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# THE RULE BREAKER

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**Published by Cathryn Fox**

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ISBN Print: 978-1-989374-28-3

ISBN ebook: 978-1-989374-29-0

As we head up the stairs to the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America organization, I tilt my head and grin as my gaze rakes over the Seattle Shooter's newest publicist—probably hired just for me. Probably? Oh hell, who am I kidding. He was most definitely hired for me. I am, after all, known as the rule breaker.

“What?” Jeremy asks, like he can feel my eyes on him as we walk. As the late June sun shines down on us, he reaches for the door with barrel arms, and I lift my head to take in his questioning eyes. At six-foot, two hundred pounds, I consider myself a big guy, but Jeremy still towers over me and those muscles don't come from a gym or a rink, like mine. He grew up on a farm and I'm guessing those arms come from picking up tractors or something. He doesn't fit the image I envisioned for a publicist. Maybe that's sexist on my part, or maybe I'm influenced by all the chick flicks I've watched.

I chuckle. “You know, in every makeover movie I've ever watched, the publicist is always a hot woman who ends up falling in love with the guy she's ‘fixing.’” I stop to do air

quotes around the word fixing. Is this trip to the Big Brothers organization about fixing me, changing my image? Damn right it is. That's what too many fights will get you, especially when they're off the ice, videoed by every patron at the bar and splashed all over social media.

"You watch a lot of romantic comedies, do you?" he asks with a smirk.

I shrug. "Three older sisters. I couldn't escape it." I'm not about to tell him I enjoyed those chick flicks just as much, and maybe even more, than my siblings. No, if I admitted that, I'd have to cash in my man card, and that just can't happen. The world can't know I'm quiet and introverted, and my antics on the ice and at the bars are for show only. The world expects rowdy from me, so I give them rowdy. It's all about keeping the fans happy, right?

Although I'm not too sure anyone was happy with that leaked sex tape a puck bunny I slept with sold to Dirt, an online tabloid that breaks the biggest stories in celebrity and entertainment news. I guess she wasn't happy that I didn't want a long-term relationship, and really, she knew that from the start anyway. It's not a secret that I don't do commitment, the secret is *why* I don't.

"Should I be worried about you falling for me?" he asks. I laugh at that and he adds, "Just so you know, I like you, but I don't swing that way."

His heavy hand lands on my shoulder, as I walk through the open door and laugh out loud. "Ditto." Everyone knows I'm a man-whore. It's all part of my image, and another reason I'm staring at a big desk, the beige walls behind the receptionist splattered with posters of smiling kids doing fun activities

with their mentors. Honestly, how anyone thinks I'm capable or qualified to guide a youth is beyond me.

I was the youngest of four, with little responsibility at home. Not only do my fans call me the rule breaker, I live up to it. That's not the kind of guy who toes the line and sets good examples. But if I want to keep my coach happy, and keep my endorsements, mentoring a youth and cleaning up my image is what I must do. But what will the fans think? Are they going to drop me because I'm not who they think I am, not living up to their rough and tough expectations? Talk about a rock and a hard place. Nevertheless, I have a seven-figure endorsement contract that I don't want to lose, and I damn well hope I don't lose my fans once I become the poster boy for good sportsmanship.

The middle-aged lady behind the counter smiles up at me, and I glance at her nametag. "Liam Dalton," she says and stands, her hands going to her round cheeks. "It's so nice to meet you. I'm a huge fan."

"Thanks," I say and tug on my ballcap. "If you'd like, you can grab your phone and we can get a selfie."

Her eyes go wide. "Really? You wouldn't mind?" She glances around. "I mean, we're not supposed to harass our volunteers, especially the famous ones."

"But I asked you, Rita," I tell her with a smile. "And I'd be nothing without fans like you." I wave my hand. "Get on over here."

She snatches up her phone, comes out from around the desk, and holds it out, but can't quite angle it right. I take it from her to get a better reach and put my arm around her shoulder. She's practically vibrating with excitement as I snap the picture. "There you go."

Beside me, Jeremy smiles and gives a nod, approving my behavior. I'm not putting on an act here. I love my fans and take all the time in the world for them. She shuffles back to her chair, and her face is glowing as she hands over a pen and clipboard.

"If you could just fill these out. Mr. Sanders will be with you in a moment. You can have a seat over there."

As I walk toward the small waiting room, toys in one corner, muffled voices reach my ears. I drop down into a plastic chair, and spot a young boy staring at me. He's tugging on his mother's dress with one hand and pointing to me with another.

"That's him, that's Liam Dalton," the boy says repeatedly. I'm not great with ages—heck I can never remember my nieces' and nephews' birthdays—but I'd say he's around four or five.

Looking a little frazzled and rushed, his mother drops to her knees and says something to her son, something quiet and private—something that sounds like she doesn't want to bother me, and that they're in a big hurry—but her little boy is so excited, I don't think he's listening. My gaze drops to take in her perfect, heart-shaped backside as she aims it my way. I should look away. I want to look away. Damned if I can help myself, though. You didn't miss the part where I said I was a man-whore, right?

I quickly pull myself together and cleanse my wayward thoughts. She's here with her son for Christ's sake, not to get ogled by me, and I shouldn't be taking pleasure in the way her dress hugs her curves. I'm about to stand and ask if they'd like a picture, when the mom turns to me, a wobbly, apologetic smile on her face.

"I'm sorry to bother you," she says, and stands, sweeping her hand down a summery blue dress, the fabric splattered with



big, white daisies. My gaze tracks the motion of her hands, going lower and lower until I reach long slender calves. Sexy and adorable. There's a combination I don't see every day. "My son Gavin would like to say hello, if that's okay?"

"Of course, it's okay," I say and jump up, but my fast reaction seems to startle her. She stumbles back a bit, and my stomach clenches at her skittish reaction. Shit, I know I'm a big guy, and can be overbearing, but I didn't mean to scare her. I slow my pace, and when I reach the child, I go down on one knee, facing her son at eye level.

"Do you watch hockey, Gavin?"

He nods emphatically and I smile at him. "I watch it with Holden. Mom doesn't like it."

His mom's face is twisted, apologetic once again when I glance up. "That's okay, not everyone likes hockey." I resist the urge to ask him if Holden is his father. Then again, he would have called him Dad, right, and am I really thinking about hitting on this woman as she stands here with her child? Jesus, fuck, I am. Now that we've all established that I'm a grade-A asshole, I ask, "What's your favorite team?"

"Seattle Shooters," he says and makes a motion like he's taking a shot.

I laugh at that. "Atta boy," I say and ruffle his hair. "Who's your favorite player?"

"Cole Cannon," he answers without missing a beat.

His mother sucks in a tight breath. "Sorry," she says, but I laugh it off.

"Don't be sorry." I glance up at her, take in her big blue eyes and the way she's wrestling her hair back into a big clip. Dog

hair clings to her dress, at least I think it's dog hair, and with a face free of makeup, her blonde hair all over the place, nothing about the woman screams composed or poised, which somehow intrigues me all the more. Strange, I know. But Jesus, she's absolutely gorgeous. I tear my gaze away, despite the fact that I'd like to take all the time in the world to admire her, figure out why she's so agitated, and focus in on her son. "I wouldn't want anything but honesty from you, Gavin." I take my hat off and put it on his head. "A little big, but it's yours if you'd like it."

He takes it off, looks at the Shooters emblem, and turns to his mother. "Mommy, can I have it, please?"

"I don't think we should take it," she says, and I'm not sure what it is, but my stomach tightens again, that strange protective feeling I had earlier once again careening through my blood as I note the uncertainty in her eyes. "He's not supposed to take things from strangers," she clarifies.

"Oh, sorry. I never thought of that." I smile at Gavin. "How about this." I hold my hand out for a shake and he puts his small palm in mine. "I'm Liam Dalton, and you are..."

"Gavin Peterson."

"Well, Gavin, now that we're friends, would you like my hat?"

He nods and his mother lets loose a small laugh that curls around me. I lift my head to find her smiling. "Thanks," she says. "I'm sure he'll never take it off."

Gavin puts his hat back on. "Are you here to get a big brother too?" he asks, and my heart squeezes a bit.

"No, but I'm here to be a big brother."

Blue eyes go wide as he stares up at me. "Can you be my big brother?"

"Gavin," his mom says quickly. "We can't ask things like that, and I'm sure Liam's already been matched."

Gavin's shoulders sag a little, and I cast a quick glance toward the receptionist. "Have I been matched?" I ask.

"Not yet. We haven't even received your paperwork yet." The phone rings, and Rita answers it with a happy chirp in her voice.

"I guess there's still a chance." I stand and hold my hand out to Gavin's mom. "I'm Liam Dalton."

She puts her hand in mine, and I catch her sweet scent that reminds me of the citrusy jellybeans I used to eat as a kid. Damned if that's not another thing that attracts me to her.

"I know who you are," she says.

I angle my head. "Oh really, and here I thought you didn't watch hockey?"

"No, but I do read the papers."

I inwardly cringe. "You know you can't believe everything you read, right?"

She hikes her big purse up higher. It looks like it weighs a ton. "You didn't punch that guy out at Nelly's bar last week?"

I shrug my shoulders, and kick at an imaginary rock on the floor. "Well yeah, but he was messing with a girl who didn't want to be messed with, so what was I supposed to do?"

"Oh, so you were defending some girl's honor, were you?" she says, her lips twitching as she holds back a smile.

“Darn right, I was,” I say, watching my language in front of Gavin.

Gavin grabs his mom’s dress again. “Mommy, can Liam be my big brother?”

She opens her purse—which could double as a suitcase—checks the time on her phone, and says, “Gavin, why don’t you go play for a quick second?”

Gavin scrunches up his nose, and skips away to the play area. “I didn’t get your name,” I say.

“It’s Harper,” she says in a low voice, and then adds, “Liam, I don’t know how to say this. I don’t really know you and I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but I don’t think you’d be a good match for my son.”

I shove my hands into my jeans. “Yeah, it’s okay. No worries.” I’m not sure why, but my stomach is tight, like I’d just taken a stick to the gut. With my reputation, did I really expect this woman to trust that I’d be a good role model for her son? But there’s something else. Something I can’t quite put my finger on, something that makes me want to tuck her under my arm and protect her from a world that might have been cruel to her and her son.

She checks the time again. “I do have to go.”

I back up a bit. “Okay.”

“Gavin, come on. We need to get home.”

Gavin’s eyes are hopeful as he comes racing over. “Is Liam going to be my big brother?” he asks. Harper opens her mouth, and then closes it again. She doesn’t want to disappoint Gavin, that much is certain.

“No, I don’t think...I just...chances of you guys matching...”

Gavin's smile falls, and my heart sits heavy for the kid. "Gavin," I begin, coming to her rescue. "I think they might have already matched you, and you know what, I bet your big brother is going to be the best big brother in the world." I glance at Harper. "Can I have your phone?" She eyes me with uncertainty, and I laugh. "Don't worry, I'm not putting my digits in your contacts. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not a creep. I just want to get a picture with Gavin."

"Right." She hands me the phone, and I drop down next to Gavin. He puts his arm around my shoulder as I take a bunch of pictures. "Now you can show Holden."

"Mommy, Holden won't believe this!"

"Pics or it didn't happen," I say, and when he stands there staring at me, I laugh. Of course, he doesn't know what I mean. He's a kid with no social media presence. "Am I Holden's favorite?" I ask.

"No, he likes Alec. He wants to be a goalie like him."

"Am I anyone's favorite?" I ask with a laugh as I stand back up. Gavin looks through the pictures as I nod to his mom. "Nice meeting you, Harper."

She stands there staring at me, and I can almost hear the wheels spinning. What is going through that pretty head of hers?

A big strand of blonde hair falls from the clip, and I resist the urge to brush it from her face. She blows it away and says, "You're really good with him. Do you...have kids?"

"No, but I like kids," I say quietly, thinking of my nieces and nephews. "That's why I'm here." It's not a lie, I do like kids, and when I was told to clean up my image and do volunteer work, I was the one who chose this organization.

"I've seen pictures of you and other teammates at the children's hospital. That's a really nice thing that you guys do."

"Mommy, look at this one," Gavin says, and holds the phone up. She smiles as she takes a look.

"That's a great picture," she says, and puts her hand on his hat. Her gaze lifts, focuses back on me. "I mean, I'm sorry...I just..."

I hold my hands up, palms out. "It's okay," I say. "I'm sure he'll be matched with someone great." The front door opens, and in walks a woman and a little girl. The girl heads straight for the play area, and I glance at Jeremy as he scrolls through his phone. "I'd better get those forms filled out."

"Okay," she says, and takes Gavin's hand. "It was nice meeting you, Liam." I go back to my chair, disappointment sitting heavy and I'm not sure I really understand it. Then again, maybe it's because I always get what I want, and this woman shut me down at hello. I smile, liking her all the more.

Harper steps up to the reception desk and speaks quietly. A moment later, she disappears through the door, and something in my gut tells me to get my ass in gear and go after her. Not just because she's the sweet kind of girl that I should be photographed with, or that she doesn't like hockey and clearly doesn't like me—something I'd like to change—but because, like her son, she needs someone rock-solid in her life. But thanks to my reputation, that guy will never be me.

“Okay, that’s it, you’re certifiable.”

**O**Sitting at my kitchen table, I stare at my best friend as she flips through the photos on my phone. Her jaw is practically sitting on the table, as she shakes her head at me, unable to wrap her brain around me turning down Liam’s offer. Then again, did he really offer to be Gavin’s big brother? He only said there was a chance. “Harper, what the hell is wrong with you?”

“How much time do you have?” I tease, even though Emma knows everything about me, everything from how Gavin’s father took off after he was born, never to be heard from again, to the next guy in my life who slowly drained the inheritance Mom and Dad left to me in their will four years ago, when Gavin was only one. Simply put, I’m a bad judge of character.

Emma continues to stare at the pictures, and I’m about to offer her a napkin to wipe the drool from the corners of her mouth when she drops my phone and shakes her head. “You

said no to Liam. Girl, he could have been Gavin's big brother, and your big daddy."

I pick up my mug and cover my smile with it. Maybe I shouldn't have told her every single word we exchanged, and maybe I shouldn't like talking or thinking about him so much. "That's not funny."

"Then why are you laughing?"

So much for hiding my reaction. I can't get anything by her. She glares at me, waiting for an answer. But I'm not about to tell her I'm smiling to hide what I'm really feeling deep inside me—right around the juncture of my legs. I took one look at Liam when he dropped to his knees in front of my son, and nearly sank down with him. I mean, I've seen the pictures, know he's smoking hot. But the photos of him splashed in the tabloids pale in comparison to the real thing. Liam Dalton is seriously the hottest guy on the face of the earth, and when he smiled at me, I swore I could hear the clench of my ovaries.

Emma snickers. "He was that hot, huh?"

"What?" I ask. "Wait, why are you staring at me like that?" Once I realize my coffee cup has been hovering over my mouth as my mind drifted, I take a big sip.

"Because you totally zoned out, and I'm guessing that's because you were thinking about big daddy and all the spankings he could give you. I mean, you did see the leaked sex tape, didn't you?"

I laugh, and coffee comes out my nose, which stings horribly. "Ohmigod." I jump up and run to the small bathroom just off the kitchen. Emma's laughter fills my small house, rising over



the sounds of Gavin and Holden playing video games in the living room as I grab a cloth and wipe my face.

"No, I did not see the tape, nor do I want to see the tape," I call out. "And that hurt."

"I bet he'd make it hurt so good."

"Are you still at it?" I step back into the kitchen, and find her on my phone again.

"Man, I need to have a kid." She glances up at me, the hope in her eyes reminding me of the look Gavin gave me before I sort of shot down his dream of having Liam as a big brother. Did I make the right decision? "Do you think he'll still be offering his big daddy services in nine months, 'cause girlfriend, I'd like to match my face right to his—"

"Stop." I grab the phone from her and set it aside. "I'm sure we're not going to be matched, and I don't want Gavin with a guy like Liam, anyway."

"You mean a guy who fights to defend a woman's honor. A guy who was nice to Gavin, gave him a hat and took pictures with him." She puckers her lips. "Yeah, I see what you mean."

"I just...have to be careful who I bring into Gavin's life, Emma."

She touches my hand. "Is this really about Gavin?" she asks.

I stiffen. "What's that supposed to mean?" I ask, even though I already know the answer and she knows I know it.

"It took me forever to convince you to get Gavin a big brother in the first place."

"He needs the male influence, you were right."

"But what do you need, Harper?"

“I don’t need—”

“That’s where you’re wrong. You’re twenty-eight years old with lots of needs that are going neglected as you let life pass before your eyes.” I’m about to tell her I’m a busy single parent, working full time and trying to save for my own pet store and doggy daycare business, when she holds her hand up to stop me, the look on her face suggesting she’s heard it all before. “Look, all I’m saying is you shut down.” She puts her hand over her heart. “In here. You don’t go out, don’t date, don’t do anything just for you.”

“What does any of this have to do with Liam being Gavin’s big brother?”

“Because you were attracted to him, and that frightens you. I think he’d be good for Gavin.” She wags her brow. “And for you.”

“Are you suggesting—”

“I’m suggesting you have some fun. He has a reputation, I know, so you know he’s not looking to put a ring on it. Why not have some fun with him, and Gavin gets a superstar, professional hockey player for a big brother?”

I shrug. “I doubt they’ll be matched, and it could take months. That’s what we were told anyway.” My cell phone rings, and I practically jump out of my chair. I reach for it and see that it’s from the Big Brothers Big Sisters organization. I slide my finger across the screen.

“Hello.”

“Harper, we have good news.” I instantly recognize the receptionist’s voice. I cover the phone and tell Emma it’s Rita.

“You have a match?”

“We do. How would you like to bring Gavin in tomorrow to meet with him?” Her voice is full of sing-song excitement.

I consider my schedule for tomorrow. I work at the pet store in the morning, and then have to walk a few dogs in the afternoon. “Would three o’clock be okay?”

“Perfect, see you then.”

I end the call and glance at Emma. “They found him a match. That was crazy fast.”

She puts her hands on the table and stands. “I’ll keep my fingers crossed that it’s Liam. But not my legs. Jared is coming over later, and I believe I’ll be thinking about hot daddy when I take him to my bed.”

“How are we even friends?” I ask with a laugh. Honestly though, Emma is the best friend a girl could have, and she gives good advice. Should I take it where Liam is concerned? Should I see about matching him with my child?

See about matching him with me?

Wait, what! I am not going to get emotionally tangled with the guy who’s going to mentor my son. That would be wrong on so many levels. But what about a quick hook-up? Sex only, no emotions. Would that be wrong?

Yes, it would!

Then again, all this is moot. They just called to say they had a match, and Liam is just getting processed in the system. It could never happen that fast. Right? Unless, he’s already been cleared. He does, after all, spend time with kids in the children’s hospital. I’m sure he’s already had every criminal background check they needed.

“You just keep thinking about what I said, Harper.”

I blink my mind back into focus and find Emma staring at me with a knowing look on her pretty face. “Goodbye, Emma,” I say and point to the door as she laughs.

“Later, babe,” she says.

Once she’s gone, I head in to check on the boys. “Mommy, can Holden stay for dinner?” Gavin asks.

My heart pounds harder in my chest as I look at my sweet boy and his best friend. “If it’s okay with his mom?”

“It is,” Holden says barely sparing me a glance as he maneuvers the game controller and I just laugh.

“I’ll check in with her.” I step back into the kitchen, and call Violet. Emma, Violet and I go way back to junior high, and while we’re all so different—Violet is married and has Holden, Emma has no desire to settle down, and I’m a single mom—we’ve all remained friends. After Gavin and I left the Big Brothers organization, we stopped to pick Holden up. I honestly don’t know what I’d do without Holden and his family in my life. With the amount of babysitting they do for me, it’s the least I can do to have Holden for dinner.

Violet answers the phone with, “Is my tater tot giving you trouble?”

I laugh. “No trouble at all. Apparently, he has your permission to stay for dinner.”

“That kid,” she says with a laugh. “He’s going to be the death of me when he becomes a teen.”

“We both have eight more years before we have to worry about that.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, my throat tightens. Honestly, all I ever do is worry about Gavin. By the time he reaches thirteen, I want him to be a respectful young

man. I've been doing my best to be both Mom and Dad, but sometimes it's not easy. Sometimes? Okay, pretty much all the time. Emma was right about getting him a big brother. Was she right about me getting back out there, getting myself a big daddy?

Am I really considering this?

Oh God, I am.

"Sure, he can stay," Violet says, her voice pulling me back. "I'll come pick him up later."

"Sounds great." I'm about to end the call when she clears her throat, the way she always does when she's about to take center stage and climb on her soap box. "What's up?" I ask.

"Don't you have something to tell me?"

"Ah, nope." I can just visualize her standing there, tapping her manicured nails on the countertop. Her name might be Violet, and she's well kept, but she's no delicate flower. None of us are. I glance at my nails, chipped with half the paint peeled off. I am so not put together like my friends. But I'm a pet groomer, and walk dogs for a living. Someday though, I'll have my own pet store and grooming business. "Not that I can think of."

"Okay, that's it, *former* best friend," she says, and I'd be worried, but I hear the lightness in her tone. That's when I realize where she's going with this, and I groan. "Oh, yeah, I hear that groan, and if you knew what was good for you, you'd be making those same noises with Liam Dalton on top of you."

"I'm going to kill Emma."

“Did you really think she wouldn’t tell me? And I’m mad that you didn’t.”

“It’s nothing. It’s no big deal. We ran into him. That’s all that happened.” Maybe that’s not all that happened. I can’t deny that I caught him checking me out. His gaze going from daisy to daisy on my dress, lingering over my breasts and legs. A warm shiver moves through me, and my traitorous nipples tighten, just like they did when he flashed me that panty-melting grin. God, no wonder women are all over him. He’s the hottest guy I’ve ever set eyes on and I really hope he didn’t notice my reaction to him.

“You should have said yes. He’d be an awesome big brother, and anything else you might need him for, and yes, I’m talking about your beaver canoe.”

The fact that she’s always called a woman’s private parts their beaver canoe never fails to make me laugh.

“Are you sure you’re not saying that because you and Jason want to meet him.” Her husband Jason is a huge Seattle Shooters fan, and no doubt is going to lose his mind over this.

“You should have said yes,” Jason screams out in the background.

Violet laughs. “That’s three against one, girlfriend, and no, this isn’t about us, it’s about you and Gavin. You know we always have your best interests at heart, and well, if you’re going to dust off the ‘beaver-can’t do’ and turn it into a ‘beaver-can do’ why not do it with God’s gift to women himself.”

“Hey, I thought I was God’s gift to women,” Jason yells.

“You’re God’s gift to me, baby.” My heart squeezes as I listen to them. That’s what I want. Right there. Couples who tease,

laugh and have fun together. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't envious. I'm just too damn afraid of getting hurt, of watching another man walk out of Gavin's life—out of mine. Although Devon didn't walk out. I kicked him out. Too bad I hadn't done it before he drank and gambled my inheritance away, getting physically abusive when I told him it was over. He walked out the door, taking my dreams of running my own business within the next couple of years right along with him. At least he didn't leave with my head.

“You know his reputation, right? Would he really be a good influence on Gavin?”

I want Gavin to grow up respecting women, not sleeping his way through the alphabet. As Violet tries to convince me that he's a player on and off the ice, but that doesn't mean he's not good with kids, and I could use a no-commitment 'beaver can-do' banging, my mind drifts. Liam might have been checking me out, and hell, I was checking him out too, but he seemed so different than he's portrayed in the papers. Then again, I'm not a good judge of character, right?

Violet sighs into the phone. “Just tell me you'll think about it.”

“I'll think about it.”

“Okay, I'll stop by after dinner to pick up my tater tot.”

I end the call, and get to work on cooking, all the while trying to keep my mind off a guy who is suddenly living rent free in my head. I feed the boys, and after Violet picks Holden up, I give Gavin a bath and tuck him into his bed.

“Night, kiddo.”

I'm about to turn the light off and shut his door when his soft, tired little voice stops me.

“Mommy.”

“Yeah?”

“How come I don’t have a daddy like Holden does?”

My heart squeezes in my too tight chest, and I take a gulping breath. Sooner or later, I knew he was going to ask the question. Perhaps being at the Big Brothers organization really brought it home for him. I hover at the door and look at Gavin’s innocent face. After losing his grandparents at the young age of one, and having two men leave his life, he deserves stability, someone who’s going to put him first. But I’m so goddamn scared to get back out there. Honestly, I’m not even sure there are any good guys left.

Redirecting the conversation, I say, “Well, you’re going to get a big brother soon. That’s pretty exciting, isn’t it?”

He holds his hands up and crosses his fingers. “I really hope it’s Liam.”

“I know you do, kiddo.”

“Maybe someday he could be my daddy.”

I groan inwardly, and really wish I wasn’t thinking about him being my ‘big’ daddy, too.