She brings me peace.

She brings me happiness.

She brings me a boner of fucking steel when her hands fall over her breasts like they are right now.

When she finally opens her eyes and sees me standing there, she cocks her head and gives me a lazy smile. "What are you doing out there?"

"Admiring you," I tell her.

"I hope you like what you see."

"Layken Elizabeth Ollenbergh, you are perfect. I like what I see very much." I step away from the wall I was leaning on and lift off my shirt. Then I unzip my pants and pull them off along with my boxer briefs leaving them in a pile on the floor. "And I'm going to like what I'm about to see even better."

"Oh yeah?" She grins. "And what is—"

I open the glass door and step inside with a very bright, rainbow-colored dildo in my hands. Layken spots the toy in my grasp and her lips form the perfect O.

"Oh. I see," she says, her smile broadening. "And you think you're going to use that on me?"

I shake my head, my eyes glazing with need. "No, Naughty. Tonight, you are going to use this on yourself, and I am going watch every single moment of it with my painfully stiff cock in my hand."

I hand her the suction cupped dildo and look on with a bit of a kinky curiosity as she finds the right height on the shower wall and then attaches the suction cup right where she wants it. The toy has an upward curve to it that should penetrate her just the right way and fuck, I can't wait to watch her.

Before she turns around to line herself up, I tug her into me, her back to my chest, and wrap my arms around her, my hands palming each of her breasts. She rests her head on my chest just under my shoulder as I fondle her aroused peaks.

"Mmm," she moans. "Your hands on my tits is a feeling I will never tire of."

"Is that so?" I chuckle deeply behind her.

“Mmhmm.”

I trail my fingers down her sternum between her breasts until I reach her deliciously wet pussy, my finger massaging her clit. “And what about here?”

She subtly changes her stance, opening her legs wider for me, and nods against my chest.

“Yes. God,” she hisses. “That feels amazing.”

“Good. Now I want to see you fuck yourself, Naughty,” I tell her, dipping my fingers inside her. “I want to watch you stretch this pretty pink pussy and love every minute of it.”

I slide my other hand from her breast up to her neck holding her against me. “I want to watch your sweet mouth open up as you gasp in the throes of passion because this dildo fucks you oh so well.”

My fingers delving inside her, a vision of my own girth filling her almost sends me over the edge.

Fuck, I’m hard.

“Put on a show for me, Naughty. Let’s see what you can do.”

I pull my hands from her and she turns and brings her warm hand to my swollen cock. I hiss a breath between my teeth. “Fuck.”

“I think I can do one better than simply fucking myself for show, Griffin,” she says to me, her sultry voice branding me.

Bringing a hand behind her, she lines herself up with the suctioned cock and backs up as her sweet pussy swallows it inch by fucking inch.

“Mmm yeah,” she says. “So full.”

With my cock still in her other hand, she raises her head to meet my eyes and then she leans down and sucks my cock into her mouth.

“Ah, fuck!” She nearly takes my damn breath away as she consumes me, her tongue circling my shaft as she pulls off of me and then sucks me back in. She creates a rocking motion between my achingly stiff cock and the one suction-cupped behind her. As she pulls herself off the toy, she swallows me farther into her mouth. And then when she slips from my heated skin, she fills herself, stretching her pussy with the mammoth toy.

Any other day I might be hella fucking jealous of a sex toy but tonight? Fuck no. Tonight I’m not only enjoying a front row seat to my girl’s pleasure, but it’s also becoming an interactive experience I will not soon forget.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Naughty. Your mouth feels incredible.” I shake my head in awe. “If you could see yourself right now. So, fucking beautiful like this. With your pussy full on one end and your sexy mouth stuffed with my cock on the other end.”

As I’m admiring the most erotic view I think I’ve ever seen, I gather her hair and wrap it all around my fist a few times, holding it away from her face to ensure a clear picture of her mouth.

“Fuck, yeah. Just like that,” I tell her when her fingertips skate against my balls. “Such a fucking good girl.”

She groans against me as she impales herself in every direction. The vibrations of her voice sending chills down my spine.

Vibrations.

Remembering the setting I found on that dildo last week, I lean forward and smooth my hand down her back, around her leg, and underneath her. My fingertips find the switch near the bottom of dildo and I flick it on.

“Oh, my God!” Layken exclaims, popping off my cock momentarily.

“Watching you fuck yourself might be the best thing I’ve ever seen in my entire life, Mrs. Ollenberg. That feel okay?”

She nods vigorously with a renewed hunger in her eyes. “Yes. Fuck, yes.”

“Good. Now open up for me so I can fuck that pretty mouth of yours.” With a slight tug of her hair, I pull her toward my cock helping her rock back and forth. The vibrations of the dildo causing her legs to shake and her body to hum. She continues the steady motion of sliding her mouth over my rigid cock but picks up speed as her body begins to betray her.

“Oh God!” she cries with her mouth full.

I slap my hands on the shower wall to keep myself steady as she sucks me hard, relentlessly. “Jesus fuck, you’re going to make me come.”

Together we fall into a tandem rhythm. As she rocks back and forth I thrust myself into her mouth so her legs don’t have to work too hard.

“Feel me, Naughty? Feel how fucking hard you make me?”

There’s nothing fucking flaccid about what’s in her mouth right now.

And there never will be again.

“Mhmm,” she moans hungrily taking every inch of me unremittingly. And then as the fury builds inside her, she does the one thing that sets my body ablaze. Her hand on my balls, she reaches up between my legs and

taps her finger against my tight puckered hole, pushing it just inside, and I'm a fucking goner.

"Mother fuck, Layken! Oh fuck!" I come so hard I almost fall down, my legs shaking as I spill inside her. She swallows down everything I give her and then cries out as her own orgasm rips through her body.

"Fuck! Yes! Griffin!" she screams my name, panting for breath as she comes. Her legs become wobbly but I'm right there to catch her so she doesn't fall. Instead, I lead us to the bench inside the shower and hold her lifeless body against my chest.

"That was, unfuckingbelievable Mrs. Ollenberg." I kiss the side of her head and smooth my arms up and down her body. "Absolutely incredible."

She lifts her head and I push her wet hair back from her face, revealing her satisfied smile. "Toys are fun, but I've been spoiled by your mighty and possessive cock," she explains.

"Who do you think taught this cock all it knows?" I wink at her and she giggles against me.

And for the first time in my life, I feel completely at ease and truly happy.

"I love you, Griffin."

She doesn't look at me when she says it, so I bring my finger to her chin and turn her face to be sure she's looking into my eyes when I tell her, "I love you so much more, Layken." We share in a gentle and slow kiss and when we pull apart, I place one more kiss on the edge of her nose. "Come on, let's dry off and then go to bed. I want to hold you while we fall asleep."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

LAYKEN

“Is it official?” Corrigan asks with a drink in her hand lifted and ready to clink with my glass.

I nod, beaming at her proudly. “I officially hit publish this morning and the book is now live!”

Ella claps her hands and then lifts her glass as well. “Yay! Oh, my gosh, this is so exciting! Congratulations, Layken!”

“Thank you so much!”

Scarlett clinks her drink against mine and Corrigan’s and Ella’s while also cheering me on. “Yes girl, congratulations! I’m going to download it right now.”

“Maybe we need a little reading club between the four of us.”

“I’ve already read most of it.” Corrigan smirks. “But that’s bestie privileges. I’m totally in for a group read.”

“Oh, my gosh though,” I say, covering my face. “I don’t know if I want to know where you are in the book or if or when you’re reading it at all.”

“What?” Corrigan says, taken aback. “Girl, why?”

“Because! What if it sucks? I don’t want you to tell me if it sucks. And if I know you’re reading certain parts and you don’t say anything about it, I’ll think you hate it and I don’t want that. Also, I don’t want to disappoint you guys. Ew. I’d be so embarrassed.”

The girls laugh and Scarlett shakes her head. “That is not going to happen. First of all, I read your other books and they are stellar! I’ve told

you that before.”

“Right,” Ella says, nodding. “And if this one is all about hockey? Hell yes! I’m in my hockey era twenty-four seven so I am here for this!”

“See?” Corrigan shrugs. “Told you, you would be a hit. How many downloads do you have already today?”

I feel bad for smiling because I’m anything but a braggart. I know I worked my ass off for this book. It’s been a long four months of writing and editing and marketing but seeing my book out there being downloaded by people who don’t know me at all makes me feel all the warm fuzzies. My cheeks redden as I softly say, “Two-thousand, seven hundred and twenty-one.”

“WHAT?” Scarlett shouts in the middle of the Mexican restaurant where we met for lunch. “Are you serious?”

Corrigan and Ella laugh as I nod affirmatively. “Yeah. And that was an hour ago when I last checked.”

“Girl.” Scarlett shakes her head, smiling. “Do you have an affiliate program, because I need to get me some of whatever you’re doing right now!”

I snicker as I grab for a chip and dunk it into the bowl of queso. “This coming from the high-profile vlogger with millions of subscribers.”

She shrugs. “What can I say? I’m resourceful and opportunistic.”

Corrigan gives me a high five and shakes her head, impressed. “I told you. I just had a feeling this one was going to be big. Readers love their hockey guys.”

“You’re right.” I nod. “They definitely do.”

“I’m so fucking proud of you friend.”

“Well don’t be super proud of me yet,” I tell them all. “Release day or release week is one thing. Success comes when the book is still going strong a month or more from now. I could easily be forgotten for the next author’s release.”

“Never going to happen.” Ella smirks. “Not this time.”

My phone dings on the table and I catch a quick glance at the sender of the received text.

“Julie?”

“Who’s Julie?” Ella asks.

“Julie from the hospital?” Corrigan inquires. “You’re old boss?”

“Yeah.” I lift up the phone to read the text.

JULIE

Congrats on your new book! I follow you on Bookzon and saw it in my email this morning! How awesome is that? 😊

ME

Wow! Thank you so much! I really appreciate that!

JULIE

So, are you a big bad rich author now? Too much of a celebrity to hear me out on an idea?

ME

LOL. Hardly. Maybe one day but that day is not today. What's up?

JULIE

I have a job proposition for you.

ME

Perfect! Would I be working with you?

JULIE

Yep!

ME

Oh, my God! I'm so in! Tell me more!

My eyes light up with excitement. "Shit! This is my lucky day!"

"What? Why?" Corrigan's brows arch with curiosity. "What did she say?"

"She has a job prospect for me."

"Yes!" Corrigan pumps her fist. "I knew something was going to work out for you! You deserve this!"

"So?" Scarlett says, gesturing with a winding hand. "What's the job?"

"She didn't say exactly. Just that I would be working with her again which I'm all for. Julie was the easiest boss and she really believed in me and my abilities."

My phone dings again in my hand and I read the text immediately.

JULIE

I got hired as the Chief Development Officer at Bayside Children's! Which means you would basically have the same job you had as the Development Coordinator They said I could bring whoever I wanted for the job and you're obviously my first choice!

“Bayside Children’s,” I murmur with a furrowed brow. I glance up at Corrigan. “Is there a Bayside Children’s in California?”

We watch and wait as Corrigan plugs the name into her phone and does a quick internet search. Then with a shake of her head she turns her phone around so I can see.

“Looks like Bayside Children’s is in Miami.”

“Florida?” I ask, my eyes bulging. “Miami, Florida?”

Corrigan nods, apprehensive. “Yeah.”

“Fuck.” I sit back against the booth, a million thoughts running through my mind.

Florida is on the other side of the country.

Griffin.

What will he say?

What will he think?

I need the job.

It would be a great opportunity for me.

But I love him.

Could we make it work?

That’s quite a long distance but I could fly here whenever possible.

Maybe he could stay with me during the off season.

Anything is possible if we work at it.

Would he want to work at it?

What if he doesn’t want that?

Can I blame him?

I’d be heartbroken.

And then there’s Corrigan.

My best friend.

My ride or die.

Leaving here would mean leaving her.

And she’s with Bodhi so I can’t ask her to split her free time between him and me.

Fuck.

“What do I do?” I ask the girls helplessly.

Each of them stares at me blankly and I can’t help but assume they don’t want to have to tell me what I already know.

Going to Miami might very well mean the end for me and Griffin.

“What does your gut tell you to do?” Scarlett asks.

“Yeah.” Ella nods. “What’s your initial reaction?”

“Um, I guess my initial thought is it would be a great opportunity.”

Corrigan lifts her straw to her lips swallowing back a sip of her drink.

“Okay, so does Julie want you to go visit and interview?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “We haven’t gotten that far into the conversation.”

“My advice if you want it,” Scarlett explains, “is to go do an interview and maybe a tour. Doesn’t mean you have to take the job. Scope it out and see what you think.”

“Good point,” Ella agrees. “At least then you’ll be able to make an informed decision.”

My gaze moves to my best friend who is eerily quiet. “What do you think?”

Her teeth pulling on her bottom lip, she eyes me sullenly. “Girl, I would miss the absolute hell out of you.”

My heart flips in my chest and I nearly burst into tears just thinking about leaving my best friend. “I would miss you too, Corri.”

She grabs my hand and gives it a squeeze. “But on the other hand, like you said, this could be a wonderful opportunity for you and for that reason, you have to do what you have to do. I know I can’t keep you all to myself for the rest of my life and you know I’ve always wanted what’s best for you.”

I nod. “Yeah. I know.”

“Okay. So, if you’re not immediately saying you don’t want the job and you’re not interested, then you owe it to yourself to go visit. You need to talk to Julie about the job. Learn all the facts and then you can make a clearer decision.”

“Yeah. You’re right.” I blow out a deep breath. “Okay. That’s what I’ll do if she’s offering that.”

Glancing down at my phone, I type out one last text to Julie and then pocket my phone so I can enjoy my time with my friends.

ME

Definitely interested in learning more. Will write you later tonight when I’m home to work out an interview/visit.

“What do you think Griffin will say?” Ella asks, grabbing a chip from the basket.

My heart sinks even thinking about it.

"I think he'll tell me to go because he also wants what's best for me, even if it means his heart breaks on the inside."

Corrigan chuckles. "Has he said it yet?"

"Said what?"

"You know, those three little words."

"Oh, uh...yeah." I can feel the blush on my cheeks thinking back to that night in his kitchen a few weeks ago. "He told me he loved me."

"Eeeek!" Ella claps her hands. "And you said it back, yes?"

I nod. "Of course, I did. That man is...everything."

And now suddenly I don't know if I can bear the thought of flying across the country from him even if we do vow to make it work.

Maybe my leaving would be a good thing for him.

It gives him the out he could use to divorce me if he wants to.

He could move on.

Find someone with the same kind of family upbringing.

Someone who really knows how it feels to be loved.

"I know what you're thinking," Scarlett says, watching me. "And you should cut that shit out right now."

"What?" I shrug.

"You're thinking that even though Griffin Ollenberg is the love you've been waiting for—the love you fucking deserve—that maybe he would be better off without you."

Fuck.

When did she become so insightful?

"How did you know that?"

She swallows back a heavy sip of her margarita and then lifts her brow. "Because it's written all over your face."

"But—"

"No." She waves her finger back and forth. "Fix your face, Layken. You have zero reason to be thinking that way. Griffin loves the fuck out of you."

"Quite literally," I chuckle, causing the girls to giggle at my response. "I mean T-M-I, but the man likes to fuck. A lot."

"Meh. I think it's a hockey thing," Ella says, laughing. "August is all over me all the time."

"Same with Bodhi, but I think he's just trying to make up for all those years he spent not having sex."

“Yeah it’s definitely a thing with all of them, I imagine,” Scarlett says. “It’s their way of letting off steam. And honestly...” She winks. “I can’t say I hate it.”

“Same,” we all say in tandem.

“MIAMI, FLORIDA?” The expression on Griffin’s face is making me wish I would have just kept my mouth shut and never told him about the job offer. We could be sliding into bed right now ready for another mind-blowing romp in the sheets, but I had to go and ruin the mood with my news. The devastation in his eyes when I told him about this job in Florida is a look I won’t soon forget.

It’s heartbreaking.

I can see he’s trying to remain upbeat but what his voice doesn’t say, his face always does. “That’s uh...” He nods, taking it all in. “That’s pretty far.”

“I know.” My shoulders fall but I try to give him a tiny nugget of positivity. “But it’s also just a plane ride away if it’s something we want to talk about, you know, later.”

He cocks his head, his brows pinched as he hastily pulls off his shirt, all evidence of his bruised ribs gone. “Do you think I won’t want to talk about it?” Irritation stirs in his voice and a strong sense of guilt rips through my chest. Like nothing I’m saying is coming across the way I want it to and I’m just upsetting him.

An emptiness in the pit of my stomach, I shake my head. “No, that’s not what I—”

“Do you think I don’t care what you do?”

“No, Griffin, I—”

“Have I given you that indication? Because last time I checked, I told you I loved you and didn’t want to spend my life without you, but here you are a few weeks later ready to jet off to Florida for a job interview whether I like it or not.”

“Okay.” I nod, trying to understand. “So, then I won’t—”

“If you want to talk about it now, then let’s talk about it now.” He unzips his shorts and kicks them off. “I mean, how do you really see this all

going if you get the job, Layken? Do you think you'll just fly back here on the weekends? Every other month? What? We'll see each other a few times a year?" He shrugs his shoulders, his arms lifting at his sides. "I mean what kind of marriage is that?"

"Okay!" I raise my voice to match his so he won't talk over me again. "Then I'll cancel. I won't go."

"But you can't not go, Lake!" he shouts back, clearly irritated. "This could be a great opportunity and you already told her you would show up and if you don't show up you risk her bad-mouthing you to other potential organizations."

"I don't think she'd ever do that, Griffin."

"But do you know she wouldn't or just think she wouldn't?"

"I..."

"I'm just saying," he counters, moving to the bathroom door, "sometimes people will love you and talk highly of you and offer you every opportunity until they don't get their way and then it's a whole other ballgame."

"You mean like right now?" I spit back. "Are you telling me that's how you feel about me?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Layken. You know that's not what I'm saying." He scoffs, shaking his head and then murmurs something about needing a shower before the bathroom door closes behind him and I'm left standing in his bedroom all alone.

Tears prick my eyes as a tingling pressure builds in my chest. Not knowing where to put my focus, my eyes dart around the room as I try to figure out what the hell just happened. I didn't imagine this conversation unfolding quite the way it did and I have no idea what to do about it.

My vision blurs as tears spill down my cheeks. I swiftly wipe them away and reach for my pajamas so I can crawl into bed before Griffin gets out of the shower. Lifting off my shirt, I reach for my sleep shirt as the bathroom door clicks open and Griffin stalks out making a beeline for me. There's no time to catch my breath before his hands are holding my face and he's crashing his lips to mine.

What the?

"I'm sorry, Lake," he murmurs in between kisses. "I'm so fucking sorry. I didn't mean it." His lips are on mine again, his tongue against my lips asking for entry and I grant it to him willingly. "I don't know what I was

thinking. I'm sorry." His gaze intent, he brings a hand to the side of my throat, clearing away my tears with his thumb. "You should go to the interview. Hear her out. Then we can talk about it. Whatever you want to do, we can figure it out." He shrugs helplessly. "I'll ask for a trade or something if I have to. I'll make it work somehow because I love you."

"Griffin."

He squeezes his eyes closed and shakes his head. "I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that. I shouldn't have acted like an asshole. I'm not that guy, Lake."

He nudges his nose against mine and I release a shuddering breath. "I know."

"Forgive me," he begs.

"Forgiven."

"I love you."

"I love you too, Griff."

He doesn't say another word. Instead, he leans down and lifts me up, his hands under my legs curling them around his waist as he kisses me again as if he hasn't tasted my lips in years. And then he turns and heads back to the bathroom, carrying me with him. The shower still running, steam billows above the glass shower doors. He unhooks my bra and nibbles on my bottom lip and I guess now my plans have changed.

I'm taking a shower before bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

GRIFFIN

Four days.

It's been four fucking days since Layken came home and told me about this upcoming interview and hospital tour...in Miami fucking Florida.

And for some reason that I can't put into words, it's been the longest four days of my life. Though I've been busy with gym time, practices, and two games in those four days, it feels like I'm running on empty. Like, I'm just going through the motions to what I fear will be an inevitable loss.

She leaves tomorrow.

And the team leaves for Portland in two days and then we're in Chicago the day after that.

The Red Tails have become our biggest personal rivalry over the last few years. Ever since Oliver's sister married one of the birds, we've taken it upon ourselves to tease the hell out of them, ruffle their feathers, and then celebrate with them win or lose afterwards. We're rivals and friends, as it should be, and I'm very much looking forward to seeing them, but there's been an ache in my chest all day. A nagging feeling that my wife, the woman I've fallen head over heels for, is going to go to Miami and will fall in love with this new job opportunity and not ever care to look back.

I'm afraid she'll leave me.

I've racked my brain for ideas, anything to subliminally show her that she loves it here and doesn't want to leave.

But why would she stay?

Her family doesn't give a shit about her, so other than me or Corrigan, she has no other ties to Anaheim.

She could start a fresh new life. Make a new best friend.

Marry some other guy...

I know I shouldn't be putting myself into this depressive state, especially right before one of our biggest games of the season, but fuck if my fear isn't grabbing a hold of my balls and squeezing the hell out of them.

All I want to do is love on Layken.

She's all I've been thinking about for days.

We've had sex every single day since the moment I apologized to her for being an asshole the other night. The moment I closed the door to the bathroom and turned on the shower I regretted every word I said to her. She didn't deserve any of it. I overreacted and I couldn't stop myself even though I knew. I knew I was being an ass. So, I turned around and opened the door and fucking kissed her until she forgave me because I'm a fucking sucker for Layken Elizabeth Ollenberg.

Once she told me I was forgiven, I carried her right into the shower and pleased her until she came.

Twice.

I can't fucking get enough of her.

Her scent.

Her body.

Her voice.

The way she sighs when she's coming down from her orgasm.

Fuck.

It's the most melodious sound and I live for it.

I crave it.

I work for it.

And even though we've promised each other that no decisions will be made without talking about it first, the darkest parts of me are telling me her decision is already made and she's going to leave me.

The bathroom door opens and she steps out wrapped in a towel after her bedtime shower. Inhaling a deep breath I watch her every move.

"Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?"

Her lips turn up into a smile. "Every single day, actually."

I lie on my back, my hand rubbing over my stomach and chest. “Hmm. Really?”

“Mhmm.”

“Good. I need you to remember it.”

She turns toward me, combing her fingers through her golden wet tendrils, her brows coming together. “Why do I need to remember it?”

“You know.” I shrug lazily. “In case I’m ever not around to remind you.”

She turns out the overhead light to our room, casting us into the glow of the moon shining through the windows. Then she crawls onto the bed and over to my side where she pulls back the covers and shimmies over me until she’s straddling my naked body with her own. Well, she’s nearly naked.

Fuck me.

Her warm pussy pressed against my dick is a feeling I will never fucking tire of.

“And why wouldn’t you be around to remind me?” she asks pointedly. “Are you going somewhere?”

I reach up and slowly pull apart the towel wrapped around her and let it fall to the floor. This way I can see all of my wife.

God, she’s stunning like this.

So, fucking sexy.

“I’m not going anywhere, Naughty,” I tell her, softly trailing my fingers from the base of her collar bone, down her sternum, to her pelvis and then I feather them down her thigh. “But you’re flying in a different direction tomorrow and I just want you to remember how beautiful you are. And that I love you more than I can ever put into words.”

“Griffin.” She places her hands on my chest and looks me square in the eye. “I’m not leaving you. You know that, right?”

I swallow the lump in my throat and nod wordlessly because if I open my mouth right now I might very well beg her not to go tomorrow.

To resist the temptation.

Logistically, I can give her anything she desires.

She could live with me and never work a day in her life.

But I also know that wouldn’t make Layken happy.

She has a gift. A talent that reaches farther than just writing romance books. She’s an out-of-the-box thinker when it comes to raising money and helping people. Especially kids.

She needs to go to this interview.

She needs to do this for her.

And as much as it fucking sucks, I respect it.

I respect her.

Because I love her.

“And you know I’m going to fly into Chicago so I can be with you for the game, right? We’ll be apart for one weekend. That’s it.”

“Yeah.” I give her my best smile. “You won’t want to miss us killing the birds.”

She giggles. “I can’t wait.”

“And then you can tell me all about your interview while I’m ten inches deep inside you.”

She starts to laugh, nearly bursting out, but stops when she feels how hard I am underneath her.

“Did you have something to say, wife?”

She nods, still trying to stifle her giggle. “Yeah. I do.”

Good Lord, she’s going to emasculate me.

She likes to tease me. It’s one of the things I love about her. Her unwavering ability to poke fun at me to keep me grounded. She’s fucking good at it.

“Alright, out with it.”

She bends forward, her nipples brushing my chest and I gasp at the sensation and bring my hands to her ass on instinct. She lowers her lips to mine feathering her tongue against them and then whispers, “I think ten inches isn’t quite correct, husband.”

“No?”

Here it comes.

She’s good at teasing me about my cock.

I guess I bring it on myself.

She lifts up and wraps her hand around my cock, squeezing the base the way she knows I like. “It’s at least eleven,” she says, and then lowers herself on top of me, soaking my cock as I push inside of her.

“Fuck, Layken,” I moan at the tightness of her pussy. “So, fucking good.”

Her eyes lock with mine as she moves against me painstakingly slowly, feeling me stretch her, taking me in inch by inch. “I love you, Griffin,” she says, moving her hips backward and forwards with my cock inside her.

I bring my hands to her soft breasts, lifting up to suck a nipple into my mouth. She arches her back and I place a hand there to hold her steady while I circle her sensitive bud with my tongue, flicking, licking, sucking.

Flicking, licking, sucking.

And then I move to the other side and repeat my movements.

“Yes.” She sighs. Her hand slides through my hair holding me to her chest as she fucks me, sliding against my hardened shaft, seeking the pleasure she deserves.

The pleasure I want to give her every fucking day for as long we both shall live.

My arm wrapped around her, I roll us until she’s underneath me and I can feast my eyes on her beautiful face while our bodies connect in ways I never thought would actually mean something to me.

She arches her back when I sink inside her again, stretching her as she frames my cock in her warmth, in her arousal. “I love you too, Layken. Do you feel me?”

“Yes,” she hisses.

“I don’t ever want to lose this feeling with you, Lake,” I tell her, my eyes moving between her stare and the connection happening below us. “The way you take me.” I shake my head. “You’re perfect for me.” I push inside her even more until I’m balls deep and can’t go any farther. She gasps at the fullness. “So, fucking perfect.”

Her hands are on my back, her nails digging into my skin, marking me in what I’m positive will be visible scratch marks tomorrow. And I will wear every single one of them with pride.

“Griffin!” she cries, tears springing to her eyes. “You were made for me too. Me, and only me.”

“That’s right, Naughty.” I kiss her forehead as I rock my hips trying my damndest to keep myself in control. I brush her tears away with my thumbs and then kiss her cheeks where they once were. “You and me. Forever.”

“Forever.”

I lift her legs and rest them on my shoulders and then reach down and palm her breasts.

“Come with me.”

It’s not a command as much as a question. A request.

“Yes,” she nods fervently. “Please, Griffin.”

She rocks her body as I piston my hips against her until we find the rhythm and speed we both need. I apply just enough pressure to her nipples that her mouth falls open and she gasps a breath.

“Oh God! Griffin! Yes!”

Her pussy clenches around my cock and I hasten my speed to get us both where we want to be. A spark ignites in my spine and I swear words come out of my mouth in a garbled mess of sounds as white-hot heat spread through my chest.

“Oh, fuck! Lake.”

“Yes! Please Griffin. Please!”

I bring my hand up her chest, wrapping it lightly around her throat and her wide heated eyes stare back at me. Our mouths open as we pant together. I thrust inside her once, twice, three more times and then she’s coming hard, her slick pussy clenching around me, squeezing me, holding me inside her like a prisoner.

“Fuck! Layken. Oh, fuck!”

She reaches up and brings her mouth to mine, swallowing my words as I come inside her, filling her with my love.

My promise.

My vow.

“God, I’ll never not love you.”

I DIDN’T SLEEP a fucking wink last night.

Sleeping without my wife by my side might be the single worst thing I’ve ever tried to do. How did I become such a sucker for her? When did I become so attached that a night without her changes my whole damn attitude?

Layken left yesterday afternoon and I did nothing but wallow the entire rest of the day. My workout sucked. I sulked through our team meeting and then came home to an empty apartment. She called me from her hotel once she got settled in so it was nice to hear her voice but once she hung up to go to sleep all I did the rest of the night was think about her. Then I whipped out my iPad and did some online shopping ordering a bunch of pink sparkly home decorations to put around this place so she might feel like it’s more

her and not just me who lives here. I ordered throw pillows and wall paintings and even a few sparkly vases with fake flowers that never die.

I purchased a new duvet in a more neutral color so it doesn't look too masculine in my bedroom. Hell, I'd paint this whole place pink if she asked me to. When I woke up this morning with my cock in my hands, I got myself off to visions of her on top of me and then cleaned myself up, packed my shit, which included several copies of her new book, and made my way to the arena so I could talk to someone about an idea that came to me last night. If I can pull this off, with any luck, it will make her want to stay in California rather than move across the country.

A man can hope.

"Marlee!" I shout down the hall when I spot just the person I was hoping to see. Marlee Remington is the team's Events and Operations manager. Where we go, she usually goes. Or at least she's the one telling us where to go and when. Ledger's had a crush on her for years and for some stupid reason hasn't done a damn thing about it. Pity, because the more I talk to her around the arena the more I think she would fit in well with our little family of players and wags.

"Oh, hey Griffin. What's up?"

Jogging down the hall, I come to a stop and hand her a book from my duffel. "First of all, here's a gift for you."

Her face pulls into a genuine smile. "Oh, my gosh! Is this Layken's newest book? I've heard all about it but haven't gotten to grab myself a copy yet."

"Well now you've got one. Enjoy. Maybe take a picture or two of you reading it." I shrug. "You know, if you want to. I mean social media reach is huge for an author, you know?"

Her eyes widen. "That's a great idea and I absolutely will! Hell, I'll take a pic of myself reading it on the plane."

"Perfect." I raise my hand and she gives me a high five.

"Now what can I do for you? Or did you just need to give me this?"

"Actually, I have something to run by you. An idea. Do you have a second?"

"For you? Of course! Can we walk and talk?"

I nod. "Yeah. Actually, I'm on my way to the team meeting so that would be great."

"Okay, tell me your idea."

“So, you know how Harrison has the summer camp for kids? That’s been his thing for years and he’s fucking good at it.”

“He is.” She nods, listening.

“It’s like the one big thing we do for kids.”

She bobs her head. “I mean yeah, but we do have other drives and things throughout the year for kids though.”

“Yeah, but we could do so much more. Not just for anyone in the community. I mean I know we give to food banks and veterans and homeless shelters and all that stuff but what if we had someone in our organization to spearhead community relations for the next generation?”

“Okay, tell me more.”

“So, I know we have a senior manager who heads our community relations department, but do you think the front office would go for creating a position in the organization specifically for a youth outreach coordinator?”

“Hmm.” Her brows lift and she nods her head. “That’s not a bad idea at all, Griffin.” She winks. “Let me guess, you know just the person for this job?”

I give her a bashful smirk. “Fucking right I do.”

WE’RE NEARLY to the airport and I haven’t heard from Layken. I know I shouldn’t be panicking but those insecure parts of me have me checking my phone every five minutes to see if she’s texted yet. Shuffling in my seat on the team bus, I write out one last text to her before we get out and board the plane.

ME

Hope your interview is fire! You’re going to knock ‘em dead, I know it. I LOVE YOU! ❤️ 🤔 ❤️

“Dude,” August chuckles next to me. “I think she gets it. You love her.”

I lean my head against the back of the seat, exasperated. “I know. I know. I just can’t help myself. It’s been...” I glance at the clock on my phone. “Five hours since we last talked. I know she’s interviewing and stuff. I just thought I’d hear from her by now.”

“You will, man. I’m sure she’s being wined and dined. This job she’s vying for is an important one. They’re going to want to know that she knows her shit. Could be any number of things.”

“She’s coming tomorrow, right?” Harrison asks me from across the aisle. “To Chicago?”

“Yeah.” I shrug my shoulder. “I mean she said she would.”

He furrows his brow. “And you really think for even a second that she won’t show up? The girl is crazy in love with you.”

“Ditto that,” Bear says chuckling. “She’s your fucking wife man. Calm your tits.”

“It’s not that, you guys. I know she’ll come back. She has to come back. Her shit is in my apartment.”

Ledger turns around in his seat in front of us. “Then what is it?”

I push my hand through my hair. “I’m just...I’m scared, okay? I’m scared.”

“Of?” Ledger curls his hand in a gesture that tells me to explain.

“I’m scared she’ll fall in love with fucking Miami and the idea of working for her old boss and she’ll want to try something long distance with me and then at some point we’ll both see that it isn’t working and she’ll leave me for real. Like a real fucking divorce. And then I’ll never see her again.”

Oliver turns around in his seat on the other side of the aisle too, his brows arching. “That was impressive.”

“Well, you asked.” I shrug again. “And I know I told her I would move anywhere with her, but also, my family is here. If I move, they’re going to want to move, and all Gage knows is here. In Anaheim. I mean I know he would adapt but asking him to do all that just for me? For Layken? It’s a lot, you know?”

The guys all nod.

“Not to mention I don’t want to fucking trade. I love it here. You guys are my family. You always have been.”

“Aww, we love you too, man.” Bodhi reaches in between my seat and August’s to pat my shoulder.

“But I’m crazy about Layken. She’s perfect for me. She’s...she’s my goddamn everything. So, what am I supposed to do? Right now, I’m nothing but a sitting duck until she decides what she wants.”

“Which will be by tonight, Griff,” August reminds me with a nudge. “We’re talking a mere possibly eight to ten-ish hours from now.”

I sigh. “I know. I’m just making myself crazy because I’m scared to hear how her day went and what she thinks about it all. I kind of wish she had never wanted to go.”

“Remember when I came to you panicking when Ella was on that date?” August reminds me.

“Yeah.”

“You and Ledge told me not to sweat it because I was the perfect one for Ella and that she just didn’t know it yet.”

Ella raises her hand a few seats in front of us. “And he was right. Thank you Griffin and Ledger!”

“You’re telling me Layken doesn’t know it yet that I’m the one for her?”

August bobs his head. “I think she knows it. Afraid to admit it maybe? Sure. But I have zero doubt she’ll come to the right conclusion. Give her a little time.”

Corrigan stands up a few seats in front of me with Ella and turns around. “Griffin, if it helps at all, she had the same worries about you when she got the initial text in the first place. Trust me. You’re going to be just fine whatever you both decide.”

“Thanks Corrigan.”

“And remember, butthole, I was her friend first. If anyone is going to lose something in this deal, it’s me losing a best friend.” She shrugs. “And I’m not worried so you shouldn’t be either.”

“You’re right.” I hold my hands up. “You’re right. Okay. I’ll try not to panic.”

Everyone nods and prepares to step off the bus to board the plane waiting for us. “But you all have your copies of Layken’s book right? Pictures! Post those pics to social media!”

“Got it!” August holds his copy in his hand.

Harrison pats his backpack. “Got it in my bag.”

“Already done, man.” Bodhi smirks. “I took a pic in the locker room this morning.”

“Perfect. Thanks.” I hike my duffel bag up onto my shoulder and step off the bus. Following in line, I’m behind August five stairs up when a voice shouts for me.

“Ollenberg!” I turn around slightly, one foot up on the next step when I see Coach Hicks jogging toward the plane with Marlee Remington at his side.

“Yeah, Coach?”

He motions for me to come down the steps, his expression void of emotion.

What the fuck?

What did I miss?

Did I leave my phone on the bus?

Does he not like the pajama pants I chose for today?

I’ve been wearing them since I walked into the arena.

He could’ve told me then.

The guys who hadn’t started up the stairs yet scoot over for me to get by as I step back down onto the tarmac.

“What’s up, Coach?”

His face ashen, he places a supportive hand on my shoulder and says, “It’s your brother, Griffin. There’s been an accident.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

LAYKEN

“So, you can see we have state of the art facilities here after the reconstruction of their new pediatrics wing,” Julie tells me as we tour the hospital. “And with the amount of money that flows through Miami, coupled with your ability to put on a great fundraiser and garner community involvement, you would be a perfect fit for the job.”

My phone has been buzzing against my leg incessantly.

I know it’s Griffin probably giving me more book ideas as that’s what he does when he’s sitting on the team plane on the way to a game.

Or Napa Valley...

And if it’s not book ideas, he’s probably reminding me how much he loves me and that I’m beautiful and not to forget it. As much as I know his messages would make me smile, I’m currently on a tour of Bayside Children’s Hospital not only with Julie, my old boss, but also three other members of the hospital board. I can’t just ask them to excuse me while I check my boyfriend’s goofy messages. Thoughts of him make me smile though. He’s been on a kick lately of making sure I know just how crazy about me he is, and if I’m being honest with myself, I feel the exact same way.

When I got on the plane to come here yesterday I asked myself why I would even entertain moving across the country to take a job when I’m perfectly happy where I am. I have the man of my dreams who seems to enjoy making me happy. His family is one of the best I’ve ever met. They

love me and support me in everything I do. My very best friend in the whole wide world lives in Anaheim and has been my ride or die for years. And the guys on the team are top notch friends to not only Griffin, but to me as well. They treat me like I'm their own family and I love them all dearly.

Corrigan and Scarlett were right, though. This job has the potential to be a great opportunity for me and even if it's not something I take for myself, who knows what kind of other doors it could open for me down the road. And even just being able to see how other hospitals or businesses operate and work closely with their charitable boards is a learning experience in and of itself.

"It really is a very beautiful facility," I tell the board members. "You should be extremely proud."

"Layken helped Pacific Children's hospital back in Anaheim raise over ten million dollars last year," Julie explains to them. "And that was at just one of our annual events. Never mind the sponsors who pledge to the hospital every year."

"That is also impressive, Ms. Hobbs."

"Oh, it's Mrs. Ollenberg, now." The words fall from my lips before I hear myself to stop them. The confused board members stare at me with arched brows and then they glance at Julie for explanation.

"Uh," she startles. "I hadn't heard this, Layken. I'm so sorry. Please accept my apology. You got married?"

I nod with a kind smile. "Yes, not too long ago. It's been a few months now."

"Ollenberg." Julie's brows pinch together. "Why do I know that name?"

"Because my husband is Griffin Ollenberg," I tell her. "Of the Anaheim Stars."

A wild smile grows across her face. "Oh, my gosh! You and Griffin? I had no idea you were even seeing each other!" She gives me a short congratulatory hug as the board members look on happily.

"Yes." One of the men, I think his name was Anthony, nods. "Congratulations indeed. I follow hockey a little, myself, and I hear Griffin's name often while watching sports news. He's the guy with the uh..." He gestures to his legs. "With the pants."

"Yes, sir," I chuckle. "His penchant for pajama pants is something to behold and also, comes from a place of love for his brother. Griffin is truly

a great player on the ice and great man off the ice. He has a very giving heart.”

“That’s great to hear,” he says. “So, knowing this now, how do you see this job working out for you with a husband on the road a lot?”

“Oh, I don’t see it as a hindrance at all. Griffin is very busy for about nine months out of the year and when he’s on the road, if I have reason to stay behind, that’s what I do. So, there would be no problem with him traveling with the team while I’m working here.” I bob my head. “He’s also mentioned a potential trade interest if this were to be the right fit for me. We’re committed to making it work either way.”

“Very good.” Anthony nods. “Well, I think the board and I have heard all we need to hear on our end. You’ve answered all our questions and it seems Julie was right to recommend you for this position. We hope you’ll enjoy the rest of your stay here in Miami and please, if you have any questions whatsoever don’t hesitate to call me.” Anthony hands me one of his cards and then reaches out his hand to shake mine.

“I absolutely will. Thank you very much.” I take a moment to shake hands with each of them and then follow Julie down the hallway. Realizing my phone has gone silent in my pocket, I take that to mean Griffin got to the arena in Portland with the team and is preparing for their game tonight.

I’m looking forward to snuggling into my hotel room bed in Griffin’s pajamas with some junk food so I can stream the game and watch my man play.

“Sooo? What do you think?” Julie says when we get back to her office. She takes a seat at her desk and motions for me to take whatever seat I choose, chair, couch, or otherwise.

I inhale a deep breath and release it nodding affirmatively. “It’s a spectacular facility. Wow! The updates alone are a huge temptation even though it wouldn’t be much use for me. I get that my place is behind the computer or on the phone planning the events.”

“Right but keep in mind, you’ll be able to use part of the hospital for certain events. And also, since you were so successful working with the Anaheim Stars coupled with the Chicago Red Tails, you have several pro sports teams right here in Miami as well. I’m certain with your connections thanks to your husband, you could invite them all in to work with you. The possibilities are endless, really.”

“They are, you’re right.”

Julie's phone rings on her desk. She raises her finger. "Sorry Layken it's my assistant. Just one moment."

I wave my hand dismissively and shake my head. "No, please."

She picks up the phone and says, "Yes, Sam?"

I try not to watch her face as I don't want to butt into her conversations but then she looks at me, her brows furrowed. "Uh huh...yeah. I understand. You did the right thing. Thank you, Sam. I'll let her know immediately."

Is she talking about me?

She'll let me know?

Or is this a work thing I know nothing about?

Julie hangs up the phone and folds her hands together, her tone softening. "Layken, I'm sorry, but there's been an accident."

My heart drops inside my chest as all the blood drains from my face. "I'm sorry? A...an accident?"

She stands and steps over to me to grab my hand. "Griffin is fine. Corrigan Hicks called the hospital looking for me because they've been trying to get ahold of you and she knew you were here with me."

I spring up from my chair, my chest tightening. "He's...but he's okay? Griffin? He's okay? Was it the plane? They're in Portland today. Was it another accident on the ice? Is it bad? Did they take him to the hospital?"

I realize as I'm throwing questions at Julie, she's shaking her head no and when I finally halt my barrage, she tells me, "It's not Griffin at all, Layken. It's his brother. Gage?"

I gasp and squeeze her hand. "Oh no!"

"Griffin ended up not getting on the plane at all. I guess Mr. Hicks got him right before they boarded."

"Oh. Good. Did she say what happened? How bad is it?"

"I don't know the particulars, I'm sorry. I just know he was life-flighted. I'm sure Corrigan can tell you more. She spoke to Sam who got you booked on the next direct flight back to California today instead of Chicago tomorrow. Our driver will run you back to the hotel to grab your bags. I know Corrigan wouldn't have called here if it weren't imperative that you get back home."

He needs me.

Of course he needs me.

And I need him.

I want to be there for him.

He has to be scared out of his mind.

“Oh, my God, thank you, Julie. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Of course. Again, I’m so sorry. Go. Be with your husband and we’ll touch base in the next few days. If you have questions about the job, you know how to get a hold of me.”

“Julie.” I squeeze her hand, my eyes glistening, and shake my head, not only in fear of what’s happening with Gage, but because I know what I’m about to tell her isn’t going to be what she wants to hear. But it’s the right call for me. I know that now. I feel it in bones.

“I’m so sorry. But I can’t take this job.”

She gives me a sympathetic smile. “I had a feeling you might say that.”

“You know I have always had the utmost respect for you, but my husband needs me. His family is his everything. And I know that’s all just hitting me right now and I’m a little shaken and emotional but I have to follow my gut and my heart and both are telling me Anaheim is where I need to be. It’s where I want to be.”

“After hearing you got married, I wouldn’t expect anything less.” She gives me a surprisingly big and comforting hug. “I’ve always respected your tenacity and your confidence in what you do. Don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise.” She grasps my shoulders. “You’re going to make a future organization very lucky to have you when that day comes, Layken.”

Tears spill over my cheeks at her compliments. “Thank you, again, Julie. For everything. And good luck with everything here. It truly seems like a dream job.”

“It will be for me,” she says, escorting me out the door to meet Sam who, she explains, will take me to a waiting car. “But my dream doesn’t have to be your dream. Take care, Layken. Send me an update when you can, will you?”

“Of course,” I tell her as I wave. “Thank you!”

Julie waves as I follow Sam down the steps and out of the hospital into a waiting car. The minute I’m inside and headed for the airport, I pull my phone from my pocket and glance through all the notifications. Only one text from Griffin this morning but several in a row from Corrigan.

CORRIGAN

Hey. You available?

CORRIGAN

There's a bit of a problem. Can you text me when you have a minute?

CORRIGAN

Call me when your interview is done.

CORRIGAN

Okay I'm not sure how long your interview is so I'm just going to write this out.

CORRIGAN

Griffin did NOT get on the plane to Portland because Gage was in a car accident with his girlfriend late this morning.

CORRIGAN

The girl is okay I think. Scrapes and bruises. But Gage was life-flighted to Memorial Hospital in L.A.

CORRIGAN

I'll try to find out more while you're busy so call me when you get this! Bodhi said he'll pay for your flight back if needed so Griffin doesn't have to worry about it. Love you girl. ❤️

Shit!

I can't believe this is all happening.

Poor Griffin.

I punch Corrigan's name on my phone and she answers after the first ring.

"Hey Lake."

"Corri! What's happening? Have you heard from Griffin?"

"No, I'm sorry. I'm getting all the info second or third hand from either Marlee or Dad. Griffin has kind of gone radio silent."

"Oh God," I whimper. "He has to be so fucking scared. And I'm not with him to keep him calm. Fuck, I wish I could just snap my fingers and be there."

"I know, babe. I know."

"I'm on the next direct flight," I tell her. "Julie said her assistant got me all set up."

"Yeah, I told her to send you to L.A. and then you can uber from there to the hospital."

"Perfect. Thank you, Corri. Does Griffin know I'm on my way back?"

“I would guess not. Like I said, he hasn’t reached out to anyone and the guys didn’t want to bother him. Do you want me to let him know you’re coming back.”

“No, that’s okay. You’re right, if he knows I’m in the air he’ll just worry about where I am and whether or not I’m safe. If he’s silent, he has a reason and I can respect that. I’ll just see him when I get there.”

“Safe flight, girl. Let me know when you land so I know, okay?”

I nod, even though she can’t see me. “Yeah. Of course. Talk soon.”

“Bye babe.”

I lay my phone in my lap and lean my head back, closing my eyes for two minutes and breathe. This has been a long day and all I want to do is get back to my husband.

When my driver pulls up to the airport entrance, I thank him for getting me here so quickly and hand him an extra tip even though Sam told me everything was paid for and then make my way into the airport thanking the gods that I’m TSA approved and won’t have to wait in the long line. Pulling up my boarding pass in my email, I check in for my flight and make my way through security way quicker than I expected and then check my watch noting that I have roughly twenty-five minutes before boarding. I purchase myself a chicken sandwich and a bottle of water and then take a minute to change into Griffin’s pajama pants and his hoodie in the bathroom so I don’t have to sit through the flight in my suit. Checking myself in the mirror, I smile remembering this outfit as the exact one he gave me the first time I stepped into his apartment.

When boarding time is called, I find my seat on the plane, appreciating the first-class seat, and settle in for the long flight. As we lift up, I close my eyes and think of Griffin. I say a quick prayer for Gage and for Griffin’s parents and then drift off dreaming of every happy memory Griffin and I have had since the day we met.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

GRIFFIN

“An accident?” I ask, my heart sinking inside my chest. “What do you mean an accident?”

“An automobile accident, this morning,” Coach tells me. “Your parents called the front office because they didn’t know if you were already in the air.”

“Everything okay, Griff?” I hear August say from the stairs. Without thinking I turn and toss him my backpack.

“No. Do me a favor and pass those out. You know what to do.”

His brow furrows and he unzips my bag to see it full of Layken’s books and then he glances back at me and nods. “Consider it done, man.”

“Where is he?” I ask Coach and Marlee who are still standing with us. “Did they take him to Anaheim Medical?”

Marlee shakes her head and I swear to God a piece of me dies inside.

“He made it, though, right? He’s okay? He’s going to be fine, right? Did they tell you that?”

Fuck.

I can’t handle this right now.

I reach out my hand for Layken’s knowing her touch will ground me. She’ll help me think straight. She’ll say all the right things.

But she’s not here.

Trying not to look like a crazed idiot, I stretch my hand and shake out my fingers like I was having a spasm or something and then put my hand in

my pocket.

“Griffin.” Marlee glances at her phone. “They life-flighted your brother to Memorial Hospital in L.A.”

L.A.?

It'll take me too long to get there with all the fucking traffic.

What if he doesn't make it?

What if I don't get to see him before...

“Griffin, I have a friend who is going to fly you there,” Coach tells me. “His name is Dan and he's got time in his schedule this morning to fly you up there.” He turns to gesture to the incoming helicopter landing on the helicopter pad about two to three hundred yards away. “That's him now.”

“He can get you to one of the smaller local landing strips, and then I'll have a driver waiting to get you to Memorial Hospital. Don't worry about a thing. We're getting you there, okay?”

“Thank you. Truly. I appreciate it very much.” I glance back at Coach Hicks and shake my head. “Coach, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'll miss—”

“What have I always said to you guys, Ollenberg?” He reaches out and squeezes my shoulder. “Family first.” He gestures with his head toward the helicopter. “Go do what you have to do. Keep me informed when you can.”

I nod and shake Coach's hand. “I will. And thank you again.”

And with that I'm sprinting as fast as I fucking can to the helicopter praying my brother is alive and pleading with whatever holy or spiritual being that might be listening to keep him alive. Dan jumps down from inside the helicopter long enough to give me my instructions on where to sit, how to strap in, and what to do. I acknowledge his instructions and then hold up my finger asking him to give me a minute. And then I jog about fifty feet away and vomit the contents of my stomach onto the ground.

I can't lose my brother.

Gagey. I need you to be strong, bud.

I love you so goddamn much.

Hang in there. Do you hear me?

Please for the love of fucking Christ, hear me.

I'm coming Gage!

Dan is waiting with a few napkins and a bottle of water when I walk back to the helicopter.

“Thanks,” I shout above the noise.

“Sure thing.” He nods to me. “I promise I’ll get you there as fast as I can.”

I twist open the bottled water, take a large swig and swish it around in my mouth and spit it out beside me. Then I take another swig and swallow it down before locking eyes with Dan. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

“INTERNAL INJURIES?” My brows arch as Mom and Dad try to answer my questions. I bring my hand to my forehead pushing my hair up as I try to comprehend the entire last hour of this day. “What the fuck happened?”

“He was T-boned,” Dad explains. “He and Mallory were on their way to their weekly social group meet at the YMCA.” Dad shakes his head, his eyes darkened, his face sullen. This morning has clearly taken a toll. He’s not the rosy-cheeked easy-going man I know him to be. “They said it was a drunk driver. Some twenty-year old kid driving ridiculously too fast in town. Blew through a stop sign and rammed right into Gage. The kid’s truck hit on Gage’s side of the car.”

Oh, God.

“Mallory,” I repeat the name, bringing my hands to my hips. “You said Mallory was with him? Is she okay? Is she here too?”

Mom shakes her head. “No. Mallory wasn’t seriously hurt since she was on the passenger side. They took her to County General back at home I think. Her parents were heading there. I half expect to see them here at some point but not until she gets checked out to make sure she’s okay. They said she had some minor scrapes and bruises, but that’s it.”

I glance around the empty waiting room feeling like the walls are closing in on me. My muscles tighten and I fold my body over, clenching my fists and squeezing my eyes closed.

“Fuck!” I shout, fixating on all the worst-case scenarios that float through my mind.

What if he dies?

He had to have been so scared.

And I wasn’t there to protect him.

I wasn’t there with him.

I can’t fix this.

What if he doesn't wake up?

What if this is the end and I didn't even get to say goodbye?

"Fucking fuck!" I shout again, but this time, Mom is by my side, wrapping her arms around me.

"Oh, Griffin. He's going to be okay. We have to believe he'll be okay."

"But how do you know, Mom?" I snap at her, my eyes glistening with unshed tears. One look at her tired, worried face and I can't hold them back. "What if he doesn't make it, Mom?"

Her own tears match mine as they flow freely down her cheeks. I want to reach out and dry them for her, but my chest fucking hurts and my world is falling in around me.

"We can't think that way, Griffin." She shakes her head. "We can't. All we can do is think positively. You've always been the one to tell Gage there's no room for negative talk and he's lived by that his whole life. Because you told him that."

"Yeah, but what if I was lying, Mom?" I finally stand up and pace the floor, my hand on the back of my neck. "What if I've lied to him all this time? What if I lied to you?"

"You haven't, Griffin," she says, tenderly bringing her hand to my back. "You were right to tell him that. Look at how well he's done for himself. He's never lingered on the negative. He focuses on the things he can control and right now that's all we can do."

"I have lied to you, Mom." I turn on her, glancing at Dad next to her. "And you too Dad. I've lied to both of you."

Mom's brows fold in and she shakes her head in disbelief. "What do you mean, Griffin?"

"Layken, Mom."

Fuck.

Layken.

I didn't call her.

She doesn't know.

I can't bother her with this now.

There's nothing she can do.

But God do I wish she was here.

"Where is Layken?" Dad asks, turning his head and glancing around as if she's going to walk through the door any minute. "Is she driving here?"

“No, she’s not driving here. She’s not coming and I...I didn’t even tell her about Gage. She’s in Miami interviewing for a job. She’s so fucking far away, there’s nothing she can do.”

“Wait. I don’t understand,” Mom says. “Miami?”

“Mom, our marriage...” *Fuck.* I release a heavy sigh as tremendous guilt washes over me, tears streaming down my face. “I lied to you both and I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Are you trying to tell us you’re not married?” Dad inquires.

Mom adds, “Did you guys have an argument?”

I shake my head. “No. Nothing like that. And we did get married. We did, but...”

I can’t believe I have to say this out loud.

“We were both so fucking drunk we only barely remember doing it.” I lock eyes with my parents, neither of whom seem the least bit fazed. “We didn’t mean to get married.” I hang my head in shame, trying to focus on steady breathing.

Mom takes my hand and sits me down, my parents taking the chairs on both sides of me.

“We know, Griffin,” Mom says softly, squeezing my hand.

My head snaps to her. “What?”

“I said we know. We’ve known for a long time.”

“What?” I scowl. “But...how did—”

“Layken told me last month when you were home with bruised ribs.” She tries to give me a reassuring smile. “She told me everything.”

“I...” I shake my head. “I don’t...she never told me.”

“Do you want to know why she never told you?”

Does this change everything?

She doesn’t love me?

She told my parents our secret.

And then she left me for Miami.

She really is leaving.

“She’s leaving me...is that what she told you?”

Mom chuckles. “Heaven’s no, Griffin. That girl is head over heels in love with you. Don’t you see that?”

“Anyone could see it, Son,” Dad says, sitting back in his chair. “The way she took care of you. The worry on her face when she knew you were in pain.”

“She apologized for withholding the whole truth, Griffin,” Mom explains. “But I didn’t give two shits about that because the two of you are perfect for each other. We knew it the moment we met Layken. We knew it the moment you both walked out our door to head home when you came to visit.”

“The way you look at her, Griffin,” Dad murmurs next to me. “It’s kind of next level.”

“I love her, Dad,” I cry. “I love her so damn much.”

He rubs my back. “I know you do, Son. We can see that too.”

Calming down as we talk about her, I huff a quiet laugh. “She makes me feel things I’ve never felt before. Excitement. Fear. Passion. Fuck, she makes me want to be better. Do better. For her. She has me thinking about life beyond hockey and it...it doesn’t look that bad.”

Dad laughs, patting my knee. “There was definitely a time when you couldn’t see the sky through the trees. Hockey has been your life since you can probably remember so it’s nice to know you’ve got someone on your side who loves you who can show you what life after hockey can be like.”

“Her old boss from the hospital called her and all but offered her a job with her in Miami if she wants it.” I shrug helplessly. “And I didn’t have it in me to ask her not to go to the interview. What if she falls in love with the job and wants to take it?”

“If you love her, you cross that bridge together. Marriage is about give and take. Sacrifice and compromise.”

A few more tears slip from my eyes. “I’m scared. I love her so goddamn much. I don’t want to lose her. I’d do anything for her, but...I love you guys too. And Gagey. I can’t leave you guys.”

“Pshh.” Mom waves me off. “You can and you will, Griffin. That’s what flying the nest is all about. We moved here to Anaheim when you became a Star because Gage was young and we know how close the two of you are. But you’re both older now with your own adult lives. And even if we’re miles apart we’re just a plane ride away. Or who knows. Maybe we’d move again if it’s what Gage and Mallory want.”

“So, he’s really serious about Mallory then, huh?” I ask with sincere curiosity.

Dad nods. “Oh yes. He’s been telling us he’s going to ask you to help him propose to her.”

“No shit?” The thought makes me smile.

“I’m sure he’ll tell you all about it when he wakes up.”

If he wakes up.

Mom lays her hand on my other knee. “Don’t let go of Layken, Griffin. There is a bright and wonderful future out there for the both of you, I promise you that. Not every day is easy, but when you’re going through life with someone who loves you despite any of your faults or weaknesses, every day is worth it. Even the bad ones.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

We make small talk for the next couple hours while we wait for Gage to be done in surgery. I don’t know how we managed to come up with so much to talk about given the only thoughts going on in each of our heads is Gage’s wellbeing. Dad eventually closes his eyes for a short rest and Mom scrolls through her phone while I take a walk down the hall to make a quick call to Layken. After all the chaos and emotion of the morning, I’m fucking spent, my anxiety is high and all I want is to hear her voice.

But she doesn’t answer.

She must still be in the interview.

Or being wine and dined.

When I get the beep of her voicemail I leave her a message.

“Hey Naughty, it’s me. I uh...look, I know you’re in your interview and I hope you’re having exactly the kind of day you need. I want you to feel like you’re on top of the fucking world, but uh...also...” I clear my throat. “Things aren’t so hot here. Umm...I didn’t get on the plane with the team. Gage was in an accident this morning. They lifted him to Memorial Hospital in L.A. so that’s where I am now. He’s in surgery so hopefully we’ll hear something soon.” Not knowing what I want to say next because all I really want to do is wrap my arms around her and cry, I’m silent for a long pause before I continue. “Sorry, umm...” I clear my throat again, the lump of emotion making it difficult to swallow. “I was just hoping to hear your voice. I love you, Lake. I just want you to know that. Whatever happens between us. Whatever you choose, I love you. Give me a call when you get this. I’m not positive I’ll be going to Chicago so I’ll let you know where I am. Alright. I guess that’s it. I’ll talk to you soon. Bye.”

Sighing deeply, I pocket my phone at the same time I see two doctors head for the waiting room where my parents are seated.

Oh no.

Were they smiling or frowning?

I didn't pay attention.

Fuck!

Following them, I meet my parents and stand with them while they talk to the doctor.

"Mr. and Mrs. Ollenberg?" he says to my parents.

They both look up from their seats and stand. "Yes," Dad tells him. "We're Gage's parents."

"Good to meet you." The doctor nods with a positive smile. "Gage pulled through surgery like a champ. I apologize for the long wait but we wanted to be sure all was well before we gave you any update. We removed Gage's spleen which was the cause of the internal bleeding, and did some exploring to make sure no other internal organs were harmed. Then we had to fix his arm. His left arm was crushed by the impact so we had to pin and reset it. That part actually took a little longer than taking his spleen. But we're happy to report that everything else looked great. He'll be as sore as anyone would after these types of surgeries, but we're extremely hopeful he'll make a full recovery."

"Oh, God!" My mom brings a hand to her heart, tears of relief flooding her eyes. "Thank you doctors." She reaches out and hugs each of them. Dad and I shake their hands and give our sincere thanks as well.

"When can we see Gage?" I ask.

"He's in recovery now, so once he's awake and stable, one of the nurses will be out to update you. May be about an hour or so. They'll want to monitor his vitals for a bit to make sure he's okay."

"Thank you, again," I tell them sincerely. "For everything."

I make a mental note to make a sizeable donation to Memorial Hospital if I get my brother out of this place alive and well.

We're all seated around Gage's bed a few hours later when he's in his own room. He opened his eyes when we first walked in but he hasn't quite beat the effects of the anesthesia yet. We're okay with that though. Being able to watch him sleep, watch him breathe, brings me a bit of peace. Finally, he opens his eyes and I'm the first person he sees. His mouth spreads into lazy but happy smile when our eyes lock.

"Griffy!" His voice is hoarse, but the way he says my name, like he did all those years when I would visit him in the hospital when he was sick or after a procedure, brings huge fucking tears to my eyes.

"Hey Gagey. You scared me you stupid fuck."

Gage laughs but winces a little. He always laughs when I swear.

"It hurts to laugh," he mumbles.

"Yeah, sorry about that big guy. I'll watch my mouth from now on." I lean down and kiss his forehead and then connect my forehead to his squeezing my eyes closed. "I'm really glad you're okay, Gage."

"Griffin?" His voice is a little stronger the more he talks. I look down into his worried eyes.

"Yeah bud?"

"Where's Mallory? Is she..." His eyes glisten. "Is she okay?"

Wow.

The concern in his eyes.

He really loves her.

My little brother is in love.

I can see it all over his face.

Mom takes Gage's hand and nods her head. "Mallory is good, Gagey." She pats his hand. She's just fine. She had a few bumps and bruises. The ambulance took her to the hospital by our house so her parents are with her now. I talked to her mom a bit ago and she's going to come visit you tomorrow, okay?"

Gage relaxes against his pillow with a huge sigh of relief and nods silently.

"How do you feel, Son?" Dad asks Gage from the foot of the bed, his hand on Gage's leg.

"Tired. And my belly hurts."

"Yeah," Dad nods. "It's going to hurt for a few days, but the doctors said you did a great job. They said you were a champ."

"And they fixed my arm." Gage lifts his heavily wrapped arm a tiny bit but Mom is right there to remind him not to move it so it can heal.

He turns his head back to me studying me for a minute, his brows pinching.

I bow my head glancing at myself and then back at him. "What's wrong?"

"You're not wearing your jammy pants," he says. "You're always wearing jammy pants when I'm in the hospital."

My shoulders fall as guilt washes over me. I should've pulled some out of my bag before I threw my backpack at August.

"You're right, I'm not. I didn't know you were going to—"

“He didn’t, but I did!”

Layken steps inside the room, her chest heaving telling me she must’ve run through the building to get here. The vision of her in my cinnamon roll pajama pants and team hoodie makes my chest swell and my breath catch as she shows herself off to my brother.

Gage’s smile grows tenfold as he beams at the love of my life.
“Layken!”

Out of breath, she places a gentle hand on Gage’s leg and says, “I came as soon as I could.”

And then her eyes slide to me and I’m biting the inside of my cheek to not cry my eyes out as I step over to her and lock my arms around her, holding her tighter than I’ve ever held on to anything in my whole damn life.

“Layken...”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

LAYKEN

He holds me in a vise-grip, lifting me off my feet, a relieved sigh coming from inside him as he breathes against me.

“Hey,” I console him in a partial whisper, rubbing his back and then bringing my hand up to the back of his head as he keeps me in his grip. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I just...fuck, I missed you.” Finally, he sets me down and then presses his lips to mine, his hands holding my face as he takes control, his tongue slipping into my mouth and colliding with mine. For just a moment I allow myself to get lost in him forgetting that his family is in the same room.

His woodsy scent fills my senses with a familiarity I didn’t expect. Like I’m in my own home, where I am free to be me. Griffin is my family. My home. He’s all I’ve ever wanted. All I’ll ever need.

His protective hold gives me the reassurance I need that no matter where I go, he is with me. Helping me. Encouraging me. Keeping me safe. I am his and he is mine. He’s my partner for life.

His mouth against mine makes me feel wanted. Cherished. Desired and most of all, loved. This man loves me. I have no doubt. Which makes my decision to not look at Miami any further feel that much better.

When he pulls away, he slowly opens his eyes and stares at me. A coy smile spreads across his face. It’s not his regular happy-go-lucky good-humored smile, like when he’s goofing off with his teammates, but I’ll take

it understanding the day he's clearly had. Hearing his voicemail on my phone when I got off the plane damn near ripped my heart out. I could hear his fear and uncertainty dripping from his voice. I knew he needed me and did all I could to get the hospital as fast as possible.

"I missed you too, Griffin," I whisper. "And I'm so sorry I wasn't here for you when you needed me."

He shakes his head. "No, I'm sorry, Lake. I know I should've called you earlier. I could've at least texted. I just..." He shakes his head again, this time pushing a hand through his hair. "I was kind of running on auto. I wasn't thinking."

"It's okay. Corri called me. She knew you were radio silent. Apparently the guys had tried to text you a good bit but you weren't answering and..." I shrug cautiously. "They were concerned."

"So, you flew six hours just to check on me?"

"I'd do anything for you, Griffin."

"How was the interview?" He eyes me. "I'm sorry I totally forgot to ask."

"Oh." I wave off his question. "I told them to fuck it."

His eyes bulge, a baffled expression on his face. "You what?"

"Okay, so I didn't say it in those words," I explain to everyone, noticing Griffin's parents listening to our conversation. "But I did tell them thanks but no thanks."

Griffin's shoulders fall slowly. "You did?"

"Yeah." I nod.

"But why? Layken it was a dream job for you. I would follow you anywhere. If you want to call them back I'll go with you. We can work something out. I want you to be happy."

I place my hand tenderly on his cheek. "Then believe me when I say there is no place I would rather be than right here in California. With you and our friends." I look around the hospital room at Gage and then Griffin's parents. "And our family."

I gesture to Gage. "Besides, if I move to Miami, when would I get to hang out with this handsome guy here and make social media videos with him?" I gesture to his mom. "And when would I get to ask your mom to go book shopping with me or have her teach me how to make the world's best lasagna?" I step over to his dad. "And when would I get to hang with this

loving guy to hear every sappy Griffin story from your childhood so I can fall in love with you all over again?”

Griffin’s dad laughs and wraps his arm around me, hugging me into his side. “Oh, I’m game for those chats any time you want, Layken.”

I turn back to Griffin, wrapping my arms around his torso as he hugs me against his chest. “And if we move to Miami, I’d never get to experience the cock verse wiener game with the guys and something tells me, it’s an experience I would never forget.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” Griffin chuckles, kissing the top of my head.

Just then Griffin’s phone dings in his pocket and he pulls it out to check who it’s from. Smiling at his phone he turns to show Gage a video of his teammates all wishing him well and telling him they can’t wait to see him at one of their home games as soon as he’s feeling up to it.

Gage is all smiles, as is Griffin and his parents.

Seeing the love in this room, including the love and encouragement from the guys on the team, it’s all I needed to see to breathe a huge sigh of relief that I’m making all the right decisions for me and for my future with Griffin.

This is the life I want.

A life with Griffin by my side.

A life with a loving, supportive family.

A life with the best friends I could ever be blessed to know.

“Wait, Griffy,” Gage says, pointing to the phone. “They’re wearing their uniforms.”

“Yeah.” Griffin nods. “They have a game to play tonight. It should be starting in the next hour or so.”

“But you’re going to miss it.”

Griffin smiles. “Yeah, but I’m here with you bud. I wanted to make sure you were okay. You’re way more important than a stupid hockey game.”

“Hey.” Gage points at his brother. “Hockey isn’t stupid. You have to go play so I can watch you.”

“Well, it’s a little late for tonight bud. We’ll have to cheer on the guys. You and me together.”

“I can find the game on my iPad,” I tell Gage. “You guys can watch it right here if you want.”

“But what about Chicago?” Griffin’s told me before that Gage knows every bit of his brother’s schedule. Every stat. Every score. He makes it his

job to know.

“I don’t need to go, Gage. It’s okay. Coach knows where I am.”

“I want you to go. You love the birds.”

I chuckle hearing Gage call the Chicago Red Tails the birds as that’s how the team refers to them as well.

“I do. You’re right.” Griffin nods. “But they’ll understand. It’s okay.”

Gage shakes his head. “Griffin, I’m fine. I can do this. And you can go play. Your teammates are counting on you. They need you. If you’re not there, Dex Foster will beat up on Bodhi Roche and the team will lose.”

Griffin laughs. “I won’t tell Bodhi you said that, okay?”

Gage shrugs. “Okay but it’s true. Dex can be a rough player until you’re on the ice. You guys have fun together.”

“Yeah, we do. You’re right.”

“Gage is right, Son,” his dad says. “He’s going to be okay. If you want to play in Chicago there’s still time to find a flight out even first thing in the morning if not tonight.”

Griffin surveys his family and then glances back at me. I only offer him a helpless shrug because this has to be his decision. Definitely not mine.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay?” he asks his brother. “I have no problem staying here with you.” He holds Gage’s leg. “You’re more important to me than anyone.”

Gage smirks. “Even Layken?”

Griffin shrugs and then loudly whispers, “Bro before Doe.”

“HEY OLLENBERG!” A familiar face walks toward us in the hallway of the arena as Layken and I enter the players area. The hole in Dex Foster’s smile where he had yet another tooth knocked out a few nights ago gives him an all new mischievous look about him.

“Hey Foster. You ready for tonight?”

“Ready to kick your ass you mean?”

Griffin tips his head back and cackles. “In your dreams buddy. Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

When Dex reaches us he gives Griffin a big hug and does this bro-like handshake that I couldn’t replicate if I tried. “How’s your brother, man? I

heard he was in an accident?"

"Yeah." Griffin nods. "T-boned by a fucking drunk. He pulled through surgery though and is doing okay. R-I-P to his spleen and he has some new hardware in his arm but he should thankfully have a full recovery."

"Optimus Fine he is then, huh? More than meets the eye."

"Yeah," Griffin laughs. "It was his idea for me to get the hell out of the hospital so I could come whip you into shape on the ice."

Dex laughs. "Dammit, that's going to suck for you isn't it then? When you have to tell him you failed."

"Meh. I'll just hand him one of your teeth and tell him it was all me."

Dex laughs harder and then rubs his chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Hmm, would Tate like that better in the bedroom or no?"

"Nah," I say, butting into their conversation. "We girls like a little nibble action."

"Shit I'm sorry, Layken," Griffin says palming his forehead. "Dex, this is my wife, Layken. Layken, Dex Foster."

"Oh, I'm well aware who Dex Foster is," I say, reaching out my hand to shake his. "Plus, we were introduced last year at the Children's Art Auction."

"Indeed, we were." He nods. "So, then you know I'm a hugger not a shaker." He opens his arms and gives me great big hug. "It's a pleasure to meet you again, Layken. I've already started reading your book."

I freeze in Dex's arms. "Wait, what?"

"Yeah. Charlee Landric knew all about it. She gave copies to all of us. Milo was eating it up." He leans in and whispers, "Chapter twelve?" He kisses the tips of his fingers in a chef's kiss gesture. "Perfection."

Feeling the blush creep onto my cheeks, I smile. "Well, I'm glad you like it."

He waves his finger at me, his eyes narrowed. "I have a feeling we're going to hear big things about you, Layken Hobbs Ollenberg."

Dex nudges Griffin. "I've got to stop into the daycare and check on the kids before the game. Summer always gives me a good-luck kiss. I'll catch you guys later?"

"For sure." Griffin nods.

I wave as he walks past us and continues down the hall. "It was great to see you, Dex."

"Right back at ya pretty lady!"

We continue down the hall toward the Stars' locker room and I am suddenly giddy. "Oh, my God, Griffin, did you hear him? They're reading my book! Like, the whole fucking team!"

Griffin lifts me up and swings me around. "Fucking right they are. I told you big things were going to happen for you."

"I love you, Griffin."

"I love you too, Naughty. And I can't wait to spend every night from now until eternity showing you just how much."

"Layken! Griffin!" Marlee steps out of one of the rooms as we approach happy to see us both. "I was just looking for you guys!" Her smile fades momentarily. "How's Gage?"

"He's good, thanks," Griffin answers positively. "Should make a full recovery."

"Amazing news! Really, that's so great." She beams and then shakes her head like she's clearing the clutter from her brain. "Anyway, the reason I was looking for you. Actually, it's Layken I was looking for, but I figured you would want to hear this too, Griffin since you guys are...you know, married and all that."

"What can I help you with?" I ask her, wondering why on earth she would be looking for me.

"Well, your charming husband had this idea that I absolutely loved so I took it the organization and they are totally on board if you are."

I frown, shaking my head in confusion. "On board with what?"

"Oh." Marlee glances at Griffin curiously. "You didn't tell her?"

"Hell no," Griffin answers adamantly. "I wasn't about to do that and have it not work out."

"What are we talking about, exactly? What's not working out?"

Marlee grins at Griffin and winks and then turns to me. "Layken, how would you like a job working for the Anaheim Stars Franchise?"

Wait.

What?

Me?

Work for the Stars?

"Uh..."

She explains further. "The Stars organization would like to add a new tier to their charitable foundation. One that works primarily for the youth in our community." She pats Griffin's shoulder. "And this guy here thought

maybe that might be something you would excel at. So, I contacted Pacific Children's because Coach Hicks said that's where you used to work until they merged. They put me in touch with your old boss and she couldn't sing your praises enough. She said we would be stupid not to hire you on the spot so," she says with a shrug. "I know we're in Chicago at the moment but on behalf of the General Managers and the board of directors, I'm offering you a full-time job as the head of our Youth Development Foundation with the Anaheim Stars if you're interested."

My jaw practically unhinges.

Is this even happening right now?

What are the odds that I turn down a job, and am offered a dream job within days of each other?

Tears spring to my eyes and I feel Griffin put an arm around me. He leans in and whispers in my ear, "This is where you say yes, Naughty."

"Yes!" I blurt. "Oh my God, yes! I...I accept."

"Perfect." Marlee chuckles. "I had a feeling you would say that."

"Marlee, thank you." I step toward her and give her a gigantic hug. "Thank you so much! Truly. I don't even know what to say."

"Well, you can thank your husband for putting the bug in my ear. It was the perfect idea and even better that we didn't have to make this a lengthy process of finding the right person to help us make it all happen. I'll notify the front office and we'll set up a meeting when we get back to Anaheim to go over particulars and sign contracts and all that good stuff."

"Sounds good. Thank you again."

"No, Layken. Thank you!" She gives Griffin a high five and says, "Good luck out there tonight. Ruffle those feathers."

"Thanks Marlee," Griffin says with a wink and a smile. He turns back to me and I attack his face with my mouth, pressing my lips to his and practically jumping into his body.

"You did that? For me?"

He shrugs. "It was just an idea I had. I wasn't sure she would go for it, but...you lose one hundred percent of the chances you don't take so, I had to give it a go."

His eyes bore into mine. "I didn't want you to go to Miami," he confesses. "I mean I would've done it because I love the fuck out of you, but..."

“I get it,” I tell him, nudging his nose with mine. “I didn’t want to go either. I would’ve missed you terribly and I would’ve worried every single day that you weren’t happy.”

“Are you happy now?” he asks me sincerely.

“No,” I tell him shaking my head. “But I will be when you kick those birds to the curb tonight and then sink that eleven-incher inside me so hard it knocks the wind right out of my lungs.”

The giddy smile that crosses my husband’s face is nothing less than adorable. “Gotta go, Naughty. I’ve got a game to win. Birds to kill.” He pats my ass and then kisses me once more. “I love you so goddamn much, Layken. And I’m so fucking happy you’re my wife.”

“I love you too, Griffin. If I had to twerk down the aisle on my wedding day, I’m glad I was twerking towards you.”

Want more Griffin and Layken?
Click [HERE](#) to subscribe to my newsletter
and get a free bonus epilogue!

And then keep reading for a sneak peek at the next book
in the Anaheim Stars series, WHAT IF IT’S US
featuring Ledger Dayne and his long-time crush, Marlee.

WHAT IF IT'S US EXCERPT

LEDGER

“Did you guys get blue balls yet?”

I, along with the rest of the guys, turn in Ella's direction. Each of us appearing just as shocked as the next. August nearly chokes on his beer but laughs as he watches his wife take her seat at the reception table.

“What did you say?”

She picks up a blue cake pop from her dessert plate and raises it for all of us to see before tossing it into her mouth, her eyes rolling back in her head as she moans over the delightful taste.

“The blue cake balls. Did you have one yet?”

“Oh.” August chuckles. “Nope not yet.”

“Well don't eat them,” she warns. “They're poisonous. I'll take one for the team.”

“Do they taste like cinnamon rolls, Ella?” I ask her, remembering her penchant for cinnamon rolls. “Is that why you think they're so good?” Really, she only eats them when she's nervous. It's her tick for lack of a better word, but all of us like to tease her about her sweet tooth induced nervous habit.

“Nope. It's this heavenly almond flavor on the inside.” She sucks the tip of her fingers before grabbing her napkin. “They're just coated with blue colored chocolate but oh, my God, so good.”

“Oh, my gosh, are we talking about blue balls?” Corrigan asks, taking a seat next to Ella.

Ella's eyes bulge and she exclaims, "Yes! Aren't they delicious?"

Corrigan nods. "Legit one of the best balls I've ever put in my mouth."

"Aht-aht-aht-aht-aht." Bodhi raises his hand, effectively stopping Corrigan. "Let's not go too far, Lady Roche."

Corrigan pats Bodhi's leg. "Don't worry honey. Your balls will always be top of the list."

"Fucking right they will."

The rest of us at the table have a good chuckle when Corrigan points to the blue cake ball on her plate and performs a chef's kiss.

Oliver and Scarlett's wedding went off without a hitch. Or maybe I should say it went off *with* a hitch since the couple did, indeed, get hitched. It's been a long time coming, but after a busy hockey season, they had a beautiful ceremony at Generations Hall in New Orleans, Louisiana. They met in New Orleans a few years ago when I encouraged Oliver to take my cousin, Scarlett, on her honeymoon after being left at the altar by her then fiancé. By some grace of God, Oliver took me up on my deal and ended up falling in love with Scarlett. Now today, after their beautiful wedding ceremony, I can brag that I'm finally related to Oliver Magallan.

Not that I haven't thought of him as a brother since the day we met.

But now we're officially related. Cousins through marriage, and that makes me happy.

Because Oliver's sister is married to Milo Landric who plays for the Chicago Red Tails, they're all here too. It's a huge party hosted by Scarlett's parents, though I know Oliver helped pay for a good deal of it so they wouldn't have to.

"Hey!" Layken scurries over to the table, lowering herself in a chair next to Griffin who is sitting next to me. "Did you guys try the blue balls yet?"

Corrigan and Ella laugh, nodding, and then Ella says, "To die for, am I right?"

"Hell yes. I ate two on the way over here from the dessert table."

"Did you leave some for the rest of us?" I tease.

"Actually, I brought a little something sweet just for you, Ledge," Layken tells me, wagging her brows.

"Oh, my very own blue balls you mean. Because I'm certain I've got a case of those for myself, thanks."

How long has it been since I've gotten laid?

The season has been over for a solid month and a half and even before the end of the season I hadn't gotten laid in a month or two. So yeah, it's been a long fucking time.

"Nope. But now that you mention it, perhaps what I have to tell you might perk those blue balls of yours right up."

"Ooh..." Griffin rubs his hands together. "Tell me you have some Marlee Remington news without telling me you have Marlee Remington news."

Layken leans over and kisses Griffin's cheek. "I do, indeed, have Marlee news. How ever did you know?"

Marlee Remington is the team's Events and Operations Manager. She's been working for the organization for the last four years or so and since the day I met her, I've had a massive crush on her. I find her beguiling in every sense of the word. She's hard-working and always seems busy, but she's approachable and kind and very down-to-earth. She seems confident in everything she does and appreciates the humor in certain situations. She's never been afraid to chat with any of us on the team and on top of that, I find her to be drop dead gorgeous.

She's a normal height. Probably five and a half feet tall or so. When it's not up in a ponytail, her maple brown hair hangs a little past her shoulders. Her eyes are this enchanting blue-gray color that I want to stare at every time I'm in front of her. The color seems to change depending on the light she's standing in but they're mesmerizing either way.

Marlee's body is fire.

She's not stick thin. She's got curves in all the right places and tits I dream of getting lost in. She's literal perfection.

She's so fucking perfect but she's also the one person in this entire universe who sets my insides on fire whenever she's around. I've talked to her many times over the years, but if we're ever alone in conversation my stomach ties in knots and I'm pretty sure I stop breathing until she walks away.

If only I could get the nerve to tell her how I feel.

She brings the middle school boy right out of me.

"I swear to God, Layken, if you're about to tell me she's seeing someone else..."

Layken shakes her head. "Nope. That's not it."

"What then? Does she have a twin?"

She chuckles. "Ooh double the crush, double the fun, eh, Ledge?"

I let out a breath. "Alright just tell me."

Lowering her voice, Layken leans across Griffin so she can be closer to me. "I was just asking about her summer and she said she's thinking very seriously about trying to have a baby."

Wait.

A baby?

But she's...

Bodhi leans across the table having heard what Layken just told me. "So, she is seeing someone again? Or did she get back together with the last guy?"

Layken shakes her head. "Neither. She's thinking about going alone and having a baby on her own."

"Why would she do that?" I ask with morbid curiosity.

I have no doubt Marlee Remington will make an excellent mother to any child, but why on earth is she trying to go it alone? Surely she has a line of guys waiting to take her out.

"I think she's over trying to find the right guy." Layken shrugs her shoulder. "Her biological clock is ticking, you know?"

"What does that even mean?" I ask.

Corrigan joins in. "It means she's in her thirties and for women past the age of thirty, for some weird reason, the medical people say it's considered risky to have a baby. There could be complications or abnormalities, things like that."

"That's crazy," I say, frowning. "Thirty isn't even that old."

Corrigan shakes her head. "Nope, but would you believe pregnancies in women over thirty-five are actually categorized as geriatric pregnancies?"

"Geriatric?" I scoff. "That's fucked up. Who decided that?"

She shrugs, popping another cake ball into her mouth. "Probably some old man who liked his women young and bouncy and not so experienced. I don't know. It just is what it is. But it could also be that once we hit our late thirties or early forties some of us start to experience symptoms of perimenopause and that could create issues for us as well. I'm not saying women can't have babies when they're past forty. Certainly, lots of women do. It's just riskier is all."

"At any rate," Layken chimes back in. "Marlee's considering it. So maybe you should make your move, Ledge. We're at a wedding. It's

beautiful here in New Orleans and everything around us is so romantic.” She gestures with her head. “You should go sweep her off her feet.”

“And what am I supposed to say, exactly? Hey Marlee, heard you want to knock yourself up. Care if I join in?”

Ella slaps her hand on the table, her eyes bulging as she glances at Corrigan and Layken. “Oh. My. Gosh. Ledger! You could totally father her baby!”

What?

I rear back. “I’m sorry, what in the holy fuck did you just say?”

“Bro!” she says with a giddy grin. “Be the baby daddy. Donate the juice. Jizz in a cup and serve it up! Whatever you’ve got to do. This could be epic!”

Corrigan coos beside her. “Oh, my Gosh that would be adorable!”

My brows practically shoot off my face. “You think I’m going to walk over to Marlee Remington and offer her a cup of jizz? What, like it’s the soup of the day?”

Everyone laughs softly. Even Bear who is sitting quietly at the end of the table chatting with Zeke Miller, the Red Tails’ Goalie.

“Well, maybe don’t say it like that,” Ella advises. “But she knows you’re a good guy.” Her eyes move up and down what she can see of me from where we’re sitting. “There’s no questioning you’re hot.”

“Watch it Mrs. Blackstone,” August chides next to her.

She cocks her head and rolls her eyes at her husband. “What? It’s true. We all know it.” She gestures to me with her hand. “Ledger is a gorgeous human being. He’d make pretty babies.”

There’s silence around the group for about ten seconds and then everyone nods.

“She’s right,” Corrigan says.

Layken nods. “Yep.”

“You guys, don’t be so ridiculous.” I roll my eyes. “I mean you’ve come up with some far out there ideas over the years but offering my spooze to Marlee Remington and fathering her child takes the cake.”

Griffin shrugs in response. “Well, you could just hook up with her and have a one-night-stand kind of thing and give it to her the old-fashioned way.”

“You guys! I am not fucking Marlee Remington,” I very nearly shout but I rein in my emotions so as not to make a scene. “I am not knocking her

up and I am certainly not fathering her children,” I say, finally laying down the law.

Though I’m not sure who I’m trying to convince. Them or me.

“Okay, okay,” Layken concedes. “But you could at least go ask her to dance.”

“What?”

The DJ here tonight starts up the music and announces the happy couple’s first dance. As Oliver and Scarlett are spinning around the dance floor, the DJ asks the entire wedding party to join them. That means all of us who were groomsman, like me, who didn’t come with a date, need to find a dancing partner fast.

Shit.

“Don’t worry,” Bear finally says, rising from his seat and fixing his tie. “I’ll ask Marlee to—”

“The fuck you will,” I say, finally growing a pair of balls. “If anyone is asking her to dance tonight, it’ll be me.”

“Oh. Darn,” he says flatly. “Alright then.” He shrugs and gestures for me to go ahead of him, a knowing smirk on his face.

Can’t believe I fell for that.

Making my way across the lawn, I spot Marlee sipping her wine and watching the newlyweds dance. She looks happy and relaxed. I want to say her demeanor makes it easier for me to approach her and ask her to dance, but it doesn’t.

She makes me nervous.

Every. Single. Time.

“Marlee,” I say probably a bit too softly. Luckily for me, she at least notices my presence and smiles at me.

“Hey Ledger. Enjoying yourself?”

“Yeah. But it’s more fun out there on the dance floor.” I gesture with a nod of my head. “Would you like to join me?”

“Whoa!” she says, impressed. “You dance too? Is there anything you can’t do?”

If you only knew.

“Well, it’s kind of my job as one of Magellan’s groomsmen so...”

She chuckles. “I see. Well, we can’t have you failing at your groomsman responsibilities, can we?”

Thank God.

Is that a yes?

Marlee sets her glass down on the table and I offer her my hand as she lifts from her seat.

Whoa. That was easier than I thought it would be.

Her soft hand in mine, I lead her to the dance floor and then wrap my other arm around her waist, pulling her into me. She feels wonderful in my grasp. A sweet floral scent wafts into my nose and I know it has to be the beautiful woman in my arms. Dressed in a floor-length blue dress, she's the image of an angel.

"You look beautiful tonight," I tell her, forcing myself to make eye contact no matter how dry my mouth is or how fluttery the inside of my chest feels.

Her smile widens. "Thank you very much, Ledger. You clean up pretty well yourself."

"Nah. You're just used to seeing me in suits. We wear them all the time, but it's not everyday I see you in a dress."

"Don't sell yourself short Mr. Dayne," she says. "And you're not wearing your suit jacket now. You look much more comfortable than coming and going to and from the arena on a game day. The look suits you...pun unintended of course."

My cheeks are heating.

Thank God it's almost dusk.

"Thanks."

"How are you enjoying your summer?" she asks me as we sway back and forth in slow circles. "I'm sure it's nice to be off the ice for a while."

I'd like my summer a whole lot more if you were a part of it.

"Well, I'm helping Harrison with his youth league so I'm not really off the ice for too long. But yeah, the break is nice. Hopefully we can get to a few baseball games before preseason workouts start back up."

"Oh, so you like baseball?"

"Yeah, you?"

"Love it! I was just chatting with Ada, Zeke Miller's wife?"

"Oh yeah." I nod relaxing a bit at the comfortable conversation. "Her brother, Carter, plays for the Indianapolis Racers."

"Yeah! Now I totally have to catch a game the next time they're in Anaheim."

“I’ve got season tickets,” I mention. “I mean, I give them away a lot when I’ve got hockey responsibilities but I’d be happy to take you the next time they’re in town.”

Oh fuck. Did I just ask her out?

Did I even do it right?

She beams and I smile back at her because damn, it feels good being able to make her smile. “That sounds like a blast.”

“Hey Marlee,” Layken sings as she and Griffin sway next to us.

“Hey Layken.” Marlee eyes the happy couple. “You two are the cutest.”

“Thank you.” Layken winks at her. She glances at me and then says, “You know, I was thinking about what we talked about earlier. You know your bundle of joy plan.”

For the first time in a while, I actually see Marlee’s cheeks redden. “Oh. Yeah?”

“Yeah. And I’m just saying,” Layken nods her head toward me, “Ledger could make a great dad. He’s a good guy. Not bad to look at either.”

Oh, for the love of Christ.

“Layken...” I start. I laugh nervously finding myself stuck between wanting to tell Layken to shut the fuck up and not wanting to make Marlee any more uncomfortable than she undoubtedly is.

“Oh.” Marlee giggles nervously. “Um...” Her brows furrow as she glances at me.

Yeah. See Layken?

She thinks it’s a terrible idea.

“You know about—”

“Layken mentioned it,” I confess.

“Oh.”

“She likes to tease me because I’m single,” I lie. Well, sort of.

Layken shrugs with a knowing smirk. “I mean, I’m just saying. He’s single. You’re single. You want to have a baby so...two birds, one stone, know what I mean?” She wags her brows like she’s a fucking genius.

She’s not, by the way.

“It would be like the team’s very first pure-bred Anaheim Star!” She beams at Marlee and me like we’re about to give her a fucking high five and thank her for her generous offer.

Her offer of my dick.

Because that’s what’s happening here.

Layken Ollenberg is offering the contents of my explosive dick to Marlee Remington, the woman I've been crushing on for years.

Fuck my life.

Griffin spins his wife and they wave heading in the opposite direction from us.

"Wow that's..." Marlee starts, looking a bit taken aback.

"Sorry about that." I shake my head, more than a little perturbed with Layken. "You don't have to say a word. She's just messing around."

"Right. Yeah."

"But for what it's worth, I think it's great that you want to be a mother. You'll be a great mom."

She shrugs her shoulder. "Yeah. I don't know. It was just an idea. I mean, yeah, I want to be a mom. It's just...I know it can be a lot. I'm still thinking about it."

"Definitely a life-changing decision. I get it."

"Yeah."

We continue dancing through the rest of the song though admittedly now my mind is reeling.

Offering to sperm it up for Marlee wasn't exactly on my life's Bingo card.

But, if anyone is going to offer themselves up and help make a baby inside of her, I'll be devastated if it's anyone else but me.

What If It's Us releases June 12, 2025, and is available for preorder!

<https://mybook.to/WhatifItsUs>

OTHER BOOKS BY SUSAN RENEE
ALL BOOKS ARE AVAILABLE IN KINDLE
UNLIMITED

The Anaheim Stars Series

[What if We Do](#): Jilted Bride

[What if I Told You](#): Childhood Friends to Lovers

[What if I Knew You](#): Coach's daughter

[What If I See You](#): Accidental Marriage

[What If It's Us](#): (Coming June 2025!)

The Red Tails Hockey Series

[Off Your Game](#): Angry Meet Cute

[Unfair Game](#): Strangers/Roommates to lovers

[Beyond the Game](#): One Night Stand/Surprise Pregnancy

[Forbidden Game](#): Teammate/Best Friend's Sister

[Saving the Game](#): Fake Relationship

[Bonus Game](#): Single Dad/Nanny

The Bardstown Series

[\(Prequel\) I LOVED YOU THEN](#): Second Chance at love

[I LIKE ME BETTER](#): Enemies to Lovers/workplace

[YOU ARE THE REASON](#): Second Chance

[BEAUTIFUL CRAZY](#): Friends to Lovers

[TAKE YOU HOME](#): Boss's Daughter

The Camel Club Series

[Smooch](#): One Night Stand/Strangers to Lovers

[Smooches](#): Single Mom/Ex's Best Friend

[Smooched](#): Fake Relationship/Surprise Pregnancy

The Schmidt Load Novella Series

[You Don't Know Jack Schmidt](#)

[Schmidt Happens](#)

[My Schmidt Smells Like Roses](#)

The Village series

[I'm Fine \(The Village Duet #1\)](#)

[Save Me \(The Village Duet #2\)](#)

*The Village Duet comes with a content warning.

Please be sure to check out this book's Amazon page before downloading.

Stand Alone Novels

[Hole Punched](#): Strangers to Lovers/Hidden identity

[Total Ship Show](#)

(part of Love at Sea multi-author series)

[Kamana Wanalaya for the Holidays](#): She-grinch/Sunshine

[No Egrets](#): Grumpy/Sunshine

(Part of the Tuft Swallow Multi Author Series)

[Solving Us](#)

[Surprising Us \(a Solving Us novella\)](#)

KEEP IN TOUCH WITH ME!

[Click to join Susan Renee's Newsletter!](#)

[Join Susan's Sweet-Tarts Facebook Reader Group!](#)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



International bestselling author, Susan Renee, wants to live in a world where paint doesn't smell, book boyfriends are real, and everything is covered in glitter. An indie romance author, Susan has written about everything from tacos to tow-trucks, loves writing romantic comedies but also enjoys creating an emotional angsty story from time to time. She lives in Ohio with her husband, kids, three dogs and a cat. Susan holds a Bachelor and Masters Degree in Music Education and a self-awarded Doctorate in Sass and Sarcasm. She enjoys laughing at memes, speaking in GIFs and spending an entire day jumping down the TikTok rabbit hole. When she's not writing or playing the role of Mom, her favorite activity is doing the Care Bear stare with her closest friends.