
HOMETOWN HUNKS SERIES
RIGHT THERE ALL ALONG
Jenni Simonis

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HOMETOWN HUNKS SERIES
BOOK ONE

JENNI SIMONIS

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all those who wished for something for years and years, hoping it would come true. May this be the year that it does.

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Author's Note

This book deals with significant untreated mental health struggles of a side character. Struggles that may make them act in a way that readers may look at and find odd or even hateful if they've never been in a similar situation. People in the midst of a mental health crisis don't always act in a way others might consider to be logical.

In addition, both main characters are also seeing a therapist to help work through issues with their own mental health.

For those of us with mental health struggles, this can be a hard thing to deal with: getting people to understand that we're not being overly dramatic or attention-seeking. I hope that seeing these situations and the thoughts of the characters involved will help folks who haven't dealt with these situations be a little more understanding and empathetic.

Content Warnings can be found at the end of this book and on my

website:

www.jennisimonis.com

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Cast of Characters

Zach Hayes – main male character

Hannah St. James – main female character

Willow Hayes – Zach's sister

Violet (Vi) Hayes – Zach's sister

Olivia (Ollie) Hayes - Zach's sister

Janet St. James – Hannah's mom

Myles St. James – Hannah's dad

Alex Graham – Hannah's adoptive brother (cousin)

Maggie Hayes – Zach's mom

Henry Pierce – Zach's dad

Trent – Hannah's ex

Annie Walsh – Hannah's best friend

Sean Mason – Zach's best friend

Chelsea – nanny

Coach Brecken - Houston Hurricanes coach

Jack - Houston Hurricanes head quarterback

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Chapter One

“REALLY? THIS AGAIN?” HANNAH St. James cried out as the computer in front of her went dark. She wanted to scream, as she’d just finished inputting a whole stack of transactions into the system, and she wasn’t sure any of it had saved. *Well, there goes hours of work down the drain.*

“I thought they had this fixed yesterday,” her co-worker, Terri, replied.

“They said that two days ago, too. And yet, here we are, without power for the third time this week.”

And of course, her work expected them to still get everything done on time even with the electrical issues, but absolutely *no overtime*. If you needed to stay late, that was on your time, not the company’s. Just one of many reasons why she hated working there.

Terri sighed as she pulled her phone from her pocket. “Guess I’d better put in for a ride share. You know Brandon is going to come out of his office any minute and tell us to go home.”

Hannah dug her phone out of her purse. “I’d better do the same.”

“Trent can’t pick you up?”

“He’s at work today, and he gets grouchy if he has to leave to drive me somewhere,” she explained as they headed downstairs.

She snorted. “*Grouchy* is that guy’s middle name.”

“He’s not *that* bad; he just doesn’t like getting interrupted at work. It’s fine; I booked an Uber.” Hannah held the front door open for Terri. “See you tomorrow, assuming we actually have power.”

When the driver dropped her off at her apartment complex forty-five minutes later, she was surprised to find Trent’s car in their parking space. *He’s supposed to be at work today. Well, maybe we can spend some time together. Our work schedules have been crazy lately, and we haven’t seen much of each other outside of bedtime.*

Hannah didn’t even get the front door closed before she heard a feminine laugh from down the hall. Their unit was a one-bedroom apartment, so there was only one place the sound could be coming from. Her brain, however, refused to accept the obvious: Trent was cheating on her.

No. That can’t be it. I thought we were happy…

Quietly, Hannah moved down the hallway, past the photos of them lining the walls, to confirm her suspicions. Sure enough, a pile of women’s clothes sat just outside the bedroom, and inside was Trent with a blonde woman bouncing up and down on his dick. And to make matters worse, she was wearing the brand-new teddy Hannah had bought just a few days earlier. She didn’t care much about clothes, but lingerie was her weakness. She loved how it made her feel, and how the fabric felt against her skin. Now, it made her want to get sick.

Not wanting to give away her presence, she quickly made her way back out of their home and out into the parking lot. There, she collapsed onto one

of the benches that lined the green space next to the lot and buried her face in her hands.

How could he cheat on me? We've been together for almost a decade. It was his idea for us to live together. And he keeps dropping hints about us buying a place once he gets his promotion at work. I even thought, maybe…

She wiped the tears from her face. *Stop it, Hannah. It's done. We're done. It's time to put ourselves first for once.*

Fumbling with her purse, she dug out her phone and called her best friend, Annie.

Annie barely got out, "Hello," before Hannah started sobbing again.

"He's cheating on me."

"*Trent*? Are you sure?"

She swiped at the tears rolling down her cheeks. "I just walked in on them, so I'm sure. She's in our bed wearing *my* lingerie."

"Asshole." Annie sighed. "What do you want to do?"

"It's over. I could never take him back after seeing that. I want to come home."

"Don't let him know that you know. Make yourself scarce for the rest of the day. Go see a movie, go out to eat, go shopping, whatever. Come home late and go straight to bed. If he figures it out, he'll love bomb you until you take him back. I'll be there first thing in the morning, and we'll get you out of there."

"You're driving up here?"

"*We're* driving up there."

"No, please. Don't tell him. He'll kill Trent."

"Don't worry, I know how to handle your brother. We won't come over until you let us know Trent has left. And we'll be back home by the time he

knows you're gone."

"Does Alex *have* to come?"

"You want to get packed and out of there as fast as possible, right?"

"Yes."

"Then, yes, he has to come. Plus, he'll drive the U-Haul home."

She didn't want to admit it, but Annie was right. "*Fine*. But can you call him? I'm not up to one of his lectures today."

"Sure. You need to call your mom, anyway."

"Mom?" *Why do I need to call her?*

"For a place to stay? To accept that job she's been trying to get you to take?"

Hannah shook her head. "Where would I be without you?"

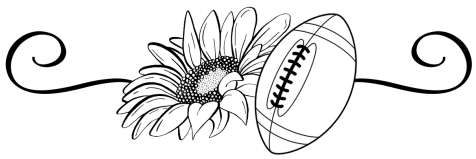
"Living with an ass you should have kicked to the curb years ago?"

"Ha, ha. Funny."

"What are friends for, if not to point out all your mistakes?" she said with a laugh. "I mean, isn't brutal honesty the reason you love me so much?"

"Says the girl with no boyfriend…"

"Ouch," she replied. Hannah could just imagine the fake indignation on Annie's face that went with the comment. "That's completely by choice, I assure you. I would hate to hurt the feelings of any of my admirers by choosing between them."



Hannah watched as Alex and Annie pulled into parking spots in front of her apartment. "Well, that was fast."

“We’ve been waiting on the other side of the complex for the all clear sign,” Annie explained before giving her a hug.

Alex pulled a stack of boxes from the back of the U-Haul. “I grabbed a few packs, but we can always run back and get more. The store is just down the street.”

“Thanks, Alex,” Hannah told him. “I don’t have that much stuff, so it’s probably enough. It’s mostly my clothes and books.”

“And don’t forget the stuff Mom and Dad bought for you guys. Be sure to grab all of it, too.”

Hannah laughed. “You mean I should leave him without dishes or a coffee pot?”

“Or toilet paper. Take every roll,” Annie suggested.

“Eh, he’s a guy, so it would be a while before he noticed,” said Alex. “He’ll feel the loss of that coffee pot real quick.”

“Especially since he has an early shift at work tomorrow. Well, let’s get to it. I want to be out of here as soon as possible.”

A few hours later, they loaded the last box into the moving truck.

Hannah looked around the apartment she’d shared with Trent for the last eight years. The photos of a smiling couple in the hallway that she always thought were a sign they were happy. The vase on the mantle from the first flowers he ever sent her. A throw on the back of the couch they used when they cuddled and watched movies. The popcorn bowl with painted cherry blossoms on it sitting above the fridge that he’d bought for movie nights. All things that should be packed away in boxes sitting in the moving truck.

But now, all she could picture was Trent enjoying those items with *her*. Of his smiles being for *her*. How many times had he snuggled with that woman

on their couch? Taken selfies of them smiling—or even kissing—on his phone? Sent her flowers?

Those items were all tainted now, regardless of how much they'd meant to her just twenty-four hours before.

Hannah sighed. *This is it. I'm really leaving.* She expected to feel sad, as most of the memories of her adult life were centered there. Instead, she felt relief. Happiness. Hope, even.

Well, I guess that tells me everything I need to know about this move. It's time. Beyond time.

"Just a couple more things to do and we can head out."

"Are you going to leave him a note?" Annie asked.

"Oh, I have something much better than that." Hannah had emptied her underwear drawers on the bed. "There's no way I would ever wear any of this again. As it is, I already have to go get tested because of his cheating. I'm not keeping lingerie she might have worn." She arranged the bras, panties, and intimate wear until it spelled out, "Fuck you."

Annie let out a bark of laughter as she snapped a photo. "Good for you. Ready to start your new life?"

She threw her key up in the air and caught it. "I just need to stop in and talk to my landlord. The last thing I need is for Trent to screw me over with the apartment. Then it's good-bye Dallas and good-bye asshole."

Hannah leaned her head against the window and watched the city's skyline grow smaller in the side-view mirror.

“Are you going to miss it?” Alex asked.

“Hmm?”

“Dallas. You lived there almost a decade. Are you going to miss it?”

“Not really. I only stayed after college because that’s where he wanted to live. I hate living in the city. It’s so loud. And our little apartment cost a fortune in rent.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re coming home. I’ve missed you.”

“You could have visited, you know.”

“And spent time with the asshole? No, thank you.”

“Just say it. You were right. Everyone was. I should have left him years ago.”

He reached over and squeezed her knee. “I’m not going to say it because I didn’t want to be right. I wanted you to be happy.”

“I thought I was. I guess I’m just as stupid as he said I was.”

“He called you stupid?” Alex growled.

“He said it’s why I couldn’t get a better job even though I have my master’s.”

His knuckles turned white as he gripped the steering wheel. “No, you couldn’t get a better job because he wouldn’t let you take the CPA test or move away from Dallas. You are not stupid, Hannah.”

She sighed and turned her attention to the town they were passing.

“Hannah. *Hannah*, look at me.”

She wiped away a tear, hoping he hadn’t seen it. “What?”

“You are not stupid. You graduated high school in three years. It only took you four years to complete your bachelors and master’s degrees, both with a 4.0. You are not stupid. You’re the smartest person I know.”

“Not too smart since I was with him for almost ten years.”

“Matters of the heart are different. Even the smartest people can be blind when it comes to that. He was your first real boyfriend, and you thought you were in love.”

“And who else would possibly love a fat, nerdy, nearly thirty-year-old like me?” *All things Trent has said about me more than once.*

Alex cursed. “I guess it’s a good thing we have a lot of miles between here and home. There’s so much wrong in that one sentence, it makes me want to turn around and go beat the crap out of him.”

She shook her head. “He’s not worth it.”

“No, but *you* are. You might not believe it right now, but you will soon. I’ll make sure of it.”

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Chapter Two

January 9, 2023

Twenty-eight. Another year older. Not that I feel any different. Well, no, that's not true. The loneliness that has been creeping up the last few years really hit me hard last night. Who would've thought I could be so lonely with three sisters filling up my life.

I've tried to hold onto what Mom told me: birthday wishes can come true, you just may have to wait a while. But twenty years? That just seems cruel…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

ZACH HAYES PUSHED THE door to the coffee shop and headed in to pick up his morning dose of caffeine. While he had a coffeemaker at home, it never tasted as good as what Jo made.

The place wasn't anything fancy, just a small storefront on Main Street that was fairly plain inside, other than a few pieces of art on the wall from local artists. Maybe a half-dozen tables filled the space, often occupied by people working on laptops. But it was his favorite spot to grab coffee. Way better than any of the fancy spots over in League City where his office was.

"The usual?" she asked as he approached the counter.

He handed over his thermal cup. "Same as always."

"One of these days you're going to surprise me and order one of those sugary lattes."

Zach laughed. "If I do that, you can be assured it's not for me."

She filled the cup with coffee, screwed on the lid, and handed it back. "Room for cream, as always. See you tomorrow."

He dropped a couple dollars in the tip jar. "Thanks, Jo. See you tomorrow."

As he walked over to the cream and sugar station, he ran over his to-do list for the day. Mondays, he usually spent the day at the office. He preferred being out in the field, visiting their stores, but there was plenty of paperwork and meetings that went along with being president of the company. He was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't notice the woman to his right until they collided with each other. His cup hit the floor and rolled away while hers tipped but didn't spill.

"Whew, that was close. I'm so sorry, I didn't see you…" But his voice trailed off as his eyes met her face. "Hannah?"

She looked at him for a moment, her head tilted. "Zach?"

He couldn’t breathe. How many times had he dreamt of this moment?

“Zach?” she asked again.

“Sorry, I was just so surprised to run into you like this. I haven’t seen you in forever. Are you in town visiting your mom?”

“Nothing as simple as that. But it’s a long story and you probably have somewhere you need to be.”

“No, not at all. I’d love to catch up. Just let me grab my cup and get some creamer first. If that’s okay?”

Her face softened for a moment and she smiled at him. “I’ll grab us a table.”

Zach picked up his errant cup from the floor as he worked to get his feelings in-check. *Hannah St. James is in town. The girl who’s never been far from my thoughts is finally back home. Maybe twenty years was just the right amount.*

He texted his assistant, Evie.

Zach

Sorry, going to be late today.

Evie

Zach Hayes is going to be late? I guess there’s a first time for everything.

Zach

Ha, funny.

He shook his head and put his phone back in his pocket. *I can’t really blame her for the teasing, though. A decade at the company and I’ve only*

been late a handful of times. Although, this is the first time it's not for Mom or the girls. This time, it's for me.

"So, does this long story start with you visiting home or moving back?" he asked as he sat down at the table.

"I'm home, and as you can imagine, Mom is ecstatic."

"I'm gathering the reason you're home isn't because you missed her, though."

She sighed. "If only I were so lucky. It all started last Thursday when I came home from work early…"

He dug his fingers into his thigh as she told him what happened. Since he couldn't wrap them around Trent's throat, it was the best he could do. There would be bruises there later, he was sure of it, but it was the only way he could keep his anger in check. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been that angry.

Maybe back during Mom's divorce?

Hannah was the sweetest, most caring woman he knew, and hearing about how she'd been treated by Trent was difficult. He took a sip of his coffee, letting the pain of the hot liquid burning his mouth calm him. "I'm so sorry, Hannah. Clearly, he didn't deserve you."

She looked down at her coffee cup. "How's that? It's not like I'm anything special."

He reached over and patted her hand. "You're worth more than a hundred Trents."

Hannah looked up at him, and he could see her eyes turn glassy with unshed tears. He knew she was trying hard not to cry in front of him.

"Do you have a job lined up?" he asked, changing the topic.

She nodded. “Mom has been trying for months to get me to come back home. The person who handles accounting and payroll at the nursery is retiring. Next week, I start the hand-over process for the position.”

“No wonder your mom was so excited at dinner last night.”

She looked at him, confused. “My mom? You had dinner with Mom?”

“Janet hasn’t missed a single birthday since Mom died. Yesterday was mine.”

She grimaced; a face he seemed to remember was something she did whenever she felt guilty about something. Or at least, the old Hannah did. *I haven’t seen her in almost a decade. She could be a completely different person now.*

“Happy birthday. I’m sorry I missed it. I was at home unpacking boxes. I would have come if Mom had said something.”

“She probably thought you needed some time to yourself. You found a place already?”

“One of Mom and Dad’s rental properties. They were keeping it vacant, hoping I would take the job. But honestly, time alone is all I have right now, and it’s driving me crazy. I’m used to going to work every day and being surrounded by people. Now, I’m just sitting at home, surrounded by boxes, and trying to figure out what to do next.”

That gave him a brilliant idea. “What are you doing for lunch?”

“Fast food, probably. There’s no food in the house and I don’t want to shop.”

“Want to eat lunch with me?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Did Mom put you up to this?”

He shook his head. “Until fifteen minutes ago, I had no idea you were in town. This is one friend asking the other to lunch. Giving you a little

company.”

He saw a look of hope on her face. “We’re friends?”

“Well, we were once. We were pretty inseparable as kids. I’m sure we can be friends again.”

“Lunch it is, then. Your girlfriend won’t mind?”

He laughed. “The only girls in my life are my sisters. And they don’t get a say in who I have lunch with.”

“*Oh*.”

“How about one o’clock at Gale’s Diner?”

“That’ll work. I’m spending the morning looking at SUVs.”

“You don’t have a car?”

“Trent thought it was stupid for us to have two vehicles. More like it was harder for me to catch him cheating if I had to rely on him for transportation.”

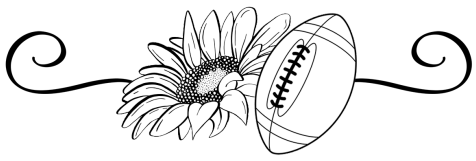
“My buddy owns a dealership. I can drop you on the way to the office.”

“I’d hate to make you even later to work. I’ll get an Uber.”

“It’s no problem at all. It’s just down the street from our office, and I’ll feel better knowing that they’ll take good care of you.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely.”



Zach watched Hannah out of the corner of his eye as he drove toward League City. He’d already pinched himself half a dozen times to make certain he wasn’t dreaming. Just yesterday, he’d blown out his birthday

candles and made the same wish he'd been making since he was eight: to marry Hannah St. James. And all night, he'd tossed and turned in bed, calling himself ridiculous. He wasn't a little boy in love with his best friend. He was a grown man with a family to take care of. A man with an empty heart and an empty bed.

And here she was, less than twenty-four hours later, in his SUV, with a lunch date this afternoon.

Well, she might not see it as a date, but my heart sure does. Thankfully, my brain is still the one in charge here. Can't get ahead of ourselves. This is the first time we've seen each other in more than a decade, and she just broke up with her boyfriend. So, for now, this is a friendship and nothing else. Got it, heart?

She reached over and squeezed his arm. "Thanks for everything. It's been nice having someone to talk to."

"What about Annie? Or Alex?"

"Everyone has been trying for years to get me to break up with Trent. With you, there's no judgement. You just listen. That's exactly what I need."

"I'm happy to listen whenever you need to talk. It's what friends are for."



HANNAH FOUND ZACH ALREADY waiting at a table when she walked into Gale's Diner. He looked up at her with a huge smile on his face, which caused her heart to skip a beat.

Well, that was unexpected.

“So, how did car shopping go?” he asked once she was settled into the booth.

“Well, seeing as I drove my new SUV here, I’d say pretty good. It’s odd driving myself around again, though. I only really drove if Trent had been drinking.”

She looked up as their waitress approached the table. “I haven’t been here in forever. What’s good?”

“I love the chicken cordon blue sandwich with fries,” he replied.

“I’ll take that with an iced tea, then.”

“Ditto, except with a Coke.”

As the waitress walked away, Hannah turned her attention back to Zach. “Now, enough about me. How about you? What have you been up to since high school?”

“Mostly just working at the family business and taking care of my sisters.”

“You’re taking care of your sisters?”

“Mom’s cancer got worse the year after we graduated, and she died later that year. I’ve been their legal guardian ever since.”

She reached across the table and rested her hand on his. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know. What about your dad?”

“Our sperm donor left shortly after finding out Mom was pregnant with my youngest sister.”

“How old is she?”

“She turns twelve in May.”

Hannah’s face fell. “She was so little when your mom died.”

“Ollie doesn’t remember her. Violet barely does. Willow turned eight the following month, so she has some memories of Mom.”

“To Violet and Ollie, the parent they know the most is you.”

“Exactly. Mom was really sick during her pregnancy and had a hard birth, so I essentially stepped into a parent role my sophomore year.”

Hannah looked over and was surprised to find their drinks on the table. She’d been so focused on their conversation she had missed them being dropped off. She took a sip of her tea. “No wonder I rarely saw you when we were in high school.”

Not that I had been looking… Who am I kidding? Annie teased me all the time about him.

“If it wasn’t football, class, or family, I didn’t have time for it. I would have given up football, but Mom wouldn’t let me. Thanks to your mom and Sean’s mom, my family was taken care of during practice and games.”

“That’s the second time you’ve mentioned my mom. She helped?”

“Our parents grew up together and our moms were best friends. It’s why we spent so much time together as kids.”

“I guess I didn’t pay much attention to the adults around us when we were little.”

“I found out when Janet started helping me and Mom. Sean’s mom I understood since we were best friends. But you and I hadn’t hung out in years. That’s when I found out that my mom and your mom had grown up together. Been best friends since kindergarten.”

“Mom never mentioned any of it.”

“Janet said she knew you’d drop everything to help. And that would have meant not graduating early. Mom asked her not to say anything. She knew how hard you’d worked for that.”

Hannah sighed. *I can’t argue with that. Mom knows how difficult it is for me to sit back and do nothing when people around me are hurting.* “I wish I

could have been there for you, at least."

"Honestly, I was a big mess and wanted to focus entirely on my family. Even if you had been there, I wouldn't have had time for you."

"Everyone needs a shoulder to cry on. And I have the feeling you missed out on that."

ZACH SIGHED. *A SHOULDER to cry on. I've been that for plenty of people, especially my sisters. But when I needed a good cry, I usually did it alone out in the pool house. The last thing I wanted was for anyone to see me in that state.*

"After Mom died, I had a crash course in the family business. She'd already been teaching me some of it, and that final year, I did a lot of her work. But with her gone, I didn't have her there to give me advice."

"That had to be difficult. I'm only taking on a small part of our business and I'm terrified. Even with my degrees and experience."

Zach popped a french fry in his mouth and nodded as he chewed. "I was certain I was going to mess everything up and the company would fail. What did I know about being president of a grocery chain? I considered hiring someone, but the folks who control the family trust insisted I give it a shot. The business had always been run by a family member. It took a couple years, but I finally started feeling comfortable in the position."

"And now?"

"We've bought a few more stores since then and income is up."

Hannah smiled at him, which made his stomach do a little somersault. "I'm so proud of you. That took a lot of work. The fact that you did it while mourning your mom and raising three sisters is a huge accomplishment."

“I did hire a nanny, which helped a lot. Chelsea is still with us part time while she finishes her degree. Now, she focuses on dinners, getting Ollie off to school, and some housework.”

“Still, not many teenagers would have taken on that kind of responsibility.”

“They’re my family. And to me, family is everything. I would never let anything come between me and my sisters.”

Hannah took a bite of her sandwich. “Mmm-hmm. You weren’t kidding. This is so good.”

He shifted in his seat at the sound of her moan. *Calm down body. We literally just ran into her this morning. Sex is the last thing that should be on our mind right now.*

But you know you want to think about it.

Shut up.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “By the look on your face, you have quite the conversation going on in your head right now.”

He chuckled. “Just work stuff. I told my brain I’m on break right now and it needed to be quiet.”

“Don’t I know how that is. It’s why I’m going stir crazy. I don’t even have work to ponder over right now.”

“Focus on your new home. I’m sure there’s stuff you need to buy. Or walls you want to paint.”

“True. It’s a rental house, but Mom said I can do anything with it I want. And I didn’t bring any furniture with me.”

“If you want, we can meet up for coffee and lunch every day. That will give you someone to talk to.”

“You’d do that?”

“I’d be happy to.”

Happy? Ecstatic is more like it, Zach. Be honest. You’d be devastated if she turned you down.

“It’s been nice catching up with you. And you can run ideas by me for your place. I did some remodeling about five years ago to make the house feel more like mine. Gave me more privacy, too.” He unlocked his phone and slid it over to her. “Add your contact info. Then, if I’m running late or whatever, I can let you know.”

She added her information and sent herself a text. “All done. I’m assuming I don’t need to worry about any photos you might text me…”

He laughed. “I’ve never sent anyone a photo like that, so you’re good. But if you want to send some my way, I’m good with that,” he said with a wink. *Oh my God, man. Where did that come from?*

Her face turned pink. “Well, I did get a dick pic on Facebook the other day I could forward you.”

His eyes bulged as he choked on a bite of his sandwich. He took a gulp of his Coke to help wash it down. “Nice comeback. But I have to admit that I prefer cats to sausages.”

She burst into a fit of giggles. “I’ll have to remember that. I was considering adopting one from the shelter.”

God, she’s adorable.

He finished off the last of his sandwich. “As much as I hate to say it, I have to get back to work. See you tomorrow at eight?” He waived over the waitress. “Can I get the check?”

“I’ll pay for my meal,” Hannah said.

“My treat. This was one of the best afternoons I’ve had in a while, thanks to you.”

“Oh, thanks. But it’s my treat tomorrow.”

Tomorrow? I like the sound of that.

“Deal.”

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Chapter Three

WILLOW STARED AT ZACH as he finished up the dinner Chelsea prepped. “You’re happy.”

At almost seventeen, his sister was clearly becoming more observant than he’d realized. “Is that so unusual?”

“Honestly, yes. Your default mode is content. *Happy*? That’s a rare sight.”

He smiled as he thought about Hannah. “Just had a good day today, that’s all.”

She squinted her eyes and pursed her lips. “Hmm.”

“What? You don’t believe me?”

She carried the bowl of salad and the bottles of dressing to the table. “That you had a good day? Yes. It’s the *why* I’m pondering.”

Hannah had been back in his life less than twenty-four hours. He definitely wasn’t ready to share about her yet. “Can you let Ollie and Vi know dinner is ready?”

“And changing topics. Even more suspicious.”

“Nothing suspicious. Just a good day.”

While Willow grabbed the girls, he took a picture of the lasagna he'd pulled from the oven.

Zach

Look at all this cheesy goodness. Don't you wish you had some?

Hannah

Ugh, I'm choking down a dry fast-food burger.

For a moment, he was tempted to invite her over for dinner, but he didn't want to push too quickly.

Sure, she is Janet's daughter and I could use that as an excuse. But Willow would be even more suspicious, and she might let something slip.

Zach

Didn't make it to the grocery store yet?

Hannah

I hate shopping for groceries. I buy junk and end up with nothing for meals.

Zach

Order them online. It's what I do. I pick them up on the way home from work.

Hannah

Forgot about that option. T always insisted I shop in-person.

Zach

Do what works for you. But please get some stuff for dinner.

~~Choking should be reserved for fun.~~

He looked at his reply for a moment, then erased it. She might have enjoyed his jokes today, but he didn't know her well enough yet. *What if it is too much? Who am I kidding? That was too much, too soon.*

Zach

I'd hate to see you eating another crappy burger.

Hannah

Oh, I bought a kid's meal just for you.

Zach

For me?

The next text answered his question; it was a photo of an orange toy cat.

Hannah

Thought you'd like to see my kitty.

Zach

Nice, but I prefer them with black hair.

Like yours. Not that I'm going to admit that … yet. Fuck, my mind is permanently in the gutter, isn't it?

Hannah

Are you sure it wouldn't cause you bad luck?

Zach

Never.

Hannah

What if she bites?

He was still laughing when Willow walked back into the dining space. “Laughter, too? Now, I know something is up.”

Zach

Gotta eat with the girls. Have a good night.

He pocketed his phone. They had a ‘no phones at the dinner table’ rule and he didn’t want her to call him on that, too. “Just a joke from a friend.”

“Sean?”

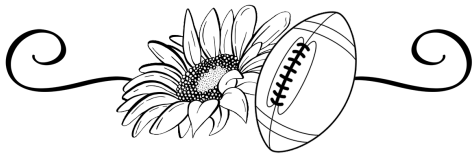
He started serving the lasagna. “No.”

“Sean is your only friend.”

“No, he isn’t.” *Wait. Is he? Do I really have only one friend?*

“Mmm-hmm,” she said as she sat down in her chair.

Damn, not only does she look like Mom, but she’s starting to sound like her, too.



Once homework was done and the girls were off to bed, he headed to his gym to get in a workout before bed. When he remodeled the house, he turned the unused formal dining room into a gym. With it just down the hall from his bedroom, it was easy to fit in an hour or so of exercise into his

daily routine. After so many years of playing football, his body craved physical activity. And when he didn't get it, he was grouchy and unfocused.

When he pulled his phone out to open his playlist, he found more texts from Hannah.

Hannah

Have a good dinner.

Groceries ordered. Bought a frozen lasagna. Won't be as good as yours, though.

Nothing is good as mine. He shook his head. *My thoughts are never going to be normal again, are they?*

Zach

Good. Need to eat well so you have enough energy.

Hannah

Enough energy for what?

Images of what he'd like her to spend her energy on filled his mind.

Down boy. We literally just saw her again for the first time in a decade this morning.

He adjusted his pants. *I mean you, too.*

Zach

Making your new house a home, of course.

Hannah

I figured it was more energy to get through your terrible jokes.

Zach

Ouch. And here, I thought I was a comedian.

Hannah

A commode-ian, maybe.

Zach

Are you saying I’m full of it?

Hannah

I’d never do such a thing. [wink emoji]

Zach

What did I ever do without you?

Hannah

Laugh less?

Zach

Indeed, Hannah. Indeed.

Hannah

Whatcha doing?

Zach

Workout. It’s part of my routine before bed.

Hannah

Why am I not surprised?

Zach

Bike first, then a run, and lastly some weights.

Hannah

If you see me running, something is chasing me.

I'd love to chase you. Maybe in the woods out back… He shook his head. *Thoughts like that and riding a bike don't go well together.*

Hannah

I'll let you get back to your workout. I think I'm going to head to bed.

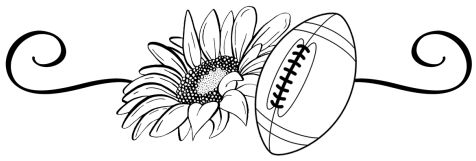
Zach

Night. Sweet dreams.

Preferably of me.

Hannah

Same to you. See you in the morning.



HANNAH ROLLED OVER ONTO her side and pulled the blankets up to cover most of her head. She loved a cool bedroom but couldn't stand her ears being cold.

Zach Hayes. I hadn't thought about him in years. Which is odd since we were such good friends as kids. But by the time we hit our preteen years, he

was busy with football and me with horses. Neither left us with much time with each other.

She adjusted her pillow. *I can't believe Mom never told me about his mom. Even a decade later, there was so much hurt in his eyes as he talked about her loss. Had I known what happened with his dad and his mom's cancer, I could have avoided drudging up his pain.*

Just the thought of losing her mom brought tears to Hannah's eyes. But going through that as a teen, and taking on raising his three sisters? That was more than she could imagine.

I wish I could have been there to help him through it all. When Alex's parents died, I was there for him, offering an ear or a shoulder to cry on. Annie and I even gave him some 'retaliation-free' prank vouchers. But from the sound of it, Zach didn't have that kind of support. He was struggling, all the while I was off having fun at college, not a care in the world beyond doing well in my classes.

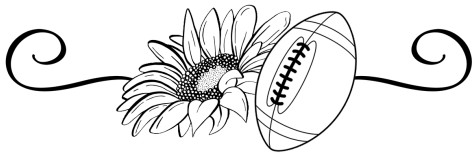
And, if I'm being honest with myself, I have to admit that after moving to Dallas, I kind of pushed everything associated with home to the back of my mind. I was all set to start this great new life and leave this little town behind. Instead, I was forgetting everything that was good in my life. And everyone.

Hannah could feel the guilt starting to bury her. Outside of family, Zach had been the person she was closest to growing up, and she didn't think about him for a decade. *What kind of friend does that?*

Had I known he was going through so much, I would have been there, school be damned. And that's exactly why Mom and Maggie hid it from me. Maggie knew I would have dropped everything to be there for her son.

Her mind wanted to argue with her, as taking the blame and guilt for situations had become second nature to her. Too many years of Trent putting everything on her was a hard thing to counteract, especially when she'd only been away from him a few days. But Zach's insistence that it wasn't her fault won out.

She snuggled up to her pillow and tried to push the whole situation from her mind so she could sleep. Normally, that would be difficult since she tended to replay things in her brain. But tonight, she had the image of Zach smiling at her as they talked over lunch. And his teasing comments that almost seemed like flirting. They were enough to allow her to drift off to a peaceful sleep.



ZACH HAD HOPED TONIGHT would be different. That for once he could talk about his parents and not have one of his recurring dreams pop up. But as he feared, he was not so lucky.

He hated the dreams because he knew what was coming but was powerless to change anything. Sometimes, it made him feel like Scrooge taking a trip with the ghost of the past. All he could do was let it play out and the heartbreak hit him again…

It was the fall of his sophomore year, and he rushed toward his mom's car that was sitting in the parking lot. He was so excited, as he'd heard about a college recruiter coming to this Friday's game. While officially he would be there to see one of the seniors, word was he was more interested in Zach and Sean. And Zach couldn't wait to tell his mom.

All thoughts of the recruiter fled his mind as he spotted his mom bent forward against the steering wheel, her shoulders shaking as she sobbed.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” he asked as he opened the door.

She jumped and hurried to wipe away the tears. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

“Mom. I’m old enough to know ‘I’m fine’ means you’re not. What is wrong?”

She choked back another sob. “Your father left.”

“He did *what*?”

“He packed a couple bags and left for a hotel.”

He swore under his breath. “Did he say why?”

“I’m pregnant again.”

“As if you got there yourself. He thinks it’s another girl, doesn’t he?”

Maggie gasped and looked at him in surprise.

“It didn’t take much to see the disdain he has for my sisters. Not to mention the fights you guys had when you were pregnant with Willow and Vi.”

“To his parents, only boys matter. I didn’t realize he felt the same until Willow. I tried hard to keep you kids from knowing.”

“Knowing Dad couldn’t care less about them?” he sighed. “Why did you stay with him?”

She wiped away more tears. “We’ve been together nearly twenty years. And he’s the father of my children.”

“Sperm donor, Mom. A father doesn’t hate his kids because of their gender.”

She hung her head. “He said if this one is a girl and I don’t get an abortion, he’ll divorce me.”

Zach wanted to punch something. “Divorce him. He’s not just a terrible husband and parent, but a horrible human being.”

“But how can I do all of this,” she motioned toward her abdomen, “alone?”

He put his arm around his mom’s shoulders. “You’re not alone; you have me. I’ll be there for you every step of the way. I promise. Family *always* comes first, no matter what. Now, switch spots with me. You’re in no shape to be driving.”

“But—”

“I need more time behind the wheel to get my license, anyway. And if I’m going to be helping out more, I want to be ready to get my license as soon as I turn sixteen.”

She unbuckled her seatbelt. “Well, since you put it that way, you can drive us home.”

Zach woke to a darkened bedroom with tears on his cheeks. After that day in the car, he rarely saw a smile on his mom’s face. The stress of a difficult pregnancy and an even worse divorce hit her hard. And all the while, she was carrying around a secret. Afraid she was already putting too much on Zach, she hid the lump she’d found on her breast. By the time he learned the truth, it was already stage four.

“Fucking Henry,” he mumbled as he punched his pillow and tried to get comfortable again. As far as he was concerned, his dad walking out led to the death of his mom, and he’d never forgive him for that.

He sighed. *I need to think about something else, otherwise I’m never going to get to sleep.*

Hannah. Just the thought of her brings a smile to my face. Willow was right earlier; I am happy. For once, I finally have my dreams within sight.

And I’m not letting anything get in the way.

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Chapter Four

January 22, 2023

It's hard to believe that two weeks ago I was lying in bed whining to myself over my life. And now, I get coffee with her every morning and have lunch with her every afternoon. We've not put any labels on what we're doing, and I'm in no rush.

There's been plenty of flirting and innuendo, which is new for me. But watching her blush and then come back with a reply that's just as risqué makes my day. It makes me want to think of even more things to rile her up…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

“ARE YOU SURE THIS is how you want to spend your Sunday?” Hannah asked Zach.

“You’ve asked me that like five times since I picked you up. Not to mention several times over the past week. Yes, this is how I want to spend my day.”

“Driving me to stores to pick out work clothes? Really?”

“You’re nervous about starting your new job. If driving you around all day helps ease some of that, I’m happy to play chauffeur.”

“And critic. I never go clothes shopping because I’m terrible at it. Usually, I save it for when Annie is available, and I take her with me. But something is up with her. She’s been a little off since I moved back.”

“Maybe work is stressing her out.”

“That’s what she said, but it feels like more than that. But who knows? Maybe it feels weird because I’m not used to seeing her in person. She could have been like this over work in the past but hid it better since we mostly texted.”

“True. Now, are you ready to go do some shopping?”

“Mall shopping on a Sunday? Never. But it’s either that or I wear jeans and a T-shirt to work tomorrow. And I’m not willing to flout office rules just because my family owns the company.”

He hopped out of the SUV and headed around to her side. Zach always insisted on opening the door for her, which she found to be awfully sweet. It had taken some getting used to since Trent had never done anything like that. In fact, since coming back home, she’d realized there was a lot he didn’t do. Pull her chair out for her before she sat down. Open a door at a restaurant. Bring her flowers. Pay for her meal. Even though they’d been

together for nearly a decade, she was always expected to pay for her own food.

The more she looked back on their time together, the more their situation felt like they were roommates that slept together rather than long-time boyfriend and girlfriend. Zach exhibited more boyfriend traits across two weeks than Trent did during their entire relationship. That realization had hit her almost as hard as finding out he was cheating.

The feel of Zach linking his arm with hers pulled Hannah from her thoughts. It was the first time he'd done anything like that, and it caught her off guard for a moment. But it felt so good, she couldn't stop herself from leaning into it.

ZACH SMILED AS HE felt Hannah's head rest against his shoulder as they walked. He'd been tempted to take her hand in his, but was worried it might be too much, too soon. She was only a couple weeks out of a long-term relationship, after all. Linking arms, though, was something friends could do. And was a good way to gauge how she might feel about something more.

For a moment, he'd been afraid he went too far, as he felt her body stiffen at the contact. But almost immediately, she softened and leaned against him. He nearly laughed at how happy the little gesture made him.

I'm a twenty-eight-year-old man, not a middle schooler. When did I become the person who was excited over walking arm-in-arm with a woman?

But he knew the answer to that question. It wasn't just any woman; it was Hannah. And he'd waited a very long time for this.

“So, where do you want to start first? A dress shop? A department store?”

“Probably a department store. I’m looking for slacks and blouses, not dresses or skirts.”

Too bad. I’d love to see you in a nice little pencil skirt. Maybe with a slit on it…

He shook those thoughts from his head. *Behave. We’re here to shop for Hannah for work.*

“No skirts or dresses? I bet you’d look great in them.”

She blushed. “Trent always said they made my ass look fat.”

“Forget that loser. Clearly, he couldn’t appreciate what was right in front of him. Try on a few for me?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “*Fine*, I’ll grab a few to try. But you have to be honest about how I look in them. *Promise*?”

“I promise.”

An hour later, Zach was kicking himself for making that promise. And it wasn’t because she looked awful in the green dress she was wearing, either. It hugged her curves and he hated that anyone besides him would see them.

“How do I look?”

He paused for a moment, but it was apparently just enough to fuel her self-confidence issues.

“Just say it. I look horrible. Trent was right.”

He hated that Hannah had been beaten down so badly by someone who supposedly cared for her. *I would never treat anyone like that. She has a body that was made to be worshipped, not insulted.*

“I won’t say it because it’s not true. You look amazing in that dress. I’m just not sure if I want others to see how good it looks on you.”

She laughed. “You’re terrible.”

“Well, I did promise to be truthful. And I’m going to be jealous of every single person who sees you in that dress.”

Her mouth dropped open and she stared at him for a moment. “I guess I’d better buy it in all three colors, then,” she said before heading back to the changing room.

True to her word, Hannah grabbed the red and blue versions of the dress as they headed for the checkout. “Too bad they only had my size in three colors. I’m not a huge fan of pink, but that dress was awfully cute.”

That was an image he did not need in his head: the pink fabric was nearly the same color as her lips and would be gorgeous with her dark hair. He was torn between being happy it wasn’t available and sad he’d never see her in it.

The disappointment of missing out prevailed, and he snapped a photo of the dress and its tag while Hannah paid for her purchases. *Maybe I can find it online.*

“Where to next?” she asked as he took the bags from her hands.

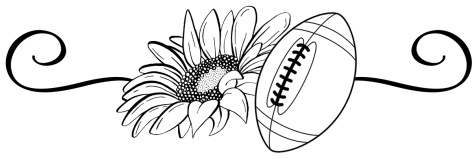
He looked at his watch. *Two-thirty already?* “How about lunch? I didn’t realize it was so late.”

Before she could even answer, her stomach growled.

“Lunch it is, then. Sushi? Chili’s? Cheesecake Factory?”

“Mm-hmm. Cheesecake. You sure know the way to a girl’s heart.”

Noted.



Willow eyed Zach suspiciously. “Five lunches?”

“And?”

“You only have three sisters.”

“And?”

“You’ve been buying lunch every day for weeks. Why do you need two extra lunches?”

“I’m not eating out today. And this one is for a friend.”

She narrowed her eyes. “The same friend who has been texting you?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Because you don’t make lunch for anyone but us. I don’t even remember you ever making Sean one.”

“Cause a lunch for him would fill a grocery bag,” he joked.

“Are we ever going to meet this ‘friend’?”

“I’ll bring them around at some point. But you’ve already met them.”

“Now I’m even more curious, as I’m fairly certain you’re purposefully avoiding saying ‘she’.”

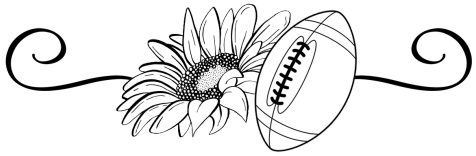
He handed her a lunch bag and pointed toward the front door. “Bus will be here any minute.”

“This conversation isn’t over.”

“It is for now, unless you plan on walking to school.”

She rolled her eyes at him before grabbing her backpack from the barstool and heading for the door. “*Brothers*!”

“Same could be said of sisters,” he called out after her.



Hannah was already waiting at their table when Zach walked into the coffee shop. He detoured her way and dropped off the lunch bag before heading to the counter for his drink.

"Why did you bring your lunch in with you?" she asked once he returned.

"Mine's in my vehicle. That's yours."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "*Mine*?"

"I figured since you hate grocery shopping—and cooking—that it was unlikely you had a lunch packed. Fast food was more likely, and I know the closest one is a distance from the nursery."

She laughed. "Got me there. Jack in the Box was the most likely candidate. At least they have salads."

"There's a salad with chicken in the bag. Plus, a turkey sandwich, a tangerine, and some chips."

"You made me a lunch with all my favorite things?"

"I know how stressed you are about today. Now, you have one less thing to worry about."

Hannah reached over and squeezed his hand. "*Thank you*. I can't remember the last time someone cared enough to pack me a lunch."

Her eyes glistened with tears. When one slipped down her cheek, he wiped it away. The fact that she was so appreciative over something as simple as a bagged lunch tugged at his heart.

"No tears today. You're going to rock your new job and have a great day."

"Be prepared for plenty of texts. Don't be surprised if you need to talk me down more than once. I still can't believe Mom thinks I'm smart enough for this job."

Damned Trent. This isn't the first time she's made disparaging comments about herself, none of which were even close to being accurate. It makes me

want to drive to Dallas and kick his ass.

He slid his hand from her cheek to her chin and angled her face so he could look her in the eye. “Hannah St. James, you are the *smartest* person I know. Who else could have finished high school, a bachelor’s degree, and a master’s degree in seven years? Most people need more than five just for the degrees.

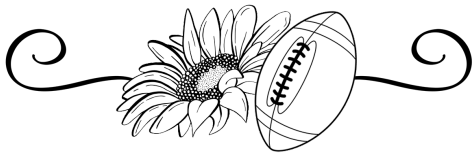
“Don’t let anyone ever make you feel stupid. Your mom thinks you’re smart enough for the job because you are. And if you don’t believe it, I’ll just have to believe it for the both of us until you do.”

Her gaze dropped to her lap. “Alex said something similar when he was driving me home from Dallas.”

“You should listen to him. He’s a smart guy.”

She giggled. “And since when do you agree with my brother?”

“Not my fault it took him so long to finally say something intelligent.”



Zach was finishing up with the stack of papers on his desk when his phone pinged.

Hannah

I’m not sure I can do this.

Zach

You’ve got this. I promise.

Hannah

I keep overhearing whispers about “the bosses’ daughter.”

Zach

It’s a family-run business.

If they have an issue with you working there, maybe they need to find a new place to work.

Cause one day, you might just be the boss.

Hannah

Shut your mouth. I can’t run this place.

Zach

Sure, you can. You can do anything. I promise.

Hannah

Well, since you promised, it must be true. [eyeroll emoji]

Zach

Exactly. And an eyeroll? Aren’t you supposed to respect your elders?

Hannah

Eight months, Zach. You’re hardly my elder.

Zach

I was walking before you even came home from the hospital.

Hannah

Oh, I take that back, sir. You're so much older than me.

He barked out a laugh.

Zach

Feel better now?

Hannah

Surprisingly, yes. But I'm sure it won't last long.

My poor Hannah. Years of that asshole in her life have really beaten her down. I remember when she was the one telling me to be optimistic.

Zach

I'm here whenever you need me.

Hannah

Thanks.

It was nearly lunch when the next message came through.

Hannah

Tell me I'm smart.

Zach

You're smart.

Hannah

Tell me I can do this.

Zach

You absolutely can do this.

Hannah

Tell me I’m beautiful.

Zach

You’re beautiful.

Hannah

[happy emoji] LOL. That’s all I really wanted you to say.

The first two were just to warm you up.

Little minx.

Hannah

Cause I know I’ve got this. I’ve already improved two processes today.

Zach

That’s my girl. I told you that you were going to rock it today.

He’d just pulled into the driveway at home when she texted again.

Hannah

You were so right! I rocked today.

And thanks for lunch. It was good.

Zach

Well, we can’t eat lunch together every day anymore.

Hannah

I missed that today. It was so nice talking every day like that.

Zach

We could text during lunch. Or video chat.

Hannah

Video chat in the break room might be weird. But I could text.

Zach

Break room?

Hannah

I’m trying to be social. If I hide in my office, they might think I’m snobby.

Zach

Good thinking. Texts, then.

Hannah

And lunch on Sat & Sun?

Zach

Wouldn’t miss it.

Hannah

Well, I’m having an early dinner and heading to bed. I’m beat.

Zach

Have a good sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.

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Chapter Five

March 18, 2023

Vi turns fifteen today. It seems so weird to think that at her age I basically took on the role of second parent in our house. That my life went from football and fun to helping care for a mom, who was frequently on bed rest, and two younger sisters.

How did I manage it all? I look at Vi and she seems way too young to have the world on her shoulders like that. I'm glad her and the girls never had to make the sacrifices I made. It really makes me feel so much older than twenty-eight sometimes.

I wish Hannah could come to the party, but there's no way I

could hide my feelings in front of the girls. Especially Willow. She's become way too observant…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, VI," ZACH said as she walked into the kitchen. "Any special request for breakfast this morning?"

"Raspberry french toast?"

He opened up the fridge. "What do you know? There just happens to be a pint of berries in the fridge."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Not like they're my favorite or anything."

Zach laughed as he mixed the eggs in a bowl. "You used to sit in front of the bush in the back and eat every berry you could find. Your hands and mouth would be stained. It used to make Mom laugh so hard."

Vi sighed. "I wish I could remember her more."

"I do, too. If I could share my memories with you, I would. I do have something that will help, though."

"What's that?"

"Mom wanted to record videos for you guys for every birthday, but she knew she didn't have time. So, she picked some birthdays and occasions that meant the most to her. She said a girls' fifteenth birthday was really the last year of your childhood. At sixteen, you were more of an adult.

"Queued up in the living room is a video for you. Only me and Mom know what's in it. And that's because I recorded it. There's also a present on the coffee table to go with it."

She sniffled. "Mom made me a video?"

“Willow got one when she turned fifteen as well. The videos are personal, so it’s your choice to keep it to yourself or share it. As far as I know, Willow has kept hers private.”

Vi swiped at a tear. “Are there videos for you, too?”

He nodded. “She recorded those in secret, so I didn’t see them. I watched my first on my twenty-first birthday. There’s several more, but I’ve only hit the milestone for one.”

“Can I watch it now?”

“I asked Willow and Ollie for some private time this morning. Go watch it and I’ll bring you breakfast as soon as it’s done.”

She ran over and gave him a hug. He couldn’t remember the last time she’d been affectionate with anyone, let alone him. “I know I don’t show it enough, but you really have been a great big brother. And I do appreciate you.”

He hugged her back. “It’s okay. Plenty of people have grumpy teenage years.”

She hit his shoulder. “I’m not a grump.”

“Grouchy, then. Would explain the big metal trashcan that showed up for you.”

“Zach! If anyone around here resembled Oscar, it would be you. Until lately, that is.”

“Like I told your sister, things are just going good at work, and it’s put me in a good mood.”

She snatched a handful of raspberries. “Mm-hmm.”

He handed her a box of tissues. “Go watch your video. Food will be up soon.”

“Do I really—?”

“Yes, you do. Otherwise, you’re going to be swiping at your snotty nose with your arm.”

Vi took the box from him. “Ugh, you’re so gross.”

“Well, I’m a guy, so…”

A few minutes later, he heard his mom’s voice fill the great room. *God, I miss her voice. It was always so soothing. Even when she was mad at us, she had trouble expressing that with her tone.*

He’d probably watched his video a hundred times since he turned twenty-one. Thankfully, they were digital, so there was no harm in watching them repeatedly. There were other videos waiting for him, including his thirtieth birthday, wedding day, and birth of first child. He couldn’t wait until the day he could watch them as well.

By the time he handed Vi her breakfast, there was a pile of used tissues on the couch next to her. She was wearing the necklace and bracelet from the box on the coffee table. Both were gifts from Mom. All the videos had an accompanying gift. For his twenty-first birthday, he’d gotten a set of cufflinks, a tie pin, and a ring that had been passed down in the family for generations.

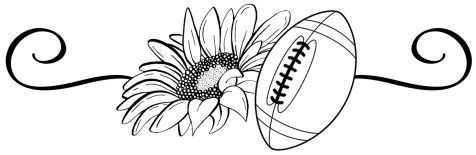
“Care for some company?” he asked her.

She looked up at him, tears running down her cheeks, and nodded.

He moved the box of tissues onto her lap, sat next to her, and wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

“Thanks,” she mumbled as she laid her head against him.

“I’m always here whenever you need me. Nothing will ever change that.”



Janet held her arms out as Zach approached her in the lobby of the restaurant. “Did Vi watch her video yet?” she asked as she hugged him.

“She did. I actually got a hug and a ‘thank you’ from her. I think I got more affection from her today than I have in the last year combined,” he replied as he walked her back to their table.

“Teen years are hard. It’s even worse when you don’t have your mom and can barely remember her. It’s why I’ve tried so hard to be in you guys’ lives. She would have done the same for me.”

“And we all really appreciate it.”

“Auntie Janet!” the girls yelled when they spotted her. All three ran over to give her a hug and receive their usual kiss on the head in return. It was just one of the many little motherly things she did with them.

“Happy birthday, Violet,” Janet said as she handed her a bag. “It’s to go along with your mother’s gifts.”

Vi looked to Zach and he nodded.

She hurried to pull all the paper from the bag. Inside were a few sets of earrings and a ring that matched the necklace and bracelet, plus a large wooden jewelry case with her name carved on top. It was the same gift Willow had received on her fifteenth birthday, although the style of each girl’s jewelry and box varied.

Willow’s jewelry featured topaz and her jewelry box had a willow tree beside a lake carved into it. Vi’s jewelry was aquamarine and violets were carved into her box. And each necklace had their first initial.

“And now, you have a set of your own,” said Willow. Vi had been jealous two years earlier when her sister had opened her gifts.

Vi hugged the items close to her chest. “I love them, Auntie Janet. Thank you for helping us include Mom in my celebration.”

“Maggie and I spent a lot of time picking out all the gifts for you four. She wanted to make sure they would be timeless and something you’d always treasure.”

Zach held out a chair for Janet, then sat down next to her. “Who’s ready to eat?”

“Can’t we do more presents?” Vi joked.

“Dinner, then presents.”

Once their plates were cleared away, Zach set the pile of gifts in front of Vi. “There’s a couple gifts in there from Sean, otherwise it’s all from me and your sisters.”

She dug through and found Sean’s gifts first. One was an envelope with tickets for a luxury box for a game next season. “Ooooh, my friends are going to love me when they find out about this. Will he come up and say hi?”

“He sure will,” Zach replied. “And sometimes he can get some of the other players to come up, too.”

Vi opened the second envelope and her mouth dropped open. “Five hundred dollars? I can’t believe he gave me $500.”

“He wasn’t sure what to get you. And he’s always seen you girls as his little sisters, too. He wanted to be here, but he’s out of town for the team again.”

“Can you text him that I said he’s the best bonus brother in the whole world?”

Zach pulled out his phone. “Let’s take a pic and send it to him.”

A moment later, Sean replied back.

Sean

Tell her I said Happy Birthday and that I’m the best brother, period.

Zach shook his head and laughed.

Zach

When you’re buying pads at the store and dealing with PMS, you can have the title.

Sean

Best bonus brother it is, then.

The rest of the presents included clothes, a new cell phone and laptop, and a certificate for driving school.

“Your class isn’t until this fall, though,” Zach explained. “That will give you enough time to practice driving before you get your license next year.”

“When do I get a car?” she asked.

“Maybe next summer. We’ll see how things go with your driving.”

“Okay,” she pouted.

“I don’t even get mine until this summer and I’m almost seventeen,” said Willow.

That made Vi smile. “So, I’ll get mine sooner than you did?”

Zach laughed. “Yes, but it’s because Mom and I agreed on summer after your sixteenth birthday. That way you could get comfortable driving it during the nice weather. It’s just that your birthday is in March, and

Willow’s is in November. But it’s conditional on how you do at driving school and your behavior.”

“I’ll do good, I promise. I can’t wait to have my own car.”

“Me, too. You can pick up the groceries,” he joked.

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Chapter Six

April 28, 2023

It's been almost four months since I ran into Hannah at the coffee shop, and I still have no idea what we're doing. Are we friends who hang out? Are we dating?

Dating. It brings both a smile to my face and panic to my chest. My therapist said to just be honest with Hannah and everything will be fine. Only he and Sean know my secret…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

ZACH WATCHED AS HANNAH cut up her food. "What did that poor waffle ever do to you?"

She looked down and seemed surprised to find her breakfast was little more than a pile of mush. “Sorry. Just a little frustrated, I guess.”

He reached across the table and rubbed his thumb on her hand. “What’s wrong?”

She pulled her hand away and dropped it to her lap. “Nothing.”

“My mom taught me well. ‘Nothing’ and ‘I’m fine’ always mean something is wrong.”

“I—” she pushed her food around her plate. “Do you like me?”

“Of course I do. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

“No, I mean…” She sighed. “You hold my hand when we walk. And sometimes you wrap your arm around me and put your hand in my back pocket. And you started kissing my cheek or forehead after coffee in the morning. But all we do is have coffee and lunch. Or breakfast on days like today when the girls don’t have school. We’ve never gone out to dinner. Which makes me think I’m being stupid again and misreading everything.” She blew out a loud breath. “*There*. I finally said it. I hope you’re not mad at me.”

“Why would I be mad at you?”

“Because I made your friendship out to be more than it is. And I got frustrated with you about it.”

“Am I your friend? Of course. I hope that no matter what, we’re always friends. And you’re more than welcome to get frustrated with me sometimes. I’m sure I will do plenty to deserve it.”

“But—”

“As to the more. Yes, I want more. But I didn’t want to go too fast or make you feel like I was pushing you. It’s only been a few months since

you ended a long-term relationship. I wanted to give you space to find yourself again. To see who Hannah is without the ‘and Trent’.”

“Y—You mean it?”

“Promise.”

She picked up her cup of coffee and pretended to drink it. He knew her well enough to know she was using it to give herself a moment to think. That sort of thing happened just about any time he complimented her or contradicted something she’d said about herself.

He wanted her to take as much time as she needed, so he turned his focus on his plate of food. As he’d hoped, she followed suit, eating her eggs and bacon. And a few moments later, a fresh waffle was dropped off at their table.

“How—?”

“I signaled Patty. She took one look at the table and knew exactly what I wanted.”

“Thanks.”

“Didn’t want you going hungry just because I’d been stupid and didn’t let you know I was interested in more. I thought the little displays of affection spoke for themselves. Then again, I’m new to all of this stuff, so…”

“They did. But then we never went out and I started questioning everything. Sorry, it’s something I—”

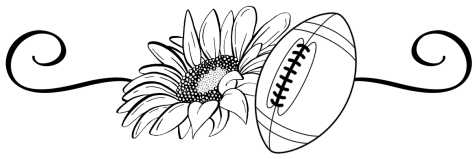
“Would you like to go to dinner with me tonight? I need to run home and get the girls set up with their meal, but we could go out afterward.”

A huge smile spread across her face. “I’d love that.”

“Seven o’clock? Mexican?”

“That sounds great. I’ll meet you there?”

“Oh, no. If we’re finally having our first real date, I’m picking you up at your place.”



HANNAH FIDDLED WITH THE snaps on the pockets of her pants. *How could it possibly be only noon? Ugh. This day is taking forever.*

She looked over her desk. All her tasks for the week were done. She’d handed out the last paycheck about fifteen minutes ago. The only thing she hadn’t done yet was eat lunch. And she couldn’t skip that; Zach loved making them for her every day.

Do I really need to still be here? Suzie said she routinely left early on Fridays since there was little to do at that point. There’s plenty to do at home, though. I’ve been so busy learning my new job that I’ve barely touched my own to-do list. That settles it. Lunch and I’m done for the day.

When she opened her front door, she was surprised to find a box among the mail that had been pushed through the slot on her door. It had no labels or postage on it, just a heart drawn on the front.

She dropped the rest of the mail onto the entryway table and took the box over to the kitchen island. Opening it up, Hannah was surprised to find a dress inside. It was the pink one she’d been admiring that day at the store. Clearly, Zach had dropped this off on the way to work.

Well, now I know what I’m wearing tonight. The only problem is I haven’t replaced any of my lingerie yet, and this dress deserves more than plain white cotton. She looked down at her watch. *I could run to the mall, but*

that wouldn't leave time for my to-do list. And I'd really like to knock it down.

Oh, maybe one of the stores over in League City will have something.

She grabbed her keys and purse and headed out to her SUV.

A little over an hour later, she was pulling back into the driveway. While the selection at the stores wasn't great, she had found a nude collection of lingerie that had shades beyond peach. One of the brown sets nearly matched her skin tone, and she couldn't pass it up. Unfortunately, she couldn't find a matching garter belt, so she decided to go bare legged instead. Thankfully, she already had a pair of sandals that would work well with the dress.

Now that her clothing situation was settled, she went back to focusing on her chores. They needed to be done, plus they'd help the time pass faster. The first item on her list: laundry. She threw a load in the washer, then headed for her bedroom to strip the sheets and put on a fresh set. Gathering up the dirty linens and her hampers from the bathroom, she took them to the laundry room.

Once laundry was underway, she grabbed a duster and started on the next item on her list. Before long, she had everything dusted and the floors swept and mopped. She glanced over at the clock.

Five. Finally! I can start getting ready.

In the bathroom, she started a bubble bath. While the tub filled, she laid her clothes out on the bed and pulled her sandals from the closet. She unwrapped her hair, careful not to knock the pins out that held her braid in place. Washing her long hair took forever, as did drying it. She'd washed it just last night, so she'd pinned it up and covered it so she wouldn't get it dirty while cleaning.

Hannah let out a happy sigh as she sunk down into the water. *There's nothing like a hot soak after hours of housework. It's like my little reward after getting my chores done. If only there was enough room to really stretch out. When I buy my own place, a soaker tub is a definite necessity.*

She leaned back against the tub and closed her eyes. *A date with Zach. I'm actually going on a date with Zach. Last night, I tossed and turned all night over the thought of having the conversation with him. I was certain he was going to say we're just friends. I'm so glad I was wrong about that.*

I'm just sad that it took me months to finally ask. I've wanted to for at least two months now, but I was afraid. Afraid that I was misreading our relationship as badly as I did with Trent.

Trent. What a jerk. Every day, I'm learning more and more about how he controlled me. And belittled me. But Zach—and surprisingly enough, Alex—have been working hard to undo some of the damage. This bubble bath is a testament to that. I can't remember the last time I pampered myself like this.

Hannah sighed. *It was like I was only half myself with him. And now, I'm slowly finding myself again.*

She slowly trailed her fingers up her thigh. *And hopefully also finding a love life where my needs are important. Where I don't need batteries to enjoy myself. Although, knowing that Zach likes me back really makes me take a second look at all those comments and texts. Was it more than just playful flirting? I certainly hope so. Maybe I'll get lucky and get a little taste of it tonight.*

An hour later, she looked herself over in the mirror. Just as she'd predicted, the color of the dress went along great with her hair—a mix of

brown and black—and skin tone. And oddly enough, it made the gold ring in her eyes really stand out. Normally, they just looked plain brown.

Unfortunately, the complimentary color wasn't enough to help her ignore all the things that drove her crazy about her body. The rounded tummy that was more noticeable if she stood a certain way. How it looked like she had a double chin if she didn't hold her head up straight. Or the thick legs that stuck out from under the dress. *I am beautiful. Zach says so.* She sighed. *If only I could convince myself the same. Well, at least my boobs look great. That's something, right?*

She slipped her sandals on and did one more look over before grabbing her phone from the charger and heading for the living room. It was only six-thirty, so she still had another thirty minutes before Zach arrived. *Thank goodness for my phone to keep me busy.*

Annie had texted her a congrats about the first date. Hannah was a little surprised, as she'd been distant and moody lately. Days could go by without a text, where they used to send dozens a day. It felt weird and she'd been at a loss as to how to fix whatever was wrong.

Hannah

Breakfast tomorrow?

Annie

If he's a good boy, you won't be awake before lunch.

Hannah

It's still breakfast if you just woke up [wink emoji]

Annie

Touché. I'll wait to hear from you tomorrow about a time.

Don't go to bed early for my sake.

Hannah

Well, it's only our first date…

Annie

You guys have been dating for months. This is just your first dinner date.

Hannah

I haven't replaced my vibe and it's been lonely.

Annie

I don't think you'll need one after tonight.

Hannah

I can hope.

Annie

Don't just hope. Ask. Initiate. He's not Trent.

Honestly, I think it would turn him on.

Hannah laughed. *I bet it would. But could I actually be that bold?*

Annie

Have a great night. Talk later. Gotta go.

She stared down at her phone. There it was again. Just as things seemed like old times, she had to go. *I wish she would talk to me. Oh well. That's a thought for another day. Focus on Zach.*

Hannah

Thanks for the dress.

Zach

I can't wait to see you in it. I've been imagining it for weeks.

Hannah

I'm ready to go if you want to come over.

Less than a minute later, her doorbell rang. She laughed as she opened it and found him standing there.

"I was early, but I didn't want to rush you. So, I just sat in my SUV and waited," he explained.

She laughed. "You could have waited inside instead."

Zach looked her over. "I don't know. If I'd seen you coming out of your bedroom in that dress, we might not have made it to dinner." He kissed her cheek. "You look absolutely gorgeous."

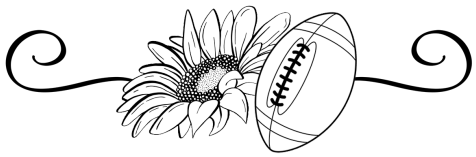
Hannah blushed. For a moment, the little voice inside her head told her that he was just being nice. No one had ever used that word to describe her, after all. But then she saw the way he looked at her, and she pushed those thoughts aside. *Stop second-guessing compliments. Zach would never say it if he didn't mean it. He's not Trent. He's honest and kind.*

"Thank you. You're looking pretty good tonight, too." His dark jeans practically looked painted on, and his blue button-up shirt was open a little

at the top. It made her want to slowly unbutton the rest and run her hands across his chest. She grabbed her purse from the entryway table and dropped her phone inside.

"Ready?" he asked as he held out his hand.

"I've been ready since this morning," she said as she placed her hand in his.



As Zach walked her back to her front door a couple hours later, Hannah was feeling thankful for the pina colada she'd had with dinner. While it wasn't enough to make her tipsy, it helped to quiet the critic in her brain, at least for a little while. And even better, it had her feeling a little bold. Something she wasn't quite used to.

When they reached her porch, he kissed her on the cheek and said, "Good-night," before turning to head back to his SUV.

She held tight on his hand, not letting him walk away. "I have a question for you, and I want you to be honest."

"Always."

Here goes nothing. "You've never kissed anyone before, have you?"

Under the lights of her porch, she could see the blush that spread across his cheeks. "No, I haven't."

"And that's why you've been avoiding dinner dates, right? Because they end with a kiss?"

He sighed, then nodded. "I mean, I've seen a ton of kisses on TV and movies, but every time I think about trying…"

“You get nervous?”

“Very much so. And embarrassed. I’m a twenty-eight-year-old guy who doesn’t know the first thing about kissing.”

“Well, there’s an easy fix to that.” She unlocked and opened her front door, dropped her sandals by the entry table, and pulled him toward the living room. “I’d love to teach you. Kissing is one of my favorite things.”

Hannah gently pushed him down on the couch. “I’m going to sit in your lap, okay?” She straddled him, causing her dress to bunch around her waist. The smell of his cologne, lavender and orange, surrounded her. It made her want to curl up against him and never move.

She indulged in one more quick inhale of his scent before returning her focus to the lesson at hand. “There are a lot of ways to kiss. It’s really about putting it all together in some combination that you like. I’m going to start with ones that aren’t open mouth. You might part lips a little, but that’s it.”

She pressed her lips to his, letting her lower lip go between his lips, his upper between hers.

“This one is especially nice first thing in the morning when you want to kiss but haven’t brushed your teeth. Then, you can take that concept and move your lips some. Nibble on the other person’s lips. Suck on them. Play with their lips with yours. Run your tongue across them. I especially love nibbles.”

She showed him examples of each, causing him to chuckle when she nipped at his bottom lip.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. “Nibbles, huh?” Pressing his mouth to hers, he played with her lips for a few moments before nipping her back.

She buried her fingers into his thick blonde hair, pulling him even closer. His hold on her tightened as they kissed. Even though he was new to it, his kisses were driving her wild.

Breathing hard, she pulled back. “Well, aren’t you a fast learner. That means we can move to open mouth kisses.”

She parted her lips and kissed him like the first one. After a moment, she tilted her head slightly and slipped her tongue into his mouth. When it connected with his, she heard him groan. She played with it, rolling her tongue around his, then retreated. When he slipped his tongue into her mouth, she sucked on it.

Hannah pulled back a second time, scooting back on his lap a little way. “Now, these same concepts can be used for kisses elsewhere. For instance…” She pressed open mouth kisses on his neck and nibbled his earlobe before continuing down to the top of his chest. When she started unbuttoning his shirt, he grasped the sides and pulled it apart, scattering buttons around them.

“But your shirt…”

“I don’t care. I’ll buy another one.”

As he pulled the shirt to the side, she spotted a large tattoo on the left side of his chest. She ran her fingers across it. “That’s beautiful.”

“I promise to show it to you later,” he said as he unbuttoned his shirt cuffs. “And I’ll tell you all about it. But right now, I want to feel your mouth on my skin.”

She laughed as he quickly finished stripping off the shirt and kicked off his shoes. “As I was saying, you can use those same kissing techniques elsewhere.” Bending forward, she rolled her tongue around his nipple.

He groaned again. “God, you’re so hot.”

She smiled at him. “Thanks. I spent a lot of time getting ready today.”

“No. I mean, yes, you look hot. But I meant it more literally. I can feel your heat seeping through my pants.”

She giggled. “Can I let you in on a little secret? That’s probably not the only thing that has done that.” She leaned forward so her lips were practically touching his ear. “My panties are soaked.”

“Your panties are what?”

She sat back and looked at the confused expression on his face. And it dawned on her. “You’ve never kissed before.”

“Yes, we already established that.”

“So, I’m gathering you’ve never…”

“No, not that, either.”

Now, I understand why he’s so confused. “You know how guys get hard when they’re aroused?” She lightly traced the ridge on the front of his pants. “Well, women are different. We get wet.”

“*Wet*?” He laughed. “Well, that’s definitely something you won’t learn from watching porn.”

“Watch a lot of that, do you?”

“I’m a twenty-eight-year-old single man. What do you think?”

She giggled again. “Your poor hand must be so worn out by now.”

He blushed and dropped his forehead to hers. “You have no idea.”

“Don’t be embarrassed. It’s perfectly normal to watch a little porn and take care of things yourself sometimes.” She’d never watched any, as Trent always said it was unbecoming of a woman to do so, even though he watched plenty.

“It doesn’t bother you?”

“Not at all. Unless you chose porn over me.” She said with a wink. “But seriously, even I know those videos show women as dry as the Sahara Desert down there. Not very accurate.”

“Baby, why would I need to watch those when I have you? You’re a million times better. I can kiss you, touch you, taste you.”

“Speaking of touching me; do you want to see what I meant when I said I was wet?”

His eyes turned a darker blue than normal, reminding her of a stormy sky. “Show me.”

“Unlike those women in the videos, all I have to do is think about you and I get like this.”

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Chapter Seven

ZACH SAT MOTIONLESS AS Hannah pushed up on her knees, put his hand on the top of her thigh, and slid it inward. “Just slip your fingers under the fabric.”

When he did, he couldn’t hold back his moan. She was hot and wet, and he wanted badly to pull down his pants and thrust inside her. Hannah was right; porn never showed this part. Now that he’d felt her, he couldn’t understand why. Just the thought of it made his balls ache. Seeing it would even be better.

“You’re killing me here.” In fact, he was pretty certain he was leaking in his pants. *Good thing I’m wearing jeans and not something thinner like slacks.*

She ran her nails down his chest. “All we’ve done is kiss and I’ve already soaked my panties. I think it goes without saying how you’re making me feel. How I feel whenever I think about you.”

He brushed his fingers against her before sliding them back out of her panties. Looking down, he saw they were slick with her arousal. For a

moment, he considered bringing them to his mouth and licking them off, but he wasn't sure if that was okay or not. Instead, he wiped them on his jeans.

A little half smile lifted the side of his mouth. "Thinking about me, huh? Like what?"

She picked up one of his hands and ran her fingers across it. "My hands are soft. Yours, though, are a little dry and calloused. Which makes me think of what they'd feel like against my bare skin."

He ran his hand across her arm. "Like this?"

"No. Somewhere I'm not normally touched. Somewhere more sensitive."

He slid his hands under her dress, across the fabric of her panties, and to her back. "Here?"

"Mm-hmm, yes," she said on an exhale.

He slowly ran his hands over her back, enjoying the feel of her soft skin under his fingers. "What else did you think about?"

She trailed a finger across her neck. "Your mouth on my skin."

Zach leaned forward and kissed the spots where her finger had been. "And?"

Her eyes closed and her head tilted to the side. "The way your weight would feel on top of me. I don't know why, but I've craved being intimate with you more than I ever have with anyone else."

That admission made him even harder than he already was. He wasn't sure what made her finally feel comfortable enough to talk with him about these things, but he hoped she never stopped. *Time for my own admission.*

He nudged her dress to the side and nibbled on her shoulder. "I've been craving it since that first day at the coffee shop."

Hannah opened her eyes slowly as she smiled at him. “Then what are you going to do about it?”

“Take you to bed and kiss every inch of your body?”

“*Every* inch? You promise?”

“Well, maybe not every inch this time. I have the feeling we’d both get too impatient by then. But I promise to get all the good parts.”

“What are you waiting for?”

Laughing, he slid his hands under her ass and stood. She wrapped her legs around him.

“Which room?”

“Second door on the right. It’s open.”

He carried her down the hallway and into her room, kicking the door closed behind him. Then, he slowly let her slide down his body until her feet touched the ground.

For a moment, he stared at her. He felt like a kid at Christmas about to open his presents. And he was so excited—and nervous—his hands were shaking. Her dress was fashioned like a robe, with one half crossing over the other and a sash across the middle. He reached for the bow just as she stepped back.

She chewed on her lip for a moment while her hands stroked the front of her dress like she was straightening wrinkles. “I know tonight I may have seemed confident about myself, but the truth is, it’s the clothes. They smooth everything out and hide the imperfections. The moment you take my dress off, you’ll see the real me. The me that I’ve only ever shown to one person.”

He sighed. *My poor Hannah. I just know where this is going*. “His comments weren’t always nice, were they?”

She chewed on her lip harder.

He stepped forward and brushed his thumb across it. “It’s okay. You can tell me.”

“Fat. Plain. Skin too tanned. Need to eat less. Walking instead of having a car will do me good.” A tear rolled down her cheek. “Too many stretchmarks—”

He wiped the tear away. “He was wrong. You’re gorgeous. And I’m going to think the same once your clothes are off.”

She sniffled. “Promise?”

Zach untied the bow at her waist. “Promise. I’ve been imagining for so long what you look like naked that I can hardly believe it’s happening.”

“There’s snaps underneath.”

“Huh?”

“Along where the two halves meet. There are snaps to keep the dress decent.”

He pulled apart the snaps. “And if I don’t want it decent?”

“Well, I figured you wouldn’t want others to see me like that.”

“Good point,” he said as he pushed the dress off her shoulders and got his first real look at her. He’d learned from that day in the department store to speak up immediately, even though he wanted to pause and take her all in. “Absolutely stunning. My fantasies didn’t even come close.”

“Really? Even though I have this roll here by my breasts?”

He studied her for a moment. “I can’t tell. The bra is in the way.”

She shook her head and reached back to unfasten it.

“Still beautiful.”

“And this?” she asked as she grabbed the pooch on her lower abdomen.

“Looks perfect to me. I can’t wait to nibble there later.”

She looked down toward her legs. “I have stretchmarks. And my thighs are so fat that they touch.”

“Unless that somehow hurts you, I don’t mind one bit. Looks like extra cushion when you’re squeezing my head between your legs.”

Hannah giggled. “They get irritated when it’s hot. And they rub, which can hurt sometimes.”

He took her hands in his. “If you want to change that, I can help. But please only change because *you* want to, not because you think I want you to. You’re perfect just the way you are.”

A smile filled her face.

Good. We’re getting somewhere.

“Anything else you don’t like?”

“My butt is too wide and fat.”

He did a little twirling motion with his finger. “I need to see it.”

She turned around, giving him a look at the curve of her back.

I’m going to enjoy kissing that. “Can’t see it. Panties are in the way.”

A little push at the fabric and a wiggle later, her underwear fell to the floor.

Zach bit his knuckle. “Now, that’s an ass I could eat.”

She spun around. “What?”

“Fuck. No. That’s not what I meant. Wrong phrase. Bite your ass. I want to bite your ass right there on that curve down to your leg. Mark you as mine.”

“So, you didn’t mean—?”

“Absolutely not. You know how I said I would kiss every inch of you? Well, it comes with an asterisk. There’s one little exception, and that’s it. If

you’re into that, I’m sorry, but my mouth is not going there. It’s a hard limit for me.”

“Good. Because if you even tried, I’d be pulling away from you so fast. I have zero interest in that.”

He let out a loud breath. “Nothing like nerves to make you even more embarrassed.”

She walked over to the bed and climbed in the middle, propping herself up on the pillows. “I believe you said something about kissing me everywhere?”

He pulled his keys and wallet from his pants and sat them on the nightstand. Seeing a wireless charger, he took his phone from his pocket and sat it on the charger.

Moving to the end of the bed, he crawled up the mattress until he reached her feet. He nibbled at her ankle, then worked his way up, alternating between kisses, nips, and licks. He nuzzled his nose against her calf, inhaling the floral scent from her body wash.

“How am I doing?”

She let out a husky laugh. “Excellent learner.”

When he reached her knee, he slid back up her body. He wrapped his hand around her breast, caressing the side of it with his thumb. “Does it feel good when I do this?”

She nodded.

“I gather most of the nerves are here, though,” he said before rubbing his thumb across her nipple.

She inhaled deeply.

“Which means this would really feel good.” He pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the hard nub before sucking it into his mouth.

She moaned quietly and buried her fingers in his hair. “So very good.”

“How about this? Do you like it better?” he rolled his tongue around it.

“Yes,” she gasped.

“I would think biting would be too much, but what if I did this?” He grazed his teeth across it.

Her fingers dug harder into his scalp. “Biting is okay, too. Just lightly.”

He looked up at her. “You like biting?”

“Mostly during sex. And gently. It’s more pleasure than pain.”

“Noted.”

“Taking notes?”

“Absolutely. I want to be a good student, after all.”

After more kisses and nibbles on her shoulders, he worked back down the other side.

“Time to flip over.”

“Flip over?”

“How can I kiss you everywhere if I can’t reach half of you?”

She turned over and pillowed her hands under the side of her head.

When he nibbled the back of her knee, she squirmed under him and laughed.

“Very sensitive right there, I see. Another thing to add to my notes.”

He nipped at the curve of her ass and when he leaned in, her noticed her scent had changed from her soap to something else. It reminded him of a slightly sweet earthy scent. His cock twitched in his pants. *Sorry, buddy, not tonight. I’m still learning her body.*

He kissed the back of her neck and she shivered; goosebumps spread across her skin.

“Enjoying yourself?”

“You keep this up much longer, and there’s going to be a wet spot under me.”

“I’ll take that as a yes. Ready to flip back over? I saved the best part for last.”

She flipped back over. “Best part, huh?”

He settled himself between her legs and started kissing her inner thighs.

“Getting a good look at my kitty from there?”

He looked up at her and smiled. “Yes, and she’s so pretty. All pink, swollen, and glistening. Although I think I need to pet her. Would you like that?”

“Oh yes,” she moaned.

He reached up and touched her. She was even wetter than before. And the scent he’d noticed earlier surrounded him now. *I guess it’s how she smells when she’s aroused. I definitely won’t forget it.*

“Is it okay if I put my mouth here?”

She pressed her hips toward his hand. “Please,” she said on a long exhale.

He pressed an open-mouthed kiss there before swiping his tongue across her. She tasted so good, he couldn’t help but do it a few more times.

Her fingers dug in his hair. “Oh, God, more.”

“I’d love to, baby, but this is another of those areas where I could use a little instruction. As much as you seem to enjoy my licking, I have the feeling there’s more to it than that. And the last thing I want to do is tease you or bring you to an edge that I can’t push you over.”

She dropped her head to her pillows and took a deep breath. “How can I help?”

He ran his fingers through his hair. “Honestly, my knowledge of female anatomy is limited. And I’m pretty sure it’s important to the task at hand.”

“Most guys are happy to stay ignorant about it. Hence all the jokes.”

“I’m not like most guys. I plan on knowing your body almost as well as you do.”

“Oh.” She took his hand in hers. “We’ll start at the top. This area is the hood. Its main job is to protect the little bundle of nerves that hides under it.” She took his middle finger and rubbed it underneath. “Feel that hard little nub? That’s my clit, otherwise known as the thing most guys can’t find.”

He laughed. “Most aren’t lucky enough to have a teacher like you.”

“More like they aren’t willing to sit back and be the student. Why wouldn’t we want to show you the things that make us feel good?”

“Well, I am more than happy to be your student.”

She pressed his finger against her. “When we get aroused, the clit gets hard like this and is easier to find. I love firm circular motions against it with your fingers.”

“How about kissing, licking, or sucking.”

“All of the above. I *think*.”

“You think?”

“My hand has been down there plenty. When it comes to a mouth, I’m just guessing.”

The realization that he was the first to put his mouth there excited him. He hadn’t expected to be her first for anything. *It shouldn’t matter, but it makes me feel oddly proud. And territorial.*

He moved his fingers lower, gently rubbing. “And this?”

“That’s the labia but commonly called lips. Not as many nerves in them, but they still like attention.”

“And the little opening there?”

“Not part of sexy time. Unlike guys, we pee from a different spot.”

“Gotcha. Marking that as off-limits in my notes.”

“Other folks may be into that, but it just screams UTI to me.”

“All that matters to me is what you like.” *I waited this long for you, after all.*

He slid his fingers lower, circling the opening. “Now, this I know. And it’s *absolutely* part of sexy time.”

“Definitely.”

He let his fingers brush just a little further south. “And here?”

She shook her head and giggled. “Sorry, Zach. Also off-limits. Anal isn’t on the menu anytime soon.”

Anal was a category he’d always skipped over when watching porn. Honestly, he just never got the attraction to it. Until now. Now, he wanted to flip her over and slide into that cute little ass of hers. He shook his head. *Get it together. You haven’t even had sex yet. You’re not there yet.*

“You’ve done it before?”

“Actually, no.”

He smiled. *Another first for us. I wonder how many more I’ll discover.* “Now, back to sexy time,” he said as he moved his fingers back up and slid one inside. His groan was so loud it filled the room. She was so hot and wet. He could feel her walls constrict around his digit. *I can’t even imagine what it will feel like to slide my cock in here.*

She let out a shaky breath. “There’s another little bundle of nerves in there, just an inch or two in. It’ll feel ridge-like, sort of like the roof of your mouth. You can curl your finger up to find it.”

“Another one of those spots men can’t find? Let me guess, the G-spot?” He moved his finger around until he felt the ridges below his fingertip.

When he rubbed his finger on it, he could feel her tremble under his hand.

"That's. It."

He chuckled. "Looks like I'm two-for-two. Now, the question is whether I paid enough attention to get an A+."

Settling back down between her thighs, he put his mouth onto her clit. He rolled his tongue around it and sucked.

"Yes, Zach. Just like that." Her fingers returned to his hair.

He added a second finger, enjoying the feel of her squeezing them.

"In and out."

"What's that, baby?"

"Your fingers. Move them in and out."

He slid them out and back in. "Like that?"

"Harder."

He thrust them in this time. "Better?"

"Yes," she said on a loud exhale.

He gave her a couple more licks before returning his mouth to her clit. The noises she was making in the back of her throat were driving him crazy. She flattened her feet against the mattress and pushed her hips up toward him.

Wondering if what she said about her nipples earlier applied here, he gently grazed his teeth across her clit. The writhing under him suddenly stopped, and for a moment, he thought he'd done something wrong.

"Oh, Zach," she cried out, arching toward him. Her body trembled, and his own jerked. He could feel cum running down his cock. *Shit. Not now, body. Hannah. Have to focus on Hannah.*

Not certain what to do, he figured it was probably like when he had an orgasm: you needed to keep it up until you were done. He continued the

pressure on her clit with his tongue and the thrusts with her fingers until she fell back against the bed.

“Good, God, Zach,” she mumbled as her chest heaved. “Are you sure you’ve never done that before?”

He pressed one more kiss against her before sliding back up her body. “Never. I just had a good teacher.” He wanted to kiss her, but he wasn’t certain what the rules were, so to speak, when you’d had your mouth down there.

She must have sensed his hesitation, as she cupped his cheeks with her hands and kissed him.

I’ll never get enough of her kisses.

“You don’t mind kissing me after…?”

“I’ll always want to kiss you. My taste on your lips doesn’t change that. Well, if you decide you want to do something gross like lick my feet or suck on a toe, then I’ll feel different. You’d need to go wash your mouth after that.”

He laughed. “No foot fetish here, so don’t worry. But I have been wanting to do this.” He sucked on the fingers that had been inside her. “Is that weird?”

She shook her head. “Knowing you enjoy my taste is hot.”

“Baby, I could eat there all day. Earlier when you let me slip my fingers in your panties, I was tempted to lick my fingers. I was just afraid you’d think I was crazy or something.”

“I was so turned on already, I’m not sure I could have handled that. We wouldn’t have made it back here.”

“As much as I’m looking forward to sex with you, I want to learn your body first. Now, which door leads to your bathroom?”

She pointed to the one on the right. “Why?”

“We’re both a mess and I need a washcloth.” He headed into the bathroom, stopping at the sink to clean his hands and face. He was tempted to take a look at the mess he was certain he’d made in his pants but decided against it.

Not like I have anything to change into, anyway. Besides, I’ll be headed home soon and can have a shower.

Grabbing a washcloth from the shelf, he wet it with warm water and took it back into the bedroom. Gently, he wiped down her thighs and between her legs. “Obviously, I don’t have any experience here, but it just seems like leaving all this behind on your skin would get uncomfortable. And that’s the last thing I want.”

He looked around the room.

“Hamper is in the bathroom behind the door.”

He threw the dirty washcloth in the hamper, then climbed into bed with her. She cuddled up against his side. Her warm, soft skin felt so good against his bare side and chest. He pulled her closer and rested his cheek against the top of her head.

“How’d I do?”

“Almost an A+. Although, I’m not sure I can handle one of those from you.”

He chuckled. “I guess I need to figure out a bit of extra credit, then.”

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Chapter Eight

ZACH WAS SNUGGLED IN a warm cocoon when his alarm went off. *That's weird. I don't remember hearing my alarm clock.* The one on his phone was just for backup.

He started to roll out of bed, but an arm tightened around his chest. *An arm? Why is there—* And a realization hit him. *Hannah. Did I fall asleep? The last thing I remember was snuggling with her and listening as her breath slowed and evened out. I guess it was enough to lull me to sleep, too.*

Not a surprise, though. The feel of her warm, naked body against him was relaxing. It would be easy enough to say, "Screw breakfast with Sean," and stay right there all day.

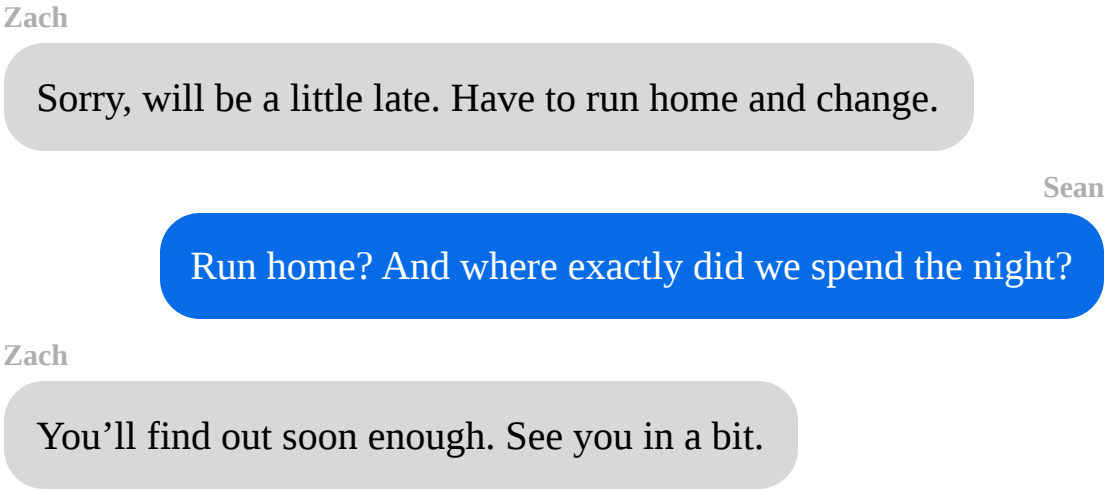
Mm-hmm. Cuddling all day with Hannah…

Suddenly, he panicked. *Shit. It's morning. Which means I've been gone all night. Something I've never done before. I told my sisters I'd be back late. What if they're at home panicking because they noticed I didn't come home?*

He nearly fumbled his phone as he picked it up from the nightstand. *No calls and only Sean texted. Whew. Now, to get home before they notice I'm gone. I can check in with them before heading back out.*

Carefully, he slipped out of her arms and headed for the bathroom. After finishing his business and washing his hands, he cupped his hands in front of his mouth and smelled his breath. *Damn. Too bad I don't have a toothbrush here.*

At the nightstand he picked up his phone back up to send Sean a text.



He dropped a kiss on Hannah's shoulder. "Baby?"

"Hmm?" she mumbled.

"I hate to leave you all alone in bed, but I've got to run. I'm supposed to have breakfast with Sean."

"Breakf—?" she looked at the clock on her nightstand. "It's morning?"

"Yes. Apparently, we both fell asleep. I only woke up because the alarm on my phone went off."

She slipped out from under the covers. "Let me grab my robe so I can lock the front door behind you."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. "I like you better in your birthday suit, but I'd rather not share that view with your neighbors."

She slapped his chest. “You’re terrible.”

“Only for you, Hannah.”

He grabbed his shirt from the couch and put it back on, then slid on his shoes. *At least with the top buttons done and my shirt tucked in, it’s mostly decent.* “Dinner tonight?”

“I was hoping you’d ask.”

“I’d be happy to skip right to dessert…”

“Like I said; terrible.”

He kissed her again. “I’ll text you later for a time. And I hope it’s okay that I’m bringing a toothbrush next time. I finally know how to kiss, and stupid morning breath is my downfall.”

“Ah, but you remembered my advice about morning kisses,” she said with a giggle. “Grab a toothbrush from the vanity. They’re in the drawer. I always buy a pack of them.”

“I knew I should have asked. Gotta run.” He started out the door, but she pulled him back for one more kiss.

“Have a good breakfast. Tell Sean I said hi.”

The front of his shirt flapped open as he walked toward his SUV. As he tried to fix it, he saw the front of his pants. *Well, damn. There goes my idea of just throwing on a fresh shirt. New pants are a necessity, too. Not only are they a mess, but they also probably smell like sex, too. Sean is already going to get in enough digs as it is.*

Forty minutes later, he walked into the Lazy Cat Café. Sean was sitting at a table with a coffee, reading something on his phone.

Zach pulled out a chair and sat down opposite Sean. “Sorry about being late.”

“No longer the twenty-eight-year-old virgin, eh?”

“Shhh!” Zach looked nervously around the room. “Last thing I need is the whole town knowing that. And no, that status remains unchanged.”

“But you didn’t sleep at home.”

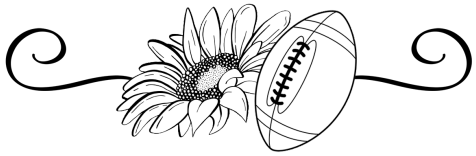
Zach looked up as the waitress approached their table.

“The usual?” she asked. Zach and Sean ate there nearly every Saturday.

“Yes, please.”

He waited for her to walk away. “I slept at Hannah’s, but we didn’t do … that. We were snuggling and fell asleep.”

“But based on the smile on your face, I’m betting you did more than snuggle.”



HANNAH GRABBED HER PHONE from her purse on the way back to the bedroom. Swiping it open, she noticed her messenger lit up with notifications.

Annie

How was your first dinner date?

Hello?

Not home yet?

Well, I know Peline’s closed an hour ago. How was the date?

Seeing as it’s midnight, I’m assuming it went really well [winky face emoji]

Hannah

Sorry, just woke up.

Um, he slept over. I guess we fell asleep.

We didn’t do *that*, but let’s just say he has a very nice mouth.

Annie

Breakfast! Now! I need all the details.

Hannah

I need a shower. Meet you in about forty minutes?

Annie

See you there.

While Hannah waited for the water to warm up, she dug out a set of clothes from her dresser. Since it was May in Texas, she expected it to be hot, so she opted for a V-neck t-shirt and a pair of shorts. Her choice of lingerie, though, was extremely limited since she’d left all of it behind in Dallas. *Plain white bra and undies it is, then. Guess I need to go shopping. I should have thought ahead and bought more yesterday.*

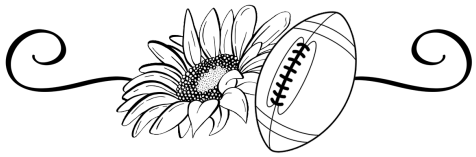
Reaching into the shower, she checked the temp of the water. *Perfect. One of these days, I’ll finally get around to replacing that water heater and I*

won't have to wait so long for it to heat.

The feel of the water on her skin made her think of Zach. Last night was completely unexpected. Once he had a bit of knowledge behind him, he was all in. She wasn't kidding when she told him it had been good. Just thinking about it made her ache between her thighs.

I can't even imagine what it will be like once he's had a bit of experience. How did I get so lucky to find someone like him? Sweet, gorgeous, makes me laugh, and thus far, great in bed. And better yet, more than willing to learn what I like.

She shook her head. *Stop thinking about sex with him and get going, otherwise you'll be late to breakfast.*



Annie was waiting for her outside the diner.

"Why didn't you get a table?"

"Um, Zach is inside."

"Not surprising. This is where he always meets me for breakfast. Gale's is great for lunch, but this place has the best waffles."

Annie held the door open. "I didn't know if you wanted to sit with him."

"Nope, it's best friend time. I'll see him later."

Sean pointed their way and Zach turned around, a smile on his face. Zach stood and offered her the chair to his right.

"Oh, no," she laughed. "You get to sit here and brag to Sean while I dish to Annie at another table." She put her hand on his shoulder and kissed him. "I'll see you later." Hannah turned to Sean. "It's good to see you, too."

Annie linked her arm with Hannah’s and led her toward a table in the back. “I’m surprised you turned him down.”

Hannah laughed. “I’m sure by now Sean knows Zach slept over and is awaiting all the details. Just like someone I know.”

They put their order in with the waitress and the moment she stepped away, Annie scooted over closer. “So? Dish.”

“You know how in high school it seemed like Zach was always dating someone new?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, it turns out our assumptions were wrong. He may have been surrounded by girls, but I don’t think he actually dated any of them. At least that’s the impression I get based on his, um, lack of experience…”

“He’s never—?”

“I showed him how to kiss last night. They were so good that they curled my toes. And I’m fairly certain I left a puddle in his lap.”

Annie barked out a laugh before covering her mouth. “A puddle?”

Hannah watched as both Zach and Sean looked their way. She gave them both a little wave. “Well, I was straddling him during the lesson…”

“I’m sure he’s never had a teacher like you before.”

Hannah added creamer and a little sugar to her coffee. “Oh, that wasn’t the end of it. I showed him other ways you can use those kissing skills. One thing led to another, and he settled himself in for an all-you-can-eat buffet.”

“How did he end up sleeping over?”

“It’s like I said in the text. I guess we were both so relaxed afterward.”

Hannah looked up as the waitress approached their table with a tray of plates and a coffee pot.

“One French toast with bacon, and one pancakes with scrambled eggs and bacon. And coffee refills.”

“Thanks,” Hannah said as she sat the food in front of them.

She giggled, as she knew it was driving Annie crazy waiting for the waitress to walk away. While Hannah didn’t mind talking about these things with her bestie, she didn’t want others to hear. Hence them in the back surrounded by empty tables.

“I’m so happy for you. After that dick, Trent, you deserve a good one like Zach. Even if you didn’t get the D yet.”

Hannah shook her head. “You and Zach are two peas in a pod: absolutely terrible.”

“Sounds like we’ll become fast friends, then.”

Hannah cut up her French toast and poured a little syrup on top. “Are you free today?”

Annie bit off a piece of her bacon. “Sure am. Why?”

A loud crash made them jump as someone dropped a stack of plates on the floor.

“Whoops. Well, it occurred to me today that I haven’t replaced all the clothes I left in the apartment.”

Annie’s face lit up. “Lingerie shopping?”

“Now that Zach is seeing what’s under my clothes, it would be nice to have a bit of satin and lace to surprise him. White cotton underwear isn’t as fun.”

“What’s his favorite color?”

Hannah scrunched her mouth up for a moment. “You know, I haven’t asked.” she pulled out her cell phone.

What's your favorite color?

She watched him to pick up his phone from the table. A smile spread across his face.

Zach

Green. Why?

Hannah

No reason…

Zach

Sean says my favorite colors are silk, satin, and lace.

Hannah

Maybe I was buying something for you to wear?

Zach

I never said otherwise. I happen to think I'd look great in those.

Hannah laughed so hard she snorted.

Zach

We heard that all the way up here. You're cute when you snort.

Hannah

Oh, hush. Go back to your food.

Zach

If you'd rather, I could talk about how you look when my fingers are inside you.

Hannah felt her skin flush across her face and chest.

"Tell him to stop sexting you so you can finish your breakfast."

Hannah

Annie said to stop sexting me.

Zach

But do you want me to stop?

Hannah

Um, no?

Zach

That's my girl.

[tongue emoji] [cat emoji]

Hannah

[smiling cat with heart-eyes emoji]

Annie sighed loudly, then snatched her phone from her hands.

Hannah

If you want [eggplant emoji] [sweat droplets emoji] later, you need to let her eat her breakfast.

Hannah grabbed her phone back and read what her friend had sent. "Annie!"

The sound of Zach's laughter could be heard back at their table.

She ate her last piece of bacon. "What? He was interrupting our meal."

Zach

I think I like your friend.

"Absolutely terrible, I swear. The both of you."

When Hannah flagged down the waitress for their check, she learned Zach had added their meals to his bill.

Hannah

Thanks for breakfast.

Zach

Maybe tomorrow I can bring you breakfast in bed.

Hannah

Planning to stay over again?

Zach

Oh, no, baby. This time, we're going to be in my nice, soft, king-sized bed.

She looked up at Annie. "Apparently, I'm staying at his place tonight."

Her eyes grew wide. "Really. You know what that means? You're taking his v-card tonight."

"Annie!!"

"Which means you need lingerie stat. And a new dress. At least thanks to the laser treatments on your legs, you don't need to wax. It would be too

late to do that. You do not want to be freshly waxed and have sex. Trust me."

"Oh, I did that once. It's why I saved up for the treatments." She loved the feel of smooth legs, but it felt weird to be completely bare down *there*. She'd kept her mound trimmed short for Trent but hadn't touched it since moving back home. And since Zach didn't seem to mind, she saw no need to go back to doing so.

Annie tugged her up from her chair and hooked her arm in hers again. "Time to go make you so sexy he will want to skip dinner and go straight to dessert."

Hannah tried to stop to say bye to Zach, but Annie pulled her toward the front door.

"Sorry!" she called out to him.

"Pick you up at five?" he called out.

She gave him a thumbs up as Annie pulled her outside.

"Come on! If you want plenty of time to soak in the tub and get ready, we need to get going. With traffic, it'll take nearly an hour just to get to the mall."

"Your car or mine?"

"I dropped my car off at the shop, so it'll have to be yours today."

Hannah unlocked the doors to her SUV. "Is it acting up?"

Annie climbed in and buckled her seatbelt. "Oh, no, just maintenance. Today was the only day they are open where I could be without it." She reached for the radio, but Hannah swatted her hand away. "I know, I know. Driver picks the music."

"Sorry, but I prefer Foo Fighters to Harry Styles."

“I swear, you should have been a teen in the 90s instead of being born in the 90s.”

Hannah turned up the volume as a Green Day song came on. “I would normally agree, but that would mean no Zach.”

“Or maybe it means you’d be Zach’s cougar.”

She turned up the volume higher. “Can’t hear you. The music is too loud.”

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Chapter Nine

“THAT WAS NICE OF Hannah not to join us,” Sean told Zach. “I was sure she was going to take you up on that offer.”

Zach sat back and took a sip of his coffee. “I think she wanted to talk with her best friend as much as I wanted to talk to mine.”

“So she could brag about her boyfriend’s magic mouth?”

He laughed. “Something like that. Or at least I hope so. Hannah seemed happy about it last night. Not that I’m some kind of expert on whether someone is faking it or not.”

Sean leaned in close. “There’s certain things they can’t fake: heart racing, the flush across their skin, the tremors you can feel inside her, and they usually end up a lot wetter. All the breathing, digging their nails into you, and words can be fake. As long as you see those physical signs, you should be good. Although she seemed too happy this morning to have faked anything.”

Zach grinned as he cut up his pancakes and took a bite. *Just as I suspected; there was nothing fake about her orgasm last night. And I can’t*

wait to give her a couple more tonight.

Sean laughed. “Based on the look on your face, I gather the topic of faking it can be dropped entirely. And no, I’m not going to ask for any details. Certain things should stay between the two of you.”

Zach scoffed. “Coming from the guy who used to give me a play-by-play? I used to worry you’d show up with a video.”

“Someone needed to show you how it’s done. Although, apparently that ‘someone’ is Hannah. I never minded giving you details because it was just sex. I was never serious about any of them.”

“And you think I’m serious about Hannah?”

“Dude, you’re twenty-eight and you took sex lessons from your girlfriend last night. And I’m pretty certain she’s gonna pop your cherry tonight. Not to mention I saw how you used to look at her in high school.”

Zach picked up his coffee cup so quickly he nearly spilled it in his lap. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, please. I don’t know how she never noticed. Your eyes followed her wherever she went. I’m just glad you finally got the balls to ask her out. And that she figured you out and broke through that wall you put up to keep from being embarrassed. I may tease you about experience and all that, but I’m just kidding. I’ll deny it if you tell anyone I said this, but it’s sweet that you waited for love.”

“Who said anything about love?”

Sean shook his head. “Lying again. Just for that, you get to pay for everyone’s meals, not just yours and Hannah’s.”

Zach looked down as his phone chimed.

“Hannah?”

He nodded. “She wants to know my favorite color.”

“Oooh. Lucky guy. She’s going shopping for you today.”

“Shopping?”

“Tell her your favorite colors are silk, satin, and lace.”

Zach’s eyes grew wide. “That’s the kind of shopping you meant?”

“Oh, yeah. She’s going to have something special for you tonight.”

The thought of Hannah in a sexy piece of lingerie had him adjusting his jeans. *Damn it, why couldn’t I have worn something with a little extra room in it? Didn’t I learn my lesson last night?*

For a moment, all thoughts of the food on his plate were forgotten. Instead, he was enjoying Hannah’s face turning redder and redder as he sent her suggestive texts. Finally, he saw Annie snatch away her phone.

He watched as the dots just kept moving across his screen, telling him Annie was sending him a text. When it popped up, he couldn’t hold back his laughter. He felt like all eyes in the diner were suddenly on him.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“Done sexting your girlfriend? I mean, she’s only like thirty feet away. Can we finish our meal first?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Couldn’t help it. She’s so cute when she blushes. But Annie is tired of being ignored as well. So, where were we?”

“Your plans for today.”

“I’m picking up Hannah for dinner at five and then back to my house.”

“Yup, definitely happening tonight if you’re bringing her home to your bed.”

Zach scooped up the last of his country potatoes. “No comment.”

“Well, I can only assume Annie is planning to take Hannah shopping to knock your socks off. Which means you should do the same.”

He stacked his silverware on his empty plate. “What do you mean?” *Do they make lingerie for men? And more importantly, what would she think about that?*

“When’s the last time you bought a nice suit? Or even just something ‘nice’ to wear?”

Oh. A suit. “Ummm—”

“Exactly. While they go shopping for lingerie and dresses, we’re getting you a nice suit. Nothing formal or anything like that. Just something that shows you clean up well. Now, I hope you’re taking her somewhere nice.”

“Well, honestly, I hadn’t thought about that part yet.”

Sean shook his head. “Good thing I have connections. What’s some of her favorite foods?”

“Shrimp, steak, um, cheesecake.”

He laughed. “That’s enough. I’ll get you a table at Jake’s at six. It’ll take a little over half an hour to get there, so that will give you a little leeway. You can always have a drink in the bar while you wait.”

“But I’m driving.”

“Not tonight. Get a rideshare. Enjoy a couple drinks with dinner. It’ll help with your nerves.”

“Nerv—?” Zach started to ask, but Sean was already on the phone with the restaurant. Instead, he flagged down the waitress.

“I need our check and the one for the table with the two ladies in the back.”

She looked toward the table. “Should I tell them it was you?”

He shook his head. “The one looking this way is my girlfriend. She’ll know who it was.”

Sean sat his phone down on the table. “All set. Ready to go shopping?”

“I’m just waiting to pay the bill and we can head out. If I’m buying breakfast, does that mean you’re buying my suit?”

“You know what? In honor of you finally giving up your v-card, I will pay for your suit today. Your hand is probably so tired that swiping your card would be difficult, anyway.”

“Fuck you.”

Sean laughed. “No, thanks. Does Hannah know you’re into guys? I mean, nothing wrong with that. Maybe you can have a three-way…”

Zach threw his napkin at Sean just as the waitress came back with his card and receipt.

“Finally. Now we can go get you a v-day suit.”

He rolled his eyes at Sean. *With friends like him, who needs enemies?*

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Chapter Ten

“HOW CAN I HELP you today?” the saleslady at the lingerie store asked as Hannah and Annie walked in.

“She’s looking for lingerie for her boyfriend,” Annie answered.

“Any specific styles or colors.”

“Green,” said Hannah.

“Size?”

“Twenty,” said Hannah at the same time Annie said, “Eighteen.”

Hannah looks at Annie. “I am not going to squeeze myself into an eighteen.”

“But it’ll make your boobs pop and accentuate your curves.”

“No, thank you. I plan on being able to eat dinner and not pass out when he gets me breathing hard. I’m fine with my actual size, and he is, too.” *It felt so good to be able to say that.*

Hannah turned to the saleslady. “Size twenty, please.”

While the woman headed to the back to pull a selection for Hannah to try on, they walked around the store to see if there was anything else that

caught her eye.

“So, he likes your curves, huh?”

“Based on how long he spent kissing and touching them last night, I’d say yes.” *Not to mention how he looked at me when the dress slipped off my shoulders.*

“Good. You’re beautiful and deserve someone who loves everything about you.”

“If he didn’t, I wouldn’t be dating him. I don’t have time for someone who wants to change me. Been there, done that.”

Annie held up a lace teddy in black. “I think he’d like this one.”

Hannah dropped it into her shopping basket, “One down. Now, I just need red and white.”

Annie raised an eyebrow.

“It’s always nice to throw in a few others in addition to his favorite color.”

On another rack, she found a lace plunge teddy in white. She showed it to Annie.

“Oh, yes, definitely that one.”

The last one was a sheer baby doll in red with a matching set of panties.

“I have about a dozen choices for you in changing room two,” the saleslady said as she approached.

“Annie, can you grab me some matching bra and panty sets? Size twenty and 46 DDD or H, depending on what they have. I’ll go try these on.”

Annie laughed. “Are you sure you trust me?”

“As long as it’s not all thongs and no underwire, we’re good.”

Inside the changing room, she divided the sets up by type, discarding a couple that didn’t seem her style. One, an emerald green crotchless teddy, jumped right out at her. Hanging from the bottom were detachable garter

clips. She slipped out of her shirt and shorts and held it up in front of her. Oh, yes, this is the one for tonight.

She put it on over her panties to ensure it fit before adding it to the purchase pile.

Thirty minutes later, the pile had seven sets in it, plus the three her and Annie had picked out. *More than enough to give me some variety and leave him guessing as to what's under my clothes.*

When she left the changing room, she found Annie with a basket filled with lingerie.

"I grabbed a few garter belts as well. I'm sure he'd love that."

"The one I picked out for tonight has built-in clips. I just need some stockings to go with it."

"Nude or black?"

"Let's grab a few of each. Otherwise, I'll have to go shopping again next week."

They took all the purchases up to the register.

"That's some lucky boyfriend. He's not going to know what to think about his good luck."

"Well, my ex cheated and let her wear my lingerie, so I have to replace everything."

"Oh, that's so wrong." She reached into the drawer under the register. "Just for that, it's your birthday today and you get five percent off." She scanned the coupon.

"Oh, that's so sweet of you."

"After what he did to you, you deserve it."

Annie linked arms with Hannah as they exited the store. "Want to walk around the mall for a bit?"

“Sure. I still need to do a bit more shopping.”

“I almost wish I could see his face when he sees your lingerie. Bet he swallows his tongue.”

Hannah laughed. “I certainly hope not. I have plans for it.”

“And you said I’m terrible.”

“I can’t help it if he’s good at kissing.”

“Yeah, but what part of you will he be kissing?”

She just shrugged her shoulder as she headed into a dress shop. “I’d like to get a few dresses so I have some for other date nights, too. Running to the mall every time I need a dress is a pain when it’s so far away.”

“A green dress?”

“Of course. Let him think I only went dress shopping. And a nice little black dress, too.”

“You should also get a red dress. It may not be his favorite color, but I bet it will be a favorite on you.”

“And something in blue? That’ll give me a bit of variety.”

They spent the next hour going through the store, looking for the right dresses. Finally, they found four that looked amazing on her.

“You’re going to knock his socks off tonight, that’s for sure.”

She looked over herself in the emerald green dress. “Good. That’s exactly what I’m going for.”

Annie looked at her watch. “It’s after two. We’d better get you home so you have plenty of time to get ready.”

“Pretzels first, then we can head home.”

Annie laughed. “Of course. Do we ever skip pretzels and lemonade while we’re here?”

Back at home, Hannah started water in the tub, then laid out tonight's clothes on the bed. *Oh, he's going to swallow his tongue all right. And I can't wait to see his reaction.*

From her jewelry box, she pulled out a simple diamond tennis bracelet, studs, and a silver necklace with a round diamond charm. Her parents had gifted her with the set when she graduated college. Thankfully, the box locked, so she knew Trent's other woman hadn't worn them.

It was rare for her to wear jewelry beyond the ring from her grandmother. It had the birthstones for her Mom, Grandmother, and Uncle Wyatt on it. She rarely took it off even though it was a smidge too small. *One of these days, I really need to get it resized.*

Once she had everything chosen and laid out on the bed, she headed for the tub. It felt a little much to have another bath so soon—especially after a shower this morning—but it felt necessary. Especially if he was planning on putting his mouth down there again. *God, I hope he does.*

As she soaked in the tub, she laughed to herself. *After tonight, I'll have slept with two guys total, both of which were virgins my first time with them. At least this time I know more and can ensure I enjoy it.*

I mean, I know your first time is usually awkward and embarrassing, but mine was just terrible. Car sex is uncomfortable enough but add in a partner who doesn't care enough to make sure you're ready for him… Ugh. worst thirty seconds of my life. Guess it should have been a warning to not waste so many years on him. Oh, well. That's all in the past. Now, I have someone who clearly cares enough to make sure I enjoy it. And I'm going to ensure his first time is everything mine wasn't.

After her bath, she unpinned her hair and pulled the braid loose. Often times, she wore it as a single braid or ponytail down her back because it

was easier and stayed out of her way. But tonight, she decided to do two braids instead. It took more time to do, since she'd need to get a straight part, which was another reason why she didn't do it often. Sometimes, she wished it were shorter so she could curl it or have more options for styles. But she couldn't cut it no matter how much she might want to sometimes. The two times she had cut it short—when her aunt and uncle died and again when her grandmother died—had broken her heart.

A little over an hour later, she threw a few necessities into a black clutch and called it done. *Now, an overnight bag.*

She grabbed a duffel from the closet and filled it with toiletries, a couple changes of clothes, pajamas, a robe, shoes, and a phone charger. *What about work clothes? Does he want me to stay all weekend? Better throw in an outfit for Monday, too.*

Looking down at her watch, she saw it was almost five. Zach would be there any moment. She grabbed her clutch and duffel and headed outside to wait.

Just as she locked the front door, her watch buzzed with a notification.

Zach

On the way. Should be there soon. Blue SUV.

Hannah

New car?

Zach

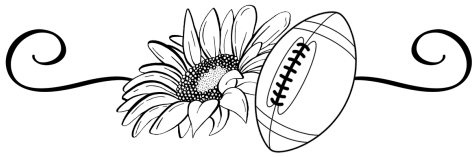
Rideshare. Thought we might like to have a drink with dinner.

Hannah

Good plan. I’m waiting outside.

Zach

We’re just down the street. See you soon.



“Hey, baby—” Zach started to say before pulling up short. Slowly, he looked her over from head to toe. “Are you sure we need dinner?”

She laughed and tapped him on the chest. “Dinner before dessert. Besides, how will you have the energy for me if you don’t have a meal?”

He bent down and kissed her shoulder. “Oh, I plan on eating, all right.”

He helped her into the SUV and got in on the other side. It gave her an opportunity to check him out. She hadn’t seen him in a suit since prom. This one was a deep blue with a white shirt that wasn’t quite buttoned up all the way. She could see the edge of one of the sunflower petals peeking out.

Just when I think he can’t look any better, he puts on this gorgeous suit. Such a good color on him.

“That dress looks amazing on you. Is it new?”

She smoothed the dress over her lap. It was a V-neck A-line dress that stopped just below her knees, although the bottom few inches were just the lace overlay.

“It’s why I wanted to know your favorite color. We ran to the mall earlier today.”

“What’s your favorite color?”

She ran a finger along the lapel to his suit jacket. “Blue.”

He laughed. “Guess I got lucky, then. I almost bought a grey suit, but Sean said this one was better.”

“It brings out the blue in your eyes.”

“I was thinking the same about yours. Not about blue, I mean, but your dress bringing out the color of your eyes. I thought they were just hazel, but it turns out there’s a ring of gold around the inside.” He slipped his fingers under the diamond on her necklace, letting them just brush the swell of her breasts. “A gift?”

“From Mom and Dad when I graduated college. It’s a tradition in our family to get this set.”

He leaned over and kissed her neck behind her ear. “I’d love to buy you some jewelry one day. Maybe a ring since you seem to be missing a matching one?”

She tipped her head to the side. “Maybe. I don’t tend to wear rings, though. Just this one from Grandma Willow.”

He nibbled on her ear while his fingers caressed her left ring finger. “I can be quite persuasive when I want to be.”

“Well, for future reference, I don’t actually like diamonds much.”

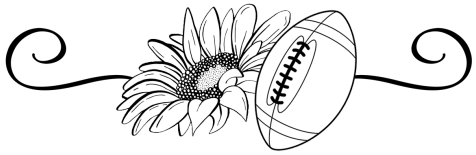
“Good to know.”

She shivered as he pushed her dress to the side and kissed her shoulder. “You sure are getting good with your mouth,” she whispered.

“Oh, baby, all I’ve thought about today is my mouth on you. I’ve been practically counting the hours until I can do it again.”

“I’d be lying if I didn’t say the same. You sure took your instruction to heart.”

“Hard not to given the subject and teacher.”



“I’M SORRY, BUT YOUR table isn’t ready yet,” the hostess said as they checked in.

“That’s okay; we’re early. Traffic was unusually light tonight,” Zach replied.

She motioned to her left. “Would you like to wait in the bar? You can start on drinks or appetizers there and move to your table when it’s ready.”

He looked to Hannah and she nodded. “Sounds good to us.”

They headed to a small two-top and ordered a lemon drop for her and a Scotch for him.

Zach trailed a finger down her arm. “You really do look great tonight. I wasn’t kidding about skipping dinner.”

He felt her shiver.

“Food first. I skipped lunch today, so dinner is an absolute necessity. Unless you want me to run out of energy early…”

“Oh no, I plan on keeping you up late tonight,” he said with a wink. “We can sleep in tomorrow.”

“No early breakfast?”

“Oh, no. We don’t eat earlier than ten on Sundays. The girls like to stay up late on Saturdays.”

The hostess approached them, cutting off their conversation. “Your table is ready, Mr. Hayes.”

“Thank you,” he said as he helped Hannah down from the barstool.

“It’s over in the corner. Mr. Wilder requested the spot with the most privacy,” she explained as she led them to their table. “It’s the only one without other diners nearby.”

Zach laughed and shook his head. “That’s Sean for you.”

Hannah raised an eyebrow at him.

He leaned in close so he could whisper in her ear. “So we can have private conversations—or more—without being overheard or seen.”

A blush crept over her cheeks. “More?”

“I’m sure he expects me to have my hands under your dress. But unlike him, I know how to be a gentleman. Until we get home, at least.”

The corner of her mouth curled upward. “Good. I’m not sure I want a gentleman in bed.”

Unlike last night, when she slid into the booth, he slipped next to her. “Just because I’m going to be a good boy doesn’t mean I have to sit in the other seat.”

“No complaints here. I like you close.”

“I can’t wait to be closer,” he replied before nibbling her ear.

After they put in an order for more drinks and their dinner, she leaned in close to him. “It seems you have some decisions to make before we get to your place.”

“Oh, yeah? What decisions?”

“The first is condom or bare.”

He coughed loudly as his sip of Scotch went down the wrong way. “What?” he croaked.

“I just had another round of testing—thanks to Trent—and I’m good. Clearly, you are. So, there’s a choice.”

“What about birth control?”

She pointed to the underside of her left arm. “Implant. Got it a couple months ago and it’s good for three years.”

“My vote is probably obvious: bare. I’d rather not feel anything between us.”

She gave him a sultry smile. He loved how she could be shy one moment and dirty the next.

“Then, I guess we don’t need to stop at the store on the way home,” she said.

“You mentioned decisions. Plural.”

“The second one is probably the most important: how do you want me?”

“How do I—?”

“Position. You’ve certainty watched enough porn by now to have an idea what you’d like.”

Good God. She’s going to kill me before we make it home. Glad I wasn’t taking a drink this time…

“I know it sounds traditional and boring, but I want you underneath me. I want to watch your face; see how you look when I first slide into you and when you come.”

“Missionary may sound boring, but it can also be very personal and intimate with our faces so close to each other. As long as that’s not all we ever do…”

He laughed. “If only you knew how many positions I’ve dreamed about you in. Spoiler: I plan on trying them all, just not tonight.”

“You dream about me?”

“Probably more than I should.” *And for a lot longer than you think. Teenage me especially loved to fantasize about her.*

“Am I doing this?” she slipped her hand up his thigh until her fingers rested right next to the bulge already evident in his pants.

Well, then. And just a few minutes ago, “more” had her blushing. “Yes, but not in public.”

She giggled. “The tablecloth blocks the view. And if you didn’t dream about anything in public, it sounds like your dreams are pretty tame.”

“Have you ever done anything in public?”

She shook her head before taking a drink. “Never wanted to before tonight. Something about you makes me want to do a lot of things I never have.”

He pushed her hand away. “I made enough of a mess in my pants last night. I don’t need an even bigger repeat of that tonight.” He slipped his fingers up her skirt.

She laughed and brushed away his fingers. “No puddles in the booth. I don’t think our waiter would appreciate that.”

He kissed her neck. “Not even if I leave a big tip?” he joked.

“Not even. Plus, I don’t want to walk out of here with a wet spot on the back of my dress.”

“Back to our earlier discussion. What are your favorite positions?”

“Honestly, I’ve only really gotten to experience two: on my back and on my knees. So, I don’t know.”

“Your ex was a real asshole.”

She sighed. “Tell me about it. I’d read my romance novels and wonder if sex could ever be like that. I had my doubts, but I’m a believer now.”

He chuckled. “And we haven’t even had sex yet. What kinds of things did you like in those books?”

“Him being aggressive, dominant. Toss me onto the bed or grab an ankle and pull me toward him. Pin my hands down. Maybe tie me up? I’m not sure since sometimes fantasy isn’t as good in real life. But do know I love dirty talk. It was one of my favorite things in my books, and you’ve already shown me how much I like it in real life.”

He leaned in close, his breath warm against her ear. “So, what would you do if I texted you something dirty at work? Something like … when you get home, I’m going to take you to my bedroom, push you down to your knees, and fuck your mouth.”

She shifted in the seat and crossed her legs.

He kissed her ear. “Your body just answered that for you.”

She turned and looked at him. “Are you really going to do that?”

“The text, or what I said I wanted to do?”

She chewed on her lip for a moment. “Both?”

“Do you want me to? Does it make you wet to think about it?”

She nodded.

“Then, I think it’s moved up my list of positions I want to try with you.” He kissed the side of her neck. “I’m looking forward to figuring out all the things that turn you on.”

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Chapter Eleven

“NOT THROUGH THE FRONT door?” she asked as he led her through a gate on the side of the house.

“This wing of the house is just me. I have my own entrance. It’s nice to be able to come and go without disturbing the girls.”

Beyond the gate was a small deck and an entry door. It led directly into his bedroom.

They both kicked off their shoes before he turned her around to unzip her dress.

“Jewelry first. Otherwise, the dress might get snagged.”

He unhooked the necklace while she removed the bracelet and earrings. After setting them on the dresser, he walked her over to the full-length mirror on the wall. “So I can see everything,” he explained.

Hannah’s dress fell to the floor in a whoosh, followed by a loud intake of breath when he saw the teddy she had on underneath.

“It gets even better. Unhook my bra. It was just there for the dress.”

He fiddled with her bra for a moment, his trembling fingers making it hard to deal with the small clasps.

“Grab the little flap and pull it forward. That should open it up.”

With the bra out of the way, he could see that the lingerie underneath was almost entirely lace. And every little bit of her could be seen through it. Looking down between them, he noticed it was a thong. His cock twitched against his boxers. “Is this for me?” he asked as he ran a finger along the edge of the thong.

She nodded. “So is the surprise in the front.”

He looked at her in the mirror and noticed her mound was bare. He kissed her neck and ran his hands across her body and to the curls peeking out in front.

“You’re getting hot. Or maybe I am?” she joked.

Slipping his fingers between her thighs, he met flesh instead of fabric. “No panties tonight?”

“Crotchless. Just for you. First one I’ve ever worn.”

He started pulling her toward the bed, but she stopped him and started to unhook stockings.

“Leave them. I want to feel them on my back.”

“Well then, it’s time to undress you.” She pushed off his coat and laid it on the chair. While she unbuttoned his shirt, he took out his cufflinks. A moment later, his shirt and pants joined her dress on the floor.

“I didn’t take you as a boxer briefs kind of guy.”

He laughed nervously, running his hand through his hair. “I figured it was my best bet after last night.”

She pushed up on her toes to kiss him. “Trying to keep the mess off your pants tonight?”

“Something like that. I’d prefer not to take them to the dry cleaners with that soaked into spots.”

“Can’t say I’ve ever had that problem.”

“Thankfully, last night’s jeans can go in the washer. No one need know except the two of us.”

She hooked her fingers on the waistband of his underwear, but he pushed them away.

“Let’s leave them for now.”

He walked her backward to the bed until her backside hit the mattress. In a flash, he had her lifted to sit on the edge of the bed and he dropped to his knees. He put her legs over his shoulders and pressed his mouth to her clit.

She was already so wet. He gave her several licks before putting his mouth back to her clit and slipping one, then two finger inside.

“Oh, God, Zach,” she said, her heels digging into his back. “I’m not going to last—” Her heels dug in further as she arched toward him, her body shuddering.

Once she went limp, he motioned for her to move to the center of the bed. He dropped his underwear and climbed onto the bed. Her eyes followed him as he moved between her legs.

“This is one spot where my, uh, videos might let me down. Do I go slow or can I just thrust in? I don’t want to hurt you.”

“This first time is for you, so whichever way sounds best.”

Everything. Everything sounds best if it means I get to be inside you.

He grabbed her hips and thrust inside. She tensed underneath him.

“Holy shit,” she yelped.

His face scrunched with worry. “Did I hurt you when I hit, um, I’m not sure what it’s called.”

She took a deep breath. “Cervix. And while it startled me, that’s not it. You’re big. Like really big.”

He laughed. “Can’t say I’ve ever compared myself to other guys, so I don’t know.”

“I’m sure you’ve measured it, though.”

“No comment.” He shifted and she yelped again.

“Please. Just stay still for a moment and let my body adjust.” She shook her head. “I purposefully kept my eyes on your face and didn’t look. I didn’t want to push you over the edge, and you come before you even got started. I should have looked. My answer to your question earlier would have been different.”

He tilted his head down, resting his forehead against hers. “I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault. I just need a little time to get used to it.”

He took a deep breath. *Holding still when I’m finally inside her is so hard. I need to get my mind on something else*. “You said you like dirty talk. I seem to remember in romance novels that the guy usually has a pet name for her in bed. Let’s figure out yours.”

Her eyes grew wide. “You read romance novels?”

“No, Mom did. When she was doing treatments for her cancer, her eyesight was bad. I bought her audiobooks and played them on a speaker. I heard plenty that way. As I recall, there were a few names that came up a lot. ‘Good Girl’ seemed to be popular.”

She shuddered underneath him. “Ugh. I hate that one with a passion. I’m a woman, not a girl. And it tends to go along with calling him ‘Daddy’. Sorry, but that is reserved for my actual Dad.”

He laughed. *I love how honest and open she is.* “Scratch that one from the list. How about we go the opposite way? Are you my dirty little slut?”

He felt a rush of warmth around him. “And once again your body answered my question for you. Do you want to be *my* dirty little slut?”

He felt her shift below him as she pushed her hips down toward the bed. He looked down where they met as she pressed back up against him.

“Good God, Hannah. I’m not sure what I like more: the feel of you around me or watching my cock slide into you.”

“Why don’t you find out?”

He looked up at her. “You sure you’re good? I don’t need sex that bad. You’re more important than that.”

“As good as I can be. Fully getting used to your size will take time and repetition.”

He slid out and pressed back in. “So, what you’re saying is you’re ready to take this cock?”

She angled her hips toward him. “I love it when you’re all sweet one moment and dirty the next.”

He closed his eyes and focused on the moment. “And I love the way you feel, all hot and wet wrapped around me.”

It was like nothing he’d ever felt before. The closest thing he could compare it to was the inside of his cheek. But it wasn’t smooth like that. And it almost felt swollen, but soft, at the same time. The way it squeezed him was nearly more than he could bear.

He tried holding back as long as he could, but she was right: it was too much. She felt too good. He pushed hard inside her, then stilled as the release hit him. “Oh, God, Hannah,” he groaned before dropping to his elbows. “I wish that could have been as good for you as it was me.”

She pushed up and kissed him. “Don’t worry, your mouth more than made up for it. Now, we get to both enjoy it together.”

He rolled off her and headed to the bathroom, coming back with a wet washcloth.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I may still be learning, but I know too much wetness between us means less friction. And less friction means less fun.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that. I’ve never really—”

“—done it more than once in a night?”

“Am I that obvious?”

“No, but your ex is an ass. So, I figured one and done.”

He looked between her legs and noticed a creamy colored fluid that wasn’t there when he’d cleaned her up last night. He stared for a moment.

“What is it? Did I bleed a little? If so, it’s okay. My cervix isn’t used to being knocked on like a door.”

“No, uh, it’s my—my…”

“Sperm? Semen? Seed?”

“Seed. I like that one. I can see it trickling out a little, and I don’t know why, but it’s a huge turn-on. Like I’ve marked you as mine. Or I’ve planted something in you.”

She giggled. “Well, I guess we’ve figured out your first kink.”

He gently cleaned her thighs before moving the cloth between her legs. “Kink?”

“Everyone has some. We already know dirty talk is one for me. You have a breeding kink. It means you love knowing you’ve come inside me; love seeing it there. It all relates in a way to pregnancy, even when you’re actively avoiding it.”

“Oh, I absolutely love seeing the evidence that I came inside you. And now that you mention it, just the thought of getting you pregnant makes me

hard. So, I guess you're right."

He walked over to the entryway to the bathroom and threw the washcloth in the hamper.

"But no pregnancies right now."

He shook his head as he climbed back into bed. "Too soon. We haven't been dating that long, and my hands are full with my sisters. Let's get at least one, if not two, off to college first."

"Agreed. I have to say, though, it's funny how you listened to your mom's romance books but didn't know about kinks."

"I guess maybe hers just didn't have them?"

"Oh, having read plenty of them myself, I'm sure they did. They just don't specifically call it out as such. But that's a topic for another day…" She reached her arms out to him.

"I don't care what you say, I'm going slow this time. And you let me know when you're ready for more."

He slid into her, smiling when a sound like a purr escaped her lips. "Better?"

"Mm-hmm. Much better." She hooked a leg on his hip, angling her hips toward him. He could feel his cock going in a little deeper than it had before.

This time, he watched her face as he moved in and out of her. When he hit a spot she liked, her eyes would drift shut and he could hear cute little noises from the back of her throat.

He balanced more of his weight on his left arm, letting his right-hand skim down her side and across her stomach. She moaned, then shivered. His fingers moved down further, seeking out her hard little nub. When he found it, he pressed his fingers against it and began rubbing it in circles.

Her right hand gripped his arm. “Oh, God, Zach. Yes, just like that.”

He quickly pushed into her. “Like the feel of my fingers on your clit, do ya?”

Her leg moved further up so her heel dug into his lower back.

“How about my cock? Do you want more of it?”

“Yes,” she exhaled. “More. Harder.”

“Are you sure you can take it?”

“Now, Zach. Please.”

He thrust into her hard and quick. “Anything my dirty little slut wants.”

She let out a sultry laugh. “Your dirty little slut wants you to fuck her hard and fast.”

“Oh, she does, does she?” He increased the tempo of his thrusts. “Does she want me to wreck this pretty little pussy?” He watched as her face flushed, the color travelling down her throat and across her chest.

“Please, Zach. I need…” She reached down and pushed her fingers against his, increasing the pressure.

“Ah, you need more there, too. Got it.”

She started writhing around under him, and her hand slipped off his and fell back to the mattress. Her fingers twisted in the sheets while the other hand dug into his arm.

He was fairly certain this meant she was close. He’d never gotten to watch her come before, as his face was too busy between her thighs. But she writhed around like that. Her breaths were short and fast, almost like panting, and her chest heaved with them. Her fingers on his arm had become frantic, the rhythm hurried and irregular. *I bet her heart is like a drum in her chest.*

Suddenly, she took a deep breath and held it. Her body arched, slamming into his. Her mouth fell open with a silent cry before she screamed, “Oh, God. Fuck yes. Zach.”

He chuckled. He wasn’t the only one with a dirty mouth in bed.

The feel of her walls trembling around him almost did him in. “Oh, Hannah. That feels so good. It’s like you’re trying to milk my cock. It’s nearly too much.”

He gritted his teeth and waited for her body to relax beneath him. The moment she did, he gripped her hip and thrust hard into her before yelling her name.

He collapsed down on her, his head next to hers on the pillow. “I could stay right here forever. You’re like heaven, Hannah.”

A loud knock on the bedroom door made them both jump.

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Chapter Twelve

“YES?” ZACH CALLED OUT.

“We need help.”

He cursed under his breath. He wasn’t kidding about not wanting to move from that spot. “Is it an emergency?”

“No, but it’s important,” Willow replied.

He sighed. “Fine, but I need a few minutes.”

He pushed himself up on an elbow and caressed Hannah’s cheek with his free hand. “I really did plan to be here with you all night.”

“Your sisters need you. I get it. I doubt they’re going to need you all night. And even if they do, I think we made pretty good use of our time.”

He leaned down and nipped at her bottom lip before kissing her. “Feel free to get dressed and come out, if you want. You can meet my terrors, I mean, sisters.” Since they hadn’t been officially dating yet, he hadn’t brought Hannah over to meet the girls yet. This wasn’t how he’d planned on them meeting. There was no way Willow hadn’t heard them before she knocked.

Pulling away from Hannah, he rolled out of bed. His body—especially his dick—already missed her warmth. After a quick trip to the bathroom, he pulled clothes from the dresser. Behind him, he heard her head into the bathroom. All he wanted to do was pull her back into bed and make love to her again. But his sisters needed him.

“What’s up?” he asked as he walked into the kitchen.

“Ollie forgot to put pads on the grocery list and she’s all out,” Willow replied.

He was pretty sure he knew the answer to the question, but he hoped he was wrong. “Can you use some of the ones we already have?”

Olivia shook her head. “Violet likes the long ones and they’re too big. And Willow uses tampons.” She scrunched up her nose as she said it.

Zach looked down at his watch. “It’s after ten. The stores in town are all closed. The convenience stores, too.” He pulled his cell phone from his pocket. “I’ll see if I can find someplace open.”

He was so focused on his search that he didn’t even hear Hannah walk into the kitchen.

“What’s wrong? Can I help?” she asked.

All three girls stared at her. He had planned to introduce them at breakfast in the morning.

“Willow, Violet, Olivia, this is my girlfriend, Hannah. Hannah, these are my sisters.”

She smiled at them. “It’s nice to finally meet you guys. I really would like to help, if I can.”

Violet crossed her arms and remained silent.

“I ran out of pads,” Olivia said quietly.

HANNAH WALKED OVER TO the barstool next to her and sat down. “I may be able to help with that. What kind?”

“The green ones. They’re my favorite.”

“Well, Olivia, you’re in luck. Those happen to be my favorite, too. I have some in my bag in Zach’s room.”

Her face lit up. “Really?”

“Really. You can have them and Zach can pick up more in the morning once the stores are open. Let’s go get them.”

Olivia hopped down from the stool and followed Hannah to Zach’s room.

Hannah picked up her bag from where Zach had dropped it when they got home. She sat it on the dresser and began digging out the pads.

Olivia looked around the bedroom. “There’s clothes all over. Zach doesn’t like messes.”

Hannah could feel her face turning red. “Um, we had to change real quick from what we wore at dinner. We didn’t want to get them dirty.”

“Ohhh. Makes sense. Zach didn’t know why we needed him. Could have been something messy.”

Hannah handed her the pads. “Exactly.”

Olivia clutched the pads to her chest like Hannah had just given her something priceless. “Do you want to watch a movie with me?”

She’d rather go back to bed with Zach, but she also needed to bond with his sisters. They were the center of his life, and it was essential that she build a relationship with them, too.

“I’d love to.”

Olivia skipped out of the room and down the hall to the kitchen. “Zach, your room smells funny. And Hannah is going to watch a movie with me.”

Zach just stared at her as she headed for her room.

Hannah walked over and leaned her head against his shoulder. “She told me you don’t like messes after she noticed our clothes all over the floor.”

He shook his head. “Sisters.”

“I wouldn’t know since I don’t have any. Just Alex.”

“Want mine?”

She laughed. “No, but I’ll share them with you.”

He kissed her. “Good answer.”

Violet rolled her eyes. “Ugh. Get a room.”

“We had one until Willow knocked,” he joked.

“You’re gross,” she replied before stomping away and plopping down into an armchair in the living room.

“I don’t think she likes me,” Hannah whispered.

“Sometimes, I don’t think she likes anyone.”

Olivia walked back into the kitchen. “What movie do you want to watch?”

“Why don’t you pick your favorite?”

She giggled and ran to the living room.

Zach wrapped an arm around Hannah’s waist. “Thanks for doing this. I’ll make some popcorn.”

“It’s no problem. Your sisters are an important part of your life. And that means they need to be the same for me. Otherwise, how can we possibly have a future together?”

He kissed the side of her head. “I’m glad to hear that, as I want you in my life for a long time.”

“Hannah, I have the movie ready,” Olivia called from the living room.

He nodded toward the other room. “Go. I’ll get the popcorn and drinks.”

Olivia was bouncing around on the couch when Hannah walked in. “Sit next to me!”

Hannah sat down on the couch and tucked her legs under her. “What are we watching?”

“*The Mitchells vs. the Machines.* Have you ever seen it?”

“I sure haven’t. Why is it your favorite?”

“She makes funny movies with her dog. And in the end, she finds out her dad really does love her. But the person she’s closest to is her brother.”

Hannah worked hard to keep her face flat. She knew Olivia had never met her dad. Zach said Henry left when Maggie was pregnant with Olivia. Apparently, he decided he didn’t want to be a husband or father anymore and just packed up and abandoned them. Zach was about Violet’s age when he became the man of the house, and barely nineteen when their mom died. Her heart broke for Olivia.

I’m so lucky to have both of my parents.

A FEW MINUTES LATER, Zach walked in with a bowl of popcorn and sodas. “You know, Hannah can’t watch the movie if you’re talking over it, Ollie.”

Hannah took an orange soda from him. “It’s okay. I don’t mind.”

Olivia made a claw motion in the air, then took a Coke from him. He made the same motion at her.

“What does that mean?” Hannah asked.

“Katie and Aaron do it to each other in the movie. It’s like the phrase ‘rawr means I love you’,” Olivia explained.

“Oh, I’ve heard that before. I’d just never seen the hand motion before.”

Zach offered Violet a soda, but she never looked up from her phone. He sat a Coke on the table next to her.

“Really? This movie again?” Willow asked as she sat in the other armchair.

“As if you care. You’re just going to bury your face in your phone like Vi,” Olivia retorted.

Hannah took the bowl of popcorn from Zach. “I wanted to see her favorite movie. You can show me yours another night if you want.”

Willow shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe.”

Zach dropped down on the couch next to Olivia. “It’s okay, Ollie. I’ll watch it with you.” Not that it seemed to matter, as all her focus was on Hannah.

About thirty minutes later, the chatter in the room quieted down as Olivia fell asleep against his shoulder. It wasn’t long before he heard Hannah’s soft snores at the other end of the couch. He looked over and noticed Violet was asleep as well.

“Willow,” he called out quietly. “Can I get some help?”

She tucked her phone in her pocket and walked over to pick up Olivia.

“I’ll get Violet and come back for Hannah.”

Willow looked over at Hannah. “You can carry her?”

He nodded before bending down and carefully picking up Violet.

They tucked the two in and headed back to the living room.

“I’m going to stay up for a bit longer, if that’s okay,” Willow told him.

“You’re almost seventeen and it’s Saturday night. I’m not going to make you go to bed.”

She tipped her head toward Hannah. “You really like her, huh? You’ve never brought a girlfriend home before.”

“I would have needed to have a girlfriend, first. But to answer your question, yes, I do. I like her a lot.” *More than like, actually. But I’m not ready to share that yet. And I want to say the words to Hannah first before I tell anyone else.*

“She staying the night?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Well, good night. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He scooped Hannah up in his arms. She let out a contented sigh and snuggled against him.

“Oh,” said Willow. “You really can pick her up.”

“The weights I work with every day weigh more than her. I’m stronger than I look.”

Zach carried Hannah to his room, kicking the door closed behind him. He made quick work of her clothes, then tucked her into bed. A few minutes later, he slipped into bed next to her and pulled her close.

“Good-night, baby,” he said before kissing her forehead.

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Chapter Thirteen

April 30, 2023

Well, turns out honesty really is the best policy. Hannah was more than happy to become the teacher. And not once did she make me feel embarrassed about still being a virgin.

I'm so glad I waited. Being able to experience that with her was beyond words. Even if our night did get interrupted.

She was so great with my sisters. It's been my biggest worry over bringing someone into our lives…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

ZACH PUT HIS JOURNAL back into his nightstand. He'd started one years ago after his therapist suggested it. Writing out his thoughts and worries helped him to better cope with things. He'd thought it was stupid at first but quickly grew to understand why his mom had always kept a journal.

He laid back down in bed next to Hannah, his chest against her back. Running his hand down her side, he enjoyed the feel of her warm skin under his fingers. It was so soft. He reached around and cupped her breast, running his thumb over her nipple.

He wanted badly to roll her over and make love to her again, but she was asleep. *I might be new to all of this, but I know I need her okay first.*

Instead, he kissed her shoulder.

"Morning already?" she mumbled.

"Yes, but it's still early. I'm used to being up to get the girls off to school, so most mornings I wake up before the alarm. As hard as I try, it's rare for me to sleep in."

She rolled over so she was facing him. "When do you need to be up?"

He brushed a lock of hair from her face that had escaped her braids. "Not for another hour. I have to run to the store before breakfast."

She wiggled away from him and got out of bed. He tried to hide the disappointment from his face, but it must have been obvious.

"Don't worry, I'm just going to the bathroom. I need to brush my teeth."

Oh, yeah. Morning breath.

He tried to follow her into the bathroom, but she closed the door. "There are two sinks, you know."

He waited outside the door and a moment later, he heard the toilet flush. *Oh, I get it now. We're not at the peeing in front of each other stage yet.*

When she opened the door, he went in and brushed his teeth. Once she headed back into the bedroom, he closed the door some could take care of business. He didn't care if the door was open, but clearly, she did. And he didn't want to upset or offend her. He'd never shared a bathroom before and unless he was taking a hot shower, he never closed the door.

Hannah was in bed, lying on her side, propped up by her elbow when he went back into the room. "So, what do you want to do?"

"Well, you, obviously."

She laughed. "Position, silly. And unless I'm headed back into the bathroom for a shower, your head between my legs isn't on the menu."

He stood there for a moment, thinking over his options. She was right; he wanted to go there again. But while he didn't mind her not being fresh from the shower—he could clean her up like he'd done previously, after all—she obviously felt otherwise. And that meant her mouth on him was also off-limits. These were good things to know for the future.

"Have you ever done it doggy-style?"

"No."

"Another first for both of us. Now, how about you be a dirty little slut and get on your hands and knees for me?"

She smiled at him before rolling forward and pushing up into position.

He climbed into bed from the foot of the bed, moving up to her. Leaning over her, he kissed up her spine and nibbled on her neck. His hands ran over her curves before moving around to her breasts. *And back to where I left off.*

He played with her nipples, rolling them between his fingers. She moaned and pressed against his hands.

"Let's see how much you want my cock," he said as one hand moved down between her legs. "So wet and I've barely touched you."

“Pretty sure I dreamt about you last night.”

“Only fair since I dream about you all the time.” He took himself in hand and tried to line up to push inside her. “I don’t think we quite have the position right.”

“Ah, the fun of something new. Figuring it all out. I’ll tilt my hips back and see if that helps.” She spread her legs a little further apart and angled her hips back.

This time, he was able to slide into her. “Being inside you is like heaven,” he groaned. “Is everything good for you? I’m not hurting you?”

She pushed back against him. “More than good.”

He started moving in and out of her, slowly at first. “I love your cute little ass, you know that? When you wear jeans, I love checking it out. It’s why I walk just slightly behind you sometimes. And now it’s right here in front of me to enjoy.” He ran his hands across her backside before giving each globe a squeeze. “I know you think it’s too big, but I think it’s perfect.”

“An ass man, huh?”

“Oh, baby, I love your breasts, too. It is just too tempting having these babies right in front of me. If I could kiss them without pulling out of you, I would.”

She giggled. “Sex now. You can kiss my ass later.”

“Who would’ve ever thought someone would say that and I’d actually like it?”

He moved his right hand around to her clit. She moaned loudly when he pressed on it and rubbed. “I miss not kissing you here this morning, though. It makes my mouth water just thinking about it.” He felt warmth flood around him and less resistance when he pushed in. While she hadn’t said so,

he’d felt a little twinge in her body when they’d joined. Now, she was relaxed and comfortable.

He grabbed her left hip and thrust into her hard, giving his hips a little twist as he did it.

She gasped. “Do that again.”

Her moan filled the room when he did it a second time.

“Listen to my little slut being so vocal. You like this, huh?” He did it several more times.

“Yes. Zach. I. Love. That,” she said between breaths.

He could feel her body trembling under him, and he was worried her arms might not hold her. “Go down on your forearms. It’ll give you more balance.”

The change in position allowed him to push in further and he had to catch himself before he came too soon. The last thing he wanted was to finish before she did.

He upped the pressure with his fingers, and apparently it was just what she needed. Her hips slammed back into him and she cried out. He wrapped one arm around her middle and a few thrusts later he followed her. It hit him so hard that his knees buckled, and he collapsed against her. A moment later, they both fell to the bed.

“Even better than last night,” he mumbled into her hair. He rolled them onto their side and held her tight. Nuzzled the back of her neck. “I love … lying here like this with you.” *Crap. I nearly said, “I love you.” And while it’s true, I think it may be too soon.*

She wiggled around until she was molded against him. “I love,” she sighed softly, “it, too.”

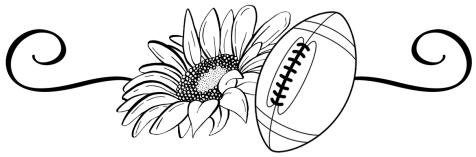
Well, then.

The next thing he knew, the alarm was going off.

He nibbled on her shoulder. “As good as you taste, I’ve got to get a move on so I can make breakfast. Want to share a shower?”

“Well, folks do say we should do everything we can to conserve water…”

He laughed. “Gotta do everything we can for the environment, right?”



“Are you staying again today?” Zach asked Hannah. They were cuddled on the couch while Olivia played a video game. Willow and Violet had both headed to their rooms after lunch.

“I’d love to. I brought clothes for work just in case. I hope you don’t mind that I hung them in the closet. I didn’t want them to get wrinkled.”

“Baby, you could fill my closet and I wouldn’t mind. I like you being here.”

“You’ll have to run me home in the morning, though. I need to get my SUV and drop off my laundry. How long do you want me to stay?”

Forever? “How about the week? We can start there.”

“Okay. I’ll grab a bunch of stuff from home after work. I have some groceries that I bought that I should bring, too.”

“I keep meaning to ask: why such a big vehicle when it’s just you?”

“It’s for work. I pulled out the second row of seats and they’re in my garage. I never have more than one passenger, usually Annie, but I transport a lot of stuff for work. Most of the time I’m in the office, but at least a few times a week I help with deliveries or errands.”

“I have an SUV for work, too. I did the same with the seats. I move a lot of products and supplies between our stores, so the company bought that one. The big SUV is for us. We needed a third row in case the girls had a friend over. The other vehicle in the garage, though, is just for me. After busting my ass for years, I thought I needed something fun.”

Her eyes lit up. “You never mentioned another vehicle. What is it?”

He pulled out his phone and scrolled through his photos. “I don’t take it out as often as I should. I was afraid to drive it on our dates and seem pretentious or something.”

“Okay, now I really need to know.”

He handed her his phone.

“Shut up! You have a Porsche and you haven’t taken me on a drive in it yet?”

“I would have yesterday, but Sean suggested the ride share so I could have a few drinks. How about a drive later and we can go out to dinner after?”

“Yes! Although unless I run home, dinner will have to be somewhere I can wear jeans.”

He smiled. “You know how I feel about you in jeans. How about barbecue?”

“I love barbecue.”

“I’ll have to see about grilling for you sometime soon. I have a nice smoker out back that makes delicious brisket.”

“Promise?”

“Promise. I like cooking. I used to hate it, but your mom started coming over and taught me how to make meals for the girls.”

“My mom did?”

“She’s done a lot to help us out after Mom died. I had no idea how to take care of three young kids.”

“That’s Mom for you. She loves helping out.”

“She said it was the least she could do for her best friend’s kids. Especially since Mom used to watch you when we were little.”

“She babysat me?”

He chuckled. “She sure did.” He moved her off his lap and walked over to the bookshelf. Grabbing two albums, he headed back to the couch.

“Mom watched us in the morning and your mom took afternoons. They did that until we were old enough to start school. Then, we were in afterschool daycare until they got off work. You don’t remember any of this?”

She sat there for a few minutes, chewing on her lip. “I remember a little plastic pool with a slide and palm trees.”

He flipped through an album. “This pool?”

She looked at the photo he was pointing at. Two little kids—a little dark-haired girl and a blonde boy—splashed in the water. “Oh, my God. That’s us!” She flipped through the album. “I can’t believe we were friends when we were little.”

“Well, you were only four when I started school. And we rarely saw each other during the summer. Especially once I started playing football.”

“I went to Aunt Carol’s house during the summer. They had horses and I loved going there. When her and Uncle Wyatt died, Alex was twelve. So, I could stay home with him.”

He showed her photos of them playing here at his house. “We were only a year apart in school, but with the way they segregated grades, we never saw

each other. It wasn't until high school that I saw more than a glance of you."

She turned the page and he knew the moment she spotted the picture. It was one of his favorites. She gasped and closed the album, pulling it to her chest. "Did I just see what I think I did?"

"If you saw a picture of you kissing me, then yes, you did."

She opened the album back up. "Me kissing you? It looks mutual to me." She closed her eyes for a moment. "It was your eighth birthday and Alex kept bothering us, singing 'Hannah and Zach, sitting in a tree…' And then, he dared me to kiss you."

My eighth birthday. The day I realized I was in love with my best friend. "You meant to kiss me on the cheek, but I turned at the last moment, and you kissed me on the lips."

"I'd forgotten all about that. So, you were my first kiss after all."

"Mom used to tease me about it. I think she'd be happy to see we're dating."

"I'm glad my mom was here for you through everything."

"She would come over and sit with Mom so I could have a break. And she picked up the girls from school and ran them where they needed to go. Plus, plenty of food. The girls call your mom Auntie Janet."

"She never said anything. I called plenty from college, but I didn't really come home much. I was enjoying living on my own. And if I'm honest, I think I liked leaving this small town behind and creating a whole new life for myself."

"Janet told me she didn't want you to drop out of school and rush back here."

Hannah put her hand on top of his. “But I would have liked to have been here for you.”

“I was a mess back then. At first, we thought everything would be okay. The treatments were going okay, and it looked like I’d be able to go off to college the next year. And then, things got bad. I’m glad you didn’t see me back then. Honestly, I’ve only felt like I’ve really been back to myself this past year. It was perfect timing that you didn’t come back until now.”

She leaned her head on his shoulder. “I’m proud of you, you know that? Not many people would give up a chance at professional football to take care of their family. They would have handed it off. Hired people.”

“I wouldn’t trade that time with my mom for anything. I miss it sometimes, especially when I watch Sean on TV and know it was supposed to be both of us. But family is more important. The most important thing in the world, in fact. I would never let anything come between me and my family.”

He looked over toward his sister as she yelled at the TV. Her headset was around her neck. He knew the next thing would be her throwing the controller. “Ollie. Is it time to take a break for a bit?”

She let out an exasperated sigh. “No. The game is just being stupid.”

“Okay, well, you know the rules. Next time, the game gets turned off.”

“Yes, Dad,” she grumbled as she put her headset back on and returned to the game.

He shook his head. “Sorry, it’s hard being brother and parent sometimes. It feels like I’m overstepping, but I’m the only one here to do it.”

“Your mom would be so proud of how you’ve raised them. I’d love to hear more about her. I wish I could recall more about her from when we

were kids. I guess I was more focused on other things than the adults in my parents' lives."

"Because Alex monopolized your time. I used to get so jealous of him."

She slapped at his leg. "Zachary Hayes, did you have a crush on me when we were kids?"

He could feel his cheeks heat as they turned red. *If only she knew.*

"And a blush? I'm taking that as a yes. What about high school? You said you saw me there."

"I was one of the student leaders at your freshman orientation. I didn't even need to look at your name tag to know it was you. It was definitely more than a crush at that point."

Her mouth dropped open for a moment. "I never knew. Why didn't you ask me out?"

"Because of our stupid sperm donor. I was barely into my sophomore year when I became the man of the house. Between school, football, and helping Mom, I didn't have time to date. And just as I was ready to ask you out, we found out about Mom's cancer."

"Your dad is an ass."

"No arguments here, except I refuse to call him that." Zach gritted his teeth. *I hate even thinking about him.* "He doesn't deserve to be called Dad or Father. He abandoned his family and tried to tear us apart when Mom died."

She hugged his arm. "I'm sorry. That's way more than anyone should have to deal with, especially a teenager."

"I didn't tell you it all before, as we'd just started dating. But now you're here, spending time with the girls, and the relationship between you and I

have grown. So, if my sisters seem overly protective of me, you'll know why."

"You've been the most important person to them for most of their lives. I understand. It's why I want to get to know them."

"Ollie clearly already adores you. Willow, I'm not sure. But Vi…" He sighed. "She's always the hardest."

"Don't worry. We'll get there." She looked through more of the photo album. "Hey, I remember this day. It was your birthday and your parents had the pool put in out back." The photo was of her bundled in a towel, sharing a piece of cake with Zach.

"My ninth birthday." The first time he officially made the wish after blowing out the candles.

"Alex was being a jerk and dared me to do something gross—"

"—eat a worm."

She shuddered. "Ugh. When I refused, he pushed me into the pool, clothes and all. It was January, so it was cold. You jumped in and helped me out, wrapped me in a towel, and got us a big piece of birthday cake. I can't remember him ever doing any more gross dares after that, though."

"I'm not surprised."

"What do you mean?"

"I made it quite clear what would happen if he did it again."

"I'm gathering you didn't do it with your words."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, words were involved. But so were fists."

"Zach!" Her voice said she was disappointed, but her smile and misty eyes betrayed her tone.

“I couldn’t let him continue to terrorize you like that. I felt bad, though, as his parents died just a few weeks later.”

“He still dares me to this day, but they’re not awful. So, thank you. He mostly directs his pranks and dares at Annie. It’s why she hates being around him.”

Zach took the album from her hands and closed it. “You can look through these any time you’d like. There’s more on the shelves, too. But how about we go on that drive instead?”

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Chapter Fourteen

ZACH BARELY HAD THE words out of his mouth when Hannah jumped up from the couch. “I’m gonna grab my purse and shoes and I’ll be right back.”

He let the girls know they were headed out and wouldn’t be home for dinner.

“Can we order Chinese?” Violet asked.

Olivia jumped up and down. “Potstickers! And don’t forget the fried rice.”

Willow rolled her eyes at her baby sister. “Do I ever?” She turned to Zach. “Do you want to order it, or should I?”

“You can do it. I installed the app on your phone, and my card is linked to it.’’

She beamed at him. Later this year, she’d turn seventeen, and she was always asking to be treated more like an adult.

“If you run into any issues, just text me. I’ll have Hannah watch my phone while I’m driving.”

He was surprised when she hugged him. “Thanks for letting me do it.”

He patted her on the back. “I have to remind myself sometimes that while you may be my little sister, you’re not a little kid. You don’t need me to do everything for you.”

“Ready to go?” Hannah asked behind him.

“Just gotta grab my keys and shoes and we can head over to the garage.” His mom had always worried about carbon monoxide from their vehicles, so the garage was a separate structure about fifty feet from the house.

“Ohh, she’s even more gorgeous than the photos,” Hannah said as she ran her hand across the hood. “I expected red, though.”

“It’s what I had planned to buy. But I saw this one and couldn’t resist. There’s a lot of red Porsches around, but not many blue.”

He opened the door and helped her into the car. When you were used to always riding in SUVs, getting into a low to the ground car like this could be a pain. Literally. If he went too long without driving it, he tended to hit his head on the way in.

She took a deep breath. “Still smells like leather and new car.”

He hurried around to his side and slid into the seat. “I’ve only had it about eight months or so, and I’m so busy that I don’t get to take her out much.” He hit the button to open the garage and twisted the fob to start the car. “I wanted a 911, but you can’t get them with a standard transmission. It felt weird to buy a sports car and not be able to shift it myself.

“Where would you like to go before dinner?”

“How about down to Galveston? But up 646 to the freeway, not via Hwy 6.”

He laughed. “Want to go fast, do we?”

“Isn’t that the point of a sports car? There shouldn’t be much traffic today, so doing seventy should be easy.”

“Baby, she can do a lot more than seventy. If we get a nice open stretch of freeway, I’ll show you what she’s got. The ride is so smooth that I can get up over a hundred without realizing it.”

“Just don’t get a ticket, okay? You don’t need to risk your license for me.”

He reached over and grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips. “Don’t worry. It’s hard for cops to hide on that stretch. And I’ll slow down before we hit the speed traps closer to the island.”

She flipped through the radio stations until she found her favorite. “I know the driver usually picks the music, but…”

“It’s fine. I know alternative is your favorite. You’re always welcome to choose the music when you’re with me.”

She watched as he shifted gears and sped up to enter the freeway. “I don’t know why, but there’s something so hot about watching you with the gearshift.”

“Thinking about my hands on you?”

“Ma—ybe.”

“Ever had sex in a car before?”

She laughed. “Don’t believe what you’ve seen in the movies. There is nothing fun or sexy about it. It’s cramped and uncomfortable and you can barely move. Of course, I might be biased because it was an all-around terrible experience, but it sucked.”

He glanced around the interior of his car. “Yeah, maybe not in here. I’m not exactly a small guy. Maybe the SUV?”

“Maybe. I was in a little car, so limited space.”

“I could help change your mind about car sex.”

“Just it being you would make all the difference. I know I can trust you to make sure I enjoy it.”

He glanced at his speedometer. “Ninety. How does that feel?”

“Wow, you’re right. It doesn’t feel like we’re going that fast.” She looked out the window. “But the scenery is flying by.”

“Was it really that bad?”

“Hmm?”

“Car sex. you’ve really got me interested now.” *Very interested based on how hard my cock is straining against my pants.*

“He was an ass. It probably didn’t help that it was the first time for both of us. He had me get in his lap in the passenger seat—the only time I got to be on top, mind you. I thought we were gonna kiss and have a bit of foreplay, you know? But he pulled my panties to the side, pushed in, and thirty seconds later it was over. I should have known then he would be a crappy boyfriend.” She sighed.

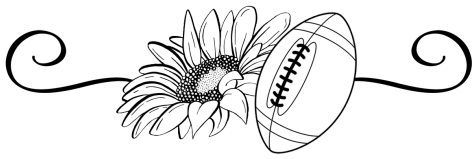
“Oh, baby, we can do way better than that. There’s no way I’d ever let you get away without coming at least once. Not today, but sometime soon, we’re going to have sex in one of my vehicles.”

One side of her mouth curled up in a smile. “Not today?”

“Ah, is my dirty little slut coming out to play? Well, unfortunately, you have on jeans, and I have the feeling it’s a lot easier if you have on a skirt or dress.”

She looked down at her pants. “Ah, yes, these make things much more difficult. I don’t want to have to try to get these off in the car.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll happily peel them off you once we get home.”



HANNAH WAS DEEP INTO a dream about Zach when she felt his fingers between her legs. “Mm-hmm. My favorite way to wake up.”

He rolled over on top of her. “I have to get the girls ready for school soon.”

She wrapped her legs around him as she felt him push inside her. “But enough time for a nice roll in the hay first?”

He thrust hard and she moaned. “I set my alarm for earlier just for this.”

Ten minutes later, he rolled them onto their side. “Are you getting up soon to get ready for work?”

She loved how he enjoyed snuggling after sex. “Soon, yes. It doesn’t take me long to get ready.”

“Will you have breakfast with us?”

“Honestly, I don’t usually eat until about ten. I need to fully wake up and be active before I can eat. I grab something at work.”

“Coffee?”

“Oh, I’ll take some of that. Jo’s, like usual?”

“I have a glass here with breakfast and stop at Jo’s on the way to work. We can grab coffee there on the way to your place.” He bent down and kissed her. “Are you taking a shower before we leave?”

“No, I prefer taking it before bed.”

“Good.”

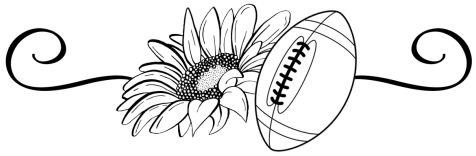
“Why?”

“We’ll both know my seed is soaking your panties while you work.”

She slapped at his arm. “You’re terrible.”

“I can’t help it. Knowing that just does something to me.”

And as much as she hated to admit it, it did something to her, too.



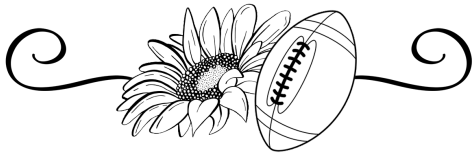
ZACH STARED AT THE screen in front of him. He'd read the same paragraph three times and had no idea what it said. All his focus was on Hannah. And all the things he wanted to do to her, *with* her.

The last weekend had been one of the best in his life, and not just because he finally had sex. Kissing Hannah and holding her body against him were pretty amazing. Finally seeing her naked after years of imagining it was pretty good, too. But his favorite was watching her as her orgasm hit. Seeing that look of ecstasy—and knowing he put it there—made him feel so good inside.

I understand now how people can become so obsessed with sex. I've only done it a handful of times, and I can't get my mind off it. If I could, I'd stay in bed with Hannah forever.

During lunch, he pulled up an adult shopping site on his phone. Several of the things he wanted to try with her needed accessories—or lube—and the sooner he could get them in his hands, the better. He ordered a variety of things, including a bondage set and a vibrator. *If my fingers drive her crazy, what would she do if I used a vibe instead?*

On the shipping screen, he made certain to pay for the fastest option. *I have plans for this weekend, and I'd rather not use my neckties. Saturday can't come soon enough.*



HANNAH JUGGLED HER PURSE and the boxes of pizza as she opened the gate to Zach's side yard. It was Tuesday and he'd be home late—he had therapy after work—so she'd offered to grab dinner on the way home.

Thankfully, there was a table on the deck by his door, so she didn't have to try typing the lock code while holding everything. *Why didn't I just go to the front door? I don't have that code, but I could have rung the doorbell. Oh, well. Too late now.*

She dropped her purse on the dresser and her shoes by the door before heading to the kitchen with the pizzas. She was halfway down the hallway when she heard voices.

"I think she's just with him for his money," one girl said. "Have you seen her house? It's tiny."

"She's trying to replace Mom," another said,

"Did you know she's sleeping with Zach? What a slut," the first girl asked.

Hannah's breath caught in her throat. *Is that what they really think of me?* She turned and ran back to the bedroom, dropping the pizza boxes on the dresser. No sooner did she drop down into the armchair, sobs wracked her body.

ABOUT AN HOUR LATER, Zach walked in the front door. He was surprised to find the girls searching the fridge for something to eat.

“Where’s Hannah?” he asked them.

“We don’t know. We figured she was with you,” said Willow.

“You know I had my appointment today. She was bringing home pizza for dinner. And her SUV is out front.”

The girls shrugged their shoulders, so he headed to his room to look for Hannah. He heard her crying as he approached the door.

“They hate me,” she said as he entered the room.

“Oh, baby,” he said as he picked her up and sat down into the chair with her. “They don’t hate you.”

“You didn’t hear them. They were talking about me when I came home. That I’m trying to take your mom’s place. I’m after your money. That I’m a sl—slut,” she sobbed.

He cursed under his breath and squeezed her tight. “None of that is true. I’ll handle it. I’m so sorry my sisters are being this way.”

When her crying calmed down, he laid her down on the bed, grabbed the pizzas, and headed for the kitchen.

“It seems like we need to have a discussion with dinner,” he said angrily. “Grab the plates and drinks. We’re sitting at the table tonight.”

He waited until everyone was seated before he started his lecture. It had been a long time since he’d needed to do one. “You three made Hannah cry.”

Willow tried to explain, but he cut her off.

“Hannah is here because I want her to be. And she’s not going anywhere. So, let’s go over what you three had to say about her.

“First, she will never take mom’s place. No one would. Even if we got married, she’d be your sister, not your mom.”

“I don’t need another sister,” Violet said, her arms crossed.

“Hannah already loves you guys. She was never lucky enough to have a sister, and she was looking forward to the three of you being her sisters. Her only sibling is Alex, who her parents adopted.

“Second, Hannah is not after my money; I can assure you of that. In fact, I’m pretty sure she has more money than I do.

“And last, there’s the most hurtful thing she overheard. I won’t even repeat what she was called. Yes, she’s staying in my room. And yes, as I’m sure you’ve all figured out, we’re sleeping together. That’s because we’re adults in a committed relationship.” He sighed. “Did you guys know that Auntie Janet is Hannah’s mother? What would she think if she knew how you guys treated Hannah?”

“But—” Vi said.

“When I was your age, I put aside nearly everything I wanted to help take care of Ollie and Mom. One of the things I gave up on was dating. Specifically, dating Hannah. She’s been special to me longer than any of you have been alive. And now that my life is somewhat back to normal, I’m finally able to take control of my life. And I’m lucky that Hannah was single. She means a lot to me and I’m not letting her go again. She’s going to be in all our lives for a very long time, so I suggest you get used to it.”

“I like her,” Olivia said quietly.

“Good, because she likes you, too. I know you guys are struggling with me having a girlfriend. Of having to share me with someone else. I get that. But you guys have to remember I’m an adult. Hell, I’m nearly thirty. And until now, I’ve never had a girlfriend. Never went on a date. That’s because I was completely focused on you. But adults need companionship, otherwise they get lonely. I was lonely. And then, Hannah walked back into

my life. As Willow has already noticed, I'm happy. I'd honestly forgotten what it felt like.

"It's not that I don't love you girls; I do. And you make me happy. But having a partner in life fulfills you in a different way. Completes you. Hannah does that for me." He pushed back from the table. "Now, I'm going to take my girlfriend out to dinner. You guys can eat your cold pizza and think about what you did today. You made Hannah cry. She thinks you guys hate her."

Willow and Vi both tried to speak, but he held up a hand. "I want you to think long and hard about it before you respond to what I said. You can tell me tomorrow over dinner, as Hannah eats with her family on Wednesdays."

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Chapter Fifteen

May 2, 2023

I can't remember the last time I was so angry. The way Willow and Violet spoke about Hannah today was beyond infuriating. I'm so angry that even with Hannah's warm, naked body cuddled next to me, I can't sleep.

I wish my therapy visit was tomorrow instead of earlier today. I could really use some advice from my therapist right now…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

ZACH SAT AT HIS desk, dreading going home. For the first time in days, he wouldn't be eating dinner with Hannah. Not only that, but he was

expecting to hear the girls' response to yesterday's lecture. He pulled out his phone.

Zach

Have a good dinner with your parents.

Hannah

I will. You really don't mind?

Zach

I don't mind. I just hate sharing you.

Hannah

I know. I'll be back by eight.

Zach

It's weird. Last week, I had dinner every night without you. And tonight, the thought is killing me.

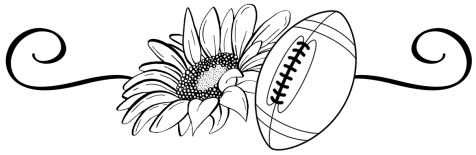
Hannah

[kiss emoji]

Zach

[heart emoji]

He sighed. *It's a good thing she is away tonight. I don't want her to hear what the girls have to say.*



Zach could smell dinner cooking when he opened the front door. “Smells good.”

“Chelsea showed me how to finish up dinner tonight. It’s a roast chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, and green beans,” Willow replied.

“Thanks for getting it started.”

“Your talk last night got me thinking. I can help out more. You’ve already been giving me more responsibilities lately, especially since Hannah started staying over. I can finish the dinners Chelsea makes. Then, that’s one less thing you have to worry about.”

He hugged her. “I really appreciate it.”

“I guess I didn’t really think about how all of this affected your life. All four of us lost Mom, but only you had your life ripped out from under you because of it. You’ve given up so much for us.” She wiped a tear from her cheek.

“And I would do it all over again. You guys are my family. I love you more than anything. I just need the opportunity to have someone for myself. Start my own branch of the family.”

“You guys are having a baby?”

He laughed. “No, not any time soon. Not until you’re off to college, and preferably after Vi is as well. We just started dating, after all.”

She pulled the chicken out from the oven. “Dinner is done if you want to grab Vi and Ollie.”

Vi. She's the one I dread talking to. I have the feeling most of the comments yesterday came from her.

He let the girls know dinner was done and returned to the kitchen to help Willow move the food to the table. Vi walked into the kitchen to grab plates and silverware while Ollie grabbed drinks.

"Last night, I asked the three of you to think about everything I said. Now, it's your turn to talk," he told them once everyone was seated.

"I'm sorry Hannah cried. I like her," Ollie said as she looked at her sisters. "She spends time with me and actually listens to what I have to say."

Zach knew the lack of a mom hurt Ollie more than her sisters. She had no memory of their mom and had to rely on stories, pictures, and videos. And lately, Vi and Willow had been less interested in spending time with her. She badly needed an older female presence in her life. Someone like Hannah.

"As I said last night, she likes you, too. She was saying how she was looking forward to doing sister stuff with you guys, like getting your nails done."

"I'm sorry we made her cry," said Willow. "I really did worry she might be with you because of your money. Her house is tiny."

"How did you know about her house?" he asked.

Willow fidgeted in her seat. "Hannah told me about it. It's three houses down from my school. She gave me a key in case I missed the bus or something happened at school. That way I'd have a safe place to go until someone could get me."

"So, she was kind to you, and you repaid her by being mean?" He shook his head and tried to keep his feelings in check. "It's one of the rental houses Janet and Myles own. Hannah just moved back into town. She's

staying there while she figures out where she wants to live. It's likely she would have bought a house by now if we hadn't started dating. But we both recognized that there's a strong connection between us, so she's waiting."

"She might move in with us?" Ollie asked.

"I hope so. Right now, she's a guest."

"I didn't realize you were my age when everything happened," Vi said quietly.

"I was fifteen when our sperm donor left, and sixteen when Ollie was born. With Mom getting so sick, I essentially became a parent at fifteen. And I willingly gave up everything to do it. I only kept playing football because Mom insisted on it. We both thought I would play in college and the pros."

"But you never got the chance to," said Vi.

"Because he stayed home for us," added Willow.

"I put my family first. Family is very important to me. And hopefully, one day, Hannah will be part of our family."

Vi crossed her arms. "I still don't like her."

"I'm not asking you to. You've only known her five days. I've known her since we were in diapers. I'm asking you to treat her with respect and give her a chance. She really is a very nice person."

"You're just saying that because she's sleeping with you," she replied.

"Violet! This is exactly what I mean. That is completely disrespectful. I've thought she was a wonderful person for more than twenty years. And while we've been sleeping together for less than a week, we've been dating for months."

"I *knew* it. She was the one who put the smile on your face back in January," said Willow.

“I’ll tell you three something only Mom knew. I’ve been wishing for Hannah to be in my life since my ninth birthday. The day after I made that wish for the twentieth time, I literally ran into her. I have no plans to give her up.”

Willow looked over at him, and he could see unshed tears in her eyes. “That’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard. I promise to give Hannah a chance. I’ll be nice to her. After all, I’m pretty sure I have her to thank for you finally treating me like I’m nearly an adult.”

“You can’t make me be nice to her,” Vi argued.

“I can ground you. Take away access to your bank account. Take away your phone and computer. You’re fifteen and it’s time for you to act like it. If you can’t say something nice, then stay quiet.”

Vi harrumphed at him. “I’ll never like her.”

“As I said, I can’t make you like Hannah. But you will be respectful. If I hear that you’ve made her cry again, there will be consequences. Is that clear?”

All three girls nodded.

“Good. Now, let’s eat dinner before it gets cold. Willow helped make it, which I appreciate. Maybe everyone can think of some things around the house they could do to help out? Chelsea graduates soon, and I’m sure she’ll move into a therapy job soon after. Which means meals and keeping the house clean will fall entirely on us.”

“I’m going to miss her,” said Ollie.

He patted her hand. “I know, sweetheart. She’s been here a long time. We’re all going to miss her.”

“I can drive Ollie and Vi once I have a car,” said Willow.

“We’ll get you one this summer so you can practice while school is out.”

“And I can pick up our grocery orders on the way home.”

“Great ideas. Ollie? Vi? How about you? How about we brainstorm some ideas over dinner?”

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Chapter Sixteen

HANNAH LOOKED UP AS her mom came into her office, closing the door behind her.

"Something wrong?" Hannah asked.

"Since it's Friday, I can't beat around the bush any longer. Are you, Zach, and the girls coming over for dinner on Sunday, or should I drop it off at their house like usual?"

Her mouth dropped open and she stared at her mom. "You know?"

"Honey, we live in a small town. Did you really think all your little dates didn't get back to me? Heck, Doris was at Jake's on Saturday and saw the two of you. And nothing gets folks talking like a Porsche showing up at the barbecue place in town. Plus, I stopped at your house twice this last week and you weren't home. You're *always* home."

She looked down at the papers on her desk. "Um, yeah, I've been staying over at his place."

Her mom sat down in the chair in front of her desk. "So, it's serious?"

"I think so." *Certainly is for me.*

“If only Maggie could see this. She would be so happy.”

The thought made her smile. “You think so?”

“When you guys were young, she joked about an arranged marriage between the two of you. It was clear Zach had a crush on you, and it would have been nice to join our families together. Maggie and I were like sisters. We met in kindergarten and were inseparable.”

“Yes, he admitted to the crush the other day while showing me photos of us together when we were young. There was one of me kissing him. I’ve been thinking about how nice it would be to recreate that and have both photos framed.”

“I could help you with that on Sunday.”

“I also need good photos of him with each of his sisters and one with his mom. I’m planning to frame a bunch of photos for his house.”

“I probably have some, but I can also grab some while you guys are over.”

“He has a lot of photo albums and I’m going to get all the pictures digitized. I found a place in Houston that will do it all while I wait. I’m not comfortable dropping the albums off with anyone.”

“I’ll go through everything I have and pull any photos of Zach and his family.”

“That would be great. I want to put them all on a disc and they can decide which ones to print for the house. Plus, they can have them on their phones, too. Right now, most of their pictures are in albums on a shelf. They should be where they can see and enjoy them.”

I especially think it would do Ollie good. She misses her mom so much.

“Now, about dinner?” her mom asked.

“Give me a sec to check in with Zach.”

Hannah

Mom wants to know if we're coming over for dinner on Sunday.

Zach

Sure. And I bet the girls would love it. They like spending time with your mom.

"Looks like you're adding five more spots at dinner," she told her mom. "We could do it every week…"

Hannah

Now she wants to know if we want to make it a weekly thing.

Zach

I'm in. I'd have to check in with the girls.

"Zach and I are a yes. He's going to ask the girls later."

"That's fine. You can just let me know when you come over. I've been trying to get them to eat with us on Sundays, but he's always turned me down."

She got up from her desk and hugged Janet. "Thanks for being there for him all these years. I can tell by the way he talks about it that it meant the world to him."

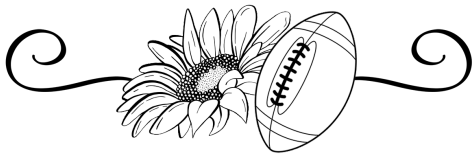
Her mom squeezed her tight. "Maggie would have done the same had the circumstances been reversed. Zach and the girls have always been like family. And now maybe…"

“*Mom*. We’ve only been dating a little while. Let’s give it a little time before we start talking marriage.”

Sure, Zach and I have hinted at it plenty of times, including talk of kids, but that’s just between us for now.

“Can’t help me for hoping. And not just because I want to see you married or get some grandkids. Zach needs someone in his life to help him remember to take time for himself and have some fun.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”



ZACH STARED OUT THE patio door, watching the crew working on the tree in the backyard. He’d always wanted to add lighting to the backyard but had never gotten around to it. But after Sunday’s talk about barbecuing for Hannah, he realized it was something he should get done right away.

They’d already added string lights around the deck and pool. Now, they were adding lights to his favorite tree, the one Hannah had kissed him under.

The lights were LED and controllable via an app on his phone. He could set the color and brightness, plus choose which sets were on. The tree was divided into four sections—trunk, bottom, middle, and top—and could be controlled independently of each other.

He had a picnic planned for dinner on Saturday, and once it got dark out, they could lay under the lights of the tree.

Zach couldn’t wait to see what his sisters thought of the additions to the backyard. They were always complaining about the crappy lighting out

there. During hot months, they enjoyed swimming in the evening, but they never could stay outside as long as they wanted. Now, they'd be able to swim as late as they liked.

While the guys worked on the lights, he ticked off his chore to-do list. Normally, he did it all on Saturday, but this weekend he wanted to focus on Hannah and the girls. He'd just finished loading the dishwasher when Willow walked in the front door.

"You're home early," she said as she sat her backpack down on a stool.

"Had some things to get done today, so I worked from home."

"When should I start dinner?"

"I told Chelsea we'd take care of the meal tonight. I thought the five of us could go out to eat. It's been a long week for everyone, and since you've been putting in an extra effort this week, I thought you could pick."

Her eyes lit up. "Mexican? I've been having a craving for queso and green sauce."

"Mexican it is, then. We'll head out as soon as Hannah gets home."

"Well, since I don't need to help with dinner, I'm gonna go knock out my homework."

He raised an eyebrow. "Willingly choosing homework?"

She laughed. "I think I can get it all done before dinner, which means I can just veg all weekend."

"Ah, now that makes more sense. I was beginning to wonder who you were and what you did with my Willow."

She rolled her eyes at him as she spread her schoolwork out on the island. "So original. Sometimes you really sound like a dad, you know that?"

"I'm not sure if that was meant to be an insult or a compliment. I'm going to choose the latter."

“Corny and not one bit funny. *Definitely* an insult.”

“Just for that, I’m hogging all the queso tonight.”

She shook her head and turned her focus to the papers in front of her. Not wanting to disturb her, he headed for the living room to wait for everyone else to get home.

Zach

Am I corny and unoriginal?

Hannah

Corny sometimes, but I love it. Unoriginal? Not that I’ve seen. Why?

Zach

I think Willow just accused me of making dad jokes. And she said I’m corny and not funny.

Hannah

Shows what she knows. You make me laugh all the time.

Zach

I’d rather make you moan.

Hannah

Oh really? And how do you plan on doing that?

Zach

You’re all mine tomorrow. [rope emoji] [tongue emoji]

Hannah

Well, you've certainly piqued my interest. Can it be Saturday already?

Zach

I thought the same thing about an hour ago.

When do you think you'll be home?

Hannah

I just have a little left to do. Why?

Zach

I'm taking everyone out for dinner. Was trying to figure out when we can head out.

Hannah

I'll be home about four-thirty.

Zach

Perfect. Ollie gets home a little after four. [kiss emoji]

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Chapter Seventeen

May 6, 2023

Well, things seem to have calmed down around the house. I haven't heard anyone being mean to Hannah since my talk with the girls. Maybe I got through to them…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

"SO … HOW ARE THINGS?" Sean asked after they put in their breakfast order.

"Best week of my life. And I don't just mean the sex. I never realized how good it would feel to snuggle next to someone and fall asleep. Or to wake up with a warm body cuddled up against me."

"I've never had a woman sleep over, so I wouldn't know."

Zach shook his head. "And how did they feel about that?"

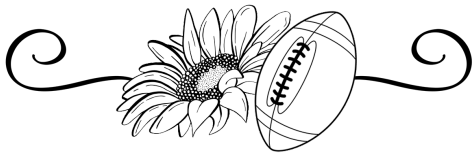
“Most are fine to leave once we’re done. But there’s always a few clingers who want to stay the night. I just tell them we’re not allowed overnight guests.”

“One of these days, you’re gonna fall for someone, and they’re going to be the person who walks away. Karma always gets you eventually.”

Sean laughed. “Unlikely. I doubt I will ever fall for someone. And if I do, they’d be crazy to walk away from me.”

Zach took a sip of his coffee. “Because you’re *such* a catch. Who could possibly turn you down?”

“I’m gonna choose to ignore the sarcasm in your voice and take that as a compliment instead.”



HANNAH WATCHED ANNIE LOOK down at her phone for like the twentieth time in five minutes. Normally, she was big on phones being put away while they ate.

“Is something wrong?”

Annie sighed. “It’s just work being a pain. Someone at another office messed up a contract and I’ve been trying to fix it.”

“You sure that’s all it is?”

“I’m sure. It just has me distracted and a bit on edge. Sorry. I asked you to breakfast to catch up and I’ve been focused on my phone. How are things with Zach?”

Hannah smiled as she thought about the last week. “Great. I’ve slept over every night since last Saturday. And I’m slowly getting to know his sisters.

We had a little issue with them this week, but he handled it pretty quickly. They're not used to sharing him with anyone else."

Annie lifted an eyebrow. "And the sex?"

She looked up toward the front of the restaurant where he was sitting with Sean. "He's an excellent student and a fast learner. I never knew it could be that good outside of a romance novel. I certainly haven't needed any battery-operated assistance."

"I'm so glad. You deserve more than someone who gets himself off, then falls asleep."

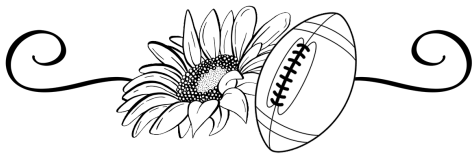
"Yeah, definitely no worries on that account," she said before taking a bite of her waffle. "He enjoys eating dessert first."

Annie's eyes grew wide. "Every night?"

She nodded.

"Damn. How does it feel to be God's favorite?"

"Well, after all the crap I put up with for the last decade, I'd say it was my turn," she said with a wink.



"PUT ON SOMETHING COMFY and meet me in the backyard," Zach told Hannah.

"I thought we were going to head out to dinner soon."

"No, food's coming to us tonight."

She pulled a sundress from the closet. "Oh, we're eating out on the deck?"

"Something like that."

A little earlier, while she was playing a video game with Ollie, he snuck outside and set up everything for their meal. There was a large picnic blanket under the tree along with a short table covered in trays of food. It was meant for a toddler sitting on the floor, but it was the perfect height for holding their meal. It even had cup holders built in, which were great for wine glasses.

He'd ordered Italian for them: spaghetti, a side salad, fried zucchini, fried ravioli, garlic bread, and her spinach salad with salmon. It was all laid out along with plates and silverware, wine glasses, and a chilled bottle of wine. While he waited on Hannah, he poured two glasses.

"A picnic?" she asked from the deck.

"A dinner picnic. Just the two of us."

She walked over and sat next to him. "And under our tree."

"Oh, is this *our* tree? I hadn't noticed."

She bumped her shoulder against his. "Says the man who remembers every detail of our first kiss."

He laughed and handed her a glass. "Guilty as charged. Of all the trees on the property, this one is my favorite."

She took a sip. "This is really good. It tastes like cherries."

"It's one of my favorites to go with Italian food. Not too heavy, and it doesn't overpower the food." He served them each a plate of food. "How was work this week?"

"I'm almost done moving us from paper systems to electronic. It's saving everyone a lot of hours in dealing with paperwork. And our suppliers are happy, as they're getting paid faster."

"That's important. The happier you make your suppliers, the better deals you can get from them. Five percent here and there really adds up when

you’re buying in volume. I did the same thing some years back, and six months later, I was able to negotiate better pricing. Saved us millions a year. I was able to use the savings to pay more of our employees’ healthcare premium. Which in turn meant they were happier, too.”

“What about you? How’s work been?”

He chuckled. “I had something funny happen on Wednesday. Our Dickinson store was short staffed, and they had a big truck come in. I was able to pull two stockers from another store, plus I helped. This older lady was having trouble reaching something and I helped her. She was so sweet and must’ve thanked me half a dozen times. When she got up front, she asked for the manager. He thought she had a complaint. Instead, she wanted to compliment ‘that nice young man stocking groceries’.

“He asked who it was, and she described me. Mark let her know it was the store owner who helped her, and he pointed to my picture on the wall. You know, the one by all the photos of the managers. She couldn’t believe I would be in the store helping instead of sitting in an office. Apparently, she’s going to tell all their friends they should shop at our store.”

“The button-up shirt and tie didn’t give you away?” she giggled.

“No, I take off the tie when I work in the stores. And I usually change into one of our polo shirts with the logo on it. Makes our employees feel more comfortable. They hate it when a ‘suit’ comes in.”

“Well, that was awfully sweet of her to mention you to the manager.”

“Yeah, when folks do that, the employee gets a card that goes into a drawing for a big prize. Plus, they get a small bonus. It was an idea one of our cashiers suggested a few years ago. Sean gets me free tickets to his games to put in as a prize, plus we have cash, gift cards, and such. They get to pick their prize and the tickets are always a hit.”

“You guys don’t use the tickets for yourselves?”

“No, he has plenty for us to go whenever we want. These are tickets he gets for me to give away. Plus, he lets me know when they’re having cheap tickets so the company can buy a bunch.”

“That’s a nice thing to do for your workers.”

“Happy employees don’t go looking for a new job, they work harder, treat the customers better, etc. It makes good business sense. But I also just prefer to treat people well and reward them for a job well done. Unlike most places, we really do mean it when we say our employees are like family.”

“At my old job, they would bring in cheap pizza as a reward. That’s the most they ever did. I’m glad to not be working there anymore.”

“We get pizza for them at least twice a month. But never the cheap ones. If you’re going to do something for your employees, it should be done well.”

After dinner, Hannah laid down on the blanket and looked up at the sky. “Do you remember when we used to lay here and stare up at the clouds?”

He stretched out next to her, their heads touching. Reaching over, he intertwined his fingers with hers. “You remember that?”

“It was one of my favorite things. I would spot all kinds of dinosaurs and other animals, while you—”

“—only noticed things related to football. I can’t help it; I was obsessed with the game ever since I was about five.”

She rubbed her thumb against his hand. “Why did you fall in love with it?”

“Henry got tickets to a game through work and took me. He told me all about the game, what everything meant, and got me autographs after.”

“Was he happy that you played?”

“Our love of the game was the only thing we had in common. He was furious when I gave it up to take care of Mom.”

“I’m surprised you don’t coach a youth team or something.”

“My hands were too full. Maybe in the next couple of years, I could look into it. The girls don’t use near as much of my time as they used to.”

She shifted over closer to him. “Maybe I’m going to steal all that time now.”

He rolled over and propped himself up on an elbow. “You could come and cheer me and the team on. Like you did in high school.”

“*What*? I never went to your games.”

“Baby, I could look into the crowded stands and find you in an instant. You never missed a home game.”

“Well, what else is there to do on a Friday night in small-town Texas?”

He bent down and kissed her. “You were there for *me*.”

“*Was not*.”

He kissed her again. “Little liar.”

“Is it safe to come out?” called Willow from the deck. “Everyone decent?”

Zach rolled his eyes. “We’re just looking up at the sky.”

“Mm-hmm. The sky is up, not down.”

He laughed.

“You told us when it started getting dark you had a surprise for us.”

Oh, yeah. The lights. Zach pulled his phone from his pocket and opened the app. “This is why I worked from home yesterday.” He turned on all the strands of lights.

Hannah looked up at him, and he could see her eyes getting a bit misty. “*Our tree*. You lit up our tree.”

“Now, we can be out here in the evening and still see it.”

She reached up and cupped his cheek. “I love it.”

“Does this mean we can swim at night?” Ollie asked.

“Yes. But same rules as usual, no one is in the pool unless someone else is with them. And I’m hoping to make dinner out here more often.”

Vi sat down on one of the chairs surrounding the pool. “I’d like that. I love your barbecue.”

Zach cupped his ear. “What’s that? Did I just hear a compliment from Vi?”

“Keep it up and it’s the last one you’ll get,” she said with a laugh.

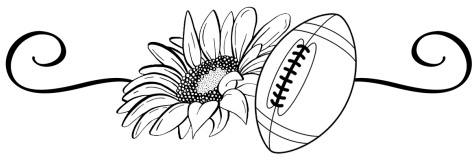
“Maybe this summer you can help me to upgrade the grilling area? Make a little outdoor kitchen?”

“Will you teach me how to barbecue?”

“If you want. I’m always happy to teach you guys stuff.”

“Deal. I want to learn how to smoke a brisket so I can have pulled meat sandwiches whenever I want.”

“Guess I should start buying more of those for the freezer, then.”



“Saturday is almost over,” Hannah said as she stepped out of the shower.

“And?” Zach asked as he dried off.

“Don’t play dumb. I know you haven’t forgotten about that text you sent yesterday.”

He pulled her into his arms and carried her to their bed. “Never. I’ve been looking forward to this all week.”

Once she was settled on the bed, he grabbed the box with the bindings and blindfold in it. She gave him a wary look as he tied them to the headboard and bound each wrist.

“You’re going to like this, I promise,” he said as he covered her eyes.

Moving to the end of the bed, he knelt by her feet. “The last time I did this, I was acting on limited information. All I knew was that I wanted to kiss you everywhere. Now, I’ve learned more about your sweet spots and what turns you on. For instance, you’re very sensitive here at your ankle. Almost as much as behind your knees.”

Like their first night together, he began kissing, licking, and nibbling across her body. By the time he settled between her legs, she was soaked. He pressed his mouth against her clit as he slipped two fingers inside her. Apparently, she was closer to the edge than he thought, as her hips immediately pushed up against his face.

“Oh, fuck,” she cried out as the orgasm hit, her fingers digging into her binds.

He continued to thrust his fingers as she rode it out. “As good as it feels when you squeeze my fingers like that, I wanted to feel you come on my cock. That’s okay, there’s still plenty of hours left in the day.”

He pressed a kiss to her thigh. “The blindfold worked even better than I imagined. I’m definitely using that again.”

She let out a deep breath. “I couldn’t tell where you were going to be next because you kept mixing it up. It was like every touch felt twice as good as usual.”

“With the blindfold on and your hands tied, your body compensated for the loss. It all aroused you so much that one thrust of my fingers against your g-spot pushed you over the edge. And it was so damned sexy watching

your body as it came alive. I've been imagining it all week, and it was a million times better than in my mind. You're absolutely gorgeous," he said before kissing her.

While she caught her breath, he rubbed the head of his hard-on against her slickness.

"How in the hell did you get so good at that in a week?" she murmured.

He chuckled. "I pay attention," he said before nipping at her earlobe. "I listened to everything you told me." He nibbled at her neck. "I watched everything you showed me." He kissed the curve of her neck. "And I pay attention to all the signs your body is giving me. I use it as a road map." He dragged his tongue across to her shoulder. "That's the most important part, as what you need tonight can be different than last night. For instance, after driving you crazy and drawing it out, I know you'll want it fast and rough. I can already tell by the tension in your body. You should be relaxed from coming. Last night, though, you wanted it to be slow and long. I recognize these things and adapt." He thrust all the way in.

"When you really like what I'm doing, you dig your fingers into something, like my arms or the bed. But when you're close, they start kneading instead. Like you're encouraging me. You give off plenty of signs. Your partner just has to be willing to pay attention."

She wrapped her legs around him. "How did I get so lucky?"

"I ask myself the same thing every day."

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Chapter Eighteen

HANNAH'S LEG BOUNCED WITH nervous activity as they drove to her parents' house.

Zach reached over and rested his hand on her knee. "It's okay, baby. There's no reason to be nervous. I've been to your parents' house plenty of times."

"As Maggie's son. You've never been as my boyfriend. A boyfriend I'm practically living with."

"Do you really think that changes anything?"

"Now, they'll be looking at you as a potential son-in-law and dad to their grandkids. It will be different. At least they know you're not like Trent."

"Even on my worst day I couldn't be like that asshole."

Olivia giggled.

"It's true," said Hannah. "I hate to admit it, but I picked a bad one."

"Thankfully, you have me now," he said with a wink.

"Not full of ourselves at all, I see."

"I can't help it; I learned it from my sisters."

A chorus of, “Hey!” sounded from the back of the SUV.

Janet met them at the front door. “I’m so glad you guys are here. I’ve been trying to get these four to come to Sunday dinner for years.”

Zach hugged her. “It felt like we were—

“Intruding on family time?” Janet said with a laugh.

He scratched the back of his neck and chuckled.

“I really meant it when I said you were always welcome.” She gave Hannah and the girls each a hug before leading them back to the dining room. “We’ve always considered you guys family. But maybe soon—?”

“Mom!”

“I told you, I can’t help it. It’s nice to see both of you so happy.”

Hannah rolled her eyes.

Her dad dropped a kiss on her head. “Mom picking on you again, sweetheart?”

“She’s just in a hurry for grandkids.”

Janet laughed. “I plead the fifth. Besides, your brother is already in his thirties and not even dating, so you’re my only hope.”

Hannah saw something flash across Alex’s face for just a second before his usual expression replaced it. She wasn’t certain, since it was only there a moment, but it almost looked like longing.

Well, isn’t that interesting. What has Alex been hiding?

“I’m happy being a bachelor.”

Hannah had always thought that was the case. Now, she wasn’t so sure.

“Okay, enough teasing our kids,” said Myles as he came through the sliding glass door to the deck. “I spent all day smoking this brisket. Let’s eat it before it gets cold.”

Zach pulled Hannah's hand into his and gave it a little squeeze. That little gesture helped settle the butterflies in her stomach. *Well, not entirely. I still feel like I'm going to get sick. Why does being at my parents' house—somewhere the two of us ate at plenty of times growing up—make me feel so anxious? And how can he possibly be this calm?* She looked over at the girls, but all she could see was happiness on their faces. *I guess Mom was right; this is like a second home to them. If only I could feel as comfortable here as they do…*

He slid a chair out for Hannah, then sat next to her.

"Guess sisters don't rate as high as girlfriends," Willow joked as she took her seat.

"No, I just know you three would tell me off if I pulled out your chair. That you're old enough to do it for yourself, while Hannah likes it."

Violet shook her head. "More like we'd be afraid you'd pull the chair out from under us."

"Don't worry; that's more Alex's style."

I can't argue with him there. Zach has seen plenty of Alex's pranks toward me over the years. Although, he's been nice to me ever since moving me back home. A little too nice, perhaps.

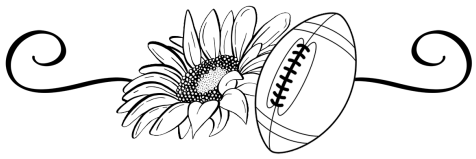
"Hey! I haven't done that to Hannah in years."

"Never mind we've barely eaten together in years…" she pointed out.

"Just for that, I'm not getting you a wedding present," he said with a laugh.

Hannah opened her mouth to respond, but her dad gave her the look. "So, Alex, how are the horses doing? Ollie was saying she'd love to learn to ride. I told her I was rusty, but you could probably show her."

They spent the rest of dinner talking about the horses and making plans for the girls to come over for a visit. Apparently, they'd been interested for years but had been shy about asking. Hannah knew her brother loved showing his horses to kids and teaching them about their care. Plus, it was a bonding opportunity with Zach's sisters. She'd jump at any chance she had to do that.



"It's a nice evening. Are you guys ready to head home, or can you stay longer?" Hannah's mom asked as they cleared the table. "I wanted to show the girls my veggie garden out back. We never get them over here, so I've never gotten to show them."

"We can stay for longer," Hannah replied, "It's still hours until their bedtime. Maybe I can get them to help me start a garden at the house. I've been trying to find things to do with the girls at home besides watching TV. School is out soon, and I'd like to spend more time with Willow, Vi, and Ollie. In fact, I was thinking about only working a partial day on Fridays and spending it with them."

Her mom nodded. "That sounds like a good idea. Besides handing out paychecks, your Fridays are usually dead anyway. And it would help you build a relationship with them. I did that with Alex when he came to live with us, if you remember. We did things just the two of us. I mean, we already had an aunt-nephew relationship, but stepping in as his mom was different. And even though you aren't their mom, in many ways you'll be playing the part."

Hannah glanced out the back door, smiling at Zach chasing his sisters around the yard. “He said that’s the hard part: playing the role of dad without *being* their dad. They snap at him sometimes about him not being their parent; that he’s only their brother.”

“When Henry gave up parental rights, Zach could have adopted them instead of being their legal guardian. But that would have changed their birth certificates. And he didn’t want to do that. They had a mom who loved them a lot.” Janet held the door open for Hannah as they headed outside.

“Zach loves them a lot, too. It’s sweet watching the four of them together.”

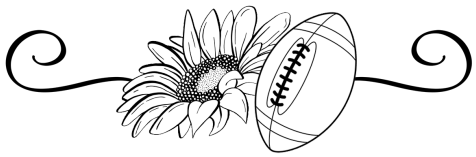
“Your father and I really are glad you got them to come tonight. It’s great to spend time with them again. They came for Sunday dinner for several months after Maggie died. We tried convincing them to keep coming. Now, Zach can’t say no.” She looked over at him pushing Ollie on the tree swing. “And he really will be a great dad. He’s already proven that.”

“We’ve only been together since January. He wants to focus on getting Willow and Vi off to college before he even thinks about kids of his own.”

“So, you guys have already discussed having kids…”

“*Mom*…”

“Okay, fine. But I really am eager for some grandkids. I thought having my first child at nineteen would have made me a grandma by now. You and your brother proved me wrong on that one. Now, how about we go get some pictures of your boyfriend and his family?”



“See, that went fine,” Zach said on the drive home. “It didn’t feel any different than previous meals with your family.”

“Except for the constant digs about grandkids.”

“Yes, well, that wasn’t an option before. But it didn’t make dinner awkward or anything, and I didn’t feel like I was being judged.”

“I’m glad to hear it. That’s what I was worried about: them treating you differently.” She turned toward the back of the SUV. “Ollie, are you looking forward to riding a horse?”

A huge smile filled her face. “Alex said I can come over as soon as school is out for the summer.”

“If you learn how to take care of them and are willing to help out, you can go over often. Same for Willow and Vi. I can drop you off when I go to work. When I was young, I used to help take care of the horses in exchange for extra riding time.”

“I would love that,” said Ollie.

“I’d like to,” said Willow, “but I’m going to work at one of the stores this summer. I want to start learning the family business.”

“What about you, Vi?” Hannah asked.

As usual, she rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to her phone.

“Violet, Hannah asked you a question. It’s rude to ignore her.”

“I don’t want to scoop horse poop,” she said with a huff.

“Well, I’d like you to be thinking about what you do want to do this summer. I don’t want you sitting around on your phone all day.”

She rolled her eyes again. “Yes, Dad.”

“I know you think it’s funny, but it really does hurt when you say stuff like that. I’m the only dad you guys have had in your lives. A little appreciation sometimes would be nice.”

Hannah reached over and squeezed his hand. “I’m sorry,” she mouthed.

He smiled and brought her hand to his lips. “The joy of teenagers.”

“Can I work at the store, too?” asked Vi.

“Yes, but because of your age, you’re more limited to when you can work and what you can do. Is that what you want to do?”

“Maybe. Willow’s right that it would be nice to start learning about the business. Our family has been running it for a long time, and it was important to Mom.” She looked down in her lap. “I miss Mom,” she said quietly.

“I miss her every day,” Zach told her. “Being in her old office and running the company she loved helps me feel close to her. I know the work I’m doing would make her proud.”

He cleared his throat. Hannah could tell by the crack in his voice that he was feeling emotional and squeezed his hand again.

“Well, think it over. You still have a couple more weeks until school gets out. I just want you to spend at least a little of your time doing something productive. It doesn’t have to be a job. You could volunteer somewhere as well.”

The silence was loud from the backseat. Hannah chewed on her lip as she tried to find a way to change the topic to something a little less… emotional. And more fun than talking about working on your summer break. *Oh, I know.*

“Can we stop at the store on the way home?” she asked Zach.

“Sure, why?”

“Annie emailed me a recipe for cookies yesterday that sounded amazing. I want to get the ingredients.”

“Cookies?” she heard from the back.

Bingo. Who can resist cookies? Now, to reel them in.

"I was thinking of making the dough tonight and baking them tomorrow when I get home from work. Maybe you guys can help?"

"Can we get ice cream to go with them?" Ollie asked.

"And do the cookies have chocolate chips? I love chocolate," Willow added.

"Lots of chocolate. How about you, Vi? Want to make some cookies with us?"

A harumph is all she heard from her.

Well, I guess that's better than an outright no.

"So, what flavor of ice cream should we get?" she asked, igniting a debate between the sisters about what flavor would go best with chocolate.

"Thanks for that," Zach said softly.

She smiled at him, glad that he read between the lines of what she was trying to do. It was a something she was learning to balance: when to step in and help with his sisters, and when it was best to just let him handle things. The last thing she wanted to do was go too far and damage the relationship she was building with them.

"Happy to be of help."

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Chapter Nineteen

HANNAH PULLED THE NOTE from her lunch bag. It was the third one this week. On Monday, it had been in her coffee cup. Yesterday, she found it in her purse.

"*Fat cow. Mooo,*" this one said.

She tucked it away in her desk drawer. There was only one person who could be writing these notes: Violet. Ollie adored Hannah and Willow seemed to be warming to her. But Vi was still clearly unhappy that Hannah was dating her brother.

She sighed. *Hopefully, this is just normal teen stuff and will blow over soon. No reason to get Zach involved. It'll just create more division between him and Vi.*

Just in case things got worse and she needed to tell Zach, she planned on keeping all the notes. She kept them tucked away, though, so she wouldn't have to look at them. Zach had been working hard to help her rebuild her self-esteem, and she wasn't going to let some sticky notes get in the way of that.

Screw that. I'm not a fat cow. I'm a beautiful, desirable woman. Zach said so this morning. I choose to believe his words over that note.

A knock on her open door made her jump.

"Something wrong, sis?" Alex asked.

"No, I was just caught up in my thoughts. Did you need something?"

"Do you want to go to dinner with me tonight?"

"I usually eat with Mom and Dad on Wednesdays."

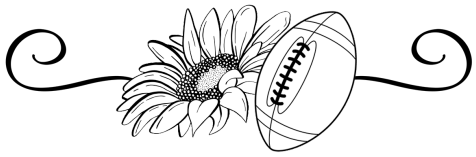
"Mom forgot to tell you; they have a business dinner tonight. So, I thought we could do dinner instead."

She smiled. "That would be great. I try to let Zach and the girls have Wednesday evening to themselves."

"I'll follow you to Zach's so you can drop off your SUV and then we can head to dinner. Sound good?"

"Sounds great."

Hannah sat back in her chair and steepled her fingers. *Why is Alex taking me out to dinner? Mom and Dad are just an excuse. I could have grabbed something after work and ate at my house. Something is up with Alex, and I want to know what.*



When Alex was silent the entire way to the restaurant, Hannah knew something was wrong. He rarely let a moment go by without teasing her. By the time they'd put in their food order, she'd had enough.

"What's going on with you, Alex?"

He fiddled with his water glass. "What do you mean?"

“You never ask me out to a meal. That was the first clue. And you’ve been silent since I got in your truck.”

He sighed. “Just thinking about my life, I guess. I’m thirty-two, and sometimes it feels like my life isn’t going anywhere.”

“You have the horses.”

“Yes, but that’s my work. Not my *life*. I thought by now I’d be married, maybe have a couple kids. But nada. You’re further along on that than me and you’ve only been away from the asshole since January.”

She reached over and put her hand on his. “It’ll happen. Maybe when you least expect it. I certainly didn’t think I was going to run into Zach three days after I moved back home. Or that I’d be practically living with him four months later. But it happened.”

He rubbed his pinky against her hand. “Is he the one?”

“I think so. I mean, we’ve had discussions about our future together. I wouldn’t be surprised if he proposes before the year is out.”

“You’ll say yes?”

“Absolutely. I can’t imagine being this happy with anyone else.”

“How did you know he was the one?”

“Spending time with him is the highlight of my day. When I’m not with him, I’m thinking about him. Just holding hands makes me smile. I feel like I can tell him anything. And I can see myself having kids with him and growing old alongside him. When I thought he didn’t feel the same way, I was devastated. Why? Is there someone?”

He slid his hand out from under hers and started playing with his silverware. “Maybe. I don’t know. I never know where I stand with her. It’s yes, then no, then yes again. I can go to her place but can’t take her on a date.” He sighed again. “I just want to be happy. Is that so much to ask?”

“No, Alex, it’s not. Everyone deserves to be happy. If you really want her, fight for her. Don’t let anything get in the way.”

“Thanks, Sis. I’ll try harder. She’s definitely the one I want.”

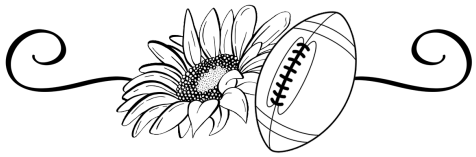
“Do I get to know the name of this mystery woman who has captured my brother’s heart?”

He shook his head. “Part of what she’s worried about is people finding out and it pulling us apart. Until I can get her past that, she’ll remain a secret.”

“Well, if she makes you happy, I’m good with her. Wait; she isn’t married or in a relationship with someone else, is she?”

“Nope. She’s single.”

“Then, I’m sticking with what I said.”



Hannah stared at the two notes she found today: one in her coffee cup, the other in her lunch. Vi didn’t have a lot of options of places to put the notes where Zach wouldn’t see them since Hannah kept most of her stuff in his room. And the door to his bedroom was always locked since that was where he kept his alcohol. Apparently, these were the only two places she felt it was safe to hide the notes. Especially since she stopped bringing her purse out into the kitchen.

Ugly, fat pig.

No one likes you.

She shook her head and tucked them in her drawer. *Sorry, Vi, but you're wrong. Everyone—except you—likes me. And I'm not going to be driven away from the best thing in my life by some insults.*

Later that afternoon, she was surprised when her watch lit up with a text from Willow.

Willow

Are you eating dinner with us tonight?

Hannah

I'd planned to. Why?

Willow

We've had a bit of a mix up with dinner.

A photo came through of a partially cooked roast surrounded by carrots and potatoes. *Violet!*

Zach had let the girls know weeks ago that Hannah was allergic to carrots and mushrooms. Not deathly allergic, but the annoying kind with an itchy rash and an upset stomach.

Willow

Vi forgot the carrots needed to be in their own pan.

And they've been cooking together for a bit, so you can't safely eat it.

Hannah knew Willow felt awful about it since she had taken on overseeing dinner a few times a week. But it wasn't Willow's fault this happened, it was Vi's.

She texted her mom.

Hannah

Mom, since we couldn't do dinner last night, how about tonight?

Mom

We'd love that. We always enjoy having you over.

Hannah

Perfect. See you at 5.

Now, to help Willow feel a little better.

Hannah

I forgot I'm eating with my parents tonight since they were busy last night.

Willow

That's good. I was trying to figure out what else I could make you.

Hannah

Thanks for thinking about me. You're a sweetheart.

Ugh. Violet. You just caused a lot of stress for your sister. For what? To deny me dinner? I can order my own food. Or go out. At least I got it handled before Zach found out. Why does she have to be so mean to me?

The notes continued until Monday when they abruptly stopped. Hannah had been considering skipping her cup of coffee at home, but pushed that thought aside. *I'm not going to let these notes control my life.*

She pulled down hers and Zach's cups from the cabinet and was surprised to find no note.

"Good morning, Hannah," she heard Vi say as she walked into the kitchen.

Well, that's a change. Did Zach find a note and talk to her? Or maybe this really was just a phase and she's given up since I never responded to any of it.

"Good morning, Vi."

Zach dropped a kiss on the top of her head as she walked by.

"Can I make the lunches?" she asked. "Willow has been helping with dinner, and Zach always does breakfast. So, I thought I could do everyone's lunches. They seem easy and I've seen Hannah make hers before. I think I can do it."

Hannah started pulling all the ingredients for lunch from the fridge. "Sure, Let's do it together today, and you can take over tomorrow. How's that?"

"Sounds good. Where do I get the chicken for your salad?"

"Every other day, I cook up two chicken breasts in the evening and put them in a container in the fridge. All you'll have to do is cut one into strips and put it in with the salad."

She reached into a cabinet and grabbed one of her salad bowls. "These are made with multiple compartments. I'll show you how you pack each one."

Fifteen minutes later, they had five lunches ready to go.

Hannah patted Vi on the shoulder. "Ready to do this by yourself tomorrow?"

"I think so."

"Well, your brother and I will be nearby, so feel free to ask for help if you need it."

By Wednesday, Vi had the process down, which meant Hannah could sit in the living room and enjoy her cup of coffee instead of drinking it on the run.

“Great job, Vi,” she told her as she handed Hannah her lunch. “It’s made things so much easier on your brother now that he doesn’t have to make lunches, too.”

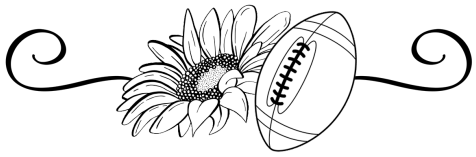
“Aww, it was nothing.”

“No, it wasn’t. You gave Zach back those fifteen minutes. Now, he can sit and eat his food and relax for a moment.”

Zach hugged her. “Yeah, thanks, Vi. I can’t remember the last time I sat and ate breakfast at home on a school day.”

Vi looked at the ground and shuffled her feet. “Really, it was nothing.”

“Well, it was everything to me. Now, get outside before you miss your bus.”



Hannah was sitting at her desk working on an expense report when a stomach cramp hit her so hard that she doubled over. *Ow. Where did that come from?*

A moment later, she had her answer. She sprinted toward the closest bathroom, praying she’d make it. Her prayers went unanswered. Thankful it was a single-user bathroom, she kicked off her shoes as she rushed for the toilet.

As the minutes ticked by, it only got worse. Her stomach hurt so bad that all she could do was wrap her arms around herself and hope it was over

soon. And cry.

She'd just pulled off her pants and ruined underwear when she heard a key in the door. There was only one person it could possibly be.

"Mom," she cried. "I think I have food poisoning."

She surveyed the mess. "Oh, sweetheart. I'm so sorry. I'll be right back." She left the room, returning a few minutes later with a cleaning cart. "First, I'll get it cleaned up in here. Once I feel I can leave you, I'll run home and get you some clothes. Oh, and you should take this." Janet handed her a bottle of Pepto. "That should help."

"I'm sorry you're having to clean up my mess."

"Well, it's not like you can do it yourself." She wrapped Hannah's underwear in a wastebasket liner and threw them away. "Look at it like me getting ready for grandbabies," she joked.

"Mom, please don't make me laugh," she groaned.

When Hannah's stomach finally seemed to settle, her mom helped her into the shower stall. "Will you be okay by yourself?"

"I think so."

"Good. I'll be back in about ten minutes. If you feel sick again, just sit down in the shower. I'd rather deal with the mess than you getting hurt."

Hannah was just finishing her shower when her mom returned.

"T-shirt, drawstring pants, and these." She held up a pair of disposable adult underwear.

"Is that really necessary?"

"Do you think you can make it home without getting sick?"

She snatched them from her mom's hands. "Fine. But no one can know about this. *Especially* Alex. He'd never let me forget it."

“I won’t tell a soul. After all, these are mine. I wouldn’t want people to know, either.”

Her eyes opened wide. “You wear these?”

“When I get a cough. Wait until you’ve had kids and have hit your late forties. You learn to gird your loins real quick,” she said with a wink. “Speaking of Alex, he’ll take your SUV over to the house and pick you up for work on Friday. If you’re up to it, that is.”

“Friday?”

“You’re staying home tomorrow. Boss’ orders.”

On the way home, her mom stopped at the pharmacy. “Just running in to grab you a few things.”

A little under ten minutes later, she came out with a shopping cart full.

“A *few* things, Mom?”

“More underwear, Pepto, crackers, and a few cases of Gatorade. I knew it would be a bit before Zach got home, and I wanted to make sure you were covered.”

When they got home, she led her mom over to the side gate. “This way is faster. The side door opens into our bedroom.” And faster was better. She was starting to feel a little weak at the knees and wanted to get into bed.

“You open the doors and I’ll bring everything in,” her mom told her. “Bending and lifting will just squeeze your stomach. You don’t need that.”

Once she had everything inside, she helped Hannah into bed.

“Zach has a fridge in his room?”

Hannah laughed at the surprised look on her mom’s face. “He keeps the beer and such in there. The room is always locked, so he doesn’t have to worry about the girls or their friends getting into it.”

“Smart. Would you like me to put the drinks in there?”

“Yes, please.”

She put the Pepto on the nightstand and the pack of underwear in the bathroom. “Would you like me to stay until Zach gets here? Or call him so he can come home early?”

“No, I’m good. I’m going to try to nap until it hits me again.”

She kissed Hannah on the cheek. “Let me know if you need anything, okay?”

“Oh, my phone is in my purse. Could you put it on the charger on the nightstand?”

“Wouldn’t do you much good over here by the door,” she joked. “Now, go to sleep. Before you know it, Zach will be home to take care of you.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

A little over an hour later, she was woken by more cramps. She ran for the bathroom and was grateful she made it in time. *Stupid food poisoning.*

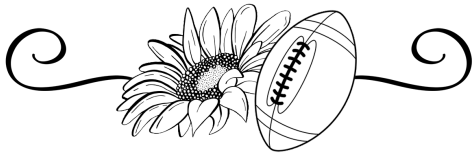
And that’s where Zach found her when he walked in the door later that evening. She was curled up in a ball on the rug, her eyes swollen from crying.

“Hannah! Are you okay?” he asked as he rushed into the bathroom.

“Food poisoning. Mom brought me home from work and loaded me up with the essentials. But I need another shower, and my legs won’t hold me.”

He started pulling off his clothes. “Oh, sweetheart. Let’s get you cleaned up and into bed.”

She pointed at the package on the counter. “And I have to wear those stupid things in case it hits me fast like it did earlier.”



“My poor baby. You’ve had it rough today, haven’t you?” he asked as he tucked her into bed. “Do you need anything?”

She grabbed the bottle of Pepto and took another dose. “A bottle of Gatorade from the fridge? And crackers from the bag on the dresser?”

“Done.” He got both and brought them over to her. “I’m going to check in with the girls and get dinner ordered for them. Then, I’ll be back to snuggle.”

But with some food and drink in her stomach, and the cramps gone for now, she fell asleep before he returned.

Hopefully tomorrow will be better.

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Chapter Twenty

May 18, 2023

Coming home and finding Hannah on the bathroom floor nearly set me into a panic attack. It reminded me of when I used to come home from school and find Mom like that.

I'm so glad it was only food poisoning and not something more worrying…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

"CAN'T I GO TO work today?" Hannah asked.

"Your mom has texted me several times warning me what she'd do if I let you go to work today. So, no, you cannot. Stay home and nap. Watch TV.

Relax. And if you're still feeling better tonight, you can go to work tomorrow," Zach told her.

"O—kay," she sighed. "Can I at least stay in the living room?"

"Yes. There's a bathroom right around the corner. I'll bring your crackers and Pepto out here and put some drinks in the fridge."

"Thank you. Do you think it would be safe to order lunch?"

He kissed her forehead as he tucked her in on the couch. "I'd go with something simple, like beef noodle soup."

"That sounds really good. I'll order that." She grabbed her phone from the side table. "I'm gonna set an alarm for two in case I fall asleep."

Zach plugged in her charger and sat the cord on the table next to her. "I'll try to check in regularly throughout the day, but I'll be visiting stores today and might lose track of time. Please let me know if you need me."

"I'll be fine. It was just a bit of food poisoning. I feel better already."

"Well, I threw out all the salad stuff just in case. No one else got sick, and that's the only thing you had that we didn't." He gave her another kiss. "Text me—"

"—if I need you. I know. Now, get to work before you're late."

"I hate leaving you home alone."

"Again, I'm fine and you have a busy day. I can take care of myself. Promise."

He dropped one more kiss on the top of her head. "I'm going! I'm going. I'll see you later."

Once he was out the door, she curled up on the couch and fell asleep. Just as she drifted off, she heard Ollie say, "Feel better, Hannah," and felt a kiss on her cheek.

At two, she was woken by the sound of her alarm. *Good thing I set that. I would hate to miss lunch.*

She placed an order with a local Thai spot before grabbing a couple drinks from the fridge. When she pulled them out, a note was taped to one.

Fat pigs mess themselves.

Hannah dropped the note and bottles to the floor. *No. She couldn't have. She's just taking advantage of the situation. There's no way she could have made me sick like that. It was probably contaminated lettuce. There's constantly recalls on it.*

Assured Vi was just yanking her chain, she tucked the note in the box with the others and settled back down on the couch with her drinks.

While she waited for her food, Hannah checked her phone and found a bunch of texts from her mom, Zach, and Annie. She texted them back, assuring them she was fine, that she'd just been napping.

"Are you feeling any better now?" Willow asked as she walked in the living room.

"Much. I ate lunch, drank a few Gatorades, and haven't gotten sick once."

"That's great. I'm sorry you were sick. You think it was food poisoning?"

She nodded. "I'm thinking the salad."

Willow looked at the weekly menu on the fridge. "Tonight is chili and cornbread. You can't have that."

"I ordered extra soup earlier. I'll have the rest for dinner. But thank you for thinking of me."

She sat down on the couch next to Hannah. “I’ve only known you about a month, but I can tell you’d do the same. In fact, I bet you would take the day off work to care for us.”

“You’re right, I would. You guys are like family to me, and I’ll always be there for my family.”

“Zach has always instilled in as the importance of family. Not just blood, but those we choose as well. He’s chosen you to be part of his family, and that right there says everything I need to know.” She hugged Hannah. “And I have the feeling one day you’ll officially be part of the family.”

Hannah blushed. “We’ve only been seeing each other since January.” *Well, not really since January, but close enough.*

“You make him happy. The happiest I’ve seen him since he held Ollie in his arms at the hospital. I don’t know when it’ll happen, I just know it will.”

“He makes me very happy, too. I can’t even remember the last time I felt like this.” Hannah yawned.

Willow got up from the couch. “Lay down and sleep some more. Zach won’t be home for hours still, and I’ll keep Vi and Ollie quiet once they’re here.”

She stretched out and Willow helped cover her up with the blanket. “That sounds like a good idea,” she said before yawning a second time. “I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

The next thing she knew, Zach was shaking her shoulder. “Baby, do you want to sleep some more, or should I heat up your soup?”

She sat up and stretched. “Soup sounds good. I’m hungry.”

“You stay here and I’ll get it ready. Do you want a Gatorade with it?”

“Yes, please.”

He picked up the empty container from lunch and carried it to the trash can in the kitchen. “Willow, can you take out the trash? The bag is full.”

“Sure.” She pulled the bag from the can and headed for the front door. But something in the bag had ripped it, and garbage started to spill on the floor.

Hannah hurried over to help. “Grab a new bag and we’ll stuff this one inside it. Then, we just need to pick up what spilled.”

She was gathering up garbage from the floor when two empty packets caught her eye. She picked one up and read the label. Powdered constipation medicine. Multiple doses worth. Realizing what Vi had done, she turned pale and fell from her knees onto her butt. Quickly, she shoved the packets back into the trash so no one else would see them.

“Hannah, are you okay?” Willow asked. “You don’t look well. Zach!”

He turned around and saw Hannah on the floor. “Baby, what are you doing up?” he asked as he ran over to her.

“I wanted to help, but I got dizzy.”

He helped her to her feet. “Let’s get your hands washed so you can go back to the couch.”

She nodded. “That would be great.”

As she sat on the couch and waited for her soup, the voice in her head was practically screaming at her. *Vi poisoned you. She put medicine in your food that would make you sick. And she planned this out, hence her offer to take over making lunch. I can’t trust her with my food anymore. I can’t even leave it in the kitchen. I’ll have to put it all in Zach’s fridge, which he’ll think is weird. And what if she coats one of my dishes with something? I should wash them before I use them.*

“What’s got you looking so serious?”

She looked up, surprised to see Zach standing there. She'd been so caught up in her thoughts that she hadn't heard him walk over.

"Work. I was making a list of everything I have to do tomorrow."

He sat her soup down on the coffee table. "Are you sure you're up to it?"

"Other than that dizzy spell, I've been fine all day. I'll avoid bending down, and Alex can drive me back and forth."

Zach dropped down on the couch next to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Okay, but if you start to feel sick, tell Janet and come home. Promise?"

"Promise."

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Chapter Twenty-one

HANNAH TUCKED ANOTHER NOTE into her desk. It had been just over a week since the poisoning incident, and she'd found eleven notes since then. But thankfully, there had been no more attacks like her tainted lunch.

It had taken her days to fully feel like herself after being so sick. Most evenings, she went to bed right after dinner. Last night was the first time in a week where she finally felt up to making love before going to bed. Zach had been so excited when he saw her lying in bed in a negligee that he tore his shirt trying to get it off.

She chuckled to herself. *He's so damned adorable sometimes.*

As if he knew she was thinking of him, her watch lit up with a text from him. She grabbed her phone from the charger.

Zach

Whatcha doing?

Hannah

Nothing much. Just waiting for the last few folks to pick up their paychecks.

You?

Zach

Sitting here thinking about you.

Hannah

Oh, yeah? About what?

Zach

Last night. And tonight.

Hannah

What are you thinking about for tonight?

Zach

What it would be like to have you on your knees while I fuck your mouth.

Hannah

Oh, Mr. Dirty Mouth has come out to play.

Zach

All I can think about is your mouth.

And my hands buried in my dirty little slut's hair.

Hannah

I don’t know. Have you been a good boy all week?

Have you earned my lips wrapped around your cock?

Zach

I’ve been the bestest boy. Ate my girlfriend every night.

Except when she was sick. I was too busy taking care of her.

Hannah

Well, then. Sounds like you’ve earned it.

But you have to be a good boy and take a shower. Be sure to scrub real good behind your … ears.

Zach

Oh, baby, my ‘ears’ will be squeaky clean. You could eat your dessert off them.

Hannah

Dessert, huh? So, I get dinner first?

Zach

As long as you don’t fill up before dessert. I have a big serving waiting for you.

She squeezed her thighs together. *I love it when he talks dirty like this. It turns me on. And I’ve been waiting weeks for him to finally ask for this.*

Hannah

I’m surprised you don’t insist on dessert before dinner.

Zach

Baby, if we start with my cock in your mouth, we’ll never make it to dinner.

Hannah

Good point.

Zach

And no one wants a hangry Hannah.

Hannah

So, where are you taking me tonight?

Zach

Heaven? Poundtown?

Hannah

For. Dinner.

Zach

I was thinking of grabbing something to-go. The girls are at sleepovers for the weekend, so…

Hannah

And it’ll be a quicker trip to your bedroom.

Zach

Who said anything about the bedroom?

Maybe I was going to feed you dessert in the dining room?

Who am I kidding? I plan on doing it in front of the mirror in my room.

I want to see how wet you get from me pounding your throat.

Hannah

Well, just the thought has me needing new panties, so…

Zach

Damn it, Hannah. Can we go home now?

She looked over at the clock on the wall. *Four already?*

Hannah

I need to hand out a few more checks. I'll go hunt folks down.

Why don't you put in our order for dinner? I'd love a spinach salad with blackened salmon.

Zach

I'll finish up here and put in order. I should be home before 5.

Hannah

See you then. [eggplant-emoji] [tongue emoji]

Zach

[peach emoji] [eggplant emoji] if you keep that up

Hannah

Oh, hon, when I'm done with you, you'll be too worn out to think about [peach emoji]

Zach

I'm never too tired to think about your ass. It's the perfect little [peach emoji].

On the way to his house, she stopped at her place and grabbed a dress and one of her new crotchless teddies. At least tonight they didn't have to worry about being interrupted by anyone.

Back at his house, she'd just slid on her heels when she heard him pull into the driveway. She met him in the kitchen.

ZACH STARED AT HANNAH. He'd expected to find her in her work clothes. Or maybe some lingerie. But this? *Wow.* He whistled. "A dress and heels for dinner at home? What did I do to deserve this?"

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "I heard someone has been a very good boy this week."

He grabbed at the hem of her dress and slipped his hand under to grab her ass. *A thong. Is she trying to make us skip dinner?* "Now, all I'm going to

be able to think about is what's under this dress." He picked her up and put her on the counter. "You may have to wait for your dessert, but I don't."

"Zach! This is where your family eats breakfast."

As if I care right now. "And? That's what sanitizing spray is for. I'm taking advantage of the empty house." He delved under her skirt and put his mouth on her.

She moaned. "Not sure how it's your dessert, though, when I'm the one enjoying it."

He looked up at her. "Believe me, baby, I enjoy this plenty."

While she lay boneless on the countertop, he cleaned himself up and took their food to the table. "Okay, time to eat dinner. Someone made a mess on the island, so we can't eat there."

She giggled as he came back over and scooped her up. "I warned you."

"I'll clean it later. I've fantasized about you on that counter way too many times to not take advantage of the situation."

She looked at him, the island, and back to him. "You fantasized—?"

"Hannah, I've dreamt so many things about you. And eventually, I'll make each of them a reality."

She opened her mouth like she was going to say something, then closed it. He pushed her container of food over to her. "Eat up."

The moment she popped the last bite of spinach in her mouth, he scooped her into his arms and headed for the bedroom.

"Eager, are we?"

"I've spent most of the day thinking about burying myself in your mouth. It's amazing I lasted this long."

He sat her on her feet in the room. "Dress off but leave on the heels and lingerie. And get comfy on your knees in front of the mirror. I'm off to

clean my … ears."

She pulled at the zipper along her side. "Scrub real good. I'll be doing a thorough inspection."

"With your tongue, I hope," he joked as he headed into the bathroom.

When he walked back into the bedroom, he spotted her on a pillow in front of the mirror.

"Isn't that a beautiful sight? You on your knees waiting for me. You even pulled your hair up in a ponytail. Now, I can wrap it around my hand."

She smiled up at him as she took his cock in her hand and gave it a few strokes. "Always so happy to see me." Before he could respond, she stuck out her tongue and licked him from his balls to the tip.

"Fuck, Hannah," he groaned. His fingers dug into her scalp. While he'd thought about being in her mouth, he hadn't thought about the foreplay leading up to it. Clearly, she had.

She licked him a few more times before wrapping her lips around the head and cleaning off the liquid that had already leaked out. Once she'd gotten every drop, she rolled her tongue around it.

His grip on her head tightened. "Oh, God, Hannah. That feels so good." He'd thought he had an idea of how good it would feel. He wasn't even close. It was hot and wet, like when he was inside her pussy, but she could control how tight her lips got. And that tongue. It was going to be the death of him.

She wrapped her hand around the base and stroked him while she worked down from the top with her mouth.

He'd thought her tongue was amazing, but when she sucked, he nearly lost it. *Clearly, this is not going to last as long as I thought it would.*

“Look at you, sucking on my cock like the dirty little slut you are. I saw you lick my cum from the tip. Did you like that? Do you want more?”

She nodded.

He grabbed her ponytail and pulled her head back. “Then let me fuck your mouth and you can have it all.”

Zach felt her flatten her tongue and relax around him. He started out slow, testing how far he could go without hurting her. Once he thought she was comfortable with it, he pushed in harder and faster. Looking down, he watched his cock disappear into her mouth, her lips wrapped tight around him. It turned him on so much he could feel more leakage from his tip.

“There’s another little taste for you, my dirty little gal. You should see yourself in the mirror. The way you take these hard thrusts—” and then he noticed tears rolling down her cheeks. He immediately pulled out of her mouth and fell to his knees. “Did I hurt you?”

She tilted her head. “Hurt me?”

He swiped at a tear. “You’re crying.”

“Ohhh, that. Involuntary reaction to you hitting the back of my throat. You haven’t hurt me.”

He searched her face for a moment. “Promise?”

“Promise. If you did, I’d push at your thighs. I know you’d stop immediately.”

He blew out a loud breath of air. “I thought maybe I’d gone too far.”

“Nope, you’re good. Now, back to my dessert?”

He laughed as he stood back up. “Lick it like the best lollipop you’ve ever had.”

She took it in her hand and ran her tongue up and down, making certain to pay attention to his balls, too. The entire time, she looked up at him.

“God, you’re so sexy like this, Hannah. On your knees with your tongue on me, the smell of your arousal filling my nose. Does sucking my dick turn you on? I can see you glistening between your legs. I bet you’re so wet. Reach down and touch yourself.”

She used her free hand to swipe between her folds.

“Show me.”

She held up her fingers, showing the proof of how turned on she was. He bent down and licked them clean.

“Ready for me to take over?”

She tilted her head back again.

“Such a good gal. All ready to get her mouth destroyed.” He thrust in several more times until his balls hurt so much it felt like they were in a vice. “Your pretty little mouth feels so good wrapped around me. Are you ready for it?”

She looked up at him and nodded.

“Swallow down every drop. Good little sluts don’t miss any.”

He pushed in one more time and came in the back of her throat. He could feel her sucking on him as she worked to swallow it all. He pulled out of her mouth. “Now, clean me off.”

She licked him, getting every bit that clung to his skin, then, laid her face against his thigh. He rubbed her cheek while he worked to catch his breath.

“Was it as good as you imagined?” she asked with a coy smile.

His thumb brushed against her lips. “A million times better. I had no idea. No wonder blow jobs feature so heavily in porn. I’m going to fantasize about your mouth a lot more now, just so you know.”

“That’s okay. I think about yours plenty.”

He helped her to her feet and led her over to the bed. “I’m hungry again,” he said with a grin before pulling her in for a kiss.

She blushed. “But, I—”

He took her face in his hands and kissed her hand, his tongue playing with hers.

“I didn’t think you’d want to kiss me after I, you know.”

“I always want to kiss you. You having your mouth on my cock doesn’t change a thing. Actually, it does. It makes me love your mouth even more.”

“*Oh*.”

He picked her up and tossed her onto the bed, then settled between her legs.

“Oh, baby, you’ve soaked yourself. You really enjoyed that, didn’t you?”

“Before, it was more something I had to do as opposed to wanting to. But for some reason, just the thought of you in my mouth turned me on. And watching your face as you did it really got me. The look of pleasure on your face when I licked and sucked on you just about pushed me over the edge.”

“And that’s why you get a reward for being such a good little slut for me.” He curled up his tongue and pushed it inside her while his fingers found her clit.

Her fingers dug into his scalp. “God, you have the best mouth.”

He looked up at her. “No, yours is the best. I’m happy to take second place in this instance. Although, the competitive side of me makes me want to do it even better so I’m first.”

She giggled and lifted her hips toward him. “Practice makes perfect.”

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Chapter Twenty-two

May 26, 2023

After our dessert earlier, Hannah got the idea to go print up a list of kinks so we could start figuring out our likes and dislikes. Needless to say, oral—giving and receiving—both ranked a ten with me.

Some things, like group activities and impact play, we were able to discount right away. I would never hurt Hannah. And no one touches her but me. And she was clear on her feelings about sharing. And the thought of anyone seeing Hannah naked? Of seeing her face when she comes? No way. She didn't seem interested in it, either.

There was still a lot on the list we were unsure of. We'll just

have to do some experimenting, I guess…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

HANNAH POKED AT ZACH. “Tell your alarm to be quiet.”

He groaned. “Alexa, dismiss alarm.”

“Why do you have an alarm on for Saturday morning, anyway?”

“Breakfast with Sean.”

“Oh, it’s a weekly thing? I thought you were just getting together to brag.”

He chuckled. “Oh, there is plenty of that. But it’s something we do every Saturday morning unless he’s out-of-town.” He picked up his phone off the nightstand. “Oh, looks like we’re not eating at the diner like usual. He hurt himself yesterday.”

“Is he okay?”

“It’s his knee, but he said it’s not major. I’m sure I’ll get the full story over breakfast at his place.”

“He lives in town?”

“I’ve been over there so many times that I forgot you haven’t yet. It’s just outside town. Do you want to come with me?”

She stretched out across the bed. “No, it’s a guys-only meal. You go enjoy yourself with Sean and I’ll be right here. Someone didn’t let me get much sleep last night.”

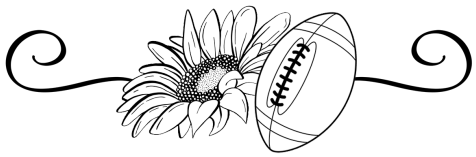
He kissed her shoulder. “A week of snuggling you, but not being able to make love to you, drove me crazy. Plus, you did practically challenge me with that ‘can’t get enough of me’ talk. I had to prove my point. No breakfast with Annie today?”

“No, she’s been a bit squirrely all week. I’m sure I’ll find out what’s up soon enough.”

“Do you want me to get you anything while I’m out?”

“Breakfast would be great. By the time you get back, I’ll be awake enough to eat.”

“Or be eaten,” he said with a wink before heading to the bathroom.



ZACH PUNCHED IN THE combo at Sean’s gate and waited for it to open. A few years ago, they’d both digitized the gates and doors at their houses, allowing entry via a code in addition to a key or garage door opener. He had the codes to Sean’s place, and Sean had his. It was useful on days like today when his hands were full, as he didn’t have to juggle food, drinks, and a key.

“Food’s here!” he called out as he pushed the door shut behind him.

“I’m in the living room,” Sean replied.

Zach found him sprawled across the sectional, his leg up on an ottoman.

He motioned toward Sean’s leg with his arm. “So, what’s the story here?”

“Official story or the real story?”

“I’ll take both,” he said as he sat the trays of coffees and bags of food on the table.

“Well, the guys think I had a little too much fun with the ladies and came down hard on my knee. In truth, I was walking through the backyard and tripped over a stupid crawdad hole. Hurt like hell. I thought I was going to have to call you and have you come over.”

Zach laughed. “A crawdad hole?”

Sean took a coffee from him. “They’re all over the yard. I wasn’t paying enough attention and caught my foot on one just right and down I went.”

“How’s the knee?”

“Still hurts, but thankfully nothing serious. I won’t need surgery and should be fine before the pre-season. But I have to do physical therapy on it. With it being the off-season, there’s less staff in-town, so they’re sending me to someone local. My first appointment is later today.”

Zach pulled the containers of food out of the bag and handed Sean his. “I’m glad it’s not too bad. It would suck to miss games over a crawdad.”

He laughed. “I swear, I’m going to hire someone to catch them all. Should make for a good dinner.”

Zach shuddered. “No mud bugs for me. Gross.”

“More for me, then. Thanks for picking up breakfast. Leg hurts too much to sit at a table for an hour, not to mention the chances of someone bumping into it.”

Zach cut up his pancakes. “Not a problem. I tell you all the time I’m fine doing Saturday breakfast at home. I just like having the time to catch up.”

“Your place is filled with little ears that shouldn’t overhear our conversations. Especially now that you have something to share.” He shoved a piece of bacon in his mouth. “Speaking of which, catch me up. I’ve been so busy with work travel, and then this injury, that we haven’t talked in a couple of weeks. Just quick texts.”

Zach took a sip of his coffee. “I figured you were busy and that’s why I didn’t hear back from you.”

“The team had me travelling for a couple weeks for publicity stuff. And then I came home and fell. I figured it was my karma from how much I

ragged on you when you were at the menswear store. So, how are things?"

"Great, other than a little trouble with the girls. Hannah's slept over at my place every night since the dinner you booked for us."

Sean laughed. "Making up for lost time?"

"And then some. Hence Hannah sound asleep in my bed right now. She kind of laid down a challenge last night and I think she's regretting it now."

"Good for you. I know I've poked fun at you enough over the years about it, but it really is great to see you going through this with someone you care about. You'll have to bring her over for dinner one night so I can get to know her better. After all, how can I gather material for my best man speech if I don't spend time with both of you?"

"Awfully presumptuous of you."

"Come on, you know you're going to marry her."

"Oh, I've known that since I was eight and she kissed me. I'm talking about you assuming you'd be my best man."

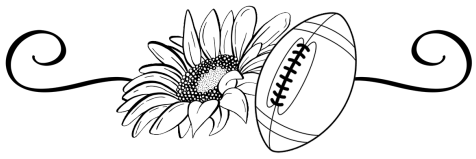
Sean threw a chunk of French toast at him. "As if you have any other friends."

"I could ask Alex."

"Her brother you punched when you were kids? I don't think so."

"He likes me now. I *think*. We got along at dinner on Sunday."

Sean snorted, then ate more of his food. "Face it, buddy; I'm your only friend. Now, eat your food so I can hear more about the last two weeks…"



When Zach walked into his bedroom from the side entry, he found Hannah sitting up in bed scrolling through her phone. “Have a nice sleep?”

“Would have been better snuggled up to you.”

He held up the bag of food. “Hungry?”

“I need a shower first. But I wanted to wait until you were back.”

He kicked off his shoes and started pulling his clothes off. “I’d be crazy to turn down that offer.”

She turned on the water while he pulled out a couple of towels. “When do the girls come back?”

“Tomorrow afternoon. We have the house all to ourselves today.”

“Oh really? And what were you thinking we would fill our day with?”

“Well, first, I honestly need to do some chores around the house. I’d hoped to get that out of the way this morning.”

“I can help with that. I am pretty much living here, after all. What’s on your list?”

“Dishes. Clean out the fridge and make a grocery list so I can shop tomorrow. Laundry. Chelsea gets to a lot of the stuff, like vacuuming, dusting, and the like. The other stuff the four of us do. And yes, I would appreciate the help.”

“You can clean the fridge and work on the list since I wouldn’t be much help with those things. I’ll do the dishes. And we can work on the laundry together. What’s the plan once chores are done?”

“I was thinking we watch some videos on the big TV in the living room and see what kind of trouble we can get into.”

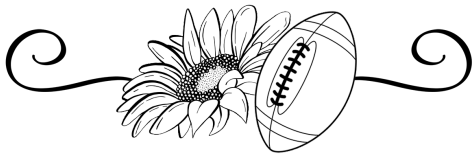
“Videos?” She giggled. “You mean porn?”

“*Educational videos*. There’s still a lot for me to learn and I thought we could watch together.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Okay, but I get to quiz you afterwards to see what you learned.”

He pulled her close. “I’m happy to do extra credit, if necessary.”

“I bet you are.”



Back in the living room, Zach pushed all the ottomans against the sectional and locked them in place. Then, he covered it with a blanket. “There, a nice cozy bed for us,” he said before pulling her into his lap. She had a sundress on and his hands quickly slipped underneath and to her ass. He rocked her against him as he kissed her neck.

“Are we going to make out all day, or are we watching videos?”

“Well, there was a certain one I was thinking of watching. It’s done by porn stars but is educational.”

“*Really*? Educational? Show me.” She turned around in his lap.

He turned on the TV and switched to where he had the video ready to stream.

“A how-to for anal sex?”

“I don’t know much beyond what I’ve seen in my videos. And I’m smart enough to know she was prepped off-camera. And seeing as you haven’t done it yet, either, I thought we could learn together so I don’t hurt you.”

“Were you, um, thinking we were going to try this out today?”

“What if I say yes?”

She adjusted on his lap. The look she gave him made him chuckle. “No, not today. I’d like to start playing a little down there, but that’s it. The video

goes over it all, including getting comfortable and things we can do before we're ready to do it."

He felt a little tension leave her body. "Good. Because I have to be honest, I'm not sure I'm quite ready to go there yet."

"And we won't until you are. But there are a lot of steps we can take before we get there."

"As long as you're not planning on getting me a butt plug with a tail and prancing around here like a horse or something."

"A puppy. I already have ears and a cute little nose picked out for you," he said with a laugh.

"And I'll be getting you a cat tail to wear…"

He put up his hands in surrender. "Fair enough. No tails. There's plenty of other options, anyway."

As they watched the video, he slipped his hand under her dress and into her panties. "Wanna ride me while we watch?" Last night, he'd pulled her on top of him and let her control things. She was so worn out afterward, she fell asleep on his chest.

"I wouldn't be able to see the TV."

"Reverse cowgirl. You'd just need to pull your legs up."

She stood up for a minute so she could take off her underwear, and he could adjust his shorts. "It's funny how you know all about the positions—"

"—with no practical experience. I know. I would call it book learning, but it all came from videos," he said with a wink. "It's okay, I'm enjoying trying it all out with you." He pulled up her dress and tucked it into the elastic around the waist.

She carefully sank down onto him. "Mm-hmm. I'm enjoying it, too." He grasped her waist as she moved up and down on him. "Are you sure you

can concentrate on what she's saying?"

"Worst case scenario, I have to watch it again. No real hardship," he joked.

When her fingers started kneading into the tops of her thighs, he knew she was close. He took over the thrusts, allowing her to relax back against him. They were both on the edge when they heard, "Don't mind me. I like watching."

Hannah shrieked and fixed her dress so everything was covered while Zach fumbled with the TV remote.

Damn Sean. Couldn't he have waited a couple more minutes? My balls are screaming at me, and I know Hannah has to be just as frustrated.

"That is, if you guys are into that kind of thing. Not everyone likes to be watched while they're having sex," said Sean.

Watched? He had been fairly certain last night when they were filling out the questionnaire that it was a no for him. Now, he knew for sure. And the way Hannah tensed in his arms told him the same thing. *Definite no.*

Sean hobbled into the kitchen and started digging in the fridge. "Okay if I make a sandwich?"

"Sure," said Zach as he helped Hannah off his lap. She quickly slid her panties back on while he fixed his shorts.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered to her. "I had no idea he was coming over."

"He has a key?"

"The code. Normally, it's no big deal since I've never been out here having sex before. We'll have a talk about ringing the doorbell first."

She glanced Sean's way. "Did you know that he—?"

"Is a voyeur? Oh, I've heard plenty of stories over the years. Things can get crazy in those hotel rooms on road trips. Let's just say he doesn't just

watch and three is never a crowd to him. Something I'd never even suggest to him. You're mine, and I don't share."

Her eyes grew wide. "Oh. Would you have been like that if you'd made it to the pros?"

"I'd like to think the answer to that is no. If I had been able to go to college, and then onto a pro team, there would have been no reason for me not to ask you out. Which means we'd be dating, or maybe even married. No need to be a manwhore like someone we know."

Sean walked in with his plate. "Manwhore? Are you guys talking about me?"

"Well, if the shoe fits."

"I don't deny it. And I'm enjoying every minute of it. But don't worry, I won't steal your gal. Watch, sure. Jump in if you guys decide you need a third? Love that. But she's not my type."

She crossed her arms. "Curvy?"

He laughed. "*Fiesty*, I like that. Your curves are sexy as hell. No problems there. You're relationship material, which means not my type. I prefer a night, maybe two, and move on. I have zero desire to be in a relationship. They're hard enough normally. Add in all my nights out-of-town, practices, games, appearances, etc., and it makes things even harder. Once I'm retired, I can look at getting serious with someone."

"I don't share, so a third won't be necessary," Zach said. The words came out with an almost angry tone, which surprised him.

"Wow, possessive already." Sean shrugged his shoulders. "Just offering. Seems a lot of women have a three-way on their wish list. It's okay; sitting there while a couple gets it on is almost as good. Way better than what you

were watching a few moments ago, anyway. Plus, I can give pointers. I'm sure I could help with that thing way better than the video that was on."

Hannah patted Zach on the chest. "One guy is enough for me."

"Why exactly are you sitting in my house, eating my food?" Zach asked.

"Sorry, man. I didn't realize the girls were away for the weekend. I never expected to walk in and see, well, *that*. I guess it's a good thing I didn't show up a little later."

A little later would have been preferred. At least we'd have both finished.

"It's my physical therapist. I had my first session with her today and she's already driving me crazy," Sean explained.

"If she's such a problem, why don't you go see someone else?" Zach asked.

"She has a contract with the team. If I go somewhere else, she'd lose that. It's a small practice that sees one patient at a time."

"So, this contract is huge for her."

"Exactly. The team likes that it's a small clinic so I wouldn't be bothered by fans while I'm trying to do my exercises. But man, she's already gotten on my nerves, and I have to see her at least twice a week for the foreseeable future."

"Then pretend like it's any of the other things you hate about playing, like doing interviews, and push through. Before you know it, you'll be healed and won't have to see her again."

"You don't like interviews?" Hannah asked.

"Canned questions and my answers will be cut down to an unrecognizable soundbite. I hate them. I'd rather spend that time with fans."

"Oh, that makes sense."

“Well, baby, how about some lunch?” Zach asked her. *Since it doesn’t look like we’ll get back to the fun anytime soon.*

“Sure, you grab some beers and I’ll make some sandwiches. And you can tell us more about this troublesome doctor…”

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Chapter Twenty-three

HANNAH PROPPED HERSELF UP on an elbow next to Zach. “Well, we have hours until the girls get home. What would you like to do today?”

He looked over her naked body and smiled.

She slapped at his chest. “Besides staying in bed.”

“We didn’t need a bed yesterday…”

“Fine. What do you want to do besides sex?”

He gave her his puppy dog eye look. “Can it include some sex?”

She rolled her eyes. “Men.”

Zach pulled her close. “I can’t help it. I’d make love to you all day if I could. How about a swim in the pool? We haven’t done that yet.”

“That sounds really good. And this early in the day, it won’t be too hot outside yet.”

“And the shadow from the house will be over the pool for a bit longer. Do you have a suit here, or…?”

She shook her head. “I’m not wearing lingerie in the pool. I packed my suit. It’s in the dresser.”

“Too bad,” he joked. “At least I get to put the sunscreen on you, right?”

Twenty minutes later, Zach was cursing himself for thinking it was a great idea. Rubbing the lotion onto her naked body was bad enough, but then she returned the favor. And now, he ached to be inside her.

She looked down at the tent in his swim shorts. “Don’t even think about it. We’ll make a mess of the sheets.”

He took her swimsuit from her fingers and tossed it on the chair. His followed. “Who said anything about a bed?” he asked as he picked her up. She wrapped her legs around his waist and he slid in.

Raising her up, he moved her up on his cock and slid her back down.

Her arms wrapped tightly around his neck. “Aren’t you…?”

“Aren’t I what?”

“Going to sit me down on the dresser or something?”

He tilted his head. “I hadn’t planned on it. Why?”

“Cause I’m, well, you know, heavy. You might drop me.”

“Baby, I keep trying to explain it to you. You’re not too heavy for me. Not too heavy to ride me, to be picked up, or to sit on my face. Which, by the way, I’m going to get you to do one of these days.”

She laughed and he felt her arms loosen.

“Would it make you feel better if I did this?” He walked over to the wall and pressed her against it.

Her hands moved to his shoulders and she nodded.

“Good. Because now, I can do this.” He pulled almost completely out of her, then thrust in hard and fast.

“Oh, fuck, yes,” she moaned.

He laughed. “You have such a filthy mouth during sex. I love it.”

“Oh yeah? I bet you’ll really like this, then. Fuck me hard and fast, Zach. *Now*.”

“Yes, my dirty little slut. Whatever you need.”

He started slamming into her so hard and fast that a picture fell off the wall. Her fingers dug into his shoulders and her breathing grew heavy.

“Look at you, being beaten into the wall by my cock. Do you like that?”

“God, yes,” she moaned.

“Good, cause being inside you is like heaven.”

After a bit, he realized he had a problem. Previously, he could rub her clit, which she needed to finish. Except this time, his hands were full. He adjusted his hands under her thighs in an attempt to give her room to slide her own hand down there, but apparently the change in position was all that was necessary, as her fingers started kneading at his shoulders. A moment later, she practically screamed his name and tried to arch against him.

He always had trouble holding back when her orgasm hit because of the way her walls squeezed him. But today, the angle and speed combined had his foreskin sliding back and forth even more than usual. And letting loose inside her was no longer a want but a need. Unable to wait any longer, he thrust forward and came inside her.

She rested her head against his chest, and he kissed the top of her head.

“Ready to go float in the pool?” he asked once his breathing had calmed.

“Already floating,” she murmured against his chest.

He smiled. *I love it when I make her feel that way.* “Need help putting on your swimsuit?”

“Yes, please.”

Zach sat her on the edge of the bed before going to grab her swimsuit. When he turned around, she had fallen back against the mattress. He stood

there for a moment, staring at her beautiful body, all flushed from love making. Her thighs were especially red, and he wouldn't be surprised if little bruises showed up later.

She pushed up on her elbows. "Why are you staring at me like that? You get yourself worked up again and you'll have to take care of it yourself. My legs hate both of us."

He slid her swimsuit up her legs. "You're gorgeous. Why wouldn't I stare?"

She lifted her lower half so he could pull it up over her hips. "And I'm sure you made sure to get a good look down there, didn't you?"

"I can't help it. You were right; I totally have a breeding kink. And one day, we'll be ready and I can actually plant something inside you."

As it is, I'm already obsessed with the idea of pushing it back inside her when it trickles out. But I'm not sure what she would think about that.

She put her arms through the straps and adjusted her breasts. "You're never going to let me out of bed once I go off my birth control, are you?"

He leaned down and kissed her. "Sure, I will. You'll need to go to the bathroom to take the pregnancy test," he joked.

Hannah rolled her eyes. "Aren't you just a sweetheart?"

"Sure am. I'll even let you walk into the pool on your own rather than throwing you in."

That earned him a second eyeroll. He loved that she felt comfortable enough around him to be sarcastic and even a little bratty. He knew enough about her ex to know she wouldn't have dared to do it with him.

Once they were outside, Zach scooped her up in his arms and moved over to one of the built-in loungers in the pool. She curled up against his chest.

She sighed. "This is cozy. I could stay here all day."

He wrapped his arms around her. “Me, too.” Having her in his arms—whether they were having sex or not—was always a highlight of his day.

She’s so soft and just seems to melt into me when I hold her close. And her scent—a mix of her shampoo and floral body wash—has become my favorite. I love the way it surrounds me.

For a while, they sat there in silence, enjoying a relaxing moment. Soon, his sisters would be home, and before long it would be a mad rush of homework, dinner at Hannah’s parents’ house, and getting ready for bed.

She traced his tattoo that covered most of the left side of his chest with her finger. “I keep forgetting to ask, what’s the story behind this?”

“Sunflowers were Mom’s favorite flower. After she died, I wanted a tattoo to honor her, but I didn’t want the typical memorial design.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“Each leaf stands for a member of my family, and their names are designed into the veins.”

“The petals aren’t finished. Are you having it done in stages?”

“There are hidden designs in them. As I come up with more items, my tattoo artist adds them in.” He pointed to a petal. “For instance, there’s a football in this one. He does a good job of blending them in, so you either have to look close to see them or know they’re there.”

Hannah bent down to look at them closer. “A candle, a genie lamp, ‘love,’ and ‘Mom’. Interesting choices.”

“One day, I’ll tell you the story behind them.”

She snuggled back up against him. “Do you like getting tattoos? Are you going to get more?”

“A lot of my friends started getting them in high school. Sean has a bunch. I was never much interested in them until Mom was gone. Once I

got this one, I understood why folks tend to end up with a lot of tattoos. Something about getting one just makes you feel good. Filling in this one feeds that occasional itch. But I probably will get another one at some point. How about you?"

"I'm not a fan of needles, so I've never even considered getting one."

"I'm guessing that would mean no 'property of Zach' tattoo, then?"

She slapped his chest. "You're terrible."

He pretended like he was writing on her with his finger. "I can draw it on with a marker if that works better for you."

She shook her head. "What am I going to do with you?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, no, Zach. She's out of commission for the rest of the day. You've overworked her and my leg muscles this weekend."

He kissed her shoulder. "You weren't complaining earlier."

"Oh, I was enjoying it plenty in the moment. But now, they're yelling at me and I'm going to listen to them. The only things I'm doing this afternoon are relaxing in the pool or over there on the daybed. And if you're lucky, they'll hate us both less come bedtime."

"Fair enough. We did get quite the workout this weekend. I didn't even use my gym last night, which is rare." He looked down at her, his eyebrows furrowed. "How's the pain in your legs?" While he knew she enjoyed the sex just as much as him, he didn't want to see her hurting because of it.

"It's more of an achy burn, like I just did a bunch of exercising."

"Want me to massage them?"

"That's an offer I'll never turn down."

"Float on your back in front of me and I'll massage your legs."

It wasn’t long before he could see she was so relaxed that she was struggling to stay awake.

“Why don’t you go take a nap on the daybed?”

She yawned. “That sounds like a good idea. What about you?”

“I’m going to swim for a bit longer and then go throw a football for a bit.”

She swam over to the stairs. “You still do that?”

“That’s why I have that big net on a frame over there. I enjoy it, plus it’s good for hand-eye coordination. There are targets marked on the net, and I try to hit them. Plus, Sean likes to practice with me in the off-season, so I have to keep up my skills.”

She pulled the blanket off the back of the daybed and curled up with it. “Wake me up when the girls get home?”

He chuckled. “I think they’ll handle that part fine by themselves.”

A little after three, Zach heard his sisters come through the front door after Chelsea had picked them up on her way home from her aunt’s. Just as he predicted, they were loudly talking over each other and woke Hannah from her nap.

“Is there enough time before dinner for us to swim?” Willow asked.

“Sure, we have almost three hours before we need to head out,” he answered.

“Getting my swimsuit!” Ollie squealed.

“How about you, Vi?”

She shook her head before plopping down in a chaise and turning her focus to her phone.

A few minutes later, Ollie ran out to the pool and jumped in, splashing her brother.

“Okay, you little monkey,” he said as he dunked her. “Did you have fun at your sleepover?”

“Tons. Stacey can’t wait until my party on Saturday. Can we use the pool?”

“Yes, as long as you guys follow the safety rules. I’m responsible for all of them while they’re here, and I don’t want anyone to get hurt.” He couldn’t imagine what it would be like to have to call a parent and tell them their kid drowned. Thankfully, only four girls were coming over for the party and sleepover, so they’d be easy enough to keep track of.

Willow stepped down into the pool. “A party? Why would we be having a party?” she asked with a wink.

“*Willow*! It’s my birthday.”

“No, it couldn’t possibly be your birthday again already. You just had one last year.”

Ollie rolled her eyes at her sister. “That’s how birthdays work, silly. Tell her, Zach.”

Willow laughed. “Just teasing you, monkey.”

Ollie splashed her. “Only Zach can call me that!”

Hannah laughed. “Glad to see I’m not the only one with a sibling who teases them.” She got up from the daybed. “I’m going to make me a sandwich. Anyone else want one?”

The girls shook their heads, but Zach held up two fingers.

“Two sandwiches? Someone’s awfully hungry,” she said with a grin before turning to head into the house.

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Chapter Twenty-four

ON TUESDAY, WILLOW HELPED make everyone's lunches and see her sisters off to school. Thanks to her good grades, she was excused from the last days of school.

"Hey, Hannah. Could you stick around for a little bit after Zach leaves?" Willow asked.

"Sure. Is anything up?"

"No, I just wanted to talk when it was just the two of us."

"Okay, I just need to let Zach know I can't do coffee on the way to work."

Willow fiddled with her fingers. "Do you have to tell him it's so we can talk?"

"Not at all. If you want this to just be between us, then I won't tell him anything. I'll say it's because of work. Some days we don't do coffee because I have to run an errand for work."

"Thanks."

Once everyone was gone, they sat down at the dining room table to talk.

"Do you care for my brother?" Willow asked.

“More than I can say.”

“Are you going to marry him?”

“If he asks.”

Willow chewed on the inside of her cheek for a moment. “I’m sorry that I haven’t been very accepting of you. I didn’t want you to hurt my brother. Or replace us.”

Hannah reached over and put her hand on top of Willow’s. “Oh, sweetie. I could never hurt him. It would be like hurting myself. Sure, we’re going to fight sometimes and may be angry at each other, but that’s normal. No one is perfect, and we’re going to have bad days. But it will be temporary. I’ll always be there for him.

“And I would never replace you guys. The love he has for you three is too strong. You occupy a place in his heart that could never be filled by anyone else. It’s why he has your names on him; you’re forever to him.”

Willow wiped away a tear. “You love him, don’t you?”

Hannah smiled. “The first time I say that, it will be to him.”

“Oh, you haven’t told him yet.”

She shook her head.

“I’m pretty sure he loves you, you know. Which is why I was surprised about the bruises on your legs. I asked Zach about them, and he assured me that it wasn’t what I thought. But I wanted to ask you.”

Hannah knew this was coming. Zach had warned her earlier in the week about Willow’s worry about him hurting her.

“They really were accidental. He picked me up, and I guess he held me a little too tightly.”

“So my brother never hurts you?”

“Never. If he even thinks he’s hurt me, he gets worried.”

“Thanks. He pretty much told me the same thing, but I needed to verify with you. He’s our role model when it comes to relationships—”

“—and you had to make sure everything was good. I understand. My last boyfriend was abusive in so many ways. Not physically, thankfully, but he made me feel worthless. The abuse he aimed my way was so slow and methodical that I didn’t even realize it until after I’d left him. Had I stayed longer, I have the feeling things would have turned physical.

“Zach has spent the last five months working to override all the horrible things Trent called me. For the first time in years, I’m feeling good about myself. But it’s been a hard battle to get this far. It’s better to never get to that point to begin with.”

It’s why Vi’s notes affected her so badly; she’d been working so hard on her self-confidence. with each note, a little of that was chipped away.

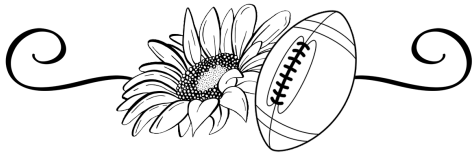
“I was lucky enough to find Zach just days after I left Trent, and he was one hundred percent there for me, even if we were only friends. A lot of women end up going from one abusive relationship to another.”

“How has he helped you?”

“He made me see how beautiful I am in a dress. Trent always told me they made me look fat. Or that I’m smart and got my job because of my skills. Trent said I was stupid and could never hold a good job. Zach makes me feel loved and wanted. He doesn’t tell me that no one else would want me. He says he’s lucky that I chose him. If you’re looking for a role model of what a partner should be like, he’s a good one.”

Willow stared at her for a moment. “Wow, I didn’t know any of that. My brother really is a good guy, huh?”

“The best. Thankfully, he learned everything he knows from your mom.”



That night was Vi's night to choose dinner. The previous week, she'd complained that most nights Zach chose what they were eating. Hannah suggested alternating who picked the menu for Chelsea's nights off, and he thought it was a great idea. They'd been doing it for a week now, and everyone seemed happy with it.

"What's up tonight, Vi?" Zach asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"Pizza. It should be here in about ten minutes."

"Enough time for Willow and Ollie to set the table."

Ollie dropped down from the barstool. "Do I have to?"

"It's Vi's night to pick the food, so you two have to turn to set the table. It's not like it will be that hard. It's only pizza. You don't even need silverware."

"My arms hurt," she pouted.

"Too much time with the horses?" he asked.

"Alex said I'll get used to it."

Willow headed for the cupboards. "I've got it. All we need are plates and cups. I'll help you out until you get the hang of things at the stables."

Ollie made the clawing sign in the air.

"Back at you, Ollie," said Willow.

"Pizza's here!" Vi said as the doorbell rang. "I'll get it."

A moment later, she sat three pizza boxes on the counter.

Zach opened up the boxes and was surprised with what he found. "Vi, why are there mushrooms on every pizza?"

“Because we like mushrooms?”

“Did you forget Hannah is allergic to them? What is she going to eat for dinner?”

“Oh, no, I completely for—”

“It’s okay,” said Hannah. “There was a birthday party at work today, so I already ate. But I do have a bit of a headache; probably from all the sugar. I’m going to go lie down.”

Zach grabbed her hand. “Are you sure? I can order another pizza. Or make you something.”

She kissed him. “Really, I’m not hungry. I just need a nap.”

He stared at her for a moment, trying to figure out if she was being honest or just helping Vi. “Okay, baby. I’ll come in and check on you later.”

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Chapter Twenty-five

May 30, 2023

Twelve. I can't believe my baby sister turns twelve today. It feels like yesterday I held Mom's hand as the doctor did the emergency c-section. Other than medical staff, I was the first to hold Ollie. To look in her eyes. Feel the peach fuzz on her cheek. Kiss the top of her head. I love all my sisters, but that moment created a special bond between the two of us. In many ways, she feels more like my child than my sibling.

And that makes watching her grow up even more bittersweet. If only Mom could be here. I hope she is proud of how I've raised Ollie. I've tried my best and she seems to have turned out well thus far.

It's Vi I worry about. Last night wasn't the first time I've seen her do something that was unkind toward Hannah. Raising teen girls is hard. I may just have to make the grounding threats a reality…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" EVERYONE CALLED out as Ollie walked into the kitchen.

"Do I really have to go to school today?" she whined.

I knew she was going to ask that. "Yes, you do," Zach answered. "It's the last day of school, which means parties and yearbook signings. Do you really want to miss that?"

"No," she grumbled.

"Before you know it, school will be out and you'll be on your way home. Chelsea is even picking you up, so no bus."

"Good. The bus is so hot in the afternoon. I wish I could stay home like Willow."

"You can do the same in high school if you get good grades," he explained. "Until then, you get to go the last days."

"*Fine*. Do I at least get my favorite breakfast today?"

"Don't I always make a special birthday breakfast?" He served Ollie a stack of chocolate chip pancakes while Hannah slid over a plate of bacon.

"Whipped—?"

"—cream?" Willow asked before topping the pancakes with a huge helping.

“And a glass of milk,” added Vi. “Even though I think it’s weird.”

“It’s like having cookies and milk,” Ollie explained before stuffing her mouth with pancakes. “Arr ve eatig oot—”

“Swallow your food first,” Zach said.

She took a drink from her milk. “Are we eating out tonight?”

“Of course. At your favorite Asian restaurant.”

“Sushi! Yum.”

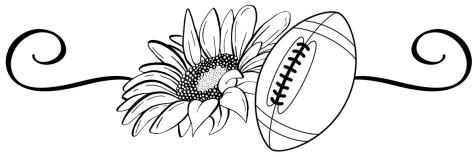
“Ugh, gross,” said Vi.

“More for me and Zach, then. Hannah, do you like sushi?”

“Some of it. I can’t eat raw fish.” She shuddered. “The texture gets me.”

“Vi won’t even eat the cooked stuff. But she likes Chinese food, and they have that, too.”

Zach looked at his watch. “Okay, eat up. You have to be out for the bus in thirty minutes.”



Hannah watched Zach as he waved goodbye to Ollie. “How are you doing?”

He looked at her, his brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Your little girl turned twelve today. She’s nearly a teenager.”

He sighed and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. “She is my little girl, isn’t she? I mean, I’ve been there since the moment she came into this world. And while, obviously, I didn’t biologically make her, I’ve been a big part of making her who she is.”

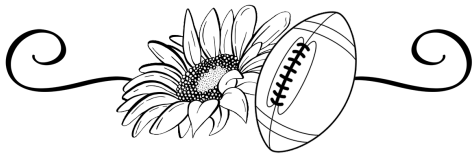
“She’s about as close to a daughter as she can get without being yours. And seeing her get older has to hit you hard, both good and bad.”

“Ollie may be a little sassy sometimes, but she’s still so sweet and innocent. Every year, she loses some of that. I worry that she won’t be my ‘little girl’ much longer.”

She leaned her head on his shoulder. “She won’t be. She’ll grow up and become a teenager and then an adult. But that sweetness she has? It’s more than skin deep; it’s part of her very fabric. I don’t see that changing any time soon. Of all your sisters, she’s the one most like you. And you’re sweet.”

He pulled her in for a kiss. “Too bad we both have to work. I’d show you just how sweet I can be.”

A coy smile lifted one side of her mouth. “You could always show me tonight. We get to sleep in tomorrow, after all…”



Dinner that night was a family affair, with Hannah’s family joining in on the celebration.

“Can we do presents first and dinner afterward?” Ollie asked.

“Well, I guess you can since you had to go to school today…” Zach teased. He’d already planned to do just that. He knew she wouldn’t be able to wait.

Janet handed Ollie a card. “This present is from Myles, Alex, and I. It was a little big to bring in with us, so we brought a picture instead.”

Ollie’s eyes grew wide. “Big?” She rushed to open the envelope. Inside was a photo of a saddle with her name, along with all the matching tack.

“If you’re going to be serious about riding, you need your own saddle,” Alex explained.

“My own? No more using one of the ones at the barn?” She’d talked Alex into letting her ride after Sunday dinners. If she’d had her way, she would have been over there every night after dinner. But Zach assured her that school would be out soon enough, and then she could go over there every day.

“All yours. I’ll teach you all about caring for it so the leather doesn’t discolor and crack. Having your own saddle is a responsibility. And it says riding is more than something you want to do a few times.” He squeezed her upper arm. “Ready to build some muscles? Hauling saddles and getting it on a horse isn’t for the weak.”

She jumped up and hugged each of them. “Thank you! Can I come riding tomorrow?” she looked at Zach and Hannah.

“I’m fine with it,” replied Zach.

“I’ll drop you off in the morning,” added Hannah before handing her a second envelope. “My present definitely wouldn’t fit in here.”

Ollie opened it and found a reservation for a spa in Galveston for next Friday.

“We’ll spend the entire day together, just the two of us.”

“Oh, Hannah, I love it. I can’t wait. Can I get my nails painted bright blue?”

“Sweetie, you can get a different color for every nail if you want.”

“Ooh, I like that idea.”

“And as always, here’s your gift from Sean,” Zach said as he handed her an envelope.

“Oh, I know what’s in here,” she said excitedly as she opened it up. “Yes! It looks like my savings just got even bigger.”

“What are you saving up for?” Hannah asked.

“A horse?”

Janet patted her on the shoulder. “Oh, honey. You’re going to need a lot more than that to buy a horse.”

“But mine will always be there for you,” Alex assured her. “And maybe, if you show you’re really dedicated to riding…”

She jumped up and down. “I will! I will!”

He laughed. “We’ll see when we get to that point. Deal?”

“Deal.”

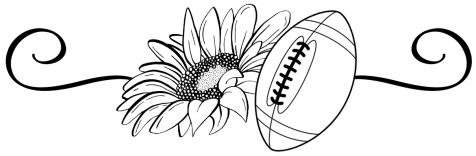
The rest of the gifts were from Zach, Willow, and Violet. She got a new pair of headphones, three new games, a tablet, and some classic My Little Pony figurines. She loved the cartoon, and Zach was always on the lookout for anything from the original releases. One wall in her room was covered in her collection. Hannah hadn’t even been at the house for twenty-four hours when Ollie pulled her down the hall to show it off.

“Sushi time!” she proclaimed as Zach moved her gifts to the end of the table. She held up a little sheet of paper. “And I already have my order all filled out.”

He took it from her. “You really think you can eat all of this?”

She laughed. “No way. I’m having sushi for breakfast tomorrow.”

“Fair enough. It is your birthday, after all.”



Zach wrapped his arms around Hannah's waist as she cleaned the makeup from her face. "Thanks for planning a day for you and Ollie. She's so excited about it. I think it may be her favorite gift, and that's saying a lot. She really loves that saddle."

"I'm glad she's excited about it. So am I. It'll give us some one-on-one time to get to know each other. I'd like to do the same with Vi, as a belated birthday gift. Do you think she'd want to go?"

"Based on the little bit of jealousy I saw in her eye tonight? Probably. But she's a wild card. Maybe talk to her and let her pick the date? Then she already has a little buy-in?"

She threw the wipe in the trash can. "That's a great idea. I'll try to catch her for a few minutes this week to bring it up."

"I love you." *Damn it. I didn't mean to just blurt it out like that.*

Hannah turned around in his arms, her eyes wide. "Did you—"

"I love you, Hannah. I've been trying to find the perfect time to tell you, but I just realized how stupid that sounds. I should be telling you every chance I get. I know better than anyone that tomorrow is never promised."

"I love you, too," she said as she nuzzled her cheek against his neck.

"I know. You like to tell me sometimes just as you fall asleep."

"I talk in my sleep?"

"No, not really. But occasionally, you're really tired and fall asleep quickly. And just as you're going under, you tell me. It's one of the reasons why I like watching you go to sleep."

“Well, you don’t have to wait to hear it anymore. I love you. I love you. I love you.”

He kissed her. “Good. Because I love you.”

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Chapter Twenty-six

HANNAH SMILED AT THE bouquet of flowers sitting on her desk. It never failed that Zach had a new one delivered every week. It was nearly as beautiful as the small one he personally picked and put on her nightstand several times a week.

She leaned forward to smell the flowers when her desk phone rang.

“Hello?”

“You have a visitor here at the front desk. should I send him back?” Lisa, the receptionist, asked.

“Him?”

“Tall, blonde, and handsome.”

Oh. I didn’t know Zach was coming by today. “Send him back.”

She hurried to finish her email so she could give him her undivided attention. A moment later, she heard the door close and the lock turn.

“Zach, I really don’t—” Her words got stuck as she looked up and realized it was not Zach who was visiting her. Based on how much they looked alike, she was certain this was his dad, Henry.

She stood as she contemplated ways to get to the door. *Maybe I can slowly make my way over.* "How can I help you today, Mr. Pierce?"

"Henry. You are dating my son, after all."

"He's been quite clear that he doesn't have a father," she told him. "Only a sperm donor."

She saw a little tic on the side of his face as he tried to let her comments slide. "That sounds like Zachary, all right."

"Again, how can I help you today?"

"You need to convince my son to change his name back to Pierce."

She was so surprised by his demand that a laugh escaped. "Change his name? And why would he do that? He was happy to be rid of it." And she had zero desire to do anything to help Henry. Not after what she'd heard from Zach and her mom.

Henry slapped her face. "Bitch. Just do as you're told. Make him change his name back."

She was tempted to bring her hand up to her cheek but held back. *This is not time to show him any weakness.* "Not happening. He wants nothing to do with you, and I don't blame him. You abandoned your family."

This time, his hit was more like a punch and she nearly blacked out. She fell back against her desk and he lunged for her. That's when she remembered the cup of tea she was steeping. She grabbed the cup and threw the hot liquid in his face.

He screamed and tried using his shirt to dry it off. Seizing the moment, she scrambled around her desk, hit the speakerphone button, then security. "Help!" she cried as she hid under her desk and pulled the chair tightly to her. "I've been assaulted. I'm locked in my office with him."

"We'll be right there, Miss St. James."

“Thank you.”

Henry kept pulling at the chair, trying to reach her, but it was no use. She was holding onto it with everything she had, plus she’d wedged it under the desk. She was terrified he was going to succeed, though. And she knew the two hits she’d already taken would pale in contrast to what he wanted to do to her now. He was already clawing and pulling at her hands and arms.

The vase of flowers crashed to the floor, sending shards of ceramic across the room.

“This isn’t over, you fat whore,” he cursed at her before fleeing the office.

A few minutes later, security came running into the room. “Miss St. James?”

“Under the desk,” she said, her voice shaking. “Is he gone?”

“It looks like it. Alan ran to the front to make sure while I checked on you. Are you okay? Can you come out?” Kyle asked.

“I think the chair is stuck. I can’t get it to move.”

Kyle pulled hard on the chair, breaking the back, but releasing it from under the desk. He held out a hand to help her up.

He gasped when he saw her face. “You need medical attention.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“One side of your face is completely swollen. I can’t even see your eye.”

Oh. That’s why everything looks strange.

He pulled out his cell phone and dialed 911, requesting police and an ambulance.

“You really didn’t have to do that,” she told him.

He led her over to the couch so she could sit down. “Your mother would kill me if I didn’t. Did you recognize your attacker?”

“I did. I’ll be able to give police his name.”

“Why—?”

“Hannah?” her mom cried out from the hallway.

“We’re in her office, Mrs. St. James.”

The moment her gaze landed on Hannah’s face, she started crying. “Oh, my baby,” she said as she joined Hannah on the couch. “Who hurt my little girl?”

“Henry.”

“*Zach’s dad?* He hit you?”

“Twice. He would’ve hurt me more, but I threw hot tea in his face and hid under my desk.”

She wrapped her arms around Hannah. “I’m so sorry, baby. He’s an asshole.” She looked up at Kyle. “You called for an ambulance?”

He nodded. “And police.”

“I don’t want to go to the hospital.”

Janet pulled out her phone and began typing. “You might be able to say no to me, but not him.”

“Mom, you didn’t.”

“Zach would want to know you’re hurt. And he’ll insist on you going to the hospital.”

She sighed. “*Fine*. But he needs to meet me at the hospital. He’s closer to it than here.”

“Deal.”

A couple moments later, Alan led a police officer and two EMTs into her office.

While she recounted what happened to the officer, the EMTs took her vitals and moved her onto a stretcher.

“She likely has a concussion, and they’re going to want to check her facial bones for fractures,” one of the men said.

“Her fiancée, Zach, will be meeting you guys at the hospital. He should already be there by the time you arrive,” Janet told them.

Hannah nearly corrected her mom but stopped herself. A boyfriend might not be able to go back to the room with her, but a fiancée could.

“We’ll let the nurse know.”

Janet kissed Hannah on the head. “Don’t worry about anything. We’ll put your vehicle over at the house, and Alex will take Ollie home.”

“*The girls*. Both are home today. Should an officer go over there just in case?”

“I’ll call it in,” said the deputy. “They’ll send someone over to check on them and stay parked outside until their parents get home.”

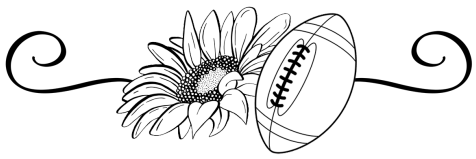
“Their mom passed away, and it was their dad who did this. Their brother, Hannah’s fiancée, is their guardian,” Janet explained.

“Good to know,” he said before leaving the room to call in the request.

“I’m going to go grab Alex and Ollie and head to Zach’s. We’ll stay until you get home.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Hannah said as they wheeled her out. “Hopefully it won’t be too long. Oh, it’s Ollie’s night to pick dinner.”

“Quit worrying. Boy, you sound like a mom already.”



ZACH STOOD IN THE doorway and looked Hannah over. She was a mess of bruises and wires for the machines keeping track of her vitals. Her mom

had told him it was bad, but not *this* bad. “Oh, my God, Hannah. Are you okay? Is the pain bad?”

She smiled at him. “Heeeey there. They gave me something in my IV. It made everything better.”

He pulled a chair over to her bed. “Henry did this to you?”

“He wants you to change your name back. I laughed.”

Zach went to take her hand in his but pulled back when he saw the scratches and bruises on her hands and arms.

“I hid under the desk and pulled my chair in after me. He tried breaking my grasp on it, but I wouldn’t let go.” She looked down at her arm. “It’s not as bad as it looks. You can hold my hand. I could really use the comfort right now, to be honest.”

He gently put her hand in his. “I hate hospitals. We spent so much time in one with Mom.”

“I hate them, too. I tried talking Mom out of it, but she contacted you. She said I can’t say no to you.”

He laughed. “She doesn’t know you that well, then, does she? You say no to me all the time.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “There’s still plenty of things I say yes to. My butt is still off-limits.”

“I can’t help it. Every time you say that, it makes me want it more. I can’t wait to f—”

“I wouldn’t suggest any sexual activity right now,” said the doctor as he entered the room.

Well, I guess we were too focused on each other to hear the knock. Whoops.

The doctor looked at the two of them. “You both look old enough to not need a lecture on safe sex, but I never know for sure…”

“Monogamous, clean, and protected,” Zach replied, suddenly feeling like a teen getting a lecture from his parents. And as much as he hated the word “clean” in this context, he couldn’t figure out a faster way to get his point across.

And it had to be fast, as this conversation needed to end. Like yesterday.

“Good. Too many young people think because they can’t get pregnant that way, they don’t need to play it safe. And then, I end up treating them for STIs. But back to what I started to say in the first place. Miss St. James has a serious concussion. She hit the back of her head in addition to the blows to her face. She is going to be nauseous the next few days. As such, I wouldn’t recommend any sexual activity until she is feeling better.”

Zach looked over at her. “She’s on a strict cuddles and rest regimen for the time being.”

The doctor chuckled. “Sounds like a plan.” He turned to Hannah. “A nurse will be in to get you in a few minutes for imaging. We need to make sure nothing was broken when you were hit and ensure there’s nothing serious going on.”

“Do you think there is something serious?” she asked. Zach could feel her body tense as she asked the question.

“You’re not showing any symptoms, but with head injuries we like to be proactive. Sometimes symptoms don’t show until later,” he explained. “When we suspect a concussion, we prefer to do a CT of your head just in case.”

Her hand relaxed against Zach’s. “So it’s just a precaution?”

“Just a precaution,” he assured her. “Once we get the images back, we can discuss your treatment options. Most likely, it’ll be pain medication, anti-inflammatories, and rest.”

When they got home, Zach took Hannah through the side door so he could get her straight into bed. The nurse had given her another dose of pain meds before they left, and she could barely keep her eyes open.

He put her blood-stained clothes in the trash, carefully cleaned her face and neck, and tucked her into bed. Bending down, he dropped a kiss on her forehead.

“Mm-hmm,” she moaned quietly. “I love you, Zach.”

He started to say the words back but was interrupted by a snore. *Well, then. I guess I’ll wait.*

“How’s she doing?” Janet asked as he walked into the kitchen.

“Sleeping. They gave her some pain meds, which knocked her out. Thankfully, the imaging all showed just deep tissue injuries and no broken bones or a brain bleed. Her doctor said no work for at least a week. No driving, either.”

Ollie ran over and hugged Zach. “Is Hannah going to be okay?”

“Yes, sweetie, she will. There’s just a lot of bruising and swelling. But she’s going to have to reschedule your spa date.”

“I hadn’t even thought about that. I was just worried about her.”

He gave her a little squeeze. “How was riding today?”

“Fun. I’m learning how to put my saddle on a horse. It’s a *lot* of work.”

“Are your sisters in their rooms?”

She nodded.

“Have you guys eaten dinner yet?”

“I was going to order something if you guys weren’t home soon,” Janet answered.

“It’s your night, Ollie. What should we get?”

“Can Hannah eat?” she asked.

“Probably not much. She’s nauseous and her jaw hurts.”

“Could she eat soup?”

“Probably, why?”

“I was thinking we could get Italian and she could get that soup she likes.”

He hugged her again. “Good thinking. It doesn’t take much chewing, and she needs to eat with her meds. Can you find out what everyone wants so I can put in the order?”

She nodded and ran off to ask her sisters.

Janet patted the couch seat next to her. When he sat down, she wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “And how are you doing?”

“How am *I* doing?”

“Yes, how are you doing? I hope you’re not blaming yourself for today.”

Of course, I am. His silence answered the question for him.

“You aren’t responsible for Henry. He’s an adult, and he makes stupid choices. Why he thought attacking Hannah would make you change your mind about your name, I don’t know.”

“She laughed at him. He hates that. He has zero self-control when he feels made fun of or belittled. It’s why he hit Mom when we were meeting with the lawyers.”

“He’s a narcissistic baby who doesn’t like to be told no.”

“I never thought Hannah would meet him, so I never warned her about him. That’s why I feel guilty.”

“Honey, none of this is your fault. You had no reason to think he’d do this. The blame is entirely his.”

“Did you tell the girls it was him?”

She shook her head. “Just that it happened at work. I didn’t want them blaming themselves, too.”

“Good. They don’t need to know the details right now. Have you heard anything from the police?”

“One of the officers said Henry was arrested. I’d imagine by now he already posted bail.”

He massaged his temples. “Assuming he had one. He has enough legal connections that I bet he gets out of this with a slap on the wrist.”

She sighed. “Unfortunately, you’re probably right. Our lawyer filed for a restraining order today. And for trespass. He will be arrested if he steps foot on company property again.”

“She thought it was me.”

“What?”

“When she was told she had a visitor, she thought it was me. The receptionist said, ‘Tall, blonde, and handsome,’ and since I look just like him, only younger, she thought I was surprising her.”

“We had a talk today with staff and showed them photos of both of you. They’ll know the difference now. And if there’s any question, they’re to call security first. Next week, a locked door is going in that blocks access beyond the lobby. So even if he does show up, he can’t get far.”

He leaned his head against her shoulder. “I was so worried when you texted. I barely kept it together on the way to the hospital.”

She wrapped an arm around him. “You should have seen me when I walked into her office. There was blood on the floor, and her face was so

swollen. All I could think was that someone hurt my baby. It took everything I had to not break down crying."

"What if he tries it again?" he asked, his voice cracking.

"We'll be better prepared. But she's not going to let him get close to her again. She knows what he's capable of."

"Just in case, I'm going to get her some pepper spray. It'll give her time to get away if he comes close."

"Chances are, he's learned that it's no good to come at you through her. But it's best to be prepared just in case."

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Chapter Twenty-seven

June 1, 2023

When Janet texted me today, I feared the worst. All I knew was that Hannah had been attacked and was being taken to the hospital. I rushed to the hospital, only to sit in my SUV crying for ten minutes. What if I'd lost her?

Knowing it was Henry who did this to her makes me even angrier. Her face is so swollen and bruised. Every time she moves in her sleep, she cries. And each time, it breaks my heart just a little more.

I'm so glad Mom listened to me and filed for divorce from him after he left. It was only a matter of time before he turned violent on her. I'm just so sorry I couldn't have

spared Hannah from his wrath, too…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

ZACH LAID IN BED, afraid to fall asleep. Not just because he was worried about Hannah, but also because he knew the dreams would come. They always did.

He made a pot of coffee with dinner and drank the entire thing. He pulled out his journal and poured his heart out over what had happened. But eventually, the warmth of her body next to him and the sound of her breathing lulled him to sleep…

Zach had insisted on going to the meeting with Henry and the divorce attorneys. His mom insisted she would be fine, but he knew better. She'd already been hospitalized twice during her pregnancy, and many days could barely get out of bed. There was no way he was letting Henry near her without him present.

When they walked into the conference room, Henry and his attorney were already there waiting.

"Of course, you'd be late," Henry scoffed.

Zach looked at his watch. "We're actually ten minutes early."

"Whatever."

Henry's lawyer gave him a look that told him to behave.

Zach seated his mom as far from Henry as he could, then sat next to her.

"Here are my client's demands," the lawyer said as he pushed paperwork over to them.

Zach took a copy to look at. He couldn't believe what was on it. The house? Alimony? *Mom can barely work.*

Mr. Giles, his mom's attorney, perused the list. "The house is a non-starter, as are her trust fund, the family business, and alimony. The house and business are owned by the family trust. Mr. Hayes was smart and put all the assets into the trust before he passed away. As such, none of it belongs to Maggie and is not considered marital property."

"But—" Henry said.

"I'm not finished. All improvements to the house were paid for by the trust. Which means Mr. Pierce has made no monetary investment in the home.

"Her trust is an inheritance and is therefore protected. She kept all funds in the original account and never co-mingled them with marital assets. Her plan was always for the money to pay for her children's college education."

He took off his glasses and sat them on the table. "And alimony? From what? She's barely able to work currently. And even if she was working, we're fairly certain Mr. Pierce makes more than she does. We can only guess, though, since he's always kept his paycheck in a separate account. Throughout their marriage, he's only provided $1,000 a month to the joint account, even though we know he makes significantly more than that."

Henry's lawyer looked angrily at him for a moment, then turned his attention to Mr. Giles. "We'll need proof of the claims you've made so we can verify whether or not they're joint assets."

He handed the man a stack of papers. "And we'll need information regarding assets like bank accounts and investments that he has kept separate from his wife. Those are marital assets."

“And my client denies paternity of the two daughters borne to his wife, in addition to the current pregnancy.”

Mr. Giles had warned Zach and his mom this would likely be the case, but it still made Zach angry to hear it.

“We figured that would be the case.” He pulled out several pages from his folder. “We had DNA tests run on Zach, Willow, Violet, and a hairbrush you left behind. As you can see, Zach and his siblings all share the same father. The DNA from your brush matched as the father. Now, Zach is practically your twin, so it would be hard to deny his parentage. But you’re welcome to submit your own sample to that lab and have it run. As to the current pregnancy, a test can be run to verify paternity once she is born.”

Henry looked at the pages, then threw them at his lawyer. “I don’t care what you say; they’re not mine, and I don’t want them.” He turned to his attorney. “I’ll give up rights to them all. I don’t want to give them a dime.”

“Giving up parental rights doesn’t change the child support issue,” Mr. Giles explained. “It just means you no longer can make legal decisions for them, have no custody, etc.”

He crossed his arms. “I’m not paying.”

“Well, that’s for the judge to decide, and I doubt he’d side with you. The funds would just be automatically deducted from your check. You’re an attorney. I know you know how this works.”

“Not only do I want my last name back, but I want the kids to all be Hayes’ as well,” Maggie stated.

“I don’t give a shit about the girls. But Zach? Over my dead body.”

Zach dug his fingers in his thigh. “That’s fine. In three years, I’ll be eighteen. And I’ll immediately file for a name change. I refuse to be named after you for the rest of my life.”

“If that bitch just would’ve had sons, this wouldn’t be necessary.”

Maggie stood up. “No, if you weren’t a horrible human being, this wouldn’t be necessary.” She nodded toward Zach, which was their signal that she wanted to leave.

They were halfway to the door when Henry ran over to block their path. “You won’t get away with this, you fat cow,” he said before slapping her.

In an instant, Zach had him pinned against the wall. “If you ever touch my mother—or anyone else in my family—ever again, I’ll—” his fist was suspended in the air, ready to punch Henry.

Mr. Giles grabbed Zach’s hand. “Let’s not do or say anything that I’ll need to testify to.”

Zach dropped his arm to his side and stepped back. Henry straightened his coat and tie, then pointed at his son. “I want him arrested.”

“For what?” Mr. Giles asked.

“Assault.”

“Defense of self or others, Mr. Pierce. And here, I thought you were a capable attorney.”

“It’s your word against mine.”

“Two problems there,” Mr. Giles said. “You should know your attorney can’t lie for you. He’ll be disbarred. And everyone agreed for this meeting to be recorded. Did you really forget about the camera over there in the corner? If anyone would be arrested, it would be you. You assaulted your pregnant wife.”

Mr. Giles turned to the other attorney. “We’ll be filing for a restraining order later today. And from now on, all communication will be done via the lawyers only. I expect the files on Mr. Pierce’s assets by the end of the week.” He opened the door to lead Zach and Maggie to the elevators.

“Stupid, fat whore,” Henry muttered.

Zach ran back over to him. “What did you call my mother?”

“You heard me.”

He started to raise his fist.

“Zach! Zach, listen to me. He’s not worth it,” his mother pleaded.

Suddenly, he was woken from his dream by someone shaking his shoulder.

“Zach!” Hannah mumbled loudly. “Wake up. You’re having a nightmare again.”

“What?” he asked.

“You were yelling and thrashing in your sleep.”

That immediately grabbed his attention. “Oh, God, Hannah. I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No, I’d gotten up to go the bathroom and take my next dose of meds, and you were like that when I came back in the room.”

“You should have woken me up. I would have gotten your meds for you.”

She giggled. “Could you have peed for me as well? There was no reason for us both to get up.”

“How are you feeling?”

“In pain. Hence me waking up to take more medicine.”

He rubbed his fingers against the right side of her face. “I’m so sorry this happened.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“He hit my mom once. I slammed him against the wall. I was only fifteen, but thanks to football, I had a lot of muscle.”

She snuggled up against his side. “Is that what you were dreaming about?”

“Yeah. It was when we met with the lawyers about the divorce. I refused to let her go without me. The pregnancy made her so sick, and I worried about her. But when he hit her, I saw red. I would have punched him back, but her lawyer stopped me.”

“Has your dad attempted anything with you since then?”

“At least once a year, he tried to get the child support ended or my custody of the girls revoked. But that was all through the lawyers. I haven’t heard from him directly in years.”

“I wonder why he thought it would be a good idea to come to me instead of you.”

“Probably because it was easier. He’s banned from every property owned by the business, as well as here. He’d have to climb the fence, anyway, and that’s too much physical exertion for him. If he sends anything to my office, it goes through my assistant first, and she’d just send it back. And she wouldn’t let any calls through, either. So, he knows trying to reach me is difficult. But you? You were a sitting duck because I never warned you about him.”

“It’s okay—”

“I know what you’re going to say. My therapist said the same thing. He was a part of my past, and I had no reason to think he would try to pop up again like that. It doesn’t stop me from feeling guilty about what he did to you.”

She rested her head on his chest. “I’m so glad you and your sisters took after your mom. He really is an awful human being.”

“Me, too.” Although, he was beginning to wonder about Vi. Between the *accidents* with Hannah’s food allergies, and the note he caught her trying to slip into Hannah’s coffee cup earlier this week, he was more than a little

worried that she was taking after their dad. They'd had a long talk about how wrong it was to do that, and she lost her cell phone for two weeks. He was really hoping it was just a teenager acting out and not something more.

Just in case, he'd also gotten her an appointment at the same therapy clinic he went to. Clearly, she had some issues she needed to work through.

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Chapter Twenty-eight

June 5, 2023

I swear to God, all I want to do right now is beat the crap out of Henry. The bruises all over Hannah have me seeing red. Between the pain and nightmares, she's had a hard time sleeping since the attack. Her doctor adjusted the pain med prescription, and that seems to be helping.

I hate that she now has to suffer through nightmares because of him. I have had enough for the both of us.

I guess he thinks either I'll bend to his ways to protect her, or I'll lose her and be miserable. He underestimates Hannah and I. Our connection is too strong to let him get between us. She's already made it clear that she isn't going anywhere

and that I cannot change my name…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

ZACH WAS IN THE middle of reading a sales report when a knock at the door interrupted his concentration.

“Can I lay down with Hannah?” Ollie asked. The last few days she’d been spending a lot of time with Hannah, often taking a nap with her.

“Sure, sweetheart. I’m sure she would love that.”

Ever since the incident, Hannah had been experiencing panic attacks if left alone, hence his new office set-up in their bedroom. But having someone in bed with her was even better. Between him, Janet, Willow, Ollie, and Annie, they’d worked out a schedule to keep Hannah company.

They’d been a huge help on Saturday, which allowed Ollie’s party to go on as scheduled. She had wanted to cancel, but Hannah talked her out of it.

He worked from home Monday and Friday, and they’d cover the other days for him. This allowed him to handle most of his paperwork and emails, while still being able to visit stores throughout the week. Anything he couldn’t do from home would be taken care of by his vice-president and assistant in the meantime. He had no intention of returning to the office until Hannah wasn’t heavily reliant on pain medication.

He smiled as he watched Ollie snuggle up against Hannah.

For years, everyone—his therapist included—had been telling him he was a *parent*. That while the girls were biologically his sisters, they were his daughters. It was an idea he’d pushed back against for years. But ever since Hannah came into his life, he’d begun to think they were right.

He'd decided to be their legal guardian instead of adopting them after their mom died. And for years, it left them in a bit of limbo. On more than one occasion, Hannah had seen the problems he'd run into because of it. Like when he would discipline one of the girls and they'd snap back that he wasn't their parent. Maybe it was time to change that.

They've been so uncertain about things ever since they realized I was serious about Hannah. I've begun to worry that they think they'll be replaced by Hannah and any kids we have. I know that could never be the case, but Willow and Vi don't see it that way. And they're scared.

Zach pulled up his personal email and shot a message over to his family lawyer. He wanted Mr. Giles to see if he could adopt the girls without removing his mom's name from their birth certificates. If he could find a solution for that, then it would be time to have a discussion with the girls. Maybe this could help with the uncertainty they were feeling about their lives. Plus, it would remove Henry from their birth certificates.

He looked over at the bed and saw Hannah with an arm wrapped around Ollie. Soft snores could already be heard from his sister. While Willow and Vi might claim they didn't need another mom, Ollie certainly did. And the more time she spent with Hannah, the more it became clear who she wanted to fill the vacancy. Just as it was clear that Hannah was more than happy to take on the job. The two of them were becoming thick as thieves.

"Aren't they just adorable?" he heard from the doorway.

"I was just thinking about how close the two of them have become. You just might be a grandma sooner than you think," he told Janet.

"Oh, really? Finally decided adoption is the right decision?"

"I have my lawyer looking into it. I'm worried they're thinking that if I marry Hannah and have kids, they'll be replaced. This just might be the

solution to show I'm committed to them for life."

She raised an eyebrow. "*If?*"

He laughed. "My lips are sealed on that topic."

"Well, you'd better get going. Willow is pacing by the front door."

"She's been like that all day. First car is always exciting. Thanks for coming over so I can head out for a little bit."

"Not a problem. Besides, now I have time to sit here and think about wedding planning and 'Number One Grandma' shirts."

A notification popped up on his phone saying their ride share had arrived.

"Okay, ride's here. Hopefully, we won't be more than a couple hours."

"Go. I have everything under control here. I've been a parent a lot longer than you," she said with a laugh.

Sure enough, Willow was waiting for him at the front door.

"Got somewhere important to go?" he asked. "I was thinking of taking a nap."

"Zach!" she rolled her eyes. "I swear, you're getting cornier by the day."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Every family needs bad dad jokes and such. And I seem to be the only one around here raising kids, so…"



"Okay, so we're going to be looking at used cars, not those pretty new ones over there," Zach told Willow as they started walking around the lot. "Preferably a sedan or small SUV. Absolutely no sports cars."

"But you have one."

“And I’m twenty-eight with twelve years’ driving experience. You want something safe but a little older so you’re not always worried about it. You get a new car and you’re constantly thinking about other people damaging it.”

“*Fine*.”

“Hey, you’re lucky; I’m planning to get you something less than five years old. My first car was a bit of a beater because I paid for it myself.” *Although, with Mom being so sick, I drove her ‘mom van’ almost as often as I drove my own car.*

After a little over an hour, Willow found a red Honda Accord she loved.

“You sure? Cars can’t be exchanged like other purchases.”

She nodded. “This is the one. It’s not too big, so I won’t be scared to drive it. And I know these are good, reliable cars. It’s only three years old with 28,000 miles on it.”

“Did some research, huh?”

“Only every night since you told me we were going car shopping today.”

He laughed and pulled her against his side. “Good job. I’m proud of you for taking this so seriously. Cars are a big responsibility.”

“Can we just go buy my car now?”

He snapped a few photos of the car so they could let the salesman know which one they wanted. “Come on, let’s go inside and buy you a car.”

Even though they were paying cash, the purchase process still took nearly an hour. Besides all the paperwork, they also detailed the car and filled it with gas.

Zach handed her the keys. “Drive us home?”

“Oh, I thought—I get to drive?”

“Yes, I’m not going to take your fun by driving your car first.”

“Thank you! Thank you!” she said as she jumped up and down, then hugged him.

“This will also give me the chance to see you drive it before you take you and Vi to work tomorrow.” Willow was working three days a week while she helped with Hannah, and Vi was doing five four-hour days.

She sat in the seat and started adjusting her seat and mirrors. “I promise I’ll drive safe.”

“I know you will. Of the three of you, you’ve always been the one who is cautious and safe. It’s just that until you have more experience driving—and specifically with this car—things can happen. As a matter of fact, you should give me your phone.”

She pulled it from her pocket. “I wasn’t going to use it.”

“Oh, sorry, no, that’s not why I wanted it.” He snapped a few photos of her behind the wheel. “I need to install the app for our insurance company. You’ll need it in case of an accident or to get roadside assistance. I added your car while we were waiting for it to be ready.”

“Oh.”

“I know you’re too careful about safety to use your phone while driving.”

She sighed. “I wish Mom could be here to see me in my first car.”

He reached over and patted her hand. “Me, too, Willow.”

“I’m glad you’re here, though. We might have ended up with a shitty sperm donor, but we got lucky in having you. Better parent than he ever was.”

He blinked a couple times to stop the tears he could feel forming. “You’re just saying that because I bought you a car.”

It was her turn to reach over and squeeze his hand. “I mean it, Zach. You’ve been Mom and Dad to us for years, and I don’t think we’ve ever

really appreciated you the way we should. With everything that happened last week, it got me thinking about how lucky we are. We had you in our lives, raising us instead of him. We'd be completely different people if he had raised us."

This time, the tears managed to slip down his cheeks. Quickly, he swiped them away. "Thank you. That really does mean a lot."

She turned the car on and headed out of the dealership toward home. "I know we give you a hard time about things. It wasn't until you gave us that lecture that it really hit me how much you do for us. We treat you like an annoying older brother when really, we should be treating you like a parent. I think seeing you as our brother makes it easier to ignore rules and, to be honest, ignore you."

"You guys ignore me? No way. I never noticed."

"And there you go again. You tend to hide your feelings behind humor. You've been better about showing them since Hannah, though."

He sat quietly for a while and thought over what she'd said. "Do you think it would make things easier if I was the parent instead of the brother?"

She started to turn to look at him but immediately put her eyes back on the road. "Adopt us?"

"I've been thinking about it lately. Folks have been telling me for years that I should. And you guys wouldn't have his name on your birth certificate anymore."

She laughed. "That's a good enough reason right there."

"I wouldn't do it without talking to you guys first, though."

"Well, if you're asking me, I'm fine with it. Although, it might be weird to call you Dad."

"Zach is still perfectly fine, no matter what."

“Ollie will probably call you that, though.”

“You think so?”

“Her relationship with you has always been more like parent and child. And I think she wants Hannah as a bonus mom.”

“You’re awfully observant, aren’t you?”

“As you keep pointing out, I’m a lot like Mom. And she always knew what was going on, even when we didn’t think she did.”

“And wise as well.”

“I can’t help it; I got it from my dad.”

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Chapter Twenty-nine

ALEX GLARED AT HANNAH as she hopped down from his truck.

“I really don’t need help getting out of a vehicle. I’ve done it fine by myself for years.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t have issues with double vision or dizziness back then,” he told her. “You’re my responsibility today, and Zach will kill me if anything happens to you. And if he doesn’t, Mom and Dad will.”

He grabbed the boxes from the back seat and followed her into the building.

It had been more than three weeks since the incident with Henry, but she was still having issues with her injuries. Thanks to them, she still wasn’t cleared for work or driving. And sitting at home doing nothing was driving her crazy. That’s why she had Mom bring over all their photo albums so she could search for ones of Zach and his family. She also scoured through the hard drive where Mom kept all their digital photos.

Now, she had everything organized and ready for scanning and printing. But since she couldn’t drive—and this project was a surprise for Zach—

Alex had to take her to Houston instead.

“You must be Miss St. James,” the man inside said. “I’m Denton. You can sit the boxes up here on the counter.”

“You sure you don’t want me to stay?” Alex asked her.

“You’re good. I’ll just sit here and listen to music on my phone while he scans everything in. Once we’re close to being done, I’ll let you know.”

He kissed her on top of her head. “Okay, I’m gonna run errands. Text me if you need anything.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” she asked Denton.

“If you want to take the photos out of the albums, that’ll help speed things up.”

Thirty minutes later, she had the albums emptied into the boxes he’d given her.

“Once they come out of the scanner, you can put them back into the albums.” They worked together all day loading photos in the scanner and putting them back into the albums. By the time three o’clock rolled around, they were almost done.

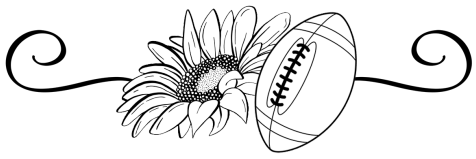
While Denton put the printed photos in the frames she’d bought, she texted Alex.

“This is a really nice gift,” Denton said as he packed everything into the boxes.

“I’m hoping they’ll pick out a bunch of photos to put up around the house. I wanted to surprise them with the photos already printed and hung, but I didn’t want to overstep. So, I’m just starting with photos of us for our bedroom. Hopefully soon, I’ll be sending you a big print order.”

“Homes are meant to be filled with family photos. We’ve gotten so used to having pictures on our phones that we forget about having them printed.”

“I hadn’t thought about it until he showed me the albums. The photos are important to him, but they’re hidden away in a book on a shelf. They should be on the walls.”



Hannah had just finished arranging the frames on Zach’s dresser when she heard him at the side door.

“How was your—?” He looked at the dresser. “What—? Are these all of us?”

She nodded. “There’s our kiss from your eighth birthday, us dancing at prom, playing in the garden at my house, and more.”

He picked up the professional photo they’d had taken at prom. “I remember your date got mad because I wanted to take a photo with you.”

“And yours stomped off.”

“Yeah, she wasn’t happy about it. But I explained that my mom was sick and asked me to take a photo with you. By her reaction, I gather she wrote you off as a family friend and not romantic competition.”

Hannah laughed. “If only she knew…” She picked up the hard drive and held it out to him. “On here is every photo from your albums, my mom’s albums, and all her digital photos. I didn’t know where your digital photos are stored, otherwise I would have added them too.”

“You had all our photos scanned?”

“I noticed you don’t have any photos on your walls. I thought maybe getting them digitized would help with that. Denton can print anything you want.”

He sat the drive onto the dresser and pulled her into his arms. “Thank you for that. It just always felt like a huge task, and I kept putting it off.”

“I thought the girls might like seeing photos of your mom. Especially Ollie.”

“They would. I would, too. It’s long past due.”

“I wasn’t sure which ones you’d want, so I just printed photos of us.”

Zach looked over the collection. “Well, I guess now I know why your mom took that photo of us kissing.”

“I told her I wanted to recreate the other photo, so we have a then and now.”

“I love it. It’s like a timeline of our relationship. Of course, my favorite photos aren’t up there.”

“They aren’t?” *Well, shoot. I thought I’d done a good job choosing.*

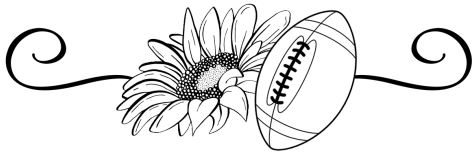
He pulled her close again. “Those are for my eyes only,” he whispered in her ear. “I don’t want someone printing them for me. Maybe I’ll print them up myself…”

She swatted at his chest. “Those are *not* for framing.”

“What are you talking about? I plan on filling the wall behind our bed with your nudes.”

“And when someone else needs to come in our rooms? Like when Mom helped me when I was sick or Alex bringing in the photos today?”

“We bar anyone else from coming in our room?” he joked. “Oh well, at least I get to see the real thing every day. I’ll just commit it to memory instead.”



THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, ZACH called for a family meeting over dinner.

“Uh oh. Which one of us is in trouble this time?” Willow asked.

Zach chuckled as he carried the platter of pork chops to the table. “No one. Family meetings shouldn’t just be about punishment. They should be to share news, discuss things, and the like.”

Vi rolled her eyes. “You’re marrying Hannah, aren’t you?”

“Hopefully one day. But no, that’s not what I want to talk about.” He held up a portable hard drive. “Yesterday, Hannah spent the day in Houston doing something special for us. This drive holds a digital copy of every printed photo of our family that we had, plus Janet’s. It also has all the digital photos Janet had as well as everything stored on my own computer.”

“Photos of Mom?” Ollie asked.

“Hundreds of them. Maybe more.”

“Can I borrow the hard drive later?” Vi asked.

“Hannah had a drive made for each of you. That way, you could see the pictures whenever you want. But I’m also planning to get a bunch of them printed. Our walls should be filled with family photos, but instead they’re bare. I want to change that.”

Willow handed him the bowl of au gratin potatoes. “Can we help pick which ones?”

He nodded. “That was my hope. I’ve already created a folder on our network drive. Any photos you want printed, copy them into that folder. I’ll

give you guys a couple of weeks since there are a lot of photos to go through. If it's something you want specifically for your room, drop it in your folder that's inside the main one."

"Hannah did this for us?" Willow asked.

"She thought that we'd like to have easy access to all our photos. She wanted to have some printed and framed, but she wasn't sure what our reaction would be. So, she just did photos of me and her for our bedroom."

Ollie perked up. "Photos of you guys? Recent photos?"

"No, mostly from when we were young."

She jumped out of her chair. "Can I see?"

"Can it wait—?" he started to ask. But the eager look on her face answered the question for him. He sat his fork down. "Okay, come on, I'll let you see. They're on my dresser and the wall behind it."

All three girls followed him to his room.

"The oldest photo is from my eighth birthday. Alex dared Hannah to kiss me," he explained.

Willow picked up a frame. "You guys went to prom together?"

"No, but I did get a couple dances and this photo."

She sat it back down on the dresser. "And we can get photos printed and framed like this?"

"As many as you want. You can even choose the frames. Now, let's go eat dinner before our food gets cold."

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Chapter Thirty

July 5, 2023

Hannah finally returns to work today. She still has some traces of the bruises remaining, but her eye has healed and she no longer sees double out of it. A huge part of me wants to beg her to stay home. My income is more than enough for all of us. But I know how important her work is to her. Trent did a number on her and made her believe she was worthless. This job has helped prove otherwise.

My therapist has talked me down more than once. I'm just so worried about Henry showing up there again. Or her having panic attacks. She's started seeing her own therapist, but she still has nightmares at least a few times a week.

I know her parents are right there, but it still scares me to see her returning to work…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

ZACH WRAPPED HIS ARMS around Hannah as she packed her lunch. She leaned back against him. “Are you sure you want to go back to work today?”

“As sure as I was the last ten times you asked.”

“Sorry. It’s just the thought of something happening to you again…”

She turned around in his arms. “Everything will be fine. There’s a new gate at the entrance to the parking lot, and security will walk me to and from my vehicle every day. And I won’t run any errands for the time being. I’ll be one hundred percent on property the entire time. Mom and Dad have done everything they can to make certain I’m safe.”

“I know. It’s just that I keep thinking about you lying there in the hospital bed, bloody and bruised. And it terrifies me.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. “The memories of that day terrify me, too. But hiding at home lets him win. And it’s a short week, so perfect for transitioning me back.”

He sighed. “I know. Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

She kissed him again. “And that’s what makes you such a good person: you care so much. But even so, you let me make my own decisions.” *Who am I kidding? Trent wouldn’t have even cared; other than the fact it meant I was home twenty-four-seven while healing.*

“Can I check in with you throughout the day?”

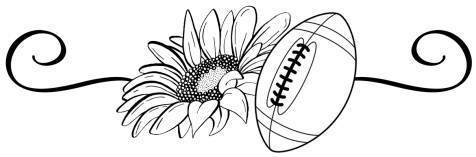
“You’d better. And if Mr. Dirty Talker doesn’t show up, I’ll be awfully disappointed. I’ve missed him,” she replied with a playful wiggle against his crotch.

“Stop that,” he growled. “Otherwise, you won’t be making it to work today.”

“Just wanted to remind you of what you’ve been missing the last several weeks,” she said with a wink.

“Oh, believe me, I know.”

“Well, maybe keep that in mind when we head to bed tonight, then?”



Hannah stood outside the door to her office, frozen in place. Her heart was racing like she’d run to work instead of driving. And if her breathing didn’t slow down, she was afraid she was going to hyperventilate.

During her time off, her office had been redecorated. The walls were now a soft blue color, and a new desk and chair replaced the ones she’d had previously. Her dad had ensured a panic button was installed under her desk, and her phone was on the right side. The old desk only had the access port for cords on the wall side, so the phone had been over there. But as they’d learned, that was too far in an emergency.

Slowly, she moved into her office and toward her chair. *I hate that this is affecting me like this. How dare that asshole ruin the enjoyment I got from being here and contributing to my family’s business. No. I refuse to give him anything else.*

She pushed herself to move faster. *Time to get to work. Folks have been picking up my slack long enough.*

By lunchtime, she was already feeling exhausted. *Good thing there's only two days of work this week.* She wasn't quite ready to face all the stares and questions from her coworkers, so she headed to her mom's office instead.

"How's everything?" her mom asked.

"Tiring. Between being lazy for weeks, and the anxiety over being back in my office, I'm ready for bed."

"Sweetheart, you know you don't have to work the whole day, right? If you want to head home after lunch, do it. We can transition you back as slow as you need us to."

Hannah sighed. *Mom is right. Maybe expecting to put in a full day was asking too much.*

"Okay. I'll go home and take a nap after this."

"Good. How many times has Zach checked in with you today?"

"Like a dozen." *No dirty messages yet, though. I'm a little disappointed.*

Slowly, she opened her lunch bag. She hadn't seen a note from Vi in weeks, but she still worried every time she opened her lunch or grabbed her coffee cup. But thankfully, the only note she found inside was from Zach.

> Hope you're having a good day. I'm proud of you for going back to work, even if I'm not happy about it.
>
> ❤ Zach

She smiled as she read it.

“What’s that?” Janet asked.

She held it up so her mom could see it.

“Aww, a lunch note from Zach. I remember when I used to do that for you kids.”

I used to tell Mom they embarrassed me, but secretly I loved them. “It’s the first one he’s left for me. I’ll have to save it.” *I’ll pin it in my office and look at it every time I think about the horrible ones Vi left for me.*

After lunch, she texted Zach to let him know she was headed home.

Zach

Tired?

Hannah

Yeah, I think it was too soon for a full day.

Especially with the emotion of it all.

Zach

Willow and Vi are at work, so you have the house to yourself for a bit.

There’s a present for you in my nightstand drawer.

I was going to give it to you before I did my exercising tonight, but maybe I can make it home early.

Hannah

You’ve got me curious now.

Zach

Text me when you find it.

Hannah went straight to his drawer once she was home. Inside was a vibrator with a bow tied around it.

Hannah

A vibrator?

Zach

I figured you were out of practice and might need a little warming up first.

Hannah

Watch out. I might like it better than you.

Zach

Oh, no. A battery operated toy will not replace me.

Hannah

I don’t know. I have plenty of time with it before you get home…

She stripped off her clothes, dropped them to the floor, and took a picture of the pile.

Hannah

I mean, it’s already got me naked…

After climbing into bed, she turned the vibrator on and pressed it against her nipple. She took a picture of that as well.

Hannah

And it made my nipples hard awfully fast…

She moved it down so it sat just below her bikini line and snapped another photo.

Hannah

Maybe I should try it lower?

Zach

I’m on my way home now. I swear to God if you come more than once, I’m gonna spank you.

Hannah

Who knows? Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I’d like that.

Zach

You’re really asking for it, aren’t you?

She laughed.

Hannah

I sure am.

She’d been trying for weeks to get him to make love to her, but he was worried about her injuries. Even after she’d been cleared by her doctor, he still held back. *Well, I’m tired of waiting. If being a brat is the only way to get his attention, then so be it.*

While she waited for him to get home, she used the vibe to warm up. She had no intention of finishing with it; she preferred doing that with him. But she could edge herself a bit to help melt away the day’s stress.

The moment he walked in the door, he kicked off his shoes and started pulling off his clothes. “How many times?”

“Four.”

“Now I know that’s a lie. You’d be halfway asleep already. How many?”

“Fine, three.”

“Hannah…” he said as he stalked toward her. “Three is more than one.”

“Three times as many,” she said with a giggle. “And I enjoyed every one of them.”

His eyes turned dark blue, like a stormy sky. *I love it when he gets worked up like this. And if letting him punish me a little makes him stop worrying about me, it’ll be worth it.*

“Is that your final answer?”

“Three. Final answer.”

He sat down on the bed and grabbed her, hauling her across his lap. His hand caressed her lower back, then moved lower. “You know, there are much better things I can do to this ass than spank it.”

“Three times,” she sang.

She heard him sigh loudly right before the first smack hit her cheek. It stung a little, but surprisingly also made her ache between her legs. And he went from a semi to a full hard-on. *Well, isn’t that interesting?*

He massaged the spot he’d just spanked. “There’s still time to change your answer.”

She held three fingers up in the air.

The second smack was on the other cheek. The ache between her legs intensified, and she felt his cock twitch against her. Like with the first one, he massaged the spot afterward as he waited for her to change her answer.

“None,” she finally admitted. “I only warmed myself up. It’s no fun coming without you.”

He turned her over and sat her across his lap. “Then why did you lie? You’ve said before you had zero interest in spankings.”

“I had to get you out of your head somehow. You’ve been so worried about me that we haven’t had sex in weeks. And maybe I spoke too soon about spankings.”

His eyes grew wide. “You enjoyed that?”

“I think so? And based on him,” she said as she pointed down, “you did as well.”

“I just like having my hands on you. You know how much I love your ass. And no, not just because of the things I want to do to it. I liked it long before my mind went to live permanently in the gutter.”

She reached between them and stroked him. “So, are we finally ready to end this dry spell? Because I could really use a few orgasms before I take my nap.”

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Chapter Thirty-one

July 8, 2023

I woke up to like a dozen texts from Sean this morning, all asking whether I was coming to breakfast this morning. I've never seen him so excited about our weekly get-together.

It was a nice change of pace to see him this way. For weeks now, all he's done is complain about his physical therapist. He'll be so happy next week when he's done with the sessions. I can't remember the last time I saw him that grouchy about anything…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

“WHAT’S SO IMPORTANT THAT you needed to start texting me at four in the morning?” Zach asked. “And why did we need to meet at your house instead of the diner? You didn’t get hurt again, did you?”

“No, nothing like that. I have a surprise for you. I know it’s kind of last minute, but I just got the okay yesterday.”

Zach sat down on the couch. “Okay for what?”

“For you to come to training camp.”

“I can come and watch you guys?”

“*Better*. You can come and play. It’ll be the first days, which means no contact. And you’ll be with the rookies. But you can stand in as quarterback and run drills with them and stuff. Throw the ball. Like you do with me.”

Zach’s eyes lit up. “*Really*?” While it would just be some practices, it would give him a taste of being in the pros.

“Really. It took a while for legal to approve it, which is why I couldn’t say anything until now. You’ll need to sign some waivers and such once you get there.”

“When do we leave?”

“The sixteenth. Camp starts the next day.”

Zach ran his hand across his face. “Now, that is cutting it close. I’ll have to get everything set up at work and talk to Hannah about watching the girls. How long would I be gone?”

“Rookies are the first three days, then everyone plays. So, you could go home Thursday or stay an extra day and watch us all on the field. Do you think Hannah will be okay with it?”

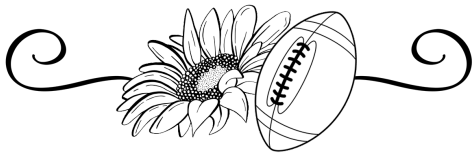
Zach laughed. “Okay with it? I think she’ll be packing my suitcases.”

“That eager to get rid of you? I’m surprised. She seemed pretty happy with you when—”

“Yeah, that was a one-time thing, just so you know. Turns out neither of us like being watched, even if it was only for a moment.”

“That’s too bad, ‘cause honestly, you two were really hot together. But I honestly figured as much based on your reactions. So, are you excited about your first training camp?”

“Excited? I don’t know how I’m possibly going to sleep between now and then.”



Hannah yawned as she finished loading the dishwasher. They’d had a girls breakfast this morning since Zach was with Sean. Willow had offered to clean up since Hannah had cooked, but she assured her she had it handled. “This breakfast was a gift to thank you for all the help while I recovered. It wouldn’t be much of a gift if I made you clean up afterward,” she explained.

But now that it was all done, she was in desperate need of a nap. Nightmares had woken her again last night, and she’d had little sleep because of it.

Knowing that if she got in bed, she’d sleep all day, so she opted for the couch instead. She set an alarm on her phone to wake her in two hours, curled up on the couch, and fell asleep.

When she woke up later, Hannah found Zach sitting in the chair waiting for her. She stretched and sat up. “Did you have a good breakfast with Sean?”

“The best. Guess what?”

“He found a girlfriend.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I’m not sure that will ever happen. But it’s even better news than that. To me at least. He’s taking me to training camp.”

“An American Football League training camp?”

He nodded and gave her the details.

“You get to play with a real team? Alongside the pros?”

He barely got out a “yes,” before she squealed and hugged him.

“Do you have suitcases? Where are they? We should start getting you packed so we don’t forget anything.”

He laughed. “I told Sean you’d go straight to the packing. He was worried you wouldn’t want me to go.”

“Not want you to go? Of course I do. Hell, I’ll drive you to the airport myself.”

“You don’t mind watching the girls while I’m away?”

With Zach gone, Vi was likely to further push boundaries in bullying Hannah. But there was no way she was going to tell him about any of it. Even though it was only training camp, it was the AFL. His dream. And she was not letting a bratty little teenager get in the way.

“Not one bit. It’ll give us some more bonding time.”

He pulled her close and kissed her. “You’re the best, you know that?”

She laid her head on his chest. *Nope. There’s no way I’m letting a bully ruin his dreams. Even if it means taking more abuse from his sister. Eventually she has to realize I’m not going anywhere, right? I mean, she’s been so good for a while. Maybe this stage is all over…*

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Chapter Thirty-two

July 16, 2023

Today's the day! Training camp. I can't believe that I'm going to one, let alone getting to run drills. Sure, it's with the rookies, but they're still AFL players.

I worry a little about leaving Hannah alone with the girls, though. She's been quieter and more withdrawn this last week. She assured me it was just nightmares and that everything is great with us. Her words don't ease my worry, though. I'm not exactly experienced when it comes to relationships. What if she's having second thoughts about us?

No, it couldn't possibly be that. She loves me…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

HANNAH BANGED HER HEAD against her steering wheel. *Why oh why did I agree to this? Why didn't I encourage Zach to let Vi stay elsewhere while he was gone?*

Because you can't back down.

Shut up, brain. Stop being rational. Can't I wallow in self-pity for a few minutes first?

But her brain was right. She couldn't back down, nor could she confront her. All she could do was keep her head held high and hope Vi would continue to be good while Zach was gone.

She sighed as she started her vehicle. *Time to go home.* Zach had assured her he could ride with Sean to the airport, but she'd insisted on driving him. It was the first time they'd spent more than a day apart since January, and she was going to miss him.

Setting the radio to an alternative station, she cranked up the volume and pulled out of the parking structure. *At least I have another hour of peace.*

On the way home, she picked up lunch for her, Vi, and Ollie. Willow was working and wouldn't be home until dinner.

She sat the bags on the counter and called out for the girls to come and get their food. When she headed to the bedroom to drop her purse and shoes, she found a note on the door.

Go away, fat pig. No one likes you. They're just trying to be nice. Even Zach wants you to leave. Why don't you make it easy on everyone and leave while he's gone?

Hannah pulled the note off the door, crumpling it in her hand. *It's not true. Zach loves me. I know he does. He tells me every morning before he leaves for work.*. She shook her head. *She's wrong and I'm not letting her get to me.*

She took the note and hid it in the old nursery with the others. It had been tempting to throw it all away, but she'd decided against it. If things got bad, she could show Zach the evidence. Surely, he'd believe her if that ever became necessary.

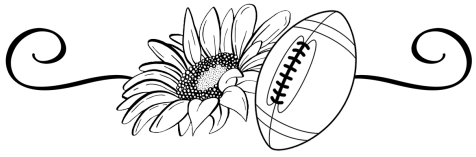
"Where's your sister?" Hannah asked Ollie when she walked back into the kitchen.

"In her room. Like always."

"How about you take her lunch to her, and then we can watch TV together?"

Ollie's face lit up. "Deal!" She grabbed Vi's meal and raced down the hallway to her room.

See? Vi is wrong, Ollie likes me.



"I haven't even been gone twenty-four hours yet and I miss you so much," Zach told Hannah.

“Thank goodness for video chat. At least we can see each other.” In fact, she had screencast her phone to the TV so she could see him on the big screen.

“It’s not the same, though. I don’t know how I’m going to sleep without your warm body snuggled against mine.”

“I do have a little something for you.”

“You do?”

“Is the TV there a smart one? Can you share your phone screen to it?”

“Yes, it asked me earlier if I wanted to connect my phone to it.”

She sat her phone down on the bed against the stack of towels she’d placed there earlier. It had taken her nearly an hour, but she’d figured out exactly where to position herself and where to set the camera.

“Okay, all set,” he said.

“You are alone, right?”

“There was no way I was sharing a room with Sean. I hear enough about what goes on with him. I don’t need to see it.”

She pulled her shirt off, showing the green negligee she’d worn their first time together.

“Oh, I like where this is going,” he said as he pulled off his shirt and pants and climbed into bed. “Give me a sec.” She watched as he grabbed some pillows, and a moment later he had his phone propped up so she could watch him, too.

Unbuttoning her pants, she slowly pushed them over her hips before turning her back to the camera. She bent forward, giving him a good look as she slid her pants off one leg and then the other.

He stroked himself lazily. “Damn, I wish I were there. I would have my mouth on that sweet pussy of yours already. I bet she’s already wet for me,

too.”

“Soaked,” she said with a sexy giggle. “I’ve been thinking about this and your reaction to it for hours.”

“Just think. It wasn’t that many weeks ago you were afraid of letting me see you under your dress. And now, you’re doing a sexy striptease for me on video chat while I get off to it.”

She reached over to the nightstand and picked up the vibrator he’d bought her. “Don’t come too fast. There’s still more to see.” It had taken more than a week for her to work up the courage to do it. Thus far, she hadn’t touched herself while he watched, and she was a little nervous about it.

His eyes grew wide. “You’re gonna—” he swallowed hard. “You’re gonna use that and let me watch?”

“I figured you might like a little show to go along with your hand,” she said with a wink. “Just give me a moment and I’ll get set up in the bed.”

Hannah moved the phone to a different spot, then climbed into bed. “I’ve never done this with someone watching before, so if it gets a little cheesy __”

“Baby, you could act out the cheesiest porno out there and it would still be sexy to me. I love that you trust me enough to do this.”

And that really is key here. I trust him. He’s not going to belittle me or laugh. Well, he might laugh, but I’ll be laughing along with him.

She turned the vibe on and ran it down her neck and chest, bringing it to rest against her nipple.

“Pull the top of your teddy down and let me see the beauties,” he told her.

Tugging down the top, she tucked it under her breasts.

“Much better.”

Hannah teased her nipples with it for a bit before moving it down to her clit. She let the vibration from it sink down to the nerves, arousing her even more. Once she could feel the nub hard under her fingers, she started grinding the vibe against her. Before long, her hips were moving to further the contact between them.

“That is so fucking hot,” Zach groaned. “You’re gonna have to do this for me once I’m home.”

She looked up at the TV and watched as he stroked himself. “Only if you do it, too. When I’m not distracted by a buzzing between my legs.”

“Turns you on, does it?”

She nodded.

“You know what would turn me on? Bring your other hand down and slip a finger inside. See how wet and swollen you are.”

She did it, then held her finger up for him to see.

“Now, bring it to your lips and lick it. Pretend like it’s me and suck it clean.”

Hannah hesitated for a moment. While she’d kissed him plenty of times after his mouth had been down there, she’d never tasted herself like this. Looking up at the screen, she could see the eager anticipation in his face. It almost looked like he was holding his breath. His reaction to just the thought of her doing it emboldened her.

She smiled at him, then licked up one side of her finger and down the other. Rolled her tongue around it. And finally sucked it into her mouth, cleaning off every inch.

“God, just when I thought you couldn’t get any hotter, you prove me wrong,” he said with heavy breaths. “You’re gonna end up making me finish before you do.”

She chewed on her lip while she worked the vibe against her. Normally, she'd be there already.

He must've noticed the look on her face, as his hand stilled. "Too caught up in your head? Let me help. Close your eyes. Instead of the vibrator between your legs, imagine it's me. I give you several good licks before I turn my focus to your clit. I roll my tongue around it and suck it into my mouth…"

"Oh, Zach," she moaned as her hips lifted from the bed. His dirty talk was exactly what she needed to get out of her thoughts and into the moment.

"Please tell me you're going to put the phone there again tomorrow night. It's like a front row seat to your pussy."

She looked up at him with heavily lidded eyes. "Who said there was going to be a repeat showing?"

He let out a strained chuckle as his fist worked fast and hard. A moment later, he groaned her name as he came on his hand and stomach. Breathing heavily, he reached over and grabbed his t-shirt that had landed on the nightstand. "The sounds you make and the way you look when you come has ruined porn for me forever. So, I hope there will be multiple repeat performances," he told her as he cleaned up.

"No pay-per-view for you?" she asked with a lazy giggle.

"Nope. So, I hope there will be plenty more phone sex where this came from."

She yawned. "Maybe. I guess you just have to wait until tomorrow night to see."

"Tired, baby?"

"Yeah, I spent the day with Ollie and I think she wore me out."

“Turn your charger upright and set your phone on it. I’ll stay here until you go to sleep.”

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Chapter Thirty-three

July 17, 2023

I feel like a kid waiting for their parents to wake up on Christmas morning. I've been up for hours and it's not even six yet. At least breakfast starts soon, so I can head downstairs.

Yesterday was a social day with us getting to know each other. I tried spending some time with Sean, but he was unusually grumpy.

Today camp starts and I'll get to be out on the field throwing a football. I haven't been on a football field since senior

year. I can't wait…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

SEAN PLOPPED DOWN IN the booth across from Zach and motioned at the waitress for some coffee. Dark circles could be seen under his eyes, which was unusual.

"Rough night?" Zach asked.

"Couldn't sleep," he grumbled.

"I guess it's a good thing you're just watching today and not playing."

Sean harrumphed and stirred sugar and cream in his coffee.

"Everything okay? It's not like you to have trouble sleeping."

"Probably just stress over the start of the season. Plus, worry about my knee. Tabitha, I mean, Dr. Winters, said it's good as new, but I won't know until I test it out."

Zach raised an eyebrow. "Tabitha?"

"I liked driving her crazy by calling her that instead of her title," he said with a shrug of his shoulders. "She was a grump and it was the only way I could get her to smile."

Zach just looked at him, not fully believing his story.

"Enough about my physical therapist. Are you excited? It's your first day of training camp. I was so overwhelmed by mine that I spent the morning in the bathroom getting sick."

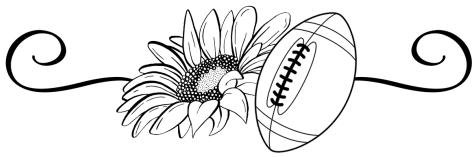
"Yeah, well, you'd just gotten a multi-million-dollar contract, a huge signing bonus, and had the season coming up. I'm just here to throw the ball and have some fun. No expectations."

“True. But it’s still AFL training camps. You have to be at least a little excited. Remember when we used to work out in that crappy high school gym and dream of the day when we’d be here?”

“Oh, I’m excited. I’ve been up for hours. I’m just not kneeling in front of a toilet level excited.”

“Well, you’ll get plenty of throwing time the next few days. Since neither the starting nor backup quarterbacks are rookies, they can’t play until later this week. I think the coaching staff is happy you’re here, as they won’t have to spend so much time playing quarterback.”

“My arm might hate me later, but I’m looking forward to it.”



Zach looked at the metal tub. “I thought you were kidding about the ice baths.”

Sean shook his head. “Wish we’d had these in high school. Ten-minute soak and you’re already feeling better.”

“Not heat?”

“This reduces the inflammation and soreness.”

“It also reduces other things,” Zach said as he climbed into the tub. “Fuck, this is cold. How do you stand staying here for ten minutes? I feel like I’m turning into an icicle.”

Sean shrugged his shoulders. “You get used to it. Plus, if you play a whole game, you’re so hot that the cold water feels great.”

“True. We were stop and go all day, and it wasn’t that hot out. I bet this feels good after a game in September.”

“Sometimes, there’s almost a fight for them. That’s the good thing about being a star player: first dibbs.”

“You had some pretty impressive passes today,” Coach Brecken said from behind them. “It’s really been a decade since you played?”

“It really has. I throw the ball into my net in the backyard, and I practice with Sean sometimes, but that’s it.”

“Well, son, it was something else. Most rookies I see can’t pass as well as you.”

Zach looked up at Sean. “Has it been ten minutes yet?”

He grabbed a towel and held it out. “Yes, you big baby.”

“Not a fan of ice baths, huh?” Coach asked.

“I’d rather be in that jacuzzi in my room.”

“You’ll be thankful for this soak later when your shoulder isn’t killing you. I promise.”

“Sean said the same thing, but I’m not sure I believe him.” *My balls certainly don’t.*

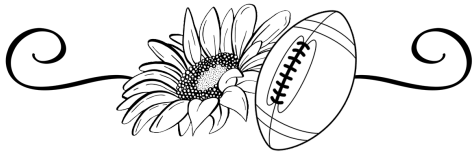
“You’ll notice the difference in the morning,” Coach assured him. “Hey, Sean, we’ve had a problem come up and I need to run something by you. Mind coming to my office for a bit?”

“Sure, Coach,” Sean replied. He turned to Zach. “You gonna be good by yourself for a bit?”

“Yes. I’m gonna head back to my room and get some work done before dinner. Text me when you’re ready to eat.”

Sean laughed. “I’m always ready to eat.”

“Don’t we all know it.”



“So … how was your first day?” Hannah asked him. “Did you have fun and make new friends?”

“Yes, but we didn’t get story time or a nap,” he joked.

“I bet you wanted a nap, though.”

“I did, but I logged into my laptop and worked instead.”

“What was it like playing with real AFL players?”

“I can’t even explain how much fun it was. To be surrounded by people whose job is to play football was just amazing. The level of commitment is so much higher than I was used to on a high school team. And you want to hear the best part?”

“Of course.”

“Coach was impressed with my passes. And Sean has told me plenty of times that he doesn’t like to hand out compliments.”

“That’s wonderful, hon. Now, what was the worst part?”

He shuddered. “Ice baths.”

“Ice baths?”

“A tub filled with freezing cold water and ice. You soak for ten minutes. It’s supposed to help with pain and inflammation. But to be honest, all it did was make me question my ability to have kids in the future.”

He could see her trying hard not to laugh. “That bad, huh?”

“It was awful. But my shoulder doesn’t hurt, so that’s a plus. How was your day?”

“They’re still doing work on the building from the ceiling leak, and I had to head home early. Apparently, paint fumes give me headaches.”

“Oh, baby, I’m so sorry—”

“Hon, it’s not your fault. I know you keep beating yourself up over the attack. It’s one hundred percent his fault. I’ll just work from home this week. It’s not a problem. Good thing you set up that desk in the corner of our bedroom, huh?”

“At least your commute is short now,” he joked.

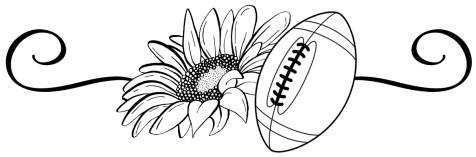
“And I can work in my pj’s if I want.”

“I prefer the sleepwear you have on now: nothing at all.”

She laughed. “You have such a one-track mind.”

“I can’t help it; I miss you. But the little show you gave me last night helped. Do I get a repeat showing tonight?”

“I guess,” she teased. “It’s so hard to say no to that little puppy dog face.”



Zach watched as Hannah pillowed her hands under her cheek. “Falling asleep on me, baby?”

“Yeah, those headaches earlier really took a toll on me. They always wear me out.”

“Feel free to go to sleep. I’ll stay here until you’re out like I did last night.”

“I miss you,” she said on a sigh. “It’s only been two days, but it feels like forever.”

“I’ll be home Friday morning, and we can spend the weekend together.”

“That … sounds nice,” she yawned and her eyes drifted closed.

“Maybe we could even go down to the beach. I bet the girls would love that, too.”

Her lips curled into a sleepy smile. “Mm-hmm. I love you, Zach.”

Each time she said it, it brought joy to his heart. Even more so at times like this. It felt real and unprompted, like she couldn’t go to sleep without letting him know how she felt. Unfortunately, it made it impossible for him to say the same in return. *Well, I say it, but she doesn’t hear it.*

He watched her sleep for a bit, then hit End on the video call. Folding his arms behind his head, he stared up at the ceiling. *She was right; he had been away for two days, and it already felt like too long.* He sighed. *More than once today, I was tempted to go home. But I owe it to myself to stick it out to the end. I might never get a chance to do this again. And Hannah would kick my butt if I came home early. I have to keep reminding myself it’s only a few more days. I lived without her for a decade; I can do a few days.*

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Chapter Thirty-four

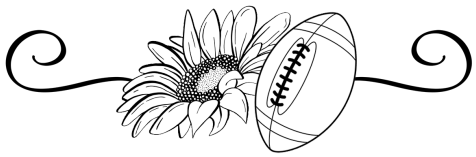
HANNAH STUFFED THE NOTE in her pocket. With Zach gone, Vi had doubled-down on her efforts to chase Hannah away. *What is it with this family and hurtful notes?*

Yesterday, she'd stopped home to pick up her mail and found two notes stuffed in her mail slot. Neither were signed, but it was clear who they were from: Henry. He was careful not to make outright threats in them, but it was implied. She called her family's lawyer who'd gotten the restraining order and let him know about the notes. Apparently, he wasn't in violation of it since she hadn't been in residence when he dropped the notes.

Seeing the notes and knowing there wasn't anything she could do about them, had made her headache even worse. She'd hoped for a better day today, but it was only eight a.m., and she'd already found three notes from Vi.

I swear, those two are going to drive me crazy if this crap doesn't stop. At least I only have another day, and Zach will be home. And he'll be here to

help me through my headaches, hold me tight, and wear me out enough to let me sleep through the night without a nightmare.



“HEY, ZACH, COULD YOU come in my office for a moment?” Coach asked him as he walked into the gym.

He followed Coach down the hall. “Sure. Anything wrong?”

“No. Well, yes, but not with you.” He motioned for Zach to precede him into the room, then closed the door. To Zach’s surprise, Sean was already there, sitting in one of the chairs. A huge smile filled his face.

“Um, now I’m really curious about what’s up.”

Sean held up a jersey with “Hayes” on it.

Zach reached out for it. “You guys had this made for me? That was nice.”

Coach sat down at his desk. “Sean suggested it. But it’s not a gift; it’s an offer.”

Zach cocked his head. “An offer?”

“An offer. Brandon, our starting quarterback, was in a car accident yesterday. He’ll be okay, but he’s out until at least the beginning of the regular season,” Sean explained.

“And? You have Jack. He’s a great quarterback.”

Coach nodded. “He is. I expect next season we’ll lose him to a team that can offer him a starting position. But with Brandon gone, Jack moves to our starter. That leaves us short a back-up quarterback. I spent all day yesterday calling around, and I can’t find anyone who is good and available.”

“But you’re good. And available,” said Sean.

Zach dropped down into a chair. “*Me*? You want me?”

“I watched you out on the field yesterday. You’re a great quarterback. Way better than any of the folks I could find.”

He blinked a few times. *Am I dreaming?* “You want me to be the backup quarterback for your team? Not just playing around with the guys during camp, but really playing? Part of the team?” He just couldn’t wrap his head around it.

Coach pulled out a tablet. “Complete with a contract and a salary. Initially, it would just be for camp and the pre-season. That’s when we use our back-ups a lot. After that, it would be riding the bench until Brandon came back.”

Zach took the tablet and looked at the screen. It appeared to be a contract. “This isn’t a prank Sean is pulling on me? This is real?”

Coach chuckled. “He figured you’d say that. It’s why he suggested the jersey. So, you could see it’s real.”

He stared at the tablet. *Play on an AFL team for real? After a decade of putting everyone first, is this the year where all my biggest dreams come true?*

“Um, I have to figure out work. And the girls…”

“Maybe go call Hannah?” Sean suggested.

“Maybe I should call Hannah,” he said absentmindedly. “I’ll be right back.”

HANNAH WAS HEADED TO the bedroom to have a cry in private when her phone rang. She pulled it from her pocket. *A video chat from Zach?* Quickly, she wiped the tears from her eyes and answered the call.

“Hey hon. Why a morning call? Did you miss me that much?”

“Um, I have something to show you.”

“Oh-kay.” He was acting odd and she wasn’t sure why, but it kind of worried her.

He fumbled with the phone for a moment before turning it toward a jersey sitting on a table. It had “Hayes” on the back.

“They had a jersey made for you? That’s so nice.”

He sat the tablet on top of it. “That’s not all they made. This is a contract. To play for the Houston Hurricanes.”

“*Play*? Are you joking?”

“That’s what I thought when they asked me.” He explained to her about Brandon and what was being offered.

“You’d be a real AFL player? Like on TV?”

“Just pre-season, but yes. It’s unlikely I’d get to play during the season.”

“Hon! You have to do it.”

“But that means being here the full two weeks. I won’t be able to come home Friday. Plus, all those away games. More days from you and the girls.”

“It’s your dream, Zach. Isn’t it time for you to live for yourself for a bit? Me and the girls will be here. We’re not going anywhere. And we can travel, too. See your games in-person.”

“I should say yes?”

“If you don’t, I’m hopping a plane to Austin and kicking your ass. Zach, you have to do this. Put yourself first for once. *Please*?”

A huge smile filled his face. “Looking forward to being the girlfriend of an AFL player?”

“As long as you don’t have a revolving door on your hotel room like Sean.”

He laughed. “No one gets to sleep in my bed but you.”

“Well, they never sleep in his bed, either,” she joked.

“You licked it, it’s all yours. Promise.”

“Good. Cause I don’t think a jealous me would be a good thing.”

He laughed again. “I feel sorry for anyone who tries to get between us. Are the girls around?”

“Yeah. Willow and Vi don’t go to work for another hour, and Alex is out of town, so Ollie is home. Let me get them.”

She called down the hall for them before screen sharing her phone to the TV.

“Hey guys, guess who is going to be playing football?” He pointed his phone toward the jersey.

“Funny, Zach,” Willow replied.

“I thought it was a joke, too. But it’s not. I’m going to fill in for their backup while their quarterback is out with an injury.”

They started screaming and jumping up and down.

Hannah turned the phone back to face her. “See? We’re all excited for you. Do it. Sign the contract. We’ll figure out the specifics later.”

“Thanks, Hannah. You really are the best, you know that?” He blew a kiss to her. “I’ve gotta go so I can let coach know it’s a yes. Talk to you later, baby. Bye girls!”

Willow and Ollie hugged Hannah. “Can you believe it? Zach is going to play football,” Ollie said. “I’ve never seen him play.”

“Will we get to see him on TV?” Vi asked.

“Yes, they show the pre-season games. But if it’s a home game, we’ll go watch in-person. We may even go to some out-of-town games.”

Ollie squealed. “I can’t wait to tell my friends!”

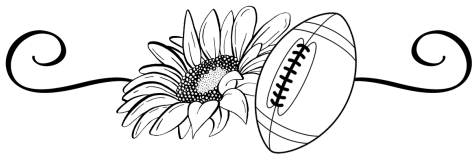
“Let’s wait until Zach lets us know it’s okay to tell people. I’m sure the team will want to be the ones to make the news public,” Hannah cautioned.

“Oh, I didn’t think about that,” she said sadly.

Hannah wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “I’m sure it will only be a day or two, and then you can tell anyone you want. Well, I have to get back to work. If anyone needs me, you know where to find me.”

When she got back to the room, she dropped down into the office chair. *Well, I can’t tell him about Henry and Vi now. I thought I was finally ready, but he’ll drop everything and come home. I can’t do that to him. He deserves this. He’s taken care of everyone for years. It’s time he finally gets to see his dreams come true.*

She leaned back and stared at the ceiling. *I guess I need to talk to Dr. Franks about strategies for coping with all of this…*



“So, how was your first day as an AFL player?” Hannah asked Zach.

“Tiring, and not because of drills. I spent most of the day signing paperwork, meeting with their marketing team, and being measured by the tailor. Plus a long photo session. I barely spent any time out on the field.”

“When are they making the announcement?”

“Tomorrow. It’s why so much was packed in today. Mandy, the PR person for the team, said they expect my life story will get my signing more

attention than usual. So, don't be surprised if the media camps outside the front gate for a bit or tries to bother you guys while you're out."

"Do we have to talk to them?" Just the thought of having to do a TV interview made her palms sweaty.

"No, I'm the only one who has to. You're free to ignore them or say 'no comment' and move on."

Good. That I can do. "How did the team take you being signed on?"

"Honestly, most were grateful. Not having a backup put their season in jeopardy. Not to mention the risk of their starter getting hurt during the pre-season. Even though they say they don't, players will often target starters to take them out before the season begins. They're a little wary still since they haven't seen me actually play yet—camp is no-contact until tomorrow. But they've seen my passing skills, which gives them hope. I can't wait to be able to show them what I can do."

"I'm so happy for you, even if it means you're going to be gone longer." She flashed him a coy little smile. "And I'm going to miss you so much. In fact, I might have to take care of myself more often." She ran her fingers down her side to the curls between her legs.

"Not without me you don't."

"But I'm used to multiple times in a day," she teased. "Once a day on video call isn't enough."

He shook his head. "Someone really enjoys playing the brat, huh? What am I going to do with you?"

She smiled innocently at him. It was all part of their game. After that day when she'd lied about multiple Os, they'd bumped brat/brat tamer up their list of things they wanted to explore. "But it's so hard waking up after a dream about you and not being able to do anything about it…"

“Hannah. Am I going to have to put you over my lap again? Or should I come up with something new?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you should have a list. Like if I do it once … three times … ten times…”

“Ten? If you come ten times without me, you’re getting more than a spanking.”

“Are you really threatening me with a good time?” she joked.

“Oh, baby. Whatever I come up with, I can promise you that you’ll be begging me to stop before I’m done.”

“Then I guess I’d better make sure the orgasms are worth it. Maybe I need some new toys?”

“No toy could ever replace me.”

“Oh, I don’t know. There are some pretty good suction ones out now. I’m thinking I should try them out and see.”

He laughed. “Boy, my dirty little slut is really digging a hole for herself, isn’t she? Better make certain you get plenty of sleep before I’m back home, as you won’t get any afterward.”

“Promises. Promises. But that little toy guarantees it.”

“Oh, don’t worry. Mine is more than guaranteed to satisfy.”

“I don’t remember. It’s been soooo long,” she said with a wink.

“My adorable little brat. Don’t worry; I’ll refresh your memory soon enough.”

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Chapter Thirty-five

July 20, 2023

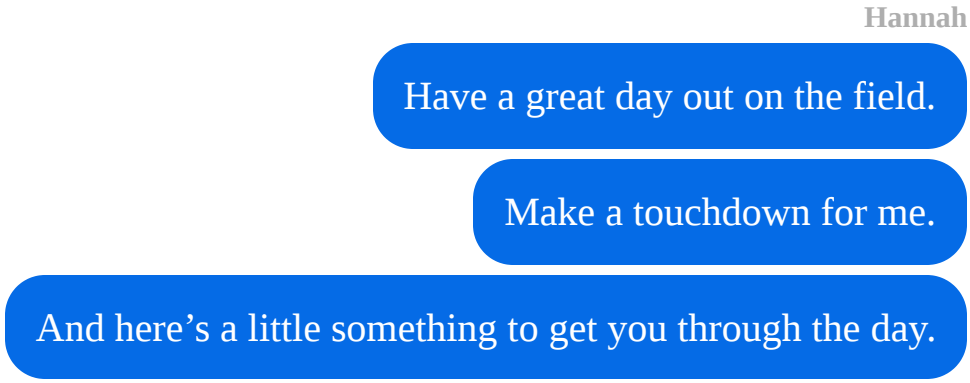
Sometimes it's hard to believe Hannah and I have only been together six months. The way I've seen her blossom and grow since that day in the coffee shop has been amazing to watch. I still see her get caught up in her insecurities, but it's a rare thing. The best part is the teasing.

At first, I could see her struggling with it. Clearly, she'd never been comfortable enough with him to do anything like that. But now, I can see how at ease she is with me. Especially once she realized how much I enjoyed it…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

ZACH MIXED CREAMER INTO his coffee as he waited for Sean to come down for breakfast. It never failed that he was always the last down. Which was odd since his best friend's favorite past time was eating.

When his watch lit up with a notification, he expected it to be Sean. Instead, it was from Hannah.



An audio file popped up and he clicked play, figuring it was her talking. The last thing he expected was the sounds of her moans to fill the breakfast room. He fumbled with his phone, trying to get it paused. Every head in the room turned his way, and he could feel a blush spreading across his cheeks.

"Hannah sent you a little gift, huh?" Sean said as he sat down at the table.

He nodded. "Without any warning as to what it was. And I'm pretty sure I know exactly what she was doing, too."

Sean laughed. "We all know what she was doing."

"No, there was something she wasn't supposed to do. I'm fairly certain that's her giving me evidence of her doing it."

"Ohhh. Someone is getting herself in trouble, huh? Gonna take her over your knee and spank her?"

"No. Not that I'd share those details with you anyway."

"I know. Doesn't stop me from asking, though. Maybe one of these days you'll share."

“Unlikely. As we’ve already learned, we prefer certain things to stay between us.”

“Didn’t this morning, though.”

“Indeed. And she knew I wouldn’t be alone when she sent that. Such a naughty little—um—Hannah.”

Zach

Tsk tsk. Not only did you have solo fun, but you sent me the evidence?

Someone is looking for a bit of punishment.

Hannah

I don’t know what you’re talking about. [wink emoji]

All I did was say good morning.

Zach

Such a naughty little slut. What am I going to do with you?

Hannah

Nothing since you’re hours away. And you won’t be home for more than a week.

I can get into so much mischief in that time.

Zach

Rest assured I’m keeping a list. Now to figure out how you’re going to pay penance for it all.

Hannah

But I’m a good little angel.

Zach

Well, the devil is an angel, so…

Hannah

In that case, you should know something.

A picture popped up on his screen. Hannah was holding up her skirt, showing that she was missing an item of clothing.

Hannah

It’s wear no panties to work day.

He groaned, causing everyone to look his way again.

Zach

I guess I should be happy that you’re working from home, then.

Hannah

Only steps away from the toys in your drawer…

Zach

Hannah…

Hannah

[kiss emoji] Gotta get to work. Might need a self-care break later. Have a great day.

Oh, my cute little devil. You're getting it when I get home.

"That's quite the look of frustration on your face. She dig her hole even deeper?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Very much so. She wouldn't be Hannah if she didn't try to push my buttons."

"*Ah*, I get it now. It's a little thing between you two. Who am I to yuck your yum? But I'm sure you're going to hear plenty from the guys. And just wait until they finally meet her."

"Clearly, she didn't think that far ahead."

"Or she knows you won't let them embarrass her."

"Damn it. you're right. She got me good, didn't she?"

"She always does. Did you hear anything back from the trustees about the house yet?"

Yesterday, he'd contacted them about adding a new building out by the pool to house a gym for him. The equipment he needed to add wouldn't fit into his current space, plus the floors in the house weren't meant for that kind of weight or wear and tear. He also wanted to include a couple bathrooms so folks wouldn't have to track through the house while wet.

"They agreed to it and said they'd get right on finding a contractor. I guess they're expecting an increase in business at the stores, so they see the benefit of me playing. And having a good gym at home means I can work out without having to run to Houston every day. That saves me time that I can spend on the company."

"I like having my gym at home. Running to Houston just for a workout is a pain. Too bad we're not doing the same exercises. We could share my gym."

“We’d get on each other’s nerves real quick. I like the quiet. You like noise. This is easier. Plus, I can turn the current gym into a home office for Hannah and I.”

“Well, you’re still welcome to come over and use any equipment you need in the meantime. I’ll even wear earbuds just for you.”

“Aww, aren’t you so sweet? And here, I thought all you cared about was food and football.”

He held up his hand to waive over the waitress. “And if you ever say anything, I’ll deny it.”

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Chapter Thirty-six

July 21, 2023

I swear I've spent nearly as much time this week doing interviews as I have on the field. Mandy was right; the media is going crazy over my story. And so are fans. Pre-orders for my jersey on the team's site have already hit the thousands. I wonder how many are from folks back home.

Every day I pinch myself, thinking this must be a dream. I can't really be signed onto an AFL team. But every evening, the aches and pains prove it's real, not to mention how badly I miss my family. I've never been away from the girls like this. And not having Hannah by my side every night is killing me. While I may joke with her about the sex, it's her companionship I'm missing. Sharing our days as we make

dinner. Her curled up in a chair with her Kindle while I work out. Snuggling with her in bed.

I'm glad once camp is over that I won't have to be away from them like this. Even road trips only mean a couple days away…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

"WHY CAN'T I JUST go to dinner in what I have on now?" Zach asked Sean.

"Because it's not a jeans and t-shirt type of restaurant."

"Do I really have to go? To be honest, I'd like to get some work done, talk to my family, and go to bed." Now that they could play contact football, his body was reminding him he was twenty-eight and not eighteen.

"It's a required team activity, so yes."

He sighed. "*Fine*. But I want to head back to my room early."

"Feeling your age?" Sean joked.

"And then some. It's been a long time since I've been tackled."

"We're all like that at this point. It's the entire point of training camp: getting back into the physicality of the game. Now, go get ready so we can eat. I'm starving."

Zach unlocked his door. "You're always hungry."

"It takes a lot of calories to keep this body active." He pushed Zach into the room. "See you in a bit."

Zach grumbled as he closed the door behind him. *Stupid dinner. Why can't I just order—?*

He stopped in his tracks. Lying on his bed, naked except for a jersey, was Hannah. At first, he couldn't believe she was real and not a figment of his imagination. But after several long blinks—and a pinch on his arm—she was still there.

Thank you, Sean. You just turned today around.

"That had better be my number on the back of that shirt. Otherwise, you've earned another punishment."

She let out a sultry giggle. "I didn't even think about that. Your coach had this waiting for me in the limo that picked me up. Next time, I'll get Sean's."

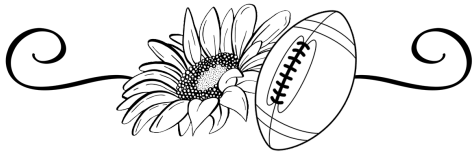
He quickly pulled off his clothes. "If I catch you wearing his, you're gonna be without a shirt real fast."

"Even in public?"

He grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head before climbing into bed. "Even then."

"But—"

He put his finger against her lips. "No more talking. Only moaning and yelling my name. I'm hungry and it's been days since I've had dessert." Zach pulled her into his arms and captured her lips. "Mm-hmm, I've missed your kisses most of all. Now, about that dessert…"



Hannah was writhing around under him when a knock at the door interrupted them.

“Go away!”

The person knocked louder.

“Fine, I’ll be right there!” Zach kissed her thigh. “Sorry, baby. Be right back.” He grabbed a towel from the bathroom and wrapped it around his waist. “This had better be an emergency,” he said as he opened the door.

“It is,” Sean replied. “Dinner, remember?”

“Oh, I thought that was just a ruse.”

“No, there really is a dinner. And the car is waiting for us.”

“You thought I’d leave Hannah after finding her here?”

“No, I just thought you’d be done already.”

Zach shook his head. “Sorry, but quickie isn’t in my dictionary. We need ten more minutes.”

“Ten?” Sean’s stomach grumbled.

“I want thirty, but I’m asking for ten. We still have to clean up and get dressed.”

“Fine. But I’m setting a timer. In ten minutes, I’ll be beating on this door again.”

True to his word, he beat on the door the moment they heard his phone go off.

Zach finished helping Hannah with her heels, then opened the door. “Calm down, we’re coming. You’re not going to starve.”

Hannah grabbed her clutch and wrapped her arm around his. “All ready.”

Sean whistled. “Damn, Hannah. That dress looks amazing on you.”

She thumped her purse against his chest. “Down boy.”

“That’s the dress she wore on our first dinner date.”

Sean punched the Down button at the elevators. “No wonder you couldn’t keep your hands—or mouth—off her.”

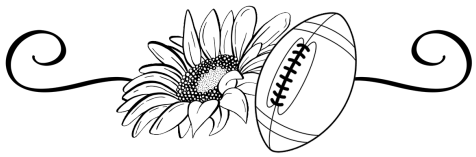
Hannah blushed and hid her face against Zach’s arm.

He gave Sean a look as they stepped onto the elevator. Some jokes are okay when it was just them, but not with her.

“Sorry, Hannah. I don’t have a filter and tend to say exactly what’s on my mind. You’re probably going to hear worse than that tonight. If any of the guys bother you, just let me know.”

“If they get inappropriate with her, I’ll handle it,” Zach grumbled.

“You’re new to the team, so they won’t listen to you. Plus, you don’t want to cause a scandal in your first week. You can keep being the sweet guy they’re marketing you as. I’m already known as a troublemaker.”



At the restaurant, the hostess led them to a private dining room in the back. When she opened the door, a cheer went up. A banner on the back wall said, “Welcome to the team!”

“See, you couldn’t miss your own welcome dinner,” Sean said. “And everyone was waiting on us.”

Zach turned to Hannah. “Did you know about this?”

She nodded. “They waited until tonight so that I could be here with you.”

He nibbled at her neck. “Sneaky. Trying to add more to my list?” he whispered.

Her eyes grew wide. “You really have a list?”

“I told you I was making one. Just wait until tonight. For now, we have a party to attend to.”

Zach walked around the room, Hannah on his arm, and introduced her to everyone.

“Ah, this is why you were late,” joked Jack, the starting quarterback. “Can’t say that I blame you.” He turned to Hannah. “If ever you’re single __”

“Not happening, Jack. She’s all *mine*.”

“I was just saying… It’s not like there’s a ring on her finger.”

“Yet,” Zach growled.

“*Oh*, that’s how this is. My apologies, then. Very nice to meet you, Hannah. Thanks for sharing him for a bit. You’ve saved my ass, for sure.”

“Anything to help him fulfill his dreams,” she replied.

When they made it around to Coach Brecken, he pulled Hannah in for a hug. “Thanks for flying in. He’s looking better already.”

She bumped her shoulder against Zach’s arm. “Missed me that much, huh?”

“Unlike the rest of the guys, he hadn’t prepared to be away from his family for so long,” said Coach. “But we’re so grateful he agreed to do so. Least we could do in return was bring you in for the weekend. I wish we could have brought the girls, too, but legal said no.”

Zach shook his hand. “And I appreciate the effort. I guess I was a little grouchy today.”

“I’m fine with you being grouchy if you continue to take it out on the ball like that. Your pass length was pretty good today. You just need to work on the focus part.”

He rubbed his side. “Yeah, those tackles today made that all too clear.”

“You’ll get there. It’s only been a few days. I have faith in you. If I didn’t, I would have never taken a chance with you. Now, go show your girl off and have a drink. You’ve earned it.”

“Oh, thanks for the shirt for Hannah. I never thought I’d get to see my girlfriend in my AFL jersey.”

Coach patted him on the shoulder. “There’s more where that came from. Her and your sisters will have a whole collection of them before long.”

Before they headed over to the bar for a drink, Sean pulled Zach over for a moment. “I’ve talked to everyone. The little incident at breakfast yesterday won’t be mentioned in front of Hannah.”

“Protecting Hannah from getting into more trouble?”

“More like keeping you from punching a teammate.”

“*Eh*, I only growled at Jack,” he joked.

“By the end of the night, and a couple drinks…”

“True. And I’m already on edge. Everyone is being so nice in throwing me this party, and all I want to do is head to bed. Thanks, man.”

“What was that all about?” Hannah asked when he returned to her side.

“Just Sean keeping my list from getting longer.”

Her eyes grew wide. “*Longer*?”

“You’re the one who chose to send me that audio while I was at breakfast. With the entire team.”

She looked around the room. “They *all* heard?”

“Sure did. I shut it off as quickly as I could, but it was obvious what it was. And now you’re here in person. Sean made it clear mentioning the incident in your presence was not a good idea.”

Her face flushed a deep red, making the urge to take her back to his room even stronger. “I can’t believe they all know I sent that to you.”

“Next time, baby, give me a warning. You know I never carry earbuds with me. I just thought it was going to be you saying good morning or something. My list for you is long enough. We don’t need to add to it.”

She looked up at him, a wicked little smile on her lips. “Maybe I want to.”

“Oh, don’t worry. You have enough coming your way as it is.”

He watched as she shifted around. A sure sign that under her dress she had her legs pressed together.

“How long exactly do we have to stay?”

“You read my mind.”

The moment dinner was done, Zach thanked everyone for the party, grabbed Hannah’s hand, and headed out to the limo. He pulled her into his lap once they were inside.

“Are you wearing the same bra and panties as you did that night?” he asked before nibbling on her neck.

“Something new,” she mumbled.

“Now you have me curious.” He pushed the neckline of her dress to the side. “Pink. Just like your dress.”

“When I saw it in the store, I couldn’t pass it up.”

“I love it when you shop for me.”

“Who says it’s for you? I like sexy lingerie. How it makes me feel.”

“How I look at you when you wear it…”

She giggled as he nipped at her ear. “Well, there is that. It does highlight your favorite things about me.”

He took her chin in his hand and turned her so he could look her in the eye. “Some of my favorite things about your body, yes. But not my favorite things about you. Only your eyes and smile would make my top ten list.”

“Oh. I thought—”

“Don’t get me wrong; I love everything about how you look. But your caring, intelligence, humor, and the way you make everyone around you feel are all way more important in my book.”

She snuggled against him. “That’s so sweet. I, on the other hand, love your body. It’s number one in my book.”

“Minx!” he said as he tickled her.

“Truce!” she cried out. “I drank way too much for tickling. So, I take it back. It’s your fingers I love. Well, damn. That’s still your body. Um, mouth? No, that doesn’t work either. C—?”

He pressed his lips to hers. “That’s enough, my little troublemaker.”

As soon as the hotel room door closed behind them, he started pulling her dress off.

“Eager are we?” she asked as she unbuttoned his shirt and kicked off her heels.

“I have a lot planned, and I have to be up early for practice.” He pushed her dress off her shoulders and looked over the negligee underneath. “Very nice. And crotchless, my favorite. I won’t even need to take it off.” He unsnapped the stockings and started rolling them down. “Don’t want these ruined, though.”

Once they were off, he moved her backward to the bed. “Lay down and put your hands up above your head,” he said as he finished undressing.

“Above my head?”

“Yes. And no matter what, keep them there.” He climbed into bed with her. “It’s time to pay the piper for all your brattiness this week.”

“Are you tying me up?”

“Had I known you were flying in, I would have been prepared. But if you move your arms or try to touch yourself, I’ll use those pretty stockings of

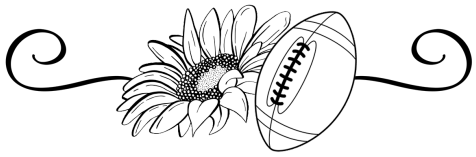
yours. My ties, too, if need be."

"Yes, sir," she said with a giggle.

He nipped at her inner thigh as he settled between her legs. "Such a naughty little slut."

She moaned as he pressed his mouth against her. "Not sure how this qualifies as a punishment, though."

He looked up at her, a devilish grin on his lips. "Just wait. You'll be begging to be a good little slut soon enough."



HANNAH CURSED HERSELF FOR ever teasing Zach. " *Please*. I promise I'll be good."

"You promise you won't touch yourself when I'm not there?"

Shit. He has me there. I'm sure I'll do it again just to see his reaction. "Um, maybe?"

"Well, I guess 'maybe' is better than the enthusiastic denial you gave me a couple days ago. And if you'd said 'yes," I wouldn't have believed it anyway."

She groaned. The ache between her legs was so bad that she was about ready to break the rules and move her hand. It wouldn't be hard; he'd let her move her arms down onto the bed more than an hour ago. Just a little pressure in the right spot and she'd finally finish. *I bet I could do it.*

"Hannah. Don't even think about it. Do you really want to try that in the middle of this lesson? Steal an orgasm from me again?"

She shook her head. *Damn it. He's way too good at reading me.*

He kissed her inner thighs, letting his hot breath brush against the spot where she wanted him most. “Maybe we need a bit more review on this topic.”

“No, please. I promise I’ve learned my lesson tonight.”

“I don’t—” His phone started buzzing on the nightstand.

She turned to look at it.

“Just ignore it.” He let his fingers trace around her folds. “I don’t know if you’ve quite made up for all your naughtiness this week yet.”

Hannah moaned. She wanted so badly just to push herself against him. But that would mean more denial, and she didn’t think she could take much more. “Please, Zach, let me come.”

“Do you think—?” His phone started ringing. “Who would be bothering me right now?”

She looked over and saw the photo on the screen. “It’s Sean.”

“Twice in one day.” He grabbed the phone. “What do you want?”

Hannah could hear Sean’s voice but couldn’t make out what was being said. Clearly, it wasn’t an emergency, as Zach started laughing.

“Fine. But if you cockblock me one more time this weekend, I’m gonna kick your ass,” he said before hanging up and tossing the phone back on the nightstand.

“What was so important?”

“So, I guess we’ve been a little loud. For more than two hours. The guys took a vote: I let you come and then everyone can go to sleep.”

“I’ll be embarrassed over that tomorrow. Tonight, I vote with them. Make me come before I burn up. Or soak the bed.”

He chuckled. “Might be too late for that second one.” He moved up her body and slid into her. “Next time you want some solo fun, remember this:

all your orgasms belong to me. Just like mine belong to you."

He stroked in and out of her a few times, letting his cock rub against her a spot. Then, he reached between them and pressed against her clit.

"Oh, fuck, Oh God," she cried out. Her release was just out of reach. The quivering in her legs was making them feel like jelly. "Harder. Please."

"Which—?"

"Both. Please. *Now*."

He thrust into her harder and upped the pressure with his hand.

Her body arched off the bed so fast that it nearly knocked him off her. "Yes, Zach!"

Normally, he held back until she finished, but she felt him still above her, then shudder, before collapsing on top of her. He nuzzled her neck. "Well, they definitely heard that. I practically yelled your name."

"Mm-hmm," she sighed. "I've died and gone to heaven. I don't think I can even move from this spot."

"Same. I think I'll sleep right here."

His phone buzzed again.

"Fuck off, Sean!" he yelled at the wall.

"Yes, what he said," she mumbled.

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Chapter Thirty-seven

ZACH SHOOK HANNAH'S SHOULDER in an attempt to wake her up. "Tired," she mumbled.

"I have to head to breakfast and to practice, but you can stay in bed as long as you'd like."

Her only answer was a snore.

He looked around the room and found a pad of paper on the desk. *Perfect.*

> *I'm heading out. There's a car service you can call to bring you over to the training facility when you're ready: 210-555-6742. There's a restaurant downstairs where you can get breakfast. Or lunch? Not sure when you'll be up.*
>
> ❤ *Zach*

As expected, all eyes were on him when he headed to a table for breakfast. With other customers in there eating, his teammates were

unlikely to make a big deal about last night. But once they were over at the gym, all bets were off.

Sure enough, cheers erupted in the training facility's gym the moment he walked in.

"If it isn't Mr. Stamina," joked Rob, the team's kicker.

"More than two hours," added Jack. "I was torn between being mad I couldn't sleep and being impressed."

Zach chuckled. "Okay, guys. Feel free to get out all the jokes now before Hannah shows up."

"Still sleeping, huh?" Lance, a wide receiver, asked. "Not surprised. Can she even walk today?"

"You're ignoring the most important question," said Jack. "Little blue pill?"

Zach shook his head. "You guys are terrible, you know that? And no, I don't need any pills. I'm not an old man like some of you."

Lance threw a towel at him. "I'm only two years older, fucker.

He cupped his ear. "What was that? All I heard was 'I'm an old man.'"

"Remember that when my arm is too tired to catch your passes."

"Eh, I'll just throw to Sean instead." He looked around the room. "Really, guys? That's all the jokes you have?"

"Oh, no, we have plenty more," Dale assured him.

"Well, you have 'til the end of our workout to get all your digs in. After that, the only thing I want to talk about is football."

Sean walked over and patted him on the shoulder. "Thanks to you, I'm pretty sure none of us need to work out our arms today."

"Leave it to you to go there," Zach joked.

Jack sat down on an exercise bike to start his warm-up. “Sorry, Zach. He’s just saying what everyone else is thinking. Your girlfriend is vocal and it was *hot*.”

“And all mine,” Zach grumbled.

Jack put his hands up in the air. “I know, I’m staying away from her. *Promise*. Doesn’t mean I can’t harass you a little about it.”

He shook his head and started his own warm-ups. Having team members was like having a whole room of Seans. And he wasn’t entirely certain if that was such a bad thing.

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Chapter Thirty-eight

THE GIRLS WERE WAITING for Hannah when she walked in the door Monday morning. They were so excited they immediately started peppering her with questions.

“How is Zach?” Willow asked.

“What was it like watching him play with real AFL players?” Vi asked.

“Did you bring us anything?” Ollie asked.

She laughed. “He was good, but he misses you three a lot. He can’t wait to come home next week to see you. It was exciting to watch him play and see how well he did against pro athletes. His coach has so many good things to say about him. They even threw him a party my first night there. And yes, Coach sent me home with something for you.” She handed them a bag. Inside was a jersey for each of them.

Ollie jumped up and down. “Yay! Now, we need to go somewhere so we can show them off.”

Hannah smiled at Ollie. Her enthusiasm was infectious. *She is so much like Zach was when we were young. I hope life doesn’t get in the way of*

that.

"We'll go out for dinner tonight, okay? And I need to do some grocery shopping."

Vi folded her shirt over her arm. "I wish we could have gone with you."

Hannah hugged her. "I know. You guys aren't used to being away from him. If they could have gotten it cleared, I would have taken you even if I had to pay for it myself."

"You mean that?"

"Absolutely. He's important to you, and you're important to him. I already talked to him about taking you to the out-of-town games. You'll fly with me and I'll get a suite so we can all be together."

Vi looked surprised. "You're not going by yourself?"

"No way. Unlike training camp, we don't need special permission for you to be there. Just tickets. And Zach is taking care of that while I handle travel arrangements. We're all going to cheer him on."

She still looked a little skeptical, so Hannah pulled a piece of paper from her purse. "Here's the letter Zach wrote in case we run into any issues at the airport. And he told me where to find your birth certificates." Then, she grabbed her phone from her pocket and scrolled through her emails. "Here's our hotel confirmation. And I can show you the airline confirmation, too. I've already booked everything for the preseason games."

Vi stared at her before hugging her tight. "Thank you."

Hannah was speechless for a moment. "There's no way I was going without the three of you. You're family."

"Group hug!" Ollie cried out before throwing herself against Hannah's side. Willow joined in a moment later.

Hannah held onto them tight. *For the first time, they really do feel like family.*

“Okay. As much as I’d like to spend the day with you, I’ve gotta get to work. It’s payroll day and folks won’t get paid on Friday if I don’t get my work done. I’ll be working out of the bedroom again this week, so just knock if you need anything.”

While she waited for the computer to log into her work system, she texted Zach.

Hannah

The girls love the shirts. We’re gonna go out tonight and show them off.

They’re really excited about going to your games. Vi was skeptical ‘til I showed her the hotel and airline confirmations.

Zach

That’s Vi for you.

Had a good flight home?

Hannah

Wish it had been longer so I could have slept.

Zach

Tiring weekend?

Hannah

Not all of us have the stamina of a football player.

Zach

Don’t forget about the contractors coming by this week to start planning the new gym.

They have the gate code in case you’re busy or not home.

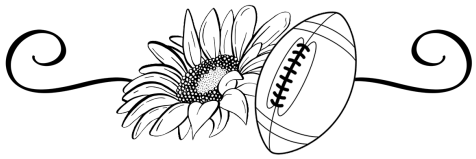
Hannah

Oh, yeah, I need to warn the girls, so they don’t worry about strange people in the yard.

Gotta go to work. Just wanted to say hi and send the girls’ thanks.

Zach

Talk later. [kiss emoji]



Hannah scrolled through options for things to do or see while they were visiting each city. She’d never been out of Texas, and neither had the girls, and she wanted to make the most of their trips. One of the three games was at home, while the other two would take them to Massachusetts and Florida.

“You probably noticed I didn’t believe you about us going to games,” Vi said.

She jumped. “Sorry, Vi, I didn’t hear you come into the kitchen.” She showed her the tablet. “I was making a list of possibilities for each city we’re going to. I figured we wanted to do more than just hang out in the hotel room. Zach will be busy with practice and such, but we can go out.”

Vi pulled up a stool next to Hannah. “Can I see?”

She handed her the tablet. “We can decide between the four of us what we want to do. I wanted to pull together the info now, so everyone had time to think about it.”

“Do you really like spending time with us, or do you do it just for Zach?”

“I really like spending time with you. It’s like finally having sisters of my own. Brothers are great and all but hanging out with a sister is different. And not just because he doesn’t like getting his nails painted.”

Vi giggled. “Yeah, I don’t think Alex is the nail polish type.”

“Would you like to go to the spa with me one day?”

“Like you’re doing with Ollie?”

“Sort of. You’re older, so there’s more options available for you. For instance, with your brother’s written permission, you can get a massage. I’d be in with you, though, getting one at the same time. And you can use the soaking pool. I would have done it with you back at your birthday, but Zach and I were still figuring out our relationship. He didn’t want to bring someone into your lives until we knew it was serious between us.”

“I’d like that a lot. Can I pick what we do?”

“Sure. It’s your birthday present. I’ll text you the link to the spa and you can let me know. And I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something

else. Zach mentioned to me that you're planning to do high school in three years."

She nodded. "I should be in high school already, but I started a year late. This is my only real chance to catch up. I've already taken as many classes as I could while in junior high."

"I don't know if he told you, but I did the same. My birthday fell too late in the year, so I was a grade behind Zach even though we're the same age. I'd be happy to help you in any way I can. Even if it's just being a cheerleader and giving you encouragement. You're a smart, young woman, Vi. And I want to do anything I can to help you succeed."

Vi looked down at her lap. "You'd help me?"

"Violet, I'd do anything for you or your sisters. Don't you know that?"

"But—" she shook her head. "Thank you. I'll let you get back to what you're doing," she said before turning to leave.

"One more quick thing I forgot to mention earlier. Zach is having a new gym built out by the pool and workers will be in the backyard starting this week. We didn't want you guys to be startled by people in the yard. Could you let your sisters know?"

"Sure," she said before hurrying toward the hallway.

Hannah watched her go. *Well, that was interesting. And confusing. I was certain Vi hated me. But then, we have days like today. I don't remember being this contrary when I was a teen. And I was definitely not mean like she has been. Not even to Alex when he was being a huge asshole.*

Maybe she's finally starting to accept that I'm here to stay? That I really do care about her and her sisters? She sighed. *I sure hope so. I'm so tired of trying to guess when her next attack will come…*

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Chapter Thirty-nine

August 2, 2023

Family meeting day. I know the girls kind of dread it because they think it means something bad is coming. Hopefully, after today they'll see it can mean good things, too. Or at least I hope they see it as good news. Willow liked the idea and thought Ollie would as well. Like usual, Vi is the wild card.

I spoke to her therapist yesterday after Vi's session, and she still feels like it's normal teenage stuff. But I can't help but worry about her. What if it's something more? I mean, I don't know of any mental health issues that run in the family, but

Henry sure makes me wonder sometimes…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

“DO WE REALLY HAVE to have a family meeting?” Ollie whined. “I wanted to eat fast and get back to my game.”

Zach laid out all the containers of Chinese food on the counter. “Yes, we really have to.”

“Let me guess, we’re not actually going to the game this week,” Vi said as she crossed her arms.

“Nope. You four will be at the airport bright and early on Saturday to fly to Massachusetts. I can’t wait to look up to the box and see my family cheering me on.”

“Then what gives?” she asked.

“It’s good news.” *Or at least I hope it is.* “Fill your plates and then we can talk.”

He took a deep breath once everyone was seated at the table. *Here goes nothing.*

“As you girls know, at nineteen I had a lot of changes and decisions thrown my way. It was a lot to handle, and I thought the choice to be your legal guardian was the right one. But in recent months, I’ve begun to think maybe I chose the wrong option.

“I turned down adopting the three of you because I feared it would mean Mom would no longer be on your birth certificate. But my lawyer has recently informed me that’s not necessarily the case. I can adopt you and request that her name remain. My name would replace Henry’s.”

“You want to adopt us?” asked Ollie.

“I do. I want to show you guys that I’m here for life. We’re not just siblings that might go our separate ways once we’re all adults. I’ve raised you. I’m your parent. And being a parent is *forever*. Regardless of who I marry or if she has kids with me, you’d always be mine as well.”

“Does that mean I can call you Dad?” she asked.

Well, Willow was right on that one. “Sweetheart, if you want to, that’s fine with me.”

Vi cleared her throat. “Do *I* have to call you Dad?”

He laughed. “No, Zach is still fine.”

“Why do you want to adopt us?” she asked.

“A parent’s love is weird. It doesn’t matter how many people are added to the family; the amount each person is loved never changes. When Ollie was born, Mom didn’t love you, me, or Willow any less. Her love grew. I want to make the same commitment to you guys. I want you to know that my heart—and this house—always has room for you.”

She stared at him for a moment, tears running down her cheeks, before she jumped up and ran to her room. Willow tried to follow, but Zach motioned for her to stay.

“I’ve got this.”

He knocked on Vi’s door. “Can I come in?”

“Okay.”

He found her curled up on her bed crying. Grabbing her desk chair, he pulled it over and sat down. “What’s wrong, Violet?”

“I thought you were going to replace us with Hannah and the kids you have with her. That I’d come home from college and find my room filled with her kids.”

He rubbed her arm. “Vi, this is your room and your home as long as you want it to be. And when you’re ready for your own place, there’s a lot next door with your name on it. If I marry Hannah—and if we have kids—the house will expand just like my heart.”

She sniffled. “You’d build onto the house?”

“Yup. Same as Mom did when she was pregnant with you. The only way I’m giving anyone your room is if you tell me to.”

Vi rolled over and smiled at him. “It would be nice to have you as our dad.”

“Well, I’ve been doing the job since you were a toddler, so I figured my title ought to match the job description,” he joked.

“*Ugh*, dad jokes.”

“Willow keeps saying the same thing. Does no one think I’m funny?”

“Hannah and Ollie.”

“Well, that’s *something* at least. Are you ready to eat dinner now?”

She nodded. “I was just overwhelmed by it all.”

“It’s okay to be emotional. Just try to remember to talk about it. Deal?”

“Deal.”

They walked together back to the table.

“So, no more Henry on our birth certificates,” Willow said.

“I figured that was a pretty big positive result to this change.”

“What happens when you get married? Would Hannah adopt us, too?” Vi asked.

“No, I’ve already talked to her about it. She’d be your stepmom and legal guardian. If she adopted you, her name would replace Mom’s. Neither of us want that. She’s fine being a stepparent or even just a sister. All that matters to her—or me, for that case—is what’s best for you guys.

“It’s why I wanted to have this meeting: to see if this is what you wanted.”

Willow looked at her sisters. “Raise your hand if you want to be adopted.”

Three hands shot into the air.

“Well, that was easier than I thought.”

“How long does it take?” she asked.

“My lawyer has the paperwork ready. I’ll sign it first thing in the morning so he can get it filed. He said since I’m already your legal guardian, it should be approved quickly. The judge might need to verify with each of you that it’s what you want to do.”

“By the end of the year?” Vi asked.

“Almost certainly. There’s no one to contest it, and it’s what all four of us want. Now, if there aren’t any more questions about the adoption, I have one more piece of news.”

His sisters sat silently, which he took as a sign they were done with that topic.

“Remember the place that digitized our photos? Well, I took him all the family videos I could find. This morning, I picked up the hard drive when I stopped in to pick up our prints. Now, you can watch any of the videos Grandpa or Mom recorded over the years. And once the drive is done duplicating, I’ll have one for each of you, just like with the photos.”

Ollie teared up. “I can watch videos of Mom?”

With her being only three when their mom died, she had no real memories of Maggie.

“Yes, sweetheart. And there’s plenty to watch. Grandpa loved making home videos and Mom followed in his footsteps. She often put the

camcorder on a tripod so she could be in the videos, too. Your hard drive should be ready by the time dinner is over."

Willow handed Ollie a napkin to dry her eyes. "I'll watch them with you, if you want. I used to watch the older videos with Mom, and she'd tell me the story behind them."

"Can I watch, too?" Vi asked quietly.

Of the three girls, he wondered sometimes if Vi was the one affected the most by their mom's death. She was five when it happened and was just old enough to have some memory of Maggie. But they were fractured and limited, which made it hard for her to fully remember her. And to Zach, that felt worse than having no memory at all.

"Sure," Willow replied. "Can we watch it in the living room?"

He started to tell her that, of course, they could; they used the living room more than he did. And then he realized what she was really asking: could the three of them watch it without him.

"Sure. I need to spend extra time in the gym tonight. And Hannah usually hangs out with me and reads. So the living room is all yours."

The smile on her face told him he'd read between the lines correctly.

"Oh, and there's a box of photos in my room. We just need to buy frames for them." It had warmed his heart to flip through the box and see such wonderful pictures of their family. He couldn't wait to see them on the walls. "It made me think that we need to take some photos of the four of us. There's plenty of individual photos of you guys thanks to picture day at school. But I rarely get any of me, and there's no recent ones of the four of us." In fact, he was fairly certain the only recent photos of him in the last several years were likely the ones taken since he started dating.

"Just four? Not with Hannah?" Ollie asked.

“We can do something with her, too, but I want some of just me and my girls.” *My girls. It feels weird yet right to say that.*

“We should do it after the adoption goes through,” Willow suggested.

Ollie giggled. “Us and our new dad. Can we have a ‘just adopted’ sign?”

Zach laughed and rumpled her blonde curls. *I hope she never loses her way of looking at the world. Growing up has a way of tamping down optimism and child-like wonder.* “Sure. Anything you guys want.”

After dinner, Zach headed to his bedroom to give the girls privacy to watch the videos. He needed to let dinner settle some before working out, plus Hannah wasn’t back yet.

Zach

Still at your parents?

Hannah

Yes. We’re pulling together videos for you to drop off with Denton.

Mom is so excited about being able to easily watch them.

How did dinner go?

Zach

Well, apparently soon I will be a DILF. [wink emoji]

Hannah

More like DIGF.

Zach

DIGF?

Hannah

Not “like to,” but “gonna.”

He stared at his phone for a moment trying to figure out what she meant. *Oh, God, am I really that stupid? That should not have taken me more than a second to get that.*

Zach

Does that make you a dad fucker?

Hannah

Absolutely. But you’re still just a plain ole Hannah fucker.

Zach

I’ll take that any day. And twice on Tuesdays.

Hannah

Only twice? And only on Tuesdays? Do I need more BOBS?

Now, he was really confused.

Zach

BOBS?

Hannah

Battery operated boyfriends. Although, the good ones now are rechargeable.

Zach

Absolutely no BOBS.

Hannah

Rechargeable one-night stands?

Zach

Nope.

Hannah

Ah, old school, then. Go acoustic with a nice big dildo. Got it.

He shook his head and laughed. *My cute little brat.*

Zach

If I find one of those around here, you might not like where I put it.

Well, one I didn't buy, that is…

Hannah

Are you really threatening me with a good time?

Oh, yes, my brat is definitely asking for it.

Zach

Aren’t you supposed to be helping your mom and not harassing me?

Hannah

She’s just finishing up labeling a few reels, and then Alex will bring it all out to my vehicle.

And it’s my job to harass you, sir.

Sir. Oh, yes, she’s getting it the moment she walks in that door. He rubbed his hands together. *And thanks to a bit of research, I have plenty of new punishments to test out.*

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Chapter Forty

WHEN HANNAH WALKED IN the door about thirty minutes later, Zach was sitting on the bed waiting for her. She was surprised, as normally he would be working out in his gym.

“Clothes off, baby.”

She looked at him, then motioned toward the door. “But the boxes—”

“I’ll get them while you undress. If you’re not in bed naked when I get back, I’ll tack on another penalty.”

Her lips made an “O” shape as she realized what this was about. “Yes, sir,” she said as she pulled off her shirt.

By the time he had the stack of boxes moved to his room, she was ready for him.

He pointed toward the nightstand. Sitting there was a rose vibe and a dildo. “I’m sure you’ve been wondering about those two things. They’re a part of my new collection.”

Hannah’s eyes grew wide. “Collection?”

“You probably noticed the credenza I built on Monday. It looks like it’s for our little home office, doesn’t it? But there’s a reason why there is a lock on it. And if you’re a good girl, maybe one day I’ll let you pick something out to play with. Tonight, we’re playing with these. Or, well, you are. You seem so sure these toys can replace me, so, prove it to me. Show me these can replace all the things I make you feel.”

“You want me to use these on myself?”

He handed her the rose. “This one first. And I’m gonna sit here and watch. Maybe remind you a little of what you’re missing.”

“I’ve never actually used one of these.” *Sure, I may have joked about it…*

“That’s okay. I did my research. Just pull your hood up a little and tuck the petals under. The opening should be on your clit. And you can push the button to choose the rhythm.”

She put it into place and turned it on. “What exactly is it supposed—? Holy hell.” Her head dropped back to the pillows and her hand pushed against the side of the rose, upping the pressure.

“Feel it sucking in your clit?” he asked. “Does it feel as good as when I lick you? When I use my tongue to play with your nub and suck it into my mouth?”

She shook her head as moans slipped from her lips.

“Can it nibble at your thighs? Slip its tongue into you?”

She shook her head again as she pushed the button to increase the speed.

ZACK BARELY NOTICED HER answer, though, as his focus was between her legs. The way her lips had darkened and swelled. How wet

she'd become. The smell of her arousal. He wanted badly to push the toy out of the way and replace it with his mouth.

"Does it have fingers? Can it thrust inside you and hit your favorite spot?" He reached out and traced her opening with his fingers, then brought them to his lips.

A loud whimper filled the room as her legs grew taunt. The little vibe had been quick to bring her to completion, but it didn't seem to fully satisfy her.

He took the rose from her hand and sat it to the side. "Now, was your BOB anything like what my mouth can give you? Was it a good replacement for me?"

She let out a frustrated sigh. "No. Not even close."

"Okay, let's try your other suggestion: a dildo. Can it make you come like I can? It can hit that little sweet spot inside, but what will be missing?"

She took it from him and just stared at it. "I think I'm gonna need lube for this. It's huge."

He chuckled. "It's actually smaller than me. And yes, I measured. It just looks so big because there's no body attached. Rub it against you and get it wet like I do with my cock."

She ran it back and forth several times, before carefully sliding it in.

"Now, make yourself come with it and see if it feels as good."

Sitting back, he watched as she moved it in and out, trying to find a rhythm she liked. At the same time, she rubbed her clit. After several minutes, he spoke up.

"Hard to get it right with both hands at once? That's the benefit of having me inside you. All you have to do is lay back and enjoy it. And I bet you're missing my weight above you. My hands and mouth on your neck and breasts. It's just not the same, is it?"

“No.” Her voice sounded defeated.

“Having trouble?”

“I can’t get there. I can do one or the other, but not both.”

He moved forward and pushed her hand off the toy. “Let me help. You focus on your clit and I’ll handle this.”

Tilting the dildo down slightly, he thrust it back inside her. The moan that filled the room told him he’d hit just the right spot. “So much better than what you can do by yourself, isn’t it?”

Her only answer was a whimper.

“Ah, no witty comeback from my little brat?”

She shook her head as she dug the fingers of her left hand into the sheets.

He pushed the toy back in harder, giving it just a slight twist. “Ahhh. Yes. Like that.”

Her legs started trembling against him, a sure sign she was nearly done.

“Come for me, Hannah. Show me how my little slut can soak this toy.”

“Fu—” she started to say as the orgasm hit her.

Once her body was relaxed against the bed, he slid the toy from her and licked it clean. He’d rather have it from the source, but she was being punished, not rewarded.

“And what did my little brat learn today?”

She pouted her lips. “That no toy feels as good as you. And the orgasm I get doesn’t even come close.”

“Very good. Of course, sometimes you can use these. Like when I’m out of town or you’re being rewarded. And I’m looking forward to us playing with them together. But they could never replace me, could they? They’re plastic; they don’t care about you. While I care deeply. I want to make every experience between us the best it can be.”

“No, they can’t replace you. Doesn’t mean I won’t try, though.”

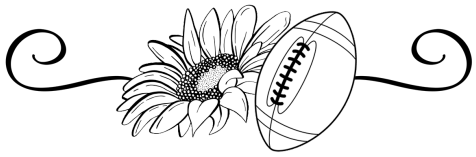
He barked out a laugh as he picked up the toys and carried them to the bathroom for cleaning. “I’d be disappointed if you didn’t. You can get dressed.”

“You’re not—?”

“I need to work out. And what kind of brat taming would it be if you got the good part right away?” he asked with a wink. “You can read one of your books and get all hot and bothered while I exercise.”

She grabbed a pillow from behind her head and threw it at him. “Tease!”

“Hey, I did help you come. It’s not my fault that BOB was no contest for me. Don’t worry; bedtime will be here soon enough.



Zach fiddled with the ring on Hannah’s finger. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you take this off.” It was on her left ring finger, and he was hoping to replace it. *Soon*.

She snuggled closer against him. “It’s because I don’t. Honestly, it’s a little small, and—”

He sat up abruptly, causing her to roll onto her side. He grabbed her hand and looked at it closely. “The ring is stuck? How long has it been that way? You know it can do damage to your finger, right?” He tried to twist it around, but it wouldn’t move.

“Um, a while? It was my grandma’s ring. It has birthstones for her, Mom, and Uncle Wyatt.”

“Why have you never had it resized?”

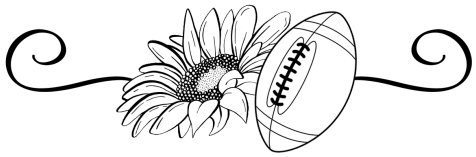
“I’m afraid of it getting ruined. I’ve heard so many horror stories.”

“There’s this great jeweler my family has been using for years. I’m taking you there tomorrow. I don’t want to risk permanent damage.”

She pulled her hand back and snuggled back up against him. “Is it important to you?”

“Very much so.” Plus, it was the perfect excuse to get her finger measured for the ring he’d already picked out for her.

“Then I’ll go into work late tomorrow.”



Peter Villiers looked over the ring. “Just beautiful. The center sapphire is excellent quality. A family heirloom?”

She nodded. “My grandma gave it to me before she died. It’s my favorite ring. But as you can see, it’s stuck.”

“Ah, not a problem for any good jeweler.” Less than a minute later, he laid the ring in her hand. “Might want to rub your finger a bit to help remove the indent from the ring. Then, we can get a more accurate size for your finger.

He turned the ring around to look at the inside band. “I see there isn’t a message inscribed. That will make resizing easier, as we won’t have to worry about damaging that.”

Peter took a measurement of her finger and jotted it down in his notes. “Oh. I forgot to ask; is that the finger you want to wear it on? I can resize to fit any of them.” Zach had secretly called him this morning to let him in on

the ruse. He'd assured Zach he could handle it without Hannah becoming suspicious.

"To be honest, it was just the smallest finger other than my pinkies. I'd rather wear it on my right index finger."

"Then we should measure that one instead."

Well handled, Peter.

Zach pretended to look at rings while Hannah finished up.

"Looking to make a purchase?" she asked as she wrapped her arms around him from behind.

"Nope, I'm good. If I'm ordering a ring anytime soon, it better be a championship ring."

Her engagement ring—as well as their wedding set—was already purchased. Her ring size was just the last piece of the puzzle.

She patted his chest. "Just for that, I'm getting you a ring from a box of caramel corn."

He took her hand and kissed her finger where her grandma's ring used to sit. "If it's a ring from you, I'll take it."

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Chapter Forty-one

August 6, 2023

I've already run to the bathroom three times this morning to get sick, I'm surprised I haven't woken Hannah yet. Sure, it's only the pre-season, but it's still an AFL game. On TV. Everyone in town will be watching. What if I'm sacked every time I get the ball? What if I get hurt?

Shit. I really did not think this through…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

ZACH SAT ON THE edge of the bed, trying to calm his stomach. He looked over at the jersey folded over a chair. Hannah had set it out last night

so it wouldn’t be wrinkled. She was so excited about getting to wear it to a game.

Her and his sisters had been proudly wearing theirs around town. When they arrived at the hotel yesterday, a whole host of official merchandise awaited them, including new shirts. The original ones had been specially made so they could have them right away.

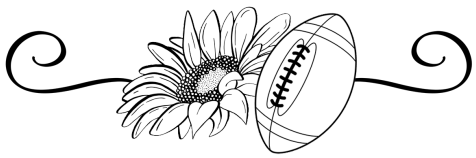
She’d squealed when she saw them and declared her old shirt was getting framed as a collector’s item. Only five had been made, after all. He loved how excited she was for him. Between her and Ollie, it was hard not to feel the same.

Arms wrapped around him from behind. “Everything okay, hon?”

He intertwined his arms with hers. “Just nerves. I’ve wanted this since I was ten, and now that the day is here, I’m honestly freaking out.”

She pressed herself against his back and nibbled on his neck. “Need a bit of a distraction?”

In a flash, she was on her back and him above her. “Oh, baby, the answer to that question will always be yes.”



“I made a little alteration to my shirt,” Ollie said as she grabbed a handful of bacon from the platter.

“Oh, really? Was it too big or something?” Zach asked.

“Nope.” She got up from her chair and turned around so he could see the back. A piece of tape covered his name. Written on it in big letters was “DAD.”

He felt Hannah's hand slide into his. Swallowing hand, he tried to fight back the tears that threatened to fall. "I love it, sweetheart. We'll have to see about getting you one made like that."

She sat back down in her chair. "Really? You can do that?"

"Sure. You can order them with all kinds of things written on the back." In fact, he'd already ordered a set with his number and "bride" and "groom" on them.

"Guess you should buy three, then," Vi said before standing up. Willow followed.

Seeing it on all three shirts was more than he could handle. "Come here you three." Once he had his arms wrapped around them, he let the tears fall. "This was the best surprise. I love it."

Any worries he had about today's game vanished. He could go out there and completely choke and they'd still be behind him one hundred percent. Their only concern would be how he felt about it, not that the team had lost. Even though he knew deep down this was the case, seeing proof of it gave him the confidence boost he needed.

Hannah kissed him on the cheek. "Feeling better now?"

"What do you think?" he asked as he piled food onto his plate. Just five minutes ago he'd planned on skipping breakfast. Now, he felt like he could eat a horse.

She leaned in close. "It was Vi's idea, just so you know. They came to me about it yesterday, as they weren't certain how to do it. The concierge helped get us the tape and markers."

"Wow. I had pegged that for an Ollie idea. She sure is full of surprises. I'll put in an order for shirts after breakfast. Hopefully, they'll arrive before the next game. How about you?"

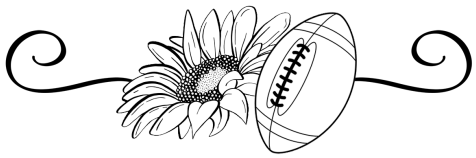
“I doubt DIGF would be considered appropriate,” she said with a giggle. “Why don’t you surprise me?”

Oh, I have some ideas, all right. And all even more inappropriate than her suggestion.

“I’m sure I can come up with something. You just have to promise to wear it.”

“Promise. Now quit chatting and eat. You have to go to work soon, remember?”

He laughed. “*Work*. It’s so funny to think of playing football as work.”



“Just remember: no one expects you to go out there and be the best quarterback there ever was. I know you and anything less than that on your part stresses you out,” said Sean. “Go out there and play hard and have fun. That’s it. Don’t get your head all bogged down with worries and expectations.”

“Why couldn’t you have given me this speech hours ago when I was getting sick in the bathroom?”

“Because you’d rather share a bedroom with Hannah than me,” he joked. “But really, just have fun. This is your first game and it’s only the pre-season. If we lose today, it’s no big deal. I got myself way too worked up over my first game and my head wasn’t on the field like it should have been.”

“You guys still won, though.”

“In *spite* of me; not because. Which is way worse than playing your best and losing. Believe me.” He patted Zach on the shoulder. “I believe in you, and so does your family. That’s all that matters.”

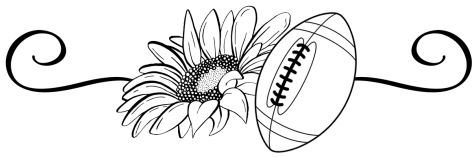
“Oh, I forgot to tell you what they did.” He pulled out his cell phone and showed Sean the girls’ shirts.

“See, that says everything right there.”

“Exactly what I thought when I saw them.”

“Now, are you ready to go play your first AFL game?”

“No?” he joked. “Nah, I’m ready. I want to go show everyone that you should never give up on your dreams.”



Zach wiped his hands on the towel at his side and prepared for the next play. It had taken him nearly a quarter to finally be able to push away the sound of the crowd and thoughts of how many people were watching him play. He’d been to plenty of games over the years and thought he knew how loud things got. It was nothing compared to what you could hear on the field.

Looking up into the stands, he focused on the box with Hannah and his sisters in it. He could see them standing behind the open windows, watching him. He flashed them a quick thumbs up and turned back to the player in front of him.

They were already up thirteen to seven, having scored a touchdown and two field goals. With about a minute left in the half, he wanted to pad that

lead a little. He took a deep breath, putting his mind back on the game. *Okay, let's do this.*

A few downs later, they scored their second touchdown. One field goal later, they were up twenty to seven just as the clock ran down to end the first half.

Sean came running up to him as they headed toward the tunnel to the locker room. "See? Didn't that feel good? Two touchdowns already and there's still the second half."

"Those two felt better than every touchdown in high school combined. It was amazing."

"Just wait. You have two more games after this, and," he looked around for a moment, "rumor is Brandon's PT is not going well. You may just have some regular season play coming."

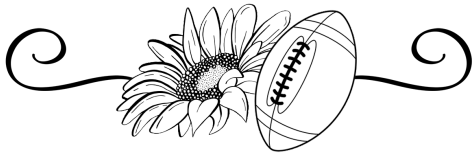
His face lit up. "You think so?" It felt awful to be so excited over someone else's pain, but he couldn't help it.

"I've already contacted my agent, and he has a referral for you. My guess is in the next two weeks you'll be called to Coach's office for another talk. This one will be for a regular contract with serious pay, bonuses, etc. You'll want to run it by an agent first. They'll try to low-ball you. Don't let them, especially if games keep going like today's."

"Thanks for that."

"I don't want to see you get less than you deserve. You saved the team's ass, not the other way around. They need to remember that."

I did, didn't I?



Zach stood on the field, staring at the scoreboard. *Thirty-four to thirteen. I did it. I won my first AFL game.* All around him, teammates celebrated, but he stood there motionless. It all felt like a dream, and he was having a hard time believing it was real.

Someone patted him on the back, pulling him from his thoughts. “Great job, son. I knew you could play, but four touchdowns? That was damned impressive. Especially for a first game.”

“Thanks, Coach. To be honest, it hasn’t really sunk in yet. It feels like I’m still back in bed dreaming.”

He laughed. “It’s been a long time since I’ve worked with a player who still had that kind of awe over the game. Too often they’re already a bit jaded by the time they make it to the pros.”

“I think I could play a hundred games and still feel this way.”

“Good. That’s exactly the kind of thing I want to hear you tell the reporters.”

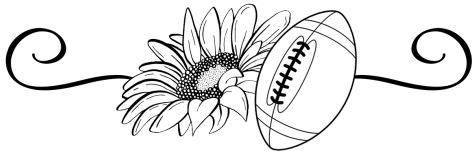
He swallowed loudly. “Reporters?”

“A whole mess of them waiting for a few words from our quarterback. Win or lose, it’s part of the job.”

“Mandy did some practicing with me, but it’s the one thing I don’t have much experience with.”

“You’ll get used to it. And the faster you get it done, the faster you can go celebrate with your family.”

My family. Yes, let’s get this done so I can go see them.



“You won!” Ollie screamed as she ran across the field and into his waiting arms. He knew she’d be the first to reach him. Willow and Vi were right behind her. He could see Hannah off to the side, giving them a moment. It was one of the things he loved about her: she was always happy to share him with his sisters. She never fought to make herself first or to be more important to him. Knowing she was that confident in him, in their relationship, to not need to do those things made him love her even more. It took a lot with her history to be able to do that.

“So, what did you think about watching me out on the field?”

All three excitedly talked over each other. Rather than tamper their enthusiasm, he worked hard to at least pick up snippets of what each of them said.

Like earlier this morning, arms wrapped around him from behind, and he felt Hannah’s cheek pressed against his back. He laid his arms on hers and continued trying to follow the conversation. All the while, he rubbed her left ring finger. *Two weeks. Two more weeks until I ask her what I’ve been dying to ask for years.*

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Chapter Forty-two

August 9, 2023

Family meeting night again. This one has me tied up in knots even more than last week's. My whole future is at stake here…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

"ANOTHER FAMILY MEETING?" GROANED Vi. "Didn't we have one of these last week?"

"Yes. But like I said a while back, we should be doing this every week. Talking about important stuff, complaints, whatever. Not just shoving our food down as fast as we can and go back to our rooms."

Willow passed around the bowl of rice pilaf. "I'm guessing there's something you want to discuss?"

“Hannah.”

Vi rolled her eyes. “Of course. Is she officially moving in?”

“Not yet. I told you guys I wouldn’t ask her without talking to you about it first. Hence the meeting.”

“You want our permission to let her move in?”

“*Permission*? No. Buy-in? Yes.”

“What’s the difference?” Willow asked.

“Permission suggests that I’m not the adult in charge here. And I am. Buy-in means you’re okay with the changes this will bring. That you’re not angry about it. That you’re happy for me. Plus, I’ve taken your wishes and concerns into consideration.”

“How exactly would things change from how they are now?”

“Right now, Hannah is a guest. Other than some items in the kitchen, her stuff is all in our room. If she moves in, that will change. She might put up photos of her family, for instance. Add bits of decor or furniture. She’d be living in this house instead of just staying in my room. She’d get to participate in decisions about the household. Right now, she stays out of all those discussions.

“Since she would be living here, she’d chip in to the household fund the same way I do every month. So, she would be paying for utilities, food, house upkeep, etc. Until now, I’ve refused her offer to do this and paid extra myself. She is my guest, after all.”

“What about chores?” Vi asked.

“She already helps a lot, but yes, we would redo the chore chart to include her. Which I’m sure you three will love since it means less chores for you.”

She crossed her arms. “What if I don’t want her to move in?”

“Vi—”

“Vi, can’t you see how happy Hannah makes him?” Willow asked. “Yesterday, she was mixing pancake batter, and he came up behind her, wrapped his arms around her, and rested his cheek on her head. The look on his face was pure happiness. And it made me wonder when the last time was, before this year, that I saw Zach happy like that. And you know what? I couldn’t think of a single time. In over a decade of memories. The realization made me want to cry. Doesn’t he deserve to be happy?”

“Yes, but—”

“There should be no buts. Either you want happiness for him or not. It’s not like Hannah is a bad person or treats us badly. She’s one of the nicest, most caring people I’ve ever met. I couldn’t ask for a better person to be with Zach.”

Ollie looked over at her sister. “Why do you dislike Hannah so much? I love her, and I’m glad she’s going to be part of our family.”

Vi looked shocked. “Part of our family? I thought this was about her moving in?”

“Well…” Ollie fiddled with her fork. “A package came from the AFL shop and I peeked inside. I thought it was our new jerseys. But the backs say ‘bride’ and ‘groom’. So, obviously he’s going to ask her soon.”

Willow snickered. “It was obvious without seeing the jerseys.”

“Yes, that was going to be the next part of the discussion. Next weekend, Aunt Janet will be hanging with you while Hannah and I are out of town. Either she can stay here or you can go to her house. It’s your choice.”

“She said she’s Grandma now,” Ollie pointed out.

He laughed. “Yes, she’s really been looking forward to someone calling her grandma.”

“Do you have a ring? Can we see it?” Willow asked.

“I do. I picked it up yesterday. And no, you can’t see it. Not until Hannah does.”

“*Oh*. That’s fair, I guess.”

“You’re really going to marry her? Even if I don’t want you to?” Vi asked.

“I really am, assuming she says yes. And while it would make me sad that you’re not happy for us, I’m still going to marry her.”

She pushed herself away from the table. “I’m not hungry. I’m going to my room.”

Zach tried to follow her, but Willow stopped him.

“Talking to her now isn’t going to change anything. Let me and Ollie work on her.”

“Thanks, Willow.”

“I’m glad you’re marrying her, dad. She loves you like I love you.”

“Aww, thanks, Ollie. That means a lot.”

“As you can probably tell, I like her, too. She loved us like family from that first night. How could I not want that in a sister-in-law slash bonus mom?”

“Bonus mom?”

“It’s what folks call stepmoms they like.”

“Oh, cause ‘stepmoms’ are seen as mean and unliked?”

“Exactly. And Ollie and I love Hannah. She’s not *that* kind of stepmom. Now, we just have to convince Vi of the same.”

“I wish you luck with that. I can’t figure her out. Maybe since you’re closer in age you can get through to her. I don’t want her to feel like I dismissed her feelings. But I’m also not going to give up my future with Hannah over it.”

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Chapter Forty-three

August 18, 2023

It's hard to believe I've even more nervous today than I was for my first game. And that's odd since I doubt she'd say no to my proposal. I guess because it's a huge step toward the future I've wanted for so long.

Vi has still not come around. She hasn't talked to me since the meeting. It really hurts that she's so opposed to Hannah…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

"DON'T GET TOO COZY," Zach told Hannah when she walked in the door. "We're spending the afternoon at the beach."

“On a Friday afternoon? Don’t you have practice today?”

“Nope. Since there’s no game this week, I have the day off. I already went to the office today, handled paperwork, and am ready to start the weekend.”

She pulled off her shirt and slid off her pants. “I’ll hurry up and change. Are the girls ready to go?”

“Just the two of us today.”

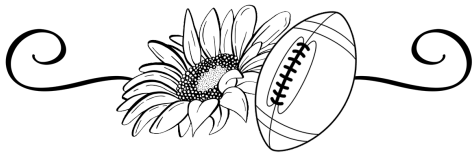
“Oooh, so we’re riding in your car. We haven’t been out in it in weeks.” She grabbed a T-shirt and shorts from the dresser. “You know how much I love watching you drive it.”

He grabbed a pair of sandals from the closet and motioned for her to sit in the armchair.

“Another thing I love: when you put my shoes on for me.”

He ran a hand up her calf. “I just like the chance to have my hands on you, that’s all.”

“I don’t care what you say, it’s still sweet.”



Zach and Hannah walked arm-in-arm down the sand for a while before he pulled her close and kissed her. “Now, I want you to run from me.”

“Run? *From* you?”

“Yes. You get a four-minute head start and then I’m coming after you. And if I catch you before you can get to that bench by the car, then I get to have you.”

Her eyes grew wide and she looked around at the people on the beach. “*Here*?”

“On the sand. The bench. The hood of my car…”

“I guess it’s a good thing quarterbacks don’t run, then?” she joked as she turned and ran.

“Penalty on the play!” he called out. “Two minutes off the clock.”

“Quarterbacks… can’t… run,” she sang as she fled down the beach.

“Oh, I assure you I can,” he called out. “And I’m gonna take you down to the sand when I get you.”

He could just make out, “Quarterbacks don’t tackle…” *Ah, I love it when my little brat comes out.*

“Mr. Hayes?” he heard behind him. Turning, he found a couple of kids standing there. “Can we take a photo with you?”

He looked down at his watch. *One minute, twenty-two seconds.* “Sure thing.”

By the time he’d finished snapping a few selfies with him, several more people had come over. He pointed at his watch. “I have until this beeps. I’m happy to take pics until then.”

When his timer went off, he still had a couple of kids waiting. *Oh well. It’s not like she’s really going to get away from me.*

As soon as he finished with the last photo, he took off down the beach. The closer he got, the louder her laughter grew. She kept sneaking a peek over her shoulder, nearly tripping over her own feet when she saw how close he was.

Rather than tackling her, he spun around just as he grabbed her by the waist. This way, he’d take the brunt of the fall onto the packed sand. “Gotcha! All mine now.”

She started to open her mouth to say something, but he kissed her before she could get a word out. “As much as I love lying here with you on top of

me, we should probably get up." With as many fans as he'd already run into, it was a sure thing that at least one of them was taking photos to post online. "Besides, I have something to show you."

He led her up to one of the benches that lined the seawall. "Just have to grab something from the trunk."

In the car he'd tucked away his tablet as well as the ring box. He hid the box in his pocket and carried the tablet over to her.

"When Denton was going through all our family videos, he found one he thought I'd be really interested in. Once I saw it, I knew I had to show you." He sat down next to her and pulled up the video. "This is from my ninth birthday."

HANNAH TILTED HER HEAD. *His ninth birthday? The one where he pulled me from the pool?*

The video started with Zach sitting on the patio at his house.

"Mama, do you think birthday wishes can come true?"

"I sure do, Zach," she answered off camera.

"Do I have to keep them secret for them to come true?"

She sat down next to him on the bench. "No, you don't. Sometimes, wishes need help from others to come true. Do you want to tell me what you wished for?"

He nodded. "To marry Hannah. I love her, mama."

Hannah felt a tear slip down her cheek. *He's loved one since he was nine?*

"Oh, my little sweetheart." Maggie wrapped an arm around him and pulled him close. "I know you do. But it will be many years before that one

can come true. You're only nine. Don't let that get you down, though. You keep on wishing for it as long as it takes. And maybe one day it will."

"I will. I'll wish for it every year. Do you love Hannah?"

"I sure do. I'd love to have her as my daughter one day. And I know Janet loves you, too."

He snuggled up against his mom. "I love you, too. Just not the way I love Hannah."

She rumpled his hair. "I know."

Hannah sniffled and swiped at a few more tears.

He stopped the video and closed the tablet. "I made that same wish every year since. And the day after I made it for the twentieth time, we crashed into each other. You make my life so much better, happier. I can't imagine life without you. Not after having you by my side these last months."

She held her breath, afraid this was all a dream and she'd wake herself.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the ring box. "Hannah, I love you. Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she managed to say before throwing her arms around his neck and crying on his shoulder.

Needing to free up his hands so he could comfort her, he put the box back in his pocket. "Hannah, baby, what's wrong?"

"So. Happy," she said between sobs.

"Oh. Happy tears. Got it." He kissed the side of her head and held her until the little gasps for air slowed.

When the tears finally stopped, she pulled back and looked down at her finger, which was surprisingly bare. *Oh, crap. The ring. Where did the ring go?* She started looking all around them to see if it fell.

"What are you looking for?"

“The ring. It was—”

He pulled it out of his pocket. “I put it away so I could hold you.”

“I didn’t even give you the chance to show it to me, did I?” She’d been so excited when he asked that everything had become a blur.

He snapped open the blue box. Inside was a silver ring with a center sapphire with six side diamonds. Together, they looked like a flower.

Her mouth dropped open. “Oh, Zach, it’s gorgeous. I love it.” She held out her hand so he could put it on her finger.

“As you may have now realized, this was the reason why I brought up your grandma’s ring,” he said as he slid it on her finger. “I needed an excuse to get you to visit the jeweler. Had I known it was stuck, though, we would have visited months ago. I had the ring all picked out, I just needed to know your size.”

“And for me to move it to another finger.”

“Well, that, too. But I didn’t want you to be suspicious. You made it too easy once you admitted you couldn’t get it off.”

She held her hand out and admired the ring. “You did a great job. I had no idea this was coming. I mean, I kept hoping you would ask…” Her thoughts were interrupted by the click of a camera. She leaned close to him. “Hon, I think someone is taking our picture.”

He chuckled. “Sorry, forgot all about. That’s Matt. I hired him to take photos. I wanted us to be able to look back on the photos years from now. And be able to show our kids.”

“You really planned this all out, didn’t you?”

“This is just the start.” He leaned in and pressed his mouth to her ear. “I seem to recall something about fucking you out in the salt air.”

She kissed his cheek. “Well, sir, you did catch me, after all. Even though quarterbacks can’t run.”

He tickled her side, making her squirm. “Come here, you little brat,” he said as he pulled her up from the bench. “I feel a spanking coming on.”

“Okay, but I’m not sure you’ll fit on my lap very well, but I’m happy to try.”

He laughed and grabbed for her, but she evaded him and ran to the car. “I hope you dodge tackles better than that on the field. Otherwise, you’re gonna end up on your back a lot.”

Pinning her against the passenger side of the car, he kissed her hand. “Oh, someone is gonna be on their back real soon, and it won’t be me.”

She nibbled on his lip. “Always threatening me with a good time…”

Zach nipped at her ear. “Keep it up my dirty little slut, and I’ll take you here right against the car.”

Hannah giggled. “With all your adoring fans watching.”

He looked up and she could tell the moment he realized they had an audience.

Reaching behind her, he opened the car door. “To be continued.”

She purposefully brushed herself against the front of his pants before getting in the car. “I certainly hope so.”

Hannah was surprised when they pulled into the driveway of one of the hotels along the seawall.

“We’re staying here?”

“Just you and me, all weekend,” Zach said as they pulled up to the valet stand.

“What about your sisters?”

“Your mom is happy to play grandma for the weekend.” He handed the keys to the valet and opened the car door for Hannah. “They’re all staying over with her.”

She linked her arm with his and headed into the hotel. “I’m sure that made her day.”

“Almost as much as knowing I was about to propose.”

“She knew?”

He punched the Up button at the elevator. “Oh, yes, and she tried to give me plenty of suggestions. I told her I’ve been planning this for twenty years, so I was good.”

“I still can’t believe you fell in love with me when you were nine.”

“I didn’t. I was eight. It was the moment you kissed me. I knew from that second that I wanted to marry you. But we’d already done the cake, so I’d already made my wish.”

“What did you wish for that year?”

“To play football, of course.”

She laughed as she got on the elevator. “So both of your wishes came true this year.”

He pinned her up against the back of the elevator and kissed her. “Not fully. We’re not married yet. And a big wedding takes time.”

“I don’t want a big wedding.” Oddly enough, growing up, she’d always dreamed of a big wedding. But now, all she wanted was to have a small ceremony as soon as possible so they could start their lives together.

“You don’t?”

“No. Just you, me, and our closest family and friends with a ceremony under our tree. We can get a big tent and have the reception in the backyard. And then, I want to run away for a week, just the two of us.”

The doors to the elevator opened and he followed her out onto their floor. “Well, I’m not sure how ‘small’ we can go since we’ll have folks from your work, my work, and probably the entire team. But we can make it simple, so we don’t have to wait long.” He put his hand on the small of her back and led her to their room.

“*Simple*. Yes, that’s what I want. I don’t need a ton of flowers or fancy centerpieces or any of that. Just us and those who care about us.”

He pulled out a keycard and unlocked their room. “Oh, I won’t skimp on the flowers.”

“Oh, my,” she said as she walked into the room. Nearly every table or counter in the room was covered in vases of peonies and roses.

Zach came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. “If I can do this in less than two weeks, imagine what I could do with two months. You love flowers. It’s why I send a bouquet to your work every week. And have that little vase on your nightstand. When the weather is right, I’m going to fill our yard with flowers. So, yes, you do need a ton of them at our wedding. But I’ll let it be a surprise to you so I can see this look again on your face.”

She turned around. “What look? And how can you see it when I wasn’t facing you?”

“Surprise, love, awe, and happiness.” He pointed toward a mirror on the wall. “I could see every expression on your face right there. It’s the look you get when someone does something unexpected and sweet for you. Like when Ollie hugs you.”

She put her arms around his neck. “Do you think we can get married this year?”

“I think so. Even if Brandon can’t come back and play, we have some extra-long breaks in November. There’s a Thursday game that month, so we won’t play the Sunday before or after it.” He pulled out his phone. “I’m gonna text your mom. I bet by the time we get to dinner on Sunday, she’ll have someone to coordinate everything.”

Hannah scoffed. “Oh, she’ll probably do it herself. She’s been eagerly awaiting this.”

“Even better. Now, I seem to remember something about a reward for catching you on the beach.” He pulled her out to the balcony.

She looked out across the water. “This view is gorgeous.” The water looked greener than it did from down on the ground. It felt like you could see for miles.

“I agree,” he replied, but he hadn’t taken his eyes off her.

“Had you called me gorgeous back in January, I would have said you were blind. I don’t know how you managed to do it, but I’m beginning to see myself the way you see me.”

He backed her against the back corner of the balcony and pulled off her shirt. “I’m glad to hear that. Because it’s true; you are gorgeous. I’ve always thought so. Nothing will ever change that. To me, you’ll always be the most beautiful woman in the world.”

She reached behind her and unsnapped her bra. “I know. I can see it in the way you look at me. No one has ever looked at me the way you do.”

He pushed her shorts and panties down, then did the same with his shorts. “Good. If anyone ever does, I might have to cut their eyes out.

She giggled as he picked her up so she could wrap her legs around him. “Jealous, much?”

“Jealous a lot. You’re mine, Hannah, and I’m yours. And I’ll never let anyone get in the way of that,” he replied as he thrust into her. “If I could bite you right here at the curve of your neck like in Mom’s fated mate books, I would. Leave a permanent mark for all to see.”

She moaned and dug her ankles into him. “At least I’m wearing a ring to show men I’m taken.”

“All the more reason to get me to the altar fast, huh? So you can put a ring on my finger?”

“Damned right. Now, less talking and more pounding me into the wall. This is our first time as an engaged couple, after all.”

He laughed. “Oh, don’t worry. I plan on spending all weekend pounding you into the wall, the bed, the couch…”

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Chapter Forty-four

HANNAH SCOOPED UP THE pile of mail as she walked into her house. While she had only really lived there for a handful of months, it felt weird that it wouldn't be hers for much longer. Zach had asked her to officially move in, and she'd jumped at the chance. Today, she planned to move the rest of her clothes and such over to his place. The furniture would stay a bit longer while the pool house was being painted.

As expected, Chelsea and her son had moved in with her fiancée a few weeks back. Since she'd picked out all the furniture in the pool house, Zach had encouraged her to take any of it that she wanted. This, in turn, made room for everything Hannah had purchased earlier this year. For now, the space would be guest quarters and later would once again house a nanny once they needed one.

She flipped through the pile. It had been more than a week since she'd been there, which meant a lot to sort through. She was thankful for Zach's suggestion of a box under the mail slot, otherwise the door might have gotten stuck when she tried to open it.

Junk, junk, bill, junk… and then an envelope with no stamp or postmark. She flipped through and found nearly a dozen more. *He really doesn't give up, does he?* She wasn't sure who was more persistent: him or Vi. *I guess I know where she gets that from.*

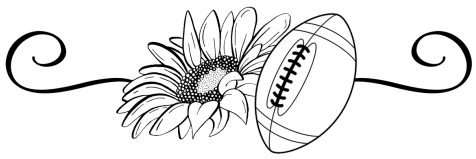
Curious, she opened a few of them. Each was more unhinged than the next. Henry was furious that Zach hadn't changed his name. That his jersey said "Hayes" instead of "Pierce." That Zach had him barred from the game in Massachusetts.

Joke's on you, asshole. That was me. The team helped me get in contact with security at the stadium and I made sure they knew about the restraining order. I've done the same for the stadium in Florida as well as Zach's home stadium. If he wants to see a game, he can watch it on TV.

She pulled a large zipper bag from a drawer in the kitchen and dropped all the letters in it. Later, she'd drop them off at her lawyer's office. So far, they'd been unable to get a judge to do anything about it since she was never home when they were delivered.

Damned legal system. If he'd been held accountable for the attack, as opposed to a slap on the wrist, he'd be out of our lives. At least for a little bit.

"Ugh!" she yelled to the empty room. *Why did he have to go and ruin my good mood?*



ZACH KNEW SOMETHING WAS up the moment Hannah got out of her vehicle. Besides her forehead being scrunched up out of frustration, she also

slammed her car door. “What’s up, baby?” he asked as he grabbed boxes.

“Nothing. I’m fine.”

“Oh, now I really know something is up. Let me get your stuff inside and you can tell me all about it.”

The moment he dropped the last box in their room, he led her over to an armchair and pulled her down onto his lap. “Spill.”

“She shook her head. You have enough on your plate between work and the team. The last thing you need is a nightm—Crap.”

“*Henry*. That’s what this is about. Is he also the reason why every time you go to the house you come back all moody? I thought maybe it was just worries over us.”

“No, never about us. I never worry about us. It’s the influence and stress from those around us that get me.”

“So, what has my sperm donor done this time?”

She told him about the letters and his attempt to go to the game.

“Hannah. How long has this been going on? And why didn’t you tell me?”

“Since just after the attack. You were so happy—and busy—that I didn’t want to bother you with it.”

“You could never ‘bother’ me. If something is going on in your life, it’s important to me. I don’t care how busy I am.”

She chewed on her lip.

“Is there more you’re not telling me?”

She shook her head, but he wasn’t convinced. He started to push but decided to hold back for now. *Let’s deal with one problem at a time*.

“What did your lawyer say?”

“The judge refuses to say Henry is in violation of the restraining order.”

“No surprise since he let Henry off on a lesser charge and community service. All to protect his law license.”

“And my lawyer can’t get the case assigned to another judge. He doesn’t think that would really make a difference, anyway, since they all know him.”

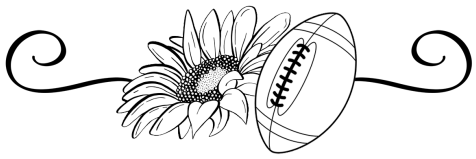
“I don’t understand why he won’t drop it. I will *never* be a Pierce again.”

“He was very angry about your jersey. Said he didn’t put all that time and effort into your football playing for your shirt to say Hayes.”

“Fuck him. I quit caring what he thought the moment he walked out on Mom. The only thing I care about is him upsetting you. I would hate to lose you because of him.”

She laid back against his chest. “*Never*. There isn’t anything he could do to make me leave you. You’re mine, remember?”

He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. He knew she’d never walk away from him. That wasn’t what he worried about. *Henry had already gotten violent with her once. What if he did it again?*



Zach woke with a start. *Fucking Henry. Why can’t he just disappear and leave us alone? Every time he shows up, these nightmares get worse.*

Pulling Hannah closer, he kissed the top of her head.

The months after his mom’s death were some of the worst in his life. Henry spent months fighting Zach over custody. He felt like he shouldn’t have to pay a penny toward their upkeep and that Zach should go away to college rather than care for his sisters. Eventually, the judge had enough of

his callous attitude toward his own children and ordered $1,500 a month for each of the girls. Plus, he confirmed Zach's custody.

Before leaving the courtroom, Zach had let Henry know exactly what he thought of him.

"You're a selfish asshole who interrupted our mourning over Mom because you hate having daughters," he told him. "I hate you. You're dead to us. I never want to see you again."

And for years, he'd not heard a peep from him. Not until it became common knowledge he was dating Hannah. *Was that it? Is he harassing us because I'm serious about someone? Is he afraid I'll have kids—sons—and them not be named after him? Good. I'll be sure to send him birth announcements with "Hayes" front and center. The only way his family name continues is if he has more kids. And the way he hates women, I doubt that will happen.*

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Chapter Forty-five

HANNAH SAT UP FROM the couch and stretched. With the girls back at school, she'd started working until two on Fridays. This let her be home before they got out of school. Willow and Ollie were always happy to spend time with her, while Vi would hide in her room. Ever since Zach's proposal, she'd refused to even talk to Hannah. Even the notes had stopped.

Both Willow and Ollie had assignments to do, so Hannah had laid down on the couch for a nap. They'd fly out to Baltimore early in the morning for Zach's first regular season game, and the girls didn't want to bring homework with them. Not that she could blame them. Who wanted to do schoolwork on a trip when there was so much to see and do? Especially since they'd be getting home late on Sunday.

When she swung her legs around to stand up, her hair hit her in the face. *That's weird. My hair is back in a braid, like usual. It shouldn't—No, no, no.* She reached back and felt her hair. Rather than a long braid, she found her hair coming loose and ending a few inches below her shoulders.

My hair. She cut my hair. Other than trims, it hadn't been out since her grandma died. That was more than ten years ago. She choked back a sob. *How could she do this? This was worse than everything Vi had done combined.*

Wiping away tears, she picked up her braid from the floor and hid it in the old nursery. Then, she knocked on Willow's door. "Can you watch your sisters for a bit? I have to run out."

She covered her mouth in surprise. "Hannah, your hair."

"I know. Can you watch them?"

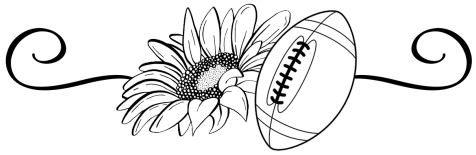
"Yes. Whatever you need."

"Thanks."

She only had a few hours until Zach came home, and she needed to get the hack job Vi had done cleaned up. At least then, she could claim she was trying something new. If he saw the uneven mess it was now, he'd know something was wrong. What she wanted to do was curl up in bed and cry. But that would have to wait for later. *Salon, first.*

While Zach had handled everything with Henry fine, she couldn't be assured of the same when it came to Vi. He hated Henry but loved Vi. She was his sister. If his lawyer was right, within the month she'd be his daughter. And he'd said more than once that family was the most important thing to him. That he would never let anything come between him and his family. Hannah couldn't handle it if he chose Vi over her. *It would destroy me.*

And that's why he's never going to learn about this. Sooner or later, she's going to have to grow up and get over sharing Zach.



“HEY, BABY, HOW WAS—?” Zach stopped in his tracks. He’d only seen Hannah with short hair twice in his life: after her aunt and uncle died, and after her grandma passed away.

“Oh, Hannah? What happened? It wasn’t one of your parents, was it?” he asked as he hugged her.

“My parents?”

“Your hair is short. You only cut it when you’re grieving.”

She fingered her hair, and a look of sorrow flashed across her face for just a second. “Oh, I decided to try something new. My braid was getting harder to manage because it was so long. I wanted to test this out before we got too close to the wedding.”

He leaned back and looked her in the eye. “You’re sure? It feels like something more.”

“I’m sure. This way, I have more hairstyle options for our wedding.”

He reached behind her and tried to wrap it around his hand. “It’s too short. How can I grab it when I’m taking your mouth?”

She laughed, but it sounded stilted to him. “I’ll let it grow out more, promise. I didn’t think about that when choosing the length.”

“I’m kidding. Whatever you like is good with me. I’ll just hold onto the back of your head, instead,” he said with a wink. He wanted to press her more on why she really cut her hair, but he could sense the tension in her body. Pushing now would only upset her more. *Maybe my therapist will have some suggestions of what I can do in situations like this. I can push*

and tease all I want when things are good, but when she's like this, it's like I don't know what to say.

"Are you ready to fly out in the morning?"

"My luggage is packed and sitting in the closet. The girls put theirs by the front door. The question is, are you ready?"

He knew she wasn't talking about packing; she meant the game. The week after his proposal to her, Coach had called him into his office, just as Sean had predicted. The car accident caused nerve damage in Brandon's arm; he'd never play professionally again. As such, they were offering him the back-up position for the season.

After some back and forth, they negotiated a contract and signing bonus. He'd immediately contacted a real estate agent about purchasing a lake house. It was going to be his wedding present to Hannah. *A private, secluded place where we can go and enjoy ourselves. And I can't wait to show it to her… and the little cabin tucked into the trees.*

While Jack would handle most of the quarterback duties, Zach would still get some time on the field. Only now, it would be regular season games with a packed stadium and millions of TV viewers. This Sunday was his first game as an official team member, and he was nervous.

"I think so. I ran through the plays so many times today, I could do them in my sleep."

"Am I going to wake up Sunday morning and find you getting sick in the bathroom again?"

He pulled a face. "Probably. You knew about that?"

She nodded. "I debated coming in but thought you might get embarrassed over it. I didn't want to make you feel any worse than you already did. Not on game day."

Zach pulled her close. “It’s odd having someone who takes care of me and looks out for me. I haven’t had that since Mom.”

She laid her head on his shoulder. “It’s my job. Just like you do for me. You’re mine, *remember*? That comes with responsibilities.”

“I swear, I don’t know how I got so lucky to have you. But I thank God every day.”

“Same, hon. Same.”

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Chapter Forty-six

September 10, 2023

I caught Hannah staring in the mirror this morning, a tear rolling down her cheek. I know there is something more to this short hair thing. Why won't she tell me the truth? Doesn't she know I would do anything to make her happy?

Thanks to her and her support, all my dreams are coming true. Sometimes, I worry that I'm not doing the same for her.

I'm giving her a little more time, and if I haven't heard the whole story, I'm going to call her on it. Not talking about a problem doesn't make it disappear…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

“WELL, IF IT ISN’T Ack Attack” Dale said as Zach walked into the locker room alongside Jack.

“Huh?”

“Haven’t you seen what the fans started calling you guys ever since it was announced Brandon isn’t coming back? With both of your names so similar, fans started calling you ‘Ack Attack’ and it stuck,” Dale explained.

“The team even had shirts made,” Sean added.

Jack shook his head. “I try to avoid social media, so I hadn’t heard about it. I’m surprised Mandy didn’t mention it to us.”

“She was probably afraid we’d talk her out of it. At least they didn’t pick something like ‘Double Ack’. That sounds like something you feel when you’re sick,” Zach joked.

“Ready to ride the bench today, Zach?” Dale asked.

“Hey, I get paid regardless of whether I sit there relaxed or out on the field busting my ass,” he responded. “So, I’m fine with it.”

“Ah, but you get a bonus if you play. And I’m pretty sure you care more about the game than the money.”

He laughed. Dale had him there. “True. But I’m thrilled to be here. Unlike you guys, this wasn’t supposed to be an option for me.”

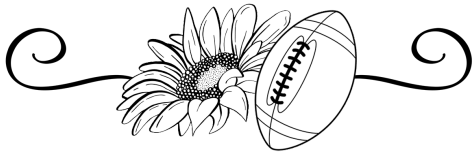
Jack patted him on the shoulder. “I’ll do my best to run up the score. If we are up by a lot, they’ll switch us out to let me rest. I know what it’s like to be sitting there wishing I was out there on the field.”

“They’ll do the same if we’re getting blown out,” said Sean.

“Yes, but we’re going to work hard to make sure that’s not the case, right?”

Everyone mumbled their agreement.

“Now, let’s get out there and kick some ass so Zach can play, too.”



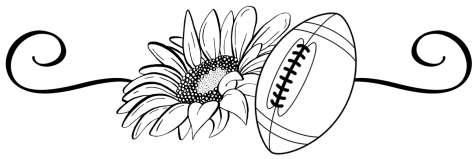
Late in the fourth quarter, Jack landed on his hand wrong. He assured Coach he was fine, but with only a couple minutes left and them ahead by fourteen, he felt it was better to pull him.

“I didn’t want you to get hurt so I could play,” Zach told him as they switched out.

Jack winked at him. “Hand is fine. But I’ll play it up a little for a couple days. Get out there and show everyone what you’ve got.”

Oh. Well, then, let’s do this.

He hurried out onto the field to huddle with the guys. “Okay, so here’s what we’re going to do…”



“Way to go, Double Ack!” Sean said as they made their way into the locker room.

“That’s not quite right. More Ack? Two times Ack?” Dale joked.

“Duo Ack. That’s got to be it. Right?”

“Ha. Get in all your digs,” said Jack. “But Ack Attack just won against a team that kicked our asses last year. And the only difference was Zach and I, so…”

“Sure, take all the credit,” said Dale. “I seem to remember making two of those touchdowns, and Sean made the other two.”

“Yeah, but you were both there last year and lost. We weren’t,” he said with a laugh. “Clearly, the win is ours.”

“Eh, let them have the glory this week. It was their first game, after all,” Sean pointed out. “Some of us have plenty of wins under our belts.”

“And just for that, no balls for you next week,” Jack joked.

“I’ve got two perfectly good ones already. Or at least your girlfriend seemed to think so.”

A chorus of “Ooooh” and “Ouch” filled the room.

Jack shrugged. “Not what your girlfriend said this morning.”

“Okay, guys, enough of that,” Coach said as he walked in. “Jack does have a point about this being an unexpected win. And with teams unsure of Zach, we have a secret weapon. Next week’s game is against a team that will probably only win a single game this year. But the one after that is the reigning champs. They’ll be the real test of our new setup.”

“Are you gonna have Zach play next week?” Jack asked.

“Yes. But let’s try not to use those secret signals from Zach to Sean and Dale. We’ll keep those on the DL a little longer. Sooner or later, players will start to figure them out. I’d rather it be later. No need to use them against a weak team.”

“But when would Zach play against a strong team?”

Coach pointed a finger at him. “Don’t think I missed what you did today. I only pretended not to notice because it worked. Switching with Zach threw off the other team and they gave up another touchdown. And it made the fans go wild. Mandy said merchandise sales went crazy, as did ticket sales. I’m gonna keep that play in my back pocket and pull it out as needed.” He turned to Zach. “Which means you’d better be ready to play every week. No slacking off because you think you’re riding the bench.”

“Yes, Coach,” they said in unison.

“Okay, get cleaned up and head out. You deserve to go celebrate.”

Zach hurried up to get showered and dressed so he could head to dinner with Hannah and his sisters. They were flying out later tonight, so it was his last chance to see them before they left. Things were harder now that school was back in session. While he liked having them at games, he didn’t want them to miss school because of it.

As usual, they were waiting for him out in the hall.

“You got to play!” all three girls screamed at the same time before tackling him with hugs.

“Sure did. It was Jack’s doing, actually. He wanted me to get a little time in the first game. I guess Brandon always fought against Jack getting any minutes, so he knew what it was like to ride the bench all the time.”

Hannah looked at him, one eyebrow raised. “Ack Attack?”

He put up his hands. “Not my choice. I didn’t even find out until the guys started razzing us before the game. Someone started calling us that on social media, and the team ran with it. I guess it’s to be expected when your quarterbacks are Jack and Zach.”

“It was great seeing you out there on the field. Even though I couldn’t see your face, I knew you had on a huge smile.”

Pulling her over, he kissed her. “You would be correct. Even that tackle couldn’t wipe it off my face.”

“Best day ever?”

“Not even the best day this year,” he said as he played with her engagement ring.

She leaned in close. “I’d love a good Ack Attack.”

“Oh, baby, I *wish*. It’s going to be weird sleeping without you tonight. And don’t even think about video calling me. Mondays are your busy days at work. Go home and sleep. I’ll make it up tomorrow. Promise,” he whispered in her ear. He threaded his fingers with hers. “Now, who’s hungry? Let’s go before Hannah gets hangry and eats us.”

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Chapter Forty-seven

September 12, 2023

2005. That was the last time I was there for Hannah's birthday. It was her tenth birthday and there was a huge party at her house.

Alex, as usual, was teasing her and Annie. I stole away, and we hid in the gardens for a while. That was the day I really began to understand how much she loves flowers. It's why I always make certain she has fresh flowers in her office and our room.

And it's why Willow, Ollie, and I have been working on a surprise for her birthday. If only I could have gotten Vi to

really help…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

OLLIE WATCHED OUT THE front window. “I see her! She’s pulling up to the gate.”

Vi rolled her eyes. “Do I have to do this?”

“Didn’t Hannah take you out for your birthday? I think the least you can do is stand here and pretend to enjoy yourself,” Zach told her.

She flopped down on the couch. “*Fine*.”

They listened as she came in the side door, dropped her stuff in the bedroom, and left the room.

“Happy Birthday!” they yelled as she walked into the kitchen.

A huge smile filled her face. “Thanks, guys. Um, why does the yard look different?”

Ollie ran over and grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the front door. “We have a surprise for you. Willow and I helped pick out the plants from your nursery last week. Zach spent the morning digging all the holes. And we helped him plant them all once we got home from school.”

“*Plants*?”

Zach snuck up behind her, wrapping his arms around her middle. “Roses. Seventy roses, to be exact. Your dad delivered them this morning. Some are here in the front yard, some in our little side yard by Mom’s sunflowers, and some in the backyard. The peonies can’t be planted until November, so those have to wait.”

“You guys planted flowers for me?” she asked, her voice cracking a little.

“This is your home now, too. Zach said he planted roses at your house, so we thought you should have a garden here, too” said Willow.

She swiped a tear off her cheek, then held out her arms for a hug. Willow and Ollie hurried over to her.

“I planted one,” Vi grumbled from the doorway.

“Thank you, Vi. I appreciate that more than you could know.”

Ollie pulled Hannah back into the house. “I made you something when we were at Grandma’s house.”

Zach chuckled. Janet was really loving the ‘Grandma’ label. It didn’t stop her from teasing him about more grandkids, though.

She grabbed a card off the counter and handed it to Hannah. Ollie had shown it to him earlier. The front said, “Happy Birthday” and was covered with little paper roses Janet helped her make. But it was the inside that was special. He knew the moment Hannah saw it that she was going to cry.

HANNAH LOOKED AT THE birthday card, which was clearly handmade. “I bet all these flowers took forever to make. They’re beautiful.”

“Grandma has a little tool for rolling them. She cut them out on her machine, and I rolled them.”

Opening the card, she read the sentiment inside. Then, read it a second time to make certain she was reading it right. “Bonus mom?” she asked, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I’m your bonus mom?”

“Not just a bonus mom, but the *best* one.”

“Oh, Ollie.” She pulled her into her arms and hugged her tight. “I’ll treasure this forever.”

“I made you a card, too,” said Willow as she handed it over. Hers was similar to Ollie’s, but it said she was a great big sister. “I’m not quite ready to call you two Mom and Dad yet, but I’m happy to call you a sister.”

Hannah pulled her in for a hug as well. “You can use whatever word works best for you. I love being your big sister.”

Ollie elbowed their other sister. “Vi made you a card, too.”

She grumbled but picked it up from the counter and handed it to her. For a moment, Hannah was afraid to open it. But then, she realized Vi wouldn’t attack her in front of everyone.

Like the others, the front said, “Happy Birthday.” Inside, it was just signed “Violet.”

She was tempted to try hugging Vi but knew that would just make her uncomfortable. “Thank you, Vi. I’m going to put all these cards in my memories box. I always want to remember my first birthday cards from you.”

Zach pulled her over so he could whisper in her ear. “I have a card, too, but it’s not kid appropriate. I’ll give it to you later. I made it just for you.”

He made me a card? I can’t wait to see what’s so bad he couldn’t give it to me in front of the girls.

Her stomach rumbled. “Is it dinnertime yet? I’m starving.”

“Oh no, Hannah is gonna get hangry again,” Ollie joked.

“In that case, we’d better head out. Our table should be ready by the time we get there.”

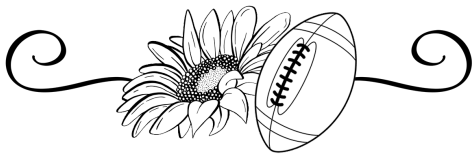
“Give me five minutes to change. You guys are all dressed up, so I’m guessing we’re going somewhere nice.”

“I can get my own reservations at Jake’s now,” he joked. “What better occasion than my girl’s birthday? Although, this time you have to behave.

There’s ten of us tonight, which means we’ll be at a big table in the middle of the restaurant.”

She slapped his arm. “I don’t remember any complaints from you back then.”

“You will never hear me complain about you and that night,” he joked. “Now, go get changed so we can get going.”



Hannah giggled as Zach tried to hold her and unlock their bedroom door. It was just a number combo, but she kept distracting him. “Maybe I shouldn’t have had the third drink.”

He pushed the door open. “Baby, it’s your birthday. You get to enjoy yourself and get drunk. It’s your day.”

She started pulling at his tie as he pushed the door shut. “On our first two dates, I was careful about how much I had. I was afraid you wouldn’t go to bed with me if I had too much.”

He worked on the zipper on the back of her dress. “You’re right. If I even suspected you were a little drunk, I would have tucked you in and let you sleep.”

She pouted as she tried to unbutton his shirt. “Does that mean you’re only tucking me in tonight?”

He brushed her fingers away and opened his shirt himself. “Oh, no. Not tonight. Back then, I couldn’t be certain you would have slept me if you were sober. I know better now. Don’t worry; you’re getting birthday sex tonight.”

She pushed off her dress and climbed into bed. “Good. I’ve been looking forward to this all day. How about you be a good boy and get over here and eat dessert?”

He laughed as he stalked up the bed toward her. “You know me; I’m always a good boy. And I *love* dessert.”

Later as they lay in bed snuggling, Hannah remembered what Zach had said earlier in the evening.

“My card. You forgot my card.”

“Oh, yeah. I sure did.” He got up from bed and unlocked the credenza.

Well, this just got even more interesting. Locked in the cabinet in our locked bedroom?

“I figured you’ve been so great about letting me take photos of you, it was about time I gave you one back.”

She took the card from him. Her eyes grew wide as she saw the front. “You took this?”

“Tripod and a camera. I was afraid to use my cell phone. Took me forever to figure out how to use the little remote.”

He was lying in bed on his side, naked except a bow tied around his cock. Several more photos fell out when she opened the card. In one, he was wearing his jersey and nothing else. Another was just his helmet.

She bounced her feet on the bed and giggled, the photos pressed against her chest. “I love them!”

“I figured giving you prints that stayed here in our room was better than texting them and one of us getting hacked.”

“Aww, no dick pics for me?”

“I thought you didn’t want any.”

“That was before I met him,” she joked.

He took the card and photos from her hands and sat them on the nightstand. “I can’t promise pics in your text, but you’re more than welcome to spend some more time with him tonight.”

“Well, she is feeling a little lonely…”

He climbed into bed with her. “Oh, we can’t have a lonely kitty in this room. That’s just wrong.”

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Chapter Forty-eight

HANNAH WAS IN THE kitchen making her lunch for work when she felt arms wrap around her from behind.

“Whatcha thinking about, baby?” Zach asked.

“Nothing. Why?”

He chuckled and buried his face in the curve of her neck. “One of my favorite scents is you when you’re aroused. And I can smell it all over you. So, I’ll ask again; what are you thinking about? I sure hope it’s me.”

“I was just looking at my list this morning and thinking what I’d like to try next. I mean, it is my birthday month, after all.”

“I’m gathering based on your state, you’ve picked something you really think you’re gonna like.”

She looked around to make sure his sisters weren’t nearby. “CNC. I’ve been reading up on it a lot to get an ideal of some options. A big one is sex while one of us is sleeping. Honestly, that sounds like a great way to wake up.”

“That’s what has you all hot and bothered? I’d be happy to wake you up that way every morning.”

Hannah chewed on her lip. “Um, no? I mean, yes, I would love that. No, it’s not what I was thinking about. I ended up going down a rabbit hole of masked men.”

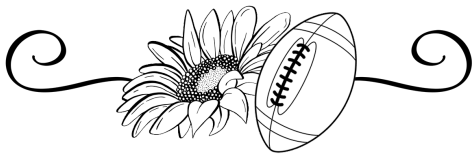
“You want me to put on a mask?”

“And pretend to break into the house and have your way with me.” She turned in his arms. “The specifics I’ll leave up to you, so I’m surprised and scared when you do it.”

“You want me to scare you?”

She nodded. “*Real good*. I’ve always loved horror movies, so I like a good scare.”

“I’ll do my best, then.



IT HAD TAKEN ZACH nearly a week to wrap his mind around it all. The idea of using Hannah this way—even with her permission—felt wrong. But then, he remembered what she said; they’re just role playing. This was just a way for them to mix things up and have a little fun. And both of them knew how to stop things if it got to be too much. Once he’d worked through that, he was able to focus on planning now he was going to do it. And *tonight* was the night

Zach quietly slipped from the bed and headed for the bathroom. Hidden in one of the cabinets was a black long-sleeved shirt, pants, and a mask. Every night about twelve, Hannah would head to the kitchen for a glass of juice. It

never failed that halfway there, she'd need to use the bathroom in the hall. He set an alarm on his watch to wake him up so he could hide in their bathroom to get ready.

Once she left the room, he pulled the straps from his bag and tied them to the bed. Once that was done, he hid in the darkness of his gym so he could surprise her when she headed back to their room. *Now, to wait for her…*

When she stepped into the hall, he snuck up on her, wrapping one arm around her middle. She struggled against him, kicking and trying to free her arms. Under his hand, he could hear her trying to scream. He carried her into the room and tossed her on the bed. She crawled across the bed to get away from him, but he grabbed an ankle and pulled her back across.

"Take your shirt off."

She shook her head and crossed her arms.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a knife. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way. I'd love to cut your clothes off you, but I'm pretty certain that shirt is a favorite of yours. You wear it often enough."

She stared at him for a moment, causing him to chuckle. "I watch you from that window over there all the time," he said as he motioned to the right. "I know plenty about you."

He watched as she chewed on her lip. *Apparently, she's torn between protecting the shirt and wanting me to cut it off her. Interesting.*

A moment later, she sighed and pulled off the shirt.

"Good choice," he said as he climbed into bed and straddled her chest. "You remember green, yellow, red?"

She nodded.

Grabbing a wrist, he fastened the Velcro cuff around it. The whole while, she clawed at him in an attempt to get her wrist free. He'd purposefully

worn an athletic cup in case her fight instincts led to her kicking him. But thus far, her attempts at getting loose had all been completely ineffectual.

“Santa is bringing someone self-defense classes for Christmas,” he said in a low, grumbly voice.

She started to giggle, then seemed to remember the role she was supposed to be playing. Her mouth opened wide like she was going to scream.

He pressed his index finger to her lips. “No screaming, else I’ll be forced to fill that mouth with something. Maybe this?” He palmed his hard-on that already tented his pants. “Or those panties I’m about to strip off you? Better yet, there’s a ball gag in my bag…”

She shook her head.

“Good. I mean, if you want to moan or scream my name, that’s fine. Just no yelling for help.”

Hannah swallowed hard. “I don’t even know your name. I can hardly scream ‘stalker’.”

Well, then. I hadn’t thought about that. A name… “Hayes. You can call me Hayes.” *At least that won’t feel odd since that’s what I’m called on the field.*

Scooting down, he straddled her hips. His fingers traced across her skin. “I love this spot here where your neck curves to your shoulder. It makes me wish we were like the people in those wolf shifter books. That I could bite you right here and mark you as mine forever.” He’d told her the same the day they’d gotten engaged.

He dragged his teeth across her skin. “Maybe your fiancée is content with just a ring on your finger, but I need more than that. In those stories, the bite didn’t just mean you were taken; it told folks ‘touch her and die.’ That’s the message I want to send.”

Her eyes grew wide at his admission.

“Don’t worry about him, though. I’d never hurt your fiancée. He’s the one person besides me who is allowed that privilege. Only the two of us have the right to run our hands over your body; to put our lips to your skin.” He ran his hands down her side as he put his mouth to her nipple. She gasped and pushed her chest up toward him.

“I don’t think there could possibly be a more perfect set of breasts than these. They’re so soft and overflow my hands.” He ran his tongue up the space between them. “One day, I’m gonna coat this area with lube, pull out my cock, and fuck your breasts until I come all over them. And when I’m done, you’re going to clean it up with your tongue.”

Her mouth dropped open in surprise.

“Or maybe I’ll finish on your face. That has its merits, too,” he said as he got up off the bed and hooked his fingers on her waistband. “Time for these to go.”

Once they were off, he reached under the bed and pulled out the wedge pillow. “Put your feet flat on the bed and raise your hips.”

She looked at the pillow in his hands.

“Just trying to make you comfortable.”

When she pushed upward, he had his first look between her legs during their little game. Not only were her lips glistening with her arousal, so were her thighs.

“Wow, someone is really excited about getting railed by a stranger, huh?” He reached forward and ran his fingers through her lips. “Absolutely soaking wet. I can smell you from here.” Bringing his fingers to his mouth, he licked them clean. “Delicious, too. Hope you don’t make a mess of the pillow,” he said with a chuckle.

It took a couple of adjustments to get it just right. With that out of the way, he dug in his bag, grabbed the blindfold, and put it over her eyes. With them covered, he was able to strip out of his clothes and mask. “Time for the fun to begin, my little bird,” he said as he climbed back into bed. Grabbing her legs, he bent her at the waist before sliding into her.

He groaned. “It’s like heaven being inside you. There’s nowhere I’d rather be than here.” He dug his fingers into her hips and thrust hard and fast. It wasn’t long before she was moaning loudly and writhing around under him. But she couldn’t get there because he was purposefully avoiding touching her clit. Hence her legs resting against his chest.

“Please, Hayes,” she whimpered.

“Ah, but only good little sluts get to come. And you haven’t earned that yet. Do you want to?”

“Please…”

He pulled out of her and stepped off the bed. Reaching up, he opened the straps on her wrists. “Leave the blindfold on. Lay across the bed with your head hanging off the side.”

When she was in position, he stood in front of her, his left hand resting on the bed. He grabbed her hand and wrapped it around his arm. “Green, one squeeze. Yellow, two. Red, three.” Taking his cock in his hand, he rubbed the tip across her lips. “Ready to earn an orgasm?”

She squeezed his arm once. *Green.*

He slid it past her lips and to the back of her throat. It felt different at this angle. Normally, he curved toward the roof of her mouth, but instead, he angled toward her tongue and throat. “Show me what that dirty mouth of yours can do.”

She rolled her tongue around him a few times before sucking on him. Just the feel of her mouth was amazing, but the suction battling his thrusts was driving him crazy. He'd already been on the edge before. Now, he knew he only had a couple of strokes before he'd be done. "Every drop. Miss any, and you'll have failed the task."

One squeeze against his arm.

Thrusting forward, he growled and came against the back of her throat. "Good, God, Hannah," he said as she worked to swallow down all of it. When she squeezed his arm again, he slowly slipped out from between her lips. "What a good little birdie; not a drop on me or you. Guess that means you've earned an orgasm of your own. Go back to where you were before."

She scooted back and flipped around so she was facing the foot of the bed. While she got into position, he worked to catch his breath. *I swear, sometimes it feels like she's sucked my soul from my body, too.*

"Why a bird?"

"Hmm?"

"You called me little bird."

"Ah. Because you're gorgeous and I love the way you sing for me when I pet you. And one of these days, I'm gonna lock you away in a cage so you're all mine."

Her mouth dropped open again and it made him wish he could see the look in her eyes, too. "But for now, these straps will have to be enough," he said as he straddled her again. He was just finishing up her first wrist when he felt her lick him from root to tip. "Fuck, little bird. What are you trying to do? Make me come all over your face?"

She giggled.

“Keep that up and you’re going to lose your reward, brat. If you want my tongue on you, I suggest you keep yours in your mouth. Until I ask for it, that is.”

As he scooted down her body, he left love bites across her skin. While some would fade by morning, others would likely be there for a few days and would serve as a reminder of her night with a stranger. “Well, well. You might not have come yet, but you sure are enjoying yourself. There’s already a bit of a puddle on the pillow,” he said before swiping his tongue across her. A loud moan filled the room. “See, isn’t it better to have my mouth than to tease me with yours?”

She was already so aroused that he worried even the slightest touch would push her over. And he didn’t want that; he wanted to draw it out as long as possible. So, he worked to alternate his attention, sucking on her clit, pushing his tongue inside her, and tracing her opening with his fingers. Whenever he’d see her grasping at her binds, he’d switch things up to cool her back down.

He was teasing her slit with his fingers when he remembered something he’d heard a few weeks back. Hopeful it was true, he wet a finger with her arousal and started playing with her ass. She stiffened for a moment but quickly relaxed. *Excellent.*

Continuing with his mouth on her, he played with the opening for a moment more before pressing inward. “Color?” he called out.

He could practically hear the wheels turning in her head as she thought it over.

“Um, green?”

Glad this was the case, he reached over to his bag and pulled out the bottle of lube. He’d thrown it in there, along with a plug, hoping for a little

play. This was so much better than that.

He quickly smeared some on his finger and continued to press forward. At the same time, he played with her clit, keeping her aroused and relaxed. The feel of those rings of muscle squeezing his finger had him imagining what it would be like to have his cock there instead. Just the thought had him leaking from the tip.

Once he had his finger in all the way, he paused for a moment to give her the chance to get used to it. After a couple of minutes, he started sliding it in and out, adding more lube as needed. When he was able to move it back and forth with ease, he added a second finger to it. He'd barely gotten it in when he felt her thighs start to shake.

"Oh fu-oh, God, Oh fu—" she cried out as her body locked up beneath him. Her moans grew louder, drowning out the words she was trying to say. He loved hearing her like this. While he'd gotten pretty good at giving her orgasms, intense ones like these only happened occasionally.

Her breathing was ragged when she finally fell limp back onto the bed.

Dropping a final kiss to her pussy, he pulled his fingers out and headed to the bathroom to clean up.

"More," she mumbled when he came back into the room. "I want more of that."

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Chapter Forty-nine

“MORE? YOU MEAN—?” ZACH couldn’t believe his ears.

“Yes. Green. *Now*,” Hannah pleaded.

Reaching under the bed, he pulled out the basket of old towels he’d tucked under there. “Lift your hips again.”

Once he had a couple tucked around her, he reached for the mask and bindings. “If we’re doing this, it’s going to be as us, not stalker and little bird. Not for our first time. Those two can play some other time.”

“But Hayes will be back?”

“Just put a candle in the window.”

“Don’t you want me on my hands and knees?” she asked as he climbed back into the bed.

He grabbed the bottle of lube and coated a finger. “No, I want to see your face. I want to be able to tell from your expression what you’re enjoying and what you’re not. I’ll start out like I did earlier, except I’ll move my fingers around instead of just in and out. And I’ll talk you through what I’m doing. Okay?”

She nodded.

He worked his fingers into her for a bit until she seemed comfortable with it. “It’s going to burn some as I push in,” he said as he coated his cock with lube. “And maybe a little discomfort at first. If at any point it hurts, you have to let me know. That means something isn’t right.”

“I’ll tell you.”

“Promise?”

“Don’t trust me?”

“It’s not that. you just seem to like a little pain with sex, and I don’t want to hurt you by accident.”

“I promise. If it’s more than a little uncomfortable, I’ll tell you.”

He lined himself up and started to push in. To him, it felt great. She was so tight and the way she squeezed him was amazing. But a look of discomfort flashed across her face. “Hannah?”

“Just the burn. Promise.”

Reaching between them, he pressed a finger against her clit. Almost immediately he felt her relax and he was able to press further into her. He could tell when he’d made it past the rings of muscles, as the pressure against the head of his cock decreased. “I’m in. Now, I’m just going to slowly push my length in.”

“What does it feel like?”

“Like you’re strangling my cock,” he said with a groan. “And beyond that, you fit me like a glove. Great doesn’t even begin to describe it. How about you?”

“It’s this weird combo of the burn and the nerves there all lighting up. I can feel a little of what I did earlier, but with a promise of more to come. If that makes any sense.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” he said as he slowly slid in further. A low moan escaped her lips. “That sounded like a good thing.”

She wrapped her legs around him. “Whatever you just did, do it more. But faster.”

He chuckled. “I haven’t done much of anything yet.” He moved forward a little faster. “You want all of me?”

“Yessss,” she exhaled.

Pushing forward, he fully seated himself in her. It wasn’t something they could normally do, and it felt so good to be flush against her like that. “Good, God, Hannah. I can’t even explain how it feels. It’s not all soft and swollen, so there’s more friction. Every bit of me feels every bit of you. Do you want me to stay here for a moment?”

“No. I’m ready for more.”

He slid out until just the crown was inside her, smeared on more lube, and pushed back in. She moaned again.

“So full. And I can feel you inside me.”

“Inside where?”

She chewed on her lip.

I love it when she gets shy. “The girl who gave me an anatomy lesson on our first night is too embarrassed to say the p-word?”

She giggled, causing her grip on him to increase.

“Fuck, do that again.”

This time she laughed and he was nearly undone.

HANNAH NEARLY LAUGHED A second time at his reaction, but she was afraid it would be over too quickly if she did. Not when she could feel the

hint of something good just over the horizon. She'd expected it to be a lot more painful based on everything she heard over the years. But other than the burn of her muscles being stretched, it wasn't bad at all. Just that little edge of pleasure mixed with pain that she liked so much.

"Ready?" he asked.

She smiled at him. "Give it to me."

The quick, hard thrust he gave her in response was just what she'd hoped for. It caused this little flicker of pleasure in her core, and she wanted, no *needed*, more of it. "Zach, yes," she moaned as she tightened her legs on him.

"Touch yourself."

"I want your fingers."

"I messed up and there's lube on both of my hands…"

Oh, yeah, that could be a problem.

She reached between them and flicked a finger across her clit. *Damn, too wet.* She grasped for one of the towels sitting on the bed.

"Something wrong?"

"Not enough friction," she said as she swiped the towel between them.

"Oh, did I get my little slut too wet?"

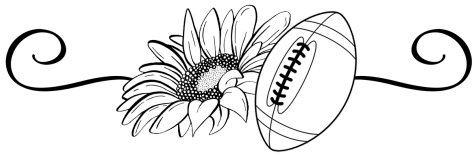
Laughing, she slugged him on the shoulder before putting her hand back on her clit. *Perfect.* She'd barely started to rub when it hit her. It was nothing like the orgasms she experienced in the past. Her entire body shook uncontrollably, and her heels dug into him.

"Oh, fuck, Oh God," she chanted as he kept up the pace through her climax. By the time she fell back onto the bed, she was lightheaded and short of breath. "Are we outside? I swear I saw stars," she said between breaths.

His response sounded like choked laughter. A moment later, he stilled and yelled her name.

She giggled as he collapsed on her, his breath tickling her neck.

“I think you’re right.” he mumbled. “We must be out under the night sky.”



Hannah was deep asleep when she felt Zach’s arms tighten around her, pulling her back against him.

“Is it time to get up already?” she whined.

“No, you and that beautiful ass of yours gets to stay snuggled up under the blankets. I, on the other hand, have to go get the girls off to school.”

Sighing, she turned around in his arms. “But I have to be up for work soon.”

“Nope, we’re both playing hooky today. The only things on the agenda are snuggling, naps, kisses, and making love. And if you’re lucky, I might make you see stars again,” he said as he squeezed her ass.

“Sorry, hon, but that’s *definitely* off the menu for today.”

His hands quickly moved up to her back. “Are you in pain?”

“No, nothing like that. Just tender. Like I worked out a lot and my muscles hate me.”

A sly smile filled his face. “You know what you do when that happens? You work out more.”

She rolled her eyes. Men. “*Nope*. It’s taking the day off.”

“Can’t blame me for trying. Last night was amazing.”

“Most of me agrees with that statement,” she joked. She held up a finger. “Of course, we could still do it…”

“Um, if you’re suggesting that finger for me, that’ll be a no.”

She reached behind him and grabbed a cheek. “No interest in finding out what a prostate orgasm is like?”

“None. I’m good with the ones I have now, thank you.”

“Well, me and my finger are at your disposal if you ever change your mind,” she said with a wink.

“Watch it, brat, otherwise you’re gonna have a whole new reason for your bottom to hurt.”

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Chapter Fifty

ZACH WAS SURPRISED TO find Hannah's SUV still in the driveway when he headed out to his vehicle. She'd left the house at least fifteen minutes ago. *She should be almost to work already.* Worried, he turned toward her vehicle instead. That's when he noticed her head was down on the steering wheel.

"Hannah!" he yelled as he ran toward her. The sound of her sobs hit him as he got close.

She picked up her head as he opened her door.

He wrapped his arms around her. "Baby, what's wrong?"

"I. Can't. Do it. Anymore," she choked out.

He froze. *Do what anymore? Us?* "Hannah, love, what's wrong? Tell me."

She pointed toward the other side of her SUV. That's when he noticed her vehicle was sitting odd.

He walked around the vehicle and found both tires flat, screws or nails had been put into the sidewalls of each. "Pig" was written on one tire, "Oink, oink" on the other. *Fuck. Who would do something like this?*

He helped her out of the driver's seat and back into the house. He led her over to the couch, pulling her down into his arms.

"She hates me," Hannah sobbed.

Someone hates Hannah? How is that even possible? She's the best person I've ever met.

"Who hates you?"

"Violet. I've tried so hard to get her to like me, but it's only gotten worse."

He took a deep breath. *My sister did this?* "Start from the beginning. What has she done to you?"

She stood up and held out her hand. "It'll be easier to show you."

When they got to the old nursery next to their bedroom, she pointed at the two boxes on the dresser. "One has all the notes she's written me. The other are items she's ruined."

Afraid of what was in the second box, he looked at the notes first. It was a decision he quickly regretted. The messages from his sister were horrible and clearly went back months based on how many there were.

"The long ones were on our door whenever you weren't here to see them. The little ones she hid in places she thought you wouldn't see."

He wanted to kick himself. When he found that first note, he believed Vi. That it was the only one and that she'd never do it again. Clearly, she was better at lying than he thought.

"When did these start?"

"The Monday after you lectured them."

Zach crumpled the note in his hand. *Yup, that was well before he found that note. She absolutely lied to me.*

He pulled out a Post-it. "Is this from when you were so sick?"

“That was Vi, too.”

His eyes grew wide. “My sister made you sick?”

“She put two packets of powdered laxative in my lunch.”

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her. “I’m so sorry, Hannah. I caught her placing one note, and I believed her when she said she wouldn’t do it again.”

She wiped tears from her cheeks. “I didn’t want you to know. Your sisters mean so much to you…”

“Hannah, did you think I would choose Vi over you?”

The tears started falling again. “I was so afraid you would. You said that family meant everything to you. And that you would never let anything come between you and your sisters. I’m finally so happy. I just couldn’t take the chance.”

“Oh, baby.” He hugged her tight to his chest. “I would never let her bad behaviors get in the way of what we have. I love you too much to ever let you go.” He couldn’t believe Hannah had been dealing with this for months. The thought of her being in pain like this for so long made his heart hurt. “When I talked about my family, I meant you, too.”

She looked up at him. “Really?”

“Ever since that day in the coffee shop. There was no way I could ever walk away from you again after that.” He looked at the second box. “The other one is worse, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said softly.

It was tempting not to look inside, but he needed the entire story. He opened the box and there on top was her braid. *She is right. This is way worse.* “She cut your hair?”

“While I was taking a nap on the couch.”

Underneath was a pile of ruined lingerie and her cell phone.

“She poured an entire bottle of bleach in the washer. I only do my stuff when she’s not home now. And my phone stays in my pocket so it doesn’t end up in a glass of juice.”

“Damn it, Violet. We’re having a talk tonight.” He wrapped his arms around Hannah again. “Please, if anything like this happens again, you have to let me know. I feel awful that all of this was happening behind my back. You’ve been miserable, and I had no idea. No one can ever come between the two of us. Got that? I wished for your love for twenty years. There’s no way I’m ever giving you up.”

She leaned her head against his chest. “Good. Because I don’t ever want to give you up, either.”

“I promise that I’m going to handle all of this. Her pranks and insults end today. And I’m gonna have a tow truck pick up your SUV and take it in to get fixed. Don’t worry about it. Can I take you to work?”

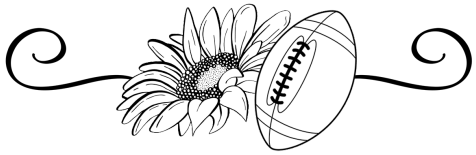
She shook her head. “I’ll get a ride share and go to my house for a bit. I think I need a neutral spot to go have a cry and calm myself down before I go to work.”

He kissed her forehead. “You’re sure?”

“I’m good. You have a busy day already and you’re late for the office. Plus, practice later this afternoon.”

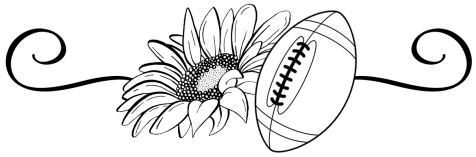
“You’re right, as usual. I just don’t want you to feel alone. You’ve had enough of that already.”

“I promise, we’re good. I’ll see you tonight at dinner.”



HANNAH DUG HER KEYS out of her pocket as she walked up the sidewalk to her house. They'd already moved most of her personal items to Zach's, but her furniture was still inside. She was looking forward to throwing herself onto the bed and having a pity party.

She was unlocking the front door when she saw someone out of the corner of her eye. "Zach, I promise I'm fine," she said before she felt a hand on her back and everything went black.



"Ouch!" Hannah cried out as she opened her eyes. *Why does my head hurt? And why am I in bed?*

She tried to rub her forehead, but her hand wouldn't move. *What the hell? Why are my wrists tied to the bed? It couldn't possibly be Zach, as he uses straps meant for that, not rope.*

A trickle of liquid ran down the side of her face. The metallic smell told her it could only be one thing: blood.

Oh shit. Oh shit. She started pulling at the binds, trying to get free.

"Help!" she screamed, which made her so nauseous she nearly threw up.

"Ah, I see Sleeping Ugly has finally woken up," a voice said from the doorway.

Henry? What the fuck?

“Just as fat and ugly as his mom. I can’t believe he proposed to you. Then again, Maggie did a good job of brainwashing him.”

He walked into the room and sat at the end of the bed. She whimpered and moved herself as far away from him as she could.

Henry scoffed. “As if I would demean myself by touching you. You’re nothing but my son’s leftovers. No, I underestimated you last time. I wasn’t about to fall for that again. There may not be much left here in the room, but you’re crafty. I’m not giving you another chance to hurt me.”

She nearly laughed but stopped herself. He wasn’t the one who ended up in the hospital after their last encounter. But she knew what to expect from him now and laughter would just make the situation worse.

“Why are you here?”

“You need to get him to change his name. *Now*. I’m sick of all these games he’s playing. It should be Pierce on the back of his jersey, not Hayes.”

“Why is this such a big deal to you? It’s just a name.”

“It’s not just a name!” he screamed as he hit her in the face. “It’s *my* name. It’s his name. He was born a Pierce, and he’ll *die* one.”

She struggled to hold back the tears. It wasn’t easy, as her head was pounding. But she refused to show him any weakness. He would eat that up, and she didn’t want to blow up his ego any more than he’d already done himself. “Why is it so important that you resorted to something like this? To attacking me in my own office and now holding me hostage?”

“Because of the inheritance!” he yelled at her. “Sons are very important in my family. So much, in fact, that money is tied to it. And my inheritance comes due next year… if I have a named son. If I don’t, I lose more than twenty million dollars. That’s my retirement.”

“It’s been ten years since he changed his name. Why didn’t you just have another son?”

He jumped up and angrily paced around the room. “You think I didn’t fucking think of that? I spent so much money on embryos for a surrogate, and every single one was female. I’m not talking about a handful; it’s been dozens. Not a single male. I tried everything the doctors recommended, but nothing changed. I spent so much money only to get girl after girl.

“Zach is my last chance of getting my inheritance. I’m not losing the comfort of my golden years because my stupid son decided to agree with his bitch of a mother. He was nineteen and decided he was going to defy me. That needs to end. *Today*.”

“Then it sounds like you’ve run out of options since he’s not going to change his mind on this.”

He looked at his watch. “Well, my food should be here soon.” Picking up a roll of duct tape from the dresser, he walked over to her. “I’ll give you some time to think it over. One way or another, it’s gonna happen. It’s just a matter of how many injuries you have in the end.” He tore off a strip of tape and put it over her mouth. “Your neighbors have all left for work, but I don’t need you alerting the delivery driver.”

She tried to avoid the tape, but sudden movement made her so dizzy she nearly threw up.

“Stop moving around so much. I know it’s making you sick; you’re practically green. The last thing I need is for you to choke on your own vomit and die. I don’t want you dead. I need you too much right now. Later, though…” He shrugged his shoulders. “I couldn’t care less.”

He slapped the tape on her mouth and left the room. She must’ve passed out again, as the next thing she knew, he was pulling it back off.

“You’re supposed to be thinking, not sleeping,” he told her.

“Maybe you should have thought of that before you gave me a concussion,” she snapped back.

“Well, if you don’t figure out a way to convince him, a concussion will be the least of your worries.” He pulled her phone from his pocket. “Zach keeps texting you. If he doesn’t get a response, he’s going to come over here. And things won’t go well if he does that. I need you to tell me what to say to him. And no hidden messages. You already know I don’t care about hurting you, but I’ll do the same to those sisters of his if need be. Got it?”

She’d seen the gun tucked in his waistband earlier when he left the room, and she didn’t want to take any chances. There was no way she was going to put Zach—or his sisters—at risk. While Henry clearly didn’t want to physically hurt his son, if he showed up at her house, it was almost a sure thing that a physical altercation would ensue. And as crazy as Henry was acting, she doubted he would refrain from pulling his weapon out.

“Tell him: I’m okay, just having a good cry at home. I’ll call you later once I’m feeling better. And please don’t come by the house. I need some time to myself.”

He narrowed his eyes at her while he tried to figure out if there was anything hidden in the texts. She’d purposefully tried to keep them as simple as possible so that it would be clear that they were straightforward and not concealing anything.

“Okay, they’re sent. You’d better hope he listens to you and doesn’t come over.” He threw her phone on the nightstand. “I’m going to take care of some work while you think things over. I’ll give you a couple of hours to do the right thing. If you don’t have a solution by the time I’m done, I’m gonna have to escalate things.”

Escalate things? Shit. My head is already bleeding, and based on how badly it hurts, there must be a pretty serious injury there. What's he going to do? A gunshot would attract attention. But what about the knife? He could do a lot of damage without killing me.

She wracked her brain to think of anything that could possibly convince Zach to change his mind. Other than doing it to save her or the girls, she couldn't think of anything. And a direct threat to Zach like that from his dad would end in a police call, not a name change. Henry might be crazy, but he was smart enough to know that. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Damn it. Why does Zach's father have to be such an asshole? Hell, why couldn't he have been the one to die from cancer? The world would certainly be a better place without him in it.

As if he knew she was cursing his name, he popped up in the door. "Based on the look on your face, I'm gathering you haven't come up with a solution yet?" He looked at his watch. "You've got forty-three minutes left of your two hours. In the meantime, I'm gonna look around for things I can use on you."

Her eyes grew wide. "Use on me?"

"I may not want to touch you myself, but that doesn't preclude other things. A broom handle, maybe?" he asked with a laugh as he left the room.

A broom handle? Fuck. I have to find a way out of here. If only I could reach my phone. It's so close, yet so far away…

Wait. Doesn't my phone have voice control? "Hey Google. Send a message to 911 saying Help. Kidnapped. He has a gun. Tied up. 4671 SE Whitaker St."

A moment later, she heard the sent message notification beep. *Thank God, I think it worked.*

“Hey Google. Send a message to 911 saying No access to phone. Please do not call or text back. Using voice to text.”

The phone beeped again. She let out a sign of relief. *The last thing I need is the phone to start making noise and catch Henry’s attention. Oh, shit. What if Zach texts? Henry might pick up the phone and see the messages I sent to the police.*

“Hey Google. Send a message to Zach. Very important: Do not call or text. Do not come over. I will tell you why soon. Love you.” *Okay. Hopefully, he listens. Now, all I can do is wait.*

“Who were you talking to?” Henry asked as he walked into the room.

“Myself. Sometimes, it helps to talk out problems aloud.”

He sat down at the end of the bed. “Come up with anything yet?”

She gave him a few ideas she’d already discounted, making them seem like viable possibilities. He jotted them down on the legal pad he’d carried in with him.

“Maybe. I’ll have to give these a bit of thought first. I’d already discarded some of these on your list, but you know him a lot better than I do. It could be that you have a different way of going about some of these than what I had planned. Let’s start at the top of the page, and you can give me more detail on what you think I should do.”

They’d been talking for several minutes when movement outside the bedroom window caught her eye. A camera popped up for just a moment in the half-circle window, then disappeared. *Thank God. The police are here.*

“I don’t know. None of these seem like something Zach would agree to. I thought maybe you had better insight into him, but you’re not giving me anything I haven’t already thought of,” Henry said, pulling her attention back to him.

“You don’t think he’d believe I want our kids to be a Pierce?”

“No. He knows you hate me. Honestly, I think fear is the only thing that will change his mind.” He got up from the bed.

“Wh—Where are you going?”

“I’m going to grab my phone. I’ll give him one last chance. And I’m going to be clear that there will be dire consequences for you if he doesn’t do as I ask.” He was almost out of the room when a loud noise surprised them from the living room.

“What the fuck?” he said as he pulled out his gun. “Did you find a way to get help? Or is it my son coming here even though he was told not to?”

The next moments were all a blur to Hannah. She heard police yell for him to put down his gun, then several gunshots. Bullets hit the wall above the nightstand and Henry collapsed onto the floor.

“Please! Help me!” she screamed as she checked herself over for wounds.

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Chapter Fifty-one

ZACH LOOKED AT THE never-ending pile of paperwork on his desk. *If only I could pass this all along to someone else like I do with a football.* He sighed. His assistant and vice-president were already doing a lot to allow him time off. They didn't need more on their plate.

It wasn't that he wanted to be lazy or anything, he just worried about Hannah. That was a lot she unloaded on him today. And he knew there was more. The meals with carrots or mushrooms accidentally included? The cake that was supposed to be chocolate, but turned out to be carrot cake underneath? Who knows how many instances he'd missed. He hadn't even fully dug through both of the boxes she'd shown him.

He wanted to scream. Hit his punching bag. Go for a run until he collapsed from exhaustion. Anything to get all this pent up anxiety and frustration out of him. It had been a very long time since he'd felt this angry, and that was at his asshole father. For it to be his own sister who had caused so much hurt made it even harder to swallow.

Zach crumpled the paper in his hand. *How could Vi have been so cruel? While I was working hard to build Hannah's self-confidence, Vi was tearing it down. And through it all, Hannah stayed. She didn't go back to living at her own house. Instead, she doubled down, taking off Fridays to spend with the girls. Her answer to hatred was kindness and love.*

That made him feel even worse. *Even with all the cruelty from Vi, she loves me so much that she refused to leave. She just lived with it. And that's my fault. I should have made sure she knew that I wouldn't choose my sister over her. Damn it. Just when I thought everything was great, I find out it was at the price of Hannah's happiness. I can't let that happen again.*

He checked his watch. *Nearly noon. I'm surprised I haven't heard from Hannah yet. She said she would call when she was feeling better. Maybe she's still working through it all.* He was tempted to call her, but she'd asked for time. The least he could do was honor her request. *Back to work.*

He was deep into a contract when his watch buzzed. *Ah, Hannah. Finally.* But when he read her text, he was even more confused. *Don't call her? Don't come over? What is going on?*

Picking up his phone, he called Janet. "Have you talked to Hannah today?"

"No, and she didn't come into work today. Is something wrong?"

"Well, it seems like Vi has been going behind my back and being deliberately cruel to Hannah," he told her before relaying everything he'd learned this morning.

"Oh, Violet," she sighed. "I'm sorry to say that she seems to take more after Henry than Maggie. I mean, Hannah and Alex had plenty of problems. And me and my brother fought all the time. But it was nothing like this."

“I’ve already put in a call to her therapist. I’m just waiting for a call back. And clearly, I’m going to have a long talk with her. But it feels like that won’t be enough. It’s times like this that I wish Mom was here.”

“Thankfully, you have a surrogate mom who can help. I’ll bring dinner over tonight and afterward, I’ll have a talk with Vi.”

He sighed. “Thanks, Janet.”

“It’s no problem. You’ve always been like a son to me, and in November you will be. Besides, your mom would haunt me if I wasn’t there for you guys.”

“Yeah, I could see her doing that. Well, I’d better get back to work. I leave for practice soon. You guys are going to be at the game this weekend, right?”

“You know we wouldn’t miss a home game. We’ll be up in the box with Hannah and the girls.”

He hung up and sat back in his chair. *Hannah didn’t go to work today? And she didn’t give her mom a head’s up? Something isn’t right. Forget work. This is more important.*

Grabbing his keys, he headed out. “Evie, something has come up and I have to leave early. I didn’t get to everything on my desk, though.”

“It’s okay, Zach, I’ll take care of it. Is everything okay?”

“I got a really odd text from Hannah, and she didn’t go to work. I can’t shake the feeling that she is in trouble.”

“Then why are you still standing here?”

“True. I’ll—” He was interrupted by the ping of a text.

Hannah

It’s an emergency. Get to my house as soon as you can. Let police know you’re my fiancée and I asked you to come.

He turned and ran for his SUV. *Shit. Shit. Shit. I knew something was wrong.*

When he turned off the highway onto her street, he encountered a roadblock.

“Sorry, Sir,” the officer said. “Road’s closed.”

“My name is Zach Hayes. My fiancé, Hannah St. James asked me to come.”

“Give me a moment,” he said before walking away. Zach could see him talking on his radio. “Mr. Hayes, you’re cleared to visit the scene. Park behind the tape and check in with an officer when you get to the house.”

“Thank you.” *Scene? Tape. Oh, God, what happened? Please let Hannah be okay.*

He parked a few houses down from Hannah’s, then rushed over to find her. At least a dozen police cars, an ambulance, and a coroner van filled the street. A hard lump filled his throat. *Coroner?*

“Mr. Hayes?” an officer asked.

“Yes?”

“Can you wait over here to the side for a bit? The house is a crime scene, so you can’t go inside.”

“Ha—Hannah? Is she okay?”

“Knocked around a bit from what I saw. She’s talking to a detective right now.”

He went over and sat on the bench they'd bought earlier that year. *She's alive. Thank God, she's alive.* Tears started rolling down his cheeks and he swiped them away. *Time enough for that later. I need to keep it together.*

After a few minutes, a man in a suit approached. "Mr. Hayes? I'm Detective Sanders. Would you be able to make an identification for me?"

"I—Identification?"

"Yes. I believe the suspect is a relative of yours." He led Zach over to a gurney sitting by the van. A body bag sat on top. "Ready?"

Zach took a deep breath. "Ready."

The detective unzipped the top of the bag and flipped it open.

The fuck? "Henry? My dad hurt Hannah?"

"This is your father, Henry Pierce?"

"Yes, that's him."

"He attacked Miss St. James this morning when she arrived at the house. She was tied up in the bedroom when officers arrived. Mr. Pierce had a gun and raised it at officers."

"For a smart man, he was awfully dumb sometimes. I take it the officers shot him?"

"They did. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Don't be sorry. The world is better off without him."

Detective Sanders looked at him for a moment like he wasn't certain what to say to that. "We're sending an officer to your sisters' schools to pick them up. The high school was already locked down because of this incident. Should we take them home?"

"Uh, yes, home. I'll ask Hannah's mom to meet them there."

"The officer will stay outside the house as a precaution. We have to verify he did this on his own."

“Thank you. I appreciate that,” he said before returning to the bench.

First matter of business was Janet. She was already in her car before they got off the phone.

Next was Vi’s therapist. He needed to update her on what happened. Janet was right; Vi was acting more and more like Henry. What if she’d inherited a mental health issue from him?

After leaving a second message for her, he called Hannah’s therapist. He didn’t have the details of what happened today, but he knew it was traumatic.

“I’ll talk with one of our prescribers and see about a prescription for her,” she said. “That will help with the anxiety and panic attacks she’s certain to have in the coming days.”

“Thank you, Dr. Jenkins. She’s still talking with police. We’ll probably head to the hospital from here.”

“I’ll make sure the prescription is added to MyChart so they can see it. They should give her the first dose while she’s there.”

Once he got off the phone, he tried calling Willow, but she didn’t answer.

Zach

Everything is okay. Hannah and I will be home later.

He also texted Sean and gave him a quick run-down so he could talk to coach.

Zach had just tucked his phone in his pocket when he spotted Hannah. One side of her face was completely swollen. He couldn’t even see her eye. Dried blood sat on top of bruises.

“Oh, baby,” he said as he pulled her into his arms. “I’m so sorry. I should have come earlier.”

“No, he would’ve hurt you. He had a knife and a gun,” she said before breaking down into tears.

“But he hurt *you*.”

“He slammed my head into the door to knock me out. And he hit me once. That was it.”

“That’s it? Hannah, your face is black and blue and covered in blood. Your wrists are all abraded. Even a scratch would be too much.”

She tucked her head under his chin. “It was about to get worse. He made threats. Thankfully, I remembered the voice assistant on my phone.”

Worse? How much worse? He started to ask her but bit his tongue. *She’s been through enough. I can get the details later.* “Can I take you to the hospital?”

“I’m okay. I already refused the ambulance.”

“No, you’re not. You’re getting your face imaged and some pain medication. And you probably have a concussion. You know how hard that hit you last time. I’m not taking a no on this.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Fine. The detective cleared me, so we can go. He said he’d talk to me again later once my head wasn’t so foggy.”

He scooped her up in his arms.

“What are you doing?”

“Stop squirming. I’d hate to drop you and hurt you even more.”

“I can walk, Zach.”

“I prefer you here in my arms where I know you’re safe. So, just settle down and accept that I’m carrying you to my vehicle.

She sighed and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Fine.”

“There’s nothing *fine* about today. The only good part is that he can’t hurt any of us ever again.”

A teardrop fell on his neck. “I saw him die,” she said quietly.

“I’m so sorry, baby.”

“He was going to call you and threaten to do things to me if you didn’t change your name. And suddenly, bullets were flying and he collapsed. Watching someone die is horrible.” She buried her face in his neck and cried.

“Oh, Hannah. I hate that my father decided to target you. It’s all my fault. If—”

She picked up her head. “*No*. This is all his fault. If I weren’t your fiancé, he just would have targeted one of your sisters. That would have been worse. He doesn’t care about me, but he hates them.”

He squeezed her a little tighter. “Still doesn’t make me feel any better.” But she was right. He wouldn’t have hesitated to hurt his sisters. Especially Willow or Ollie. All four of them had taken heavily after Henry, but the two girls had his mom’s curls and heavier frame.

As they approached his vehicle, an officer ran over to open the passenger door for him. “I’ll escort you guys to the hospital so you can go in through the back entrance.”

“Can’t we just go home?” she asked while Zach buckled her in.

“Hospital first. Then, home.”

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Chapter Fifty-two

WILLOW LISTENED TO THE other students speculate over why their campus was on lockdown.

“I heard someone was seen with a knife out in the parking lot,” said one girl.

“I saw on social media that there were reports of a shooting down the street,” said another.

A shooting? Down the street? Hannah’s house is nearby. She kicked herself for leaving her phone at home. And without it, she couldn’t easily check in with Hannah and Zach.

“The post I saw said someone died,” added another classmate.

Died? She put her head in her hands. A bad feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. While Hannah’s house was hardly the only one on the street, she felt nauseous. *Please let my family be okay.*

Her worst fears seemed to be confirmed a short time later when the intercom in the classroom screeched on. “Mrs. Falkes, please send Willow Hayes to the office. Have her bring her things with her.”

As she gathered her books and papers, a hard lump formed in her throat. It took everything she had to not start crying.

A sheriff's deputy was waiting for her in the office. "Miss Hayes? We've been asked to take you and your sisters home."

She clutched her purse to her chest as he led her out to the patrol car. "Can you tell me why?"

He opened the back door for her. "I don't know the details. Just that there was an incident and for safety reasons, we've been asked to take the three of you home."

"We're headed to get your sisters next," the deputy sitting in the passenger seat explained.

"But you don't have any information?"

"No. City police are handling it. We were brought in to transport the three of you and keep an eye on the house.

Willow swiped at the tears that were running down her cheeks. Clearly, something bad had happened. *Why did I have to leave my damned phone at home?*

As they left campus, she could see the street to the east was completely closed. And there, in front of Hannah's house, was an ambulance, a dark van, and at least a dozen police cars. She'd seen enough crime shows to recognize the van. That was the coroner. More tears streamed down her face. Someone died. At Hannah's house. *Please, God, don't let it be Zach or Hannah. Our family is finally happy again. Please don't take that away.*

While the deputy ran into the junior high for Vi, Willow cleaned up any evidence of crying on her face. There was no reason to worry Vi or Ollie yet.

"What's going on?" Vi whispered to her while they waited for Ollie.

“I have no idea. They said there was some kind of incident.”

“Maybe a threat to Zach? I know that happens sometimes with pro athletes.”

“Yes, I’m sure that’s what it is.” She felt terrible about lying, but it also felt wrong to burden her with worries that might not be true.

Grandma Janet, as she liked being called now, was waiting in the living room when they walked in the door.

“What’s happened?” Vi asked.

“I don’t know much. Zach asked me earlier to come stay with you guys. I ran out of work so fast that I forgot my phone on my desk.”

Willow ran to her room and grabbed her phone. The notifications showed missed calls from Zach as well as several texts. She collapsed onto the bed when she saw the most recent text. *They’re okay. Hannah and Zach are okay.*

She quickly texted him back.

Willow

Will you be home soon?

Zach

Hannah’s being evaluated at the hospital. Once they release her, we’ll be home.

Willow

Is she alright?

Zach

A bit banged up. Probably another concussion. I made her go to the ER.

Willow

Not shot?

Zach

Shot?

Willow

My school was locked down because of a shooting. And I saw Hannah's house.

Zach

That wasn't her. Hers are head injuries. I wanted her to get checked out in case.

Willow

And you're okay?

Zach

Yes. No injuries for me.

I was at work when it happened.

She let out a shaky breath as a sense of relief filled her.

Willow

Love you. Tell Hannah I love her, too.

Zach

Love you, too.

She tucked her phone in her pocket and headed back out to the living room. “I don’t know what happened, but Zach and Hannah are okay. He’s at the hospital with her. He suspects another concussion.”

“Hannah is hurt?” Ollie asked,

Willow nodded. “I knew something was wrong, as I saw police at her house. But I left my phone at home this morning, so I couldn’t check in with Zach. I just texted him and he assured me they’re okay.”

“Why did police pick us up from school?” asked Vi.

“I don’t have any details, and I didn’t want to bother him about it while he was at the hospital.”

“Thanks for checking, Willow,” said Janet. “Sounds like all we can do is wait for them to get home. Until then, who wants to help me make dinner?”

A couple of hours later, they heard Zach’s SUV pull into the driveway. The girls all started for the front door, but Janet stopped them.

“Give him time to get Hannah inside and settled. I’m sure he’ll come to you guys the moment he has her tucked into bed.”

Willow wanted to argue, but she knew Grandma was right. They’d just be in the way.

The moment he stepped out of his hallway, all three girls ran to him. He held out his arms for a group hug.

“Will Hannah be okay?” Willow asked.

“She has a concussion again. And lots of bruising. But no broken bones, thankfully.”

“Can we see her?” Ollie asked.

“She’s sleeping. The meds they gave her knocked her out before we even left the hospital.”

“Just a peek in the room?” she suggested.

“Okay. But just a peek.” He opened their bedroom door so they could see her.

Willow gasped when she saw how black and blue Hannah’s face was. Her right temple was bandaged, and the left side of her face was swollen.

She felt Zach’s hand on her shoulder. “Hannah assured me it looks worse than it is.”

“What happened?” she asked him.

He sighed. “Let’s go out to the living room and sit first.”

Once they were all seated, he broke the news to them. “Henry died today.”

Willow shook her head like she didn’t hear him right. “Henry is dead?”

“He went after Hannah this morning when she stopped by her house. It took her a while, but she figured out how to get a text to 911. Police showed up and he raised a gun at them.”

“It was Henry who was shot?”

“Yes. I identified him. It’s all over. He can’t threaten Hannah or you girls anymore.”

She looked at her sisters and wasn’t surprised to find them as dry-eyed as her. Henry was an asshole and they had no tender feelings for him.

“Why was Hannah at her house? Didn’t she move everything over here already?”

“Everything except the furniture. She was over there because of what happened this morning before she left for work. But maybe Vi should tell this story?”

Vi looked down in her lap.

“Vi?” Willow asked.

“I flattened her tires,” she mumbled.

“You did what?” Ollie shrieked.

“It seems like this was the latest in a long line of hateful things she’s done toward Hannah,” he explained. “Poisoned her food with laxative, wrote terrible notes, ruined a cell phone and clothes, cut off her hair…”

“*Oh*, Vi. You didn’t,” said Willow. “Why?”

“Because I don’t want her here. Zach was *ours* first. I don’t want her to take him away from us.”

“I keep telling you that won’t happen.”

“One day, you’ll have kids and you’ll forget all about us.”

“That will *never* happen. You three are just as important to me as Hannah and any theoretical kids we might have. And you can live here forever if you want. No one is pushing you guys out. But I am worried about you, Vi. Especially after everything with Henry. I already have a therapy appointment for you tomorrow, and I’m coming with you. Being this hateful isn’t normal, and we’re going to find out why.”

“Okay,” she said quietly.

“Now, I’m exhausted and am going to bed.” He turned to Janet. “Are you staying over?”

She nodded. “Alex and Miles are going to help get the guest room set up so at least one of us can stay over. Your hands are too full to do everything on your own.”

“I’m glad we’re playing a home game this week. I wouldn’t be able to leave her like this.”

“Go get some sleep. I have a project to do with the girls.”

Ollie’s eyes lit up. “A project?”

“Yes, we’re going to make sister dolls. And each will have a bit of hair from the three of you and Hannah in its heart. While we make them, we’re going to talk about what being a good sister means…”

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Chapter Fifty-three

September 26, 2023

I still can't believe that Henry is gone. I can't say that I will miss him, and I know the girls surely won't. But it feels weird to only be twenty-eight and not have any living parents. At least the adoption will be completed soon. Then, they'll officially be mine, with zero ties left to him…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

ZACH HELD HANNAH CLOSE to his side. He wanted to squeeze her tight and never let go, but he was afraid to cause her more pain. She'd been through enough, and her bruises looked worse than anything he'd ever gotten playing football. Thankfully, the swelling on the one side of her face was nearly gone, and her bruising wasn't as bad as last time. The

headaches, though, were worse. The neurologist said it was likely because of her having two concussions in a short period. As such, she was on leave from work until at least after their wedding.

He'd hired someone to help around the house, and to discreetly keep an eye on Hannah as well. With the girls in school, and him essentially working two jobs, they wouldn't be there to ensure that she followed doctor's orders. Knowing her, she would take on the housework and cooking because she felt the need to contribute while she was stuck at home.

The only thing I want Hannah to do is rest. No cooking. No cleaning. Just taking some time to heal. Her therapist said that will be a key part of her recovery from the trauma Henry inflicted on her.

"So, what happens now?" she asked.

"Hmmm?"

"With Henry. What happens now that he's gone?"

"Oh, um, I've already talked to my lawyer and made it clear that we don't want anything to do with a funeral. And that he can be buried anywhere but the cemetery where Mom is at. Henry hadn't lived in town in years, anyway, so that shouldn't be hard."

"And the will?"

"I haven't heard yet, but Mr. Giles will take care of most of it. Henry certainly didn't leave anything to the girls but may have put me in the will. I don't want any of it, though. Between the trust Mom and Grandpa set up for me, my work, and playing in the AFL, I'm set. I don't need any more money. I've been putting most of the child support every month into the girls' trusts as it is. Theirs are much smaller since they were born after

Grandpa died. And Mom left most of her assets to me since she knew I would be taking care of my sisters."

"What will you do if he does leave you money?"

"Give it to my sisters. Put it away so they have plenty for college and to eventually build their own homes, if they want to."

"That's probably a good idea since they won't be getting child support anymore."

He chuckled. "That's the funny thing. A few years ago, Henry's lawyer explained to him that he was going to be required to pay more in support. Between cost-of-living adjustments, and a huge promotion at work, his responsibility increased. So, his lawyer encouraged him to offer a one-time upfront payment of all the expected payments through each of the girls' twenty-fourth birthday. But at the rate at that time, not the expected increased one. It meant more for him at once, but significantly less over time. We agreed, as it meant the yearly fights would stop."

She giggled softly. "If only he knew that his support would outlast him."

He nodded. "I put it into their trusts where it could gain interest. A small amount each month moves to the household account and a little to their bank accounts for spending."

"You're such a good brother, you know that?"

"I promised Mom I would do everything I could to take care of them. There's no way I could do anything less than my best." *It's why missing Vi's mental health struggles for so long hit has hit me hard. Mom would have noticed it much earlier than I did. I'm certain of it. But all I can do now is ensure that she gets all the care she needs.*

"I recognize that face."

He flattened his features. "What face?"

“The ‘I didn’t do enough’ face. I’ve seen it a lot the past few months, especially since I told you about Violet.”

Zach stayed silent. He knew that disagreeing with her on the topic wouldn’t get them anywhere. And he really didn’t want to argue with her right now. Especially over this. He knew he didn’t do enough but was doing everything he could to move forward. That *had* to be enough.

He kissed her forehead.

She wrapped her arm around his waist and squeezed. “I love you. And I promise, we’ll get through all this together.”

Together. What a wonderful word.

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Chapter Fifty-four

November 6, 2023

It's hard to believe it's finally here: our wedding day. It feels like I've been waiting for this day forever. Hannah Hayes. I love the sound of that.

And while we're still having some issues, Vi is doing so much better. She's only six weeks into the new treatment and medication, but we've already seen such a difference. I feel awful that it took her hitting rock bottom for me to realize she was struggling…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

ZACH FIDDLED WITH THE buttons on his suit coat. While it had probably only been five minutes since he'd taken his place at the end of the aisle, it felt like forever. It didn't help that he hadn't seen Hannah since dinner last night and it had him feeling anxious.

Sure, it wasn't the first night he'd spent without her, but all the other times he was staying in a hotel. Being alone in his own bed felt weird. And very lonely. He finally had to snuggle Hannah's pillow so he could fall asleep.

The sound of music starting pulled him from his thoughts. He looked up and saw the curtains at the start of the aisle open, allowing Ollie and Vi to step through.

His youngest sister was one of Hannah's bridesmaids, while Vi was a groomswoman. Originally, she had refused to participate in the wedding at all but changed her mind a few weeks ago. After that, it was a mad rush to get a custom tux ordered for her. He'd paid a huge premium to have it done in time, but it was worth it to have her there with him.

Vi linked arms with Ollie and began their walk toward him. A genuine smile filled her face. He smiled back at her. It made his heart so full to finally see her happy about his marriage. They'd worked hard with her therapist to get to this point, and he was so appreciative of everything she'd done to help Violet.

Behind his sisters were Willow and Alex, then Annie and Sean. Once they were in place, the music changed, signaling that the bride was about to walk down the aisle. He felt lightheaded as his heart started pounding loudly in his chest. *This is it. Time for our happily ever after to begin.*

The curtains parted, giving him his first look at Hannah. Her smile was the very first thing he noticed, and everything except her seemed to melt

away. *My bride. My love.*

When Miles handed her off to him, Zach linked his arm with hers and pulled her close. “You look amazing.” The silk and lace of her dress hugged every curve. It took everything he had to focus on the officiant and not think about kissing her bare shoulders.

He felt a nudge from next to him.

“Dude, pay attention. It’s time to say your vows,” Sean said as he handed him Hannah’s ring,

Shit. Are we to that point already?

Hannah quietly giggled as he turned to her and took her hand in his.

“Sorry,” he mouthed to her,

She squeezed his hand in return.

A few minutes later, he was pulling her into his arms and kissing her. *I guess it’s a good thing we recorded the ceremony, as it was all a blur.* The moment their kiss was over, he picked her up and carried her down the aisle.

“Zach!” she laughed. “Put me down.”

“No way, Mrs. Hayes. I’ve been looking forward to this moment forever. In fact, I’d keep you in my arms like this all night if I could.”

She sighed. “*Mrs. Hayes*. I love the way that sounds.”

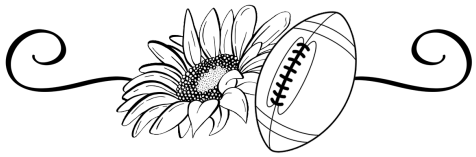
He carried her over to the arbor her mom had set up for photos. His mouth dropped open as he saw it for the first time. While Hannah’s wedding flowers were roses and peonies, the arbor was covered in a variety of sunflowers.

She reached up and wiped a tear from his cheek. “It was important to me that we included your mom in our wedding. I even had a small sunflower tucked in my bouquet.”

“I miss her so much. I wish she was here.”

“I wish she was here, too. She’d be so proud of who you’ve become.”

He brought her hand to his lips. “I hope so. It hasn’t been an easy journey to get to this point. I know she would have been so happy to have you as a daughter-in-law.”



“Can’t we just skip the reception?” Zach whispered as they finished up photos. His breath was hot against her ear, giving her goosebumps.

“Oh, no, I’ve been looking forward to celebrating with everyone for months now.”

He ran the tip of his finger along the neckline of her dress. “But—”

“Nope. We’re gonna have dinner, listen to speeches, dance, and cut the cake. Then we can start our honeymoon,” she said as she led him toward the house.

He looked over at the tent, which was in the opposite direction. “Um, aren’t we going the wrong way?”

“I need to change into my reception dress first.”

She gave him a coy smile, which confused him for a second. And then, it hit him. “You mean—?”

“Yes, but—” she got out before he scooped her up and ran to the French doors that led to their bedroom. “It hasn’t been that long since we had sex,” she joked.

“Well, thirty-four hours is too long, but that’s not why I’m in a rush. I may have made love to my fiancé yesterday morning, but I’ve never made love

to my wife. And even five more minutes is too much." He dropped her to her feet. "Stupid buttons," he muttered as he worked his way down the back of her dress.

She laughed. "They looked so pretty in the dress shop. I didn't think about how long they'd take to undo."

"Can't I just rip it open?"

"Zach! One day our daughter might want to wear this dress. Or maybe one of your sisters. Do you want to explain to them why it's ripped?"

"Fine," he grumbled. "But the next time you pick a dress with buttons instead of a zipper, it's getting destroyed."

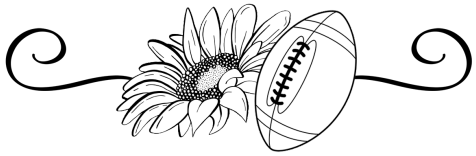
HANNAH COULD FEEL ZACH'S fingers working furiously down her back. Once the dress started to sag, she pulled her arms from the sleeves and let it fall to the floor.

He whistled as she turned to face him. "Damn, Hannah. If I'd known that was what was under your dress, I would've ripped it open."

"You like?" she asked as she ran her fingers along the swells of her breasts. The teddy was all lace and sheer fabric with garters for her stockings. It was cut high on the sides with a thong in the back. The moment she spotted it in the store, she knew it was perfect.

"Oh, baby, love doesn't even describe it." His hands slid over her hips and back to her bare ass. "You're the sexiest woman in the world. I'm so glad you're all mine."

"You're pretty damned sexy in that tux, too." She reached for the front of his pants. "Now, how about you make love to your wife?"



“As some of you may know, I’ve been best friends with this guy since we were ten,” said Sean. “We quickly bonded over football, and he became like a brother to me. Yet as much as he loved football, there was something he loved even more: *Hannah*. As a kid, I thought he was crazy. Love a girl more than football? Why? I mean, they have cooties.”

Hannah gasped in mock outrage. “*Cooties*? Only boys have those.”

“I swear, there was nothing he talked about more than her. Even when we were freshmen and getting hit on by seniors, he was committed to her. I really thought he was delusional at that point. Why would you pick an eighth grader over a girl with a license and a car?” He turned to Zach. “I mean, that’s one of the best parts of making the varsity team: varsity cheerleaders. But you never even gave them a chance.”

Zach laughed. “They thought I was playing hard to get, which made them try even harder. Drove me nuts.”

“It was obvious even back then that for him, it was Hannah or no one. Which made it even harder to watch year after year pass. He was unhappy, and there wasn’t anything I could do to help him. And then, the day after his twenty-eighth birthday, I get a call from him. Which was odd, as he always texts. But the moment I heard his voice, I knew what he was about to say. She was back, and this time he had no intention of letting her get away.”

He turned toward Hannah. “You brought back the happy and carefree friend of my childhood. I’ll be forever grateful to you for that. I wish you both a lifetime of happiness and love. Cheers!”

Annie took the microphone from him. “The summer before my eighth birthday, we moved here from Houston. Dad assured me I’d love small town living, but I was determined to hate it. And then, on the first day of school, I met Hannah. You would have thought we’d been friends forever. It was like finding the sister I didn’t know I had. I felt like I was the most important person in her life. Until partway into the school year, that is. I’d barely stepped off the bus when she grabbed me and pulled me off to the side. Apparently, Zach and her had kissed a day earlier. I, of course, thought that was completely gross. Kiss a boy? Who would want to do that?” She laughed. “To be honest, I wanted to gag.”

“Wanted to? You literally would put a finger down your throat whenever I mentioned him,” Hannah replied.

“And then came high school. I was certain they’d finally end up together. But year after year went by, and nothing happened. Eventually, she stopped talking about Zach, and it was like a little bit of the light in her dimmed. Earlier this year, her brother and I drove to Dallas to help her move back home. Seeing her so broken and unhappy just about devastated me. I’ve never seen her like that. So, imagine my surprise when just days later she called me and there was happiness in her voice again. Like Sean mentioned, I knew immediately the cause of it.”

She cleared her throat and swiped at a tear. “Zach, you’ve made my best friend so happy. After so many years of surviving, she was finally thriving again. You put that light back in her, and I can never thank you enough for that. I love you both. Cheers!”

Zach stood up. “Sean and Annie, thanks to both of you for being there for us all these years. I think I speak for both of us when I say I don’t think we would have made it through all that unhappiness without your love and

support.” He pointed to the screen on the wall. “Earlier this year, Hannah digitized all my family photos as a surprise. I thought it was a great idea and decided to do the same with our home videos. And that’s how I found this video from my ninth birthday. The moment I saw it, I knew I had to use it as part of my proposal. I’m sure you can see why.” He nodded at the wedding coordinator and she started the video.

“That birthday was the first of twenty wishes,” he said after the video ended. “Every birthday, I wished for the same thing: to marry Hannah. And every year, I was left empty-handed. As you can probably imagine, I was feeling depressed over it. Little did I know that my future was literally about to crash into me. When I looked up and realized it was Hannah I’d collided with in the coffee shop, I thought I was dreaming. Once I realized she was real, I wanted to pull her into my arms and never let go.” He cupped her cheek in his hand and caressed her with his thumb. “I was on cloud nine when you agreed to lunch. And every day since has been amazing. Having you not just in my life, but by my side, has been a dream come true.

“Hannah, thank you so much for crashing into me and turning my world upside-down. You’ve made me happier than I ever thought I could be.”

She stood up and kissed him. “Love you, too,” she whispered to him as he sat back down.

“When Zach and I started dating earlier this year, he pulled out his family photo albums and showed me pictures from our childhood. I was flipping through the pages when I found this photo.” The image of the two of them kissing as kids popped up on the screen. “For a moment, I was shocked. I didn’t remember kissing him, but there was the evidence, right in front of my eyes.

“That day was Zach’s eighth birthday, and as usual, my brother, Alex, was being a pain. This time, he dared me to kiss Zach. I was only seven, so of course I thought he was crazy. Kissing boys was *gross*. But I knew better than to back down from his dares, so I did it. I aimed for Zach’s cheek, but at the last second, he turned his head and I kissed his lips instead. My whole world turned over. I was in love.”

She put her fingers on Zach’s head and nervously ran them through his hair. “But nothing ever came of it. I waited and waited but eventually decided that he must not feel the same way. Heartbroken, I put all my focus on my education and tried to move on. I buried deep all those feelings and memories in an effort to protect myself. But in that moment, looking at the photo, it all came back.”

The second photo in her slideshow—the one of them recreating the kiss shortly after they started dating—popped up on the screen.

“Zach, I love you so very much. I’m so glad I went to the coffee shop that morning instead of a drive thru. That I found the courage to speak up and say I wanted more. But most of all, I’m glad that I was the first—and only—girl you ever kissed. You’ve been mine since you turned eight, I’m only sad that it took fate so long to catch up.”

The final photo—that day’s re-creation of the kiss—came up on the screen. Hannah turned to Zach and held up her champagne glass. “To many more years of kisses under our tree.”

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Chapter Fifty-five

April 28, 2027

Four years. Hannah and I had our first date four years ago. It seems like a lifetime ago sometimes. So much has happened since then. Who would've thought it would be possible to be this happy?

This journal used to be a way for me to work through my feelings and deal with the depression. Now, it serves more of a way to take a moment to be thankful for everything in my life.

Nearly every dream I've ever had has come true, and it's all

thanks to her…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes.

ZACH WAS BARELY IN the door from work when Hannah practically tackled him. “Happy anniversary!” she said before handing him an envelope.

“What’s this?”

“It’s your anniversary gift. Well, that and a congrats on announcing your retirement from the AFL.”

He sat it down on the dresser. “I’ll open it later. I’d much rather be kissing you right now.”

She picked it up and shoved it toward him. “No, you have to open it *now*. I’ve been waiting for days to give this to you.”

“Okay, if you insist.” He opened the envelope and pulled out a small card. “Um, did you maybe put the wrong item in here? This is a doctor’s appointment reminder card.”

She beamed at him. “Flip it over.”

Confused, he turned the card over. Written on the back under “Appointment Details” was “Birth control removal.”

His eyes grew wide. “Does this mean—?”

She nodded. “Time for a baby.”

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

Finally! It was something he’d wanted for years, but the timing wasn’t right. But now, Willow was in college and Violet would start in the fall. And he’d recently decided to retire from football once his current contract

ended. That meant he'd be done with out-of-town trips come early next year.

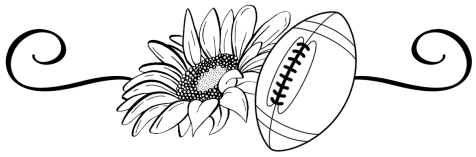
"Let's stay in tonight."

She giggled. "The appointment isn't for another month."

"I don't care. You know what the thought of getting you pregnant does to me."

"Why do you think I told you now instead of waiting until after it's out?"

"Brat," he growled as he pulled at her clothes.



HANNAH'S LEG BOUNCED AS she looked at the timer on her watch for the hundredth time. *How can three minutes possibly feel this long? Not even three minutes, there was still a minute and twenty-six seconds left. Ugh.*

Her doctor had removed her birth control implant back in mid-May. When she got home from the appointment, she found a large box filled with ovulation and pregnancy tests on the dresser and a calendar on the wall by the bathroom. Since it had been years since she had a period, they had no idea of the timing of her cycle.

It wasn't until the beginning of July that she'd finally ovulated. To say Zach had been excited would be an understatement. He'd called in sick to work for them both and kept her in bed for two days. When her period showed up two weeks later, she'd been heartbroken about having to break the bad news to him.

Now, it was the beginning of September, and she hadn't had a period since the one in July. That put her just over two weeks late.

She didn’t want to get his hopes up, so she waited for him to leave for the office before taking the test. It wasn’t easy to wait, though, as her bladder felt like it was going to explode. *Please, please, please let this be positive.*

They’d already started a major remodel of the house. The reason why was a surprise to the girls. While they’d have to tell Ollie soon, since she’d see the truth of the matter, Vi and Willow wouldn’t know until they came home for winter break.

Zach had told them the windows and roof were being replaced. As such, their rooms had to be packed up. Before they left for college, they’d picked out new paint colors and a queen sized bed. In reality, each girl was getting a new bedroom. Willow’s, which was originally the master, would get a full remodel. Ollie and Vi would get enlarged rooms with an en-suite. New furniture sets were purchased to match the beds the girls had each selected. And two new bedrooms and a bathroom were being added. Plus, the old nursery next to their room was getting spruced up.

Zach had promised the girls that they could live in the house for as long as they chose to, and the hope was these new *adult* bedrooms helped to back up that commitment. In Vi’s case, he’d drawn up a contract with her, putting that promise in writing. It was one of the steps they’d gone through to help her start to feel better about him getting married.

Over the weekend, they’d moved Ollie out to the pool house so that walls could start coming down. It wouldn’t be long before they had to tell her the truth since the crews would start framing out the addition soon.

Hannah stared as her watch counted down the final seconds. *Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Time’s up.* She took a deep breath before heading to the bathroom where she’d left the test on the counter. *Please let this be it.*

When she saw the screen on the test, she screamed. *Pregnant. I'm finally pregnant.* She dropped the test in a plastic bag, washed her hands, and headed out to her SUV. *Time to surprise Zach.*

At the store, she grabbed "Congrats!" and" "Number One Dad" balloons along with a little teddy bear. The lady at the floral counter helped her tie the balloons to the bear and secure the bag so it looked like the stuffed animal was holding it.

When she walked into the lobby, smiles popped up immediately among his employees. She put her finger to her lips when they went to cheer. "It's a surprise."

Zach was on a phone call when she walked into his office, his back to the door. Quietly, she sat the bear on his desk, then settled down in a chair to wait. A couple minutes later, he turned around to hang up the phone. His eyes grew wide as he spotted the bear. He was so surprised that he fumbled the phone and dropped it on the floor.

"I guess it's a good thing that's not a football, huh?" she asked. "Or, more importantly, a baby."

He looked at the bear, then her, and back to the bear. "Hannah, are you —?"

She didn't even give him the chance to finish his question. "I'm eighteen days late. And the test seems to agree."

He jumped up from his chair so fast that he knocked it over. Running over, he scooped her up in his arms.

"Please don't spin me," she warned as he started to do exactly that. "I haven't had any morning sickness yet, but I am feeling a little queasy."

"I should have known something was up. You've hardly been eating breakfast. Or drinking coffee. I just figured you had reverted to your old

routine of eating later in the morning."

"Honestly, that was my first clue. I can't even be near the kitchen when you're making eggs. I used to love eggs."

He sat down on his couch, pulling her down into his lap. "Have you made a doctor's appointment yet? I want to go with you, but we'll have to work around practices and such."

"That was next on my list. I wanted you to be the first to know. Although, I think your staff all knew before you. They got excited when they saw the balloons." She pulled out her phone and brought up the portal for her doctor's office. "Next Tuesday has an opening at ten."

"Perfect. It's easy to make up time missed here at the office." He dug out his phone from his pocket and brought up his calendar. "Oh, we need to create a new shared calendar. If we use the normal one, everyone will know."

"Crap. I forgot about that. I'll make it once I get to work and add you to it. We can use it both for the remodel and our baby."

A big smile filled his face. "*Our baby*. I love the sound of that."

She snuggled up against his chest. "Me, too. I'm so happy I want to cry. In fact, I may have needed to pull over on the way over here so I could cry and not cause an accident…"

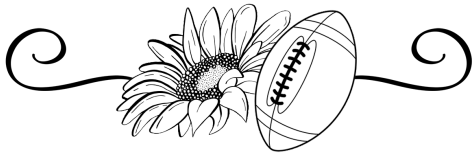
"Baby, I want to cry, and I don't have hormones to blame. So, if you feel like you need to cry, go ahead."

She sniffled. "You're the *best*, you know that?"

He pulled her a little closer. "Now, just remember that when you're camped out in front of the toilet. Or getting kicked in the bladder. And when you're in labor…"

“You’ll just have to tuck this moment away in your memory for the times when I’m threatening your future ability to have kids.”

He laughed and kissed the top of her head. “Deal.”



ZACH STARTLED AS HANNAH pressed her hand on his leg. It was bouncing so hard that several patients in the waiting room had looked their way. “Sorry, baby. I can’t remember the last time I was this nervous.” Probably when she was in the hospital after the attacks from Henry. *Not that I’m going to say so. She doesn’t need those memories brought back to the surface.*

“It’s okay, I did the same when I was waiting on the pregnancy test. But seeing the motion out of the corner of my eye is making me a little nauseous.”

His leg stopped mid-bounce and he carefully stretched it out like his left one. “Oh, shit, are you okay? Do you need to go to the bathroom? I can get a nurse…”

She shook her head. “I’m okay now that you stopped.”

Over the weekend, she’d had her first bout of morning sickness, and he’d been worried about her ever since. Thankfully, Ollie rarely travelled with her to away games anymore, so she hadn’t seen it. But it was only a matter of time before something gave their secret away.

He’d comforted her and held her hair back as she got sick. And apologized. *God, I must’ve said “I’m sorry” a thousand times. It hurts to see her so miserable.* He was hoping the doctor would have some solutions

for helping prevent it. He tried researching online, but the suggestions were so varied and contradictory that he didn't know where to start.

"Mrs. Hayes?" a nurse called from the doorway.

He helped Hannah to her feet, which made her laugh.

"I can get up on my own, you know. I'm not that pregnant yet."

"Practice. Gotta get in the habit before it's necessary."

She shook her head as she walked toward the nurse. The woman handed Hannah a cup and pointed her to a bathroom, then showed Zach to an exam room. A couple minutes later, Hannah joined him.

The nurse handed her a sheet. "Undress from the waist down and lay down on the exam table. Elisha, Dr. Adams' medical assistant, should be in with you in just a few minutes," she explained before leaving the room.

Zach pulled off Hannah's shoes and helped her out of her clothes. "It feels weird getting you undressed in a doctor's office."

She giggled. "Oh, I'm sure this will be the first of many times. Soon, I'll be so big that I can't even see my shoes."

"Like I said, good practice for the future."

"Good afternoon Mrs. and Mr. Hayes," the medical assistant said as she entered the room. "First, we're going to draw some blood. That will give us your hCG level and let us check your nutrient levels and such. Dr. Adams should be in to do your ultrasound by the time I'm finished taking your blood. She was just finishing up with another patient."

Just as the last vial was filled and the needle removed from her arm, there was a knock at the door. "Good morning, Hannah and Zach. I just saw the results of your urine test," Dr. Adams said as she walked over to the exam table. "Congrats, Mom and Dad."

Zach squeezed Hannah’s hand. Even though they were already sure this was the case, it was exciting to hear it said officially.

“When was your last period?”

“July twelfth.”

She typed the date into her tablet. “Okay, that puts you at about nine weeks pregnant, with a due date of April seventeenth. Of course, that’s only approximate since we don’t know the exact date of conception. As you move further along in the pregnancy, we’ll take measurements that will help make that date more accurate. But with any pregnancy, it’s best to plan for plus or minus two weeks. Then, you’re better prepared for the baby if they’re early.”

She pulled over the ultrasound machine. “Since this is your first ultrasound, we’ll be using the vaginal wand,” she explained as she picked it up, slid a condom on it, and coated it in lubricant. “After this, they should all be with the transducer on your abdomen instead.”

Zach stared at the wand in her hand. “Did you say—?”

“Vaginal. Yes. Don’t worry, it catches a lot of husbands off-guard. In the early stages of a pregnancy, we need to get as close to the uterus as possible to see anything.”

“It won’t hurt her, will it?”

“Not at all. It’ll be a little uncomfortable, but that’s it. Honestly, it’s less invasive than the exam women go through when doing their annual.” She lifted up the sheet. “Ready, Hannah?”

She squeezed Zach’s hand, which made him feel better. “Yes.”

A moment later, she had an image pulled up on the screen. “Well, then. That due date might be even less accurate than I previously mentioned.”

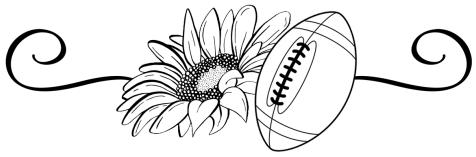
She turned the screen toward them. “See this darker shape here? That’s your gestational sac. And those lighter shapes inside it are your babies.”

“*Babies*?” Hannah and Zach said.

“Identical twins. We know this because they share the same gestational sac. If they were fraternal twins, you’d see a small separation between them.”

“Twins?” Hannah eked out.

“Twins.”



Hannah rolled over onto her side. “See, my doctor was right. Making love to your pregnant wife wasn’t so scary, was it?”

Zach chuckled as he ran his hand over her back. “*Pregnant wife*. I love hearing that. Every time someone says it, I can’t help but smile. We’re having a baby. Er, babies.”

She pillowed her hands under her cheek. “Pretty soon, it won’t even need to be said. You’ll look at me and it’ll be obvious.”

“It already is to me. I get now why they talk about pregnant women glowing. That day when you surprised me, I would’ve known just from your face. But yes, I can’t wait until you have a baby bump for me to kiss and cuddle and talk to.”

She giggled. “As long as other parts of me get plenty of kisses and touch, too…”

“Oh, don’t worry. Now that I know it’s safe, I’m going to have a hard time keeping my hands off you. Getting you pregnant was only part of what

turned me on. Knowing you're pregnant with my babies makes you so much sexier."

Hannah rolled onto her side and held her arm in an arch in front of her. "Even when my stomach is huge and in the way?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, imagining her swollen with their children. "Even then. Hell, *especially* then. That big bump is a physical representation of our love. Of the little humans we made together."

"I bet Hayes wouldn't be afraid to have sex with me while pregnant."

He laughed. Their Hayes/Little Bird role play was one of his favorites. Whenever he spotted the candle in their bedroom window, he got excited. "Heck no. He'd toss you on the bed, go downtown until you scream a time or two and pound you through a couple more before flipping you over to take that cute little ass of yours."

"I swear, you love threatening me with a good time, don't you?" she joked. "But it won't be little for much longer. I have the feeling it's going to expand right along with my abdomen."

He kissed her forehead. "And it will still be cute. There will just be more for me to love."

She cupped his cheek. "How did I get lucky enough to have you?"

"I promise, it's me that's the lucky one." He laid his hand on her stomach. "You're making every one of my dreams come true."

"Even if the baby is Hayes'? I mean, I did have sex with him about that time…"

He laughed. "Yes, even then. I mean, the two of us are so close, we're practically the same person."

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Chapter Fifty-six

December 16, 2027

I don't think I slept a wink last night. Even Hannah's warm body snuggled against me couldn't lull me into sleep. Today is the day we find out if all the therapy and reassurances truly made a difference. Today, Willow and Vi come home for Winter Break. And that means seeing their new rooms, and more importantly, they'll learn that Hannah is pregnant. I can only hope they'll be happy to be gaining two new siblings…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

ZACH TOOK THE SUITCASES from his sisters and loaded them into the back of the SUV. He was so nervous about them being home for the first

time in months. *What if they didn't like their rooms? What if they were angry about the babies? Hannah and I have been over the moon about them, and if the girls are unhappy about it, it'll be a huge blow to our happiness.*

Ollie had been nearly as excited as him and Hannah when they told her. Well, when they tried to tell her and she guessed.

"How did you know?" he'd asked her.

"First, Hannah turned green and ran for the bathroom and got sick when you made breakfast. Second, you've been hugely protective. If she drops something, you run over to pick it up. When she wants to sit at the island, you pick her up and put her on the barstool. And lastly, her hugs. Normally, she's all squishy and comfy. Like you want to lean into her and stay there. Now, there's a hard bump on her belly."

Hannah had laughed at the last one. "Wait until that bump starts kicking you."

"Oh, I can't wait. I'm finally getting to be a big sister."

He was hoping Willow and Violet would be just as excited. Willow was only five when Ollie was born, and Vi three, so neither had much memory of their mom's pregnancy or Ollie's birth. He'd been much older, so he had plenty of memories of feeling kicks on his mom's stomach and the joy of a new family member. He wanted his sisters to be able to experience that.

"Looking forward to a few weeks away from school?" he asked them as he settled into the driver's seat.

"Yes, it will be nice to just veg out and not worry about homework and classes," Vi answered.

"I'm looking forward to the sun," said Willow. "It's so cold and rainy in Seattle at this time of year."

Zach had encouraged the girls to look at schools across the country and not just those close to home. He wanted them to be able to have the experiences he hadn't. Willow chose the University of Washington for their business program, and Vi followed.

"Cold? Is that what they call it when it gets below seventy outside?" he joked.

"It was forty-three when we left this morning. *Forty-three*. I'll take seventy any day."

"Well, even if it is a little cold, you can still enjoy the pool. We made a few upgrades while you were away."

Hannah loved to swim, as it took the weight off her back. Ollie could often be found in the water with her. They'd put a birdcage around the pool with a sunshade on top. A heater was added to the filtration system to keep the water at a comfortable temperature all year. Now, unless there was a lightning storm, they could swim all year.

"I bet you're enjoying that, aren't you, Ollie? Sometimes, I think you should have been born with a tail," said Vi. "I was surprised you didn't join the swim team."

"I like swimming for fun, not competition. Besides, it would mean less time with Uncle Alex's horses," she replied. "I'd rather be riding."

Vi laughed. "Horses are cool and all, but I don't like them enough to scoop up all that poop."

As they pulled up to home, the unease in Zach's stomach grew.

"Um, why does the house look bigger?" Willow asked. "I thought you were just getting new windows and roof."

"It's definitely bigger," said Vi. "There's more windows on that side than there used to be."

“Well, I guess you’ll just have to go in and take a look, won’t you?” he asked.

The girls jumped out of the SUV and ran to the front door.

“Code is still the same!” he called out.

“Should we take in the luggage?” Ollie asked.

“No, we’ll grab them later. Let’s go see what they think of all the changes.”

He could hear the girls’ shrieks as he walked in the front door. *Well, sounds like their rooms are a hit.*

“Is that really my room?” Vi asked him when he peeked in.

“Sure is. It was Hannah’s idea. She thought it was time that you each had a grown-up room instead of a kid’s room. You all have your own bathroom, a walk-in closet, and a new bedroom set.”

She threw her arms around him and hugged him. “You kept your promise.”

“Of course. Like I’ve told you, this is your room for as long as you want it.”

Arms wrapped around his waist from behind him. “I love my new room,” Willow said.

“It’s Hannah you guys should thank. She really wanted to do this for you guys. You’ll notice we didn’t unpack any of your boxes. And there are locks on your doors. We still have a copy of the key, of course, in case of an emergency. But otherwise, we won’t come in without being invited. You’re both adults now and need more privacy.”

“Where is Hannah?” Willow asked.

“Doing some work in the office. She wanted to knock out everything before you guys got home so she could have more time with you.”

“Would it be okay to go in and say hi?”

“Yes. She planned on calling it a day once you were here.”

He followed them as they ran over to the office.

“Hannah! I just love my—” Willow’s eyes grew wide. “You’re having a baby?”

Hannah slowly pushed herself up from the chair and walked over to them. “They must’ve heard their big sisters come home. Either that, or they’re running drills,” she said with a chuckle.

“They?!” Willow and Vi exclaimed.

“Two little brothers. If you put your hand on either side of my bump, you can feel them moving around.”

Both girls reached out and laid a hand on her belly.

Vi’s mouth dropped open. “I felt it! The baby kicked me.”

Zach nearly sighed with relief. *She’s excited about the babies.*

“They’re active most days, but they’re going crazy right now. I think they’re saying hi.”

“Can we talk to them?” Willow asked.

“Zach does all the time,” said Ollie.

“Sure. Zach reads to them every night. And I talk to them while I work. Ollie likes to talk to them when I’m relaxing on the couch.”

Willow bent down. “Hi. I’m your big sister Willow. I can’t wait to hold you both.”

Vi followed Willow’s lead. “Hi. I’m your big sister Vi. I’ve never had a little brother before, and now I’m getting two. I can’t wait to show you how to draw and paint.” She wiped a tear from her cheek before standing up straight to hug Hannah. “Thank you, Hannah. This is an amazing surprise.”

Willow’s arms wrapped around Hannah. “I’m so happy, I want to cry.”

“Go ahead. I cry all the time now. And Zach does, too. You should have seen him when I surprised him at work. While the twins part was a huge shock, we’re both just so happy.

“Do you love your new rooms? I tried to use the colors and beds you’d picked out to figure out everything else. We wanted it to be a surprise, so I couldn’t ask too many questions.”

“I love mine,” answered Willow. “It’s exactly what I would have picked.”

“You were easier because you already had a suite and we knew what you liked and disliked about your bathroom. Vi was harder.”

Vi hugged Hannah again. “Well, you did a great job, as I love all of it. I can’t wait to try out that tub. It looks deep enough for a good soak. All we have in the dorm is a crappy little shower.”

“Hannah thought that might be the case, so she insisted on a trip to the mall to get bath bombs, bubble bath, and all that for you guys,” Zach said.

“I remember those dorm showers all too well. And honestly, apartments aren’t much better. I love the tub in our bathroom, and thought you might like one, too. Do you guys want any help unpacking? I can’t do a lot, but I can sit in a chair and put clothes away in the dresser or books on the shelf. Or I can just sit and keep you company.”

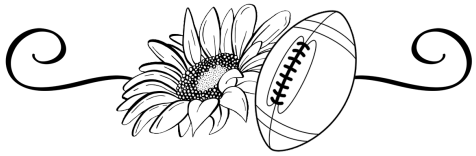
“Could you help me?” asked Vi. “I could use your advice about where to put everything.”

Zach watched as a smile filled Hannah’s face. She looked his way and he could see her eyes were shiny with unshed tears. “Have at it. Ollie can help me bring in all the luggage, and then I’ll start on dinner.”

Hannah linked arms with Vi. “Where do you want to start?”

“My art supplies. I’d like to make a few things for the nursery.”

“Sounds like the perfect place to start, then.”



Zach plopped down on the sectional and pulled Hannah down into his lap. As always, his hands rested on her stomach. He loved the feel of their sons moving around. No matter what was happening at the office, or stress over the play-offs, their kicking and somersaults calmed him. “Did you guys get everything unpacked?”

“Just about,” Willow answered. “Ollie helped put all my clothes away while I was unpacking boxes.”

“Hannah and I got distracted talking about the nursery, so all we really got done was my art stuff,” Vi said. “I’ll work on more later tonight.”

“She had some great ideas for artwork for the walls. We worked on some sketches, and I’m excited to see the final paintings.”

“Can I see the sketches?”

Vi shook her head. “It’s going to be a surprise.”

Hannah snuggled back against his chest. “You’re going to love it. Promise.”

“That reminds me; I never asked when you’re due,” said Willow. “Is it soon?”

“Mid-April, assuming I go the full forty weeks.”

“You still have four more months?!”

She patted her stomach. “I know, right? Based on the ultrasound I had this week, they’re nearly two pounds each. My doctor thinks they will be over six pounds at birth. I can’t imagine eight more pounds of baby in there. It

feels like I can barely breathe now. I told Zach if I get much bigger, I'll have to be wheeled around the house."

He kissed the top of her head. "We'll just push you around in your office chair."

"It's comfier than a wheelchair, that's for sure."

"What does it feel like when they move around?" Vi asked.

"Sometimes, it's like my stomach is grumbling or I have gas. But now that they're getting bigger, the feeling is getting more intense. Almost like getting softly punched. If they push upward too much, it's hard to take a breath. And if they push forward, I'm making a mad dash for the bathroom. They like to kick my bladder."

"Does it hurt?"

"Not really. More uncomfortable than anything. It's my back that hurts, and that's because of how the weight sits on me. Zach got me some belly bands that help better distribute it all. They really help."

"Plus, I give her a back massage every night."

"Yes, those are heavenly. Helps me sleep at night without pain."

"We were so little when Mom had Ollie that I didn't really understand all of it," explained Willow. "There's so much I don't know."

"Don't be afraid to ask me or Zach questions. We're excited about sharing this experience with you guys. They're your little brothers, after all. We only stayed quiet about it because we wanted to surprise you."

As they talked, he could feel Hannah leaning harder against him. Before long, she was asleep.

"Should we whisper?" Willow asked.

"No, it's like this every night. Zach and I have played video games and talked smack at each other and she never woke up," Ollie explained.

“Making one tiny human is tiring. Two are exhausting. She falls asleep like this every evening. Ollie and I usually spend some time together before I head out to the gym. Hannah doesn’t even stir when I pick her up and put her in the recliner. It’s why she works from home full-time now: she can take naps throughout the day. I can always tell when the boys are having a growth spurt, as she eats and sleeps more. But she hates being cooped up in the bedroom all the time, so her evening nap is always here in my lap.”

“You seem so happy,” said Vi.

He smiled. “I am. There’s just something about knowing we made these little guys. And getting to follow their development. Sometimes, I lay in bed and watch her stomach moving. I never understood how much of a miracle babies were until now. I mean, I knew how babies were made, obviously. Seeing it and realizing we did that; we made two new little lives, it’s exciting. And frightening. And a bit stressful. But I wouldn’t change anything. I can’t wait to hold them in my arms and see the three of you with them. To watch them grow up with such great big sisters. It all makes my heart so full.”

“Is this why you’re retiring from football?” Willow asked.

“Somewhat. A big part of it is the injuries. I’ve taken a lot of hits, and my body doesn’t handle it like it did when I was younger. I wanted to stop before an injury forced me to. But Hannah and I had decided years ago that we wanted to start trying for kids once you and Vi were both off to college. So, when I agreed to my contract, I made sure this was the final season on it. That gave me the ability to retire if I wanted or extend it. After two concussions last season, it was clear retirement was the right choice.”

“Are you going to miss it?”

“Of course. I’ll still go to games sometimes. Your Uncle Sean still has one more season on his contract. I suspect he’ll retire after that, too. But I’m looking forward to going back to my day job and getting to be with my family. Being able to visit Seattle and see you two or take a vacation and not worrying about games and practice. Five seasons was five more than I expected to ever get. I’m good walking away from it once the season is over.”

“When is it over?” Vi asked.

“When we lose,” he said with a chuckle. “There’s still a few more weeks of regular season. If our standing holds, we’ll be in the play-offs again. At that point, we play until we lose.”

“And if you never lose?”

“That would mean the big game. We were close last year. We lost the divisional round, which is two games away from the big one.”

“If you go to the big game, do we get to go?” Vi asked.

“Sure do. Sean and I already agreed to go half each on a suite. It’s the only way I’ll let Hannah go. She’s going to be at about thirty-one weeks at that point, so still safe to fly. But I worry about crowds bumping her or knocking her down. We put in for a suite for the remainder of our games.”

“I know I’ve missed most of your games the last couple of years, but I want to go to any you have left.”

“Well, there’s plenty of room in the suite, so we’d just need to get you airfare and a hotel room. Do you want to go, too, Willow?”

She nodded.

“This weekend is a home game. I booked airfare and hotel for the games while you’re here. I’ll book for the others once we know if we’re playing or not.”

“He even got you guys new ‘Dad’ jerseys just in case,” Ollie added.

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Chapter Fifty-seven

April 3, 2028

We're into the homestretch. Hannah is at thirty-eight weeks, which means the boys can come at any time. Yesterday, Doctor Adams said based on measurements, they're probably close to seven pounds each. Poor Hannah can barely even walk around anymore. For her sake, I hope they arrive soon. Doc is already starting to talk about delivering them early…

- from the journal of Zach Hayes

ZACH LOOKED UP FROM his tablet. "What's up?"

"Let's go for a ride. Where's the closest crappy gravel road?" Hannah asked him.

“I’m not going to take you down a bumpy road to kick in your labor.”

“Spicy food? I can’t do a long walk. I can barely make it from the bed to the bathroom. Oh, I know. Sex. Aren’t orgasms supposed to help bring on labor?”

“I already looked that up. It’s more about preparing the body for labor or pain relief. Why don’t we just call Dr. Adams and say we’re ready to induce?”

“I was trying to keep things as natural as possible. Well, until it’s epidural time. I’m not doing this without pain relief.”

“Baby, I think your body is already saying it’s time even if your cervix isn’t.”

She sighed. “I think you’re right. I can do this maybe one more day. I can hardly walk and you have to help me in and out of bed. And I feel like I spend half the day peeing, the other half sleeping.”

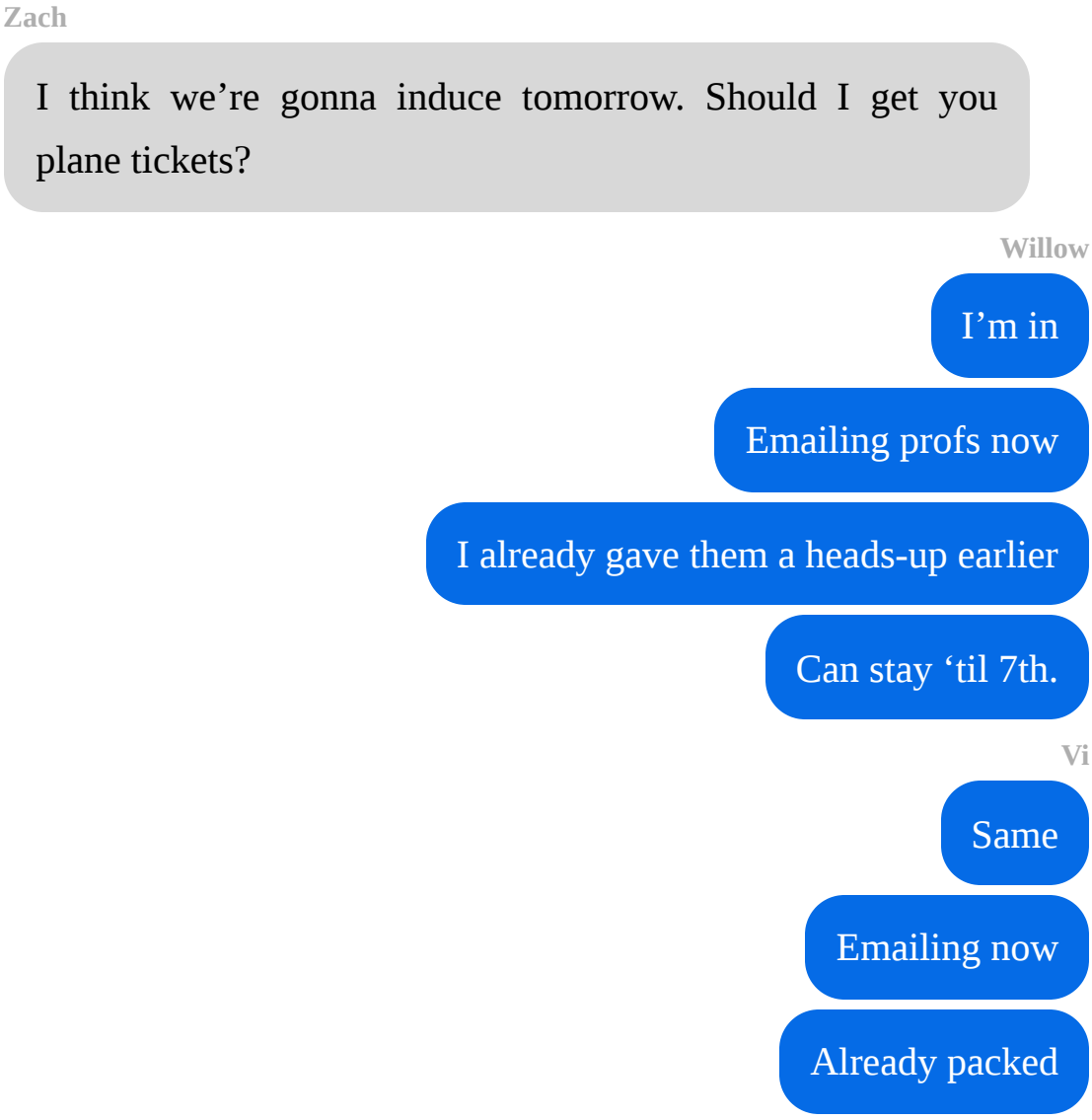
“I’ll call your doctor to see when we can get scheduled. Do you want me to try to get the girls here?”

“Would you? They were all excited over the possibility of being in the room when the boys are born. I’d love to have them with us.”

It turned out his sisters were even happier about the pregnancy than he’d hoped. They called Hannah almost daily, often talking to the boys before getting off the phone. Both constantly asked for photos from Zach, and he sent them every ultrasound photo. His favorite part was how they insisted the babies were their brothers and not their nephews. And they were quick to correct anyone who said otherwise. There was a wrapped package in the nursery with Vi’s paintings in it. He wasn’t allowed to open it until after the boys were born.

He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “I’ll call them as soon as I’m off the phone with your doctor. I can probably get them a flight this evening.”

After leaving a message with the receptionist, he texted the girls. Both had been watching their phones closely ever since Hannah hit thirty-six weeks, so he knew he’d get a quick response.



He laughed to himself. *Of course she’s already packed.* She rivaled him and Hannah in excitement over the babies. At one point she’d even talked about transferring to a school close to home. They talked her out of that by promising plenty of video chats.

Zach

I'll book the tickets as soon as I hear from doc. Will likely be tonight.

A few minutes later, the doctor's office returned his call. They booked Hannah for ten a.m. at the hospital. By the time he got off the call, he had his sisters' flight booked and details emailed to them.

"Twenty-two more hours, baby. If you're not in labor by tomorrow morning, they'll induce you." He could see the tension leave her body, which told him it was the right call.

"Thank God. I'm ready to hold them in my arms instead of my poor stretched out uterus."

He motioned for her to scoot forward on the bed. "How about I massage your back?"

"That sounds amazing."

"You're doing all the hard work. I'm just here to hopefully make things a little easier on you."

The following morning, everyone met up at their house before leaving for the hospital. With them having a family birthing room, there was space for his sisters, Janet, and Annie to be in with Hannah and Zach. Everyone else would be in the waiting room just down the hall.

"Ready, sweetheart?" Janet asked as she grabbed Hannah's suitcase.

"I've been ready for weeks," she joked. "I just want to love on my babies, sleep on my stomach, and see my feet again."

"Soon enough you'll have them in your arms, and all the difficulties will be forgotten. It's nature's way to fool us into doing it again."

"Oh, don't make me laugh. I'll pee myself."

“I told you to wear—”

“Shh, Annie. No one except you, me, Mom, and Zach need to know about the diaper. And if Zach didn’t have to help me with it, he wouldn’t know. Your wife in a diaper isn’t exactly sexy.”

Annie chuckled. “Oh, sweetie, he’s so crazy for you and these babies. I promise he doesn’t care.”

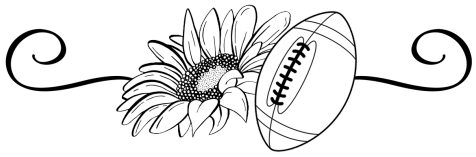
She looked over at Annie’s husband. “Is that a guess or from experience?”

“He didn’t care one bit. And he won’t this time…” She laid her hand on her still flat stomach.

“Another baby?” she whispered. “Why didn’t you say anything sooner?”

“Because this is you guy’s first pregnancy. You deserve to have all the focus on you. We’ll tell everyone later.”

Zach walked over to them and scooped Hannah in his arms. “Everything is loaded and ready to go. Time to go meet our babies.”



“How are things looking, Doc?” Zach asked as Dr. Adams checked under the blanket. It had been eight hours since they’d induced Hannah, and it felt like time had stood still. Finally, after getting her epidural a few hours ago, she leaned back against him and fell asleep.

“Nine. Babies will be here soon.”

He gently shook Hannah’s shoulder. “Baby, it’s time to wake up.”

“Am I finally ready to have the babies?” she asked groggily.

“Just about. You just need a little time to fully wake up, and I need to run to the bathroom. I’ll be back in bed with you soon enough.”

“Do you want to watch the boys’ birth?”

“You need me there behind you to help you through it all. It’s what we practiced.”

“But wouldn’t you rather be able to see them?”

“Well, of course, but—”

“Mom can sit behind me. She might not have been to birthing classes with us, but she’s done this before.”

Janet pulled a chair over to the end of the bed for Zach. “You can sit here when you get back. And I’ll take care of Hannah.”

“But—”

She shook her head. “You’ll regret it if you don’t get to see them come into the world. Hannah can squeeze my hand. And you can coach her from right there. It’s only a few feet away.”

He wanted to disagree with her, but he knew his mother-in-law was right. As messy as it might be, he really did want to be the first to see them. “Fine. But if you need me, Hannah, just say so.”

“Ready, Dad?” Dr. Adams asked as he sat down next to her a few minutes later.

“Absolutely.”

“Okay, Hannah, it’s time. When I tell you to push, bear down as hard as you can.”

She nodded.

The doctor watched the monitor, looking for the next contraction. “Push,” she said as the contraction began.

Hannah leaned forward, crying out as she pushed hard. Between her legs, Zach saw a rush of fluid and then the top of a baby’s head.

“I can see him, baby! He’s coming out.”

“Push.”

With Hannah’s next try, the head slipped out. The baby was facing downward, so he couldn’t see the face yet.

“He has your hair, Hannah. I can’t believe how much there is.”

“Okay, this will be the last big push. Just need to get his shoulders out and gravity will do the rest.”

Zach squeezed her leg. “This is it. One more push and our little one will be here. I love you so much.”

She laid her hand on top of his. “I love you, too.”

A moment later, the doctor handed Zach their first son. Even though he was flushed red from the birthing process, it was clear that his coloring favored Hannah. And when he opened his eyes for the first time, Hannah’s brown eyes stared back at Zach.

Hannah held out her arms for him. “Gimme.’’

“He looks so much like you,” he said as he tucked their baby in her arms.

She felt the soft hair on his head, ran a finger across his cheek, and snuggled her cheek up against him. “He’s perfect.”

“What’s his name?” asked Janet.

“He’s Wyatt Zachary,” Hannah replied. Behind her, she could hear a little job leave her mom’s lips.

“You named him after my brother?”

“Uncle Wyatt was like a bonus dad for me. I loved spending time with him. Zach and I both agreed it was only fitting to name our first son after him.”

“Time to hand him off to the nurses,” Doctor Adams said. “His brother is about ready to enter the world.”

“You’ll have him back soon,” the nurse said. “Just have a few tests to run.”

Ten minutes later, Zach handed Hannah their second son.

“Evan Myles,” Hannah announced.

“Oh, your father is going to be so tickled,” Janet said. “And Maggie would be so happy that you named your son after her dad.”

“I couldn’t have a son and not name him after Dad. And Zach loved his grandpa so much.”

“Thanks to Grandpa, I had a good role model for how to be a dad.”

Hannah checked over Evan just as she had with Wyatt, then handed him to the nurse.

“Just a little bit longer. Hannah, and you can focus on your babies and family,” the doctor told her.

Zach moved up to stand next to Hannah and took her hand in his. “You’re doing so good. We’re almost at the finish line.”

She squeezed his hand. “I already love them so much.”

“Of course you do; you’re their mom.”

Once Hannah passed the afterbirth and had a chance to clean up, Annie brought the rest of their family and friends into the room.

Zach waited for everyone to file in around Hannah’s bed. “I’m happy to introduce Wyatt Zackary and Evan Miles. They’re named after three great dads in our family: my grandpa, Hannah’s dad, and Hannah’s uncle.”

“Four great dads,” Vi corrected.

He could feel a hard lump forming in his throat. The birth of their sons already had him emotional, and this threatened to push him over. Faking a dry throat, he reached over for his water bottle and took a drink. “When we

found out we were having two boys, we knew immediately what their names would be."

"How can you tell them apart?" Sean asked.

Zach helped Hannah take the blanket off one of the babies. "Wyatt has blue nail polish on some of his toes, while Evan has green."

Sean laughed. "Team colors. *Nice*."

"Eventually, their personalities will emerge, and we'll be able to tell who is who. Until then, painted nails will have to do," said Hannah. "Plus, I have zero intention of dressing them in identical clothes. Other than when they wear their jerseys, they'll always be unique." She yawned.

"And that signals the end of visiting hours," said Annie. She bent over and kissed Hannah's cheek and the tops of the boys' heads. "Let me know when you're home. Your mom and I are going to alternate days to help you guys out.

"Oh, you don't have to—"

Annie shook her head. "You and Zach are going to be too exhausted to do more than basic care of yourselves and the babies. We're helping, and that's final. You two are always taking care of everyone around you. It's our turn to return the favor."

Janet gave Hannah a look he recognized as the *mom look*.

"Fine. You can help."

Annie laughed as she headed for the door. "It's so cute that you thought you had a choice in the matter,"

After everyone had said their good-byes, Zach pulled over chairs for his sisters. "Ready to hold your little brothers?"

"Yes!" they exclaimed.

He handed Wyatt to Willow and Evan to Vi.

Willow rubbed her cheek against Wyatt's head. "He's so soft."

"Wait until they get their baths tomorrow. There's nothing like the smell of a baby's head," Zach told them.

Tears slipped down Vi's cheeks. "He's so little and cute. I just love him. I'm sorry that I was so awful about you guys having kids."

He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "Long forgotten, Vi."

"You were a scared kid who was worried about losing the only parent she had," added Hannah. "Like Zach said, that's all ancient history. The only thing that matters is now, and I can already see you're a great big sister. These two are so blessed to have you three for siblings."

"I'm just jealous that Ollie is going to get to spend so much time with them. I'm flying home the moment finals are over," said Vi.

"Ditto," added Willow.

"Just two more months and you'll be home for the summer," he told them. "And there will be plenty of baby time, I promise."

Suddenly, a loud cry filled the room. On cue, his brother followed a moment later.

Hannah started to pull at her gown. "Dinnertime."

"And that's our cue to leave," said Janet. "The babies need to eat and Hannah needs sleep. I'll take the girls home. See you about nine a.m.?"

"That would be great, Janet," Zach replied.

"How many times—?"

"*Mom*. That would be really great, Mom."

She pushed up on her tippy toes and kissed him on the cheek. "I wish Maggie could be here to see you. She'd be so proud. Parenting your sisters, and now, two babies of your own. I don't say it enough, but you're a very good man, Zach. I'm so glad my daughter married you."

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her. “No one is happier than me, I assure you.”

She looked over at her daughter, a baby in each arm. “I don’t know. I think she’s just as happy, if not more so. Would you like me to grab you guys some dinner before we head home?”

“*Food*. Sh—Crap, I hadn’t even thought about that. We haven’t eaten since breakfast and it’s late.”

She patted him on the chest. “You had bigger things on your mind. It’ll have to be fast food tonight, but I’ll bring something better for breakfast.”

“Thanks. I think Mom would be proud of you, too. And she would have loved being Grandma with you.”

“She would have. We joked about it so many times when you two were little.” She wiped away a tear. “Okay, girls. Let’s go get some food and go home.”

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Chapter Fifty-eight

HANNAH LOOKED DOWN AT the two little angels in her arms. *All I want to do is hold on tight and never let them go.*

Earlier when she'd changed into a fresh gown, they'd put the opening in the front so she could easily breastfeed. She had some clothes in her suitcase made specially for that, but she didn't want to put any of it on until she had a shower. *A sponge bath is okay, but I still feel gross.*

Pulling at the ties, she opened her gown enough to uncover her breasts. With only Zach, her mom, and the girls in the room, she wasn't worried about her modesty. Plus, her babies were hungry. Willow helped her get Wyatt set upon the left side and Vi helped with Evan on the right. It took a couple tries to get them to latch, but once they did, they started sucking immediately.

"Okay, you four have a good night," her mom said as she rounded up the girls. "We'll see you in the morning."

Hannah started to say good-bye but was caught off-guard by how strong the babies' grip was on her nipple. "Ouch."

Zach sat down in a chair next to her. “Hungry little guys.”

She smiled at him. “Our babies.”

He bent forward and kissed her shoulder. “Our babies. How does it feel to officially be a mom?”

So many emotions rose to the surface. They all collided, making it hard to identify them all. “Happy. Scared. Like I’m in heaven. I can’t believe these are our little boys.”

“Well, they look like mini clones of you, so…” he said with a chuckle.

“You don’t mind, do you?”

“Hannah, there is no one in the world I love more than you. If all our children end up looking like you, I wouldn’t mind one bit.”

She could feel tears pouring down her cheeks. With her arms full of babies, she let them fall. “I love you so much. Sometimes, I’m not even sure I can put into words how much.”

“Are you sure you don’t love Hayes more than me?”

“Well, there is that one thing he does…”

He shook his head. “Brat. I’ll let you get away with that one, though. Maybe if you’re good, I’ll let him come visit once you’re all healed.”

“Really? Maybe even go for a visit to the bird cage?” Zach had bought her a beautiful lake house as a wedding gift, but the best part was the little cabin tucked in the woods a few hundred feet from the house. It had two bedrooms. One was set up as a little nursery, the other a private get-away for them.

“Definitely a trip to the bird cage. I heard he had some new purchases he wanted to play with.”

She groaned. “No sex talk. I hurt so much down there, it isn’t funny.”

A look of concern flashed across his face. “I’m sorry. Do you need something for it? I can call the nurse.”

“Not your fault. It’s all part of bringing our babies into the world. And yes, after we eat our dinner, we should call the nurse. I’m sure they have something I can take while breastfeeding.”

“Totally my fault. I happily planted those two inside you. And hopefully, I’ll get to do it again in a couple years. I just feel bad that you have to go through so much for us to have them.”

She rubbed her cheek across one baby’s head, then the other. “My vagina says, ‘out of business.’ My heart says, ‘More, please.’ I just love them so much already. My heart hurts just looking at them. But maybe we can do it one kid at a time from now on?”

“Well, I think that’s up to you and your eggs. But I’ll take the kids any way they come.”

ZACH SAT AND WATCHED as Hannah fed their sons. He was in awe of how they could make these two little guys, and her body continue to nourish them even after they were born. And the way she was able to take care of them both at the same time was amazing. He’d caught her practicing numerous times over the last few months, usually with a stuffed animal. But seeing her do it with fourteen pounds of baby was something else.

“You’re amazing, you know that?”

“How’s that?”

“Just everything. Carrying our babies. Birthing them. Feeding them. I can’t help but be in awe of it all. The fact that a bit of sex could lead to a

woman’s body being able to do all of this is hard to wrap my mind around. Knowing the facts and experiencing them are so vastly different.”

“Women’s bodies are crazy, huh? Hard to believe a little piece of me and you could make these little guys. But I’m so glad they did. I’ve had them for like two hours, and I can’t imagine life without them.”

“Our life won’t ever be the same again. Now, we’re more than just Hannah and Zach; we’re Wyatt and Evan’s mom and dad.”

She yawned again. “I think they’re both asleep.”

He scooped up the babies one at a time, checked their diaper, swaddled them, and put them in their bassinet. “Now, time for you to eat some of the food your mom dropped off, then bedtime for you as well.”

“I’m too tired. Can’t I go to sleep?”

“You have to eat if you’re going to feed the boys. The last time you ate was dinner last night; you turned down breakfast this morning.”

She sighed. “You’re right. I have to think about the boys now if I want to breastfeed them. Just one more way my life has changed.”

“We can use formula—”

“No. As long as I’m able to, I want to do it myself. Pumping for bottles is fine, after all, I want you to be able to feed them, too. And the girls.”

He handed her the bag. “Then eat. Once you’ve had enough, I’ll get in bed and snuggle you to sleep.”

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Epilogue

Six years later

“WYATT, EVAN, IT’S ALMOST time to head out to school,” Hannah called out as she finished packing their lunches. Zach could hear Wyatt whining before he walked into the living area.

“Dad, do I have to go to school? I wanna stay home like Lucas and Silas,” he complained.

“Yes, Wyatt, you have to go. How else are you going to make friends?” Zach asked.

“I don’t need friends. I got Evan.”

“Yes, brothers are great and all, but you need friends, too. Can I tell you a story?”

Wyatt climbed up in his lap. “I love stories.”

“When I was little, I had a friend I loved to play with and hang out with. There was nothing better than spending time with her. At my eighth

birthday party, she kissed me and I fell in love."

"Eww. You kissed a girl?"

"I did. And one day you'll want to kiss one, too. Or maybe a boy. They'll become the most important person in your life."

"Do I have to kiss someone at my eighth birthday?"

Zach laughed. "No, you don't. I fell in love early. Your uncle Alex was eighteen. And Uncle Sean was nearly thirty. It's different for everyone. But if we'd stayed home and never went to school, we'd have missed out on making good friends like Sean. And you could miss out on finding someone to love."

"I love Evan and you and Mama."

"And we love you, too, bud. But friends are important as well. Do you know who the friend was who kissed me?"

He shook his head.

"Mama. I fell in love with her that day and wanted to marry her. And when I was older, that's what I did. Without her being my friend, we would have never had you, Evan, Lucas, and Silas. And that would have made me very sad."

Wyatt's face scrunched up, which was a sign that he was thinking. "Fine. But I don't wanna kiss a girl. Or a boy. Or get married until I'm this many." He flashed ten fingers in the air multiple times.

Zach laughed again. "That's okay. Now, go grab your backpack and lunch. Kim will be driving you to school soon."

Wyatt hopped down. "It's not fair. Lucas and Silas don't got to go to school."

"They're too little. They'll go to school when they're older, just like you."

Wyatt grumbled but headed to the kitchen to get his backpack and lunch. Right behind him was Evan.

“Yay! Time for school.”

Zach laughed. *How could two kids who looked exactly the same be so different? Even as babies, Wyatt was always the grouchy one, while Evan was Mr. Sunshine.*

“Come on, you two. Let’s get out to the car,” said their nanny.

Evan practically ran for the front door, while Wyatt dragged his feet.

“Love you guys! See you after school,” Hannah called out.

“Bye, Mom!” they replied.

“Wyatt refusing to go to school again?” Hannah asked as she cleaned up the counter.

Zach grabbed the lunch meat and mayo to put back in the fridge. “Yes. I told him he needed to go and make friends. And how my friend kissed me when I was eight. Which eventually led to me marrying you and having him and his brothers. He assured me he doesn’t want to kiss a girl—or a boy—and isn’t getting married until he’s like eighty.”

She laughed. “Sounds like Wyatt. How can him and Evan be so different, while Lucas and Silas are practically identical in all ways?”

“I was just thinking the same thing. It’s so funny. Speaking of kids…” he looked over at her phone.

“Nothing as of ten minutes ago, but I’ll check again. I swear, if this is another boy, you’re carrying the next one.”

“At least it’s only one baby this time.”

“Assuming the other one wasn’t hiding. How you managed to give me identical twins twice, I’ll never know.” Logging into her phone, she opened

her email app. After a scare with Wyatt and Evan, they'd insisted on early testing for their pregnancies since.

The look on her face gave him the answer: results were in.

"All the tests were negative."

He let out a sigh of relief.

"She's perfectly healthy."

"She?! We're finally having a girl?"

"Daddy's little girl."

He started to pick her up to swing her around but caught himself at the last second. *She has enough issues keeping her food down in the first few months. I don't need to make her throw up because I was stupid.*

"Which means this is my last pregnancy. As much as I love the kids, I'm not a big fan of this part. At least I won't end up big as a whale this time. Or having to go through delivery twice in one day."

Hannah had so many problems delivering Silas that she'd nearly had an emergency c-section. Lucas had been quick; only a few minutes from the first push to him in Zach's arms. Silas, on the other hand, took hours and she was so exhausted by the end.

"And if one more person uses the word 'geriatric' toward me, I swear I'm gonna cut out their tongue. I'm thirty-eight, not sixty."

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed the side of her neck. "Nobody gets to rile up my wife but me."

She looked over at Lucas and Silas, who were happily coloring at their table in the living room. "How long do you think they'll be occupied?"

"Knowing them, hours. They love art nearly as much as Vi." Even though she'd lived in her own house for nearly two years, she was over every day

to draw and color with the boys. “It’s funny how the first two are like clones of you, while these two are like me and Vi.”

She leaned back against him. “What do you think our little girl will look like?”

“I’m hoping for black hair with Mom’s curls. Your coloring, except for blue eyes. The perfect mix of both of us.”

“I can see you playing tea party and taking her to ride a pony at Alex’s.”

“You bet I’ll be having tea and finger sandwiches with her. I’ve been looking forward to it forever.” He laid his hands on her stomach. Even though she was only about eight weeks pregnant, he could feel the start of her bump. “Our little princess. And heaven forbid anyone ever mess with her. They’ll have four older brothers to contend with.”

Suddenly, he felt something brush his leg. He looked down and found Silas with his arms wrapped around Hannah’s leg.

“Mama. Lucas no share.”

She reached down and scooped him up. “Awww, is your brother not being nice? Let Mama handle it.”

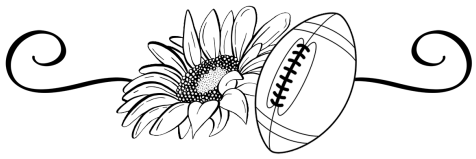
Zach laughed. “So much for a little alone time.”

“Alone time is how we got this house full of kids and one in the oven,” she said with a laugh. “Besides, Kim won’t be gone long, and then you can have me all to yourself.”

He smiled at her as she sat Silas down and tried to work out a truce between the boys. Apparently, Lucas was hogging the brushes that his brother wanted to use.

My family. I would have never thought when I made that wish on my twenty-eighth birthday that this is where I’d be all these years later. Happily married to Hannah. Three happy sisters. Four kids of my own and

a little princess on the way. Sharing the business with the girls. And a football legacy that I'm hoping I can pass on to at least one of the kids. He sighed. *I got all my wishes and more. Thank you, Mom. I know you had something to do with this. Death couldn't possibly stop you from taking care of your family.* A tear rolled down his cheek. *With moms like you and Janet, how could we be anything other than happy?*



Need more of Zach and Hannah? How about Little Bird and Hayes at the Birdcage? Click here, or scan the QR code below, to grab a copy of scenes that didn't make it into the book.

Looking for more about Violet? Her story, as well as Willow's and Ollie's, will be coming later in the series.

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About the author

Jenni Simonis, an award winning writer, has been crafting stories since she was a young girl. Whenever school supplies were bought for the year, she always snuck in a few extra thick spiral notebooks for to fill with her tales. The pile grew over the years. eventually turning into digital notebooks and then a tablet.

Before finally succumbing to her passion of writing romance novels, she spent years working in the newspaper industry in Texas. There, she won multiple awards, both individually and as part of larger team projects.

Jenni lives in the Pacific Northwest of the United States with her husband, son, sister, and several pets.

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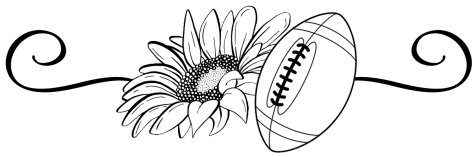
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Bonus Chapter

Keep reading for the first chapter of my debut small-town romance, *Where the Heart Is.*

Suggested reading order for this universe:

Where the Heart Is
Where the Heart Leads
The Perfect Addition
What the Heart Needs
Where the Heart Heals

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Where the Heart Is

DEVLIN TUCKED HIS HAND into Diane's. He was never quite certain what to call her. She was his confidant. Partner in crime. Shoulder to lean on. Other people called her his best friend, but that didn't feel like enough. Outsiders said she was like his sister: an idea he rejected strongly. He wasn't sure what the distinction between "best friend" and "sister" was but he knew there was one. An *important* one.

Although, partner in crime suggested a level of trouble they never quite attained. It was more like *mischief*. Unsupervised—and unauthorized—science experiments that left the ceiling stained and the counter scorched. Diane seeing how high she could push him on the swing, leaving him with a broken arm. Or him teaching her how to hit a baseball, only to have it ricochet and hit his grandparents' bedroom window. Just harmless fun that went awry. Or at least that was their story, and they were sticking to it.

Her pinky rubbed against his, giving him a sense of comfort. Small touches like that never failed to make him feel better. Even when he couldn't put into words what was bothering him, she was there.

"I think it's a horse."

She laughed as she stared at the ceiling of their clubhouse. "For the *millionth* time, that's a dog. It has a short neck."

"I should have my mom repaint it so I know every shape in the clouds."

She elbowed him. "That's cheating!"

"*No,* it's just ensuring I have the *right* answers."

She elbowed him a second time. "*Still cheating*. And if your mom paints in here, we'll have to stay out until it's dry."

He hated to admit it, but she was right.

"*You win*. It's a dog." The last thing he wanted was to be barred from their special spot for even a few days. He tilted his head toward hers. "But that one over there is a turtle."

She squeezed his hand. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"*Horse*."

He closed his eyes and sighed. No one was able to read him like she could. "*Fine.* I overheard my mom talking to my dad. We might not be in the same class this year."

"We'd still have plenty of time together. Like the bus. And recess. And most importantly, our clubhouse."

"It won't be the same, though."

She squeezed his hand again. "Your mom said we '*might not*' get the same class. But what if we do? What if there's nothing to worry about?"

"I hate not knowing."

"We'll find out soon enough. I promise."

"Lunch is ready," his grandma called from the patio.

He jumped up and ran to get their plates.

"Don't you guys want to eat inside today? It's awfully hot out here."

He shook his head. Lunchtime meant eating on the little deck outside their clubhouse. It was surrounded by a small garden that Diane had helped plant the previous year. Even though the plants hadn’t been there long, they already added a splash of color to the area. The fragrance from the rose and gardenia blooms followed you around the backyard.

“You two and that clubhouse. I swear, you never move more than ten feet from it unless you need to grab food or go to the bathroom. At least I always know where to find you.”

He sat their food on the picnic table and asked Diane, "Did you bring it?"

"Yup. My mom said it's fine with her if your parents were okay with it."

"They said 'yes' this morning."

For years, they'd been begging to spend the night in their clubhouse. Every time, the excuse was they were too young. If they wanted a sleepover, they could stay indoors. But now, they were both almost nine and finally old enough.

Diane took a bite of her sandwich before washing it down with a Coke. "I brought something even better than my sleeping bag." She took another bite.

He waited several minutes for her to tell him what it was, but she just continued eating.

"Okay, out with it. What did you bring?"

A smile filled her face. "I knew you wouldn't be able to wait long. My dad got me a star projector so we can have stars on the ceiling of the clubhouse."

"To go along with the clouds during the day?"

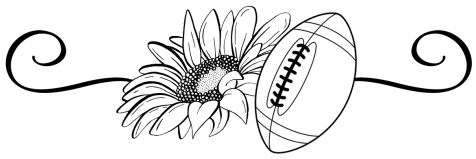
"Exactly."

He looked at his watch and grumbled. "Still another eight hours before it gets dark."

"Excited to try it out?"

"*Of course*. And so are you."

"Dad offered to set it up in my room last night, but I wanted to wait until we were together."



"Devlin! Diane! Wake up."

He rubbed his eyes in an attempt to pull himself from sleep. "Mom?"

"I need the two of you to get up and take all your stuff into the house. That hurricane changed paths and is headed this way."

Large storms, like hurricanes, were one of the risks of living along Texas' Gulf Coast. The Houston area hadn't been hit hard in Devlin's lifetime, but everyone knew it was only a matter of time.

He shook Diane. She'd rolled toward him in the night and was snuggled against his side. "Storm's on the way. We have to move everything inside."

"What?" she asked sleepily. "A storm?"

"Hurricane," his mom corrected. "I need to get you home so you can help your parents."

Diane jumped up and started shoving items into her sleeping bag. "We can use these to carry stuff inside. It'll be faster that way."

"Put everything in the spare bedroom. Come find me when you're done and I'll walk you home."

Devlin looked out to the deck. "What about the picnic tables?"

"Dad and Grandpa will move them to the garage when they're done boarding up the windows. But you can go through the yard and grab anything the wind might pick up. Anything left out here will probably be gone by the time the storm is done."

Gone? But— "What about our clubhouse?"

"Oh, Devlin, I meant the loose stuff. That's a building and is attached to the concrete. It will be fine. The lawn furniture, your bike, and your toys, on the other hand, will not be. Now, I've gotta get back in the house and get all that food cooked up."

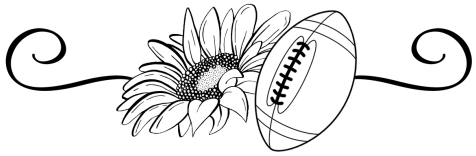
His mom sounded awfully convinced, but he was not as optimistic. Just the thought of something happening to his clubhouse made his pulse quicken and his breath heavy.

No one understood why their little hideaway was so important. To them, it was more than just a building; it was their secret little world. Half the time, they were just lying on the floor, staring up at the painted clouds, talking. All those things they were too shy or afraid to say to others could be shared with each other within the clubhouse walls. It was their safe space, and the older they got, the more important that became.

But to his parents, it was just a play space, something they'd grow out of with time. At some point they'd need more space, but he had always planned to work on the expansion himself. Surely by then, he'd be old enough.

Diane reached for his hand and gave it squeeze. "Horse."

He squeezed it back. "Dog. Guess I win this time, huh?"



Devlin paced back and forth across his room. It had been nearly two days since they cleaned out the clubhouse and barricaded themselves inside the main house. The first bands of winds and rain had come that night. Things had only gotten worse.

The sound of the wind beating on the house was so loud, he hadn't been able to sleep. The thuds of debris hitting the house was near constant. But all he could think about was their clubhouse.

Well, that wasn't quite true. He was worried about Diane. Her house never felt as sturdy as his parents' brick home and was significantly older. *What if someone was hurt?*

The more he thought about it, the more upset his stomach got. When his mom brought him breakfast, he turned it down. Just the idea of food made him queasy.

"Well, now I know something is seriously wrong. You never say 'no' to food." She sat down on one of the beds and patted the spot next to her. "Are you still worried about the clubhouse?"

"No. I mean, I am, but that's not what’s bothering me. Why couldn't Diane and her parents have stayed here?"

"We offered, but they wanted to stay home. In situations like this, people tend to want to be somewhere familiar. It can help ease some of the stress from the situation."

"But what if she gets hurt?"

His mother pulled him in for a hug. "Everything will be okay, I promise. The worst of it is nearly past us. In a few more hours, it should be safe to go outside again. And one of the first things we'll do is go and check on her family. Okay?"

The moment the sound of the winds died down, Devlin ran out to the backyard to see how their little building had fared. He wanted to check on it first before he walked down to Diane's with his mom.

As soon as he stepped out onto the patio, he knew the clubhouse was gone. Previously, the view of the magnolias in the backyard was blocked by the structure. Now, he could see all the way back to the battered trees. Piles of wood, shingles and glass were all that remained of some of his favorite memories.

His dad looked over the destruction in the backyard. “You guys had outgrown this thing anyway. Besides, don’t kids your age tend to hang out in front of the TV? Let's get it cleaned up while you wait for your mom."

Devlin wiped away a tear as he threw chunks of wood into the wheelbarrow. While it might not have been roomy, it was still *their* space.

In a heap over by the kitchen window, he found a large piece of the clubhouse’s ceiling. And not just any piece; it was the cloud shaped like a dog.

"I'm so sorry, Devlin," his mom said from the patio door. "I really didn't think the storm would be strong enough to do this much damage."

He held up the piece of wood. "Do you think we can save this?"

"The whole thing?"

"No, just this part over here," he answered as he pointed to the cloud. “This was our favorite."

"I'll get Dad to cut it down to size and I'll seal it. That should do the trick. Do you want to hang it in your room?"

He nodded.

"Okay. I'll add a hanger on the back, and he can put it up for you. Are you ready to go check on Diane?"

"Yeah, just give me a sec to put this in my room."

"Oh, don’t forget that bouquet you picked for Diane. It's in the kitchen."

Before the storm, he picked all the flowers from the garden. He knew the winds would shred any blooms remaining, so he made two bouquets: one for his mom and one for Diane.

DIANE COULD TELL SOMETHING was wrong the moment she answered the front door. In fact, she was so distracted by Devlin’s mood that she nearly missed the flowers he was holding.

Grabbing his hand, she led him down the hall to her bedroom. Something had happened, and she needed to know what. But clearly, he wasn't going to say anything in front of their parents.

As soon as her door shut, the tears started to fall.

"It's gone. It's all gone."

"What's gone? *Your house*? Did a tornado—?"

"The clubhouse. All that's left is a bunch of debris and an empty spot on the concrete. *It’s. All. Gone*," he said between gasps for air.

She pulled him into her arms and hugged him. As much as that building meant to her, it was *nothing* compared to what it meant to Devlin. It was like the one place he felt free to be himself, and now he had nothing.

"Can we build a new one?"

"I don't think so. Dad said we've outgrown it."

"Okay, then. We'll pick a new spot. Maybe the spare bedroom? It's empty, other than all the stuff from the clubhouse."

He let out a shaky breath. "It won't be the same, though. That was our little house. It was made for us. Out there, it felt like we made the rules. Like it was our world. Now, we'll be in my parents' house. It's just not the same."

She hugged him tighter. "I know. But we'll try, okay? We'll try our best."

"Okay, we'll try." He rested his head on her shoulder. "I'm just glad you're safe. What would I do without you?"

ONLY A COUPLE OF weeks later, Devlin had to contemplate exactly that: being without Diane.

After so many years of always having her by his side, he thought it would continue to be that way. After all, unless his family went on vacation, or she was out of town with her Great-Aunt Iris, the two of them spent every day together. So, when his parents told him Diane was moving, he didn’t know how to handle it. That was the day he suffered his first anxiety attack.

He was so panicked that his mom barely started the conversation before he broke down. “But she can’t move!” Devlin said between sobs. “I can’t lose my best friend.”

“If you would let me finish what I was saying, you would know that it’s just across town. You’ll still be in the same class; you just won’t be able to walk down to her house anymore,” Kelly explained. "Their rental house was damaged in the storm, and they had to find a new place."

Upset at the thought that they wouldn’t be able to play together every day, he went on a hunger strike until his mom agreed to taxi them back and forth each day. That evening, he overheard her talking to his dad about it.

"He was so adamant about fighting for his time with Diane that I didn’t have the heart to tell him she would be coming over anyway,” his mom explained. “Your parents babysit her, after all."

Later at school, he learned that Diane had also taken heavy measures to convince her parents to let her spend time with him nearly every day.

“I threatened to run away,” she’d told him with a giggle. “But they just laughed, saying they would know exactly where to look for me. I tried refusing to go to school, but they reminded me that would mean I couldn’t ride home with you every day.”

He gave her a high-five. *Partners in crime strike again.*

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Content Warnings

On-page

Between MCs: consensual non-consent, pregnancy, birth

Not between MCs: violence, kidnapping, cheating (side character), poisoning food, harassment about female main character's weight, police involved shooting and death (side character), cancer, mental health struggles

Off-page

Death of family members, labor difficulty

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