ROOKIE HAWKEYES SERIES

OFFSIDE *Rules*

KENNA KING

Offside Rules

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Cover Designed by: Anna Silka

1st edition 2026

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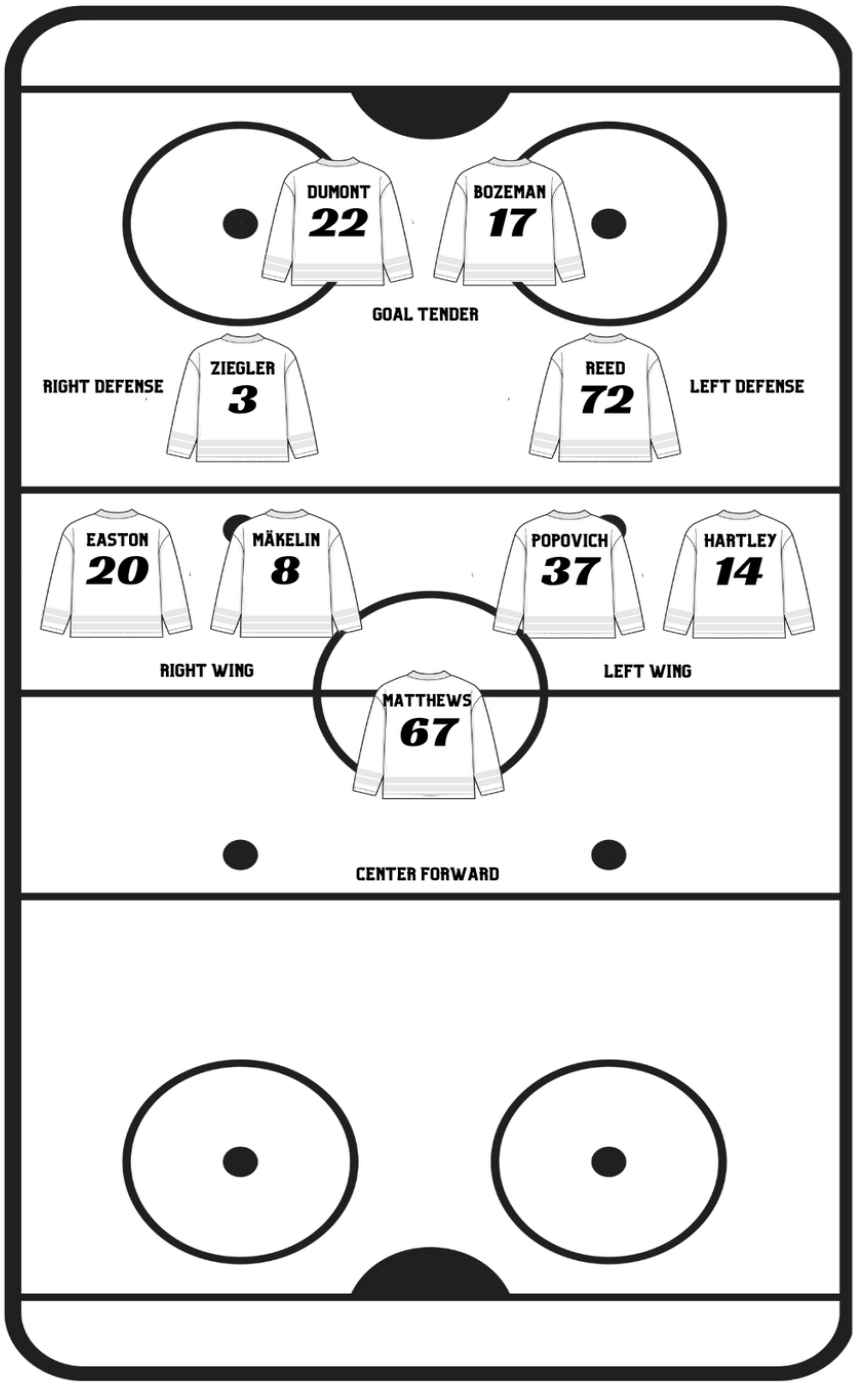
PLAYER POSITION & NUMBER



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Chapter One

BAYLOR

At 1:03 in the morning, I decide murder is probably worth the jail time.

The bass from the apartment above me comes through my kitchen ceiling, followed by three hard thumps. Either someone upstairs is moving furniture, or a small herd of rowdy elephants has moved in.

The pendant light above my kitchen island gives a little shake. I look up at it, then at the cupcakes lined up on my counter. It's taken me hours to bake everything for tomorrow, and I still have frosting and cake pops to finish before I can sleep. If this party keeps going, I can cross sleep off the list altogether.

I pick up my phone and fire off a text to Ellie, my best friend since college and the owner of Serendipity's Coffee Shop.

Me: If I get arrested tonight, will you bail me out?

Ellie answers before I can set it down.

Ellie: Depends. Who did you kill?

Ellie is the kind of friend who can convince you to move across the country, put your marketing degree aside, and finally start the bakery business you've wanted since you were a kid. She's also the friend who would help you hide a body if this party goes on much longer.

Me: No one yet. But if they don't turn the music down in the next five minutes, the apartment upstairs is going to be featured on a murder mystery show. The kind where a neighbor finally calls the cops two weeks later because of the smell of a decomposing body.

Ellie: You've lived there eight months. How have you not figured out who is throwing the parties?

Because I mind my own business. Most days, I'm up early to finish my delivery route. Then I park in my rented spot at the food truck lot. After that, I get my butt back to my apartment and start baking for the next day.

If I'm still awake after piping dozens of cupcakes with cramping hands, I make myself something to eat and collapse on the couch to watch some show about couples on an island looking for love. Usually with someone other than the person they arrived with.

Another thump comes from upstairs, and the large pendant swings again.

I text back…

Me: Working on it.

I leave my phone face down before I can start doomscrolling. Every extra sale this week goes toward the shop that just became vacant two doors down from Serendipity's. I've wanted my own cakery since I started selling cupcakes and brownies at my brother Beau's hockey games when I was six. At eight, I got the KitchenAid mixer I'd put on two Christmas lists in a row.

My parents thought baking could remain a hobby while I got a degree to fall back on. I studied marketing, spent nearly three years in a corporate office, then took Ellie up on her offer to stay with her while I figured out how to make baking my actual job. That was a year ago. Eight months ago, I moved into this apartment and got the kitchen approved.

For now, I bake here, stock a little cupcake counter at Serendipity's, and sell the rest out of Sprinkles. Ellie gave me her old delivery truck when her cinnamon roll catering business took off, and she upgraded her delivery truck fleet.

I painted her baby pink and covered her in hand-painted sprinkles. She’s cute. She also coughs every time I start her on a rainy day, which is far too often for a truck in Seattle.

The shop has room for a glass display case, a few tables, and a tasting room in the back. Best of all, a commercial kitchen. Bigger ovens and refrigerators would let me take the wedding and corporate orders I have to turn down now. I just need one big event to help cover the deposit. Preferably before Sprinkles sputters and dies.

Beau offered to help, but this is his first season getting regular NHL ice time. After surgeries, rehab, and two years on the farm team, he’s finally getting his chance. I’m not making my truck or my shop deposit his problem.

My parents already dipped into their retirement savings to pay for my degree, and my savings from the corporate job went into this apartment and the business.

I can do this on my own.

I check the butter. Soft enough to make frosting, finally.

I set it beside the mixer and glance at the magnetic dry-erase board on my fridge. Seven dozen cupcakes for the truck tomorrow, two dozen for Serendipity’s, and five dozen cake pops. The cupcakes are baked and cooled. Half the cake pops are dipped and lined up in a foam block. The rest wait in a covered tray beside the chocolate.

Tomorrow, I’ll drop off Ellie’s order, make my regular Wednesday office stops, then park with the other food trucks for the lunch rush. I usually sell out. I’d like to keep it that way.

An empty space in the truck’s display case doesn’t come with a little sign explaining that my upstairs neighbor invited the entire neighborhood over to do the Macarena.

The bass changes, and another round of thumping starts.

"If you guys don’t knock it off soon, I’m bringing you cupcakes laced with Dramamine," I tell the ceiling. "Extra drowsy."

Drugging a crowd of partygoers would probably still get me hauled off to jail, but at least it wouldn’t be on murder charges.

I debate whether it would be worth it as I measure powdered sugar into a second bowl and the pendant gives another twitch above my head. Whatever is happening upstairs has been going on for almost an hour. I

haven’t called the building manager because I didn’t want to be the neighbor who complains about a party on a Tuesday.

It is now Wednesday. I’ve shown plenty of restraint, and I don’t have time for jail.

I open the building’s resident app and tap Report a Problem. There isn’t a button for "I think my upstairs neighbors are running an unauthorized trampoline park," so I choose a noise complaint and type "unknown" into the apartment number field. The form won’t let me submit without a unit number. I try upstairs. That doesn’t work either. I put in my own number, then explain that I’m reporting the noise above 406, not confessing to throwing a party in it.

A message appears the second I submit it.

Thank you for contacting us. A member of our team will respond within twenty-four to forty-eight business hours.

"By then, you’ll be responding to a police report about a dead body."

I know which floor the noise is coming from. At this point, I’d rather tell them to turn it down myself than wait for someone to check the app.

I take off my apron and drop it on the kitchen island. The cupcakes can wait five minutes. My patience cannot. I grab my keys and phone, then hesitate at the door.

I glance in the full-length mirror by my door. Leggings, gold under-eye masks, an oversized San Diego Blue Devils sweatshirt I stole from my brother’s apartment when I visited him in California last month, and fuzzy socks. My long rose-gold pink hair is braided but starting to fall out around the ends. I find my pink Hello Kitty slippers and pull them on. There. Ready to meet the neighbors.

My phone buzzes.

Ellie: Do I need to put on pants?

Me: Only if the police call you.

Ellie: I should probably do my hair then. Mama needs a new boyfriend. I could date a cop.

Me: No, you cannot. You’ll corrupt him, and he has a duty to this city. He doesn’t have time for your shenanigans. Now go to bed. I’m going upstairs to tell them to turn it down.

Ellie: If you end up in jail, I’ll bring your piping supplies. You pipe faster when you’re mad, anyway.

I tuck my phone into my sweatshirt pocket and head upstairs. The fourth-floor hallway is quieter than my apartment as I exit my door and head for the elevator. On the fifth, the bass gets louder as I walk toward 5012.

I knock.

Nothing. Apparently, they can’t hear me over the music.

I try again, harder. This time, the door opens, and the music hits me at full volume. I’m suddenly impressed by how much these walls have been keeping out.

The man who opened the door stares at me for half a second, then breaks into a grin.

"Baylor Fairbanks? Is that you?"

I blink at the six-foot man in front of me. It takes my exhausted brain a second to catch up.

"Rooks?" I croak, my voice as tired as the rest of me.

"What the hell… Come here," he says, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and pulling me in for a hug.

Carson Rooksdale played hockey with my brother Beau from their peewee days in Boston until they went off to different colleges. He used to turn up at our house with a hockey bag and eat whatever Mom had planned for four people. Seattle is one of the last places I’d expect to run into him, but here he is, hugging me while I’m trying to free my arms. Then he backs into the apartment and brings me with him.

"Come in, come in. Have a beer," he says.

He lets go of me, then takes my wrist and pulls me toward the kitchen. The front door swings shut behind us. I’m not sure if it’s the exhaustion or finding out the guy throwing the party is someone I practically grew up with, but I need a second to catch up. Staying for a drink is the last thing I want to do right now.

I glance around and count at least forty people. I could maybe fit ten in my living room if everyone agreed to stand.

Some guests are drinking, some are playing an NHL video game on the big-screen TV, and gorgeous women are scattered around the room. How are there this many pretty girls in one apartment anyway?

"Rooks, I have an early morning. I can’t stay. This party is exactly why I’m here." I pull my wrist free and step away from him. "You need to turn the music down. It’s ridiculously loud."

I practically shout the last part over it, which should make my point for me.

He looks toward the speakers. "Is it?"

I nod, trying not to roll my eyes at how obvious it is. "Yes."

"Okay. I'll turn it down." He grins again. "Are you sure you can’t stay? For at least one drink?"

I shake my head, but a small smile slips out at the sad puppy-dog face he gives me. Rooks is hard to stay mad at. "I really can’t. I have dozens of cupcakes to frost before my delivery route tomorrow."

"You’re finally doing it, huh?" he says.

"Doing what?" I ask, playing dumb. Rooks ate enough of my rejected batches growing up to know exactly what I wanted to do.

"The baking thing. You were always good at it. Beau must be happy you’re finally doing it."

"He is." I smile. "So am I."

"Good to see you, Baylor."

"You too." I look past him at a kitchen twice the size of mine. The floor above my apartment offers two- and three-bedroom apartments, while my floor has only one-bedroom apartments and studios. "When did you move to Seattle?"

"I didn’t. I’m playing in Germany now, but I had wrist surgery. The team approved me finishing rehab here."

"Here in Seattle?"

"I’m working with a trainer here. Trying to get the strength back in my wrist so my shot doesn’t suck next season. Home’s still Boston." He gestures around us. "I’m staying with Wolf. This is his apartment."

My stomach drops.

"Wolf…" I repeat. As if he must have misspoke.

"Yeah…" he nods and then tips back his longneck beer bottle to his lips and takes a sip.

"As in Wolfgang Ziegler? As in the player who nearly ended Beau’s career?"

Rooks tips his head. "Come on, Baylor. Don’t be like that. Beau’s playing for San Diego now. He’s getting real minutes. He got an assist last week. That’s good, isn’t it?"

Rooks and Wolf played on the same team in college–Boston College. The same college that Beau wanted to attend. Wolf got the starting spot at right

defense, so Beau chose the rival school where he'd get more time on the ice–Boston University.

Both were being scouted. Neither could afford to spend those years on the bench.

"Of course it's good. Beau spent six years trying to get healthy enough to make it to the NHL." I fold my arms. "And the only reason it even happened is because Second Shift Sports Foundation paid for his surgeries and therapy. My parents couldn't have covered what their insurance wouldn't. It's not like Wolf did anything to help after that hit."

Rooks's grin fades. "I know it was bad, Baylor. Wolf didn't mean to hurt him like that."

Not meaning to hurt him didn't get Beau off the floor after surgery or make his knee bend when the therapist asked. Wolf got ejected from that game but went on playing for the rest of the season. My brother went home on crutches.

"It was a late hit. Rooks," I say. "Beau lost the rest of his senior season. Wolf finished his senior year with an NHL contract waiting for him."

Of all the doors I could have knocked on in a building with 206 apartments, I found Wolf's.

I knew some of the Hawkeyes lived here. Between my weird hours and their travel schedule, I'd managed not to run into them. Apparently, my luck just ran out.

Wolf grew up in Boston too. He and Beau have been competing for the same spots since they were kids. A rivalry was one thing. Watching my brother leave a game in an ambulance was another.

Rooks scratches the back of his neck.

"You didn't know this was Wolf's place?"

"Would I be standing in it if I did?"

"No. Probably not."

Rooks was there the night I waited for Wolf in that college parking lot—Ellie too. I was a sophomore. Rooks, Beau, and Wolf were seniors, and Beau's shot at the NHL had just gone from a real possibility to something the doctors weren't sure he'd ever get back. My parents went with him to the hospital. I had the keys to the family car, Ellie to my left trying to pull me to the car, but I couldn't make myself leave until Wolf came out. I started yelling at him the moment I saw him in his warm-up gear, a duffel bag over his shoulder.

He stood there and let me. Those blue eyes stayed on mine while I called him everything I could think of–told him he was an asshole on skates. Rain soaked through his hoodie and sweats, and I kept yelling until Rooks came out.

Rooks stopped when he saw us—me, Ellie, and Wolf, drenched. I yelled until my voice went hoarse. Then he hurried over, put his rain jacket around me, took the keys from my hand, and nodded at Ellie to follow us. "Come on, girls. I'll drive you to the hospital."

The front door opens behind me. Rooks looks over my shoulder.

"Rooks, what the hell is going on here?"

I recognize the voice before I turn. I've heard it plenty of times on sports highlights and post-game interviews over the last six years. Everyone loves a clip of Wolfgang Ziegler putting someone into the boards or giving a smart-ass answer to a reporter. One segment called him the meanest defender in the league, then spent three minutes going through his career penalties.

Wolf stands in the doorway, looking past me at the people packed into his living room. Six-foot-five, broad shoulders, a gray Henley with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows, exposing tattooed forearms. The man could probably carry a commercial refrigerator into my future shop without asking anyone to take the other end. The thought of watching him do it shouldn't make my ovaries tingle, but dammit, it does.

I hate that I notice any of this before I remember how much I can't stand him. His eyebrows pull together when he sees Rooks.

"You said a few people."

"I only invited a few people," Rooks says.

Wolf looks around the room. "Then how many did they invite?"

I would like the answer to that myself.

"I stayed to help clean up at Oakley's because you said you had this handled," Wolf says. "Why is my apartment packed?"

Rooks opens his mouth, then shuts it. Apparently, he can count after all.

Wolf walks past us to the speakers in the living room and turns the music down himself. Someone on the couch objects, but one look from him ends the complaint. Finally, I can hear myself think again.

When he comes back, his attention settles on me.

It's the first time we've stood face-to-face since that night in the college parking lot. Seeing him on a screen isn't the same. On a screen, I can turn

him off.

His gaze pauses on the gold patches under my eyes.

"What are you doing here?" he asks.

Rooks jumps in. "Wolf, it’s Baylor Fairbanks. Beau’s little sister. You remember Baylor, right?"

I lift my chin and wait.

"How could I forget?" His gaze moves over my outfit, and now I wish I’d changed. Not into a short miniskirt like half the puck bunnies here, but at least out of my slippers and under-eye masks. Now that I know whose apartment this is, the number of pretty women makes a lot more sense. They were probably at Oakley’s after the game. The Hawkeyes won tonight, and this city makes sure everyone knows when that happens.

"You’re wearing a rival team’s sweatshirt in my apartment," he says.

That’s what he has to say to me? My sweatshirt is the problem? My brother spent six years recovering from that hit, but sure, Wolf. Let’s talk about the logo on my chest.

"I didn’t know it was your apartment. And besides, my brother plays for them. Which I’m sure you already know."

"That’s right. Beau got signed this year. Congratulations." His gaze lifts from the Blue Devils logo to my face. "How’s your family?"

Congratulations? Is he serious?

I cross my arms. "Just fine. No thanks to you."

"Baylor…" Rooks lowers his voice, looking between us.

"I’m only up here because the music is so loud I could feel it in my molars," I say.

Wolf looks from me to Rooks.

Rooks’ hands shoot up. "I was going to turn it down."

Wolf glances back at me and then at the crowded living room.

I don’t know why I’m still standing here. I got what I came for. The party can keep going at a normal volume while I finish my cupcakes and pretend I never found out whose apartment this is.

"I have to get back to work," I say.

Wolf looks back at me, though I wish he’d just forget I was here altogether. "What kind of work do you do this late at night?" he asks.

His question takes me by surprise. What does he care what I do?

"Cupcakes. I have a cakery food truck. What did you think I was doing dressed like this?"

"You sell cupcakes at one in the morning?" His eyebrows draw together. "Where are you parked this late? Is it even safe for you to be out there?"

Now he’s worried about somebody getting hurt?

"I don’t sell them at one in the morning. I prepare everything for the next day. But now, I’ll be up for another couple of hours to finish everything." I shoot a glare at Rooks. "Thanks for that, by the way."

I turn toward the door. A woman in a bra and underwear hurries out of the bathroom hallway, drenched from head to toe and clutching a pair of jeans against her chest. Another woman follows, also dripping wet, with her shoes in one hand, braless, covering her breasts with her arm.

A real classy party happening in Wolf’s apartment. Should I even be surprised? Wolf has a reputation.

Then three men in wet boxer briefs come out behind them. One nearly slips and grabs the doorframe.

"What happened?" Wolf asks.

"The tub flooded," the first man says. "We moved into the shower and must have forgotten to turn off the faucet."

Wolf stares at him. "You flooded my bathroom?"

"We were just—"

"Why were you in my bathroom to begin with?"

"You didn’t have a hot tub," one of the idiots says.

Someone still in the bathroom calls for towels. Rooks goes to find some, and one of the men tries to push the water back with his foot. He nearly falls over. None of them look sober enough to be useful.

I look down at the floor. Water is spreading toward Wolf's kitchen.

My kitchen is one floor below us.

"Everything I baked is downstairs," I say, mostly to myself.

Wolf turns to me. "What?"

"The water. My apartment's below yours."

I run past the two women and out the front door. Wolf tells someone to shut off the faucet and Rooks to get towels. Then I hear him behind me as I sprint toward the stairs. I don’t have time to wait for the elevator.

Our footsteps echo down the staircase. On the fourth floor, I race to my door, hold my key fob against the lock, and push it open.

A gasp breaks past my lips the moment I see it.

How could this have happened so fast? The water must have been running for longer than anyone upstairs noticed.

The pendant light hangs crooked over the island, water still running down it from the ceiling. Part of the ceiling has come down on my mixer and the trays beside it. Wet chunks of drywall cover the counter, the cupcakes, and the cake pops I dipped earlier tonight.

I’m frozen just inside the doorway.

All nine dozen cupcakes for tomorrow are under there. The cake pops too. A few cupcake liners stick out from beneath the wet drywall, but I can’t make myself walk over and check them.

I take one careful step. Water soaks through my slippers. The mixer is on its side with a piece of ceiling across its base. I’m not touching it while it’s plugged in, with water dripping from the light above it. There’s no dry place on the counter to set anything I might rescue.

Wolf stops just inside the doorway behind me. For a moment, neither of us says anything.

I take another step, and my wet slipper slides across the floor.

"Whoa. Be careful." Wolf’s hand closes around my hip, steadying me.

I catch my footing. "Don’t touch me."

He pulls his hand away.

Rooks hurries in behind him with a handful of towels, slips on the wet floor, and catches himself against my front door. "Oh, shit."

I look at the empty truck boxes stacked beside the door. I'm supposed to fill those before morning.

"What am I going to sell tomorrow?"

Rooks walks past me and spots the covered tray on the far counter, out of reach of the fallen ceiling. He lifts the lid and takes a cake pop.

"Damn, Baylor. These are really good."

I turn to glare at him. Tomorrow’s deliveries are under wet drywall, my mixer is on its side, and Rooks is standing in the middle of it eating.

Behind me, Wolf says, "I’m going to kill him."

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Chapter Two

WOLF

I push Baylor Fairbanks's apartment door open with my phone still in my hand.

Ronny told me to come straight in. That was eighteen minutes ago, before our trainer decided my shoulder needed another ten minutes of ice after morning skate. The stop at the bank didn't help, and neither did the red lights between there and The Commons.

I'm still wearing my team hoodie and sweats. My hair is wet from the shower, and I haven't eaten since six this morning. Normally, I'd stop for something on the way home. Today, I have a group chat with my building manager, a contractor, and a woman who already hated me before my friend destroyed her kitchen by inviting random people to my apartment.

I’m not asking them to wait while I get a breakfast sandwich from Serendipity’s. The line is usually out the door at this time in the morning.

Ronny stands beside the island with a clipboard. The contractor next to him is looking at the ceiling, and Baylor is holding an empty coffee mug in both hands. She looks up when the door opens.

"Sorry. Morning skate ran over," I say.

"You’re here now," Ronny says. "Come in."

Baylor doesn’t say anything. Her pastel pink hair is pulled up into a messy bun on the top of her head, and she’s changed out of the San Diego sweatshirt into a pink hoodie with a cupcake on the front. The gold under-eye patches, replaced by dark circles from the stress of her kitchen flooding, no doubt.

I close the door behind me and put my phone in my pocket. The envelope of cash I picked up on the way here is tucked into the front pocket of my hoodie.

The last time I was in here, she told me not to touch her after I caught her slipping on the floor. I keep to the other side of the island. She made herself clear, and she has enough to deal with without me crowding her.

The contractor turns. He’s about six feet tall, wearing a clean button-down with the sleeves rolled up. He looks at least ten years older than me, in good shape, with gray starting at his temples.

"Dan," he says, holding out his hand. "I’m handling the repairs."

"Wolf," I say, shaking his hand.

"I know. I watch the team." He smiles. Good... at least one person in here is pleased to see me. He gestures toward the island. "We were going over what needs to come out."

The broken drywall is gone. So are the cupcakes. A wet outline stretches across the exposed ceiling above the counter, and the cabinets underneath it are standing open. Two large fans are running near the wall.

I look from the wet ceiling to the cabinets. The upstairs tub was still running when we got back down here. Nobody at that party had thought to check where all the water was going.

Her mixer sits on a towel by the sink. She’s wiped the white debris off it, but there’s a dent in the base where it landed. I helped move it out from under the light last night after Ronny shut off the kitchen circuit. She hasn’t put it away, although looking at the rest of the counter, I’m not sure where she would.

"How bad is it?" I ask.

"Ceiling, obviously. We have moisture behind the upper cabinets and underneath the flooring." Dan points to the cupboard closest to the sink. "That one’s already swelling. I won’t know the full extent until we open it up, but I’d plan on replacing the affected cabinets."

Baylor sets her mug on the counter. "And the floor?"

"We’ll lift what we need to so we can dry underneath it. I’m not putting new material over anything wet."

She nods, keeping one hand on her mug.

"How long?" I ask.

"Six weeks is a reasonable estimate."

She shoots a look up at Dan. "Six weeks? I run my cakery out of here. I can’t wait six weeks for it to be functional again."

"We have to dry it out, repair the damage, and get the replacements in. Some of that can happen at the same time. Some can’t." He looks back at Ronny. "I’d rather give you a date I can meet than tell you two weeks and keep moving it."

"Six weeks," she repeats to herself while staring down at her black-and-white checked Vans.

"I’ll know more once we’ve opened everything up. I have another team for the upstairs bathroom, so that won’t hold this up. The two rooms will have different schedules depending on the damage and what we need to order."

Ronny flips a page on his clipboard. "The bedroom and your bathroom are dry. Dan has checked the living room too. Once the kitchen is isolated with contractor plastic and we’ve confirmed the rest is safe, you can stay here during the work."

"I can live here," she says. "I just can’t use the kitchen."

"That’s right."

She looks at the island. A cardboard box beside it holds her piping bags, spatulas, and a stack of little plastic cupcake toppers. Last night, she made a pile of the things we could dry and a pile of the things we couldn’t. The second pile was bigger.

"We don’t have a vacant unit here," Ronny continues. "I checked first thing this morning. There is an apartment available at another property we manage. You could use that while this work is done."

"Where?"

He gives her the location. She takes her phone out, types it in, and waits.

"Forty-five minutes?"

"Depending on traffic," Ronny says.

"That’s without traffic." She turns the screen toward him. "My truck is here. My route is here. Serendipity’s is here. I can’t add an hour and a half to every day."

"If you’d prefer to stay, we’ll arrange the work around you as much as possible," Dan says. "We’ll seal off the kitchen. You’ll need to keep out of it while we’re working, but you won’t have to move everything out of the apartment."

"That’s not exactly good news, but I guess I have no choice." She puts her phone away. "I’ll stay."

Ronny makes a note.

"What does that mean for my business?" she asks.

Nobody answers right away. I look at the mixer, then the hole above it. I can pay for the equipment and the food we threw away. Neither gets her back to work this morning.

"The kitchen was approved for my food business," she says. "Do I have to go through that again after all this?"

"We’ll get the requirements before we start rebuilding," Dan says. "That way we don’t finish it and find out something needs to change."

She nods again, more composed than she was with me last night. She had plenty to say about the loud part, until she got back down here. Then she stood in front of those trays, and I watched as she stared at all of today's orders that were ruined.

Nine dozen cupcakes. Five dozen cake pops. Things she’d made ahead for a birthday party and a baby shower.

This morning, the kitchen is clean enough for a contractor to walk through, and she’s been told she can’t work in it for six weeks.

"Use mine," I blurt out.

All three turn to look at me. Apparently, I’m the only one who thought I’d be contributing more than a check.

"My kitchen. It’s bigger than this one. You’re already in the building. Bring whatever equipment you need upstairs."

Baylor’s eyebrows draw together. "I can’t just bake in your kitchen."

"Why not?"

"Because this one was inspected and approved. Yours wasn't. I run a business, Wolf. I don't bake dozens of cupcakes at one in the morning because I have a serious snacking problem."

"Then we get it approved."

She stares back at me, blinking a few times and her lips pursed. She's not impressed by my solution. "Oh, right, of course. We just get it approved like that," she says, snapping her fingers. "Why didn't I think of that?" The sarcasm isn't lost on me. "Oh, maybe because it took me months to get someone to approve this kitchen the last time I applied."

Dan speaks up. "I do a lot of restaurant remodels. I know a couple of people who handle these requests. I can call and ask what's available for a temporary arrangement."

She shifts her mug away from the edge of the counter. "Thank you, but no. I'll figure something out. I'll find somewhere else to bake."

"If you have to bake somewhere, why not in my kitchen? It's close to where you live. You don't have to leave the building, and I'm barely home as it is."

"And the next time you have a rager and an impromptu bathtub pool party? I can't leave cupcakes out to cool and hope whoever you bring back from the bar doesn't eat them."

"Nobody's throwing another party there." Ronny pipes up. "Or you're getting evicted."

I shake off Ronny's comment because I've already assured him that it won't happen again, and I've agreed to cover whatever renters insurance doesn't on the remodel.

"Rooks left for Boston this morning, and he won't be inviting anyone back when he visits again," I say it as much for Ronny's peace of mind as I do for Baylor's.

"It's not Rooks," She says.

"It's me, then?"

"Of course, it's you. It's like you've completely blocked out what you did to my brother. First Beau's ACL, now the kitchen I make my livelihood. What's next?"

Dan looks down at the open cabinets. Ronny stops writing. Neither of them says anything.

Beau hasn't spoken to me off the ice since he got called up. On the ice, he makes his opinion clear enough. We've competed since we were kids.

I knew his family still hated me. I just hadn’t thought through what I was asking of Baylor. Walk into my apartment every morning, use my things, trust me with work she can’t afford to lose. After last night, I’m not exactly giving her a great reason to do that.

"I’m sorry about your brother."

"Are you?" she asks.

"Yes. He’s playing again now. It was six years ago, and I never meant for him to take that hit."

"He just got here, Wolf–to the NHL. Two years on the farm team after the four years it took to get him back on the ice. That doesn’t make the six years disappear." She grips the edge of the counter. "You hit him as hard as you could. You two have been rivals for years. Do you think I’m supposed to forget that?"

I never meant for it to happen that way. That was what I’d been trying to tell her. What came out sounded like I thought she should be finished being angry.

Ronny clears his throat. "We’ll leave you two to discuss the kitchen while we look at the upstairs bathroom. We’ll see you there, Wolf." He gathers his clipboard, and Dan follows him out.

"I’ll call Ellie," she says when I don’t say anything back. "I’ll find something."

"Who’s Ellie?" I ask.

"My best friend who owns Serendipity’s."

"The new owner," I say. Crystal and her husband sold it a couple of years ago to open a goat farm bed-and-breakfast up north. How that works... I have no idea. Most of the Hawkeyes team still frequent Serendipity's Coffee Shop, especially the wives and girlfriends of the players.

"How do you know that?"

"I get breakfast there sometimes."

"Well, anyway… I’ll figure it out myself. I don’t need your help."

She goes to the sink and reaches for the tap before stopping herself.

"The water’s off," I say.

"I know," she mutters back angrily, her shoulder tensing as if she’s mad she forgot, and I’m the one reminding her. Then she sets the mug down harder than she needs to in the basin. "I know the water’s off." She wouldn’t have to remember that if my friends hadn’t flooded her kitchen. I should have kept my mouth shut.

"I’m sorry this happened."

She turns back from the sink to look at me. "Does this happen to everything you touch?"

Ouch, but maybe I deserve that from her.

I look down at the dented mixer. She has two reasons to ask me that now, and I’ve managed to make my apology sound like an argument. It’s hard to hear the question without thinking about Beau.

Six years ago, Beau Fairbanks left a hockey game on a stretcher because of a late hit that was meant for someone else. The fact that I wasn’t aiming for him doesn’t do much for the knee he had to have put back together afterward.

A forward had taken a cheap shot at our goalie earlier in the game. I caught up with him after the puck was gone. I was late, and I knew I was late, but I didn’t care. I wanted him to pay for going after our goalie. I made that choice. Beau cut across in front of me at the last second, not seeing me coming, and inadvertently took the hit meant for his teammate.

A hit against him that I had no business making. An accident.

He went down wrong. I remember that part better than anything I did in the game before it.

We’d played against each other enough over the years that I expected him to get back up. It wasn’t the first time I hit Beau during a game. He’d landed his own hits over the years too. I stood there waiting for it until the trainer got to him.

I was ejected. By the time I got out of the locker room, Beau was at the hospital, and his sister was waiting outside to tell me exactly what she thought of me.

She was crying in the rain, clutching a set of car keys, Ellie trying to pull her by the arm towards the car, and I stood there while she yelled. I couldn’t think of one thing to say that wouldn’t make it worse. Telling her the hit was meant for someone else wouldn’t have helped. Her brother was still the one in the hospital.

I drove to the hospital after Rooks drove Baylor and Ellie there. Her dad was alone in the lobby of the ER, on the phone, frantically pacing when I walked in. He stopped me before I could ask the intake nurse if I could see Beau.

"You’ve done enough damage, Ziegler. Leave."

I asked if Beau was going to be okay.

"Don’t call him. Don’t come looking for him. If you contact him, I’ll have a lawyer handle it. Stay away from my family."

I could tell Baylor that I showed up. That I came to the hospital. That I tried to apologize, even back then. Which was rare for me. I didn’t apologize for doing my job out on the ice; I still don’t. But that night was different.

Telling Baylor wouldn't change anything. I’m the villain in her story. Beau still needed surgery. His family still had to sit there and hear that he might never play again. Where I showed up or not didn't change anything.

What happened out on that ice is what makes hockey a risky sport. Beau knew the risks. We all do. Every player I know has been hurt, played hurt, or watched a teammate get carried off the rink. I still chose to hit someone after the play was over. Now I’m staring at a kitchen that I may not have ruined myself, but I allowed it to happen by giving the keys to Rooks. I should have known something like this was going to happen.

"I let Rooks bring people back to my apartment," I say. "That was my call. I’ll cover what you lost, and the offer to use the kitchen stands."

She crosses her arms over her chest, her hip against the countertop. "You don’t even know if I can use it."

"Then we’ll find out."

"That’s easy to say with millions in your contract and a city that loves you. I’m sure you have ‘people’ to make this mess go away."

"Not exactly, but Dan said he could try. Six weeks without a kitchen isn’t an option. That’s why I’m offering you mine."

She looks away and reaches for the box of supplies. I move back to give her room. I’ve done enough standing around in the middle of her kitchen telling her what she should do.

She picks up a packet of cupcake toppers from the box and sets it on a dry towel. There are little superhero masks inside.

"What did you do with the orders for today?" I ask.

"Canceled them."

"All of them?"

She looks up. "Unless you have a hundred and eight cupcakes in your pocket, yes."

"I don’t."

"Then all of them," she says, and then goes back to using the dry towel to dry out the toppers.

"I have a couple of season-ticket seats for the home games," I say. "You could take Ellie to the next one."

She stops arranging the toppers and stares up at me, her eyebrows stitching together. "You want me to sit in your seats? And what next… wear your jersey with your name across my back?"

I never thought about that, it's an interesting visual, but I know better than that. She's just as soon as not wear it.

"No, I figure you'd wear your brother's jersey in my seats just to get back at me."

The corner of her mouth lifts before she presses her lips together. Baylor in a San Diego jersey. In my seats. At my own home game. And worse… I'd let her do it if she'd stop being pissed at me—at least a little.

"Still enemy territory. My brother would kill me if I came to watch your game. My parents would kill me if I sat in your seats. So… no thanks."

Her entire family still hates me. I guess I deserve that.

"They'll be at will-call if you change your mind."

"Don't waste them on me. Give them to your dad."

"My dad had a heart attack two months ago and hates to fly."

"Oh… I'm sorry, I didn't know–"

"It's fine. He's just as big of a pain in the ass as ever. Hasn't slowed him down a bit. Though it should."

"Then your mom…" she says.

"I haven't seen my mom in twenty-two years."

I'm not sure why I thought hockey tickets would help a woman who's angry at me because of hockey. I'm usually better at talking to women than this. Apparently, that stops being true when one of them has every reason to tell me to fuck off.

"I–I didn't know."

The last thing I want is for Baylor to feel sorry for me. My mom walked out on me and my dad when I was six. Ran off with my dad's auto shop manager.

The last thing I heard her say as my dad begged her to stay at midnight while I was supposed to be asleep in my room was "You pushed me into marriage too soon, and I never wanted to be a mother. It ruined everything."

Maybe Baylor's right… Maybe I do ruin everything.

"The tickets will be there if you change your mind." I glance around at the damage that one night and a bathtub full of drunk idiots can do before I

decide that it’s time to get out of her way. "Do you need help with anything?"

"I need to call Ellie. And the people I refunded this morning. And the insurance company, who wants pictures and a list of everything I had on the counter." She puts another packet on the towel. "Nothing that you can help with."

"Okay."

I take my phone out to check the message from Ronny. Dan needs me upstairs to explain which parts of the hallway were wet. I type back that I’m coming.

I pull the envelope from the front pocket of my hoodie. There’s a dry spot on the island beside her box of supplies. I set it there.

"What’s that?" she asks, looking at the envelope.

"I looked up your prices. Nine dozen cupcakes, five dozen cake pops, and the prep you lost for the birthday party and baby shower. That should cover it. Plus a tip."

She looks from the envelope to me. "Wolf, you didn’t have to—"

"Yeah. I did."

She looks up at me, and the tight line between her eyebrows eases. It’s the first time this morning she hasn’t looked ready to choke me out with those tiny hands of hers.

"That’s for what you lost," I say. "If I missed anything, tell me."

She nods, still looking at me.

"And the kitchen offer… It's an open invitation. I know you don’t want it, but it’s yours… Anytime."

I don’t wait for her to answer. She’s already said no. Six weeks is a long time when she has orders to fill and nowhere to bake, but she needs to decide whether putting up with me is worth it. I’ve made the offer. Asking again isn’t going to improve it.

At least she knows where to find me.

Upstairs, Dan and Ronny discuss the guest bathroom. Dan points to the bottom of the vanity.

"We’ll have to pull that out and check behind it. The flooring too. Once we know how far the water went, I can give you an estimate."

"Whatever it needs," I say.

The living room smells like spilled beer, and somebody has left a bra on the arm of my couch.

I turn back to Dan. "That person you know who handles kitchen approvals. Can you ask about an emergency inspection? Or a temporary arrangement while hers is repaired? I'll cover the application fees."

"I'll ask what they need," he says. "Sometimes a cancellation opens up."

"Let me know. I'll have everything ready."

He nods. "I'll make a call."

I take out my phone to check my schedule. If Dan gets an appointment, I need to be here for it. She can still tell me no.

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Chapter Three

BAYLOR

I come in through the back door of Serendipity's.

I always use this door. Usually, it's because I have cupcakes to unload. Today, all I have is a headache that has gotten worse every time someone says six weeks.

One of Ellie's employees passes me with a cart of cinnamon rolls. Another is sealing boxes at the stainless steel table where I used to spread out my cupcake orders before I got my apartment kitchen approved. There are delivery labels lined up beside her, each with the name of a different café.

Ellie is going to put Seredipity's cinnamon rolls on the map. Or at least, all over this town.

I step out of the way with a smile and a small wave. I know everyone who works here by name, but they’re moving too fast for me to stop anybody.

"Baylor?" Ellie comes out of her office with her phone against her ear.

"You know what? I’ll have to call you back. Okay, great… thanks." She hangs up and waves me toward her office. "How bad?" she asks as I walk in, closing the door behind us.

"Six weeks without a kitchen."

Her mouth drops open.

"Yeah. That was my reaction too."

Ellie’s office is small, with just enough room for her desk, a filing cabinet, and the two chairs she insisted on buying because she was tired of meeting with suppliers while standing in the kitchen. A stack of order forms takes up one side of her desk. The other has a framed picture of her gran holding a tray of cinnamon rolls.

"Sit down. I’ll be right back." Before I can say anything, Ellie is out of the office and headed down the hall toward the café.

Three minutes later, she comes back in with two cappuccinos in white cups.

She hands one to me, then sits behind her desk with the other. "Okay, now we’re ready. Tell me everything."

She knows about last night. I called after Wolf and Rooks left because she was blowing up my phone demanding proof of life. I came straight here after the walkthrough with Ronny and Dan.

"They have to replace the cabinets and floor," I tell her. "The kitchen’s getting sealed off. They offered me another apartment forty-five minutes away, which doesn’t help when my truck and customers are here."

"And that takes six weeks?"

"That’s the estimate. Dan has another team for Wolf’s bathroom, so it won’t hold mine up. Mine has more damage."

"You can stay with me," Ellie offers immediately.

"Thanks, but I can stay in my apartment, for the time being, at least. They’re going to turn the water back on in my bathroom. The kitchen will be sealed off."

"If that changes, my door is open."

"I know." I nod.

She takes a sip of her cappuccino and then looks back up at me. "Wait. What about baking?"

I look down at my cup.

"I’m not sure yet."

"Call Beau."

I put my coffee on her desk. "No."

"He offered to cover the deposit on the shop. He loves you and wants to help. Plus he should be swimming in it with the Blue Devil contract, right? Let him."

"He’s finally getting regular NHL minutes, Ellie. He’s still seeing his physical therapist three times a week. He has enough going on."

"He can play hockey, answer his phone, and write a big fat check for his sister. He probably wouldn’t even miss the money."

I pick up my coffee and take a sip while I consider it, but I just can’t. I need to prove to myself that I can keep this business running. I didn’t walk away from my job and a four-year degree that my parents paid for in Boston just to call my brother every time a bill comes in.

"I don’t want to ask him for money."

"Even if it gets you into the shop sooner?"

I look at her. Of course I want the shop sooner. I’ve walked past it enough times to know which window I’d put the display case behind. I have a folder on my phone full of ovens and refrigerators I can’t afford yet. Calling Beau would be the easiest part. Accepting the money would be harder.

"It still won't give me a kitchen tomorrow," I say. "I’d have to contact the owner, sign the lease, get the keys. I don’t even know when I could move in. Then there’s the equipment and getting the space ready for my business. I can’t show up with a deposit and start baking."

"No," she agrees. "But you could get the process moving."

"You’re right, I know."

I lower my cappuccino. She lets me have a minute without suggesting we call him from her desk.

"I’ll figure out the shop," I say. "Right now, I need to figure out this week."

"You can bake here. In the evenings when the café is closed."

"You’re already running a night shift to keep up with the cinnamon roll orders. Your catering crew needs the kitchen too. You’d have to give up space or oven time, and I can’t ask you to do that."

Her lips twist as she ponders a way to make it work. We both saw the orders lined up out there. There’s no way around it. I’d be in the way.

"Wolf offered his kitchen," I tell her.

Her eyebrows rise. "He did?"

"Yes. I saw it when I went up to tell them to shut off the music. It’s bigger than mine, but…"

"But what? That sounds like a great option. It’s still in your building. What’s with the face you’re giving me?"

"I loathe the guy… remember? For the last six years, he’s been enemy number one on the family list. Now what? I’m supposed to be friendly with him? Bake cupcakes in his kitchen like… like…" I can’t find a comparison that doesn’t make this sound worse.

"Like you're sleeping together?" Ellie teases.

"Hell no! I would never consider that," I blurt out. "He’s the last man on earth that I would sleep with."

"Come on… surely he’s not the last. There are some real trolls out there. Remember that douche bag last week that was walking his Great Dane and didn’t pick up the droppings on the sidewalk? I vote for him as the last man on earth." She settles back in her chair with her cup.

"You’re going to hate me for this, but I would still probably pick the dog poop guy over the guy who tried to end my brother’s career."

"End his career? Isn’t that a little dramatic? I was there… remember?"

I take a deep breath and stare back at her delivery logistics map behind her. Route and trucks all laid out for tomorrow morning deliveries.

"Fine. Sleep with the dog poop guys. At least you’d get laid in this century."

I open my mouth to object, but I have no comeback. It’s been a while.

"Want my advice?" she asks.

"No, not really."

"Doesn’t matter. I’m your best friend, so I get to tell you anyway. I think you should agree to let Wolf help you. He owes you for the kitchen." I open my mouth, but she holds up a finger. "And I think you should use every piece of equipment in that apartment that he’s offering. I mean every piece of equipment." She winks. "It’s not every day a girl gets her hands on a hot, experienced professional hockey player. Have you seen that man stretch out on the ice? God help me."

I take a sip of my drink again as if I couldn't be bothered with the idea. "I’m immune to hockey players. I grew up around them. I’ve seen them eat their own boogers and try to fart in each other's faces to make the other one throw up. It’s not as glamorous as it looks."

Ellie shakes her head like she just tasted something rotten. "That’s a startling image. Okay, fine. Just use his kitchen."

"There’s no way my family is going to like this."

"You’re not dating the guy. You’re using his kitchen." She grins, then sets her cup down. "I know why this is hard, but your family is going to have to understand. You’re still allowed to keep your business open."

"My family’s going to hate it."

"Probably," she says. "But I’m not sure there’s a kitchen in this city your dad won’t find something wrong with."

"That’s true." I glance down at my cappuccino. "If the kitchen gets approved, I’ll call Beau. I’m not letting him find out from somebody else."

"Tell him what it is. Somewhere to bake until yours is fixed."

"I still have to find out if I can get temporary approval."

"Then ask Dan today. Come here tonight so you can fill tomorrow’s orders while you wait. We can squeeze you in for one night."

"You’re going to have to shuffle things around," I warn.

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"I can move one cinnamon roll batch earlier." She takes a sip of coffee. "One night, Baylor. You’re not making me shut the place down. My team can handle it, and they love you."

I consider whether I should tell her this last bit. I tell her everything, so I don’t even know why I’m stalling. "Wolf left me money."

Ellie sits forward. "Left you money for what?"

"For the sales and the prep I lost. He looked up my prices. Put in a tip too."

"A tip?"

"That’s what he said. I haven’t had a chance to add it all up yet."

She smiles.

"I knew I shouldn’t have told you."

"What? I can’t be happy that the day wasn’t a total loss? He comes in here for breakfast sandwiches from time to time. He’s nice to my staff, and the players’ wives who come in here all like him."

"He also offered us tickets to a game," I say.

Ellie’s smile gets bigger. "Us?"

"Me. He said I could take you."

"Good seats?"

"His seats."

Her jaw drops. "Wolf Ziegler offered you his seats?"

"Don’t say it like that."

"Like what?"

"Like somehow it means anything more than him trying to repay me for ruining my kitchen."

She lifts her cup again, still looking far too interested in the tickets.

"My brother plays for San Diego. I’m not sitting in Wolf’s seats at a Hawkeyes game."

"You’ve been to Hawkeyes games."

My nose scrunches up at the idea of being in the enemy's barn, but yes… technically she’s right. "When they play San Diego, yes."

"Fine. Continue."

"He said he was sorry about Beau."

Ellie lowers her cup. "See! Look, he apologized."

I lean forward in my seat. "Yeah. Six years too late."

"What did you say?" She swirls what’s left of her cappuccino in her cup.

"I asked if he meant it."

"And?"

"He said yes. Then he reminded me that Beau is playing again and said he never meant to hit him."

Her smile disappears. "Okay. That part could have been better."

"A little."

"I’d like him to try that again without explaining why you should feel better."

I look past her at the order forms. "My family hates him, Ellie. It doesn’t matter how else he *tries it again*."

"Maybe you’re right… Maybe you’re wrong."

"Beau just got his chance. He still calls me after a game and talks about whether they’ll give him the same minutes next time. He’s icing his knee for hours after every practice and every game. My parents don’t see Wolf on TV and think about how funny he is with reporters. They think about the surgeries. Watching their son in pain. At least that sports foundation for non-pro athletes paid for Beau’s surgeries, or else it would have bankrupted my parents."

"I get it. I’m not trying to be insensitive to what your family has endured to get Beau back on the ice," she says again, quieter this time.

"And I saw it. I was sitting right there."

"I was sitting with you. I saw it too."

"You screamed, remember?" I ask her. She was sitting with me and my parents at that game. My parents picked us up from our campus apartment at Boston University to make the drive over to Boston College. "So don’t tell me it was six years ago and I should get over it."

She puts her cup down and looks at me.

"I’m just saying there might be more to him than the guy you remember from that game."

There might be. This morning, I found out his dad had a heart attack two months ago, and he hasn’t seen his mom in twenty-two years. Neither was information I expected to get when I told him to give the tickets to his parents. I felt like an asshole. I still do, a little. But having a complicated family doesn’t erase what happened to Beau. I can feel bad about one conversation without changing my mind about six years of being angry.

"I need a kitchen," I say. "I don’t need to figure out Wolf."

She nods. "Fine. Whatever you need to do. At least tonight is covered. If you need tomorrow too, we could–"

"No." I point my finger at her. "Tonight only. We already agreed."

Ellie folds her arms. "Then what are you going to do?"

I look at the framed photograph on the shelf behind her. The two of us outside our freshman dorm, a year before Beau got hurt. We’d just bought matching mugs from the campus bookstore. We thought we were very grown-up.

I could spend the afternoon calling every kitchen in Seattle and hoping somebody has enough room for me and an amount of rent I can afford.

Maybe I’d find one. Maybe I’d spend hours making calls and still have to ask Ellie to push her orders around tomorrow.

Meanwhile, Wolf has a kitchen one floor above mine that he’s apparently willing to let me take over. He said he’s barely home. He even promised to keep the parties out of it.

I don’t have to like him to use an oven. I just have to manage not to tell him what I think of him every time I see him. That part might take some work.

"I’m going to have to take Wolf up on it," I say.

Ellie nods and reaches for her coffee.

"You can set some rules with Wolf. It’s his kitchen, but it’s your business. Like no walking around shirtless in gray sweatpants. Far too distracting."

"I can come up with my own rules, thank you very much."

"I bet you do," she says with a grin.

I pull out my phone and start making a checklist of everything I’ll need to bring in tonight to Serendipity’s for tomorrow’s orders. I can make chocolate and vanilla cupcakes tonight, keep the flavors simple, and get a smaller batch of cake pops ready while the cupcakes cool. Enough to get back out tomorrow. I’ll deal with the bigger orders once I know where I’m baking after that.

For the first time all morning, I know what I need to do next.

Ellie checks her phone when it buzzes. "Come back around six. I’ll make sure there’s a place for you to start. We’ll work the oven time out before then."

"Thank you."

She reaches across the desk and squeezes my hand. I let her.

Then I tuck my phone back in my bag and stand. I need to check my ingredients before I buy anything else and ask Dan what he can find out about getting an emergency approval. First, though, I have to do the thing I’ve been avoiding. Ask Wolf if his kitchen offer still stands.

"You don’t have to forgive him if you don’t want to, but just remember, resentment gives you frown lines," Ellie says.

I look back at her from the doorway. "I’m using his kitchen, Ellie. Forgiveness is not on the table."

"Whatever you say." She picks up her coffee. "And when are we going to this game?"

"Don’t hold your breath," I tell her as I walk out of her office.

Ellie’s cackle follows me down the hall.

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Chapter Four

WOLF

My phone buzzes as I walk out of the locker room, still fixing the cuff of my suit jacket. I'm headed for interviews, but I stop beside the wall when I see Dan's name. He said he'd let me know if he heard anything about the kitchen inspection, and I've been checking my phone between everything else today.

Dan: Your lucky day. Kitchen inspector had a cancellation tomorrow morning. He can fit your place in at eight. Have the paperwork and equipment ready. I'll send you his email. Don't miss this.

I smile down at the screen and send him a thank-you before pushing my phone into my suit pants pocket. Eight tomorrow. Now I just have to tell

Baylor, assuming she lets me get that far. As far as I know, she's still finding another kitchen, but at least I have an appointment if she needs it.

"Ziggy. You coming?" Aleksi asks as he passes me in the hall, sporting his own suit.

"Yeah." I push off the wall and follow him toward the press room, rolling my shoulder. A twinge of pain shoots down my arm, and I wince.

Our trainer taped it again before warmups, and I spent a few minutes with ice on it after the game. He wants me back in the training room tomorrow. Tonight, I'm supposed to ice it again when I get home.

Aleksi goes in first. I wait outside until he finishes, then take my turn at the table and pull the microphone closer. A woman near the front raises her hand, glancing down at her notes before she asks her question.

"You put their winger into the boards twice in the second period. Was there something going on between you two tonight?"

"He kept coming down my side," I tell her, settling back in my chair.

"So you were sending a message?"

"That he should try the other side? Yeah." A couple of the reporters laugh, and the woman smiles before moving on to her next question.

"You blocked that shot late in the third, then took a hit getting the puck out. You looked uncomfortable coming off. Everything okay?"

"Ask me when I get out of bed tomorrow," I say. A few more reporters laugh, but the woman keeps watching me until I move on to the next question.

My shoulder was bothering me before that shift, but I'm not giving the next team we play a reason to go after it. The trainer checked it after the game and mentioned that he wants Dr. Kendall to see it.

The questions move on to our penalty kill and the road trip coming up. I answer those, then one more about the playoff race before they let me go. In the hall, I take my phone out again. Baylor isn't in my contacts. Ronny's group chat is, but I'm not asking her about the kitchen with an audience. I'll knock tomorrow before eight. If she's found somewhere else, I can cancel. For now, the guys are waiting at Oakley's.

* * *

I've been home from Oakley's for four minutes when someone knocks on my door. If one of the guys followed me here, he'll turn his ass around. I played a full game tonight, stayed for one drink afterward, and spent most of that drink listening to everyone tell Rooks' bathtub story.

I left out the part of the story that the neighbor under me is Beau Fairbanks' little sister and how she was standing in my kitchen in his sweatshirt and Hello Kitty slippers.

Everyone on the Hawkeyes team knows Beau. He plays defense for our biggest rival, and the guys would have had plenty to say about his sister living downstairs. They also didn't need to hear how fucking cute she looked with gold patches under her eyes while she told us to shut the music off.

This morning, she showed up in a cupcake hoodie, her rose-gold hair pulled into a messy bun with loose strands falling around her face. She probably hadn't slept more than a few hours. I'd noticed all of it while trying to keep her from telling me to fuck off again.

I've barely finished changing into navy sweatpants and strapping an ice pack to my bare shoulder. My shirt is still on the bed, and I'm not putting it back on to tell whatever Hawkeyes player is at the door to fuck right off.

I leave my phone on the counter and open the door.

Baylor stands on the other side with a white box in one hand and a bag big enough to hold half her apartment hanging from her shoulder.

"Hi," she says, but her eyes drop before I can answer. She looks at the ice pack, my bare chest, then the navy sweatpants sitting low on my hips. By the time she looks back up, I'm smiling. Plenty of women have looked me over like this. I just didn't expect it from the one who spent this morning telling me how much she hates me.

"Hi," I say back.

"Of course you'd be wearing that," she mutters, shifting the bag higher on her shoulder.

I glance down at my sweats. "It's my apartment. I just played a game."

"Right. I saw that block you made." Her eyes move back to the ice pack, and I lean my good shoulder against the doorframe.

"You were watching?"

"No. The kitchen staff at Serendipity's had it on. I was there, and Ellie let me use the ovens, so I'd have cupcakes for tomorrow. The TV was on."

"So you *were* watching."

"I was baking." She lifts the box a little. "Is the kitchen offer still open?"

"Yes." I step back to let her in, leaving the game alone before she decides she'd rather go downstairs.

She glances into my apartment first.

"Are any of the guys here?" she asks.

"Nope."

"Do you have a puck bunny stowed away somewhere in here?"

"What… like luggage?" I ask.

"You know what I mean," she says, her eyebrows furrowing.

"No…no puck bunny," I say, which gets her to take her first step into my apartment. "Unless you're a puck bunny."

"Did hell freeze over?" she asks.

"Not that I'm aware."

"Then fat chance. Now can we talk?" she asks over her shoulder as she heads for my kitchen.

I close the door behind us while she sets the box on the island.

"These are for you," she says. "The ones I bring tomorrow aren't."

I lift the lid. Six cupcakes with pink frosting, packed into little individual holes so they don't tip over. "Thank you."

They smell fucking amazing. I haven't eaten since after the game, and I usually have a snack by now. If she weren't standing here, I'd have the first two gone already.

"You paid for them. Technically."

So much for a peace offering. At least I know which cupcakes I'm allowed to touch.

She puts her bag on one of the stools, keeping her hand on the strap. "Ellie made room for me tonight, but I can't keep taking up space in her kitchen."

"Then I'll try not to drop my ceiling on them." I close the box, and she looks up at the pendant lights over the island. Fuck. Too soon. "That sounded better in my head," I admit.

"I'm sure a lot of things do."

This morning, she wouldn't even consider coming up here. Now she's in my kitchen with cupcakes, and I'm making ceiling jokes. I keep my mouth shut and let her talk.

"I'll figure out the approval," she says. "I need to talk to Dan about whoever he knows and find out what I have to do. I don't want to move everything up here and get told I can't use it."

"Someone's coming tomorrow morning. For the inspection. Eight o'clock."

Her hand stills on the strap. "You already arranged it?"

"Dan made the call. They'll tell us what we need to do. If it passes, you can start using it."

She looks around the kitchen before turning back to me. "How did you get someone out here that fast?"

"There was a cancellation. Dan found someone who could fit us in." I shrug with my good shoulder. "He sent me the paperwork. I'll forward it to you. They'll expect it to be filled out and ready by the time he gets here."

"Eight?" she asks, pulling her phone out of her bag.

"Eight."

"I can be here. I'll get my deliveries done first." She types something, then puts the phone away and lets go of the strap.

"So you're taking the kitchen?"

"I guess so. But we need rules."

"What kind of rules?" I ask, walking around the island and leaning my hip against the counter. Her eyes drop to my torso before she looks back at her bag.

"Gray sweatpants… thanks for that, Ellie," she mutters.

"What?"

"Nothing, never mind." She reaches into her bag and pulls out a whiteboard, followed by a black marker. I look from the board to the bag. She came prepared to do a lot more than ask if the offer was still open. It has me wondering how bad she really hates me.

"You brought your own board?"

"It's magnetic," she says, crossing to the fridge and pressing it against the door.

"That wasn't the part I was asking about." It sticks, and she adjusts it until it sits straight. Apparently, I have a whiteboard now. "How many rules are we talking?"

She goes back to her bag and pulls out a glass jar, setting it on the counter beside the fridge.

"A swear jar? You're going to make a goddamn fortune." I look from the jar to her. "Invite the guys over. "You'll have your retirement funded by the end of the season."

"It's not a swear jar. It's a fine jar for breaking the rules."

"You're going to fine me in my own kitchen?"

"Twenty dollars every time you break a rule." She taps the jar with the marker. "I'm not trying to make money off you. It's supposed to be a

deterrent. How much you pay depends on how difficult you make this."

I could tell her this isn’t going to work—her baking here with rules and a fine jar. Instead, I’m standing here letting a woman who smells like sugar and vanilla threaten me with fines in my own apartment. Apparently, I’d rather follow her rules than give her a reason to leave.

The shrink my grandmother talked my dad into sending me to after Mom left when I was six would have plenty to say about that. Good thing I stopped seeing him years ago.

"You know I get paid to break rules, right?"

"Then you can afford it. Maybe I’ll be out of your hair sooner than I thought."

"How would that get you out of here sooner?"

"The money goes toward the deposit on my cakery. There’s a space two doors down from Serendipity’s that I want to lease." She moves the jar beside the backsplash. "Right now, I have the food truck Ellie gave me when she upgraded last year. I want a shop with a bigger kitchen so I can take on larger events."

"Why don’t you ask your brother for the money?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

"Because he’s your brother," I say. "Shit, I’ll cover it if that gets you back to work."

She rolls her eyes and tightens her grip on the marker. "I don’t want Beau’s help. I especially don’t want yours. I wouldn’t even be in your kitchen if I had a better option that didn’t cost my best friend her baking time. I want to earn this myself."

I hold up a hand. I’ve just offered her more money when she came here to work for her own. No wonder she’s looking at me like that. "How many rules would you like me to break a day?"

"None would be ideal. Follow the rules. If you break them, at least I get something out of it. Deal?"

"Deal."

She uncaps the marker, writes twenty dollars per violation along the bottom of the board, then puts a one at the top and points the marker at me. "Can you not wear that when I’m here?"

"Not wear what?" I glance down at my sweats. "You don’t want me wearing sweatpants in my own home? If I remember right, you were

wearing something pretty close to these when you came up to yell at me about the music."

"Yeah, but it's…" She gestures at me with the marker. "Distracting."

I can't help the grin. "I can take them off if that's too distracting."

"No! A shirt would suffice. And maybe blue jeans." She turns back to the fridge, but I catch the color in her cheeks before she does. I've spent the last day being told she can't stand me. Distracting is a better word. I'm not pointing that out unless I want her to take her board and leave.

"I don't own too many pairs of jeans. My ass doesn't fit well in them, but I think I might have a pair in the back of my closet. I wouldn't want to distract you. How about that?"

She writes *Fully dressed during baking hours*, then looks back at the ice pack. "When are you done with that?"

"I've got another fifteen minutes," I tell her. "When does the dress code start?"

"Tomorrow. And once I'm baking here, I'll be in before you're awake most days."

She adds *Shirt and pants* beneath the first rule before moving the marker to the next line.

"That brings me to number two. The whole mess that got us into this. No parties while my supplies are here."

"Nobody's throwing another party here."

"And no letting someone else throw one," she adds, watching me over her shoulder.

"Especially that." I mean it. Rooks can buy his own hotel room next time.

She writes it down, then starts the third rule. "And if you're going to have a woman stay over, I need to know in advance."

"That's a rule?" I ask, watching the marker move across the board.

"Yes. So I can finish early and get out of your way. I'm not trying to interrupt your…" Her hand does a wave over my general area. "... whatever you do."

"My, whatever I do?"

"You know what I mean." She puts a number three next to the rule: *Advance notice of overnight guests*. I move closer to read it.

Her eyes snap to where I move to. I can sense she wants to ask me to move back, but she bites her lip, probably to keep from telling me to fuck off, and then she turns back to her whiteboard.

"Any guests, or just women?" I ask.

"Anyone staying here. Obviously." She presses the marker cap against her palm. "I don’t need to come up here at five in the morning and find some woman getting coffee in your shirt."

"So I need a shirt, but she doesn’t need her own?"

"Wolf."

"I don’t have anybody staying here."

"I’m not asking you to be celibate just because I’m baking in your kitchen."

"If somebody stays, I’ll tell you. I don’t usually bring women back here."

"You don’t bring women back here?"

"Are we having a conversation about my sex life? Is that part of your rules?"

She closes her eyes briefly, then turns back to the board. "No. Of course not. We got off track."

I move a little closer again. Not intentionally. It just happens.

"You’re inching closer," she says.

"Too many concussions. I don’t see well from far away."

"Liar…" she mutters.

She underlines the rule and moves on. She’s asked about women staying over twice now, and I’d like to hear the next question if there is one.

"Four. Stay out of my work area while I’m baking."

"Where’s your work area?" I ask, looking from the board to the island.

"I haven’t decided yet, but I’ll bring painter’s tape to mark it off. I’m going to sanitize everything before I start. Once I’m working, you stay on your side."

"Then we might want to decide before I agree to stay out of it. I still need to eat."

"I’m not banning you from your kitchen." She lowers the marker and looks around, taking her time with it now. Her eyes move from the outlets along the counter to the oven and the space beside it. "Can I use this?" she asks, touching the island.

"Yes."

"For decorating and boxing. I can keep the batter and the mixer over there, closer to the oven." She points to the stretch of counter on the other side of the kitchen. "That leaves the sink and everything on this side clear

for you. I'll need a refrigerator shelf too. Maybe two, depending on the orders."

"You can have those counters." I open the fridge with my good arm. There are meal containers, eggs, beer, and a bottle of something one of the guys left here that I'm not drinking. I move the beer into the door and put the containers together on the bottom shelf. "Those two."

She comes closer to look, the marker still in her hand. "You don't have to move everything around tonight."

"It took ten seconds. Do you need freezer space?"

She nods and steps back while I close the fridge and open the freezer. I slide a bag of frozen vegetables beside the others to clear the bottom drawer. They're all unopened. Our team nutritionist would have something to say about that.

"Bottom drawer," I tell her.

"Thank you." She looks inside, then steps back so I can close it. There's a faint smear of pink frosting on her wrist.

"You've got frosting on your wrist."

"I know." She pulls her sleeve over it and turns back to the board, adding Island and oven counter beneath the fourth rule.

A few rose-gold strands have fallen out of her bun. I'd like to tuck them back, but she told me not to touch her last night. Clearing a freezer drawer probably hasn't changed her mind.

"Last one. Ask before eating anything."

I glance at the box. "You said those were mine."

"They are."

"All six?"

"If you want." She sets the marker on the island and faces me. "If it's in a box with a name on it, leave it alone. If it's on a tray cooling, leave it alone. Sometimes I make extras, and you can have those. Ask first. I'm serious. If someone orders two dozen, they need to get two dozen. I can't show up with twenty-three and explain that you were hungry."

"You underestimate how much this city loves me," I tell her. I'm kidding… sort of.

She glares at me.

"I'll ask," I say. I'm not stealing food she needs to sell. Remembering a shirt before I walk out of my bedroom half asleep might take more effort.

She caps the marker, then looks around the kitchen. "What about your rules?"

"My rules?"

"It’s your apartment. What are your rules for me?"

I look around. The living room is clean again, and the guest bathroom is closed off. The bra one of the women abandoned on my couch is in a bag of clothes by the door. Rooks can figure out who owns what before I donate the whole thing.

"Lock the door when you leave. And leave me a clear path to the coffee maker. I’m not coordinated in the early morning until I’ve had caffeine."

Her fingers pause on the cap. "That’s it?"

I glance at her sweatshirt. "No Blue Devils gear in my apartment."

"We’ve been over this. My brother plays for them."

"Then wear it in his apartment. It’s blasphemous in here."

I can see that she wants to roll her eyes, but she does a good job resisting it.

"You let people flood your bathroom, but this is where you draw the line?"

"I didn’t let them flood it. And yes."

"I don’t have any Hawkeyes gear to wear. And I like baking in oversized sweaters; it’s cozier, and my stuff is too restrictive. Can’t you make an exception to the rule?"

"Sure, you can wear that hoodie, and I’ll walk around without pants on."

She glares back at me. "You’re impossible."

"Here, I’ll help you." I head down the hall and get a black Hawkeyes hoodie from my closet. When I hand it to her, she unfolds it and holds it against herself. The hem hangs halfway down her thighs.

"Are you lending me this or asking me to upholster your couch? This is massive."

"I’m six foot five and two hundred and eight pounds. What did you expect? You’re what? Five foot two?" I ask, and she looks appalled.

"I’m five foot four and a half," she insists. "…On a good day."

I bite back a grin. "You can wear your own hoodies. Just leave San Diego downstairs."

She sets it on her bag instead of handing it back. I’m counting that as progress.

"Anything else?" she asks.

"That’s it."

She uncaps the marker and adds my rules along the bottom of the board.

"What happens if you break one?" I ask.

"I won’t."

"You’re that confident? Really?"

"I lock doors, Wolf. And I clean up after myself. Getting you safely to your coffee shouldn’t be difficult."

"And the sweatshirt?"

"I own other clothes."

"Then you shouldn’t mind a penalty."

She looks at the jar, then back at me. "You want twenty dollars?"

"No. I get a favor."

"Eww, gross, no."

I chuckle. "I’m going to try not to be offended by that, but no, I didn’t mean that kind of favor. Just a simple favor."

"Like what? Bring you back a cinnamon roll from Serendipity’s Coffee Shop?"

"Like you have to sit in my seats and wear my jersey to whichever game I choose."

"Ohhh, you’re diabolical," she says, pointing at me with a lifted brow.

"Deal or not?"

"Fine," she agrees. "But I won’t break any rules, so it doesn’t matter."

"We’ll see," I tell her.

I glance at the Blue Devils logo across her chest.

"I’ll give you a minute to change."

She gives me a look, then starts packing her things into her bag, leaving the jar and board where she put them.

She looks tired. She was up baking last night, spent the morning dealing with her ruined kitchen, and had to find somewhere else to work tonight.

"How did tonight go?" I ask.

"At Ellie’s?" She caps the marker and sets it on top of the fridge when I nod. "Good. Busy. I got enough done for tomorrow. After that, I’m counting on your kitchen passing. I’ll have to keep the flavors simple for a few days."

"If they need something changed, tell me. Another shelf, more storage, whatever it is." I lean against the counter on my side of the island. "I’d rather know now."

She looks at the shelves I cleared. "I'll see what the inspector says."

I nod, then unstrap the ice pack. It's barely cold anymore. I set it beside the sink to put away before bed. If I leave it there, I'll be the one asking where it went in the morning.

"Do you have another mixer?"

"No. I got that one for Christmas when I was eight. I haven't needed another one since." She runs her thumb along the edge of the cupcake box. "I'll borrow Ellie's spare. She said I could keep it until I replace mine. I'll need a commercial-grade one later when I get the shop anyway."

"Since you were eight? Shit, Baylor, I—"

She holds up a hand. "It's fine. It was time for an upgrade. I need something with a larger capacity anyway."

She says it while she's still looking down at the box. A mixer she's had since she was eight, and I thought I only needed to replace a piece of equipment. Maybe I wasn't the one who filled the bathtub, but that doesn't make this any less my responsibility.

"Bring up whatever you need."

"It's a lot."

"You brought a whiteboard and a rules jar in that bag. I believe you."

Her mouth lifts at one corner. I open the box and take out a cupcake before I say something that ruins it. The frosting is piled high enough that I need to decide how to get it into my mouth without wearing half of it.

She watches me peel the wrapper down.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing."

I take a bite. Chocolate cake, and something in the middle too. I look down at it, turning it a little in my hand.

"Is that caramel?"

"Yes."

"Fuck."

"Good fuck or bad fuck?"

"Very good fuck." She presses her lips together, but she's smiling now. I take another bite and stop talking while I still have the chance.

She adjusts the board so it sits straight, then picks up her bag. "I should go. I have to be up in a few hours."

"Hang on." I set the cupcake on its wrapper and open the drawer by the sink. My spare key is at the back, under a stack of takeout menus I never

use. I pull it out and hold it toward her. "You'll need this. I won't always be here when you are."

"I can knock tomorrow."

"And when I'm on the road?" She shifts the bag on her shoulder but doesn't reach for the key. "It's for the kitchen, Baylor. Use it when you need to."

She takes it, her fingers brushing mine. I look up at her face.

"This doesn't mean I've forgiven you," she says.

"I know." I let go of the key. She's accepting a kitchen. I'm not asking her for anything else tonight.

"I'll bring some equipment up before my deliveries so the inspector can see what I'm using," she says, putting the key in the little zipped pocket inside her bag. "I'll wait until we get the approval to start baking."

"Text me when you're on your way up." I reach for my phone on the counter and unlock it. "We should probably exchange numbers before I tell you to do that."

She takes her phone out again and reads me her number. I save it and send her a message, and her screen lights up a second later. She checks it before slipping the phone away. At least I won't have to ask Ronny's group chat when she's coming over.

Her eyes move toward the hallway. "Can I see the damage to the bathroom? It's still hard to imagine how it got so bad."

I lead her down the hall and push open the guest bathroom door. Part of the flooring is pulled up where Dan checked for moisture. The vanity is still there, but he said it has to come out too. There's no hole in the ceiling like the one downstairs.

"Can you use this?" she asks, staying in the doorway.

"Not until Dan's finished with it. I have a bigger bathroom off my bedroom."

"Bigger than this?" She looks at the tub. "I would kill for a bathtub."

"You don't have one?"

"No. Just a shower."

"Come look." I step back into the hall, leaving the guest bathroom door shut behind us. "Mine's dry. Nobody got near it last night."

She follows me, which surprises me enough that I check over my shoulder before I turn into my bedroom. Thankfully, it's mostly neat. The

shirt I took off is on the bed, and I move it to the hamper on our way through to the bathroom.

The soaking tub sits in the corner, separate from the shower. Baylor stops beside it, looking from the tub to the taps. "I’m so jealous. That looks amazing."

"Use it when you want. Just text me first so I don’t walk in."

She turns toward me. "I couldn’t—"

"You have the key. If you want a bath after you’re done baking, take one."

She looks back at the tub, trailing her fingers along the edge. I leave the offer there and step aside to let her back into the bedroom. I hadn’t expected to show Baylor Fairbanks my bedroom tonight. She’s interested in the bathtub, but I’m still glad I picked up the clothes off the floor.

I walk her to the front door while she shifts the bag higher on her shoulder. "What time are you bringing your equipment up?"

"Early. Before my first delivery. I’ll text you."

I glance back at the board on the fridge. "Then I should probably sleep in pants."

She stops with her hand on the door and looks down at my sweats one more time. "Yes, Wolf. You should."

As soon as the door shuts, I put the ice pack back in the freezer and check Dan’s email. There’s a list of documents the inspector needs. I send it to Baylor, set an alarm for seven, then add one for seven-ten. Tomorrow, I need to be awake before somebody comes in to judge my kitchen. Preferably wearing a shirt.

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Chapter Five

BAYLOR

I've had Wolf Ziegler's phone number for less than six hours, and I'm already texting him to put some damn clothes on.

I'm coming up. Please be dressed.

I read it again before hitting send, then shove my phone into the pocket of the Hawkeyes hoodie Wolf gave me last night and pick up the last box. It hangs halfway down my thighs, and I've already rolled the sleeves twice, but it's ridiculously comfortable. The material is buttery soft. Isla Altman designs the Hawkeyes gear now, and considering she used to own a luxury women's workout clothing company, that explains why I don't want to take it off.

It smells freshly washed, but there’s still a little of Wolf in it. The same scent I noticed when he leaned beside me to clear a shelf last night. Apparently, leaving my brother’s sweatshirt downstairs means spending the morning wrapped in the smell of a man he hates.

At least I’m warm.

My phone buzzes before I make it into the hallway.

Wolf: What do you consider dressed?

I balance the box against my hip and pull out my phone with my free hand.

Me: Shirt. Pants. We covered this.

Wolf: I remember. Checking whether socks are mandatory.

I put the phone away without answering. He can figure out his feet on his own. I have two café deliveries to make before eight, and I haven’t even loaded the cupcakes into Sprinkles yet.

Getting the cart into the elevator takes two tries, mostly because one of the wheels insists on going in the opposite direction. By the time I reach his floor, I’ve got the box wedged under my chin and my key caught in my front hoodie pocket. I stop outside his apartment, set the box on the floor, and work the key loose.

This is weird. Yesterday morning, I was telling him to stay away from me. Now I have a key to his apartment and an appointment to bring a stranger into his kitchen so I can use it. College sophomore Baylor would have plenty to say about this. A week ago, I would have put a picture of Wolf’s face on a dartboard before I let him have my phone number.

Now I’m "moving in." That’s not technically what this is, but it feels oddly more domestic than I care to consider at the moment. When Mom called last night, I told her I was baking at Ellie’s. Which I was. Today, if this kitchen passes, I have to call Beau and explain whose oven I’m using. I’m hoping I can get through it without him offering to pay my rent again or Mom deciding I should come back to Boston..

The door opens before I get the key into the lock.

"Socks," Wolf says, looking down at his feet. "Just in case bare ankles were going to get me fined too."

"Your feet are safe from my fantasies. Hockey skates do no one any favors."

"Damn, Baylor. It’s five in the morning. At least let me get some coffee before you start in with the insults."

He’s wearing a black T-shirt that fits his broad shoulders a little better than it needs to, dark jeans, and, yes, socks. His hair is a mess, and there’s a crease down one side of his face. Apparently, I woke him up.

His gaze drops to the Hawkeyes logo, then travels down to where the hoodie hangs over my thighs. When he looks back at me, his smile is slower than the one he gave me over the socks.

"What?" I ask, pulling the sleeves back over my hands.

"Nothing. Looks good on you."

My stomach does something I don’t have time for at five in the morning.

"It was this or the Blue Devils sweatshirt. Don’t get excited."

"I’m trying."

"Very thorough," I tell him, bending to pick up the box. He reaches for it first and lifts it before I can.

"Where do you want this?"

"On the island. Thank you." I push the cart through the doorway while he carries the box ahead of me, then shut the door. His apartment is quiet, the kitchen lights on and everything beyond them still dark. The jar and whiteboard are exactly where I left them. Seeing my handwriting on his fridge is almost as strange as using his key.

He sets the box down and looks back at the cart. "All this fits in your kitchen?"

"It did."

His eyes come back to mine, and I wish I’d just said yes. We both know why I’m here. I don’t need to bring it up every time he asks a question.

"The ingredients go over there," I say, pointing at the counter we agreed on last night. "I’ll put the mixer beside them. The inspector needs to see what I’m using, but I’m not starting anything until I get back."

"I’ll get it." He reaches for the mixer with his right hand, then slides his left underneath the base before lifting it. "This one’s heavy too."

You wouldn’t know it from how easily he carries it. His biceps tighten beneath his sleeves, and I spend a second looking before remembering I’m supposed to be clearing a spot on the counter.

"That’s the point. It has to stay put while it’s mixing." I move a container of cupcake liners out of his way, and he lowers it onto the counter. "How’s your shoulder?"

"Still attached."

"I meant after the game."

"I know what you meant. It’s sore." He takes his hand off the mixer and looks at the remaining bins. "Does anything else need to come up?"

"Not right now." I open the box on the island and pull out a roll of blue painter’s tape. His eyebrows rise, but he moves out of my way as I start marking the edge of the counter beside the oven.

"You weren’t kidding."

"About what?"

"Dividing the kitchen."

"I told you I was bringing tape." I smooth down the end, then move to the island. "It’s just a reminder. I can’t have you setting your breakfast on a counter I’ve sanitized or reaching over cupcakes while I’m decorating them."

"What if I need something from that cupboard?" He points above the mixer.

I look up, then back at him. "What’s in it?"

"No idea."

I open it. Empty. He owns a kitchen this big and doesn’t even use half of it. Meanwhile, I’ve been storing cake boxes under my bed because I ran out of cupboard space in October.

"I think you’ll survive," I say, closing the door.

"You can put your stuff in there."

"I’ll see how much room I need." Most of it can stay in the bins. I have to move everything back downstairs eventually, and I’d rather not spread it through his entire kitchen. I tear off another strip of tape, marking the edge of the island nearest him. "And this side is mine."

He looks down at the narrow strip of counter I’ve left him. "Generous."

"You have the entire other side of the kitchen."

"I’m aware." He steps back, and I finish pressing the tape flat. "Coffee?"

"Please," I practically beg. I’m tired, I have a headache, and there’s no coffee maker downstairs unless someone wants to dig mine out from under a wet cabinet. "If you’re making some anyway."

"I am." He takes two mugs from the cupboard beside the sink, staying on his side of the kitchen. I go back to unloading, stacking the bins underneath my counter and putting the liners beside the mixer. It feels better getting everything off the cart. At least I can see what I have now.

He sets my coffee on the little patch of island I left him, then puts the milk beside it. "When’s your first delivery?"

"Six." I pour a little milk into the mug and take a sip. It’s hot enough that I have to put it down again. "I need to get moving. I still have to load the truck, and the orders aren’t sorted."

"Sorted how?"

"Each café has different flavors and quantities. Usually, I box everything by stop before I leave, but I needed to get out of Ellie’s kitchen last night. They had their own orders to start, so I packed the cupcakes together. Now I have to sort them when I get there." I glance at the clock on the oven. "Which takes longer than handing someone their boxes and leaving. And Sprinkles has decided she needs several attempts to start lately, so there’s that."

"Your truck?"

I nod, reaching into the last bin for the measuring cups. "Once she’s running, she’s mostly fine. She just sounds a little rough when I’m stopped."

"How long has that been happening?"

"A couple of weeks. I need to get her looked at. I’m aware."

"I wasn’t going to lecture you." He rests his mug on the counter. "I could drive."

I stop with the measuring cups in my hand. "Drive Sprinkles? To my deliveries? Why?"

"I’ll drive and carry the boxes. That way you can sort for the next drop-off."

"You don’t have hockey practice today?"

"We have the day off. I usually hit the gym with the guys, but I can go later."

"I can do my own deliveries, Wolf." I set the cups down a little harder than I mean to. "I do them every morning."

"I get it. You just said this morning’s going to take longer, and you want to be here for the inspection. You can check the orders while I drive and have the boxes ready when we stop." He picks up his coffee again. "If you want help, I have time."

I look at the clock. I still have to go downstairs, get the cupcakes out to the truck, load them, and pray the engine starts before I lose another ten minutes. But letting him drive means sitting in the same truck as him for the entire route. He’s already given me his kitchen. This feels like one too many. I shouldn’t accept.

"I grew up in my dad’s mechanic shop," he adds. "I might be able to hear what’s going on with the engine while I’m your getaway driver."

"Getaway driver?" I laugh before I can help it. "That’s not exactly what we’re doing."

A smile spreads across his face. "Depends how fast you want to leave each stop. I think in another life I was an F1 driver."

"Doesn’t every red-blooded male think that?"

"Probably." He lifts his cup and takes a sip of coffee.

"I’d prefer all the cupcakes arrive with the frosting still on them."

"Then I’ll drive very responsibly. If Sprinkles cooperates, we’ll get back in time for the inspector."

I hate that he has a point. Missing that appointment means more time without a kitchen, and I can’t keep asking Ellie to squeeze me in around her catering orders.

He sets his coffee down, pulls out his phone, and starts texting.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Texting Olsen. He has a key. If the truck holds us up, he can let the inspector in."

I look at the clock again. "Okay. But just this morning. That’s it. And I handle the customers."

"Good thinking. I wouldn't want to steal your job with my charm and quick wit." He puts his mug down. "I’ll get my shoes."

I finish putting the equipment away while he goes down the hall. Apparently, I’ve just hired myself a six-foot-five delivery assistant. My brother would have plenty to say about that. None of it would be helpful, and most of it would be loud.

By the time Wolf comes back with his keys and phone, I’m rinsing my mug. He drinks the rest of his coffee and leaves the mug beside the sink, then holds the front door while I push the empty cart into the hallway.

Downstairs, he stays by my apartment door while I bring out the trays I baked at Ellie’s. I’m grateful he doesn’t ask about the kitchen. I still need to take pictures for the insurance company, and I’d rather not look at the hole before I’ve had breakfast.

We get the cupcakes into the cart, and he follows me down to the garage. Sprinkles is parked near the elevator, pink paint and sprinkle decals looking far more cheerful than I feel. Wolf stops beside the driver’s door and looks up at her name across the side.

"She’s hard to miss."

"That’s the idea." I open the back and secure the trays before coming around to the front. He’s waiting beside the door, and I stand there with the keys in my hand. "I’ll tell you where to go."

"Okay." He holds out his hand, and I give him the keys.

It’s a truck. I’m letting him drive a truck. This shouldn’t feel like something I need to explain to my entire family. At the very least, I’d prefer not to be thinking about Beau while I hand Wolf the keys. Putting my life in this man’s hands. But I have an eight o’clock inspection, cupcakes to deliver, and possibly someone who can diagnose my truck's internal issues. For one morning, I can accept that.

He slides the seat back before folding himself behind the wheel. He’s still a large man, even for a delivery truck. I climb into the passenger seat and buckle up while he turns the key. The engine struggles, then quits.

"That," I say, staring through the windshield. "That’s what she does."

He tries again, and this time it catches. For a few seconds, we both listen to the uneven sound before he looks at me. "Does it happen when she’s warm too?"

"Sometimes. Mostly first thing in the morning."

He nods, then checks the mirrors. "Which way?"

I point toward the garage exit. "Take a right when you get out." I’m relieved he starts with where we’re going instead of a list of expensive things that might be wrong with her.

At the first café, Wolf parks in the loading spot I show him and carries the empty order boxes around to the back. I wash my hands at the truck’s sink and start filling them from the trays, checking quantities against the order on my phone. He stays out of my way until I put the lids on.

"These two?" he asks, resting a hand beside the finished boxes.

"Yes. Take them to the back door. Ask for Megan."

He lifts them and heads across the small lot while I start putting together the next stop’s order. Having someone else carry the boxes means I can get ahead instead of stopping halfway through to make two trips inside. I don’t want to admit how much that helps.

When he comes back, he has an empty reusable carrier in one hand. "Megan says thank you. And she asked if you’re doing lemon cheesecake again next week."

"Hopefully." I take the carrier. "I’ll confirm when I send the menu."

"She also wants to know why she didn’t get her usual invoice."

"Because I canceled yesterday’s delivery. Today’s is on me." I glance toward the door. "Give me a second."

Megan meets me before I get inside. "You can’t give away a whole order, Baylor."

"I didn’t give you much warning yesterday."

"Your ceiling fell in. You’re allowed a day." She puts her hands on her hips. "Send the invoice. And put me down for lemon next week if you have somewhere to make it."

"I’m working on that."

"I know. You showed up with cupcakes. Go finish the rest of your deliveries."

I promise to send the invoice, then get back in the truck. Wolf turns the key once I’m buckled in. This time, Sprinkles starts on the first try.

"Good customer," he says.

"The best. She sends me half her friends."

"Good business too."

I look at him.

"You came back today," he says. "She noticed."

I check the order on my phone because I don’t know what to say to that.

Three more deliveries later that go off without a hitch, and now I’m really glad he offered. I couldn't have gotten this done this fast without him driving.

"One stop left. Left at the next light."

I’m almost offended that Sprinkles is behaving for him. Even my delivery truck has a crush on Wolf Ziegler.

At the café, I have the order ready by the time he parks. His phone lights up on the console with a message about meeting at the gym, and I look away after catching the first few words.

"Someone’s looking for you."

"They can start without me." He turns the engine off. "How many boxes?"

"Three. I’ll take one."

He takes the other two, and I follow him to the kitchen entrance. The manager thanks me, checks the order, and insists on paying when I explain why I haven’t charged for it. Apparently, nobody on my route is accepting

apology cupcakes today. Wolf holds the door when I leave, then follows me back to the truck with the empty carrier.

It’s all so normal. He drives, I handle the orders, and the customers still want what I make. For the first time since I walked into my flooded kitchen, tomorrow feels like I might not be playing catch-up for weeks.

On the way home, Sprinkles shudders while we’re waiting at a light. Wolf glances at the dashboard, then looks back at the road.

"See?" I say. "That’s the other thing."

"Does it settle down once you’re moving?"

"Usually."

The light changes, and it does. He listens for another moment, but whatever he’s thinking about it, he keeps to himself.

We’re back in the garage with enough time for me to put the day’s remaining stock away, get the cold ingredients I left in my downstairs fridge, and make the inspection. Wolf gives me the keys as soon as he gets out.

"Thanks for driving," I say, looking at the keys instead of him.

"You’re welcome. I need to get my diagnostic scanner and plug her in to see if she throws a code. It’s a good place to start."

"You don’t have to do that, Wolf, seriously. I’ll get her to the shop, eventually."

He closes the door. "There’s definitely something wrong with her, and you can’t be out here doing deliveries at six in the morning with a truck that could break down at any minute. It’s no trouble, really. I’ll see you upstairs."

At seven fifty-two, I let myself into his apartment with an insulated bag. Wolf has a plate of eggs on the little patch of island I left him, and he sets his phone down when I come in.

"There’s more coffee," he says.

"I’ll get some after the inspection. I’m already too jittery with nerves as it is." I put the bag down and take out the butter. Now that the deliveries are done, I have plenty of time to worry about the kitchen. I have enough cupcakes to open the truck today. If this doesn’t work, tomorrow is a different problem.

He finishes his breakfast and takes the plate to the sink while I put the ingredients on the shelves he cleared. I’ve just shut the fridge when

someone knocks. My stomach tightens, and I wipe my hands on my jeans even though I haven’t touched anything messy.

"I’ll get it," Wolf says, heading for the door.

The inspector introduces himself as Martin and comes in carrying a tablet and a folder. He shakes Wolf’s hand, then mine, and asks which one of us runs Sprinkles.

"I do," I say. "Baylor Fairbanks."

"You sent over the paperwork for your current kitchen?"

"Yes. Yesterday evening. I have copies too." I reach into my bag, grateful I stayed up long enough to find everything instead of trusting that it would all magically be where I needed it.

He takes the folder I hand him and looks around. "Show me what you’re planning to use."

I lead him over to the counter and explain the setup. The borrowed mixer, the storage, the ingredients I’ve brought up. He asks about my orders and how I pack them, and I show him the bins and boxes. Wolf stays beside the sink, answering when Martin asks about the apartment and otherwise letting me talk.

For once, I’m grateful he isn’t trying to be funny. I need the man with the tablet to take me seriously, and I’ve got enough going on without Wolf explaining my tape.

Martin opens the fridge, checks the shelves, and asks a few more questions before looking through the paperwork again. I stand with my hands clasped in front of me so I won’t reach for his folder and point out every single thing I’ve already sent him.

"The downstairs kitchen is unusable during the repairs?" he asks.

"Yes," I say. "They’ve estimated six weeks."

Wolf waits beside the sink while Martin makes a note.

Martin makes another note. "I’ll send the temporary approval through this morning. This is the address you’ll use while you’re operating here. If anything changes with the setup, contact us before making the change."

"I can start today?" I ask, wanting to hear him say it before I pull a single mixing bowl out of the bin.

"Yes. Keep the paperwork with your business records." He hands my folder back. "Good luck with the repairs."

"Thank you." I manage to say it without hugging the inspector who I suspect wouldn’t appreciate it, though I really want to because he just saved

me.

Wolf walks him to the door while I put the folder back in my bag. I have a kitchen. For six weeks, at least, I have somewhere to work. I can fill the orders already on the calendar and keep the truck open instead of calling everyone and explaining why I need to give their money back.

"You okay?" Wolf asks when he comes back.

"Yes." I press my palm against the edge of the island and look around at my equipment. "I just really needed him to say yes."

"He did."

"I heard." I look up at him. "Thank you for getting him here."

"Dan got him here."

"You asked him to."

"Group project, we got it done." He picks up his water bottle, then looks at the counter. "Are you starting now?"

I nod and pull a hair tie off my wrist, gathering my hair into a bun. "I've got a birthday order, prep for the baby shower, and tomorrow's truck stock to get through. I'll clean up before I leave."

"I figured."

I wash my hands, turn on the oven, and start wiping down the counters. Wolf puts his plate in the dishwasher, then washes his mug and sets it on the drying mat beside mine. It takes a few extra trips to find everything I need, but once I have the ingredients measured and the mixer running, I stop thinking about whose apartment I'm in.

Wolf fills his water bottle while I measure the next batch. He asks if I need anything before he goes for a run, and I tell him I'm good. The first tray comes out evenly baked. I move the cupcakes to a rack to cool and put the second batch in without turning the pans halfway through or threatening the oven door to get it to shut properly. His ovens are better than mine. I'm going to hate giving those up.

I'm piping frosting onto the cooled birthday cupcakes when the shower shuts off down the hall. A few minutes later, Wolf comes into the kitchen in gray sweatpants. No shirt.

I squeeze the piping bag before looking back down and leave a blob of frosting twice the size it should be on the cupcake. Wonderful. I scrape it off with a small spatula and point toward the fridge.

"Twenty dollars."

He looks at the board, then down at himself. "Right."

"You wrote your own rules on there too. You can’t claim you didn’t see it."

"I wasn’t going to." He starts back down the hall. "Keep frosting. I’ll be back."

He returns in a black T-shirt, puts a twenty-dollar bill in the jar, and reaches for his water bottle on his side of the counter. I try very hard not to watch the way the shirt fits him.

"Paid," he says.

"Try remembering the shirt next time."

"Would save me twenty dollars." He looks at the tray. "Those look good."

"They’re an order."

"I’m looking. Not eating."

I go back to the frosting before he notices I’m smiling. He gets his bag, then stops by the door.

"I’m seeing the doc after the gym. Probably be back early afternoon."

"For your shoulder?"

"Yeah."

I look up. He’s adjusting the strap to keep it off that side. "You don’t have to tell me when you’ll be back. It’s your apartment."

"You asked last night." He takes out his phone.

Once he’s gone, I turn my playlist back up and get to work. There’s no reason to think about his sweatpants when I have frosting to finish.

By the time the next tray comes out, I’ve put the measuring cups in the drawer beside the mixer and moved my piping bags into the cupboard underneath. It only makes sense to keep them where I’m using them. The empty boxes are stacked beside the fridge, my water bottle is on the counter, and I’ve caught myself singing along twice.

Then my phone lights up with a message from Ellie.

Ellie: Did it pass?

I take a picture of the new tray cooling on the island and send it.

Me: I’m baking.

Her reply comes almost immediately.

Ellie: Look at all that counter space. Tell me you’re marrying him for the kitchen.

Me: I fined him twenty dollars.

Ellie: What did he do?

Me: Forgot his shirt.

Ellie: Tell him that rule is costing you valuable scenery.

I look toward the sink, where his mug is still sitting upside down on the drying mat beside mine. He drove my whole route before he even had breakfast.

He drove my deliveries, I type, then delete it before sending. Ellie would make far too much of that.

Me: He’s fine. He went to the gym.

I have one more call to make before I can pretend this is a normal workday. I turn the playlist down and tap Beau’s name. He answers on the fourth ring. So much for leaving a voicemail and letting him process this before he calls me back.

"Hey. Everything okay?"

"The kitchen passed."

"Ellie’s? I thought hers was already—"

"Not Ellie’s. I’m using the one upstairs while mine gets fixed."

"Okay. Whose?"

I look at the blue tape dividing the island. "Wolf Ziegler’s."

He doesn’t answer. I hold the phone away from my ear to check that the call hasn’t dropped.

"Beau?"

"You’re kidding."

"I wish I was. It was his bathroom that flooded. He offered the kitchen, and I got temporary approval this morning."

"Baylor, no. You can’t be serious."

"Where do you want me to bake?"

"We’ll find somewhere. I’ll pay for it."

"You’re on the road. I’m standing in an approved kitchen with orders to finish. I can’t spend another day calling places." I stop before I turn it into an argument. "It’s six weeks. I’m not moving in. I bring my supplies up, bake, and go back downstairs."

"You don’t know what he’s like."

"I remember the same game you do."

"Then why are you there?"

I look at the cooling cupcakes.

"Because I need to keep working. Ellie squeezed me in last night, but her staff needs the space. I’m not asking them to give up their orders for mine."

Beau exhales into the phone. "I don’t like this."

"I didn’t think you would. I wanted you to hear it from me."

"Does Mom know?"

"Not yet. I just got the approval."

"Just be careful, Baylor. He’s a cocky asshole who thinks he’s God’s gift to hockey, not to mention he’s a player. Don’t trust him."

When we hang up, I look down the hall even though Wolf is gone. There’s no reason to feel guilty. I needed a kitchen, and he offered one. Beau doesn’t have to like it. I just wish I could get through one day without disappointing somebody while trying to keep my business open.

I set the phone down and open the drawer beside me. The measuring cups are right where I put them, and I reach for the one I need without having to think about it.

I was supposed to be keeping everything in the bins.

I look at the open drawer, then shut it with my hip and go back to measuring the flour. I’m not digging through a box every time I need a quarter cup just to prove a point.

I’ll pack it up when my kitchen’s done. Right now, I have thirty-six cupcakes to frost, another batch to put in the oven, and today’s truck stock waiting for the lunch rush.

I’m back in business.

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Chapter Six

BAYLOR

Wolf has been home for twelve hours, and he’s already moved my tape.

Not all of it. Just the piece dividing the island, which now gives him an extra six inches of counter. Apparently, three away games have made him forget how boundaries work.

I put down the box I’m folding and look at him across the kitchen. He’s standing at the stove with a spatula in one hand and a plate in the other, fully dressed and making breakfast. The shirt part has improved. The rest still needs work.

"Did the tape move itself?" I ask.

He looks at the island, then back at me. "It was peeling."

"So you put it back in a different place?"

"I put it where it would stick." He turns an egg, watching the pan instead of me. "You weren’t using that part."

"I’m using it now."

"For an empty box."

"Which will have cupcakes in it in about three minutes." I pick up the roll from beside the mixer and tear off another piece. "You had a whole road trip to enjoy counter space that wasn’t taped off. I hope you made the most of it."

"I spent it in hotels."

"Then this must be very disappointing for you."

He smiles, and I press the tape back where it belongs. It’s been nine days since the flood. Long enough for me to know that he eats more eggs than anyone I’ve ever met, rinses his dishes before putting them in the dishwasher, and has no idea how many measuring spoons I own, which is probably for the best. Ignoring each other’s existence would probably make this whole thing fly by, but Wolf Ziegler is not the "ignore your existence" type, unfortunately.

While he was gone, I filled two birthday orders, kept Sprinkles running without any major hiccups, and baked enough lemon cheesecake cupcakes to keep Megan, one of my best customers, ridiculously happy. I swear I’ve gotten over a dozen referrals from her in the year since I started my business. And I know they’re from her because every referral tells me they’ve been instructed to order lemon cheesecake or they’ll die without tasting the best thing on earth. Megan’s words.

I can’t lie… using Wolf’s kitchen has been a dream, though I wish I could hate it. He has double ovens built into the wall and a gas stove. And the countertop space is almost too good to give up, but eventually, I’ll have to. I could never tell Wolf how much I love his kitchen or he might start thinking he did me a favor by ruining mine. The last few days while he was out of town with the team were amazing. Quiet. Nobody coming out of the shower half-dressed while I try to frost cupcakes.

Now he’s back, standing beside the extra six inches he apparently thinks he earned by leaving.

"How was the trip?" I ask, setting twelve chocolate cupcakes into their box.

"We won two."

"I saw that."

His head comes up, and he gives me a smug grin. "You watched another one of my games?"

"Settle down. I was at Serendipity's. They had a huge cinnamon roll order due the next morning and were short-staffed, so I helped out. I owed Ellie anyway. The game was on in the kitchen, just like last time. They had the volume turned up so loud I couldn't miss it." I close the box before he can ask anything else.

He slides the eggs onto his plate and switches off the burner. "Did you see the assist?"

"Whose?"

"Mine."

"I was too busy counting all of your penalty minutes."

"So you were paying attention," he says, carrying his plate to the island.

I don't admit that I absolutely caught the assist and even watched the replay. I also saw Wolf shove a guy away from his goalie after the whistle, the guy shove back, and both of them get sent to the box. It took less than a minute for that clip to show up on my phone, and dang it, I watched it a third time. Everyone loves covering Wolfgang Ziegler, especially when he gives them a reason to discuss whether he's an asshole.

"He took another shot after the whistle," Wolf says.

"So you needed to introduce him to the glass?"

"He was standing close to it. Thought he'd like to be introduced."

"How nice of you."

"That's what they call me on the ice. Nice guy Ziegler. It's a new nickname circulating around."

He pulls out the stool on his side. "JP had the puck covered. The whistle went. He knew what he was doing."

"So did you."

"Yeah." He sits and picks up his fork. "I did."

There's no apology in it. No attempt to tell me I misunderstood what I watched. I'm not sure whether that's better or worse. I put the finished box on the counter behind me before I start an argument about a man playing the way he's paid to. Five million a year, guaranteed, though he'll be a free agent this summer. I'm curious what he'll decide to do, or if he'll stay in Seattle. I'd never dare ask, though. It would sound too much like I'm invested in his answer.

I bend to pick up the new bag of flour beside my supplies and haul it onto the counter just as my phone rings beside the mixer. Beau’s name fills the screen. I push the bag back from the edge and glance at Wolf before answering. In four weeks and five days, my six weeks will be up. Then I can bake downstairs and stop explaining why I’m in Wolf Ziegler’s kitchen every time somebody in my family calls.

"Hi."

"Why do you sound out of breath?"

"I just lifted a giant bag of flour onto the counter. Why are you awake? It’s barely six."

"Because I have a job."

I take the phone in my hand before I drop it into the frosting. "Speaking of your job, how’s the road?"

"Long. We got in late. Somebody put me in a room next to the elevator."

"Poor baby."

"You’d say that until people started hauling bags past your door at two in the morning." He pauses. "Does the contractor still think he can have you back when they said?"

"They gutted my kitchen, so that’s progress at least."

"Is Ziegler leaving you alone?"

"Yes."

Wolf looks up. Beau isn’t making much effort to keep his voice down, and I turn toward the stove.

"I told you, we have opposite schedules. He’s been out of town."

"And now he’s back?"

"Everybody on his team is back, Beau. It was an away trip, not a permanent move."

The oven timer goes off. Wolf gets up, carrying his plate to the sink.

"I’ll get it," he says.

My eyes snap to his. He stops with his hand above the timer, and I reach over to silence it myself.

"That’s him, isn’t it?" Beau asks.

"Yes." I open the oven, letting the heat out before checking the cupcakes.

"I thought you said he was hardly around."

"He lives here. Occasionally, he has breakfast."

"Apparently with you."

"We’re using the same room." I tuck the phone between my ear and shoulder again and pull on an oven mitt, taking out the trays and setting them on the racks beside the stove.

"You’re sure that’s all this is?"

"God, yes. I’m baking. He’s eating eggs. Very scandalous."

Wolf shakes his head with a chuckle. I wish he’d stop looking amused. There isn’t anything happening, but Beau apparently needs a kitchen camera to verify it.

"Are you sure you won’t take the money and get into the shop? I’d rather you were there than anywhere near Wolf."

"The money doesn’t put an oven in the building today."

"He’s not to be trusted, Baylor. I know his type. And if he tries anything with you, I’m only a flight away. I’ll beat his ass. No questions asked."

"Please don’t book a flight over an omelet."

"I’m serious."

"I know you are. I’m fine, and I only need the kitchen for five more weeks."

Wolf takes his coffee and leaves the room. I watch him go, wondering how much he heard. My answers probably filled in the rest.

"I’ll cover the deposit," Beau says. "Hell, I’ll pay the rent for a year."

"Mom and Dad already paid for college, and I’m not even using my degree. I don’t need anybody paying for anything else."

"You’ve always wanted to bake. That doesn’t mean you threw college away."

"I appreciate it, Beau. But the deposit is only part of it. There’s equipment, whatever changes the kitchen needs, and enough money to keep it running once I’m in there. Let me try this first."

"Okay."

I pick up another box before he can reconsider. "How’s the knee?"

"Stiff after the flight. They want me in early so the therapist can work on it before practice."

"Did something happen?"

"No. I got twelve minutes last game. Coach wants to see how I recover before he adds more."

"Twelve is good."

"Yeah. I just need him to keep giving them to me. I’m tired of watching from the bench."

I’ve watched him finish games and struggle to get down the stairs afterward. Heard him pretend he was fine until Mom left the room. Twelve minutes should be something we can celebrate without worrying about his knee the next morning. Instead, I’m baking in Wolf’s kitchen and hoping he didn’t hear my brother threaten to beat his ass.

"Call me after practice," I tell him.

"I will. Oh, Mom’s looking at flights for the Seattle game. She wants to do dinner as a family."

"Are they staying at your hotel?"

"I think so. Dad wants to come to morning skate."

He asks about the birthday order I finished last week, and I tell him the mother sent me a picture of the little girl wearing a party hat with frosting all over her face. He tells me about a kid at their last home game who wanted his stick more than a photo. By the time we hang up, I’ve finished three boxes.

I set my phone beside the mixer and look at the jar by the fridge. Four hundred and eighty dollars in fines. Apparently, fully dressed needed more explanation than I thought. Once, he came out in a towel. Another morning, he wore a shirt and boxers and argued that both halves of him were covered.

The rest were mostly for crossing the blue line. He needed a spatula. His coffee was on my side. He thought he’d heard me ask for something. I hadn’t, but he stayed long enough to eat a cupcake, which cost him another twenty.

The jar was supposed to give him a reason to follow the rules. So far, it’s just made him carry cash.

With another couple hundred from my customer tips, I’m getting closer. What I really need is one big event that pushes me over the top.

Wolf comes back.

His coffee in one hand. "Finished?"

"Yes. You didn’t have to leave."

"You were on the phone," he says. "My presence wasn’t helping."

"I can be on the phone while you eat."

He glances at my phone. I’m not asking how much he heard. Between the eggs and the omelet, he probably got the point.

"You asked about the next trip before I left," he points at the fridge where a Hawkeyes season game sheet is now hanging up where it wasn’t before. I

don’t know how I missed it. He must have put it there this morning before I came in. "That goes through the end of the regular season."

I walk over to it, scanning over the dates. Home games and away games are marked separately, and he’s written the departure and return times for the next trip in the margin.

"Thank you." I lay it on the clear end of the island. "I just need to know when I can leave things out without getting in your way."

"You don’t have to put everything away when I’m home." He looks at the boxes. "Keep going. I’m not waiting for you to finish so I can use the kitchen."

The San Diego game is farther down the page, a little less than five weeks away. Hopefully, I’ll be cooking downstairs by then. My parents can see the repaired kitchen, Beau can see that I’m doing fine, and we can have one dinner without somebody asking whether Wolf is leaving me alone.

That would be nice.

"You’re gone three nights next time?" I ask.

"Yeah. We leave Monday after practice. Get back early Thursday morning."

"Okay." I look at the return time. "Should I clear out before you get home?"

"At three in the morning?"

"If I’m still baking."

"You can be here. I don’t mind when you’re around. The apartment always smells good too."

I go back to packing before he catches me smiling.

"How’s Sprinkles?" he asks.

"Four tries to start her yesterday."

He sets his mug beside the sink. "I think I know what’s wrong. I ran the diagnostic when we did your route, but I wanted to check a couple things before ordering parts. Then we left town."

"You think you can fix her?"

"I think so. What’s your lightest delivery day?"

"You don’t have to do that."

"I know. What day?"

I press the lid onto the last box. Paying a mechanic is one thing. Having Wolf spend his morning fixing my truck is another favor I’ll have to explain if Beau finds out.

"Let me check my orders."

"Let me know." He takes the top two boxes and carries them to the cart by the door. I follow with the last one. "And if she won’t start today, call me."

"I’m not making you my regular driver."

"I didn’t apply for the position."

"Good. The pay is terrible."

"I noticed."

I laugh as I secure the boxes. Beau would hate that I’m considering letting him fix Sprinkles. He’d hate the laughing too.

Wolf points back toward the island. "And I’m leaving the tape alone."

"That would be a nice change."

He goes down the hall, and I check that I have my keys before looking back at the schedule on the fridge. I put his departure and return times in my phone, then add a reminder for the evening before he gets home. I’ll leave something marked for him if I’m still working. It’s easier than arguing over a missing cupcake at three in the morning.

Then I check my orders for the week. Just to see which day would work.

Sprinkles needs to keep running. I need to keep saving. And by the time my family gets here, I need to be back in my own kitchen.

As long as nothing goes wrong, this could work.

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Chapter Seven

WOLF

Hunter’s yelling for the puck before I’ve finished getting it off the boards.

I heard him the first time. So did the winger trying to pin me against the glass. I keep my body between him and the puck, turn my skate, and kick it far enough out to get my stick on it. Hunter moves into open ice, and I send it across before the other forward can cut between us.

The pass reaches him. The hit reaches me a second later.

My shoulder takes the boards, and I swear hard enough that the guy behind me hears it. He’s already skating away. I push off with my good arm, get my stick down, and turn back toward the play.

We’re up by one with just over four minutes left. I already spent two minutes in the box for cross-checking in the first. I’m not giving them

another power play now. I can think about my shoulder when I’m sitting down.

Hunter carries the puck out of our zone and sends it ahead to Aleksi, who takes it over the blue line with their defense backing up. I follow far enough to give him an option, then stop high when the puck comes loose. Their center collects it and looks up. He’s got a winger coming through the middle and another one wide.

I hold my position. Make him choose.

He goes wide, and I turn with the pass, keeping my stick between the winger and the middle of the ice. He tries to cut inside anyway. I get enough of the puck to send it toward the boards, then stay with him when he goes after it. This time, I meet him with my good side.

He doesn’t appreciate it. His elbow comes up, I shove it down, and the puck gets chipped past us to Hunter. Behind me, JP calls out that we have time.

We don’t need much. Hunter clears the zone, and I get to the bench before I do something that puts us short a man.

The trainer is watching when I sit down. I reach for the water bottle with the arm that isn’t throbbing and pretend I haven’t noticed.

"You all right?" Hunter asks, dropping beside me.

"He caught me wrong."

"Saw that." He looks at my shoulder. "You turned the other way on the next one."

"Worked, didn’t it?"

"That wasn’t what I asked."

I take a drink instead of answering. The next shift goes out, and both of us lean forward to watch. I want the win. I want to be available if they need us. Neither requires a conversation with Hunter about every movement I’ve made since he started noticing which arm I use to take off my equipment.

He knows too much about shoulders. That’s the problem with having a defensive partner who’s already hurt his own.

We hold the lead. When the horn goes, I join the guys on the ice, tapping JP’s pads before he comes out of the crease. He made two saves in the last minute that kept us from overtime, and I tell him so.

"You could stop letting them shoot," he says.

"You’d get bored."

"Don’t worry about me." He bumps his glove against mine and heads toward the tunnel.

Back in the room, I wait until the guy beside me has moved before pulling my jersey over my head. Getting the sleeve free of the bad arm takes longer than I’d like. I keep my face down and set it with the rest of my gear.

Hunter is still watching.

"Does the Doc know it’s still bothering you this bad?"

"Yes. Kendall checked it this week."

"And?"

"I have another appointment before the next game."

He holds my gaze for a second before picking up his towel. "We need you for the playoffs. You need to keep that shoulder attached until the offseason, then do what you want with it."

"I’d like to be there too."

"You still heading back to Boston after we win the Stanley Cup."

I like his confidence. "The surgeon who did my surgery in college is going to do this one too. Being home to recover and force my dad to start looking at his own health is two birds, one stone."

"He’s still giving you a hard time about retiring and selling the auto shop?"

"Let’s just say that he told me I can take it from his cold dead hands."

"Dramatic, is he?"

"He was raised in a tough part of Boston. He made something of himself. I get what it’s like to build something, and you’re on the cusp of losing it."

"Is this about your dad, or about your hockey career?"

"Maybe both."

"Your dad had a heart attack. He clearly needs to slow down and enjoy retirement. You, on the other hand, you just need surgery this summer, and then you’ll be back to playing better than ever."

"Can you guarantee that?" I ask, but we both know the answer. He can’t… no one can.

His phone dings. "Payton just texted. The girls are waiting for us to head to Oakley’s. You coming out with us?"

"For a beer, sure. I’ll meet you out there."

Hunter leaves while I pack the last of my gear. Theo comes over before I can zip the bag and checks my shoulder again, reminding me about my

appointment with Kendall.

After my shower, I pull on my suit pants and sit with the ice pack he gives me. The room is mostly empty now. I can finish getting dressed in a few minutes.

First, I call my dad.

He answers on the fourth ring.

"That kid beat you down the side in the second."

"Hello to you too."

"Once is enough if he scores."

"He didn’t." I settle back in the chair. "Why are you still awake?"

"Because my son was playing."

My dad’s always been my biggest fan. He hasn’t missed a single televised game I’ve been on in my entire career.

"You could record it."

"You could stop getting penalties."

"I’ll pass that suggestion along with upper management."

He laughs, and I look down at the ice pack before asking how he’s feeling.

"Were you at the shop today?"

"For a bit."

"How long?"

"Four hours."

Two months ago, I got a call that put me on the next plane to Boston. Now I’m arguing with the same man about whether four hours counts as a quick visit to work.

"Pop."

"I answered phones and looked at invoices. I didn’t crawl under a truck. Now who’s the father, you or me?"

"Did you make the specialist appointment?"

"My doctor said I’m doing well. It’s not a problem. My heart is as strong as an ox"

"That wasn’t the question."

"I’ll call Monday. How about that?"

I’ve heard that before. I make a note in my phone to ask him on Monday, then Tuesday if I have to.

"Your head mechanic can handle the shop without you," I tell him. "You said he was interested in buying it."

"He is," he says, as if the idea bores him.

"So talk to him. Your retirement’s set. Sell the place and take Marcy somewhere."

Marcy is Pop’s girlfriend of the last five years. She’s great. Pop didn’t date much, if at all, after my mom left when I was six. He spent most of my childhood working his ass off to provide me with everything he didn’t have as a kid. Hockey wasn’t exactly a cheap sport either, but he knew I loved it. Eventually, I used being a defender as a way to get out my anger at my mom for leaving. Those teen years were tough,, but I channeled that energy into being the meanest player on the ice.

"She wants to go to Italy."

"Great. Go to Italy."

"She wants you to visit first."

"I will. Maybe sooner than I expect if this shoulder doesn’t stay together."

"You’re tough, Wolfie… Probably the toughest guy I know. You can do this. You can finish out the season and then come home and get that shoulder taken care of. But if that doctor of yours tells you not to play, listen to her… you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Good. Come home in one piece."

I’d thought spending the summer in Boston might work out. Get my shoulder handled. Convince Dad that retiring doesn’t mean sitting in a chair waiting to die.

Now I’m wondering what happens after that. I’m a free agent this summer. If the surgery doesn’t get me back where I need to be, I won’t have a team waiting in Seattle.

Or a reason to come back.

"Before you go, I’ve got a truck question," I say.

"That’s my specialty. Whatcha got?"

I tell him about the code I pulled from Sprinkles, the rough idle, and the trouble starting.

"Have you checked the plugs?"

"Not yet. I drove it once, then we left town."

"Start there before you order anything." He asks a few more questions, and I hear a drawer opening.

"Dad, I’m asking for your opinion. You don’t need to go to the shop."

"I’m getting a pen."

"All right."

"Whose truck?"

"My neighbor’s. She sells cupcakes out of it."

"And you’re fixing it?"

"I’m going to see if I can."

"Good boy. You got a thing for this broad?"

"She’s Beau Fairbanks’s little sister."

"You have a death wish, son?"

"I’m doing what I can to help her. That’s all. I kind of owe her. I flooded her apartment kitchen. Well, Rooks actually did."

"Rooks," my dad grumbles. "That kid can’t walk down the street without breaking something. They should put him in a bubble suit."

"I’ll consider that next time he comes into town. Back to the truck…" I tell him.

I grew up handing him tools and asking questions until he finally let me do something myself. He likes having an answer when someone needs one.

So do I.

We hang up after he gives me a few things to try first, and he promises to call the specialist. I put away the ice pack, pick up my bag, and find a message from Scottie in the group chat.

Scottie: Wolf. Where you at?

Aleksi: Girls are getting antsy already. They want to go dancing.

I tell them I’m on my way. One beer at Oakley’s. They can figure out the dancing after that.

Oakley’s is packed when I get there. A replay of JP’s last save is on one of the televisions, and somebody near the bar cheers like he hasn’t already seen it three times.

Hunter waves me over. Luka slides along the booth to make room, and Olsen is already arguing with Aleksi about something that apparently happened in the second period.

"One drink," I tell them, taking off my jacket.

"That’s what we all said," Luka tells me.

I order a beer and settle in. My shoulder still aches, but sitting here isn’t much different from sitting on my couch. At least nobody’s asking me to lift anything.

I’m halfway through answering Olsen when the front door opens.

Ellie comes in first. Baylor follows, and I lose whatever the hell I was saying.

Her hair is down. I've seen it out of the bun before, but usually she's pulling it back up while looking for a hair tie. Tonight, the rose-gold strands fall over the shoulders of a fitted black top. Her jeans have a rip above one knee, and she's wearing boots that give her a few extra inches.

She looks fucking gorgeous.

She usually looks good. That's been a problem since she showed up at my door with a noise complaint. But I've gotten used to slippers and sweatshirts and her telling me to move while I'm holding something that costs twenty dollars to eat without permission.

This is different.

Her eyes move across the room, checking tables. I'm still watching when they reach ours.

She smiles.

At me.

I lift my beer slightly, and Ellie catches Baylor's arm before she can head our way. She points toward the table where Peyton and Natalia are sitting, then leads her over.

"What were you saying?" Olsen asks.

"No idea."

He follows my gaze. "Oh."

Ellie starts introducing Baylor around the table. Natalia gets up to hug her, then moves her bag off the empty chair. Baylor takes off her jacket, smiling at something Peyton says.

I give them a few minutes. Long enough for Ellie to order drinks and Baylor to sit down. Then I get up.

Luka moves his legs out of my way without being asked.

When I reach their table, Ellie looks up first.

"Well, look who finally left his apartment."

"I leave it every day."

"For work. That doesn't count."

Baylor looks up at me, and I have to make myself keep my eyes on her face.

"Can I borrow you for a minute?"

"Depends. Did you break something?"

"Not since you left."

"That you know of."

I hold out my hand. "Come inspect me for damages."

She laughs and takes it. Her fingers are warm, and I help her out of the chair before letting go.

Ellie settles into the space Baylor leaves, giving me a smile I’m going to hear about later.

"Bring her back," she says.

"Ellie came over and helped with the last order. Then informed me I was leaving the building."

"Glad she did."

More books to choose from.

Look up **Lokepub** on Google and find a novel you like.

Baylor glances at me, then at the drink menu on the counter.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"I can buy my own drink."

"I figured. What do you want?"

She gives me a look before ordering. I add a water for myself and wait while the bartender makes her drink.

"Good game," she says.

My head turns.

"I’m capable of saying it out loud. It was a good game, no matter how much it pains me to see you win."

"Apparently."

She nods instead of telling me I deserved it. I appreciate that more than I probably should.

"What were you making tonight?" I ask.

"Three little pigs cake pops. First birthday party."

"Did you make the wolf?"

"Of course."

"Handsome?"

"He’s made of cake, Wolf."

"Still waiting on an answer."

"They turned out adorable, actually. Boxed and ready. Your cupcakes are beside the coffee maker."

I grin, and she takes a drink before I can say anything else.

Across the room, Ellie stands and waves us over. Natalia is putting on her jacket.

"We're going dancing," Ellie announces when we reach them.

Baylor looks at her. "We are?"

"You're already wearing shoes. Most of the work is done."

"I have deliveries in the morning."

"One hour."

"That's what you said about coming here."

"And look how well that turned out."

Natalia laughs and takes Baylor's jacket off the chair, handing it to her.

"Come with us. We finally got Ellie out. She can't be the only one who stays."

Baylor looks at me.

By the time we settle our tabs and collect everybody's jackets, Ellie has convinced Baylor that an early delivery route doesn't mean she needs to go home before midnight. Baylor reminds her that she helped make the cupcakes and is welcome to help deliver them too.

Ellie suddenly gets very busy finding her phone.

The club is a short walk from Oakley's. Inside, I follow Luka past the bar while the others trail behind us. The music gets louder as we reach the dance floor, and Baylor steps closer when a group squeezes past in the other direction. Her hand catches my sleeve.

I look down at her.

"Trying not to lose everybody," she says near my ear.

I slow down so she can stay beside me.

Luka points toward a booth along the far wall. Natalia is already there, putting her bag down and shifting a couple of chairs to make room. Baylor lets go of my sleeve to take off her jacket.

"What do you want to drink?" I ask.

"Just water. I still have to function tomorrow."

"Two waters," I tell Luka when he heads toward the bar.

Baylor slides into the booth, and I sit beside her. Hunter takes the spot at the end while Peyton leaves her jacket with him and follows Natalia toward

the dance floor.

Ellie puts her bag beside Baylor’s.

"Coming?"

"In a minute."

Ellie looks at me, then back at Baylor. "You two have fun but don’t let her stay off the dance floor."

Baylor watches her walk away before leaning toward me. "She thinks she’s subtle."

Her knee rests against mine beneath the table. She doesn’t move it, and I don’t give her a reason to notice.

We sit there talking while the others drift between the booth and the dance floor. Baylor tells me about the birthday order and the mother who changed the cake-pop colors twice before choosing the original ones. I tell her about JP threatening to start charging us every time he has to cover for a bad pass.

"He should get a jar," she says.

"I’ll suggest it."

"Yours is doing pretty well."

"I’ve noticed."

"You could follow the rules."

"I could. But that wouldn’t be as much fun watching you ruin cupcakes everytime I walk out shirtless."

She shakes her head, blushing into her drink.

Then Ellie comes back, catches her hand, and tells her she’s had a long enough minute.

Baylor leaves her glass on the table and lets Ellie pull her out. I watch them find a spot beside Natalia. Ellie says something near Baylor’s ear, and Baylor tips her head back laughing.

Luka leans closer.

"You into her? You’ve watched her since she walked into Oakley’s."

"She’s Beau Fairbanks’s sister."

"Oh shit… really? Then you know how well that would go."

"With him or with her?"

"Both."

Baylor moves with the music, one hand lifting her hair off her neck. I look away before Luka can make another observation.

"She’s using my kitchen until hers is finished. That’s it."

"Is that why you came over here instead of staying home?"

"I came with everybody else."

"Sure."

I pick up my water. Beau already hates me. His parents hate me. Baylor has spent years agreeing with them, and I can’t blame her for that. A couple of laughs over a drink don’t erase what happened to her brother.

Still, when she turns toward the booth and catches me looking, she smiles again.

Then she curls two fingers at me.

I get up and make my way over. Ellie sees me coming, says something to Natalia, and the two of them move a few feet away.

"You inviting me to dance?" I ask.

"I wanted to see if you could."

"That’s an interesting challenge." I step closer, putting my right hand at her waist. "Any rules I should know about?"

"Just keep your clothes on."

"Are you sure? You seem to like it when I don’t."

She laughs, and I move with her. I’m not winning any awards for this, but she doesn’t seem to care. Her hand settles on my chest, and she looks up when I bring her a little closer.

Not close enough to give her a reason to pull away.

Close enough that I can smell that vanilla sugar she always smells like. Like a freshly frosted cupcake.

"You okay? Tonight was rough out there," she says, glancing at my shoulder.

"Yeah."

She keeps her hand on my good side. I notice. Then I spend the next few minutes trying not to think too much about her fingers resting against my shirt or how easily she fits in front of me.

I’m used to her moving away when I get too close to the counter.

Tonight, she stays.

We last longer than Ellie’s promised hour, but Baylor checks her phone twice before finally saying she needs to go.

"I’ll get a cab," I tell her.

"You don’t have to leave. Stay with your friends. You get to sleep in tomorrow. I don’t want to ruin it for you."

"I’ve had enough. You’re not ruining anything."

Ellie hugs her goodbye, then looks at me over Baylor’s shoulder.

"Make sure she gets home."

"We live in the same building," Baylor reminds her.

"Very convenient."

Baylor rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling when we leave.

Outside, she puts on her jacket while I book the ride. The night air is cold enough that she folds her arms, and I step beside her as we wait.

"Glad you came out?" I ask.

"Yes." She looks up at me. "Don’t tell Ellie. She’ll make it a weekly thing."

"That might be good for you.

"Now you sound like her."

The cab pulls up, and I open the door for her. She slides across the seat. I get in beside her and give the driver the address for The Commons.

On the way back, we talk about the club, about Ellie convincing Olsen to dance, about Natalia taking a picture he immediately demanded she delete.

Baylor holds up her phone, and I laugh at the picture. Olsen looks like he’s trying to explain an equipment malfunction to Ellie while she dances around him.

She tucks her phone away, still smiling. Her leg rests against mine again, and neither of us moves until the cab stops.

Inside the building, she presses the button for her floor. I leave mine alone.

"You’re getting off with me?"

"I’m walking you to your door."

"You don’t have to. I know the way."

"I’d hope so, but I’ll feel better knowing that you’re safe on the other side before I head back to my place."

She gives me a look, then steps out when the doors open.

The hallway is quiet. She takes her keys from her bag as we walk, stopping outside her apartment.

"Thank you for the drink," she says.

"You’re welcome."

"And the ride."

"I was coming here anyway."

"I know." She looks down at her keys, then back at me. "I had fun."

"So did I."

She hasn’t opened the door yet.

I’m close enough that I could put my hand at her waist again. Close enough that she tips her chin up to keep looking at me. There’s no music now. No Ellie watching. No excuse to lean in so she can hear me.

I want to kiss her.

I look at her mouth, then back at her eyes. She’s gone still, her keys held against her palm.

"Baylor."

She wets her lips, and I nearly forget every reason this is a bad idea.

Then she looks down and turns the key.

"I have to be up in a few hours."

"Yeah."

The door opens. She steps inside, keeping her hand on it.

"Good night, Wolf."

"Good night, Cupcake."

"Cupcake? Is that what you’re calling me now?"

"I could call you Bay if you’d rather."

I’m aware of what her name sounds like shortened–Bae. Her eyes move between mine, and her lips part before she answers. She knows too.

"Cupcake is probably safer. We wouldn’t want anyone getting the wrong idea that we’re dating. I practically spend more waking hours in your apartment than my own. People might talk, and my brother will make good on his threat."

"His threat to do what?"

"Fly out here and beat your ass."

I laugh. In all seriousness, though, if hitting me made him feel better and we could all move past her family hating me forever, I’d buy him the plane ticket.

"Just make sure you give him the right apartment number."

She shakes her head, but there’s a smile on her face when she steps inside.

"Good night."

"Night."

She waits another second before closing it.

Upstairs, I let myself in and find the little box beside the coffee maker. My name is written across the lid, underlined twice.

I eat one of the cupcakes standing at the counter.

Banana and salted caramel.

She left them before she knew she'd see me tonight. Before she smiled at me across Oakley's or asked me to dance.

I close the box with the second one still inside and put it back beside the coffee maker.

Then I set out two clean mugs.

She'll be here early.

I'm getting up.

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Chapter Eight

WOLF

I’m parked outside the rink, trying to open the cupcake box Baylor gave me without putting my thumb in the frosting. I’ve already done it twice. Not enough to ruin anything, but enough that I should probably wait until I get home.

My phone vibrates in the cup holder before I can peel back the wrapper. Juliet. Coach Haynes’s wife has been planning events for my foundation since I hired her four years ago, when I moved to Seattle.

I put the box on the passenger seat and answer.

"Are you in a good place to chat? I have some things I need to go over with you," she says.

"Parked. What do you need?"

"Your opinion on the gala. The committee has opinions, the venue has opinions, and I've realized the person paying for a substantial portion of it hasn't given me any."

The Second Shift Sports Foundation is having its annual benefit gala at the end of the month, and Juliet has been working hard to make sure that sponsors and donors have a great time. This foundation for youth sports injuries means a lot to me, and I want to do everything we can to help families who have been affected by an injury while playing the sport they love.

"Sounds like you have enough opinions already. What do you need mine for? You know I'm going to go with whatever you think we should do, anyway."

"I could always use one that comes with a decision." I hear paper moving on her end. "Do you have a preference for the dinner? We're confirming the choices this week."

"Whatever you picked last year was good," I say, though I don't remember it since I never got a chance to sit down that night. Shaking the hands of everyone that came.

"That's what you said last year."

"And that is why you are the best at what you do. You have great taste."

She lets out a chuckle. "Your attempt to flatter me won't work, but for now I'll write down that you liked the last caterer. Anything you'd like changed?"

"No." I glance at the little white box on the passenger seat. Baylor gave it to me before I left this morning, asking whether the banana cupcakes would still work without the caramel filling. I haven't eaten them yet. "Actually, do you have anyone for the dessert table?"

"Not yet. I've requested proposals. Our last vendor is already booked for the same day of the event."

Perfect. I don't know why I didn't think of this sooner. I already know roughly what we paid for the vendor last year. It has to be at least enough to cover Baylor's deposit, plus some to upgrade appliances, and whatever else she needs to open up her shop.

"I have someone."

"Someone you know, or someone whose food you've eaten?" I can hear the concern in her voice. I'm not known for my expertise in food vendors, but this shop… I can vouch for, personally.

"Both."

"Good. I’m not hiring anybody because you like them as a human, Wolf. Their food has to be excellent"

"She’s good. Cupcakes, cake pops–anything else you want for the dessert table. She has a food truck and takes private orders." I look at the box again. "She’s looking to open a shop. This could be a good job for her."

"A job, yes. Providing she can do the volume."

"You can ask her about that, but I think she can manage." I’ll help her if I have to, and I know Ellie would do what she can too if this means getting Baylor into the shop.

"I will. Send me her information. Who is she?"

"Baylor Fairbanks."

There’s a short pause. "Fairbanks?"

"Beau’s sister."

"Oh." Another pause, then the papers move again. "Do you have a business name?"

"Sprinkles. She supplies the cupcake counter at Serendipity’s too."

"I’ve had those." Her voice brightens. "The chocolate ones with the filling?"

"Probably. I’m still working through the menu."

"It’s a better recommendation than you realize. Give me her number."

I shoot her over the contact information for Baylor.

"One favor, Juliet."

"Uh huh?" she says as I can tell she’s already moved on to the next thing she needs to get done today.

"Don’t tell her I gave you her contact information. And don’t tell her I’m involved with the foundation."

The papers stop. "Does she know you fund it?"

"No."

"Any chance you want to explain why?"

"Not particularly, no. It could potentially cause some issues that would cause a problem for me right now."

"I see. Okay, not a problem. You've always been a little secretive about your involvement. I’m not surprised, and I won’t say a word."

I used my entire first-year guaranteed contract money from Colorado to start the Second Shift Foundation. Putting my name on a check would have made that check worthless to the people I needed to help. I’d been told to

stay away from Beau and his family. There wasn’t much room to misunderstand that request.

So I found another way to pay for the things keeping him from getting back on the ice. Surgeries. Rehabilitation. The bills that kept coming after everyone else had moved on to the next season. Beau was the first recipient. Then the foundation took on other donors and other injured athletes—kids, college players, people who didn’t have a professional contract waiting. Some just wanted to finish a season or get through school without their families taking on another bill. I remember exactly why the first payments went out, but Beau isn’t the only reason I keep funding it. These days, I also like being able to give without a reporter asking whether I’m making up for a late hit. The money is supposed to get somebody treatment, not get me a nice headline.

I’m not ready for Baylor to find out while she’s standing in my kitchen trying to keep her business running. I could tell her about the referral without telling her the rest. But then she’d ask why I work with the foundation, and I’d have another choice to make.

I look at her number in the message I sent Juliet. Baylor should get the job because she can do it. Juliet will make that decision after a tasting and a proposal. Keeping my name out of the conversation is for me.

"She needs to know the organization she’d be working with," Juliet says. "I won’t misrepresent that."

"Tell her everything about the event. I’m asking you to leave my name out of it."

"I can do that. You’ve kept it off everything else."

"Thank you."

"And she’ll need to do a tasting. I’m serious about that."

"So am I. If it’s not right, it’s not right." I pick up the little box and turn it in my hand. "But try the banana ones if she brings them."

"Now I’m definitely calling her."

We finish with the venue dates and the dinner options. Juliet promises to send what needs a signature, and I tell her I’ll answer the email this time before she has to call me again.

When we hang up, I open the box. Two cupcakes, one with filling and one without, each marked on the inside of the lid. She asked me to compare them. I can manage that much without making another phone call behind her back.

I take a bite of the first one, then send her a message.

Keep the filling.

Her reply comes before I’ve finished chewing.

You’re not even home yet.

Research.

You better eat the other one too. It’s a comparison.

I look at the second cupcake and smile. I was planning to.

* * *

Baylor

By Monday afternoon, I’ve answered three calls about birthday orders, returned a message to the leasing agent, and decided that Wolf’s opinion about caramel filling is mostly an opinion about having more caramel.

Not useless. Just predictable.

I’m measuring sugar for another batch when a number I don’t recognize comes up on my phone. I wipe my hands, turn the mixer off, and answer before it goes to voicemail.

"Sprinkles, this is Baylor."

"Hi, Baylor. Juliet Haynes. I’m an event planner in the area, and I have an event I would like to see if you’d like to provide desserts for. Have I caught you at a bad time?"

I look at the bowl. "No. I’m baking, but I can talk."

"I’m calling about a dessert contract. I’ve had your cupcakes at Serendipity’s, and I wanted to ask whether you take larger events."

"I do. How large are we talking?" I grab my notebook from beside the fridge and open it to a clean page. This is why it lives up here now instead of at the bottom of my bag. "And what’s the date?"

She gives me the Friday date, two days after the Seattle–San Diego game, then says five hundred guests, needing one thousand desserts. I write the number down and underline it before asking what she wants served. That’s a massive number. I’ve never come close to an event this size.

"We’re planning a display rather than a plated dessert," she tells me. "A few choices, easy to take back to the tables. We’d need delivery, setup, and

someone there to keep the display stocked."

"Cupcakes and cake pops could work. I do smaller cupcakes for events like that too, if you'd like people to try more than one flavor. Do you have a theme or colors?"

"I'll send the details. This is for the Second Shift Sports Foundation's spring gala."

My pen stops halfway through writing display.

"The Second Shift Sports Foundation?"

"Yes. Are you familiar with it?"

"Very." I look down at the half-finished word, then put the pen on the notebook. "They helped my brother. A few years ago. Beau Fairbanks. He plays for San Diego now."

"Then you know why we're doing this." Her voice is warm. "We're hoping for a good turnout. The dessert table has been popular, and I'd like to offer something a little different this year."

I rest my hand against the counter. I remember Mom at the dining room table with a stack of envelopes she wouldn't let me open. Beau was upstairs after another procedure, Dad was taking a call in the garage, and she was trying to make the numbers on two different pages agree. Then the foundation called. She asked the same question three times because she didn't believe the answer. They paid for the next surgery and the therapy afterward. Beau could keep going instead of having one more conversation about whether the family could afford the next part. I never forgot the name. Now someone is asking me to bake for their gala.

"Baylor?" Juliet asks.

"I'm here. Sorry. Yes, I'd love to do it." I pick up the pen. "I'll put together a proposal. What budget are you working with?"

She gives me a range, and I write that down too. It's more than the birthday parties I usually do, but five hundred guests, multiple desserts, totally one thousand cupcakes and cake pops, plus delivery, setup, and help for the evening would use plenty of it.

I need to do the math before I get carried away. I'm already getting carried away.

"I'd want a tasting before we confirm," she says. "Can you bring a few options next week to my office?"

"Yes." I check the order page in my notebook. "Next Wednesday afternoon?"

"That works. I'll email the time and location. And if the quantities don't fit your capacity, tell me. I'd rather know now than the week of the event."

"Of course." I look at the ovens. Bigger than mine and working, unlike mine. My own kitchen is supposed to be finished two days before the gala, which isn't much room for a delay. "I'll send suggested quantities and pricing by Friday. Then we can adjust after the tasting."

"Perfect. What email should I use?"

I give it to her, confirm the date, and ask about access to the venue for setup. She answers what she can and says she'll send the rest with the event information. By the time we hang up, I have a whole page of notes and an appointment I want to tell somebody about immediately.

Ellie is the obvious choice.

I call her while the mixer is still off. She answers with, "Please tell me you're bringing more lemon tomorrow."

"I am. Also, someone called about the Second Shift Sports Foundation gala."

"What?"

I tell her about Juliet, the guest count, and the tasting. I'm halfway through the budget when she interrupts.

"Baylor. That's huge."

"It's a proposal. I haven't got it yet."

"You have a tasting. That's how it starts." I hear a door close on her end. "Okay. I'm in the office. Tell me the numbers again."

I do, this time with the rough costs I'm already putting beside them. Ingredients, boxes, transport, the hours I'd need someone with me. Ellie asks questions about the display and whether the venue has anything I can use, and I write down the things I need to check.

"And the kitchen will be done by then?" she asks.

"The gala's two days after the repair deadline. I'll ask Dan what that means before I confirm. I can bake ahead, but I still need somewhere for the decorating and storage."

"Good." There's a pause. "What does that leave you for the deposit?"

I look at the last number on the page. "More than enough. I could use the extra to get a commercial-grade mixer, cooling racks, a bigger fridge… plus I'd get to do something with an organization that has done so much for my family."

"And get paid a fair price for your work," she adds. "Both can happen."

I smile at the notebook. "I sort of can’t believe this just happened."

"I can help you too. I’ll take the day off to help decorate cupcakes and work the event. I bet a bunch of the Hawkeyes players will be there too. I bet Wolf could ask them to help us bring in the boxes of cupcakes."

"I don’t want to ask for charity."

"We’ll pay them off with extra cupcakes. They’ll be happy to do it. I see these guys on the regular. They’re really good people."

She has to go when someone knocks on her office door. I let her, then finish measuring the sugar and start the mixer again. The orders I already have still need filling, even if I want to spend the rest of the afternoon writing a gala menu and looking at pictures of the shop.

An hour later, Wolf opens the front door while I’m folding boxes on the island. He has his bag over his good shoulder and the little cupcake box in his hand.

"You ate both?" I ask.

"I followed the instructions." He sets the empty box on his side of the counter. "The filling stays."

"You might be biased."

"I’m giving you a customer’s opinion."

"A customer who got them for free."

"Would you like me to pay?"

"No. I’m conducting research too." I press a box flap into place, then look up at him again. "I got a call about a gala."

He puts his bag down. "Yeah?"

"Five hundred people. Dessert display, a few different flavors. I have a tasting next week."

"That sounds good."

"It is. If I get it. There’s a lot to work out." I reach for the notebook and check the date. "It’s two days after my kitchen should be done. I need to talk to Dan about that. I’ll need help on the day too, but Ellie can probably recommend someone. I’m thinking mini cupcakes and cake pops so I can offer more than one thing without getting into plated desserts."

He looks at the notes, then at me. "You sound like you’ve worked some of it out already."

"I’ve been thinking while I bake."

"Does that usually work?"

"Better than when you’re talking to me."

He smiles, resting his good arm against the counter.

"It’s for the Second Shift Foundation," I tell him. "They helped Beau after the injury."

He nods.

"Someone organizing it has had my cupcakes at Ellie’s." I run my finger down the quantities. "It’s strange. They helped my family when we didn’t know what to do next. Now they’re asking me to do something I can actually do."

He looks down at the notebook, then back at me. I leave my finger beside the date and wait for his answer.

"You make good cupcakes, Baylor."

"You keep telling me that."

"You keep looking surprised." He taps the corner of the empty box. "I ate both. I’m very committed to the opinion."

I laugh, then turn the notebook back toward myself. "I’m going to try a few things before the tasting. I’ll have to use both ovens some evenings."

"Use them."

"And possibly more fridge space."

"We can move things."

"I’m not asking you to live entirely out of takeout containers."

"That’s mostly what’s in there already." He straightens and picks up his bag. "Tell me which nights you need the whole kitchen. I’ll take dinner into the living room."

I watch him turn toward the hallway, then stop him before he goes.

"Wolf."

He looks back.

"I’m not thanking you for the ceiling."

"I wasn’t expecting you to."

"I mean, this doesn’t make that good." I gesture at the kitchen, frustrated with myself for not finding the right words. "But having somewhere to keep working matters. I couldn’t say yes to a tasting if I was still trying to find an oven."

He nods once. "Then I’m glad you have one."

"Two."

"Two," he agrees, and leaves me to my boxes.

I stand there for a moment, looking at the notes. I’ve told Ellie. I’ve told Wolf. I want to tell Beau too, but I’m not quite ready for him to ask why

Ziegler heard about it first.

I turn to a clean page and write six flavors across the top. Chocolate caramel. Lemon. Banana. Vanilla with raspberry. Strawberry. Something with brown butter, if I can get it right before next Wednesday.

Then I draw a line through the words, banana without filling, on my notebook and put it back the way Wolf liked it.

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Chapter Nine

BAYLOR

Juliet called Monday, and I've been thinking about tasting flavors ever since. This morning, I'm finally testing them.

I unlock Wolf's door with a bag of ingredients in one hand, but something on the floor stops me before I get inside.

There's a bra on Wolf's floor.

A red one. Not mine, obviously. The fact that I feel the need to clarify that is probably a problem.

I stop with one hand on the open door and the other wrapped around my bag. The bra is beside the bench in his entry. Farther down the hall, there's a pair of men's sneakers and a cocktail dress.

Oh, no.

I yank my phone out of my pocket, nearly dropping it before I get our messages open. Please tell me he warned me. That I missed a text while I was loading the truck, and I can quietly back out before somebody catches me standing here inspecting their underwear.

Nothing. No message telling me to come later. No warning that somebody stayed over.

Wolf got back early yesterday morning. I finished baking that afternoon and left him alone for the evening. I figured he could use some peace and quiet after the away games.

Apparently, he found something better.

He'd almost kissed me Saturday… or at least I think he almost did. Now I'm standing here with ingredients for six cupcake flavors while someone else's dress is on his floor.

Which is fine. He can do whatever he wants. I just asked him to warn me when it might involve a naked woman coming into the kitchen while I'm measuring flour.

I shove my phone into my pocket and take a quiet step backward.

"Baylor?"

Wolf stands at the end of the hall in a gray T-shirt and loose dark pants, his hair messed up.

"I'll come back."

"What…Why?"

I look at the bra. He follows my gaze.

"Oh."

"Yes. Oh." I lower my voice. "I asked for a warning."

"That's not mine."

"I didn't think it was your size."

His mouth twitches. "Rooks got in yesterday. He went out last night and brought someone back after I went to bed. I saw his text this morning."

I look toward the guest room.

"They're still asleep, I think," he adds.

"Rooks," I grumble.

"Rooks," he confirms with a nod.

"What's he back for?"

"His trainer wanted to check how much strength he's getting back in his wrist after working with the physical therapist."

"And you're running a hotel?"

"He has one appointment, but he’s staying a couple days. I told him to stay out of your way while you’re baking. Then he’s going home to Boston. Germany before next season."

"Hopefully with a better understanding of where his guests should leave their clothes."

That explains the bra. And the dress. I loosen my grip on my bag, but I’m still standing in the doorway.

"Okay. Well, the rule applies to guests too."

"I’ll tell him." He looks at my hand on the door. "Please don’t leave. Have you eaten?"

"I’ve had coffee."

"So, no. Come on. I’ll make you breakfast."

He walks past me toward the kitchen, leaving me to close the door.

My tasting is five days away, and I’ve already finished the café deliveries for today and stocked the truck. I came up to test flavors before the lunch rush. I’m not losing an entire morning because Rooks couldn’t keep his date’s clothes in the bedroom.

And I am hungry.

I leave my ingredients on the counter, then sit at the island and pull my notebook from my bag. Wolf takes the eggs and milk out of the fridge while I find the page with my tasting flavors.

"You looked mad back there."

"Why wouldn’t I be? I asked you to warn me, and then I walked into a scene I wasn’t prepared for."

"I didn’t know until I woke up."

"I know that now."

He sets the carton beside the stove, then looks over at me.

"Are you mad about the lack of a warning, or that it wasn’t your bra and dress on my floor?"

I look up to find a smug expression on his face I’ve been trying not to think about since he walked me to my door.

"Get over yourself, Wolf. I have no interest in you."

"Didn’t seem that way when you asked me to dance."

"It was dancing, Wolf. Not a marriage proposal."

"Too bad. I might have said yes," he teases.

My stomach flutters, which is a ridiculous reaction to Wolf joking about us getting married. Mom would clutch her rosary and say ten Hail Marys.

Dad would need his blood pressure checked. And Beau—he’d probably have a stroke.

"Can you imagine Beau at our wedding?" I ask.

"Think I should ask him to be my best man?"

I laugh out loud. "Only if you want your bachelor party to double as your funeral. I’d keep the casket closed to save you the embarrassment of everyone knowing that a Blue Devils player got the final jump on you."

He grins, and I look down at my notebook. I walked in here ready to leave over a bra that wasn’t mine, and now we’re planning our wedding. I should probably stop talking until I’ve had breakfast.

A door opens down the hall.

A woman steps out wearing an oversized T-shirt and a pair of men’s sweat shorts. She makes it three steps before seeing us.

"Oh. Hi."

"Morning," Wolf says.

Her eyes drop to the bra, and she hurries over to collect it and the dress.

"Sorry. I’m just getting my stuff."

"You’re fine," I tell her.

She folds the clothes together, tucking the bra in the middle, then looks back toward the bedroom.

Rooks appears behind her. Shirtless, barefoot, and looking considerably less concerned about an audience.

"Found everything?"

"I think so."

He bends to kiss her. I suddenly become very interested in the flavors on my notebook page.

"I’ll text you," he tells her.

She smiles, says goodbye to us, and slips out the front door with her clothes held against her stomach.

Rooks watches it close, then turns toward the kitchen.

"Baylor Fairbanks. This is a nice surprise."

"For one of us."

He laughs and walks over, catching me in a side hug before I can move my bag out of the way.

"Are you still mad at me?"

"You flooded my kitchen."

"That was over two weeks ago. You can’t stay mad at me forever, can you?"

"She can," Wolf says from beside the stove. "Six years and counting."

I look at him. His gaze drops to Rooks’s arm around me, then comes back to my face.

"Want to try for seven?"

Rooks laughs, and I elbow him lightly. He lets go, still grinning, then pulls out a stool and takes a seat.

"You making enough for me?"

"Wasn’t planning on it," Wolf says, cracking another egg into the bowl.

"Throw in a couple more. I’m starving." Rooks turns toward my notebook. "What are you making?"

"I’m making cupcakes for the Second Shift Sports Foundation gala next month. I'm trying out new flavors today."

"Wait. Wolf… isn’t that your–" Rooks starts, but then an egg hits Rooks in the head, yellow egg yolk dripping down his brown hair into his eyes. "Hey!" Rooks yells. "What the hell was that for?"

"You want breakfast, then keep your mouth shut, huh?"

There’s a moment between them. A conversation I don’t understand, and then Wolf turns back around to crack more eggs.

Rooks walks out to the sink to wash off his hair.

"What flavors are you trying today?" he asks. "And do you need a guinea pig? Because I’m happy to taste test."

"Shouldn’t you be on your way home?" Wolf asks, staring back at Rooks over his shoulder as he starts to work the eggs in the pan so they don’t burn.

"No. I figured I’d stay another day."

"Lucky us," Wolf mutters, annoyed, and then turns back to his eggs.

I hold back a snicker.

"To answer your question…" I start, straightening my spine as I look down at my list that I’m very proud of. "I’m going to try a brown butter cupcake with brown sugar frosting, a blueberry and honey cupcake with a honey frosting and streusel crumble on top, and a new dark chocolate chip cupcake with a mint frosting and chocolate ganache."

"And you’re making extras for me, aren’t you?" Rooks asks.

"I haven’t decided."

"Hey," Wolf cuts in.

We both look at him. He points the fork at Rooks’s bare chest.

"He doesn’t have to wear a shirt in the kitchen?"

I glance at Rooks, then take a spatula from my bag and tap the jar beside the fridge.

"Sorry, Rooks. House rules."

He looks at the jar, then at the whiteboard.

"Twenty bucks?"

"Every time."

Rooks gets off the stool and heads back down the hall.

Wolf watches him go, then goes back to beating the eggs. "He gets a hug. I get fined."

"He’s getting fined too."

"After the hug."

"You can put that in your complaint."

Rooks returns with his wallet. "How much to keep my shirt off?"

I consider it for a minute. "A hundred, but you can’t come into my sanitized space."

"Deal," he says it with a proud smile and pulls out a hundred, jamming it as far as his big hands will let him.

Wolf pauses with the bowl over the pan. "He gets a day rate. That’s not fair."

"I’m her favorite, remember?"

I look at the bill in the jar. Apparently, shirts are a considerable inconvenience for professional hockey players. I should have charged more.

"And stay on that side of the tape," I tell him. "I’m not cleaning everything twice."

"Yes, Chef," Rooks says, giving me a casual salute.

I turn back to my notebook while Wolf finishes breakfast. Rooks reads the rest of the rules, occasionally asking a question that makes me wonder whether a hundred dollars was enough.

"No eating without permission?" He looks at Wolf. "What did you do?"

"Ate a cupcake."

"Before I said he could," I add.

"Was it worth twenty bucks?"

"Yes."

"Then I’ll need to try one."

Wolf switches off the burner and divides the eggs between three plates.

"You can order them like everybody else," I tell Rooks.

"Two dozen. Whatever flavor you think I'll like."

"Vanilla. When are you leaving?"

"Sunday."

"Then I'll have them ready Saturday afternoon."

Wolf sets my breakfast in front of me, and I move the notebook to make room.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He sits across from me, and I take a bite before I start smiling again. Ten minutes ago, I was backing out of his apartment. Now he's made me breakfast, and I know better than to look at him while I'm still thinking about Beau as his best man.

Rooks tells us about the bar he went to last night while Wolf pours the coffee. Apparently, the bartender recognized him and let him pick the music, which explains why he stayed until closing. I'm relieved he keeps the rest of his evening to himself.

After breakfast, Rooks carries his plate to the sink and takes his coffee down the hall to call someone. I rinse my own plate, then wash my hands and get out the ingredients for my first test batch. Wolf loads the dishwasher beside me.

"The tasting is Wednesday," I tell him. "I need to narrow down the flavors and work out what I can reasonably make for five hundred people."

"How many are you bringing to the tasting?"

"Six. I'd like her to choose three or four for the gala."

"Banana caramel should be one."

"You've made your position on that very clear."

"I'd hate for there to be any confusion."

He sets my coffee on the clear corner of the island, then takes his usual stool while I measure. It's easier to talk about cupcakes. I know what I'm doing with those.

Rooks comes back down the hall with his bag over his shoulder.

"I'll just stay with Hannah tonight. Give you some room to work."

"The woman who left this morning?" I ask.

"Yeah. We get together when I'm in town." He grins. "She'll probably appreciate not having to walk past you two carrying her bra again."

"Keeping it in the bedroom would help," Wolf says.

"I’ll pass that along." Rooks turns to me. "I’ll pick up the cupcakes tomorrow afternoon. Thanks, Baylor."

"You’re welcome."

With the first tray in the oven, I prop my tablet beside my notebook and put on *Couple's Cove* while I measure the ingredients for the next batch.

Wolf comes around behind me with his coffee, then stops.

"What the hell are you watching?"

"Couple's Cove."

He looks at the screen instead of me. "Hold on. Is that woman crying over the guy in the pool?"

"Yes."

"The one kissing somebody else?" He points at the screen.

"That would be why she’s crying."

"Isn’t she right there? He can see her."

"He knows."

I weigh the sugar while he stands behind my stool. On-screen, the guy climbs out of the pool and reaches for a towel.

Wolf lowers his mug without taking a drink.

"Please tell me she’s not going over there."

"She’s going over there."

"Oh, for fuck’s sake."

"You don’t have to watch."

He pulls out the stool beside mine and sits.

The guy drops his towel and pulls on his shorts.

"How do these people manage to dress themselves?"

I look over my shoulder. "What?"

"He put his shorts on backward."

I glance at the screen. He did. Unfortunately, pointing that out seems to encourage Wolf.

"Does she know?"

"About the shorts or the other woman?"

"Either."

I set down the sugar and pause the episode.

"Why’d you stop it?"

"Because I’d like to hear some of it."

"I’m trying to catch up."

"You’ve missed eleven episodes. I don’t have time to explain every bad decision before lunch."

He takes a drink of coffee, looking far too entertained.

"I’ll wait for the recap."

"You’ll be waiting a while."

I leave the tablet paused and switch on the mixer. Wolf returns to his stool with his coffee while I scrape the last of the measured ingredients into the bowl.

My phone rings.

Mom.

I switch off the mixer and pick up my phone.

"Hi, Mom."

"Are you still baking upstairs?"

"Yes. The repairs aren’t finished."

"I thought you might have found somewhere else by now."

I look at Wolf across the island. He’s holding his coffee, watching me.

"Somewhere with two ovens, enough storage, and no rent? Unfortunately, nothing’s come up."

"Baylor."

"I’m just saying it works."

"Your father asked whether Ellie could make room."

"Ellie offered. She’s already running her kitchen around the clock. I’m not asking her to turn down work so I can get mine done."

"I know, sweetheart. We just don’t like you depending on him."

Wolf gets off his stool and carries his mug toward the living room. I wait until he’s out of the kitchen before answering.

"He hasn’t asked for anything, Mom."

"That doesn’t mean your father and I aren’t concerned."

"I’m using his oven. I’m not announcing an engagement."

Which would have been a much better answer if we hadn’t planned half our wedding over breakfast.

"We hardly see each other," I add. "He’s gone for games. I’m out making deliveries. Once my kitchen’s finished, I won’t need his."

Dad says something in the background. I hear Wolf’s name, then Mom asks him to let her finish talking.

I scrape the batter from the side of the bowl. I understand why they’re worried. I was there for the surgeries and the months when Beau couldn’t

put weight on his leg. I don’t need Dad to remind me who was responsible.

But Wolf didn’t have to get up and make me breakfast. Or leave the room so I could have this conversation without feeling any more uncomfortable than I already do.

"What did Dad say?" I ask.

"Nothing you haven’t heard."

Exactly.

"I’m fine, Mom. I promise."

She’s quiet for a moment.

"I know you can look after yourself. That doesn’t stop us from worrying."

"I know."

"And I don’t want you feeling like you owe him."

I glance toward the living room. Wolf has his phone against his ear now, his back to me.

"I don’t."

"All right."

She doesn’t sound convinced, but she asks about dinner when they come to Seattle. Dad wants somewhere he can get a decent steak. Beau apparently wants somewhere that won’t take two hours to bring him one. I tell her I’ll find a place that satisfies both demands.

Then I tell her about the tasting.

"The Second Shift gala?" she asks. "Baylor, that’s wonderful."

"It’s only a tasting. I don’t have the contract yet."

"They already know how to pick good people."

My throat tightens a little. We can agree on the foundation, at least.

"I’d really like to get it."

"I hope you do, sweetheart. Tell us how it goes."

"I will."

By the time we hang up, she’s asked me to send pictures of the cupcakes and reminded me to eat something besides frosting.

I look at my empty breakfast mug.

Already handled.

Wolf comes back into the kitchen as I set my phone beside the notebook. He puts his mug in the sink, then looks at the mixing bowl.

"Need me out of your way?"

"No. I’m just getting this batch in."

He nods and starts toward the hall.

"Will you be home tonight?" I ask.

He turns back. "Yeah. Why?"

"I'll have the test batches finished. If you want to try them."

"You're giving me permission in advance?"

"I think you might know my cupcakes better than anyone right now. I could use your opinion."

He smiles. "I'll be here."

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Chapter Ten

WOLF

Dan is standing where Baylor’s mixer used to be, measuring the wall.

The kitchen is dry, but there’s nothing left in it. No cabinets, no counters, no appliances. The new cabinets are sitting in boxes in her living room, taking up most of the space between the couch and the television.

It’s Sunday morning, almost three weeks since the flood. My guest bathroom has a floor again, but the shower and tub still haven’t been installed. At least I have another bathroom. Baylor doesn’t have another kitchen.

"We’re on schedule," Dan says, writing a measurement in his notebook.

"Still the original deadline? Do you think your crews will be done in about three weeks?"

"That’s the target. Cabinets first, then we can measure for the counters. Flooring, appliances, hookups. There’s still plenty to do."

"And the gala’s the following Friday after the work is supposed to be complete. Will everything be hooked up and ready for her to bake in here?"

He looks up. "I know she needs this kitchen. We’re doing everything we can to get her back in it on time."

I nod, looking at the empty space where her oven stood. She’s been working around my schedule, keeping her orders on her side of the tape and asking whether she should clear out before I get home from a trip. Even now, she acts like I might decide I want the kitchen back.

"Do you need anything from me?"

"Access to your guest bathroom tomorrow. The fixtures are coming."

"I leave after practice. I’ll make sure you can get in."

He closes his notebook. "I’ll send Baylor an update once we’ve started installing these."

"Thanks."

I head upstairs before I’m late for practice. Baylor is at the sink rinsing a bowl. The island is covered with labeled sample containers, and there’s a cake pop lying on a folded paper towel beside her notebook.

"Did he say anything new?" she asks. She had a last-minute add-on order to try to frost in time for her delivery this morning, so I offered to meet with Dan for her.

"Still on schedule. He’ll message you when the cabinets start going in."

"Good. I’d like to see them somewhere besides my living room." She dries the bowl and puts it away. "Are you leaving?"

"Yeah, I’m on my way out."

She takes the paper towel when I’ve finished. "Are you still leaving tomorrow?"

"After practice."

"Okay. I’ll bake what I can ahead, keep it covered, and finish the fresh frosting here Wednesday morning. The tasting’s in the afternoon."

"You can leave the boxes wherever you need them."

She nods, glancing at the hallway before looking back at me. She’s looking at me like she wants to ask something but is thinking better of it.

"Does your offer still stand?" she asks. "The… uh, soaking tub in your bathroom? I thought I might use it while you’re gone, if you didn’t care. I wouldn't be in your way."

"You’re welcome to use it anytime. Clean towels are in the tall cabinet beside the shower."

"Okay." She reaches for her notebook, then pauses. "Thank you."

I nod and get my bag before I start suggesting times she could use it while I’m home, preferably while I’m also in it. Though she specifically didn't ask for company, and I’m trying to behave like a man who’s just recently got her to put up with his presence and can answer a question without taking his clothes off in the middle of the kitchen.

At the rink, practice gives me plenty of other things to think about. Breakouts, coverage, a drill we repeat until nobody can claim they misunderstood it. I do the work, get off the ice, and report to Kendall before she has to come find me.

She’s sitting on a rolling stool with my notes open when I come in, her navy Hawkeyes jogger suit that all of the healthcare staff wear around the arena, her blonde hair in a messy bun, a breast pump tucked in the back corner. Little baby Makelin is adorable, and seeing Aleksei as a dad has me wondering what that would look like for me.

Maybe this will be my last season on professional ice. Then what will I do?

Coach? Sports reporting?

I don't have to work. I have enough to retire if I wanted to, but I need to work. Maybe I get that from my father, but idle hands only get me in trouble.

Settling down and starting a family. That’s starting to not feel as far away as it used to.

I take a seat, and she rolls over on the stool. Her hands instantly go to my shoulder for a moment. I wince when her finger presses into a tender ligament.

"That hurt?" she asks.

"Nope," I say back.

She chuckles. "Okay, tough guy. Let’s look at the scans they took last week."

"Any change since the last check?" I ask.

"Depends. Did it hurt more or less last game?"

I don’t respond because we both know.

"Mmhmm, that’s what I thought. You got caught against those boards. Your shoulder doesn’t like that."

"Tell the asshole who put me there."

She just smiles. Her husband spent his own time against the boards with the same asshole from last game as well.

"Shirt off. Let’s look."

I do, and she takes me through the movements, asking where it hurts and stopping me when I start compensating for the range I don’t want to test. This isn’t the first appointment. She knows what I can do when I’m trying to make something look better than it feels.

"You’re tighter," she says when she’s finished. "And you’re working harder to get the same movement."

"I got hit."

"You play defense. That’s going to happen again." She looks at me. "I need honest answers, Wolf. If something changes, you tell me. That includes during the trip."

"I’m telling you now."

"You are. Keep doing it. I also want you to work with Theo every day on stretches and strengthening. You should be taped up twenty-four seven to keep everything where it should be, and it will help with blood flow to your shoulder. I’m also referring you to an advanced trauma physical therapist. Your surgeon in Boston agrees with me. We need to keep everything in as good a shape as we can before you end up on his surgery table this summer. The less damage to your ligaments, the better chance you have for recovery."

We talk through the plan. There’s no fix before tomorrow’s flight. She wants it checked during the trip, and if I lose more movement or take another hit that changes it, I need another examination. I agree, and she writes down the checks before I can make the agreement sound less definite.

"And Boston?" I ask.

"His office is working on your summer surgery date. I’m sending him the updated scans so he knows what’s changed."

"What are the chances I’m ready for next season?"

"That depends on what he finds during surgery and how you recover. I know you want a better answer, but I can’t give you one yet."

I look down at my shoulder. "I need it to last through the playoffs."

"Then keep working with Theo and tell us when something changes. Don’t wait until you can’t lift your arm."

"And an injection?"

"We can discuss pain control. It won’t fix the damage."

Then Baylor sends me a picture of my bathroom countertop. Two large bottles of bubble bath, a gold bath bomb, and a book.

Baylor: Is it okay if I use a glitter bath bomb? It might be sparkly for a few days even if I rinse out the tub.

Me: Whatever you want. I rarely use it.

I push my phone back into my pocket, trying to think of anything other than the fact that Baylor Fairbanks is planning to be naked in my bathtub while I’m on a flight out of town.

I look at Hunter across the aisle. He has a large box on his lap, and it looks familiar. Sprinkles is handstamped across the lid. I’ve watched Baylor stamp enough of those boxes to recognize one.

"Did you go to my apartment?" I ask.

"Knocked to get my PS5 controller back. I left it at your place the last time we played. Aleksi brought his console so we can play in his hotel room." He grins.

A novel for your next quiet moment.

Find something to read on Lokepub.

"And you ended up with cupcakes? How did that happen?"

"Baylor was cool. She said she had extras I could take to the team."

"To the team? Looks like you’re hoarding them. How many did she give you?"

He opens the lid, and I lean across the aisle to look. A dozen. I can barely get a cupcake without a fine from the same woman who walks into my apartment every day, bakes in my kitchen, wears my hoodie, and now has bubble bath contents lined up beside my tub. But Hunter and Rooks get a free-for-all?

He holds out the box. "Want one?"

I take it before he changes his mind, then text Baylor.

Me: You’re feeding the whole team now?

Baylor: I had extras, and he came by to grab something. I thought you guys could use a little sugar rush on the jet.

Me: He offered me one. It was good.

Baylor: Yours is in a box in your bag. With your name on it.

I open the bag beside my feet and find a small box tucked into the side pocket. She must have slipped it in while I was getting my things together. I'd been thinking about my shoulder and the conversation with Kendall. Meanwhile, she'd packed me something for the flight.

Me: Thank you.

Baylor: You're welcome.

Inside are two cake pops. I close the lid and put the box away until we're in the air.

I'm getting very used to coming home to her.

Later that night in the hotel, after we played our asses off and got our asses handed to us, I get a text from Baylor.

Baylor: If I end up getting hired for this foundation event, any chance some of the guys might be coming to the gala? I could use a few hands to bring in the boxes, and Ellie thought it was worth asking.

With an ice pack on my shoulder, it's hard to text well enough with my left that I decide to just call her.

She answers on the third ring. "Wolf?"

"Hi. Your message about the venue—"

"Is everything okay?"

I sit up a little, making sure the ice stays put. "Yes. Why?"

"You called."

"Am I not allowed to call you?"

"You usually text." There's a faint sound on her end, then she exhales. "I thought something happened to you."

"Nothing happened. I was going to tell you that most of the guys are going, and I'll ask tomorrow, but I doubt it will be a problem. I'll be there to help too."

"Okay. Thank you. You don't have to talk if you're busy tonight. Out with the guys or whatever."

"I'm not. I'm icing my shoulder. No one's in much of a celebratory spirit anyway."

"That was a tough game."

I don’t have to ask anymore if she watched. I’m starting to get the idea that she doesn’t miss a game that I play.

I look at the time. "Are you still baking?"

"No. I finished."

"Tasting samples?"

"The baking is. I’ll finish the fresh frosting in the morning."

"Then where are you?"

She pauses long enough that I wonder if she’s gone downstairs and doesn’t want to tell me I’ve called while she’s trying to sleep.

"Your bathtub," she says.

I stop looking at the clock and just about swallow my tongue.

I clear my voice. "You’re in the tub?"

"You said I could use it."

"I know what I said." I lean back against the pillows. "You answered the phone in the tub."

"Because you called. I just told you I thought something was wrong."

I look across the hotel room at the closed bathroom door. That bathroom has a shower, towels folded over a rail, and nothing I’m particularly interested in. Mine has Baylor in it. My bathtub. Off my bedroom. The one she put her hand on when I offered it to her. She’s there now while I’m sitting in a hotel several states away holding a phone to my ear.

"Wolf?"

"I’m here."

"You went quiet."

"It’s nothing… It’s just been a long day," I say instead of something stupid about how I might be able to jump on the last flight of the night back to Seattle if she promises to be in the bathtub when I get back. I have a feeling she’d hang up. I settle back against the pillows, keeping the ice pack in place. "Is it working for you?"

"The tub? Yes. Very much. I’ve been standing all day, and I’m finally not."

"Good."

She makes another small sound, and I hear water move. I have no idea what she’s doing. That isn’t stopping me from picturing her leaning back, hair piled up to keep it dry, phone in one hand. I’d like to know whether she used one of my towels or has her own folded beside the tub. I’d like to be close enough to find out without asking.

"Did you settle on the flavors?"

She tells me what she’s finally decided on. Chocolate caramel, lemon, banana caramel, brown butter with brown sugar frosting, blueberry honey, and dark chocolate chip with mint. She’s bringing two kinds of cake pops too, with quantities she can adjust after Juliet chooses the desserts. I listen while she explains which ones travel well and what she wants to serve in smaller portions.

When she stops, I realize I’ve been looking at the same spot on the wall for several minutes.

"Wolf?"

"I’m listening."

"Thanks. For the kitchen, and the bathtub… and answering a girl's neurotic late-night questions after you flew all day and played a full game and are now icing your shoulder. I know I’m still supposed to hate you… But thanks for everything anyway."

"You’re welcome."

"Get some sleep, Wolf."

"Good luck tomorrow."

"Thank you." Her voice softens on the last two words, and I keep the phone against my ear until the call ends.

I look at the screen afterward. We talked for twenty-three minutes. About frosting, hockey, and a bathtub I’ve been thinking about since the first time she saw it.

I take the ice pack off when it’s time and set it aside, then pick up my phone to send one more message.

Me: Call me after the tasting. I want to hear how it goes.

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Chapter Eleven

BAYLOR

Juliet takes a bite, looking down at the menu I brought. "And these would all be this size?"

"For the gala, yes. People can try a couple without having to carry a full-size cupcake back to the table. I'd bring them out in smaller batches and keep the rest boxed until we need them."

"Who handles that?"

"I do, with an assistant. That's included in the staffing line." I turn my copy toward her and point to it. "Delivery, setup, replenishing the display, and packing up afterward."

She nods and makes a note. I try not to read it upside down. I know the cupcakes are good. I sell them every day. But selling someone a lemon

cheesecake cupcake on their way to work is different from sitting across from a woman deciding whether I can feed five hundred people with a thousand desserts, without embarrassing her.

"What about the cake pops?" she asks.

I slide the sample box toward her. "Chocolate and vanilla. I can match the coating to the event colors. I brought these plain so you could taste them without eating a pile of decorations."

"I appreciate that." She picks up a chocolate one. "My last meeting involved fondant."

"I’m sorry."

She laughs before taking a bite, and I finally loosen my grip on my pen. There’s a dent in my finger. Wonderful. At least I haven’t broken it and gotten ink on her table.

It’s Wednesday afternoon, three weeks since the flood, and we’ve been in the venue’s small meeting room for almost forty minutes. She’s tried all six cupcake flavors, asked about quantities, and made me explain how I’m getting the display here. I’ve shown her the stands I plan to rent and the boxes I use for transport. I even have backup transportation, thanks to Ellie putting me in touch with a woman who rents out her catering van.

It would cut into my profit, but at least I wouldn’t be stranded somewhere with five hundred people’s dessert because Sprinkles decided to be a bitch.

"The brown butter is my favorite," Juliet says, reaching for her water. "But I’d keep the lemon cheesecake, chocolate caramel, and blueberry honey too. That gives us a good range."

I write that down even though I’m fairly sure I’ll remember it until I die.

She checks the bottom of the proposal, then looks up at me. "I’d like to go ahead."

My pen stops moving.

"With all four flavors?" I ask, because apparently that’s the part my brain has decided to question.

"All four, and both cake pops." She smiles. "I’ll send the agreement this afternoon. If you can confirm the final quantities and return it by Friday, I can have the deposit processed."

"Yes. Absolutely." I look down at my paper, then back at her. "Thank you."

"You came prepared. That makes my job easier." She sets her fork on the plate. "And I may need you to leave the rest of the lemon."

"You can have all of it."

"Don’t offer that until you’ve met the committee."

I laugh, and this time I don’t have to work at it. I got it. I have an actual agreement coming for a dessert table with my business name on it. Ellie’s already agreed to help me, which still will be tough with just the two of us, but we can do it. The rest of it, I’ll worry about after I’ve made it back to the truck and I’ve caught my breath, and my cheeks stop hurting from smiling so wide.

"I can’t believe I’m getting to work with this organization. Honestly, this feels kind of like a full circle moment with Beau playing for the NHL this year." I start putting the unused napkins into my bag. "They helped my family so much after Beau got hurt. Surgeries, therapy… I don’t know how my parents would have managed without them."

"Speaking of Beau, he’ll be in town that week for the San Diego game, right?"

"Yes. Our parents are coming too."

"Do you think he’d be willing to say a few words at the gala? Hearing from someone who’s back on the ice means a lot to the athletes we help."

"He’ll be here for the game that Wednesday. I can ask whether he could stay until Friday."

"Please do. I’ll send you the details, and I can arrange tickets for your parents too."

"My mother would love that."

Juliet smiles. "Let me know when you hear from him. If he can fit us in, we’ll make him a top honored guest and put him on the program as a key speaker for the evening."

She walks me down to the service entrance and shows me the route to the room where the display will go. I take pictures, check the doorway against the width of my cart, and write down where I’m allowed to park. By the time I’m back outside, I have three more things on my list and no excuse to keep standing beside Sprinkles grinning at my phone.

I call Beau before I start the truck. He answers with a groan.

"Bad time?" I ask.

"Just got out of therapy. Tell me something good."

"I got the gala contract."

"For the foundation?" I can hear his voice pick up. At least I can give him good news.

"Yes."

"Baylor, that’s fucking great."

I grin at the steering wheel. "Juliet wants to know if you’d come say a few words. About what they did for you. That is, if you can stay in town through to Friday."

"I’ll talk with coach, but I don’t think it will be a problem. It’s good PR for the team too. Our next game isn’t until Saturday, and this is important."

"Send me her number. I’ll figure it out." He pauses. "I wouldn’t be playing without them. The least I can do is show up."

"I know. She said Mom and Dad could come too."

"Mom will buy a dress before we hang up."

"They’re going to be so excited to see you up there."

I tell him about the flavors and the guest count, and he whistles.

"You’re going to need a bigger mixer."

"Ellie already volunteered to help. I think we’ll make it."

"You will make it. Just in case I haven’t told you lately… I’m proud of you for going out on your own like this."

"Thanks, Beau."

"Love you, sis."

"Love you too."

He has to get to a team meeting, so I promise to send Juliet’s information and let him go. Then I text Ellie.

Me: I got it. Four cupcake flavors and both cake pops.

Her answer comes before I can send the next message.

Ellie: YES! Come by later. I want details. We’ll work out space here for the gala prep. You’ll need more ovens and cooling racks.

I want to tell her she doesn’t need to rearrange her kitchen for me, but five hundred people is a lot of cupcakes. Her commercial ovens would make it go so much faster, even with the cinnamon roll orders going out around us.

Hopefully, this is the last big order I’ll need to squeeze into someone else’s kitchen. If I can pull this off, I’ll be closer to having my own shop two doors down from hers.

Another message comes through.

And bring the agreement before you sign anything.

I laugh. This is why Ellie is so good at what she does. She can get excited about cupcakes and remember the part where somebody has to pay for

them.

I send Wolf a message too.

Juliet said yes.

I put my phone in the cup holder and start the truck. First try. Apparently, Sprinkles wants credit for a successful afternoon too.

By Friday, the agreement is signed, the invoice is sent, and I've spoken to the leasing agent about what he'll need if I apply for the shop. Income records. References. A business plan. Things I can actually give him. He hasn't promised to hold it, but he hasn't leased it to anyone else either.

I'm updating my numbers at Wolf's island when my phone rings. I almost let it go to voicemail. I have two trays coming out in four minutes, and I'd like to finish one thing before starting another.

Then I see Megan's name.

"I promise, I'll do lemon cheesecake next week," I say when I answer.

"Oh, good… but that's not what I'm calling about. My friend's engagement party is tomorrow, and her dessert caterer just canceled. Pneumonia. I told her to call you, but she's convinced it's too late."

I put down my pen. "For how many people?"

"Two hundred."

"Megan."

"I know. But if anyone can do it, it's you."

Flattery. Very effective, unfortunately.

"What time?"

"Seven. They can collect everything at six."

I open the fridge and check the frosting bases I prepped this morning. I have enough for my regular orders. Another two hundred people means more supplies, more batches, and a lot of decorating before tomorrow evening.

"I could offer three flavors with a simple swirl," I tell her. "Nothing elaborate on that notice. And there'd be a rush charge."

"That's fine. Her fiancé can afford it."

I look at tomorrow's order list. The café route, a birthday pickup, Serendipity's counter, and the truck stock. I can get the baking done with two ovens. Frosting and packing everything on time is another matter.

But the extra profit would help with the shop, and two hundred people would get to try my cupcakes. I've had half that many referrals from Megan

alone. Turning down her friend’s party because I might have to ask someone for help seems like a stupid business decision.

"Send me her email and the party colors. I’ll send her a quote."

"You’re a lifesaver, Baylor!"

"I’m happy I can help."

"Thank you. I told her your cupcakes were better anyway."

"Have you tried the other caterer’s?"

"No. Why would I?"

I laugh. "I’ll get that quote to her as soon as these trays are out."

When we hang up, I pull tomorrow’s order list closer and start counting batches. More butter, more boxes, and someone who can use a piping bag. Preferably someone who won’t charge me more than I’m making.

I text Ellie first.

Me: How busy are you tomorrow? I just agreed to an engagement party for two hundred.

Then I open Wolf’s messages. He’s getting ready for a game out of town, so he probably won’t see this until afterward.

Me: Your ovens are about to earn their keep. I picked up another order. Two hundred people. Tomorrow.

Ellie answers first.

Ellie: Please tell me you meant next Saturday.

Me: I wish.

Ellie: Let me see what I can move around. And eat something before you pass out. I’m sure you skipped breakfast again.

The oven timer goes off, and I put down my phone to get the trays. Between this order and the gala, I’m getting closer to the shop deposit. Then there’s the display case, a new mixer, and everything else I’ll need for the commercial kitchen. My list isn’t getting any shorter, but at least I’m finally making enough to cross something off.

I just need the space to stay available long enough to put my name on the lease.

And a few hundred cupcakes made by tomorrow and frosted the next day.

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Chapter Twelve

WOLF

"Please don’t touch those."

I stop in the kitchen doorway, my hand nowhere near a cupcake. Baylor has a piping bag in one hand, her phone beside an open notebook, and enough cupcakes on the island to feed most of my building. It’s ten on Saturday morning. I got home at three, slept until nine, and woke up to the mixer running.

"I was going for coffee."

She looks at my empty hands, then closes her eyes for a second, and rubs her forehead. "Sorry. I’ve had about three hours of sleep, and I’ve been painting tiny engagement rings since before sunrise. I think the glitter fumes are getting to me."

"Glitter?"

"Edible. But if I start coughing sparkles, you'll know why."

I look at the tray beside her. Rows of little decorations sit on parchment, some shaped like rings, others stamped with a date and painted gold.

"You made all those?"

"Two hundred. Hand-cut and painted." She sets the piping bag upright in a mug, then stretches her fingers out. Her hands must be screaming at her to take a break. "My hands might never open properly again."

"Didn't you say simple decorations?"

"They were simple when I agreed to them. Then Megan's friend sent me a picture, and apparently I lost the ability to say no." She picks up her coffee, takes a sip, and makes a face. "There's fresh coffee in the pot. Use a mug from the cupboard. I need the ones on the drying mat."

I glance over at four mugs currently holding up piping bags, and a couple others that look like mixed food coloring are inside

I get a mug and look around while I fill it. Three mixing bowls sit beside the sink, boxes are stacked on my chair, and a handwritten page near the fridge says SATURDAY in letters big enough to read from the doorway.

When her message came through yesterday, I was getting ready for the game. Two hundred people. Tomorrow. I'd read it twice before texting Olsen and Hunter. Between them, Ellie, Peyton, Natalia, and Cammy, we have enough people coming at four to help decorate and pack.

I haven't told Baylor yet because I knew she'll tell me not to. She thinks she has to do everything on her own, but she doesn't. She's already arranging cupcakes on another tray, and I'd rather let her finish than have her stop to explain why nobody needs to give up their Saturday.

"And those?" I ask, nodding toward the boxes by the door.

"Birthday pickup. Finished, thankfully." She checks the clock. "The engagement party order leaves at six. Three hundred cupcakes, three flavors, and two hundred decorations because apparently I thought some of the cupcakes should feel left out."

"Have you eaten?"

She looks at her empty coffee mug.

"Something you had to chew, Baylor."

"I will. I just need to finish this tray."

I open the fridge and take out the eggs. "I'll make something."

"Thank you." She says it quietly, then picks up the piping bag again. "And I’m sorry I snapped at you. You’ve barely made it out of bed."

"I’ve had worse greetings in here."

"I know. I’m working on it."

I smile into my coffee before setting it down. "What can I do after breakfast?"

"Can you fold boxes?"

"I can probably manage cardboard."

"Everyone says that. Then they put the tabs on the outside."

"Give me a quick tutorial, then I can handle it from there."

She sets the bag back in its mug and reaches for a flat box. I watch her fold it, then take the next one. The first tab tries to go somewhere it shouldn’t. I get it out before she comments.

"Like that?"

She looks inside. "Yes."

"See? I’m easy to train."

"Let’s get through the second one before we decide."

I sit on the clear stool and start folding. She moves between the cooling racks and the island, counting out a row before touching the frosting. At the rink, I know what every drill is supposed to accomplish. Here, I’m only sure she has a reason for doing one tray before another. I ask which boxes need inserts before I ruin an order she’s been working on since before I woke up.

By noon, the birthday cupcakes are gone, we’ve both eaten breakfast, and Baylor has told me twice that folded boxes are not finished boxes until the inserts are in them. I put the inserts in. She lets me choose the music after rejecting my first three choices. I have the afternoon free once I’ve done the shoulder exercises Kendall sent home with me. The team’s recovery check was handled before we left the rink last night.

"How many of these do you have left?" I ask.

"To frost? A hundred and eighty. Then decorations and packing." She twists the top of the bag tighter, but her fingers slip. "Fuck."

"Put it down for a minute."

"I don’t have a minute."

"You have help coming at four."

"Ellie. I know."

"And Olsen, Hunter, Peyton, Natalia, and Cammy."

Her hands stop. "What?"

"I texted them yesterday after you told me about the order. They're coming to decorate and pack. You'll have to tell them what to do."

"You arranged that yesterday?"

"I had my phone. It wasn't especially difficult."

"Wolf."

"If Hunter eats anything, fine him. I've warned him."

She laughs, then looks down at the piping bag. "I'll pay them for their time."

"You don't have to. They want to help."

She looks up at me, eyebrows knitting together. "Why? Most of them barely know me."

"The Hawkeyes are a family. If something matters to one of us, the others show up."

"And my cupcake order matters to you?" she asks, smiling.

"You matter to me, Baylor. And getting that shop matters to you."

Her smile softens, and she looks down at the bag in her hands. I've apparently found something she doesn't have an immediate answer for.

"Thank you," she says.

"You're welcome." I reach for another box. "Now, which inserts go in these? I'd hate to embarrass myself in front of the family."

She sets the bag in its mug and comes around to check my stack.

"The smaller boxes get the six-cupcake inserts. Those are for the regular orders. The bigger ones are for tonight."

I move them into separate piles, and she slides the right stack toward me before going back to her tray.

At one, she starts a new piping bag, and I clear the empty wrappers from my side of the island. There's a small bowl of leftover frosting beside her notebook, away from the trays. She marks it EXTRA with a piece of tape after catching me looking at it.

"For me?"

"For the ones I use to check the flavor. Not the three hundred cupcakes leaving here tonight."

"So not for me."

"There's a whole plate of extras beside it. You can have those."

"I'm going to be a diabetic by the time you move out."

I take a cupcake before she changes her mind and order lunch while she goes back to the lemon ones. When the sandwiches arrive, she says she'll eat after the next tray.

I pull the tray out of her reach and place the sandwich in front of her. "Eat. We can't afford our fearless leader passing out in the kitchen until we finish."

She looks at the sandwich and then back at me. "You're bossy."

"What do you mean? I haven't even threatened to force-feed you like a baby bird yet. It could get much worse for you if you don't just eat it with your own two hands."

"I can manage." She washes her hands and joins me on the stools, keeping the sandwiches on my side. "Ten minutes."

She eats half before reaching for her phone. A message from Megan's friend has the pickup name and a request for a few extra empty boxes so guests can take leftovers home. Baylor writes it down, then checks the order total.

She takes another bite, and I tell her about Hunter's missing room key on the trip. He made three visits to the front desk before finding it inside his skate.

By three thirty, the piping is done. She checks the rows against her list and draws a line through the last flavor. Three lots of a hundred.

"Is that all of them?" I ask.

"All of them." She sets the bag down and flexes her fingers. "Now the helpers can add the decorations and pack. I'll show them what I want on the first ones."

"Can I take down that tape? I'll need somewhere to put the boxes."

"No. You can slide it out another six inches."

I look at her.

"For tonight," she adds. "Don't get excited."

"Too late. This is everything I've ever wanted."

She laughs, and I get up to move the stack before she changes her mind. We've spent most of the day in here. Boxes, food, her telling me what not to touch. I thought I'd get tired of being given instructions in my own apartment. Instead, I keep finding things that need doing so I don't have to leave the room.

At ten to four, I pick up the last stack of boxes to move it beside the fridge. My shoulder complains when I straighten, and I switch them to my

other hand. Baylor catches the movement.

"You should've asked me to get those."

"They're empty boxes. I'm not moving your mixer."

"You still made a face."

"You've been looking at my face?"

"It's unfortunately attached to the rest of you."

I set the boxes down and turn toward her. "Which part were you looking at?"

She takes a little frosting from the bowl marked EXTRA and puts it on the end of my nose.

"Your nose. I realized you were missing something."

I stare at her. She's trying to keep a straight face and doing a terrible job.

"That's how you thank me for an entire afternoon of unpaid labor?"

"I wasn't going to ask you to help, but you opened your big mouth and started overselling your cardboard abilities, if I'm being honest."

"Overselling?"

I scoop a little frosting from the bowl and smear it on her cheek.

Her mouth falls open, but she's trying to hide a smile.

"What?" I ask. "Apparently, I needed another way to impress you."

"You're going to clean that up."

"I barely used any."

She wipes her cheek with two fingers, then drags the frosting down the front of my shirt. Her palm follows, pressing against my chest and sliding over my stomach. I tighten my abs beneath her hand.

Her hand stops.

I look down at it, then back at her. Pink creeps into her cheeks, and my cock twitches.

"Something wrong?"

"No." She pulls her hand away. "You're taller. More shirt to ruin."

"If you wanted to touch my abs, all you had to do was ask."

She reaches toward the frosting bowl again instead of answering. I pick up the small silicone spatula resting against the rim, a little frosting still on its head.

"Wolf."

I hold the handle in my good hand while my other index finger bends the flexible head back just a little.

"Don't you dare."

I let go.

The frosting lands in her messy bun, with a little catching her forehead.

She gasps, and I lose any chance of keeping a straight face.

"Wolf!"

"You can’t expect me not to retaliate. You’ve seen me on the ice."

She scoops frosting onto her fingers and comes toward me. I set the spatula beside the bowl and back toward the sink, but she catches my jaw with one hand and drags the other down my cheek.

"There. Now we match," I tell her.

Her eyes meet mine, and she grins.

"Not anymore."

Before I can stop her, she wipes the frosting left on her fingers down my neck, then backs away.

I push off the counter. "Come here. I’ll fix it."

I reach for the open tub of sprinkles beside the frosting bowl.

Her eyes drop to it.

"No."

"You’ve already got frosting. Might as well finish decorating."

She ducks around the island as I toss a pinch toward her. Half lands on her shoulder. The rest scatter across the floor.

"You’re vacuuming every single one of those."

"Put it on the board."

I set the tub down just as she grabs an unfrosted cupcake from the plate of extras and throws it at my head.

I catch it against my chest.

We both look down at the chocolate cake smashed against my shirt.

"Whoa. Let’s not get the innocent pastries involved."

I peel down the wrapper and take a bite.

"That was supposed to hit you."

"It did. Thanks." I look down at the mess. "I guess I have to get rid of this shirt."

I set the cupcake on its plate, then work my shirt over my head, freeing my good arm first and easing the sleeve off the sore one. I toss it toward the hallway.

Baylor’s gaze drops to my chest, then lower. She stays on the other side of the island.

"That’s twenty dollars," she says.

"I’ll settle up when we’re done."

She reaches for another cupcake.

"I wouldn’t."

"Why? Worried you can’t catch two?"

"Worried you’re going to run out before I get you."

I scoop a little frosting onto my fingers and take a step around the island.

She gives a small shriek, laughing as she puts the cupcake back and hurries away. I follow, keeping us on the side away from the finished trays.

"You’ve got nowhere to go, Baylor."

"I have an elevator."

"You have to get past me first."

She glances toward the doorway, then back at the frosting in my hand. I take another step, and she turns to make a run for it.

Her slipper hits a smear of frosting.

Her foot slides out from under her. I catch her around the waist with my good arm, but her other foot slips before she can get it underneath her.

My knee hits the floor. I turn with her, keeping her head away from the cabinet, and lower her as carefully as I can.

My bad arm reaches out before I can stop it.

Pain shoots through my shoulder when my palm hits the floor.

"Fuck," I groan.

Baylor lies beneath me, one hand pressed against my chest. I shift my weight onto my good forearm and keep the other arm close to my side.

"Wolf." Her smile is gone. "Your shoulder."

"Give me a second."

She stays still while I wait for the sharp pain to ease. My knee hurts. There’s frosting on my neck, and I’m probably wearing more of it somewhere I can’t see.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Yes. You’re the one who’s hurt." Her eyes move to my shoulder. "You should’ve let me fall."

"I’ll never let you fall, Baylor."

She looks back at me.

I hadn’t planned to say that. I mean it anyway.

Her hand slides up my chest and around the back of my neck. I’m close enough to see the frosting she missed on her cheek, but it’s her mouth I’m looking at now.

She pulls me down and kisses me.

For a second, I’m too surprised to do anything. Then I kiss her back, and her fingers tighten at my neck.

I’ve wanted this since she stood in my doorway with that fucking whiteboard. Probably before that, if I’m being honest. Now she’s kissing me on my kitchen floor, and I’m trying to remember why I thought I could keep sharing this apartment with her and pretend I only cared about the cupcakes.

She draws me closer. I settle between her thighs, keeping my weight on my good arm so I don’t crush her.

Her mouth opens beneath mine.

Goddamn it.

I slow down enough to kiss her properly, even though everything in me wants to hurry. She has one hand at my neck and the other sliding over my bare back. When I shift closer, she pulls me in instead of letting me move away.

I lift my mouth from hers just enough to look at her.

"Still no interest in me?"

"Stop talking before I think better of it."

I kiss her again, smiling against her mouth until she makes it very difficult to think about anything else. Her knees draw closer to my sides, and I move with her, grinding down between her thighs, showing her how fucking hard I am when I'm with her.

She pushes back against me, increasing the friction between us. A soft moan escapes her lips when I start to grind with a rhythm she likes.

"Harder..." she mutters against my mouth, so I increase the pressure, grinding her into the floor of my kitchen, listening to her moan against my mouth.

"Here, or in my bedroom? Tell me where you want us, Bay."

Bay slips out. Baby almost follows, but I’m already pushing my luck.

Then someone knocks.

We freeze, our mouths barely apart.

We wait as if maybe we heard that wrong. The blood pumping through my ears make it hard to be sure.

Then another knock

"Baylor? Wolf?" Ellie calls through the door. "You guys in there?"

Another voice carries into the apartment.

"Think we should come back?" Olsen asks. "Maybe they’re—"

"We’re here!" Baylor calls.

I drop my forehead against hers and laugh.

"I’m suddenly regretting how many people I know."

"Go put a shirt on."

"You weren’t complaining a minute ago."

"Wolf."

I sit back on my heels, then get up carefully and offer her my good hand. She takes it, standing close enough that I’m tempted to forget everyone outside.

She looks down at my chest.

"And wash that off."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. Let me get the door before Ellie starts calling the fire department."

She grabs a towel to wipe her cheek while I head down the hall. My ruined shirt is on the floor where I threw it. I pick it up and carry it into my bedroom as the front door opens.

"Oh, honey," Ellie says. "What happened to your hair?"

"Wolf happened."

"I heard that," I call.

"You were supposed to."

I wash the frosting off my hands and neck in my bathroom, then find a clean shirt. By the time I come back, everyone is taking turns at the kitchen sink, and Baylor is wiping the last smear off the floor.

Olsen looks up as I ease the hem of my shirt down.

"Did we interrupt anything?"

Ellie snickers beside him.

"Laundry," I tell him.

"Looked urgent."

Baylor tosses the towel into the laundry basket, then washes her hands.

"If you’re done, I have three hundred cupcakes that need decorations and boxes."

Olsen sets his stack on the counter. "Just waiting for instructions."

"Good. Wash your hands."

He heads for the sink without another word.

Ellie looks between us, smiling, but Baylor picks up the order sheet before she can ask anything.

"Peyton and Natalia, you can start with the toppers. Cammy, would you check the quantities while they work?"

"Absolutely," Cammy says, taking the sheet.

I take my place beside Olsen and reach for a box. Across the island, Baylor looks up at me.

I smile.

She looks down at the cupcakes, but she’s smiling.

Before long, everyone has a set station set up on the island, and we all have a job to do. We spend the next two hours laughing and eating dinner that I order in while cupcakes get dropped in decorative sleeves, topped with decor, and adorned with sprinkles (which Olsen takes incredible precision with), and then each one gets loaded carefully into the boxes.

A quick trip to drop off the cupcakes with Ellie, Olsen, me, and Baylor, and then they say their goodbyes after we get back to the apartment. I’m glad she had the three of us to help her because the party was on the twentieth level of an event center. Taking that many boxes up by herself would have taken her forever.

When everybody’s gone, the apartment is quiet except for the dishwasher. Baylor has packed her clean piping tips and washed the last bowl. I pick up the light bag of used wrappers, and she stops me before I open the door.

"Thank you."

"For the boxes?"

"For asking them. For helping." She looks down at the towel in her hand. "And for not dropping me."

"I wasn’t enjoying that part nearly as much as the kissing."

She glances down, her smile tight. That’s not a good sign. "We should probably talk about what happened."

"Okay..."

"I got a little carried away back there. I didn't mean to let that happen. I shouldn’t have kissed you like that."

"Really? Because I think it worked out nicely, actually."

"You could have been hurt, first of all. Catching me like that."

"Baylor, I’m glad I caught you before you hit the floor. I’ll be fine."

"I just think we should agree that what happened in the kitchen can’t happen again."

"The falling or the kissing?"

"Both."

"I don’t think I’m the only one who enjoyed it. You seemed into it too."

"I was, but…" She glances away at the kitchen and then back. "My family doesn’t like you, and as soon as the kitchen renovation is done, I don’t see us spending any time together. I think it’s just safer that we don't cross that line again."

"You don’t want to see each other after this?"

"I don’t see why we would. We have opposite schedules, and once I move my stuff into the shop, I won't even be back in this building anymore."

I nod. Though I know this has nothing to do with our schedules or where she bakes. This has to do with the fact that her family hates me and calls or texts her every day to remind her of that. Not to mention that I still see the look on her face in that parking lot when I close my eyes. She hated me too. Maybe that’s too much to get past.

My own mother abandoned me at six years old for less.

She nods and puts the towel beside the sink before picking up her bag. I set the trash down and open the door for her.

"Baylor."

She turns back.

"I’m still glad you kissed me."

"I feel like I led us both on by doing that… I’m sorry." She gives an apologetic smile.

"I’m not."

Her fingers tighten around the strap of her bag. "Yeah…" she says, and I see the moment she seems like she might say more, but then she sucks in her lower lip and turns back out towards the hall. "Goodnight, Wolf."

"Goodnight, Cupcake."

She goes downstairs, and I wait until the elevator opens and she walks inside before I go back in and close the door.

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Chapter Thirteen

BAYLOR

I look for a hoodie and realize everything is covered in frosting. Apparently, this is the cost of success. I got three hundred cupcakes out the door yesterday, but I haven't had time to do laundry all week. Even Wolf's hoodie has a pink smear down one sleeve.

Beau's Blue Devils sweatshirt is still hanging in my closet, where I left it after Wolf banned it from his apartment. It's the only clean sweatshirt I have, and honestly, something oversized and comfortable is exactly what I need after last night.

I pull it on, grab my keys, and head to Serendipity's.

Fifteen minutes later, I come through the back door, passing racks of cinnamon rolls waiting to be packed for the next round of deliveries. Ellie

has two people working in the kitchen this morning, and neither looks up while I make my way to her office. Her door is open, and she’s at her desk with a calculator and a cappuccino.

"Hey," she says, looking up. "There’s coffee out front if you want some. How are your hands?"

"Still attached. I’m trying not to use them for anything that requires squeezing."

"Then today’s a bad day to ask you to help with the cinnamon rolls."

I give her a look, and she laughs before setting down her pen.

"I’m kidding. Sit. You look exhausted."

"I slept. I just had a lot to think about after I got home."

Her eyebrows rise. "Oh?"

I close the door behind me and sit across from her. I thought I’d have an easier time saying this once I got here, but now she’s looking at me, waiting, and I’m trying to decide how much I need to tell her. She’s going to want details. Ellie always wants details, especially when they involve a man I couldn’t stand being in the same room with three weeks ago, but happily kissed while lying underneath him less than twenty-four hours ago.

"I kissed Wolf."

She shrieks, then slaps a hand over her mouth while I glance toward the door.

"Ellie. Everyone's going to hear you."

"I’m sorry." She drops her hand, grinning. "No, I’m not. When? Yesterday?"

"Before you got there."

She gasps and sits up in her seat a little straighter. "I knew something happened! He came out pulling his shirt on, and you wouldn’t look at any of us." She leans forward over her desk. "Please tell me it was good."

It would be much easier to explain what happened afterward if I could tell her it wasn’t. That we tried it, there was nothing there, and now I could go back to using his kitchen without thinking about what else I’d like to do with him.

Unfortunately, I can still remember his mouth on mine while I’m sitting in my best friend’s office the next morning.

"It was good."

"How good?"

"Too good for a man I’m not supposed to be kissing."

"Now I feel like I need to apologize for knocking. I can’t believe we ruined the moment."

"You should not apologize. I had three hundred cupcakes to finish."

"I doubt Wolf feels that way. How did this even happen? You’ve been so resistant to him for these last few weeks and then you just up and kissed him?"

I rub my forehead, but I’m smiling. "We were messing around with the frosting. I slipped, and he caught me before I hit the floor. He hurt his shoulder and then tried to act like it was nothing, but I saw his face." I look down at my hands, remembering how still he held himself while he waited for the pain to ease. "Then I kissed him, and then we kept kissing until you got there."

She lets out a little sigh. "Baylor, that’s—"

"I told him it couldn’t happen again."

Her smile fades, and she sits back in her chair.

"Wait, what? This man has been amazing the last few weeks, enough that you finally let him close enough, and then you initiated the kiss."

"My family doesn’t like him. As soon as my kitchen is finished, we won’t have a reason to spend so much time together. What’s the point if I’m just going to feel like a bad sister and daughter? "

"Did you mean that?"

I look up. "You know how my family feels about him. It’s not like there would be a future even if my family didn’t dislike him so much. He’s a free agent next year, and he might have a career-ending surgery. He might not come back to Seattle."

"That wasn’t what I asked. Do you really think that there is no point with him, even if it’s just casual for the next few weeks? If he’s leaving anyway at the end of the season, and your family would stop you from pursuing anything long-term, why not just have a little fun? Who’s going to find out?"

"I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, Ellie. Beau calls to tell me about therapy and how many minutes he got, and then I’m upstairs laughing with Wolf. Now I’ve kissed him too. Could you imagine Christmas dinner with Wolf Ziegler sitting across from my brother?"

"Your mom would have to hide the carving knife."

I laugh, then cover my face. "You’re not helping."

"I know. Sorry." She waits until I look at her again. "But you’re talking about Christmas when you haven’t even figured out whether you want to kiss him a second time."

"I do. That’s the problem."

She nods instead of looking pleased with herself, which I appreciate.

"I apologized. I felt like I’d led him on. I was the one who kissed him, and then I stood there telling him we couldn’t do it again."

"Was he upset?"

"He didn’t argue with me. He said he kissed me back and that I hadn’t made the decision for both of us." I swallow, looking down at my cuff again. "Then he told me he was still glad I kissed him."

Ellie reaches across the desk and squeezes my hand.

"You don’t have to decide what to do about him this morning. Go get coffee. Eat something. You’ve barely slept the last few days, and yesterday was a lot even before you ended up kissing him."

"I still have to bake today."

"Then bake. He knows where you stand. You told him."

I nod. She’s right about that much. Wolf knows why I pulled back. I don’t need to go upstairs and explain it again, especially when I’m not sure I’d do any better the second time.

Before I leave, I show her Megan’s pictures. She gets excited all over again when she sees the little engagement rings on the cupcakes, then insists I ask permission to post them. By the time I’ve gotten coffee and something to eat from the counter, I have three messages to answer and an order inquiry that needs a quote.

That, at least, I know how to handle.

Wolf is at the island when I let myself in, eating toast with his phone beside his plate. He looks up, and I’m immediately aware that the last time we were alone in here, I was apologizing for kissing him.

"Hey," he says. "How’s Ellie?"

"Busy. She had people packing cinnamon rolls when I left."

I set my bag on the stool and pull out my notebook. He takes another bite of toast while I find today’s list, giving me a minute to remember that I’ve managed to work in this kitchen for weeks without making every conversation awkward.

"How’s your shoulder?" I ask.

"Sore. I checked in with Theo this morning. Same instructions."

I nod, relieved he didn’t just tell me it was still attached. "Let me know if you need me to carry anything today."

"I’ll put you in charge of the mixer."

"That’s probably wise."

He smiles and gets up to put his plate in the dishwasher. When he turns back, his eyes drop to the logo on my sweatshirt.

I look down too.

Shit.

"I’ll change," I say before he can comment. "This is the last clean hoodie I have in my apartment."

"Oh, no. You’ve been robbing me blind with your rules, and you’ve never given me a pass. Pay up, sucker."

"Excuse me?"

"Wednesday night. Your ass in my seats. Ellie can come too."

"Wolf."

"I have a clean jersey in my closet ready for you." His smile widens. "Damn, you’re going to look good in it too."

"You’ve thought about this, haven’t you? Waiting for me to break one of your rules."

He nods. "Every time I’ve stuffed another twenty dollars in that jar."

"You’re a special kind of evil, aren’t you?"

He chuckles. "Bring Ellie. Eat something. Watch me play. Your parents aren’t going to watch my game anyway."

"They’d probably enjoy watching you get sent to the penalty box."

"And you?"

"I assume that’s where I’ll find you."

"It’s part of the job," he says.

"Lucky you. Did you get Employee of the Year for it?"

"Plaque’s on its way. I’m clearing a spot on the wall."

"I bet you couldn’t stay out of the penalty box to save your life."

He stops beside the island. "You think I can’t?"

"I’ve seen you play, Wolf. You spend enough time there that I wouldn’t be surprised if they started charging you rent and utilities."

"Is that a bet?"

"It’s an observation."

"Then you shouldn’t mind putting something on it."

I look at him. He’s already getting me into his seats and apparently his jersey. I should probably stop giving him opportunities, but I’ve watched this man collect penalties for years. One clean game would be an accomplishment worth witnessing.

And if he thinks he can manage it just to prove me wrong, I’m happy to let him try.

"Okay," I say. "If you get even one penalty Wednesday night, you lose, and I get your apartment to myself. Bubble bath, bonbons, a full *Couple’s Cove* marathon in your bed. Nobody stealing my snacks or asking how these people manage to dress themselves."

"That was a reasonable question. He put his shorts on backwards."

"And I would have noticed eventually if you’d stopped talking."

"Fine." He leans against the counter. "And if I win?"

"You won’t."

"Then you have nothing to worry about. Same plans, same bed, but I get to be there too. You stay all night."

I rest my hands on my notebook. Yesterday, I told him we shouldn’t kiss again. Today, I’m apparently negotiating a sleepover. Ellie would be thrilled with how quickly I’ve stopped taking my own advice.

"I’m not sleeping with you."

"I’m asking you to watch television."

"All night."

"You’re welcome to fall asleep. I won’t quiz you on the episode."

"No sex?" I ask.

"No sex. We don’t have to touch. I just want you to stay."

I look down at my notebook, pretending to check something I haven’t even written yet. That answer is doing more to me than the joke about how I’ll look in his jersey. He wants me here when I’m not working. No trays to finish or boxes to pack. Just the two of us spending a night together because we want to.

Assuming he wins, which he won’t.

"And you won’t spend the whole night making fun of my show?"

"I’ll try."

"Try harder."

"I’ll behave."

I look up. "I have Hello Kitty pajamas."

His mouth lifts. "I've seen the matching slippers the night Rooks ruined your kitchen."

Oh… right. "I pick the snacks," I fire back.

"I trust your taste in all things snack related."

I point at him. "You still have to play properly. No hiding from everyone so you can win."

"Baylor, I'm not throwing a hockey game to watch *Couple's Cove*."

"I'm just making sure."

"I can do my job without taking a penalty."

"That would be something new for your highlight reel."

He laughs and holds out his hand. "Deal?"

I take it. "Deal."

His fingers close around mine, and I remember those same fingers at my waist yesterday. I should let go before I start thinking about the rest of it, but he releases my hand first.

"This is going to be the easiest bet I've ever won," I tell him, reaching for my bag. "I'm going downstairs to change,"

"Leave that. You're coming back."

He's right. I still have today's baking to do, and carrying everything downstairs won't get me out of the bet. I put the bag back on the stool.

"Don't touch anything."

"I know. Twenty dollars."

"And don't start making plans for Wednesday night. You're going to lose."

He grins. "Bring your pajamas anyway."

I pull the door closed before he can see me smile, then open Ellie's messages on my way to the elevator.

Me: Are you free Wednesday night?

Her answer comes before the doors open.

Ellie: For you, always. What are we doing?

I look down at the Blue Devils logo across my chest.

Me: We're going to a Hawkeyes game. I broke a rule.

Me: And… apparently, I need to do laundry before I break anymore.

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Chapter Fourteen

WOLF

I’m about to put my phone away when Baylor sends me a picture of herself in my jersey.

Ellie is beside her, holding up two fingers behind Baylor’s head. They’re somewhere on the concourse, and Baylor has her hair down instead of piled on top of her head with a pencil or whatever she uses to keep it there. The jersey hangs past her hips. She sends a second picture over her shoulder so I can see my last name across her back.

Baylor: Don’t get used to this.

Too fucking late.

I’ve been looking forward to tonight since Sunday, when she walked into my kitchen wearing her brother’s sweatshirt and tried to convince me that

having no clean laundry should excuse her from the rules. Meanwhile, I've paid four hundred and eighty dollars for crimes that include getting a spatula from my own drawer. She can spend one evening in my jersey, and I plan to enjoy every minute of it since I doubt she'll ever let it happen again.

Getting her to stay afterward took a separate bet, but I'm fairly confident I can manage sixty minutes without getting sent to the box. I've done it before. Probably more recently than she'd give me credit for.

Me: It's happening tonight, Cupcake. You, me, and a bowl of popcorn. I'll be looking for you in my seats.

Her answer comes while I'm reaching for my helmet.

Baylor: You haven't even warmed up yet. Try not to get a penalty before the game starts. Getting ejected early would be embarrassing.

Me: Never had a problem with premature ejection, Cupcake.

Baylor: Good to hear… for no specific reason.

I grin, then put my phone away before I waste the rest of warmups arguing with her.

Hunter looks over from the next stall. "What are you smiling about?"

"Nothing." I shove my phone into my bag.

"Tell Baylor I said hi." He picks up his helmet and gets to his feet. "Come on. You can flirt after warmups."

I follow him toward the tunnel. Kendall checked my shoulder earlier, Theo helped with the tape, and I've done the exercises they keep reminding me about. I'm cleared to play, and I'll have ice on it immediately afterward. Which means no Oakley's after the game for me.

I don't mind tonight, because as long as I keep my ass out of the penalty box, I have a date with Baylor in my bed. Never thought I'd get this excited about watching reality TV with a woman who specifically ruled out sex, but here we are.

For now, I need to win a game and prove Baylor wrong. Preferably in that order.

Their winger puts his stick into JP's glove after the whistle, and I'm halfway toward him before I remember I have plans tonight that don't involve finding somewhere else to sleep.

I get between them, backing him away from the crease while JP gets to his feet behind me.

"Puck's covered."

"Didn't see it."

"Try opening your fucking eyes."

He shoves me. I keep my gloves down, although I'd like to put one through his face. The official comes over and tells us both to move, so I skate toward the faceoff circle before the winger can give me another reason to reconsider.

Hunter is staring at me.

"What?"

"You sick?"

"No."

"You sure? That asshole is still upright."

"Would you like to take my temperature, or can we finish the game?"

He looks back at the winger, then gets into position.

We're tied halfway through the second, and I've already walked away from two arguments I would usually have finished. The player in front of JP is particularly interested in starting another one. He spends his next shift telling me where to shove my stick, then asks whether I've forgotten how to use it.

I haven't. I'm just trying to get a woman to watch television with me, which apparently requires more self-control than anything else I've done in my career.

A few minutes later, their defender, Will Schumer comes over the blue line with the puck. I close the gap, keep my elbow down, and catch him cleanly with my good side. He hits the boards, Hunter collects the loose puck, and I follow the play out of our zone.

There. He can enjoy that without either of us involving a referee.

Hunter sends the puck ahead to Aleksi. His shot gets stopped, but Luka puts the rebound in, and we're up by one when I get back to the bench.

"Apparently you can still hit," Hunter says, dropping beside me.

"Never said I couldn't."

"Then what happened back there with JP?"

I take a drink. He's going to keep asking, and I'd rather he stop trying to diagnose me between shifts.

"I made a bet with Baylor. No penalty minutes tonight."

His head turns. "You agreed to that?"

"She said I couldn't do it."

Olsen leans forward from Hunter's other side. "And that was all it took?"

"What do you get if you win?" Hunter asks.

"She stays tonight."

Olsen’s eyebrows go up.

"To watch television…" I add.

Hunter starts laughing.

"Fuck off."

"No, I like it," Olsen says. "What happens if you lose? She makes you read?"

"She gets my apartment to herself."

"And you go where?"

"Not your place."

"Anything you three would like to share?" Coach Haynes asks from behind us.

"No, Coach."

Hunter turns toward the ice, still grinning. Olsen sits back, and I take another drink before my next shift.

They can laugh. Baylor has spent weeks working in my kitchen, and I’ve spent most of that time trying to get her to sit down long enough to eat something. Tonight, she won’t have a piping bag in her hand or six boxes waiting by the door. She can put on her ridiculous pajamas and explain why everyone on that show keeps sleeping with the wrong person.

That’s what I asked for. I’d like to get it.

By the last few minutes of the third, keeping my gloves on has become considerably less entertaining.

We’re still up by one. Schumer has caught me along the boards twice, and my shoulder is sore enough that I’m going to have to tell Theo exactly how much when I get off the ice. The next time he comes toward me, I move the puck before the contact arrives, but I still hit the boards harder than I’d like.

"Fuck."

I push off, get my stick down, and follow him toward the play. He says something as he passes. I don’t catch all of it, but I doubt he’s asking whether I need an ice pack.

Hunter gets the puck out, and I head for the bench on the change. Theo comes closer when I sit down.

"Shoulder?"

"Yeah. I’ll come see you afterward."

He nods, staying nearby while I watch the next shift. We have less than two minutes left, and their goalie is heading for the bench.

JP stops the first shot. The rebound goes to the boards, but they keep it in and send it across. He makes another save, and I lean forward with the rest of the guys, waiting for somebody to get the fucking puck out.

Luka finally does. His clearing attempt slides wide of the empty net, but they barely make it back into our zone before the horn.

I stand and follow the guys onto the ice, tapping JP's pads before he comes out of the crease.

"Good saves."

"Thanks." He lifts his mask. "You finish with zero?"

"What the hell? Does everybody know?"

"Hunter told me."

"Of course he did."

The winger who's been running his mouth all night skates past, catching my elbow with his as he goes.

"Getting soft, Ziggy."

I should let him keep going. I've managed it for sixty fucking minutes. Instead, I move my stick just enough to catch his skate.

He stumbles onto one knee, then scrambles upright and turns toward me.

"Watch your fucking stick."

"Watch where you're going."

Slade catches up beside me, looking from him to my stick.

"Seriously? You couldn't make it to the tunnel?"

"I made it through the game."

"Congratulations on the personal growth." Slade turns toward the winger. "Get lost, Schumer. You're lucky Ziegler was feeling generous tonight. Usually, you'd need help getting off the fucking ice."

Schumer gives us both the middle finger before skating toward the tunnel, still running his mouth.

I look toward the officials. Nobody's coming over. Slade shakes his head and skates away.

Then I look up at the stands.

Baylor is pointing at me. When she knows I'm looking, she points toward Schumer leaving the ice.

Shit.

I shrug and lift both hands like I have no idea what happened.

Her mouth falls open. She turns to Ellie, who's already laughing, then looks back at me and shakes her head.

I hold up a gloved hand and make a zero.

She points at me again, but this time she’s smiling.

I’ve been hit, shoved, and insulted for the better part of three periods, and somehow that makes the whole fucking thing worth it.

Kendall checks my shoulder before I shower. I tell her about the hits, show her where it hurts, and answer her questions without trying to convince her I’m doing better than I am. I’d like to play the next game too, and lying to her isn’t going to help with that.

Theo gets the ice on afterward, and I sit with it while the room clears out.

Olsen stops beside me on his way to the door.

"Enjoy your show."

"Planning on it."

"Don’t stay up too late. Those season finales get pretty wild. An old man like you needs his beauty rest."

Considering I’m six years younger than him, his insult doesn’t land.

"You asked out that waitress yet? Bristol, right?"

"You asked out Baylor yet?" he tosses back.

"She’s sleeping in my bed tonight, so I think I’m doing a little better than you."

"To watch television."

"Still got her through the door." I adjust the edge of the ice pack. "You planning to ask Bristol before the season ends, or are we carrying this into next year too?"

"I’ll get to it."

"Night, Bozeman."

"Night, Ziegler."

I finish icing, shower, and get dressed, taking a little longer with my shirt than I’d like. By the time I reach the reporters, I’m ready to go home and sit somewhere nobody will hit me.

"No penalty minutes tonight," one of them says. "Was that a conscious adjustment heading toward the playoffs?"

"I wanted to stay on the ice. Hard to help from the box."

"Will we see more of that?"

"That would be a dull rest of the season, wouldn’t it?"

A couple of them laugh. I answer questions about JP’s saves and Luka’s goal, then get out before anyone asks for a detailed explanation of my

improved behavior. I’m not telling them about Baylor. Hunter has already done enough damage without giving the press something to work with.

My phone buzzes as I head down the hall.

Baylor: Ellie wants to know if we’re going to Oakley’s.

Me: Heading home. Shoulder needs more ice. You can go with the girls if you want.

Though I won the bet, I’m not going to force her to come home with me. If she wants out of this, I’ll let her.

Baylor: We had a bet. I lost. Besides, I’m hungry for popcorn.

Me: Meet you by the players’ exit?

Baylor: We’re here. Ellie’s waiting for Peyton and the girls.

Baylor is beside Ellie when I come through, her coat open over my jersey. She looks up, and I’d like a minute to appreciate having her waiting for me without Ellie standing there looking quite so pleased about it.

"How’s your shoulder?" Baylor asks.

"Sore. Kendall checked it."

"I saw that hit in the third."

"I’ve taken worse from your brother."

That gets me a grin. It’s true. I might be called the meanest defender in the NHL, but Beau Fairbanks isn’t an angel. He caught me in the ribs during a high school game, and I felt it every time I laughed for three weeks.

Ellie checks her phone. "Peyton’s coming out now. We’re walking over to Oakley’s."

She pulls Baylor into a hug, then looks at me.

"Congratulations on the win."

"Thank you."

"And the other win," she adds with a wink.

Baylor pulls back. "Ellie."

"What? You made the bet." She grins. "Have fun, you two."

"Watching television."

"Yes. You’ve mentioned." Ellie turns to me. "FYI, Baylor turns to mush with a good foot rub."

"For the love of God, Ellie. Please leave."

"Thanks for the tip," I tell her.

Ellie laughs and heads toward the girls before Baylor can say anything else. I look down at her, taking in the jersey properly now that I don’t have

a screen or half an arena between us.

"Looks good on you. Show me the back."

"You've already seen the pictures."

"Yeah, but I like it better in person."

She rolls her eyes, but slips her coat off her shoulders and turns so I can see Ziegler across her back.

"You're awfully pleased with yourself," she says, turning back.

"Zero penalty minutes."

"I saw what you did to Schumer. You're lucky we didn't specify that you had to make it off the ice."

"I'm very grateful for your lack of attention to detail."

She laughs, slipping her coat back on, and I reach for her hand before nodding toward the parking lot.

"Everyone around us noticed too," she says as we start walking. "The man behind me asked if you were injured."

"I had an assist and four hits."

"I know. I was there… in your seats."

She says it without making a joke, and I like that more than I probably should. She watched me play. Now she's walking beside me in my jersey, her hand in mine, and I get to spend the rest of the night with her.

"I already picked the episodes," she says.

"Episodes?"

"It's a marathon, Wolf. Did you think we were watching one?"

"No. I'm prepared."

"And I have snacks."

"You're very organized for someone who thought I'd lose."

"I was going to need snacks either way."

I laugh as we reach the car. When I open the passenger door, she pauses beside it.

"TV only," she reminds me.

"I remember."

She studies my face for a second, then smiles. I meant what I told her when we made the bet. She can climb into bed beside me, eat her snacks, and explain whatever the hell is happening on that show. I'll keep my hands to myself, even if she looks as good in those pajamas as she does in my jersey.

"Ready for our marathon?"

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Chapter Fifteen

BAYLOR

I have a flatbread waiting in Wolf’s fridge, popcorn in his cupboard, and Hello Kitty pajamas downstairs.

Apparently, I’m a woman who prepares thoroughly to lose a bet.

In my defense, I was going to eat all of this by myself if he lost. Although making enough flatbread for two might have been a little ambitious, even for me.

I turn on the oven and take the container from the fridge while Wolf changes out of his suit. The whiteboard is still beside the fridge, exactly where I put it.

Fully dressed.

No eating without permission.

The rules seemed perfectly reasonable when I wrote them. Of course, I wasn’t planning on spending the night in his bed at the time. Now I’ve agreed to do exactly that.

Not that it matters. We agreed to no sex.

Wolf comes back wearing a loose black T-shirt and gray sweatpants, holding the wrap for his ice pack in his good hand. His hair is still damp from his shower at the rink, and without his suit, I can see how carefully he’s keeping his arm close to his body.

"Sit," I tell him.

He takes a stool while I get the ice pack from the freezer. He shows me how the wrap fastens, and I help secure it without lifting his arm more than necessary. He’s quiet while I work. So am I, mostly because standing this close gives me an excellent view of his mouth.

I finish with the strap and step back. "Too tight?"

"No. Thank you." He settles his arm against his side while I take a baking sheet from the cupboard. "What did you make?"

"Flatbread. It just needs to be baked."

I remove the lid and carefully slide it onto the baking sheet. He leans forward to look while I straighten the edge.

"Pesto, mozzarella, spinach, mushrooms," I tell him.

"You made me dinner."

"I made myself dinner. You’ve apparently invited yourself."

"By winning the bet." He looks up at me, smiling. "Good thing you were thinking of me when you made it."

I put the lid back on the empty container instead of answering. The mushrooms are the ones he always adds to his omelets, along with the spinach he’s convinced makes them healthy, even after he puts half a bag of cheese in the pan.

I could’ve made anything but I ended up picking things he likes and made enough for both of us.

He doesn’t need to look so pleased about figuring that out before I did.

"I’ve been making you boring-ass eggs, and you can cook like this?" he asks.

"Boring-ass eggs? You’ve been very proud of those omelets." I move the baking sheet closer to the oven. "And you haven’t tasted this yet."

"I’m willing to risk it. How long does it take?"

"Twenty-five minutes. Three hundred and fifty degrees."

He glances at the oven display, then nods toward the hallway. "Go take your bath. I'll bake this and get the popcorn going. It'll be ready when you get out."

I turn back to him. "Are you sure? You won the bet."

"Yeah, Baylor. Same plans, but I get to share the bed." He smiles. "Go take your bath."

There's something about him saying it that casually that makes me want to stay right here beside him. Which would defeat the purpose of the bath I've been looking forward to all week.

"There's rosé chilling in the fridge. I bought it when you were out of town."

"Then I'll open that too."

I pick up my overnight bag from beside the island. "Don't get up until you're done icing."

He checks his phone. "Six minutes left. I can manage that."

In his bedroom, I leave my bag on the chair and take out my pajamas, slippers, a toothbrush, and bubble bath. There's a clean towel beside the tub, and I set my clothes on the vanity before turning on the water.

I've packed less for nights away from home. Granted, those nights didn't involve a man who specifically requested the Hello Kitty slippers.

By the time I sink into the water, I can hear the popcorn machine going in the kitchen.

I lean back and close my eyes.

He won the bet, and somehow I'm the one soaking in his bathtub while he makes dinner. I could get used to this, which is probably something I should avoid thinking about while I'm naked in his apartment.

Instead, I stay until the water starts cooling, then rinse the tub and dry off.

The smell of freshly baked flatbread reaches me as I come down the hall in my pajamas. Wolf is at the island, cutting it into pieces. The popcorn is in a large bowl beside two glasses of rosé.

He looks up when he hears me, and his eyes travel from my pajamas down to the pink slippers, then back to my face.

"Cute," he tells me, smiling.

"You're getting the full marathon and snacks effect. This is what pure leisure looks like."

"Relaxed looks good on you," he says, and then pushes a plate with slices of flatbread on it.

I pick it up, careful of the hot cheese. "Did you have some?"

"Not yet. I was waiting for you."

That shouldn’t make me smile as much as it does. I take a bite while he watches, then nod.

"Good?"

"Very. You may have a future in following oven instructions."

"Finally. Something for the résumé."

He takes a piece for himself while I find a tray for the wine and plates. His ice pack is back in the freezer, but he’s still careful with his arm when he reaches for the popcorn.

"I’ve got that," I tell him.

He lets me take the bowl, then picks up the tray with his good hand.

I follow him into his bedroom. A lamp beside the king-size bed lights the dark upholstered headboard and charcoal bedding. Across from it, a television hangs above an electric fireplace, blue flames flickering behind the glass. The windows take up most of the far wall, with the city lit up beyond them.

His apartment is nicer than mine downstairs, and that extends to the bedroom. It’s a little more masculine than I’d choose, but between the soaking tub, the fireplace, and that bed, I’d probably never leave if it belonged to anyone else.

Wolf puts the tray on the low wooden dresser, and I set the popcorn beside it. He’s arranged extra pillows on his side for his shoulder, leaving the other side for me.

The bed is enormous. We could stay on opposite sides all night without accidentally touching each other.

I’m not sure that’s as reassuring as it should be.

"I’ll behave, Baylor."

"I know."

And I do. That’s part of the problem. He’s had plenty of opportunities to make this uncomfortable, especially after Saturday, and he hasn’t taken any of them.

I take off my slippers and get in while he brings over the snacks. Once everything is within reach, he settles beside me with a pillow supporting his arm and hands me the remote.

"Your show, your snacks, and I’ll be the perfect gentleman."

"I'll let you know if you're the perfect gentleman after the first episode. It will depend on how much you talk during the show"

"I won't say a word. I even waited to eat."

"I noticed. That took a lot of self-control."

He smiles and takes another piece of flatbread while I find *Couple's Cove*. Once the episode starts, I set the remote beside me and pick up my glass of rosé.

We make it through most of an episode before he starts asking questions.

Not about why the man on the screen keeps telling his girlfriend that the other woman understands him better. Wolf seems to have formed a fairly clear opinion about that already.

He wants to know why she hasn't left.

"Because they've been together four years," I tell him.

"So?"

"She's probably trying to work out whether she wants to throw that away."

"He's working pretty hard to help her decide."

"I didn't say she should stay."

On the screen, the girlfriend starts crying. Wolf looks at her, then reaches for his water.

"He could at least tell her the truth."

"She keeps asking."

"This guy is an asshole. She can do better."

I watch him for a second before turning back to the television. He hasn't made a joke about this woman since the conversation started, and when her boyfriend walks away, Wolf shakes his head.

"How did you even get into this show?" Wolf asks.

"Me and my mom love reality tv. We were bored one Christmas break and spent the entire thing catching up on the four seasons prior."

"There's that many seasons of this?" he asks, his eyebrows raised in disbelief.

"Yep. We could binge for a month and still have more to watch." I tell him. "Did you and your dad ever watch anything like this?"

He looks at me. "No. My dad rarely watches TV. He works unless he's asleep, and not because he has to financially anymore. But he'd have a lot to say about that guy spending ten minutes trying to open the champagne."

"His date finally did it."

"Then he toasted to taking care of her. Bold claim from a man who couldn’t get her a drink."

I laugh, then look down at the rosé in my hand. Wolf opened it, made dinner, and had everything waiting when I got out of the bath. He hasn’t mentioned any of it.

When I look back at him, he’s watching the screen, shaking his head as the guy starts explaining what he needs from a woman.

I take another sip before I say something stupid, like how much I like being here.

"You said your dad works even though he doesn’t need to?"

"He’s a workaholic, and he’s always invested his money well. He built his automobile business from nothing at the age of eighteen. I think the workaholic part is why my mom left."

"You said you haven’t seen her in twenty years. She just up and left one day?"

He twists the cap back onto his water.

"She ran off with my dad’s shop manager. He promised her adventure, my mom had me at seventeen. Maybe she felt trapped with a workaholic husband and a little kid when she was still a kid herself. She left when I was six."

"Dad raised me. Single dad at twenty-four years old. The shop became my playground. If I wasn’t in school or playing hockey, I was there."

I look down at the popcorn bowl between us. I knew about the shop. He’s mentioned it when talking about Sprinkles and the parts he ordered. I hadn’t thought about how much of his childhood he spent there, or why.

"Did you ever hear from her?"

"A few times. Nothing that lasted. Christmas cards sometimes. Promises to come to my games that ended up as empty seats."

He says it simply, looking at the television, and I don’t know what to do with the urge to move the bowl and sit closer.

"But you were close with your dad?"

"Still am." His mouth lifts. "He’s a pain in my ass, I’m a pain in his, and yet, there’s nothing we wouldn't do for each other."

"You’re a very devoted son."

"He’d call it nosy. Since the heart attack, I have to interrogate him to find out how many hours he’s spending at work."

I look over at him. "He’s still not cutting back?"

"He says he is. Apparently, four hours at the shop counts as stopping by."

"That would scare me too."

"It does. I was at an away game when his girlfriend called me to tell me he was in the hospital. He’s doing better. He thinks that means everyone should stop asking questions."

"I can’t imagine where you get your stubbornness from," I tease.

"His head mechanic wants to buy the shop. Dad could retire, take a vacation, spend time with his girlfriend. Instead, he keeps finding invoices that apparently require his personal attention."

"He has a girlfriend?"

"Marcy. She tells me about the appointments he forgets to mention."

"She sounds like she cares about him."

"I’m glad he found someone. He didn’t date much when I was growing up. He wanted to raise me himself. He didn’t want another woman coming in and doing that again to me."

"And what’s that."

"Let me get attached… and then leave." He let out a breath and my heart breaks for him.

I can’t imagine what that would feel like to be abandoned like that by your mother at such a young age.

"What about you? Besides the fact that your family would prefer you were watching this with anybody else."

I pick up the remote with my free hand and pause the episode. It’s easier to talk without somebody crying in the background.

"My parents are still together. You know Beau. Everything was hockey when we were growing up."

"For you too?" he asks.

"I went to all the games. Knew all the parents. I spent enough time in rinks that I still get cold thinking about it."

"But you wanted to bake."

I nod. "I always wanted to bake."

"Did they know that?"

"They knew I liked it. I don’t think they ever considered that I could do it for a living." I swirl what's left of my rosé in my glass. "They paid for college because they wanted me to have options. A job with benefits. Something dependable. I get that."

"But?"

"But I went because they wanted me to. And then I felt guilty when it wasn’t what I wanted."

He stays quiet, giving me time to work out how to say the rest without making my parents sound awful. They aren’t. They love me. I’ve never questioned that.

"I don’t think they realized how serious I was. Beau did. Ellie did. My parents were busy, and after Beau got hurt, everything became about getting him better."

Wolf looks down at his supported arm.

I wish I hadn’t said it quite like that.

"They had a lot going on," I add. "Surgeries, therapy, money. I understood. I just got used to figuring out my stuff without making it something else they had to worry about."

"Is that why you won’t take Beau’s money?"

"Part of it." I pull the covers a little higher over my legs. "They already paid for a degree I’m not using. I want to do this myself. I want to know the shop works because I built a business that can support it."

"You are building that."

"I know. I just need it to keep working."

"It will."

I look at him.

"You don’t know that."

"No," he says. "But I’ve watched you work. You don’t leave much to chance."

"I left my entire business under your bathroom."

He winces, then laughs when I smile.

"I’m still sorry about that."

"It wasn’t your fault. And I guess I got a better kitchen to work in for six weeks, and a getaway driver once in a while."

His smile fades a little.

"And Beau. I’m sorry about that too."

I lower my eyes to the blanket. It would be easier to keep talking about the shop. Or restart the show and let someone else’s family problems keep us occupied.

"I know you are," I say.

"I made a late hit. I was angry about what happened to our goalie, and I went after the player who did it when I shouldn’t have. Your brother got in

the way, but that doesn’t change what I chose to do."

I look back at him. He isn’t trying to soften it or tell me Beau should have expected to get hurt.

"I can’t fix that, Baylor. I can’t make your family forgive me either."

"I know you can’t."

We sit quietly for a moment. Six years doesn’t disappear because he’s letting me use his kitchen or because I like the way he looks at me. Beau still deals with his knee. My parents still remember the hospital.

But Wolf remembers too.

We finish the flatbread, and I move the popcorn bowl to the nightstand. Wolf checks the time and takes off the ice wrap, setting it beside his water before easing his arm back onto the pillow.

"Better?" I ask.

"A little."

"Does it always hurt after a game?"

"Lately, yeah."

I look at the tape visible beneath his sleeve. "Are you scared about the surgery?"

He doesn’t answer immediately. I’m starting to think I should have kept that question to myself when he looks back at me.

"I’m just scared I’ll never get to play professionally again. I worked my whole life for this, and it might be over already. Way before I’m ready to give it up."

My chest tightens.

"I’m twenty-eight. I should be talking to my agent about where I want to play next season. Instead, I’m waiting to find out whether I’ll be able to. He wants to shop me around as a coach or sports broadcaster."

"What does the surgeon say?"

"That we’ll know more after the repair. Then there’s rehab."

"And Boston."

He nods. "And Boston."

"You could spend time with your dad."

"That was the plan. Get him to the specialist. Work on him about selling the shop while he works on me about doing my therapy." He looks toward the paused television. "It seemed like a decent way to spend the summer."

"Until?"

He turns back to me.

"Until I started wanting to stay here."

He could mean the team. His apartment. His friends.

I know better.

"If you can play again, couldn’t you come back?"

"If they want me. If the contract works. There are a few things I don’t get to decide."

"And if you can’t?"

He presses his lips together, then lets out a slow breath.

"I don’t know."

I’ve never heard him sound like that. Wolf always seems to have an answer, even when it’s one designed to annoy me. Tonight, he’s sitting beside me with his arm on a pillow, admitting he’s afraid of losing something he’s spent his entire life working toward.

I move my glass to the nightstand, then push the blanket off my legs and turn toward him.

His eyes follow me as I shift onto my knees beside him.

We agreed we didn’t have to touch. He’s kept his hands to himself all night, even when my knee brushed his leg. Now I put one hand on his good shoulder and lift my knee over his thighs, careful not to disturb the pillow supporting his bad arm.

"Baylor."

I settle onto his lap, my knees on either side of his hips. His hand comes to my waist, steadying me.

"I don’t want you to regret this," he says.

"I regretted telling you we couldn’t kiss again."

His fingers tighten slightly against my skin.

I swallow. Saying that was easier than I expected. The rest isn’t.

"My family still hates you. And you’re leaving for Boston."

"I know."

"My kitchen will be finished in two weeks."

He watches me, waiting for me to get to the point.

"What if we just had this until then?"

"This?"

"Us. Whatever this is." I glance down at his shirt, then back at him. "We don’t have to figure out next season or Christmas dinner. We just know it ends when I get my kitchen back."

"Two weeks."

I nod.

"You’re sure that’s what you want?"

I think about Saturday. About standing in his kitchen, watching his expression while I tried to explain why I couldn’t want him. Then I think about the last few weeks. His coffee waiting for me. His handwriting on the schedule. The way he looked toward the seats tonight.

I’ve been looking forward to seeing him every day while telling myself that wasn’t what I was doing.

"Yes."

He lifts his hand from my waist and brushes my hair behind my ear.

"This has nothing to do with the bet."

"I know it doesn’t," I tell him.

"You can stay here all night and watch your show. That’s what I asked for."

"I heard you." I lean closer. "I’m asking for something else."

His eyes drop to my mouth.

I kiss him before I can spend another night talking myself out of it.

His hand settles at my back, drawing me closer, and this time there’s no knock at the door. No order waiting to be packed. When I pull back, he’s looking at me with an expression that makes the two weeks feel much shorter than they did a minute ago.

"Still sure?" he asks.

I nod and kiss him again, slower this time. He lets me set the pace, careful with his shoulder, and I’m grateful for the chance to touch him without either of us rushing to explain it away.

He reaches for the remote and pauses the television.

For once, I don’t object.

He reaches down and grips my ass, pulling me tighter against him so I can feel how hard he is. I whimper against his mouth at the feel of him between my thighs.

His fingers slide under my shirt, and I help him lift it over my head before he discards it beside the bed.

I pull back long enough for him to see me completely topless, my nipples hardening as his pupils dilate at the sight of me.

"Come here, Cupcake," he says softly. Before I know it, he turns, sliding me under him and bracing himself on his good forearm so he doesn’t put his

full weight on me. His mouth meets mine before I can think of another reason this is a terrible idea.

I’ve spent weeks finding those. My family. His shoulder. The fact that he might leave Seattle and never come back.

None of them seem especially convincing with his hand sliding up my belly to my rib cage, then cupping my breast. I moan into his mouth as he massages me, my nipple sliding between his index and middle fingers. He squeezes gently, a shot of pain and pleasure making my center tighten.

"Your shoulder," I murmur.

"Has received plenty of attention tonight."

"I’m serious."

"My shoulder isn’t getting between us tonight. I’ve been waiting too long for this."

He shifts back long enough for me to help him pull his shirt over his head. Then his hand slips beneath the waistband of my pajama pants, warm fingers moving beneath my panties to slide through me. I grip the back of his neck as more arousal coats his fingers.

He draws his hand away so I can push my pajama pants and panties down and kick them off. He removes his sweatpants and boxers, then settles over me again, keeping his weight on his good forearm.

I’ve seen him shirtless enough times that this shouldn’t distract me.

Having permission to touch is making a considerable difference.

My palm moves over his chest and down his stomach until my fingers wrap around his length. He draws in a breath, watching my hand before looking back at me.

"Go slow or this is going to end sooner than either of us would like. I still have a lot I want to do to you tonight."

Then he lowers his mouth to my breast, his lips hot and wet around my nipple. My fingers tighten around his length as my hand slides up and down his shaft.

He lifts his head, and I press my forehead against his, my breath catching when his fingers find me again.

"Okay?" he asks.

I nod.

"Yes." I catch his mouth before he can ask anything else. "Very okay."

He smiles against my lips, then touches me again.

I forget what I was going to say next.

For a while, there’s only his mouth and his hand, the way he watches me whenever I pull back enough to breathe. I’ve gotten used to Wolf looking pleased with himself.

This is going to make him impossible.

I kiss him harder anyway.

My hand moves over him again. His eyes close briefly, and the sound he makes sends heat through me.

When he opens them again, he catches my hand gently.

"Give me a second."

He shifts back and reaches into the nightstand for a condom. I take it from him and open the wrapper, then roll it onto him while he watches.

Once it’s on, he moves back over me, keeping his weight on his good forearm. I run my hand up the back of his neck and draw him down.

The kiss is slower this time. Deep enough that I stop worrying about where to put my hands or whether he can tell how badly I want him.

He already knows.

I feel him at my entrance and lift my hips toward him.

"Baylor."

"I want this."

His eyes stay on mine as he eases into me.

My mouth falls open. He kisses the corner of it, moving slowly enough that I feel every inch. I hold him at the back of his neck, pulling him close without putting pressure on his shoulder.

"Okay?" he asks again, his voice rougher now.

"Yes."

He sinks the rest of the way in, then stays still with his forehead against mine.

He mutters a curse as he buries his face in the side of my neck.

I kiss his cheek as he sucks on my throat, his hips beginning to move in a rhythm that makes my entire body hum.

It’s all I can think to do with how close he is. How good he feels. The fact that we’re finally doing this after I spent so much time insisting I didn’t want him.

He draws back and moves into me again.

My fingers tighten.

"Oh."

His mouth brushes mine. "There?"

I nod, and he does it again.

There’s nothing remotely useful happening in my head now. I move with him, finding the rhythm as his mouth returns to mine.

He lifts his head just enough to watch me. I bite my bottom lip, and his gaze follows the movement. He likes watching what he does to me. I can see it in his eyes. Then he moves again, rolling his hips until I moan his name.

I want him closer, which shouldn’t be possible. My hands move over his back, then return to his face. Every time he kisses me, I keep him there for another second.

The pleasure builds until I’m barely following what he’s saying against my mouth.

"You feel so fucking good," he tells me.

I make some sound that is probably agreement.

His hand slips between us, and I lose the ability to do even that.

I draw my knees closer to his sides. He keeps moving, watching my face as his thumb finds the place that makes my whole body tighten.

"Wolf, I’m—"

"That’s right. Give it to me, Bay. I earned it, didn’t I? I worked that pussy so good. Come hard on me."

I reach to kiss him, but he lifts his head.

"I’m not going to kiss you, Baylor. I want to watch you fall apart under me."

He keeps touching me, and I come apart beneath him, holding him close as I cry out his name.

His rhythm falters.

"Baylor. Fuck."

He presses into me again, then holds there, his forehead resting against mine as he comes. I feel him shudder and slide my hand into his hair, keeping him close while we both try to catch our breath.

For a little while, neither of us says anything.

Then he kisses me. My mouth, my cheek, the spot beside my ear.

I turn my face toward his.

"Hi."

He lets out a breath that turns into a laugh.

"Hi, Cupcake."

He eases out of me and disappears into the bathroom, then comes back with a warm washcloth. Afterward, I settle beside him while he gets his arm comfortable on the pillow.

"Too much?" I ask, looking at his shoulder.

"No." He brushes his lips over my forehead. "Come here."

I tuck myself against his good side, my hand resting on his chest.

The television is still paused on a woman I was very invested in an hour ago.

I can’t remember her name.

Wolf follows my gaze.

"Should we finish the episode?"

I look up at him.

"What?" he asks. "You were very specific about the marathon."

I laugh and rest my cheek against his chest again.

"We have time."

His hand moves slowly over my back. "What else would you like to do instead?"

"Let’s do that again."

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Chapter Sixteen

BAYLOR

"Are you going to let me have that, or should I get another mug?"

Wolf looks down at the coffee in his hand, then back at me. He’s barefoot, standing in the kitchen, in sweatpants and a T-shirt, his hair still a mess from the pillow.

"I made this for you."

"Then why are you holding it hostage?"

"I haven’t had a good-morning kiss."

"You had one in the bedroom."

"That was before you showered. A lot has happened since then."

I’m dressed in leggings and his Hawkeyes hoodie, with my hair clipped up and a bag over my shoulder. Apparently, the considerable amount of

time I spent getting ready hasn’t given him enough time to hand over my coffee.

I set my bag on a stool and step closer. He puts the mug behind him before sliding his hand around my waist.

Four days ago, I was explaining why we shouldn’t kiss again. This morning, I woke up with my leg over his and his hand on my ass. I’m not sure how I’m supposed to defend that particular development to anyone, so I’m concentrating on getting coffee instead.

I kiss him, holding the front of his shirt when he pulls me closer. His other hand settles against my back, and I forget about the mug until he lifts his head.

"Good morning."

"Yes. We’ve established that."

He laughs and finally hands it over.

"Are you using Sprinkles today?"

"No. Ellie’s coming supply shopping with me. We’re taking her car."

"Good. I’m going to take a look at her after practice. Pops gave me a couple of things to try."

I lower my mug. "Wolf, your shoulder. You shouldn’t be doing anything but resting it when you get home."

"I’m not taking the engine out, Baylor. But I can’t have my girlfriend driving around in a truck that could leave her stranded at any minute."

"Girlfriend?"

He looks at me over his coffee. "That’s the part you heard?"

"We agreed this was temporary. Two weeks, remember?"

"Just because it has an expiration date doesn’t make it less real. I’m not seeing anyone else. Are you?"

"No."

"Then what would you call this?"

I look down at my mug, but that doesn’t stop the smile spreading across my face. Apparently, I like being called his girlfriend. That should make things considerably more difficult when I’m supposed to stop being one.

Wolf sets his coffee down and comes closer.

"So, is that a yes?"

"To you working on my truck?"

"And to being my girlfriend for the next two weeks. I’ll ask about the truck again once I’ve got that settled."

I laugh, then look up at him. "Until my kitchen is finished," I remind him.

"Okay."

"And you stop if your shoulder hurts."

"Now we’re back to the truck?"

"Yes. Try to keep up."

He grins and holds out his hand.

I get the keys from my bag. "I’m paying for anything it needs."

"I’m checking a few things first. If it needs more than I can do, I’ll tell you."

I put the keys in his palm, relieved he isn’t making me argue about letting him help. I’ve done enough of that. Sprinkles needed four tries to start yesterday, and pretending that doesn’t worry me isn’t getting my deliveries made any faster.

"Thank you."

"You’re welcome." He kisses me once more before letting go. "What else are you doing today?"

"Coffee, supplies, laundry. I’m down to underwear I don’t particularly like."

His eyes drop to my hips.

"Don’t get excited. There’s a reason it’s the last pair in the drawer."

"I could help you get rid of it."

I laugh. "I have no doubt you would love the task."

"Bring the laundry up when you get back."

"You’re offering your washing machine now?"

"Your underwear situation sounds serious. We should resolve it so you can spend more time out of clothing."

I’m laughing when my phone buzzes beside my bag.

Dan:Countertops a week from Tuesday. Appliance delivery is still on schedule for later this week. We’re on track for handover two weeks from today.

Twelve days. The same day as the Seattle vs. San Diego game.

I read it again before turning the screen toward Wolf.

"Good," he says. "You’ll have your kitchen back."

"Yeah."

He looks at me for a moment, then reaches past me for his coffee.

"I’ve gotten used to this one."

"So have I."

Neither of us says anything else about it. I finish my coffee, rinse the mug, and pick up my bag before I can spend the morning thinking about what I'll do when I no longer have an excuse to come upstairs.

He kisses me goodbye, and I leave before he can make a list.

I come through Serendipity's back door, passing racks of cinnamon rolls and two people packing them into boxes. Ellie's office is empty, so I pull out my phone.

Me: Where are you?

Ellie: Up front. Come find us.

Us turns out to be a table full of women I recognize, along with one I don't. Ellie spots me first and waves me over.

"There she is."

Natalia moves her bag off the empty chair beside her. Peyton is across from her with Cammy, and Penelope has a notebook open beside her coffee.

I set my bag down, suddenly aware I'm wearing Wolf's hoodie.

"Baylor, this is Isla," Ellie says.

"Oh! You're Wolf's Baylor." Isla smiles at me. "It's so nice to finally meet you."

I look at Ellie.

She looks delighted.

"Apparently," I say, taking the chair Natalia cleared.

"We've heard a lot about you," Isla adds.

"From who?"

"Kaenan heard about the bet," she says. "Then I heard about the bet."

"And Hunter told me," Peyton says.

"Luka told me," Natalia adds.

I look around the table. "Does anybody in that locker room keep anything to themselves?"

"No," Penelope says, without hesitation.

Wonderful. Beau is a professional hockey player. I'd appreciate it if this particular story stayed in one locker room.

Ellie nudges a menu toward me. "What are you eating?"

"Wolf sent you, didn't he?"

"No, but I agree with him if he told you to have breakfast."

"He did."

"Then let's reward this rare moment when two people agree on what you should do."

I order a cappuccino and a breakfast sandwich before she starts selecting things for me.

Natalia turns toward me. "I meant to ask you about cake pops. A friend of mine is having a bridal shower, and I told her about the ones you made."

"What date?"

She checks her phone while I pull my notebook from my bag.

Ellie laughs. "Of course you brought that."

"I’m going supply shopping after this. I need to know what I’m buying."

Natalia gives me the date, then shows me a picture of the decorations her friend picked. I write down the colors and ask her to send my email along so I can get quantities before quoting anything.

Isla waits until I’ve finished. "Do you do children’s birthdays?"

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"Yes."

"Excellent. My daughter changes her mind about the theme every other day."

"I recommend not asking again once you’ve paid the deposit."

She laughs. "That might be the only way we get through it."

Cammy mentions a baby shower, Peyton asks whether the lemon cheesecake cupcakes come in a larger size, and I’m still writing when my coffee arrives.

I like this part. Dates, quantities, flavors. Things I can answer without wondering whether I’m making a terrible decision.

"So how’s the shop coming along?" Penelope asks.

I glance at Ellie, who lifts both hands.

"I’m proud of you. So sue me."

"There’s a space two doors down," I explain. "I’ve spoken to the leasing agent about applying. I’m getting everything together, and the gala payment should get me the rest of the deposit."

"The Second Shift event?" Penelope asks.

I nod. "Four cupcake flavors and two cake pops."

"For five hundred people," Ellie adds.

"I’m trying not to say that part too often."

"You handled yesterday’s order beautifully," Natalia says. "You’ll be ready."

"You also won’t be doing it alone," Peyton adds.

I look down at my notebook, pretending I need to check what I just wrote. They spent hours helping me finish an order when most of them barely knew me. Now they’re discussing another one as if showing up is already decided.

"Thank you," I say. "I’ll probably take you up on that."

"Good," Cammy says. "Just give us jobs before Hunter starts asking which ones he can eat."

Peyton laughs. "He’ll ask anyway."

Penelope closes her notebook. "Send me your pricing and availability too. We order food for office events, and I’d like more dessert options."

"I can do that."

I write it down before she can change her mind.

"You should come over," Penelope tells me. "We watch at my house when the guys are out of town."

"Ellie comes," Natalia says.

I look at her. "You do?"

"Sometimes."

"How did I not know that?"

"You haven’t exactly been eager to discuss the Hawkeyes until recently."

That’s unfortunately true.

"We eat, watch the game, catch up," Penelope says. "You’re welcome whenever you can make it."

"I’d like that."

The answer comes out before I have time to consider what my family would think of it.

I stay through another round of coffee. Keely tells us about a school email she wishes she hadn’t opened, Natalia shows us the gift she finally managed to keep hidden from Luka, and Ellie complains about a supplier who sent the wrong boxes and then suggested she could probably make them work.

By the time everyone starts gathering their things, I’ve written down three potential orders and agreed to come watch an away game.

I want to.

That’s the part I keep thinking about while Ellie collects our mugs. I want the games and the coffee mornings. I want to hear how Keely’s birthday planning turns out and whether Natalia can keep Luka from finding the next present. I want to come home afterward and tell Wolf about it.

He doesn’t even know whether he’ll be coming back after surgery.

"You ready?" Ellie asks.

"Yeah." I close my notebook and put it in my bag.

She studies me for a second. "What?"

"Nothing. I had fun."

"Good. You’re allowed to do that."

"I know."

"And you’re allowed to come back."

I smile at her. "I know that too."

She holds the door while I carry my bag outside.

"Now let’s go buy you an unreasonable amount of butter."

By the time I get back, I have supplies in my kitchen’s designated storage area, clean clothes folded downstairs, and a laundry bag full of frosting-covered things that need another wash.

Wolf’s bedroom door is open. He’s sitting on the edge of the bed in a clean T-shirt and sweatpants, trying to fasten the ice pack around his shoulder.

I leave the laundry bag beside the dresser.

"Need a hand?"

"The strap’s twisted."

I move behind him and straighten it, then bring it around while he holds the pack in place.

"Too tight?"

"No. That’s good."

I finish fastening it and come around to face him. He catches my hips, pulling me between his knees.

"Hi."

"Hi." I brush his hair off his forehead. "How was practice?"

"Fine. How was coffee?"

"Apparently, the entire locker room knows about the bet."

"Hunter has a big mouth."

"So does Luka. And Kaenan, by the sound of it."

"I'll put in a request for confidentiality next time."

"Please do."

He smiles, his thumbs moving over the sides of my hoodie.

"Isla called me your Baylor."

"Did you correct her?"

I look down at him. "Should I have?"

"No."

He says it so easily that I have to kiss him. His hand slides around my back, keeping me close for another moment before he lets me lift my head.

"Penelope asked for my pricing," I tell him. "For office events."

"That's great."

"How's Sprinkles?" I ask.

"I checked a couple of things. I'm going to talk to Dad again before I do anything else."

He tips his head toward the laundry bag. "You taking me up on the washer?"

"Unless the offer expired while I was out."

"Nope, it's still available."

"So is the girlfriend position?"

His smile widens. "Sorry, I filled that position this morning."

I look down before he can see quite how pleased I am with that answer.

"Good. I'm sure she's exhausting."

He licks his lips. "Actually, she's growing on me. Though her taste in television is questionable."

"You didn't seem to mind my questionable TV last night."

"That's because you have no idea what level of trash TV I'd be willing to endure just to sit next to you, Cupcake."

I laugh and move toward the stove before he can pull me into his lap.

"I'll start dinner."

"Can I help?" he asks.

"Yes. Keep the ice on."

"Didn't realize I had such a demanding girlfriend."

I smile as I take a pot from the cupboard.

"Apparently, she's growing on you."

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Chapter Seventeen

WOLF

I’m standing in front of Sprinkles parked against the curb with the hood up, my phone on speaker beside the small toolbox Dad gave me for my seventeenth birthday.

"Every man needs his own set of tools to get through life, son."

Some have gone missing over the years. Others I’ve added myself. The box is still the same, though, and he was right.

"Did you clean the terminals before you put the cables back on?" my father asks.

"Yeah, Pops. You taught me how to do that when I was eight. I haven’t forgotten."

He’s already asked me three questions I could’ve answered before I was old enough to drive.

"Then you won’t mind me checking."

"The battery tested fine too." I set the brush down. "I’m trying to fix my girlfriend’s truck, not make more work for myself."

There’s a pause.

"Your girlfriend."

I close my eyes. I didn’t mean to call her that to my dad. He’s been asking when I’m going to bring someone home for years.

"Yes, I’m seeing someone."

"The baker?"

"That’s the one," I say, hoping he won’t ask for more details.

"About time you found someone willing to put up with you. The Ziegler men don’t get easier with age. Lock her down while you still have a chance."

For a second, I picture Baylor putting up with me when I’m old. Unless her entire family develops permanent amnesia, that’s probably not in the cards.

"It’s not a long-term thing." I wipe my hand on the rag beside my phone. "She’s opening a cupcake shop, and I’m headed back to Boston after the season."

"People who own shops can have boyfriends. And last I checked, cupcake bakers are allowed into Boston."

"Long distance is tough."

"You’ll only be apart for surgery and rehab. Then the Hawkeyes will sign you again. I know it. You’ll be back in Seattle before the paint dries on her new shop."

I look down at my bad arm. It’s easy for him to say. He isn’t the one trying to get through the season with this shoulder, wondering whether surgery will leave him with anything worth offering a team.

Then again, Pops is the toughest guy I know. He’d lose an arm and insist that he can play better defense without the extra weight.

My situation isn’t that dire. They aren't going to amputate my arm, but the point is that he isn’t the kind of man who considers defeat. He’s already decided I’ll be back in Seattle next season. I wish I could be that sure.

"You like her," he says. "This cupcake girl."

"Yeah." I look toward The Commons building "I like her a lot."

I leave out the part where she’s the best thing that’s happened to me in years. That she got me through an entire game without a penalty just by promising to stay the night. If I hadn’t nearly ended her brother’s career, I’d be asking whether I could take her parents to dinner when they come for the San Diego game.

Instead, they’re still telling her to stay away from me.

I think Baylor could be the one. That’s a hell of a thing to realize about a woman who’s only agreed to date me until her kitchen is finished.

But wishing I hadn’t taken that hit six years ago won’t change what happened to Beau. I can’t count on her family forgiving me, and I’d never ask her to choose. She loves them. Even when they drive her crazy, she shows up for them.

It’s one of the things I like most about her, right up until it means she can’t stay with me.

Two weeks. That’s all I get, and I’ll take it. Then I’ll head to Boston and figure out what happens with my career, Seattle, and my stubborn father. Maybe I’ll be there longer than I planned, helping him sell the shop and take better care of himself.

While I’m still here, I’m going to make sure Baylor has a reliable truck to make her deliveries.

"Then make it work, son. If you like her and she’s worth the effort, you’ll find a way." He pauses. "In the meantime, crank this old girl up. Let’s hear what she’s doing."

I leave my phone on speaker beside the open hood, then climb into the driver’s seat and turn the key.

Sprinkles hesitates before the engine catches.

My father has the ear of a classical musician when it comes to cars. He can hear the smallest tick or rattle and tell me where to look. I’d trust him over a diagnostic scanner any day, though I’m not telling him that. He’s already enough of a pain in my ass.

We go back and forth for another twenty minutes, trying a few things and listening after each one. He makes me repeat one check, which I complain about before discovering he was right to ask, which won’t make him any easier to live with come the offseason.

By the time I need to leave for practice, the truck starts with less hesitation and sounds better once it’s running. I turn off the engine, collect my tools, and close the hood before picking up my phone.

"Thanks for your help, Pops."

"Anytime, my boy." His voice softens. "I know you're not looking forward to the surgery, but I'm looking forward to having you home for the summer."

I lean against the side of the truck.

"It'll be good to be home. But your ass is going to the doctor, even if I have to drag you there myself."

"We'll see."

"That wasn't a suggestion."

"And, son?"

I stop arguing long enough to hear him.

"If anyone can pull off a comeback, it's you. I'm proud of you, Wolfgang. Not just the player. The man you've become."

I look down at the rag in my hand, rubbing my thumb over a clean corner.

There isn't much that could make me emotional out on the streets of Seattle. Apparently, hearing those words from the man I've looked up to my entire life gets pretty fucking close.

"Thanks, Dad."

"Now go. You don't need to be late because you were talking to me."

After we hang up, I stand beside Sprinkles for another moment before opening Baylor's messages.

Me: Truck should be running smoother tomorrow. Let me know how it goes. I have a couple more ideas if this doesn't fix it.

Her answer comes while I'm putting the tools away.

Baylor: Best two-week boyfriend ever. I'll reward you with dinner in bed.

I look at the message, then read it again.

She could've left out the two-week part. I'd have been perfectly happy with the rest.

Me: Forget the dinner. I'll just eat you, Cupcake.

Baylor: Have a good practice.

I put my phone away and head upstairs for my gear. Dinner in bed with Baylor is a considerable improvement over anything else I might have planned.

For now, I'll take that too.

Theo is waiting when I get to the training room.

"How's it feeling?"

"Sore."

"More than yesterday?"

"About the same."

He nods toward the table, and I set my bag down before pulling off my sweatshirt. He watches the movement, then has me sit while he checks the shoulder.

I answer his questions without giving him a reason to ask them twice. We've been doing this long enough that he knows when I'm trying to hurry through it.

"Did you do anything this morning?" he asks.

"I worked on Baylor's truck. Nothing crazy."

His hands stop.

"I wasn't hauling an engine out, Theo. I cleaned a couple of connections and talked to my dad."

"Then keep it that way."

"I'm aware I have a shoulder injury."

"I'm also aware you occasionally treat it like an inconvenience you can ignore."

"You're right. It's very inconvenient."

He doesn't laugh. I didn't expect him to. My shoulder is serious, and keeping me playing healthy is his job.

We work through the exercises, and he corrects me when I start compensating instead of moving the way he wants. By the last set, I'm ready to be done, but he makes me slow down and finish properly.

"Boston confirmed the plan?" he asks.

"Yeah. Same surgeon. Same timing, as long as nothing changes before then."

"Keep me updated. Once you're cleared to travel after surgery, it would be good to get you back here before the rest of the guys return for next season. We can pick up where your rehab team leaves off."

I lower my arm and look at him.

"You're making plans for next season."

"That's generally what we do this time of year."

"I'm a free agent."

"I know."

"And I don't know if I'm coming back here."

Theo takes the resistance band from me and sets it aside.

"Penelope and Haynes aren’t going to let you go without a conversation."

"Maybe not. But a conversation isn’t a contract."

"No," he agrees. "It isn’t."

I appreciate that he doesn’t immediately promise me everything will work out. Dad already has that covered.

"I’m saying we can have a plan," Theo continues. "You have the surgery. You do the rehab. When we know what comes next, we adjust."

"And if I can’t play?"

"Then we deal with that when we have an answer. Today, we have practice."

He hands me my sweatshirt.

I sit there with it for a second before carefully putting it on.

Today, we have practice.

Tonight, I have Baylor.

I’d like to stop wondering how long I get to keep either one.

He gets up, and I follow him toward the ice.

Once we’re out there, I have something to do besides think. Haynes runs us through drills, stops us when he doesn’t like what he sees, and makes us do it again. I take the corrections, make the passes, and try not to get irritated when my shoulder reminds me that being cleared to practice doesn’t mean I get to forget about it.

Hunter notices when I adjust.

He catches up beside me while we wait for the next drill.

"You good?"

"Yeah."

He studies my face long enough to be annoying, then nods toward the other end of the ice.

"Your turn."

I push off before he can ask anything else.

For the next hour, I get to be a defenseman. Not a free agent heading into surgery. Not a son trying to convince his father that surviving a heart attack doesn’t mean he should go straight back to work.

Just a guy who knows where to be when the puck comes his way.

I’m going to miss that more than I know how to explain if I don’t get it back.

Afterward, I do what Theo tells me. Treatment, ice, no pretending I’m too busy to sit still. Hunter heads out before me, and the room gets quieter as

the guys finish changing and leave.

I check my phone.

Baylor has sent a picture of two plates on my kitchen counter.

Baylor: Nothing fancy tonight. I'm tired.

The food looks good. More importantly, there are two plates, and she's waiting at home for me.

Me: Looks perfect. Heading home soon.

I shower and get dressed, then put my gear away. My shoulder makes pulling on my shirt more difficult than it should be, but I get it on without having to ask anyone for help.

For some reason, that feels like an accomplishment today.

On my way out, I pass Haynes talking to one of the assistant coaches. He lifts a hand, and I return it before pushing through the doors to the parking lot.

I've walked out of this building after wins, losses, practices, and meetings I wanted no part of. Most of the time, I'm thinking about the next game before I reach my car.

Today, I stop beside it and look back.

I know exactly where I'm going tonight.

I just don't know how many more times I'll get to leave this place and call it home.

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Chapter Eighteen

BAYLOR

It’s been a few days since Wolf worked on Sprinkles, and she’s started on the first try every morning. I’ve stopped holding my breath when I turn the key, which is a nice change. She still grumbles a little here and there, but it’s a big improvement.

This morning, he left tickets beside my coffee and asked if I wanted to come.

No rule to collect on. No bet.

I said yes.

Now I’m meeting Ellie outside the stadium, wearing his jersey again. Fans in Hawkeyes gear crowd the entrance, and the smell of cooked hot

dogs drifts from a vendor near the curb. A car honks behind a rideshare that's taking too long.

Ellie spots me near the entrance and waves, then looks me over when I reach her.

"Look at you. Wearing it voluntarily."

"It would be weird to sit in his seats without wearing it," I tell her.

"Sure. Okay, we'll go with denial today. It's on brand, at least."

"It's only for another week and a half. This was your idea for me to date him until my kitchen renovation was done, remember?"

"Because I figured once that man got you in his bed, you'd come to your senses about dating him." She gestures toward my jersey. "You two have off-the-charts chemistry. Everyone else in the room can see it."

She's not wrong. I want to be here. I want to wear his jersey and go home with him afterward. None of that changes what'll happen when my parents and Beau come to town. But a future with Wolf isn't exactly a clear, steady path when it comes to my family. It's a rickety bridge over sharp rocks and hungry alligators.

And that's just getting him to Thanksgiving dinner at my parents' house later this year. Keeping Beau from stabbing him with the serving fork would be a separate problem.

Not to mention, he's leaving and might not come back.

My phone dings in my pocket, saving me from answering.

A message from Dan appears on my phone.

Dan: Cabinets are installed. Flooring crew is on schedule. Still looking good for next Wednesday.

"Everything okay?" Ellie asks.

"Yeah. Dan says my kitchen's still on schedule."

Her eyes move over my face as though she's trying to work out whether I've just given her good news.

"How do you feel about that?"

"Good. I need it finished before the gala."

"I know you do." She waits while I grab the ticket out of my bag. "That wasn't what I meant."

I glance toward the doors, where the line is moving through security. I've been looking forward to tonight all day. I'm not ready to start counting how many nights we have left.

"I'm trying to enjoy tonight, Ellie."

She slips her arm through mine.

"Then let’s go watch your man play."

The Hawkeyes are down by one when Wolf catches a pass near the blue line, and I lean forward with my hands clasped between my knees.

"Come on," I mutter.

Wolf sends the puck ahead and follows the play, but the other team gets possession before the Hawkeyes can get a shot off. He turns with them, backing into position as their winger carries it toward the boards.

I recognize the moment he closes the gap.

So does Ellie, apparently, because she stops chewing.

His elbow stays down. His skates stay on the ice. He catches the winger hard enough that I hear the boards from here, and the puck comes loose.

Hunter gets it.

I’m on my feet before I realize I’ve stood.

"Yes!"

Wolf looks toward us as the play moves away. He points his glove at me, then turns back to follow his team.

Ellie grabs my sleeve.

"Did he just point at you?"

I’m laughing too hard to answer properly.

"I think so."

"You think so?"

"He’s demonstrating his excellent behavior."

"He just put a man into the boards."

"Legally."

"That’s *Wolf speak* for, "I love you"."

"I’m not going there with you."

She laughs, and I sit down with my face warm and a smile I can’t seem to get rid of.

There’s no bet tonight. He doesn’t have to prove anything to me.

He still wanted me to see it.

When he gets to the bench, Hunter says something that makes him look back toward our seats. I lift my cup at him.

Wolf grins before reaching for his water.

I’ve watched him play for years. Usually, I’ve been hoping somebody would knock him on his ass.

Tonight, I’m wearing his name and checking how long he’s been on the bench because I want him back out there.

Ellie settles beside me, shaking her head.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing. This is just very entertaining."

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"The game?"

"Sure, Baylor. Not the fact that Wolf Ziegler is openly flirting with you while playing a high-stakes professional-level hockey game. If this isn't true love, I don't know what is."

Thankfully, for how cold it is in here, she can’t tell my cheeks are pink from blushing. "Stop with the love stuff and hand over the popcorn," I tell her.

They lose by one.

The last few minutes have everyone around us standing, waiting for a shot that never makes it past the goalie. When the horn sounds, I let out a groan and sink back into my seat.

"Damn it."

Ellie looks over. "Careful. You’re starting to sound invested."

"I wanted them to win."

"They will next game."

On the ice, Wolf taps JP’s pads before skating toward the tunnel. He glances up at us, and I give him a little wave.

He lifts his glove.

Even after the loss, I’m smiling.

I can’t remember the last time I spent an evening this happy without having an oven timer go off somewhere in the middle of it.

We collect our things and make our way down. Natalia stops us near the concourse to confirm we’re coming to Oakley’s, and Ellie tells her yes before I can check what Wolf wants to do.

"He said drinks," Ellie reminds me once Natalia has gone.

"I know. I just thought after the game—"

"He still has to eat, Baylor. And you've been smiling for three hours. I'd like to see whether your face can maintain that through dinner."

"Stop looking at me. You're creeping me out."

"You just don't want me to see the evidence." She hooks her arm through mine. "Come on. Let's find your boyfriend."

Wolf is still talking to the press when we get to the waiting area.

Ellie checks her phone while I take off my coat. It's warm down here, and I'm still a little flushed from yelling at the ice as though any of the players could hear my very useful advice.

My phone buzzes.

Mom.

Mom: I just saw a highlight from the Hawkeyes game.

A picture comes through underneath it.

Her television. A slightly blurry shot of the stands, taken at an angle from the couch.

Ellie is beside me with popcorn in her hand.

I'm standing in Wolf's seats, wearing his jersey and smiling toward the ice.

My stomach drops.

Mom: Is that Ziegler's jersey?

I look down at the logo across my chest, as if there's a chance I've changed clothes since she took the picture.

There isn't.

Me: Yes. Ellie and I went to the game.

The three dots appear immediately.

Mom: I can see that. Your dad didn't see it. I'm hoping Beau doesn't either.

I read the message twice.

The hallway is still noisy. Someone laughs farther down, and a door opens behind us. Nothing has changed except the way my jersey feels against my skin.

I turn my phone toward Ellie.

She reads it, and her smile fades.

"Shit… Did she say anything else?"

I shake my head.

I could tell Mom it doesn’t mean anything. That Wolf gave us tickets, and I borrowed the jersey because I didn’t have anything else to wear.

But I had plenty of clean clothes tonight.

I chose this one.

Ellie rests her hand on my arm while I type.

Me: I’ll call you tomorrow.

I put my phone away before she answers.

A door opens down the hall, and Wolf comes out with his bag over his good shoulder. He spots us, and his smile spreads before he’s even reached me.

"There you are."

He wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me against his side, leaning down to kiss my temple.

I put my hand on his stomach.

"You girls ready for drinks?"

I look at Ellie. She gives me a small reassuring smile, as if trying to tell me that everything is going to be okay.

I know it won’t be because in a week and a half, I have to give him up.

I don’t tell him about the message.

He already knows my family doesn’t like him. He doesn’t need another reminder tonight, and I don’t want to watch that smile disappear.

I tuck my phone farther into my pocket and look up at him.

"Yep. All set."

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Chapter Nineteen

WOLF

I knock on Baylor’s door, then step back while I wait for her to open it.

Ellie: Food’s there. Everything’s ready. Lock up when you leave.

Me: Thank you.

Ellie: Thank me by making sure she actually takes a night off.

The door opens, and I forget to text Ellie back.

She’s wearing a green dress that stops above her knees, her hair loose around her shoulders. I’ve seen her dressed up before. I’ve also seen her wearing considerably less, but apparently that doesn’t stop me from staring at her legs and considering whether I should cancel our plans and get them wrapped around me instead.

"Hi," she says, smiling when she catches me looking.

"You look fucking gorgeous."

"Thank you." Her eyes travel over my shirt and down to my jeans. "Look at you. Taking this dinner thing seriously."

"I told you I was taking you out."

"I know. But you also told me you were fully dressed once when you were wearing boxers."

"Give me some credit. I had a shirt on."

"And we covered why that wasn’t enough." She reaches behind the door for her coat. "Let me get my bag."

I step inside while she picks it up from the chair. Her kitchen is starting to look like a kitchen again, though there’s still protective covering on the floor and a box against the wall. I’d ask about the work, but I hear enough from Dan without inviting another update tonight.

Baylor checks her bag, then turns toward me.

"Okay. Ready."

"Not quite."

I put my good hand at her waist and pull her closer. She smiles before I kiss her, resting her hand against my chest.

I’ve been looking forward to this all day. Taking her somewhere that doesn’t involve a delivery route, a game, or a list of things she needs to finish before she can go to bed.

When I pull back, her fingers are still holding my shirt.

"Now I’m ready," I tell her.

"That was on your checklist?"

"Right at the top."

She laughs and lets go so she can lock her door. I take her hand as we head toward the elevator, trying not to look down at her legs again.

I’m going to take this woman to dinner.

Then I’m going to bring her home.

In that order, because I put too much effort into this to abandon it now.

Baylor watches out the window as I drive.

"Are you going to tell me where we’re eating?"

"When we get there."

"Should I be concerned that you won’t name the restaurant?"

"No."

"Because if you’re taking me to a drive-through, I should’ve worn something with an elastic waistband."

I look over at her before turning onto the next street.

"You can eat dinner without knowing exactly where it came from for the next five minutes."

She’s smiling when I glance at her, and I reach across the console to take her hand.

I pull onto the street where Serendipity’s is, and she sits a little straighter.

As soon as I pull up into a parking space in front of the empty shop and switch off the engine, Baylor looks at the storefront, then back at me.

"What are we doing here?"

"I told you… having dinner."

"But there’s no restaurant in here. It’s vacant."

"I guess we’ll have to use our imagination, won’t we?"

Her eyes move toward the dark windows. From the car, she can see a little light farther inside, but not what’s waiting for her.

I get out and come around to open her door. She takes my hand as she steps onto the sidewalk, still looking at the shop.

"Did you arrange another showing?"

"Something like that."

I unlock the door and hold it open for her. She steps into the empty retail space, looking around while I close the door behind us.

"I can’t believe you did this." She turns toward the warm light coming from an open doorway farther back. "What’s in there?"

"Go look."

She walks past the existing kitchen, where the counters and deep sinks are already in place, then stops at the doorway to the small room at the end of the hall.

There’s a blanket spread across the floor, two cushions against the wall, and a picnic basket beside them. Battery-operated candles line the blanket, and a small lamp lights the corner. The room’s only window faces the back courtyard, with the blind pulled closed.

Baylor looks from the basket to me.

"How did you manage all of this?"

"I had help. Ellie and the landlord."

She steps inside, smiling as she takes it in. "This is where I wanted to do tastings."

"That’s what Ellie said. Figured we could try it out."

"With what?"

"Dinner." I point to the basket. "From that Italian place you wanted to try. Ellie picked it up and dropped it off before I came to get you." I say, putting the key away in my pocket.

"The landlord met me here this afternoon. We're allowed to stay for a couple of hours, and I promised to leave it exactly how we found it."

She walks toward the blanket, looking down at the candles, then around the empty room.

There's not much to see yet. Bare walls, a few marks where shelves used to hang, and an open space that'll need some work before she can sell anything from it.

But I've watched her look at pictures of this place on her phone often enough to know she sees more than that.

She turns back to me.

"I don't even know what to say."

"You could show me where you want everything. I'd like to know where I'm carrying that commercial mixer before you buy it."

"Your shoulder isn't carrying a commercial mixer anywhere."

"I have teammates. Big ones. You've fed most of them."

"Do they know that you're volunteering them?"

"Absolutely. It's time they contributed something. Besides, they like to feel needed."

She laughs and comes toward me, reaching for the front of my shirt. Then she pulls me down and kisses me.

I put my good arm around her waist and let her take as long as she wants. Her other hand slides behind my neck, and when she pulls back, she doesn't let go.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"This is…" She looks around the room, then shakes her head. "I love this."

I kiss her once more before letting her step away.

"Good. Now show me your shop."

I follow her around while she explains where she wants the display case, the extra fridge, and enough cooling racks that she won't have to keep borrowing mine. She gestures with both arms, occasionally stopping to pull up something on her phone.

There are paint colors I can’t tell apart and chairs she assures me are completely different from the ones in the previous picture.

"That one’s blush," she says when I make the mistake of calling it pink.

"My apologies."

"And this is dusty rose."

"I’m going to need labels and a color wheel to keep this all straight."

"You just need to carry them."

I nod. "That I can do."

She laughs and keeps going. I’ve heard her talk about the shop before, usually while she’s adding up what she still needs to save. Tonight, she’s standing in it, telling me where everything belongs. I want to be here when those things arrive.

Even if we’re no longer together, I want to help her move in. Whatever offside rules she puts between us, I can still show up and carry a few boxes. At least until I leave at the end of the season.

By the time we get back to the tasting room, she’s shown me enough pictures to furnish the place twice.

"Hungry?" I ask.

"Starving. You should’ve stopped me from rambling on."

"I like it when you ramble on. You’re excited and I’m glad I get to be here for it."

She nudges me, then takes off her shoes while I lower myself onto the blanket. I settle against a cushion, and she sits beside me, tucking her legs beneath her.

When she opens the basket, the smell of garlic makes me glad I ordered extra bread.

"Ellie packed actual plates," she says.

"She didn’t trust me with that part."

"Smart woman."

Baylor hands me a plate, and I start opening the containers.

By the time we finish, she’s stolen the last piece of garlic bread and I’ve decided we need to order from this place again. I stack the containers and tuck them into the basket while she sets our glasses safely beside it.

Then she shifts onto her knees.

"The kitchen, my truck, and now this," she says, resting a hand on my good shoulder.

"I’m expecting a very generous cupcake allowance."

She laughs and brings one knee across my legs. I move my hand out of her way, then settle it at her waist as she lowers herself onto my lap.

"You’re not just the best two-week boyfriend I’ve ever had."

"How many have you had?"

"Wolf." She squeezes the back of my neck. "I’m trying to tell you something."

"Go ahead. I’ll shut up."

"You’re the best boyfriend I’ve had. Period."

I look at her, my thumb still against her waist. She’s close enough that I could kiss her without moving much, but for a second, I just want to hear her say it again.

"I like being your boyfriend, Baylor."

Her smile softens, and she leans down to kiss me. I draw her closer with my good hand, letting her decide when to pull back.

She doesn’t go far.

"You’re making this deadline feel very difficult," she says against my mouth.

"Then let’s stop talking about the deadline."

Her fingers slide into my hair.

"Good idea."

She smiles and reaches for my belt.

I help her get the rest of my clothes off, then settle beside her on the blanket. Her hand moves down my stomach and wraps around me.

My eyes close.

"Go slow."

"Like this?"

"Baylor."

She kisses my jaw, looking entirely too pleased with herself.

I catch her hand gently before she can make me embarrass myself.

I pull the condom from my back pocket and then open in, rolling it on, then she lies back, pulling me down with her.

I brace myself on my good forearm. Her hand rests at the back of my neck, and she kisses me slowly enough that I forget about the landlord’s time limit.

I move between her thighs, keeping my eyes on hers.

"Still okay?"

She nods, then reaches up to brush my hair back.

"I want you."

I ease into her, watching her expression as she draws me closer. Her mouth opens against mine, and I stop for a moment before moving deeper.

"Wolf."

"I've got you."

When I'm fully inside her, I stay still with my forehead against hers.

I should have a better vocabulary by now. Something besides her name and a collection of swear words.

Apparently not.

"Fucking hell."

She kisses my cheek, her fingers moving over the back of my neck.

I draw back and move into her again. Her hand tightens, and I lift my head enough to see her face.

"There?"

"Yes."

I do it again.

She bites her bottom lip, then lets it go when I kiss her. I like watching her, but I like this too much to stay away from her mouth for long.

Her hands move over my back, then return to my face. Every time I pull away, she brings me back.

I've spent weeks trying to get a few more minutes with this woman. Now I'm lying with her in the shop she wants, and she's looking at me like she's glad I'm the one here.

I want another night like this.

Several hundred, if we're being honest.

She shifts beneath me, and I stop counting.

"You feel so fucking good."

Her answer gets lost against my mouth. I move my hand between us, and she holds me closer, her breath catching as my thumb finds her.

"Wolf, I'm—"

"I know, Bay."

I lift my head and keep touching her. Her eyes find mine before they close, her fingers pressing into my back.

She says my name as she comes, and that's enough to undo whatever control I had left. I come next, hard inside of her, kissing her as I do.

"That was…" I start.

"This room will never be the same," she teases.

"No… it won't."

I help her clean up and then clean up next. By the time we've packed the basket, Baylor has checked the floor twice and found an earring beneath one of the cushions.

"Got everything?" I ask.

"I think so." She slips the earring back in, then looks at the candles. "Can I keep one?"

"Help yourself. I didn't know what else to do with them after this. My day to day doesn't require battery operated candles but I didn't want to burn the place down before you got into it."

"That was smart."

She picks one up and switches it off before putting it in her bag.

"For your tasting room?" I ask.

She looks at me. "I'd like to remember our first dinner here."

"I think I've made a fairly lasting impression."

"Christening my tasting room before I've even moved in is a memory I won't soon forget."

I laugh and pick up the basket with the leftovers while she gathers the blanket and cushions. We switch off the remaining candles and the lamp, then walk back through the quiet shop.

At the front door, she stops and looks around once more.

"You'll have to bring me back when you get the keys," I tell her.

"You'll be carrying a mixer, remember?"

"I wouldn't miss it for anything."

She leans up to kiss me, then steps outside while I turn off the last light. I lock the door and check it before following her to the car.

When I open her door, she puts the cushions and folded blanket on the back seat, then turns toward me.

"Thank you for tonight."

"You're welcome, Bay."

She takes my hand and squeezes it before getting in. I close her door, put the basket in the back, and walk around to my side.

On the drive home, she rests her hand on my thigh and tells me she's changed her mind about the chairs.

I'm not sure which shade of pink we're discussing anymore, but I listen.

When we get back to The Commons, she comes upstairs with me and she falls asleep in my arms.

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Chapter Twenty

BAYLOR

I sold the last lemon cheesecake cupcake to a man who came back because his wife said one wasn’t enough.

I respect her.

Now the display is empty, the lunch crowd is thinning, and I’m wiping frosting off the counter before I close Sprinkles for the afternoon. Three hundred cupcakes yesterday would’ve sounded impossible a month ago. Today, I’m annoyed I didn’t bring another dozen blueberry honey.

Across the lot, people are carrying their lunches back toward the office buildings. Somebody’s sitting on the curb eating chili, and the waffle truck beside me still has two customers waiting.

"Sold out?" its owner calls when I lower my serving window.

"Everything."

"Should’ve traded you before the rush."

"I offered. You said you were watching your sugar."

"I make waffles for a living. You should’ve known I was lying."

I laugh and lift a hand to wave goodbye. The woman at the chili truck waves back from behind her window.

"See you tomorrow, Baylor."

"Save me some cornbread."

"Save me a cupcake."

I point at her. "Deal."

Inside, I secure the empty trays and check that the ingredient containers are closed. My hands are still a little sore, but everything takes less time when I’m not trying to find room for leftover stock.

There isn’t any.

I take a picture of the empty display and send it to Wolf.

Me: Sold everything. Even the blueberry honey you said needed more frosting.

Wolf: Congratulations, Cupcake. Imagine how fast it would’ve gone if you’d listened to me.

Me: You’re no longer invited to tastings.

Wolf: Pretty sure I did well at the last one.

I look at the message, then shake my head, smiling while I put my phone away.

He’s referring to last night. I know he is.

I finish checking the back, grab my water, and climb into the driver’s seat. Sprinkles starts on the first try, which is becoming normal enough that I almost forget to be grateful for it.

Almost.

My phone rings before I put her in gear.

Mom.

I switch off the engine and settle back against the seat. I promised I’d call her yesterday. Then I spent the evening with Wolf, and somehow discussing his jersey with my mother dropped to the bottom of my list.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi, sweetheart. Are you working?"

"Just finished the lunch rush. I sold out."

"Oh, honey, that’s wonderful."

"Thanks. I’m still parked. I have time to talk."

"Good. Your dad’s looking at flights for next week, and I wanted to ask you a couple of things."

I set my water in the cup holder and settle back against the seat.

"Okay."

"Would Tuesday work? We could have dinner, and then we’d have Wednesday to spend with you before Beau’s game."

"Tuesday’s good. Wednesday will be busy. Dan says the kitchen should be finished that day."

"Oh, sweetheart. Finally."

"Yeah. I’ll need to get everything moved back downstairs, but at least I’ll have it for the gala."

"Your dad can help."

"I’d appreciate that."

I look through the windshield as the man from the waffle truck carries his sign inside. The lunch crowd has mostly gone, leaving a few people finishing their food at the picnic tables.

"Are you still planning to apply for the shop?" Mom asks.

"Yes. The leasing agent sent me the list of everything he needs. I’m getting it together."

"Your father would like to see it."

"I can show you where it is. I’d have to arrange for someone to let us in."

"We’d love that."

I smile. "There’s a kitchen already, which is why I want this one. I’d need more refrigeration and some equipment, but I wouldn’t be starting from scratch."

"You’ll have to tell us all about it when we get there."

"I will."

For a moment, I let myself imagine that visit. Showing them the front window, explaining where the display case will go. Mom taking pictures while Dad asks sensible questions about the lease.

Then she goes quiet.

"Baylor, about the game."

I turn the lid on my water bottle.

"I thought we might get to that."

"I didn’t want to discuss it over text."

"I know. I’m sorry I didn’t call yesterday. I got busy."

"Did Wolfgang give you the tickets?"

"Yes."

"And that was his jersey?"

"Yes, Mom."

She pauses before asking the question I’ve been waiting for.

"Are you seeing him?"

I look down at my lap. There’s a little frosting on the cuff of my sweatshirt, and I rub at it with my thumb.

"Yes."

"Oh, Baylor."

It’s quiet. Concerned.

Somehow, I would’ve preferred yelling.

"For how long?" she asks.

"Not long. We’ve been spending time together since I started using his kitchen, but dating is new."

"Does Beau know?"

"No."

"Sweetheart, he would be furious."

"I know."

"He’s coming to Seattle next week. He’s going to see you, and he’s going to play against Wolfgang. Have you thought about that?"

I’ve thought about little else whenever I’m not with Wolf.

"Yes."

"Beau is still in physical therapy. He called me after his appointment the other day because his knee was bothering him again."

"I know he’s still in PT, Mom. We talk."

"I’m not saying you don’t. But just because he’s playing now doesn’t mean everything that happened is behind him."

"I haven’t forgotten what happened."

"I know you haven’t."

"Then please don’t talk to me like I need reminding."

She goes quiet, and I close my eyes.

"Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap."

"I’m worried about you both, Baylor. You and Beau have always been close. I don’t want this to come between you."

Outside, the woman from the chili truck walks past and lifts a hand. I wave back, trying to smile while Mom waits for me to answer.

"I don’t want that either."

"And your father…" She lets out a breath. "He won’t take it well. He was already uncomfortable with you working in Wolfgang’s apartment."

"I’m not asking Dad to date him."

"Baylor."

"I know. But I’m the one spending time with him, Mom. He’s been good to me."

"I’m glad he has."

"He’s helped with my business. He worked on Sprinkles because he didn’t like the idea of me getting stranded somewhere. He makes me breakfast when I’ve been up baking since four."

I stop before I tell her about last night.

I want to keep that evening for myself a little longer.

"A few weeks ago, you couldn’t stand him," she says.

"A few weeks ago, I hadn’t spent time with him in six years."

"And now you like him."

"Yes."

Saying it to her feels different from saying it to Ellie. Ellie watched it happen. Mom still knows the Wolf who sent Beau to the hospital.

So did I, until I walked upstairs.

"I’m not trying to hurt anyone," I tell her.

"I know that, sweetheart."

"But I can’t keep pretending he’s only lending me an oven."

She doesn’t answer immediately. I look at the dashboard clock, then away. I have things to do this afternoon, but none of them feels especially urgent now.

"I haven’t told your dad about the jersey," she says.

"Thank you."

"That doesn’t mean I’m comfortable keeping this from him."

"I wouldn’t ask you to."

"And Beau needs to hear it from you. Please don’t let him find out from someone else, or another clip on television."

My stomach tightens.

"I’ll talk to him."

"Before he gets here."

"I know."

I’m not sure how to make that call. I can already hear the silence after I tell him, followed by questions I won’t have answers for that he’ll accept.

But Mom’s right. He needs to hear it from me.

"Does Wolfgang know how your brother feels?" she asks.

"Yes. He knows."

"And he understands what this could do between you?"

"He hasn’t asked me to choose between him and Beau, Mom."

"I’m glad."

"He wouldn’t."

I say it before I can soften it. Wolf has given me room to decide what I want, even when I’ve made decisions that hurt him.

Mom lets out another breath.

"I just don’t want you getting hurt."

"I don’t either."

We sit with that for a moment. Then she asks whether I’ve eaten lunch.

"Not yet."

"Baylor."

"I sold everything. That’s good news, remember?"

"It is. Now go buy something that isn’t a cupcake."

"I’m parked beside a chili truck."

"Perfect."

I glance toward it. The serving window is still open.

"Okay. I’ll get lunch."

"Your dad will book the flights tonight. I’ll send you the details."

"Thanks, Mom."

"And we are excited about the gala. About your business. I don’t want you thinking otherwise."

My fingers tighten around the phone.

"I know."

"I love you, sweetheart."

"Love you too."

We hang up, and I set my phone beside my water.

Wolf was smiling when I left this morning. He kissed me at the door, asked when I’d be back, and told me to sell every last cupcake.

I did.

I should be sitting here figuring out how much of today’s profit can go toward the shop.

Instead, I’m trying to work out how to tell my brother that the man he hates is the one I want to go home to.

But then the memory of seeing Beau hit the ground at that game, of him in the hospital… I just can't bring myself to call him right now.

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Chapter Twenty-One

BAYLOR

"There’s no way they need all of these," I tell Ellie as she parks behind a car that probably costs more than my future display case and commercial mixer combined.

"They don’t need them. They want them. There’s a difference."

I look at the two cupcake boxes on my lap. "You told me to bring dessert."

"And you did. Very thorough of you."

Cars fill Penelope’s circular driveway, and the house beyond it is big enough that I’m starting to understand how she hosts everybody for away games without borrowing chairs from her neighbors.

Ellie gets out and comes around to open my door, taking the top box so I can climb out.

"Come on. The game starts in ten minutes, and I want a plate before everyone gets settled."

"You’re very focused on the food."

"I’ve been smelling cinnamon rolls since five this morning. I need something with cheese."

I follow her toward the side entrance. Before we reach it, the door opens, and Penelope waves us inside.

"There you are. Come in, everyone else is here."

"We brought cupcakes," Ellie says.

"I was hoping you would. Drinks are in the fridge, food is out on the island. Help yourself."

Penelope takes my box and steps aside. She’s wearing Slade’s jersey with leggings, her hair piled on top of her head. Beyond her, the kitchen island is covered with enough food that I could’ve left both boxes at home and nobody would’ve gone hungry.

Something smells like garlic. There are meatballs, several dips, a tray of sandwiches, and a chocolate fountain surrounded by things I’d happily eat without the chocolate.

I stop beside the island.

Ellie puts her box beside mine and reaches for a plate.

"Where should these go?" I ask.

"Right here. And then you’re getting food." Penelope says.

I fill my plate while Ellie makes room for the cheesy dip Penelope takes out of the oven. By the time we get to the great room, the players are lining up for the opening faceoff.

"Over here," Natalia calls, moving her bag off the sectional. "We saved you spots."

I sit beside her, and Ellie drops onto the cushion on my other side. The television above the stone fireplace is enormous. I can practically count the hairs in Wolf’s playoff beard, although I’m hoping he plans to shave before it gets much further along.

Not that I’m complaining about where he puts his face.

"Wine?" Natalia asks, holding up the bottle on the coffee table.

"Yes, please."

She pours me a glass while I settle my plate on my knees. Behind the sectional, two children are arguing about whether their blanket fort needs another entrance.

"If it collapses again, you're rebuilding it yourselves," Isla tells them.

"We know!"

"She says that, but she'll be back there fixing it in ten minutes," Peyton tells me.

"I heard you," Isla says.

"I know. I'm sitting right here."

Ellie laughs around a bite of dip, and I turn toward the screen as the puck drops.

Wolf starts the game beside Hunter. I've watched that pairing enough to know where to look when the camera follows the puck, but it's still strange how quickly I find him.

Three weeks ago, I would've found him just as quickly. Usually to complain about whatever he'd done to earn two minutes in the box.

Tonight, I'm hoping he makes it through the game without someone driving his bad shoulder into the boards.

Natalia leans toward me. "Luka said Wolf's been looking at his phone every five minutes since they left."

"He has other people to talk to."

"Of course." She reaches for her glass. "Probably his agent sending pictures of himself wearing Wolf's hoodie."

"Right well, their relationship is a little unorthodox, to say the least."

Natalia laughs at my attempt to deflect the fact that the locker room all knows about us.

I glance down at the black fabric across my lap.

Ellie is smiling into her wine.

On the television, Wolf gets the puck away from a forward and sends it along the boards to Hunter. Peyton leans forward as Hunter carries it out, and I find myself doing the same.

The pass reaches Aleksi, but his shot goes wide.

Half the room groans.

"Jesus, that was close," Ellie says.

"Don't worry," Peyton tells her. "We have plenty of time to develop stomach ulcers."

My phone buzzes with a text from my brother.

Beau: Can’t wait to see you next week sis. Looking forward to the gala. Proud of you.

That last part stings.

"You’re quiet," Ellie says.

"I’m eating."

"Very suspicious."

"Do you want to inspect my sandwich?"

"No. I have my own."

"Then let me enjoy mine."

She nudges my knee with hers, still smiling, and leaves me alone long enough to finish it.

During a stoppage, Penelope comes in carrying the cupcake boxes. She sets them on the coffee table, and Peyton immediately leans over to read the labels.

Penelope takes a seat across from us. "How’s the shop coming along?"

"I’m getting my application together. Once the gala balance is paid, I should have enough to move forward."

"Oh, that’s exciting. Is it close to Serendipity’s?"

"Two doors down," Ellie tells her. "I’m planning to become a terrible influence on her lunch breaks."

"You already are."

"You ate lunch today, didn’t you?"

"Yes."

"Then my work is paying off."

Penelope smiles. "Send me the date for the grand opening when you have it. We’d love to come by and support you."

"Absolutely. I would love that."

"And I need your menu," Isla says from the other end of the couch. "Berkeley’s birthday is coming up, and she’s changed her mind about dessert three more times this week."

"I’ll send it tonight," I tell Isla. "If she wants something decorated, send me the pictures too."

Ellie leans toward me. "Did you just come to game night and get yourself another week of work?"

"I didn’t bring my notebook. I thought that would help."

"Rookie mistake. You brought the cupcakes."

Penelope gets up to check the food during the intermission, and I carry my plate into the kitchen with her.

"Do you girls do this every time the guys are out of town?" I ask.

"We do this whenever we can. Most of the ladies here have demanding jobs and little ones but it makes the away games more fun, and the kids get to grow up together which is great."

I'd like to tell her I understand that now. I've only been dating Wolf for a short time, but I can see how lonely it could be during the season without the support of other women and families going through the same thing.

Instead, I pick up a serving spoon and help her move the remaining meatballs into a smaller dish.

Maybe I don't have to lose all of this when Wolf leaves.

My family couldn't reasonably object to me being friends with these women. They haven't done anything to Beau. And they're interested in my business, not just who I'm sleeping with.

But would they still invite me if I stopped being Wolf's girlfriend?

"Game's back!" Peyton calls.

Penelope takes the spoon from me.

"Go. I'll bring this in."

I head back to the couch, where Ellie has saved my seat and placed a brown butter cupcake beside my wine.

"I protected it," she tells me.

"From who?"

"Myself. Show some appreciation."

"Thank you for your sacrifice."

"You're welcome. It was considerable."

The Hawkeyes are still tied halfway through the second when Wolf takes a hit along the boards.

I stop peeling down the wrapper.

He gets the puck away before the contact, then pushes off and follows the play. He's skating fine. His stick stays down, and he gets back into position before their forward reaches the middle.

I still watch him all the way to the bench.

Ellie's hand touches my knee.

"He looks okay."

"I know. I just hate that side."

Natalia glances over. "Kendall's with them. She'll check him."

I nod, grateful she doesn’t make me explain why I’m suddenly less interested in my cupcake.

The camera moves to JP, and I finally take a bite.

A few minutes later, Hunter gets the puck to Wolf near the blue line. Wolf sends it toward the net, and Luka gets his stick on it.

The puck goes in.

Natalia is on her feet before the goal light finishes flashing. I get up with her, nearly catching my wineglass with my knee.

"Yes!"

Ellie grabs the glass before I can spill it.

"Apparently, we needed supervision after all."

I laugh and sit down while Natalia celebrates with Peyton. On-screen, Wolf bumps gloves with Luka, then Hunter says something that makes him grin.

I miss that grin.

I saw it this morning when we video chatted after my deliveries, before the team headed to the stadium in Utah. Apparently, that doesn’t matter.

By the third period, my shoes are tucked under the coffee table and I’ve eaten enough that I’m considering whether Ellie will judge me if I ask her to roll me to the car.

I’m leaning forward with Peyton and Natalia when JP covers the puck.

They clear it after the faceoff, and the other team barely gets back into the zone before the horn.

The room breaks into applause. Somebody behind the couch yells for a player who wasn’t on the ice, and Penelope calls it an excellent team effort.

I watch Wolf skate over to JP, then follow Hunter toward the tunnel.

Now he’ll get checked, shower, talk to the press, and get back on the team plane.

I liked watching him with everyone here. I’d like the evening even better if I could take him home.

We stay long enough to help collect plates and get the children out of the fort, and then we leave with more take out food than either of us can eat.

Wolf: You going upstairs tonight?

Most of my things are there. I could go downstairs, sleep in my own bed, and stop borrowing his life quite so thoroughly, but he’ll be home by two in the morning and I want to be there when he gets back.

Me: Unless you’ve changed the dress code again.

Wolf: No. Just checking where I get to find you in a few hours.
I tuck my sleeves over my hands and settle back in the seat.
Me: Your bed. Hurry home.

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Chapter Twenty-two

BAYLOR

Olsen is explaining why he still hasn’t asked out the waitress at Fifth Street Café when my phone lights up beside my drink.

Mom: Your dad wants to stop by tomorrow and see the kitchen before we head to the arena.

I read it, then turn my phone facedown.

Across the table, Hunter is staring at Olsen.

"You know her schedule. You know what car she drives. What exactly are you waiting to find out before you ask her to dinner?"

"Whether she has a boyfriend."

"You could ask her," Peyton suggests.

Olsen looks at her.

"Out loud," she adds. "While you’re in the same room."

Wolf laughs beside me, his hand resting on my thigh beneath the table.

"I think you’re making him nervous," he tells her.

"Good. Maybe he’ll do something."

"You flooded a woman’s apartment to get a girlfriend," Olsen says, pointing at Wolf. "I’m trying a different approach."

"Wasn’t my best opening move."

"It certainly wasn’t," I tell him.

He turns toward me, smiling, and squeezes my leg.

I smile back. I’m trying. Everybody’s here, dinner was good, and for once, I don’t have to rush home to finish an order. This should be a nice night.

Instead, I keep thinking about tomorrow.

Dan’s crew is finishing the last things in my kitchen. They’re working upstairs too, installing the faucet in Wolf’s guest bathroom and checking everything before they leave.

Six weeks ago, I wanted them done yesterday.

Now I’m hoping somebody’s ordered the wrong faucet.

Apparently, dating Wolf has made me the kind of woman who wishes plumbing problems on innocent contractors.

"You’re quiet," he says near my ear.

"I’m listening."

"To Olsen? We’ve all heard this before."

"I heard that," Olsen tells him.

"You were supposed to," Wolf fires back.

Wolf turns back to me, but this time, I don’t quite manage to hold the smile.

His hand stops moving.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Just tired."

Peyton leans forward to see my plate. "You finished with those fries?"

"Yep. Help yourself," I say, pushing them towards her.

Wolf looks at the fries, then at me.

I should’ve eaten one. Giving away potatoes is apparently how he knows something’s wrong.

"Baylor…?"

I take a drink of water before answering.

"I don’t feel very good. I think I should go home."

"What’s wrong?"

"I don’t know. I’m probably just worn out. I’ve been working on my feet nonstop lately."

He takes his hand from my leg and reaches for his phone.

"Okay. Let’s go."

"You don’t have to leave. Stay and hang out with everyone. I can get a cab."

"Not a chance. I’m taking you home. I can see them anytime."

He says it while opening the rideshare app, and I don’t have the energy to argue. I don’t particularly want to either.

Peyton tells me to text if I need anything while Wolf settles our part of the bill. Olsen promises to let us know if he speaks to Bristol before the season ends.

"Preferably before she retires," Hunter says.

"And if all else fails, flooding her apartment isn’t off the table," Wolf teases. "It works."

Wolf helps me into my coat, then puts his good arm around me as we head outside.

The cold air feels nice against my face.

"Think it was something you ate?" he asks.

"No."

"Been feeling bad all day?"

I shake my head. "I think I just need to lie down."

He looks at me for a moment, then draws me closer while we wait for the car.

I rest my head against him.

When we get back to The Commons, Wolf presses the button for his floor.

He doesn’t ask where I want to go.

I don’t correct him.

His apartment is dark except for the light over the stove. There’s a clean mug beside the coffee maker for me, and the piping bag I washed this afternoon is drying on a towel near the sink.

Tomorrow, I’m supposed to start bringing all of this downstairs.

Wolf takes my coat while I kick off my shoes.

"Want water?"

"Please."

He gets me a glass, then waits while I take a drink.

"I’m going to run you a bath."

"You don’t have to–"

But he’s already headed down the hall towards his bedroom. "Drink some water then go get comfortable," he tells me over his shoulder.

I take a big gulp and then set it back down on the kitchen island and follow after him down the hall.

He turns on the water and checks the temperature before reaching for the bubble bath I left beside his tub.

"This one?"

I nod.

He pours some beneath the faucet while I sit on the edge of his bed and take off my earrings.

My book is on the nightstand. My pajamas are folded where I left them this morning. There’s a hair tie beside his watch, and neither of us has bothered pretending all my things belong downstairs anymore.

Wolf comes back to the doorway.

"Water’s good. I’ll leave you alone for a bit."

"Thank you."

"Call me if you need anything," he says and the bends to kiss my forehead before leaving.

I wait until he’s gone to press my hands over my face.

Of all the things that could upset me tonight, apparently having a bath run for me is the one I can’t handle. I didn't even have to ask; he just knew to do it.

I undress and step into the tub, lowering myself beneath the bubbles. The water is warm enough to turn my skin pink, and I lean back, trying to convince myself that a few minutes in here will help.

Tomorrow, I get my kitchen back.

Friday, I have the biggest order I’ve ever done.

Soon, if everything goes well, I’ll have enough to apply for the shop.

These are good things. Things I’ve worked for and wanted for years.

I should be able to enjoy them without sitting in somebody else’s bathtub wishing the work would take longer.

I close my eyes.

A tear slips down my cheek.

I wipe it away, annoyed with myself, but another follows. Then I’m sitting forward with one hand over my mouth, trying not to make enough noise for Wolf to hear.

"Baylor?"

I look up.

He stands in the doorway with my water glass in his hand. His gaze catches on my face, and he sets it down before coming toward me.

"What’s wrong?"

I shake my head, wiping beneath my eyes.

He crouches beside the tub, keeping his bad arm close to his side.

"Are you hurting? Do you feel sick?"

"No."

His eyebrows draw together.

"I thought you said—"

"That I don't feel well… I know." I press my lips together, but that doesn’t stop another tear. "I’m not sick, Wolf."

He waits, looking at me.

"This is our last night and I know that was my call to have an expiration date on it."

His face changes, and I wish I hadn’t said it. We both knew what tomorrow meant. I didn’t need to drag him in here and make him look at it.

"I thought I could go out with everybody and have dinner and be normal about it." I let out a shaky laugh. "Apparently, I can’t."

He reaches for my hand.

I hold on.

For a moment, he looks down at our fingers without saying anything.

"I’m not particularly good at it either."

"You seemed fine."

"I wanted to bring you home before we ordered."

"Why didn’t you?"

"Because you were laughing with Peyton and Cammy, and I like seeing you happy." He brushes a tear from my cheek. "Then you stopped."

I turn my face into his hand.

"I don’t want to leave you."

His jaw tightens. He leans closer, resting his forehead against mine.

"Then don’t leave tonight."

"Wolf—"

"If this is our last night, Baylor, I want to spend it with you. Not across a table. Not sitting out there while you’re in here crying."

I reach for his shirt, and he leans in before I can pull him closer.

His mouth meets mine, and I hold on. I’ve spent all evening trying to prepare myself to stop doing this. Now he’s kissing me beside his bathtub, and I can’t remember a single reason that feels worth letting him go.

He starts to lift his head.

I follow, catching another kiss before he can get far.

"Give me a second," he murmurs.

I release his shirt long enough for him to take it off. He stands and finishes undressing while I push myself up from the tub. He’s already hard, his length reaching between us. He reaches an arm around my rib cage and lifts me out the tub, my bare wet legs wrapping around his middle.

My wet hands slide over his chest and around the back of his neck. He kisses me as we move toward the shower, stopping long enough to reach past me and turn on the water.

I press my mouth to his jaw while we wait for it to warm.

He turns his head, finding my lips again.

Neither of us seems willing to be the one who stops.

When we step beneath the spray, he backs me against the tile. The cold makes me gasp, and his hand settles at my waist, his hot body pressing against mine, his thick cock bobbing under me, his mouth at my throat.

He groans when I reach down under me and wrap my hand around his length. His mouth finds my breast, his lips locking around my nipple causing me to arch into him.

My hands slide into his hair. When he draws back enough to breathe, I keep him close, my forehead against his.

"Still want me here?" I ask.

His arm tightens around me.

"Baylor. I haven’t wanted you anywhere else."

That gets through every sensible thing I’ve been telling myself.

His mouth moves down my neck, and I tilt my head to give him room. Water runs over his shoulders and down my chest. His fingers slide between my thighs, and I grip the back of his neck when he touches me.

"Wolf."

He kisses me again, swallowing the rest of whatever I was trying to say.

His thumb moves slowly, deliberately, and I press closer even though there’s nowhere left to go. He knows what I like now. Knows when to keep doing exactly what he’s doing, even when I can’t manage to ask.

I look at him and try not to think about never having this again.

It doesn’t work.

A tear slips down my cheek. The water carries it away before I can wipe it, but he sees.

His mouth softens against mine.

"Stay with me," he murmurs.

"I’m here."

"I know. Keep looking at me."

I do, although it gets harder when his fingers move inside me. My breath catches, my hands tightening against his back.

"There?" he asks.

I nod, and he does it again.

My knees start to give. He draws me closer, holding me steady against the wall while I catch his mouth with mine, but I want him inside me when I come apart.

I line his head up to my center and he rocks into me, his head pressing into me as I moan out his name.

My fingers slip against his cheek. I catch his jaw and bring his mouth back to mine, unwilling to waste even the time it takes to find him again.

"You were worth it Baylor… so fucking worth it," he says as he fills me over and over until I can't hold back anymore.

I come hard against him and then he follows after, no protection, nothing between us for once.

After we both come down and catch our breath, he turns me to wash me, setting my feet on the tile shower floor. The shower water hits my back as Wolf takes a loofa and washes between my thighs slowly, and up my stomach, over my breasts. He takes his time and I’m in no rush for either of us to leave this shower.

After he finishes, he washes himself and brushes wet hair away from my face with his finger, but I catch his wrist and kiss his palm before he can lower it.

His eyes stay on mine.

I’ve never seen him look at me quite like this.

I pull him closer.

For a while, I manage to think about nothing except kissing him. The way he follows when I move. How his hand spreads against my back, keeping me close even when I pause.

Then tomorrow gets into my head again.

"I don’t know how to go downstairs tomorrow and pretend this was nothing."

Wolf draws back just far enough to look at me.

"Who said you had to?"

"We agreed—"

"I know what we agreed on." His thumb moves against my cheek. "It still wasn’t nothing. We’re not breaking apart because we grew as different people, or want different things. It’s because of circumstances that we can’t undo. This isn’t some bad breakup where we cross the street to avoid each other in the future. I think this might be the first time people started out on worse terms and became better friends at the end of it."

"We’re friends?" I ask. I hadn’t thought about it like that.

"We might have decided that this doesn’t go beyond tomorrow, but I sure as hell don’t want to go back to what we were when Rooks flooded your apartment."

I smile up at him. "No.. me either."

My eyes sting, and I kiss him before I start crying again.

He holds me closer.

There’s too much I should say. Too much we’ve both left until the night before I’m supposed to pack my things.

I open my mouth, but he rests his forehead against mine, his eyes closed.

"Just stay with me tonight, Bay."

I slide my hand behind his neck.

"I’m here."

This time, he’s the one who reaches for another kiss.

By the time Wolf turns off the shower, my fingers are wrinkled and I’ve stopped crying.

He reaches for a towel and wraps it around me, then kisses my forehead while I hold it closed.

"Do you feel better?"

I nod.

"Yeah, a little."

He gets another towel for himself while I squeeze the water from my hair. We move around each other in his bathroom the way we do every morning. I open the drawer where I've been keeping my things, and he steps aside without looking.

I put on my pajamas.

He pulls on clean sweats, then follows me into the bedroom.

I move the pillow into place for his shoulder before getting under the covers. He settles beside me and reaches for me as soon as he's comfortable.

I tuck myself against his good side.

For a while, neither of us speaks.

Then I look up at him.

"I should get my things out of your apartment tomorrow, huh?"

His eyes come to mine.

"Why?"

"Because that's when we said…"

I glance toward the bathroom, where my toothbrush is still beside his.

Wolf follows my gaze, then looks back at me.

"Our agreement about dating is over. That doesn't mean our friendship has to be."

"I know."

"I still care about you, Baylor. I'm not going to stop because your kitchen's finished."

I press my lips together.

He brushes his thumb along my cheek.

"Move your things back at your own pace, okay? You've got the gala on Friday. Leave whatever you need here until you're done."

"And the rest?"

"Your slippers aren't bothering me."

I give him a small smile.

"Neither is your toothbrush," he adds.

"You make this very difficult."

"Yeah. You mentioned."

I settle against him again, resting my hand on his stomach.

Nobody's angry. He hasn't asked for his hoodie back. I don't have to put all my things in a bag and leave before morning.

It should make this easier.

Instead, I’m lying beside a man I still want, trying to figure out how we’re supposed to become friends when I already know how it feels to come home to him.

"Can we not talk about tomorrow anymore?" I ask.

Wolf draws the blanket over my shoulder.

"Absolutely."

I close my eyes.

His hand keeps moving slowly over my back, and I stay right where I am.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

BAYLOR

Dad opens a cabinet, closes it, then opens the one beside it.

"Those are soft-close," I tell him.

"Very nice. I like them."

Mom stands beside the island with her coffee, looking at the new countertops. There’s still a toolbox near the oven, and one of Dan’s guys is beneath the sink, finishing something I couldn’t explain even if my life depended on it.

"Careful of his feet," I tell Dad as he moves toward the drawers.

The man beneath the sink lifts one hand.

"Thanks."

"Sorry," Dad says, stepping back.

Mom runs her fingers along the edge of the counter.

"It looks good, sweetheart."

"It does," my dad agrees.

And it does. The cabinets are installed. The floor is dry, the lights are straight, and there’s nothing hanging from my ceiling that shouldn’t be there.

I spent six weeks imagining how relieved I’d feel standing here. I’m trying to find some of that now.

Dad looks toward the oven.

"They tested everything?"

"Dan’s going through it all before he signs off today. They finished Wolf’s bathroom yesterday."

He makes a noise that tells me that he doesn’t want to even hear the name ‘Wolf’. Mom gives him a look over her coffee as if to remind him to be nice.

"At least your kitchen is nearly finished," she says.

"Good. Now you can get out of his apartment," my dad grumbles.

I glance over at my father. He’s inspecting the drawer beside the oven, apparently unaware that he’s just made my stomach hurt.

"He gave me somewhere to work."

"I know. I didn’t like you depending on him," my dad says.

"I wasn’t depending on him. I was using his kitchen."

"Because he ruined yours."

"Acutally Carson Rooksdale is the one that threw the party. Call him up to complain if you’d like."

Mom sets her cup down.

"Your father’s glad you have your space back, Baylor. That’s all that matters. We shouldn't have to hear anything about Wolf again, right?" she asks, sending me a look when my father isn’t watching that practically says, no more Ziegler jerseys.

Yeah… Got it mom.

Dad closes the drawer.

"Beau called while we were coming up. He wants us there early. Said he can meet us before he has to get ready."

"I’ll meet you at the arena."

"You aren’t coming with us?" Mom asks.

"I need to get some things from upstairs first. Ellie’s meeting me outside."

Dad nods, reaching for his jacket.

Mom hugs me before they leave. She holds on a little longer than usual, then draws back with her hands still on my arms.

"Everything okay?"

"Yep. Just a lot to get done."

Her eyes search mine, and for a second, I think she’s going to ask what happened with Wolf. Then Dad opens the door, and she lets go.

Thank God. I can barely explain it to myself.

Wolf’s apartment is quiet when I unlock the door.

He left for the rink while my parents were still downstairs. We said goodbye this morning. Several times, actually. None of them made leaving his bed any easier.

I leave my bag on the island and look around.

There’s a mug beside the coffee maker. Mine. Wolf’s is in the dishwasher, where I put it after breakfast.

I start with the cupcake liners because I know where those belong. Then the food coloring, the spare piping bags, and the unopened bag of powdered sugar. Everything goes into the bin I brought up on my first morning here.

The personal things can stay. My slippers, my toothbrush, the pajamas in his drawer. I need another day before I’m ready to take away every sign that I’ve been here.

I carry the bin to the door, then take my bag down the hall.

The bedroom is exactly how we left it. His side of the bed is made badly, one corner of the comforter tucked beneath the pillow supporting his shoulder. Mine is smoother because I fixed it while he was brushing his teeth.

I collect my book from the nightstand and the stack of clothes I folded earlier, tucking them into my bag. Then I turn toward the chair.

His jersey is hanging over the back.

I pick it up.

Ziegler stretches across the shoulders, and I smooth my hand over the letters before turning it around.

I wore this voluntarily the last time.

I wanted to sit in his seats. I wanted him to look up and see me there. When he pointed at me after that clean hit, I nearly embarrassed myself in

front of an entire section of people by jumping up and down.

Tonight, I’m sitting with my parents.

My brother’s name will be on the other team’s jerseys, and Dad will have plenty to say every time Wolf steps onto the ice.

I hold the jersey against myself for a second.

Then I put it back on the chair.

I don’t know whether he expects me to take it.

I don’t know whether I want it downstairs, where I’ll see it every time I open my closet.

For now, it can stay here.

My phone buzzes while I grab the last few things like bubble bath that I know won’t go to use if I leave it.

The notification is from the group chat with Dan.

Dan: Final paperwork—

I turn the phone facedown on the dresser before reading the rest.

I know what it says but I’m not ready to face the finality of it yet. I can open it later.

Ellie is waiting near the arena entrance when I get there, checking her phone while people move around her toward security.

Ellie looks up and waves, then her gaze drops to my black sweater.

She doesn’t comment on it.

"How are you doing?"

"I’ll be better after tonight."

She puts her phone away.

"Once everybody knows where they’re supposed to be, and I’m downstairs again, it’ll be easier," I tell her.

"Do you want me to agree with that?"

"Yes, please. That would be great. You might also have to remind me which team I’m supposed to be cheering for."

She gives me a look.

"I can tell you your sweater’s cute."

"That’s a great start."

She hugs me, and I hold on for a second before stepping back.

"Thanks for sitting with us."

"I’m happy to."

"My dad’s going to complain about Wolf."

"I’m prepared for ‘ol daddy Fairbanks to bring out the scowl on our boy. It’s going to be okay though," she says while rubbing my arm and we walk toward security. "Wolf is a big boy. He can handle it."

I nod. I know she’s right. Wolf can probably handle it. But can I?

I should be rooting for my brother. This is his dream to be playing in the NHL and he’s finally here. I should be wearing his jersey, buying a Blue Devils foam finger, and being the most annoying super fan in that place. I should be… but my heart isn’t in it.

I wore black, like it’s a damn funeral. I hadn’t considered the relevance of my choice in the hoodie I chose until right now.

Beau: You here yet?

I type back while Ellie pulls out her phone and scans both of our tickets for the security guy.

Me: Coming in now.

Beau: See you soon.

I put the phone in my bag.

"He’s excited," I tell her.

"To see you?"

"Yeah."

Ellie’s expression softens. She knows how much I love my brother and my family. She knows that not being ecstatic for this game is killing me.

She slips her arm through mine.

"Come on. Let’s get you inside."

We find Mom and Dad already in their seats. Dad stands to let us past, wearing Beau’s jersey beneath his open jacket.

"There she is."

Mom moves her bag so I can sit beside her. Ellie takes the seat on my other side while Dad points toward the ice.

"Your brother said he’d look for us during warmups."

"I’ll wave."

"You should’ve worn his jersey," Dad says.

"I’m fine in this."

Mom glances at me, then reaches into her bag.

"Cotton candy?" she offers.

I take it because it gives me something to do besides answer.

Across the arena, I can see the section where Wolf’s seats are.

I look away before I start searching for the exact row.

Ellie leans closer while Dad explains something about the standings to Mom.

"You ready for this?"

I keep my eyes on the ice.

"No."

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Chapter Twenty-Four

WOLF

I look at my seats before I remember she won't be in them.

Habit, apparently. The last few home games and I've already trained myself to look for Baylor before I've taken a shot in warmups.

I skate past the crease, turn, and look toward the visitors' family section instead.

There she is.

Black sweater. Hair down. Ellie on one side, her mother on the other. Her dad is standing at the end of the row in Beau's jersey, looking toward the other half of the ice.

Baylor sees me looking and lifts her hand a little. I raise my glove before her father turns around.

He follows her gaze. His expression doesn’t improve when he finds me.

Her mother looks from him to Baylor, then down at her lap.

Excellent. Dinner with the family should be a fucking delight.

I’ve been thinking about asking them since I left the apartment this morning. Longer than that, if I’m honest. Last night, I held Baylor while she cried over something neither of us wanted to end, then told her she could leave her toothbrush in my bathroom.

Very generous of me.

What I should’ve told her was that I love her.

That I have no idea whether I’ll be playing next season, or where, but I’d like to figure it out with her still answering my calls.

Instead, I kissed her goodbye this morning and went to the rink.

Hunter sends a puck toward me. I stop it with my stick before it gets past.

"Planning to participate?"

"Deeply considering it."

"Well then, don’t take too much longer or you’ll miss the entire game."

I take the shot, then follow him toward the boards.

Across the ice, Beau is talking to one of his teammates. He looks good. Stronger than he was in college, quicker than the last time we played them.

I know how much work it took him to get here. I also know better than to expect him to appreciate hearing that from me.

He catches my eye near center ice as we circle back.

"Good to see you getting these minutes," I tell him.

His gaze drops to the Hawkeyes logo on my chest, then comes back up.

"No thanks to you."

He skates away before I can answer.

I let him.

It’s not a great start but it’s the first words we’ve had in six years. If I want Baylor, I’m going to have to get him to talk a little more than that.

Beau catches me against the glass four minutes into the first.

I’ve already moved the puck, but it isn’t the latest hit I’ve ever taken. My shoulder takes most of it, and I push off the boards with my good arm before turning back toward the play.

He follows close enough for me to hear him.

"Still standing?"

"Keep skating," I tell him.

He does, heading after Hunter.

I get back into position.

We’re both here to win a hockey game. I can do that without turning every hit into an argument, even if he’d prefer otherwise.

The next one comes halfway through the period.

I collect the puck behind our net and send it up the boards. Beau comes through on my bad side, driving me into the glass hard enough to knock the air out of me.

Pain runs from my shoulder down my arm.

I swear, get my stick back on the ice, and follow the puck.

He knows.

Everybody who’s watched enough film knows which side I’ve been protecting. That doesn’t make it pleasant when he chooses it.

Hunter looks at me when we reach the bench.

"You good?"

I nod. "Yeah."

He glances toward San Diego’s bench.

"He’s finishing everything tonight."

"So am I."

Theo comes closer, and I tell him where I took the contact. He asks a few questions, watches me move the arm, then tells me to speak up if anything changes.

I know the instructions. I’m getting very fucking tired of needing them.

We finish the first period tied.

Haynes talks about turnovers. Slade talks about their center cheating on faceoffs. I sit through both with my arm supported and an ice pack against my shoulder.

My phone stays in my bag.

Dan’s message is still there.

Both apartments finished. Final checks done.

Baylor has her kitchen back.

I wonder whether she’s taken her toothbrush downstairs yet. Which is not what I should be thinking about right now. There’s only two more games left in the regular season, we need this win to clinch a spot in the playoffs.

Early in the second, I get the puck along the boards near the benches and send it ahead to Hunter.

Beau hits me after it’s gone.

I see him coming just in time to turn, but he drives through me anyway. My bad shoulder slams into the boards, and the glass rattles above my head. For a second, I can’t get any air.

"Fuck."

My stick drops from one hand. I brace against the boards with the other, waiting for the pain to ease enough to push off.

The whistle goes.

An official is already coming toward us, his arm raised.

Beau looks at him. "He had the puck."

"Not when you hit him. Two minutes."

Beau turns back toward me before skating to the box.

"Getting careful in your old age?"

I keep my good hand on the boards until he’s gone.

There are several things I’d like to do about that hit. None of them involve skating quietly to the bench, but that’s where I go.

I look toward Baylor on the way.

She’s on her feet, one hand pressed over her mouth. Her eyes stay on me as I reach the bench, and I try to straighten before she sees how carefully I’m holding my arm.

Too late.

Her face tightens, and she turns away, shaking her head at something Ellie says. Ellie puts an arm around her shoulders.

Hunter moves over to give me room.

"That was fucking late."

"I noticed."

Theo is beside me before I’ve finished sitting down.

"Talk to me."

I look back toward the stands, but Baylor’s face is still turned into Ellie’s shoulder.

"That one hurt."

By the end of the second, we’re down by one and I’ve had enough of Beau’s shoulder for the evening. I’ve also had enough of thinking about where Baylor’s sleeping tonight while I’m supposed to be tracking his fucking line.

I get checked, answer Theo honestly, then head into the room.

Hunter finds me before I sit down.

"Baylor’s by the family corridor."

I look at him.

"She asked one of the staff to get you."

I glance toward Haynes.

"Make it quick," he says. "Then get back here."

Baylor is standing near the access door with her pass turned backward against her sweater.

She straightens when she sees me.

"How’s your shoulder?"

"Still working."

"That’s not what I asked. You could barely push yourself off the boards."

"Theo checked it."

"I saw." Her eyes move toward my arm before returning to my face. "He keeps hitting that side."

"You know why."

"Yes, I do. I’m going to talk to him."

"About the game?"

"About being an asshole."

Despite everything, I smile.

"There’s my girl. But you can’t, you know that. It’s just a game and he’s playing smart. He knows where my weakness is."

"Your shoulder."

"No… you. He knows I’m not going to fight back because you’re here."

Her face changes just enough to make me wish I’d said it somewhere we had more than a few minutes.

I step closer.

"I saw the text. Dan and the crew are done."

"Yeah."

"You open it?"

She looks down at her pass.

"No. I’m not ready."

I nod.

For a second, neither of us speaks. There are voices down the hall, a cart rattling somewhere behind the service doors. In a few minutes, I have to get back on the ice.

Last night, I let the clock make my decisions.

I’m done with that.

"Baylor, I can’t do this."

She looks up quickly. "What do you mean you can’t do this? Can’t do what?"

I take her hand before she can step away.

"I can’t go home tonight and pretend I’m fine with you being downstairs. I’m not."

Her fingers close around mine.

"Wolf—"

"I know they hate me. I know I earned a lot of that. But I have to try."

"Try what?"

"Would you let me ask your parents to dinner tomorrow night?"

She stares at me.

"So we can talk," I continue. "I can apologize. They can ask me whatever the hell they want. I’m not expecting them to forget what happened just because I buy them dinner but I have to try something."

"You’d do that?"

"To keep you from moving downstairs, I’d try anything."

"My dad might not even let you finish, but my mom knows. I think I might be able to get her to understand… maybe. If I could get her on our side, she could help at least."

"We’ll go somewhere expensive where your dad can’t make a scene. He’ll have to hear me out."

A small laugh escapes her, but her eyes are wet.

"I’m serious," I tell her.

"I know. I just…" She looks down at our hands, then back at me. "They aren’t going to see you the way I do."

"Maybe not tomorrow."

"And Boston?"

"I don’t know."

She swallows.

"I don’t know what happens with my shoulder," I say. "I don’t know if Seattle will sign me again. I wish I had something better to give you than that."

"You don’t have to—"

"I love you, Baylor."

She goes still.

There. Finally, I said it.

I should’ve said it in my kitchen. In bed last night. This morning when she stood beside the coffee maker wearing my shirt and pretending she was only tired.

I’m saying it now.

"I need to try," I tell her. "And I need you to know why."

She steps into me so quickly that I barely have time to put my good hand at her waist.

Then she’s holding the front of my jersey and kissing me.

I bend toward her, pulling her closer. Her fingers tighten in the fabric, and for the first time all fucking day, I stop thinking about the clock.

When she draws back, she keeps her forehead against mine.

"Wolf, I love–"

"What the fuck?"

Baylor freezes. We both turn to find Beau is standing several feet down the corridor, his helmet in one hand.

He looks at her hands on my jersey.

Then at mine on her waist.

"Get your fucking hands off her."

Baylor turns before I can answer.

"Beau."

I let my hand fall, but I stay beside her.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asks her.

"We need to talk."

"No shit, we need to talk. You told me he wasn’t harassing you."

"Don’t speak to her like that," I say.

"Mind your own business Ziegler, you’re next."

Baylor steps between us. "Stop it! Both of you! We’re not doing it like this."

He laughs once, without any humor.

"How long?"

She draws a breath.

"A few weeks."

His eyes come to me.

I’ve had men look at me like that before. Usually, I’ve given them a reason in the last thirty seconds.

This one’s been waiting six years.

"You’ve been fucking my sister?"

"Don’t talk about her like that."

"Don’t talk to him like I’m not standing here," Baylor says, stepping between our lines of sight. "I’m the one you should be asking."

"You were in his apartment to bake."

"I was."

"And all that shit about hardly seeing him?"

"I should’ve told you. I know Beau. I know you hate him but–"

"But you kissing and making up with the one person I hate most."

"I’m my own person Beau. I can’t avoid anyone you don’t like. And you’re playing now."

He looks at her for a moment.

"Do Mom and Dad know?"

"Mom knows."

That lands.

His jaw tightens, and Baylor reaches toward him.

"Please. We can talk after the game."

He steps back before she touches him.

"I need to get ready."

"Beau."

He looks past her at me.

"Stay away from her. I’ll see you on the ice."

Then he turns and heads down the corridor.

Baylor starts after him, but the door swings closed before she reaches it.

She stops with her hand still out.

I go to her.

"Bay."

"I should’ve told him."

"Yeah. You should’ve."

She turns toward me, eyes shining.

"But that doesn’t give him the right to speak to you like that," I add.

She nods, wiping beneath one eye.

A staff member appears at the far end of the corridor and gestures toward the room.

I look back at Baylor.

"I have to go."

"I know."

"We’re not done talking."

"I know," she says again, taking my hand.

I kiss her once more.

She holds on until I have to step away.

Hunter is waiting beside my stall.

"What happened?"

"Beau saw us."

His expression changes.

"How much of ‘us’?"

"Enough."

"Fuck."

"Leave it alone if anything happens out on the ice, I got it. I have a feeling we’ll be settling something tonight."

He looks at me for a second, then nods.

I pull on my helmet and get my gloves.

There’s a game to finish.

After that, I’m finding Baylor.

Beau doesn’t look at me during the faceoff.

He waits until we’re moving.

"Stay the fuck away from my sister."

I keep my eyes on the puck.

"That’s her decision."

He cuts across behind me, close enough that his shoulder clips mine.

"You heard me."

The play moves into our zone. I turn, track the winger, and get my stick into the passing lane. Hunter collects the loose puck and sends it out.

Beau follows me toward the boards.

"I’m not doing this with you out here," I tell him.

"Then you should’ve kept your hands off her."

The whistle goes at the other end.

I turn toward him. "I love your sister."

His expression hardens. "No you don’t. You only care about yourself."

"I’m sorry for what happened six years ago. I’ve been sorry every fucking day since."

"You think that fixes it?"

"No," I say. It doesn’t, I know that.

"Then stay away from her."

"I can’t promise you that."

He shoves me. I move backward, keeping my gloves down.

"She gets to decide if she doesn’t want to be with me, not you."

He drives me into the glass.

My bad shoulder hits first. Pain flashes down my arm, and before I can get my footing, he’s got a fist in my jersey.

"Beau. Enough," I say behind clenched teeth.

His glove drops and the first punch catches my mouth.

I taste blood and turn my face away from the next one, trying to get my good hand between us.

I could hit him. I know exactly where he’s open. He’s a good defender—mean too—but I’ve won more fights than he’s even started. I could beat the shit out of him if I wanted to but that wouldn’t get me any closer to being with her.

All I can think about is Baylor standing in that corridor, asking him to listen.

I grab his wrist instead.

"Stop."

He yanks free and swings again, connecting with my eye socket this time.

There’s a whistle. Somebody yells my name.

Beau hauls on my jersey as I try to turn out of the corner. My skate catches, and for a second, all my weight goes the wrong way.

My injured arm is trapped between us. Then we hit the ice.

The pain is immediate and so sharp that everything else disappears.

I can’t breathe.

I can’t get the arm out from beneath me.

Hands are pulling at jerseys. Hunter is shouting, an official is over us, and Beau’s weight finally comes off me.

I stay where I am. I know well enough that I’m injured. Too injured to move without help or it could be worse.

"Wolf?"

Theo drops beside me.

"Don’t move."

"I’m not fucking trying to."

Except I am. Instinct, stupidity, whatever the hell it is, I try to draw the arm closer.

The pain sears through my body, nearly makes me sick.

"Okay," Theo says, watching my face. "Leave it. We’ve got you."

The crowd has gone quieter. That’s worse than the shouting.

I stare at the ice while he asks questions. I can feel my fingers. I know where I am. My shoulder hurts so badly that answering anything else feels unreasonable.

Someone brings the stretcher.

"No," I start.

"Wolf," Theo says. "Let us do this."

I close my eyes.

The next time I open them, Kendall is beside me.

Her expression tells me enough.

"Try to relax your arm," Kendall says as Theo starts cutting off my jersey.

I laugh, once, because that’s a ridiculous fucking request.

"I know," she says. "Do what you can."

The treatment room door opens and closes around us. Someone takes my skates. Someone else asks about medication, and Kendall answers while checking my hand again.

"What happened to Beau?"

"Game misconduct," Theo says. "He’s off."

"Is he hurt?"

"They’re checking him."

I stare at the ceiling.

Kendall gets something started for the pain, but it doesn’t change the way she’s looking at my shoulder.

"You’re going to the hospital now. We need images and an orthopedic assessment."

"And then?"

"I’ve called Boston. Your surgeon wants the scans as soon as we have them. His office is making room for you tomorrow if that’s what the assessment supports."

"Tomorrow."

"We’re arranging the transfer. Hospital first."

I look at her.

"What about the playoffs?"

She doesn’t answer quickly enough.

"Wolf, you’re not going back on the ice tonight."

"I didn’t ask about tonight."

"You’re done Wolf. Season’s over, and we need to work fast if you ever want to play hockey or lift your unborn children onto your shoulders. Do you understand how important this is?"

I turn my head away.

I knew surgery was coming. I’d accepted that much. I had a date in Boston, a father making plans for the summer, and a list of things I needed to do before I left.

I wanted the rest of the season.

I wanted more time.

Apparently, I’ve been asking for a lot of that lately.

The ambulance is waiting in the rain.

They’ve supported my arm and given me enough medication that I can breathe without swearing every time the stretcher moves. Kendall walks beside me, speaking to one of the paramedics.

There’s another conversation happening about scans and transport and who’s bringing my bag.

I don’t care where my fucking bag is.

"Wolf!"

I turn my head.

Baylor comes through the doors at a run, with Ellie close behind her.

She’s not wearing her coat.

Her hair is already getting wet by the time she reaches me.

"What did they say?"

"Hospital. Then Boston."

"Tonight?"

"As soon as they can get me there."

She looks at Kendall, who steps closer.

"We’ll know more after the images. I’ll make sure you have the information."

Baylor nods, but she’s barely looking at her now.

She takes my good hand.

"I’m so sorry."

"You didn’t do it."

"I should’ve told him. I should’ve—"

"Baylor."

She stops.

Rain catches on her eyelashes. She wipes at her face with her free hand, then looks down at my shoulder.

I told her I loved her less than an hour ago.

I was going to ask her parents to dinner.

Now her brother’s been thrown out of a game, I’m on a stretcher, and she’s standing between an ambulance and the family waiting inside.

"I was wrong," I tell her.

Her eyes come back to mine.

"About what?"

"Thinking I could fix it over dinner."

"Wolf, don’t."

"They’re not going to forgive me."

"You don’t know that."

I look at the doors behind her. She does too. Even if neither of us want to admit it.

Six years ago, she waited outside an arena to tell me what I’d done to her family.

I remember her face. How frightened she was beneath all that anger. I’d hurt the person she loved, and nothing I said was going to make it better.

Tonight, she’s looking at me again in a rainy parking lot, drenched again, but she’s tearing up for a different reason. Both times, I’m the one making her cry.

I never wanted her caught in the middle of this.

"I won’t make you choose," I say.

"You’re not. They’ll come around, you said so yourself."

"Then listen to me."

Her hand tightens around mine.

I want to.

I want to tell her to come with me. Get on the plane. Leave everybody else to sort out what they think while I keep the only good thing I’ve managed not to fuck up until tonight.

But she has the gala on Friday. The shop. A family she’s been trying to hold on to while I kept finding reasons for her to stay upstairs.

"I love you," I tell her.

Her face crumples.

"Then don’t do this."

"I’m proud of you too. You know that?"

"Wolf."

"The gala. Your shop. All of it."

"Stop talking like you’re never going to see me again."

The paramedic moves closer.

"We need to get you inside."

"Give me a second."

Baylor bends toward me, and I lift my good hand to her face.

She kisses me before I can say anything else.

I hold her there for as long as they let me.

When she pulls back, her forehead stays against mine.

"I’ll come to the hospital."

"Bay, don’t pick me."

"I’m not your mother, Wolf. You’re worth choosing."

The minute she says it, I know she’s right. There’s always been a part of me afraid to ask her to choose because I was scared of not being chosen… again.

But I’ve already hurt her enough. I can’t let her lose her family. She’ll never forgive me for that, and Beau will never forgive me for everything else.

Ellie steps closer when they start moving me. Baylor walks beside the stretcher until she runs out of room, her fingers holding mine until the last possible second.

Then I have to let go.

"You told me you loved me back there."

"I do. Which is why you need to open the new shop. You deserve this. Go make it happen."

Six years ago, I left an arena knowing I’d hurt her.

Tonight, I do it again.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

BAYLOR

Beau calls while I’m pressing the Second Shift Sports Foundation logo into a circle of fondant.

I push too hard, and the stamp goes straight through. I was doing just fine until my brother started calling nonstop over the last five minutes.

I pull it free, look at the ruined circle, then turn my phone to silent.

"You can block him for the morning," Ellie says from the other side of the table.

"I don’t want to block him. I just want him to get the hint that I am not going to be taking his calls right now."

"Then silence him."

"I did. It still lights up."

She holds out her hand.

I give her the phone before I start crying over a piece of sugar.

Ellie changes something in the settings, then puts it back beside me.

"You'll still get everyone else."

It's not exactly what I want. I've never blocked my brother before, but I have a lot to do today to get the gala order done. I need a clear mind which is already full of Wolf and his shoulder.

"Thank you."

She looks at the fondant stuck to my stamp.

"Want me to do those for a while?"

"No. I can do this. I just need to stop thinking about last night."

I peel off the ruined piece and add it to the little pile beside my elbow.

Apparently, I can do most of these.

Behind us, a mixer starts up. Ellie's head baker is working through my cupcake recipes with two people from her crew. They've already got the next batches lined up, ingredients weighed into bowls and trays ready beside the ovens.

That was supposed to be my job.

Then I lost count of the flour while measuring. Twice.

The second time, Ellie took the bowl out of my hands and gave me something I could do sitting down.

I'm a professional baker who apparently requires supervision to count cups today.

Not ideal timing.

A couple other bakers are dipping the cake pops and sprinkling with the foundation's color scheme.

Tomorrow, I'm responsible for the gala desserts. Saturday, I'm supposed to meet the property manager, sign the paperwork, and get the keys to my shop.

Kendall texted this morning. Wolf made it to Boston, his dad is with him, and they've taken him into surgery.

I know where he is. I know he isn't alone.

I still want to hear his voice, and I can't shake the feeling that I should be there, waiting for him to get out. We're not together anymore, even though he told me that he loved me last night. He told me that I needed to do this… so I'm doing this, but I hate that it feels wrong to be on the wrong coast. He's so far away.

I wipe my hands before picking up my phone and opening our messages.

Me: Did you get there okay?

Me: I know you’re probably busy with the doctors. Just let me know when you can.

Me: Thinking about you.

The last one has been sitting there for almost an hour.

I press his name and call again.

Straight to voicemail.

His voice fills my ear, and somehow just the sound of his voice soothes me a little. I close my eyes before ending the call. I’ve already left a message. He doesn’t need six more waiting when he turns his phone on.

I just want him to call me as soon as he gets out of surgery.

"Still off?" Ellie asks.

"Yeah."

"Kendall said she’d let you know when she hears something."

"I know."

"She will, Baylor."

I put the phone down.

"I just hate waiting."

Her expression softens, and I look back at the fondant before she can come around the table and hug me. I won’t get anything done if she does.

I roll the next piece out, check the thickness, and cut another circle.

His dad will be there when he wakes up.

That should help. He’ll have the person he calls when Sprinkles won’t start, the person who knows how to get an answer out of him when he’s being stubborn.

I wish I had his dad’s number.

I wish I’d asked for it when Wolf told me about the heart attack. Or when we talked about Boston in bed. Or any of the dozen times I stood in his kitchen while he was on the phone with him.

At the time, getting his dad’s number would’ve felt like assuming too much. Now I’m considering how many auto shops there could possibly be in Boston. Probably more than I have time to call with one thousand cupcakes and cake pops to bake and decorate.

I lift the stamp carefully. This time the circle turns out fine.

I set it beside the others and pick up the brush for the edible glitter.

I’m glad his dad is there. I’m glad somebody who loves him will be waiting when he wakes up.

I told him he was worth choosing. He still told me to build my shop, as though I couldn’t want that and him at the same time.

I press the brush into the glitter harder than I mean to, then set it down before I ruin another decoration.

Ellie checks the back door when someone knocks, leaving it closed until she’s looked through the glass.

It’s a delivery.

She lets the driver in, signs for the boxes, then locks up behind him.

"You don’t have to keep doing that," I tell her when she comes back.

"Yes, I do. Beau is the type to just show up."

"He might not come."

She rolls her eyes."He’s called you four times since you got here. But don’t worry, he’s not getting through me if he tries to show up to talk to you."

I look toward my phone.

Beau sent a message after I ignored the last call.

Please let me explain.

I haven’t answered.

I watched him hit Wolf after the whistle. I watched Wolf keep his gloves down. Whatever Beau wants to explain, I’m not ready to hear it while I’m still waiting to find out what it cost Wolf.

He was ejected from the game. This morning, he got a two-game suspension.

I wish it were more.

Then I feel awful for thinking it, which makes me angry all over again.

The Hawkeyes won. One game left in the regular season, and they’ve clinched their playoff spot.

Wolf should be celebrating with them.

Instead, he’s in surgery, and I’m ignoring calls from the brother who put him there.

I spent years defending Beau. Sitting through appointments, listening when he was frustrated, wanting him back on the ice as badly as he wanted it himself.

Now I can’t look at his name on my phone.

"I should’ve told him," I say.

Ellie stops opening a package of cake boards.

"That doesn’t make what he did your fault."

"He found out by seeing us together. I could’ve at least warned him."

"You could have told him you were dating Wolf. You didn’t need to warn him not to attack somebody."

"I know, you’re right."

She waits, and I turn the brush between my fingers.

"If I’d told him before the game, maybe he would’ve had time to calm down."

"Or he could’ve called you, yelled, and then gone out there and done exactly the same thing. You don’t know."

I hate that I can’t be sure Beau wouldn’t have done it anyway.

Ellie comes around the table and takes the brush from me before I snap it.

"You should’ve told him. Okay. That part is yours. What he did on the ice is his."

I look up at her.

"Wolf wanted to ask my parents to dinner."

She goes still.

"Tonight. He wanted to take them to dinner tonight and apologize. Let them ask him questions." My voice catches, and I clear my throat. "He knew it would be awful. He wanted to do it anyway."

"He wanted more with you."

"He told me he loved me."

Ellie puts the brush down.

"I was going to tell him too. Then Beau showed up, and everything…" I shake my head. "I didn’t even get to finish."

She reaches for me.

This time, I let her.

"I should be there," I say against her shoulder.

"I know you want to be."

"He was scared of the surgery before any of this happened."

She holds me a little tighter and I close my eyes.

Last night, he told me he wouldn’t make me choose. I told him he was worth choosing. I don’t know how to make it clearer than that. He let go anyway, like he had to in order to protect my dream.

And I don’t know how to be angry about it while I’m this worried about him.

When Ellie steps back, she gets me a tissue and moves the finished decorations farther from my side of the table.

"Thanks," I tell her.

"I’m protecting the merchandise."

I laugh a little, wipe my face, then get up to wash my hands.

There’s work I can do.

For now, that has to be enough.

I’ve finished another tray of decorations when the front kitchen door swings open.

Peyton comes through carrying two coffees. Natalia is behind her with Isla, and all three stop when they see me.

I look toward Ellie.

"What are you guys doing here?"

"Ellie said you could use some help with tomorrow’s order," Peyton says, putting the coffees on the clear counter. "So here we are."

"You don’t have to—"

"Already parked and paid the meter," Natalia tells me. "You’re stuck with us."

Though I know that’s her way of saying that they’re staying even if I try to kick them out.

Isla sets her bag beside Ellie’s office door.

"Show me where to wash my hands."

I look at all of them, then at the table full of fondant circles.

At Penelope’s, I wondered whether I’d still be invited to their game nights once I wasn’t Wolf’s girlfriend.

Today, they’ve come looking for me.

"I don’t even know what to give you first."

Ellie points them toward the sink.

"Wash up. Baylor will explain."

While they’re drying their hands, Natalia comes closer.

"Luka’s waiting for an update too. If he hears anything before you do, I’ll tell you."

Relief hits me harder than I expect. "Thank you. Really, Natalia." I swallow, trying to keep my voice steady. "I hate not knowing."

"I know." She squeezes my arm, then looks at the trays. "All right. What can I ruin?"

"Hopefully nothing. I’ve already handled that part."

I show them how lightly to dust the stamped circles so the logo stays clear. Peyton practices over a spare piece before moving on to a finished one. Isla starts cutting more circles, and Natalia takes over arranging them on the drying trays.

Within ten minutes, the pile I thought would take me all day is shrinking.

I check my phone.

Still nothing.

I put my phone beside my notebook where I'll see it light up, then reach for another piece of fondant.

Hunter and Olsen arrive after practice while Ellie's crew is pulling another batch from the ovens.

"Where do you want us?" Hunter asks.

"Box duty." Ellie points toward the clear table and the stacks of cardboard beside it. "Wash your hands first."

While she gets them started, her head baker hands me a cooled chocolate caramel cupcake to taste.

It's exactly right. Apparently, remembering how much flour you've added makes a difference.

"These are great," I tell her.

She smiles and brings over the first tray.

Ellie grabs a piping bag and takes the spot beside me. We frost while the girls add the decorative wrappers and fondant toppers. The guys pack everything into boxes, check the labels, and carry them into the walk-in fridge for tomorrow.

Once we get going, there's barely a pause between trays. Ellie's crew keeps baking, the finished boxes keep disappearing, and the order that felt impossible this morning starts looking manageable.

I glance at my phone, then back at the cupcake in my hand.

He'll call when he can. When surgery's over and he's awake enough to talk.

I have to believe that.

Ellie nudges another tray toward me.

"Ready?"

I adjust the piping bag in my hand.

"Yep. Keep them coming."

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Chapter Twenty-Six

BAYLOR

By the time Ellie backs the van into the loading space, I've checked my phone three times since we turned onto the street.

Nothing.

Wolf is out of surgery. Penelope called this morning to tell me Slade spoke to his dad yesterday. The surgery took longer than expected, and there was more damage than they'd seen on his previous scan. They won't know how well his shoulder will recover until he's further along, but he's resting.

Apparently, Kendall was right to get him transferred so quickly.

I'm trying to concentrate on the resting part. The rest makes me want to get on a plane.

"Ready?" Ellie asks, putting the van in park.

"For unloading or the entire evening?"

"Let’s start with unloading."

"Right, that’s a good idea. I’m nervous, can you tell?"

"You’re going to be great, and the desserts are amazing."

I tuck my phone into my pocket and climb out. We rented the catering van because Sprinkles couldn’t hold everything in one trip. Wolf got her running better, but he couldn’t make her bigger.

We open the back doors, and I check the boxes before releasing the straps. Everything is still where we put it. After the number of things I imagined going wrong on the drive here, I’m almost disappointed in myself for wasting the energy.

"Tell me which ones."

I turn to find Hunter coming toward us in a tuxedo, Peyton beside him in a gorgeous figure hugging dress that looks amazing on her. Luka, Natalia, Olsen, and Isla follow them across the loading area in similar fashion.

Just like Wolf said, the team would be here to show up for me and I couldn’t be more grateful to each of them. Each start grabbing boxes to take in. Ellie gets the cart unfolded, and within a few minutes, we’re heading inside with everything I spent yesterday and today worrying we wouldn’t finish.

The display takes forty minutes to put together. It would’ve taken much longer without everyone carrying things in, holding doors, and finding the extra table the venue promised me.

By the time the last cake pop is in place, I’ve stopped checking my phone long enough to remember that I know how to do this.

Each cupcake flavor has its own stand and a little card in front. The cake pops are arranged at either end, and the foundation logos catch the light without looking as though someone assaulted them with a glitter cannon.

Considering yesterday, that’s an accomplishment.

Ellie steps back beside me. "Look at that."

"Does the left side look higher?" I ask, reaching to straighten a card.

"The left side is higher. That’s how you arranged it."

"Right."

She catches my hand before I can move anything else. "It looks beautiful. Leave it alone."

I lower my hand and look at the whole display.

My business name is on the sign beside it. Beyond the tables, there are five hundred place settings, a stage, and a screen showing photographs of athletes the foundation has helped.

I did this.

With a lot of help and two flour incidents I would prefer everyone forget, but I did it.

"This looks wonderful."

Penelope comes up beside us in a dark gown, her phone in her hand. I glance at it before I can stop myself.

"Thank you. Have you heard anything else?"

"Nothing new. Slade checked in again. He’s still sleeping a lot."

"Okay." I smooth the edge of the tablecloth. "That’s good. He needs the rest."

"He does. His dad’s keeping an eye on him."

I nod. I’m glad he isn’t alone, and I’m glad he’s sleeping. I’m also aware that he must wake up sometimes. To eat. To use the bathroom. To talk to his dad.

I hate that I’m keeping track of the opportunities he might have had to answer me.

He’s recovering from surgery. Getting back to me doesn’t have to be his first priority. His phone is still off so it’s not like he’s ignoring me.

I just wish I knew whether he intends call me back.

"Come on. We have enough time to get these out of sight and get you changed," Ellie says.

Mom finds me after I’ve changed in the restroom and put on the earrings Ellie brought because I forgot mine.

"Sweetheart… Look at this."

She stops in front of the display, looking from the cupcakes to my business name. Dad comes up beside her and reads the flavor cards.

"You made all of these?"

"I had a lot of help."

Dad puts his arm around my shoulders. "Proud of you, Baylor."

I lean against him for a second. I want to enjoy this with them. Let Mom fuss over my hair, take pictures, and listen to Dad tell strangers that his daughter made everything on those tables.

Instead, I keep looking toward the entrance.

Wolf isn’t going to walk through it. I know that. Apparently, knowing doesn’t stop me from checking.

"Can we get a picture?" Mom asks.

Ellie takes her phone, and I stand between my parents in front of the display. I manage a smile while Mom asks for one more, then another with the sign in it.

Then Beau arrives.

He’s in a dark suit with his speech folded in one hand. I notice the mark near his knuckles before I look at his face.

"Hey, sis."

"Hi."

Mom reaches for Dad’s arm. "Let’s find our table."

Ellie stays beside me until I give her a small nod, then goes to check on the assistant helping replenish the display.

Beau looks over the cupcakes. "They look great."

"Thanks."

He folds the paper again, although it’s already small enough to fit in his pocket. "I’ve been trying to talk to you."

"I know."

"I love you, Baylor."

My throat tightens. "I love you too."

"I’m sorry about how I reacted. I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that."

I look at his hands again. "And the rest?"

His jaw shifts before he answers.

"I’m sorry I hurt you."

I nod slowly. He means it. I believe that. But he still hasn’t said Wolf’s name.

Beau reaches for me, and I let him hug me. I’ve hugged my brother after wins, losses, surgeries, and more bad days than I can count. This time, I rest my hands against his back and wait for him to let go.

"I didn’t want things to get like this between us. I don’t like feeling out of touch with you," he says.

"Neither do I."

Someone near the stage gestures for him. He looks over, then back at me.

"I have to go over the introduction."

"Okay."

He waits another second, and I know what he wants. A smile. Something that tells him we’re fine.

I can’t give him that yet. Not until I hear from Wolf, at the least. I need to know he’s okay. Hearing it second hand is better than nothing but it’s still not enough to settle my nerves. I need to hear his voice myself.

He heads toward the stage, and I turn back to the display.

These are my people. My parents. My brother. I’ve spent my entire life loving them and knowing they loved me. I just don’t know what to do with how far away I feel from them tonight.

By the time Beau takes the stage, the room is full. My assistant has the replenishment schedule, the extra boxes are where they’re supposed to be, and Ellie has convinced me to sit down long enough to eat.

I make it through half my dinner before getting up to check the display.

She watches me pick up my napkin. "They’re still cupcakes, Baylor."

"I’m just checking."

"Try to come back before your dinner requires a microwave."

Beau waits for the applause to settle, then adjusts the microphone.

"Most of you know I play for San Diego. What you might not know is how close I came to never playing professionally at all."

I stop beside the dessert table.

Mom watches him with her hands folded beneath her chin. Dad sits straight in his chair, his attention fixed on the stage.

Beau talks about the surgeries and rehabilitation. The days when walking without pain felt ambitious enough that thinking about hockey seemed pointless.

I remember those days. The appointments, the arguments when he wanted to do more than he was ready for, the way Mom would go quiet after opening another bill.

"The foundation paid for treatment my family couldn’t have managed on our own," he says. "It gave me a chance to keep working toward something I wasn’t ready to give up."

Behind me, someone speaks quietly.

"I still can’t believe Wolf’s missing his own gala."

Aleksi.

I turn slightly. He’s standing with Kendall and Hunter near the end of the dessert table.

"He wanted to be here," Kendall says, looking toward the stage.

"Especially for this," Hunter adds. "Beau getting up there after being the reason he started the whole thing."

"What?"

More books to choose from.

Look up **Lokepub** on Google and find a novel you like.

All three turn toward me. My voice came out louder than I intended, and Beau pauses onstage.

"What do you mean, he started it because of Beau?" I ask.

Hunter looks at Kendall. Aleksi lowers his glass.

"Baylor?" Beau says into the microphone.

I barely hear him.

"Hunter. What are you talking about?"

He looks past me, and I turn enough to see Juliet approaching from the nearest table. Other people are looking now. My parents. Ellie. People whose names I haven’t learned.

"Didn’t he tell you?" Hunter asks.

"Tell me what?"

Juliet reaches us. "Baylor, we can talk somewhere a little more private."

"Is this Wolf’s foundation?"

She stops beside me.

"Yes. He founded Second Shift."

I look at the logo on the nearest cupcake. I’ve stamped it onto hundreds of fondant circles. Put it on my proposal and written the name across every page of my gala notebook.

"Wolf started this?"

Hunter nods. "He put up the guaranteed money from his first contract. That’s how it got going."

"And Beau?"

Juliet glances toward the stage before answering.

"Your brother was the first athlete the foundation helped."

I stare at her.

Wolf getting quiet when I mentioned the foundation. Rooks starting to say something in the kitchen before Wolf stopped him.

He knew they'd helped Beau. He'd listened to me explain what that meant to my family without telling me he was the reason they could.

"Why didn't he tell me?"

"I can't answer that for him," Juliet says gently.

"Then why didn't he tell us when Beau was getting treatment?"

"He believed your family wouldn't accept the help if you knew it came from him. He didn't want that to keep your brother from getting what he needed."

I look toward Beau.

He's still standing at the microphone, his speech hanging at his side. The color has drained from his face.

Mom comes up beside me. "He paid for everything?"

"The foundation covered the approved treatment," Juliet tells her. "Wolf provided the original funding, yes."

Mom presses her fingers against her mouth. Dad follows her from the table, looking from Juliet to my brother.

"I told him to leave," my father says.

I turn toward him. "What?"

"At the hospital. After the game."

"He came to the hospital?"

Dad nods. "He wanted to see Beau."

"And you wouldn't let him?" I ask, my voice raising.

Wolf tried to apologize after I yelled at him in the parking lot and my father turned him away.

"Baylor, your brother had just been brought in. We didn't know how bad it was. I was angry."

"What did you say to him?"

Dad glances at the people watching us, then back at me.

"I told him to leave and not come back."

For six years, I've remembered Wolf coming out of that arena. How furious I was. How easy it was to believe he could keep walking while my brother's life fell apart.

He went to the hospital.

And when Dad wouldn't let him through the door, he found another way to help.

Beau steps down from the stage and comes toward us. I watch him approach, trying to put the brother standing in front of me together with the one who thanked Wolf’s foundation from that microphone.

"Baylor."

"You stood up there thanking them."

"I didn’t know."

"Neither did I."

My voice breaks. Beau reaches for my arm, but I step back before he touches me.

"He told me he loved me," I say. "Before you went back out on the ice."

Beau’s hand falls to his side.

"He wanted to ask you to dinner. All of you." I look at my parents. "He knew how you felt about him, and he was willing to sit there and hear it if it meant we had a chance."

Mom wipes beneath her eye. Dad looks down.

"I told him I wanted him. He still thought leaving was better than making me choose between you."

"Sweetheart," Mom says, reaching toward me.

"Now he’s in Boston, and I haven’t even heard his voice."

She stops.

I look around and remember where we are. The tables, the stage, the people watching a conversation I never meant to have in front of them.

I can’t stay here.

"I’m sorry," I tell Juliet. "The display’s finished. There are more boxes in the back, and Ellie has the schedule."

"Everything is covered," she says. "You don’t need to worry about that. We can handle it from here."

Ellie reaches my side with my bag.

"Come on. I’ll take you home."

Beau says my name again.

I keep walking.

I call Wolf while Ellie gets the van out of the loading space.

Voicemail.

I try again before we reach the end of the block.

"Come on," I whisper.

His recorded voice answers, and I end the call. Ellie doesn’t tell me to stop. She drives with both hands on the wheel, glancing at me when we

reach a red light.

"Your place?"

I nod. I don’t know how to explain which apartment I mean.

At The Commons, she walks me to the elevator.

"I can stay," she offers.

"I know. I think I need to be by myself for a little while."

She studies my face, then pulls me into a hug.

"Call me, okay? Even if all you want to do is sit on the phone."

"I will."

I wait until the elevator doors close before pressing Wolf’s floor.

His key is still on my ring. I hold it between my fingers for a second before letting myself in.

The light over the stove is on. My baking schedule is still on the fridge, and my mug sits beside the coffee maker. I left it there because I wasn’t ready to take everything.

Now I’m grateful I did.

I put my bag on the island and call him again. This time, I wait for the beep.

"Wolf, it’s me." I swallow. "I know about the foundation. About Beau."

I close my eyes. I want him to answer so I can ask him why he carried all of this by himself. Why he let us hate him when he could’ve told us.

Why he thought I’d be better off without him.

"Please call me. I need to talk to you."

I hang up and take the phone into his bedroom.

His jersey is still folded on the chair where I left it. I pull off my dress and put it on, then climb into his bed.

The remote is on his nightstand. I find *Couple’s Cove* and start the next episode, but I barely hear what anyone is saying.

Wolf would’ve asked me three questions by now. He’d have an opinion about the man on the screen and probably reach across me for the popcorn while he explained it.

I look at his pillow, then turn onto my side and cry.

Tomorrow, I’m supposed to sign the paperwork, pay the deposit, and get the keys to my shop.

I’ve wanted that day for years.

Right now, I don’t know how I’m going to get out of his bed.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

WOLF

"Rise and shine."

I open one eye.

Pops is standing in the doorway with a coffee mug, looking considerably too pleased to find me conscious.

"No."

"Strong argument, but it will not deter me. Get up."

"What time is it?"

"Late enough. I've let you sleep on and off for two days. Time to join the living."

"I had surgery."

"I was there. Very expensive nap by the way." He comes closer and puts the coffee on the table beside the recliner. "You also have a post-op appointment, and I’m not telling your surgeon you couldn’t make it because you were busy drooling on my furniture."

I run my good hand over my face.

My mouth tastes terrible. My shoulder hurts. There’s a blanket over my legs that I don’t remember putting there.

"Where’s my phone?"

"Charging in the kitchen. You told me to turn it off."

"I remember."

I remember pieces of everything else too. The hospital. The flight. Pops meeting me in Boston and trying to look like he wasn’t worried.

The surgeon explaining things I understood better before they started giving me medication.

Baylor standing in the rain. That part I remember perfectly.

Pops brings my phone and sets it beside the coffee. "Breakfast in ten minutes. Marcy left enough food to get us through a minor natural disaster."

"Where is she?" I ask.

"Work. Some people still do that."

"You’d better not be one of them." I warn. I will get him to sell the auto shop before I leave Boston. That I won’t back down on.

"I’m taking you to the doctor, aren’t I?"

"I don’t know… are you? Do I need to call and check for myself?"

He points at me as he backs toward the kitchen.

"Ten minutes."

I turn on my phone.

It takes a moment to start. Then the notifications begin.

Teammates. My agent. Kendall. Penelope. Juliet.

Baylor.

Her name appears again and again as the phone catches up.

I open our messages. She asked whether I got here. Whether I was out of surgery. Whether somebody could call her and let her know I was okay.

Then, last night—

I know about the foundation. Please call me.

Shit. She knows.

I sit back, careful of the arm, and look at the message.

There are voicemails too.

I listen to the last one.

"Wolf, it’s me. I know about the foundation. About Beau. I…"

She stops long enough that I look at the screen to see whether the message has ended.

"Please call me. I need to talk to you. I can’t believe you never told me… you never told any of us."

I lower the phone. I should’ve told her, I know that. But I didn’t want money to be the reason she gave me a chance. I wanted to earn it. Be worthy of it.

I had plenty of chances. Every time she mentioned the gala. Every time she talked about what the foundation did for her brother.

Instead, I kept finding reasons to wait, and now somebody else has done it for me.

I check the date.

Saturday.

She gets the shop today.

For weeks, I’ve listened to her talk about the deposit and the lease and whether the property manager would wait long enough for the gala payment to clear.

Today, she gets to stop looking at pictures and unlock the fucking door.

I open Juliet’s messages. There are photographs of the dessert table, the room, Baylor standing beside the display with Ellie.

She looks beautiful.

She also looks like she hasn’t slept.

I go back to our conversation and type with my good hand.

Me: Just turned my phone on. I’m out of surgery and home with Dad. I have a follow-up appointment today, and you have a shop to collect. We’ll talk tomorrow. Juliet sent pictures of the dessert table. You did a great job, Cupcake.

I read it before sending.

It isn’t enough.

It’s what I can manage before I have to sit across from a surgeon and ask whether I still have a career.

I send it, then leave the phone faceup beside my coffee.

Pops puts a plate in front of me after I make it to the kitchen.

Eggs. Toast already cut in half.

He takes the chair across from me, pushing his coffee aside.

I eat a few bites while he looks at the paperwork from the hospital. There’s a list of questions written in his handwriting on the back.

He used to do the same thing when I was a kid. Teachers, coaches, doctors. Everybody got the list.

Apparently, I haven’t aged out of it.

"So," he says, putting the papers down. "The girl."

I look at my plate.

"Baylor."

"I know her name."

"There’s something I didn’t tell you."

"That seems to be going around."

I lift my eyes and he waits. "She’s Beau Fairbanks’s little sister."

Pops leans back. "Oh, shit…"

"Yeah."

He looks toward my shoulder, then back at me.

"He found out?"

"At the game," I confirm.

"That explains a few things then."

I put down my fork.

I don’t ask whether he watched the game. My father has never missed one.

"Is that why you didn’t throw a punch?" he asks.

I look at the brace.

"I deserved it."

"Hmmm, that’s an interesting take on it," he says.

"If he needed to take the last six years out on me, so be it."

"Did you deserve it?"

"He spent years getting back on the ice because of me."

"I remember you were going after that shithead forward who’d been taking runs at your goalie."

I look at him.

"Yeah, son. I remember the game. I remember Beau moving into that play too."

"I still hit him."

"You did."

"I should’ve pulled up."

"You should have."

There’s no relief in hearing him agree.

Pops folds his arms on the table.

"But nobody sitting on our side of the glass thought you went out there planning to hurt Beau."

"It doesn’t change what happened."

"No. It changes what you keep telling yourself about it though. You’ve been living with what Beau accused you of, not what you know happened. It was an accident that he took the hit."

I look away and he lets me sit with that for a moment.

"Was Wednesday about giving him something you thought he deserved," he asks, "or were you hoping that once he got it out of his system, he’d let you be with his sister?"

My jaw tightens.

"I don’t know."

"Yeah, you do. Think about it."

I push my plate back.

"I didn’t want to hurt him again."

Pops nods.

That answer, at least, makes sense to me.

"I love her," I say.

He looks at me for a second, then reaches for his coffee.

"Figured we’d get there."

"She loves her family. Her family isn’t particularly interested in making room for me."

I look toward the phone beside the recliner.

Baylor wanted me to stop talking outside the ambulance. She wanted me to listen. She said she was coming to the hospital. I told her I wouldn’t make her choose.

I didn’t give her much opportunity to do anything else either.

"She wanted more time."

Pops nods slowly.

"Well, you’ve got some of that over the season break. Might want to use it to work out what you’re doing."

I rub my hand over my mouth.

"I don’t even know if I’ll be able to play again."

For once, he doesn’t tell me the Hawkeyes will sign me. He doesn’t promise I’ll come back stronger or that the surgeon can fix anything. He

gets up and brings my coffee to the table.

"Then we'll ask the questions today. See what he can tell us."

"And if he can't tell us anything?"

"Then we go home and figure out the next appointment."

I look at the list beside his plate. He's written down everything. Except the one thing I've been thinking since they put me in that ambulance.

I don't know who I'm supposed to be if I can't play hockey.

Pops picks up the papers and folds them.

"Eat what you can, son. Then I'll help you get your shirt on."

I reach for my fork.

I used to come home so I could make him slow down.

Now I need him to help me get dressed.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

BAYLOR

Wolf texts while I’m brushing my teeth in his bathroom.

I nearly drop my toothbrush trying to pick up the phone.

Wolf: Just turned my phone on. I’m home with Dad. Appointment this morning, so hopefully I’ll have more to tell you afterward. Juliet sent pictures. You did a great job, Cupcake. Go get your shop.

I read it twice, then lean against the counter.

He’s home. He’s awake. He’s talking to me.

I’ve spent two days wanting those things, and now that I have them, I want to call him and ask why he thinks I give a shit about the pictures when I haven’t heard his voice since they put him in an ambulance.

Instead, I finish brushing my teeth so I don’t cry with toothpaste in my mouth.

Me: I’m glad you’re home. Let me know what the surgeon says. I’ve been worried.

I wait, watching the screen.

Nothing else comes through.

Boston is three hours ahead. He could already be leaving for the appointment. His dad could be helping him get dressed. There are plenty of reasonable explanations, and I’m getting tired of supplying all of them myself.

I set the phone down and finish getting ready.

The property manager is meeting me at ten. I have the signed documents he emailed, confirmation of the transfer, and a pen that works. I checked it twice.

I’m getting the shop.

Even if I have to do it on four hours of sleep in yesterday’s mascara.

Actually, I should probably fix the mascara.

The property manager spreads the final pages across the counter near the front window while I take my folder out of my bag.

"I’ve marked the places that need your initials. Then signatures on the last two pages."

"Okay."

I’ve already read everything with Ellie, who had considerably more questions than I did. Mostly because I got distracted every time I reached the words *leased premises* and remembered they meant this place.

My place.

I initial where he points, check the dates, and sign my name.

He confirms the payment on his tablet, then slides two keys across the counter.

"Congratulations."

I pick them up.

They’re ordinary keys. One has a little red cover, and the other has a scratch near the top. I don’t know what I expected. Something heavier, maybe, considering how long I’ve been saving for them.

"Thank you."

He goes over the alarm again and reminds me which number to call about the building. I write it down, even though it’s already in the paperwork,

because today doesn’t feel like a day to trust my memory.

The front windows need cleaning. There’s a scuff on the wall where I want the menu, and the space for the display case looks smaller now that I’ve actually paid for the right to put one there.

"Any questions?"

About a hundred. None of them are his problem.

"I think I’m good."

"Then I’ll let you enjoy it."

I walk him to the door and then something catches my eye to the side of the front door. Something I didn't see when I first walked in. A brand new commercial size mixer with a bow on it.

"What's that?" I ask, pointing at it.

I know I didn't order it. I wanted to but it took everything I have to pay for the first, last and deposit for this place. Ellie offered to let me keep using her old one but it's still not as big as I'll need once the shop opens and foot traffic requiring more product each day.

"Oh, yeah. That got delivered this morning. The delivery guy was waiting out front with it. Said that the person who ordered it weeks ago was specific that it needed a bow. He paid extra I guess to make sure it got delivered today."

I walk over to it and pull the note off of it that's attached as the property manager sees himself out. I open the card as the door shuts behind him.

Congratulations, Cupcake.
I knew you could do it.
—W

He ordered this weeks ago? He never said anything to me about it. This mixer is even nicer than the one I planned to buy once I have the money.

I can't believe he had already done this and never told me.

I take out my phone and photograph the mixer.

Me: Look what was waiting for me.

Ellie answers immediately.

Ellie: I know. He came into Serendipity's three weeks ago and asked me which one was your dream mixer.

I look up from my phone at this shop. He wanted to see this happen. He brought me here when I was still calculating how many cupcakes stood between me and the deposit, while he was planning this.

He never had a doubt.

I send him the picture.

Me: Got the keys. Found this waiting for me. Thank you.

Then I put the phone away before I can spend another morning watching it.

The kitchen looks the same as it did when I toured it. Counters, sinks, empty shelves. I run my hand along the edge of the worktable and try to imagine the mixer here. Cooling racks against that wall. The refrigerator I've been watching online in case the seller drops the price again.

Wolf would tell me to stop looking at it and call the guy.

Then he'd volunteer somebody much larger than me to collect it.

I keep walking until I reach the tasting room.

There's no blanket on the floor now. No basket, no cushions, no dinner waiting while Wolf asks me to explain the difference between two colors he insists are both pink.

I stand in the doorway, looking at the spot where we sat.

I was so happy that night. He'd brought me somewhere I wanted to be more than anywhere else, then listened while I explained every inch of it.

Now I have the keys, and he isn't here.

I press my lips together and turn away before I ruin the first morning by crying on a floor I haven't even mopped yet.

"Baylor?"

Beau is standing near the kitchen entrance.

I stop. "How did you know I was here?"

"Ellie."

"She's a traitor."

"She said you had an appointment with the property manager."

"I did. He just left."

His eyes move to the keys in my hand. "You got it?"

I nod. Talking doesn't interest me right now.

"That's great, Baylor. Congratulations."

"Thanks," I say, and suck in my lower lip.

He looks around the kitchen, keeping his hands in his pockets.

I haven't answered him since the gala. I saw the messages when I woke up, but I didn't know what to say, and getting dressed felt like enough of an accomplishment for one morning.

"If you're here to talk about last night, I'm really not in the mood. Today is a good day for me. I don't want to ruin it with this."

"I’m not." He glances around the space.

"Can we sit somewhere?"

"I just got the keys, Beau. There aren’t any chairs."

"Right." He rubs the back of his neck. "Standing’s fine."

I lean against the counter and wait.

He looks tired. There’s a crease in his shirt, and his hair is still damp. For a second, I want to ask whether he’s eaten.

Then I remember that I don’t know whether Wolf can get dressed by himself.

"I owe you a better apology," Beau says.

"Yes, you do."

"And I owe him one."

I look up.

He holds my gaze this time.

"What I did was wrong. Finding out about the foundation didn’t make it wrong. It already was."

My fingers tighten around the keys.

"I knew his shoulder was hurt," he continues. "I kept going after it anyway."

"I was there Beau. I remember it quite well. In fact, it replays in my head on repeat and I wish I could make it stop."

Beau looks down.

"I know what that’s like," I say. "You know I do."

His jaw works before he answers.

"Yeah. I do."

For a few seconds, neither of us speaks.

I set the keys on the counter because they’re digging into my hand.

"You don’t have to like him," I tell him. "I wasn’t asking you to forget what happened."

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"I thought—" He stops and shakes his head. "It doesn’t matter what I thought. You tried to talk to me, and I wouldn’t let you."

"I should’ve told you sooner."

"Probably. But after the way I acted, I can’t really stand here asking why you didn’t."

That gets my attention more than another apology would have.

Beau pulls his hands out of his pockets and rests them against the edge of the counter.

"I’ve been angry at him for six years. Every appointment, every time my leg hurt, every time I wondered whether I’d ever get a real chance to play. It was easy to keep putting all of it on him."

"He knows what he did. He was going for someone else and he hit you instead. He knows that’s no excuse. He just wants a chance to make it right."

I wanted him to listen three days ago. When Wolf was still here. When I could’ve gone upstairs after this conversation and told him Beau might actually hear him out.

"I called him," Beau says.

My head turns. "Did he answer?"

"No. I left a message."

"He only turned his phone on this morning."

"Then maybe he’ll listen later."

"He might not want to."

"I know." Beau looks at me. "I’m still going to apologize. Whether he wants anything to do with me after that is up to him."

I fold my arms, mostly because I don’t know what to do with my hands.

"What did Mom and Dad say?"

"Dad wants to talk to him too."

"About the hospital?"

"Yeah."

"And Mom?"

"She’s worried about you."

"She was worried about me before. That’s how we got here."

Beau lets out a breath. "Nobody’s going to give you a hard time about being with him, Baylor."

"You can’t promise that for everybody."

"Then I’ll promise it for me."

I study his face.

He looks uncomfortable. Sorry. Like he’d prefer almost any conversation to this one, but he’s staying here and having it anyway.

"He told me he wouldn’t make me choose," I say.

Beau nods slowly.

"I wasn’t asking him to make me. I was trying to tell him I wanted to be with him."

"I heard you last night."

"He doesn’t seem to believe me."

"Then tell him again."

"I’ve called. I’ve texted. He sent me a message about the shop this morning like that was the only thing I had to worry about."

Beau reaches into his pocket and takes out his phone.

"I bought you a ticket."

I stare at him. "What?"

"To Boston. It leaves in two hours."

"You bought me a plane ticket? Are you crazy? You might have just ended his career and you bought me a plane ticket to go see him after hating him for six years and beating him up on national television. That’s supposed to make this better?"

His mouth pulls to one side. "I’m realizing that part might not be helping my case."

Despite everything, a small laugh escapes me.

"I can cancel it," he adds quickly. "You don’t have to go. I just thought you might want the option."

I look at the phone he’s holding out.

My name. Boston. A departure time that makes me check the clock on the wall.

"Beau, I don’t even have a bag packed."

"Is that really going to stop you? You left a good paying corporate job to start a cakery business from nothing in a town you’ve never lived in."

He makes a good point. I can buy clothes anywhere.

For two days, I’ve wanted to get on a plane. Now there’s a seat with my name on it, and I’m suddenly afraid of what happens when I get there.

"What if he doesn’t want to see me?"

Beau is quiet for a moment.

"He told me he loved you while I was threatening him. I don’t think Boston changed his mind."

I know he’s right. I know I need to get on that plane and tell him I love him in person. I need to put myself out there like he did at the game.

I look toward the tasting room again.

The shop will still be here on Monday. The paint samples, the refrigerator listing, the floor that needs cleaning. I can do all of that when I get back.

Wolf doesn’t have to wait until I’ve finished everything else.

I hand Beau his phone.

"Send me the ticket."

His shoulders drop a little. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I’m going."

He starts tapping the screen, then looks up when I step closer.

I put my arms around him.

He hugs me immediately, holding the back of my head the way he has since we were kids and I could still fit beneath his chin.

"I’m still mad at you," I tell him.

"I know."

"And you still have to talk to him."

"I will."

I pull back and wipe beneath my eyes.

"You really couldn’t find a flight that gave me time to shower?"

"This one was non-stop."

"Fine. That’s a decent answer."

Me: I got the shop. I still need to talk to you. Let me know how the appointment goes.

I stare at it after I hit send.

I could tell him I’m coming. I probably should.

But I don’t want another message telling me to stay in Seattle and concentrate on my business. If he wants to send me home, he can have that conversation with me in person.

Beau drops me at departures with enough time to get through security, provided I don’t stop moving.

"Call if you need anything," he says.

"I will," I say. "And thank you Beau."

"And I’m sorry I made you feel like being happy with him was something you had to hide from me."

My eyes sting again.

"You’re really making it difficult to get on this plane without looking like a mess."

He gives me a small smile, and I hug him before heading inside.

By the time I reach the gate, they’re already boarding my group.

I hand over my pass, walk down the jet bridge, and find my seat. My overnight bag fits beneath the one in front of me, although it takes some effort and a quiet apology to the man waiting in the aisle.

When I finally sit down, I check my phone.

No new message from Wolf.

I open Ellie’s instead.

Me: On the plane. Can you find out if any of the girls knows his dad’s address?

Ellie: I’ll ask around and send it to you.

Me: Thanks. Wish me luck.

Ellie: Go get him.

Then I send Wolf one more message before switching my phone to airplane mode.

Me: I love you. I was trying to tell you that before we got interrupted. I’m telling you now.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

WOLF

My dad pulls into the shop parking lot at eight thirty on a Saturday night, which tells me everything I need to know about how seriously he’s taking retirement.

"No."

He puts the truck in park. "I haven’t said anything."

"You don’t have to. Whatever’s in there can wait until Monday."

"I need to pick something up."

"You have employees."

I look through the windshield at the dark service bays. We went out for dinner because Marcy said we both needed to leave the house for something

other than a medical appointment. Apparently, Dad interpreted that as an opportunity to sneak in some work.

"You know she’s going to ask where we stopped."

"I’m counting on your discretion."

"You called her when I tried to make my own sandwich."

"You nearly dropped a knife."

"It was a butter knife."

"And yet you still managed to make it concerning."

He gets out before I can answer, then comes around to my side. I open the door myself, which he has the good sense not to comment on.

Getting out takes longer than it should. Everything takes longer than it should. I’ve spent two days learning exactly how many ordinary things require a shoulder that works.

Dad waits while I straighten, then locks the truck.

"Five minutes," I tell him.

"Look at you. Home three days and already running the place."

"Somebody should."

He smiles and heads toward the office entrance.

I follow him inside. The familiar smell hits me before he turns on the lights. Oil, rubber, the coffee that’s probably been sitting in the pot since this morning. Dad stopped noticing it years ago, but I always smell it when I come home.

My school pictures are still on the wall behind his desk, between an old business license and a photograph of me holding my first hockey trophy. There are newer pictures too. Draft day. My first game in Seattle. Dad looking uncomfortable in the suit I made him wear to an awards dinner.

He catches me looking.

"Handsome kid."

"Terrible haircut."

"Your grandmother liked it."

"She wasn’t the one going to school with it."

He sets his keys on the desk and checks his phone.

I take mine out too.

Baylor’s message is still open.

I love you. I was trying to tell you that before we got interrupted. I’m telling you now.

I read it outside the surgeon’s office. Then again in the truck. I’ve read it enough times that I could probably repeat the punctuation.

I called her as soon as I saw it.

Straight to voicemail.

For a few seconds, I thought she’d decided to let me experience the other side of that. I wouldn’t have blamed her.

So I sent Baylor another text.

I love you too. Call me when you’re free. I want to hear about the shop.

That was hours ago.

Apparently, waiting for someone to call is fucking miserable. I’m beginning to understand how much of an asshole I’ve been.

"Sit down," Dad says, nodding toward the chair beside his desk.

"I’ve been sitting all day."

"And complaining through most of it. You’re very talented."

I lower myself into the chair anyway and rest my good hand on my thigh.

This morning’s appointment didn’t give me the answer I wanted. The repair looks the way the surgeon expected it to. I have instructions, restrictions, and another appointment.

I do not have a promise that I’ll play hockey again.

Dad has managed not to ask about it for most of dinner. I appreciate that, even if he’s now looking at me like there’s something else he’d like to discuss.

He glances toward the window.

Headlights sweep across the wall as a car turns into the lot.

"Expecting someone?" I ask.

"Apparently."

I turn enough to see a small silver car park beside his truck.

The driver’s door opens.

Baylor gets out.

For a second, I stay exactly where I am.

She’s wearing leggings and my hoodie, her hair pulled back, one hand holding her phone while she looks toward the office.

Then she sees me through the window.

I get up too quickly.

"Easy," Dad says.

But I’m already heading for the door.

She’s halfway across the lot when I step outside.

"What are you doing here?"

Her eyes move over my face, then down to the sling.

"I had a few days free. I thought I could use an impromptu trip to Boston."

"You’re lying. You don’t have any days free."

"Well… maybe I just wanted to check on you."

"How did you know where—"

"Your dad."

I turn.

Pops stands in the doorway with his hands in his pockets, looking far too pleased with himself.

"Slade gave her my number."

"You could’ve mentioned that."

"She asked me not to."

"And you just agreed?"

"She said please. You should try it occasionally."

Baylor steps closer. I look back at her, and whatever else I was going to say disappears.

There’s a faint crease on her cheek from where she must’ve slept on the plane. She looks tired. Beautiful. Worried enough that I want to apologize before she’s even said anything.

"Can I hug you?" she asks.

I reach for her with my good arm.

She comes carefully against me, keeping to that side, and I close my eyes when her arms go around my waist.

Fuck.

I’ve missed her.

Not just talking to her. This. Her forehead against my chest, her hand settling at my back. Knowing where she is without looking at a phone.

I hold her closer.

"I wasn’t sure you’d want me here," she says against my shirt.

"I’ve wanted you here since I got here."

Behind us, Dad clears his throat. "I’m going to check something in the back."

Baylor chuckles and I can see her cheeks warm slightly.

I wait until he’s gone before tipping her chin up with my good hand.

"I’m sorry I didn’t call."

"You scared me."

"I know."

"No, you don’t. I kept hearing that you were sleeping, and I was glad you were getting some rest, but then I started wondering whether you just didn’t want to talk to me."

"I wanted to. I didn’t know how to do it without asking you to come."

Her eyes fill, and I brush my thumb beneath one before the tear falls.

"You could’ve asked," she says. "I’m very good at booking flights. Apparently, so is my brother."

I pause. "Beau?"

"He bought my ticket."

"Your brother bought you a ticket to come see me?"

"I’m still a little surprised myself."

I let out a quiet laugh, looking past her at the rental car.

"He came to the shop this morning," she continues. "He’s sorry, Wolf. For what he did on the ice. For the way he spoke to me. He said it was wrong before he knew anything about the foundation."

I look back at her.

"He said that?"

She nods. "He wants me to be happy."

"And you told him you were coming here?"

"He’s the one who drove me to the airport."

I don’t know what to say to that. The last time I saw Beau, he was telling me to stay away from her. Now she’s standing in front of me because he helped her get here.

"He wants to talk to you," she adds. "When you’re ready."

"I can do that."

"Good. Because I’d really like to be able to leave you two in a room without somebody needing medical attention."

"I think we can make that happen. I know he loves you, and I love you too. We’ll figure it out for you," I tell her, because that’s true. I’d do anything for her.

Her hand moves to my cheek, her fingers careful near the bruise.

"I’m still mad at him," she admits. "But I believe he’s sorry."

"We’re going to figure this out, I promise. One big happy family. You’ll see."

"Really. You think we can?"

I grin down at her, her eyes wide and hopeful. "It’s not going to be an overnight thing, but if we can all move past the last six years and build something new, then I believe so. Do you?"

She studies my face for a moment, then leans up and kisses me.

I slide my hand around the back of her neck and keep her there. She’s careful with me, and I appreciate it, but I’ve spent too much time wanting this to settle for a quick kiss in my dad’s parking lot.

When she starts to pull away, I follow.

She smiles against my mouth.

"There he is."

"I’ve had a rough week."

"I noticed."

"Could probably use another one."

She gives me one, her hand resting against my chest. When she pulls back this time, I let her, although I keep my arm around her waist.

"How long can you stay?"

"Until Monday. Ellie has my orders covered."

"I’d offer to show you around, but my current schedule is mostly appointments and trying to get comfortable."

"I didn’t come for a tour."

"No?"

"I came because I love you, and you weren’t answering your fucking phone."

I laugh, then kiss her forehead.

"I love you too."

She closes her eyes for a second and leans into me.

There’s nothing I want more than to get on her flight Monday. Go back to our bed, make her coffee, listen to her tell me everything she needs to do before the shop opens.

But I have another follow-up here. Physical therapy. A surgeon who was very clear this morning about what he expects from me.

"I can’t come back with you yet," I tell her.

"I know. Your dad told me."

"I’ll talk to the surgeon about when I can finish rehab in Seattle."

"Okay."

"And when I get back, I want you upstairs."

Her mouth lifts. "Most of my things are still there."

"I mean all of them, Baylor."

She looks up at me.

"You want me to move in?"

"I want to come home to you. Without a kitchen renovation deciding how long you get to stay."

Her fingers curl into my shirt.

"You realize I have a perfectly good kitchen downstairs now and an entire shop downtown."

"Good, because I hear the upstairs neighbor's an asshole."

She shrugs. "He has his moments. But he's a great snuggler and he makes the best breakfast."

"You're lying, the eggs suck. But there's a better bathtub to make up for it."

She laughs, and I feel it against my chest.

"I'm going to need more than one drawer."

"You can have as many as you want."

"And somewhere for my clothes. You've seen how much laundry I have."

"You can have the entire walk-in closet if you want. I'll live out of my suitcase if that's what it takes to make sure you never go back downstairs."

She smiles at me, wide enough that I'm starting to wish I'd asked her this weeks ago.

"Then yes. I'll move in."

"I just have one rule we need to discuss."

"Okay…" Her smile turns suspicious. "Let's hear it."

"The *fully dressed* rule has to go. I have every intention of being a distraction to you every chance I get."

Her eyes brighten. "I suppose that can be arranged."

I kiss her before she can add anything else to the list.

The office door opens behind me.

"If you two are planning to stand out here all night, I'm going home," Dad announces. "Marcy's waiting, and I told her Baylor would be hungry."

"I am," Baylor says, stepping back just enough to look at him.

"Good. Someone in this family appreciates being fed."

"I ate dinner with you an hour ago," I argue.

"And complained about the detour. Look how well that turned out."

Baylor laughs while Dad locks the door.

"I'll follow you," she tells us, lifting her rental keys.

He nods toward me. "You taking him?"

She glances over at me. "If he behaves. He knows I have rules."

"You already know he's a rule breaker and there's no chance he'll behave. But he's due for an ice pack, so that should keep him occupied at least."

I look over to see an large envelope my dad got out of the office before he locked up.

"What's that?"

He glances down. "Paperwork for the shop. My head mechanic and I finally agreed on a price."

I stop beside the truck. "You're selling?"

"Lawyer still needs to go through it, but that's the plan."

"What changed your mind?"

"Marcy keeps sending me pictures of Italy. Figured I should take her while she still wants to go with me."

I laugh, then look at the envelope again. I've spent months trying to get him to consider this, and he's telling me in the parking lot like he remembered to buy milk.

"I'm glad, Pops."

"Don't get excited. I'll still come in occasionally."

"Of course you will."

He points toward Baylor's car. "Go. You've got better things to do than supervise my retirement."

Baylor takes my hand and leads me toward her car.

I still have appointments and physical therapy before I can leave Boston. Dad still has paperwork to sign, and I'm sure he'll find several reasons to check on the shop after he does.

But Baylor came for me.

Baylor came for me.

And when I get back to Seattle, she'll be living in my apartment, probably with a longer list of offside rules and a bigger fine jar.

I can't wait.

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Chapter Thirty

WOLF

TWO MONTHS LATER….

The glass door to Baylor's shop is wide open. The smell of new paint and freshly baked desserts fills the space. A grand opening banner sweeps above the entry.

My girls' open house is today and I couldn’t be more proud or relieved to be here with her, helping make her dream come true.

"To the left a little," I say to Olsen.

He shifts then in the corner of my eye I see Baylor.

"What are you doing? You shouldn’t be moving that Wolf," Baylor practically shouts coming down the hallway from the tasting room in the back.

I look up from the little table by the window. Olsen has the other end, although he’s doing most of the lifting.

"You said you wanted more room by the door," I tell her.

"I did. But that was yesterday and now I think it works here. I also didn’t want you to do it."

Olsen sets his end down. "I’m leaving it here until you two agree on a floor plan."

"Fine, an inch toward the window. That should give enough room for people to move around better," Baylor tells him.

He looks at me. "Are we sure this is what she wants?"

"Move the table, Bozeman."

Baylor presses her hands to her hips and tilts her head, as if that will give her a different angle to see the position of the table while we slide it into place. I wouldn;t have cared as much if this weren’t the third location we’ve tried, but I moved it anyway because I want it perfect for her. She’s put a lot into this.

"There. That works. Thank you." She looks at me. "You’re supposed to be directing, not moving. JP and Trey are outside putting up balloons. One of them could have taken the other side of the table."

"I can move a simple table, Bay."

Olsen glances over at her. "I tried to stop him too. He wouldn’t listen. Is there anything heavy I can move without him?"

"Ellie has a box of drinks in serendipity’s walk-in fridge for the event. Can you grab those from her?" She asks him.

"Excellent. A different building. On my way."

He heads for the door, leaving me with my girlfriend, who’s now looking at my shirt.

"What?"

"Nothing." She reaches up to smooth the fabric over my chest. "I didn’t think you’d actually wear it."

I look down at her business name embroidered on the black polo.

"You gave me a uniform. I assumed attendance was mandatory."

"It’s a little tight."

"Want me to take it off?" I wink. "We could sneak into the tasting room and do a little tasting before everyone gets here."

Her fingers pause against my chest before she lets go.

"Tempting," she smirks. "But we open in ten minutes. Please behave until we get home."

"Until we get home," I repeat. "I can work with that."

She points at me before heading behind the counter. I watch her go, then turn toward the front window, where JP is holding a bunch of balloons while Trey argues with a strip of tape.

A breeze comes through the open door, lifting the edge of the banner above them. It’s the end of June, and Seattle has given her sunshine for the occasion. People are already slowing on the sidewalk to look inside.

Baylor notices too. She checks the clock, then bends to straighten something in the display.

My last appointment in Boston was three weeks ago. The surgeon cleared me to return to Seattle, where Theo has been spending his own time making my life unpleasant. My contract is up, and the season’s over, but apparently neither gets me out of doing my exercises.

He thinks I can make it back if I keep putting in the work. Between our sessions and the physical therapist Kendall has me seeing every week, I’m getting plenty of opportunities.

I’ve been skating a little with a few of the guys who live here year-round. Nothing crazy. Kendall has been very specific about what I’m allowed to do, and for once, I’m listening. Penelope and my agent have been in constant communication. I still don’t know whether the Hawkeyes will offer me another contract. My agent calls, I answer, and we have variations of the same conversation.

On weekday mornings, I’m Baylor’s getaway driver while she delivers the orders. Then she heads back to the shop, and I go find out which part of rehab I’m going to hate that day.

I’m improving. Not as quickly as I’d like, but enough that I’ve stopped asking when I can return to full practice at every appointment.

Now I ask at every other one.

For today, I have somewhere else to be.

Baylor comes out from behind the counter with a stack of menus.

"Can you put these on the tables?"

"Absolutely. Paper is well within my physical ability. Anything else you need?""

"Not yet, but I’ll let you know," she says as she hands them over, then catches my wrist before I move away. "Thank you, by the way."

"For the menus?"

"For being here. For believing in me."

I lean down and kiss her. "There wasn’t a chance I was missing this."

"I know." Her smile widens. "I’m still glad."

"Baylor?"

Her mother stands in the doorway with a vase of flowers held against her chest. Her dad follows with Beau, who ducks beneath the balloons just as Trey finally gets the tape to hold.

"Don’t touch those," Trey tells him.

"I wasn’t planning to."

"They’re structurally sensitive."

JP looks at the tape. "They’re going to fall."

"Not if everybody stops breathing on them," Trey shoots back.

Baylor laughs and hurries over to hug her mom. I take the vase before either of them spills water down her dress.

Her mother turns toward me.

"Thank you, Wolf. How was the trip back?"

"Good. Much better than the trip out."

Her expression softens. "I imagine it was."

Baylor takes the flowers to the counter while her dad stops beside me.

"Good to see you."

"You too."

We shake hands. It’s easier than the first time we did this in Boston, when he came to Dad’s house and we sat on the back porch for a conversation neither of us particularly enjoyed.

He apologized for the hospital. I apologized for the hit. He thanked me for making sure Beau got the surgeries and help he needed that they could never have afforded.

We had coffee afterward, and it went fine. We’re both trying for Baylor.

I’m not expecting him to start wearing my jersey, but he asked about my shoulder before he left. That felt like a decent place to start.

He looks around the shop now, taking in the display case and the menu on the wall.

"She did a good job."

"I agree. It’s what she always wanted."

He looks back at me. "Thank you for this. For helping her see her dream through. I didn’t see it at first. Beau did."

"She knew what she wanted. I mostly tried to stay out of her way."

He gives me a small smile. "She gets that from her mother."

Across the shop, Baylor moves the vase her mother has just repositioned.

We both watch her mom move it back.

"Yeah," I say. "I can see that."

"Anything I can do to help?" Beau asks me.

"Olsen could probably use some help with the drinks over at Ellie's shop," I tell him.

"Do you think Ellie's still mad at me about the hit against you? She's scary when she's pissed."

Ellie is probably the one who's taken the most time to forgive Beau.

"I think you're in the clear."

He nods and heads out.

Beau's come up to Seattle from San Diego twice since I got back. The Blue Devils didn't make it far in the playoffs and their season ended early, though they put up a big fight for the Stanley Cup. We're making an effort to put the past behind us, and it's getting easier.

As soon as Baylor turns the sign to OPEN, the place fills up.

Within twenty minutes, I'm refilling the water jug while her dad wipes down tables between customers and her mom replaces the napkins. Olsen and Beau barely get the drinks put away before Ellie sends them back for more.

Everybody has something to do. Every time I finish one thing, Baylor points me toward another, usually with a quick kiss if I get close enough.

People stop her to compliment the shop, ask about custom orders, and tell her they've been waiting for somewhere to sit and eat her cupcakes. She knows half of them by name. By the time they leave, I'm pretty sure she knows the rest.

She hasn't stopped smiling since this morning.

I pause beside the counter with another stack of boxes and watch her show a little girl the cake pops. Her hair is coming loose, there's frosting on her apron, and she's explaining something with the same enthusiasm she had when she showed me around this place before there was anything in it.

Getting here was worth everything.

And when we turn off the lights tonight, I get to take her home, listen to her tell me about the parts I missed, and tuck her into bed beside me.

I still don't know what happens with hockey.

But I’m staying in Seattle.
Baylor’s here. I’m home.

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Epilogue

BAYLOR

Wolf has been on the ice for less than five minutes, and Ellie has already told me to sit down twice.

"They’re warming up, Baylor. It’s going to be a long game if you're going to be this anxious."

"I know… I’m just nervous, and excited. He’s so happy that he got cleared."

"Then why are you standing?"

"Because the man in front of me is standing."

The man turns around.

"Sorry."

"Oh, no. You’re fine." I touch Ellie’s arm. "She’s the problem."

He laughs and sits, which leaves me without much of an excuse. The anxiety in me doesn’t know what else to do but stand, otherwise my knee is going to bounce like crazy.

I lower myself into Wolf’s seat anyway.

His jersey hangs over my jeans, and my hair keeps catching beneath the collar every time I turn my head. I wore it down because he likes it that way, although I’m starting to remember why I usually put it up.

Ellie hands me the popcorn.

"Eat something before you wear a hole through that sleeve."

I look down. I’ve been twisting the cuff around my fingers since our rideshare over here from the shop.

"I’m fine."

"You asked me whether his shoulder looked stiff while he was standing still."

"Well, did it?" I ask, my heart thumping so loud against my chest.

I just want this night to go well for him. The last time I saw him in a professional game, they were pulling him off the ice. It’s a hard image to erase.

"He’s cleared to play."

"That doesn’t mean he won’t get hurt out there."

"He’s a hockey player, Baylor. He’s going to get hurt. I can just about guarantee it."

"You’re not helping…" I tell her and then take a deep breath in an attempt to calm myself.

He’s a professional player who has done this most of his life. He knows the risks, he knows how to protect his shoulder if he needs to, though he says his shoulder hasn’t felt this good in years. Still, knowing hasn’t stopped me from watching every move he makes.

The last time I sat in this arena with my family, he left on a stretcher. Tonight, he’s skating backward beside Hunter, laughing at something I can’t hear.

I’d like to enjoy it without remembering the other part.

I’m working on it.

Wolf spots us on his next pass. His eyes find mine, and he lifts his glove. I wave back, plastering on a smile so he doesn't know that I feel like my whole heart is out there on that ice.

The arena fills around us, people squeezing past knees with drinks and food while the music plays loud enough that I feel it through the seat. Across the ice, the players on the other team circle their net.

I barely glance at them.

There was a time when I would've come here hoping somebody put Wolf Ziegler on his ass. Tonight, I'd prefer they keep a respectful distance.

Maybe send him a strongly worded email if they need the puck.

My phone buzzes.

Mom: We have the game on. Tell him good luck.

A second message follows.

Mom: Your dad says to keep his head up.

I smile and show Ellie.

"She's come a long way."

"They both have."

Dad called Wolf himself when the contract was announced. Then he invited us to Boston for Christmas.

Both of us.

I've already bought the flights. Wolf's dad and Marcy are joining us for Christmas Eve Mass, followed by dinner at my parents' house. Mom tolerates a lot of swearing during hockey season, but nobody gets fed on Christmas Eve until they've been to church.

I haven't mentioned that part to Wolf yet.

Beau sent a message this afternoon too.

Beau: Tell Ziegler to save me a few penalty minutes. I don't want him using them all before we play you this season.

I passed it along.

Wolf's response was not suitable for the family group chat.

They're getting there.

Ellie leans over while I put my phone away.

"Have you hired a replacement yet?"

"For Wolf?"

"For your delivery driver. I assumed you were keeping him for the other position."

"I've hired someone for the days he can't do it."

"How generous of you to accommodate his hobby."

"What can I say, the man is a great getaway driver. Plus, he doubles as an amateur mechanic."

She laughs, and I look back at the ice.

He drove Sprinkles all summer.

First with me beside him, reading out the next stop. Then on his own while I stayed at the shop, until my customers started asking where he was on mornings I made the deliveries. Now with the shop booming and deliveries needing an extra route, I need more help and the hockey season is a full-time gig for him.

One woman sent him home with a sandwich because she thought I wasn't feeding him enough.

He's still bringing that up.

Between the routes, he went to physical therapy, worked with Theo, and eventually started skating with the guys. I watched him come home frustrated, exhausted, pleased with himself, and occasionally all three in the same afternoon.

When the Hawkeyes offered him a new contract, he came straight to the shop.

I was filling an order for a baby shower. He stood on the other side of the counter with his phone in his hand, smiling at me.

"They want me back."

I cried into his shirt–happy tears. Then he pointed out that I was still holding a piping bag. We both had to change.

On the ice, he sends a puck toward the net, then follows Hunter toward the tunnel as warmups end.

My stomach tightens again.

Ellie sees it and rests her hand over mine.

"He worked hard to get here."

"I know. I'm proud of him."

"He knows that too."

For tonight, I'm going to try to behave like someone who believes the medical professionals who cleared him.

The Hawkeyes are tied when Hunter gets the puck back to Wolf near the blue line. Wolf looks toward the net, shifts, then sends it across to Aleksi.

The pass comes back.

Wolf shoots.

For a second, I can't see where the puck went.

Then the goal light comes on.

I’m on my feet, screaming loudly enough that I’ll probably have no voice tomorrow.

His teammates crowd around him. Hunter catches his helmet between both gloves, saying something that makes Wolf laugh, and I press my hands over my mouth before I start crying.

Ellie hugs me anyway.

When Wolf skates toward the bench, he looks up.

I’m still standing.

He points his glove at me, and I point right back.

"Yes, you," I tell him, although there’s no chance he can hear me.

He grins.

I’ve seen that grin across our kitchen, over the steering wheel of Sprinkles, and from his side of the bed while he makes some comment about my television choices.

Seeing it here again nearly undoes me.

They win by one, and I’m still smiling when Wolf finds me after he finishes with the press.

His hair is damp, his tie is crooked, and he drops his bag beside us so he can pull me into his arms.

"Good game," I tell him.

"I heard you yelling from your seats."

"You did not."

"Pretty sure everybody did."

I laugh, and he kisses me before I can argue. My hands settle against his chest, and for a moment, I forget we’re standing in a hallway with people walking around us.

When he pulls back, I straighten his tie.

"How’s the shoulder?"

"Good. They checked." He brushes my hair behind my ear. "Ready to go home, Cupcake?"

I nod and take his hand while he picks up his bag.

There was a time I couldn’t imagine spending an evening with Wolf Ziegler without wanting to throw something at him.

Now I get to go home with him.

I made rules to keep this man out of my way and somehow ended up sharing his bed.

I’m never going to hear the end of it, but I guess Wolf and the rule jar had it right all along.

Some rules are worth breaking.

The End

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