
THE BODY CHECKER

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A loud thump from one of the many upstairs bedrooms pulls me awake. I shift on the sofa, open one eye, and groan. Partly because my place is a disaster after last night's—all night—party, and partly because I have a killer fucking headache that's blurring my vision.

I turn over, using slow, easy movements, and the beer bottles lined up on the coffee table sway as I try to blink the room into focus. I steal a glance at the massive clock on my wall, each tick of the second hand amplified in my head as I discover it's just past noon. Christ, I've only been asleep for a few hours.

I close my eyes as I think about finding my way to my comfortable king-size bed, but another loud thump sets off a pounding behind my eyes. I'm going to fucking kill whoever is stomping around upstairs. But when the noise continues, I realize the banging isn't coming from one of the bedrooms, it's coming from my front door.

I drag my hands through my mussed hair, smoothing it down, and swallow against a dry throat as I try to pull myself together.

Who the hell would be at my door this early on a Saturday morning? All my buddies are asleep in my house. Most have flown back to Boston, my hometown and the spot where I'll be hanging out after a successful season, to celebrate my massive contract extension with the Seattle Shooters, and anyone who knows me, knows I like to sleep in when I'm not on the road.

The knocking continues. "Okay, I'm coming," I yell, and reluctantly climb from the sofa. I grumble under my breath, trip over a pizza box, and stumble to the door. "What?" I asks as I open it, the noon-hour sun burning the shit out of my eyes. I shade my face with my hand, take in the woman on my stoop.

"Jonah," Shari says, and holds a small pink bundle out to me. A small pink bundle that looks as bad-tempered as I feel.

"What's going on?" I ask, as the baby in Shari's arms lets out a loud shriek. Jesus. I falter backward, my head ready to explode from the godawful noise.

"What's going on is I'm tired, Jonah. I haven't slept in four months, and now it's your turn to take care of her."

I squint and look into the baby's blue eyes, take in her tear-streaked cheeks. "What are you talking about?"

"Meet Daisy," she says and shoves the baby into my arms. She cries louder, and I'm sure my head just cracked at the base of my skull.

"Daisy?" I say.

"Yeah, Daisy. Your daughter."

My head rears back. Oh, fuck no. I must be hearing her wrong. Has to be the hangover messing with my ability to comprehend. I pinch my eyes shut and open them again, hoping I'm hallucinating, but nope—Shari and the baby are still there. "What did you just say?"

"Meet Daisy. She's your daughter." Shari pulls a big bag from her shoulders and drops it in front of my bare feet. "You

have enough formula and diapers for a couple days. I suggest you do some shopping.”

She turns to leave, and I reach out and cup her elbow. “Oh no, no way is this child mine.” I try to hand the squirming bundle back, but Shari folds her arms and steps backward, out of my reach.

“Oh, she’s yours, all right.”

I rack my brain, Think back to the last time Shari was in my bed. “We used protection. I always use protection,” I remind her. “You’re making a mistake. This kid can’t be mine.”

“She can and she is.” She gives me a look that suggests I’m dense. “The condom broke, remember?”

Wait, was that with Shari?

“No, I don’t remember.” Okay, I’ve been with a few girls—or a lot—but I don’t remember a condom breaking when I was with Shari. But it’s possible it could have. Judging from the bundle in my arms, I’d say it’s more than possible. Still, I’m not ready to accept it as truth. I give a hard shake of my head and the room spins around me. “You’ve got to be mistaken.”

“She’s four months old, Jonah. A little over a year ago, I was in your hotel room in Philly, and the condom broke.”

I remember Philly. Shari had flown there, and we had one hell of a wild weekend, but no way am I ready for a baby, to be a father, which is why I always wear protection.

“Wait, didn’t you say you were on the pill?” If I’m remembering correctly, she told me not to bother with the condom, but I used one anyway.

“So you remember that, but you don’t remember the condom breaking?”

I search for clarity. Stupid fucking hangover. “I don’t know what I remember. But what I *do* know is, you can’t

leave her here with me,” I say, and hold the baby out to her. “I don’t know the first things about babies.”

“Then you’d better read a book, or google it.” Before I can stop her, Shari races down the front steps and hops into her car. The doors slams and without so much as a glance our way, she drives off.

I stand there, the baby still in my outstretched arms as I glance up and down the street.

What the fuck just happened?

Mrs. Johnson, my next door neighbor, leisurely strolls down her driveway, and when her head angles my way, I step back and shut the door. Shit. Shit. Shit. Now what the hell am I supposed to do?

The baby’s lower lip trembles as she stares up at me, no doubt as terrified as I am.

“Hey,” I say, because I’m an idiot and have no idea how to talk to a baby. She wails again, and I cradle her in my arms the best I can and pick up the bag. I walk to the sofa, sit down and rifle through it. I find a pacifier, and put it in Daisy’s mouth, and for all of one second she’s satisfied. But before I can pat myself on the back for a job well done, she spits it out and cries some more.

Fuck me!

Panicked, my gaze lands on my cell phone. I pick it up and do a quick search.

What to do when a four-month-old cries.

Okay, shit, she’s hungry, and I have to warm her bottle and test it on my arm to ensure it’s room temperature. I find a bottle in the bag and hurry to the kitchen to warm it. Since I’m smart enough to know rubber can’t go in the microwave, I unscrew the top and place the bottle inside, nuking it for ten seconds. I bounce Daisy gently, trying to console her as I wait for the microwave to beep.

“What the hell, man?” my best friend Zander says from the doorway.

I turn to him, and I must have panic written all over my face, because his eyes go wide and he hurries across the room, coming to my rescue. Zander has a younger sister, took care of her growing up. Surely to God, he’ll know what to do with Daisy.

“Dude, what the fuck?” he asks as he takes the wailing baby from my arms. The microwave beeps and I grab her bottle. I screw the top back on, shake it, and test it on my arm. I have no fucking idea if it’s too hot or not.

Zander holds his arm out, and I squeeze a few drops for him to test.

“It’s fine,” he says, and puts the bottle into Daisy’s mouth. Her tears stop instantly, and she gobbles the milk. “You want to explain what’s going on here?”

I hold my pounding head and gesture toward the living room, needing to sit before I do a face plant. Zander follows me in. He takes the sofa and I take the chair across from him.

“Shari stopped by,” I begin, and Zander nods. He knows who I’m talking about. Shari is a puck bunny, and has slept with almost every guy on our team.

He quirks a brow. “And?”

“And she said the baby is mine.” I shake my head, refusing to believe it, or to entertain the idea for one second longer.

“Oh man,” he whispers under his breath.

“How did this even happen...?”

“Dude, if you don’t know that,” he teases.

“She can’t be mine, Zander. I always use protection.”

“Protection doesn’t always work, and sometimes condoms break.”

“Yeah, she said mine broke, but I don’t remember. Then again, we all got pretty fucked up after kicking Philly’s ass.”

He nods and goes quiet, the way he always does when he’s

puzzling something out. “The condom must have broken, Jonah. I can’t imagine Shari would lie about something like that?”

I plant my elbows on my knees and rest my forehead in my hands as my heart beats triple time against my ribs. “Yeah, I guess.” Little hungry gulping sounds fill the silence, and the pounding in my head subsides slightly. I look at the baby.

Am I really her father?

“I’m not equipped to take care of a child,” I say. Jesus, I was an only child growing up, and pretty much catered to by a doting mom. I’m a little embarrassed to admit that I’ve never had to care about anyone or anything but myself, and I’d call my mother to help right now but she and Dad are away on holiday for the next couple weeks.

“No, but I know who *is* equipped,” Zander says.

I lift my head to find Zander feeding the baby with one hand and digging his phone from his back pocket with the other.

“Who?” I ask.

“Quinn.”

The invisible belt squeezing my chest eases, and I nod. As a daycare teacher, Zander’s younger sister might be equipped to help, but that doesn’t mean she will. She doesn’t even like me. Why would she step up to the plate to help out?

I listen to the one-sided conversation, and when Zander ends the call, I hold my breath, praying the news is good.

“She’s on her way.”

Air rushes from my lungs. “Thank fuck.”

“Hey, watch your language in front of the child.”

“Shit, right.”

Zander glares at me, until footsteps on the stairs catch our attention.

“Zander?” Liz asks hesitantly as her gaze moves around the room, settling on the little pink bundle in his arms.

“She’s not mine,” he says to the only girl he’s ever been serious about. “She’s Jonah’s.”

“You’re kidding me.” She plunks herself down beside Zander. “I had no idea you had a daughter, Jonah.”

“That makes two of us,” I say.

Liz gathers her hair and pulls an elastic from her wrist to tie it up. “Who’s the mother?” she asks.

I open my mouth but Zander answers for me. “Shari,” he says. He takes the bottle from the baby’s mouth and puts her over his shoulder. Jesus, he’s a natural with her. Then again, his mother left when he was young, leaving her two children behind. Quinn was just an infant herself, and at four years old, Zander had to take on a lot of responsibility. I’m sure feeding his baby sister was one of them.

“Watch and learn, Jonah.” He taps the baby’s back, Daisy lets out a loud burb. Christ, she could put a locker room full of hockey players to shame. Zander chuckles.

“Does she have a name?” Liz asks.

“Daisy,” I say, and Liz makes an aww sound.

She touches the baby’s little hand. “That’s so pretty.” She looks at the baby, then at me. “She kind of looks like you, Jonah.”

“She looks like Winston Churchill,” Zander says, and Liz slaps him.

“That’s awful. She’s beautiful.”

Zander cradles her in his arms again, and now that she has a full belly, she falls asleep.

I look at the bundle all wrapped up in a pink blanket. No way. Now way can I do this. I try to breathe through a fresh burst of panic. But now suddenly I can’t seem to fill my lungs.

“She needs a crib,” Zander says.

A crib? Sure, like I have one of those just laying around.

“Can I hold her for a bit?” Liz asks. Zander hands the

baby over, and I root through the bag again, to see what supplies Shari left for me.

“You’re not going to find a crib in there,” Zander ribs, a crooked grin on his face.

“Funny,” I say, in no mood for his humor. I find a few more bottles, a stack of diapers and a couple changes of clothes. What the hell do I do when I run out?

Hopefully Shari will come to her senses by then, and come back and rescue her child. What kind of mother just leaves her baby with a guy who has no clue how to take care of her anyway? Then again do, I even want her to come back after a stunt like that?

Daisy makes a cooing sound as Liz snuggles her, and while I’m terrified of the little bundle, it scares me more to think Shari could have just left her somewhere alone, no one to take care of her. An uneasy shiver moves through me, and as I feel a strange protective tug, Zander points to the bottles.

“You’d better put them in the fridge.”

“Yeah.” I gather up the bottles and the cans of formula. Needing a moment to myself, to wrap my brain around this turn of events, I hurry to the kitchen and open the fridge. I shake my head when I find nothing but beer and wine. A baby can’t live on takeout. Wait, does a four-month-old even eat solid food?

Christ, I am so fucked.

My doorbells rings and I head back to the living room to find Zander opening the door for his sister. Her hair in a frazzled mess, she steps around him, plants her hands on her hips and gives me a scolding glare.

Air leaves my lungs in a rush, like I’d just been body checked. For a tiny might of a girl, her scowl sure packs a punch

She waves her finger at me, her mess of short blonde hair bobbing around her chin. “First things first, if you’re going to

have a baby in here, you need to get this place cleaned up,” she says. I take in the room from her eyes. Empty pizza boxes, Chinese food containers, bags of chips and dozens of bottles are littered throughout the room. Yeah, okay, it’s a pigsty, but we were celebrating.

“I’m not even convinced she’s mine, Quinn.”

The amber flecks in her blue eyes flare bright. Could she hate me any more? “Clean up,” she says, “and put a damn shirt on already.” She starts stacking bottles in her arm, clinking them together, and Zander reaches for the pizza boxes to help.

I stand there, dumfounded. Wait, Quinn is going at this situation like I’m actually going to keep the child here with me, in my house.

Oh, hell no. I’m not fit to be a father.

“I can’t keep Daisy here, Quinn,” I say, pointing to the sleeping baby in Liz’s arms. “I have no idea how to take care of a baby.” I grip my hair. “Jesus, I have a career to think about, and the last thing I want is to be a father or settle down with a family.”

She glares at me, and so help me God, if looks could kill, I’d be riding shotgun on the bus to Hell.

“It’s too late for that now, isn’t it?” she says.

Jesus, does she have to be so mean? Yeah, okay, I know I’m a selfish prick, but at least I know it and don’t pretend otherwise. And yeah, she’s right. It *is* too late for that.

I'm so pissed off, I'm sure there is steam coming out of my ears. I can't stand for a man to shirk his responsibilities, and seeing Jonah standing there, denying the baby is even his, makes me want to throat punch him.

I've never, for one minute, liked the way my brother or his best friend lived, puck bunnies in their beds every night. At least now Zander has seemed to settle down with Liz. Seriously though, did Jonah not think that it would catch up to him? That something like this would eventually happen? Sure, he's the golden boy of the NHL, but this is reality, and he needs to clean up his act and stand up to be the man Daisy needs him to be. She deserves that much from him. Especially after being abandoned by her mother.

My stomach takes that moment to clench, and I stop what I'm doing long enough to swallow down the pain of my own abandonment. How can a mother just up and leave her child? I glance at the sweet bundle being held by Liz and my heart squeezes.

Jonah must know what I'm thinking because he puts his big hand on my back.

“Quinn, I really appreciate you helping me out like this.”

He splays his fingers, and as the heat of his touch goes right through me, goose bumps pebble my skin, despite the warmth inside his mansion.

Honest to God, I hate myself right now. Hate how much I like his touch. He’s a selfish prick who cares about no one but himself. How could I ever like a guy like that...fantasize about being in his bed?

I’m such an idiot.

I shake him off me and stiffen. “Let’s get one thing straight, Jonah. I’m not here for you, I’m here for Daisy. That poor child can’t be left alone with you until you get yourself together and be the father she needs you to be.”

He holds his hands up in surrender and steps back. “Okay, thanks for helping, Daisy,” he says.

My gaze drops to his bare chest, to the hills and valleys my fingers itch to touch. I briefly pinch my eyes shut and before I can stop myself, I blurt out, “Put on a shirt.”

“Okay, okay,” he says and darts up his stair. I watch him go, admire his ass in those nice-fitting jeans.

When I look at Liz, she’s biting back a smile.

“What?” I ask, and narrow my gaze.

She shakes her head hard. “Nothing.”

“That’s what I thought.”

I carry the empty bottles into the kitchen, and my brother is pulling a garbage bag out from under the sink. “Zander,” I say, and he turns to me, a worried look on his face. I drop the bottles into the bag and glance around the kitchen.

“You okay?” he asks

I push crumbs off a chair and drop into it. “Not really.”

He sits next to me and puts his hand on my knee. “Sucks for Daisy, huh?”

“Poor little girl.” I fight back tears, thinking of my own

childhood. At least I had Zander. He was my best friend growing up. It was always us against the world. He took such great care of me, and still tries to. Often, I have to remind him I'm a grown woman now, but I get his sense of duty to me. It couldn't have been easy for him to step into the role of mother at the tender age of four. Dad was never too right in the head after Mom left, working odd jobs to put food on the table. Most times it was just cereal. I guess he did the best he could at the time. Now we're the ones taking care of *him*. Smoking finally caught up to him, and he's battling lung cancer.

"He'll do the right thing, Quinn. He's a good guy. This just caught him off guard. I probably would have reacted the same way."

I blink up at my brother. "Do you think the baby is his?"

"Shari said it was. Why would she lie about something like that?"

"She sleeps around, Zander. It could be anyone's child."

"I know, but she said the condom broke when she was with Jonah, and the timing is right." My brother goes quiet for a second and looks down, like that thought disturbs him. Like he might have had a broken condom a time or two. Is it possible that he has kids out there that he doesn't know about?

"He's going to need a nanny to help out. He can't bring a baby to Seattle when you guys return for training, or take her on the road with him when you travel," I say, understanding hockey is Jonah's life. He might be a selfish prick, but I'd never want to see him kept from playing the game he loves—the only real thing he loves. I personally know how hard both he and my brother worked to get to where they are now. Talent is one thing, but the passion they both have, the drive, the hours they spend training, that's something else altogether, something admirable.

“Yeah. I know,” Zander says. “Do you know any good ones?”

“Unfortunately, no. I can put out some feelers at the daycare and help him interview, though. I want to make sure Daisy gets the best.”

“Interview for what?”

We both look up to see Jonah standing in the doorway.

“A nanny,” I say, and he opens his mouth like he’s going to shoot down the idea. Likely because he still can’t accept that the baby is his. I glare at him, and his lips pinch tight. “It will take time to find the right person. Weeks maybe.”

Jonah rakes his hands through his mussed hair. “Shit.” Dark brown eyes lock on mine, and I brace myself because I know what’s coming next. “Quinn, do you think you can stay the night to help me?”

“Well, I’m certainly not going to leave Daisy alone. Poor little girl has been traumatized enough.”

“Thanks,” he says, and Zander squeezes my knee.

I turn back to him. “Go easy on him, Quinn,” he says, loud enough for Jonah to hear. “He’s terrified.”

I angle my head, let my gaze roam over Jonah’s face, his tense posture.

Jesus, Zander is right.

Since the two guys met on the playground back in elementary school, they’ve pretty much been inseparable. I’ve seen a lot of emotions cross that man’s face, and fear was never one of them. It’s clear he’s desperate for my help.

As a nurturer by nature, something inside me softens.

I stand. “Okay, I’ll stay for as long as you need me to. We’ll start a search for a nanny tomorrow. In the meantime, we need to get a few things for her. I’ll help you, Jonah. I’ll teach you the basics.”

His brown eyes soften as I walk toward him. I’m about to slide pass him in the doorway, but he captures my hands in

his. My gaze flies to his, as his warmth arouses the needy spot between my legs.

“Thank you, Quinn. I promise to make it worth your while.”

He’s not smiling, and gone is his signature ‘Body Checker’ toughness. In its place I see genuine appreciation, and it messes with me a little, makes it hard for me to stay mad at the guy who spent a lifetime overlooking me as a woman and always challenged me to contests, like he would one of the guys

“You don’t have to make it worth my anything,” I say, the fight gone out of me. “You’re Zander’s best friend, and like a brother to me.” Okay, not a brother, not even a cousin. More like my brother’s hot best friend who just happens to make my ovaries stand up and do the Macarena. Shit. “It’s the least I could do,” I say.

“Still, I’ll make it worth your while somehow or another.”

“Okay, fine.” I push my short hair behind my ears and glance around. “Let’s get this place cleaned up, then we’ll run out together and go shopping. I’ll help you pick out everything you’ll need.” I do a mental list. “Wait, did Daisy’s mother at least leave a car seat for her.”

He shakes his head.

“Dammit.”

“How about this,” Zander says. “Write me a list and I’ll go get the stuff, while you clean this place up.”

Isn’t that just like my brother, ready to jump in and help. He’s a good guy, one full of integrity and character.

“No, we’ll go. She’s my responsibility, not yours,” Jonah’s says, and I’m glad to see him step up. He’s no doubt worried about me snipping a few of his beloved body parts. “Maybe if you could just pick up a car seat, then bring it back.”

“You sure? I don’t mind. I mean, I am Daisy’s uncle right? Not by blood, but by brotherhood for sure.”

“I think I should be the one picking out her things, bro. But thanks. And make sure you get her the best car seat. I don’t care what it costs, safety first.”

“Okay, I’ll grab the seat and be back shortly.”

Both Jonah and I nod, agreeing on something, which is a first for us—and a good sign that we’ll get done what we need to get done without too many arguments or challenges.

I head into the living room to find a bunch of Jonah’s teammates, along with their puck bunnies, making their way downstairs. I pause and give Jonah a look that says they need to go. Now. He winces like I’d just slammed him into the boards as I take sweet little Daisy from Liz, thanking her for helping out.

Jonah grips the back of his neck with one hand and rubs like he’s got a massive knot to work out. His T-shirt stretches over tight muscles as he massages, and it takes everything in me not to gawk.

“So, ah, I guess I have some explaining to do,” Jonah begins when everyone stares at the baby, all wide eyed and frightened, no doubt praying she’s not one of theirs. “Apparently, I have a daughter,” he says, and his gaze flashes to mine for a second, like he’s waiting for my reaction. I smile at him for finally accepting the fact that sweet Daisy is his. “Found out this morning.”

“Congratulations, man,” Luke, a teammate known as the Stick Handler says as he steps up to me to take a peek at the sleeping baby. None of the others get too close, probably because they’re worried it will rub off on them or something. I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

“So yeah, no parties for a while.”

I clear my throat to gain his attention. His eyes flash to mine.

“Or...ever again?” he asks, obviously wondering if that’s what the throat clearing meant, which of course, it did.

“Not as long as Daisy is in the house, and she’s your responsibility,” I say.

I mull that over for a second. Will having a child to care for change him, shift his priorities? I’ve seen it happen in guys; not hard-core tough guys who’ve never had to care about anyone but themselves. Well, then again, that’s not entirely true. Jonah cares about his best friend. When my brother was down and out with a concussion, Jonah checked on him every day, and I can’t forget that when he was at the hospital, he’d visit the children’s ward. Giggles would fill the hall...and my heart.

Jonah’s buddies and their girls grumble as they gather up their things and file out the front door. Looking like a kicked puppy—like he’s never going to have fun again—Jonah shuts it tightly behind him.

“Back in a few,” Zander says, rattling his keys, and he and Liz leave through the side door leading to the garage, where he must have parked his car last night.

Jonah turns to me when we’re the only two left in the house. “Do you want me to take her from you?” he asks, his voice as shaky as his outstretched hands.

“I think we should lay her down,” I say quietly. “Let her sleep.”

Jonah scratches his chin. “I don’t have a crib yet.”

“She doesn’t move much at this age. I’d put her in a bed, and secure her with pillows, but I’m guessing all the beds have been slept in.”

He gives me a sheepish look. “Ah, yeah.”

“Then you get the bedding washed and I’ll set her up here on the sofa.” I walk across the room and set her down. As I do, I note the way Jonah is studying the way I handle her. She stretches out and I tuck her in, placing cushions on the outside of her so she can’t roll off. “I’d rather have her close

anyway. At least until we get a baby monitor and can hear her cries.”

“The neighbors can hear her cries, Quinn,” he says, and for some reason that makes me laugh.

“You think that’s funny?” he says, his mood lightening slightly. “I thought my head was going to split in two.” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “How can something so tiny make so much noise.”

“If you’re looking for sympathy, forget it. Your headache was your own fault, and you can’t drink like that as long as you have Daisy.”

“I’m never drinking again,” he says and holds his head.

I roll my eyes. Haven’t we all been there and said that? “Come on, let’s clean. You start upstairs, I’ll start here.”

We both lose ourselves in our duties for the next hour or so, and from upstairs, I can hear the washing machine going. At least we’ll all have clean bedding for tonight. I’ve never slept over at Jonah’s place before. I have my own little condo in the city, close to the daycare where I work. Sometimes, though, when my brother is back home in Massachusetts on hiatus from hockey, I’ll stay with him in his mansion just outside of Cambridge. He has a massive property, and most times it’s empty. He told me I could stay there anytime I want, even open up a daycare in one of the wings. I’ve been dreaming of having my own business for years now, but it’s his place and I don’t want to intrude. Someday he’ll want to raise his own family in that house.

Me, well...I’m not interested in a family. I satisfy my maternal instincts at the center every day. Zander, though, he’s definitely daddy material. Over the years, he’s taken such good care of me, has given me so much, which is why I insist on helping him with Dad’s medical bills. It’s important for me to make my own way in life, and if Zander doesn’t like that, too bad for him. He is, after all the one who made me strong

and independent. Now he has to deal with that woman, whether he likes it or not.

I finish gathering up all the garbage, wash and dry the dishes, and take a look in Jonah's fridge. I guess groceries are also on our to-do list today. If I'm staying here, I'm not going on a liquid diet.

The only thing I have left to do is sweep the kitchen floor, but I can't find a broom anywhere. I make my way upstairs, to ask Jonah where he keeps it, and find him in his bedroom, sitting cross-legged on his bed with his laptop open. All this time I've been cleaning, and he's been surfing the net?

Anger sweeps through me. "What do you think you're doing?"

He closes his laptop, like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Since I'm pretty sure that he was watching porn, or something equally dirty, while I cleaned, I step up to him and open his laptop. My heart jumps into my throat when I see his searches.

Babies. Baby food. Baby clothes. How to take care of a baby.

"Jonah," I say quietly, my heart missing a beat.

He slides his legs from the bed and plants his feet on the floor. "I...just didn't want to look like a total moron, Quinn."

I sit down on the bed next to him. "Look, Jonah. I don't expect you to know anything about babies. You were an only child, and were never around infants."

"I know, but sometimes..." He lets his words fall off.

"Sometimes what?" I push.

"Sometimes, when I do stupid things, you're kind of mean and scary."

I laugh, unable to help myself. "Mean and scary? Are you serious? Jonah, you're known as the Body Checker, one of the toughest guys on and off the ice."

He nods, and I shake my head at him. "You're only five feet tall—"

I stop him. "Five foot two, thank you very much."

"Okay, five foot two, but earlier, you scared the team's two hundred and fifty pound defense man simply by clearing your throat. I mean, I love that you're strong and confident—"

I hold my hand up to stop him. "Wait, you love something about me?" I give a very unladylike snort. "That's a surprise. I thought you *hated* everything about me, especially when I beat you at your own challenges."

"Yeah, well, that's true, but I'm just saying you're a strong woman, with a strong personality."

"Thanks to Zander," I say quietly, not wanting to dwell on the past, or how things could have turned out so differently if it weren't for him.

"When you were younger, I used to think your bark was bigger than your bite," Jonah says, nudging me with his shoulder. I rock against him, and become acutely aware that we're sitting on his bed...his nice, comfy bed.

Don't let your thoughts drift, Quinn.

Suddenly I've visualizing me on the bed, a naked Jonah above me, touching me with those big, calloused hands of his, giving me pleasure unlike anything I've ever felt before.

Shit, I let my thoughts drift.

I clear my throat. "Is that why you called me a Chihuahua?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady, despite the hot thrum rolling through my body.

His deep brown eyes go wide. "Shit. You knew I called you that?"

I fold my arms and glare at him. "Yeah, I heard it a time or two."

"Hey, it was a compliment." He nudges me again, and I swear to God if he keeps making body contact, I'm going to hand over my panties and beg him to take me.

I give a humorless grunt. "No it wasn't."

"I was wrong though," he says thoughtfully. "I think you

can totally handle yourself. You're not a Chihuahua, you're a Ninja Chihuahua."

This time, I burst out laughing. "Seriously, Jonah? Ninja Chihuahua?"

"Hey at least it's better than the names you called *me*. I can't even imagine what you wrote about me in those journals you always had your nose in."

Oh, no, he can't imagine at all.

Thank God.