

The book cover features a close-up, high-contrast photograph of a person's back and shoulder, rendered in a warm, golden-brown, painterly style. The person's skin has a textured, almost fibrous appearance. On the left side of the cover, there are several horizontal, overlapping rectangular bands in shades of blue and teal. The author's name, 'L.R. Wards', is printed in a white, sans-serif font, slanted upwards from left to right, positioned in the upper right quadrant. The title, 'Micah Rush', is printed in a larger, white, sans-serif font, also slanted upwards, positioned in the center-left area, overlapping the person's back and the blue bands.

L.R. Wards

Micah  
Rush

# MICAH RUSH

*L. R. Wards*

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*Dear Readers;*

*Please remember because of numerous requests to get another book out, I know I've missed some editing errors, but please be patient. I will revisit this as soon as I can. Please enjoy Micah Rush, the little boy from Dutch and Lizzette in 'Wild Rush'*

## CHAPTER ONE

There was an odd hush all around him and Micah could hear his father's voice in the distance, but he wasn't sure if it was a dream. Where the hell was he? Then he smelled the familiar aroma of the ice, then felt it against his face—freezing the skin. Soon he heard whispers of concern, what seemed like thousands of them. He started to lift his head.

“Dammit Rush don't move!”

That was his coach. His distinguishable bear-like voice was as clear as day. Thing was, he didn't think he could move if he wanted to. He felt numb from the neck down and there was this odd ringing in his ears. The ice was freezing his cheek and part of his mouth and nose.

Then he heard the thunderous roar of a crowd. Oh hell, now he remembered where he was. He was in the arena. It was quarterfinal playoffs for the cup, but he couldn't remember where.

Dutch Rush erupted on to the ice. All six foot six of hard muscle and he was in his fifties. He'd seen his son go down from a check to the head from an opposing player and he hadn't gotten up.

Normally he'd be hollering for him to do just that. Get up. However, he was no stranger to hockey and he'd felt a hit more than once like that himself. It wasn't one you got up from right away.

Micah was the oldest of his five sons, his first born. He'd trained him himself until he got drafted by the NHL at the tender age of twenty. He'd been pro for six years now and traded three times, but it wasn't due to lack of skills, just the opposite. He was one of the most sought after players in the league along with his buddy and best friend Tyler Hartley.

Because of his less than desirable childhood, Dutch never

knew what love was until his first set his eyes on him. Micah changed him, for the better. Well, his mother certainly had a lot to do with that too, but Micah, he was something else.

He was four when he first met him. His mother and he had slept together once, and Micah was the product. She left town for five years after a fight they had. Actually Dutch practically chased her away and it took some time, but he realized that he was one hundred percent at fault for that. Liz tried to give him everything and he turned her away. It was the stupidest thing he'd ever done.

At the time he didn't want a relationship or kids. How wrong he was. He never realized how empty his life was without both of them. When he first found out he had a son, it felt as if he was given a miracle. He wasn't just a great kid, he was the best kid he'd ever met.

Every time Micah fell and skinned his knee when he was younger, Dutch felt blessed that he was there to pick him up. This one hit he'd just witnessed, he practically felt himself. It was something as a parent that he had to get used to and let Micah out on his own. Letting go of your child, your first born, wasn't easy. He was hard on him growing up, but fair. Liz was there to keep him in line too thankfully.

Like the rest of the crowd, that hit brought him to his feet. He saw him go down, and after a few seconds, still hadn't gotten up. He left his seat in the VIP box and pushed his way through the crowd to the ice below. When he reached the side gate a security guard put his hand on his chest to stop him from going onto the ice, "Think about that." Dutch said abruptly to the shorter man whose head just reached his chest. The man craned his neck up to Dutch and immediately pulled his hand off him. People nearby would say that it was either his height, size, or those icy blue eyes that he was known for in staring down opponents when he played hockey that made the man back off.

“Let him through.” Said Terrence McGillivray, the assistant coach who immediately recognized him.

By the time he made it next to Micah, a good two minutes had passed and he still hadn’t moved, “Is he conscious?” There were half a dozen people around him. Three of them were medics, and then there was his coach, and the players of his own team that were on the ice during his fall concerned and silent. He’d slid to a stop in front of his own player’s bench and the rest of the team was leaning over the boards looking down at him in silence. Every now and then they’d mumble something encouraging.

“He was a moment ago.” Coach Dan Fox said looking up at him, “he’s breathing fine Dutch.”

It was hard to hear now because the crowd was booing the opposite team now over the rough play. This was Micah’s team’s home ice and the crowd was making sure their disapproval was heard. The player that knocked out Micah was sitting in the penalty box while the rest of his team kept their distance. When a player went down like that there was a lot of blame even if it was an innocent check to the boards. However, there was nothing innocent about this.

It wasn’t uncommon to target the best players of the other team, and although Micah knew he was on the hit list, he let his guard down. He really didn’t see him coming and he was as sharp as a tack on the ice but mistakes happen. Sometimes you get caught up in watching the puck too much, called puck chasing, or anticipating your next move. Though you also had to know where the opposing players were. The thing was, Micah never chased the puck, ever. He knew how to play like he was born on the ice.

Dutch knelt down next to the paramedic who was putting a brace around his neck. Micah was face up now. The medics had rolled him over carefully when he was making his way to him.

“Micah.” Dutch said sliding his large hand over his son’s cheek. Suddenly his eyes fluttered but didn’t open. The announcer mentioned that Jason ‘Dutch’ Rush was now on the ice seeing if his son was okay and the crowd roared again. Everyone knew who he was. He had played professionally for ten years before he retired and had two cups under his belt.

“Hey dad, someone get that truck?” Micah finally said hearing his father’s voice accompanied with the large familiar calloused hand on his cheek.

A few people that heard him despite the noise around them and gave a nervous laugh. Dutch didn’t. Although he felt some relief, he was too worried. Micah was an inch taller than him and it would take no less than a truck to take him down.

“It was Wilson, that bastard.” Said one of his teammates.

“Don’t tell mom.” Micah managed with a slight pulling up at the corner of his mouth.

“Shut up kid.” Dutch said moving aside as they rolled him on the c-spine causing him to grunt. Micah wasn’t a kid, he was far from it. Everything about him, the way he carried himself, his confidence, the way he played, made him every inch a man, but to Dutch, he would always be his kid. The boy he helped shape into what he was today.

He knew Micah was trying to make light of the situation, but Dutch knew what an impact like that could do to one of the players. Every bone in your body felt as if it hit a brick wall. As for his wife, chances were Liz was watching the game live, from home. Just as he thought that his cell phone went off. He didn’t answer it knowing it was her. Micah was his concern and more than likely she could see he was busy but was letting him know that she wanted an update as soon as he could give one.

“I can walk. Christ, don’t take me out on this in front of our fans.” He said finally opening his eyes and looking at his father.

“You have to be sure.” Dutch said. “This hero bullshit could

keep you from playing.” He meant that if there was damage to his spine he could wreck it further by trying to walk off the ice. Of course Dutch would have done the same thing at his age.

“I’m sure.” He said meeting his father’s eyes with his own.

Dutch, reading his son’s determination in his expression, finally nodded after a few seconds and centered his eyes on the paramedic, “Get him off of that.”

“I’d love to because me and the guys aren’t looking forward to carrying him outta here.” He said referring to his size. Then he redirected his attention to Micah, “Can you tell me where you are?” the paramedic said leaning over him and looking into his eyes.

Micah told him now that everything was coming back to him. The ringing in his ears was gone now too, and he took that as a good sign.

“Your name?”

“Micah Rush.” He grinned setting his eyes on his father, “Son of the great Dutch Rush.” More laughs followed except Dutch. He really didn’t expect him too. Even though he looked as calm as day, his father was worried. It was hard to get him to laugh normally. He wasn’t known for his sense of humor.

“Do you have pain?” the medic continued.

“Hell yeah. I think all of my teeth are jarred loose.”

He smiled, “can you wiggle your toes?”

“And my legs. I can bloody well walk. I was stunned but I’m fine. Let me up and take that goddamn thing off my neck.” He said irritably. The longer he was down, the more he felt like an invalid. He said a few choice words after that.

“We’ll let you walk off but you’re going down below so we can check you out properly off the ice. And you’ll take it slow.” He countered.

“Fine. Get me up.”

After several moments, with help from the paramedics he



sat up and got to his feet a little unsteadily followed by a roar of approval from the twenty two thousand people that came to watch him play. Micah lifted a hand and the roar exploded to an earsplitting noise. Although he didn't say anything that sound made his head throb horribly.

The teammates of his that were still on the ice patted him on the shoulder as he glided by them erect and a little unsteady.

Dutch gripped his elbow to help him, but didn't touch him more than that. He knew his son didn't want to look like he needed the help. A mumbled word of thanks made him know he was right.

He made his way down to the quiet room knowing he was going to be examined like a patient on Freud's couch. It was like that all the time when they took a good hit like that.

As the game continued, Dutch waited outside the room until the doctor came out. There was a time when they could just get on the ice again after a hit like that, but with all the new rules, player well-being and insurance, they needed to examine them thoroughly, mentally and physically, before they allowed them to do that. "Concussion?"

"Yeah. That was quite a check, but besides being a little stunned, he should be okay in a few days. Even though it didn't look like it, his size saved him."

"Thanks Doc." Dutch said pulling out his phone to call his wife.

Inside the room the sports physiotherapist, Kevin, adjusted Micah's back. He was sitting on the side of the exam table bare from the waist up while he worked on him. Several other people were also there. Two were team trainers and one was an official.

He still felt dazed and he knew he couldn't play. Though he really didn't need to, they were in the third period and three goals ahead. However, there was his pride so he intended to make an appearance beside his teammates. He'd taken a hit and

needed to show everyone he was fine.

“Never could see how you guys could get drilled like that and walk off the ice.” He said griping a shoulder and pushing on the lower back with his other hand. He felt a slight pop and Micah winced and grunted. “Better?”

Micah rotated his broad shoulders and moved his head from side to side, “Yeah, thanks Kevin.”

Just as Kevin was finished, in stepped his father as he was tucking his cell phone back in his jeans pocket, “Your mother.” He said when Micah gave him a questioning look.

“I figured. Did you tell her I’m fine?” Micah started getting dressed again.

“Yeah.”

He smirked, “Did she believe you?”

“No.” Dutch said watching him. Seeing him sitting there looking relaxed allowed some relief to go through him. “But she said she can wait until you call and tell her the truth.” Micah’s body was like his at that age. Although he was muscular, he wasn’t too bulky, which was good because it allowed for speed on the ice, but he was in excellent shape. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on him. His height should have slowed him down somewhat, but it didn’t. Now Dutch had more muscle bulk with his age and type of work he did and he didn’t play or coach hockey as much as he used to.

“I will.” Micah said referring to calling his mother. It didn’t even cross his mind not to. Micah was very respectful of both of his parents. They made him what he was today, and he owed them a lot. They supported him in every decision he made

“Can you give us a minute?” Dutch said to the other people in the room. They nodded and left the room while Dutch studied his son’s expression. Micah was the only one of his sons that inherited Dutch’s pale blue eyes and blond hair. Some of them had his eyes, but they all had their mother’s ebony locks. He

loved all of them equally but Micah was the oldest and the first of his boys to make something of himself. Dutch always felt overwhelming pride when he looked at him probably because he was instrumental in saving Dutch from himself when he was younger. "You have a concussion."

"Doc says it's mild." Micah answered.

"Are they going to let you play?"

"They're not supposed to, but I'll make an appearance back on the bench. We don't know about that game on Friday. He said he'd check me again in the morning."

"Good idea." He said as he lifted up a nearby stool and set it down in front of his son. He sat on it leaning forward with his elbows on his knees while looking Micah squarely in the eyes, "Now do you want to tell me what the hell happened?"

Micah met his father's stare. Dutch may have been a hockey jock but he was far from stupid and because he knew him so well it was impossible to even try and lie. However, maybe it wouldn't be so bad to smudge the truth a little. "I didn't see him." His father just stared at him for a moment and Micah shifted his gaze just slightly. It was enough for Dutch to catch it.

"Do you care to try again, with the truth this time?"

"Christ." Micah said bowing his head in his hands and rubbing his scalp rearranging his sweat soaked hair. Why did he even try?

His father watched his posturing carefully, "You've been on your game for the last year, but this was out and out carelessness. Your mind wasn't on it here. Something's wrong son."

"I was careless." He agreed not elaborating.

"That last game two days ago—you were the same." Dutch said. He knew Micah better than everyone and this distraction he denied wasn't working on him. He didn't get hurt hard in that game, thankfully. He never told Micah he noticed it at the time because he thought it was a brief thing. Now he knew different.

“We won.”

Micah watched as Dutch sat up and folded his thick arms across his chest. He may not have played professional hockey for more than two decades but that didn't mean he didn't stay in shape. He was a rancher, a hardcore red-blooded cowboy, who believed in hard work despite how rich he was. Micah and he spent just about every day together until he got drafted. Now, he made a point of showing up when there's a problem. Micah should have known that he'd been there tonight because his father doesn't miss anything when it comes to him. He knew for a fact that his parents hadn't missed one of his televised games.

“Winning doesn't stop my son from getting killed or from getting injured enough to prevent you from playing again. Do you want to tell me what's going on?”

Micah stared at him for a full minute contemplating his father's words, “No.” It wasn't meant to be disrespectful in the least. He really didn't want to tell him for his own personal reasons. He thought his father would be angry, but he wasn't. All he did was give a brief nod.

“Are you sick?”

“No Dad, it's not that.” Now he understood the absence of his father's anger. He was worried he was ill with something serious. His mother died young of cancer and his father had a mental illness.

Dutch took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He and his oldest son were very close and he knew Micah would talk to him if he needed to but if he was distracted to the point of getting hurt again, he would interfere. “If you don't pull yourself together, I'll talk to Pierre.”

Translation; *I'll have your ass pulled from the game if you don't wise up.* Micah found it in him to grin, “Sure thing.” Pierre was the team's owner. He had a reputation for being a ruthless bastard but he was good to his players as long as they played

well. Micah had met him once in the last year when he got traded to the team. Most times he watched the team practice from his private box way above the ice. He knew from Dan, his coach and his father, that Pierre was involved a lot behind the scenes. Micah remembered that Pierre seemed a little too cool for his tastes. Oh, he was a rich man who was all about business, but his father was rich too, maybe not as rich as Pierre, but his family came first and foremost. Pierre didn't seem like the type to have children. It was just a guess because he just seemed to be lacking that unspoken air of a proud father that his possessed.

Dutch nodded and stood up, "Come on, twenty thousand and some people are waiting to see if you're okay."

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Hailey watched the team practice through the Plexiglas from the entrance that led down to the dressing rooms. She was wearing coveralls and had a satchel slung over her shoulder with some of her tools. Her long auburn hair was pulled back into a ponytail and she watched the athletes on the ice with light hazel eyes.

One in particular was the focus of her attention.

Micah Rush.

He was fast, big and hit like a semi truck. Her father used to talk about Dutch, his father, like he was a God when he played years ago. She smiled to herself remembering. Maybe that's why she watched Micah since he got drafted to her home team just over a year ago. It didn't help that he was just so beautiful, which was the other reason she watched him.

He was the fantasy poster boy for hockey. He was tall, muscular, athletic, blond and blue-eyed, and moved like a whisper in the wind on the ice, but had the stealth of a stalking Panther.

Her father was ecstatic when Micah's name came up for the draft in the NHL. Only they didn't get him until five years later

and it cost a *lot* of money and a three player trade. Thankfully Micah lived up to his reputation despite the media criticizing the trade. He was a star player that earned his enormous salary.

“Should have known that man could only throw males.” Her father said over dinner one night. It turned out Micah had four younger brothers. Cole, the second oldest was looking good for a draft next year, but he was only nineteen. Micah had been playing professional since he turned twenty six years ago. That was a hockey player in his prime. Her eyes went over him as he rocketed by her, *definitely in his prime*.

“You should put some skates on and join them.” Said a deep teasing voice behind her. “You could probably match some of them and outskate the rest.”

Caught off guard she near jumped, then turned to see the team goalie, Emil Sudas standing behind her in full gear looking like a small mountain. His goalie mask was flipped up on top of his head leaving his face visible. “Hi Emil.” She said sheepishly.

“Hmm.” He said coming up beside her with his dark intelligent eyes panning the activity on the ice, “What has you so distracted?”

“None of your business.” She said turning away from him.

“No?” he said looking down at the top of her head from his six foot three height, “Daddy won’t appreciate you even looking those boys Hailey. I know for a fact that he doesn’t want you anywhere near them.”

“I know.” She said not denying it. Normally she didn’t have a problem staying away from them, but she couldn’t help coming to see Micah practice. To her, he seemed so set apart in talent than the rest, especially in looks and the raw virility that radiated off of him when he played. It was true, that he was arrogant and rightly so. He probably could have any woman he wanted, but that still didn’t stop her from admiring him. At times she felt like she was no different than the women that waited for them after

the game, the ones that swarmed at them with no self respect doing their best to get noticed. Yet, because of her father, she knew him better than they did, so didn't that give her some right? Not only that, she wasn't trying to get noticed at all. If she was, she certainly wouldn't be wearing shapeless coveralls, have her hair pulled up, no makeup and hiding in the dark corridor.

Emil cleared his throat seeing that her mind was elsewhere. She actually blushed a little which was unlike her. It was because she was daydreaming, which she never did. Not only that, she was daydreaming about a hockey jock so she was caught twice. He lifted his brow in question and she shook her head. "No way am I telling you what I'm thinking."

He chuckled. Emil was in his mid thirties and the second best rated goalie in the league, but he'd also been on the same team for the past five years so he knew her well. He'd been over at her father's house with his family many times for dinner. She would like to say they were friends, but her father was the type of person that didn't call many people friends. It was all about appearances.

"We have a game in Chicago day after next." He said to himself while watching Micah follow through with the training staff's drills, "Nice looking young man." He said glancing at her seeming to know that it was him she was admiring. It was hard not to know. Every female admired Micah. She never said anything to the contrary, so he continued. "A real womanizer like his father."

"His father's married." She offered without looking at him. She knew why he was discouraging her. Emil knew her father and the last man her father wanted her hooked up with was an athlete.

"They eat, live and sleep hockey." He told her, "They don't make good husbands. You *know* that Hailey. Temptation is too great and when you combine that with the arrogance of a star

athlete, it's –“

“I also know that he has four younger brothers and his parents are devoted to one another.” She countered in defense interrupting him. She knew Emil was being protective, but she wasn't seventeen anymore.

Hailey knew everything about the team, even their personal lives, sometimes more than the papers knew. Then again, she had inside information.

He smiled at her defensiveness while looking down at her, “Yes, but before then—“ he nodded toward the tall player she was watching, “—he had a reputation, much like the rest of these guys. Even some of the married ones step out on their wives.” That was something that was never spoken of outside of the team, but Hailey needed a reality check. Of course he was concerned about her, but not just because of Micah corrupting her. Her father could be frightening at times and as far as he knew never took his wrath out on Hailey, but he certainly didn't want her exposed to it. She was young and sweet, and most likely it would destroy her.

She narrowed her gaze at him. “Does anyone not believe in marriage anymore?”

“I do!” he said with a laugh, “My wife would castrate me. Besides, I could never do that to my two boys. And—“ he continued, “—you have seen my wife, she's a damn fox!” That made her laugh. He opened the rink side entrance, “Take care honey and stay away from the Rush kid.” He added with a wink before he left.

She inhaled deeply and let it out slowly watching Emil glide across the ice toward the net and start stretching. She believed him when he said he loved his wife. She'd seen him with her. There was no less than adoration when he gazed at her. As for her, her defensiveness alone revealed that she liked Micah, but she couldn't help herself. She knew that Emil was being



protective because he cared about her, but like she thought before, she was old enough to make her own decisions.

Then the coach blew the whistle and the team glided to the player's bench beside her to refresh themselves. She took a couple of steps back because she didn't want to be seen staring at him. It didn't matter. He wouldn't recognize her from a hole in the ground anyway. She'd been at the arena just about every day since he'd come to play there and not once did he look at her. Mind you, like Emil said, men of his caliber we only focused on one thing when they came there—hockey. Their play time during the season was pretty much extinct.

They were wearing their exercise gear which was black and grey sporting their team logo. When he removed his helmet, the sharp contrast to that and his blond hair was very attractive. Never mind that it was stuck to his head soaked in sweat, or that his face was flushed from the rigorous exercise they were doing. She didn't care, if anything, it made him look raw, masculine.

Her eyes roved over him as he lifted a Gatorade bottle and took a long swig. Then to her complete shock his head suddenly turned and his pale eyes landed on her. She was sure she was standing in the dark of the corridor, not only that, there were two layers of Plexiglas that he had to peer through. She also had the advantage of the ice being well lit. At least she thought she did. Not one breath escaped her as his eyes narrowed and his hand slowly lowered the bottle he held while he stared at her. Before she could let him get a decent look, she quickly backed up out of view.

"Richards, who was that girl?" Micah tapped one of his teammates on the shoulder and nodded toward the corridor just as she disappeared.

"What girl?"

"The one standing over there." He turned back and she was gone, "Damn."

Richards glanced over to where Micah was indicating which was now empty, “Man you must be hard up, because there’s no one there.”

“No, but she was a minute ago.” He answered, “A cute redhead.”

Richards shook his head, “I didn’t see her.” He grinned devilishly, “If she was there and cute, I couldn’t have missed her.”

The whistle blew again and Micah put his helmet and gloves on, and picked up his stick. He cast a glance over his shoulder toward the corridor, then went back and glided a circle in front of the area just to see it empty. After a prolonged look, he turned and skated back over the ice. He was sure she was standing there.

Hailey pinned herself against the cool painted brick of the corridor. She was glad that the lights down there weren’t on or he would have seen her for sure. How stupid could she be standing there and ogling him like a prized stallion.

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Several hours later Micah left the arena with his best friend Tyler Hartley who was also his partner left forward on the team. They got drafted together and proved why they were the best in the league. They anticipated each other’s moves almost as good as twins. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that they had been playing together since they were four. They had been traded a few times before they ended up on the current team and Micah wouldn’t accept the deal until Tyler was part of it.

“Do you remember that girl I went home with a few weeks ago from pre-playoff party.”

“The gorgeous red-head?” Tyler grinned, “Who could forget. She was a beaut.”

“I thought I saw her today.”

“Hmm, gave you some memories did she?” Tyler said with a wry smile.

Actually she did, but he didn't elaborate. "I swear I did see her, but instead of that stunning green satin she wore last time, she was wearing what looked like coveralls."

"Maybe you got hit too hard last night." Tyler said with concern, "did the doc say you could play in Chicago Friday?"

"He was going to check me again on the morning of game day." He stopped and looked at him, "That's the other thing. "When we changed out before I got hit, I looked up at the screen and it viewed some of the crowd. I swear I saw her then too."

"Before?" Tyler finally realized what Micah was getting at. Micah nodded.

"Damn Micah, you got distracted?" Tyler said in surprise. He nodded.

"Does Dutch know?"

"He knows, but not why." Micah answered casting him a glance.

"Jesus, I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that," Tyler said with genuine worry. If Micah's father found out that it was a woman that distracted him from the game, he'd more than likely work the hell out of both of them. History had shown that where there was Micah, there was Tyler and when one did something wrong, usually the other wasn't far behind.

"It wasn't so bad. He just hasn't figured out what's distracting me."

Tyler shook his head, "Well, let me know when he finds out because I'll avoid the arena all together."

"Chicken shit." He chuckled.

"Yeah, well you remember he trained us both since we were little, I've seen him raging mad. He may never have raised a hand to us but his wrath was enough to drop the leaves from trees. Trust me, if he knows that its some girl you're caught up with he'll work it out of you until you collapse."

Micah laughed. Tyler's description was dead on. Tyler was

a few months older than Micah. When he turned sixteen, they got a hold of a bottle of whiskey and got so damn drunk that they stole Tyler's father's car and woke up in one of the grazing pastures the next morning. The car had front end damage because it went through a fence. Dutch dragged them to the arena and put them through drills until they had thrown up to the point of dehydration. Neither one of them could get out of bed for almost three days. To this day neither one of them has ever touched hard liquor again. They also had to get part-time summer jobs to pay for the damage on the car. Dutch still didn't let up. Even if they worked until midnight, he still expected them on the ice at five thirty in the morning for practice. It was the last time they did something that stupid.

"So about this girl, do you think she's following you? That's nothing new." He smirked, "Just like your dad, the team stud."

Micah didn't say anything. He was the choice for endorsements because he had those movie star looks like his father and the same bad boy reputation. With that fame came women, lots of women. Attention like that did give a man an ego. Micah had enough to fill a room.

Although he didn't have as many penalties and game misconducts as his father had, he never backed down from a fight. If he could have gotten up last night he would have engaged Wilson who head checked him against the boards. It was a dirty hit. It was the opposing team trying to take down one of the best centers in the league. As for his reputation, Tyler wasn't much different, but Micah's father was famous and it paved the way for his own reputation.

As for this girl, he couldn't help but feel a tremendous disappointment to put her in the same category as the others, because nothing about her was like that. He had enough experience with women to know the difference. Mind you they didn't spend too much time talking but he certainly liked what

little he knew. She was fun, smart, and beautiful. “This girl was different.” He finally said.

“How so?”

Micah just shrugged and didn’t elaborate.

Tyler was a little surprised by that response. There were two types of women to them; ones you date, and ones you sleep with. Within the ones you date category, were the ones you introduce family to and the ones you don’t. Tyler and Micah normally didn’t date and neither one of them ever introduced a girl to their families.

Tyler would be lying if he said that he and Micah didn’t share stories about their escapades, but this was different. Micah wasn’t very forthcoming which was unlike him in that respect. Tyler eyed him for a moment and felt a little uncomfortable over the subject, so he changed it. “Come on, let’s go get something to eat. We need to get back before five for our second workout.” He led the way to his Porsche.

That wasn’t all of it. Something was bothering Micah and he really didn’t know how to deal with it. They only talked about women in the way that men of their position and status talked about them. They used them for sex, just as the women used them. When they would head back to the dressing room after a game, there would be women hanging over the walls from their seats trying to touch them and throwing their panties at them.

Some of the other players were married, some faithfully, some not, but Tyler and Micah liked to play the field, a lot. Who could blame them? They were both twenty six and loaded with testosterone. They had jobs that demanded the most intense physical fitness workout a man could get. It was a normal occurrence to lose six or seven pounds of dehydration during a game. They had to eat a strict diet depending on their needs, workout intensely twice a day during playoffs, and abstain from alcohol. Sex, at this time in their lives, was the best form of

release of such a rigorous schedule.

Well, abstaining from alcohol wasn't as easy as people thought.

That girl Micah seemed distracted over was at their playoff party several weeks ago. There was an enormous crowd there that involved officials, coaches, other players and their wives. Also some of the hockey groupies that were regulars showed up. However, he'd never seen the redhead before then and there was no way he'd forget a face or body like hers. Micah saw her first, and even if he didn't, it wouldn't have mattered because she seemed to only have eyes for him.

After several glasses of wine a bunch of them left and hit the clubs. They had spent all night drinking and dancing. In the early hours Micah and the redhead disappeared. Tyler himself went home with a pretty blond. "so do you think she's a bit crazy?" So much for leaving the subject alone.

"This girl? No." Micah had women that stalked him before, and still stalked him, but she wasn't like that at all. She was funny, sweet, and throughout their passionate night together, she was nervous, almost frightened, but adventurous, sexy, and felt like fine satin.

"You liked her." Tyler finally said seeing Micah's expression.

"I did."

"Then call her." Tyler said simply.

"I would, but don't have her number or her last name." Micah admitted.

"You've got to be kidding me?" What woman didn't make sure that they could get a hold of her again?

He shook his head, "I was hoping to at least see her again, somewhere, but I have a feeling that party she was at was a first for her."

It took them almost two days to recoup before practice the following weekend. The coach found out what they did and

worked them extra hard. Not just them, the other four of their teammates that were involved. Micah claimed it was Emil that told Dan because even though he was in his mid thirties, he was like their surrogate father away from home. Though he didn't need to, Dutch had been present at the last two games. He made it his business to keep his son and him, for that matter, in line. Dutch and Tyler's father were good friends and Dutch made a promise to his parents to keep an eye on him when he started playing professional. He held true to his word.

Normally they didn't drink because of that lesson Micah's father gave them years ago, but it was the first time in years that the team made the playoffs. When they did drink it was either beer or wine. Neither one of them developed the taste for hard liquor again.

Dutch use to drink but rarely did anymore because he always ended up in a jail cell when he did from fighting, but he'd reformed. Micah's mother had a lot to do with that. Micah confided that Dutch near lost them both after a night of tying one on.

"Are you going home after the cup playoffs?" Tyler asked. They usually had a month off after the finals before training began again for the following year and a bunch of the team were talking about taking off to Europe, but Micah never said much in those conversations so he was wondering what he was going to do.

"My parents want me to." Micah said settling in the seat beside Tyler, "I promised my brothers I would anyway."

Tyler and Micah were very close with their families. Tyler had an older sister who he loved to death and was married but he was more close to Micah because they'd practically spent every day together since they met. Dutch actually had an ice rink built on his ranch that they would practice on all year round. His brothers played wicked hockey too, but he wasn't sure if they

were all going to play professional.

“Are you?” Micah asked.

Tyler shot him a look of mock fear, “Of course I am. Do you think I’d let you go home and catch wrath from your parents that I’m not with you.”

Micah laughed, “I suppose not.”

“Besides, your mother may be small but she scares the shit out of me more than your dad.”

Micah grinned. It was true. She was also the only one that never let his father’s explosive temper even affect her and was able to calm him easily. Despite him being so far away, he was very close with his family.

“So,” Micah shot him a sideways glance, “What was the redhead’s name?” Micah looked out the passenger window and answered him.

“Hailey.”

“Nice.”

“Yeah.” Was all Micah said. Too bad he didn’t get her last name. She took off so quick the next morning that he never got it. He was still asleep when she left and rightly so after that marathon night. He searched his condo for her number hoping she left it, but she didn’t. He’d never had someone do that to him before and it drove him crazy. Maybe she thought that night was just that, a night. He also felt that way in the beginning, even told her so, but once he got his hands on her everything changed.

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Two days had gone by since Hailey had that near miss with Micah. She was making sure the boilers were running well because there was another game the next night.

When she was done she was heading back to her locker when she ran into Sean, the arena manager and her boss.

“Just the gal I want to see.” He said. We’re short a maintenance man. Do you feel like putting on skates to help out



tomorrow night?”

“I suppose.” Hailey said. He knew she was an accomplished skater. She had worked at the arena since she was fifteen in high school and did her power engineering practicum there. When she was finished at twenty two last summer she got hired. She was one of half a dozen of them that worked the arena. During off times she’d be on the ice when it wasn’t being used. Her father didn’t have sons so he had her in girl’s hockey since she put on her first pair of skates. She actually played on the women’s team when she was in high school, but decided she wanted a different career.

Actually she was surprised that he’d let her. Her father was obsessed with the game and wanted a hockey player in the family, but certainly didn’t want her near the players. He never really explained why, but for some reason she knew it wasn’t because he was protecting her. She actually felt as though he didn’t want her to interfere with their game or his players. She near laughed, like she could possibly influence superstars.

It was disappointing, but she had come to terms with the way he was years ago. She still loved him, but knew not to get her hopes up that he would put her first.

Now what her boss was asking was a spot on the maintenance team that fixed issues on the ice during the hockey game. He knew she could skate as well as anyone because he’d seen her on the ice with her father when she was younger. “Sure.” She answered. It was hard to turn it down because she have a rink side seat, not that she couldn’t take advantage of her father’s VIP status, but she never liked to do that. Then there was his strict rules keeping her away from the team.

She never had a problem with that, especially growing up around them. She wasn’t a fool when it came to men like that. She’d heard more than enough locker room talk when wandering the back halls. However, her father wasn’t always that strict.

Only when she hit her early teens did he forbid her to go around them. When she was older he confided in her that they'd been inquiring about her. She developed young for a woman and looked eighteen when she was only fourteen. Even if she was an adult now, if he knew what she'd done last month, he would probably kill her.

It was the fourth of seven in the quarterfinals and if their home team, Micah's team, won, they would be in the semifinals. It wasn't often something went wrong on the ice, but when it did it was usually something simple like the Plexi coming apart at the seam from a hard hit to a player. Regardless it would be a monumental game and she wanted to watch it close up, not down in the staffroom on the television.

"Good, that saves me from finding someone. I have three of my guys out sick with the flu." He paused looking a little worried, "Your dad, will he be okay with that?"

Hailey should have known this would come up. Most of the arena staff had known her since she started working summers there years ago, and they knew how her father felt having her around the players, because he wasn't that quiet about it. "I think I'm old enough to look after myself Sean."

He chuckled, "Your dad has a lot of pull Hailey. I don't want to get in shit."

"It won't happen." She hoped crossing her fingers behind her back.

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The next night, she was sitting next to two men watching the third and final period of the game. It was, in a nutshell, phenomenal. They were tied two-two, and penalties were getting handed out right and left. Micah had spent two of them in the box in that period alone. His size didn't help of course. When he checked someone in the boards they usually went down especially if they didn't brace for it. He played intensely and she

always admired that about him. She was sure she could be standing in the middle of the ice naked and he wouldn't even notice her because he was so focused on the game. She flushed slightly and glanced around to see if anyone noticed. Thankfully they were too focused on the game.

Just as she thought that, a fight broke out. The opposing team rushed Emil, their goalie, and knocked the net off the posts and sent a crowd of players crashing against the boards in a spray of legs, arms and equipment. Next thing you knew Tyler had Wilson by the shirt and was punching him while a few more were facing each other off. Gloves, sticks and helmets littered the ice around them.

The crowd erupted in approving roars. Micah was chest to chest with another player, well, he was about six inches higher than him but he hadn't dropped his gloves yet to invite a fight. It looked like they were exchanging a few choice words.

The referees were trying to pull Tyler and Wilson apart. Tyler was landing good blows while his opponent only got a few off. Hailey knew that was his justification for the hit Wilson gave his partner Micah last week. She shook her head and felt herself smile. Micah and the other player were still chest to chest when a linesman moved his arm between them and told them to cool down.

She never really liked the fighting that could break out but she felt some satisfaction for the concussion that Micah had to deal with last week. Everyone knew it was a deliberate hit to take out one of her team's best forwards.

"You don't choose your fight's wisely Scott." Micah said staring down the other player letting his mouth curl into a sardonic smile.

Scott shoved him right before the linesman broke them up and followed it with a string of epithets.

Micah never dropped his smile or backed away. His pale

eyes were riddled with challenge.

“Enough.” The linesmen said, “Back to your perspective areas.”

Tyler skated by Micah at that moment and they exchanged a glove to glove hit besides a humorous look. Wilson left the ice with a bloody nose.

“We’re on.” The guy beside Hailey said as he stood up. He had the earpiece in. “They juggled the Plexi loose behind Sudas.”

Seconds later they were skating across the ice as players were in the middle of regrouping.

“Hey.” Tyler said nudging Micah’s arm with his gloved hand. His eyes lit on the redhead that just rocketed past them. “Isn’t that your girl?”

Micah turned and immediately saw her, “What the hell?”

When the maintenance team was done refitting the Plexiglas they turned and skated by them again, “You’ve got to be shitting me.” He said seeing her give him a brief glance. “That is her, isn’t it?” he said reaching up with his gloved hand to move his helmet back a bit with his eyes following her. He already knew it was. There was no way in hell he’d forget that figure.

“You’d know more than me.” Tyler grinned. “Well that explains why she’s been seen here. At least you can track her down.”

“I’ll do more than that.” He said angrily. Now he knew he wasn’t seeing things. But why did she stay out of sight all of this time?

“Hell, she’s fast.” Tyler added watching her beat the other two back to the gate.

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After the game, Micah was stopped outside the dressing room for comments from reporters. His team lost in overtime. It was fine because they were still three games ahead, and the other players got a lucky shot by Emil. It was a heated game on both

sides with the players. The other team was trying not to get eliminated and his team was doing their best to make sure they were. At least they gave the crowd plenty of entertainment.

He answered their questions as briefly as he usually did. It was Public Relations and as team captain he was obligated. The whole time he was anxious to review the replay of the game especially with the redhead on the maintenance crew. Someone had to know who she was.

Even though he was distracted thinking of her, Micah was determined to win the next game, and was already thinking ahead on how to do just that.

Once back in the change room Micah sat beside Tyler and pulled out his phone to pull up the replay of the game from the web. It took him a good half an hour to find her, then he paused the scene.

"She skates like the wind." Tyler said from beside him watching him zoom in the image.

"I saw that." He answered then looked at him, "Someone has to know her."

Tyler nodded toward Dan, "ask the coach. He's been with this team for almost eight years."

"Good idea."

Tyler watched Micah stand up and approach the coach. He couldn't hear what was being said but the look on Dan's face said everything as he took in the picture that Micah had on his phone.

"How do you know her?" Dan finally said lifting his eyes up to Micah's with a worried expression.

"That's not important." Micah said not missing his coach's look. It was something that told him to keep his reasons for wanting to know about her to himself. Micah then narrowed his gaze inquisitively, "*Who* is she?"

"Stay away from her Micah." He warned. "That is one girl you need to avoid."

“Why?”

Dan looked at his star player, “You really don’t know?”

He shook his head.

Dan sighed heavily, “That’s Hailey LeBlanc. You’d better take a long hard think about this.”

Now that was a familiar name. “LeBlanc.” It wasn’t a question. He knew the name as well as he knew hockey. His coach nodded. He said something caustic after that.

Dan warned him again, “If you keep after her, you’ll find yourself benched. Playoffs or not.”

Tyler saw the look of complete surprise on Micah’s face from across the room. He was curious to see if the coach knew her. Obviously he did. Micah talked to him for a few more minutes before he came back to him and sat down muttering more curses.

“Is she married?” Tyler asked. He already knew by Dan’s expression that he knew who she was, but the look on Micah’s face was what bothered him. He looked utterly shocked.

“Nope.”

“Then, who is she?”

“She—” Micah said holding up the phone so Tyler could see her picture, “—is the daughter of our team’s owner.”

“Oh hell.” Tyler said slowly. “Unbelievable.”

“That’s about the size of it. Coach Fox says she works here. She’s one of the power engineers.” Actually that bit impressed him. Daddy was worth billions but his daughter works for a living. “Apparently Pierre has a real issue with players around her—a really *big* issue.”

“Well I can’t blame him. If it was my sister who was around us, I’d worry—but wow—.”

“What the hell have I done?” Micah said looking at her picture while leaning forward with his forearms on his knees. Even on the small screen he held there was no mistaking how damn perfect she was! That didn’t help his mood. He was

furious.

“Only you and I know about it.”

“And four of our guys.” Micah added. They were all together when he took her home. “Richards has a big mouth.”

“I don’t think they’ll remember much. They were pretty occupied—and drunk.” He said thinking about the women and the alcohol. “Do you think she was trying to get you in trouble?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out. She obviously targeted me. It could be blackmail. I don’t know.” If it was, she hadn’t made any indication of it and if she was working there, it would have come up sooner, wouldn’t it? None of this made sense. He ran his fingers through his hair, “Dad’s going to bloody well kill me. Only I could get hooked on a girl that could destroy my career.”

“If you’re lucky on both counts.” Tyler said. He’d heard that Pierre wasn’t always an honest business man and had dealings with the mob in his youth. He now dealt with internet security and made billions on it. Surprisingly, Tyler was more worried about Dutch and Liz’s reaction.

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Hailey purposely waited until all the players left before she came out of the employee change room. She’d been around that crowd for years and pretty much knew when the NHL stars left the building. She took longer so she wouldn’t run into him. She knew he saw her on the ice because she saw Hartley’s tap on his shoulder as she skated by. Maybe she took that job for the night for that reason because she wanted him to know who she was. Yet, part of her regretted it immediately when his eyes lit on her in recognition. She couldn’t really read his expression in that brief instant but for some reason she felt as though she’d done something horribly wrong, like she was just as cheap as those women that constantly threw themselves at the players. Why wouldn’t she? She was no better that night.

At the time she didn't think that at all because he never made her feel that way. He was very respectful and it was something she really didn't expect. Not that she knew exactly what to expect, but after the first few minutes he mentioned something to her inexperience and took the lead. He was patient and encouraging. It didn't take long for her to begin to relax. Of course the alcohol helped, but really, she probably still would have gone through with it because of what happened to her earlier. Well, maybe not.

Who was she kidding? Of course she would have! She was crazy about him since her father raved about him when he was first drafted. It wasn't just the way he looked, but it definitely helped. It was the way he played. She always loved the game since she could remember, but Micah played like a God on skates. He had a passion in him about it that left her in awe. It was that intensity she was attracted to.

As for that night, she slept all weekend afterwards. He'd completely exhausted her. Every muscle in her body was screaming the next day. She hurt in places she never even knew had muscle. When she brushed her hair, her scalp even hurt. It was then she remembered that he had a hold of her hair at some point and to her surprise, blushed while looking at her reflection in the mirror. Heat pulsed low in her belly even remembering it and despite her blush she felt herself smile.

Oh, gosh she was going to go crazy remembering everything she'd done.

Quickly she shook off those memories knowing that she'd never get anything done. That man was going to distract her to stupidity.

She stood up and hung her skates in her locker before walking out to the hall. Then stilled. Micah was leaning against the far wall facing her with his arms folded across his chest. He was devastating in a dark grey suit, blue shirt and striped tie. His



blond hair was damp from the after game shower. It surprised her that he'd actually tracked her down because she was sure that he didn't want to see her again. She didn't know what to say so she just stared at him.

"You skate like a girl." It was said as a joke but the amusement didn't reach his pale eyes. To anyone it was obvious that he was angry.

She was confused at his tone. Yet, she was unsure on how to respond to his demeanor, so she said the only thing that seemed to come to her mind. "I am a girl." If he thought he was menacing, her father was the devil.

"There's no doubt." He said moving his pale eyes down her body. She was wearing jeans and a cream knit sweater. Her clothes looked comfortable, but oddly sexy to him. Then again, he knew how long those legs were. Seeing them in denim didn't mean a damn thing because he'd had them wrapped around him several times and couldn't forget how nice they were.

She brushed her hair back off her face and looked up at him, "What do you want Micah?"

He erected himself and took a couple of steps toward her. He knew he was intimidating from his size, but it didn't even affect her. She probably was used to the monstrous height of hockey players considering that she'd been around them all her life. "I want to know what exactly that other night was about."

Her eyes lifted to his, "Why does it matter?"

There was no guilt in her eyes when she met his unwavering. Somehow he'd hoped there would be, but there was nothing but mirrored confidence. Now, did that mean that the night they spent together was without repercussions regarding his future with this team, or did it mean that this woman had no conscience? "It matters that I screwed the daughter of the man who signs my paychecks." There it was. That look he'd been hoping for.

After her initial embarrassment which she had a little trouble masking, her eyes narrowed, “I shouldn’t have expected you to be less than obtuse.”

He glared at her, “Are you trying to get me traded, or benched?”

“No!” she said appalled that he would even suggest such a thing. For some reason she didn’t even consider that. She was keeping her distance and not letting him know who she was because she didn’t want her father to be angry with her. Also, she really didn’t think he wanted anything to do with her again. He did have a reputation. However, was she so stupid to not realize that there were repercussions with him too? No, she didn’t because she always saw him as untouchable. She doubted very much that her father would take anything out on the great Micah Rush. More than likely he’d give her hell for interfering with the team captain’s game.

Micah stared down at her and felt his anger start to dissolve. Her denial was too unguarded for her to be lying and he really believed her. Besides that, she was too damn beautiful to stay angry at. Something he didn’t notice about her before was that she had a slight spray of faint freckles across her nose. She looked so damn perfect. “Then what was that about?”

Her eyes searched his for a moment. She loved those pale blue eyes of his. Whenever he looked at her with them, it disrupted the rhythm of her heart. “It was about a girl who got dumped by her fiancé because she found him cheating. I went a little crazy.”

His blond brows popped up to his bangs, “A little?” Crazy was an understatement. They practically wrecked his condo.

She flushed a little, “It wasn’t normal for me.”

He already knew that from her inexperience and that’s why she stuck in his mind. Yet, that didn’t stop her from letting him do whatever he wanted. Christ she was flexible too, and now he

knew why after seeing skate like that. He knew she was in excellent shape because he'd felt every inch of her, memorized it. "I can't see you again." He finally said practically biting the words out. It wasn't easy. He wasn't so stupid to realize that she was different and he liked her, a lot.

"I know." She really didn't expect for him to have anything further with her.

"You do realize that your father will probably find out about us."

"I haven't told anyone." Even her best friend Jill who encouraged her to go to that party so she could take her.

"My life isn't a secret. Someone will leak that out sooner or later."

"I'll handle him." She said for the second time in less than twenty four hours. Sean may have believed her, but Micah knew better.

"Will you?" He said skeptically. For some reason he didn't believe Pierre LeBlanc was handled by anyone.

She released a deep sigh and averted her gaze for a moment before she faced him again, "I guess I owe you a bit of explanation Micah. It wasn't a personal vendetta against you. It wasn't something I'd ever done before either. I'm sure you know that now, but I just didn't think of the repercussions. Micah, I'm sorry." She finally said, then turned and walked away. That night she met him, she told him she wasn't like those women he was used to and he said he believed her, but after that night it was obvious she wasn't. So if there was a doubt, he knew that she told the truth after being with her.

*Now that was a first*, Micah thought watching her. A woman apologizing for using him! Her, of all people. However, there was no question to weather he was satisfied that night either. He was, in spades. There weren't many women that could keep up to him, but she did. He could still hear the bubbling

laughter come from her when he nudged her awake for the third time when the first beginnings of daylight hit the sky.

His eyes went down to her bottom. She had a great ass! It was hard to forget especially when his hands had a hold of it a few weeks ago while he buried himself deep inside her. And those legs! They were long and well toned. He should have known they belonged to a skater. Ten seconds passed before he overcame the resistance he felt and followed her.

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An hour later he found Tyler sitting on the hood of his Porsche waiting for him out in the parking lot. He was wearing a dark navy suit and tie and texting with his phone. It was mid April so the weather was nice, yet cool enough to enjoy some of the outdoors without overheating from the coastal sun.

Tyler stood up as he approached, "Did you find—" he paused seeing his friend's hair tousled, tie ruffled and hanging out of his suit jacket. "—Jesus Micah," That made him run his hands through his hair, "fix your tie too." Tyler added glancing around hoping all the press had left.

Micah looked down and saw what Tyler was talking about. He didn't realize he looked so terrible. After all, he only undid his fly and dropped his pants. He actually had to fight the urge to grin. "You didn't have to wait." He said while adjusting his clothing.

"I had Kevin and the massage therapist work on me for an hour and your bag was still there, so I wanted to see how it went. Now I don't need to ask." He said shaking his head but betrayed his disapproval with a disbelieving smile. "I've only been out here for a few minutes."

"I couldn't help it." He said once they were in the car. "You seen what she looks like and that doesn't even scratch the surface."

"You're risking too much."

“I know.” He said solemnly.

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Several days had gone by and Micah was doing his best to get his game back during the practice drills they had twice a day because they'd lost game number five, but he was preoccupied and he knew why. Hailey. He hadn't seen her at all so she had purposely been avoiding him. At least that's what he summed it up to. Regardless, he knew it was his fault they lost even though his team didn't hold it against him. He'd missed some easy pucks and even the public criticized him. He wasn't sure if it was because of his lack of focus by the way he'd taken her against the wall in the supply room last time he saw her or he was just having an off day. Unfortunately he wasn't the only one that noticed that his head wasn't in the game.

His father had shown up that afternoon unannounced and to Micah's dismay saw him standing beside the team's owner behind the player's bench watching the drills.

From the way they were talking and looking his way, he knew he was the subject of discussion.

“Do you see that?” Tyler said sliding up beside him and nodding toward Dutch. “I wonder what that's about?”

“Yeah I see it, and it means I'm in deep shit.” Micah said uneasily.

Micah saw his dad get the coach's attention then Pierre LeBlanc, the team's owner, turned and left. At that exact moment, the coach blew the whistle and told Micah that his father wanted a word with him.

“Good luck.” Tyler said matching his unease. He may have been speaking to Micah, but his eyes were on his former coach and mentor. The expression he wore said plenty. It wasn't what he could see, it's what he couldn't. Dutch looked calm, too calm. Like the sea before a storm. Micah *was* in deep shit.

“I'll need it.” He skated over to the player's bench to take a

drink before going through the gate. His father made his way in from the other end. "Hi." He said barely meeting his eyes.

Dutch didn't say anything. He just turned and nodded toward the corridor.

Micah took a deep breath and went through the back door down the corridor to the change rooms. That look his father gave him was a familiar one. One that he used on him many times when he was young and did something really stupid, somehow it made him feel nine years old all over again.

Once inside he told him to sit down. Yet he didn't take a seat himself. Micah waited patiently knowing this wasn't going to go well.

Dutch folded his arms across his thick chest and stared down at him, "What's her name?"

Micah averted his gaze and shifted uncomfortably on the bench. Sometimes it wasn't always a good thing that his father knew him so well.

"Pierre says your head isn't in focus. He thinks it's from that hit you got a few weeks ago even though the doctors cleared you, but I know better. It took me some time to figure it out." He had to reflect back on some things in his own life to do just that. The only thing that ever distracted him to the point of forgetting who he was, was Liz. His wife. Micah and he were a lot alike in many ways, so it shouldn't have surprised him at all. His son's reaction just confirmed that he was right.

"It doesn't matter." Micah finally said meeting his father's eyes.

"It does Micah." Dutch said a little more firmly, "After that performance the last night you played Pierre's going to bench you for the game on Friday. He's going to have Dan tell the press that you are still not one hundred percent after that last hit."

Micah swore. A lot.

Dutch remained unfazed while he went through as many

curses as he could. "My words exactly. Now, I made him a promise that I'd take these next two days and get you ready myself if he promised not to."

That was as good as a punishment as any. His father was relentless and because of it, made him the athlete he was today.

"I know you son. You are the last person that wants to be responsible for letting this team lose the cup."

Micah nodded. His father was right. Part of him was angry with Hailey even though it was his own damn fault. He'd never felt that way about a woman before and even that rough lovemaking episode in the supply room left him wanting more.

"I can't see you again." He repeated to her afterwards not meaning a word of it.

She stared at him for a moment before she allowed a smile to spread across her lovely face, "Okay."

He grinned, grabbed her and gave her a devastating kiss and a rakish grin before he left her there half dressed and satiated.

He loved the fact that she just let him ravish her. He walked up behind her, snaked a large arm under her breasts and lifted her off her feet into the nearest room, closing the door.

She was too occupied with her thoughts to even hear him coming. There was only a small squeal of surprise which was soon replaced by the sweetest feminine moans he'd ever heard. He wasn't gentle either. Well, he was in control enough not to let his large size hurt her, but still, he couldn't get close enough, or deep enough. He knew he left fingerprint bruises on her backside.

Because of her inexperience, it was killing him to know if it was the alcohol she had ingested that night that let him do things to her or his experience. From her reaction in the supply room, his head swelled with the knowledge that it was him. All him.

"Tomorrow morning at five. Bring Tyler. You both need it."

His father brought him back to the present. "Yes sir."

“You sure you don’t want to tell me her name?” Dutch asked him once more. For some reason he already knew the answer.

He shook his head slowly. Micah knew damn well that his father would make sure that Hailey didn’t make it near him during the semifinals. However, that wasn’t a problem lately. He hadn’t seen her since that day in the supply room. He even went to the employee change room several times, but she wasn’t there. His eyes searched for her when he came to the arena too, but to no avail. She was avoiding him.

Dutch stared down at him with all the confidence of a man who conquered the world. He had unlimited pride when it came to all five of his sons, but Micah was the oldest and most accomplished even though Cole was certain for a first pick draft most possibly on the day he turned twenty. However, he’d be lying if this didn’t bother him. Micah was just barely twenty six. He seemed too young to be hung up on a woman. Sometimes young men like him became enamored with the wrong type of woman and that worried him. Yet, he knew that Micah had his share of experience so for him to be caught up with that type of hockey groupie was near impossible.

“She’s not like that.” Micah said seeing his father’s thoughts appear in his eyes and felt oddly defensive of her. “Don’t judge someone you don’t know dad.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Dutch said not denying or elaborating what he was thinking, “But stay away from her until the playoffs are over.” One thing was certain, if she was distracting Micah, she had to be something else.

“It won’t be a problem, she’s been avoiding me.” He reluctantly admitted looking down at laces on his skates. It occurred to him as he was telling his father, that it bothered him.

That took Dutch back. A woman avoiding Micah? He was swamped with them all the time. Liz had mentioned more than once how she didn’t appreciate her son being pawed by fame



seeking groupies.

There were a few times his wife threatened them when leaving the arena with their son because she still looked young and the women could be rather nasty trying to get to him mistaking her for Micah's girlfriend. Liz could hold her own though. She was confident and tough from being the sister to a hockey player, the wife of one, and the mother of four more potentials. As for Micah's female fans, she made sure they knew exactly who she was.

Liz could be a force to reckon with when she was angry. He didn't blame her. She had enough to deal with still, with him. Women still propositioned him even though he made sure they knew he was married—very happily. Some of them just didn't care. At one time Dutch appreciated the attention, but now he was a man who was deeply in love with his wife. She was the only one who knew him like no one else.

Micah stood up, "tomorrow—early." he repeated his father's order, "Thanks for coming."

"By the way," Dutch smiled, "Your mother is coming on Friday. Cole's coming with her."

That cheered him up significantly and he showed it by grinning. He'd get home as often as he could, but that didn't mean he didn't miss his family, friends, and the ranch.

"Keep your head on the game son."

"I'll do my best." He said before he left the room to head back to practice. He was surprised that his father didn't press him for Hailey's name. Normally he wouldn't have given up on the subject. Obviously he knew there was something more going on with him there.

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"What's the verdict?" Tyler said as Micah came back out on the ice.

"You and me five o'clock sharp."

Tyler groaned. “Sure—“ he cast him an accusatory look, “—at least you’re getting laid. I have nothing to endure this punishment.”

Micah couldn’t help himself and laughed.

## CHAPTER TWO

The banquet room was wall to wall with people, from team owners, to the typical bleached blonde in a slinky outfit hoping to catch the attention of a hockey player.

Hailey stayed beside her father at the start of the evening while he did the usual introductions to the General Managers, officials and business partners. She smiled and played a perfect billionaire’s daughter despite what had happened earlier.

She hadn’t told anyone but her best friend Jill Wilson who was mixing with the athletes the best she could. It was easy to pick those men out because they had thick necks and shoulders and towered over everyone else. They were also the only men in the room that filled out their expensive suits nicely. As for what had happened to her that afternoon, she had caught her fiancé Grant cheating—literally in the act. He didn’t expect her, but she took an early lunch break. He was supposedly home with the flu and she wanted to see how he was doing. That was a mistake.

When she heard him moaning, she thought he was getting sick but instead found him under a well endowed blonde.

She turned around and walked out of his apartment with him chasing her downstairs only sporting a sheet trying to explain that it was an accident.

She never said a word as she walked briskly through the lobby of his apartment building until she reached the doors, and much to the shock of the door man and other people in the foyer, turned and punched him in the nose knocking him off his feet.

The sheet flew open in front of several people. As he laid there nude holding his nose, she turned her gaze down to his groin, smiled sardonically and tossed her engagement ring on him.

"I guess I made the right choice." She said regarding his gender. Then she left.

Of course she broke when she got back to her own apartment and phoned her friend Jill.

"Enough is enough Hailey. I told you that guy was a jerk."

"I can't believe, it I thought he loved me."

"Hah! The only thing a man loves is his pecker."

Hailey actually burst into laughter.

"Now, let's help get you over that. Please, please, *please*, take me to that playoff party tonight. God knows I need some action and you my dear definitely do."

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"What did you say?" Tyler asked Micah. He thought he heard him mumble something. They were both bored, but like the rest of the team required to be there for Public Relations.

"I said, a perfect ten." His eyes went to the gorgeous redhead who was just retrieving a glass of wine off a waiter's tray.

"That can't be her real hair color." Tyler said. At the moment she had her back to them, and her hair was long, wavy and a rare deep auburn. "Wow," he added as she tossed back the contents of the glass, "Now that's my kind of woman."

"Too late." Micah said taking two glasses of another server's tray before heading toward her, "I saw her first." She was wearing this deep green satin gown that fit every delicious curve of her and the material gathered beautifully at the derriere to flow down to the floor. Those curves alone should be outlawed.

Hailey was in the process of looking for another glass of wine. It wasn't like her to drink, but she figured she had every right to.

"I need your help."

Hailey turned to the sound of the deep voice and looked up into the face of none other than the star center of their home team, “Micah Rush.” She said easily with a slight smile.

“That’s unfair. I don’t know yours.” He gave her the glass of wine, which she took. He wasn’t surprised that she knew who he was. Usually the women her age at parties like this were only looking for hockey players. Although, he was arrogantly hoping that she would look a little more excited at meeting him, but she knew his name and that was good enough for now. Most women were more enthusiastic but then again, most women weren’t as beautiful as she was. That left a question in his mind and after a quick glance at her ring finger, which was empty, he felt relief.

“Thank you. It’s Hailey.” Her heart was all over the place because Micah was tall, muscular and drop dead gorgeous especially when he was dressed all in black, like he was now. He wore an expensive suit with a designer shirt with a high collar. It brought out the contrast in his eyes. To any woman, even one with her resistance, he was utterly charismatic.

She had thought so since he started playing for their team, however, she’d never approach him on her own. In fact every intelligent brain cell in her mind that wasn’t doused in alcohol was telling her to do just that—leave. Yet, she couldn’t. “Help for what?” The alcohol also helped her with her courage and she was able to keep her heart out of her eyes.

“Hailey?” he encouraged.

“Just—Hailey.” Was her response. There was no way in hell she was giving him her last name. She didn’t like people to treat her like she belonged on a pedestal because of who her father was.

“All right Hailey then. My friend over there—” he moved his glass in the direction of Tyler. “—doesn’t think that your hair color is natural.”

“And” she said turning and giving Tyler a stunning smile to

which he returned it with a grin and lifted his glass.

“I think it is. In fact I think everything about you is natural.” His eyes went to her mouth then her breasts before back to her eyes.

She lifted her delicate brows acting totally unaffected by his candidness. She’d been around men like that her whole life, yet on the inside, her hopes crushed. It was a lousy pick up line. Did she look like a bimbo? She dreamed about the day she’d actually get to talk to him. Now, she realized it was a mistake.

Despite her disappointment, she didn’t let on. “hmmm, then you have a dilemma.” She knew exactly what he was saying and there was only one way to prove to him that her hair color was natural and she wasn’t doing it. Obviously he mistook why she was there.

“I do?” he said with mock shock.

She dropped her smile letting her insult show. “Because there’s no way in hell you’re going to find out what is real and what isn’t. Thanks for the wine.” with that she walked away. Maybe she should have been more outraged at his insinuation, but she was beyond that now. Grant was a dick, plain and simple, and at least Micah was upfront about what he wanted.

Tyler was laughing loud enough for it to reach him through the noise of the minglers. Micah just gave him a warning look before he turned and followed Hailey through the crowd. He didn’t get where he was by giving up.

Hailey had just gotten her stole from the coat check when Micah appeared. She couldn’t take this crowd anymore and already said goodbye to her father. He knew something was wrong and asked her about it. She said she’d talk to him tomorrow. Jill just pleaded with her not to go, but she told her to stay and enjoy herself. She had to get out of there.

“Can I try this again?” Micah said coming up behind her.

She turned around and looked up at him with intentions of

telling him to get lost in not a very nice way when she saw his expression. All humor was gone and he actually looked apologetic and sincere, “My name is Micah Rush. I like hockey—no I love it.” He finally smiled, “My father is a former pro player and is now a rancher and my worse critic. I have four younger brothers and a beautiful mother that still looks in her thirties despite all the grey hair we’ve given her.” He tucked his hands in the pockets of his slacks, “I’m not typically stupid when it comes to women, but well, you are beautiful.”

She stared up at him then past him to Jill who suddenly appeared and was giving her the thumbs up. She obviously followed her out there to see if she was all right, but stopped when she saw Micah talking to her. She gave her a slick smile before she went back into the party. Hailey turned her attention back to him, “I think you’re typical around a certain type of woman.”

“Touché.” He said with a brief nod.

“You’re way off base here.” She said.

“I realize that.” He said sincerely. “What can I say? I’m a conceited jock.”

She stared up at him fighting the smile that threatened to form. He certainly was charming, “Yes you are.”

He placed his hand on his chest and bowed in defeat.

She couldn’t help but laugh, “Okay, apology accepted.” She glanced past him to now see Tyler come through the doorway obviously wondering how Micah was doing, “you can tell your friend that it’s natural.”

He grinned, “No need. I already know. Come back to the party, I’ll behave. I promise.”

“It’s not my crowd Micah, but thank you.”

“Come back for me then. Keep me company while I smile to the higher ups.”

*Only if he knew that her father was part of that crowd . She*

cocked her head, “You should know that I don’t date hockey players.”

Now that was a surprise, “But—“

“I came with my father, “he—he was invited.” She added not wanting to say who he was or that it was him that was footing the bill for this celebration.

Thankfully he didn’t ask who her father was. Really, she shouldn’t be angry with him. Most of the women there that were her age were only there for one reason. She wasn’t one of them, but she could understand his misconception. Not only that, she was sure that if he’d even used a more cheesy line on any of them, they’d swoon at his feet. “I usually never come to these functions.”

“What’s wrong with hockey players?”

“hmmm.” She said looking up at him with a slight smile, “If the arrogance doesn’t get in the way, their lifestyle does. You guys have no life outside of playing the game. And,” she added with unspoken knowledge, “I don’t like to be second best.”

He chuckled, “True to all of it.” He knew he was dealing with a different type of woman than he was used to so he turned the arrogance down a little. She’d humbled him briefly. He was being an ass. Not that the other women he’d slept with weren’t intelligent, but Hailey was very perceptive and quick witted. Normally he hardly had to do any work to get a woman interested in him. Maybe that’s why he was so intrigued by her. It was a new tactic, but he decided to be himself, “I like women.”

“A lot of women.” She clarified keeping her smile and seeing his own devilish grin from her statement near turned her heart inside out. Lord he was sinful when he smiled like that!

“For someone who doesn’t like hockey, you know a lot about me.”

‘I never said I didn’t *like* hockey,” she corrected slyly, “Just I didn’t date players.”

“I didn’t ask you for a date. If I’m being honest, I was thinking more along the lines of—”

She turned to leave not letting him finish. She already knew what he was going to say. She was no one night stand! He said it anyway.

“—inviting you back to my place for the night.”

Just as she thought. She stopped and turned back to him looking no less than appalled and angry. “Do I look like—”

“No.” he interrupted holding up his hand, “I’ve actually come to realize that you aren’t after a very brief conversation with you. I’m good at reading women.” He’d had plenty of practice, but it was obvious from the get go that she was different. Truth was, he’d never had a woman walk away from him before—ever. She did it twice.

“Thank you.”

“However, from the way you were drinking that wine earlier, I’m going to guess and say—ex-boyfriend?” he lifted a single blond brow.

“Something like that.” She answered without elaboration.

“So, let me help you forget him.”

Her eyes went over his face actually considering what he was saying. Was she a prude? Grant had called her that so many times before because she wasn’t that affectionate with him. Well she let him touch her breasts and kiss her, but that was it. Now she wasn’t even sure if she loved him, but it was stung pride that hurt. “I can’t.”

“Hailey, I’d like to take the time to invite you to dinner and have maybe a date or two, but I don’t have time to have a relationship as you pointed out—I’m being honest here and I like you. Hockey is my life. Besides my family, I love the game more than my next breath. I also have no intention of settling down sometime soon.”

“If you want sex, I’m sure you won’t have a problem going



home alone. There's half a dozen women in there that would bark like a dog if you asked them."

He chuckled, "Yes I know, but I don't want a woman like that." He said reaching over and taking her hand confident that she wouldn't pull away.

"Same old, same old?" she said letting the warmth of his large hand transfer to hers.

"Let's just say I got my eye on a fiery redhead." He smiled slowly. "I'll tell you what, a few of us boys are going to get out of here and hit the clubs downtown. Come along. If you want, I'll have you taken home at any point you're not having fun." She looked skeptical, "Honestly I'm not lying. My mother would clock me over the head with a two by four if I disrespected a woman. I swear." She still hesitated but he could see the indecision in her eyes. "I'll give you her phone number and you can call her to find out."

That time she laughed then nodded, "All right Micah, just this once."

*Once is all I need, or want.* He thought to himself. How wrong he was.

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"Jesus, I forgot how big that guy was." Mark Richards said to Micah. They were just clearing the ice after the anthems when he saw one of the opposing players. "He'll be after you Micah. They're going to use him as a goon."

They had already gone over that prior to the game. The opposing team didn't mention that Dobrowski was playing until before cutoff for the roster. It was a sly play on their part because Dobrowski had two inches in height and about twenty-five more pounds on Micah. Rumor had it that he was out with the flu. So much for rumor.

"You stay alert Rush." Coach Fox said from behind him

while thumbing him on the padded shoulder.

“I will.” He said right before his line hit the ice for the game faceoff. His father had done his job. He was focused.

Hailey watched the game from the nosebleed seats. She didn’t want Micah to see her. She could have sat in her father’s box with him and Micah’s parents, but there was no way she could not look them in the eyes and let them know what was going on, or was there something going on? He hadn’t called, not that she expected him to, but it still bothered her. Well, she really didn’t give him her number, but he did know where she worked. Then again, she knew he had to be ready to play. She knew how it was with hockey players and that’s why she never got involved with them besides her father’s warnings. That and they were only after one thing.

She hadn’t lied to Micah about her fiancé. They started dating in last year and she did find him in bed with someone else. Only what Micah didn’t know, is that she never slept with him. Micah was the first man she’d ever slept with, though from her reaction that night you’d think that she had some knowledge of what to do. She couldn’t help herself. As soon as his hands touched her, she was in a whole new realm. Of course she’d been drinking and so had he, but that just removed her shyness. She was more than willing especially after she got his clothes off. She’d never in her life seen such a beautiful body on a man and it wasn’t as if she didn’t watch r-rated movies with her friends. One thing was certain, the man had stamina.

That really didn’t explain her lack of protest in the supply room. She had surprised herself with how desperate she was to have him again. To feel him moving against her with all the sinewy power he possessed. The fact that she didn’t have Alcohol clouding her judgment made things surprisingly better, if that was possible. Now she wouldn’t forget the little things that he could do to make her moan. Her only regret is that it was

amazing, but too darn short. Oh she was definitely satisfied. He made sure of it. God, did he ever! It was just too bad they couldn't continue that for the rest of the evening. He was so addictive.

After that first night together, her conscience took a beating over her actions. Then after she thought about it—a lot, she had come to the conclusion that she had every right to enjoy the attention of a gorgeous man without any strings attached. After all, she'd been with Grant for eight months and not once when he touched her like that did she flare up like a firecracker. It didn't help that she always watched Micah from a distance admiring him more and more. Maybe she couldn't blame Grant for what he did. Her heart was never his. She knew now that she didn't love him.

It was partway through the third period when Dobrowski finally nailed Micah against the boards like a freight train. There was frustration on the opposing team's side because they were down five nothing and no matter what couldn't catch Micah or Tyler. Everyone already knew that the quarterfinals belonged to them with this game. Hailey and the other twenty thousand fans shot to their feet. The only difference with her was her heart fell into her gut.

She was present at that game before when he was knocked out and she was worried for him then too, but this was different. Since then she'd touched him again, since they shared each other, part of her was on that ice with him, in pain.

Even before Micah rolled over onto his stomach in agony clutching his head, Tyler fearlessly jumped to Micah's defense. He dropped his gloves before he grabbed the jersey of Dobrowski and started pounding him. Never mind that the other man was taller, Tyler just had to reach higher. His Helmet flipped off and Tyler knocked him down but kept delivering blows. Dobrowski did his best to fight back, but Tyler was too good. Then all hell

broke loose. Several more players joined the fight and the referees were swamped trying to pull them apart and threaten misconduct penalties.

The fans watched as Micah was still laid out on the ice and started cheering Tyler and booing Dobrowski. Micah had managed to curl his knees under him to try and push up. His helmet got blasted off in the strike and he was obviously hurt. At least he was conscious.

At the same time Sudas skated over to him and bent over, "Micah?"

Micah nodded and reached his arm up to which Sudas took helping him to his feet. Several other players gathered around him.

By now the rest of the players were being brought under control and the referee started announcing the penalties. Tyler got a ten minute misconduct and so did Dobrowski with the chance of future game suspension.

Tyler embellished his penalty by lifting his arms and waving to the crowd encouraging them to roar louder, if that was possible. The floor beneath Hailey's feet was vibrating from the cheers already.

"You're going to get a fine for being unsportsmanlike." Richards said skating by him and flipping around to skate backwards to face him with a grin.

"Yeah, but I'm not the one bleeding." Although he could feel the beginnings of a fat lip. Tyler was a good fighter. Micah never initiated them, but he could definitely finish them, whereas Tyler was known to start a few of his own.

Even with the three big guns off the ice, Richards, Hartley and Rush, their team still won. Hailey left after that to avoid the crowd and made her way to her father's box. She was sure that Dutch and his wife would be down checking on Micah and she was all right.

“Hey baby.” Her dad said as she came in.

She smiled at him.

“I was wondering where you were at.”

“I was watching from the crowd.” She said without meeting his eyes, “I think your team had the game from the first period.” She added with amusement.

“You think? It was certainly great entertainment.” he chuckled, “You just missed Micah’s parents.”

“Ah, the God of hockey.” She teased. How come every time she heard Micah’s name her heart skipped a beat?

As for his father, her father always admired Dutch and he purposely went after Micah when he turned twenty, but wasn’t able to get him until six years later.

“There is no other.” Her father said, “I’m after that next Rush too. He turns twenty in the fall.”

“You’ll have all five of them before you retire.”

Her father grinned. He was a powerful man to begin with. She’d heard rumors of how he got rich but chose not to listen to them. To her, even if they were true, it didn’t matter. He was her father. There were times she could see that look in his eyes that frightened people and she knew that there was some truth to those rumors. That’s one of the reasons that she branched out on her own. She wanted to make her own way and not be attached to her father in reputation.

Not only that, it was her father that insisted she date Grant even though she didn’t feel that attraction to him. He pushed her until she gave in. Part of her was afraid to say no to him. Sure she acted happy in front of him but Grant never seemed like someone she could fall in love with but her father seemed to think that he knew what was best for her. She knew not to argue with him. He never laid a hand on her growing up but he had that air of presence that dared someone to talk back to him. She never pushed it.

He had bought the team in his late thirties and was now almost sixty. He used to play when he was younger, but only as a hobby. Apparently they were too poor for him to do it full time. Now that he was rich, he said he'd own the team that will win the cup because he couldn't get there himself.

She felt bad for him in many ways because this was one man that should have had sons. As it was her late mother, only had one child before she died and her father had girlfriends that were just a few years older than her, but she'd never judge him. He never remarried because he said that her mother was the love of his life and there wasn't another like her. However, her father had her in hockey before she could properly walk, so she knew everything there was to know about the game, but opted not to play when she graduated school. Her father was okay with that especially when she went into Power Engineering. She knew he had something to do with her getting the job at the arena, but she took it because it was hard for a woman to get a job in that field. She had taken a lot of ribbing from the men, but had proven her worth. Especially when they stayed afterwards for a friendly game of hockey and she wiped the ice with them.

Pierre put his arm around his daughter, "I invited them to dinner at the house tomorrow night, so you'll get to meet them. I want to check out Cole on a more personal level."

"But I thought you didn't—"

"It's not like you're around the whole team Hailey." He said a little tersely referring to her protest. It was true he didn't want her around the players, but there wasn't much they could do under his close supervision in his house.

"All right dad." She said in resignation. Sometimes he just didn't make sense.

"Wear something nice. I want to see if I can sway Cole to go with a free agent and avoid the draft because we don't have first pick. After all, I have his brother." He added.

She swallowed wondering if Micah would be with them. She assumed he would because his parents were in town. Her father had mentioned that Dutch was a thorn in his side when it came to treatment of his son. Thankfully her father never took offense and instead embraced Dutch's advice. Of course he would, he wanted to win. He had told her that Micah was having some distraction issues and he called Dutch to straighten him out. It must have worked because he played beautifully tonight. However, she wondered what distraction issues he had. A brief thought went through her mind that it might be her, but she doubted very much if she could cause a man like Micah to not keep his head on the game. She stayed away from him purposely. Truthfully, she thought he wouldn't even know that she existed when the important games started that week. So instead of her being hurt over it, she decided to stay away from him until he made the next move. Well, he'd actually been making all the moves. Still, it wasn't that long ago that she got hit hard by rejection and guarded herself.

"Our captain played well." Pierre said.

"Yes he did." She said quietly. Micah always did.

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Micah was hoping that Hailey had made an excuse and found a way to avoid dinner at her father's house, but when they were let in the front door, there she was. He tried his best to keep his eyes off her, but she was wearing this fantastic white knee length dress that stretched over her form and showed off her figure superbly. His eyes lingered down her body longer than he meant to when her father made the introductions. She had left that hair down around her shoulders and if she only knew how damn sensual she looked, he would have a hell of a lot of competition competing for her attention. Just as he thought it, his little brother stepped forward and took her hand grinning from ear to ear. Thing was, he knew what those silken glorious

locks felt like clutched in his fists as they rocked the mattress off the foundation that one night—again, so he was feeling a little territorial.

Hailey didn't miss his lingering stare and she hoped to hell everyone else did. She was no better. He wore a black suit, red shirt and matching striped tie. What caught her attention the most though, was a distinguishable bruise on his jaw and she ached to reach up and touch it. It was the result of Dobrowski's hit.

As their parents and Hailey's dad turned away, Micah's hand wrapped around his brother's shoulder, "Rein it in stallion." He said in his ear from behind so no one could hear him.

"Wow." Cole whispered while guiding his eyes down to Hailey's bottom.

"Yeah, well, that's one thing that will *not* get you on this team so keep your hands to yourself. Her father holds the decisions." He'd like nothing more than have his little brother on his team so they could be together, but that wasn't the only reason. As far as Micah was concerned, Hailey was his. His brother was right about one thing though. That dress tucked around her ass beautifully. There was no mistaking how damn perfect those cheeks curved.

Dinner was pleasant yet uncomfortable because Micah ended up sitting beside her at the last minute when Cole made to. She covered her smile with her hand. Micah gave her a brief, yet possessive glance when he sat beside her. She pretended not to notice. Unknown to both of them, someone did.

Liz was a sharp woman and she dealt with an older brother who played hockey, a husband and five sons. It was impossible to hide things from her and her boys stopped trying years ago. While the younger woman was preoccupied with answering questions from Cole she studied her with intense interest. There was no doubt that she was excessively beautiful and her father



couldn't brag enough about her. She went back over those things he told her in her mind. She had some sort of a degree which was impressive. Liz never went to school, she was too busy having children, but she admired women who did. Especially a woman who stood to inherit millions but chose a working profession. This one sitting across from her had chosen a male dominated field and that alone impressed her. She also grew up around hockey so she had an idea what players were like. Yet, there was something between her and Micah.

Well, if you took in a mother's prejudice, Micah was gorgeous like his father. She always knew he would break hearts too, and he lived up to that from the time he was fifteen, but that look, that brief barely detectable look, said this was different.

Without realizing that she was being studied like a butterfly under glass, Hailey really liked Micah's mother. She was a little shorter than her, but quite beautiful with black hair and blue eyes. She may have been in her forties, but didn't look a day over thirty just like Micah told her when they first met. Except for the eyes, Cole favored her and you'd never know that he and Micah were brothers unless you studied their features closely. They both had their father's pale blue eyes. Liz's were a bit darker, but they were still blue. Even so, it felt like the woman could look into her very soul with them. There was a definite intelligence there.

Liz was more interested in Hailey than the men's discussion and spent most of the meal speaking to her while the men talked hockey. Her whole life was absorbed in the sport because of her husband and sons. She honestly didn't mind because she loved the game too. Her brother played when she was younger. "So do you play often? Your father said you did." She asked Hailey.

At that moment Hailey coughed and grabbed her napkin to cover her mouth. Then she cleared her throat and forced a smile, "Only in friendly games, usually after work." She'll kill Micah

later who slipped his hand over her bare thigh and up her dress under the table. He may seem involved in what the others were talking about but he had no problem groping her under the table without the slightest change in his expression. Despite her initial shock, she couldn't resist the feeling of his calloused warm hand. He managed to curl his long fingers around her inner thigh and give a squeeze that sent shivers through her.

Meanwhile Micah was exchanging conversation with the men, but he was an incredible multitasker. He had to be in his career knowing where the puck and all the players were on the ice when he played. So, while thoroughly enjoying the feel of Hailey's soft skin under the table, hearing that she played hockey really peaked his interest. He swiveled his handsome head toward his in disbelief. "You play hockey?"

She finally found her will and squeezed her hand over his under the table and kept her false smile, but there was a warning in her hazel eyes screened by her thick lashes that he obviously saw from the challenging grin he gave her. "Yes." Didn't he realize how risky this was?

"Isn't that interesting Micah, you two share the love for the game?" His mother said smiling at both of them slyly.

"Well I don't play anymore." Hailey said blushing slightly. "Just friendly games with my coworkers."

"She was the best forward on her team." Her father interjected proudly.

Her eyes went to Micah's shyly as he stared down at her in awe. His sudden intense scrutiny of her started to make her feel a little self conscious. If she was mistaken that those pale eyes of his could possibly darken with desire like they did in the supply room a few weeks back, she was wrong. It happened now. They looked like a deep glacier blue. It surprised her that he actually found that as a turn on. Most hockey players were adamant on it being a man's game, but for some reason Micah found it

appealing.

"I'll be damned." *That certainly explained the way she skated*, he thought to himself. Yet somehow knowing that about her, just deepened her attractiveness to him and he thought she was incredible before.

"Micah." His mother warned.

"Pardon my language mom." He said shooting his mother a charming grin. She didn't like cursing to begin with but it was hard to control with all the boys in the family. At the dinner table it was absolutely forbidden. She gave him a look of warning before turning her attention back to Hailey. She wasn't the only one. Cole spoke up then

"Wow, I'm in love." He said causing the rest of them to laugh except Micah. That possessiveness he felt before surged again.

"You don't play anymore?" Liz asked with a smile. Cole was the jokester in the family. It was a nice contrast to Dutch and Micah who seemed so serious all the time.

She shook her head, "I wasn't that good."

"She lies." Her father said, "She could have easily played professional hockey in the woman's league."

"Dad please." She finally said feeling more and more embarrassed.

"Marry me." Cole said and got a boot under the table for it, "Ow!" he glared at Micah who glared back.

"Mind your manners Cole." Liz said knowing exactly what happened and gave Micah a brief yet effective look in warning.

Micah turned back to Hailey and ignored his younger brother who looked close to calling him out on the back lawn, "My family is certifiable." He teased.

She laughed, "I think they are wonderful."

"Is that right?" he added with a squeeze of his hand on her bare inner thigh.

Hailey was glad that the conversation moved on and talk

turned to other things because she practically burst right out of her skin. Somehow she'd gotten used to it being there and forgotten about it.

"Hockey huh?" he said in a hushed voice.

"Be quiet." She whispered.

"I'm so turned on right now, I'm afraid to stand."

"I hate you."

He erupted into laughter that paused everyone else's conversation and raised numerous eyebrows in question except her father's who's narrowed in suspicion.

Hailey could have crawled under the table at that moment. Thankfully, Micah was able to come up with a joke he claimed she told him and it made them laugh too. What surprised her is that it was clean. She was sure he didn't know any clean jokes.

"You should come to the ranch." Liz finally spoke up looking directly at Pierre. "When the playoffs are over, Micah's coming home for that month. Before he could protest, she sweetened the deal, "Dutch makes the boys practice throughout June. We have a rink on the property. That way you can see how Cole plays."

"That's a great idea!" Pierre said enthusiastically.

Then Liz turned her calculating look on Hailey, "Of course you're more than welcome to come too."

"I couldn't possibly—"

"—Nonsense!" her father interrupted. "I'll speak to Sean tomorrow."

Hailey didn't know what to say. Part of her was angry that her father felt like he could still tell her what to do and take the initiative to speak to her boss. There was a reason she branched out on her own besides his controlling her life as with Greg. She needed her independence. There were times like this that he still insisted on things from her, but refused to realize that she had a job and refused to take advantage of his influence. Yet, she

wouldn't argue with him in front of company.

"I insist." Liz said centering her sapphire gaze on Hailey. "I think you will find the country very—affable." She finished with a pleasant smile.

"Who could say no to you?" Hailey said meaning every word. Liz Rush was a woman who knew how to get what she wanted and for some reason she wanted Hailey there. In all of that she felt an overwhelming need not to disappoint the woman. It was obvious that she loved her sons and her husband. Any woman like that who can handle living with six men, must be special. Hailey hardly remembered her mother and she envied the bond Liz had with Micah and Cole.

"No one in their right mind." Liz teased.

"Amen to that." Dutch said causing everyone to laugh.

Hailey didn't have much time to ponder Micah's mother's words because she was still trying to get his large hand off her inner thigh to no avail.

After dinner talk moved into another room and Hailey kept her distance from Micah managing to glare at him when no one was looking. She was able to glance down and adjust the skirt of her dress over the pink large handprint that marked her inner thigh from the pressure and heat transfer. He was the one that was concerned about people finding out about them but he couldn't keep his hands to himself?

In the large expensively decorated sitting room Dutch, Liz, Cole and Pierre resolved to looking through his vast collection of Hockey memorabilia and photo albums. It was a hockey player's dream to own such things and they were ecstatic. Hailey sat in one of the wing back chairs sipping a glass of wine watching them. Then for some reason Micah sat on the chair next to her. She cast him a glance thankful that their families were busy being awed by her father's photo albums and hockey cards. "You're missing out." She finally said.

“No I’m not.” He answered quietly giving her a clever look.

Her heart skipped a beat, “You need to behave.” She said taking a sip from her glass while watching the others and being thankful that it was a big room so they couldn’t be heard. However, she was worried that someone would see the concealed play between them.

“Honey, I’m willing to do anything but.” He countered with a dark hungry look in his eyes.

She flushed a little and glared at him before shortly excusing herself to go fetch a bottle of wine from the cellar and to her chagrin Micah volunteered to help her. Once downstairs she turned on him with her finger in his face, “Are you trying to get my father to tear you to pieces? I think your mother is on to us.”

He gave her that smile that he was famous for, the one that women swooned at his feet over, and despite the noticeable weakening of her knees she was too angry.

“So, my mother likes you.” He said not even letting her ire affect him.

That made her drop her irritation a bit, “Really?”

“She’s not very prone to liking women, especially the type of women we date.”

“We *aren’t* dating,” She narrowed her gaze again causing him to grin wider and grab her about the waist pulling her against him.

“Jesus you feel so damn sweet.” He bent and nuzzled his face in her hair at the side of her head.

How could she possible get mad at him, she turned her face into his chest, “You’re driving me crazy.” She murmured.

“Me? One look at you in that dress nearly made me betray us.”

She looked up at him with a question in her eyes.

“Physically.” He continued.

“*Oh.*” She said finally understanding with wide eyes and

turning red over it.

He bent his head and buried his face into her neck while holding her tight, “I need to see you.”

“You know that can’t happen.” She said breathlessly. So much for her anger—and resistance.

He tilted her head back and kissed her, hard. Then he lifted his head and looked directly in her eyes, “When the playoffs are over, I’m gonna make sure you can’t walk straight for a bloody week.”

If anyone else said something like that to her she would have been offended, but from Micah, it was different. Not only that, he was perfectly capable of doing just that. She felt her whole body heat up like a solar flare.

“*And* you play hockey? Christ I am so turned on.” He said releasing her. Then he turned, grabbed a bottle of wine off the rack and left while shaking his head.

It took her a little longer to compose herself before she joined them. In fact he’d hiked up her dress and cupped her bottom and she hadn’t even noticed. After she fixed her dress she followed the same path. For a young man, he certainly knew how to seduce a woman. As she headed back up the stairs she wondered what he really wanted with her. She knew better not to get her hopes up and think they were dating, because the letdown would crush her.

After that Hailey kept her distance to the point where she was practically invisible. Micah had actually phoned her several times and left these scandalous messages on her voicemail. She laughed and erased them reluctantly, but thankfully his head was still in the game.

## CHAPTER THREE

There was no doubt that his team would win the cup and

when they did, he rocketed to fame. After that the voicemails stopped. She knew he had a ton of endorsements, photo shoots, and public appearances, but that didn't mean he couldn't pick up the phone. Yet, she did confirm with him at her father's house that they weren't dating. Actually she was hoping he'd deny it, but he didn't and it crushed her. Before long it had been over two weeks and after a prolonged depression she decided enough was enough. She called her friend Jill and offered her a meal at an expensive restaurant

"Are you kidding? I'm in!" she said excitedly.

"Where something eye tickling."

"Oh you don't have to tell me that." She said before she hung up.

Hailey picked out an elegant black low-cut dress that she knew enhanced her figure. She really needed to feel beautiful tonight. She didn't mind doing this for Jill because she had a minimum wage job while Hailey's demanded six figures.

Once there Jill beamed from ear to ear when they were seated and the waiter poured two glasses of champagne. "Oh Hailey, I can never pay you back."

She waved her hand, "It doesn't matter." Suddenly Jill's attention averted passed Hailey's shoulder. "Hey isn't that that hunky hockey player we went out with a few months back?" Jill asked when Micah came in the door of the restaurant. Jill knew absolutely nothing about hockey, but she certainly couldn't forget the lusty men that Hailey treated her to a few weeks back.

Hailey turned around just to see him and two of his teammates, Tyler Hartley and Mark Richards come through the doors, but that wasn't what caught her attention. It was the gorgeous blond on Micah's arm. The other two men had dates too, but she didn't even look at them. She just couldn't believe it. Out of all the restaurants in this big city he walked into hers. "Actually, all three of them."



Jill knew that the blonde one—Mike—Michael, had a thing for Hailey. She may have gotten sloshed, but she did remember that he didn't take his eyes off of her all night. Jill couldn't blame him, Hailey was beautiful. There wasn't one time that she could remember that he didn't have his hands on her at some point in the evening. Not in a groping fashion, but more of holding her hand, or cupping her elbow and keeping her near him at all times. She knew right away that he had the charm of the devil especially with that organ shaking smile he held. "Wow, I forgot how gorgeous he was." Jill said in awe not hearing her friend's response.

That wasn't helping, because She didn't. He wore a black suit, and white shirt with a high mandarin collar fastened with a onyx and platinum button at the throat.

"What's his name again? I can only remember his last name. His first name is different. I keep wanting to call him Mike."

"Micah." She said softly.

"I thought he might have had a thing for you that night, but then I got too darn drunk to remember the rest of it." Jill's eyes remained on the handsome group.

"He obviously didn't." Hailey finally said trying to stop her heart from choking to death in her chest. Jill didn't know about the stint in the supply room, or him coming over for dinner and saying those things to her. It made her think there was something between them, but now she knew. Obviously she was just something to play with to release stress during the intensity of the playoffs. She even knew the possibility of that at the time, but she hoped he saw her as someone different.

"Their dates sure are pretty." Jill said mostly to herself.

Hailey turned back around and faced her friend unable to look at him anymore and forced a smile, "Well, hockey players have their pick."

Hailey could too, thought Jill. She was jealous that Hailey got to work around men like that even though she never took advantage of her position. She was jealous about a lot of things when it came to Hailey. She was beautiful, smart, and had no problem getting attention from the opposite sex without even trying. Yet, Hailey was also one of the nicest people she'd ever met. Jill never kept secrets from her friend and mentioned her envy whenever she felt it. Hailey, in turn, always came back with some compliment that made her feel better. She knew her friend meant them too, but she still wished she was half as beautiful as Hailey was.

Jill was skinny and flat chested unlike Hailey who had really nice curves. Then there were those legs of hers. Because she played hockey, she had these legs that were not only long but beautifully shaped. Jill would to have liked to learn the game but she had two left feet and never skated before in her life, but she was a really good swimmer and used to compete. Her slender form was prime for gliding through the water. Yet, she'd trade it in an instant for what Hailey had. "I guess you know better than anyone." Jill said.

Hailey cleared her throat misinterpreting her statement, "Pardon?"

"I mean since you grew up around them." Jill said then she paused and tilted her head slightly, "Hailey, is something wrong?"

"No." she said to quickly because Jill caught it.

"I've known you since school. You're not very good at lying."

Hailey took a deep breath, "I—thought we had something."

"You and the Rush guy?" she said in surprise.

"Yes."

"Wow, lucky gal." Jill said sitting back in her seat and staring at her in awe, "I mean, he's the best man in the league isn't he?" Leave it to Hailey to land someone like that.

Hailey gave a bit of a false laugh, "Well, he found me replaceable didn't he?"

"No one said hockey players were smart Hailey." Jill said getting angry that someone dared hurt her. Hailey was one of the most wonderful people she'd ever met. Jill had a poor upbringing and Hailey was filthy rich, but not once did she ever make her feel uncomfortable.

"Actually Micah's quite intelligent. Hockey players are, they just have this stereotype attached to them because they can have inflated egos." Hailey said, "He's also very good at breaking hearts."

"Gosh honey, I'm so sorry." She said reaching across the table and squeezing her hand, "You are the last person that deserves that twice in two months."

"Grant was a jerk." She smiled.

Jill laughed, "he really was."

"I don't know what I was thinking. I know now that I never loved him."

"He was good looking and your father wanted the match because he was influential."

That was true, but only Jill would say it out loud. Grant was a city councilman and was looking good for the mayor next election.

At that moment the three athletes walked by their table led by the hostess. Hailey couldn't bring herself to look at him and just locked gazes with Jill who gave her an assuring smile.

Regardless she could feel those pale eyes on the top of her head and maybe, just maybe there was a slight pause as he went by her table, but he didn't say a word.

She was thankful that they were seated far enough away that they could talk without being overheard.

"I think he stopped and looked at you." Jill said guiding her eyes by her friend, "Yup, he's looking at you now."

“I don’t care.”

Her eyes went back to Hailey, “Again, liar.”

She shrugged.

“He got to you hmm?”

Hailey nodded. “He was fun, sexy and—“ she paused blushing.

“Oh dear.” Jill said with wide eyes, “You’ve slept with him!”

Thankfully her shocked whisper didn’t get past them. The restaurant was full, but music was playing overhead. “My god Jill.”

“I’m sorry.” It was Jill’s turn to blush, “I just can’t believe it. I mean you were celibate with Grant.”

“I wanted to see what all the hype was about after I caught him in bed with someone else.”

“And?” Jill said slowly with a telling grin.

Hailey blushed a little and rolled her eyes, “I’m not kissing and telling.”

“Just tell me one thing,” Jill said widening her grin if that was possible, “Was he good?”

Hailey flushed deeper and took a drink of champagne from her class finally setting her eyes on her friend. She may not have said anything but it was as clear as day in her eyes.

Jill burst into laughter. “Gosh I’m so jealous! I went home alone.”

“I feel stupid though. I thought it meant more to him. I mean he didn’t make me feel cheap or regretful until now.”

“You’ll get used to that. Men don’t get emotional with sex like women do.”

“I think I know that now.” She said thinking about the beautiful woman sitting with Micah.

“She’s got nothing on you.”

“You have to say that.”

“I do, but I’m serious. A stunning redhead is first place over

a bleached blond any day.”

“You’re a good friend Jill.”

“I could go slap him for you.” She grinned.

“He’s not worth it.”

Just then the waiter came with a bottle of champagne.

“I didn’t order that.” Hailey said lifting her half empty glass to show him that she still had some left.

“No madam,” he turned and nodded toward two handsome men sitting by themselves, “It is from the gentlemen.”

“Well, well,” Jill said excitedly, “Looks like we have some admirers.”

The waiter poured the champagne and one of the men raised his glass. Hailey tipped her head in thanks.

Across the room, Micah didn’t miss any of it. He felt his stomach fall when he first saw her sitting there. Even though she didn’t acknowledge him, he knew she saw him. How could she miss them? Anybody who knew Hockey started talking when they walked through the doors. People who didn’t would just follow the stares with curiosity. Regardless, it did get noisier when they walked in and there’s no way she didn’t see him. He was hard to miss to begin with and paired with Mark and Tyler, he was opaque.

At that moment Tyler noticed the two women, “Hey isn’t that—”

“Yes.” Micah said casting him a speaking glance.

Tyler knew that look. He was the only one that knew what was going on between the two. “I bet this doesn’t look good.”

“You’re not kidding.” Was all Micah said. He knew he was on her shit list right now. And what the hell was she wearing? It was a stunning low cut dress that showed the cleavage of her breasts perfectly. Breasts that he’d touched and tasted. He didn’t like it, at all.

Then Micah near came to his feet when the two men

adjacent to Hailey's table got up and joined them.

"Oh hell." Tyler said under his breath.

"Darling," said Micah's date as she reached under the table and moved her manicured hand up and down his thick muscular thigh, "Why don't we just go dancing."

"And not feed him. Are you nuts?" Mark said with a laugh.

Tyler laughed to, but Micah was still staring across the room at Hailey.

"What's so funny?"

"We have large appetites Melanie. We're big men."

"Melinda." She said insulted.

"Yeah—whatever." Tyler said casting Micah and Mark an amused glance. Micah was the one who said her name was Melanie.

Micah actually smiled sheepishly. It just went to show where his head was.

"I don't mind eating." Said Tyler's date. Her name was Cassandra. She, like Melinda, wasn't a real blonde. He was sure that the one Mark brought was a stripper. He wouldn't be surprised either way. He told them she was a model, but there was something about her that didn't scream model. It screamed exotic dancer. Maybe it had something to do with the way she kept licking her fingers every time she took a sip from her glass of wine. However, they weren't out with the women because of their hair color or profession. Tyler grinned to himself.

Micah didn't hear anything after they ordered because his eyes were on the two women and men across the room.

"Are you going to do something about that?" Tyler finally said when their dates started chatting with each other. Though he already knew the answer. In fact, he'd bet his career on it.

"I'm thinking about it." Micah said.

"Remember who she is."

"Who is?" said one of the women.

“No one.” Said Tyler.

“That’s hard to forget.” Micah said not caring about the sulky look Melinda was giving him. He really wasn’t interested in her, but he was out with her for a reason. Unfortunately Hailey saw them. This wasn’t going to go well.

“My name’s Michael, and this is Donald.” The men said as they stood beside Hailey and Jill’s table.

“Did you want to sit down?” Jill said lifting her brows slightly as she shot Hailey an animated look. That was a name she could remember.

“We’d love to.” Michael said with his eyes directly on Hailey.

After they sat down, Donald spoke up, “So what brings two beautiful women out on the town alone?”

“We’re celebrating.” Jill said smiling at him. They were both very handsome men. Donald had brown hair and brown eyes, and both of them wore expensive suits.

“Celebrating?” he said lifting his brows.

“the single life.” She sent a grin to Hailey who gave her a speaking glance to tone it down. Unfortunately, Jill chose to ignore her.

“No kidding.” Said Michael looking at Hailey. “I find that hard to believe.”

“She got dumped twice in the past couple of months.”

“Jill!” Hailey said completely embarrassed.

“I find that even harder to believe.”

She finally turned her attention to him, “Apparently I’m undesirable.”

“That,” he said with a rakish grin, “Is impossible to believe.”

She laughed, “Okay you can stay.”

“I was hoping.” He said dropping his gaze to her mouth. “Now your names?”

“I’m Hailey LeBlanc and this is Jill Moore.”

As Donald started talking to Jill, Michael focused his

attention on Hailey, "So what do you do?"

"Besides hanging around in expensive restaurants?"

He nodded, his blue eyes meeting hers.

He was handsome, but he was no Micah Rush. Honestly she shouldn't compare the two considering that Micah wanted nothing to do with her. "I'm a power engineer."

"Is that right?" she nodded, "That's remarkable."

"So I've heard." She said with a small smile. "And you?"

"I'm a neurosurgeon."

She released a disbelieving chuckle.

"Really, I am." He nodded to Donald, "Ask him. He's a plastic surgeon. We went to med school together."

She glanced at Donald who was engrossed with Jill before centering her attention back on Michael, "Show off." She said referring to his career. People thought she was unique, but a neurosurgeon was a near impossible profession. You had to have the IQ of a genius.

He burst into laughter, "Okay, maybe I was a little."

Just then a shadow came over the table and Hailey looked up to see Micah standing there.

"Hailey." He said casting his eyes around the table. He couldn't take it anymore. Hearing her laughter made him want to tear those two men apart. Tyler tried to stop him by placing a hand on his shoulder but he shook it off.

"Micah." Tyler said. "You need to stop and think about what you're doing."

"I have." Micah answered standing up before walking over to Hailey's table.

"Hello Micah." Hailey said trying to sound calm despite the rapid beating of her heart. "This is Michael and Donald."

"Good for them. Get your purse, you're leaving." He said abruptly.

"Pardon me?" she said dropping her jaw. She'd never seen



that look or heard that tone from him before. He looked angry, no raging.

“You heard me.”

“Micah, you can’t just—”

“I sure as hell can.” He centered his pale stare on Michael. “If you even breathe in her direction, I’ll be meeting *you* outside.”

“Oh my God.” Hailey said dropping her face in her hands.

“A friend of yours?” Michael asked warily taking in the size of the man that just appeared.

“No.” she muffled into her palms without looking at either one of them.

“Yes.” Micah interrupted, “in fact we’re very *close* friends.”

Hailey popped her head up and looked around. She could have crawled under the table. People started looking at them now. Micah may not have cared about causing a scene, but she certainly did. Jill didn’t help either. When Micah said that to everyone she released a laugh.

“Jill!” she countered.

“Sorry.” She said slapping a hand over her mouth and not meaning it at all.

“Get your purse. Tyler will make sure you’re friend gets home.” Micah continued, “Now.”

“We brought my car because—”

“Jill you are going to be looking for a new best friend tomorrow.” Hailey shot at her. Again Jill just smiled completely unaffected by her threat.

“Even better.” He said reaching down and wrapping his large hand around her forearm lifting her out of the seat.

“Now just a minute.” Michael said standing up, “I don’t think she wants to go with you.”

“I told you we can discuss this outside.” Micah said towering six inches taller than him.

“It’s fine Michael.” Hailey said, “I’ll go with him.” She shot

Micah a look that could kill a normal man.

Micah leaned toward the one named Michael until his face was inches from his and spoke in a low threatening voice, "Yeah Michael, sit the fuck down before I make you sit down." He tightened his grip on Hailey's arm.

The other man actually took a step back, who wouldn't. His height alone was threatening, never mind his expression, but looking at Hailey made him want to fight for her attention, "Can I have your number?" Michael asked shifting his gaze uneasily from her to Micah. He may risk a punch in the jaw, but the redhead was worth it.

"You have balls." Micah said through his teeth.

"Jill will give it to you." Hailey said angry, hurt and embarrassed as Micah was pulling her away from the table

"No she won't." he said giving Jill a warning look to which she just grinned back at him.

"Micah I never even got my meal yet." Hailey said as he propelled her towards the exit.

"So." He said walking her out the door.

"I really hate you now." She was trying to dislodge her arm from his vice like grip unsuccessfully. It wasn't tight enough to hurt, but calculated well not to let her break free.

"I know." He said quietly while hailing a cab still not releasing her. His temper started to dissipate now that he had her away from the other men.

When a taxi pulled over to the curb he opened the door and put her in it. Then he leaned in and told the driver to take her straight home while handing him some money, "No stops."

The cabbie looked at the large tip he got, "Yes sir."

He then turned his attention to her, "I'll call you tomorrow and we'll talk."

She glared at him close to tears from embarrassment, "You can go to hell!" She reached for the door handle and he moved as

she slammed the door. She only had room in her life for one controlling man, and Micah just pushed her too far.

The cab pulled away with his pale eyes watching to make sure it disappeared out of sight.

Tyler came out at that moment, "Hey man, our meals are there are you coming back?"

"I'm coming." Micah said turning toward him.

"How mad is she?"

"Furious."

"Well, that was probably the most brutal thing I've seen you do." Tyler felt bad for her. She was humiliated in a crowded restaurant.

"I know."

"I've never seen you like that. You looked a spitting image of your father."

He reached up and scratched his head as they walked back into the restaurant, "Yeah, well, she probably will shoot me next time I see her. I'd better take care of her tab too."

"You can't blame her."

"No, I definitely can't. Hell Tyler, I saw red."

"You got jealous."

"I got *very* jealous." He corrected.

"You're in trouble Micah." Tyler had never seen Micah get jealous over a woman before in his life.

"Yeah."

## CHAPTER THREE

Hailey ignored the phone for the eighth time that day. There were already twenty messages on it with him apologizing. She was still raging mad the next day and the three days that followed. What gave him the right to act like she belonged to him

when he was the one that didn't want a commitment? The answering machine kicked in then and Hailey heard her father's voice. She rushed to answer it.

"Hi daddy."

"I'm phoning to remind you that you'd better get packed honey."

"Packed?"

"Yes, Sean gave you a week off so we can go to the Rush's ranch. I talked to him this morning. I figured that you might have forgotten."

Oh my god, she *had* completely forgotten about that.

"The plane leaves tomorrow morning—are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She answered quickly trying to force some delight in her voice.

"I'll have the jet ready by noon. Come stay at the house with me tonight and we'll leave together."

"Okay dad." She said.

"Love you baby." He said before he hung up.

He must've sensed something was wrong because he rarely ever said that to her. Maybe he thought she was still pining for Grant. Thing was, Grant never put her on the emotional roller coaster that she was on with Micah. She just couldn't believe that he was out with another woman and demanded that she go home because he didn't like seeing her with another man.

Just then there was a distinctive ring on her phone. It would be the doorman.

"Miss LeBlanc, there's a delivery man here."

Now that was odd. Then she thought that maybe Micah, in all of his arrogance was trying to apologize, "If it's flowers, I don't want them."

"It's not. He says you have to sign for the parcel."

Now that made her curious. "Send him up."

Soon after there was a knock on the door. "Are you Hailey

LeBlanc?”

“Yes.”

He handed her a clipboard, “Sign at the bottom.”

She did.

Then he turned and picked up a large box placing it just inside the door.

“What on earth—“

“There’s a note here that says you have to open it before noon.” He stood up, “Have a good day.”

She shut the door and stared down at it. There was no return post on it anywhere, but there was an envelope. She pulled it off and flipped it over. It was blank. When she opened it all it said was, *Arena 3pm*.

This had to be from Micah. She looked down at the box. Now he must’ve known that flowers would be thrown out on the street, or did he? She couldn’t help herself and smiled. This was different, she’d have to give him that.

She released a frustrated noise aimed at herself for falling for this and kneeled down to open the box.

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“You’re sure about this?” Tyler said not feeling too confident about Micah’s plan.

“Yeah, it’s the best way to get her to forgive me. She’s not answering her phone.”

“Send her some flowers, *Jesus* Micah.” He said looking at what he was wearing.

“You don’t know her. She’d probably burn them and send the ashes back in a box.” He smirked.

“You owe me big time.”

“Me too and I may not forgive you,” said Emil as he threw on his jersey over his padding.

“Me neither.” Tyler said fitting himself into Emil’s extra goalie gear, “Jesus man, you’re a bloody tank.” He was pulling on

the shoulder gear that was way too big on him. He was about the same height as Emil, but the goalie had about thirty pounds more of muscle on him.

Emil laughed.

"You will forgive me." Micah said tossed on his own jersey. "You're my best friend and you have to."

"I'll deny everything if I'm asked. Especially if daddy finds out." Emil added. "I like my balls."

"Yeah, I like living too." Tyler agreed.

"I'm here for selfish reasons. I want to see that gal embarrass the hell out of you." Mark Richards said stringing a whistle around his neck.

"Don't be pussies." Micah said irritably before he stood up and headed to the ice. It wasn't like him to humble himself at all for a woman, but he was doing it. Mostly because he behaved really badly, but there was that other thing that he had issues admitting even to himself. Now he had Emil and Richards in on his secret affair with the team owner's daughter. Apparently Emil already suspected something, but Mark didn't. Still he needed a referee. Mark was it. He knew he could trust him not to say anything to the wrong person.

Emil and Tyler exchanged an amused look before following him.

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Hailey thought the jersey with the team logo on it was a sweet touch. Her name LeBlanc was even on the back above the number twelve. Micah's number was seventy-seven, so she wasn't sure what twelve meant.

If that was a surprise, when she came out of the change room the scene on the ice was shocking. There was Micah at center ice skating around with a puck.

She looked at the nets. That was definitely Emil in one. There was no mistaking his bulky form, and the other looked like

Tyler Hartley who was talking to Mark Richards. He was wearing the familiar striped uniform of a referee.

"You've got to be kidding?" she said looking at all of them.

"Hey," Micah said seeing her. He skated over to her.

"What is this?" she waved an arm at the scene.

"Well," he turned around with his back against the boards and looked at the other three men around the ice, "I figured I owed you a chance to release some of that anger on me."

"Oh really." She said narrowing her gaze suspiciously. "Why don't you just give me the stick and stand still so I can beat you with it?"

"Because I'm not stupid." He chuckled turning and looking down at her, "Tell you what. If you beat me in the game, I will get down on my knees and beg for forgiveness."

"Even if I don't beat you, you owe me an explanation." She demanded, "You humiliated—"

"I never slept with her Hailey, nor did I have any desire to do so." He interrupted.

The relief she felt was registered in her expression like an open book.

"Hey," he said seeing it and softening his own expression, "We—you and I, we have something here. I couldn't possibly—" he took a deep breath while staring down at her, "Hailey for crying out loud, I can't think straight when you are around. I have a public appearance to maintain, and it masks what we have. I was worried people were starting to see through me."

What we have? *What do we have?* She thought to herself, "Did you kiss her?"

He made a face, "No." Seeing her doubt it, he nodded toward Tyler, "Ask him. He'd be the first one to tell on me because he doesn't like the fact that you and I have something going. It's interfering with my concentration." He'd dumped his date at her apartment as soon as he left the restaurant and just

went home after that. They had rented a limousine so he actually was never alone with her. It was true that she did try and kiss him goodnight but he stepped away, said goodnight and walked back to the car leaving her stunned. Maybe he should have told Hailey that he was doing that for public appearances, but he knew that she wouldn't take it well and he was right. However, he behaved more badly than she would have.

"Really?" she felt her heart skip a beat. Maybe it was her that got him distracted in the playoffs. If only that was true! She'd know then that she was more than just a fling to him.

He nodded keeping his expression serious.

"Hey, I have a hot date later Micah. Today would be nice." Said Mark who was still by Tyler.

"Yeah, yeah." He said over his shoulder before turning back to her, "The rules."

"Rules?"

"You can body check me— *Please*." he grinned looking down her form salaciously before setting his pale eyes back on hers, "However, I may squash you if I do, so it'll be nudges from me only." His grin turned devilish, "Maybe an ass grab here and there."

She felt heat rise to her cheeks at that heated look, "I'll just bounce off you anyway."

"We'll see." He chuckled and started skating backwards, "Come on then. Let's see if you're as good as your father says you are."

"With Sudas in the net? That's unfair." She said waving an arm toward him.

"Sudas is *your* goalie. Tyler's mine." He said with an arrogant tilt of his head, "Remember, I'm completely humbling myself here. But chances are the puck will never make it down there."

"Oh I like those odds." She said excitedly. "And we'll see



about the puck.”

“However—“ he said letting his own grin show, “If I win. You have to do something for me.”

“What?”

“Now that wouldn’t make this exciting if I let you know, would it?”

“That’s not fair.” She said dropping her smile.

“Remember you have Sudas. I have Tyler.”

“I heard that.” Tyler said flipping down his mask. He wasn’t looking forward to getting pelted with pucks at all. He’d been hit in the head and face more than once with them and could never do what Emil does for the team.

“Deal?” he said still skating backwards toward the center ice.

“Oh, you are on.” She said stepping onto the ice. Hailey had never expected such a thing from Micah. It was possibly the most romantic thing anyone had ever done for her.

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“I have a whole new respect for you. I mean our goalies are our gods, but I really am in awe.” Tyler said to Emil while clamping him on the shoulder as they left the ice together.

“she’s pretty good.” Emil said casting a look over his shoulder at the couple who were just inside the corridor facing each other engrossed in conversation.

“Yeah. Way better than I thought she would be.” Mark said from behind them. He’d purposely made the game go Hailey’s way just to see Micah lose. That and Sudas was elemental in it. He didn’t let one puck through the net even when Hailey was hanging off his stick arm to the point of being completely free of the ice.

“Hey, that’s holding!” Micah accused Mark. “Are you or aren’t you a Ref?”

“I don’t see a damn thing.” Mark said with a wide grin and giving Hailey a wink. Micah was standing there with his stick in

one hand and Hailey comically dangling off his other arm.

“Traitor.” He said trying to act angry but his grin betrayed him

Hailey was laughing her head off and could barely hang on.

Still it was funny to him to see his team captain’s frustration at the ridiculous calls he made.

“You embarrassed me.” Hailey said once they were alone after the game. The other three men turned the corner at the end of the corridor engaged in their own teasing discussion. Only Tyler cast a glance back at the couple with a worried look before he disappeared around the corner.

Micah and Hailey hung back. Hailey needed to get the other night off her chest. She’d gone over it a thousand times in her head. Did Micah expect to have her only to himself while he had affairs with other women? They never made any commitments to one another and she had absolutely *no* idea if this was normal for two people or what, but she certainly was a monogamous person. The other thing that worried her was that show of temper. He wasn’t brutal with her, but that on ice attitude was unexpected in the restaurant. Micah always seemed so at ease. Tyler seemed to be the scrapper in the group. So was he crazy? Would he just erupt like that and make demands all the time?

“I’m possessive of you.” He offered while looking down at her. He loved those light hazel eyes of hers too. There was no doubt that she was beautiful even in the hockey gear he took several days hunting for. He actually went to the junior section to find it and paid a little extra so they could get her name and the number on in a short time for this game.

Now that wasn’t expected. She tilted her head in disbelief.

“I swear.” He continued, then lowered his voice, “I know you were a virgin Hailey. I wasn’t so drunk that I didn’t notice.”

She blushed ten different shades of red while looking around to see if anyone was within hearing distance. Thankfully there no

one else around.

"I have enough experience to know that, but what you don't know, is that you were the most amazing woman I've ever had in bed. For some reason, the fact that you were untouched until I put my hands on you, made me severely jealous of other men."

"You can't do things like that." She said a little weakly referring to his jealous behavior. His confession had her insides singing. How could she be angry at him after that?

He reached up and removed her helmet, then removed his own tossing them on the floor at their feet before he cupped her head and tilted it up to meet his eyes, "I know. I acted like an ass." He bent and kissed her forehead, "Forgive me."

She released a deep sigh, "Micah—this can't work."

"I know that too, but I seem to have this problem of getting you out of my skull and keeping my hands to myself around you." He moved his mouth closer to hers. "Have you figured out the number on your Jersey." He murmured against her skin.

"No."

"It's the day we met. March twelfth."

She sighed, gosh that had to be one of the most romantic things a man has done for her. First the hockey game, then him remembering that day. "My dad—he's going to be so angry." She sighed parting her lips.

"I'm aware of that." He said right before he covered her mouth with his in a brief yet very effective kiss. "Spend the night with me."

"I can't." she breathed. It was almost painful to deny him that. Having him towering over her sexy as hell in his practice gear was definitely one of her weaknesses.

"Why?" he lifted his head but didn't release her.

"I'm staying at dad's tonight. We're taking the jet to visit your parents tomorrow afternoon."

"You can't get out of it?" he said as if it was the easiest thing

in the world.

She smiled, “Even for you, I can’t. My father expects me to comply when he asks something of me. You don’t know the half of it Micah.”

“I know the feeling.” He said returning her smile. Though he was sure that his father wasn’t as strict as hers was, he knew what parents expectations were like.

“I guess I’ll see you at the ranch then.”

He groaned, “Separate rooms. Christ, I’ll come unglued knowing you’re down the hall from me—do you sleep naked?”

“Micah!”

He kissed her again, hard, “I can’t help it.” Then he released her, “I’ll find a way to seduce you again honey.” With that he walked away.

Find a way? She was pretty sure he just did with that kiss. Her fingertips went to her tingling lips as she watched him leave. Was she being crazy? There was no future with him. Emil was right, these guys eat, sleep and live for hockey. Micah didn’t have time in his life for a girlfriend, not that she was one. She didn’t know what she was. She knew one thing though. She was absolutely, definitely in love with that man.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“So,” Tyler said when he came back to the dressing room, “Are you forgiven?”

Micah just grinned.

Mark had left already and Emil was already dressed. He clapped him on the shoulder as he was leaving, but didn’t say anything.

Micah just nodded at him. Emil had already given him his opinion on dating Pierre LeBlanc’s daughter. He told him when Micah approached him about helping him with Hailey, that he

knew her father more than the other players. He also warned him not to make Pierre angry.

“He’s got a really shady past Micah.”

“I’ve heard things.” Micah said.

“Well, they’re probably all true. Hailey is his only child and he’s more protective of her than anyone I’ve ever seen. There’s a reason you’ve never seen her around the arena before. She’s worked here since she was a teenager, but not allowed near the players.”

That was news, but it made sense why he’d never seen her since the playoff party.

“He doesn’t want her involved with a hockey player because he knows what they’re like. She was engaged to a councilman who Pierre was going to make sure got in as mayor so he had some political influence.”

“Sounds like he sold her off.” Micah said angrily.

“No, he honestly thought it was a good match. At least that’s what he told me, but I have a feeling that Hailey never had her heart invested in him. Pierre came from the streets, you know. Not many people know that so he wanted something better for his baby girl.”

Micah could probably understand that, but what was wrong with a hockey player?

Emil seemed to know what he was thinking, “We’re never home. We can be volatile with our on ice attitudes. We’re arrogant, pigheaded and difficult to live with. My wife has put up with a hell of a lot.”

That was true. That was like his father in a nutshell, but around his mother Dutch was a pussycat. His parents were deeply in love and his mother knew exactly how to read and handle his father. It helped that his mother grew up around the sport, but Hailey did to, more so in fact. She didn’t cater to him either. Other women would bend over backwards to please him,

but Hailey had no trouble speaking her mind from the first moment he'd met her. He loved that about her. She kept him grounded. "I hear you Emil."

After Tyler and Micah got changed they headed to the parking lot where Tyler had his car parked.

"She's a lot better than I thought she would be." Tyler said casting him a sideways glance.

"Yes, that's probably the sexiest damn thing I've ever seen with a woman." Then he stopped, how wrong he was!

Tyler looked at him when he paused in mid-stride then followed his line of sight to see what caught his attention. "You've *got* to be kidding?"

Hailey was walking about two hundred yards ahead of them across the parking lot toward none other than a sleek black motorcycle. She was dressed in black and yellow leather from head to toe while carrying her helmet in one hand and a pack sack in the other.

"Christ, if that doesn't bring a man to his knees, I don't know what will." Micah finally said. Now he understood what Jill was trying to say at the restaurant about bringing her car. Obviously Hailey didn't have a car. Hell, if he'd known she had a motorcycle, he would have insisted on going home with her that night. It was that damn hot!

Oblivious to both of them Hailey pulled on her packsack and swung her leg over her motorcycle before putting on her helmet and starting the bike.

The two men stood there and watched her rip away until she was out of sight.

"I want one of those." Tyler said after a long stretch of silence.

"Yeah well look somewhere else, because she's mine." Micah said knowing it wasn't the motorcycle he was talking about.

“Lucky bastard.” Tyler said, “A girl that plays hockey and rides a bike that looks the way she does. Hell, it was like she was made to order for you. I’m drooling.”

Micah chuckled, “I am a lucky bastard.”

When Hailey got home she started packing. Her dad phoned and told her that he’d send a car for her around suppertime. She just didn’t know what to pack. She was a city girl and had never been to a ranch before in her life. So she did the only thing that came to her mind and phoned Micah.

“Just make sure you have jeans and shirts that you can move in. Don’t worry about boots or anything else. Mom will make sure that you have what you need.” He paused, “I could come help.”

That deep timber of his sounded so seductive over the phone. “No way. Dad’s sending a car in a couple of hours.”

“That’s all I need.” He grinned into the phone.

“Micah, behave yourself. What do you think my dad will say if I show up a couple of hours late for dinner? He insists on punctuality. More than likely he’ll come over and see what’s keeping me.”

“what are you wearing?”

“I’m hanging up now.” She bit her lip to stifle her own giggle.

“As soon as I get you alone at home, I’m going to—” he said something so scandalous that she did hang up cutting him off. He laughed and tucked his phone back in his pocket.

“I think I’m going to throw up.” Tyler said beside him. They were in his car heading to Micah’s condo.

Micah laughed again. “Admit it, you’re jealous.”

“Damn rights.” Tyler agreed with a grin. “If you look under ‘perfect woman’ in the dictionary, her picture is there.”

“She’s mine.” Micah repeated dropping his smile.

This time Tyler laughed.

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When Pierre and Hailey got off the jet at the small Sulphur Springs airport in Montana, there was a black Cadillac escalade waiting near the hanger. Leaning against it were two dark haired boys and a blonde Dutch. One she recognized as Cole, Micah's younger brother. She couldn't help but feel disappointment that he wasn't there to greet her. Then again, she doubted she could resist running over and wrapping her arms around him. It had only been less than twenty-four hours since she had seen him last, but she actually missed him a lot.

Dutch shook Pierre's hand and introduced Mason, his third oldest. To Hailey they almost looked like twins, except Mason had his mother's deep sapphire eye color. It was quite striking with his black hair, but still, Micah looked the best to her.

"You look like twins." Hailey said thinking, dark or light, all of the Rush men seemed to have those lady killer looks, towering height, and made for hockey bodies.

"yeah we get that a lot." Mason said with a handsome grin that all of the Rush men seemed to possess, "Except we're ten months apart and Cole has dad's eyes."

"They get in trouble as much as twins." Dutch offered shooting them both a look. They both gave him sheepish smiles.

"How old are you?" she asked Mason

"Eighteen—just." He flashed a clever grin at Cole before looking back at her, "Our parents had one of us every year after they got married. I'm sure Dad would have wanted his own hockey team, but mom drew the line."

"Mason." Dutch warned causing him to laugh.

"What? It's true." He said in mock innocence. "She said five of you was enough."

Dutch gave him another look that didn't seem to affect him at all before he turned back to Pierre and Hailey who was laughing now, "Liz is cooking up a banquet. I warn you though,



she's an excellent cook." He looked at his sons, "Get the luggage boys."

"Yes sir." They both said in unison and headed toward the jet.

Dutch's eyes settled on Hailey, "I think we have a treat for you to."

Her brows lifted, "Treat?"

"It's a surprise." He said with a devious grin.

Hailey didn't know what to say. Her heart started hammering in her chest and she glanced at her father wondering if Dutch knew about her and Micah and he was going to tell her father. Thankfully, he didn't say anything, but that didn't help her either. Unfortunately for the entire ride to the ranch she was worried that he knew something.

After the boys loaded the luggage into the SUV, Hailey sat in the back between Cole and Mason, who both talked her ears off on the way to the ranch. More than once she found herself laughing at the teasing play they shared between one another. No matter what reputation Dutch had for his volatile temper, one thing was certain, those boys were raised with a lot of love. They were respectful and like Micah, confident.

She couldn't get over the beauty of the country. The snowcapped mountains and crystal clear lakes they drove by. It seemed to go on forever with a farm house scattered here or there. For some reason she expected the landscape to be flat, but it was coated with rolling green hills. It was possibly the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

"My wife can take you through the town later this week and show you some hometown hospitality." Dutch said over his shoulder.

"I'd like that." Hailey said with a smile meeting his eyes in the rearview mirror. Gosh Micah favored him so much! Then her eyes went back out to the landscape, "When do we get to your

place?”

“We’ve been on it for the last ten minutes.” Mason answered with pride, “Dad owns over fifteen thousand acres.” He pointed to the cattle grazing in the fields they were now driving by, “That’s our cattle there.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen one close up in my life.” She said in awe, “They’re bigger than I thought.”

“We have over five thousand head at a given time.”

“That sounds like a lot.”

“It is.” Cole answered this time, “We have the biggest ranch around.”

That was impressive, thought Hailey. Didn’t this family ever do anything in a small way?

Cole and Mason kept her busy for the rest of the drive. However, when they pulled up in front of the house on a paved road she was distracted by the beauty of the house. “Dad, isn’t that amazing?” she said looking out the windshield at the three story Victorian mansion.

“My brother in law helped me bring it back to its original shape. Except for the kitchen, it’s state of the art. My wife and I both like to cook.”

“It’s beautiful.” She said in awe.

“It’s magnificent.” Pierre agreed

“Come on, I’ll show you where your room is.” Cole said opening the door and holding out his hand to help her out.

“I’ll get the luggage.” Mason said getting out of the other side.

Liz came out onto the covered veranda wearing an apron and a beautiful smile.

Every time Hailey saw her she seemed to grow younger and prettier. Dutch had this look on his face that couldn’t be mistaken for anything less than true love when he looked at her.

“How was the flight?” Liz said looking at the younger

woman. She was wearing designer jeans and a plain pink buttoned up shirt.

“It was dad’s private jet, so very comfortable.” Hailey said.

“Micah and Tyler came home this morning, commercial flight.” She laughed, “Dutch said he was too busy to go and get them.”

“He flies?”

“Micah does to. Got his pilot’s license at sixteen.” She turned away to hide her smile at Hailey’s look of awe. All of her kids had their pilot’s license, but she knew that Hailey wouldn’t have needed to hear about the rest. There was only one Rush that beautiful young woman was interested in.

“Come on in, Dutch likes to show off my brother’s carpentry skills.” Liz said opening the door.

Hailey couldn’t believe what overachievers this whole family was. Wasn’t there anything they couldn’t do? As for the carpentry work, Liz wasn’t lying. The woodworking skill on the interior was phenomenal. “Gosh, I would love a place like this.”

“It took three years to restore it. Jackson, my brother, put a lot of love into it.”

“No kidding.”

“He’s an artist.” She smiled, “When Micah was four and we moved back here from Arizona, Jackson had a western theme room built for him. I have pictures. I’ll show you later.

“I’d love that.” She said enthusiastically hoping that there were pictures of Micah when he was young in those too. She bet he was a really cute child.

“After supper maybe, when Cole shows you your room.”

“That’d be great.” She said casting her eyes up to Micah’s younger brother who waited patiently at the top of the stairs with her suitcase in his hand.

Liz left after that mentioning something about burning steaks.

Hailey took her time going up the stairs so she could admire the handiwork. Her hand slid along the polished wooden banister and she went up to the second floor. The end cap was a beautiful carving of a horse's head. "did your uncle do all of this?" she said indicating the horse head.

"Yes, it was before I was born, but he's really good."

"This looks real."

"When you're around something your whole life, it's just a matter of putting memory to wood. Jackson says that anyway. I'm not an artist." He indicated with a nod toward the hallway at the top of the stairs, "Lets go put your things away and you can spend the rest of the day exploring the house."

"Oh," she laughed, "I'm sorry Cole. I forgot that you're waiting for me."

He gave her a dimpled grin, "No problem."

She followed him into the hall and he stopped and opened the first door. "Mom wants me to put you in here. My aunt Grace loves this room." Cole said placing the suitcase on the four poster bed, "you can see that it has a turret with large windows so you have a three quarter view of the ranch, well what you can see from here. Our property stretches over those mountains." He pulled aside the curtain and nodded in the distance.

"I could really get used to this pace." She sighed looking out at the blue grey mountains and rolling green hills.

Cole laughed, "Ranching is anything but slow Hailey. Give it a few days, and you'll see. Maybe we can teach you how to ride a horse."

She rapidly shook her head, "I like things with motors. I'd rather be in control."

"I heard." He grinned again, "I'll leave you to get unpacked. Mom says dinner in ten."

"thanks." She said before he left. She couldn't help but wonder by that 'I heard' statement. She also couldn't help but

wonder where Micah was. It bothered her that he didn't greet her when they pulled up to the house. Actually it probably bothered her more that she hadn't seen him yet.

Meanwhile, Micah saw her. He watched the Escalade pull up in front of the house from the glass double doors of the arena. It was a bit of a distance but he could still recognize that delicious figure in jeans.

He and his two younger brothers Matt and Jack, had been working on the ice that day to get it ready for practice. Their father wanted it in good shape so Pierre could see how Cole played. It took everything in him not to go and see her, but she was right. His actions were going to get them caught. If he thought his father was hard on him before the finals, he would be brutal if he knew he was having an affair with the team owner's daughter. A hot, lusty affair. His groin ached involuntarily just thinking about that spectacular body of hers. Then there was her father. Even though he did listen to what Emil and Tyler told him about Pierre being dangerous, he couldn't break it off with her. Did he really need to have her that bad? Bad enough to ruin his career?

"Christ." He said turning away after she disappeared behind the shrubs that were planted in front of the house. What he wouldn't give to just touch her for a few minutes.

"Cole said that chick is hot." Said Matt who suddenly appeared as Micah turned around.

He was so busy concentrating on watching Hailey he didn't hear him approach. Matt wasn't quiet about anything either. He had the grace of a bull in a china shop. It looks like it was more than just hockey he was distracted from. "she is." Micah said, "And she's definitely off limits."

"Hey, I got a girlfriend remember?"

"You're seventeen. You don't need one."

Matt grinned, "I *need* something. That's why I have a

girlfriend.”

Micah laughed, and ruffled his little brother’s hair who was only a few inches shorter than him and headed back toward the ice, “Come on stud, we’ve got to finish this before dinner.”

After Hailey unpacked she went back downstairs. For a large family it seemed as if there was no one around. Finally she found the kitchen and Liz working diligently in it.

“Oh, let me help.”

“No, I’m fine, it’s all done.” Liz turned around holding a large bowl of salad. “The boys will be in—“

A loud raucous outside of the kitchen cut her off and she grinned flicking her eyes to Hailey full of amusement, “—now.”

“Wow.” Hailey said hearing the throng of male voices.

“They can smell food like vultures to a carcass.”

Hailey laughed, “Well, I can smell it and my stomach is hurting now.”

When Hailey walked into the dining room she had to pause and look at the sea of ebony haired boys. It looked as though a football team had just come in there. Except one. Micah met her eyes behind the other four and let the corner of his mouth slip up just slightly. She felt her gut flip over several times. God she missed him!

Liz slyly sat her directly across from him while the boys filtered around the table. Dutch sat at one end with her father beside him and she sat beside her father.

Conversation, as usual turned to hockey and the boys named Matt and Jack were grinning at her from ear to ear.

“Micah said you played hockey too.” Jack said out of the blue.

Her eyes darted to Micah who looked completely disinterested in the conversation before settling back on the one named Matt. “I used to.”

“We’re you good?”

“What a question.” Liz said disapprovingly.

“Sorry mom.” Matt said, “Micah says you were.”

Micah cleared his throat, “Well, that’s what her father says.” He couldn’t very well say that they’d had a game.

“She was good.” Pierre kicked in, “Still is. She only plays casually with her coworkers now.”

“That’s so cool!” Jack said, “We should have a game tomorrow. All of us.”

“Leave her alone you guys. She just got here.” Liz said, “Micah, why don’t you show her around after supper?”

“Sure thing,” he said as if it bored him.

“I’ll show her.” Said Cole.

“You need to finish fixing the wire along the road before we lose another calf.” Dutch said, “Something that should have been done yesterday.”

Cole flushed, “Sure thing Dad.” He gave Micah a look that said, you get to have all the fun.

“Hey,” Micah said, “If you want that bike, I’d do as he says.”

“bike?” Hailey perked up.

Liz cringed, “I don’t like you guys riding those, I worry.”

“We’re not that reckless mom.”

“The words *‘that’* reckless’ have me concerned.”

“Bike?” she said again looking around at the four boys purposely avoiding Micah. She knew it was hard to take her eyes off of him and this was getting more and more difficult when she did look at him.

“Yeah.” Cole said. “I have my eye on this gorgeous Harley and I’ve just about got enough money saved to buy it.

Now that was interesting. Dutch was filthy rich yet he made his sons work for everything. She found herself admiring this family more and more.

“You should see Micah’s.”

That made her shift her gaze to him.

“After supper.” Micah said in that same disinterested tone.

“Mom wouldn’t let us buy them until after we turned eighteen.” Matt continued.

“I’m saving for one too, but not a Harley.” Said Mason. “I want one of those crotch rockets that—”

“Mason!” Liz said interrupting him, “Watch the way you speak around a lady!”

“Sorry mom,” Mason said sheepishly, “I forget sometimes because, well, there’s only you around here.”

“Mason, you can help your brother with the wire.” Dutch said narrowing his eyes. “Your mother is as much as a lady as any woman.”

“Aw mom, I didn’t mean it that way.” He said apologetically, “You’re used to us. Of course you’re a lady.”

She only smiled and gave her husband a look that said he was being too hard on them.

The teasing continued through the rest of the meal and Hailey delighted in all of it. *What a wonderful family*, she thought to herself. She couldn’t get over how much love was between them. It made her miss her mother more and more and wonder what it would have been like with a sibling to talk to.

Her father was always worried about her getting caught up with a hockey player because of their lifestyle, but Dutch was an amazing father.

Before long dinner was over and Hailey instantly started to help Liz clean off the table.

“No, don’t you dare. You’re a guest here. Matt and Jack will help.” She nodded toward Micah who was standing in the doorway with his hands in the pockets of his jeans waiting patiently. “Micah will take you around for a tour.”

Her eyes went to him and all six foot seven of him towering in the doorway. He was such a vision for a lovesick girl like herself. Just the sight of him sent her heart flying. “If that’s



okay.” She said almost to herself. She hoped he was only putting on an act for his family, because his aloofness really started to bother her.

“I don’t mind.” He finally said meeting her eyes.

Gosh she loved his eyes!

“Go on.” Liz said turning away to hide her smile. “Come on boys.” She said to the other two who were helping her clear the table. Matt and Cole had already left to fix the fence and Dutch said something about showing her father the arena.

“Shall we?” Micah said turning in the doorway and leaving.

She followed him down the hall to the foyer.

“You’ll need boots.” He opened a closet door and pulled out a pair of pale tan cowboy—or cowgirl boots.

“Are these your mother’s?”

“No, she bought them for you last week.”

“That’s so sweet.” She said flushing. She’d never met so many nice people before. The Rushes made sure that she felt at home there.

“They’ll be a little snug at first, but that’s how they fit. They’ll form to your feet by the time you’re ready to leave.”

“Thanks.” She said slipping her feet into them, “I wonder how she knew my size.”

“I think she guessed.” He said with a smirk, “My mom’s resourceful.” He stared down at her while she pulled them on. He ached to reach over and touch her auburn hair. It was so damn soft in his fingers. Just then she erected herself and he moved his eyes back to hers.

“Micah, are we okay?” she said worriedly.

His smirk went to a smile.

She just stared up at him wishing he’d just say something. He could smile all he wanted and send her heart thumping out of control, but that didn’t tell her a darn thing.

“Come on.” He said opening the front door, “I’ve got

something to show you.”

She let out a breath in disappointment and followed him.

They walked side by side down the paved drive until they hit gravel. She loved the large red barn they walked by and off of that, it looked like a long building with windows.

“Those are the stables where we keep the horses.” He answered her curious look. “We have cattle barns too.” He pointed over to three buildings on the left that were smaller than the barn but also long stable like structures.

“this place is huge!” she said. Then as they cleared the barn there were more buildings.

There were numerous large outbuildings. More like large shops or warehouses about forty feet long. She stopped and counted them—five, no six. Then there was one that was twice the size of all of them. “What are those?” she said noticing that there were all lined up perfectly beside one another.

“I’ll show you.” He said continuing toward them, “It’s where we’re going.”

He led her by the largest one but jugged a thumb over his shoulder as he passed it, “That’s the arena my dad had built. I’ll show it to you later.”

“I’d like that.”

“This—“ he said making his way to the first large building past the arena, “Is mine.” He walked up and pulled open the door.

“Yours?”

“My father built one of these every year my brother’s were born. That’s why there are five of them.” For the first time he grinned with emotion. It was pride. “They house our toys.” He turned and flicked on the dozen florescent lights over head.

“Oh my god!” she said stepping in and looking around. “Here I thought your dad made you work for everything.”

“He does. My building has more toys because I’m rich and

can afford them. My brothers have yet to fill theirs.”

He shut and the locked door behind them without her noticing and cast a glance down her backside while she was staring in awe at the contents. It had several styles of motorcycles, a boat, several cars, one she recognized as a jaguar.

“I thought you didn’t drive—well, I mean because you always rode in the car with Tyler.”

“Like you, I have a motorcycle in the city. I like them better than cars because they can go anywhere in city traffic. It’s been too cold to use it. At least I thought it was until I saw you get on yours.” His eyes darkened with desire.

She spun around to face him, “You saw me?”

He nodded, “When I saw you, I thought I was the luckiest man alive.”

She stared up at him. All trace of the boredom was gone from his expression now and in its place was raw desire. She was relieved to see that it was an act earlier, “Oh Micah.” She breathed.

He reached for her before she could even mouth a word of protest and covered her mouth with his.

Hailey wrapped her arms around his neck feeling a surge of joy at his confession. Next thing she knew she felt his large hands on her bare skin. He’d managed to undo the buttons on her shirt. “Micah, we can’t—“

“I’ve got to have you Hailey.” He breathed raggedly in her ear while pulling her tight against him, “I’ve got to! You have no idea the restraint I was using.”

Every limb in her body vibrated with that deeply voice statement, “But—“

“I locked the door. Everyone is too busy to notice that we aren’t around.” He continued moving her backwards, “I swear I’m going to go crazy if I don’t feel you against me in the next few minutes.”

Something solid hit her backside then and she turned to see a sleek polished black motorcycle with red striping “Is that an Agusta F4?”

“Yes.” He growled against the skin of her neck. Hell, she even *knew* about bikes!

She tilted her head back, “Gosh it’s so beautiful.” She sighed at the caress.

“You are beautiful.” He said sliding her blouse off and tossing it over the handle bars. He did it slowly caressing her bare shoulders as he slid the material down her arms. His mouth ran up the curved arch of her neck.

“Micah—” she lost her words when he removed her bra and threw it on top of the blouse. He palmed her breasts and took her mouth again. She’d meant to protest, but she was just as desperate to get close to him as he was to her. After another moment of his persistent intimacy she felt her fingers go to the waistline then the belt buckle of his jeans.

A few minutes later they were both naked and he lifted her up onto his hips with graceful ease causing her to wrap her legs around his waist. Micah was a strong man and it made her feel as if she weighed nothing. Their mouths never separated once. Then to her surprise he straddled the Agusta and leaned back slightly threading his fingers into her thick hair taking her with him moving his mouth over hers.

Micah moved one of his hands to her lower back, then to the delicious curve of her bottom. Her skin was soft yet toned. He’d never made love to a woman that was so athletic before, but he sure as hell was wrecked now. There was no way he’d settle for anything less. She had amazing curves for someone who was in such good shape.

He moved his hand down between her legs and her groan vibrated in his mouth. “Hell Hailey, you’re so damn wet!” he said.

“I can’t help it.” She fell her face into his shoulder. “You have me so worked up.”

“Me neither.” He released her hair and moved his other hand down to her bottom lifting her up on him.

She heard a deep groan vibrate in his chest as she enveloped him perfectly.

“So tight too!” he growled, “Fuck I love it.”

She didn’t hear that at all because of the sensations throbbing through her made her blind and deaf to anything else but the feel of his body under hers.

It was chilly in the building but the two perspiring naked bodies didn’t even register it.

Sobs started to come from her as he took charge of the rhythm with his hands cupping her bottom. That wasn’t what pushed her over the edge. It was his deep voice vibrating in her ear saying the most scandalous things. Things that would have offended her if anyone else said them. Yet Micah was masterful in how to draw that last liquid drop of wanton desire out of a woman. Soon it was her that took over and he allowed her the control, the freedom to be herself.

Their mouths met with each thrusting move and their tongues tangled in scorching play but not once did she break the pattern. It didn’t even take thought to keep it, because it was so natural, so right. A cry tore from her when she felt every nerve in her body come alive and convulse.

“That’s right baby, come for me!” He dug his fingers into the flesh of her backside taking command.

She did. Again and again, letting out the most delicious cry of release.

She wasn’t alone.

Micah’s voice echoed off the walls of the building as he roared his own.

Neither one of them said anything for a full ten minutes.

Micah kept himself inside her and wrapped his powerful arms around her splaying his hands over her back. His mouth moved tenderly over her forehead, cheeks and nose making soft whispers against her skin.

Hailey started to cry.

“Hey.” He said cupping her face his hands to tilt it up, “What’s wrong baby?”

“That was so—“ she couldn’t finish, but he knew exactly what she was talking about.

“Hell, yes it was amazing.” He smiled, “It made me want to weep to. It was such a powerful release.”

“Really?”

He made a face like he was in pain for a moment, “I’ve got to sit up. This fiberglass isn’t good on my back.” The seats on the Augusta weren’t made for two people or for what they were doing. He reached down and adjusted her bottom while sitting erect, “No—don’t move.” He said when she made to get off him. He reached down and moved her legs higher up his hips, “I want to stay in you for as long as I can.”

She laid her cheek against his chest while he ran his fingers through her hair. His other hand still remained on her bottom.

“This isn’t going to work.”

She lifted her head and searched his eyes with hers, “You and me?” she felt panic rise, but he quickly squashed that.

He shook his head, “No, our sleeping arrangements. I could take you again Hailey, and again, and again. This isn’t enough for me.”

She colored.

“I love the way you blush.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “It’s going to be so hard for me having you down the hall over the next two weeks. I don’t like sneaking off.”

“What do you suggest?”

“I want to tell our parents.”

It was probably a whole minute before Hailey found the will to speak. Panic surged through her and she pushed off of him.

“Hailey—”

“Micah you don’t know my father.” She said untangling her limbs which was harder than she thought because her legs felt like jelly trying to get off the bike and him. Then she started to throw her clothes back on.

“Hey,” he said following suit but only pulled on his underwear and jeans. He didn’t even bother doing up the belt, “Listen, I have a lot to lose too.”

“Dad warned me to stay away from his players.” She said not looking at him.

Micah narrowed his gaze, “You’re father does not own me!”

“He does Micah!” she countered facing him while doing up the buttons on her blouse, “He owns all of you—Tyler, Sudas—all of the team.” She waved an arm.

Actually she was right, “So?”

“Don’t you care about your career?”

“Of course I do, but I care about you to.”

Her face softened at that confession.

He saw it and gave her a reassuring smile while reaching for her. “He can’t be that bad. Look at how amazing you turned out.”

“Full of compliments.” She murmured allowing him to hold her.

“I’ve never lied to my parents Hailey. I don’t like sneaking around. I want people to know we’re together. My father will hit the roof to, but I was raised in a way that honesty is always an option.”

“I wasn’t.” she said, “My father is very controlling Micah.” She said stepping back so she could see him, “I love him and I know he loves me, but there’s things about his past that he’ll never let me in on. I’m not so stupid not to believe partial rumors about him. It’s not me I’m worried about anymore.”

He bent and kissed her long and hard. Of course she wasn't worried about herself. Next to his own mother, Hailey was the least selfish woman he knew.

Her hands splayed over his powerful chest still damp from their lovemaking. He was built like a Greek warrior, all solid and sinewy. She loved the way his corded muscles moved under her fingertips.

Finally, before she fell under his spell again, she forced herself to take a step back, "Please Micah, promise me that you won't say anything."

"Hailey, that's an unfair thing to ask me." It went completely against his principles.

"I know it is, but you don't know my dad. I worry that he'll do those things you said he'd do. In fact, I'm sure he will. He'll trade you to one of those obscure eastern teams that never make it to the playoffs. Or worse, he'll keep you and not let Dan play you ever again."

Micah loved hockey. He even dreamt about it. The thought that Hailey was right actually horrified him. He would be lying if he said he didn't like the fame, fortune and media attention. Right now, he was twenty-six and felt like he was on top of the world. The problem with that was he wanted more. He wanted Hailey to go with it, but she was right, Pierre would knock his feet out from under him. Still, it didn't feel right keeping this a secret and he didn't like that feeling at all. His eyes searched hers and the desperation he saw there. He couldn't deny her anything at that moment, "all right." He said dejectedly. "I don't like this Hailey."

"I know. I'm not too keen about it either, but I think it's best for now."

"for now." He agreed.

A few minutes later they were walking back along the gravel drive when a thunderous noise made her turn around.



Micah moved his arm around her waist and pulled her beside him as his two brothers rocketed by them on sorrel horses in a full race while whooping and hollering.

Hailey watched wide eyed as they raced down the road and out of sight, "Oh wow!"

"That'll be a common sight around here for the next few weeks. We're very competitive."

"Where are they going?" she said still wide-eyed. She thought the cows were big. Horses were bigger.

"To do as my dad said, fix the fence."

"Do you ride horses." She said looking up at him.

His eyes sparkled, "Of course. I can teach you."

"Oh no, I'd rather keep my feet on the ground."

"Its no more dangerous than that motorcycle you have."

"Yeah well I can predict which way that bike turns."

He chuckled, "Horses are intelligent animals. They can be trained well, besides—" his eyes darkened, "You didn't seem to mind something powerful between your legs—"

"Oh gosh Micah!" she flushed glancing around, "I'm going to kill you."

"Catch me first." He said running off with her hot on his trail.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Of course she couldn't catch him. His legs were twice as long as hers. She found him leaning against a tree with laughter in his eyes.

"Tomorrow we'll go riding."

"Motorcycles? Does that mean you're going to let me ride your Agusta?"

He gave a short laugh, "No, I meant horses."

"I'm not getting on one of those things!" she protested with

her eyes as wide as saucers.

"I'll saddle mine. You can ride with me."

"Micah, I'm not getting on one of those beasts!"

"You are." He grinned while straightening. "They're less harmless than that four hundred pounds of aluminum and fiberglass that you ride."

"You can say that all you like but I'm not doing it."

"Oh you will honey." He said nodding toward the large structure that housed the ice rink, "Come on we'd better make an appearance before they come looking for us. I'm sure your father and mine is anxious to show you the rink."

"I'm still not riding a horse." She said falling into step beside him.

He chuckled but didn't say anything. For someone who liked a lot of sports and hobbies that were male dominant, how could she be afraid of a harmless creature? He felt her cast a wary glance in his direction. She may protest all she wanted, but he was getting her on a horse. He'd have to invite his brothers along though, just so no one got suspicious. He was sure that Cole would jump at the chance to come along and show off.

"I've realized something about this family." Hailey finally said as Micah opened the door to the arena for her.

"Which is?"

She turned and looked at him, "You are all overachievers. I don't think any of you do anything half way."

"I think that's because my father instilled those morals in us." He smiled staring down at her as she stepped through the door. "Look who's talking."

"Hey!"

They both turned to see Pierre and Dutch over by the rink boards waving at them.

The arena was fully encased in an insulated building with about ten feet of walking area to the wall on the outside of the

boards and Plexiglas. It wasn't as if they entertained games so it was built for the sole purpose of him keeping in shape and coaching the towns Tyke team, but now it's only used for the training Dutch's boys. Dutch was busy managing Micah's career and soon it would be Cole. He never pushed any of his kids into the sport, he made sure it was their choice. More than likely Matt would be a rancher like him. He was a natural with animals. It wasn't that he wasn't good at the game, he was, but he didn't seem to have the heart that Cole and Micah had.

"tomorrow we'll see the boys in action." Dutch was saying as Micah and Hailey approached, then his eyes went to her, "You're more than welcome to join us."

"Really?" Hailey said with excitement ignoring the look she knew she was getting from her father. She could feel the heat of his stare on the side of her face.

"Now wait a minute Dutch," Said Pierre unable to get his daughter's attention to show his disapproval, "I don't want those boys hurting her."

"Dad." She said with embarrassment.

"They won't." Dutch said casting her an amused glance, "They'll slam each other into the boards but not her. I'll warn them beforehand."

Pierre reached up and scratched his balding head, "I don't know Hailey." He said looking at her.

She knew what this was about. The Five rush children were all men and played hockey. This wasn't about her getting hurt. It was about her being around hockey players, especially two, Cole and Micah. She took a deep breath and did something that she never thought possible. Defied his wishes. "I would really like to play." She knew what her father was telling her, but playing stupid seemed to be the best thing at this time. The look on his face told her that he didn't fall for it and would speak to her later.

Pierre LeBlanc was a big man, maybe not as big as the

Rushes, but the way he carried himself made him seem bigger than most. He was powerful, rich and sure of himself, but cross him, and there would be hell to pay. He was used to getting his own way and always did. No one ever turned him down, but his daughter just did. He narrowed his gaze on her and she averted her own. This was unlike her. She knew what he meant by that yet she chose not to listen. He didn't like that, not at all. It was then he wondered if there was something else going on. With what, he didn't know, but he sure as hell would find out.

When she was getting ready for bed there was a knock at the door. Robe before answering the door. She already knew it was going to be her father, and it was.

"I need to speak with you." He said sternly.

She stepped aside and waved him in. Then she shut the door behind him and crossed her arms under her breasts. She expected this and was ready to stand her ground.

He turned and looked down at her lifting a finger and shook it in front of her nose, "You know damn well, I don't want you playing hockey with those men."

"Dad—"

"I'm not done." He said angrily.

She snapped her mouth shut. At least he kept his voice to a civil level so the rest of the people in the house wouldn't know how furious he was.

"I've told you from the day you could understand that I don't want you around hockey players."

She unfolded her hands and lifted her arms to the side, "then why did you invite me?" she shot back.

"Because you needed to get out of the city. Grant hurt you. I thought the country would do you some good." He answered, "I thought maybe after you cleared your head, you'd go and talk to Grant. He cares about you."

"You *can't* be serious?" Grant had phoned her every day

since she caught him in bed with another woman. Of course she never answered the phone after she saw it was him. She was relieved that he finally stopped calling her. Now she knew. He started talking to her father. It never even crossed her mind that he would try and get them back together. Did his prestige mean more than she did? "Grant is a jerk."

"He feels bad about it. I want you to give this another try."

Was he actually thinking that she'd do that? After a moment at staring at him, she knew the answer. It felt as if her heart was splitting in two. "I can't believe you would actually push me to get back together with a man I don't love. A man I can't trust."

"He can provide for you. He's got a lot of pull with the city and—"

"Can push through your building permits." She finished angrily.

He straightened himself and shoved his hands in the pockets of his slacks, "He has influence."

"Oh my god dad. Did you sell me out to the highest bidder?"

"Jesus Hailey. No one marries for love anymore."

"I will!"

His expression darkened fiercely and his finger came up to her nose again. "You will get back together with him, or I'll pull you out of my fucking will, have you fired from that ridiculous job and leave you blackballed until you have no place to go but the streets."

She froze. The words were cruel and hurtful. He'd never spoken to her like that, "You wouldn't." she said in barely a whisper.

He reduced his harshness slightly, "I know what's best for you and just because I brought you here to a house full of men doesn't give you the right to jump into the rink with them."

"Good god dad, you make it sound like I'm sleeping with them!" She'd never spoken to her father like that—ever. In fact

she flushed deep red even before she'd finished speaking. If that was hard, what he said next was worse.

"Are you?"

She ground her teeth together and just stared at him. If she said 'no' it would be a lie. If she said 'yes' he would be angrier than he was now. "I'm twenty-two dad. I'm a mature woman who—"

"You're just like your goddam mother!" his voice rose.

Her mouth fell open, "W—what did you say?"

"She was a bloody tramp."

What the heck was he talking about? "You said you loved her!" she said in a harsh whisper.

"I did, and that was my mistake! You are going home tomorrow after you're done your stupid game."

"What are you more worried about? Me or your precious players?" she shot at him hurt beyond caring.

"Tomorrow." He repeated coolly before he turned and left then shutting the door behind him.

She stood there staring at the closed door. She'd heard about that temper of his, but now she saw it for the first time. It left her shaking. She reached up and moved her hair back off her face thinking she should have just kept her mouth shut. She'd never gone against him before and now she knew why. He actually scared her a little, and she didn't scare easy. It was that look he gave her before he left. She'd never seen that look in his eyes before. What was that about her mother? He never said anything negative about her before. Was he just so angry that he was trying to hurt her by saying that? She had no idea, but she was going to find out.

A knock on the door again brought her out of her thoughts. She thought maybe it was her father coming to apologize. She should have known that he wouldn't when she opened the door and Micah was there in a striped navy and green flannel robe.

His face softened when his eyes set on her, "Hey, you're crying."

"I am?" she reached up and wiped the wetness from her cheeks.

"What happened?" He stepped in and closed the door.

She shook her head, "It's nothing."

"Nothing that I can hear through the walls into my room." He said stepping in and closing the door.

"Oh gosh, you heard that?" she was humiliated having her family's dirty laundry publicized.

He nodded and pulled her against him, "This is a good old house and the walls are thick, so don't worry. More than likely I was the only one."

"I've never seen him so mad—it scared me."

"Well, he doesn't scare me." He said looking down at her.

"You should have seen the way he looked at me. It was like he hated me."

This time he gave her a smile and moved her hair off her cheek with two of his fingers caressing it softly, "Impossible."

"He was angry because I said I'd play with you and your brothers tomorrow."

"Why would something so innocent be seen as a threat?" he didn't understand what was in Pierre's head when it came to Hailey. If she'd let his brothers know about them, they'd back off completely, but she wouldn't let him tell his family. Well, after hearing the way her father just spoke to her, he began to understand a little more why.

"he mentioned something about my mother being a tramp." She said with difficulty, "I never heard him talk so viciously about her. As far as I knew, he loved her."

Micah didn't know what to tell her. He knew Pierre was a force to be reckoned with because of Dan's reaction when he showed him a picture of Pierre's daughter and Emil's warning

and now what he'd just heard. It was true that Micah was arrogant but he wasn't stupid to know he crossed some invisible line that no one else was going to take a chance with. Not only that, she had worked in the arena since she was a young teenager and she had never dated a hockey player. The men he worked with would have snatched her up the day she turned sixteen. Yet, know one hardly knew about her except a select few. All of this time she kept out of sight, but when she emerged, he honed in on her like a bee to honey. "Did you want me to stay?"

"Micah, what if we get caught?"

He cupped her head in his hands, "I can be back in my room before the household awakes. Trust me." Looking at her now, made him realize why she made him promise her earlier to keep this a secret. She was really shaken up. He could feel her tremble under his touch. He didn't think anything could frighten her because she was so self assured. It angered him. Pierre had no right to treat her in such a way. She was an adult.

Yet, he was no better when he hauled her out of that restaurant. It made sense why she was so angry with him, but was surprised him the most now, is that she actually forgave him. After hearing the way Pierre spoke to her, it was obvious that she'd been controlled all of her life. Micah was no different that day when he treated her badly. He made a promise that he'd never treat her like that again.

He knew that parents had trouble letting their kids become independent. His were the same way when he ended up in Canada with the NHL, but they let him go with their blessings. He supposed by the time Matt went off to chase his life that his parents would have gone through it four times already so it probably got easier, but Hailey was an only child and a girl. For some reason he was sure that fathers were a little more protective of little girls. He knew he would be if his daughter was as beautiful as she was.



Daughter? Christ he could actually imagine how gorgeous a little girl would look from the both of them.

What was he saying?

He quickly shook the thought out of his mind, “Did you want me to stay?” He repeated when she didn’t answer.

Despite the warning sensors going off in her head especially after her father left in a rage, she couldn’t say no. She didn’t want to be alone. She never got to respond to him because he’d opened her robe and slipped it off her shoulders so it pooled at her feet.

“I’m going to make you feel better Hailey.” He said when she glanced down at her feet covered by the soft satin material of her robe.

He placed his forefinger under her chin and tilted her face up to his, “I’m thinking you need it.” She looked lost to him and his heart went out to her. He wouldn’t know what to do if his father spoke to him the way Pierre just spoke to his only child.

“I do.” The words left her mouth but she felt a thousand miles away.

He took her mouth in fierce possession while bending down and scooping her up in his arms.

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“Micah!” Mason said pounding on the door of his room, “Micah, mom says get your ass down to breakfast!” he pounded again. After a moment of silence he turned the door knob and opened the door. It was dark in the room because he had his blinds pulled, and after his eyes adjusted he could see his brother in bed. As usual and like the rest of them, he slept in the raw. Growing up with four brothers left modesty out of the picture years ago.

Micah was sprawled face down in bed with a single sheet that just barely covered his backside. He was still sound asleep with his face turned away from him. Micah was always a solid

sleeper, that's why he could get by on little sleep, because when he did sleep nothing could wake him.

"Damn Micah! Wake up." He walked over to the bed, picked up a pillow and smacked him on the back of the head with it.

"Huh?" Micah lifted up and turned to face his younger brother, "What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock, mom's worried. You're always up before the sun. She wants to know if you're sick."

That was true. He was normally up really early, "I'm just tired man. Go away." Although there was a reason he was. He'd just come to bed less than two hours ago.

"Yeah right, then mom will come up and she's already unhappy because the company's downstairs waiting for you to make your star appearance."

"You're such a dick." Micah grinned laying back down and closing his eyes, "Give me a minute."

"that's all your getting because mom said—"

"—Get out Mason!" Micah threw a pillow at him after he called him something unrepeatable. Mason ducked.

"Thirty seconds or I'm sending mom up." He laughed shutting the other door just to have it hit by another rogue pillow.

"Ah hell, I overdid it." Micah said rolling onto his back flopping his forearm across his forehead and grinning at the ceiling, "Oh, but so worth it."

When he walked into the dining room several minutes later Micah's mother was just setting the last platter on the table, "Some people get lazy when they don't work." She teased.

"Or play." Micah returned his mother's smile. He never thought of hockey as work. He loved the game.

"Leave the boy alone Liz." Dutch chuckled, "His team took the cup this year."

"And next year." Pierre said with concrete determination.

Micah saluted his father making him shoot his wife an amused glance.

Hailey didn't look at him and she actually looked like someone just ran over her dog. "Good morning." He said to no one in particular. She cast him a quick guilty glance and forced a smile but didn't return a greeting. Several others did.

"Hailey's got to go home after the game this evening. It seems Sean can't get along without her. She's his best Power engineer and he's got other two." Pierre lied and shot his daughter a look that warned her to countermand him in front of everyone.

Micah sat down while staring at her. She never said a word or looked at him but continued to eat her breakfast. He felt heat rise in the pit of his stomach in anger. She wasn't going to say anything to the contrary. He didn't blame her at all, he blamed Pierre. She told him everything last night about his restrictions over being around the players Micah felt helpless to help her. So instead he made her forget for several hours. He'd taken his time and made love to her slowly with all the tenderness he never knew he had. He was a man who liked to take the bull by the horns and was much the same with his sex life as he was with hockey and everything else. Yet, she brought something out in him that he didn't think he had. It made him slow down and really look at things for the first time. He wasn't patient, but she made him want to be. He knew why. Hailey was unique. She was someone who was beautiful and exciting inside and out and he wanted to savor that part of her as long as he could.

"That sucks Hailey," Cole said, "I mean you haven't had time to see who the best Rush boy was." Grinning, he tapped his chest with his fists.

"She already knows." Said Mason who was wiggling his eyebrows.

Hailey found herself laughing into her napkin for the first

time since her father tore her to pieces.

"I'm sure she knows." Pierre said smiling, but it was cool. Only Hailey seemed to notice and dropped her expression.

After breakfast when everyone was getting up, Micah approached his father, "Dad, do you have a minute?"

"Hailey, do you want to give me a hand?" Liz said casting a glance at her husband. She knew she told her that guests didn't help out around the place, but it looked as if she needed someone to talk to.

"not at all." Hailey said forcing another smile. She was sure her cheeks were going to start to hurt if she kept that up. She started collecting dishes and followed Liz through the swinging door to the kitchen. She managed to shoot Micah a warning look that he caught. He had said he wouldn't say anything, so she was reminding him of his oath. He met her eyes but she couldn't read anything in their icy blue depths.

"Sure thing Micah." Dutch answered but his eyes went to the young woman. He wasn't so stupid to see that something had happened since yesterday when they were all together. Hailey was unusually quiet. There was unspoken tension between her and her father.

He turned to Pierre, "Matt will take you down to the arena. I'll be there in a minute, "Cole, get suited up."

"Yes sir." He said leaving the room.

"Privately." Said Micah, seeing Mason and Jack were still there with their eyes and ears wide open.

"You two go on ahead." Dutch said.

"Yes sir." They said casting curious glances at their brother.

"come on. We'll speak in the study." Dutch led the way.

At the same time Hailey set the dishes on the counter near the sink.

"So, do you want to talk?" Liz said while opening the dishwasher.

“Talk?” Hailey said.

“Yes, about this thing you have going on.”

Dread hit her. Did she know about Micah? “Mrs. Rush I couldn’t—” she was going to say, *help myself*, but thankfully Liz interrupted her.

“—With your dad.” She finished while erecting herself and smiling. Then she dropped it, “My goodness Hailey your white.” She pulled out a stool from the breakfast nook, “Sit down.”

Hailey burst into tears.

“Oh lord.” Liz hugged her, “I’m sorry honey, I shouldn’t pry into family matters but you looked so upset this morning. I know your mother passed away when you were young, so you probably don’t have someone close to talk to.”

“I thought I hid it well.” She muffled into Liz’s shoulder.

“No, only to the men because, unless you hit them upside the skull with a brick, they don’t notice a woman’s emotions,” that got her a muffled laugh, “I however, have a mother’s instincts.”

“Micah said not much got by you.”

“Is that right?” she said carefully. Obviously her son and Hailey shared a few conversations about family which wasn’t like him. Despite Micah being famous like he was, he put on a different persona for the media than he did for people who knew him. There were certain expectations that he had to live up to being the famous man he is to bring in publicity and endorsements. One thing was certain, Micah never discussed his family with anyone except friends.

She had a feeling before that there was something going on between them, but they seemed just to be friends since she’d arrived here. Micah had even talked about her a bit which was really surprising. Liz couldn’t remember Micah talking about a woman before in his entire career. That’s how she knew that Hailey liked motorcycles. Now, however, Micah was cordial but

didn't seem to portray any attractiveness toward her. She had told Micah to take her on a tour because she figured they would both like that, but they'd barely looked at each other since her arrival.

Liz would like Micah to date a woman like Hailey because there was nothing false about her. She was beautiful, smart, and confident and they shared a lot of the same interests.

Hailey nodded and stepped out of her grasp. "I'll be okay. My father just made some demands on me and it was hard to take."

"Father's can be like that."

"it was just a side of him I've never seen before."

"He's concerned about you." Liz assured thinking it must've been terrible because of her reaction. Hailey struck her as a very confident person and for someone to break her like that it had to be a little severe. Yet, Liz didn't say it out loud. It really wasn't her business but she wanted Hailey to know that if she wanted to talk about it, that she had a friend.

*He was controlling*, thought Hailey. He wanted her to get back together with a man she didn't love just so he could have an edge in city hall and threatened her if she didn't do it. She couldn't possibly tell Lizzette that. It was too embarrassing. "I suppose." She said solemnly.

"Come. You can help me make a few pies for supper." Liz said trying to distract her.

"I—I'm not a very good cook."

"I suppose not with your life so full of hockey and motorcycles."

"H—how did you know?" she already knew the answer. *Micah.*

Liz gave her a knowing look, "Are you serious? My boy is nuts about those things, well, all my boys are, but Micah was set back on his heels when he found out you liked them."

"I always have." Hailey said, "I like speed."

"So does he." Liz said turning away and pulling out a container of flower, "He thought you'd like his toys."

She blushed bright red and was thankful that Liz was busy laying things out on the counter for the pies. If only she knew what they'd done earlier on one of those 'toys'. "I did." *Did she ever!* Just remembering Micah's hard chiseled body made her heat up internally as well. She never knew that a man could feel the way he did and now he was imprinted in her. She'd never forget, or feel about anyone the way she felt Micah.

"I wouldn't let any of them get motorcycles until they were eighteen." She turned around with a rolling pin in her hand, "That included tattoos as well. Thank goodness Micah stayed away from those." She turned back to the pastry she was making.

Micah had a tattoo on his upper right arm of a muscled up cartoon rooster lifting a barbell. Obviously Liz didn't know and she sure as hell wasn't going to say anything. It was odd because if he wore a muscle shirt or even had his shirt off around the house she would have seen it. That only led her to one conclusion. He must've gotten it not too long ago.

"Dutch has quite a few of them. It's not that I don't like them. I just want to make sure that the boys don't regret getting them and when they're young, they make rash decisions."

"You are an amazing woman Liz." Hailey said suddenly. Any woman that could handle so much testosterone in her house, had to be.

Liz paused and turned to look at her with genuine affection in her eyes, "Dutch tells me that every day. Thank you for the compliment."

Hailey wanted so much to say, *I'm in love with your son, my father has it in for me, and I feel like I'm being torn in half. Can you help me?*

Liz turned back to her pies and Hailey kept her mouth shut.

Liz was right, she didn't have a mother figure to talk to, but she couldn't possibly tell Liz her secrets. Micah was her son, Dutch's pride and joy. She doubted very much that anyone would think that she was good enough for the star center.

Hailey spent the rest of the morning helping Liz make pies. Actually, she found it fun. She wasn't a cook in the least because they'd always had servants. She could make simple meals but never baked.

Before long they were walking down the lane to the arena. "I don't have any equipment." Hailey said, "I didn't think I'd be playing."

Liz cast her an amused glance, "We have everything you could possibly imagine from when our kids were young."

It was hard to see Micah as a child, because he was all man now and that's all she'd known him as. That first night together was as vivid as if it happened yesterday.

"You're sure about this," he said to her after he shut the door to his condo while staring down at her nervous expression.

"I am."

He cupped her face in his hands, "You can still go home."

"No, I don't want to."

"Last chance." He said setting his eyes on her mouth. He may have said the words but he didn't mean them, not one bit. He was dying to get his hands on her.

She reached up around his neck and pulled him down to her. When he kissed her, it definitely was nothing she experienced before. Micah didn't hold back. His mouth took hers softly at first, toying with her lips. Almost as if tasting her, testing her. Then he splayed his fingers over her jaw, tilted her head and applied enough pressure to make her open her mouth and accept all of him. Lord, he kissed like the devil.

Instantly she felt herself swelling everywhere. He was good, really good. Of course he had the confidence of a man who knew



what he was doing, so to her, he was exactly what she needed. She needed not to think. She needed someone like him that could make her forget everything. She needed him.

Micah reached back and undid the zipper on her gown allowing it to pool at her feet. She reached up and pushed his blazer off his shoulders and he allowed it to drop in the same fashion. Then her hands fumbled with the belt of his slacks. Immediately he placed his hands over hers stilling them and lifted his head at the same time meeting her eyes, "You're nervous." It wasn't a question.

"I am." She confessed.

He gave her a reassuring smile. "You don't need to be. Trust me. At this point I'm pretty much a sure thing."

She found herself laughing softly and relaxing a little. "I've just never done this before."

"We don't have to." He said staring down at her, "I won't pressure you."

"Like I said Micah, I want to."

He nodded searching her eyes with his, "That's a good thing because you standing there in that black bra and lacy thong is killing me."

She didn't have a chance to say anything after that because he took her mouth again.

Soon they were in his bed with his body on top of hers. She remembered that he was heavy, hard and very warm. He was a large man, but she enjoyed the pressure of his body, relished it. In fact she wanted more, much more.

She got it.

Micah did know how to touch a woman to get her to respond. She was a virgin but had no problem reacting to his expert caresses, hard mouth and rhythmic movements of his flesh against hers. Then he shifted and she cried out as his caresses moved lower.

“What—oh god—“ she arched up.

“Slow down baby, we have all night.” He said before he moved his mouth over her breast.

Soon she was sobbing for him to finish her. He didn’t disappoint. He sat back on his heels and adjusted her to his satisfaction before gripping her thighs and pulling her intimately against him.

She always thought that being in such a position would be embarrassing, but that sure as hell didn’t cross her mind now. Seeing him there erect between her thighs in all his masculine poise near sent her over the edge. He was so perfectly made that she was no longer nervous, she was in awe.

He moved one of her legs up his body so her ankle was by his ear before he moved forward and took her. It didn’t hurt, not at all. If anything it made her reach for him to get closer. Then he moved again and she cried his name. An odd look came over his expression then. He was still chiseled in desire but there was a brief look of surprise before he released a deep sexy growl, leaned over her and started moving his hips rhythmically against hers.

Now she knew. She knew why men and women came together this way. She couldn’t get enough of him. Every time she came close to release he’d ease back until she was clawing at his shoulders and begging him. Then when she thought she couldn’t take it anymore, he moved faster, harder. Sweat was pouring off both of them when she called out. It was as if a million stars exploded throughout her body. Micah wasn’t quiet either. He spoke to her the entire time in this husky breathless voice telling her what he was doing and oh lord, did it fire her up!

Before she could even recover, he was at it again. He had the stamina of a wild stallion.

The next morning she slipped out from under the sheets and collected her clothes going into the bathroom to get dressed.

When she came back out she couldn't help but pause and look at him. He was gorgeous. Sprawled face up in his bed sound asleep with a wisp of the sheet covering his groin and his muscular legs entangled in the rest. The sight of his powerful naked body from his thick chest to his washboard abs made her flush all over. It was no wonder she felt every cell of her muscles screaming this morning. She'd done things and let him do things that she never thought possible. Looking at him now, it was no wonder why. It took the strength of a tornado to tear her eyes from him and sneak out of the condo or despite how sore she was, she was going to crawl back on that man.

She promised herself that she wouldn't regret what she'd done, but she certainly could be embarrassed about how she behaved. For someone who didn't know a damn thing about intimacy, you'd think she was an expert. That night he'd had her on her back, her stomach, all fours, then against the wall in the equipment room, and recently, on his motorcycle. Well, she'd have to give him that, he certainly wasn't boring.

Last night, however, was different. He was always patient with her, but last night, he was tender, almost loving and before long she was crying again. Only this time, she'd hid it from him. She had more tears pour out of her in the last few days than she did her whole life. It was a sign of weakness that she didn't like to show people. Still when he finally fell asleep, he'd pulled her against him so her back was to his chest. It was another hour before she drifted off because she wanted to savor that moment with his strong arms around her. For the first time in her life she felt like there wasn't a worry in the world.

After that first fantastic night they had spent together, she promised herself that she'd stay away from him. That lasted a whole two weeks before Sudas caught her spying on him. She couldn't help herself every time she thought of him there was this deep throbbing low in her pelvis. She'd never experienced that

before. It was like some darn beacon that kept drawing her to him.

Hailey was brought out of her thoughts by Tyler who'd just pulled up in a Mercedes beside several other vehicles parked in front of the arena. He got out and removed his equipment bag from the back seat. "Hey Red." He said when he saw her letting a charming grin spread across his face.

"Hi." She said greeting him with a smile but he reached over with his free arm and gave her a hug. She liked Tyler, but only as a friend and she also didn't think that he thought of her beyond that either, after all, he knew about her and Micah. He was still a handsome man. He had black hair and deep brown eyes. He was also shorter than Micah by about four inches, which still made him over six feet.

"I'll meet you inside." Liz said walking by them while they talked, "I've got to fish out some gear for you."

"Thanks." Hailey said before turning her attention back on Tyler, "So what brings you over?"

He lifted his bag, "What else—Hockey!"

She laughed and they went into the arena together.

Hailey chose to ignore the glare her father gave her when she walked in beside Tyler laughing. She was sure he was ready to blow his top now. It was more than obvious that they knew one another.

Male shouts caught her attention as the five Rush brothers warmed up in the rink with the familiar sounds of skate blades shaving the ice and the sticks hitting pucks. There was no doubt that she always loved that sound and the familiar aroma of the humid cool air. She watched them momentarily forgetting about the anger that her father had for her. It was obvious to her at that moment that these boys were raised on the ice together. They passed the puck and moved among one another like smooth flowing water.

Yet, they weren't the only ones on the ice. Now she knew why there were other vehicles out front. There were a few more players and a goalie at each end. Her eyes went past them to the Plexiglas on the other side of the arena where her father and Dutch were talking. Thankfully he'd given up glaring at her while Dutch was pointing to certain players on the ice.

Twenty minutes had passed before she realized it. It was Tyler stepping onto the ice in full gear that brought her around.

"Come on Hailey." Liz said, "the dressing room is free and I think I found gear for you. Micah had some when he was—" she chuckled, "—around twelve."

Hailey laughed. "I'm five foot six."

"Okay, maybe he was eleven." She countered with laughter in her eyes. "I'll guard the door while you get dressed. I'm thinking Dutch will have to have a female change room built on to this place."

She wasn't sure what for unless Liz was going to have more children. Though she didn't see the hopeful look in her eyes either when she walked by her into the change room.

To her complete surprise when she came out of the change room, Dutch was standing there with his hockey gear on too. He must've gotten changed rink side so she could have the privacy of the change room. He grinned at her while opening the side gate, "After you."

"Oh, this is going to be fun." She said grinning as she stepped onto the ice.

"You're on my team." Dutch said, "I can't put you on defense." He said looking down her small form, "but you're used to playing right forward, so how about it?"

"I'll do it."

"I already warned the other players not to complete checks on you on pain of death." He grinned.

Her eyes were drawn to his mouth for a second. Not

because she found him attractive, but because Micah had that same telltale cat with the canary grin.

Hailey loved this. All of it. After being there less than twenty four hours she realized that the Rushes were a very close family. There was a lot of love between them and she didn't realize how much she missed out on until she hung around with them.

Hailey was a pro at stealing the puck but whenever she tried to check one of the boys, there was no give. It was like hitting a brick wall. More than once her bumps were met with a deep chuckle. Yet they were all perfect gentlemen no matter how frustrated she made them because she was quick and smooth. Before they realized it, she'd come up behind and taken the puck away.

At one point Dutch just stopped and held his hands out at his side because he'd lost sight of her. He wasn't used to such a small player on the ice.

Liz started laughing.

Everyone found this amusing except Pierre. He didn't like this one bit. In the short time they'd been there, Hailey seemed taken with the Rush family. He saw them purely as money and fame, but Hailey never spoke back to him before. It made him realize that he had to get her back where he wanted her so he could control her future. Yes, he wanted her with Grant because of what Grant could do for him, but there was more to that story. There were things she didn't know about him and he'd rather she didn't know.

Something else that was bothering him was the way the Rush boys seemed to be attracted to her. Cole in particular made no secret about how attractive he found Hailey. It didn't matter that he was a few years younger than her, because he probably had more experience as a man with women than most men his age.

Grant admitted to screwing around, but he also confessed that Hailey refused to sleep with him. Part of him was relieved because it made him realize that his daughter wasn't like her mother in that way. What Hailey didn't know is even though Pierre loved her, he'd found out that she was sleeping with several of his players while married to him. It enraged him. Not only was he humiliated but he was determined not to ever fall in love again, or trust women. He was away a lot, but to him, it was inexcusable. One thing was certain, his daughter would not mess with his team and get in the way of business. Never would he let a woman manipulate him like that again.

No one knew that he would have strangled that bitch with his own hands if he'd known before she died of cancer. He'd found out afterward. The two players he found out about were traded immediately. The betrayal was unforgivable. He actually didn't blame them at all. Men were being men but others knew about it and he needed to seek some sort of revenge to save face. Problem was, they were two of the best defensemen he had on the team so he suffered as well.

Hailey was two when she did pass away so he had a few years to let the anger go. He'd always told Hailey that he loved her mother, which was true. He really did as much as a man like him could love someone. However, he wanted the best team in the league and no woman would come in between his property and him. Business was business. Now he finally got the cup for the first time in twenty five years and he wanted another. He had the fever and even his daughter wouldn't be distracting players. He would do what he'd said he'd do if she even so much as looked at any of them in the wrong way. For all he knew, she wasn't his anyway. He didn't like her playing with them one bit.

Micah was thinking the opposite while watching her. He wanted her so bad, he could taste it. His pale eyes hardly ever left her as she moved around them. If he wasn't careful someone

was going to see that raw look of desire on his face because it was getting more and more difficult to mask it. Seeing that gal scoop around his brothers was so damn sexy. It was funny really because he wasn't all that keen on women playing hockey, but there was something about Hailey in skates. It wasn't as if she had a lot of bulk, because she didn't. she had fantastic curves. Curves that he had memorized by Braille.

After the game Pierre told Hailey to go and pack before he turned away to talk to Dutch. No one seemed to notice the defeated posturing she held except one.

Micah was getting fed up with the whole situation. His eyes went to his father and caught his look for a few seconds before turning away. There was something in his father's eyes for a moment that he couldn't put a finger on.

Hailey made her way back to her room and started to do what her father asked. Half of her was raging mad for the way he treated her and the other half was embarrassed over caving under his rule. She took her frustration out on her clothing while virtually pounding it into her suitcase.

"hmm, I'd hate to think that was me."

She turned her head to see Cole standing in the doorway. "It's not." She said completely out of smiles and turning back to her packing.

"Let me guess. Daddy." He said stepping in the room.

"Are all you boys perceptive?" she flipped the top over her clothing and zipped it shut. She was tired of hiding behind a façade. Why did it matter that people knew what was going on anymore?

"Not normally." He said coming up beside her, "Mom said you guys had a disagreement after a couple of us noticed the change in your usual carefree demeanor. Let me help you with that."

She stepped back and let him lift it off the bed, "Normally?"



He grinned down at her, “Normally we don’t watch a girl as much as you. It’s obvious your dad has a problem with you being around us.”

“Well, he wasn’t really subtle was he?” she said ignoring the girl watching statement. Cole was gorgeous, but young, and not Micah Rush.

“I wanted to ask you out.” He said bluntly.

“Cole—“

He held up a hand, “—Don’t worry, I’m not going to. My brother has already made it clear that I can’t date the team owner’s daughter.” He said as if she wasn’t going to refuse his request.

“Darn.” She said with a smile.

He laughed, “Yeah right. I can see you’re all broken up about it. You’re dad said you were engaged anyway.”

She was just about to deny it when her father appeared in the doorway, “Micah said he’d take you to the airport Hailey.” He said with faux pleasantness.

“I’ll go put this in the caddy.” Cole said as he was walking toward the door, “Hopefully I’ll see you this year.”

“Me too.” She said as Cole disappeared. Then her eyes went to her father and narrowed at his own suspicious look, “give me a break.” She said turning away and grabbing her handbag off the dresser, “I don’t date hockey players, remember?”

“Hailey—“ he said as she walked by him.

She stopped but didn’t look at him, “I’ll never forgive you for embarrassing me like this.” Then she left.

Pierre shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks. She may not see it now, but he did have her best interests at heart, well, and that of his team. There was no reason he couldn’t control both.

Micah was talking to Cole when she came out of the house. Liz met her at the bottom of the stairs and gave her a genuine

hug.

“Please come back anytime.”

“I’d really like that.” She said feeling like weeping. She left before she actually did.

“it was nice seeing you again Hailey, just know my heart is breaking.” Cole said with a pained expression as she came down the steps.

Micah shoved him and called him something unrepeatable.

She started laughing.

“come on Hailey,” Micah said opening the passenger door of the Escalade, “Before I get the urge to beat the snot out of him.”

“I’d see you off, but I still have a fence to finish fixing,” Coal said, “And I want my bike.”

Micah shut the door behind Hailey and walked around the vehicle to the passenger side, “Remember what I said Cole.” He warned.

“Yeah, but who says I can’t have fun.”

Micah shook his head and got in behind the wheel. Cole had a great sense of humor. He was more like their mother in that regard. However, he was worried that Pierre wouldn’t think he was joking and Cole wouldn’t be a consideration for the draft. He’d want nothing more than to have his little brother with him.

Once on the road they drove mostly in silence until he asked Hailey if she was okay. She never said anything since they left the ranch and he knew she was reflecting on the past few days so he’d left her alone for it, but he was getting worried about her prolonged silence. Hailey was the type of woman that could easily light up a room and this was unlike her.

“I’m just angry now.” She said looking out the side window.

“I don’t blame you honey.” He said casting a glance at her.

“Did you talk to your father about me?” she said finally facing him.

He gave her a look of disbelief, “No.”

She studied his features for a second, “Really?”

He set his pale eyes on her for as long as he could take attention from the road, “No, I didn’t. I promised you.”

She took a deep breath, “I didn’t know, you wanted to talk to him at breakfast and—“

“Hailey, not all men are like your father. My father would want what I want. He may run me through the mill a few times, but it’s only to make sure I make a good decision.”

She clamped her jaw shut. It was stupid of her to think that Micah had to clear this decision to be with her with his own parents. It was obvious that they loved him and would support anything he wanted.

“I wanted to talk to him about heading back to the city early. It’s a fact that this time of year is devoted to my family—“ his eyes went to hers again before back to the road, “but I told him that I needed to get back to the city early before training starts in three weeks.”

“Oh?”

He nodded but didn’t say anything else.

She wished he would, but maybe it was best he didn’t. She already had enough to deal with. If she disobeyed her father with Micah, she was sure he’d do what he said he would. She didn’t care about the will, but she certainly cared about her job and the people she worked with. More importantly, what would he do to Micah?

Micah pulled the SUV onto the tarmac beside her father’s jet. Hailey got out as Micah got the luggage out of the back. She walked around and met him, “I’ll take it.” She said.

“I’d kiss you but—“ he nodded toward the plane where the pilot was waiting at the top of the steps, “—your father’s employee.”

“I know.” She said taking her bag.

He stared down at her for a moment, “Ah screw it.”

Hailey dropped her bag when Micah suddenly grabbed her about the waist and kissed her hard. She might have been concerned until his tongue invaded her mouth, then she really didn't care if god himself struck her down.

One of Micah's hands went to her jean clad bottom and squeezed one of her nicely formed cheeks. Then he lifted his head, "Christ, I'm gonna miss this ass."

She laughed, "You're going to get me in trouble."

"I'll call you in a couple of weeks, sooner, if I can."

Now did that mean that he was coming home early for her? God, she wished he would just say something. Normally she would have, but she was afraid. She was frightened that it wasn't about her and if she said something she would make a fool out of herself.

He looked past her to the open mouthed pilot, "Tell him I assaulted you against your will." He released her then and got back in the vehicle driving away.

*Yeah*, she thought watching the vehicle disappear from view, it really looked like she was fighting him off.

"Everything okay miss?" said the pilot as she came up the steps.

"Um—he, well—" She blushed.

"If you think I'm going to tell your father, that's not happening."

She released a breath of relief, "Thanks Anthony."

"I just don't want to be on the receiving end of his temper. Besides, I'm a big fan of Micah Rush."

"God bless fans then." She said with a smile going by him to take her seat.

## CHAPTER SIX

It was three weeks that had gone by, not two and Hailey had

fallen back into her routine to try and take her mind off of him. Thankfully, her father didn't come and interfere in her life, but it was the off season so most likely he was in the Caribbean with a woman half his age. She wouldn't see or hear from him until just before playoffs as was his routine.

Grant started phoning her again and she even went so far as to pick up the phone to tell him to go to hell, but he begged to see her and she finally gave in. It wasn't because she felt sorry for him because she didn't. She actually wanted closure, and apology. She had all intentions of not obeying her father in that aspect.

Gosh though, she missed Micah so much! Why didn't he at least call her? She actually got brave enough to call him but only got his voicemail. Where was he? She wanted to tell him that she was meeting Grant for dinner and it was just that, dinner. Not that she owed Micah an explanation, after all, she hadn't heard from him and there was no clarification to their relationship besides the sex. Well, there was that time he dragged her out of the restaurant practically by her ear. Yet, he only stated that he was possessive. There was nothing about what was going on between them outside of the bedroom.

She released a frustrated breath and started getting ready for dinner. She told Grant that she'd only meet him in a public restaurant, not in his apartment.

At that exact moment her phone rang. Her heart thudded in her ears at the number on the display. It was Micah.

"I just got back into town." His deep voice rang in her ear when she answered the phone, "My mother didn't want to let me go despite my father's agreement."

"I called you."

"Really?" My phone died, and I forgot my charger in my Condo.

"Micah it's been three weeks."

“I know.” He said softly. He actually felt guilty about that.

“You could have called.”

“Miss me?”

“Right now I don’t even like you.”

He chuckled completely unaffected by her tone. If anything it showed him that she really did miss him, “My family is very time consuming Hailey. My father makes us pick rocks by hand out of the fields because it keeps us in shape. That’s just one of the things he insists on. Trust me, if I had an ounce of strength in me, I would have called you.” What he didn’t say is that he’d miss her too much if he heard her voice. Even now, it wasn’t doing anything for him. He needed to see her badly.

“It’s not good enough.” To her own horror she hung up the phone. What the hell was wrong with her? She just stared at it hoping he’d call again, but he didn’t. Well after that, she certainly couldn’t call him back. But, what was he thinking? Three weeks! He’d have to be crazy to think that she wouldn’t be angry. Or would he? Micah was the type of man that was used to women who would do anything to gain his attention. Well, she wasn’t like that. After one last look at the phone, she turned around and left for her dinner with Grant.

Micah walked into the change room a week later and knuckle punched Richards, “Hey man how’s the family. Europe was grand.”

“the family is fine.” Was all he said.

“How’s the girl?”

Micah shrugged. It had been over a week and he should have called her back when she hung up on him but he needed to think about quite a few things. In total, month had passed and he still wasn’t able to figure things out. Staying away from her would clear his head. At least he hoped it would, but hell, he really missed her face. “I don’t know.” He finally said.

“Oh,” was all Mark said. He liked Hailey after he first met

her, but obviously something had happened and Micah didn't look like it was his favorite subject.

"I've got to get ready." Micah said going to his locker. He started tossing on his training gear not saying much to Tyler or anyone else. Usually a lot of talk and teasing went back and forth but Micah again, wasn't in the game. When he took his jersey off the hook and a brown envelope fell on the bench.

"What's that?" Tyler said. He watched Micah pick it up and slide what looked like photos out of it. Then he saw Micah's face redden. "What is it?"

"Nothing." He said tersely as he pushed the photos back in the envelope.

Tyler had seen Micah angry before but this was out and out rage. "Hey man—"

"Leave it be." He said shooting his friend a look.

"All right." Tyler said holding up his hands in surrender after that warning.

"Tell coach Fox, I'll be a minute." He said slinging on his jersey and leaving the change room with the envelope crumpled in his hand.

It took him about twenty minutes to find her. She was on a ladder working on one of the boiler pipes. "Hailey."

She looked down to see Micah approach, "I'm still mad at you." She lied through her teeth. Her heart was doing backflips in her chest at the sight of him. He was wearing his training gear and he always seemed so darn attractive in that realm.

"Can you come down from there?"

There was something in his voice that made her back down the ladder slowly until she was two steps from the bottom and eye level with him. Obviously she didn't mistake his tone. There was no mistaking the anger in his expression, "What is it?"

He threw the envelope at her hitting her in the chest, which she somehow managed to catch. She gave him a questioning look

before she looked down and opened the envelope. Inside were photos of her having dinner with Grant and of course a picture of him giving her a kiss goodnight. A kiss that she kneed him in the groin over. All she could do was stare at them in shock, “where did you get these?”

“Does it matter? Who’s the guy?”

“It’s Grant but—”

“The fiancé? So does that mean that you took your father’s advice?” he said sarcastically.

She narrowed her eyes, “I don’t like your tone Micah.” Didn’t he know? Micah was the only one she ever defied her father over. He knew that she was untouched when she went home with him. How could he possibly think that she’d go back to Grant?

“I guess this explains your eagerness to hang up on me.”

“Now wait a minute.” She said getting down off the ladder and stepping up to him while craning her neck up. He was wearing his skates which added a couple of inches to his already towering height, “You have no right to say that to me. No one is so heartless not to call after three weeks when you said you’d call me in a week.”

“Well it certainly didn’t take you long to open your legs to some other—”

She slapped him. Hard. “You son of a bitch. You of all people know that I’m not like that.” That hurt. Out of all the things he could say to her, he knew how to hit deep.

“People change.” He said unmoved.

“Apparently.” She turned and walked away from him before the tears that welled up in her eyes betrayed her.

Micah lifted a hand to his stinging cheek. Why didn’t she at least try and deny the relationship with Grant.

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After that Micah threw himself vigorously into the practice



drills. Usually when he got like that, he needed sexual release to break down the tension. There were plenty of opportunities, and as far as he was concerned he was free to screw whoever he wanted. He actually took a woman home one evening but that's as far as it got before he sent her home in a cab. This thing with Hailey wasn't settled as far as he was concerned, and one thing he wasn't, was unfaithful.

It was true that they didn't really establish any sort of a relationship verbally, but he knew it was. He just couldn't get past the thought that maybe she cheated. She never denied it or admitted it and it was making his head swim. Yet deep down, he knew her. Just because they had a night together when they first met—a fantastic, mind-blowing night, didn't mean that she'd repeat that with a man she claimed not to have any feeling for. Then there were those photos. Who the hell knew about them and would go through the trouble of upsetting him like that. Not only did he basically throw the game, he'd hurt her.

Was he so stupid not to realize that it was a setup? Or maybe it was someone who cared about him that wanted him to see the truth?

“fuck.” He said to himself.

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Hailey's father returned from his trip a week after Micah accused her of sleeping with Grant. Yet it was still fresh with her and she still was hurting though she didn't let on to anyone. Who could she possibly talk to?

Sean had come and got her about an hour before the first game of the season and told her that her father wanted to speak with her. He was in his VIP box above the ice. Thankfully he was alone when she got there because he didn't waste any time in telling Hailey that she had to get back together with Grant again.

“Dad, do your worse then, because I'm not doing it. I'll be a waitress if I have to earn a living that way.” She was done trying

to please everyone. Micah had torn her heart out with his assumptions and she hadn't been sleeping very well since then. Nothing could match that pain.

"Is there another man?"

"No." she said honestly, *not anymore*. "I don't want to be involved with anyone. I'm only twenty-two."

"what the hell is with that get up." He said finally seeing what she was wearing. It was the black with red piping uniform. "That's for the maintenance—" a dawning realization hit his expression, "Hailey Elizabeth you are not working with the ice crew tonight."

She placed her hands on her hips and stood her ground, "Dad. I love my job, I love what I do. I also love you, but I'm doing things my way from now on. Don't worry—I'll stay away from your stupid players!"

"I was harsh." He said after a moment. "I know I was." He turned away and sat down in one of the chairs while rubbing his forehead.

To Hailey it looked as if he aged a lot in a very short time.

"Your mother cheated on me with a couple of my players when you were little."

"What?" she herself had to find a seat and chose one next to her father. She put her hand on his shoulder, "My mother?"

"I didn't want to tell you Hailey. I wanted you to only know her as she loved you. I have my reasons for not wanting you around those men. They'll use you and you're better than that."

"Oh dad, that doesn't matter." She said feeling bad for everything she said to him. "I'm sorry—"

"No, don't be." He said lifting his head and looking at her, "You go on. The game's going to start soon and my guests will be here. I understand if you don't want to see Grant. I won't pressure you anymore."

"Thank you."

“Are you sure though?”

She made a face.

“Just making sure.” He said studying her expression, “But no players.”

“No players.” She said in agreement.

He gave her a hug and she left.

Pierre sat back in the chair and put his arms behind his head with a smile. Forcing her to do something was different than manipulating her. He’d make sure to get her back together with Grant, but for now, he’d make it seem like she was getting her way because he loved her.

Halfway through the first period Hailey had to go on the ice with the maintenance team.

“Well, yum yum.” Dobrowski just spotted the gorgeous redhead on skates. She was wearing a black helmet but her long red hair trailed halfway down her back in a pony tail. The uniforms the maintenance team wore were mostly a stretchy material also, so it was easy to see the type of body she had. He mainly said it to himself but he was overheard.

Micah’s eyes went from Hailey to Dobrowski, who just noticed her. They just happened to be waiting around for the team to fix the panel so they could drop the puck for a face off in the defensive zone of the Dobrowski’s team. “Watch your own fucking women.” Micah said feeling a surge of jealousy.

“Micah.” Tyler reached out and placed a gloved hand on his shoulder. Emotions were running high on both sides and if any of them got out of line the refs were itching to throw some penalties their way as a warning.

Micah shrugged it off and glided over to Dobrowski.

Dobrowski grinned, “Is that how to get into your head?” his eyes went to Hailey, “Nice ass.”

“Micah leave it.” Tyler said behind him. Hockey was a very mental game besides a physical one. As far as anyone knew,

Micah didn't have an Achilles tendon in the mental aspect of the game. Until now.

"Yeah, listen to your girlfriend."

"Fuck you." Tyler said gliding up behind Micah. So much for not wanting to start anything.

Hailey turned to see the opposing players start shoving each other without the puck being in play, "what on earth." Micah and Dobrowski were chest to chest. Then Micah threw the first punch at Dobrowski's jaw snapping his head back. The crowd roared their approval. This wasn't going to go well.

"Oh no." she said as nine of the ten players on the ice joined in. On top of that, the linesmen and referees came in to try and break them up.

"Come on Hailey. We don't want to get involved in this mess." Brent, one of the maintenance crew said taking her arm, "The refs will sort it out."

She glided off the ice after him but she couldn't help but look back and see if Micah was okay. There were emotions on both teams that ran back years. It was typical in the league. Usually Micah never initiated anything, but he would finish it. Tyler was the fighter.

She had to sit through the rest of the game, the first period carried on without Micah who got a ten minute misconduct penalty. When he came back on, he was overly aggressive to the other team and ended up with three more penalties in the second and two in the third. It was virtually unheard of. Their team lost.

Hailey had no idea what the hell was wrong with him and from the mumblings behind the scenes no one else did either. She took her time changing because she wanted some peace and quiet to reflect on everything. When she came out of the employee change room she near ran into Marcus Dobrowski. Defenseman for the visiting team.

Now Micah was tall, but this man was a few inches taller

than him. He had green eyes like hers and dark brown hair. He wasn't overly handsome but she supposed that his size, profession and wealth didn't hurt him in the popularity contest with the opposite sex. He was wearing a dark navy pinstriped suit and white shirt, no tie. "Oh excuse me." She said meaning to step around him. He had other plans and actually stepped in front of her causing her to look up.

"Honey, you do not need to excuse yourself around me."

"Pardon me?" her eyes went up to his in question. The makings of a black eye were starting to form on the left side of his face and she had to bite her lip to keep from smiling knowing that was a result of Micah's rock hard fist.

"I went through a little trouble tracking you down after I saw you earlier." His eyes went down her front, "Well, it wasn't much trouble at all."

"don't you have a plane to catch." She said not appreciating his scrutiny.

"Tomorrow." He said, "I was going to ask you to dinner."

"It's late."

"A late dinner then."

"I'm not hungry."

"How about a coffee then."

She narrowed her eyes on him, "Do I look like a fool?"

"On the contrary."

"Just because I work here, doesn't mean I follow Hockey players around like a lost puppy."

"I didn't even think about that." He said honestly, "But now I see what it is Rush sees in you."

"What did you just say?" she felt herself pale. How did he know about that? Did Micah say something? He couldn't possibly, he hates this guy.

He grinned, "You honestly don't know what that was about tonight, do you?"

She just stared at him.

“Man, I would love it if you came to dinner.” He said shaking his head and grinning, “Just to irritate the team captain.”

“Thanks, but not interested and it seems that you’ve done enough to irritate him.”

“Come to dinner and I’ll let you in on the secret.”

She eyed him suspiciously, “Aren’t you guys supposed to be on lockdown when you’re out of town?”

“Supposed to be.”

“Well, I have no intention of getting in trouble for you.” Being seen with her father’s own players was bad, being seen with one on an opposing team would most likely push her father’s temper to the limits. Besides she’d told him that she’d stay away from them.

“Then let me take all the risks. I swear I’ll behave. I just want dinner—unless you have a boyfriend.”

She sighed in frustration and looked up at him, “My father is Pierre LeBlanc.” It was quite possibly the first time she’d ever used her father’s influence. At least it was effective.

“*The Pierre LeBlanc?*” his charming expression dropped and was replaced by surprise.

“Yes. Now do you really want to go there?”

He held up his hands in surrender, “Okay sweetheart, you win.” He looked down at her and shook his head, smiling again, “What a waste.” With that he walked away.

Hailey was just about at the end of her rope with everything and that included arrogant hockey players.

Unfortunately it didn’t help the situation when Dobrowski opened the door for her as she was leaving especially with Micah standing just outside the doors signing autographs with some of the other team.

Then Marcus turned to her in front of him and said, “Thanks for everything sweetheart.” He grinned at Micah when he said it.

Hailey's mouth fell open at the same time Micah turned his head to see the both of them. He looked back and forth at the two of them while scribbling on some hockey cards that kids had in their hands. Hailey just froze thinking that he was going to snap, but he didn't. He turned back to the crowd. His look was cold and she felt it all the way to the bone.

Tyler who was standing beside him shrugged his shoulders as if to say, 'I know nothing'.

"So much for your theory." Hailey said walking past Dobrowski and down the stairs to the parking lot.

"I guess," he answered simply guiding his eyes down to her bottom. She really did have a nice ass.

"You okay?" Tyler said under his breath as he handed a photograph back to a boy that looked eleven or twelve.

"Fine." Micah said not elaborating.

After another thirty minutes of signing autographs, the team started to leave. Tyler and Micah were walking toward his car when Micah spoke again, "Those were photos of Hailey and that chump of a fiancé. They were kissing."

Tyler just glanced at him and didn't say anything.

"I wanted to tear them both to pieces." Micah said as he got in Tyler's car.

"Did you ask her about it?" Tyler found it hard to believe that she went back to the man after what Micah had confided in him over her father's demands. As Micah's best friend he looked out for him, but something was wrong with this whole thing.

He cast him a glance, "Not really. I just accused her." He rubbed his forehead, "They looked really bad." He said referring to the pictures.

"First of all Micah, who would send you photographs like that? Maybe they were taken months ago. Secondly, didn't you say that she refused to do what her father asked her?"

"Jesus Tyler, women change their mind all of the time."

"I don't know. Hailey seems quite independent despite how controlling her father is."

"No one knows about us."

"Well, some of us do, but you guys aren't exactly subtle."

"What do you mean?"

"Man, you look at her like you're starving. Look at how quick Dobrowski picked up on it. He used that to get into your head so you'd screw up." Tyler looked at him, "What a surprise. It worked."

"shit." He said still rubbing his forehead, "I think I fucked up."

"You did." Tyler said starting the car. "Go and talk to Hailey. It looks as if it's only a matter of time before Pierre finds out now, but you might as well get benched and burned for doing something wrong instead of nothing at all."

"I'm pretty sure I hurt her." He said looking out the side window as Tyler pulled out of the expansive parking lot that surrounded the arena.

"She forgave you before."

"I didn't accuse her of screwing someone before." He said partially to himself. "And that's not the way I put it to her. It was less—nice."

"Oh." Tyler didn't know what to say to that. It was harsh. To begin with, it was probably the worst thing you could possibly accuse a woman of. It was odd really. In all the years he'd known Micah, he'd never seen him display that famous Rush temper that his father held, but he'd seen more of it in the past few months than he'd thought possible. Micah had never been irrational in his whole life, he was sure of it.

One thing was certain, Hailey really got under his skin. Who could blame her? She was possibly the most unique woman he'd ever met. He'd have to admit that she was absolutely perfect for Micah. Women in his past always catered to him, both of them



in fact. Tyler never saw anything wrong with that either until he'd met Hailey. He always liked to have a woman go overboard in trying to please him, but Hailey's fiery independence was very attractive besides her hobbies. It wasn't that Tyler would ever go after Hailey himself, that was breaching the unspoken friendship contract, but it didn't mean he couldn't admire her from afar.

"You're stupid if you let her go." He finally said meaning every word, "Women like that are uncommon."

Micah turned and looked at Tyler who kept his attention on the road purposely not meeting his eyes. That was something he never thought he'd hear Tyler say and it set him back on his heels.

After a prolonged silence Tyler flicked him a glance. His expression was serious, "I'll stand behind you if you want to defy her father, but I'm in for a three year contract. You may be traded or benched—who knows—but I'll go free agent when my contract is up and follow you because we're a team."

"Thanks Tyler." Micah said meaning it, "But I have to somehow get her to forgive me—again."

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Later that evening Dutch and his wife were curled up on the sofa watching TV when he heard the phone ring. A minute later Mason came in, "Dad, it's Tyler."

"Tyler?" he removed his arm from around Liz and sat up taking the phone from his son.

"Is everything okay?" Liz said worried about Micah.

"Tell Liz, he's fine." Tyler said hearing her speak.

"He's fine." Dutch repeated.

She smiled and squeezed one of his thick thighs, "I'll leave you two then." She got up and left the room shutting the door behind him.

"What's going on then?"

"Micah made a promise, but I didn't make any such oath, so

I'm telling you that he's got a problem."

Dutch's eyebrows went up, "Problem? Does this have to do with the girl he won't tell me about?"

"Yeah." Tyler said and proceeded to tell Dutch everything.

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Jill poured two cups of tea and walked back into the living room giving Hailey a cup before sitting beside her. Hailey was wearing a pink silk robe with her knees curled up under her. "So, what are you going to do?"

"Nothing." She said blowing into the mug before taking a sip.

"Hailey—"

"I don't really want to get into it Jill." she cut her off, not wanting to talk about it anymore.

"You could at least tell him the truth."

"Yeah well he'll say I cheated on him."

"but you didn't."

"No, but he thinks I had an affair with Grant—which is ridiculous!" she said angrily. "Like I'd let that man touch me."

Jill let out a breath of frustration, "Hailey, Micah cares about you or he wouldn't have been so angry. You should have seen his face when he hauled you out of the restaurant that day."

"He's a possessive controlling brute."

"No he isn't." Jill defended, "Only with you."

Hailey bit her lip. Jill was right and she knew it.

"maybe you should—" Hailey shot to her feet and bolted to the bathroom so quick that Jill didn't finish speaking. She got up and followed her.

"I can't take this." Hailey said leaning over the toilet bowl losing her breakfast for a third time that morning.

Jill wet a cloth and held it to her friend's forehead. "You have to tell him."

"I just can't." Hailey said sitting on the side of the tub and

leaning forward holding her midsection crying, “I *can’t*.”

An hour later Jill got Hailey settled to bed and to sleep and was getting ready to leave when she saw Hailey’s arena pass and keys on the table by the door. She pulled on her coat and glanced over her shoulder before she swiped them both off the table and left.

Micah was just coming off the ice when he recognized Hailey’s friend Jill from the restaurant. She was standing against the wall of the corridor. He stopped while everyone else walked passed them. His eyes went to the ID around her neck which was Hailey’s but he never said anything. He expected this was where the best friend came to tear him to pieces for hurting her. So despite how bad he felt, he steeled himself defensively for her assault.

“She’s pregnant.” Jill said.

Well so much for that theory. He reached out and placed a gloved hand on the wall because he felt lightheaded suddenly. Then he reached up and removed his helmet holding it in his free hand while staring down at her as if somehow that would make him absorb what she said better.

“She won’t tell you, but I have no problem letting you know what an ass you are.” She said glaring at him.

He still never said anything. What could he say? He was still trying to sort out the pregnancy statement. He swiped his forearm across his sweating brow. He was unsure if it was from the workout or the shocking news.

“It’s yours too, if you’re wondering.” She said angrily looking him in the eyes so he could see that she wasn’t lying, “She never slept with that moron either despite what you think. Her father pushed her into that relationship and because she never felt attracted to him, she couldn’t give herself away cheaply. She had one dinner with him when she got back and when he kissed her goodnight she kneed him in the nuts and left him in a ball on the

ground. She even tried calling you to let you know she accepted a dinner from him, but you being the ass you are, never answered your phone. She may kill me for telling you this, but you need to know what you let go.”

Jill may not have known it but he agreed with her. He was an ass. When he did say something it certainly wasn't worth repeating and Jill actually flushed from his statement, which he didn't know, was a rarity for her. Tyler was right all along about the ex-fiancé. He should have been more understanding when it came to those photos. Whoever planted them in his locker space had intended on his reaction.

“You had a right to know.” Jill said turning away.

“Jill.” He said.

She turned back and looked at him suspiciously.

“How is she?”

Hope flared in her over his statement. For some reason she expected him to deny everything, or just be arrogant about the whole thing, but that was said sincerely. “She's feeling very alone.”

He nodded. “Thanks for letting me know.” With that he walked away.

Jill stood there watching him thinking that she misjudged him. He didn't deny anything and besides being a little in shock, didn't seem that upset either.

When he hit the dressing room he didn't say anything to Tyler who was looking at him questioningly. He saw him stop and talk to the woman and he probably even recognized her, but he needed more time to absorb the fact that he was going to be a father.

After his shower he was just finished dressing when his own father showed up.

“I'll catch you later Micah.” Tyler said guiltily before leaving.

“I take it he called you.” Micah said to his father seeing Tyler

duck out of there like his ass was on fire.

“Yes.” Dutch said, “He’s worried about you.”

Micah wasn’t angry. Tyler was his best friend and did this because he cared about him. “Well, I could really use a drink.” He finally said.

Dutch stared at him for a moment. During training they were supposed to stay away from alcohol, but if Micah said he needed a drink, he knew he really did. “All right.”

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“Does Pierre know?” Dutch said after about five minutes of silence from what Micah had just told him. They’d found a comfortable sports bar down on main street and after two beer Micah told him what Jill had confessed to him.

Micah tried to read his Dad’s expression, but Dutch didn’t really reveal much. “I don’t think so. Are you upset about it Dad?”

Dutch smiled, “No. I’m a little shocked, your mother on the other hand will probably be celebrating, but you know we love kids. Being a grandfather makes me feel a little old, but I wasn’t much older than you when you were born. I think I can get used to it quickly.” Already he was thinking about teaching him everything he knew about hockey, even if it was a girl.

“I’m pretty sure I’m in love with her dad.”

“I’m pretty sure you are.” He said unfazed.

“You knew didn’t you?” Micah realized. His father’s calm response showed him that it wasn’t a surprise at all.

“I did.” Dutch said, “but it was your mother that pointed out that it was Hailey LeBlanc. I didn’t have a clue. After that phone call I got from Tyler about you being nuts over a girl, but his loyalty to you wouldn’t tell me her name.”

“Mom knew?” He knew his mother was insightful but she’d only been around him briefly in the last four months. “Wow, she’s good.” He said almost to himself.

“You have no idea.” Dutch chuckled sitting back in his chair and eyeing his son cleverly. “Now, my next question is this. What are you going to do about it?”

Micah lifted his arm looked at his wristwatch, “It looks like I’ll be skipping practice this afternoon.”

“I reckon you will be.”

For the first time that day Micah grinned.

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“Oh god, go away.” Hailey said covering her head with a pillow as the knocking continued on her door. But it didn’t stop. It went on for another ten minutes before she dragged herself out of bed to answer it. She’d have to speak with the doorman about this. There was no phone call telling her that she had a visitor.

“Oh lord.” She breathed when she opened the door and Micah stood there disgustingly tall and handsome whereas, her hair was a mess, she was ill and blotchy looking.

“Jesus.” He mumbled looking at her disheveled appearance.

“What a romantic.” She rolled her eyes and turned away leaving the door open, “I’m going to kill her.” She said to no one in particular about Jill. It was obviously her that spilled the beans to Micah.

“You should have told me.” He said shutting the door, and removing his coat while watching her. He didn’t like the way she looked at all. She looked completely defeated, and alone like Jill said. He felt as if he was to blame for everything. His heart contracted in his chest.

“I didn’t think you would want to know. You were pretty clear on how you felt.” She said unable to look at him. Here he was waltzing into her apartment like a man who owned the world. Didn’t he have any idea that her own world was falling apart? She didn’t even have the energy to throw him out on his ear. He seemed to know that.

He followed her into the living room and tossed his jacket

over a chair while she sat on the sofa looking up at him. He really didn't like feeling guilty for the way she look and felt, but it was entirely his fault. He took a deep breath feeling like a complete fool.

"What do you want Micah?"

"That depends on you." He crouched down on the balls of his feet in front of her so he was eye level, "I want to be a father." He said with such conviction it could be felt in the air around her.

All of her insides leapt around at that statement and she tried her best to keep the joy off of her expression. "What about my dad, your career?"

"I think we can figure out what to do." What he wasn't going to tell her is that he and his father already spoke to Pierre.

It didn't go well.

After they left the bar, they went back to the arena and found Pierre. He was watching the practice on the ice. It was something he did regularly.

"I'm going to kill you!" Pierre shouted turning bright red in the face with anger.

Dutch stepped in front of his son at that moment who was really taken back by Pierre's anger, "You can try." He said calmly folding his arms across his chest.

The man was so enraged that he was beet red. At that point he was really glad his father was there, because he'd never dealt with such anger in his life. It wasn't as if he was afraid of him, it was just unexpected and caught him off guard. For some reason he was hoping that he'd react like his father did, but after listening to him speak to Hailey the way he did at the ranch, he should have known better.

"Don't think you know me Dutch!" Pierre continued in the same loud voice,

"that goes both ways Pierre." Dutch stated.

"I love her." He said matching his father's calm voice. He

knew Pierre was a powerful man, but his concern was for Hailey. Now he got to see why she was worried about his reaction. Micah decided then and there that he really didn't like the man.

"He defiled my daughter!" He pointed to Micah as if he didn't hear him, "No wonder your fucking head was in the clouds!"

"I know as well as anyone that it takes two." Dutch countered, "I'm sure she wasn't tied down."

*Actually*—thought Micah, but kept that to himself.

"You're done! The last thing I need is some lovesick fool making me lose this year's cup!" he said to Micah past his father's shoulder before he turned and stomped out of there.

Dutch turned and looked at his oldest son, "Well, you certainly know how to pick them."

For some reason he thought his father would be as angry. Certainly not as much as Pierre was when he found out about him and Hailey, but because of what he risked, but he wasn't. If anything, he completely understood, and now, looked amused. It was uncanny how easily his father was taking all of this in. He was still reeling from hearing about Hailey's pregnancy.

"You are taking this well." He finally said. Yet, he knew that his career was now in trouble. "My career—Christ Tyler's going to kill me." Micah said with heaviness in his voice.

"I had your mother tell me four times after you were born that I was going to be a father." He grinned, "Nothing on earth could match that feeling—even playing hockey."

Micah knew he was telling the truth, because he felt as though he was walking on a cloud since Jill told him, and even Pierre's outburst couldn't take that away.

"Well, son, you have to make some choices here. I can't make them for you. Pierre will trade you for sure now and I doubt he'll let Tyler go. More than likely he'd try and trade you to another country, but he can't do that."



“Probably back east then.” That was the furthest Pierre could get him away from his daughter and his precious team. It was blatantly obvious that the man cared about his team more than his own daughter. He didn’t even acknowledge the fact that he was going to be a grandfather.

Dutch nodded, “What do you want?”

“I want to stay on the team. I want Hailey—“ he grinned, “I want everything.”

“Typical Rush male.” Dutch said meeting his eyes without the same humor, “But you need to give up one of those to keep the other. Talk to Hailey, see how she feels about you.”

“I don’t want to disappoint you.” Micah said solemnly.

This time Dutch gave him one of his rare smiles, “son, you can never do that even if you were a beggar on the street.”

He really meant that. Micah loved his father and knew he loved him, but his expectations were always so high that he always wanted to live up to them.

“Ask yourself this.” Dutch interjected, “Is she worth giving up a career over. You already have more than enough money to live comfortably for the rest of your life. However, is hockey your first love—or Hailey?” with that Dutch walked away.

The problem with that decision, is that Hailey would never disobey her father. So even if he chose to pursue her, she would do what her father asked because she loved him. Well, there was only one way to find out.

So after that she went over to her apartment. He was able to slip by the doorman knowing that she probably wouldn’t let him up to see her. He was glad he did, because she looked like hell and obviously needed him.

“Micah—“ Hailey said bringing him back to the present.

“Quiet.” He interrupted softly, “I’m not good at this so you need to forgive me if I stumble a little.”

She gave him a confused look.

He smiled and reached into the pocket of his slacks removing a velvet box opening it.

Hailey gasped and covered her mouth with her hands at the sight of the ring sitting in a bed of royal blue velvet.

"I should have done this a month ago." He took the ring out of the box and reached over, took her hand and slipped it on her finger.

Her eyes went from the gorgeous ring to him, "Micah, this baby isn't a reason to—"

"Hailey be quiet, it's not the baby. I know there's no other woman on this planet that can make me feel about her the way I do about you." She started to cry "I love you Hailey. I'm just pigheaded."

"Are you sure?" she sobbed.

"one hundred percent." He said full of emotion, "My father made some mistakes with my mother and me, and I can't go down that road knowing that you may disappear from my life and I'll never get to know my child."

She threw her arms around him causing him to drop the box on the carpet so he could hold her.

"Hailey, say yes." He said huskily in her ear.

"Yes. Yes. Yes!" she answered.

He buried his face in her neck and held her tightly. After a long embrace he put his hands on her waist and pulled her back so he could look down at her, "You're father was less than impressed."

She paled, "Oh no, you told him?"

"I did." He took a deep breath on what he was going to say next, "He doesn't want me near you so you also have a decision to make. How important is your love for your father over the love for a family?"

She was shaking her head before he even finished, "I want you."

“Are you sure baby? This could get ugly.”

“Oh Micah, you have no idea on how much I want to be a family! My father was never there for me. He’ll destroy me if I don’t do what he says and no matter what, I can’t do that. I can’t be someone I’m not.” Even though he said he wouldn’t push her back with Grant, the last time he told her to come to dinner at the house a few days back, she arrived and Grant was there.

She turned around and walked out of the house. He’d lied to her. She should have known that what he wanted would still come first before her own feelings. Her father had called her a couple of times but she ignored the phone. Knowing him he’d think he’d track her down at the arena after he gave her enough time to cool down.

She never even told Jill that had happened because she couldn’t divulge to anyone how hurtful that was. Now she did. She told Micah everything while he held her.

“Jesus, I was no different.” He contracted his arms around her again and held her.

“Micah, you didn’t know.”

“I should have been more patient about those photographs and asked you, not accused you.” He lifted his head and looked down at her, “But you drove me crazy. I just couldn’t think straight when I thought you were with someone else.”

“I could never—“ she took in a shaky breath unable to finish. Her emotions were displayed clearly in her hazel eyes. He could see that and smiled.

“Now tell me how you feel.” He said gently.

“I love you!” she said clinging to him. “I have from the first day you were traded to our team.” Her heart soared as she soaked in everything he was telling her. He chose her! Even though he knew that her father was ruthless with revenge, he still chose her.

He tangled his fingers in her hair and kissed her.

An hour later the phone beside Hailey's bed rang. Micah, not thinking, answered it even though it could have been Pierre. It was a man's voice at the other end. First he cleared his throat before he spoke. Obviously hearing a man answer the phone here wasn't a common occurrence. *Good*, thought Micah.

"Is Hailey there?"

"Who is this?" Micah felt the familiar jealousy rise. It certainly wasn't Pierre's voice.

"I'm Joe Manhard, Mr. Leblanc's lawyer. It's important that I speak to Hailey."

"Just a moment." He looked down at Hailey who had lifted herself up from the comfort of his shoulder and took the phone from him. "Joe Manhard." He said.

"Dad's lawyer?"

"Yeah, that's what he said."

"Joe?" she said putting the phone to her ear and started to listen.

"Hailey?" Micah saw her mouth fall open, then she turned ghastly white and started to tremble. "Hailey." He sat up and took the phone from her, "What the hell did you just say?" he barked into the phone.

"Mr. LeBlanc just died. I know it was stupid to give her the information over the phone—please tell her I'm sorry—"

Micah angrily hung up the phone cutting him off. He turned back and gathered her into his arms just as she burst into tears.

"The doctor said it was a heart attack." She wretched, "that it was sudden—Oh god Micah, I killed him!"

"You didn't." he countered, "He was angry with me, not you."

"I did." She pulled back from him, "I refused to listen to him."

"If you remember, I was the one that upset him last."

"You didn't know he had health problems." Joe had told her

that he'd been having some trouble with his heart over the last six months. Something she didn't know.

"By the looks of your face, you didn't either, now quit blaming yourself." Micah couldn't help but be angry at the man even if he'd died. He never gave anything to his daughter freely including affection. Yet, here she was blaming herself for everything. If anything, it was him and his father that upset Pierre. Even then he was more concerned about his team than his only child who was pregnant.

"Mr. Manhard wants to speak with me as soon as possible after the—f-funeral."

"We'll go together." He said, "And I'll help you with everything else." He meant the arrangements.

"Micah—"

"Shh, Hailey. I'll help you through this. So will my family. Just remember you're not alone. Now try and calm down, please, that's our child you carry and stress does affect them. Remember—" He smiled trying to ease her guilt, "—my mother had four more after me. I think I know a little more than you."

"Oh thank you." She said holding on to him as if he was the last man on earth.

Micah reached over and picked up the phone to call his mother while holding her tight to him with his other arm.

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Lizzette Rush was met at the airport by her husband who gave her a hug and a sound kiss on the mouth much to the amusement of passersby.

"How is she?"

"coping. Micah's doing a good job at keeping her sane." He said taking her hand and walking to the luggage carousel.

"Poor Hailey." Liz said feeling her eyes water.

"Well that man was an out and out prick. I don't have a clue on how he put out such a wonderful child."

Liz had phone her husband after Micah called her saying that he needed her. When a mother heard those words come from one of her full grown children, the most independent of them, she knew it was bad. At least he knew that he could call her when he needed her. He went on to tell her everything that had happened that day. When he was done Liz had shed a few tears for Hailey. However, Micah didn't tell her about the baby. She managed to get that out of Dutch when she called him right after. He was never good at hiding anything from her.

"I would like to be celebrating being a grandmother, but I have a feeling that will have to wait."

"You and me can celebrate." He said casting her a devilish grin while retrieving her luggage. He sure as hell wasn't going to shed a tear over Pierre.

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"Micah, what are you doing?" Hailey awoke sometime later and smelled something exquisite. When she followed the aroma to her kitchen there was Micah, barefooted, slacks on , shirt unbuttoned and hanging off him while he was cooking over her stove.

He turned and gave her a grin, "Hi." Then he wiped his hands on the towel before walking over and giving her an affectionate kiss, "My parents on their way." His eyes went to her hair, "Maybe you should shower."

Her eyes went down his chest through his open shirt and she licked her lips.

"Hey." He chuckled taking her shoulders and turning her around. "None of that." He patted her ass, "To the shower."

She gave him a heated look over her shoulder, "Kill joy."

"Yeah well, by the time I'm done with you, my parents would have come and gone and we wouldn't be out of the bedroom. So I have my reasons. That and I'll end up burning dinner."

She purred, “A man who can cook that looks the way you do.” She fanned her hand in front of her face while heading toward the bathroom followed by his laughter.

She stripped off her robe and adjusted the water temperature before stepping in. Lord the shower did feel good.

Then the glass door opened and in stepped Micah wearing nothing but a sexy grin. “Micah?” she broke into a beaming smile.

“I have everything keeping warm.” He said wrapping his arms around her. “My mother’s plane landed about fifteen minutes ago. That gives me at least a half an hour with you, forty five with traffic. I’m betting on heavy traffic.” He said moving her back against the cool tile causing her to gasp.

“But the shower—?”

“Is the best idea I ever had.” He bent his head and moved his mouth over hers.

As soon as his hands started moving over her body, she had no will to protest. Add to that the vision of his perfectly chiseled naked body, wet and against hers, she wouldn’t have protested if she was on fire. “God Micah, you are so beautiful.” She breathed against his mouth.

“You have the patent on that honey.” He countered nibbling at her bottom lip.

“—and so big, and hard and—”

He chuckled sexily against her mouth before moving his tongue against her upper lip. She released this throaty little gasp that made him painfully hard. He reached down and gripped one of her thighs pulling it over his hip to bring himself intimately against her.

“I love you Micah.” She murmured.

“I know you do baby.” He whispered back before lifting her onto his hips and sandwiching her between the tile and him. He loved her too. There was no doubt because whenever he touched

her, he felt like the luckiest man alive. He'd never experience that in his life before. Then there was the way he felt whenever he set his eyes on her. She made him feel indestructible.

When he made love to her, like now, the feeling went a hundredfold. He knew when Jill told him that she was pregnant, that she was worth his career. She was worth everything especially when she started saying his name the way she was now every time he moved within her.

He felt himself begin that surge of pressure before an orgasm and gripped her bottom with one hand, palmed one of her breasts in the other and tangled his tongue with hers as it grew and grew until he came deep inside her. Her scream was muffled by his mouth and he absorbed it with his own.

His mouth moved over her eyes, nose and back to her mouth kissing her tenderly—adoringly while lifting her off him and letting her slide down his wet slick body slowly.

She just stared up at him with wonder in her eyes while the water from the jets poured over them. Slowly he bent his head and kissed her again. Her arms went around his neck and she kissed him back.

Then he lifted his head, “come on honey. My parents will not appreciate finding us naked in the shower when they knock on the door.”

“Oh I forgot.”

“I think we both did for about twenty minutes.” He grinned releasing her, “Take your time. I’ll take care of dinner.” He stepped out but before he shut the door he turned and looked down the length of her.

She didn’t feel the least bit ashamed of what they just did, or what they did earlier because it felt so right. Now she was standing there in the shower completely naked in the light of the bathroom, but she still didn’t feel embarrassed. She actually felt beautiful for the first time in her life. Then he gave her that look.



It was loaded with emotion and appreciation that she almost started crying again.

His eyes went back up to hers, "I can't wait to be a dad." He said before he shut the door.

Micah had just finished buttoning up his shirt when the phone rang. It was the doorman announcing that his parents had arrived, "Send them up."

He opened the door and his mother was glowing when she saw him, "I'm going to be a grandmother." She beamed throwing her arms around him, "Oh Micah, I'm so excited!"

He looked over her head at his father who was wearing an identical grin, "You couldn't wait huh?"

"Are you kidding?" Dutch said, "She was able to get it out of me over the phone."

"Where's my future daughter?"

"She's in the shower. She's still dealing with illness over the baby. It told her to go have one before you guys came. It'll make you feel better."

Her eyes went up to her son's damp hair and cast her husband a look without saying anything.

"I made dinner." He beamed.

"I can smell it." Dutch said. "And I'm really hungry." Liz and he made sure that their kids could cook. He didn't like restaurant food at all and only ate out when it was necessary.

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Hailey dealt with the next few days in a haze. Micah was beside her through it all. The funeral was the worst for her, but she was thankful for close friends. The whole team showed up to pay their respects.

Through it all, Hailey wished that they hadn't left off the way they did. She felt incredibly guilty about it. Even though Micah said it wasn't her fault she felt completely to blame.

That is until she was sitting in front of her father's lawyer.

What he told her near knocked her over.

“Your father expected you to marry Grant Hailey. In fact he was betting the farm on it. I know I shouldn’t be disclosing all of these facts, but your father is deceased and well, your husband will be the new owner of the team.” His eyes went to Micah, “Congratulations.”

He gave him a look of disbelief. Joe continued.

“As I said, he thought she was going to marry Grant, not you. He phoned me that day he died—“ he cleared his throat, “—cursing and swearing your name wanting me to cut you out of the will completely. I was due to meet him that afternoon, but when I got there—well he’d passed.”

“He really meant all of that.” Hailey said in disbelief, but she shouldn’t have been so shocked. Pierre told her he would. It was just really hard to take.

Micah reached over and took her hand and gave her a sympathetic look. What a horrible thing to find out. Her father was a ruthless prick that was only concerned for himself. Then his eyes went back to the lawyer, “So the will remains unchanged?”

Joe nodded, “Mr. Rush, you are the new owner of the team as soon as Hailey says ‘I do’. Along with it comes one point seven billion.” His eyes went to Hailey, “He left you nothing my dear, but this is better than what he was going to do. Leaving the money with your husband I mean. He was going to cut you and whomever you married out completely. I told him my thoughts on it and he threatened to fire me. He was pretty angry. I’m sorry to tell you this after burying him only a few days ago, but I have a daughter myself. I couldn’t imagine doing this to her.”

Hailey nodded numbly.

She wasn’t the only one. Micah was just told he inherited a fortune. His eyes went to Hailey, and his heart hurt for her. She was such a beautiful vibrant person and it was a shame Pierre

couldn't see what he had right under his nose. He squeezed her hand getting her to look at him.

"I'm signing it all over to you the minute you marry me." He said easily. Micah was already rich and of course that was more money that he could dream of, but Hailey was worth more to him.

She started shaking her head.

"Why?"

"I don't want any of it." She said sadly, "He didn't love me Micah. I was a possession like his hockey team, his real-estate. I don't want money from someone who didn't care about me. It's yours."

"ours." He corrected. "We'll give a lot back to the community. There's a lot of kids that can't afford sports, so we'll set up charities, build some rinks in underprivileged communities to help. There's a lot of good we can do with it."

Her eyes watered, "I'd like that."

"I thought you would." He leaned over and kissed her temple.

"Not the team though Micah." She said seriously, "It's yours. Consider it a wedding present. I don't want a man like my father running it again."

"I don't have a clue about owning something like that." He said honestly. "I'm an athlete and know nothing about managing."

"Then give it to your father, it doesn't matter. I just don't want them to be controlled like I was."

"We'll do whatever you want."

Joe watched the exchange with relief. He'd known Hailey all her life and Micah Rush seemed completely genuine about his affection for her. Nothing could have matched his happiness at hearing that she was engaged when they came into the office. Not much was said between Joe and Hailey at the funeral because

she seemed so conflicted, so distraught. Through it all was that tall man comforting her. It was obvious that he loved her and Joe couldn't be happier for the two of them especially because of the stipulations in the will. He was leaving Pierre's fortune in good hands. "I hope I get an invitation to the wedding." Joe finally said causing Hailey to actually smile for the first time.

The wedding took three months to plan and was one of the most elaborate the city had ever experienced. Micah's brothers all stood up for him as did Tyler being his best man. Jill was her maid of honor along with four more of her friends as bridesmaids.

The press was there in droves and Hailey actually felt like it was a royal wedding. The look on Micah's face as she walked down the aisle would stay with her for the rest of her life. He truly loved her. Of course it could have something to do with the designer form fitting dress she wore that accentuated every delicious curve she owned. She may have been pregnant but despite being over three months, it didn't really show unless people knew.

It was Sudas that walked her down the aisle, lifted her veil and kissed her lightly on the forehead while smiling at her full of pride, "I guess I was wrong about that Rush kid." He said with his dark eyes twinkling knowing that Micah could hear him.

It was also Sudas that confessed to stuffing the envelope with the photos in them into Micah's jersey. He was trying to protect them both and didn't realize that it had already gone too far for anyone to try and get between them. He'd thought that Micah would leave her alone after that. He'd heard her father ranting about Hailey not listening to him and was sure that Micah wasn't after anything permanent. He also knew that Hailey and Grant were over which was proven after she kneed him in the groin, but he needed something to discourage Micah. Thankfully they'd both forgiven him because, if anything, those photographs

made Micah realize how much he cared.

"I'm so glad you were wrong." She said flicking her eyes to Micah

"Lucky bastard," Emil said low enough while handing the bride to be over to Micah so the priest wouldn't hear him swear.

"I know." He said with his eyes on Hailey. He mouthed the words 'I love you' before they turned and faced the Priest.

## EPILOGUE

When Micah scored the winning goal for the cup the following year he skated over to the side gate beside the player's bench where his wife was.

He was sucking wind by the time his puck smacked the back of the net like a missile because he, like the rest of the players, were physically exhausted. It was a highly intense game that remained an even one one goal for both sides until it went into overtime. Fifteen minutes into it Micah had a breakaway and only hell could stop him as he rocketed down to the opposing player's goalie. No one could catch him.

Hailey had come down from the owner's box where Dutch, Liz, and their four boys were when the game went into overtime and took her four week old son with her. She was on edge watching the evenly matching teams.

When Micah scored the goal the crowd erupted into a thunderous explosion and she pulled her son's toque over his ears to try and block the noise but he was already squirming. She comforted him while looking on in pride as the players leaped out of the bench and dog-piled onto Micah. Jerseys and memorabilia started to litter the ice as the team managed to get off of Micah. He got up and looked over at Hailey and she felt her heart soar as he glided over to her, kissed her and his son, said something that she barely heard over the crowd before going back out onto the

ice and joining his team. Tyler was already hoisting the cup over his head and screaming. Despite the noise she did hear him.

*This one's for you baby*



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