



L.R. Wards

Hartley's
Crush

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Other books in this Series

Wild Obsession

Wild Rush

Wild Heart

Micah Rush

PROLOGUE

The woman rolled off Tyler and went into the bathroom. After his eyes followed her silhouette, he looked over at the clock on his bedside table for the second time in an hour.

Midnight.

He groaned and rubbed his sore eyes with his fingers. At least he'd get some sleep. He was exhausted.

It was unfortunate that he didn't pay more attention to her physically but he was tired. It was a long hard day of practice, and yes he did need some release, but for some reason that beautiful woman didn't seem as satisfying as he thought she would be. That was becoming more common lately.

It wasn't her fault. He was just getting tired of picking up women for one night stands. It wasn't as if it wasn't easy for him, it was. They just all seemed to do the same things, behave the same way, and act the same in bed. He knew she'd leave her number on his kitchen counter, bedside table or just tell him, but he wouldn't call her again. She didn't interest him beyond tonight. He'd spent an hour and a half having sex with her, then she finished him with her mouth. It was true that men liked that but it was all starting to be the same routine.

He'd been with women like this for more than ten years. Sometimes it was explosive in the bedroom, sometimes it wasn't. It all depended on where his mind was.

Until this year he didn't think he lacked anything in companionship because it was easy to pick up his phone and call a past acquaintance. It just wasn't working for him anymore. He'd had a few girlfriends when he was younger, but nothing really serious. It wasn't their fault. It was hard to keep him interested.

He reflected on his best friend's marriage and smiled.

Micah and Hailey were perfect for one another and seemed completely in love. He never even came close to that. There were women he liked over the years, but not like the way Micah coveted Hailey. He'd never seen his best friend look at a woman like that. It made him want that too.

He wondered if that were even possible for him. He seemed so detached from the opposite sex lately except when he needed sex. Oh, he was attentive and played the perfect gentleman. It was so habitual for him that he got good at it and the women didn't even seem to notice when he drifted off in his thoughts. In bed, as usual, there was no emotion, no notion of commitment. In fact he never wanted anything with a woman beyond getting laid. After that, he was done with them. As for companionship, he had plenty of friends, well, male friends, but Hailey was a good friend of his. Truthfully, besides his sister, she was the only female friend he had. Mind you, he spent most of his life around men so maybe that made him a little more insensitive towards women except when it came to family. Mostly likely he wouldn't have even seen Hailey as a friend if he'd seen her before Micah did.

He'd reflected on his views often to wonder if that was disrespectful to the opposite sex, but it wasn't as if he'd ever sent a woman home in tears, he hadn't. They always left his bed satisfied. He was an attentive and experienced lover and he did enjoy bringing them pleasure. He was conceited in his talents between the sheets and if she was shouting your name in bed, or God's, it usually was a good thing.

The woman came out of the bathroom then and got dressed. As he thought she set a piece of paper with her number on his bedside table. Then she gave him light brush on the lips and a whispered 'thank you' before leaving.

He reached over, picked it up and looked at it briefly before he got up, walked to the bathroom crumpling it up in his palm

and threw it in the wastebasket without another thought. Although he had a few women on his phone that he could call up if the need be, he just wanted someone a little different tonight. It still didn't do any good. He felt like something was missing.

While he did enjoy her company so he wasn't alone, he wasn't that into her. She was one of the many women that waited for the athletes when they left the arena after practice along with many other fans. It was her posturing and sultry hints when he signed her blouse over her left breast that made him get her number and call her later for sex. Although he did take her out to dinner first and feed her some expensive wine which he didn't drink.

He didn't talk much, but she didn't leave much room for it which was fine, because he didn't feel like being a conversationalist tonight. The time was filled with her talking about herself and while he acted interested, he zoned her out after the first fifteen minutes. He did find out that she worked in one of the local art galleries. She was sophisticated, but into hockey players. He didn't mind. He used it like he always did. Besides she had a great body. It was too bad her breasts were augmented. He began to dislike that more and more and it seemed like most of the women he slept with had them now. Why couldn't they just be happy with what they have? He already knew the answer to that. It was men like him—athletes, that wanted the perfectly shaped women and if a woman wanted a man like him, they did whatever necessary to get it. Only he wasn't like that.

He grew up in a small town in Montana around women that were genuine and hardworking. None of the girls he used to go out with would even fathom doing such things to their body. When he got drafted to the NHL, things changed. At first he loved the attention of beautiful women, but it had been eight years of that lifestyle and he was weary of it.

They sweated for over an hour in bed until he was satiated. Not as much as he was hoping for, but it would do. She'd let him do anything he wanted, even told him so, but he didn't explore it all. He was tired. Not just physically, but mentally. He gave her enough to make her happy though.

He showered and went back to bed only covering himself with a thin sheet. He stacked his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling in thought. Street lights from below his condominium illuminated it slightly.

For someone who had a lot of friends and was surrounded by beautiful women, he sure felt lonely. It worried him at times because he wasn't sure if he was even capable of the affection his teammates showed their wives and girlfriends. He sighed heavily deciding not to let it bother him.

Tomorrow was another day.

CHAPTER ONE

The next day after practice Micah Rush, his best friend and teammate, sat down beside him in the dressing room while the rest of the players were getting changed and engaging in banter and talk.

His and Micah's lockers were always beside one another even when they were kids. Now that they were in the National league, they kept their spots together. Their friendship was the same. They were tight. Micah had four younger brothers, but he always considered Tyler his closest and most trusted friend. Things he wouldn't dare divulge to his brothers, he easily told Tyler.

As for today, this wasn't an official practice, but their General Manager insisted that Tyler and Micah be there to help with the new rookies. Micah's younger brother started last year and was also told to come because he needed the practice. A few

other players straggled in also just to get a jump on the season.

"Hey man. Something wrong?" Micah finally said after watching him for a moment. Tyler had been sitting silently with his forearms resting on his thighs and his hands folded together while staring at the far wall. He didn't even seem to notice that he'd sat next to him. If anyone knew the guy, they would immediately notice that it was unusual for him.

Tyler sat erect and shook his head after flicking him a quick glance. Nothing was revealed in his expression.

"You seem distant the last few weeks," Micah added. He never brought it up before because they usually had no problem talking about things that were troubling them, but Tyler hadn't let on that something was. He was starting to worry about him.

"I've just been thinking about things, is all," he finally said as he reached down and started unlacing his skates.

Micah watched him keenly with pale blue eyes that he inherited from his father and his son inherited from him. His reluctance to talk just confirmed his concern.

He and Tyler had just spent the summer together back in Montana with their families where they grew up and Tyler was not his normal self then either. Usually he had a tremendous sense of humor and was incredibly outgoing, but there was a slight change in him. He'd caught him staring more than once like he did moments ago. "You want to come to the house for dinner tonight?" He knew Tyler, probably better than his own family did. Something *was* bugging him and because they were so close, he could read him. They were always there for one another. Nevertheless, he'd felt he'd been neglecting him lately and felt guilty. They always traveled to and from practice together but he'd been busy with his younger brother and hadn't spent as much time with him as he used to.

His brother Cole, the second oldest out of five boys in the family, was starting his second year as one of the defensemen.

He was still a rookie and still needed a lot of guidance and extra practice. On top of that, Micah's two year old son and wife came first in his life. Tyler never complained—ever, but that didn't mean he couldn't feel terrible for not being there. He loved him like one of his brothers and he'd certainly be there for them if they needed it.

"I would." Tyler smiled as he accepted Micah's invitation. Although part of Micah's family lived with him, Tyler's was far away so he spent a lot of time at the Rush's. He even had a bedroom there that they set aside for him when the nights got late and he didn't want to drive home to his lonely condo.

Micah stood up and patted his shoulder, "Well, you know where I am if you want to talk," he said before he left for the shower.

"Yeah thanks," he said to himself while watching him walk away. Tyler and Micah had been friends for more than twenty years and shared everything. Tyler would definitely tell him if he thought it merited it, but it wouldn't solve his problems and Micah already had a lot on his shoulders. He knew he was feeling guilty because of his preoccupation with his younger brother, but that wasn't bothering Tyler at all. He'd make sure he'd straighten him out tonight in regards to that. As it was, he was glad he had him. Besides, spending time with Micah's family eliminated his loneliness. Too bad it was only a temporary fix.

The following day it was Micah driving Tyler to practice. He called him that morning and told him he'd pick him up. It was something they used to do often, but Micah had been exceptionally busy for the past few weeks with his responsibilities toward the team and his family. There was a time when Tyler only drove because they lived in the same building and Micah didn't have a car then. Not that he couldn't afford it, he just didn't see the use for one when he owned a motorcycle. Now he

lived in one of the posh estates just outside the city with his wife and baby and drove back and forth.

It wasn't an early morning practice so they were able to stop and grab breakfast together, but it was the first official one of the season and loads of press would most definitely be there. Cole, took his motorcycle. It was September but the weather was still nice.

Micah was driving his Mercedes SUV. He'd bought it before the birth of his son Shane. Otherwise it would be Tyler driving and Micah taking his own motorcycle, but today they decided to carpool.

As usual their conversation was friendly and mostly about hockey, the players, or their families. Although they'd been inseparable most of their lives, no one could mistake them for brothers. Besides the contrasting looks, Tyler was known more for his sense of humor than Micah was. Although Micah did have one, he also had a lot of responsibility and played more seriously. It was the topic of many media discussions because despite his sense of humor and Micah's seriousness, Tyler was the fighter, and Micah wasn't. It took a lot for Micah to confront a player besides the normal hockey scrums. Normally he'd just turn away and go about the game. Tyler on the other hand, hit hard and finished checks against the boards. If it came to sore feelings, then blows, he never backed down and usually won.

Micah turned down a detoured street because of ongoing construction and Tyler perked up while peering out the windshield.

"Hey Micah, do me a favor and pull the car over up here. There's something there I've been meaning to get," Tyler said spotting something that he'd been drooling over for the past two weeks when they took the same detour.

"Where?"

"In front of that flower shop." He pointed to a quaint little

storefront littered with various species of beautiful flowers.

Micah's blond brows lifted, "You want me to stop in front of a *flower shop*?" he said in disbelief. "What the hell do you want there?"

Tyler gave him an annoyed look, "Just humor me."

He chuckled, "Fair enough." He pulled the car over to an empty parking space a few spots down from the front of the store.

"I'll be back in a minute," Tyler said before he got out.

Translation; *stay put*. Micah smirked, "Sure thing. Just remember, you only have a minute. We don't want to be late."

At first, he thought maybe he was going into the cigar shop next door. Tyler didn't smoke but they picked up the occasional gift for business purposes. But he didn't go to the cigar store. It *was* the flower shop. He watched as Tyler walked over to someone bent over stocking the vases on the shelves outside the store. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans and bent slightly to speak to them. Then Micah grinned slowly. Now he knew what Tyler was 'getting'.

Tyler wasn't known for buying women flowers or anything for that matter, so at first this stop really puzzled him, but not anymore. When the person, or woman rather, a beautiful young woman, erected herself and turned to him, everything made sense.

Tyler had his share of female admirers and rarely turned down a good thing, but this was the first time that he went so far as seeking out someone of the opposite sex. After seeing her, it was obvious why.

Micah cut the engine and lowered the passenger window of the Mercedes so he could try and hear what was being said. It didn't work. The traffic on the street was too loud. He glanced at his watch. Well, they still had some time before practice and it wasn't often Tyler acted odd like this for a woman so he would

allow him a few minutes.

His eyes peered through the windshield. She was very pretty. Long dark hair parted to the right that hung loosely around her shoulders and she was slender by the way the apron wrapped around her. She had a heart shaped face, petite manicured eyebrows over nice large almond shaped eyes framed with thick lashes. He couldn't quite make out her eye color from where he was, but they looked lighter than Tyler's so they weren't brown. She smiled and nodded at Tyler when he spoke to her and Micah felt himself grin. She had a beautiful smile too and a nice mouth. A nice bow shaped mouth, not as nice as his wife's but he was prejudiced. As far as he was concerned she was the most beautiful woman on the planet.

His phone rang then. He picked it up and smiled. *Speak of the devil*. It was Hailey, his wife. "Hey, you're not going to believe this," he said into the phone after hearing his wife's voice while darting his eyes to the couple a short distance away.

Meanwhile Tyler had just finished introducing himself. Unfortunately, she wasn't so giving with her name.

He'd been driving past this shop for more than two weeks since he'd first gotten a glimpse of her and he couldn't take it anymore. Every time they drove by there was this unbelievable woman out front stocking the vases and setting up displays. She was positively *gorgeous*. Like any red-blooded single man in his prime, he loved beautiful women, but he needed to stop and talk to her because as far as he knew, she had the brains of a shoe. Despite his hockey jock image, he actually liked women who were intelligent otherwise he got bored quickly. Hence the numerous one night stands.

It was only by luck that he noticed her in the first place because if there wasn't ongoing construction with their normal route, he would have never seen her. Tyler wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth and decided that today he was going to

take some time and speak to her. At least he was trying to. She still hadn't answered him. Well, at least that gave him more time to soak up her pretty face.

Eva brushed her hair aside because it was blocking her view and stared up at the man. He was tall, really tall. He could definitely give her two older brothers a run for their money.

But it was his looks that made her bite her bottom lip to keep her jaw from dropping.

He had deep set dark brown eyes that could literally turn a woman's insides into hot melted butter, especially when they were focused directly on hers with unwavering confidence. His face was deeply tanned, like he'd spent a lot of time in the sun recently. There was a day's worth of neatly trimmed stubble on his jaw. It was well done so it was obvious that he put a lot into how he looked although he really didn't need to.

His nose looked like it'd been broken once or twice, but it wasn't really noticeable. If anything it added to his masculinity. It showed character and somehow made him seem real. Giovanni, her oldest brother had his broken a few times and it was more noticeable, but he was still a nice looking man that had no problem with the opposite sex.

At first she was a little startled at his forwardness, but quickly masked her expression and smiled greeting him like she would any customer.

Then her ultimate surprise, he told her his name and asked her out.

Her smile faltered slightly.

First of all, she didn't know him—at all. Furthermore, her family would definitely protest her going out with a stranger. Not only that, she could see her sister through the window of the shop looking at them with peaked curiosity. Of course she was pretending to move arrangements around in the display window, but she was practically breathing on the glass. This wasn't

something she needed. Her sister was the type of person that would tease her endlessly over this attention. Finally, who actually did that—walked up to someone they didn't know and ask them out on a date? For all he knew she could be married, or involved, but he didn't even seem to consider it. Or worse, he could be some crazy stalker no matter how nice looking he was. Crazy didn't come with a manual or a preset image, so how was she to know he wasn't. This was a big city. It was full of nut jobs. Then how come she just didn't tell him to get lost? Well, she already knew the answer to that.

"And your name?" Tyler asked when he didn't get a response.

"Pardon me?" she finally realized that he said something again. If those deep brown eyes of his weren't so sinfully hypnotic, she would have heard him the first time. Then he smiled and she felt it viscerally. Her eyes went to his mouth. He had a great smile. His mouth was wide, sensual, and masculine, and he had nice even white teeth and if she didn't know better, something told her he was worth a lot of money. Of course the designer clothes and expensive leather jacket was a giveaway, but still, it was beyond the clothing. He carried himself as if he was important. With that, went the warning bells in her head. Actually they rang a few times, but for the same reasons she still didn't tell him to get lost.

"I asked you for *your* name," he repeated completely undeterred by her reply. That's because he saw where her eyes went. There was attraction there even if she didn't act like it. When a woman looked at a man's mouth, she was interested. It was brief, but he saw it. He was experienced enough to pick out the most subtle hints and hell, was she subtle.

"Are you interested in buying an arrangement?" she said avoiding the question. She had to or she was going to start ogling him again. If he said no, then he'd hopefully leave because she

somehow couldn't find the words to him to. At the same time she was thinking that if he was crazy, it was a complete waste of a gorgeous man. Could God be that cruel? Who knew? Well, at least he wasn't gay. No one could accuse him of that especially with how aggressive he was with her.

Ah, Tyler thought feeling his ego rise to the challenge, so *that's the way it was*. Well, he was a patient man. There hadn't been one time that he could remember that he didn't get a woman he wanted, so if she wanted to play that way, he'd oblige her. He looked around at the colorful displays, "Sure, why not?" he gestured toward the store entrance without taking his eyes off of her, "For someone special. A beautiful woman. I wouldn't mind if you helped me pick out the flowers. Do you have time?"

She gave him a pleasant smile, "It's what I do." Well, the man had the audacity to hit on her but buy flowers for someone else! Now she thought he was crazy and arrogant to boot. How many women did he have?

"Then I chose right."

She paused ever so slightly as he waved and arm toward the open door of her and her sister's shop. He said it as if it had nothing to do with flowers. She actually started to get a little irritated. He was still hitting on her but buying flowers for another woman? She didn't think she'd ever met a more egocentric man in her life.

Micah had just hung up from speaking with his wife when Tyler started following the woman in the store. Then he turned and held up his splayed fingers stating 'five minutes'. Micah lifted his arm and tapped his watch, but he couldn't stop the smile that pulled across his face.

Tyler shrugged sheepishly. Then he waved an arm toward her backside just before she went in the store. He followed it with a grin causing Micah to laugh. It was an expression that said, *Can you blame me?*

Micah didn't mind waiting for him at all, if Tyler didn't mind the repercussions.

It was odd really because Tyler always had women around him and had his pick, yet he made him pull over so he could check out this one. It was interesting and he really didn't mind sticking around to see how it went.

Twenty minutes later he was back in the car with a bouquet of flowers

"What the hell is that?" Micah asked as Tyler turned and set them in the back seat.

"Give them to Hailey." He gave him a look of defenselessness turning away.

Micah erupted into laughter while starting the engine. "You are a sucker. I take it she turned you down?" he said pulling out of the parking space into flowing traffic while casting Tyler a glance. Obviously whatever happened, didn't go well because Hailey wasn't the flower type and Tyler went as far as buying them to impress the girl. Well if Tyler bought them Hailey would probably be flattered because that wasn't normal for him at all.

Come to think of it, not impressing the flower girl was kind of surprising, because Tyler certainly didn't have any trouble winning attention from the opposite sex. He was oddly quiet after that. Micah looked at him again.

He had his elbow on the window ledge and was caressing the stubble of his jaw with his thumb and forefinger in thought. Micah was hoping he'd let him in on what was going on, but he didn't. How long had it been going on? Is this why he seemed preoccupied lately? Micah wanted to ask because Tyler was his best friend, but he wouldn't pry. If and when Tyler wanted to say something, he would when he was ready.

Hailey, his wife, made him describe the woman to him over the phone. He was glad that she was secure in their relationship because some of the things he said would make any other wife

raging with jealousy, but Hailey knew that she was the love of his life because not one day went by that he didn't tell her. Besides, as far as he was concerned there was no other woman more beautiful than her and she was the mother of his son. It was a double plus. So, if Tyler was going out of his way for a woman, like him, his wife was very curious.

Tyler was a nice looking man with black hair, brown eyes, and a strong athletic build. He had no shortage of female admirers. He should know. He and Tyler had been friends since they were in preschool, so for more than twenty years, and they knew each other well. They were drafted at the age of twenty for different teams, but didn't get together again until they were twenty three. He, Tyler and Mark Richards, his right winger, were the best offensive line in the league.

Micah glanced at his watch again and shook his head. They were going to pay for being late for the first practice of the season with the team. It didn't matter that Tyler and Micah had diligently been on the ice for the last two weeks unofficially because his father insisted on it to help the two new rookies. He would still be angry with them over this. People who didn't know the dynamics might think it was crazy that a twenty-eight year old man still took orders from his father, but *his* father was the General Manager of their team.

Moreover, Micah's father wasn't just the General Manager; he owned part of the team along with Hailey. It used to belong to his father in law, who left it to him in the will, but Micah didn't want it and neither did his wife. However, he managed to finally convince her and she gave half ownership to his father. He thought she should have part of the legacy that her father built despite the way he treated her.

Despite being the fact that she was the daughter of a billionaire, she wasn't spoiled by money. In fact she really didn't want anything to do with her father's money or business. So as

long as Dutch dealt with all of the business of the team she would have a stake in it. If he would have said no, chances were she would have sold it. None of them wanted the team to be owned by someone who didn't know how to deal with hockey or hockey players. His father was a star player in his youth and didn't only manage the team, he was on the ice for every practice. He also did all the discipline which Micah knew the first of the season would be dealt to him and Tyler for being late. It wouldn't be pretty either. He was expecting something horrific.

A half an hour later, and forty minutes late for practice they pulled into the arena.

"I'm letting dad know that this is your fault." Micah said before getting out of the car. "You know this is going to hurt."

"I can take it." Tyler replied with amusement despite knowing it was most likely going to be rough.

Micah shot him a look of disbelief. Tyler did have a better sense of humor than him, but there was nothing to joke about when it came to his father.

Four hours later they were sitting, exhausted, side by side, hunched over with their elbows on their knees in the dressing room still with their full gear on even though they were soaked with their own sweat. The others left an hour ago, but like Micah predicted, his father wasn't happy. They didn't have enough energy to even get undressed yet or to even form words for at least ten minutes after they sat down. Both of their faces were still flushed with exertion and sweat dripped off every inch of them.

"I hate you." Micah finally managed. "I've said it before, but I really mean it this time."

"I hate me too," Tyler said wiping his brow with a towel completely dog-tired. "I was hoping for a stroke so it would end. Jesus, don't you own the team?"

“Actually, my wife owns it,” Micah admitted.

“Micah, you told me yourself you inherited in the will.” Tyler countered.

He grinned. “Yeah, but I gave it back to her for her twenty third birthday last month. It took some convincing, but she accepted as long as dad took fifty-one percent. I can’t own the team. I’ll have players bitching to me all the time if they found out. So, she gave the control to dad. She really doesn’t want the responsibility.”

“Your father is the General Manager, he shouldn’t have a stake in us. Your wife gives him too much free reign then.” Tyler added with some irritation. He didn’t miss the amusement in Micah’s tone either. It was his own fault too, making him madder at himself than Dutch, so that didn’t help. He’d made them late and joked about it. Now he paid for it. “Not only that, what type of General Manager insists on being on the ice torturing the players.”

“Dad does.” Micah glanced at him with a stern look from those pale blue eyes of his, “Besides, you knew better. You know what he’s like. Remember what happened when I got caught up with a girl?” His father worked them like slaves for several days straight until they only thought about hockey and nothing else. They even dreamt about the bloody game. It worked though, they took the championship.

“Seriously? You’re using *that* incident to this one?” Tyler said incredulous at the comparison.

Micah grinned at his exasperation. “I am.”

“If I remember correctly, that girl you got in so much trouble over, you married her,” Tyler argued. “Micah that was just *mean*.”

Micah released a laugh unable to contain it anymore. He couldn’t help it. They both deserved this and knew it. They really screwed up by being late this day of all days. As for the last

time it happened, Micah didn't regret it one bit. "Yeah and it was worth it—marrying her I mean. You're right about today though, it was hell." Despite his protests, he could understand why Tyler was frustrated. His father had always paired them. If one got in trouble the other would pay for it right along with him. In fact his father didn't even ask for an explanation. He just started putting them through drills for four hours straight with barely a break. Micah knew why. He and Tyler should be leading by example. Because of the rookies and their status, they should be there earlier than the rest of the team and leave last. On top of that, when his younger brother Cole saw them come in late, he knew they would catch hell. That telltale mocking Rush smile spread across Cole's face and Micah made a mental note to tune him in later.

Micah wasn't just married to the one owner of the team and son to the other. He was the star center and the team captain. Tyler was the alternate captain and Mark was the second alternate. It definitely didn't look good if either one of them were late. Moreover, the arena was always flooded with the media filming during practice and in waltz the two of them late for the first practice of the year. It doesn't bold well for their star reputations. It made them look arrogant and sloppy. So his father made sure they knew it, in spades.

"I'm twenty eight Micah, yet your father still makes me feel like I'm still in the tyke league." He shook his head and rubbed his hands through its sweat soaked ebony locks while gritting his teeth. "Christ, even the roots of my hair are hurting."

Dutch Rush, Micah's father, formed the Tyke team back in their home town and made sure he followed them all the way through the juniors. When the boys got drafted Dutch followed Micah to make sure he kept up his game, which he did, and he never interfered until Micah met Hailey and lost his concentration.

“Yeah, join the club.”

Tyler looked at him. “You want to know about the girl, don’t you?” He knew Micah was curious. He did ask in the ride to the arena, but he had to internalize her rejection first and how to approach her again. If she thought he was done, he wasn’t. He’d realized that he came across all wrong. He was hitting on her expecting her to look at him with star struck eyes, but that certainly backfired.

Micah shrugged like it wasn’t important, then he grinned, “Hell yes. Who is she? Hailey wants me to get all the information I can.” He slapped his friend’s padded shoulder. “Besides you owe me for this.”

Micah was right. He did owe him for what Dutch just put them through. He couldn’t help but return Micah’s smile. “Well, she won’t give me her name, but I’ll find out. All I know is for the past few weeks that we’ve driven by that shop, there was this unbelievably sexy woman out from stocking the vases. I finally couldn’t take it anymore. Hell, she was bent over one day and I got a great look at her ass. Then I was hooked.”

“Over an ass?”

“I’m saying that’s what caught my eye, but she’s beautiful too,” Tyler added undisturbed by his own shallow confession.

Micah shook his head. “Man, there’s more to women than looks.”

Tyler gave him a look of disbelief, “Yeah, this from a guy who married a redheaded knockout.”

“Hey, she’s got other assets.” Micah said splaying his hands helplessly.

“Yeah you fluked out. A woman, I might add, who rides motorcycles, fixes boilers, and this is the best part, loves hockey and plays it like a pro.”

Micah nodded starting to smile.

“Remember this though, I was there when you met her and

it wasn't exactly her hidden talents that caught your attention."

Micah grinned not denying it, "Yeah, well, she's pretty hard to beat." He said it with an expression of love in his eyes.

"God, you are hopeless." Tyler grinned shaking his head.

"Yup." Micah said beginning to strip off his gear starting with his jersey then his padding. It was no secret to Tyler or anyone who knew him that he was madly in love with his wife. They had a bit of a rocky start because her father was very controlling of her life and didn't want her around hockey players, but like Tyler, he was used to getting what he wanted. Luckily he did. He loved her more than life itself.

"Anyway she wouldn't give me her name. I might have been a little aggressive. I probably look like some conceited chump."

"You do." Micah teased.

"Thanks asshole."

He laughed again.

After they showered, dressed and were out in the parking lot heading toward the car did Micah speak again. He was thinking about how Hailey was when he first met her and how different she was from other women he'd known. In fact, it was Tyler that pointed that out, so he thought he'd return the favor. "Remember what you told me when I met Hailey? Have you considered that she's not like the women we're used to? I mean at one time we could belch the star spangled banner and still not go home alone. Then take into consideration that the women we—I mean, I used to date before I got married, well, they were usually in money, or sophisticated. Some of them never knew a job, or a hardworking job. You're after a gal who is from middle class and she obviously didn't recognize you, did she?" Micah did watch the exchange from a short distance and when he reflected on it, she really didn't seem to know him. They lived in a city that treated them like celebrities, but obviously this girl didn't follow hockey.

"nope." Tyler smiled without looking at him because it was

true. Not only were they hockey players, they were in the number one team of the league. Their faces were plastered all over the place when the playoffs started. Micah was probably the number one pick for endorsements because he was the best looking guy in the league. Well, he was the team captain and fast on the ice too. When he got a breakaway puck, no one could catch him.

Tyler certainly wasn't ugly and had his own share of commitments, but he wasn't the star player. Although their line on the team was the best, Micah still had more fame. It helped that Micah's father used to play professional years ago and now took it upon himself to manage this team since the death of Micah's father in law, the previous team's owner. It made headlines when the son of Dutch Rush became the number one draft pick. Yet Tyler knew that Micah was under tremendous stress to keep that star reputation too. He wouldn't trade places with him for anything. Tyler was content with the fame he had.

With that distinction came women. Lots of women. Tyler, as well as the rest of the single players, had no problem finding a girl for every day of the week if they needed to, but sometimes they all seem to blur together. Some of the men had girlfriends, and others wives, some wives and mistresses, but Micah and Tyler, along with Mark, another player, never had much use for either. Who could blame them? They were young and their first love was hockey, then women.

All of that changed when Micah met Hailey, his wife. After Tyler met her, he knew exactly why Micah fell for her. Well, she was perfect, especially for Micah. Tyler thought the world of her and their son. He even babysat him a couple of times.

Micah was right though about this one. She was different. He figured that out already when she didn't fall over herself after he introduced himself. In fact, she didn't even recognize him and if anything, seemed a little pissed off even though she

tried to hide it. It was unfortunate because that meant he had to try harder. Tyler wasn't used to chasing women, but how hard could it be? "Yeah, I have thought about all of that because she didn't recognize me," Tyler said answering him. "Or if she did, it didn't do anything for me."

"So, are you going to keep this up?" Micah asked.

"Chasing her?"

"Yeah."

"Most likely." Tyler grinned at him over the roof of the Mercedes as Micah turned off the alarm on the car and unlocked the doors. He released a slow appreciative whistle. "You saw her. She's something else. Her figure alone could stop a truck."

"Well, you never did back down from a challenge." Tyler was the fighter on the team. He had a reputation for purposely frustrating the other players on opposing teams.

"She'll come around," Tyler said getting in the passenger seat.

"You know, that ego near ruined me. I near walked away from the best thing that ever happened to me." Micah said starting the car, "Be careful."

"Hey, I never said I wanted to marry her." He laughed.

CHAPTER TWO

"He was cute."

Eva sat at the kitchen table tapping her fingers on the tabletop with her chin resting in the palm of her hand, elbow on the table, as her sister, Adelina, Adel for short, sat across from her. Between them, was the disgustingly huge bouquet that Tyler, Tyler Hartley as he introduced himself, asked her to put together. She did with him hovering around her which was entirely too distracting for her to admit.

Her sister was watching the whole time behind the counter

while leaning her face on her hand and staring at him dreamily. Eva already knew that her sister certainly wasn't going to let this go.

Because of that, during that whole time he was there, she was angry with him over the attention. He didn't know her family from a hole in the ground. She was lucky that half the neighborhood hadn't heard about her admirer before supper with the way Adel liked to talk.

Then, when she was done the arrangement, she walked off and let her sister finish ringing it in. So much for him buying it for another woman. She sighed inwardly, he bought it for her. He said it was for a beautiful woman. That *gorgeous* man thought *she* was beautiful.

She knew he expected her to stay while he purchased the bouquet but she surprised him and actually hid her grin as she said goodbye without a backward glance. But he had the last laugh. Turns out, the bouquet was for her. She was right about him though, he had money. The arrangement cost over five hundred dollars and Adelina said he didn't even hesitate when she told him. He even paid in cash. "Yes he was handsome." she finally said agreeing with Adel and sighed again, *Very*.

Tyler kept telling her to add more flowers even though the bouquet was already expensive. He also picked up a small pretty bouquet for what he told Adel was for his best friend's wife. She got the large expensive one, so she believed him. If it was for a girlfriend, she would have gotten the latter as a gesture of how much he appreciated her help. At least that's what she told herself.

"If you add more, it'll take away from the arrangement." She finally told him said without looking up at him. She had a feeling he would have bought out the shop if she didn't stop him. When he didn't answer her, she finally did move her eyes up to his and found out that he was waiting for her to do just that.

"Well, then, its perfect," he said, but his eyes were on her, not the bouquet.

Gosh, his eyes were so deeply attractive. Her heart actually skipped a beat, but she tried to act like it didn't happen and returned her gaze to her work. She began to wonder if he even looked at it once.

"Really cute." Her sister elaborated cutting through her thoughts.

She moved her head aside so she could see her sister past the enormous display of Lilies, "I heard you the first time."

Adelina smiled, "Oh Eva, he bought you flowers."

"We work in a flower shop. It wasn't that hard," she said irritably. Truthfully, it was sweet, but she'd never admit it. Despite the fact they owned a flower shop, no one ever bought her flowers before.

"They were expensive."

"Just because someone has money doesn't mean I fall all over them."

"Can I have him then?"

Eva rolled her eyes, "Mama would roll over in her grave, and Papa would come unglued." Her eyes went back to the bouquet.

It was pretty though, even though she put it together for him—herself. She'd be lying if she didn't admit that she took special care to make it look extra nice because of how nice looking he was.

She fingered the wisps of baby breath in thought. He seemed thoughtful, but he was way too much for her and she knew that after the first thirty seconds of meeting him. Her family would never let her date a man like him to begin with because they didn't know him. He was very confident in himself so he probably was never turned down by a woman in his life. Furthermore, he seemed to think that she would just give in and hand over her name and phone number as soon as he told her his

and flashed that gorgeous smile. *Oh but gosh, it was gorgeous too.*

She may only be nineteen but she wasn't stupid. He wasn't the first guy that went past the shop and hit on her, although he was one of the nicest looking. Then there was that lingering thought that there might be something wrong with him. While she didn't think she was ugly, Eva never thought she was beautiful, so his attention seemed misguided.

Still, he seemed to be a one night stand kind of guy and she was the commitment type. Not that she knew what a man like that looked like, but again, it was that charisma he carried himself with. She'd never had a one night stand in her life. In fact she never had any kind of intimate relationship. How could she? Her brothers were so overprotective and so was her father. Her older sister could get away with murder and they wouldn't say boo. Mind you she was six years older than her and had her own way to do things. She had strong opinions and made them known. She figured they just gave up trying to control her.

"If you wanted to go out with him, I'd cover for you." Adel offered possessing a sly smile. Like Eva, Adel knew that her brothers and her father wouldn't let Eva near a man like that.

Unlike Adel, Eva could not lie to her father.

"I'm not discussing this anymore," Eva said getting up from the table. "Let's get dinner started before Papa comes home."

Dinner was a noisy event around their house, especially with her two full blooded Italian brothers who were barely seventeen months apart at twenty eight and thirty with Giovanni being the oldest. They always got in heated discussions about little things, which was typical of an Italian family. Eva wasn't quite like that. She was quiet most times and although she had strong beliefs she really didn't need to voice her opinion over them. Unfortunately her sister wasn't as subtle.

"Eva had a suitor today," she said grinning at her sister despite the glare she was getting.

Two dark male heads and one grey one turned toward her and all conversation came to a halt. Her brothers looked suspicious, but they were about any man that came around her. Her mother died having her and it seemed as though her brothers decided to be her protectors since the day of her birth. Most times they would threaten any man that came near her or intimidate them to the point of her never getting a second date. So she tried to downplay it. "It was nothing."

Then there was a burst of male voices all protesting as if she had a choice in men being attracted to her.

"Oh he wasn't nothing," her sister said fanning her face with her hand, "Oh, papa, he looked Italian too."

"Really?" That peaked his interest.

"He bought flowers, that's it." She shot her sister another glare, but it didn't work.

"Yeah—for *you*."

Eva had moved the large bouquet to her room hoping that no one would notice them. She should have known her sister wouldn't leave it alone. "Oh Adelina, *please*," Eva said in a last desperate attempt to get her sister to shut up. It didn't work.

"He had lots of money too."

"That doesn't matter," her father spoke up waving his fork in Eva's direction. "If he has a job, and is a hard working man, that's acceptable. It's all about character. I don't care if he has a lot of money, unless he's a hard working man, is honest and has good faith."

"Is he from our neighborhood? What's his name?" Tito said.

"None of your business," she said starting to get angry. It was like her family thought she was already dating him.

"Tyler Hartley," Adel volunteered.

"You are *not* my sister," Eva said irately following with a

glare to her older sister who kept volunteering information.

“Really?” Giovanni’s brows shot up. “What did he look like?”

“He was ugly,” Eva said hoping her sister would just stop. She should have known better.

“You are a liar Eva,” Adelina said, “You just want us to leave this alone.” She waved a dismissive arm at her. “He was really handsome,” she said to her oldest brother.

“Handsome? Adelina, I asked what does he look like, not your opinion.” Giovanni said impatiently, and turned his attention to his baby sister, “Dark hair, eyes—big man.” He lifted his hand above his head a few inches to indicate his height was taller than his own.

“I guess.” she shrugged. Actually he was describing him quite well.

The brothers exchanged a look

“What?”

“There’s only one Tyler Hartley I’ve ever heard of and that’s the left winger for our home team,” Tito answered.

“Home team?” Eva asked.

“Hockey,” he elaborated.

“It’s got to be a coincidence,” Giovanni offered.

“Actually,” Adel cut in. “Come to think of it, he has the build of one. He was a really sexy beast.” She made a space with her hands. “His shoulders were broad and he had a thick chest like there was muscle—“

“Oh God.” Eva fell her face in her hands. This was the most embarrassing day of her life. She could literally kill her sister. She was making it sound like he was half naked and flexing in front of them. Even if he wasn’t, her brothers wouldn’t definitely see it that way.

Giovanni’s eyes went from Adel to Eva. He narrowed his gaze. “You are *not* dating a hockey player.” He set his elbow in the table and pointed a finger at her.

"I'm fine with that," Eva said wondering why everyone was now looking at her like she started the conversation.

"Next time he comes to the shop, you send him away. Guys like that only have one use for women."

"It was one time," Eva defended and shoved a hand toward Adel. "Do you see what you started?" She got up and took her plate to the sink in the kitchen. She was done listening and being blamed for something she didn't do.

"Go talk to your sister Adel," Giorgio, her father said without looking up from his meal as if this were an everyday occurrence.

"Okay papa," she said feeling a little guilty for causing a stir.

Eva was scraping dishes with a little more force than needed before she rinsed them and put them in the dishwasher.

"I'm sorry sis," Adelina said. She did feel bad. However she was also jealous. Tyler Hartley was drop dead gorgeous and Eva had all the best feminine attributes between the two of them. Adeline felt her nose was too big and so was her mouth whereas Eva had this angelic look to her. She had a small pert nose, pouty mouth, and their mother's green eyes. Her glorious thick black hair was halfway down her back and had a slight curl. Adeline's was in tight curls and she had to keep it short because it frizzed up. When men came into the shop they always flirted with Eva yet she always kept it polite and professional.

She knew her baby sister was still a virgin because there was no way her puritan ways would be corrupted especially with their brothers demanding to approve everyone she dated. For once she'd like to see her get in trouble. When it came to her own boyfriends, her brothers and her father had given up on her years ago for misbehaving and barely lifted a brow when she told them of a new love interest, yet they practically interrogated Eva.

"I don't know why you push things like that," Eva said while shutting the door of the dishwasher. "Now Tito's going to park outside the store and wait for him. I know he is. He'll threaten

him.” Tito had a reputation for fighting. He was more muscular than Gio who seemed to be the diplomat in the family. Tito thought he could solve any problem with a fight.

“I think Tyler Hartley can hold his own, even against Tito. I mean all the buff he has can’t be from nothing.” She held her arm up and squeezed her bicep.

“Sis, that’s not the point.” It shouldn’t even happen in the first place. She was an adult and her brothers can’t keep running around threatening people who they think may corrupt her.

Adel laughed, “Oh sis, I’m sorry, but don’t worry. Tito won’t do that. Besides, Mr. Handsome probably won’t be back after you gave him the brush off.”

Her sister may think so, but for some reason Eva didn’t believe that *Mr. Handsome* was used to giving up. How she wished she was wrong.

The next day she was in the back room doing arrangements when her sister came in wearing a great big grin like the Cheshire cat. “Your suitor is back.”

She groaned, “Adel, just send him away.”

“No way. I think we should put him in the store front with a red rose between his teeth and attract customers. We had three women follow him in. One even asked for an autograph. I’m thinking that he must be who Gio and Tito say he is. Isn’t that great? You’re being admired by someone who is famous.”

“You are relentless,” she scolded and walked over to the doorway to peak around it. Tyler was standing over in the corner wearing an expensive dark grey suit and a blue shirt. His black hair was neatly combed back and it looked like he shaved the stubble off that he had yesterday. If she didn’t know better it looked as though he was dressed to go to church. That stunning masculine image left her practically breathless. Wow, he was really handsome, but she couldn’t date him. Even if he was

famous, she really didn't know him.

He was fingering the petals of an orchid and smiling slightly. She actually sighed. Forget that, he really wasn't handsome. He was completely drop-dead gorgeous.

"Go," Adel said giving her a shove from behind.

That made her fumble in the doorway causing a noise and Tyler turned toward her setting his charming smile to a devastating grin. She still had a pair of scissors in her hand and briefly thought about stabbing her sister.

"Hi," He said walking over to the counter and leaning lazily on it.

"Are you here to buy more flowers?" She had to clear her throat before she spoke. His blazer fell open and Adel was right. His dress shirt stretched across his thick upper chest straining a couple of the buttons. He *was* in good shape. She tried her hardest not to notice or stare like an idiot, but he looked so good. Thankfully he didn't seem to notice. It was probably because women did that often with him. Stared. It reminded her that this man was way out of her league. She had no experience to deal with the likes of him.

"No, I'm still after your name." His eyes dropped to her mouth briefly. Hell, she had a lovely supple mouth, a perfectly kissable mouth.

"Her name is Eva," Adel said from behind her.

"Lovely," he said flicking his gaze to Adel then back to Eva.

"I can't go out with you," she blurted. "So you should just leave." For some reason she started to feel her cheeks heat up and wondered if she was blushing. How on earth did that happen?

"That's okay," he said acting completely fine with her rejection while reaching into his inside breast pocket and pulling something out. "I'd like it if you came to the game tonight. These tickets are for seats behind the player's bench."

“Game?” she said trying to see what he was trying to give her without touching them. She didn’t want to take them from him. She wanted him to leave before she started falling over herself like Adel was doing.

“I’m a hockey player,” he said with amusement and moved his hand toward her for her to take the tickets. He couldn’t think of one time he had to tell a woman what he did for a living. They usually knew. Surprisingly enough, that still didn’t change her mind.

“Oh.” She waved a hand trying to get him to put them away. “I can’t. I can’t date you.”

“It’s not a date. I’ll be playing and we’ll be on the opposite sides of the Plexiglas.” His eyes met hers. “You’ll be perfectly safe.”

Safe? From who? she thought to herself. Just looking at him now, made her know that Plexiglas was just a word, not a barrier. He was potent enough to seep through a steel wall. What’s worse, he knew it. That grin he followed it with just made it seem as if the heavens opened up and reined all the confidence in the world down on him.

“Just come and watch. You’ll be my own good luck charm.” He looked past her to Adel. “Bring your friend.”

“She’s my soon to be ex-sister,” she said reaching up and pushing her long hair off her shoulder nervously.

He chuckled. “Doors open at four thirty, game’s at six.” He looked past her to her sister. “Adel, make sure she goes.”

“You bet,” she said grinning back at him and feeling her heart jump with the use of her name on his lips. It was interesting that he’d heard it. The only time he could have is when she went to get her sister in the back. *My my, was he loaded with charm.* Adel felt her knees weaken.

“I can’t. My family is very strict about—”

“Someone came in the shop and offered you complimentary

tickets for your help and advice in picking out an arrangement. Nothing more.” He tilted his head slightly letting his confident brown eyes work hers when he interrupted. “I’m innocent,” he said while holding up his hands in surrender.

“An arrangement you bought *me*,” She countered

“Big deal. I didn’t make a play for you. I didn’t ask you out this time. I just gave you two tickets. People take gifts all the time.” His eyes moved over her face. Her complexion was flawless. She was slightly tanned which really made those green eyes of hers stand out. Hailey had green eyes, but they were more emerald. Eva’s were lighter with gold flecks, and in his point of view, prettier with the contrasting ebony hair.

Eva stared up at him while considering his reasoning. He actually had a point. However, this was a little unorthodox. “But—”

“I’ll see you there,” he interrupted again, completely sure of himself and set the tickets on the counter because she still refused to take them.

“How do you know I’m not involved?” she finally said still trying to get him to go away.

“You’re not.”

Her mouth fell open. He had the audacity—!

Then he flicked his eyes to her sister again. “Right?”

Obviously, behind her Adel shook her head, “See?” he grinned setting those mocha tinted eyes back on her.

“I’m not going,” she said adamantly not having another defense. Who the heck could think anyway with those deep eyes on them?

“Nice to meet you Adel,” he said turning away keeping his grin.

“Anytime,” she said dreamily leaning against the door frame to the back room and fanning herself with her hand.

“Tyler!” Eva called after him. He waved over his shoulder

before he walked out of the shop giving her a view of his nice broad back. "The nerve!"

Tyler was still grinning when he got in his car. She may have not wanted to go, but her sister did. It was obvious that she was very interested in him and the more aggressive of the two, but she wasn't the one he was after. Because of Adel, he was one hundred percent confident they would both be there. As for that bullshit line Eva tried to feed him, she wouldn't be looking at his mouth the way she was the day before if she was involved with another man. Even if she was, he was still going after her. If a woman was involved but looked at him the way she did, it wasn't solid. He didn't miss the subtle glanced to his chest either.

"He's got guts! What a conceited—"

"Oh Eva, please lets go," Adel begged from behind her.

Eva whirled on her sister with wide eyes after Tyler left. "Are you insane? Tito will throw a fit. Papa will most likely send me to a convent. And, I don't think I want to feed that ego. It's big enough as it is," she said throwing her hands up in exasperation. "Who does that? Comes in and basically tells me what I'm doing and who I'm seeing." Her sister didn't help by ignoring her completely and did what every woman did around him. Drool.

"God, I didn't think they made men that sexy," she said walking past her to the front window to see him walk around a black Porsche and get in the driver's side, "Look at him in that suit—and he drives a Porsche."

Eva despised it when her sister ignored her like that, "I hate you."

Adel waved a hand over her shoulder like she heard her sister talk like that every day. After the car pulled away she turned and looked at her little sister, "Leave the excuses for us not being at dinner to me."

"Didn't you hear me? I'm not going. How many times do I have to say that?"

"If you don't go, he'll be back."

"So?"

Adel really wanted to go, so she softened her voice calculatingly that she had done so many times with Eva to get her to do what she wanted, "Eva, you're not doing anything wrong. Besides we've lived in this city our whole lives and the only time we've ever watched a game is when Tito and Gio watch it on the television." she sighed, "I really want to go."

Eva ran her fingers through her hair in frustration moving it off her forehead. She actually liked hockey, but didn't follow the names of the players like her brothers and her father did. This team was a big deal because they won the cup two years in a row. Well, at least now she knew that her brothers were right about who he was.

"I'll tell papa we're going to the movies."

"We are not lying," she said adamantly. "I can't do that to Papa."

"Then I'll tell him we're going out because a customer gave us tickets to an event—Does that mean you're considering it?"

"I don't know." She leaned on the counter and put her face in her hands. "He is handsome. He just seems so—"

"Sexy, gorgeous, charming—" Adel's eyes widened, "—vigorous, muscular," she purred.

"Oh stop!" she erected herself. "He's too sure of himself. I don't want him to get the wrong idea. I'm sure he is used to a certain type of woman. I can't be her."

"He's an athlete Eva. They do have really large egos so you're probably right, but just be yourself. It's not like you're a stranger to an alpha male. Our brothers could probably match him in conceit."

She shrugged. "Tito and Giovanni are just that, our brothers. This man is too much for me."

"Oh, he'll rub off on you." She looked back out the front

windows. "I would love it if someone like that rubbed on me."

Eva flushed and turned to go back to her arrangements. She knew that Adel had some experience with men and had no problem telling her about them, but it was just too personal for her. She would be lying if she said she didn't find his charm attractive and he was really a nice looking man, but it also scared her. Her brothers made sure that she knew exactly what men thought about women and they were only after one thing. She knew they used it as a scare tactic, but it worked. She'd had a few dates but something about them always made her turn off them. It wasn't anything horrible, just that she didn't find them attractive even though they were nice looking men. However, this man was probably the nicest looking man that ever asked her out and he was smart too or he wouldn't have changed tactics so quickly. Somehow he knew she'd say no, or avoid the question again and who in their right mind could turn down rink side tickets to a hockey game? She bit her bottom lip. Most likely they were worth several hundred dollars too.

Tyler cast a glance over his shoulder six minutes into the first period for the third time and the two seats were still empty. He released a curse under his breath.

"She'll come," Micah said watching the game in front of him with intensity while chewing on his mouth guard like bubble gum. He was leaning forward holding his stick and resting his elbows on his knees. He was superb at multitasking. He didn't even turn his head to take his eyes off the game to see what Tyler was doing.

Tyler didn't answer him, but he hoped Micah was right. That's why he worked on the sister. She was openly excited about going and practically falling all over herself around him, but Eva seemed very unsure. It was a terrific name, Eva. Hell, she was so damn beautiful. He'd already told Micah her name

and everything else he learned that day.

The whistle blew then for an out of play puck and their line was back on the ice.

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this," Eva said following her sister down the aisle to their row. They were late because of traffic and for some reason Adel thought she should dress to the nines. Eva only wore a pair of jeans and a green knit sweater in case she got cold. Not Adel, who wore a skirt and tank top. She remarked that it was in the arena, and cold, but Adel just brushed it off.

"I'm so excited," her sister said looking over her shoulder as they shimmied by people in the row to take their seats.

Eva started to feel selfish. Her sister was glowing. It was a great opportunity and Adel and her worked at the flower shop six days a week and barely had time for a social life. Her father spent all day doing the deliveries and brothers worked construction. The flower shop had been in their family since her grandparents immigrated from Italy. Her brothers didn't think that two Italian men working at a flower shop was their career choice, so they took jobs elsewhere.

Together they all made a decent living, but this was a rare treat. First of all, she knew right away that the seats were expensive and she really shouldn't have accepted the gift. Yet, seeing the look on her sister's face made her keep her mouth shut and let her enjoy it.

"Oh look at those men. They look so big!" she said referring to the hockey players in the bench in front of her while taking her seat and grinning at the man sitting next to her with a team jersey on to cheer for the home team. He gave her an odd look but she didn't care.

Just then Micah, Mark and Tyler came off the ice changing players and Micah nudged him as they went through the gate to the player's bench. Tyler looked at him and he nodded toward

the seats that now had butts in them. Tyler grinned seeing Eva. Although she didn't notice him most likely because of his helmet, but her sister did who jumped up and started slapping the Plexiglas and yelling his name. He laughed.

"See? I told you she was fucking gorgeous," Tyler said taking his seat beside Micah. He was grinning ear to ear now. Not just because she showed up but at his own ability to have played the sister just right.

"She is pretty," Micah agreed honestly while turning his attention to the game. He still thought his wife had that market hands down.

Mark turned around to see what they were looking at. He grinned and set his eyes back on the ice not saying anything.

"Jesus lady," said the guy beside Adel. "Subtle much?" He was referring to her banging on the Plexiglas in front of them. She was still banging on it even though the men were more interested in what was in front of them now which was the game.

"Oh be quiet. You're just jealous. We know him," she bragged.

"Sure you do and I own the team."

"You sure look like you eat like you do." She purposely eyed his beer gut before glaring at him and sat down.

Eva bit her lip to stop from smiling. It was times like that she loved her sister's instigating. Although she shouldn't find it funny because she'd been on the receiving end more than once.

Watching the game first hand from those great seats was nothing like she thought it would be. She didn't realize that they changed players so much during the game because it was something you didn't see often on the television. Finally she was able to spot Tyler and memorized his number because it was hard to distinguish him from all the other players. Despite her reluctance, she had to admit, this was a treat.

She even jumped up and cheered when Tyler made a goal.

He skated back over to the bench and blew her a kiss causing her to blush outright. It was the only time during the entire game he looked at her, but she supposed he was concentrating on playing. That was the other thing. Being there in person made it so much more intense.

"I told you," Adel said to the man who was working on his third or fourth beer. "He knows us." She was referring to the kiss Tyler blew Eva.

He leaned forward careful not to spill his plastic cup of beer and looked at Eva. "Hell I don't know her and I'd blow her a kiss."

"You are going to get that spilled on your crotch," she said irritably.

Eva burst out laughing.

It seemed as though the game ended too soon. Tyler's team won. As they were coming off the ice he stopped in the corridor just below the row she was sitting in. The crowd was cheering so loud that he had to practically yell to get the man's attention that was sitting next to the wall. It slanted upward, but Eva was sitting at the lowest seat where the wall came level to Tyler's brow and he was six foot four.

"Hey buddy, get that pretty gal for me," he said to the man Adel was arguing with earlier and pretty much all through the game. They argued about referee calls, penalties and players.

The beer drinker turned around and looked at Eva, "He says he wants you."

"Hey." Said Adel, "How do you know it wasn't me?"

"Give me a break lady."

Adel started arguing with him again as Eva stood up and leaned past the man over the wall. She still had the smile on her face from all of the excitement.

"Meet me out front in about an hour." He placed his gloved hand on the wall beside hers and leaned up to her to talk because

of the noise, "I'll take you to a late dinner."

It took her a moment to hear him. There were people in the rows behind her were leaning far over the wall trying to touch him and the other players that were walking by while yelling their names. She couldn't believe how crazy some people were. Tyler didn't even seem to notice as hands brushed his glove or stretched to touch his shoulder and helmet. "I can't."

"She can." Adel said suddenly appearing over her shoulder. Tyler laughed.

"Mind your own business." Eva snapped at her.

"Yeah lady."

"Mister you are asking for a black eye." She turned back to him again.

Eva turned back to Tyler, "I have to go home. Sorry."

"Give me your number then." He urged.

"I can't." To her surprise he grinned. By now she shouldn't have expected anything less. He was loaded with confidence. It didn't even occur to him that she wasn't interested. He probably had women crawling all over him since he hit puberty. After watching him play, she really couldn't blame them. He just seemed so—masculine. At least she knew now that he wasn't crazy, just very very conceited.

"I'll give you my number!" a woman shouted in the next row up. Tyler gave her a rakish grin but only gave her a brief glance to go with it.

"I love you Tyler!" Screamed another.

He gave a slight wince as if it embarrassed him a little. Here he was trying to pick up Eva and women were falling all over themselves around him. Normally he didn't mind, but he didn't want to chase Eva away. He began to think that inviting her wasn't a good idea. It was his ego that made him invite her in the first place. He figured once she watched him play, she'd be his. Instead it backfired because she didn't look to sure about the

attention he was getting from the opposite sex. He cursed inwardly.

Eva's eyes widened. She couldn't believe the way people acted around him, "This is crazy."

He shrugged as if it was nothing, "I'm not done honey. I'll see you tomorrow then." He straightened and pulled his gloved hand away from hers, but the grin stayed. Honestly, he had to go because she was looking more and more wary with the attention he was getting.

"We're closed. It's Sunday."

"Monday then," he corrected. He waved at her and walked down the corridor out of sight before she had a chance to answer. People were still leaning over the wall to try and touch him.

Eva never knew that hockey players were seen as celebrities until now. Well, she liked the game, but didn't follow anything beyond that. This was unfathomable to her. Women were still screaming his name as he disappeared from sight. No wonder the man was so self assured; he was a major sex symbol. No matter, this just sealed her reasons for not wanting to see him. There was no way she could compete with that kind of attention.

"Hey, you really do know Tyler Hartley. Can you get me an autograph?"

"Bite it. You had your chance." Adel said before turning to her sister, "Eva, go out with him."

She shook her head, "I don't want to talk about this."

In the dressing room Mark sat next to Tyler in Micah's spot. Micah, being the team captain was detained by the media outside the dressing room. "Who's the babe?"

"Not your business man," Tyler said pulling off his jersey.

"Was she just part of the audience or did you invite her?"

Tyler stopped what he was doing and looked at his fellow teammate, "You're serious?" Mark was letting him know that he was interested if he wasn't.

“Hell yeah. She’s a fox.”

“I invited her. She’s with me,” he said laying his claim down immediately. It actually made him feel jealous, something he could never be accused of. He’d been after her for a few days, but admiring her for weeks, yet Mark caught a glimpse of her and was smitten. Was there going to be other competition he had to consider? “Stay away from her Mark.”

“Spoilsport.” Mark said getting up, “But she’s hot. Too bad you saw her first.”

Tyler chuckled.

“How was the show?” Giorgio called out from the living room as his daughters came home. He heard the front door open and close. He and his sons were in there watching the post game news and highlights.

“Show?” Eva asked and looked at Adel who shot her a warning look. “You lied?” she whispered.

“Yes.” she answered as if it wasn’t a secret she did such things.

She shook her head at her sister before she walked into the room where the three men were, “We went to a hockey game dad. Tyler came by the shop and left us tickets.” To her surprise none of them seemed shocked. After a moment she found out why.

“We know.” Giovanni said evenly, “When Tyler blew you a kiss after that goal, they showed it.” To prove his point he lifted the remote and replayed the scene on the TV. He recorded most of the games the team played.

Eva’s mouth fell open at the scene. It was all too obvious but she still tried to deny it, “That wasn’t for me.”

“Now who’s lying?” Adel said laughing.

“The game announcer was wondering if you were a new love interest.” He fast forwarded to the second intermission where the announcers were replaying the scene over and over.

"Oh-my-god." She blushed bright scarlet.

"They even showed you a few more times throughout the game cheering when they goaled. For some reason you're even on the post game show. After he blew you that kiss, he scored, so everyone's wondering if you're his good luck charm." His eyes narrowed, "I thought I told you to stay away from him."

Eva was so ashamed because it seemed like she deceived her family and the media embellished the attention she got from Tyler, making it feel worse. How could a small gesture get so much attention? "Gio, he hardly even spoke to me," she said exasperated.

"That's true." Adel said stepping in front of her, "and when he asked for her number, she said no."

"He asked for your number?"

"You are not helping sis."

"Hey," Tito piped up, "She had incredible tickets. I would date the guy for that."

Eva's frustration evaporated and she burst into laughter along with her sister. Even Gio gave a chuckle. Tito was one hundred percent Italian, so for him to talk like that was virtually unheard of.

"Invite him for dinner." her father said out of the blue. He was quiet up until that point.

"*What?*" the four said in unison.

This wasn't like her father at all. Of course if Eva had shown interest in a man and talked about him, he would have done that, but she'd done everything to try and show that she wasn't. Maybe she was being too adamant about it and it gave away her interest in him, "Papa, I really don't—"

"I want to meet this man who has interests in my daughter. I need to see if his intentions are honorable." he interrupted her to tell his sons because they both started protesting.

"Dad this is the twenty-first century. No one invites suitors

home to meet the family anymore.” Adel said, “Besides you never asked that of any of my boyfriends.”

“No one wants to meet yours,” Tito said, “They’re either bartenders, bouncers, or some useless—“

“Nice.” she interrupted placing her hands on her hips defensively, “Why don’t you tell Papa about that little tramp that you visit three blocks over whenever you get the urge to—“

“Enough.” Giorgio said slicing his hand through the air, “this is about Eva. She wants to bring a man home for dinner.”

“Actually you said—“ Eva tried to say, but Tito cut her off.

“Eva, you just met him. Even though he’s famous you don’t know him enough to bring him home yet.”

“You said yourself Tito, that he’s famous. He wouldn’t do anything to hurt her and damage his reputation.” Adel cut in.

“I doubt I’ll even see him again.” Eva tried to get everyone to just stop talking about her. She’d already made her mind up but no one was listening to her again.

“He said he’d be back to the shop on Monday when she wouldn’t give over her phone number.” Adel said casting her angry looking sister a smile.

“Then invite him when he comes in.” Gio told her.

“Why do I even bother?” Eva said slapping her hands against her thighs in frustration before she spun around and left the living room. How come the three of them made it sound like she always made the suggestions?

The conversation continued without her.

“Eva, you stay away from him.” Tito called after her.

“Tito leave her be. She likes this man, so we should meet him.” His father said.

“I agree.” Giovanni said but for different reasons. He wanted Tyler to know what the consequences were if he were to hurt Eva.

"You can't keep coming here," Eva said when Tyler walked through the door Monday just before noon emitting confidence like a well fed lion. Again he was dressed in his casual clothes of jeans, a designer grey and black striped shirt and a black leather jacket. It was different from the one she saw on him the first day. She should have known that he probably has closets full of clothes because of his wealth and he obviously knew how to look good in fashion. Well he'd probably look good in a burlap sack. He let the stubble grow on his jaw again and she had to admit she liked that look with him. It made him look even more masculine if that was possible. He was the fantasy poster boy for what a red-blooded virile man should look like as it was.

She had just finished with a customer and there were several more in the store. When he came in his eyes found her and a smile spread across his face. She quickly walked around the counter and approached him doing her best to ignore the rapid beating of her heart.

"Don't you want my business?" he said in response to her statement.

She flushed a little feeling rude, "I never did thank you for the flowers—and the tickets." Her family did not raise someone ungracious and even though she really wished he didn't buy them, she did appreciate them.

"No need." He gave her a charming smile, "They were worth every penny."

"Did your friend's wife like the flowers?" she said changing the subject.

"Yes, very much." Micah said she was really flattered. According to Micah, she thought it was very sweet and put them in a vase in the entrance way so everyone could see them when they came in. It was true that Hailey wasn't a flower kind of girl, but if Tyler bought flowers, the gesture was deep and she appreciated it.

She looked around to see if they were drawing attention. Of course they were. Who wouldn't look at him? She grabbed the sleeve of his leather jacket and hauled him behind the counter into the back room.

He followed willingly with a grin on his face.

"Adel could you watch the front?" she asked her sister who was currently in the back room cutting flowers.

"Sure thing," she said when she looked up and saw Tyler, "Hi Tyler." Her face broke into a bright smile.

"Hi."

She gave Eva an excited glance before leaving which Eva didn't return.

Once she left Eva turned and looked up at him, "Please stop," she said pleadingly.

"No," he said gently, confidently.

"No?" she said in disbelief.

"No," he repeated adding a smile with it this time. "Never. Not on your life."

"What will it take?" she said in exasperation.

"Short of a miracle? Nothing."

"Tyler, I don't want to see you." she tried once more. His smile never faltered. Not once. She had a hard time getting used to this man's overwhelming confidence. He started shaking his head with that last statement, "What?"

"You came to my game Eva. There's interest there, so I'm building on it. If you didn't come, I wouldn't be standing here," he said setting his deep brown eyes on hers.

"My sister insisted."

"Liar," he said softly.

She shook her head but for some reason she couldn't stop the smile and along with it came a shy blush. "Okay, fine. You win." She had to admit that his firm pursuit of her was flattering even though she was intimidated by his overall image.

"Nice." His eyes dropped to her mouth.

"Stop it," she said dropping her smile. Gosh did he have to be so affectively enigmatic? Then she cast a glance by him to see the doorway empty. She was expecting Adel to be eavesdropping. Hopefully she was busy with customers.

"Come to dinner with me," he said, "It's all I ask. If you decide you don't like me then, I'll leave you be."

That was a problem. She already liked him, but refused to admit it to him. If he'd gotten her to himself, she'd be done for, "I can't. I told you my family is very protective."

He looked a little confused for a moment, "How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"Really?" His brows shot up. Wow. He thought she was at least twenty one from the way she looked and was shaped. He had to rethink this.

"Hmmm, I see skepticism," she said trying to read his expression.

"Absolutely not." he countered quickly, "Not from me. I'm surprised because I really thought you were around twenty one, but I have no problem with it."

"So my age doesn't bother you." she hoped. It wasn't because she didn't like him; it was because she started liking him too much.

"No," he said truthfully. It was a surprise, but just because she was a couple of years younger than what he thought didn't mean that he suddenly wasn't interested. She was gorgeous and he already admitted to Micah that he was shallow in that department. On a deeper level, she was feisty and he was finding that more and more attractive.

Although, if she was eighteen, he would have had to draw the line or wait a year or so, which wasn't an option. What a horrible thought. There was no way he could remain celibate for

that long. He liked women too much. "When do you turn twenty?"

She gave him a puzzled look, "In a couple of months, Why?"

He shook his head, "Just planning ahead."

"I wouldn't. Once you meet my whole crazy family you'll change your mind."

"I doubt it," he said with conviction. It would take an act of God to stop him from pursuing her. He already knew what she was going to get for her twentieth birthday—him.

"I have two older brothers that are very protective." She warned him, "And your charm won't be that effective."

He grinned at her flattery. It meant that she wasn't immune after all. "My best friend has four. I'm used to brothers. I also have a sister."

"Not like mine. They're Italian. Tyler, they'll more than likely threaten you," she said with honest reluctance, "I mean I never had a steady boyfriend because of them. Tito can stare down a brick wall."

He gave a short laugh, "Honey, I think I can handle myself. I've been doing it with other males since I was four. As for Italian, you may like to know that my grandfather was."

That actually was good news. If he had any chance with her family, especially her father, that would get his foot in the door. Oh, what on earth was she thinking?

"Dinner then."

He said it if she already agreed. She turned away for a moment and bit her lower lip. Should she? If she did and her family deterred him then he'd leave her before she really started liking him. Truthfully she couldn't help that she already started to like him and she hardly even knew him.

Tyler waited patiently. From her hesitation, he already knew he won. She was worried about how her family would take him, but he had two uncles, and grew up around arrogant hockey

players. Nothing could match that. Finally she turned back and he grinned. He could already see that she gave in.

"Only if it's at my house or my dad and my brothers will hunt us down."

"I'm fine with that." he said easily. Inside he was elated. At this point he would have agreed to having dinner anywhere just to have her say yes.

How could anyone be so confident that everyone would like them? "You think you can sway anyone, well, you haven't met my family." she warned.

"I like a challenge." he countered.

She already knew that because he wouldn't leave her alone even though she asked him to, "That is easy to see, but you'll not want to see me again after this." She was hoping. She was already drowning in those deep brown eyes of his and this was only the third time she talked to him—briefly.

"When?"

"Tomorrow night at six thirty." She went over to the table where she made her arrangements, took a card out of the slot and wrote her address on it.

"Put your number on there too," Tyler said from behind her.

She stilled her breath. He was standing right behind her now and was watching what she was writing. She was nervous about dinner already and was preoccupied to the point of not hearing him approach. Gosh he was so close! "I—"

"Just in case I get lost." which was an outright lie. He knew this city like the back of his hand. He'd been living there for five years.

After a brief hesitation she did as he asked and turned to give it to him. Her eyes were level with that thick chest he possessed and he was barely six inches from her. Close enough to smell his expensive cologne and feel the heat from his body. Slowly her eyes ran up to his. He was no longer grinning. His

expression looked incredibly serious and his eyes were directly on hers. She was sure those eyes of his darkened slightly.

“Did anyone ever tell you how damn beautiful you are?” he said huskily in a low voice.

Her lips parted and she couldn’t find words to answer him.

“I see,” he said not seeming to need one. From the look on her face, no one ever did, “And you smell like Lilies.”

“I—I work in a flower shop.”

“No honey, it’s in your hair.” He smiled slowly because he’d lowered his head and inhaled when she was scribbling out her address.

She just couldn’t find any words to answer him, but he didn’t seem to need any. He bent his face toward her slightly leaning in to remove the card from between her fingers. In the process his hand gently brushed hers. His eyes remained on hers the whole time, “Six thirty.” he repeated softly.

She only nodded unable to take her gaze off of his. He was so hypnotic.

He let a smile pull at the corner of his mouth before he erected himself and turned and walked out of the room.

Eva must’ve stood there for a full five minutes with her hand on her chest. What on earth just happened?

Tyler was whistling as he left the shop. He grinned staring at the card with her phone number, lifted it and kissed it in victory. He could have kissed her and she wouldn’t have stopped him. He knew she wouldn’t have. Although he’d give his right arm to taste her, he didn’t want her to bolt as soon as she got her wits about her. He would take it slow even though it was killing him. He glanced at his watch before getting behind the wheel of his Porsche. At least he would be on time for practice today. Although being late because of her was definitely worth it.

He had to admit that he liked that she didn’t seem flattered by his wealth or his fame. Most women were.

CHAPTER THREE

Tyler was introduced to her family as soon as he came in the front door because they all crowded behind Eva like the national guard when she answered it. He brought an expensive bottle of wine and a box of hard to attain Cuban cigars. Her father seemed pleased with those. Yet, the two brothers were a different story. He'd shaken hands with the both of them and Tito, the younger one seemed to be challenging his grip. Tyler only grinned and met his eyes.

Tyler never backed down from a challenge in his life. Micah was right about him in that aspect. It was unfortunate that he was going to have problems with him because in other circumstances he was certain they could be friends. Mind you, he really didn't like his sister's husband when he first met him either, so he could relate. For that reason he decided to be more understanding.

The older one, Giovanni, just surveyed him with intelligent eyes. After the first ten minutes he found himself comparing him to his oldest uncle Lance. He had that quiet, yet commanding respect about him. He was the type of guy that spent a lot of time analyzing things internally before he spoke.

As for Eva, she was wearing a pretty blue dress. It had a sweetheart neckline and wide shoulder straps. It was a little conservative, but he really liked it on her. If anything it made someone focus on how beautiful she was. She'd left her hair down and pulled over one shoulder, and to him, she was absolutely stunning.

"How old are you?" Tito said narrowing his gaze seeing the way he looked at Eva.

"Tito!" Eva said appalled that her brother would ask such a question. He wasn't even in the door for five minutes and that

was the first thing her brother said after being introduced.

“Twenty eight.” Tyler answered not letting Eva’s horrified expression bother him. He already expected the protectiveness from her family. He couldn’t blame them at all.

“Too old for Eva.” Tito loved hockey, loved their team, even the players, especially Tyler because he was a fighter and good at it, but he was way too experienced for his baby sister. He already figured that out ten seconds after meeting him. He was too damn sure of himself around her.

Tyler smirked at the younger of the two brothers that she introduced him to. He was really muscular, more so than himself, and only a couple of inches shorter than him, and he was sure that if it became physical, it would be an even match, “So should she date someone younger, insecure, no career, no money?” he said undeterred.

“Are you getting smart?” Tito narrowed his gaze.

“That’s enough Tito.” Giorgio said.

Tyler gave him that same sardonic smile that he gave many opponents on the ice. He wasn’t the least intimidated by Tito’s challenge. Yet, he was right, this was his baby sister and Tyler was inching into heavily guarded territory. Having a sister himself made him understand how he felt. However, when Tyler wanted something he went after it with a fury, and he wanted Eva.

Once they sat down for dinner, which was incredibly good, and after several minutes of loud conversation carried on, Tyler turned to her father, “I was thinking of taking Eva to some friends of mine for a barbeque this Sunday.”

So much for loud conversation. Everyone stopped talking and focused on him. He actually liked their teasing and conversation during dinner. It reminded him of home. This was a family that obviously cared about each other.

“Papa, she doesn’t know him.” Tito said gesturing toward

Tyler. "No offense."

It was said to mean the opposite and Tyler knew that.

"None taken." Tyler's attention went to Tito. He let a slow smile cross his face and Tito kept his expression serious but their eyes challenged one another. He pulled his eyes away from him first, not in submission, but because he was asking Giorgio to take his daughter out, and not wasting any more time on Tito who wanted to turn this into a pissing match. "We'll be with most of the team and their wives." He looked back at the youngest brother, "I'm not taking her to a brothel."

Adel burst out laughing. Even Gio found it in him to smile.

"With all of those men." Tito continued.

"Most of whom are married, or they have girlfriends. There's only about five that are single. I assure you I won't let them influence her." He wasn't even going to let her out of his sight because he knew damn well she would be hit on. Mark gave him that indication the other day.

"Just you being around her influences her Tyler, you know that. Eva's not dated much and she's a good girl." Gio finally spoke up. Unlike Tito's accusing tone, Gio's was calm and reasonable. "She went to catholic school."

Eva was mortified. Why didn't he just come out and say that she was a virgin. When Tyler's eyes set on her, she knew from the look that he knew exactly what Tito was saying. Then the blush that reached her cheeks certainly gave away any uncertainty he may have had with her in that regard.

"I'd take good care of her," he said seriously moving his attention back to Gio, "I'll even have her home by eleven." Tyler had to admit that despite the fact that he was famous, rich and popular, it didn't sway her family, and that impressed him. It meant that Eva really meant something to them.

"You mean that?" Gio said. He really couldn't help but like this guy so far and it had nothing to do with him being a star

player for his favorite team.

Even though he knew that Tyler wouldn't do anything to publically tarnish his reputation, he was still a man. A man that had his sights set on his beautiful younger sister. A man that was loaded with self assurance and had no problem letting them know exactly why he was there. Yet through it all, he actually was humbling himself by asking the family to take Eva out. It was virtually unheard of from a guy like him or anyone in this day and age.

He knew after the first few minutes of meeting him that Tyler was an alpha male. He was used to getting his way and challenging Tito seconds after stepping in the house made him know it was true. He wasn't intimidated at all by them, and even in their house he walked in with an air of owning the world.

So after brief consideration, Gio was going to take a step back and see how serious and respectful he would be with his baby sister. If he wasn't, then he'd deal with him his way.

Tyler nodded in response to Gio's question about respecting their rules when it came to Eva.

"I like him." Gio said out of the blue shocking his siblings, "He has the respect to ask to take out Eva even though she's a legal age." He nodded to him in appreciation. "However, that doesn't mean that we'll be watching you."

Tyler's eyes went to Tito who didn't look as enthusiastic but he did nod in agreement. "Eleven then."

Eva was angry at all of them. Who gave them the right to bid on her well being? She told them all that, stood up and left the table but not before she told Tyler that she never agreed to anything.

"Now what the hell did I just do?" Tyler said when Eva got up and left abruptly. He thought she'd be happy that he sought out her family's approval. It seemed to be the only thing holding her back from going out with him. At least he thought it was.

Micah was right, she wasn't what he was used to.

Gio started eating again undisturbed while Tyler looked around the table. The only one that was paying him any attention was Giorgio and he was grinning, "Well, that's as far as we go. You need to get her to forgive you. Good luck, that's the hard part. Eva doesn't like her life dictated to her."

So that was it. Tyler took his napkin off his lap and stood up, "Where'd she go."

"Her room is the last one on the left down the hall." Adel offered.

"Thanks," he said giving her a smile. He could always count on Adel to tell him anything.

"Go away," Eva said as she was taking her earrings out of her ears and putting them in her jewelry box when there was a knock at the door.

"Eva open up."

It was Tyler. She expected Gio to come and apologize for treating her like a little girl. Well, she was angry with Tyler too, but her family was driving her crazy. She sighed and opened the door, "Do you see now?" She gestured down the hall. "This is why I didn't want you to come here. This is why I want you to leave me alone."

"They love you. I wasn't much different when my sister brought home boyfriends."

"Well, I'm sure you took your time airing personal things in front of him."

He lifted his brows briefly and tilted his head in surrender. He was embarrassed for her. Gio just told him that she had never been in a serious relationship, well, basically he told him she'd never been with a man. It should have sent him packing, but honestly, he found it intriguing. She was bloody beautiful and no man had his hands on her? No wonder with her brothers watching her every move and her sister probably telling them

every time she did do something the least bit deviant. It also explained her reluctance. He was a bit aggressive when he wanted something and obviously frightened her a little. If anything it made him realize that he needed to be more careful. As for her being innocent, it was no consequence to him. He would have her. "Come to the barbeque with me. My best friend's wife is anxious to meet you. It's going to have a lot of people."

"You could have asked *me* first." she accused.

"Yes, but that would have let your family think that I didn't respect you enough to seek their permission first. Besides, you would have said no thinking that they wouldn't want you to go."

She looked away for a moment before returning her gaze to him. She had to give him credit, he was smart, and, he was right, "How did you know?"

"It's what I would have wanted. My mother did raise a gentleman despite how antagonistic I can be. A lot of it's from my job. I won't lie, I'm arrogant, conceited and used to getting what I want. I'm highly competitive." He grinned, "When I want something, I have no qualms about going after it."

"Like women," she said.

He nodded. He wouldn't lie to her.

"See, that's just it Tyler—the women. There's so many that are after you. That game just proved it, my God I thought they were going to leap over the wall—"

He stepped in a closed the door cutting her off.

"—what are you doing?" she said with wide eyes. She'd never had a man in her room ever.

He lifted a hand indicating for her to relax and lowered his voice, "Unless I misread your sister, I think that she's down the hall listening. This is something that we don't need to share. I know I can seem a little controlling, but that's my personality. I won't disrespect you and we'll go at your pace. Also, despite what

the media portrays and what you think about me with the opposite sex, I am a monogamous man and only date one woman at a time. Also, I can't be accused of lying to any of them. So come with me." What he didn't tell her is that the last time he actually had a girlfriend he was about seventeen. Since then he'd occupied himself with many other women. However, he told her the truth. He didn't overlap them, he just had no commitment when it came to them and they knew that.

She narrowed her gaze suspiciously. That was really hard to believe, "There were so many of them yelling your name. Isn't that tempting for a man like you."

He shook his head and kept his expression serious, "Eva, I've had attention like that since I was fourteen. It's nothing new, and it gets old."

She supposed that could happen, but she still had difficulty believing him.

He saw her look, "I swear." He made the sign of the cross over his chest, "Ask my friends when you come to the BBQ with me. I do not let that affect me."

"I never said yes." Oh, but she really wanted to go with him! It was the fact that a lot of women wanted him and he was doing his best to chase her. It was more than flattering and she couldn't help but really like that.

His eyes glittered, "I won't take no. I'll invite Adel and she'll make you come, just like the game."

She laughed letting all her irritation and worry disappear, "You are the devil!" She had to give him credit. He certainly knew how to read her sister well.

"Come with me sweetheart. I swear, as God as my witness, I'll behave, no matter how hard it is." His devious grin made her laugh again.

"Somehow I don't think that word is in your vocabulary."

"Normally, but I'm smitten." He placed his hand on his chest

like his heart was hurting, “Really.”

She rolled her eyes, but still smiled. “My goodness, no female has defense against you.”

“Is that a yes?”

She took a heavy breath, “I shouldn’t.”

“But you will.”

“You are arrogant,” she said narrowing her gaze on him.

He chuckled and held his hands out helplessly, “And I admit it. Come, please. They’ll love you. Micah’s my best friend and his wife wants to meet you.”

“The blonde one you sat with?”

He wanted to laugh out loud. What woman didn’t know Micah by sight? He was disgustingly famous because of his movie star looks. “Yes.”

“He’s married?”

“Happily, disgustingly happily and they have a little boy that’s just about two.”

She furrowed her brow thinking about it. Tyler couldn’t be that bad if his best friend was married and he liked his wife.

“Look Eva, next week I’m gone to Pittsburg for a couple of games. I won’t get to see you until the week after. I’d like to take you to meet my friends so you can get to know what type of a person I am. I have nothing to hide. Not even one skeleton in my closet.”

“Okay.” She finally agreed. He had a point. To her shock he bent down and kissed her lightly on the cheek. She had to refrain from placing her hand in that spot because it tingled. Her eyes widened at that bold gesture and she stared up at him but he didn’t seem to think anything of it.

“Terrific. Now come back and let me enjoy that fantastic meal someone cooked.”

“Adel and I made it.”

He groaned, “And you cook. Christ I’m in heaven.”

She laughed as he opened the door and let her go out ahead of him. "Don't get too settled."

"*That's* their house?" Eva had never been to this ritzy part of town where all the mansions were. It was an area just outside the city that housed acreages with large homes on it. This one seemed bigger than her whole block. Suddenly she became nervous. Well more nervous than she was before.

Tyler reached over and squeezed her hand as he drove up to the iron gates in front of Micah's home. He didn't release it after that.

She looked down at his large hand holding hers then back up at him. It wasn't often a man touched her, and when Tyler took it upon himself to do that, she couldn't help but enjoy the attention, especially with the words of encouragement that followed. Without saying anything he actually knew she was unsettled about meeting his friends and his consideration was heartwarming.

"Don't worry about it. Once you meet them, you'll see it means nothing on who they are." They'd been sharing polite conversation up until this point and then she became silent when she spotted the mansion. He knew she was apprehensive. The size of the place could intimidate rich people.

He rolled down his window and entered a security code on the number pad under the intercom that was window level. Immediately there was a buzzing noise and the gate opened.

He cast her a glance as he drove up the paved drive, "Eva." She looked at him, "Don't be nervous."

She looked down at the simple floral print dress she wore, "I feel underdressed."

He smirked and returned his eyes to the house, "It's unnecessary."

She looked at him as he pulled the car up beside what looked

like a jaguar. Then she looked around thinking there wasn't one vehicle there that was under a hundred thousand dollars. Normally she was confident in herself, but this wasn't her realm or comfort zone and she was feeling really out of place.

Tyler knew she was feeling unsure and there was nothing he could say to make her feel better. He was hoping it would evaporate when she met his friends. He got out, walked around and opened the door for her.

She got out and looked up at the beautiful yellow brick mansion, "this is so beautiful."

"It was Hailey's fathers place. She kept it after he died."

"She must've loved him."

"She did. It was unfortunate it wasn't returned."

"What?" she stared up at him in surprise.

He shrugged, "Pierre was a little ruthless when it came to Hailey. He wanted to control her and actually tried to get her to marry someone else. Money and success was more important to him than his only daughter."

"But she still chose your friend?"

He looked down at her, "she sort of didn't have a choice. Micah is persistent and—" he smiled, "—she was pregnant with Shane."

She flushed, "I didn't mean to pry."

"They'd tell you themselves. It's no secret." He took her hand again, "come, I'll introduce you."

She liked the feel of his rough calloused hand. It showed a man that wasn't afraid of hard work, but she was surprised that playing hockey gave you hands like that. It also made her feel oddly protected. Maybe it had something to do with his size to hers. Whatever it was, she really started liking the warm feeling it gave her.

Micah opened the door without knocking and led her through the house and the first person they ran into was Cole.

Micah's little brother.

"Be still my beating heart." He threw his hand across his chest and set his eyes on Eva.

"Don't be such a Romeo. This one is taken," Tyler said with amusement, "Eva this self proclaimed stud is Micah's little brother. We got him last year, but he still has a lot to learn."

"I am not little." He grinned not denying the stud or learning part, "I'm taller than Micah—and you." Cole said straightening himself beside Tyler. He was several inches taller than him and less than an inch taller than his older brother.

"By a quarter of an inch." Tyler reminded him of his height next to Micah. However, he was a wicked defenseman. He was big and brutal, besides being able to play a good game of hockey.

"Just saying," he said in defense.

She laughed.

His eyes went back to Eva and he held out his arm, "I'll be happy to escort you to the pool—did you bring a swimsuit?" he said with his eyes lighting up. Her eyes widened in response.

"Back off," Tyler said, "Or I'll put your head through the wall." He gave him a playful shove and tightened his grip on Eva's hand. There was no way he was going to tell Eva to bring a swimsuit because he knew she was nervous besides being conservative. Furthermore, like hell he was going to let that group of testosterone get a look at her in a swimsuit. He knew he'd have trouble with other men gawking at her as it was. If she was wearing a suit, he'd have to start hitting them.

Cole grinned while catching his balance, "Well honey, I guess the richest man wins."

"The best looking." Tyler countered causing Cole to put up his fists and gave him a challenging grin.

"Don't make me embarrass you in front of Eva."

"You two stop it." She started laughing again and stepped between them. "I will not be responsible for black eyes."

“I’m not twelve anymore Tyler. I can beat you.”

“You act like it.” he gave him a challenging grin, but his eyes were full of humor.

“Both of you stop it.” Came another woman’s voice.

At the sound of her voice, Eva turned to see a very pretty, slender auburn haired woman walk into the large foyer with a baby on her hip that looked to be about two years old. Right away she knew this was Micah Rush’s wife. She was smiling widely.

“I’m sorry. They may be all star athletes, but they act like school children.” She walked toward Eva and held out her hand, “I’m Hailey Rush.”

“Eva Moretti,” she said returning her smile and taking her hand. She was wearing a pink blouse and jeans. It was probably the most typical outfit to wear to a BBQ. Eva was impressed. For some reason she had an image of Micah’s wife in some sort of expensive dress with her hair up and a Nanny in tow with the baby. Instead, she saw someone who was down to earth and friendly. Now she knew what Tyler meant about her not being nervous.

Despite it all, she was still worried because he thought so highly of her and maybe the woman wouldn’t like her. However, Hailey didn’t look like some sophisticated snob, someone who would look down at her because she wasn’t as wealthy. She wore comfortable clothing, had her long hair pulled back, and was very friendly. Best of all, she seemed genuinely glad to meet her.

“This is Shane.” she said introducing her son. He had pale blue eyes and light blond curls that fell around his ears. “Say hi to Eva.”

“Hi,” he said grinning.

“Gosh he’s handsome.”

“I should say. His father is the best looking man in the league.” She cast her a sly smile and then flicked a glance to Tyler as if she was challenging him to deny it.

Tyler held up his hands, "I wouldn't dream of challenging you honey. I've seen the way you play hockey." Then he bent and kissed her on the cheek, "It seems like forever since I've seen you last."

"It has." She turned and set her eyes back on Eva with a devious grin, "so don't do it again. Come on, I'll introduce you around." She glanced at Cole, "And *you* keep your hands to yourself."

Cole lifted his hands in surrender but kept his steady grin.

Hailey shook her head, "Cole has no qualms about stealing women away from anyone, so keep yourself in check."

Eva glanced at him and he set his pale blue eyes on her with a sloppy grin of helplessness. He was cocky and it made her laugh, "I'll keep that in mind."

"I'll take Shane," Tyler said lifting the little boy off her hip who was trying desperately to reach for him while saying "Tywer, Tywer."

"I'm his uncle away from home," he said to Eva hoisting the boy up on his shoulders before following them out to the back. "He's the first grandchild to Dutch and Liz so he gets doted on tremendously."

She was sure it had something to do with how beautiful that toddler was too. He had dimples which to anyone, was positively adorable in children.

Eva stopped when they went through the double French doors to the patio out back. The back yard was gorgeous. There were beautiful flowers everywhere and there were patio lanterns hanging about, music playing, and laughter reached her ears. "This is amazing."

"Dutch and Micah like to do this a couple of times a year for everyone." Hailey explained, "The men work hard, and they like the family ambience. It keeps the players and their families close. We usually have to wait until the first few games so they're

settled in but it's a tradition we'd like to keep."

There had to be about fifty people there. Not only players, but wives, children. It was a wonderful setting for family. There were several games set up throughout the enormous yard. A volleyball net, lawn bowling and there were quite a few kids taking advantage of the pool. Now she knew that Tyler was right, her family had nothing to worry about her here. "Dutch?" she asked.

"Micah's father." Hailey answered, "He's also the general manager of the team and," she smiled, "owns fifty one percent. I own the other half."

"He's named after a nationality?"

"No, his father gave him that because he's blonde and blue-eyed like a Dutchman. It stuck throughout his professional career. Everyone calls him Dutch. Micah is a spitting image of him. Micah's four brothers have their mother's dark looks but Dutch's build. His real name is Jason."

"Oh." Then as to answer her next question a very tall handsome man appeared and slipped his hand around his Hailey. His pale blue eyes were on Eva and it was easy to see the curiosity in them.

"Hi," he said with a welcoming grin showing handsome boyish dimples on either side of his mouth, "Eva, I presume."

"I am." She said craning her neck up. He was *really* tall.

"Six foot seven."

"Pardon?"

"I get asked that a lot—my height."

"Oh, I was curious." She admitted. Tyler was tall, but this man had him beat. She saw him look down at Hailey and didn't miss the emotion in his eyes. Now she knew where their son got his eyes and hair from. Micah was a really nice looking man and actually had those same telltale dimples when he smiled much like his son. They were a beautiful family.

"She met your brother in the house." Hailey offered.

He glanced at his wife, "Ah, did he tell you he's taller than me?"

She nodded.

"He does that a lot." He chuckled guiding his eyes over Eva's head, "It still doesn't make him better than me."

"Hey!" Cole piped up. He was standing behind Eva.

Eva burst into laughter. She didn't know he was there, but she really liked the way they were with one another. Tyler was right, they didn't act like rich snobs at all.

Tyler and Micah started talking to each other about, what else, hockey.

"Tyler said you work at a flower shop?" Hailey asked taking her arm and leading her away from the men. She wanted to get to know this new love interest of Tyler's without them around. If Tyler was interested in a woman enough to bring her to the BBQ, she wanted to know everything. He always came alone in the past. She saw Eva cast a glance over her shoulder, "Don't worry Eva, they'll be babbling about the last game they had and strategizing for the next for an hour. Even though those two are inseparable, it's like they can't get enough of one another. Now about your flower shop."

Eva returned her attention to Hailey, "Oh, actually it was my grandparents. When they came from Italy they opened it. My mother inherited it from them, and when she died they left it to my sister and me."

"My mother passed away when I was young. I was raised by my father." Hailey said, "So I know how tough it can be without a mother. However, Micah's mom is the world to me. I don't know how I would have gotten through colic with Shane if it wasn't for her. Liz is the best."

"I'm sorry about your father. Tyler said he died."

She shrugged, "It was a couple of years back." She looked at

her sideways while leading her through the crowd, “My father had certain ways about him that made it difficult for him to be close to me.”

Tyler was right, Hailey did tell her about her father like he said she would, but Eva didn’t know what to say to that. However, Hailey didn’t seem to need an answer. Over the next hour she took her around and introduced her to everyone. Every now and then she caught a glimpse of Tyler through the crowd and usually at that exact moment his eyes met hers and he gave her a devastating smile.

She quickly averted her gaze and pretended to concentrate on what Hailey was saying. Tyler, to her, seemed to be set apart from the other men there. And there were a lot of beefy thick men like him, but none caught her attention like he did. Her heart thumped whenever she set her eyes on him and just a small gesture of his smile that was meant for her made her feel warm all over. It was different from the ones he’d give other people and it made her feel special.

He was right though. She was able to see how other people were around him and it did help her know him a little more. People liked him. Every time she glimpsed at him he was laughing with his friends and he had this harmless boyishness about him that made him seem really attractive. Micah, who stood beside him most times, seemed a little more serious. Hailey on the other hand, was very funny. Eva swore she never laughed so much.

After the introductions were done by Hailey, and after several glasses of wine, Tyler finally appeared and took her hand. “Okay Hailey, no hogging the girlfriend.”

Eva’s heart leapt and she glanced up at him. As far as she was concerned this wasn’t a relationship and once he realized that she wasn’t like other women he was used to, he’d get bored. However, hearing that word made her wonder if she was wrong.

Still, she couldn't see a man like Tyler settling for a commitment of any kind. That was the main reason she never admitted anything to him. She just couldn't trust him yet.

"I suppose," she said giving her an amused look, "I've had you long enough."

Tyler gave Hailey a grateful look that she nodded to in response. Whatever nervousness Eva was feeling, didn't seem to be there anymore. He appreciated how much Hailey did to help her feel at ease.

After Hailey left, he leaned down and spoke in her ear, "Was I right?"

She looked up at him, "About Hailey? Oh yes. She's wonderful."

"I didn't tell you this before, but she works at the arena. She's a power engineer."

"You're kidding?" she said in disbelief.

He shook his head, "She didn't want to be attached to her father's money. I didn't tell you because I wanted you to see for yourself how great she is."

"I actually appreciate that." She admitted, "I thought she'd be really sophisticated and—" she paused, not wanting to insult his friend but wanting to let him know the truth, "—I thought she might look down on me."

"I thought so," he said undisturbed by her confession.

"You're not upset?" She knew how much he thought of Hailey and Micah. The last thing she wanted to do was insult his friends.

He shrugged, "She's a billionaire, married to a hockey star and lives in a fifteen million dollar home. Who wouldn't make that distinction?"

She breathed a sigh of relief.

"I really admire your honesty Eva," he said sincerely.

That was something her sister was always giving her hell

about, her honesty. She hiccupped.

His brows shot up and he looked at the glass of wine that she was drinking and was almost empty, "How many of those did she feed you?"

Her eyes went to her glass. It actually took her a moment to remember, "I don't know—three maybe."

"Oh hell." He took the glass from her and put it on a server's tray as he walked by, "I really don't need to piss off your family by bringing you home inebriated."

She grinned, "We're Italian we drink wine for breakfast."

"Sure you do," he said not believing her and tightened his grip on her hand, "I think I'll just keep a close eye on you for the rest of the night."

"Why Tyler, are you trying to seduce me?" she leaned toward him and gave him a lovely smile.

He burst into laughter. It took him a moment to get it under control before he could talk again, "Honey, there will be no question when that happens," he said settling his eyes on hers.

She flushed despite the wine that made her brave, "It won't happen."

"You just keep telling yourself that," he said moving his eyes down her front suggestively.

"Tyler!" She felt her cheeks heat up under his scrutiny. That was the first time he actually made any sort of indication that he found her desirable. Wow, she liked it.

He laughed again and squeezed her hand. "Let's eat, I'm starving."

She let him lead her to one of the tables as others started to find seats when the food was brought out. He introduced her to everyone there and she already knew that she wouldn't remember all of their names. Yet the atmosphere was loaded with humor. It was obvious that Tyler and his team mates were close. Now she knew what made them so effective on the ice.

Her eyes went to him just to find him looking down at her with a darkening in his deep brown eyes. Quickly she averted her gaze. He was confident in himself when it came to her and she really wasn't that forthcoming. Yet he seemed determined that she'd succumb to his charms. Was that the only reason he hadn't left her alone? He knew what experience she had because Gio told him in a not so subtle way, but he was still interested in her. That actually frightened her because even if she wanted to be with him, she knew just from the way he was that she had nothing near his experience. It would be disappointing for him, she knew it would be.

Throughout the meal he laughed and joked with others at the table, but he always made sure she was included in the conversation. He was definitely a gentleman despite what she thought in the beginning about how arrogant he was. Well, he was conceited, but he had grounds and at least he wasn't a jerk—yet.

Later in the evening when it was time to go, Tyler led her over to Micah and Hailey, "I promised her family I'd have her home by eleven. We have to go."

"Really?" Hailey said trying to refrain from laughing at the curfew. Since when did Tyler obey rules? Eva answered her unspoken question.

"He's trying to impress my brothers," Eva said, "It's not an easy job."

"Yeah, I remember when Tyler's sister started dating this chump from town he—"

"Shut up Micah." Tyler cut in with a warning.

"What did he do?" she said with peaked curiosity.

Micah looked at Tyler who was ready to kill him, "I'd better not. I like my teeth. Let's just say it involved a dead duck."

"That's enough," Tyler said warning him again.

"You spoil the fun," Eva said. Then gave Hailey a look and

made a motion to her ear like she was holding a phone. Hailey laughed.

“Enough of that,” Tyler said taking her hand and pulling her out the door, “You two are not allowed to be friends.”

“Too late.” Hailey called after them.

Eva laughed all the way to the car.

After he put her in the driver’s seat and got in behind the wheel he turned to her and grinned while shaking his head. She was laying her head against the seat and smiling at him. “You had fun.”

“I really did. Thank you Tyler. It had been a long time since I enjoyed myself like that.”

“I’m glad you like my friends. It means a lot to me.” His eyes went down the front of her again.

She dropped her smile and cocked her head slightly, “It does?” my goodness, he could make her warm up so easily.

“Absolutely.” Then he turned and started the car not elaborating on it.

Eva stared at him pondering what he said. He threw things out there like that this evening and it made her wonder about him again. Did he really mean all of those things? Every time she decided not to trust him, he would say something so sweet that it completely contradicted his famous reputation.

An hour later, and five minutes before he said he’d have her home, he pulled over to the curb a few hundred feet from the front of her house and she looked at him in question.

He cut the engine and turned to her. “All I’m asking for is a kiss. If I pull up front your family will have their faces pasted all over the front windows.”

She looked at him, then turned and looked at the house biting her lip to keep from smiling. He was right about that. There were lights on and she knew that either one, or all of her family were waiting up.

"They can't see in here Eva. My windows are smoked, but my Porsche is not common in your neighborhood." He knew they'd be looking for it, and if it was just sitting out front for a moment, her family would know what was going on inside.

She brought her head back around to look at him. Again he was being considerate. More than likely they were tear a strip off of her if he did park out front and it was a few minutes before she got out of the car.

"A kiss?" he asked softly dropping his eyes to her mouth.

After she let her eyes move over his face studying him she nodded.

"One." She said and he grinned. She narrowed her gaze playfully, "How come I think that word isn't in your vocabulary."

"Smart girl but one is all I need. Now come here." He leaned over and at the same time reached up and nudged her chin with his forefinger to get her to tilt her face up to his. Then he paused his mouth a mere breadth from hers and met her eyes, "You are so *beautiful*," he said before he took her mouth under his.

Oh, he wasn't lying. It was one. A very long smooth one. And along with his compliment, it shot a thrill through her.

His mouth was warm, sensual and he certainly knew how to use it. With his nearness she could smell his cologne. It swirled in her nostrils making her feel euphoric. Of course several glasses of wine probably had something to do with that also.

He was careful with her, she knew he was, because he wasn't the least bit aggressive and this was a man who had that as his middle name. It was obvious he knew how to read a woman's experience and she hadn't had much with kissing. He was tender and patient. Her mouth even parted to accept more of him, but after a moment he eased off. She wanted more, and after she reflected back on it later, she knew that's exactly what he was aiming for.

When he finally lifted his head from hers, only slightly, so he

could look down at her and hopefully see disappointment in her eyes. There it was. It's what he was wanting. "I did say one."

Unfortunately he wasn't immune either. He expected her to taste good, but not to elicit such a heated response from him. He may look calm and collected but inside he was on fire. Her mouth was perfect; soft and pliable under his and he knew it wouldn't take much to teach her more because she was ready for it, but he couldn't. First of all it was no use carrying it a little further because he was catching a flight tomorrow morning and staying up all night with an erection wasn't an option. Secondly, he knew her. If he pushed her, she would run.

"I liked that." She admitted.

He smiled, "I'm glad because I'll want more." Then he turned and started the car to move it forward down the road so they were directly in front of her house.

He got out and opened the door for her to help her out and walked her up to the steps, "I'm going to miss you."

"How long are you gone again?" she asked ignoring his statement and the rapid beating of her heart that went with it. She wasn't sure if he was teasing or if he was serious. She still didn't know him well enough to figure it out. Furthermore, this man was a star athlete that had women crawling all over him, so how could he possibly miss her?

"Until next week. We have two games down there, so we stay a few days to adjust to the climate and train in their arena to make it familiar to us."

"Wow, I never thought it was so complicated."

He shrugged, "The pains of being a hockey player." Amusement was in his expression. That was the easy part. The part that he didn't tell her was the research they did on other teams; studying video breaking it down, anticipating plays and player styles.

"Uh-huh, some pains, a star athlete. Well, maybe I'll see you

when I get back." She teased.

"Maybe?" he started walking backwards, "Short of an act of God I'll be back." He waved, got in his car and drove away.

"So?" Tito said as she came in the door. He was waiting in the porch leaning against the wall.

"So, what?" she grinned.

"Eva, you're killing me." He and Gio actually stayed up until she got home. They were worried about her in more ways than one. It wasn't just Tyler's worldly experience with women that bothered them, it was the fact that she would be around a social group that she wasn't used to. Neither one of them wanted her to be made to feel like she wasn't worthy. Despite how brutish they were with her, they loved her and knew she was a naïve kind beautiful woman that could be easily taken advantage of.

When they heard the car drive up, Gio left Tito to find out how her night went, and left for bed. They didn't want to seem like they were ganging up on her.

"Oh, don't worry Tito, his friends are wonderful! His best friend's wife is like you and me. If I met her outside of that mansion they own, I would think she was a regular middle class working woman."

Tito felt some relief and couldn't help but start liking Tyler for the consideration he was showing her. He knew that men like him didn't do that often. Hell, he didn't do it often. He knew how he looked to women and used it just like any hot-blooded man in his prime would.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Hell, I forgot how much I hate that guy," Tyler said under his breath to Micah who was standing next to him during the singing of the American anthem.

Micah lifted his eyes to Marcus Dobrowski, the center for

the opposing team and for three years their lines were matched together on the ice, and for three years, Micah's team beat his. Marcus was looking back at him and he could see the challenge there. He resisted giving him a sarcastic grin because they were supposedly respecting the anthems. "Don't start anything. I want this win more than I want to have you beat the shit out of him." Micah mumbled back.

"Ruin my fun."

This time Micah did smile but he returned his eyes to the ice as if he was just thinking about something.

There were camera men everywhere panning the players during those few minutes before the start of the game and he, like the opposing players, looked terrible to their fans if they started showing unsportsmanlike behavior. It was suppose to be a game. A game with hidden undercurrents and emotions that kept the passion for it alive in the players.

"Did the game start?" Eva called from the kitchen.

"Just about. They showed your boyfriend," Adel called.

"He's not my boyfriend!" She shouted from the other room before appearing with three bowls of snacks. Thank God Gio bought the large flat screen television last summer because the neighbors came over to watch after her father bragged about the neighborhood that she was dating Tyler Hartley. Though he really didn't have to. Most of them saw the game that Eva was at and the media attention she got. There must've been fifteen people in there, including her family.

She curled up on the sofa beside her brother Gio and tucked her legs under her. He put an arm around her. Their neighbor Theresa, who was in her fifties sat on the other side of her. Her husband Hal, sat in the loveseat next to Tito. Various other bodies sat on kitchen chairs brought into the living room and on the floor around them. Eva liked this kind of ambience. She liked her neighbors and around her area they all knew each other

and looked out for one another like family. It was a middle class mostly Italian neighborhood.

She perked up when the camera focused on Tyler. More and more she liked seeing him in his uniform. He just seemed so tough and virile. He had his helmet balanced on his stick and his hair was messed up as he stood in line with the other starting players during the singing of the anthems. If she didn't know better he was sporting a bit of a smirk.

"He looks intense." Gio said obviously not noticing the same.

"Well, don't they take this game seriously?" she asked.

"Their playing against a team that had high rivalry for years. That big guy there." He pointed to a man that looked like he towered over Tyler as they matched up for a face off. "He hit Micah Rush hard a few years ago, gave him a concussion. Tyler jumped on him and beat the living tar out of him."

"What? That *huge* guy?" she said with wide eyes, "Tyler beat him up?"

"He's a tough guy, that fella of yours and fearless. Dobrowski has about five inches on him. He's the biggest guy in the league."

First of all, Tyler was over six feet. She couldn't possibly imagine the size of the other guy. And, what possessed him to take on someone that size?

"He was retaliating for Micah, the team captain. Dobrowski hit him hard against the boards. Knocked him flat. He was pissed because he couldn't catch him before he scored a goal."

Inside she was smiling to hear that kind of admiration from her brother. In fact she didn't even deny that he was hers this time. To Gio, the fact that Tyler wasn't a wimp meant a lot to him. It meant that he could protect his baby sister. Eva has dated an accountant and another man was a computer geek. It was Gio that took it upon himself to speak to them, not Tito and they never asked her out again. "Where is Micah?"

“The one with the ‘C’ on the left side of his chest next to Tyler. He’s the captain. Whenever you see Tyler, Micah’s not far behind.”

“Wow, really? Tyler never mentioned that. I mean he said he was his best friend, but I didn’t know he was the Captain.”

“Rumor had it that he actually owned the team, but he’s denied that publically. The truth is his wife owns it after the death of her father, but she gave control to Dutch, Micah’s father. Apparently his father is one of the general managers. He’s a legend in himself. Used to play years ago.”

Eva knew about Micah’s father because Hailey told her. He’d gone home that night she was at the house to be with his wife.

“Hey you two, keep it down.” Tito turned up the volume, “Puck dropped. It’s game time.”

Tyler plunked himself beside Micah on the player’s bench, “That bloody goalie is an acrobatic monkey.” They had delivered three shots on goal in the first five minutes of the game and their goalie stopped them all.

“Yeah, it just makes him harder to crack.” Micah let a smile pull at the corner of his mouth.

Tyler gave a short laugh and looked up at the screen that just so happened to have focused on him and Micah. He gave a wink and retuned his attention to the game.

Eva couldn’t help but feel her heart leap when he did that. Like he was winking at her.

“He’s very handsome Eva.” Theresa said while patting her knee.

Eva didn’t deny it because he was.

The first period seemed quick paced, but there was no goal from either team. The second period was a different story. The teams started hitting each other hard out of frustration and

penalties started. Tyler was a big man so when he hit, it was brutal.

Then Micah Rush got a breakaway and Tyler was right with him as they approached the goalie. Everyone in the room leapt to their feet and cheered.

He was ready for a center pass to Tyler when Micah got tripped by the stick of another player from behind. At the same time the two of them plowed into the goalie at full tilt. Tyler barely escaped doing the same. The net flew off, the goalie was buried beneath two big bodies and the other players took offense to Micah landing on him.

The big guy Gio pointed out crosschecked Micah with a stick as he was trying to get up, throwing him back to the ice violently. Tito jumped up and cheered as Tyler threw his gloves down and grabbed him by the jersey delivering blows to his head sending his helmet flying off.

"Oh gosh!" Eva buried her face in her hands.

"Oh Eva, isn't he magnificent?" her sister said.

"I can't watch. That man is going to hurt him."

"Which man?" Gio said with a chuckle, "The one he's got by the scruff. So far I think he only got two punches in. Tyler has him over a barrel. He's got a right fist like a steel piston."

The referees started to get them under control but Tyler ended up in the penalty box and so did Dobrowski for the crosscheck. Tyler got an extra two minutes for roughing. According to Gio, both of them got off easy.

After that the players actually seemed to settle down. Micah scored the winning goal five minutes into overtime. Tyler assisted.

"Wow he is fast." Adel said referring to Micah's skating ability.

"With legs that long, he would be. That's why he makes the big bucks." Tito said standing up, "Anyone want a beer?"

Everyone was still there an hour later when the phone rang. Unfortunately it was Adel that answered it.

“Eva!” she shouted, “it’s Tyler.”

Everyone started Clapping and Eva could have crawled under the table. She took the phone and walked down to her room.

“I see you guys watched the game,” Tyler said with a chuckle.

“I might have glanced at it briefly.” She lied with a smile.

“Sure you did honey. Adel told me you did already.”

“I’m disowning her,” she said shutting the door of her room and sitting on her bed. He laughed. It was really noisy in the background on his end. “Where are you?”

“We’re just leaving the dressing room.”

“Hartley lets go.” Came a male voice in the background. “Bus is waiting.”

“Yeah yeah, give me a second.”

“Is she hot?” came the same voice.

“Shut the hell up Richie,” he said angrily to Mark Richards who was hanging over his shoulder.

Eva laughed.

“Ah hell, see what I have to deal with,” he said to her.

“If that’s the babe that you brought to the BBQ last week, give her my number.”

Tyler said something that Eva would never repeat, but it did make her smile. From the muffled sound, he tried covering the mouthpiece of his phone, but it really wasn’t effective. It wasn’t like she wasn’t used to that language. Her brothers were terrible. A moment later his voice was clear again.

“Look, I’m calling because I won’t be back this weekend. Micah’s dad gave us a few days before the next series so we can unwind. Micah and I are flying home and won’t be back until Wednesday. It’s been awhile since I’ve seen my family so I’ve got

to go. Our next game is the follow Friday." He paused, "Tell me you'll miss me."

"I won't."

He chuckled, "I've got to go, I'll miss you babe." He hung up.

Eva stared at the phone, feeling completely hopeless. How could a man do that to a woman especially not knowing him that long? Her heart was thumping rapidly in her chest at the endearment he used.

The following week was horrible. She hadn't heard from him. Of course he made no promise to call her, but she still wish he did. She was thankful for her job at the shop because it helped pass the time. Her sister on the other hand, didn't help at all. She kept reminding her that Tyler hadn't phoned, and if he was at home, maybe he got caught up with an old girlfriend.

"Why do you do those things?" she said roughly arranging flowers in a crystal vase.

"I'm just saying that you should look at all sides. I mean, he's famous, rich, and handsome. I know for a fact that you haven't put out and—"

"—Oh my god!" she turned to face her sister with a look of astonishment, "Adel, my personal life is not open for discussion."

Adel placed her hands on her hips. "It would make a difference in how he treats you. I mean, what is wrong with you? My God look at him! He's a hard everywhere, and I'm sure he knows how to please a woman—"

"He treats me like a gentleman should" Eva interrupted appalled at her sister's lack of personal privacy, "I like it that way. Mama would have loved him."

"He treats you like a prized trophy Eva because you are beautiful and he likes having you on his arm. Also, he's a virile man in his prime, he has women all over him and men like that have needs. I'm sure he—"

“That’s a lie,” she said not wanting to hear anymore. She knew that Adel was probably giving her a reality check, but it bothered, no, hurt her to think that he was with another woman. Though, she really shouldn’t be upset if he had because she never agreed to anything with him.

“That’s how they are.”

“And you know this because you dated so many famous men?” It was a low blow and Eva knew that as soon as the words left her lips. She knew that Adel didn’t think she was pretty or could never measure up to her which was ridiculous. Actually she didn’t mean it that way in the least but she knew Adel would take it that way and she did. Her face fell, “Oh Adel I’m sorry—“

“—save it!” She said angrily, “It’s too bad all of us women don’t have your angelic looks Eva.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Well, why does it matter? You know you’re beautiful and I’m not. Of course you would have someone like Tyler Hartley chase you just from a glimpse off the street. Everything gets handed to you.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“No? Then why do Papa, Tito and Gio treat you like a precious princess.”

“I’m a prisoner in my own home!” she argued, “Is that what you want to be like? Tito scares the crap out of any man that tries to date me. I’ll be a virgin until I’m fifty!”

Someone clearing their throat made them both spin around to see Tyler in the doorway as large as life. He was wearing a tan suit mauve shirt and his hands were in the pockets of his slacks.

Eva fell her face in her hands and could feel her eyes water. This couldn’t possibly get any more embarrassing.

Adel on the other hand seemed to think it was funny and actually laughed. “I’ll leave you two alone.” She walked out of the back room thinking revenge was sweet. Even though Gio

basically spelled it out before, now there was no doubt. Tyler knew that she was a virgin, and now he would surely drop her. There's no way a stallion like Tyler would want someone as inexperienced as her. Men like him liked women that knew how to please them. She was done with her friends and family going on about Eva and her knew famous boyfriend. If she felt left out before, she felt invisible now.

Tyler waited until Adel was out of earshot before approaching Eva and wrapping his large hands around her wrists to pull her hands away from her face. He spoke gently, "Hey, is this all about me?" He already knew it was. He'd stood in the doorway and heard everything. Finally he'd had enough of Adel's cynicism and cleared his throat.

She took a deep breath and looked up at him, "Now you know some of what I deal with. Oh god, I'm so *embarrassed*."

He smiled and saw that her eyes were moist but no tears fell. He was thankful because he really couldn't handle a woman's tears. Even worse, he doubted very much he could handle Eva's. Chances are, it would bring him to his knees. "I couldn't help but overhear, you guys were loud."

"I thought the closed sign was up." She countered not wanting to talk about it, but he wasn't as willing to let it go.

"You might want to remember to lock the door then."

She could kill her sister. She said it was. "Tyler, what do you want?"

"Besides taking the brunt of your anger because of your sister?" he grinned as she pursed her lips not denying it, "I want to take you to dinner." He lifted his arm and looked at his watch, "My plane landed just over an hour ago and I'm starved." He'd spent an extra few days at home with Dutch's permission and neglected to call Eva. It was done purposely. He was hoping she'd finally cave and tell him that she missed him, but he wasn't going to push her especially after the fight she'd just got in with

her sister. If she thought he didn't know she was a virgin, she was wrong. He knew. Even if Giovanni didn't tell him, she acted as though she'd never been kissed.

"I can't," she finally said.

"Why?"

She took another deep breath and looked away, "I can't see you. Adel's right. You are a famous athlete and I—"

"Eva." He interrupted nudging her chin so she'd look at him, "I'm a man, plain and simple. Money and fame are just words. Don't let anyone change your mind about me, except me. I like you."

"As I said before, you have women hanging over you all the time. They scream your name. I saw one woman throw her underwear at you when you left the rink on your last game—"

"—actually that was for Mark." He countered. Mark picked them up too and got the woman's number.

"It means no difference." She said in frustration. "I know it happens to you to, but you aren't admitting it."

"It does." He shrugged, "I don't care about them."

"I do."

"Why?"

He was going to make her say it. Well, what did she have to lose? "You heard Adel. I have no experience. I don't know how to handle you, or the numerous female fans you have. I drove by the TD building today and there's this massive banner with you and Micah's face on it hanging a hundred floors up." She waved her arm, "Tyler, that isn't normal. The attention is so overwhelming."

"*That*, doesn't matter. The thing I like most about you is that you are yourself. You don't try and make out to be someone you're not. The women and the fame bother you, but none if it matters."

"It does matter to me. It makes me feel vulnerable. I don't

like it.”

“I find it appealing. You may not believe that Eva, but I don’t think I’ve ever dated a woman as sweet as you. Usually, they can be demanding with my time, my money, or—other things,” he said not elaborating, but by her blush she understood. She started shaking her head, but he wasn’t deterred. “Come here.” He reached for her arm and pulled her against him, “You haven’t even given us a chance,” he said smoothing his hands over her back. Christ she did smell like lilies. He bet her skin smelled like that all over. What an amazing thought. As for his embrace, she was tense against him, but soon he could feel her relax, as he rubbed her back with his hands. “You need to be fair to me.”

“I don’t want to get hurt.”

“No one does, but that’s a risk we all take.”

She pulled back from him so she could meet his eyes to see if he was telling the truth but he still kept his hands on her. To her, it seemed as though he was serious. It was just so hard to believe. This unbelievably handsome, famous athlete wanted to date her.

“Have I pushed you at all?” he asked looking down at her.

She shook her head. Only in getting her to go out with him, but intimacy wise which she knew he was referring to, he didn’t. If anything she was disappointed that he never initiated more.

He was glad she said that because if he went any slower with her, he would be going backwards.

“Dinner. Tonight. I’ll pick you up at seven. I just want to go home, shower and change.” He leaned down and put his mouth by her ear, “And all the things that Adel said—are bullshit.”

She smiled and nodded. He must’ve known that her sister wouldn’t be far.

He turned his head and kissed her cheek softly before he erected himself, “I’ll see you in an hour.” He slid a long finger

down her soft cheek as his eyes met her gaze, "Wear something elegant."

"Okay," she said feeling heat flush her cheeks.

He turned and left.

Eva finished with the arrangement before she left the back room. Her sister had already left which must have meant she was still angry. When she got home Adel had already told Tito that she was going out with Tyler for dinner and an argument ensued between them. She should have known that Adel listened in.

"I'm not twelve. I'm going," she said turning away from him after he told her she couldn't go. She went down to her room to find something to wear.

"I want you home by eleven."

"I'll come home when I want!" she shouted back at him before slamming the door. She hauled clothes out of her closet flinging them on the bed showing her frustration with her family. Well, she'd had it. She was going to look for an apartment first thing tomorrow.

When Tyler showed up an hour later, Tito was waiting for him on the porch. He was leaning lazily against a rail post wearing a white tank top and jeans, with his arms folded across his chest. It made his muscles bulge in all the right places. He was a nice looking man, the whole family was with their dark looks. Although, Eva had the only green eyes in the bunch. He figured it was from her mother because the rest of them had dark brown eyes, darker than his own.

"She's defying her family because of you." He straightened himself as he accused him.

"She's nineteen Tito. That makes her legal in this country and I've done nothing to provoke her," Tyler said undisturbed, "I've already told you all that I won't disrespect her."

"She's young in a lot of ways." He countered.

"Those are the words of a brother that doesn't want her to grow up."

"She's screaming at me." He waved an arm toward the door. "She never yells at me. You did this."

"No, I didn't. She's pissed off because Adel and she had a fight earlier. Maybe if you quit listening to the antics of her sister and listen to Eva, you would understand her side a little more."

"So now you're an expert on my family?" He was hedging for a fight.

"No, but I've seen her belittle Eva, today in fact. Now, you can blame me all you want because I couldn't care less, but maybe look at the whole picture in fairness."

Tito seemed to drop his defensiveness for a moment, "They really had a fight?"

Tyler nodded, "I want to take Eva to dinner. I'll have her home early. I've got to go to early practice tomorrow morning at five."

Tito settled a bit more, "You mean what you said about her right?"

"I did. I like Eva. I don't want to hurt her."

Tito walked over to the front door and pulled it open, "Eva, your date is here!" he hollered into the house. Then he turned back to him, "If you do hurt her, I don't give a shit how famous and rich you are. I'll bust you in half."

Tyler grinned. "Fair enough."

Micah glanced at his watch, "I swear to god, he's been more late this past month than we have in our whole lives. I'm ready to start chewing on this chair I'm so famished."

"Settle down Micah." Hailey said with laughter in her voice, "I see the car." She nodded toward the big windows in front of the restaurant as the Porsche cruised into a parking spot.

Micah breathed a sigh of relief and looked at his wife, "I'd be lost without you."

"You'd be a mess." She corrected with a laugh.

"I was." His eyes went down to her chest appreciatively, "I'm going to lick every inch of that gorgeous body later."

She flushed, "Promises."

After two years of marriage, he still couldn't get enough of her. When their plane landed, he went right home and found her soaking in the tub. He stripped naked and ravished her for over an hour straight. Since she had Shane, her breasts had grown fuller along with her hips. Her curves were nice before, but now she was completely flawless. He forbade her to wear a bikini because he couldn't hide the erection he'd get from her in it. Even now just thinking about her and him together made him hard with want. He also didn't appreciate other men drooling over her. "I want you."

Her eyes widened while she was taking a sip from her water glass and she coughed.

He chuckled.

"My God, Micah," she said in a whisper, "I can barely walk after that welcome you gave me earlier."

"A small detail." He grinned deviously, "I'm not done."

She shook her head at him but her green eyes darkened under her thick lashes, "You are a devil. Can't you go a week without me?"

"I can't help it," he said deeply setting his pale eyes on her, "You're so sexy. I'm as hot as fuck for you right now."

Even after all the time they spent together her heart could still leap when he spoke to her like that. "Micah behave yourself or I'll have some trouble concentrating on tonight and I want to make Eva feel comfortable."

Just then Tyler came in the front door with Eva on his arm.

"Oh look at her Micah, she is so pretty." She was wearing a

pale green empress style dress that came to the knees. She had pulled her long hair up so it was piled stylishly on top of her head. "She certainly doesn't look like she's from a middle class neighborhood now."

"No," Micah agreed with a grin, "She looks like a million bucks."

"Do you think he's serious about her?" Hailey asked because she really liked her. She knew already that they could be really good friends.

Micah lifted his hand and Tyler spotted them. "Yeah, I think Tyler's getting in deep with her. She's all he talks about."

"I think it's sweet. I've never seen him so protective of a woman before."

"The boys have stopped teasing him because he gets caustic."

"Really?" That was a surprise because Tyler had a great sense of humor. Rarely did any of them see anything different.

"He's sensitive where she's concerned and he's only been chasing her for a few weeks." He whispered out of the side of his mouth as the couple approached.

Tyler bent down and kissed Hailey's cheek after he seated Eva. "You are gorgeous. I'm surprised that he keeps you locked at home."

"I have a toddler who keeps me locked at home."

"Yeah, you keep telling yourself that. He's threatened guys for looking at you," Tyler said sitting down next to Eva.

She swung her head around to look at her husband, "Is that true?"

"No." he lied shooting Tyler a warning. "If you want to take that route Tyler—"

"—How's Shane." Tyler asked Hailey cutting him off.

Micah chuckled.

"Nice to see you again Eva." Hailey said ignoring the both of

them.

“You too.”

“How’s business?”

“Really good. I have to work this Sunday to catch up on orders. We’re far behind.”

“I feel like I can’t catch up either, but I’ll need to take some time off soon.”

Micah brought his eyes to his wife, “why? Are they overworking you? Are you ill?” he said with sudden concern. She never mentioned anything to him and they were as close as a couple could get.

“Not yet,” she said looking up at him resisting a smile at his concern.

A dawning light came into his eyes, “Really?”

She nodded spreading a smile across her face.

He let out a whoop and scooped her out of her chair swinging her around.

Eva jumped but Tyler grabbed her hand, “She’s pregnant—I think—Micah, put your wife down and let us know if it’s true.”

Everyone in the restaurant was looking at them now. He set his wife down and announced that he was going to be a father and they all clapped. Then he ordered champagne for everyone there. They clapped louder.

Hailey blushed to the roots of her hair, “He never ceases to surprise me. I should have picked a lonely back road and told him.”

Eva laughed, “I’m so happy for you both.”

“Baby number two. I’m excited, maybe not as much as him, but I am,” she said smiling widely.

“I love kids. I have four younger brothers.” Micah said taking his seat, looking at her glass of water. “It explains why you didn’t want the wine,” he said pulling out his phone.

“what are you doing?”

"Calling mum and dad," he said with a grin that threatened to split his face.

"Can't it wait?"

"No." he chuckled as his father answered the phone.

Eva really enjoyed the dinner and conversation between them all. She knew why Tyler liked these two so much. Micah was just as self assured as Tyler was, but he was down to earth and the same with Hailey. She was also insistent on bringing constant attention to Eva, which she appreciated. She seemed interested in everything she did, even the fact that her flower shop was hers and she actually worked in it. It made Eva proud of her job.

"Will you two stop?" Micah said, "You'll have me buying flowers for my wife every week."

"Every day." She corrected

He smiled, "Darling, you are so beautiful, that flowers aren't enough."

She looked at Eva, "See what I have to put up with?"

"He's incorrigible," Eva said casting him a glance followed by a laugh.

Tyler put his arm across the back of her chair, "I bought her flowers and she still hasn't swooned at my feet," he said looking down at her.

"You shouldn't hold your breath," she said cheekily returning his stare. The others laughed.

His smile spread to a grin but his eyes stayed on her.

Eva's heart leapt at that look. Gosh she just about did swoon.

Micah cleared his throat, "Should we leave you two some privacy."

Eva flushed and Hailey elbowed him in the ribs.

He embellished the elbow, "she's so tough." He then looked around the restaurant and indicated to the waiter for the check.

"I hate to end this night, but Tyler and I have an early call."

"It was a lot of fun." Eva agreed.

"My treat." Micah said.

"You bet it is." Tyler agreed while standing up to help Eva out of her chair. "Next time, it's mine."

"Agreed."

"I see why you love them so much," Eva said as Tyler pulled in front of her house.

"It is easy, isn't it?" he agreed, cutting the engine and turning to her, "Micah is more than just a friend. I don't know how we could have gone through our careers without each other," he said with pride.

"I admire that. I don't have many friends because my life is devoted to our shop. I never really minded. I had Adel."

"Adel is painted green with envy over you and I."

"She's hurt Tyler."

Of course she would defend her, he didn't expect anything less. His eyes went to her mouth, "Kiss me goodnight."

She gave him a partial smile, "And let you tease me again?"

"I won't. I promise," he said flicking his eyes up to hers. It was interesting that she knew that from their last kiss. Well, he never thought she was stupid just very inexperienced.

She leaned forward as he lowered his head. This time he did take it further and she wished she didn't ask for it. Before she knew it, his tongue was in her mouth and she could feel his hand slide up her ribcage to the side of her breast. She pulled back, "Tyler I—"

"It's fine," he said looking down at her, "I moved too fast."

She shook her head and took his hand in her own. Then she leaned forward and kissed him while placing his hand over her breast. He groaned taking her mouth again. More roughly this time. His other hand threaded through the hair at the back of her

head and knotted in her thick curls as he leaned over the middle consol to get closer to her.

Tyler was a big man, and his body could have swallowed her whole and Christ he wish he could at that moment. Every inch of her was soft and supple. Except her breasts, they were high, firm and fit perfectly in his hands. His thumb moved over her pert nipple and she whimpered. With that small vulnerable sound came a flooding of heat to his groin. He moved his lips farther apart and applied more pressure causing her to open her mouth more and accept him.

She tasted like warm honey and her mouth responded to his like she was doing this for years. Soon she discovered how to use her own tongue and Tyler had to stop. He felt her, kissed her and could smell that intoxicating scent she carried. It was too much. He was already so hot for her it was painful.

Reluctantly he pulled back, "Eva, I have to stop or I'm taking you home," he said breathing deeply.

Her eyes went to his, "Is it like that every time." She asked breathlessly.

"what?"

"Gosh I feel so—alive." She breathed flicking her eyes to his mouth again.

"Ah hell." He turned and got out of the car to walk around and let her out.

"What is it?" she asked as she took his hand and got out of the car. He seemed angry.

He never said anything as he walked her up to her front door. "It's not you." He finally said before he gave her a brief kiss and walked away without a backward glance.

It was the first time she saw him that way. He was always smiling or joking. Even though he said it wasn't her, what was it? His mood changed so suddenly. She waited until the car pulled away before she went in the house.

“How was your night?” Tito said as she walked by the living room where he was watching TV.

“I had fun.”

He stood up and walked up to her, “I’m sorry about earlier sis.”

“Me too.” She hugged him.

“Tyler seems decent enough. He seemed to care. I just can’t stop seeing you as twelve and it’s hard for us.”

She smiled, “Does that mean you like him.”

“Let’s not push it.”

“thanks,” she said going up on her tiptoes and kissing his cheek, “It means a lot Tito.” She turned and went down to her room.

He didn’t call her the next day or the day after that. However she did sit down with her brothers and her father to watch the game. Adel said she had something else to do and didn’t join them. It wasn’t common for her to watch hockey anyway and she knew she was still upset with her. Adel could hold a grudge until hell froze over.

“Don’t worry, Adel will get over it.” Tito said.

Eva never said anything. She didn’t know how Tito knew they were fighting but Adel wasn’t really quiet about things.

Halfway through the first period things didn’t go well. Tyler ended up with several penalties.

“Wow, he’s seems frustrated tonight.”

“He does?”

Tito looked at her, “How was he the other night?”

“He was fine,” she said not understanding what he was getting at. Well, he was fine until he walked her up to her front porch.

Meanwhile Tyler was sitting in the penalty box for the third time watching the game from behind the Plexiglas. He was being

stupid and he knew it. He cast a glance sideways to the player's bench and saw Micah's look, then he nodded toward the overhead screen. Tyler looked up and saw their General manager, Micah's dad on the display, staring down at the ice with a familiar look that only he and Micah knew. "fuck," he said under his breath. He was in trouble.

Things got worse when they lost two nothing.

As they made their way back to the dressing room, Micah tapped him on the leg with his stick, "You are going to owe me for this, because it's going to hurt."

"I know," Tyler said not looking forward to what was coming.

Sure enough, when they got to the dressing room there was Dutch. He told Cole, Tyler and Micah to stick around after the other players left.

He didn't ask what kept them late last time when Tyler first went and introduced himself to Eva, or said anything at all, but he sure as hell had no problem tearing Tyler to pieces for his actions tonight. It was rare to see him so angry, usually a look was enough. Despite it all, Tyler knew he deserved it. He wasn't a dirty player. He always had a reputation for fighting, but honestly and with integrity. He acted like a goon tonight.

"Cancel your date plans this weekend you two." Dutch said looking at Micah and Tyler. Then he looked at his younger son, "Cole, you're in on this."

"You're kidding me!" he said holding out his hands, "I don't know what the hell is wrong with Tyler dad. Why am I involved?"

"You're in on this because it'll help you learn what not to do."

Tyler never said a word. He knew better. He was sure that if he even cleared his throat at this point Dutch would make things worse for him.

“Dad, I have plans for tomorrow.” Cole argued.

“Cancel them.” He pointed a finger at Tyler, “And you, I don’t know what the hell is up your ass, but you’re mine until the next game on Monday.”

“Yes sir,” he said solemnly.

Dutch left then. Cole threw his gloves across the room. “This sucks!”

“Hey, you wanted the draft on this team Cole, deal with it.” Micah said standing up to pull off his gear, “This is what we do. We deal with things like this together. You know dad always made us share problems. If one team member has one, then we all do. It’s what keeps us close. Tyler suffered along with me and my mistakes when it came to Hailey. Dad ran us through drills for two entire days.”

Cole moved his eyes to Tyler, “Yeah I know, sorry Ty—I had a hot date.”

“No need to apologize.” He actually thought it was amusing that Dutch threw Cole to the wolves with them. Cole was a great guy, but a cocky rookie and he needed some of that knocked out of him.

“Say, is this about that bombshell that you brought to the house?” Cole asked.

Tyler never denied or confirmed it. His eyes went to Micah who shook his head and smiled.

“Well, dad will work it out of you.” Micah said wondering if there was trouble in paradise for Tyler.

Cole went to the shower after that.

“You want to talk?”

“I’m just wound up,” Tyler said starting to strip off his clothes. “Think about it.”

Micah burst into laughter, “Is that the problem?”

“Yeah, she’s a good catholic girl. I need to be patient or I’ll scare the hell out of her.” He stopped and looked at his best

friend, "I really like this girl."

"I know you do," he said understandingly, "She's easy to like. Hailey thinks the world of her." He paused deep in thought, "Look if you want to beat this hump. Don't call her for a few days. Don't even call her to tell her you're not going to call her. Focus on the next few games then call her. It made a difference for me. I doubt very much that Eva is going to go anywhere. She seems pretty caught up on you."

Tyler nodded, "I know what I have to do, but it seems disrespectful."

"She'll forgive you. There are women out there capable of that. Hailey's one of them, and I'm pretty sure Eva fits that too."

"Christ you don't know her that well, she has a temper. She's Italian."

"So? You'll have to beg more." He laughed.

After four days Eva stopped watching the games with her family. She never said anything about Tyler but Tito seemed to know. Maybe it was because when he asked her how he was, she avoided the question, and that was the clue.

First she was hurt, then angry. Now she knew for sure that something was wrong when he dropped her off the last time she'd seen him. Yet, he denied it.

At least Adel stated speaking to her again and didn't mention Tyler's name. She knew that her sister thought she was wrong about the things she said about Tyler and it rubbed salt in the wound to speak to her about it. Well, maybe she wasn't so wrong because she hadn't heard from him at all.

Then on the fifth day the phone rang and Gio called her. She felt her heart pounding like a drum in her chest when she answered it. It was Hailey.

"Let's get together this weekend, there's this great show at the theatre I want to see."

“I don’t know.”

“Come on Eva, I have no one else to go with. My best friend moved to Washington last summer and my mother in law is here. She said she’d watch Shane. I actually have a night to myself.”

“Well, how can I disappoint you then?”

“It’s not a chick flick, I’m not into those. I hope you don’t mind suspense.”

“It sounds like fun.”

“I’ll pick you up at six then.”

“Okay.”

She couldn’t help but be disappointed over it not being Tyler. Maybe he did grow bored with her.

She pushed it to the back of her mind and started cleaning up the kitchen after dinner. Gio came in to help her. He cast her couple of glances but didn’t say anything until she was getting ready to leave.

“You realize honey that Tyler has a job. It may be simple looking to us but he has to stay focused.”

“Does this have a point Gio?” She said out of frustration while grabbing her purse.

He nodded, “He’s probably trying to get his game back. He was terrible last week.”

“Well, he won the last one so why didn’t he call then?”

“The same reason he won’t until the next series. Give him a break Eva, you are distracting.”

She didn’t know what that meant but she didn’t care. She was hurt and angry. “I don’t care.” She turned and left the house just as a sleek black Mercedes pulled up to the curb.

She saw Hailey and waved before she got in the passenger side.

“How are you?”

She looked at her, “I’m fine.”

“Sure you are,” she said pulling away from the curb. “If it

makes you feel better, I haven't seen Micah or Cole in five days either.'

That surprised her, "Really?"

She shook her head, "When one of the players does badly, Dutch will make Micah and Cole suffer along with them." She said indicating that it was Tyler that was doing badly.

"Did he at least call you?"

"Yes. To tell me they were on lockdown in a hotel before they flew to Chicago." She cast her a glance while she turned the corner. "But he wasn't the one in trouble. Tyler lost his focus with that game on Friday. Dutch near tore him in half over it, so Micah says."

Eva took a deep breath, "You knew didn't you—about how I felt."

"It happened to me before. I figured you could use a friend that understood. As the wife of a hockey player, we put up with a lot of absences besides tired, cranky and frustrated players during the season. We also get the advantage of having the most amazing fathers and husbands." She smiled, "At least I think so."

"So you really think this is because he lost his focus?"

"Look in the mirror Eva, he definitely has."

She flushed. "Thanks Hailey."

That night when she went to bed, she didn't want to hate him anymore. Even if she did want to, she couldn't. It took her three days of missing him to realize that she *really* missed him. She couldn't concentrate at work, and sent three orders off to the wrong addresses. A mistake she never made before in her life. Already she knew it was too late for her. She was falling for him.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Thank fucking God," Tyler said as the plane landed back in

their city, "I've got a lot of forgiveness to beg for."

Micah never said anything. Hailey had told him that she talked to Eva and explained things. However, he wanted to see Tyler beg a woman to forgive him. He'd never done it in his whole life.

Tyler had to admit that again Dutch did a good job. He looked across the aisle at his best friend's father who was sound asleep even as the plane landed roughly and shook his head with a smile. No one seemed more at home with road games than Dutch. He could sleep even if the plane exploded in mid-air. Suddenly he opened his eyes as if feeling someone watching him and turned to look at Tyler. Dutch's pale blue eyes that Micah inherited seem to always penetrate his soul. He gave Tyler a nod, which meant he was proud of him. Tyler felt himself fluff up like a cock on the walk. It was interesting that he was able to command so much respect without saying a word.

Dutch was like a father away from home, but that didn't mean he went easy on him. It was just the opposite. His parents were very supportive but gave Dutch free reign since he became his hockey coach twenty four years ago. Also, his and Micah's parents were best friends, so his parents trusted Dutch to make him into the athlete he was today and as far as he was concerned, he agreed.

"I'm trying to figure out what to get her as a present." he finally said to Micah after Dutch got up to get his bag out of the overhead compartments and the other players followed suit.

"I know what you can get her," said Emil Sudas overhearing. He was the team's main goalie.

Now everyone knew about Tyler's latest love interest. It was hard to keep secrets when they spent so much time together as a team.

Tyler twisted to look over the seat, "She owns a flower shop, so that's out."

"It's not flowers."

"I don't think she's into jewelry Sudas."

"Not that either."

Now he was curious, "Okay, what is it." He grinned as Sudas told him.

"Come by the house before you go see her."

"I will." He said standing up to get his bag in the overhead compartment.

"Come to dinner tonight." Micah said as they collected their luggage at the carousel.

"I have to go see Eva," he said picking up his carry on and shouldering it. It was the only thing he could think of right now.

After they retrieved their luggage, they left the airport only to be mobbed by fans. They were the final two players to leave and most of the crowd was waiting for them.

They spent another hour signing autographs and posing for pictures. Tyler kept looking at his watch, but he wasn't going to disappoint the fans.

Finally they went to their vehicles, "Look, come to dinner and bring Eva." Micah asked again.

"I was thinking of taking her out tonight—dancing maybe. Did you want to come?"

Micah chuckled and tossed his luggage in the trunk. "Hell no. My wife is waiting and my mom supposedly flew up today with my brothers. I'd like to say yes, but, you know—family. My house is full."

"That's fine Micah. I'll make you drag Hailey out with us another time."

"She'd like that. How about you come out to the house tomorrow after practice, so mom doesn't get upset that she hasn't seen you? We'll have a pool party and get some relaxing in before the game on Tuesday."

"That sounds great. I'll see if she's up to it." Having Eva

meet Micah's mom and dad was a big step for him and truthfully, he'd never introduced any of his past girlfriends to family. It was really odd though. He didn't feel the least apprehensive about it.

Tito came in the house an hour and a half later, "Eva, Tyler just pulled up."

Eva near knocked him over as she ran out of the house without shoes on and practically leaped on a shocked Tyler kissing him in front of her whole family.

Tyler lifted her up off the ground tight against his body and kissed her back. It never even occurred to him to stop her. Hell, what man in his right mind would?

"That's enough!" Tito shouted from the porch. "Jesus man that's my baby sister!"

Eva lifted her head ignoring her brother and looked at him with a smile on her face.

"Wow." He grinned.

"What took you so long?" she said breathlessly.

"I should do that more often if that's the kind of reception I get. What do I get if I'm gone a month?"

"Tyler, my family is behind us," she said turning pink.

He looked past her, "They can't hear me," he said returning his attention to her while letting her feet touch the ground.

"How come you didn't call?"

"Traffic," he said still surprised at her reaction.

He tilted her head in mock anger and he chuckled.

"Okay, there was a plane, two games in Chicago, and my ball busting GM."

She grinned, "I missed you."

He arched his brows, "You don't say?" It was the first time she ever expressed affection for him. He could have kissed her again, but Tito was giving him the evil eye from the porch. "I got you something."

"Flowers," she said narrowing her gaze in mock anger.

"No." He released her and held up his hand. "Stay here." He turned and went back to the car and opened the passenger door.

She slapped her hands over her mouth when he turned back with a chubby brown and white puppy in his arms sporting a big pink bow. Even though she wasn't wearing shoes she ran up and took it from him, "Oh my gosh, I love him—"

"Her." He corrected.

"I love *her*," she said letting the puppy lick her chin, "What's her name?"

"I don't know. Sudas gave me some long winded thing. I think you should call her whatever you want. His sister breeds them. She's pureblooded."

"What breed is she?"

"English Bulldog."

"Awwwww. Oh Tyler, she's perfect!"

"So, I'm forgiven?"

She nodded and looked at him with moist eyes, "No one ever got me a puppy."

"I wasn't sure—" he looked past her as Tito came down the steps toward them. He wasn't sure if he was bracing for a fight because of the way he mauled his sister, but a smile spread across his face and he held out his hand. Tyler shook it. He nodded toward the puppy.

"Nice," he said to Tyler.

"If you can't keep her, Micah said he'd take her." He offered.

"No, he won't," Eva said hugging her protectively.

"I agree. I like dogs." Tito said scratching her ear.

"She'll need lots of attention. She's only six weeks old," Tyler said.

"That's okay." Tito said, "Give her over Eva, and spend time with your fella." He held his hands out to take the new addition

to the family.

After Tito walked away with the puppy, she smiled up at him, "I think you found the only way to get into Tito's heart."

"Yeah, he took the puppy and left you with me," he said with a devious grin.

She nodded as Tito went into the house.

His eyes went down to her, "Get dressed. I want to take you out."

"I ate already."

"I want to take you dancing, not dinner. It's too late for that."

"I—I don't know."

"I called some friends. They're going to meet us at this club we hang out at. You'll be with friends. I need a night to unwind."

"No practice tomorrow?"

"Not until the afternoon."

"All right," she said casually. Truthfully she would have sold her soul to spend some time with him.

Eva groaned as a bright light made her head throb. She peeled her eyes open and saw Gio standing in the doorway leaning against the jamb with his arms folded across his chest and a sloppy smile on his face, "What time is it?"

"One in the afternoon."

"What?" She started to sit up, got half way there, and groaned going the rest of the way slowly with her hand on her forehead. Her head was throbbing like a jackhammer, "where is everyone?"

"Church."

"Oh." She reached for a glass of water that was at the bedside then saw something else on the table beside it.

"Tylenol," he grinned, "take them, they'll help." Gio put them there about an hour ago when she still hadn't woken up. He

knew she was going to have a hell of a hangover. He even stayed home from church to make sure she was okay.

"What happened?"

"Well, dear sister, you got shitfaced," he said with a chuckle, "Something I never thought I'd see. It was—interesting."

"I *didn't*," she said with wide eyes.

"Tyler brought you home slung over his shoulder."

"Oh lord," she said before swallowing the pills following it with half of the glass of water.

"Honey, you are not a drinker."

"Are you mad at him?"

"No. you are an adult as I remember you screeching at us several times these past weeks, besides, Tyler never had one drink last night and he brought you home when he really didn't have too."

"How do you know about him not drinking, I mean?"

"It's hockey season. They try to refrain from alcohol—most times. Besides when he dumped you on your bed, he told me. He's too arrogant to lie to me."

That was probably true. "He put me to bed?"

"He *dumped* you on the bed. Then left." He chuckled this time.

"How embarrassing." She looked down to see that she still wore the same dress as she went out in.

"I wouldn't worry about it. Being who he is, you probably aren't the first woman he hauled home over his shoulder."

She glared at him, "Gee thanks, Gio."

"Anytime, now get dressed and join the living." He turned and left closing the door behind him.

She had a shower and threw on a pair of jeans and stylish brown checked blouse. She could have kissed Gio when she went out to the kitchen and saw that he made her some pancakes. She sat down across from him, "Thanks."

“Well there were a few times you did that for me when I was stupid.”

She only remembered bits and pieces about her night, but she did remember that he only ordered soda or a Perrier, “I really hope I didn’t make a fool out of myself.”

“Chances are—and from my experience,” he grinned, “You probably did, but this is a lesson learned.”

Micah tapped Tyler’s helmet with his gloved hand as he coasted by him to center ice, “wake up man. Dad’s watching.”

Tyler shook his head and moved to the left wing. He cast a brief glance at Dutch who definitely had his attention on him. “shit,” he swore under his breath. He was a little sluggish because he went out with some of the team last night and their girlfriends. Micah declined because his mother was still here and he hadn’t seen her in a few weeks.

With Dutch being so busy with two of his sons’ careers, he didn’t get home often, so Micah’s mother would fly out to meet him and bring his three younger brothers. They were all at the house and Micah was big on family. They both were. That’s why they both went home when they had a few days in between games. Still, he missed Eva.

He grinned to himself and cast another glance at Dutch who was skating along the boards, but his eyes still flicked to him. It wasn’t going to be easy to avoid punishment, but by the looks of it Dutch was moving on to Mark, who actually did drink last night. He was sweating a little when he showed up this afternoon from a hangover and Tyler could have kissed his feet for distracting Dutch. If he looked closely he’d see the beginnings of a black eye that was barely visible under his helmet. Mark made sure to keep it on when Dutch was around and he hadn’t caught wind of it yet.

They were a tight team especially when it came to things like

that. No one who was there would tell what happened last night and as far as the four of them were concerned, they had a great time.

He meant to go home at midnight, but that didn't happen. Last night Eva was in a word, sensational. His little catholic girl completely loosened up after a few glasses of wine and he honestly didn't have the will to make her stop drinking with the discovery of her wild side. He was enjoying himself with her way too much. On the dance floor she moved against him so seductively that he was sincerely tempted to take her back to his place not home, but he wasn't immoral, and he wanted her sober when she made that decision. He'd had drunk women before in his bed and it was a waste of time. Mind you his state of mind was no different.

No, for Eva, she had to be one hundred percent sober and willing. He wanted her to remember everything he was going to do to her when they finally got together. It was too bad she fell asleep on the way home because he really wanted to taste her again, but as before, he couldn't take advantage of her vulnerability. However that didn't mean that he couldn't move his gaze down the front of her. She had exquisite breasts and although she let him touch them, it didn't do justice because he knew having his hands on her bare skin would be phenomenal.

He carried her over his shoulder to the house and knocked on the door. Gio answered, saw the situation and stepped aside without a word. He did follow him down to Eva's room while he laid her on the bed and removed her shoes before covering her up. He was surprised that her older brother wasn't angry with him, but he just thanked him for bringing her home.

The best part about last night was that she had no inhibitions and had no idea how damn sexy she was. She wore a cream dress that fit her snug, but not snug enough for her to lose her class and hell did she look classy. Men's jaws fell when she

walked into the club with her on his arm and it made him feel like a prized stallion.

He may not have taken her home to his, but he took every opportunity to touch her. More than once his hand slid from her back to her ass, and Christ was it nice! A perfect round form that fit in his large hand flawlessly. Several times he was able to bend down and move his mouth into the crease of her neck to inhale the slight scent of perfume she wore and she would move her arms around his middle and return the embrace.

Hopefully this helped her loosen up a bit around him because he was starting to go crazy not being able to touch like he wanted to, or like he was used to with women. He never wanted to touch a female body as much as he did hers.

Maybe it had something to do with the fact that no man ever had their hands on her, or that he was seriously becoming crazy about her. Eva was unique. She was sweet, caring and had this passionate hot temper that kept him guessing. She was nothing like he was used to. The only problem was he wanted her so bad that he could taste it. Yet, he had to be careful. The last thing he wanted to do was send her running. No one knew how many times he chastised himself for not taking her home last night, but it was so morally wrong. Yet, he was suffering. Every time he closed his eyes he had images of them breaking his bed.

After practice Tyler pulled off his gloves and Micah glanced at his knuckles. "Oh man. You'd better hide that."

Tyler looked down to see what Micah was staring at. It was the obvious bruises and one split knuckle that he'd bandaged early that morning. He glanced up at him and turned his hands away when Dutch walked by. He had to refrain from smiling because he had too many close calls already with the GM.

"Just let me know now, did anyone know who you were when you beat the snot out of him?" Micah didn't even consider

that Tyler would have lost. He'd always been a fighter and more than once when they were younger did they get in scraps with local boys who were jealous of their popularity. One thing he was absolute about, Tyler could fight like hell. Dutch made sure they took boxing when they were growing up just to be able to compete on the ice when a fight broke out. However, it'd been years since he'd done that because of the unwanted attention being a well known athlete. He saved the fighting for the ice now. At least he thought he did.

Tyler shrugged, "I don't know." Then he grinned, "It was two guys by the way. Give me credit."

"Jesus." Micah said not amused, "Dad's going to come unglued if the media gets a hold of that."

"It was after the club closed and we were all leaving. Some prick made a play for Eva. I intercepted."

"I'm sure it's not as simple as you put it."

"No." Tyler grinned. It was actually four guys who were drinking but Tyler only had to fight two of them. His buddies handled the other two. Tyler had the upper hand, along with Johnny Ibsen, one of their best defensemen, and Mark who felt like he could take on the world.

The other guys were stupid to even try. Just looking at size of the four of them should have been a deterrent, but it didn't happen. Liquor made people brave.

One of them carried on comments that he'd been using in the club about Eva. Tyler thought he'd shown a tremendous amount of restraint until one of them grabbed her ass when she was coming off the dance floor with one of the other girlfriends. He could take the chatter, he was used to worse, but touching her was disrespectful and unacceptable.

Tyler said to meet him outside and he did, but he brought three friends. Obviously the guy thought he was alone until three more six foot something hockey players showed up behind him,

all sober except Mark. It was a brief fight and he was hoping that Eva was too loaded to remember any of it. He actually put her in his car and went back to take care of the guy. He definitely wouldn't have let his teammates interfere, but he also didn't expect the guy not to be honorable. After all, it was his girlfriend he was pawing, then he had the balls to bring three more guys. Well, they sure got a surprise didn't they?

So he told Micah the truth.

"Well, we won't tell dad unless he finds out the hard way. I'm sure you like your nuts."

Tyler laughed, "I'm attached to them—yes."

Meanwhile Dutch tapped Mark on the shoulder and indicated with a nod that he wanted to talk to him privately.

"Ah hell. Poor bastard," Tyler said.

Mark shot them a look of helplessness before he followed Dutch reluctantly into the other room. Tyler knew that he wouldn't say anything to what happened the night before, and most likely Dutch wouldn't care, but make him pay for it instead.

Micah returned his attention to Tyler, "Did you tell Eva about the pool party?"

"No, she wouldn't have remembered. She was sloshed."

Micah grinned, "Well, bring her tonight. My mom wants to meet her."

"Who's all going?"

Micah spread his arms. That meant everyone. "Except maybe Mark. I think dad dragged him back out on the ice."

"He looked a little green." Tyler laughed, though he really shouldn't have, he'd been there.

"A what?" she said into the phone. Tyler called her at three and told her to be ready by five when he came by. She did hear that part but what he said next made her do a double take.

"Pool party. Bring your swimsuit—" he paused, "something

that preferably covers you body well, because I don't feel like fighting my friends." His voice deepened.

Eva spun away from Tito who was sitting at the kitchen table drinking a coffee because her face went bright red and he was watching her with the eyes of an eagle, "I'm not doing that."

"Be brave."

"no."

"I'll make it worth your while."

She stopped breathing. Gosh his deep voice was just heavenly and the promise in that phrase left her speechless. Then he chuckled and her insides pulsed.

"Speechless?"

"I'll bring shorts."

"And a swimsuit."

"I—I don't think I own one."

"Just a minute." He said before he addressed someone else. Then he was back on the phone, "Hailey said she's got one and it's conservative. She said it doesn't fit right after she had Shane."

She still didn't say anything.

"Eva, sweetheart, I swear you'll have fun. Have I ever lied to you?"

"Not that I know of." She finally said a little shyly.

"That's my girl. I'll see you in about an hour." He hung up.

My girl. She closed her eyes.

"Where are you going?" Tito asked as she hung up the phone.

"Micah's."

"Are you drinking again?" he said narrowing his gaze disapprovingly.

"No, Tito, probably not for the rest of my life."

"He shouldn't have let you do that."

"He didn't let me do anything. I did it to myself. Tyler didn't

even drink.”

“Yeah Gio said that.”

“Why don’t you like him?”

He shrugged, “I don’t trust him with you. I like him as an athlete because without him our team wouldn’t be the best in the league, but it’s different when it comes to family.” He sighed, “Look Eva, I’m a man too and I know how a man thinks when he looks at a woman. Tyler’s not naïve when it comes to beautiful women. I worry that he might hurt you.”

If only Tito knew that it wasn’t Tyler that was wanting more out of this relationship. She started dreaming about him and it left her hot and bothered most nights. She liked the way he touched her and kissed her. It sent her senses soaring. If Tito knew that it was her initiating the intimacy, he’d be shocked. “He’s been a gentleman Tito,” she said truthfully.

“Eva, you’re beautiful. No one is going to judge you,” Tyler said outside the change room.

She looked down at the swimsuit Hailey gave her and sighed. She was acting like an adolescent. She had seen the suits the other girls were wearing and they weren’t near as conservative as this. She silently thanked Hailey when she gave her the designer one piece. It was pretty blue and green and it covered her well.

“Are you dressed,” Tyler said.

“Yes.”

He pulled open the door and stepped in, “*Damn!*” he said looking down the length of her and released a long slow whistle of appreciation.

“Tyler!” she admonished with eyes as wide as saucers.

“You have amazing legs.” *Amazing hips, curves, breasts*, he thought the rest to himself.

“Get out Tyler,” she said while placing her hand on his chest

and trying to push him back out the door which was really pointless. He was too big. It was like pushing on a cement wall. He ignored her and shut the door behind him.

It wasn't because of her shyness that she wanted him to leave, it was more than just that. He was wearing swimming trunks and every inch of him was evenly tanned and revealing how perfectly muscular he was. He had several tattoos on his upper torso and biceps that she never would have guessed he would get. It just made him seem so much more appealing—masculine. Something she knew he didn't need more of. She quickly dropped her hand realizing that she was touching him.

Her eyes slipped down his chest to his sculpted abdomen. She never thought that men really had those type of washboard abs that you seen on television, but he did. Then there was his thick chest with a spray of dark hair. It picked up again just under his navel and disappeared into the elastic band of his shorts. She turned her head away but not before she had his body burned into her mind. She realized that he just stood there and allowed her to admire him. Obviously he was proud of his body, and he should be.

"No way am I leaving when a beautiful woman looks at me like that," he said deeply stepping up to her and placing his fingers under her chin, "Look at me honey. There's no shame in it."

Her eyes went to his, "You—you're, well—" she blushed. He was just plain *heavenly*.

"Here." He took one of her hands and placed it on his chest. "You have my permission to touch me as many times as you want. I certainly won't protest."

She looked up at him. His expression was serious, intense. Yet, she didn't remove her hand, she didn't want to. He was as warm and hard as she thought he would be.

"I—I went to catholic school." She stuttered out.

“I figured that out already,” he said allowing a smile to tug at the corner of his mouth.

“I mean—gosh Tyler.” She took a big unsteady breath and moved her eyes down to his chest where her hand was.

The look of awe on her face was fascinating. Women admired him before, but Eva was different. She was discovering her own attraction and it was, quite frankly, sexy as hell.

Tyler bent his head slowly until she looked up at him again and then he kissed her. There was no hesitation from him to allow her to become accustomed to it this time. He had given her enough of that. This time he was going to kiss her like that mouth of hers was built for.

Eva somehow lost track of time, or even place, perhaps her own name if she was asked to recall it right then. Now both of her hands moved over his chest between them. She kissed him back like she was ravenous and didn't even notice that one of his hands moved up and skillfully slipped the shoulder strap of her swimsuit down her arm.

Only when his warm calloused hand came in contact with her breast did she gasp and pull her head back to look at him. That meant nothing to Tyler because he had experience and although the touch was unfamiliar to her, he knew she desired him. Without pausing or hesitating he caressed her skillfully. Within a fraction of a second her eyes closed and a moan left her parted lips. He took the opportunity to look down at her. Christ she was so beautiful! Her head fell back and he did what any hot blooded man would do, took advantage.

Eva had to bite her lip to keep from screaming his name when his hot mouth closed over her breast. Her arms moved around his head as he suddenly lifted her up on his hips, took a couple of steps, and laid her down on the chaise lounge within the change room bringing his body over hers. Not once did he stop what he was doing with his mouth and within the next

minute the swimsuit was down to her waist and she was arching toward him. His mouth moved between her breasts licking and flicking the soft skin coupled with small bites.

Eva felt like weeping. Never could she have imagined that two people could share something so tortuously sweet! Her fingers knotted in his thick hair trying to get closer to him.

Tyler growled and reached down lifting one of her thighs up over his hip to settle intimately against her. She still didn't protest and his need was obvious. Painfully obvious.

He had to stop. There was no way he could take her in the change room. He had an incredible amount of stamina and someone would definitely come looking with the amount of time they would be missing. He could take her quickly, but that would be wrong in so many ways. It would destroy what he wanted with her. Most likely she would lose what little trust he built with her. God damn it! He never wanted a woman as much as her. This was killing him.

"Eva," he said raggedly, "We can't—not here." He lifted his head and looked down at her. Her eyes were glazed over as she stared up at him. He groaned, that look of desire could make any man come on the spot. "Shit." He took another breath and eased himself off her. It was stupid to seduce her here. Soon people would be wondering what took them so long.

He sat back and pulled her to a sitting position and reluctantly slipped her bathing suit back over her shoulders. "Honey, are you all right?"

Her eyes sought out his and she nodded. "Are you?" He looked like he was in pain.

He stood up and adjusted his swimming trunks trying to hide the evidence of his erection, but it wasn't easy. "I will be in a few minutes."

Eva watched him with fascination.

He flicked her a glance and shook his head. He wasn't sure

who corrupted who now. She still had that glazed look and he had a notion to take her home and make love to her.

“I feel boneless?” she said finally.

He cocked his head, “Boneless?” He asked staring down at her from his towering height.

“Mindless—hot.”

He grinned slowly, deviously, “Good.”

“Wow.”

He groaned, bent over and took her arms making her stand, “Honey, you have no idea what that sultry look is doing to me, so stop it.”

“I look sultry?”

“To say the least.” His eyes went to her breasts, “They’re perfect.” They really were. Not too big or too small. They were pert and well shaped with nicely sculpted rosy tipped nipples. He couldn’t imagine a nicer shaped woman than her and he’d had a lot of women.

For the first time she started to blush, “Oh Tyler—I can’t believe—that—well, it felt so—“

He kissed her again cutting off her words before he gripped her hand, “No need to explain, but we may have to if we don’t get out of here soon. People are going to wonder what we’re doing.” He had to shut her up. The newly discovered desire in her was going to have him lose it.

Eva completely forgot about being in her bathing suit after that. In fact she forgot a great many things. They played volleyball in the pool where the women sat on the men’s shoulders, and even though she loved the sport she kept thinking about what Tyler did to her earlier and let several good lobs go by. It didn’t matter, everyone was having fun.

Tyler didn’t forget a damn thing. He became fiercely possessive and refused to let Eva out of his sight. He kept thinking that everyone was looking at her. Hell, He couldn’t get

his eyes off her. Her shape was exquisite. Her skin soft against his was unforgettable, and as far as he was concerned, she was his.

"When's your birthday?" he asked out of the blue.

She gave him a puzzled look, "December fifth. Why?"

"Does your family have anything planned?"

"I don't know. Usually I get a cake and a gift from them," she answered getting more confused at where this was going.

"No fancy party?"

"Not since I was twelve—what's with the questions?"

He stared at her a moment before answering. He wasn't sure how she'd handle what he was going to ask her. He'd been going over it for several weeks on how to get her to agree. He even put some planning into place already. Yet, he was concerned she'd turn him down because of her morals. Then again, how would he know if he didn't come out and say it? "I want to take you to Vegas on your birthday."

She blinked but didn't say anything.

"Before you protest, Hailey and Micah are going along with a Mark and whatever girl he brings."

She started shaking her head.

"Honey." He reached over and took her hand. "Before you say no, take the next few days and think about it while I'm out of town. You'll be twenty years old."

"I have the shop."

"Adel said she'd cover."

Her mouth fell, "You told Adel!"

"She swore on your mother's grave she wouldn't tell your family until either you or I spoke to them." Tyler knew she wouldn't because she was half in love with him.

She felt her face get hot with her anger but before she could say anything he started talking and she felt her anger subside.

"I know you don't like to be surprised by this, but you are a

beautiful young woman who needs to enjoy herself more. I have the means to provide it, and I want to. I've never seen anyone work as hard as you do. I want to show you what it's like to be treated like a lady. Let me," he added softly.

"It's not right." She couldn't ask about the room arrangement, because from the look he carried all afternoon and the incident in the change room, she already knew the answer.

"It's perfectly right."

"I'm not one of those women you are used to Tyler."

"Of course you aren't." he agreed adamantly. "But you are my girlfriend, and I want to take you somewhere special for your birthday. I have that right."

"Am I?" she asked surprised at his confession.

He gave her a look of shock, "Jesus Eva, I didn't spend several months chasing you the way I did if I didn't think that way about you."

She threw up her hands in exasperation, "I told you, I don't know anything."

He considered that for a moment before answering. Of course she didn't. "I don't chase women. Also, I haven't had a girlfriend since I was seventeen," he explained.

Her eyes widened, "really?"

"I never had to chase a woman in my life." He admitted honestly. "When I saw you though, that changed." He had to keep reminding himself that she didn't know him, or who he was so she didn't know his history.

Her whole body had a warm flushing feeling go through it. It was hard to believe that someone as rich and famous as he was admitted to chasing her when he could have anyone and probably has.

"You may not think so, but I've humbled myself around you. So much so, that Micah can't stop laughing his head off whenever he sees me run around after you."

"You don't!"

"Oh baby, do I *ever*." He said deeply dropping his gaze to her mouth.

She was speechless again.

"I know you don't see it, but it's true."

She still never said anything.

"Think about it okay? Vegas."

Her eyes studied his. How she would love to go with him and his friends. It sounded like so much fun and Tyler was right, she never really did have much of that in her life and she'd never really been out of the city. He'd been giving her tastes of what she was missing and she was really enjoying herself. Only she knew her brothers and her father wouldn't let her. "I will."

"That's my girl." He smiled slowly, "I'll see you next week."

"All right," she said hoping he'd kiss her goodnight, but he didn't. At least he gave a reason why.

His eyes went down the front of her, "You'd better go, because if I touch you again, you won't be getting out of the car."

She took a deep breath and stared at him a moment before she broke into a grin and did as he asked.

He waited until she was safe inside, the whole time he kept thinking about how soft she was under him, what she felt like and what she tasted like.

He started the car and cast a glance back at the house again. Not long now and she'd be his.

"What the hell is this?" Tito took the newspaper away from Eva who was sitting at the table circling items in it.

She shot her head up as he shook it to straighten it out and read what she was doing. She knew her family wouldn't let her go to Vegas with Tyler and she really wanted to go, badly. All day at work she thought about how to make this possible and finally decided what to do. On the way home she bought a newspaper

and started looking for apartments. She was old enough to move out on her own and could afford it easily. As far as she was concerned she was mature enough to make her own decisions.

Slowly his dark eyes ran over the print before setting them on her. They were hard and accusing, "No way."

She stood up and snatched the paper from him, "I'm nineteen. I'll be twenty next month and you and Gio allow me no freedom." She said glaring up at him.

"That's not true." He said taking it back, "You are not moving out."

"No? It's almost midnight and where is Adel? If I was out this late, you guys would call the cops."

"She's twenty five."

"And I'm nineteen." She said in exasperation, "Soon to be twenty."

He gritted his teeth and stared down at her, "Eva, you *know* why."

"Yes, neither, you, Gio or papa trust me to look after myself."

He took a deep breath and released it slowly to try and control his temper, "Adel is a different person."

"Adel is not a virgin you mean." She shot at him, "She didn't have the strict upbringing I had, she didn't go to catholic school, she wasn't made to deal with all the rules you guys lay out for me." Surprisingly Tito looked uncomfortable, but she never really discussed anything like that with her brother before.

At that point Giovanni came into the kitchen to see what the raised voices were about. Tito told him that Eva was looking for an apartment. His eyes went to her, "Tito, give me a minute."

Tito released a breath of frustration slapping the newspaper back on the table followed by a stern look at Eva before he turned and left the kitchen. Gio was better equipped to handle this than he was. Most likely he would say something offensive and hurt her.

"Sit down Eva." Gio said while nodded toward the chair.

She did after a huff of frustration. Why did these two have to constantly interfere in her life?

He sat in the chair next to her, "Why the sudden urge to move out?"

She looked away.

"Eva." He repeated.

She turned her head back to him, "Tyler wants to take me to Vegas on my birthday. I know you guys won't let him, so I was going to get my own apartment. I'm done with being treated like a child. I want the freedom that Adel has."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly while keeping eye contact with her. "I don't like to compare you two because you're different people Eva, but we're protective of you because you're special."

"Adel is too." She protested.

"That's not what I'm saying. Adel was always independent and when it came to men, she knew how to handle them and she did what she wanted no matter how much we protested. You don't remember that because you're younger."

She really didn't.

"You respect your family's wishes and have always acted accordingly." He explained.

"You haven't given me much choice."

"Honey, I know we're protective, but you have this sweetness about you that would bring any man to their knees. We just don't want to see you get used."

She flushed a little, "that's not true Gio."

"No? So a star athlete spots you from a drive by and has since fallen all over himself around you, means nothing?"

"I don't know Gio. I don't know anything about attraction between men and women. And—he doesn't fall all over himself around me." She brought her eyes to his showing her

embarrassment. She never had anyone to talk about those things with and Adel always made it sound crude. Yet, what she experienced with Tyler wasn't anything near that.

Gio studied her expression, "If you saw the way that man looked at you, you wouldn't doubt it."

She shook her head.

"How do you feel about him?"

She shrugged, "I'm really scared about what I feel." She admitted. "I think about him all the time and there's butterflies in my stomach whenever I see him."

He nodded and his eyes were serious, "You love him."

"I'm sure I love him." She conceded reluctantly, "I tried not to."

He smiled, "I'm sure you did, but he's pretty charming." It wasn't just his looks, money or fame either. Gio knew that. Eva's feelings ran deep. He treated his baby sister like a princess and made her feel beautiful. Her family could have told her that a thousand times, but it wouldn't have near the affect that it did if Tyler said it to her.

"I just think I'm another woman in a long line of women for him."

Gio didn't want to tell her but he didn't think that was near the truth. It was true that Tyler had a reputation because he'd followed his career since he started playing there several years ago. Every time you saw a picture of him in the paper he was with some stunning woman. Yet, he'd been the perfect gentleman around Eva not to disrespect her. He'd been patient, attentive and respectful of her family's wishes despite what he was used to with women. Gio suspected that Tyler was pretty crazy about his sister too because he wasn't the least bit deterred by the subtle threats. Who could blame him? Eva was stunning. From the day she was born he and Tito were fiercely protective of her. They'd actually tuned in a few of their friends that had

mentioned anything indicating that they found her attractive. Eva had no idea the lengths they'd gone through to protect her.

"I'm sorry for your sheltered life honey, but your family does not want to see you end up some man's flavor of the night. You're too special for that. You're smart, beautiful and we know you can go farther than all of us. That's why we're so protective."

She narrowed her eyes, "I'm not stupid Gio. I want to go with him."

He tilted his head knowingly, "that's obvious." He smiled slightly, "I'll talk to Papa."

She grinned suddenly and threw her arms around him, "thanks Gio!"

"Tell Papa that Tyler asked Adel to mind the shop and she said she would. Besides we hired that new girl last week so hopefully it won't be too hard on her. Business picked up in the last few weeks."

Gio shook his head and smiled wider, "Honey, why do you think that is?"

She shrugged.

"Remember that your face was cast in front of millions of viewers, I'm sure some of them figured out where you work."

"You think it's because of Tyler?"

"I know it is," he said as her face fell

"I have no problem with you dating Tyler, but don't put your life in his hands. Figure out what you want with yours."

CHAPTER SIX

"Hailey wants you to call Eva." Micah said after he picked Tyler up from his building. They had a practice this afternoon and a game tomorrow.

Tyler looked at him but didn't say anything.

"Man, it's been over two weeks."

“Leave it alone Micah.” Tyler said.

Micah cast him a glance as he pulled out into traffic, “Have you met my wife?”

Tyler shrugged, “Tell Hailey it’s fine. I just have some things to work out.”

“Hailey thinks that you are being complete bastard.”

“She’s right.” Tyler agreed. He really needed some time to clear his head. Whenever Eva was around, he just couldn’t think straight, and he had some things to figure out.

“Are we still on for Vegas?”

“As far as I know.”

This didn’t make any sense. Tyler wasn’t giving anything up. “Did something happen?”

“Yes, and no.” he answered.

Micah clenched his jaw. Tyler wasn’t telling him a damn thing and he had Hailey on his case about Eva. She’d ran into her a few days ago downtown and she looked as though she’d been run over by a truck, so his wife said, “Hailey said it looked as though she’d been crying.”

“Micah, shut the fuck up.” Tyler said with restrained anger as turned his attention to the scenery outside the passenger window.

His tone or blunt statement didn’t affect Micah but he knew when to stop pushing. They had had harsher words with one another before and sometimes they’d come to blows. With how close they were growing up together, it wasn’t a surprise to anyone to know that. It wasn’t his business and he shouldn’t have started with him, but he was worried about Eva too.

If he thought he was the only one, he was wrong. When they pulled into the parking lot of the arena, Gio was there leaning against his truck with his arms crossed across his chest.

“Ah hell.” Tyler said. “This is all I need.”

“do you want me to go to the underground parking?” Micah

asked knowing there was security guarding it.

"No. Drop me off. I'll talk to him."

"Eva sent her brother?"

"Chances are, she doesn't know he's even here." Tyler admitted while Micah pulled up alongside of the truck. He got out, "I'll see you in a few minutes." He said to Micah as he shut the door.

Micah pulled away watching Tyler walk up to Gio in the rearview mirror. Gio straightened and dropped his arms while talking to Tyler.

A half an hour later he came in the dressing room, "Everything all right?"

"Yeah." Tyler said starting to get undressed.

Micah finished changing and didn't say another word. He didn't have anything to tell Hailey and chances were she was going to get fed up and talk to Tyler herself. He'd already told her to leave him alone, but chances were, she wasn't going to listen.

Micah somehow sensed that something deep was going on inside Tyler's head and he decided to give him time before he started bugging him again.

At that moment his father walked in the dressing room as large as life. His dad had this air about him that commanded respect even though he didn't act like it. His eyes searched the crowd before they settled on Tyler, "Hartley." He said quietly, "A word."

"Christ." He mumbled and turned away from Micah walking toward the room Dutch indicated to.

Once inside he told him to sit down. Tyler did.

"I need to know." Dutch said, once Tyler seated himself on a bench.

Tyler didn't have to ask what he meant because he knew. Dutch was aware that something was bothering him. He'd

actually given him time to come clean, but he hadn't. Obviously he'd noticed his inconsistencies even though he hadn't let on. "Jesus, can't a man have some bloody privacy?" Tyler grumbled. His teammates razed him about her too and he really didn't want to talk about this relationship. Maybe he screwed up by bragging about other women he'd had. Still, he wanted privacy with Eva. He needed to figure out exactly what he wanted to do with her now. He expected a tongue lashing for that statement but Dutch only sat down next to him and took a deep breath of patience. He was surprised that when he finally did speak, he was firm but not angry.

"Not with your status Hartley. You of all people should know that. I'll pull you from the first line if you don't start acting like the athlete you are. You have an image to uphold. I never tolerated this bullshit from my son, so don't expect better treatment."

Tyler raised his eyes to his mentor, "I met someone."

"I figured." Dutch said if it were no surprise.

"Really? Is there anything you don't know?"

"Yeah, you and Micah are different in a lot of ways, but you're also a lot alike." Dutch admitted. Then he gave him one of his rare smiles. "So tell me about her."

Two weeks.

Eva paced the floor of her room holding the cordless phone in her hand. She'd dialed it at least a dozen times but hung up before it rang.

He'd gone a week without phoning her before but at least Hailey phoned and let her know what was going on. This time there wasn't one call. When she ran into Hailey a couple of days ago she seemed surprised when Eva asked about Tyler. Obviously she wasn't in on why he hadn't called. All along she thought that maybe they were being detained by Dutch again, but

apparently not. If Hailey didn't know anything, neither did Micah. She couldn't help but have her eyes water up. Quickly she excused herself feeling terrible that she put Hailey on the spot like that.

Chances were Micah would have heard about it from Hailey when she went home.

Now she was worried. Why wouldn't he call her? He'd invited her to Vegas and they were to leave that following weekend. He hadn't even called to see how it went with her family. Did he change his mind and grow bored with her? If he did, she would tear a strip off of him for not telling her. She at least deserved that much respect.

She looked at her bedside clock. It was nine in the evening.

With shaking fingers she dialed his number again and let it ring this time resisting the urge to hang up. He'd given it to her after their first date at Micah's, but she never wanted to use it. She didn't want to seem desperate.

It was answered at the other end, "Tyler?"

To her ultimate surprise it was a woman who's voice answered her, "No, he's out, but I expect him home soon. May I take a message?"

She bit her bottom lip, "No, thank you." she hung up devastated.

She tossed the phone on her bed and sat down with a plop burying her face in her hands fighting tears. How could he? She thought they had something. He called her his girlfriend. He asked her to Vegas.

It served her right for handing her heart to him on a platter.

For an hour she brooded and then she got angry. Well, he wasn't going to get away with hurting her. She stood up and left her room to get her coat.

Her siblings were out with friends or girlfriends and her father was sleeping in front of the television. She slipped out

unnoticed.

“What are you doing answering the door like that?” Eva said with wide eyes. Tyler opened the door bare chested with just a pair of pajama bottoms on. It took her less than an hour to reach his place.

“You’re lucky I went that far. I sleep naked.” He said rubbing his eyes with his fingers.

Her eyes popped wide.

Whatever irritation he felt at being woken up evaporated at that look. She was too damn pretty. He sighed, reached over and took her hand pulling her into his condo and shut the door, “What are you doing here?”

His demeanor was all off. He didn’t seem upset that she was there, just surprised. If he had another woman, wouldn’t he be acting guilty or angry that she interrupted them? Regardless she was going to let him know how she felt. She placed her hands on her hips and stared up at him trying to avoid how well shaped he was. Gosh she almost forgot how he looked without a shirt! “I called you earlier and a woman answered the phone. I’m here to tell you face to face that I don’t want to see you again!” She waved an arm toward him, “Obviously I interrupted something.”

To her complete chagrin and surprise he threw back his head and laughed.

If she wasn’t so angry, she probably would have found that attractive. “Tyler!” she said suddenly feeling stupid and not knowing why. He really didn’t act like he was having an affair with another woman.

“I’m sorry honey,” he said getting himself under control but another laugh escaped him, “That, was my sister.”

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

“Really.” He took her arm and led her further into his apartment and down the hall.

"Where—" he stopped in front of a room, opened the door and flicked on the light. On the bed was a suitcase, opened and it looked like it had been rifled through, "She's here for a wedding and is crashing here for one night."

She flushed, "Oh lord."

Then he pulled her further down the hall and opened another door which was clearly his room from the masculine touches. It was neat and tidy except for the bed that he obviously crawled out of to answer the door. "This is my room," he said looking down at her with clear amusement in his eyes, "If I had a woman in this apartment, I doubt very much I would be sleeping in a separate room with her if we were lovers."

"I feel so stupid." She muttered bowing her head.

"No, absolutely not. I love the fact that you got jealous enough to confront me, but honey, no worries. I only have eyes for one hot headed female."

She looked up at him, still embarrassed, "Well, Tyler, look at you. You can't really blame me for thinking—"

He cupped her face and stared down at her, "No, and I do understand why, but I told you before I'm monogamous."

"But," she said softly, "I—I mean, we—"

He smiled slowly knowing she was having some difficulty discussing intimacy, "Just because we haven't been together, doesn't mean I'm going somewhere else. I like you, I like you a lot."

She nodded. "You didn't call."

"I'm human Eva. I needed some time, that's all. I've been neglecting my responsibilities with the team. Every time I get near you I can't think straight. Even calling you to explain would make things worse." Hell, he wanted her. He really did, but he wasn't an ass that would take advantage of her vulnerability.

Her mouth parted, "Really Tyler?"

"How did you get here?" he said changing the subject.

Having her in his apartment alone, was way too dangerous.

“I took a taxi.”

“I’ll go get dressed and take you home.” He said releasing her.

“I woke you didn’t I?”

“It’s fine.”

“Tyler I can take a cab home.”

“Yeah, then I’ll worry and wait up until you got there and called me to make sure you’re okay. I’ll only be a minute.”

“I suppose you have game tomorrow?”

“Practice at five in the morning.”

“Now I really feel bad.”

He bent down and gave her a light kiss on the forehead, “I’ll be fine, now go wait in the living room or I’ll have to take you in my room.”

She widened her eyes and left quickly while his eyes went down her backside. He shook his head and went in his room.

While he was getting dressed Eva was spending a few minutes looking at the pictures hanging on his wall while waiting. He had a wall full. Some from when he was little and in a uniform all the way up to what looked like the junior league and beside him in most of them was who could only be Micah. They were so cute. One dark, one blond. She saw others that had what must’ve been family and others of friends. She was wondering what his sister looked like and spotted a beautiful woman with long blonde hair and blue or green eyes. It was hard to make out the color.

“That’s my mother,” Tyler said from behind making her jump.

He chuckled, “Sorry.”

She saw that he’d pulled on a white t-shirt and a pair of jeans. “Your mother?” His hair was still tousled making him look a little untamed. It was sinfully appealing. She had to redirect

her attention and quickly looked back at the photo remembering what he'd said about the woman being his mother. "No way. I thought she was your sister."

"Well, she'll love you for just saying that. My sister—" he said moving over to a shelf and picking up a framed picture, "has my dark looks."

"Oh wow, she's beautiful," Eva said taking the picture. Her hair was just past her shoulders and she glanced back and forth at his mother, "She looks like her but with dark hair."

"—And eyes," he said taking the picture and placing it back on the shelf.

"My mother was young when she had Emily and I was born the following year. She still looks good," he said proudly. "My father has more grey hair, but my mother says I'm a spitting image of him when he was my age. My sister, believe it or not is this high." He leveled his hand with his chest. "But hell on wheels when she's mad. Much like you."

She frowned at him but he just grinned.

He nodded back to another photo on the wall. "Those four dark haired boys with Micah, the only blonde, are his brothers. Cole—" he pointed to one of them, "is with us this is his second year. He's our star rookie. You met him at Micah's"

"How long have you known Micah?" she said nodding toward the photo.

"Yes, since we were four. We're as close as brothers."

"He's really handsome," she said out loud.

He narrowed his eyes at her, "Yes, but married, very married."

She laughed this time, "Now who's jealous?"

"Very much in love with his wife." He continued not changing his tone.

She laughed harder, "You say I have no reason to get jealous. You're so sexy I never even noticed—"

“What did you just say?” he said cutting her off with an expression of astonishment. Not once until now had she admitted to her attraction. Oh, he could see it in her expression, but she was stubborn in not letting herself be vulnerable toward him.

She snapped her mouth shut and blushed. She couldn’t believe she just blurted that out.

“I’m sexy?”

She groaned, “Gosh, Tyler, I’m such an idiot.”

“For complimenting me? Are you *crazy*? That’s the first time you said anything along those lines. I was beginning to think you were immune.”

After a pause she spoke softly, “No, I’m not immune.”

His eyes went over her lovely face for a moment before he responded, “so, how susceptible are you then?”

“We should go. I’ve said too much already.”

He reached out and held her arm to stop her from turning away, “I’ve been dreaming about you. About us.”

Her eyes went back to him in question.

“being together.” He elaborated, “It keeps me up at night. I’m tired for practice. I can’t concentrate when I’m on the ice, unless I get worked to the point of passing out and stay out of your life for a few days.”

“Tyler—“

“I’m not done Eva, so be quiet,” he said gently moving his hand over her cheek, “I’ve never felt that way about a woman before.”

She took a deep breath but matched his stare. It was getting a little easier despite how much he towered over her.

It wasn’t hard to figure out that she was in love with this man and it was something she came to terms with when she missed him over the past two weeks, but his confession just pushed her that much further. He was really good to her except

with the long absences, but she really didn't have a right to demand he check in with her constantly. Seeing him now and how he looked down at her, made her feel like the only woman in the world.

"Stay with me tonight." He said softly.

"Gosh, I can't." *gosh, I want to.*

"Honey, stay with me and let me show you how it can be between a man and a women, especially us. Then you wouldn't ever suspect that I was with another."

Her stomach seemed to be filled with butterflies now and her eyes went to his mouth. "I'm scared."

He nodded, "I know you are. I can take care of that," he said stepping closer to her.

"Really scared." She stuttered out. It was hard for her to admit that she was so vulnerable toward him. She'd never dealt with feelings like this before.

"I know." He bent his head and kissed her.

If she thought of protesting earlier she didn't now. Her hands slid up under his t-shirt and pressed against his hard sculpted abdomen.

"You need to tell me yes, Eva." He whispered against her mouth. He needed this to be her decision without him feeling as though he seduced her. He respected her too much and he didn't think he could handle the guilt the next morning if he felt he did.

She blinked a few times to focus. Her eyes went over his handsome face. She may not have said the words but she did nod.

For Tyler, it was good enough. "Thank God!" he bent and scooped her up into his arms and carried her to his room.

Eva didn't even remember having her clothes removed, but she certainly would never forget the feel of his naked body on hers. He was hard, hot, and surprisingly tender for how big he was.

He kissed her, caressed her and moved deliciously against her body until she started whispering his name breathlessly against this mouth. Then he moved his attention lower—much lower.

“Oh God!” Eva tangled her fingers in his hair and pulled while arching off the bed. At first she tried to get him to stop, but he was persistent, and after the first feel of his mouth and tongue, that was it! She was lost.

Tyler didn’t stop what he was doing until he knew she was ready for him. She trembled and cried out as she reached her first orgasm. He wasn’t done yet. This was going to be a long night and he was going to taste and touch every inch of her gorgeous body.

He sat back on his heels and moved his eyes down her naked satiated body with blazing heat before he bent and slid back up her slowly, seductively. Instantly she started to respond to him again.

Then he lifted himself up and over her suspending himself above her on his arms. “Tell me what you want Eva,” he said huskily.

“You, all of you.” she breathed reaching for him.

He moved to the side and reached into his nightstand drawer for some protection. He may have seemed calm and collected but his hands were shaking when he sat back on his heels and put it on. He wanted her so bad that he’d literally kill to have her.

Then he moved back over her taking her mouth under his as he settled between her thighs. “Wrap your legs around me,” he said against her mouth. She did. Then he moved forward carefully sinking into her. She gasped.

“Tell me if I hurt you.” he rasped trying to control himself.

“No—it’s just—different—” she breathed.

He kissed her hard and long while moving further and

further into her. He was still trembling. Not just with restraint but anticipation. He would be her first and if the rest of the night was like this, he'd never look at another woman for the rest of his life. Nothing felt even close to what he was experiencing now; physically and emotionally.

He was thankful that she was moist from her release because she was so damn tight he doubted he could fit within her if she wasn't. The last thing he ever wanted to do was hurt her. He couldn't handle it. Suddenly he felt the barrier and pushed through it sinking deep within her followed by a groan of unbelievable satisfaction that rumbled deep from within his chest. Every inch of him pulsed and shuddered with exquisite pleasure. He arched his back and pushed deeper unable to get close enough. She whimpered and he lifted his head to look down at her, but he didn't move again.

Eva could feel his whole body shiver and knew that he was doing his best to hold back from hurting her. "I'm okay," she said weakly knowing what he was thinking. It hurt, but there was something else there too. Somehow having him so close to her made it all worth it.

"Tell me how it feels," he said with his voice cracking huskily while moving out then back in again. It was easier that time but she still winced. He reached down and moved his hand under her bottom to tilt her hips up to get deeper.

That did it. She tilted her head back as something inside seemed to come alive, "It—it feels—" he moved again, "—Oh Tyler—I can't—"

He grinned and covered her mouth with his thrusting his tongue deep into it to tangle with hers as he found a slow torturous rhythm that she responded to.

He was tender and patient despite the overpowering urge to claim her roughly. Yet, there was something about her that made him want to make love to her with all the patience in the world.

It made everything come into perspective for him. This is what it was supposed to be like with a woman. A woman like Eva.

The light of the moon silhouetted through the blinds and cast a dim blue white glow on the bare skin of the lovers as they moved as one in a newly discovered realm of ecstasy.

Eva could feel that pressure building again and she tightened her legs around his hips. He must've known because he gave her what she was thinking. More—deeper—harder. She might have even whispered it in his ear. Soon she was calling out over and over again unable to keep it in.

“Open your eyes baby—look at me.” He said roughly while suspending himself on his forearms planted on either side of her head to reduce friction.

She did as he asked and saw his handsome face grow taught through the blur of her own desire. Then he bent his head and kissed her hard while emitting a deep visceral groan before bringing his full two hundred and ten pound muscular body down on her too slack to move. Still, he kissed her, tenderly.

She finally opened her eyes to see him staring down at her. Then he reached up and moved her hair off her face, “Christ, I can’t even begin to explain how amazing that was.” He bent his head and kissed her again.

Eva felt like weeping. She loved him so much and now she knew that it was her heart that was invested more than his. She just gave herself to him and it left her completely vulnerable.

He seemed to sense it, but misunderstood. “Did I hurt you Eva.” He asked gently.

She shook her head. It wasn’t what he thought. This time tears did fall and she was embarrassed at her weakness.

“Then why are you crying?”

She bit her bottom lip not wanting to tell him.

He felt like a brute thinking that he did actually hurt her. His heart felt like it had just been crushed, “Sweetheart, I’m

sorry." He brushed her tears off her cheeks, "I rushed you."

"No Tyler, please don't think that. You gave me the choice."

"I'm experienced in getting what I want Eva." He was worried that he didn't give her much of a choice at all. He knew he was physically persuasive and an innocent like Eva never really had a chance.

She nodded and actually smiled a little, "I know, but this was my choice—really." She said honestly. Thankfully he seemed to accept that.

"Really?"

She nodded.

He moved to the side and pulled her tight against him causing his body to envelope hers completely like he'd never let go. His thigh moved over her hip as his arms wrapped around her. She buried her face into his neck and fell asleep. He followed soon after.

"Hey," Tyler said sitting on the side of the bed, "Time to wake up sleepy head, I've got six o'clock practice."

"What time is it," she said opening her eyes.

"Four thirty."

She was so tired she could barely think. It took her a moment to catch her bearings. "How do you guys do that?" she sat up holding the sheet to her bare chest and couldn't help the blush that followed. In fact she was sure it went all the way to her toes. He was looking at her with those dark sinfully seductive eyes too, so that really didn't help. This newness between them had her completely unsettled.

"I've been doing it since I was four, it's not that hard." He reached out and cupped her jaw, "How are you?" he asked with his eyes searching hers.

She averted her gaze, "I'm fine."

"I meant, are you sore." He asked sincerely. Her shyness was

completely spellbinding. He loved the raw freshness that she held.

Her eyes came back to him, "Tyler, some things are personal."

He shook his head, "Not anymore." He bent over and gave her a scorching kiss, "there's nothing between us now. I know every inch of you." He smiled slowly. "However, I will give you some grace and allow you to dress without me ogling you because chances are I'm going to make love to you again and I can't risk being late for practice. I'll wait out in the kitchen." He got up and left giving her privacy to dress.

They didn't say much on the ride to her place because Tyler knew that she had some things to deal with that were unfamiliar to her. He however, was going crazy with wanting her again already. He pulled up in front of her house and turned off the car before turning to her. His eyes went past her to the house, "Are you going to be all right?" he was talking about her family and her not going home last night.

She nodded causing him to bring his eyes back to her. "They'll still be sleeping and chances are, they didn't even know I left."

He gave her a sloppy smile, "Eva, you little deviant. Sneaking out with boys."

She actually laughed, "Just you."

"that's right." He said dropping his smile.

She leaned over and kissed him, "Jealousy looks good on you Tyler."

"I'm not jealous," he denied terribly causing her to laugh again. He grinned, "Well a little." he looked at her for a moment, "about last night—"

"I'm fine." She interrupted blushing, "I really mean it." Her eyes searched his, "Tyler, you made me feel like a beautiful woman." it was really hard for her to say, but she needed him to

hear it. She honestly didn't want him to feel guilty. Eva always had trouble expressing her feelings except for anger because of how her siblings were, but it was important that he know that it was her that wanted to be with him on her own accord. "I know you feel as though you persuaded me, but really, it was my choice."

After a long moment of silence he finally nodded, "I just want to make sure. The last thing I want to do is hurt you."

She could have wept at that because she really believed him. "I'd better go." She turned to leave but felt a strong hand on her arm causing her to turn back to him.

Without a word he bent over and kissed her. It was hard, sinful and completely seductive.

She was breathless when he finally lifted his head and stared down at her, "I can't wait to get you alone in Vegas."

Her heart started pounding rapidly in her chest at that deeply voice promise.

"Baby, you'll be lucky to leave our room in one piece."

She blushed furiously now, but after last night with him, she couldn't stop the thrill that went through her.

"I'll see you later." He said dropping his gaze to her mouth.

She nodded and got out of the car before he could help her. It was that, or she was going to crawl over the middle consol and sit on his lap. He had no idea what was going on in her mind and she wanted to keep it that way. She was already way too vulnerable toward him.

When Tyler arrived for practice, he was back to his easy going self. Micah just grinned, but didn't say a word. He knew better. It was obvious to him that Tyler was no longer 'wound up'. Something had happened.

"How's Hailey feel about Vegas." He asked Micah after they were in the dressing rooms.

“Ecstatic—elated.” He laughed. “She’s been preparing for two weeks.” Micah was so relieved to see his friend almost back to normal for the first time in months. He knew this was uncharted territory for him but he had to admit, it looked good on him.

“Women.” Tyler chuckled.

“Hey you asked.”

“I did.” He said.

“How’s the oldest brother after the other day. You never said what he wanted.”

Tyler shrugged, “We squared it.”

“That’s good to hear because I have a feeling you should be more worried about him than the other one you told me about.”

He cast him a sideways glance, “You’re right. He reminds me of Lance.”

“Wow, now that you mention it, I can see that.” Micah only got a brief glimpse of him but just from the way he stood, he could almost see Tyler’s uncle having that same confident pose. Lance was a lawyer and a damn good one. He’d gotten them all out of scrapes more than once in their lives.

“Tyler glanced at his watch, “I have to leave. I want to take Emily to the airport. She said she was sorry she didn’t get to see you guys, but she misses her kids.”

“Understandable. We’ll see her soon anyway.” Micah said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Emily eyed her younger brother with a look of amusement as he carried her luggage to the check in at the airport. He left practice and went directly to his condo to drive her to the airport. She said she would take a cab, but he insisted. She was glad he did, because she loved him and hardly saw him at all anymore except in the off season.

"Quit looking at me like that sis." He said without looking back at her. He could feel the mischievous look in her eyes from where he was. He wasn't sure what it was about but he already knew she would tell him and she did.

"Just curious about the girl you left with this morning." Emily finally said knowing why he wouldn't look at her.

He stood up and rubbed his fingers through his ebony hair finally returning her gaze, "Christ, you heard that?" Honestly, he didn't expect that. If it were any other circumstance, he wouldn't give a shit what his sister heard, but this was Eva. He thought maybe she noticed the change in him like Micah did and that's what she was going to ask him about. This threw him a little. His condominium was well built and the walls were solid as far as he knew.

She held her hands up, "I only heard you leave with her this morning. I didn't hear anything else, I swear. I didn't get in until three in the morning anyway so you can relax." She laughed at his worried expression, "I just thought it was surprising because I was there." Tyler never paraded his women around them—ever. It was really surprising that he'd brought one home when she was in the same apartment.

"Don't get the wrong idea about her Emily."

"Oh, no? I've met a few of your acquaintances." She mused thinking of the all body and no brains women he usually dated.

"This one is different. She's not—how do I say it—" he pursed his lips in thought before he continued. The only way to explain it to his sister was the same way that Gio explained it to him, "—she's a good catholic girl." He actually winced a little when he said it as if it was said in front of Eva embarrassing her.

Emily's eyes widened in acknowledgment as she understood what he was telling her, "Oh?"

"I'm asking you to be respectful Emily. I know my history isn't anything to go by, but you'll like her."

“I think I will.” She agreed because of his admission.

“Hailey adores her.” He said awkwardly. He felt as if he’d betrayed her by telling his sister that Eva was a virgin, well basically until last night. “I’ve been seeing her for several months now. You’ll meet her soon.”

Her brows popped up, “Really?” That was a first. Tyler never introduced family to his female companions before, “You really like her, I see.”

“I do.” He answered honestly.

“How serious is this?”

He shrugged and reached into his inside jacket pocket for an envelope, “Can you give this to mom and dad when you get back.”

“What is it?” she said curiously knowing he could just phone them.

“None of your business,” he leaned down and kissed her cheek affectionately, “See you soon sis.”

“Next summer you mean.” She said to his receding back. He waved over his shoulder but didn’t turn back. She smiled and shook her head before turning and going through the security gates.

Tito was standing in Eva’s room with his hands on his hips watching her pack.

“Just because you’re there like a Roman general doesn’t mean I’m changing my mind.” Eva said without looking at him and turned back to her closet.

“What makes you think that I want you to change your mind?”

“Because you have a problem with Tyler.”

“Not anymore, he did bring me a dog.”

She stopped and looked at him, “My dog.”

He grinned, "Whatever. I named her daisy."

She rolled her eyes, "You are so difficult to predict Tito." She said returning to her packing.

"He's okay," he admitted reluctantly.

She stopped and stared at him in disbelief. "You do realize that I'm going away with him for the weekend."

"I do."

"And you're not feeling like killing him?"

He shrugged.

"Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine Eva." He said getting a little irritated.

"Did Gio talk to you?"

"Gio doesn't tell me what to do Eva."

"I know, but he's very persuasive."

He clenched his jaw, "Come say goodbye before you leave." He said walking out of her room.

She stood there gaping. Never in all of her life had she seen him so calm about something. The only thing she could think of was because of Gio, but Tito was right. No one told him how to behave or what to do. He wasn't one to have an instant shift in his opinion either.

"Whoa." Gio said as he looked out the front window.

"What is it?" Adel asked as she came into the living room. Her brother was standing transfixed on something outside.

Gio nodded toward the front of the house.

"You've got to be kidding me." Adel said under her breath as she stood beside him. A long, black, sleek Limousine pulled up in front and a chauffeur got out to open the door for no other than Tyler and he was dressed to kill.

He stood and straightened the sleeves of his dark suit before walking up the sidewalk toward the front door.

"That's just so unfair." Adel muttered.

Gio looked down at his sister. "There's no reason why you can't have that either Adel, but you refuse to hold out for the best."

She scoffed, "yeah, like I'd have a chance to get a man like Tyler."

Gio lifted his brows, "do you honestly think that?"

"I can't compete with Eva, she's gorgeous."

"You're no ugly duckling Adel." That was a shocking admission. Adel was very self assured and not once did she give anyone the indication that she thought she wasn't attractive. It was true that Eva was very beautiful, but Adel certainly wasn't any less beautiful than her younger sister. Gio always thought his family was very attractive and that included Adel. She wore her hair short and did wear glasses, which he knew she hated, but she had their mother's looks also, except for maybe her nose and her eyes.

She took a deep breath and averted her gaze to the handsome man walking up to the front door.

"Adel." Gio repeated.

"I'm going to go get the door." She said turning and walking toward the front door just as Tyler knocked.

Tyler stepped in and greeted the three shaking Tito and Gio's hands. "Is she ready?"

"Adel, did you want to go help Eva?" Gio said without taking his eyes off of Tyler.

"sure." She said in a tone that meant the opposite. *Why not?* She thought sarcastically.

"Who's all going?" Gio asked when Adel left.

"the team is flying down tomorrow afternoon. My parents will be there in the evening. We'll be having dinner with them."

Gio grinned, "So much for a simple birthday trip to Vegas huh?"

Tyler's took a deep breath, "Yeah, it seems like everyone is

going to be there as soon as they found out we were going.”

“Good luck on having her to yourself then.” Tito said with the same amusement his brother held.

Just then Eva appeared with her bag.

Tyler looked her over slowly. She was wearing a pale yellow dress with embroidered flowers across the bodice. Again, it was a simple design that made her look very beautiful. He told her so causing her to blush and Tito to grunt under his breath. “I’ll take that.” Tyler said reaching over and taking the bag from her.

“Take care of my baby sister.” Tito added as Tyler opened the door so Eva could step out ahead of him.

“I will.” He nodded to both the brothers and placed his hand on Eva’s lower back as they walked toward the car. The chauffer stepped forward and took the bag to the trunk.

“Tyler, are you trying to spoil me?” she said seeing the car.

“Yes.” He answered easily, “It’s your birthday.”

“Not until Sunday.”

“Well, my presents start now.” He lowered his voice, “And tonight you’ll get something extra special.”

She flushed bright red and cast a look past her shoulder to the house. Her family wasn’t visible at all which again was weird. How come they seemed so relaxed in letting her go? She figured that blowup she had with them over this trip must’ve jarred something loose in them. Still, it didn’t make sense. They never gave up without a fight.

“Something wrong?”

“I don’t know. My family is acting weird.” he said as he helped her in the car.

He sat beside her, “Maybe they’re finally letting you grow up.”

She shrugged, “You don’t know them. Nothing is that easy.”

He reached up and turned her face toward him. His eyes roved over it and a smile formed on his handsome face, “You look

stunning.”

“Tyler, don’t embarrass me.” The only way he could was compliment her, and he did it a lot. It didn’t just embarrass her, it made her feel adored. She couldn’t remember a time in her life that she’d felt like that, except with him.

He bent his head and kissed her. It was long, tender and she completely forgot about her family.

Eva watched as Tyler tipped the bellhop, shut the door, engage the interior lock and turned to her with a devilish grin on his face.

She tilted her head in question.

“Get your clothes off woman.” he said sinfully as he lazily stripped off his jacket and tossed it on a nearby armchair while walking toward her. “I need to put my hands on you in the next few minutes or I’m going to come unglued.”

Her eyes widened. He’d been cordial throughout the flight and the limo ride to the hotel. He hadn’t touched her again since that kiss when he first got in the car with her and she began to wonder if he felt as if he made a mistake taking her. Now she could see that she was completely wrong. He was trying to control his urges, that is, until the door shut. His eyes darkened as they focused on her.

“I mean it. I finally got you alone again, and I’m an impatient man. It’s been too long.”

She shook her head and started to back up. “It was last night.”

“Forever.” He slid a ravishing smile across his face. “I’m an athlete darling. I need constant exercise—to keep in shape.” He kicked off his shoes.

He wasn’t kidding! she thought as she soaked up his perfect physique. “Tyler—we just got here.” She hastened a glance to the large windows that overlooked the city and casino. It was still

light outside and the room was well lit. Did he really expect to take her now? He seemed to sense her apprehension but it didn't stop him from undressing or wiping that seductive grin off his face.

"Don't tell me my little gal suddenly became shy." He said undoing the buttons of his shirt. He shook it off and tossed it carelessly on the carpet. He didn't slow down in approaching her at all.

Her eyes went down the length of his bared torso and she felt her mouth suddenly go dry. "Tyler, you're just so beautiful." She finally managed suddenly forgetting about her shyness.

Tyler had everything arranged weeks ago. He got the suite that cost nearly three thousand a night. He'd actually stayed there before, but not with a woman. Yet, he didn't get it to impress her. He got it because he thought she was worth it. Everything he had planned this weekend was because he thought she was worth it.

He approached her, gathered her into his arms and moved his hands to the zipper of her dress at the back. She tilted her lovely face up to his and hadn't said another word. She didn't stop him when he pulled the shoulder straps off, and with a slight tug at the skirt, dropped it to the floor around her feet. She stood there in her underclothes while he took a step back and looked down her body.

"the light is on." She breathed.

"And it's going to stay that way." He whispered back stepping up to her again.

"I'm shy Tyler."

"And I love that about you, but we'll be making love so often from now on that you won't care if we are on a public beach." He teased.

She felt some of her nervousness leave at his jest and smiled. His hands circled around her waist and pulled her against

him, "Now, undress me." He said huskily.

Although she was unsure of herself, she moved her hands down his thick chest over his flat muscular abdomen to the belt of his slacks. She fumbled a little and feeling insecure looked up at him but only saw warmth and encouragement in his deep brown eyes. It gave her the confidence she needed. She steadied her hands and was able to undo the belt and his slacks. Then she felt his warm hands on hers. She looked up at him again and he bent his head to kiss her while moving one of her hands beneath the material against his skin. When it covered the heat of his groin he hissed through his teeth.

She thought she'd be afraid at touching him so intimately, but it was the opposite. Her little bit of exploration made him react so quickly that she found herself feeling more brave. Her slender fingers circled around the length of him and he groaned. Suddenly her insides started to burn and she moved closer to him tilting her face up.

"Tell me how you feel." He said with his voice cracking returning her intense gaze.

"Powerful." She murmured going up on her toes to kiss him.

His restraint broke and with a growl of surrender he kissed her back—hard.

Her hand contracted at the sudden passion and he groaned against her mouth this time finally encircling her wrist with his hand, "Baby, you shouldn't do that yet. I'm sure you can feel how turned on I am for you right now. Don't poke the bear." She giggled against his mouth as he pulled her hand away from him and bent down to lift her in his arms and head to the bedroom. Not once did his mouth leave hers. It was a task to get the rest of their clothes off like that. He was impatient, and as soon as he arranged her to his liking, drove into her with the force of a runaway freight train.

Eva was nervous and frightened but as soon as he entered

her she arched up to meet him. He smothered her body with his creating heat between them from the friction of skin on skin. She loved his strength, his powerful body and was sure she said something to that effect.

His response was another one of those downright sexy groans and he sat up pulling her onto his lap without breaking contact between them. "I just can't get close enough," he mouthed against her lips and placed his hands under her bottom moving her up and against him. He loved her slender form. She was easy to adjust with barely any effort.

Later she would wonder where she found the strength or the courage to do such a thing, but it seemed as natural as breathing when he encouraged her. His mouth moved to her breasts and she curved against him throwing her head back but with his help she didn't break rhythm not once.

"Oh Christ—" He rasped out, "I'm going to come."

She was sure she said something along those lines too right before she felt herself tighten and what seemed like a thousand stars exploded in her head. She fell forward and buried her face in his neck while he held her tight to him.

He murmured something but she was breathing so rapid that she didn't hear him. Finally she lifted her head and looked at him, "what was that?"

He gave her a devastating grin and moved his hands soothingly over her back, "I said, I hope you're on the pill because I didn't use protection."

Horror filled her. "I—I'm not—oh God Tyler, what if—"

"shh." He said interrupting her, "It's okay." He framed her face in his hands, "It was one time."

"but what if—" she trembled unable to finish.

"Then we'll be parents." He said as easily as ordering coffee.

She couldn't help herself but started to weep. How come she didn't think about that?

“Hey, Eva, don’t cry. It’s not that bad.” He moved her hair off her wet cheeks and made her look at him.

“For you.” she said, “You can easily leave and I’ll be alone.”

“Never.” He kissed her slowly. “I’ll never leave you.” He moved her on to her back and covered her body with his while moving his mouth over her face kissing her eyes, her nose and finally capturing her mouth again with his as he moved up and adjusted himself in her.

She moaned sweetly and he began to move again.

He was wrong. It wasn’t one time. By the time the night was over, it was twice and not once did he bother with protection. Eva lay half on him while he slept. He was flat on his back with one arm behind his head and the other beneath her waist resting on her hip. She loved the feel of his body next to hers and decided that she would never feel sorry for giving herself to him. She wasn’t stupid, but her heart ruled her body and despite what he said, she knew not to hold him to it. Adel had told her that men like him don’t stay with women after they get what they want. As soon as a baby comes in the picture they run. In Tyler’s defense, Adel didn’t know him. When he told her that, she wanted to believe him. Then again, she may not be pregnant.

Her hand went down to her flat abdomen and wondered what it would be like to carry a child of his. It would definitely be a handsome one. Male or female. Her mind reflected on Hailey and Micah’s son and how beautiful he was.

She lifted her head and looked down at him. He was so incredibly gorgeous. His thick black lashes rested on his upper cheeks. She lifted her hand and ran her finger down his slightly crooked nose. He didn’t even wake. She smiled to herself thinking that he was obviously used to sleeping sound anywhere because of the enormous amount of travel he did every year. She wasn’t. She bit her lip. How often did he find companionship when he was away from home? It was crazy for her to think like

that, but she couldn't help it. She was very naïve but she knew what he looked like to her sex and she saw how women threw themselves at him. How long would it be before he got bored of her? She felt an edge of panic rise and she quickly squashed it thinking it would ruin this whole weekend for her if she let it take over.

Her eyes went to his muscular chest. It rose and fell with the slow rhythm of sleep. Slowly she guided her eyes down his body visible above the thin sheet they both wore. It covered to just below his navel. They were both so warm that they didn't need anything else. It was easy to see the outline of his gender beneath the fabric and she had the incredible urge to lift the sheet and look, but this was still all too new to her. It was amazing what he could do to her and make her forget herself. It was almost as if she was someone else when he made love to her. She loved it!

She felt herself heat up remembering.

He was really good to her in every way she could possibly imagine. He treated her like a woman and even together like they were earlier, he was generous with her. He brought her to that exquisite peak over and over again until she was reduced to a boneless blob. It didn't sound too graceful when she thought it but it was the closest thing she could compare it to.

She leaned down and kissed his cheek tenderly before whispering that she loved him. Then she laid her head back on his chest and closed her eyes.

Tyler opened his and stared at the ceiling in thought. He'd heard her. It was something he was waiting to hear from her, but again, she wasn't so forthcoming with her feelings. He was hoping that since they'd been together that she'd finally let herself go and trust him, but he was wrong. Could he possibly stay with someone who was so closed up all of the time? He was honest with her about everything and she'd yet to let him in. She

was already deep in his heart he hoped to hell that what he had planned tomorrow finally made her realize that she could trust him. If not, he couldn't keep going with this.

"What on earth is that noise?" Eva said. Then she looked beside her and the bed was empty. "Tyler?" The noise came again and she realized it was someone knocking at the door.

"It's breakfast." She heard him call from the other room. Then she heard a muffle of voices as he spoke to someone obviously delivering the meal.

Relief went through her over her initial thought that he'd gotten up and left. But why would he? She chastised herself for being so insecure around him. She was never so unsure of herself except around him and she kept acting stupid because of it.

Moments later Tyler came in the bedroom with a tray and set it on her lap before sitting beside her. His hair was wet like he had a shower and he was wearing one of the complimentary black robes of the hotel with the name embroidered on the chest.

"You really are spoiling me." She said as he lifted the lid to show a lovely display of fruit toast and eggs.

"Me?" he said with mock surprise, "sweetheart, after last night, I think I'm spoiled." She blushed and he reached up and caressed her cheek while meeting her eyes, "It was amazing."

"You have to say that," she hedged.

He shook his head, "No I don't." he said seriously.

She averted her gaze.

"Oh no you don't." he nudged her face so she'd look at him, "I meant it."

"Thank you." she said a little weakly not knowing what else to say.

He chuckled, "that's better. Now I have some news. My parents are due here this afternoon. I want you to meet them

and my sister.”

“You want me to meet your *family*?” She said unable to keep the shock out of her voice and out of her expression.

“I do. They heard I was going to be here and decided to come and meet you.”

“Tyler, we’re sharing a room.” She was appalled. They would think she was a tramp.

He burst into laughter.

She frowned at him.

He saw her expression and did his best to get his humor under control. “I’m sorry. I’m sure they don’t think I’m a virgin.”

“That’s not what I meant.” She scolded.

He kissed her, “I know that. I’m only teasing. You need to relax.” He pulled back and looked at her.

“I know I do.” She was nervous about meeting his parents because she was raised with strong morals and here she was sharing a room with a man she’d only met a few months ago. Would they think less of her because of it?

Tyler picked up a strawberry and rubbed the tip of it against her lips causing her to look at him. “Quit worrying. My mother and father are very open minded.”

She smiled and slowly sunk her teeth into the end of the berry.

“You little tease.” He said with barely contained desire and watching her mouth.

“You taught me everything I know.” She said sulkily while tilting her head slightly causing her hair to fall forward.

Fuck me, he thought. This woman could practically get him hard with a few choice words. His eyes narrowed, “but not everything *I* know.”

He won out. That was possibly the most seductive tone she’d ever heard. She couldn’t possibly out seduce this man and her eyes widened.

“You little Minx. Well—screw breakfast!” He said practically leaping on her sending the tray flying followed by her screech.

Several hours later the phone rang and Tyler reached over to answer it forgetting that Eva was passed out on top of him. “Hey.” He said patting her bare bottom. His hand was resting on one of those deliciously curved cheeks. She really did have a great ass!

She lifted her head and the phone rang again.

“I’m sure it’s mom and dad.” He said grinning down at her, “We slept the afternoon away.”

“Oh,” she rolled off him so he could turn and answer the phone. Then she laughed as he said something rather racy about her body on top of his before she got out of bed, found a robe and went to the bathroom to get washed up.

She turned her face up to the spray of water from the shower and ran her hands up and over her hair to rinse it out. Again her thoughts turned to what could be a result of this weekend. She would be twenty tomorrow and it was still really young to have a child. Although she knew she could handle it, she didn’t want to be a single mother. She really wanted to talk about this with Tyler but just couldn’t find it in her to bring it up.

When she stepped out of the shower, Tyler was standing there naked. She gasped and jumped at the surprise. “What are you doing?”

“My turn.” He said as she reached for a towel to cover herself.

“Can’t a girl have privacy?” she shot at him. She was still very shy about her body and Tyler wasn’t the least bit shy about his. He didn’t have to be.

“Are you kidding?” He bent and kissed her as she struggled with the towel, “I could look at you all day long. You’re exquisite!”

How could she possibly stay mad at him? “I thought you

showered already?" she said suspiciously, "I think you just came in here to ogle me."

"I did for that reason too, but I'm all sweaty again." He grinned.

"Oh lord." She rolled her eyes and turned away causing him to laugh.

After she combed out her hair, she went out to find something elegant to wear. She was doing her best to hide her nervousness at meeting his parents but it wasn't doing any good. How come she couldn't adopt his carefree attitude when he met her father? She already knew the answer to that.

She felt completely out of her league even though Tyler did his best to make her feel like she fit in. It couldn't change who she was. She was a girl from a middle class family. Tyler was born into wealth, made his own fortune, and played a game for a living.

"This sucks." She said to herself as she continued to get ready. She already had a precognition of his parents thinking she was not good enough for him.

Twenty minutes later she was still frowning in the vanity mirror when he came up behind her.

"Leave your hair down for me, okay babe?"

She looked at him in the mirror, "You like it down?"

He nodded, but his expression was serious. If she didn't know better, he actually seemed a little uncomfortable too.

Then he stepped up behind her bent down and moved his hands around her to cup her breasts. "You look beautiful Eva."

She looked down at his large hands on her chest, "Tyler, my goodness can't you go five minutes without—"

"No," he interrupted bending his head and moving his mouth over her neck, "Never."

She laughed and turned her face to his getting a kiss for her efforts, "I don't want this to end."

“You’re enjoying yourself and we haven’t even left our room yet.”

“You make me feel like a princess.”

“You are.” He kissed her once more before erecting himself. “I like that black dress.” He said staring at her reflection. As usual it wasn’t too revealing, but it definitely indicated to how curvaceous she was. He reached into the pocket of his suit.

“What? This old thing?” she smirked at his reflection again. She had actually bought it for this weekend.

“It’s missing something.”

She looked down the front of her, “What.”

He put a closed fist in front of her face, then opened it. A dainty gold necklace with a heart shaped pendant dangled from his fingers, “this.”

Her sharp intake of breath was audible, “Oh Tyler—it’s beautiful.” She felt her eyes moisten, “No one has ever bought anything like this for me.”

“Happy birthday.” He fastened the necklace around her neck.

She sniffed trying to stop the tears.

Only Eva would accept such an inexpensive gift with overwhelming gratefulness. Well, it wasn’t cheap, but it wasn’t gaudy either. He could definitely afford something else, but he was hoping he knew her enough. He didn’t say it, but it took him three bloody days to pick this out. He had Mark with him, who told him to by the large sapphire necklace that he was considering. At the last minute he chose the heart shaped pendant. By the look on her face, he chose right.

She turned around and looked up at him, “it’s beautiful.”

He brushed the tears off her cheeks, “Honey, stop it. You’re killing me.”

“I can’t help it.” She fingered the heart. “I love this.”

“I thought you would.”

She took a deep breath and looked up at him. There was no mistaking the emotion in her eyes now and he must've seen it as clear as day because his expression altered and closed up before he turned away, "Come on. My parents expected us downstairs five minutes ago."

She felt stupid throughout the whole ride down in the elevator. If he didn't know how she felt before. He certainly knew now. Tyler wasn't someone to be tied down by one woman no matter what he told her last night when they were making love. She kept her face averted so he would see the hurt present there.

Before the elevator doors opened she felt his hand search out hers.

She turned her face up to him and saw nothing but warmth in his eyes. Why couldn't she figure this man out?

"My parents will love you."

Nothing was said about what happened in their room. She really wished she could tell him how she felt without worrying about being rejected. Obviously he misinterpreted her worry, or he just chose to ignore it. "I really hope so."

The restaurant was in the Casino and it was very upscale. She kept expecting the hostess to not let her in because she didn't look like she belonged there at all. Again, being around him shot down what little confidence she had, but he carried enough for the both of them. The whole time she kept her eyes on her feet becoming more and more nervous.

"Over here." He said seeing his parents and sister. He grinned widely as Jacob and Tess Hartley came to their feet and hugged him. Then he stood back and introduced them to Eva.

"Oh you're lovely!" Tess said giving her a genuine hug. "I'm so happy to meet you."

"Me too." Tess Hartley was blonde, green eyed, and beautiful. She seemed really sincere in meeting her. In fact she

seemed really excited. Her eyes went to Jacob, Tyler's father. He did look like Tyler, but older and more distinguished, but a very handsome man in his middle age.

"I think so." Tyler said squeezing her hand reassuringly over his mother's comment.

"Hi." Emily said holding out her hand, "I'm Emily. Tyler's sister."

"I think I talked to you on the phone." She reluctantly admitted knowing that she practically hung up on her.

"I think so." She said with a teasing glint in her eyes.

Tyler said it's your birthday." Jacob spoke up as Tyler pulled out the chair for Eva.

She paused partway down and cast a look up at him before she took her seat. "It is tommorrow." Gosh she was just so nervous!

"Happy birthday." Tess said. "I hope you've been having fun."

Yes, I've been introduced to the wonderful world of intimacy by your son, "I have." She said clearing her throat.

"Is that from Tyler?" Emily nodded toward the necklace.

"Yes." Tyler volunteered.

"That's sweet Tyler." Tess said looking at her son with a flash of excitement in her green eyes.

He grinned.

Jacob waved at the waiter and ordered a bottle of the finest champagne. "We should celebrate."

"I shouldn't." she cast another look at Tyler. She wasn't old enough to drink in this country. In Canada, where she was from, the legal limit was nineteen in her province.

"No one will say anything." Tess said, "Besides, it's your birthday. One glass of wine won't hurt."

Just then Hailey and Micah came in and after greetings they sat down next to Emily. Eva felt enormous relief that her friend

was there and was able to drop some of the nervousness.

The champagne came and Jacob made sure all of their glasses were filled. Eva lifted hers thinking there was going to be a toast but no one else did. She looked around the table and everyone was staring at her.

Dread filled her. It was as if she was having a bad dream where she should up to school with no clothes on and everyone stared at her before they burst into laughter. She started to tremble.

Suddenly the whole restaurant seemed to become hushed and people started standing up. She started looking around thinking something had happened nearby. Then her eyes went to Tyler who was just staring at her with that expression that was loaded with confidence and didn't reveal anything else. "What is going on?" He was the only one that remained seated now besides her.

To her total shock, he slid out of the chair onto one knee in front of her as he pulled a black velvet box out of his pocket.

Her hands slapped across her mouth as he opened it revealing a beautiful, very expensive diamond engagement ring. She choked out tears as he started talking.

"Eva, I know there's no other woman for me. I don't know how I survived without you in my life. You have made me whole. Marry me." He removed the ring and took her hand, slipping it on her finger.

She sobbed and he leaned forward and held her. "Hey, baby answer me."

"I thought you were going to dump me when this was over." She whispered hoarsely in his ear.

He was astonished at her admission. "Are you kidding?" he pulled her tighter against him, "I told you that I'd never give you up. I arranged this weeks ago. If you take a look around, the team is here, and so is your family."

She lifted her tear stained face and sure enough saw her brothers, sister and father standing beside Tyler's parents now. She was so nervous when she walked through the restaurant that she didn't notice the other diners.

"Honey, say yes, I'm beginning to get worried." He said searching her eyes.

"Are you sure?" she hiccupped.

"Am I sure?" he grinned. "I meant every word I've said to you over the past few days. So say yes."

Finally she nodded and the place erupted in cheers right before he kissed her.

"Now we can toast to the happy couple." Said Jacob followed by more cheers and clinking of glasses.

Tyler got to his feet and pulled Eva to hers wrapping his arm around her waist, "This is our engagement party." He explained. "I wanted to surprise you—so surprise." He chuckled.

"Oh lord." She sniffed again and Tess handed her a tissue. She mumbled her thanks.

"I know you hate surprises, but I think you'll forgive me for this one."

She nodded and looked up at him. "I can't believe you did all of this for me."

He bent his head and kissed her in front of everyone causing the place to erupt in cheers again along with the clinking of utensils on glass, "I told you I was smitten." Then he moved his mouth to her ear to whisper, "I heard what you said last night when you thought I was sleeping."

Her eyes went wide and he focused his back on hers, "I felt as though I could fly when those words came out of your mouth."

A fresh wave of tears came as people started to step forward and congratulate them.

Tyler's flight had just landed from a game in Edmonton

when his cell phone rang.

"Eva?" Micah asked with a glint in his eyes.

He shook his head when he heard the familiar male voice of his soon to be brother in law.

"what's wrong?" Micah asked seeing Tyler's face fall while listening to the person on the other end.

He covered the receiver, "Can you grab my case?"

"Sure." Micah said seeing the worried expression. He went to the luggage carousel and waited for his and Tyler's luggage with the rest of the team while Tyler continued his conversation. He was sure that Eva was feeling nervous about the wedding that was in two months. Hell, he was nervous! Tyler was getting married and he'd never thought he'd see the day.

He retrieved the two bags and went back to Tyler, "Is everything okay?" he asked as Tyler hung up the phone.

"No. that was Giovanni. Eva's locked herself in the bathroom and won't let anyone in."

"why?"

"she won't say." He rubbed his face with his hand, "Christ, I hope to hell she's not having second thoughts." He focused on Micah, "I love this girl more than life. It'll kill me to lose her."

"Now you know how I feel about Hailey." Micah said seriously.

Tyler nodded, "I've got to get there."

"Call me later."

"I will."

The drive to Eva's house was one he did many times, but it seemed like the longest ride ever. He reflected on their relationship a hundred times in that hour long ride from the airport. She was young, naïve, and his lifestyle was frightening for her. Maybe she did have second thoughts. After all, when they got engaged, he was out of the country again two days later. It didn't give them any time to adjust to the engagement

together. Maybe she realized that she was too young to get married.

For the first time in his life, he felt his confidence falter.

He remembered Gio waiting for him at the arena when he and Micah arrived for practice a month ago. When he got out of the car, Gio had only asked him a simple question.

“What are your plans with Eva?”

It had been two weeks since he’d talked to her because he was having problems concentrating. He had to put her out of his mind to be at his peak performance. Also, he needed her to finally admit that she cared about him. She had been doing a damn good job of denying what they had together. He figured the absence would wake her up. He was right. There was no resistance when she showed up at his condo that night. He knew then that she loved him, but to hear her actually say it when they were in Vegas felt like he’d been granted a miracle.

Gio patiently waited until Tyler spoke. “I’m going to propose to her in Vegas.” He finally said.

Gio looked visibly taken back, “What did you just say?”

“I said I’m going to marry her Gio.” He repeated seriously.

“Wow.” Gio said softly, “I expected something, but not that.”

“I’ll be sending you plane tickets. The team is going to be there, and so is my family. I want it to be a surprise birthday present for her and an engagement party. My family doesn’t even know yet.”

“Is she pregnant?”

Tyler burst into laughter “Only unless it’s through immaculate conception.”

Gio smiled showing his relief. Then he held out his hand, “Tyler, I was wrong about you.”

Tyler shook his hand, “I’m glad.”

Eva’s house came into view and he renewed his worry. When he pulled up to the curb, Tito came out of the house to

meet him.

"did you say something to her?"

"Jesus, Tito I haven't seen or spoke to her in three days."

"well, she was fine this morning." He accused.

Tyler had to bite his tongue to keep from saying something harsh. They were worried about her and why wouldn't they suspect that it was something he said. "I'll find out what's wrong." He said calming his own temper which was fueled by worry.

Gio was standing outside of the bathroom door when he saw Tyler, "Eva, Open up. Tyler's here."

"Go away!" She shouted.

Tyler furrowed his brow. It had sounded like she was crying. What the hell was wrong with her? "Why didn't you just bust in?"

"Have you met my sister?" Gio said arching his brows. "She'd never forgive us."

He took a deep breath and knocked twice on the door, "Open up Eva or I'll break the damn door down." The brothers may have a problem with pissing her off, but he was marrying her and she bloody well better open up for him in more ways than one.

Tito started to say something but Gio shook his head, "Let's leave them be. He can handle her."

After Gio and Tito left there was a long silent pause before Tyler heard the lock on the door click as she unlocked it.

He turned the knob and stepped it. His heart contracted in his chest seeing Eva sitting on the side of the tub with her arms folded across her abdomen. In one of her hands was what looked like a little white plastic stick. He shut the door behind him and crouched down in front of her. She wouldn't meet his eyes, but he had a feeling he knew what this was about.

Slowly he reached over and removed the object from her fingers and looked at it. Hell, he didn't know how to read these

things. He looked around, saw the wastebasket and the pregnancy test box. He pulled it out and read it while looking at the stick. "Jesus," he mumbled to himself, "this is why you're upset?" His eyes went to her as she slowly looked up at him with red rimmed eyes. He gave her a gentle smile and tossed both objects in the garbage before taking her hands, "This is nothing." Relief flooded through him and he felt his confidence return. She wasn't having second thoughts at all. Yet, she still wasn't upfront with him and he felt like an outsider.

She sobbed.

"Oh hell." He moved forward and held her forgetting about his previous angst. "You really wanted a baby?"

"I did." She confessed weakly.

He kissed her cheek, "there's no reason to take this so hard. We'll have plenty of time to make babies."

"I just—just wanted a piece of you."

"You have all of me now." He countered softly feeling a wave of emotion going through him at her confession, "And you're young. I'm sure we won't have a problem getting you pregnant. Preferably after we're married." He chuckled, "Or you might not fit your gown."

She smiled into his neck. She honestly didn't think she'd take it so hard, but it was as if she lost something precious even though she didn't have it in the first place and she told him exactly how she felt. This was something she couldn't possibly talk to her siblings about.

Tyler listened closely. It was the first time since that moment she told him that she loved him that she opened up and she thought he was sleeping at that time. Now, those final barriers of hers dropped and she told him how she felt about him. This is the Eva he fell in love with and she'd only given him glances into that until now. She finally trusted him with her feelings. There were no words to describe how much he loved

this woman. From there flowed a great many things; her worries, her passions and her vulnerability toward him if she let herself go completely.

"And you don't think I am?" He finally said meeting her swollen eyes.

She shrugged, "You're famous, gorgeous and I don't get this—you and I."

"Eva," he pulled her tightly against him, "I love you because you're nothing like I'm used to. You are unspoiled and have no idea how you make me feel. You're passionate, exciting and honest. You need to trust me. This openness we just shared needs to continue." He moved her back so he could look into her eyes, "Starting now. I can't marry you if you don't."

Those words made her prickly with dread. Yet she completely understood. He never gave her cause to not trust him. The thought of losing him was horrifying. It was then she realized that it was worth giving in completely and trusting him with her heart. After a slight pause she bit her lip and nodded, "I will Tyler."

He bent his head and kissed her. It was full of emotion and she started crying again.

An hour later they emerged from the bathroom to four pairs of worried eyes. he made sure that they went over everyone of her concerns she had with him, the baby she wanted, and his career until she was completely satisfied.

He never realized that although her family loved her, they didn't give her any room to express herself because they were so protective. It was a habit that she just accepted. Not anymore. He was raised with parents who insisted that he express his feelings and he believed in an equal relationship.

"She's fine." Tyler said answering all of the unspoken questions.

Relief was visible in all of them.

“Pre wedding jitters.” He offered not telling them why she was upset. It was no one’s business but theirs.

“Well, Jesus—” Tito said angry but relieved, “marry her then, so we don’t have to go through this again!” he waved an arm at her before he turned and marched out of the house.

Eva laughed for the first time in days.

Tyler slid an arm around her waist, “why don’t you go get changed, “I’ll take you for dinner.” She nodded and went to leave, but he still held her tight and bent down to whisper in her ear, “To my place.”

She sucked in a breath and left quickly when he released her.

“She’s really okay?” Gio asked.

“Yes.”

“Christ, I thought she was dying or something.”

“She’s emotional, that’s all. She’s young and this is a big step.” Tyler said still not elaborating.

Gio seemed to accept that.

Tyler breathed huskily in her ear as he moved within her.

“No—oh lord—do that again.” She sunk her nails into his shoulders.

Dinner sat on the stove, cold now from neglect. He’d started cooking then end up planting her against the counter where they still were now.

His shirt was open in the front and his pants were halfway down his legs. All he could think was that thank God she wore a skirt because he was so damn impatient he couldn’t wait long enough to get inside her. He didn’t even get her underwear off, just pushed it aside before he thrust into her.

She was so damn gorgeous. Her long hair fell across the counter as he positioned her high on his hips. Never in his life had he taken a woman in his kitchen, or any kitchen for that matter.

He swore he saw stars when he exploded in her coupled with a shout.

His eyes lowered to hers and he kissed her tenderly while slowly lowering her back down so her feet touched the floor.

"I love you Tyler," she whispered to him.

He smiled against her mouth. It was easy for her to say that to him now. "If that didn't give you a baby, I sure as hell don't know what will." He responded softly, "and, I love you too Eva. So much I fear I can't take a breath without you near me."

Her eyes watered, "Look at me. I cry all the time now."

"You're happy, aren't you?" That incident in the bathroom earlier that day got him thinking. There was something he needed to ask her.

She nodded as he brushed her hair off her face.

"I don't want to take you home tonight. I want you here next to me in my bed."

She took a deep breath. Her family was big on tradition. She and Tyler weren't married and it was expected that she stay in her house until then. What he said next shocked her.

"Let's elope. Tonight."

"I—I—"

"Eva," he placed a finger against her lips, "I meant what I said. I love you and I want to give you a child. I want us to be parents, but I doubt I can wait a few months before I call you Mrs. Hartley. Also, I don't think you're family will think too highly of me if there's a child conceived before we're married no matter how much you want it. For the first time in my life, I'm feeling guilty about making love to a woman because it seems immoral. I want you as my wife. I want you beside me legally, starting tonight. I have a game in three days and there's no way on God's green earth that I'm going to be able to play properly until I know you're mine completely."

She didn't know what to say to that. It was a very profound

confession from a man like him and she knew he meant every word. Was it possible that she could love him more? Without a further thought, she felt herself nod. A wide grin spread across his face.

EPILOGUE

Almost exactly nine months later to that episode of cold dinner in the kitchen, Eva had a nine pound baby boy. He had a head of thick black hair. The room was full of their family members but Tyler only had eyes for his wife and son.

Their families were more shocked than anything when Tyler called them from Vegas to tell them they had gotten married, but easily forgave them. Micah and Hailey stood up for them. They were able to make the flight on short notice. Dutch stayed at the house back home and watched Shane. It wasn't as if he didn't have experience, he had five sons.

"He's so beautiful." Eva said looking down at the bundle in her arms.

Tyler had his arm around his wife as he sat on the side of the hospital bed running a finger over his son's cheek. He never felt such overwhelming pride and love for anything like he did when his son was born. He actually felt like weeping. "I want to call him Trevor."

"You can call him anything you like." She said looking at him with love in her eyes.

He smiled and kissed her, "Trevor Jacob Hartley."

"Wow, what a compliment." Jacob said staring down at his son and grandson.

"I bought him skates." Said Dutch out of the blue like it was completely expected.

The room filled with laughter.



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