



The Puckin'
BAD BOY

A J SUMMERS

THE PUCKING BAD BOY
AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS
SECRET BABY HOCKEY
ROMANCE



A J SUMMERS

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PROLOGUE



HARPER

Parties have never been my thing. Especially not on Halloween.

The ones I have been to since I started at NYU are almost interchangeable: outrageous costumes, a mass of screaming, drunken bodies, lots of booze and cheap candy that sticks to your teeth.

I have avoided them since my freshman year.

Until now.

I frown at my roommate as she drags me up the stairs. “I don’t know what I’m doing here,” I complain for probably the twentieth time tonight.

Carol rolls her eyes at me. “I need you to keep watch,” she says as we step into the hall of a musty, dark building, and she proceeds to drag me toward the elevator. “Remember? It’s Mark’s party, and I’m scared I’m going to embarrass myself by drinking too much. You’re my sober sponsor.”

I let out an aggrieved sigh. The last year of rooming with her has been the best of my college experience. And so, for the sake of our friendship, I must endure whatever this night brings for the next couple of hours.

“Fine,” I hiss as she pushes the elevator button. “We’re going to be in and out of here in three hours, though. Deal?”

Carol flashes me a sloppy smile. “Don’t get all serious with me. This party is probably the most exclusive in all of NYU. You might even end up meeting someone.”

“I doubt that. Chicks before dicks. Remember my motto?” Unlike Carol, my romantic life in college was less of a messy Halloween party and more like a graveyard. I had not had a boyfriend since sophomore year, when my ex, Patrick, had called it off in the middle of screwing me. I still feel some embarrassment whenever I remember that particularly humiliating moment of my life.

“I don’t think I can do this anymore,” he had sighed in my ear, his penis growing limp. “You are exhausting. I’m tired of your weird kinks and having to tell you what to do all the time. It’s too much. You’re too much.”

Ew. Couldn’t he at least have waited to tell me that after he made me come?

“Here,” Carol says, slipping her hand into her jacket and passing me something as we walk into the elevator. I brace myself for a mini bottle of vodka or some other alcohol—sobriety for Carol is anything before four drinks. But when I look down, I see it’s an elaborate feather mask will cover my whole face.

“What’s this for?” I want to chuck it back at her.

“It’s a masked party. It’s Halloween, girl.” She has the gall to sound exasperated. “A lot of cool students are here. Rich ones, future national athletes, a few guys visiting from Cornell. Go and play.”

I let out another sigh. This party was sounding lamer by the minute, but maybe it was a good thing no one will be able to recognize me.

I slip the mask on just as the elevator doors open, spilling us into a musty corridor. Carol leads me to the second door on the right. Loud music is blasting through the speakers even before we approach the room. She slips on her black cat mask, and we walk through the half-open door.

It’s a regular party, with a lot of screaming and dancing in the vast apartment. No one gives us a second glance.

“I’ll go find Mark,” Carol screams in my ear. “If I’m not back in half an hour, come look for me—maybe in the

bathroom.”

I start to protest, but she lets go of my hand and disappears into the crowd.

Great, I think, pushing past the teeming mass of sweating bodies and heading toward the kitchen counter, the least crowded place in the room. I dump myself on one of the sticky bar stools, wishing I was back in my dorm.

“What are you supposed to be?”

I jump at the sound of the voice.

Male. Hard. Dominant.

I turn around to look at him. He towers over me. His face is hidden behind a Bauta, a Venetian mask covering the whole face with a prominent nose and no mouth. He’s dressed in a Henley that hugs his frame, revealing a bulging chest and muscles. And while he does look good, I’m mostly intrigued by one thing.

There is something primal about the barely contained power of his body. Men never make me nervous. But I feel tiny beads of sweat on my brow. “What are you supposed to be?” I ask instead, making sure to display the very image of calmness.

He takes a step closer, the dark eyes underneath the mask boring into me. “Someone who expects answers when they ask questions.”

I swallow. Hard. Heat pools between my thighs.

This guy is arrogant, bordering on rude.

But I don’t feel put off by it at all. Quite the contrary.

Mystery man is the complete opposite of my ex. He would surely not complain about me being *too much*.

That awareness sends desire leaping into my core.

“So...” he murmurs, taking a step closer. “Who are you?”

My skin tingles. It doesn’t occur to me to not answer him.

“A pissed-off roommate,” I mutter, staring down at my jeans. Not exactly appropriate wear for a Halloween party.

Hidden behind the mask, I can't tell if he cracked a smile at my joke, but I imagine it anyway. He leans over, hooks two fingers underneath my chin, and raises my head to his.

I inhale sharply. His scent fills my nostrils. He does nothing, merely stares at me through the eye slits of his mask.

He doesn't need to do much.

Because I feel my arousal. I had no idea how needy I was until he touched me.

“I bet you're pretty,” he murmurs, setting a spark off in my chest. “Follow me.”

He takes one of my hands, pulling me to my feet. Dazed, I obey him. I have never been in a situation like this, but once more, I'm unable to stop myself from doing what he ordered me to.

Maybe I subconsciously wanted to be a part of something like this for a long time. And I had absolutely no idea.

He leads me through the mass of people lounging around the corridor, toward the back of the apartment. Finally, he opens a door to what seems like a walk-in closet.

“After you, milady.” He bows.

Entering a closet with a complete stranger must be one of the most reckless things you could do at a masked party, where few social norms apply.

But the glimmer of excitement in the pit of my belly makes it easy to ignore common sense.

My body is in flames.

We walk into the confined space, and he bangs the door shut behind us. The moment the door clicks, without a warning, he flips me to face the wall, while his hands, hard and warm, grab my breasts, stroking them and pulling my shirt aside.

Without wanting to, I moan, backing up against him. A strange boldness wraps itself around me, and I'm suddenly pushing myself up against him. He reaches down and grabs a fistful of my ass. Another rasping breath escapes my throat.

“Good girl,” he mutters, his fingers wrapping around my neck, squeezing gently. His voice is a rumble, sending sparks along my nerve endings and heating the blood in my veins. “Here are the rules. If at any point you decide you don't like our game anymore, you say ‘stop,’ and I'll let you go. Understood?”

I nod my head, my heart banging in my chest. Somehow, this stranger is revealing and fulfilling my wildest fantasy all at once.

His fingers work at my jeans, tugging and shoving. Suddenly, he is yanking them all the way down, and the lower half of my body is bare.

“Nice ass,” he grunts as I step out of them. His palm spans one of my cheeks, making it jiggle. His words are blunt and unfeeling, revealing no emotion at all. And somehow, that makes me pine for him harder. Has he done something like this before?

I close my eyes and push my ass into him, desperate to feel him.

“Easy,” he says, yanking me away from him. “I want to enjoy you. Every single second I get to fuck you.”

His words make my nipples stand at attention.

I don't just want him anymore. I need him.

And then, without the slightest warning, he tugs away the crotch area of my panties and digs his fingers into my pulsating center.

A scream rips out of me without warning.

He pulls me closer, and for the first time, I feel the full strength of his erection, hard and throbbing, pressing against my ass.

“You’re wet for me,” he says, pulling out his fingers. The next thing I know, he is sliding them under my mask and parting my lips, forcing me to suck my own fluid off them. “I like you wet.”

Everything about *this* is a wet fever dream.

I hear him tug at his pants and briefs, the ripping of a condom. When I turn around, I catch a quick glimpse of him sliding it on. He is... perfect. Huge, thick, hard and throbbing. An unusual, large birthmark the shape of a vase graces his inner thigh.

I hold my lips tightly, aware that I’m trembling with anticipation.

And then, he is up against me, lining his cock against my entrance, teasing my opening with his tip. His hands find my breasts, squeezing hard.

“I want to hear how much you want me,” he mutters in my ear. “Right now.”

Another lick of pleasure rises up in my belly.

“Please,” I gasp. “Fuck me.”

He pushes into me in a single, slow thrust, leaving me breathless. Then he pulls out slowly before slamming into me again, this time with no gentleness.

Exactly the way I had hoped Patrick would.

I keep my eyes shut against the throes of pleasure, letting myself enjoy every second of him filling me. Tonight is all I have with him. Tomorrow, this will be a fever dream, and years from now, I will remember it as the best hookup I had in my entire life.

Or so I thought.

Two months later, I’m sitting on the toilet seat, staring down at a pee-stained stick with a cross sign on top.

The sign that changed my life for good.

CHAPTER 1



HARPER

*S*even years later

“So, they sent in the sexy one.”

As a news reporter who routinely interviews NHL and NFL players, I have heard and seen it all. Men who burst out crying in the middle of an interview because they had no one else to talk to. Men who confessed to having a secret addiction or a shameful past. Men who would drunkenly beg me to jerk them off.

But this one tops them all.

I look up at the unsmiling, hardened face of Reggie Turner, three-time champion of the NHL and soon-to-be retiree. He looks exactly like the pictures and videos I have seen of him. Tall, hugely muscular, sleeve tattoos on his arms. He is huge enough to crush me with one hand. His face is chiseled to perfection, his short brown hair framing it in the most appealing of ways.

“What did you just say?” I ask, though I heard him clearly. Many of my colleagues like to let stars have it their way while interviewing them, even entertaining a creepy joke or some flirting if it meant getting their report finished on time. I prefer the opposite approach: take charge of the conversation, let the star know quite early that you don’t find them as fascinating as everyone else, and set the rules of the interview.

It always works.

Reggie should be backtracking and apologizing for his inappropriate comment by now. The last thing I need is Reggie Turner assuming he can ride and control me for the next few months.

He steps off the treadmill, his eyes growing colder. His muscles are sleek with sweat, and he dries them off with a towel as he strides up to me.

“You’re sexy,” he repeats, completely unrepentant. “Seems like you’re trying to hide it. Dowdy dress, boring glasses. Don’t know why.”

I stare at him, lost for words, barely believing he dared to say something like this.

Is he a Neanderthal? Hasn’t he heard of ‘Me too’?

“Now,” he continues, unfazed, swiping a bottle of water from the nearest table, “I know you’ve been sent to do a profile on me or whatever, but let me tell you how this is going to work. You will not follow me around like a lost puppy. Instead, I’ll tell you what you’re going to write. Then you’ll put out a few interviews about me and convince people I’ve got a heart of gold or whatever the hell people care about these days. Then we part. Is that clear?”

I blink. Twice.

This might be coming as a surprise to this oaf, but I’m the one setting the rules here.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, reminding myself to stay cool. I cannot afford to get upset. Completing a profile on this man is the only thing standing between me and the promotion I desperately need to send my son to the private school of our dreams.

Okay.

The private school of *my* dreams.

An all-boys school on the Upper East Side that produces Harvard alumni and Washington politicians.

The private school my child deserves.

If I had to take shit—and give it back—from the biggest asshole player in the NHL, then that’s what I’d do.

I square my shoulders and lock my gaze with his. “We’re just meeting for the first time.” My voice is dripping with honeyed annoyance. “So, I feel obligated to tell you that I’m not the kind of journalist who’ll let you boss her around. And yes, I’m going to follow you until the profile is done. I’m going to watch all your games and record your actions on and off the ice. And we’re going to have several sit-down interviews where you talk about your life in excruciating detail. This is what you signed up for when you requested a national profile from us.”

I expect him to register amusement or offense at my refusal to back down.

But Reggie Turner gives absolutely nothing away.

He takes another swig from his water bottle, the sweat on his tattooed arms glistening in the light as he moves, shadows playing on the indents of his powerful chest. “I signed up for the national profile for one reason only,” he says, matter-of-factly. “My agent made it quite clear that I have an abysmal record of brand deals for a hockey player who’s planning to retire this season. Said I needed to put more of a palatable image out there.”

“Yeah, and this is what you have to do to change your image.” I raise my brows, completely unsympathetic. “Sit for a few interviews with me. Talk about yourself. Show everyone a different side of Reggie Turner.”

“You sound just like my agent.” His eyes flash with something close to anger. “This *is* every side of me.”

My brows rise even higher. “What you have on isn’t even a personality. It’s a cliché. Broody inked guy who sleeps with women for sport and prefers to spend most of his time alone. I’ve got to believe there’s more to you than that.”

He stays silent for a moment, his gray eyes piercing me. “Kind of hypocritical of you to say that.”

“What do you mean?” I’m not quite sure if I should be offended or not, but I’m certainly intrigued.

“Because your whole life is pretense.”

Fury shoots from the pit of my stomach to the back of my head. “What did you just say?”

He is supremely unconcerned by my anger. “I mean, look at you. You’re wearing a fake pair of glasses, a boxy, dowdy shirt, and the most irritatingly boring skirt in the universe. If I met you randomly somewhere, I’d assume you’re one of those women who dress poorly because they either don’t have time to do better or they’re trying to prove some asinine point. But judging from the highlights in your hair and your brash red lipstick, you do know better. You are fashionable. So, I’m forced to guess that this is all a facade. For whatever reason, you want to hide your real self.”

My jaw drops to the floor.

“Are you talking about my ‘happy to not impress you’ outfit?” I snark back. “And maybe I’m not in any of the three categories you put out there. Maybe I’m just a single mom who doesn’t care what clothes will capture the male gaze.”

There. The trump card. I hate talking about Carl to people I only know on a professional basis, and I detest the fact that I’ve got to use him to prove a point, but I would do anything to wipe the arrogant expression off Reggie’s face right now.

But my big reveal doesn’t evoke the reaction I was hoping for. Not even a damn eyebrow twitch.

“You’re a mom.” He smirks. “Figures. So, you avoid the ‘male gaze’ because you’re sure your child—son, I guess—won’t be too cool with the idea of a stepdad? And you think this kind of attire will keep men from noticing you’re sexy? How’s that going for you?”

I swallow, my fury backing up for a second dose.

How did this meeting turn into this jerk analyzing my life?

And worse still, why am I more eager to argue against his points than return to what we should be talking about?

“Again,” I say, folding my trembling fingers into a fist, “you’re wrong. And I really think we should be focusing on —”

“Yeah,” he says suddenly. “I might be wrong.”

I widen my eyes, barely believing he just caved.

But then, he takes a step closer to me, the tiniest glint in his eyes. “Maybe your reason is kinkier than anything I just said.”

My cheeks grow hot. I exhale sharply, hating myself for my own reaction.

“Mr. Turner, this meeting is not about me,” I say.

“Sure,” he retorts, folding his massive arms across his chest, ink winding around the veins and the dents of his muscles, shifting with every movement. “But I should get to know the woman who’s going to be following me around for the next couple of months. So, I’m going to lay out exactly what I think about you, and you tell me if I’m close to the mark or not.”

“I’m not going to—”

“Say this is not about you being a single mom,” he says. “Say it’s about something more, like you’re scared.”

“Scared of what?” I ask, my voice sounding shrill even to my own ears.

“Of being seen,” he says blankly. “You’re a woman, and you’ve got needs. Hell, every woman has needs, single mom or not. But then, you’re going the opposite way and dressing down because you don’t want to be noticed, especially while working in an industry known to have lots of attractive single men. That only means one thing: that you’re already certain that they cannot satisfy your needs.”

My cheeks are growing hotter by the second. I want to open my mouth, to tell him to stop talking, but I can’t bring myself to put a coherent verb and a noun together.

He takes another step closer, so he is right in front of me. Then, he bends slowly, so his towering bulk curves over my

frame. “Could it be,” he murmurs, eyes pinned on me, “that your needs in bed are different from those of most women? That maybe you want something special? That maybe you’re wary of attracting attention from guys around you because you’re certain the boy next door would never understand?”

The heat on my face is spreading in waves throughout my body. I take ragged, harsh breaths as goosebumps rise on my arms.

Everyone who warned me about Reggie Turner was right.

He isn’t scream-at-you-and-cause-you-to-shit-your-pants terrifying. He is look-at-you-and-know-every-piece-of-your-being terrifying.

And that is the kind I can’t handle.

I want to back away, to go back to my office and let my boss know that I’m passing on the offer of writing a profile of this athlete. A promotion does sound good, but there has to be another way to send Carl to the all-boys school that doesn’t involve a man that can uncover my deepest secrets with a single look.

“Close to the mark?” he asks, interrupting my thoughts.

I jump at his voice and am instantly irritated by my reaction.

“No,” I spit at him. “You’re wrong.”

He disregards my words. “I’m going to try to guess what your secret is,” he says, leaning back to drink me up in his gaze. His eyes rest unabashedly on my breasts, and I mentally kick myself for wearing my pushup bra to this meeting. He lingers, staring at them longer and harder than anyone has done in a long time.

And then, I feel it.

A thrill running down my spine, causing my nipples to harden under his gaze.

Damn.

He looks up at me again. “You’ve been fighting for control since you walked through that door. Tells me how much you’re addicted to running things in your personal life.” He pauses, and I’m filled with trepidation for his next words.

He doesn’t keep me waiting long.

“You must be desperate to let go of your type A personality as soon you walk into the bedroom,” he says, the glint growing larger. “It must be a relief to let someone else take the reins.”

My heart misses a beat before it starts banging frantically against my ribcage.

Reggie does not seem to know the sudden upheaval his words just caused in me. He continues on that track mercilessly. “What is it then?” he asks, his voice lower. “Like it rough? Enjoy being told what to do?”

My brow is covered in a sheen of sweat. I should say something, tell him to back off. But my mouth is jammed shut.

Especially as he reaches out, hooks two fingers under my chin, and pulls my face to his.

“Don’t worry,” he mutters, his cold eyes lingering on mine. “You’re going to like working with me then. Unless you’re already freaked out and you’re desperate to get someone else to cover this project.”

I barely hear his words. I’m thinking of how ridiculously close he is, the warmth his touch is spreading through my body.

And I’m thinking of his previous sentence: *Like it rough? Enjoy being told what to do?*

Yes, my entire body is whispering. Yes to both.

Reggie’s personality is nauseating, but I have not had sex in seven years. Maybe that’s why my entire body is tingling at his touch and why a tiny part of my brain is craving for him to pounce. To ask me to get on my knees. To ask me to unzip him. To...

Unless you’re already freaked out.

“No.” The word spills out of my lips before I’m even aware of what I’m saying.

But I don’t regret it.

I’m not going to back away from this so easily.

I take a deep breath, grateful for the return of my voice.

“You’re not nearly as scary as you think, Reginald,” I tell him, stuffing all my feelings into a tiny box in the pit of my heart so I can return his gaze evenly. “The profile starts next week. I look forward to seeing you then.”

I turn around and march out of his gym, my head held high and my shoulders straight.

I’m not going to let this ass delay my promotion. And I wish I could say that is the only reason I am going to continue with the profile.

But the tiniest part of me is also curious about what it would feel like to work with the first man who’s managed to turn me on in seven years.

CHAPTER 2



REGGIE

“*S*orry, Reg. *PulsePixel* is standing firm. It’s her or no one.”

“Fuck.” I slam my fist hard against the table. A bunch of files slip off the edge of the desk and fall to the floor, and Paul’s assistant scrambles to pick them up.

Paul Kellerman, my agent, looks amused. “What’s your problem with this chick, anyway? Ran a background check on her. She’s squeaky clean.”

I huff in annoyance, staring at the blank wall behind his figure. Seven years as a hockey player and seven years of attending miserable meetings such as this, and I had still not gotten used to how damn soulless Paul’s office is.

“Fine,” Paul spits after a few seconds.

I like being around him—he understands it’s futile trying to get me to talk about my feelings.

“Doesn’t matter why you don’t like her. They want her on this job. She’s going to do the profile.”

“Damn it.” I grind my fist into the surface of the desk for the second time. Paul’s assistant jumps. I scowl at him, and the color drains from his face.

“I need to... um... restroom,” he squeaks, before he flings himself at the door of the office, yanks it open, and slams it shut behind him. I can almost hear the sigh of relief he lets loose the moment there is a door separating us.

“I don’t like your new assistant,” I tell Paul blankly.

He shrugs. “Tough luck. You liked the previous ones too much. I had to let them go due to...” He clears his throat and looks at me mockingly. “... conflict of interest.”

It’s the term Paul uses as a euphemism for me screwing his secretaries. For seven years, Paul had no problems replacing them once the inevitable happened. Until the last one, Angela, who turned hysterical in this very office after I told her it was over between us. Paul finally gave up and hired a man.

“I cannot do the profile with Harper Morris.” I redirect the conversation back to the matter at hand. “I’d rather we find someone else than endure two whole months of her following me around.”

Paul’s eyes are threatening to pop out of his head. “Are you serious?”

No one else dared speak to me this way. But then again, Paul is also my closest friend.

“You can’t switch now. This is the freaking *PulsePixel*. Took me months of begging for them to even consider it. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but you’ve practically shot your reputation to hell during your career.”

I shrug. “So?”

Frustrated, Paul runs his hands through his thinning hair.

We have had this conversation several times in the past. But I can never bring myself to reach the level of frantic he does.

“Because,” he drags out the word, “this is literally your last chance to show the country that you’re more than the person they think you are—a woman-loving dickhead, whose only redeeming quality is the fact that he can maneuver the puck and outskate his opponents.”

The corner of my lips twitch. “But I *am* a woman-loving dickhead.”

“You’ve got to be more than that if you want to attract brand deals. A few other players are retiring this season as

well. I've looked around. The person with the least number of deals on that list still has a ton more than you."

"You've pointed that out only a million times."

Paul's angst seems to be growing. "Because you don't listen," he spits. "Look, this year has been good for you. You've pulled in a ton of money. But all of that's going to stop in a few months. Every athlete in the US knows this. All you have to do now is to secure enough lifelong brand deals, so you'll be set up for the rest of your life. But—"

"But I fucked my way through all of the female fans throwing themselves at me and have ruined my chances," I interrupt.

"That's not what I was going to say. There are a lot of promiscuous hockey players out there. Hardly the reason why no one can stand you."

I raise my brows. The last thing I planned for today was to get a dressing down by my agent. Still, my curiosity gets the better of me.

"Why, then?" I ask, without the tiniest bit of sarcasm. One of the first things I promised myself not to do after getting into the NHL was to stay updated on news clippings about me. I barely knew what the world thought of me most days, even after large dramatic moments on and off the ice.

"Because you're... a dark soul."

What?

"You don't speak. To anyone. About anything. You're missing every time the New York Rangers go out to celebrate a win. When the hockey season is over, you disappear until they start training again. No one knows anything about your upbringing."

My fists contract of their own accord, trembling. I extend my fingers mindfully, trying to focus.

"I'm forced to inquire why it's anyone's business how I choose to lead my personal life. I play, I score. That should be enough."

“Because the brands don’t trust someone they don’t know. Look at every sports player out there securing brand deals. They’ve got something in common.”

“They’re cringey?”

Paul looks pissed enough to pull the remaining tufts of hair off his head. “They’re open. Remember Adam Sanchez?”

Bile rises up my throat. “The Boston Bruins guy who burst into tears during that interview about his dead dog? Great role model.”

Paul ignores my sarcasm. “What you might not know is how many brand deals he got from that alone,” he says. “That’s what advertisers want. Someone they can trust. Someone relatable. Someone who can convince people to buy their products.”

I sag in my seat. Interacting with others usually tires me out after a while. Even talking to Paul has its limits. Especially when he keeps droning on about brand deals.

“It’s all well and good when you’re bringing in money on the ice,” Paul says. “But I’ve had a meeting with your financial manager and crunched the numbers. After retirement, the quality of life for sports players generally declines, unless they’ve got a good brand behind them. Right now, you don’t. And on your present savings, you’re going to run out of money in ten years. That’s why this is so important.”

Paul has been saying a variation of the same for years now. And while I generally choose to tune it out, I can’t ignore him anymore, not when retirement is literally knocking on the door.

“I already said I was going to do the profile,” I say through gritted teeth. “But you’ve got to replace that reporter.”

“Why?” Paul says, the word coming out like a chagrined war cry.

“Why?” I spit back at him. “Because she’s the most aggravating woman I’ve ever met in my life. Had the audacity to tell me that she is planning on grilling me on every single

detail of my life and writing it out in excruciating detail. Would you look forward to that shit?”

Paul looks confused. “Reggie, that’s exactly what she’s supposed to do.”

My throat clamps up. “What she’s supposed to do is fucking listen to what I tell her to write. But she’s intent on observing every single aspect of my behavior, like I’m a damned lab rat.”

Paul’s confusion grows. “You’re literally describing a profile,” he says. “That’s her job. Unless...”

I look up at him as his eyes darken with suspicion.

“You were planning to lie through all of it, weren’t you?” Paul says. “Make up some stories that have nothing to do with you? And you’re pissed at this reporter because she’s not letting you have it your way.”

“That’s one way to look at it,” I mutter darkly.

There are several reasons Harper Morris gets on my nerves. One, she is hot. Long, wavy brown hair that frames her diamond-shaped face in the most delicate of ways, huge boobs spilling out of a bra, and hips that sway when she walks. Even her dowdy outfit made her look that much hotter. She looked like the sexy librarian in a porno. She is a tiny little thing, but she also has a sort of ethereal confidence that makes her look bigger than she really is.

When she walked into my gym, the first thing I thought about was how to get her to go out with me.

She was scorching hot. I’ve never had to be around a woman that looks like that while knowing that I’m not supposed to pursue her.

I could have gotten over that, I suppose.

Until I got a hunch about her sexual preferences. It was a combination of how she carried herself, her clothes, combined with a strong gut feeling. I just knew I was right.

Although I have sex with a lot of women, I rarely enjoy it deeply beyond the initial release. Routine sex is especially

boring. For years, I've looked for more than what many women could offer me. Which is why I find it so easy to get rid of them afterward.

But I could tell that Harper is different. A woman who is that domineering in real life is sure to do anything I ask her for in the bedroom.

Just thinking of it makes me hard.

Knowing that Harper might have a kink will make it a lot more challenging to work with her.

Especially since she doesn't seem like the kind of woman I can seduce into submission. She will do exactly what she told me she would.

Observe and write the truth.

And if Harper Morris writes the truth about me, my reputation is going to take an even bigger hit.

I look up at Paul's confused face. "I can't do it with Harper Morris," I tell him. "I just can't."

"Tough luck." He looks completely spent. "Look at it this way. You've got two choices. Get over yourself, impress the woman, and cause her to do a profile on you that'll send advertisers running your way and setting you up for life. Or let go of the chance to be featured on the biggest online magazine in the US and be forced to wait tables in ten years. Your choice."

I stare at him, hating his candor, but knowing deep down he is right.

Two months isn't the longest time in the world. Maybe I can manage to fool Harper Morris into writing something decent about me.

If I don't let my intrusive thoughts win, like the ones about what she would look like naked and wrapped around me.

CHAPTER 3



HARPER

“*H*ello, Harper.”

My body stiffens.

I had painstakingly planned for this conversation not to happen. Came home from work with thirty minutes to spare before the evening rush. Even decided to skip getting groceries because it meant I could slip into my apartment without being noticed.

But it didn't work.

As I turn around and face Matthew, the guy living in the apartment above mine, I force a polite smile. He looks the same as always. Clean-shaven, light blond hair glowing in the afternoon sun coming in through the windows, delighted expression on his handsome face.

“Hello, Matt.” Frantically pushing on the elevator button, my insides are already clawing at me, demanding I get as far away from him as I possibly can.

“Haven't been seeing you around lately.” His eyes are earnest as he draws closer to me. “I was worried about you... and Carl. How's he doing?”

At the mention of Carl, my frigid heart melts some. How could it not? Matt is everything any woman would want—successful, attentive, good looking. And he always asks about my son.

He would make a perfect stepfather. Just like he's been hinting for years now.

But while he is stunningly attractive, there is a problem.

I have dated guys like him—adorable, stable, safe.

Boring.

Every time I consider giving him a chance, I remember the words of my college ex-boyfriend.

This is too much. You're too much.

Matthew is everything I could ever wish for in a partner. But I would rather stay single than be sexually repressed and frustrated for the rest of my life.

And that's exactly why I have been avoiding him.

"He's fine," I say. I throw a quick glance at the elevator and see that it's on the ground floor. Relief floods me as I turn back to him and aim a sympathetic smile his way. "But he's up there waiting for me, so I'd better run."

"Sure. Say hi to him for me. But before you go, I'd like to ask—"

I don't let him finish that dreaded sentence. The elevator doors part, and I slip into the cabin, pressing the button to my floor as quickly as I can.

Once the doors close, I heave a sigh of relief.

You're wary of attracting men because you're scared they won't be able to understand you.

The words hit me like a punch to my temple.

I blink, almost about to look around for who just said them.

But I remember a moment later.

I close my eyes and let out a grunt, frustration growing quickly inside me.

Damn that jerk to hell.

I hated every second of being in Reggie Turner's house. It was grating enough when he explained to me how the interview would go, but nothing had been worse than hearing him describe me that perfectly.

And now, a whole week after our first meeting, I once again admit the truth to myself.

Every single thing he said about me is right. I do shy away from perfect men like Matt because I know they would never be able to understand my needs and desires.

But that was not the worst part of meeting Reggie.

My pulse races as I remember the feel of his fingers tucked underneath my chin. He hadn't done much, merely raised my face to his.

But that singular action was enough to make me understand that Reggie is about the strongest alpha male I have met in my life.

And I love it.

My heart is clamoring wildly against my ribcage. In seven years, I had not met a man I thought could match my sexual energy. But my body is telling me that, if given the chance, Reggie could. Even if he is the biggest asshole on planet Earth.

And although I wanted to persuade myself that I was immune, that I was safe, I have to admit I'm not.

It isn't just that Reggie is a stunning man. Through my work, I meet a lot of athletes and celebrities. People who are powerful, domineering, strong. But there is something else about Reggie. The thought of him taking charge is dizzying.

And knowing that scares me. A lot.

As I step out of the elevator, I'm debating if taking this job is the right thing.

I put my key in the lock and turn it. The moment I step into my tidy two-bedroom apartment, I hear Carl scream for me.

"Mommy!" he yells, and every single thought of Reggie is forgotten as my son comes running toward me and wraps his sticky little hands around my waist.

I hug him back, happiness ballooning in my chest at the fact that I'm touching him again. Carl was an unexpected surprise that drastically changed the trajectory of my life.

But I don't regret going to that Halloween party.

My chest constricts, and I push the feeling away. Looking down at Carl, I ask him cheerfully, "How was school today?"

"Great!" he yells, with all the exuberance of a six-year-old. "But Grandma's having problems helping me with my assignment."

I let him lead the way from our cozy living room to our small kitchen. My mother is hunched over the dining table, drawing straight lines on cardboard.

"Hey," I greet her. "Thanks for picking him up and watching him." My parents had been horrified when I came home from my senior year of college with a positive pregnancy test, and for a moment, I thought they would kick me out. But once Carl arrived, their disappointment was replaced with gratitude and endless love for their grandson.

I wait for my mother to tell me about Carl's day, as she always does after I thank her for watching him.

Instead, a worried smile spreads on her face. "Carl," she says loudly. "Go find us a green crayon."

As he speeds off to his room, I give my mom an inquisitive look, wondering how concerned I should be.

"What's wrong? Did something happen at school?"

She sighs, her fingers flying up and kneading the graying hairs on her temple. "No, nothing like that. But look at this." Her eyes are trained on the cardboard.

I look down, the words in colored ink at the top of the paper registering.

Carl Morris's Family Tree

"Oh no," I hear myself whisper.

I was well aware that this would be among Carl's homework during his first few years of elementary school. Almost every child in America has to do this assignment at least once in their lifetime.

And I dreaded it for years now. But I'd assumed I had a bit more time, at least until the third or fourth grade.

I look at my mother, not bothering to hide the molten fear in my eyes. "What...?" I start, not even certain about what I'm going to say.

But she answers my question anyway.

"He says his tree is skewed," my mother mutters. "That it's got only one branch, and all of his friends have two."

Her words dig a hole in the center of my chest. I take a deep breath, trying hard to maintain as much calm as I can. "Carl can't be the first child that ever grew up without a father. The teachers will know how to explain that families are different."

"Harper." My mother breaks out her rarely used stern voice. "It's not about the assignment anymore. Don't you get it? Before you came in, he was asking questions about his father." She lingers in silence for a moment.

A larger hole forms in my chest.

No, no, no.

It has been six years since Carl was born, and my mother and father have been curious about his paternity for most of that time. It was easy to stay silent on the topic. I truly have no idea who Carl's father is.

But I have to say something to him eventually.

"He hasn't asked me about it yet." I held onto the flimsiest bit of hope that Carl would not be curious.

My mom rolls her eyes. "Why do you think that is?" Her voice is reproachful. "He barely sees you, and even he is mature enough to understand not to ask you difficult questions during the few hours you spend together."

Fatigue weighs heavily on my shoulders, and I slip into a chair. Everything she said tonight cuts deep.

"I'm trying my hardest to provide for him." I hate my voice for suddenly breaking. "And it's freaking difficult."

“I know that.” A sympathetic gaze crosses her face. “But Carl has always got to be your first priority.”

“He is.” My voice is turning shrill. “That’s why I’ve been pulling all these long shifts. Because I want to get him into private school as soon as possible.”

“But that’s not the only thing you can do to help him,” she continues, not backing down. “You can help him understand his heritage. Where he comes from, who his dad is.”

Feeling like a failure of a parent is not fun.

How do I tell my six-year-old boy that I don’t know who his dad is? Whether I tell him now or when he is an adult makes little difference. I still don’t know who the man at the Halloween party was.

I let out a huge sigh. “I can’t do that, Mom.”

Not because I don’t want to, but because I don’t know the truth, either.

“Hey!” Carl’s voice rings behind me, interrupting my train of thought. “Found the green crayon. What did you need it for, Grandma?”

My mother takes it with a sigh and starts to shade the leaves of the family tree. I realize a second later that I’m holding my breath, waiting for Carl to ask me why he doesn’t have a paternity branch.

But he doesn’t.

Slowly, I release my breath, letting my despair seep out of me, replaced with a steely resolution.

My mother is completely right. I’m not being the best of moms to my son—keeping late hours, never being around, not even able to tell him who his father is.

But there is one thing I can do. Leave my son for two months, write the damned profile of Reggie Turner, and come back with a promotion that would give me stable hours and enough money to pay for private school.

All I need to do is to get through two months with the most aggravating man on the planet.

Without letting him have his way with me.

CHAPTER 4



REGGIE

Social gatherings are not my thing. Least of all the pre-flight meetups at the airport shortly before getting on the plane to head to a game in another city.

While locker room banter, team huddles, and group dinners are all tiresome in their own way, this one is special. And when it is the first game of the season, even more so. Everyone is in a mood so hopeful and happy it makes mine positively foul, as they all trade stories from the last season or how good our chances are.

I keep my position as far away from the hubris as I can, my arms folded and my back up against the wall. My teammates are chattering and joking like a bunch of preschoolers. Thankfully, not a single one walks up to ask me questions about my off season or what I plan to do when we get off the plane.

Stay away from people long enough, and they will eventually respect that you want to be left alone.

I try not to focus too much on what they are saying. But then, a word floats to my hearing from the nearest batch of chatterers.

Boston.

I look around for the person who said it. It's Aaron Knightley, a pimply little brat just drafted from one of the Division One colleges. He looks as nauseatingly happy as any new recruit would about getting to play their dream sport on a national level.

I forcefully turn my gaze away, reminding myself that it's not Aaron's fault and that it isn't possible anyway to cram the word back in his throat. Our first game is in Boston, and we are going to be there for a significantly long period of time before moving out again.

Acknowledging that makes me want to bash my knuckles against the wall.

I look around for a distraction. Anything will do.

And then, I spot her—a flight attendant who is gripping the handle of her suitcase much too tightly as she heads straight for me.

I raise my brows, silently urging her to go back. Sure, about a dozen attendants have approached me like this, and they always had the same reason. About half those times, I was interested enough to squeeze myself in the damned plane toilet and get it on. I enjoyed doing that once or twice, but most of the time, the sex was mediocre, maybe a little boring.

And the last thing I want to do is have vanilla sex while flying to the city I loathed more than anything in the natural world.

But she doesn't stop. She heads straight for me, her face getting whiter with each step.

It's only when she is a few feet away from me that I recognize her.

We met only a few months ago, on a return flight to New York at the end of last season.

It doesn't surprise me in the slightest that I forgot her. The encounter had probably been uneventful, and I found it best to not clutter my memory with an average performance.

“Hi, Reg.” A nervous smile spreads across her face.

A reluctant shiver runs through me. I absolutely cannot stand forced familiarity, people pretending to know me on a closer level than they actually do.

“My name's Reggie,” I grind out, keeping my gaze expressionless as I meet hers. “Just Reggie.”

“Sure.” Her face turns even whiter. “I just thought I’d say hi, you know. And—”

“Great. Hi.”

Hurt seeps into her eyes. Any other man would probably be softening a little at that, maybe even enough to apologize.

But I don’t feel the slightest bit contrite. Before we got down to it, I made it clear that it was going to mean nothing to me when we landed. And she agreed.

But I should have foreseen that she would read a deeper meaning into our ten minutes of fun and make me out to be the villain.

“I sent you a few messages on Instagram,” she mutters. “You haven’t replied.”

An irritated sigh escapes me.

“I don’t reply to fan messages on social media.”

She lets out a small, pained gasp. “Fan?”

I meet her gaze squarely. “Yes.”

She looks like I just ripped out her kidney and handed it to her. “It didn’t seem to me like you thought of me as a fan when you fucked me in the plane bathroom a few months ago.” Her voice is low and thick with venom.

A dim memory of whisking her into the confined space comes to me. But again, nothing registers about the sex.

It must have been underwhelming.

“I can hardly remember what happened that day.” I refuse to back down as hurt mounts in her eyes. “But I thought you understood what I’m sure I said—that whatever happened between us was a one-time thing.”

Her knuckles go white. She opens her mouth and then snaps it shut again.

Then, I see the worst thing of all: tears starting in her eyes.

“Fine,” she spits. “You’re a freaking dick, Reggie Turner. And I hope I never have to see you again.”

The feeling is mutual.

But I keep my mouth shut as she turns away and marches off, head raised high in faux dignity.

My shoulders sag with relief.

“I must commend you,” someone says out of nowhere, and I turn around to see Coach Ernest smiling at me from a few feet away. “That went better than the last one. You know, what happened at Dulles airport when that woman went into a screaming fit because you refused to acknowledge her?”

The last thing I need right now is an offhand lecture.

“Your point?” I ask through gritted teeth.

Coach shoots me a small smile. “Nothing at all.” He raises both hands up. “Only... this is your last season, Turner. Try to keep it in your pants. No shouting matches, at least. All we want to do is win the Stanley. Nothing more, nothing less.”

As I open my mouth to reply, my eyes catch sight of Harper Morris, sitting on one of the lounge chairs behind Ernest. Her fake glasses are perched on her nose and her hair is up in a prim ponytail. She is dressed in a puffy blouse that does nothing to hide the upthrust of her breasts, and her matronly A-line skirt goes down to her knees.

But I don't spare a second glance at her outfit, even to wonder if she is wearing anything under that archaic looking skirt.

Because a second later, I register what she is doing.

Watching me. Listening intently. And... my stomach does a rough somersault... scribbling on a giant notepad.

It hits me the next instant.

Harper Morris just witnessed what happened between me and the attendant. And she intends to write that into my profile.

“Now,” Coach Ernest is saying, “we should really be talking about...”

“Pardon me, Coach.” I storm past him to where Harper is seated, her head bent over her notepad.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” My voice is filled with a deadly warning.

She looks up at me, and I’m chagrined to see a fake smile of surprise perched on her lips. “Hi, Reggie,” she chirps. “Didn’t see you there.”

Grabbing her by the arm and dragging her to her feet, so I can yell in her face is probably not the best idea. Folding my own arms to make the urge subside, I hiss, “Fucking answer me, Harper. What the hell are you doing? What are you writing?”

The smile disappears from her face. “I’m doing my job. You know, the job your agent begged *PulsePixel* to consider for months. The one that involves an honest profile about you, so our viewers can know everything there is to know. And right now,” she says, raising her hands and dropping them again, “you’re not giving us much of an inside peek. Your drama with that flight attendant is pretty much the same old story everyone knows about you by heart.”

“Which is precisely why you can’t write things like that,” I spit at her, my fury mounting. How the fuck did I get stuck with this woman, out of the millions of reporters out there? “This profile is supposed to improve the public’s perception of me.”

Harper stands up, resolution heavy in her eyes. “Well then,” she says. “You should have thought of that before your quickie on a plane. Classy, by the way.”

Her voice is a little louder on the last few words—most likely intentionally—and I notice a few of my teammates turn around. Someone even sniggers.

When I look back at Harper, she has the smuggest little smile on her face.

My thoughts morph into a rock-solid decision in a quick second.

To hell with propriety, I think, as I take her by the wrist and walk away from my team and toward handicapped bathroom. Harper lets out a tiny growl of resistance, but I push the door open, drag her in, and lock the door behind us.

Suddenly, we are all alone.

And I'm excited for what's about to happen next.

CHAPTER 5



HARPER

A few seconds ago, I was poking fun at Reggie Turner for how classy it was that he got it on in a plane bathroom.

But then he grabbed me by my wrist, and I just followed him into an airport bathroom.

Like the weakest woman in the entire universe.

Not much classier, if you ask anybody.

The mere thought of having sex in a public place is thrilling, and I don't feel an ounce of fear as he locks the door, shutting us in.

Even though I still dislike Reggie, particularly after hearing how he treated that poor woman out there.

But the last time I was confined to a small space with a man who knew how to handle my wild side, I had the best sexual encounter of my life.

And Reggie is exactly that sort of guy.

My heart slams in my chest as he pushes me up against the door of the bathroom and steps as close to me as he can without our bodies brushing.

"I'm going to make one thing perfectly clear." His voice is low with warning. "This profile isn't about what you may or may not witness over the next few months. It's about writing what will sell me to your audience."

I'm distracted by the low simmer in my belly. There is something primal about him, a slutty bad boy magic that turns

me molten.

“Actually, it’s not.” Defiantly, I stare back at him, curious to see where this is going. “It’s about you. The profile is going to sell anyway. Maybe it’ll sell even better if people believe they’ve been right about you all along.”

He slams his palm on the wall next to me. Not hard enough to frighten me, but enough to make me understand that he is not happy. As intense as his gaze is, I know that Reggie would never hurt a woman. A fly, maybe. Another man, for sure. But not me. If only he knew that all his caveman display achieved was to send a hot current zipping along my nerve endings.

I yawn as loudly as I can, wanting to convey how unscary I think he is.

“We done here?” A part of me is a bit disappointed. Not that I actually wanted this to go much further, but I did think it was going to play out in a more thrilling way.

“Far from it.” He brings his face even closer to me. I catch a whiff of his mint flavored breath. “Give me that.”

I raise my brows. “What?”

“That damn pad you were scribbling on.”

I look down at the notebook I’m clutching. “Not going to happen.” I slip it into the pocket of my skirt. Reggie might be rough around the edges, but I’m positive he will not fumble under my skirt without my permission.

His face darkens, and he opens his mouth, probably to bellow out yet another empty threat, but I get to him first.

“You can hold off on whatever you’re about to say,” I spit. “Because I’m not publishing anything about you... yet.”

“What do you mean?”

I straighten up so I’m no longer leaning against the door. He still hulks over me, but I’m a little more in control. “This is supposed to be a profile about the man behind the mask, Reggie. I’m not going to write a story about what I just witnessed until I know why you behave the way you do.”

He looks at me like I'm batshit crazy. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

"You can save yourself." A smile forms on my lips as I whip out my notepad and pencil again. "You'll look a lot more tolerable to our readers if you tell me why you treat women like chattel. You behaved like a jackass to that lady, and I could tell that wasn't your first rodeo."

"Remind me to kill Ernest the next time I see him, will you?"

I scribble down his comment about killing his coach and put it back in my pocket. "More proof that you carry around a lot of rage for no reason anyone can see," I add. "But let's get back to the thing about women. Did someone break your heart when you were a teenager, and you decided to become a prick?"

His eyes flash with fury. "This isn't a fucking therapy session. Also, you're not going to write anything about what just happened. That's an order."

An order.

My skin crawls with goosebumps. The barely contained power in his body makes my femininity clench.

Pushing the moment of weakness away, I suck in a deep breath. We're finally getting into a groove. I have interviewed enough rage-filled men to know that the breakthroughs are always on the other side of their threats.

I just need to push a little bit more.

"Also, I noticed you're not too friendly with your teammates. You didn't say a word to any of them, and they skirt around you too. Why's that?"

He places one of his trembling fists on the wall next to my head. "Stop talking. Now."

I feel the tiniest bit of irritation as I look up at him.

"Or what? You're going to make me?"

He holds my gaze with his, his tension dissolving into a suggestive smirk.

“I could make you.”

Something about the way he says those words causes a lump to form in my throat. Goosebumps are rising on my skin again, but I pay them no heed.

“You can make me leave you alone faster by talking.”

He takes a step forward. I instinctively retreat, pressed against the door. He advances again.

“Don’t you remember?” he drawls in a low murmur. “I figured you out from the second I saw you. As much as you pretend you love hunching down and scribbling absolute garbage about people on your notepad, you want more. You want to be seen, outside of this horrible outfit you’ve got on.”

My throat starts to close on itself.

How does he manage to push me off my game every time, without breaking a sweat?

And what does he have against my outfits?

“Maybe you even want me to wrestle the notepad off you. I’d have to touch you, and you’re screaming to be touched.”

My heart is banging against my ribcage.

I force out a laugh that sounds foolish even to my own ears. “Once again, you’re getting ahead of yourself.”

“Am I?” he mutters. His fingers reach forward, filling the space between our bodies. I hold my breath as he presses against the waist of my skirt. Then he goes lower, brushing past the edge of my pocket.

I look up at him. His eyes are still on mine. He is waiting for me to stop him, to push him off me and tell him to back off.

But I do no such thing.

Because he is absolutely right.

I want to know what his touch feels like.

Letting him have me is off the table. But maybe there is a bit of fun to be had by dancing near the cliff.

His fingers push into my pocket and find my notepad, but they don't close around it. Instead, he pushes backward, his fingers scraping my bum.

Without warning, he grabs and holds onto my ass. Tightly.

A sudden tidal wave of lust overcomes me. An errant moan slips out of my mouth, unbidden.

There is a glimmer of knowing in his eyes, and I'm almost embarrassed to look up at him.

While I want to uncover who Reggie Turner is, I want him to hold me even more.

"See?" he mutters, his lips an inch from my ear. "You want this. Badly."

He squeezes me again, and my knees tremble. I want to have a little bit more resolve, but it has been a long time since I have been touched by a man.

And now that he is doing it, I'm finding it impossible to push him away.

With my last bit of stubbornness, I straighten defiantly.

"You're not going to make me write what you want."

He looks mildly amused. "Not yet, anyway."

He gives my ass one last squeeze before he withdraws his hand from my pocket. I keep my lips jammed shut, not trusting myself to hold my moan.

His gaze dips lower, finding my breasts. There is not an ounce of shyness in his stare. He caresses me without a touch, and my chest starts to heave with the weight of his attention.

"Not yet," he murmurs again. "But very soon, Harper, you'll be begging me to touch you."

A burning sensation courses through my chest. I want to raise my chin and tell him to go to hell, remind him how inappropriate his words are.

But I can't. Because he is so right it actually pains me to admit. A part of me wants to beg him to touch me right now.

“And when I finally see you naked...” He reaches out casually and pulls me in, his fingers heavy on my ass. My lungs constrict as my breasts are crushed against his powerful chest “... you're going to be begging me to claim you. And I'm going to fuck you so good, you'll forget everything but how to make me happy. Even if it means writing only what I tell you to.”

He lets go of me, moves me away from the door, and slips out through it.

My heart is pounding, and my body is trembling as I stare after him.

I recall the flight attendant, the wretchedness in her gaze as Reggie refused to acknowledge her and she stormed away. I was sorry for her and angry at Reggie. But I also felt slightly icky. I wondered why she felt the need to go to him when she probably knew the kind of person he is. Reggie is deathly attractive, but there are a million other guys out there. He might be masterful at sex, but there is no way he is that good.

But maybe it isn't just about that. It could be the raw, unmatched power he exudes. Such that could make any woman—including me—do what he wants regardless of her own desires.

I am starting to understand the appeal of Reggie Turner.

CHAPTER 6



REGGIE

The moment the buzzer goes off, my teammates erupt in an uproar that reverberates around the stadium. I skate away from the mess of screaming and hugging bodies before it gets too damn much to handle. Handing my stick over the glass to a random kid, I leave the ice for the wide passageway that leads directly into the locker room. I appreciate that all the fans streaming from the bleachers keep a wide berth as they run to the rink.

Ever since we came to Boston, my mood has taken a positively horrible turn, which is impressive, considering it was already awful. But every little thing about this city fuels a rage inside me, and every cell in my body is itching to get away.

Not even winning our first game of the season has appeased me. And right now, I am desperate to get back to my hotel room, take a hot shower, and sleep for however long it takes to wash the tiredness off me.

“Good game.”

I scowl at the voice of Coach Ernest, who, of course, is striding up to me.

“I did what you wanted me to do,” I tell him. “We won. What else could you need from me right now?”

He keeps an irritating little smile on his face. “I know, I know,” he says, putting up his hands. “You don’t want people to associate with you and all of that. Heaven forbid, we ever see you happy. How you maintain a good game on the ice with

that attitude remains a mystery. You ever think your reporter might go easy on you if you show you have a heart by talking to some of your fans before you leave the rink?”

“What the hell do you know about Harper?” I ask him.

We have been in Boston for all of one week, but Harper is already driving me batshit. Since our episode in the bathroom—the one I was so certain would cause her to back off—she has gone completely mental. Her next course of action has been to nag me consistently about doing a sit-down interview. And no matter how many times I tell her to buzz off, she takes it as an invitation to ask with more intensity.

As much as I hate to admit it, I am at the end of my rope. It is hard to get her to leave me be when the one weapon in my arsenal is useless against her.

Not to mention that I feel myself falling prey to her charms.

The time we shared in the bathroom was a clusterfuck. When I touched her, a current of electricity zipped through me, turning my cock to granite. A thick coil of hair unraveled over her shoulder, brushing my arm, and the scent of her shot me into a near catatonic state, leaving me with a burning and overwhelming need to claim her.

On top of it, she did not seem scared like she should have.

And while I want a lot of women, Harper is different. Primarily because every aspect of her personality is eerily similar to mine. She is someone who wants to be in control.

Except in the bedroom. That’s my theory, at least. And I’m eager to test its validity.

Just thinking of breaking her makes her damn near irresistible. Makes me want to go on the chase that much more.

“I only know she’s been recording every single action of yours since you got here.”

I grimace. Coach is right. Every practice of ours has been watched faithfully by Harper, who spends the time scribbling

in her fucking journal. Once I made it clear that I was not going to speak to her, she decided to observe me instead. And every time I let out my anger at something or someone, I notice she scribbles a bit faster.

“Yeah, well,” I say. “What else?”

“Some of the other players got uncomfortable,” Ernest says, still wearing his loopy grin. “So, I had to confront her.”

“I don’t want any of you talking to her,” I say through gritted teeth. The last thing I want is for this circus to go fully blown.

Coach shrugs, unconcerned. “I had to. Players were concerned she was writing about them. But when I met with her, she seemed to understand. Made it absolutely clear she was interested in only you.”

“That’s a relief,” I say, my voice tinged with sarcasm.

He does not seem to notice. “But she also mentioned that you are not willing to engage.”

“It’s none of your damn business.” I push past him and toward the lockers.

He hurries after me. “It is, if it involves her following you around and spying on the rest of the guys. Talking to her will make all of this go away faster.”

“I only signed up to do the profile to lift the bad publicity about me.” I hate that I’m starting to sound like a broken record. “I’m not going to let her x-ray me because of that.”

“You do know you could make this much easier on yourself if you spent a second smiling at the fans before leaving? Maybe she’ll find other things to write about you, then?”

I scowl at him. “So you keep mentioning. And by the way, you sound exactly like her.”

“Maybe because we had a conversation before the game,” he grins. “Pleasant woman.”

My eyes are smarting with anger.

“Why the fuck did you talk to her?”

He shrugs. “Because I wanted to,” he says easily. “But she did share why she needs to latch onto you as tightly as she’s doing.”

My fingers fold into fists. Great. She managed to convince my coach that everything she is doing is legit. Harper is about to become even more insufferable.

“She did need a favor too,” Coach says now.

“What, permission to watch me in the shower?”

He grins. “Well, no,” he says. “She wanted to know if it would be okay to talk to the team about you.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“She mentioned that the profile would suck if she started to release pieces about your attitude around them. Said it would look bad not only for you, but for the New York Rangers as a whole. A new draft season is coming up. We don’t want college players avoiding us because you gave us a bad rep before you left.”

“That’s never going to happen. She’s playing you. And she knows exactly what to say to make you believe her ideas are valid.”

Coach Ernest is unconcerned. “I can’t take your word for it over hers,” he says. “She’s been working the press for years. Your only experience with them is how to piss them off. And even now, when you’ve got a chance to hunker down and leave with a good rep, you’re being stubborn.”

It’s getting harder to keep my cool. “Again, none of your damn business.”

“Well, it might be,” he says, folding his arms. “I told her I would talk things over with you, but I’m considering giving her the go-ahead to talk to the guys. It doesn’t infringe on your rights, and it means she gets to do her work faster. Plus, if and when they condemn you as an outlier, it takes the stink of your profile off the team.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to keep my swirling head under control.

“I’m not going to let you do that,” I say, once my eyes are open again.

Coach’s grin goes wider. “Yeah, I thought you’d say that. She did as well. So, she offered you an out.”

“An... out?”

“Yeah,” he says. “She’s in the little café by the stadium waiting for you. If you don’t want her asking the team questions about you, meet her there so you can finally start to talk. You get to tell her what to write about all by yourself.”

Also known as a sit-down interview.

Ernest claps me on the shoulder. “See you, pal.” He chuckles as he strolls away.

I stare after him, fuming. Still, the fury I have for him is nothing compared to what I now feel for Harper.

It was dumb to think that a simple ‘no’ would hold her back.

She is playing dirty.

It’s time I do the same.

Twenty minutes later, I’m sitting across from her in a nauseatingly cutesy café I have never walked into before. She is wearing a matronly dress that falls below her knees. Her wavy brown hair is in a tight updo at the crown of her head. Her beautiful face is bare of makeup, but she is still spotting her trademark red lipstick.

“I’m glad you came,” she says, pure innocence on her face.

My jaw clenches. “Let’s get this over with.”

She stares down at the notepad. I’m displeased to see that it’s looking way more worn than it was just a week ago. I should have taken the blasted thing when I had the chance.

“Let’s start with your upbringing. Did you grow up in a happy home?”

My mind wanders, thinking about how it would feel to bite on those full lips. “Doesn’t matter.”

“I disagree.” She is already putting pen to paper.

“What on Earth are you writing?”

Her innocent smile is still in place as she looks up at me. “Well, being shady about your upbringing usually points to something darker underneath. I’m just making a note of that.”

I have to clamp down on the urge to stand up and put this interview to an end before we even get started.

Instead, I stay put and grit my teeth. “That’s absurd. It’s normal not to disclose your life history to a stranger who’s basically stalking you.”

She shrugs. “I’d tell anyone who asked about my childhood. People who hold back as much as you usually have a lot to hide.”

“Fine,” I spit, folding my arms. “Let’s play a game that’ll help me open up.”

A wary look washes over her features.

“I’m not going to propose you sit on my face.” I grin as she turns cherry red. “You answer a question of mine for any question you want to ask me.”

She looks confused. “What good is that going to do?”

“First, you get to be on the hot seat for once.” I reach for the mug of coffee in front of her and take a sip. “Second, I get to learn something about you too. It’s only fair.”

“If you want it that badly, alright then.”

“I have one other request though.” My shoulders tense up with the weight of my words. “No questions about my childhood.”

“Yeah, not now, but—”

“Ever.” The word comes out sterner than I wanted it to, but I do not regret it. This is nonnegotiable.

She stares at me for a few seconds. Then, surprisingly, she lets out a deep breath and moves on.

“Fine,” she agrees. “When did you start liking hockey?”

The question is a lot easier than I would have thought. “In my teens. I saw a game when I was twelve and decided to become a hockey player.”

“Did you tell your parents about your dream? Did they help you?”

My shoulders stiffen. “You’ve asked a question. I get to ask mine. What age is your son?”

The wariness in her gaze increases. Good. Maybe this game will work even quicker than I expected.

“I never told you I have a son.”

“You just look like a boy mommy.”

She lets out a sharp breath. “I don’t even want to know what that’s supposed to mean.” She pauses, as if weighing the pros and cons of going along with this game. “My son is six,” she says through gritted teeth. “My turn. Is your lack of long-term commitment to romantic relationships a choice, or do women find you utterly repulsive because you assume you know every little thing about them?”

Her anger washes over my fury like a soothing salve. Maybe this meeting is going to be a lot more enjoyable than I thought.

“I don’t assume. I know for sure.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

I feel a tiny twinge of amusement. “I was right about you having a son. I know you keep dressing in those absurd clothes because you are hiding something. And I know how much you want me to touch you.”

Her jaw drops to the floor.

“You’re ludicrous. And wholly inappropriate.” There is a slight tremble in her voice.

I sit straighter and lean in. “No, I’m not. You’ve not been touched right in a long time. I can tell. And if I had decided to lift your skirt and finger you back in that airport bathroom, you would have gone along with it happily. You are desperate for me. Sure, you feel guilty about it and cover it up with your questions, but you are not fooling me.”

“You don’t get to...”

I take her hand in mine, brushing my thumb over her knuckles and fixing my gaze on hers. It’s soft and small against my calloused skin. The rest of her protest seems to die in her throat.

I was wrong, I realize. Yeah, Harper is a difficult woman to break, but she is still a woman. And maybe it is not the worst thing in the world to break her. I’m more attracted to her than I would like, but as long as I remain in control, I could double the fun.

“Here’s the thing though.” I continue caressing her hand. Her skin is like velvet. “You don’t need to pretend with me. I see you.”

A shiver runs through her body, but she does not pull back. I’m not surprised. Harper is as obsessed with winning as I am.

“You know nothing about me,” she murmurs weakly.

“I’ll take that challenge.” I throw a cursory glance at the restaurant around us. We are tucked in a corner, away from the attention of everyone else. Still sitting down, I drag my chair toward the table. Harper lets out a small gasp as my knees brush hers.

A smile tugs the corner of my lips. “You wouldn’t be this scared of me getting closer if you weren’t worried about what you would do if I touched you.”

“I’m not scared.” Her eyes are filled with spite, along with something else.

Daring.

She is daring me to touch her. Daring me to make her lose control.

“You should be.”

I let go of her hand, placing both of mine on my knees. Slowly, I reach forward and brush one of her legs. Harper flinches, but she doesn't protest or pull away.

I have always enjoyed a challenge.

“You don't mind if I touch you this way, do you?” My eyes are not leaving hers as I reach over her unnecessarily low hem, slipping past her toned legs and sliding upward. I might like to play rough, but not without consent. Her eyes are trained on mine, and I go further, until I'm brushing against the lower part of her inner thigh.

There are beads of sweat on her forehead, but she manages to maintain a disdainful expression.

“So, what, you're going to finger me into forgetting you promised me an interview?”

“Would you like me to?”

She looks surprised at my question. But her mask does not fall. Yet.

“Classy.”

“I never claimed I was.”

She narrows her eyes. “You think you're quite skilled at using sex to get out of difficult conversations, aren't you? Is that why you keep fantasizing about my sex life? And you keep thinking you're right.”

“I'm right about you.” I glide my fingers even closer to her center. Harper shivers, but she stays put. “You can go off about how dirty I like to play, but it doesn't hide one simple fact.”

“What is that?”

“That you want this.” As I slide my fingers higher, I expect to brush against her panties, maybe even some granny underwear that I would have to push aside.

But I meet nothing.

She is completely bare underneath. No panties, no hair. My fingers are brushing against her slick, pulsing cunt. A roil of heat washes over me, while all the blood from my head rushes south, making me lightheaded.

A guttural groan escapes me as I stare back at her. She tilts her head and smirks. She is the very image of poise, and no one passing by would guess that she is this wet for me, and that I am inches from slipping my finger into her.

Something about her ability to maintain a straight face fills me with a need to break her.

I want to see her unravel.

Slowly, I brush against her opening. She parts her lips, panting, her hips moving toward me.

“You feel amazing,” I growl, not breaking eye contact. Her eyes are half closed, her lips parted, as she shamelessly grinds against my palm. “Is all this creaminess for me, baby?” I smile as I push my fingers into her, almost losing the last shred of control.

What I would give now if I could have her in a dark alley all to myself.

She cocks her head to one side, still panting, though trying to regain composure. “Are you about done? Or are you going to keep fingering me because you think it’ll make me forget how to do my job?”

It’s a harsh sentence, but her voice is in shreds.

I say nothing, instead sliding my fingers in and out of her, pinching her clit. Harper’s teeth are jammed together, like she is trying hard not to let out a traitorous sound. But her core is pulsing around my fingers, quickening. She is grinding her hips against my palm now, and I’m about to lose my mind imagining how she would feel wrapped around me.

“Let go for me, baby. Let me see you come undone for me.” I lean into her, whispering, as I graze my lips over her ear, biting her gently. Her pussy convulses around my fingers in a powerful orgasm. I stroke her clit, brushing it with my

thumb until she stops shivering. My dick is hard, and it takes all of my restraint not to whisk her back to my hotel room.

Her forehead is slick with sweat, and her entire face is redder than a tomato.

Slowly, I slip my fingers out of her, the thrill of victory rushing through me.

“You can’t keep doing this.” Harper’s eyes are filled with a crazed amount of confusion and lust. “I won’t let you distract me from my job by doing...”

Holding my gaze with hers, I raise my hand to my lips and lick her juice off one of my fingers.

She inhales sharply. Her gaze drops to my middle finger, still slick with her arousal, and I brush it across her lower lip.

“Next time, I want to see you fall apart on my cock.”

Lust fills her eyes as she swipes her tongue over her lips, and I’m about to explode.

Strange. I’m not quite in the habit of losing myself when trying to rid a woman of her control.

She is breathing hard, her collarbones rising and falling rapidly. She stares straight back at me, and we silently challenge each other in a staring contest.

Finally, with a sigh of defeat, she pushes back her chair and stands up.

“This interview is over,” she mutters before turning around and storming out of the café, her skirt fluttering behind her.

I watch her, the joy of winning surging up inside me. But there is another, even more powerful feeling.

The sting of loss.

Because I would rather hold Harper in my arms as she gets me to spill my deepest, darkest secrets than have her walk away from me.

CHAPTER 7



HARPER

“*I*t’s been ten days, Harper. There’s no way you haven’t got anything to report to me at all.”

I let out a ragged breath as I dump myself onto the huge hotel bed. We were staying put in Boston for over a week, and I’ve been getting used to the six-hundred-thread Egyptian cotton sheets.

But I could barely enjoy being stuck in a four-star hotel when I had nothing to report to my bosses.

“Walk me through it.” Dora’s voice sounds like she is chomping on something on the other end of the line, but I can also tell she is not happy.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I say honestly. “It isn’t going as well as I’d hoped.”

“What do you mean? Is he being tight-lipped or what?”

Goosebumps form on my skin as I recall Reggie’s fingers slipping between *my* lips. Stomach folding from the memory, I close my eyes as shame washes over me.

What is wrong with me? Why on earth did I let him finger me in a restaurant?

And how did I let myself enjoy it so much?

It has been three days since the attempted interview, and I thought of him every single day.

There is no denying that I am into him. Bad enough to let go of any ounce of self-respect I had and let him have his way

with me.

If I'm honest with myself, I was hoping for something like that. Why else did I decide to not wear panties before going to that café? A part of me wanted Reggie to make a move.

And he did.

“Harper?”

I startle at the sound of my name.

“Yeah, I got nothing,” I say. “Reggie refuses to speak to me.”

Dora lets out a frustrated sigh. “That doesn't mean you have nothing. You've been shadowing him for over a week.”

I reach across the bed to my bedside table for my trusty notepad. It takes less than a minute to flip through the pages.

“Sure, I've got a lot of interesting stuff here about him. I've witnessed a few of his temper tantrums, and I've noticed how much of a grumpy loner he is. He barely speaks to anyone.”

“Why don't you write something about that, then?”

I shake my head. “That's just more of the same old. Everyone knows Reggie Turner can be a bit of an asshole. I thought this profile was supposed to go deeper.” While I could not care less about branding Reggie as a sympathetic character to an audience, writing a half-assed profile is not going to bode well for my promotion.

“Harper,” Dora chides, and I can tell her frustration is mounting. “You can't write an in-depth profile on someone who doesn't want to open up to you. He's got to say something. And we can't wait around for him much longer. We're wasting precious resources by keeping you there.”

My heart misses a beat as fear ricochets through my body. Pulling me out of here would mean way more than losing the chance to write Reggie Turner's profile. It would also mean losing my job promotion and never getting Carl into a private school. And that means everything to me.

My brain goes into panic mode as I think of something, anything, to get Dora to not go through with pulling me out of here. I know she is right about my wasting resources.

My mind goes back to the day at the café, before Reggie had managed to make a fool out of me. His first ground rule had been for me to ask nothing about his past. I am aware that a lot of celebrities have awful childhoods, but most of them end up talking about it sooner or later.

But not Reggie. I spent my days in the room googling him frantically, and I pulled up blank each time. He has never spoken about his past. Every time I searched his last name, I didn't get anything either. I am convinced he changed his name somewhere down the line.

"I understand you're mad," I tell Dora now. "But there's a story here. I feel it in my bones. Reggie has something to hide, and it might take a lot of digging, but I'm going to uncover it sooner or later."

"I'm going to let you," Dora says. "If you tell me how you're planning to do that."

After trying everything in my power to make Reggie talk over the past few days, I came up with nothing. He is great at deflecting and initiating sexual conversations to avoid speaking about himself. And like a fool, I fall for it every single time.

There is absolutely no point pretending I can convince Reggie to fess up to me.

I have to do something else.

A lump forms in my throat as I recall Reggie's fingers brushing past my thighs and against my opening. I try not to remember how damned good it felt, focusing on the look on his face, the sound he had let out.

He'd been turned on, just as much as I had been.

Reggie distracted me by seducing me. He has done it twice now.

But two could play that game.

My heart rate quickens. I don't want to use myself as bait for this profile, but I will do anything to avoid being called back to New York and losing my promotion. Making sure my son enjoys the advantages of a good education is worth the embarrassment of trying to seduce Reggie to get him to talk.

And maybe I would only have to play this card once. All I need is enough information to get me started on the article. Once I know what he is hiding, it would be much easier to keep Dora happy for the next few weeks.

It would buy me some time to figure out my next move.

"Give me five days," I plead. "I'll come up with something. You don't need to know how. But I'll get the first article over to you before next week."

She lets out a ragged sigh. "Fine," she agrees. "Five days. And if I don't see something before that time eclipses, you're coming back home."

The line goes dead. I close my eyes, my heart hammering.

I'm about to do the unthinkable.

ONE HOUR LATER, I'm standing in front of La Torte, a private club and today's hangout spot for the New York Rangers. My palms are cold with sweat as I step past the bouncers and into the dimly lit club interior.

I catch sight of myself in a reflective mirror by the side of the main hall. I'm dressed in a tight, black, off the shoulder dress, my hair in loose waves that spill down my back.

I look... different. Sexy.

My stomach contracts with guilt as I look away from my image. As much as I hate being here and looking like this, I have to. I think of Carl and the future I envision for him.

I feel my stomach constrict with a different sort of emotion—I'm curious to hear Reggie talk about his childhood. But I also want to watch him fall prey to my seduction.

I feel the weight of stares the moment I push through the people on the dance floor. After years of going under the radar,

it's strange to be sexually desired by men. But I don't feel nearly as uncomfortable as I thought I would.

I feel... alive.

For the past seven years, I have spent my life hidden in plain sight. I have enjoyed taking care of Carl, but being around a pack of sweaty, wild people makes me remember what my twenties could have been if I hadn't become a mother.

It could have been pure, unabashed joy.

I remind myself that hasn't been me for a very long time.

I notice at least two men make a beeline toward me, but I push past the tiny crowd and make my way to the back, where I can scour the area reserved for the New York Rangers. It takes a few moments to spot Coach Ernest chugging down a beer at the bar.

"Hi," I say as I slide up to him.

He glances at me once, then does a double-take. "Woah, girl. You clean up nice."

I force a smile as I slip onto the seat next to his. "Tough day, huh?"

"Tell me about it," Ernest says, signaling the bartender for another bottle of beer. "Practice was a mess. Especially with the stunt Reg pulled."

My ears perk up instantly. "What did he do?"

"What didn't he do?" Ernest drawls as he snags the new bottle from the bartender. "Everything was fine until he got a weird text around break time. Turned him into a monster—and that's saying something, considering how he is on a normal day."

I need to know more. "Who do you think the text was from?"

Ernest shrugs. He seems to be phasing out of the conversation. "Who cares? Maybe it wasn't even a text. Reggie always gets super evil when we're in Boston."

“Really? Why?”

“Couldn’t tell you. But from what I know, he grew up here. This place holds a lot of memories for him.”

My eyes widen. I hadn’t known Reggie is from Boston. His foul mood at the airport is starting to make a whole lot more sense.

“Where’s he now?” I ask.

“Not seen him since practice. He’s probably at the hotel. He spends most of his time holed up there.”

I swallow. Knowing that I won’t have to seduce Reggie at the club tonight is a relief.

But a tiny part of me feels almost disappointed. I can’t join in the crowd of people having fun, but doing something risqué in a club is a huge part of being in your twenties. And I’d looked forward to exploring that part tonight, even if it was to fool Reggie.

“You should go find him at the hotel,” Ernest drawls. “He might want to see you.”

“I doubt that.”

Ernest shrugs and continues sipping on his beer, losing interest in the conversation.

I push through the crowd again and make my way outside the bar. The fresh air hits me like a spray of water, and I walk over to the next block where the hotel is.

The only emotion I feel right now is excitement.

I’m only a few steps away from the hotel entrance when a dark, hulking figure stalks out of it.

Reggie.

It’s too dark to make out the expression on his face, but I notice the set to his shoulders and the way he storms out of the place.

He looks even more furious than Ernest described. I watch him march across the sidewalk and slip into the driver’s seat of

a car. He pulls out onto the street.

I have no idea what Reggie is doing this late at night. Maybe he decided to go to a less popular bar to cool off. Or perhaps he is still dealing with whatever made him so furious this afternoon.

What I do know is that I have four days to get information out of him.

I cannot waste tonight.

I step up to the sidewalk and flag down a passing cab, just as Reggie's car is turns a corner. My nervousness is back, and my heart is racing, but I'm completely certain of what I'm about to do.

"Where to, miss?" the cab driver asks.

"Follow that car."

CHAPTER 8



REGGIE

I should be more furious and less numb.

But a big ball of acceptance has crushed all of my rage into dust.

I slip out of the car and walk toward the building in front of me. It looks like the exact replica of the one I'd had to go into a few years ago on the opposite end of town.

All police precincts are the same.

With every step I take, a new, horrible memory flashes through my mind.

The first time I was detained at the station.

Accompanying my mother to the precinct while she sported a busted lip.

The second time I was detained.

By the time I step into the dreary building and up to the front desk officer, every single shred of acceptance is gone, and the fiery rage in the pit of my belly is burning again, sending flickers of molten fury down every vein in my body.

I hate this. More than I have ever hated anything in my entire damned life.

Two officers are at the front desk. The man eyes my tattoos suspiciously as I step up to him.

"Here to report a crime?" he asks, sounding like he is already convinced I perpetrated one.

It's better to focus on the woman. "I'm here for a suspect that was booked earlier today."

She gives me a welcoming smile before turning back to her colleague. "I've got this, Hammel." He lets out a small grunt but nods and stomps away.

She turns back to me, her grin a little wider. "Sorry about him." She looks at me almost apologetically. "He can be a bit unfriendly. Who are you here for?"

"Grayson." My throat feels tight as I force out the name.

Her eyes widen, filled with something between disgust and fear.

"*Grayson?*" she croaks.

I nod. My pulse is thrumming wildly in my throat. Soon, it's going to become difficult to speak.

"Okay," she says, and I watch as she struggles—and fails—to keep the emotions on her face in check. She stares down at the screen in front of her and starts to drum on the keypad.

"Says here he was booked yesterday for being in possession of a deadly weapon," she says. "Bail's been set at forty grand."

For a fraction of a second, I consider what it would feel like to let him rot in here a little longer. But then, when I close my eyes to properly relish the moment, the image that pops up is the blue, white, and red shield of the New York Rangers. What would happen to the team if the news got out?

And worse still, what would happen to me if Harper got her manicured little fingers on it?

I open my eyes. I have no other choice.

"Fine. How do I pay?"

She takes me through the steps rather quickly. In a few moments, I'm forty thousand dollars poorer and a million times angrier.

"You can wait over there." She is suddenly stern and cool, nodding toward the waiting area, where a bunch of drunken

and sleep-deprived people are sprawled out on benches. “I’ll have my colleague bring him out to you.”

I ignore her, deciding to wait on the street. The last thing I want is to sit down next to a bunch of petty criminals, one of whom might have a smartphone and access to the internet. Maybe I would have considered it in the past—just as I would have considered letting him rot in jail—but the stakes are too high.

It’s my fucking last season. After a decade of back-breaking training, I need to find a way to keep comfortable for the rest of my life. And having a picture of me in a police station going viral would not help my already sour reputation.

Outside, with the fresh night air hitting my face, I take a deep breath. With peace and silence around me for the first time in a while, I finally admit the one thing I was suppressing all day.

Agreeing to the profile was a bad idea.

It was good in theory, of course. Having the press finally start to put out stories about ‘the real Reginald’ was going to help my reputation. Paul was right about that. But when I agreed to it, I hadn’t considered two variables.

One, the fact that they would send about the most infuriating woman in existence to write it. A woman that is so maddening that I care more about fucking her than speaking to her.

And two, that the first city we were heading to was Boston. Maybe if we kicked off somewhere else, it would have been much easier to fake a sunny personality so I could give Harper something positive to write about.

But, through some twisted form of misfortune, my last season has to start here. Where it all began.

“Reginald.”

The voice comes from behind me, startling me out of my thoughts. The moment it hits my ears, a shard of ice finds its way past my rib cage and into the direct center of my chest.

I'm surprised his voice can still do that, after all these years.

Hunching my shoulders, I take a deep breath and turn around.

Grayson is standing in front of me. He is leaner than I remember, and he is sporting a new tattoo of huge wings that stretch the width of his collarbone. But his dark eyes bear the same glint in them as he steps up to me.

It has been two years since we saw each other last, and even longer since I lived in perpetual fear of him. And yet, my throat knits together even tighter than it did when I had to say his name.

With steely determination, I pry my jaw open. I'd decided decades ago as a kid to work hard enough so no one could ever make me speechless and weak again. And I'd definitely succeeded. No one would ever make it impossible for me to have my voice heard.

Not even the kingpin of the Boston street gangs.

"What, no hug?" he drawls in a raspy voice, the glint growing larger.

Hate wells up in my heart. I keep my fists at my side. "You owe me."

He raises his brows, looking amused. "No one forced you to come up here and bail me out. Would have gotten someone else to do it."

Having a conversation with him is about the last thing I want to do, but his lack of appreciation grates me to my core.

"Before or after you ruined my games with your foolishness?" I ask.

He steps up to me. Twenty years ago, that action would have caused me to flee with my heart in my mouth.

Now, I remain exactly where I am. We are the same height these days. Makes it a whole lot easier.

"Did you just call me foolish, boy?"

My heart is pounding fury through my veins. “I’m not your damned boy,” I say, meeting his gaze. “You know damn well what you were doing, causing a ruckus while I was in town. You could’ve laid low for a couple of weeks.”

The glint disappears from his eyes. He looks enraged.

“You’re a fucking disappointment,” he says. “And I’ve not so much as thought about you since the last time I saw you.”

It has been decades since I detached myself emotionally from him. Yet, I feel the tiniest dull throb in the center of my heart.

“Great,” I say, brushing him aside. “The feeling is mutual. As for being a disappointment, I’ll take that as a compliment. You know, since it’s coming from a drug dealer who’s spent half his life in prison.”

His eyes flash with fury. I expect what is going to happen even before he knows he’s going to do it.

Grayson swings at me. I step back, and his fist smashes nothing but empty air in front of my face. He lets out a loud bellow and lunges for me. But before he can lay his hands on me, he has been flattened on the ground by three officers, writhing under their combined bulk.

“Really freaking great, Grayson,” one of them spits at him. “We’re going to book you for assault now. Do I need to read you your Miranda rights? Seems like you should have memorized them already.”

He is still grunting loudly as he looks at me. I stare at him for a second longer, allowing myself to remember how pleased my younger self would have been to see him this way, facing justice.

Now though, I feel nothing.

Until I turn around.

A woman is standing by my rental car. She is dressed in a deliciously tight black dress, her wavy hair coiling around her breasts, almost reaching her waist. My first thought is how

damn sexy she looks. How, in fact, she could be the very thing I need to wipe the bad taste of tonight away.

But then, I see her face, eyes bulging with shock, mouth slack.

I would recognize this girl anywhere. Especially when she is clutching a tiny notepad in her left palm.

My gut squeezes in on itself and rolls over.

It was horrible having to see Grayson again, having to use my hard-earned money to bail him out of his stupidity, just for him to get booked again not even five minutes later. And while that is awful in and of itself, this is worse.

I march toward her, surprised by the calmness wrapping itself around my rage. I don't know how Harper managed to follow me here or what her plan was. I don't even know if she had gotten wind of who Grayson is and decided to do her own digging. Hell, I have no damn idea what she saw.

What I do know is that she has managed to uncover my deepest and darkest secret.

And she is most likely going to use it.

She is only a few feet from me now, and something about my expression must scare her because there is pure terror on her face.

“Reggie,” she starts, sounding less certain and more sympathetic than I have ever heard her. “I’m so sorry if I—”

This is what I can't stand. The damned sympathy. The blasted pity.

“Congratulations,” I say, unable to stop my voice from trembling with the weight of my anger. “You now know who my father is.”

CHAPTER 9



HARPER

*H*is father.

Not in a million years would I have imagined that following Reggie with a stupid plan to seduce him would lead me to witness this scene.

He is mere inches from me, but I don't dare turn and look at him, even to mumble an apology. Not when he is holding the steering wheel as though he is about to rip it off the dashboard and is going at least ten miles an hour over the speed limit.

Anger is seeping from his every pore. Rightfully so. I expected him to be way more upset. The look in his eyes when he spotted me and stormed over was chilling. I half-expected him to yell at me. But all he did was order me to get into the car. I did since I needed a ride back to the hotel anyway.

Right now, though, as he grips the steering wheel with deathly force, I'm starting to wonder if it might have been wiser to call an Uber.

I think back to everything I witnessed tonight. I was beyond confused when Reggie stopped at the police station. I assumed he was there to report a crime. But when he came out ten minutes later followed by a man who looked like him—except for the fact that Reggie is a good fifty pounds heavier—I was shocked. At first, it did not occur to me that this could be his father. Nothing about my extensive research on Reggie suggested that he was still alive, or that Reggie even knew him at any point in his life.

But not only did he know his father, I could tell that they had a troubled relationship. Even before the old man tried to throw a punch at him. Reggie's shoulders had trembled slightly the moment the man walked out, and his fists had been clenched during the whole conversation.

He hated him.

I look at Reggie from the corner of my eyes. He is staring straight ahead. Over the past few weeks, everything Reggie did infuriated me.

But today, I feel an emotion I'm not used to when I'm around him.

Pity.

I was right. There is so much more to uncover about Reggie Turner than anyone could imagine. With what I witnessed, I had enough to write a piece that would blow Dora's Louboutins off her dainty little feet.

But there is only one problem.

Reggie is fast becoming much more than another subject I need to fleece for information.

There is a reason why he didn't want to talk about his life. It was much darker than I could have ever imagined. Not exactly the kind of easy read my bosses hoped for.

And I don't want to use his story without his absolute permission.

The tension between us is crackling, making me slightly nervous.

Still, I can't decide to do anything else. My job is on the line, the one that will be wrenched away from me in a few days if I don't do well.

"I'm sorry." I hate how my voice is coming out in a terrified squeak.

Reggie's grip on the steering wheel becomes, if even possible, tighter. But he doesn't look at me or respond.

I heave a deep breath. I'm not certain if his silence is good or bad, or whether it means it should be easier to say what I really want to. Still, I give it a shot.

"I had no idea about your father." It's hard to maintain a conversational tone when Reggie looks like he is inches from snapping at me, but I manage it anyway.

Grayson Green. In the few moments before Reggie turned around and spotted me, I had pulled out my phone and typed 'Grayson, Boston' into the search bar of the Google home screen. I expected to have to comb through at least five pages to find the man Reggie was speaking to, but he was the first hit.

A drug kingpin. One of the biggest in Boston.

I glance at Reggie just in time to notice his muscles tensing in response to my words. I suppose I should be terrified of speaking because of his silence, but my pity for him only soars. What would it have been like for Reggie to grow up in that neighborhood, with that father? It must have been awful. Surely it has contributed to him turning out this self-reliant and emotionally unavailable.

I take another deep breath. The wise thing to do right now is to keep quiet. Even a child would know that.

But I'm running on a tight deadline. I can't wait for Reggie to let go of his anger before I say what I really want to.

Gripping tightly to my knees with both palms, I let the words out of me in a rush.

"I think you should let me write about it."

His entire forearm trembles. He swerves off the main road so suddenly a strangled yell escapes my lips. He drives toward the thicket of bushes on the side of the road, speeding down the bumpy lane until we are so far away from the main road, I can see nothing but trees when I look around. Then he turns off the ignition and faces me.

Finally, I have his attention.

But at what cost?

His eyes are smoldering. “I should obliterate you,” he says, perfectly enunciating each word.

A chill runs through me, but I ignore it. Holding on to whatever courage I have left, I raise my chin to his face. “I know you think I’m being stupid, but—”

“You actually followed me there,” he says, his voice a deathly whisper. His fists are trembling again. “You had the audacity to watch. You should be getting down on your knees to apologize for that level of nosiness. And yet, you’re telling me to let you write about it?”

I would be more scared of being in a forest alone with a furious man if I didn’t know a little bit about Reggie. Sure, he barely had any positive press about him, but the one thing I have never seen him accused of is laying a hand on a woman.

I open my mouth to say something, but then, I notice his burning gaze dipping lower, sweeping over my bare shoulders and the dress that clings to me like a second skin.

My breath catches in my throat. There is every chance I could vex him into laying his hands on me in different way.

An image storms my mind. One of Reggie angrily thrusting into me, over and over, while I’m compliant in his arms, letting him expel his wrath.

The realization hits me with a sharp pang. I wouldn’t mind that at all.

After talking to Dora, I was convinced that I had to dress this way to get Reggie to talk. He is a highly sexual man, and there is no other way to get his attention than to look like someone he would give his attention to.

But I don’t have to do this. I *want* to do this.

Watching Reggie as he undresses me with his furious gaze makes me feel as excited as I did being in La Torte. Or maybe even more. It makes me feel the way I did the night I conceived my baby with a stranger. Like the world was full of endless possibilities and that anything could happen. Like the man who is in front of me could lead me to experience the greatest pleasures imaginable.

My breath is shallow as my eyes lock with his. Him being good at sex is a no-brainer—there is no other reason why dozens of women would unashamedly throw themselves at him everywhere he goes. But when I started this job, I'd promised myself not to let him claim me. It would be too risky, letting someone like Reggie, someone who probably gets bored of a woman halfway through fucking her for the first time, have me. What if we do it once and he decides he is sick of looking at my face? That would stop me from doing my job. Also, I want to be a challenge, the one person who would not fall prey to his charms, no matter what.

Even when I set out tonight, I was determined not to sleep with him. Maybe I would tease him a little, grind up against him while he distractedly blurted out things from his past. But definitely no sex.

Though now, it looks like I have gotten more than what I have bargained for. Enough to write a killer article that would blow Dora's socks off.

I just need to convince him to let me do it.

And I highly doubt just teasing him is going to be enough.

My heart is pounding as I look into his face. Maybe I could get this done by reasoned, passionate arguments. Maybe we won't have to go... *there*. Reggie needs this profile to go well as much as I do, maybe even more.

"I understand you're angry." I keep my voice as low as I can so he doesn't get irritated enough to cut in again. "I'm really sorry. And I swear to you, I never intended to stalk you and intrude. I never even knew you grew up in Boston or that your family..."

A dark shiver runs through him. "He's not my family," he growls.

Shit.

"Sorry," I say quickly, pushing the word out of my mouth. "All I'm saying is that I never dreamed I would see that. I'm really, really sorry. You're right. As a journalist, it's not my place to stalk you for information or force you to divulge

things that you don't want to. That goes against our code of ethics."

Reggie stares at me for what seems like a long time. He looks as angry as he did when he drove us down here, but I notice that his fists are no longer shaking.

"Wait," I say, just as he starts to reach for the ignition.

He turns toward me, his shoulders tensing up.

"I still think you should let me write the story."

I have only a few seconds to convince him before he orders me not to speak again, so my words come out in a rush. "I know you hate people knowing about your life and you changed your last name to avoid being associated with him. But the public knowing things about you doesn't automatically make you appear weak or less terrifying. It just means they can relate with you more."

I pause for breath, expecting him to cut in.

He doesn't.

I'm not even sure if he is still listening at this point, but I continue to ramble on. "I need you to remember that this isn't just about what you might be comfortable with. It's about making sure you secure a future outside of hockey once you retire. No one gets better brand deals than relatable athletes. I've seen it happen over and over. Someone gets candid about a personal aspect of their life, and their fame blows out of proportion. That's what your agent wants for you, and that's exactly what you're going to get if you let me write this article. And you can trust that I'm not going to butcher you. I'm going to keep it tasteful."

As the last word flies out of my mouth, I deflate, out of breath. I said everything I could think of. It's up to Reggie to decide whether he will accept my help.

"You literally just apologized for stalking me. And now you carry on by trying to convince me to let you monetize my history?"

“I didn’t apologize for stalking you,” I say quickly. “Because I didn’t stalk you. I told you, when I set out to find you today, I never thought I’d be seeing that. I apologized that I invaded your privacy. But I still need you to know that it’s in your best interest to have us publish about this.”

“You mean your best interest.”

I feel a tiny spark of irritation. “This is not about me.”

His eyes grow cooler. “Sure. You’re this intent on getting news about me because you’re that desperate to see me have a financially secure future. I’m sure there’s nothing in it for you, like a bonus or a promotion.”

My irritation increases. I have no reason to be sour at him, but I hate his uncanny ability to guess precisely what I’m going through without the slightest bit of effort. “Sure, I’ve got something to gain from this,” I admit. “But it’s more about you.” I pause, wondering whether to divulge this information or not and finally deciding on it. “You need this profile to look good. I’m going to write it in a way you’re going to—”

“What then?” he says, interrupting me.

I blink. “What do you mean?”

His gaze finds the cleft between my breasts. My heartrate doubles.

“What were you expecting to see? You keep repeating you came to find me but did not expect to see this. What did you expect to see, then?”

A half-drunk, pissed-off man who would be so distracted by how I look he’d volunteer information about his past.

I swallow hard. It’s hard to think of what to say while his gaze glides like a feather over the curve of my naked shoulder.

“I just wanted to talk to you about the profile.” I have to force the words out of my throat. “I saw you getting into a car, and I thought you were going to a different bar, so...”

“You wanted to talk to me about the profile?” he says, his gaze still fixated on me.

My nipples bead under his gaze. It's getting really difficult to focus.

"Yeah," I breathe, noting the new, hungry expression in his eyes. He looks like he is about to pull down the top hem of my dress. Or maybe I'm just hoping he will do it, imagining what it would feel like.

My throat closes up. Something about that visual, about trying to convince Reggie to let me write about him while I'm half-naked, makes me heat up. It pleases me. Intensely.

But Reggie doesn't make a move. He merely keeps staring.

And somehow, his inaction leaves me even more frustrated. I want him to do something already.

Or maybe he is not going to do anything. He already fingered me in an open coffee shop, but he wasn't nearly as upset back then. Maybe Reggie Turner is pissed enough to not think of sex right now. That thought fills me with some frustration.

You do not want to have sex with Reggie.

Or so I keep telling myself.

But when I'd slipped on this dress earlier in the evening, I'd expected that there would be something going on between us tonight. Maybe a little bit of touching. Maybe he would make me unravel again.

I have not been held by a man in a long time, and I am allowed to be excited at the prospect of it happening again, even if it is someone as downright annoying as Reggie.

He is still staring at me, as if waiting to pounce. His gaze drops and lingers on my nipples, beading underneath the fabric. Reggie is probably aware that they were not hard a few minutes ago.

He knows the effect he has on me, and it turns my brain to mush. Still, I force myself to remember the job I was sent here to do.

"My boss just reminded me that I am expected to submit something." My words sound strange after almost a minute of

silence between us. “I needed to see you and get you to understand the urgency of starting on the profile.”

“Does the real reason you wanted to see me have anything to do with that dress?”

My throat feels like it just caught fire. “What?” I croak.

Finally, he reaches out and runs a finger across its top hem, somehow managing to not touch my skin.

A mix of frustration and deep desire rises in me. Right now, I’m not sure what I want more—for him to touch me, or for him to let me write about his father.

Maybe both.

“You’ve been wearing Regency era outfits over the last two weeks,” he murmurs, his voice causing me to shiver. “And today, you come to me like this. You’re practically begging me to sit you on my face.”

My heart is pounding even faster now. He is right.

Even though my body is aching for his touch, I find it impossible to let myself submit to him. To let myself admit how much I want him.

And not just for the article. For myself.

“No,” I whisper.

His eyes are darker. “No?”

“No,” I repeat, my voice an octave higher. “I didn’t wear this for you. I knew you were going to be in a club, and I needed to dress the part, maybe have a little fun. But I just needed to talk to you about the profile.”

He releases his hold on the steering wheel. And for the first time since the conversation began, he turns fully toward me.

“In that case,” he says. “Get out.”

CHAPTER 10



REGGIE

This damned woman.

Her consistent disregard for my boundaries is infuriating. I was going to use that as leverage, maybe demand that she be replaced with a different reporter. A man or a woman in her forties.

But the moment I saw her nipples harden underneath that dress, I became pissed off at another person.

Myself.

Being in Boston is hell. And because I am so distracted, I missed on the obvious thing that could have made it bearable. I should have spent all my free time with Harper rather than avoiding her. Teasing her, playing around with her, letting her take notes while she sat on my lap.

Which is exactly what she should be doing now.

But I'm also angry that her putting on that dress had nothing to do with me.

Or maybe she is lying.

Right now, she is staring at me with wide eyes. "You want me to get out?" she asks, sounding like she doesn't believe me.

"Get out of the car," I repeat, slower, to avoid any ounce of confusion. "Now."

She gulps, looking downright humiliated, even a little hurt.

But it doesn't occur to me to back down.

She stalks out, leaving the car door open, faint light spilling on the empty field. I open the driver's side and slip out of my seat as well. The headlights are on, so I can see her in a brighter light than I could back at the precinct.

She looks even better than I thought.

My eyes roam her body. She is dressed in an elegant, off the shoulder number that leaves her arms and shoulders bare and accentuates the graceful curve of her neck. The fabric clings just right, hinting at the flare of her hips and stopping at her knees. She is mind-blowingly sexy and classy at the same time.

A groan of need spills from my lips as my gaze comes to rest on her protruding nipples. She was definitely lying about not dressing for me. Every cell in my body tells me she chose this outfit to seduce me. There is no other explanation that makes sense.

Still, thinking of her wearing this with the intention of talking to another guy, after the hell she put me through over the last few days, is unbearable.

As I cross over to her in a few steps, she looks up at me, a mix of fear and confusion plastered on her face.

"I apologized for intruding while you were bailing out your father," she mutters. "But if you want me to walk back to the hotel in these heels, then—"

"I've got another sort of punishment in mind." I slip my arm around her waist and pull her roughly to me.

She takes a series of deep breaths. I can tell how nervous she is. Still, being Harper, she does a good job of concealing it.

"You can't punish me," she snorts, making a good show of sounding furious. "I already apologized. And what I want from you now is your permission to write about what I saw."

But I can't let her write an article documenting my personal business. It's not possible.

My anger at her, and at the whole fucked up situation, simmers down, eclipsed by the realization that I have Harper

in my arms, in a dress that I could rip off her in one swoop.

She appears to take my silence as permission to push further. “Reggie, this will work for you. I know it in my bones. I’m not going to publish any names or go too deep into what I saw. But it’ll make people like you more, learning about who you are deep down. You already said you hoped you’d be able to convince me to write some lies about you. There’s no reason for you to be disturbed by the truth that much. You know, studies have proven that readers of magazines usually forget the real gist of an article about an hour after reading it. You know what they do remember, though? What they feel about you. And that’s going to persist after—”

“God, woman, do you ever stop talking? Just shut up.” It was getting impossibly harder for me to think with her rambling on.

She looks furious. “What did you just say?”

“Shut the hell up.” I smirk. It feels good to throw her off kilter. And while I would like to push that button even farther, there is something else I would much rather be doing right now.

Her face goes blotchy red. “How dare you!”

Her fearlessness is impressive. She is in a forest with an angry guy that she barely knows, the son of a drug pin, and it doesn’t occur to her to be in the least accommodating.

“Are you wearing panties?”

I watch as she completely loses track of what she was about to say. “What?”

“Are you wearing underwear?”

She squirms in my arms, trying to get out of my grasp. I hold on to her even tighter, her movements turning my dick to steel. Finally, she lets out a spent sigh and gives up.

“That’s none of your business.”

“It is if you’re going to pretend you didn’t walk out of your hotel room today thinking I’d like seeing you in that dress. You’re a good liar, Harper Morris. But even you cannot

deny that, in any given moment we've been together, you've wanted me to touch you."

She swallows hard. "You're out of your mind."

Yet another thing about Harper that makes me want her so badly is her inability to back down. From anything.

It would be easy to be with any other girl and forget about her five minutes later. But Harper is different. She is downright addictive. Chasing her makes me almost forget the upsetting conversation I just had with Grayson.

She is exactly what I need.

The bottom hem of her dress is a few inches away from my free arm. I reach out and hold on to it for a second, before I push it up without warning.

"Hey!" Harper objects.

I run my fingers across her ass cheeks, searching for underwear with my palm. But I only feel bare skin—and a hard-on screaming in my pants.

Harper lets out another sound of protest at my touch, but this one is a strangled moan.

"Nothing," I growl, letting my fingers glide away from her ass and around, to the front of her dress. Here, I press them against the wetness around her pussy. The tension in my body vanishes as I feel her trembling clit.

Harper lets out a real, loud moan this time.

"You're naked again. Because, deep down, you're a little cock tease, aren't you?"

Harper's gaze is flushed as she stares at me, unable to hide the blazing desire in her eyes.

I spin her around so her bare ass is up against my front. She automatically lets out another sound of pleasure, pushing her ass against me, rubbing herself against my straining erection.

As much as I want to rip myself free and plunge into her, I first want to do something else.

Make her squirm.

I take a step back, so she has no access to me anymore. It's impossibly difficult to focus on anything else when her round ass is this close, but I manage it anyway.

“Admit it.”

She twists her neck around, so she can glare at me. “Admit... *what?*” she huffs, looking only half as frustrated as I want her to feel.

“Admit that you're a damn tease. That you wore this outfit for me.”

Her cheeks grow even redder. “Again, you're out of your mind.”

I wrap one hand around her waist, snaking the other between her legs. She is hot and wet, and I swipe my finger along her opening.

“You're so wet, baby. I know this is all for me,” I growl as I plunge one of my fingers into her. She screams in pleasure, and I feel her pussy walls clench, desperately begging me to stay put.

“How is it that you're a grown woman, a mother, who somehow always forgets to wear panties? At least when I'm around.” I push another finger into her, twirling it deliciously.

I know it's a struggle for her to speak while I'm pumping my fingers, but she manages it anyway.

“I told you,” she spits through gritted teeth. “I really just wanted to ask you about the profile. Wanted to know if you'd be okay talking about your childhood.”

“Stop lying.” The tension is building up inside me again, partly because she keeps refusing to admit how much she wants me. I've never had something like this happen to me before. I had no idea I would be this bothered by it.

But I'm also irritated by how much she keeps bringing up the profile. The last thing I want to remember is how angry I am about the fact that she witnessed the conversation between Grayson and me.

Or maybe it's the exact thing I need to remember, I think as I continue playing with her, pinching her clit gently.

Harper lets out a strangled gasp. "I'm not lying," she hisses. "And we should really talk about the profile." Freeing herself from my grasp, she steps away and turns back to me. "I really need you to understand why it's important for me to write about what I saw. And—"

I close the gap she created between us in one step, trapping her against the car. Holding on to her top hem, I squeeze a bunch of the material in my fist.

"And I need you to understand something," I say, my tension spilling into frustration. "It's really fucking hard to hear you or even take you seriously when you're dripping wet and begging me to take you. Or when your tits are looking like that." I yank the hem downward, her breasts spilling out.

I stare down at them. They are big and full, looking like they would overflow out of my palms. Her nipples are round, pink and hard. I was never the sort of man who was into breasts. But for the first time in a long while, I feel a burning need to suck her until she is screaming my name in pleasure.

Harper gasps, shock and unbridled desire on her face. She is as good as naked, with her dress bunched around her waist and no underwear on, exposed in the middle of nowhere. But then again, she makes no effort to cover herself from my gaze.

I lean over her, my face a few inches from hers. "Isn't this what you wanted?" I smirk as I graze my lips over her neck, making her shiver. "For me to get distracted by the way you look, so that I ask you to write the profile because I am that desperate to have you? Surprised this is not going exactly as you intended?"

She stares back at me, guilt seeping into her fury-filled eyes. "That's not..."

I take hold of one of her nipples and pinch it between my fingers. Harper's words turn into another moan of pleasure, but her defiant gaze remains on my face.

“You’re out of luck,” I say decidedly, spinning her again. She complies far easier than she has to any of my other instructions, and I know why. She is burning for me, and for once, she doesn’t care anymore whether I will let her write the profile.

I can work with that.

I push my palm against the middle of her back, guiding her to bend over the hood of the car so her ass is up against my crotch once more. I let out a sigh as I feel the contact of her hot pussy against my clothed erection.

I cannot wait to be inside her.

I unbuckle myself faster than I would have thought possible, a tiny ounce of excitement spreading in me. Can’t say I have been this eager to fuck a girl in at least five years, but watching Harper being subject to my whims after having to hear her run her mouth for what seemed like centuries gives me an obscene sort of pleasure.

“What are you doing?” she gasps. There is no trace of anxiety in her voice. Instead, she sounds... expectant.

“I suppose you’re not on birth control, are you?”

“I... I am.”

“Good. I always wear protection, but there’s no way I’ll wear it with you,” I say, pressing my hard, naked dick against the crack of her ass.

“Now tell me that you want this, Harper.” She presses her ass into me, desperately searching for friction, but I back away and lean over her, biting her ear.

“What? Please, Reggie.”

“Say it, Harper. I know you have a kink and love playing hard, but I need to hear your words before we go on. Say it.”

“Please... Please, Reggie. I want you. I want this.”

“Good,” I hiss, as I slowly push myself through the lips of her pussy. Harper lets out a yell as I fit myself inside her, going inch by slow inch.

I bend down and whisper against her ear, “Relax, baby. I’m going to make you feel good.”

But she takes a long time to accept me. She has clearly not done this in a long time. Maybe even since her son was born.

That awareness drives shocks of pleasure up my spine. I lean back before I drive myself into her, slowly at first. Harper lets out a scream, but then, I’m buried in her to the hilt, moving carefully in and out.

I take both of her hands and pin them behind her back.

“Reggie,” she gasps.

“Say that again,” I order as I push into her again. Normally, I don’t care much for gentleness, but I want to make sure her first time with me is good.

But as I watch her writhe in pleasure, I realize that she wants more.

“Reggie,” she mutters, obeying my command like it is second nature to her.

That sends a second wave of pleasure through me. I push into her again and again, going harder and faster each time. Harper screams my name with each thrust, filling me with a rush of emotions that I never thought possible. Unpinning her hands, I reach for her tits, tugging at her nipples.

Harper writhes even harder now, raising herself up so her back is flush against my front. Letting go of one of her breasts, I wrap my fingers around her neck. I squeeze lightly as I continue to move in and out of her. She is literally weeping from pleasure, and seeing her this way makes me go mad with ecstasy.

“Say it,” I whisper, my voice hot and heavy in her ear.

“Anything,” she mutters, every inch of her body trembling.

“Say how much you want me. That you dressed for me tonight.”

Harper swallows, her lips pursed tightly together.

I slam into her, harder than before.

“*Fuck*, Reggie,” she gasps, doubling over from the pleasure.

I let my other hand trail away from her breasts, going lower. Finding her clit, I run one of my fingers over it.

She screams again.

“Say... it,” I demand, my frustration causing me to slam into her again.

“Okay,” she gulps. “I... I wanted you to like me in this dress.”

“I need more, beautiful,” I say, now squeezing her clit between two of my fingers.

“I... wanted you. I wanted you to touch me again. Like you did at the coffee shop.”

I let out a sigh that releases most of my frustration.

“More,” I order. I reduce my movements to a slow thrust, going in and out of her as slowly as I can.

“I wanted you to do that.” Her voice is so low, I have to strain to hear her.

Because she is embarrassed about what she is admitting. And she is saying it anyway because I’m asking her to.

This night feels even better than I would have imagined.

“Do what?”

“Rip my dress off,” she mutters.

I thrust into her suddenly, giving no warning.

“And,” she gasps, “I wanted more. When you said you were going to punish me. Thought you were going to ask me to get on my knees and suck you.”

Fuck.

“We’ll do that next time, baby.” Especially if she keeps yapping about that damned profile.

I close my eyes against the surge of pleasure that comes rushing through me, but there is no point. Her pussy is milking

me, pulsating and demanding. With one last thrust, my peak overtakes me, and I spill myself into her. Harper lets out a strangled yell, falling backward onto me as she convulses around me. I grip on to her clit tightly, letting her scream of pleasure linger in my ears.

I pull away from her, half-expecting to be done with her.

But as I spin her around, I feel the stirrings of desire again as I look down at her breasts. Wondering what it would be like to slide my dick between them.

“I guess I’ll have to keep doing this to you if you keep pissing me off.”

It’s a promise I have never made a woman.

But Harper is barely listening. She is not even looking at me. Her gaze is focused on my groin, the car lights dancing over her features.

I try to make a joke. “You look like you haven’t seen one in a while.”

She blinks and looks away, pulling up her dress and covering herself. “I think we should go,” she says abruptly, turning around and getting into the car.

I stare after her, knowing exactly how she feels. Because that was how I felt when I had sex with the flight attendant. And with many other women.

Like I was done with the person for good.

This is the first time I’m the one on the receiving end of this treatment.

And it hurts more than a punch to the balls.

CHAPTER 11



HARPER

Taking a deep breath, I cradle the phone to my face, yearning for even a hint of Carl's scent. Although I know it's impossible, it is not going to stop me from trying. The ache of missing him intensifies with each passing day.

"Mommy," he cries through the phone, sending my longing for him into a fever pitch. "How are you? Grandma got me coloring books at the store today."

Hearing his voice brings tears to my eyes. "That's great," I chirp, trying my hardest to sound cheerful. "I'm glad you're having fun. What did you eat today?"

Carl goes off about his dinner. I hang on to his every word, already wondering if I will be able to get through the next few weeks without seeing him. That was more than a month to go, and every day is harder without my son beside me.

"I'm going to give the phone to Grandma now," he jabbers after going on about his meal for a full five minutes. "She wants to speak to you."

"Alright," I mutter, feeling defeated. A million phone calls aren't going to fill the void. What I need is for him to be next to me. For profiles that require extended stays, I've seen the bosses at *PulsePixel* arrange for families to be flown in and stay on-site for a week or two. But I can't exactly ask for that favor, not when I have not sent in a single word about Reggie to Dora.

“How’s the job going?” my mom asks the moment she gets on the phone.

“Err...” I close my eyes as the earth-shattering orgasm I endured under Reggie comes back to haunt me. It happened a good twelve hours ago, but I am still sore, feeling every inch of him pressed inside me.

I have not felt this way in... *ever*.

For the first time, I really understand why those girls keep humiliating themselves for him.

He is kind of worth being embarrassed for.

After what happened last night, I should feel better than I have in a very long time.

But I don’t. Instead, I’m jittery.

Because I glimpsed that huge vase-shaped birthmark on his thigh.

“Harper?”

I blink, remembering what my mom just asked.

“Yeah,” I say. “It’s going well.”

In my defense, I’m only half-lying. Unable to sleep after he dropped me off at my room, I started outlining the first piece of the series. I only meant to write a few notes, but a few hours in, I was still going strong. The words kept pouring out of me, enough to shut Dora up for at least a week, and more than enough to keep my job safe.

There is only one problem. The fact that my article is entirely based around what I witnessed last night.

And that Reggie hasn’t given the go-ahead for me to use his pain that way.

I’m completely at a loss about what to do. Seducing Reggie fell flat. Sure, he seemed more likely to listen to me when he was turned on, but the problem with that is the fact that I got distracted too.

“Can’t wait for you to come back home. Carl misses you. He kept talking about how much fun you had the last time you gave him a bath. Told me about his lucky charm birthmark, how you said it made him unique, and that no one else has that.”

I feel a sharp jerk in the center of my stomach.

Birthmark. The large, vase-shaped patch of skin that no one in our family but Carl has.

The exact same mark I saw on Reggie’s thigh.

It means nothing.

A million people have skin discolorations. The fact that Reggie and Carl have the same one means nothing.

There is nothing to be worried about. Still, I can’t help the nervous, fluttering feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“I miss Carl too” I say, deciding to focus on my son.

When I get off the phone, I go to my computer and print out the full article. I have no idea if I’m going to convince Reggie to agree to let me publish it, but I have to try. There is no other choice, especially since, in three days, Dora is going to cancel this whole project if I don’t show progress.

Today is an off day for the team, and I know Reggie is going to be in his room brooding. I pick my outfit carefully, a long pair of pants and a loose-fitting blouse. This time, I also make sure to wear underwear, choosing a plain white cotton pair.

I will obsess about the birthmark later. Right now, I need to convince Reggie Turner to let me publish the article.

Seizing the printout, I slip out of my room. I’m aware that I should be slightly nervous about seeing him while I’m still shaking from the weight of last night’s orgasm. Instead, I feel slightly jarred.

Why is that birthmark so hard to displace from my mind? Sure, Carl has something similar. But it has nothing to do with me, with us. I need to let it go.

My heart starts to pound slightly faster as I exit the elevator and head for Reggie's room. I almost welcome the feeling. I would rather be nervous to meet him than bothered about some dumb mark.

I knock on his door, my heart already racing with the gravity of this meeting. My job, my son's future, all depend on me getting Reggie to say yes.

The door creaks open, and the mountain of a man is standing in front of me with a loose towel tied around his waist.

My abdomen contracts involuntarily as I stare up at his muscled, sculpted body. In addition to the sleeve tattoos on both arms, he has one of a bleeding heart on his left breast and one of an arrow on his right. His abs are toned to perfection, standing out like six bulging bricks.

He looks good enough to eat.

My gaze shifts to his dark eyes, which are blatantly caressing my body. He smirks as he registers my buttoned-up clothes.

"Surprised to see you here," he says evenly, taking a step back so I can come in.

I hesitate for a fraction of a second. I'm definitely here for business, but Reggie is almost fully naked, and I don't want to end up with him bending me over the nearest flat surface.

Again.

My cheeks are in flames as I remember last night. He knew all along that I enjoyed giving up control. He had my hands pinned to my back and me completely underneath his command. I felt more alive than I have in a long time.

A huge part of me is hoping we get to do that again.

But only after I make him agree to the article.

I take a step into his room. I don't know what I'm expecting, but it's not this: a judiciously clean space with a large balcony that oversees the swimming pool of the hotel.

As much as I want to comment on his tidiness, I force myself to stay on point. I do not want Reggie to think I came over for an encore.

“Why would you be surprised? You know I want you to let me write about your history. I told you this only last night.”

In between moaning and telling you how much I wanted you.

Reggie seems to disregard everything I said. “I’m surprised because you were clearly riding the regret carousel. Thought it would chew you up so badly, you’d take the first flight out of Boston today.”

I raise my brows and chuckle. “Regret carousel?”

“Yep, hanky panky hangover is a real thing. Stings a little, I’ve got to admit. Never met a woman who was done with me faster than I was with her.”

For a second, I’m amused by his insecurity. But then, I realize what happened. He had taken my distraction with his birthmark to mean that I regretted having sex with him.

“You’re wro—” I start, but then cut myself short. There is no need to tell Reggie I’m pining for him again. This conversation would turn sexual way too quickly, and I would not achieve my goal. Also, he could be curious about the real reason I shut down, and then I would have to tell him.

And I’m not planning on doing that, not when I have no damn clue myself.

But Reggie is nothing if not aggravatingly smart. His sharp eyes narrow at my hesitation. “Wrong?” he says. “Is that what you were about to say?”

I have been in his room for less than a minute, and things are already derailing. “Let’s stay on topic.” I hand him the printout. “This is what I decided to write about... what I saw. I told you it would be tasteful, and you’d like it. Read it and let me know what you think.”

His jaw tightens. “I told you not to write anything.”

“I know. But I thought you should read it anyway. Remember that you need this profile to cast you in a different light. And that’s exactly what I did.”

“Would prefer it if you made up some sob story instead of harping on about needing to know the truth.”

“Our readers can detect lies from miles away. Also, what’s it to you, anyway? Doesn’t matter if people know the truth about you. It doesn’t mean they really know you. They just know more *about* you, and it’s a part they can start to relate to.”

His eyes flash with something close to anger. For a moment, I expect him to order me out of his room. But instead, he reaches out and swipes the papers from my grasp.

“I’ll read it,” he hisses, and I heave a deep sigh of relief. “Mostly because you’re going to keep bothering me until I do.”

He turns away from me, already scouring the article. The distaste on his face grows as he takes in the lines on the first page.

Already a bad sign.

I watch as he reads, distracted momentarily by the hard muscles on his back, my heart giving a painful squeeze. I can hardly think of my assignment when my body is tingling with how much I want him.

This situation is almost funny. A month ago, I was just another sex-starved single mom who was resigned to the possibility of permanent celibacy. Now, I am in a room with one of the sexiest men I ever met, one that seemed to delight in making me explore parts of myself that I’ve kept hidden for a long time.

The only *other* man who had cared to do that to me—

He interrupts my train of thoughts. “This...”

“What?” I’m almost grateful for the distraction. I have tried my hardest to bury that Halloween night. And I was

almost successful. Not even Reggie should be able to make me think about it again.

“It’s... unexpected.” He points to the article and proceeds to read from it. *“Today, if you are ever tempted to read a personal article about Reggie Turner, the leading right winger for the New York Rangers, you might come across a news post about how he lost his temper during a hockey match or screamed at one of his teammates, or some op-ed article about why women are drawn to the poster child of toxic masculinity. The first time I met Reggie, it couldn’t have been more obvious to me that he does not care about any of these stories or about perpetuating the stereotype that he is as bad as the press thinks he is. I was fortunate to witness a particularly nauseating encounter where he told off a woman he’d recently had sex with after she complained he didn’t text her back. I expected to uncover even more repulsive details about his life choices. I did not expect THIS encounter: Reggie, a broken son, bailing out his abusive drug pin father from a police precinct.”*

Hearing him read my words suddenly makes me wonder if I had written garbage. “You don’t like it.”

“No,” he says after a long pause. “I don’t hate it.”

My eyes widen. I’m surprised, even distracted from my desire for him. “Really?”

He flips over the page. “I like the way you describe the... *encounter*. No flowery words. Straight to the point. You don’t bother to hide how depraved he is.”

My ears perk up. This is the first time he’s verbalized a feeling about his father. Maybe he will feel comfortable enough to talk about him just in time for my second article.

“Also,” he continues, looking up at me. “You make no effort to excuse my ‘bad behavior.’ Cannot stand when people try to link my sexual appetite to growing up with Grayson.”

“Isn’t it linked, though?”

He stares at me, fire building up in his gaze. I swallow hard, a little worried about the fact that I just upset him and

might have kissed any chance of him letting me publish the article goodbye.

But then, he also looks like he is about to pull me in and kiss the hell out of me.

And I wouldn't mind that in the slightest.

However, Reggie just stares down at the article again. "How do you think this will make people like me more?"

I push away whatever disappointment creeps up because of my fantasy not materializing. "It makes people decide what they want to feel for you. Sure, I don't beat them over the head with why they should show you a little bit of sympathy, but it's spelled out there. Plus, this is just the first article out of many. We don't need them to start liking you from the gate. But we do need them to be interested enough to want to read more."

He says nothing for a while, and I'm aware he is thinking hard. Finally, he looks up at me.

"Read more? What are you going to do next, stalk me till I reveal every single detail of my life?"

I meet his gaze. It's far easier to not focus on his body when we are arguing. "Yes. That's what doing a profile is, Reggie. It's revealing yourself to the public eye. It might be uncomfortable at first, but the positive reviews should put your mind at rest. That, and when the brand deals start rolling in."

His eyes darken. "I've never needed positive reviews to make me comfortable. That's not going to start now."

I shrug. "It's a different ballgame here. We're trying to get people to like you. It's important to get good reactions."

"Fine," he spits, chucking the sheaf of papers back at me. "Go for it."

I blink. "You are letting me submit the article?"

He lets out a ragged sigh. "Yeah. Whatever. Send it in. But you better believe we're going to be having a long conversation about boundaries before you write the next one."

I'm weak at the knees in relief. "Thanks," I mutter. He should really be thanking me, but right now, I need this way more than he does.

"Whatever," he repeats.

I open my mouth to ask when we can start discussing the next article.

But then, Reggie wraps his hand around my arm and pulls me to him.

"I'm going to need some kind of a reward to forget I just agreed to this," he mutters, his gaze heavy on me.

It's suddenly impossible to breathe. Or do anything other than look down, tug at his towel, and let it fall to the ground, revealing his fully erect cock. My breath hitches as he takes my hand and puts it on him. I can't help but stroke him, rendering him even harder. My lungs seem to be collapsing in my chest, and every neuron in my brain is waiting for him to rip my clothes off.

"Do it."

I stare at him, aware of how red my face is. "What?"

"Exactly what you want to do," he says, his gaze never leaving my face. "From the look of you, it's got to be something good."

Gosh. He is perfect.

I take a step back, so mesmerized, I have totally forgotten my pledge to not fuck him again. I can't hold on, not when his fingers have replaced mine and are going up and down his shaft. Or when my pussy is screaming to have him in me again.

My fingers find the hem of my pants, and I start to shove them down my thighs. I'm almost embarrassed by my choice of panties, but then, I decide not to sweat it. They are already soaking wet, anyway.

"Good girl," he murmurs.

My entire body stills. I can't move, even if I tried.

Good girl.

I have not heard those words in a long while. It is a common phrase, but the way Reggie says it is... different. Familiar.

My heart is beating frantically in my chest as though it's desperate to break free. Everything in front of me suddenly feels blurry.

The last time I heard those words in that *exact* tone, I was locked in a closet with the man that changed my entire life in more ways than he would ever know.

The man that I now remember had a distinctive birthmark on his inner thigh.

Realization hits me like a jet of cold water. I blink rapidly, forcing my vision to clear, so I can gaze at the reason for the unsettled feeling I've been having since last night.

Reggie is stroking himself, his cock pulled away from his thigh. I can see the birthmark clearly.

My son's body wasn't the first place I had seen that shape.

It's the exact one as on the man I had sex with at that party seven years ago.

Carl's biological father.

The one I thought I would never meet again, or who I thought I would not recognize if I ever came across him.

But he is standing right in front of me, stroking himself and beckoning me to come closer. And when I stare at him now, I see the unmistakable charisma, the undeniable gravity-like attraction I felt to that man even back then.

I never saw his facial features, but I know I'm not mistaken.

Reggie Turner is the long-lost father of my child.

CHAPTER 12



REGGIE

“*H*ave you read it?! Did you see the comments?! I’m going crazy over here!”

I woke up to the confused jarring of my phone, which I had foolishly placed a few feet beside my head when I’d dozed off last night. Still, a wave of irritation surges through my skull the moment I hear Paul, my agent, screaming at me on the other end of the line.

“It’s fucking seven in the morning,” I growl at him, glancing at the clock on the side of my bed. This is one of my last free days before going back to intense training. We are set to leave Boston in a few days.

As much as I want us to win, all I can think about right now is getting out of this city as fast as possible. With Grayson back in jail, it’s just a matter of time before a journalist sniffs blood and connects the dots.

“I don’t care what time it is,” Paul says, his voice maddeningly gleeful. “And you shouldn’t either. Not when you broke the internet.”

I roll my eyes as I plop myself back on the bed. “The internet goes mad over dogs wearing shoes. Forgive me if I’m not as excited as you are.”

Paul refuses to be deterred. “Really, Reg,” he huffs. “This is good. Really good. This is probably the first time I’ve seen comments about you where the word ‘asshole’ isn’t used for ten lines in a row. People are calling you ‘inspiring,’ ‘brave,’ ‘strong.’ Several networks are currently hosting a bunch of

speakers to talk about child abuse. Everyone is in love with the writing. Harper Morris really is a genius.”

My bad mood plummets even further.

A genius and about the biggest cock tease that ever walked the face of this Earth.

Yesterday, after I gave her the go-ahead to publish the article, I was sure she wanted me again. And the thought of having her in my bed, where I would take my time with her, was dizzying. I could feel how hungry she was for me. She even started to undress.

Until a crazed, still look came into her eyes, and she backed away from me like I was a ravenous hyena.

This is the second time in a row she’s done that. It unsettled me two days ago, but my feelings were momentarily alleviated when she admitted she didn’t regret us fucking the night before. But then, she came around and pulled a similar stunt again.

Hard to focus on the joyful occasion when I’m suffering from a severe case of blue balls. It’s something I have never had to endure before.

“I can’t believe she got you to open up.” Paul is completely disregarding my obvious foul mood.

“She didn’t,” I spit at him. “She’s stalking me.”

“Well, maybe that’s exactly what she needed to do,” Paul says, still cheery.

“Fuck you.”

“Love you too, big guy,” he says. “I knew you were going to make life horrible for her, so I’m glad she got you to loosen up. The whole world is desperate for the next installment. Also...” He pauses in what I know he assumes is a dramatic fashion. “... I’ve started getting calls.”

“I’m not interested in a sit-down interview.”

“No, not an interview,” he says. “Axe deodorant called and asked for your availability. They want you to be in one of their

ads.”

I pause, feeling a glimmer of positive emotion for the first time in a long while. I’ve rethought doing the profile about eighty million times over the past week, so it feels good to know it’s starting to catch on. “Best news I’ve heard all month.”

“I turned them down,” Paul says with a yawn.

“Are you *crazy*?” Paul’s asinine decisions are enough to render me almost as confused as I feel about Harper. “Get them to come back.”

“No. Their entire brand is about being a *masculine* man. You know, the kind that masks emotions and knows how to hide their suffering.”

“I don’t suffer at all. I’m perfect. And I’d like to think that I’m masculine. So, it’s a good fit.”

“Sure. But remember that Harper Morris is trying to paint you in a different light, at least to the public. We want you to seem more emotionally vulnerable.”

His choice of words makes me shudder. “You’re crazy.”

“No, I’m right. No point making you represent a deodorant that has been canceled about fifty times,” he says. “Also, I talked it over with Harper and she...”

“You *what*?”

“... agrees with me. It’s going to be hard enough to convince the public that there’s a heart beneath all of that scorn you’ve got painted on your face. We’re just going to wait until better opportunities start rolling in. Not to mention, the money they were offering was laughable.”

My anger skyrockets. Knowing that Harper is talking to my agent while icing me out is not a great start to my day.

“Harper believes that more brands will be interested as she releases more articles about you. We want to wait for the *crème de la crème* to find you. Until then, all you’ve got to do is cooperate with her as she writes things for your benefit.

Remember that this is supposed to help you and stay complicit. Shouldn't be hard, no?"

Tell that to my dick.

"All right," I yawn. Paul is a jackass on the best of days, but he is damn good at his job. I need to let him do it.

I can almost feel him grinning on the other end of the line. "Also," he says, "try to make life simpler for her. You know, maybe fess up something about yourself for the next article. Should make it easier to open up, shouldn't it, seeing that people actually like this side of you?"

"I don't give a fuck what people like or don't like," I remind him. "All I want is enough brand deals to ride off into the sunset."

"Yeah, yeah," Paul says. "Anyhow, you'll get good brand deals when you open up. Give Harper something else to publish about you and make sure it's soon."

The line goes dead.

Exasperated, I chuck the phone to the other end of the room. Paul is right, and it's good news that I've started to gain popularity. I have not been asked to do a brand deal, even a crappy one, in half a decade.

But that does not stop my frustration at this rollercoaster I'm on with Harper. Does not stop me from remembering what it felt like to have her on that hood, to force her into confessing that she wanted me. For that one glorious hour, she was mine. I assumed it would be enough.

But not even close.

I swing my legs over to one side of the bed and stand, anger taking the place of irritation. I have never found it difficult to interpret a woman's desire for me. An easy job, really, seeing that most are itching to be with me.

Harper is different in a way that messes with my head. Her behavior makes no sense. She went from confessing that she wanted me to come on to her, to avoiding me completely.

No woman acts that way when she is into a guy.

Unless Harper had planned to drive me crazy only until she got what she needed for her article.

And then dump me right after.

The thought hits me like a jet spray of cold water. My knees give way, and I dump myself back on the bed, confusion gnawing at me.

Was Harper pretending this whole time? It's possible. The woman is a better actress than anyone else I have ever met. She did manage to maintain a perfectly still expression in a crowded restaurant while I was making her fall apart around my fingers. It's possible that, all along, she was playing the long game, trying to get me interested in her, so I would lose my guard and start to pursue her.

And I played right into her trap.

That was not one of my smartest moments.

As I get to my feet again, a resolve forms deep in my mind. After brushing my teeth and throwing on a fresh change of clothes, I make my way out the door.

I need to get to the root of this right away.

Harper's hotel room is two floors below mine. It's also the floor most of my teammates are staying on. But it's a Sunday, and most of them are probably already out for breakfast.

Perfect timing.

I bang my fist against her door. Someone pokes his head out of the room on the right, muttering darkly about noise. I ignore him, listening to the shuffling of feet.

The door creaks open a second later to reveal Harper. She looks pale, like she is just recovering from an illness. Her body is clad in a huge bathrobe and her feet are encased in fluffy slippers.

Not the best outfit for what I have in mind.

Genuine fear creeps up her face when she spots me.

"Reggie," she croaks. "Why are you...?"

Pushing past her, I walk in, trying to clamp down my annoyance at the fact that she doesn't look the least bit excited to see me. Not that I should care. But in this case, since I want to make sure Harper has not been screwing with my head for sport all along, her reaction doesn't exactly help her case.

Confused, I look around her room. Harper comes across as uptight, and so, I expected it to be in pristine condition. But there are snack wrappers and clothes strewn on the floor, and the bed is unmade.

This girl is a walking contradiction.

"I guess your control freak nature doesn't extend to your personal life." I smirk, my lips twitching in amusement as I turn to her.

Her expression dissolves into one of irritation. "Housekeeping skipped me today." She turns to me. "Why are you here?"

There is no denying it. She does not want me here.

My displeasure grows. Sure, I have been in situations where the thought of being around someone I recently hooked up with was enough to make me want to barf. But Harper treating me with the same level of disdain is unsettling.

"You persuade me to let you publish an article about me and then fall off the grid." I have never been the kind of man to bite my lip about anything. But it does feel a little jarring, confessing how annoyed I am by her inconsistency.

"Yeah. That. You're welcome, by the way."

My irritation finds a new high. "You did not just say that."

Defiance shines in her gaze. "Yes, I did. I wrote you an article that shifted your public image overnight. Some appreciation would be nice."

I always forget how damn aggravating Harper is until I'm around her.

"Surprised you missed the chance to boast about it this morning," I say. "Holing yourself up in your room and deciding to snack doesn't seem like your style."

Her face goes pink. “I was a little ill. Needed to rest.”

“Yeah. Ill with bullshit.”

She raises her brows. “What are you mad about? I did everything I told you I would. And you can’t decide to back down about publishing the article, not now. Because you said ___”

“I don’t give a damn about the article.” If someone else mentions the publication one more time, I am going to drive my fist through the wall. “I’m talking about you.”

Two rosy flags stain her cheeks. “M-Me?”

Every single thing about this conversation grates on my nerves, especially the fact that Harper has no idea what I’m talking about. The fact that she has moved on so quickly that she doesn’t even think that could be one of the reasons I would be in her hotel room.

I take a step forward, throwing caution to the wind. “Yesterday, when you begged me to let you publish the article ___”

“I didn’t beg you. I—”

“When you begged me, and I decided to let you do what you wanted, there was a tiny caveat.”

She gulps.

“You were going to indulge me for letting you do that.”

Her eyes widen in shock. “How dare you? I’m doing you a favor.”

“Yeah, well, you are going to do me another favor. One that we both know you are going to enjoy.”

She lets out a stiff breath. I watch the emotion rise in her face. As much as I like seeing her physically react to my words, I hate how tight my pants are getting with expectation. I have always been able to turn my sexual desire on and off. Harper defies the norm in an aggravating manner.

“You don’t know...” she starts, but just then, another idea pops into my head. One that involves teasing her while getting

what I want.

“You’re a coward.”

She blinks. “Excuse me?”

I take a step forward, letting my fingers grip the belt of her robe. “You’re a coward,” I repeat, ignoring the fury in her eyes. “You had sex once with me. Savored it. And since you’re too embarrassed to admit that to me—or to yourself—you prefer to lock yourself in here and hide.”

Harper is silent. She clenches her fists as her entire body starts to tremble in anger.

“Fuck you,” she spits.

Seeing her upset is like a soothing salve for my own anger. Finally, she is getting to experience the emotional torture she has left me in for almost forty-eight hours.

“I’m no freaking coward. You know that. And don’t you dare call me that again.”

For a woman as small as she is, Harper Morris has a lot of gravitas in her voice. Enough that a lesser man would consider backing off.

But I’m determined to push as many of her buttons as I can. Especially when it makes me feel this fucked up high.

“We agreed that you’re a tease. Curious to see how long you can go before admitting you’re avoiding me because you’re scared of how badly you want this.”

“I’m not avoiding you because I’m scared,” she yells.

I fold my arms across my chest, my lips twitching again. “But you are avoiding me. Why?”

Her cheeks flush. She looks angry, and I wonder if it might be at herself. “That’s not...”

“Why? Cause you’re scared you won’t be able to hold yourself back if I ordered you to suck my dick?”

“Order me?” Her voice is quavering. “*Order me?*”

I meet her angry gaze with my amused one. “We both know you’re better at taking orders than asking for what you need.”

Her nostrils flare. She stares at me for a few seconds, as though she cannot believe what I just said. I watch the fury in her eyes grow, waiting for that moment. The one I just goaded her into.

Finally, she backs away from me and turns around. Her shoulders heave as she takes a deep breath. For a fraction of a second, I’m worried I pushed too far.

Until she turns back to me, and I see her fury morph into resolve.

A strange pit of excitement burns in my stomach.

There is my fucking girl.

“You actually think I’m some pathetic little lady who’ll sit around waiting for you to tell me to jump on your dick before she asks for what she wants?” she spits now, walking back toward me.

Definitely not.

But for the purpose of this conversation...

“Yes. Hell, yes.”

The resolve strengthens in her eyes. Still staring at me, she unties the belt of her robe and shrugs out of it.

She is now standing completely naked in front of me.

My throat constricts as I appreciate her body in the light of day for the first time. In here, she looks even more glorious than she did in the headlights of my car. Plus, I can see *all* of her. The small belly and a few stretch marks, courtesy of motherhood. Still, she looks better than any woman I have seen in recent times.

She is still staring at me, not even the slightest bit self-conscious. Yet another thing I like about her.

“If I wanted you,” she says. “I would have come get you.”

I want to keep goading her. I mean, it's Harper. How can I not?

But I'm staring at the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life, and she is naked in front of me.

I can't quite bring myself to make a move yet. Anything other than walk over to her, my eyes exploring every inch of her body. I raise one of my fingers and brush them over her left nipple. It beads instantly, and Harper lets out a moan. The sound shoots straight to my dick, hardening it.

I stare down at her. "And now?"

"And now... what?"

"What do you want?"

The air between us is crackling with tension. It feels like absolutely everything in the world depends on her answer, whatever it is.

Holding my gaze, Harper goes down to her knees. She runs her moist tongue over her lower lip, her eyes deepening with expectation.

"You tell me," she says.

Damn it all to hell.

Can't say I have never had a woman salivate at sucking me off. But when it's Harper, it hits different.

My hands go down to my buckle, and I pull my pants and my briefs off my hips. I'm fully hard, precum already spilling out of my tip.

Harper's eyes widen in delight.

I know it then. There is no question she is into me. She would fuck me every second of every day if she had the chance. And she wouldn't be apologetic about it.

And yet, she is acting inconsistently, one day off and on the next.

What is the reason? Fear of disappointing her family? Her son finding out? Or is she merely sad about being away from

her child for so long?

My thoughts disappear the moment Harper slides her tongue past my tip, sucking at the precum. An electric current rushes through me, and I feel the overwhelming urge to shove every inch of me down her throat and watch her gag on it.

Still, I restrain myself. Until Harper looks up at me, her eyes even wider now.

“Tell me what you want,” she mutters in a low, demure voice. She reaches around her body, interlocking both hands so they are pinned behind her back. “Let me please you.”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Everything about this woman is too damn much.

I wrap my fingers around her throat and squeeze. Harper’s eyes close as she savors the pain. My dick is pulsating with need for *everything*, her ultimate submission, the fact that her breasts are jutting out right underneath my dick, basically waiting for me to cum on them.

I drag her forward by the throat. Her lips part willingly, happily, accepting my cock. She doesn’t complain or draw back, taking all of me. She gags on the last inch, and her saliva spills out. She runs her tongue over it, cleaning it up.

“Suck me, baby. Now.”

She obeys instantly, her mouth sliding up and down my shaft. Something about having Harper Morris, the hardened, obstinate woman I have been cursed to have around for the last few weeks, obeying my instructions messes with my head in a way that I have never felt before. I’m like dry desert ground, soaking her in.

“I’m about to come,” I say after a mere minute.

Harper draws back instantly, too fast for me to even pull her back in. And then, straightening up as high as she can while still kneeling, she cradles her breasts, pushing them out toward me, creating a hollow for me to cum on.

My head spins with her daring. She is so exquisite, so amazing, that I damn near forget I was going to come a few

seconds ago.

Harper seems to realize that. Because, as I watch, she runs her thumbs past each nipple, touching them. A moan bursts out of her mouth as she pleasures herself. Her gaze is fixed on mine as she silently dares me to keep watching, to regain the high that I lost.

I run my hand down my shaft once, and that's all it takes. All I need, anyway, is Harper around me.

My orgasm rushes through me. Semen spills out of my tip, directly on her tits. Harper lets out another moan of longing, holding her breasts as my fluid drips down her fingers.

This is something I'm going to remember for a long, long time.

I pull her to her feet the moment my orgasm recedes. About this time, with other women, I would be pushing them out of my room.

Instead, I take off my shirt with one movement. The moment I pull her up and feel her soft body, I start to harden again.

"About that payment we discussed," I say, wiping her clean, "it's high time I collected it."

Harper lets out a tiny groan of need. "Whatever you want," she whispers back.

I lift her into my arms. Her legs go around my body, linking themselves around my back. My insides gnaw with barely restrained need as I head for her bed and lay her tenderly on the covers.

Harper is looking at me, seeming almost wary. "What are you doing?"

I plunge my fingers into her pussy. Her eyes flutter shut, and I watch the tension drain from her body.

"My turn to play."

I leave a trail of kisses down her body, from her collarbone to the spot between her breasts and across her stomach.

Finally, my face is down between her legs. I inhale deeply. She smells exactly like I thought she would, and something about being inches from her makes me want her that much more.

“I’m not sure if I like...”

I run my tongue down the slit in the middle, holding off her words.

Harper writhes beneath me, a groan escaping her lips.

“You’re sure now.” I spare a moment to give her an amused glance before I turn back to her, taking her clit in my mouth and sucking gently. Harper is trembling, and I feel her hand on my head, urging me to keep going.

For the first time since I can remember, I’m eager to obey a woman. This woman.

And not just now. As long as she’ll let me.

CHAPTER 13



HARPER

Reggie is Carl's biological father.

That same thought, or a variation of it, has been playing in my head for three whole days. It has made it difficult for me to do much. Get out of bed, think of Reggie's next article, even call back home. That's actually the only thing I was eager to do. Talk to Carl.

Perched high in the bleachers, I focus on the New York Rangers' latest game. Yet, in truth, it's not the team that captures my attention, but one player: Reggie Turner. My gaze locks solely on him, rendering the rest of the world—the roaring cheers of the fans and the buzzing atmosphere of the arena—a distant murmur. His strides are fluid and powerful at the same time, making it seem as if he is gliding on a cushion of air rather than a sheet of ice. He weaves through the defense with deft stick-handling that belies his years, outplaying opponents who are nearly a decade his junior. He propels forward with a startling burst of speed, sending a defenseman skidding the wrong way, before snapping off a laser-precise wrist shot toward the goal. He isn't just playing hockey, he's performing it. This unspoken dominance of the rink draws me in and makes the world around me fade into a blur.

Reggie might be an asshole, but damn, he is amazing. On and off the ice.

How could I not have noticed he was the one?

Reggie's NHL records noted that he was recruited from Cornell. It isn't far-fetched that he had been at an NYU

Halloween party seven years ago. I close my eyes and think back to that night. The man who had made me feel things I had never felt before, who had called me to explore my primal self. He wore a *Bauta*, a Venetian mask that covered his entire face except for his eyes. In my memories, he appeared as a dark silhouette. But I can remember everything about how he made me feel. How I knew I ought to have been offended by his orders, but I found myself liking the thought of obeying him. How pleasing him made me come that much harder.

I barely remembered seeing the birthmark. There have been a lot of times over the past few days when I doubted the memory. Sometimes, I am certain it was my mind playing tricks on me. Even when Carl was born with such a noticeable skin discoloration, I had been too bothered about a lot of things to even recall that the mystery man had the same stain on his leg. A long-forgotten moment, one that I wasn't even completely sure of.

But there is no denying that Reggie is the man I had sex with back then. And not only because of the birthmark. But because of the precise way he makes me feel. How I find satisfaction in succumbing to him, in letting him use me for his own pleasure. How he makes me crave him.

I have only ever felt that way once: on the night I conceived my son. And it had been that feeling that plagued me, that made it impossible to think of dating another man again. Guys like my neighbor, good guys who have asked me out over the past years and would probably be okay in bed. Maybe they would even surpass my expectations.

But I was certain that the mystery man at the party would be the last that would ever get me to feel that way. Until I met Reggie.

I assumed that the two men were different people. But they are one and the same.

All along, I was waiting for Reggie Turner to spice up my sex life.

That thought fills me with a sense of dark, bitter irony.

The crowd suddenly goes wild. I open my eyes and look at the ice. Reggie just shot the puck into the goal. I notice with mild pleasure that the crowd is going crazy for him. In past games, even when Reggie scored, the tumult he elicited was a little less than that for the other players.

A lot of the spectators seemed to have read my profile.

Reggie turns around and waves at the crowd, the shadow of a smile on his face. Another new development. The cheer grows louder. His gaze scours the faces of the people. My heart stills when he finds mine and gives me a wink.

He turns back toward the game. But not before he is sure I understood his look.

I will ruin you tonight.

My heart races, but not with fear. With expectation. Because, even with the angst of him being my son's biological father, I still want him.

Just like how I was willing to take him again two days ago even while I was still spinning from the realization.

The memory fills me with shame as I think about it. And yet, I don't regret it. I'm well aware that Reggie had intentionally pushed me up against the wall and challenged me to get a rise out of me.

But I loved it. Getting on my knees for him, exactly the way that turned me on. Pleasuring him and letting him come on me. Him making me come all over his face, then fucking me again on the comfortable bed.

Because, no matter how messed up my head is, once Reggie Turner asks me to obey him, I'm going to do it.

What is wrong with me?

I bury my face in my palms, forcing the memory of Reggie's wink away. Right now, all I need to do is face an important question.

Is my discovery enough to quit the project?

No.

This series promises a new life for my family. I can't give that up, even if it means working closely with Reggie. I cannot let go of this contract.

But what does it mean for me and Reggie?

My eyes find him on the ice again as he skates toward the direction of the puck. Just watching him move makes my panties moist.

Cutting off our new, sexual relationship isn't the answer either. I can't stop it, even if I wanted to. Which I don't. After the profile is done, Reggie and I are never going to see each other again. I might never have great sex again. I'm not going to pass on this chance.

I let out a deep breath, facing the one question that I have been too scared to even think of.

Do I need to tell him?

The last thing I want is to have that conversation. But it does feel right. Reggie Turner is an asshole on most days, but he seems like the kind of guy who would want to know if he had a child somewhere.

What would that mean for Carl?

My heart aches with the myriad of possibilities. Custody battle? Co-parenting? Having to introduce my child to a muscled, tattooed specimen who would terrify him?

Maybe not the first two. Reggie isn't interested in forming emotional connections with anyone, and children are likely at the top of that list. For a man with a sexually active lifestyle, he has managed to keep it devoid of offspring. He probably wants it to remain that way. He would probably be fine with financial support, but that is about it.

Plus, I'm certain our sexual relationship would come to an instant end the moment I tell him about Carl.

I try not to be too selfish, removing the sex as a deciding factor. I want to be logical, to make the best decision for my son.

Truth is, I don't need financial support. I'm determined to pay for Carl's school on my own. And since Reggie seems to be the kind of guy who would not provide emotional support, maybe it makes no sense to bother him with it. I can't expect much from Reggie or his family...

Family.

Remembering the scene at the station, the man he said is his father—my son's *grandfather*—fills me with ice cold dread.

Reggie's father is horrible to him. He's handled his feelings about this by being absolutely foul to everyone around him. My son is the sweetest kid, and he has been raised in a loving, nurturing environment. Genes and a strangely shaped birthmark cannot change that.

Introducing him to a dysfunctional family dynamic is not on the table.

The last thing I want is for Carl to know that his grandfather is a drug pin and his daddy has some deep-seated emotional issues. Sure, he is currently struggling with wondering who his father is. But I'm going to rally in a couple of years and marry someone. Any sweet guy I felt a connection with would make a great stepdad to Carl. I would rather sacrifice all the fantasies I have about a great sex life than put my child in harm's way.

My thoughts funnel themselves into a decision.

I'm going to keep Carl's paternity a secret. It doesn't mean anything and doesn't bother anyone. What are the chances that I would be set to write a story about the man I conceived my son with, anyway? Definitely weird and the stuff of fiction, but I could put it out of my mind. Could stop being jumpy around Reggie.

Because if I looked at it in another light, Reggie isn't really Carl's father. We hooked up at a Halloween party, had a condom malfunction, and then moved on with our lives. He was little more than a sperm donor. It would be a surprise if he

could remember the night it happened. He has been with countless women since then.

I need to hunker down and finish this profile while keeping my mouth shut. In a few weeks, I will complete the assignment, satisfy some of my sexual fantasies, then return back to my upgraded new life. I'm going to find someone to settle down with and sail into the sunset with them.

There is absolutely nothing to be worried about.

My phone starts to ring. It's Dora. The scoreboard tells me there's only five minutes left in the game. Maybe a work call is just what I need until Reggie is free and we can potentially be together.

I stand up and make my way down the aisle of screaming, expectant fans. In a few minutes, I'm in a less crowded spot underneath the stands.

"The woman of the hour," Dora says as soon as I answer up my call.

I roll my eyes. "You're not going to fire me now, are you?"

Dora lets out a trill of laughter. "Oh, come on, Harper. You know I like your writing. But I've got to issue threats sometimes, you know, to keep you on your toes."

"Right."

"So, when are you sending me the next article? The editorial team is raving about the clicks we got on the last one. It's been amazing."

"I have no idea." I had to seduce Reggie into letting me publish the last one. Literally. And while it seems like he is starting to understand the benefits of opening up to the world, I have no doubt Reggie is going to make it difficult to get information from him.

And I almost like it that way.

"Maybe three days." Hopefully that will be more than enough time.

“Great. Try to explore the parental neglect angle if you can. Get him talking about his grandfather. So, our readers can know just how long this cycle of abuse has been going on. We can position Reggie as the one who’s going to break it.”

Get the biological father of my son talking about the deep-rooted trauma of his family, so that I can be even more concerned about the genetics of my son.

Just perfect.

“I’ll get right on that.”

“You sure you’re okay?” Dora asks after a little pause. “You sound sort of low. Thought you’d be happier that the profile started off so well.”

I clear my throat. “I’m fine.” But then I realize I can ask for something I’ve always wanted. “Actually, there is something. We talked about the possibility of flying my son down here for a week at some point, didn’t we?”

The moment I say those words, I almost regret them. Sure, I want Carl around for a bit. But not when Reggie is also here. Not after I found out he is his father. There is little to no chance they would even interact during the period of him being around, but having both of them in the same city is too close for comfort.

“Uhm... well... I’ll discuss things with the team and get back to you. But from what I can see, there’s no room in the budget. Not yet, anyway.”

I’m almost relieved.

“Or we could do this,” Dora adds, evidently interpreting my silence as sullenness. “Get back to me with another writeup, and we’ll see what we can do about your son visiting.”

“I’ll get to work then.”

All I need is to convince Reggie Turner to let me write another prying article about him.

Shouldn’t be hard at all.

CHAPTER 14



REGGIE

“What is this place?” she asks, looking around the small space. I follow her gaze. Up until thirty minutes ago, this was a deserted room no one in the hotel ever came into. But I had the staff tidy it up a bit. Now, it looks almost romantic, with a table set for two right in the center and flowers displayed on the windowsills.

“Thought we could talk in here.” I hold out a chair for her. “You know, on neutral ground.”

Her cheeks stain. “Fine,” she says, gripping her notepad a little too tightly. She sits down on the chair and waits for me to join her. “Surprised you’re this willing to let me conduct an interview.”

“Don’t worry.” I stretch out my legs underneath the table, so they are inches from grazing hers. “You’re going to make it worth my while.”

The flush on her face deepens. I feel almost amused. We’ve barely had any one-on-one interaction since the time Harper knelt down in front of me and gave me the best blowjob I’ve ever had. Just thinking about that makes sparks fly in my pants. I’d expected to get some alone time with her, but the week was grueling, and this is the first free afternoon I have had in a while.

So, when she messaged and asked to meet me, I was more than willing to grant her request. Even if it would end with both of us fully clothed. Something about being with Harper fascinates me beyond sexual intimacy.

She flips open her notebook and holds her pen over the page. “First, I’d like us to talk about your relationship with women.”

My shoulders unknot from tension I didn’t know I was holding. I half-expected her to start harping on about my damned father again.

“You know all about my relationship with women.” I fix her with a meaningful gaze. “As well as my *relations* with them.”

It’s a credit to Harper that she still maintains a poised expression. “Did you ever meet your mother?”

My jaw tightens. “Next question.”

She takes a deep breath, looking like she anticipated my reaction. “I understand it’s a sensitive topic, Reggie. But this is my job. And, as I’ve reminded you hundreds of times, it’s a job that’s going to help you out. You saw how positive the audience was to you the last time you played. That’s never happened before. And that’s what media can do, if you let it.”

My fingers curl into fists. Harper is right. I might be bullheaded, but I can admit that. The audience will go crazy for me if I open up more. And while I don’t particularly care about what people think of me, my bank account seems to be enjoying it.

“I’m going to treat your story with the utmost sensitivity,” Harper assures me, her eyes filled with compassion. “It’s not going to be written like some tabloid mess to force the excitement of half-brained people. You can rely on me for that.”

I stare into her eyes. For some odd reason, I don’t need to think over whether she’s lying or not. Because I trust her more than most people I’ve met.

“My mother died when I was young.” Even after so many years, this is the first time I’m saying it out loud, and I am surprised by how little it pains me to utter it. “I barely remember her.”

She nods, and I’m glad she doesn’t throw a cliché at me.

“How was growing up without a mother? Did you wonder about her?”

I shrug, thinking back to my mess of a childhood. “I was mostly relieved.”

Harper looks confused. “How come?”

“Because my father tortured and abused her. Physically. Mentally. I was glad she was gone. I liked imagining she was in a better place.”

My throat constricts after I say this, and a part of me wants to tell Harper to strike it out. But when I meet her gaze again, the muscles in my neck relax.

I actually want to tell this story to her.

“I started dealing drugs at eight,” I continue, without being prompted. “Hard to miss a mother when you don’t even know what mothers do. Sure, there were a lot of women around me. My dad’s lovers, women who wanted heroin, couldn’t afford it anymore, and were hoping to curry favor from him by being nice to me. Got a lot of home-cooked meals.”

“You must have liked that, in its own way.”

“No. Their food sucked. Without fail.”

Harper’s lips twitch, like she is trying not to smile. Her evident amusement grows mine, and I feel my jaw loosen.

“Their meals were also my first introduction to drugs.”

Her eyes widen. “*What?*”

“When I was ten, one of the women made me a brownie. Thought it would be fun to put some weed in it. I was high for a whole day. Hated every bit of it, even if Grayson was ecstatic about it. Was one of the first things that made me desperate to escape.”

“Grayson,” she says, making a note. “Your father.”

Tension returns to my shoulders. “In a manner of speaking.”

She notes down another thing. “You must have been relieved when you got drafted to a hockey team.”

“Yeah,” I say, meaning it. “When I got the scholarship to Cornell, actually. I finally had a good shot at leaving that life behind.”

“But you didn’t really leave it behind, did you?”

My nostrils flare. “If you’re talking about that scene at the police station...”

“No. I’m talking about how you treat women.”

“Not *this* again.” I straighten up, needing her to understand everything I’m about to say. “I like women, and they enjoy me. I don’t commit to long-term relationships. It works for both parties.”

“Not according to the myriad of women who report you’ve dumped them,” Harper replies, her voice laced with that streak of obstinance that I have grown to admire.

“Yeah, well. They all knew what they were getting into.”

“Let’s try to talk about why you don’t want a committed relationship with anyone. Could it be that, since you grew up seeing the way your father treats women, you think that a committed relationship has no point?”

“No,” I say firmly. “Most men are wired differently, after all. Some are burdened with emotions and wanting to settle down since the moment they’re born. But a lot of us don’t want that, regardless of the environment we grew up in.”

Harper visibly shudders.

I raise my brows. “What, you disagree?”

“Yes,” she says, quite emphatically. “I don’t believe that if you were raised with a... different... father, you would be this interested in having casual sex.”

I lean closer to her. “What’s your excuse, then?”

A look of foreboding enters her eyes. “What do you mean?”

This interview just got exciting.

“This is casual sex, isn’t it? This thing between us. And yet, you’re more than willing to go along with it.”

Her cheeks flush. “That’s not relevant to this interview—”

“But it is,” I say, drawing even closer. “You’re determined to build me up as a sad little boy who screws around because his father was abusive. But that’s not me. I enjoy sex because it feels good. It’s thrilling. And anyone, even someone who grew up in a loving, stable household like you, might want to experience that in their life.”

Her eyes narrow. “You don’t know anything about me. You don’t know what my family is like.”

“Oh, but I do. You’re a single mom who can comfortably shadow me for two months while leaving your little boy at home. Means you have a strong family support system.”

She looks startled at first, then annoyance washes over her features. “Still doesn’t mean you’re right. The fact that I enjoy sex doesn’t mean I’ve had nearly as many sexual partners as you. Or that I use people and dump them the moment I’m done. Your behavior speaks to underlying trauma.”

“The women I’m with enjoy me just as much as I enjoy them. We seek pleasure in each other and move on. That’s about it.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“Don’t you?”

Sweat beads on her brow. But Harper plows on with the interview fearlessly. “Again, this is not about me. I’m thinking of the scene I witnessed at the airport, the woman you made cry.”

“I didn’t make her cry. We clearly defined what would happen between us that day, back on the plane.”

Her upper lip twitches. The look in her eyes tells me what she is thinking: *Classy*.

My lips lift in a smug smile. “When I asked you to come with me to the airport bathroom, you didn’t say no.”

She takes a deep breath, her chest heaving. “For the last time, Reggie, this is not about me.”

Her insistence on maintaining the upper hand reminds me how sweet it will be once she lets go and submits to me.

“I just need you to take me back in your memories.” She crosses her legs, causing her long skirt to ride up and reveal a healthy amount of skin. I’m momentarily distracted, wondering if she put on panties this time.

My guess is she didn’t. Even in her most professional moments, Harper lives to torture me.

And I love it.

“What age were you when you knew you were not going to consider a romantic relationship with anyone?”

I’m slightly thrown off by the question. I expect to feel my walls closing in, barring me from answering her. But I feel no such thing. So, I think over her words in relation to my childhood, coming up blank almost immediately.

“No idea. Maybe forever.”

“This is what I mean.” Harper starts to scribble something. “If you had grown up with a stable family, you’d have known that it’s normal to settle down at some point. You’d have grown up wanting it. And yeah, maybe I enjoy casual sex, but growing up, I also wished for romance.”

“Where’s the dickhead father of your boy, anyway?”

Hearing my question, she gasps and looks up at me in shock. She puts her pen down.

“For the very last time, Reggie, stop deflecting. This is not about me or my son.”

I feel a slight impatience as my amusement declines. “Why do you want to show my sexual preferences as a function of my childhood?”

“Because I’m trying to make you relatable.” She sounds damn near frustrated. “No one wants to read about a man who says he has always thought of women as disposable.”

“What’s that to you?” I say, a hard edge to my voice. “You’ve mentioned that you’re going to write the truth. Whatever it is. And I’m telling you mine.”

“But I don’t believe you.” Her fingers wobble as she picks up her pen and perches it over her notepad. “I don’t believe you were conditioned to hate romance from the womb. There has to be a causality somewhere.”

I’m feeling less entertained by the second.

“Here’s my theory,” she continues. “You were born a boy like any other. Then you grow up seeing the way your father behaved around women. Around you. So, you shut yourself off and decide to be a loner.”

I place my trembling fists on the table. “Stop talking.”

Harper’s eyes meet mine. They are filled with resolution. “And right now, you spend your time dating up a storm because you’re terrified that if you form a deep emotional intimacy with anyone, they might hurt you. And you don’t know how to deal with that.”

“Stop. Talking.”

“Am I warm?”

The surface of my skin is buzzing. Her theory is sound, and it touches a nerve. Harper is locking eyes with me, unafraid and unrepentant. And all I want to do is walk out. Maybe I can get Paul on the line and tell him that I am done entertaining this bullshit.

But then, I remember that the best defense is a good offense.

Harper Morris is trying to infuriate me into agreeing with her. I have no idea why, but I now know the best way to stop it.

Taking in a deep breath and clutching the reins of my anger, I lean back in my chair, cross my arms, and stare back

at her.

“Maybe you’re right.”

She looks surprised that I’m agreeing with her. “Really?”

“Yeah. Maybe. Doesn’t matter if you really are though, right? You’re convinced you are. Just the way I’m convinced I know things about you. Like the fact that you’re every bit as detached from romance as I am.”

She grips her pen tightly. “This is not about—”

“Not about you, yes. But let’s talk about you anyway. You want sex as badly as I do. You’ve just not met a lot of men who know how to unravel you. So, you pretend that you’re a good little mom who’s focused on raising her kid and nothing else. Am I close?”

She takes in a harsh breath. “Okay,” she grinds out after a beat. “I see what you’re doing, trying to project on me. And I almost see why. I promised you I’d tell your story sensitively, and part of that means letting you tell me what you want to. I’m sorry.”

I’m taken aback. Not in a million years did I think I would ever hear Harper Morris apologize.

She stares down at her notepad. “If you say you just like women and it’s unconnected to your past, I believe you. And I’ll write that. But I still have a few questions to ask, so—”

“No.”

The word spills from my lips, surprising me. All of my muscles are going rigid, urging me to keep everything in. But somehow, I’m filled with a greater sense of peace, forcing me to say the words clogged up in my throat.

“The questions won’t take long, I promise,” Harper hurriedly says. “I—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.” My body is growing tenser by the minute, but my throat feels unrestricted enough, permitting me to say words I never thought I would. “I lied about my want for women being a primal need.”

Harper looks a lot more relieved than I would have expected.

“Oh. Why do you find yourself getting involved with a lot of women, then?”

I look at her beautiful face. All of the restrictions that claw up my heart in moments like this are gone.

“Not having a mother is not the reason I vowed never to consider romance as an early teen. Sure, I didn’t have a lot of female role models, and I learned that love comes with a lot of hurt. But that’s not it.”

Harper’s stare is urging me to continue.

I take a deep breath, completely shocked by how calm I feel.

“I never considered romance because of the possibility of having babies in the future with a woman I cared about. It meant I would have to be a father. And I’m certain that I’d be quite incapable of being a good one.”

Harper seems frozen. And suddenly, her eyes fill with tears. The shock that rocks through me forces my own surprise at my confession away from my body.

“I’m so sorry,” she says instantly, wiping the tears away. “That’s so sad. I’m an idiot. Sorry... I’m just missing my kid a lot, so...”

For the first time in my life, I act without thinking at the sight of an emotional woman. Drawing closer, I place my hand on hers. My heart surges with a mix of confusion and something else, something I can’t quite place as Harper squeezes my fingers. I’m almost relieved when she draws away.

“Thank you for telling me all of that,” she says, placing her pen back on the notepad. She is regaining control of her feelings by the second, and her face falls back into a neutral expression when she looks up at me. “I’m not going to write anything if you don’t want me to.”

“You can.” I’m continually surprised by my words today. Still, I know I mean it. The first article had proven to me that I have nothing to lose by letting the public know a little bit more about me.

She nods. “Thank you, Reg.”

I fold my arms as I watch her. There is no sign at all that she had broken down a few seconds earlier. I’m almost glad. I would rather have Harper driving me up the wall with her insanity than seeing her cry.

“Your turn,” I say now. My interview is almost over, thank God, and all I need is something to scrub the bad memories away.

Her eyes narrow. “What do you mean?”

“Why do you avoid romance?”

She swallows. I can tell she wants more than anything to not answer the question, but she can’t find a way out of it. Finally, she lets out a sigh and whispers, “You’re right.”

I have never heard Harper say those words, so I do my best to savor them. “What did you say?”

“You’re right,” she snaps. “You said the same thing the first day we met, remember? And I think I hated you then because of how accurate you were. But, yeah. Romance is off the table for me right now.”

I cock my head to one side. “Apologizing and admitting when you are wrong. It’s like I’m meeting a whole new Harper Morris.”

She has a wan smile on her lips. “Yeah, maybe you are.”

“I’m curious to see what else you can do. How else you can surprise me.”

She holds my gaze. There is a little bit of daring in her eyes. It’s not surprising. In fact, I sort of anticipated it.

“What are you thinking?”

She does not need to ask. Because she knows exactly what I’m thinking.

“Take off your shirt.”

CHAPTER 15



HARPER

I knew it would come to this.

Not just knew it. I anticipated it, really. Particularly after that soul-crushing interview.

Being Reggie's pawn for the next hour is just what I need right now. Letting go will feel good.

After he gave me the rundown of his shitty family structure and suggested he is never going to want his son in his life because he is certain he would be a horrible father, I should feel relieved. It makes it so much easier to keep the secret from him.

But I'm disappointed instead. Like I was subconsciously holding onto the tiniest flicker of hope that one day, Carl would unite with his biological father. Today, that hope had been snuffed out. Reggie will never want to know Carl.

It's done.

I take a deep breath, trying to get my feelings in check. Before this profile is wrapped up, I'm going to see this as a good thing. Because it *is* a good thing. And when I get married and find Carl an adoring stepfather, he is not going to care about his biological father.

"Did you hear me?"

I jump at his voice. But not out of fear. A thrill is running through me, filling me with a scandalous level of expectation.

This will help me calm my racing mind. Focus on the sensations Reggie is able to give me.

“Yes.” I finger my topmost button, liking the way my movements draw his gaze to my breasts. I hold onto it a second longer than I should before I push it out of its tiny hole.

Reggie lets out a small grunt. The sound goes straight to my center, wetness pooling between my thighs.

I rip open the next button. Now my lacy bra-encased breasts are peeking out at him.

Reggie doesn't make a move. I continue, opening button after button. Finally, I shrug my shirt off. The cool air hits my skin. I should feel exposed.

But under Reggie's gaze, I only feel desired.

“Take that off,” he growls, gesturing lazily at the bra. “I want to see you.”

Sitting naked in front of the man I just conducted an interview with is not something I ever thought I would do in my worst nightmares. Still, it feels natural to unhook my bra and let it fall to my feet. My breasts bounce slightly as I stand, and Reggie's hot gaze follows the movement. I unzip my skirt and let it fall to my feet too.

I'm now completely naked.

“No panties again.” His voice is low, hard.

“No.”

Because it drives you nuts every single time.

He is working hard at his buckle. Soon, he pulls *it* out. I have seen him a couple of times, and yet, I'm still filled with awe at how gigantic he is, especially when he is fully erect like this.

He runs his fingers over his shaft. Need burns inside me. I'm desperate to touch him.

“You said you had some more questions.”

I blink. For a moment, I forgot I compiled a series of follow-up questions about Reggie's house to set the stage for my article.

“Get your notebook.”

It does not occur to me to not obey him. I reach for the pad and flip it open. I can feel Reggie’s eyes savoring my naked frame, but I’m not even the slightest bit self-conscious.

“Come sit in my lap.”

Hypnotized, I walk over, and he grabs my arm and turns me around to face the same direction as him before pulling me down. My stomach tightens with anticipation as he holds his dick steady. Then, I slide onto it, a bubble of pleasure bursting in my stomach as I fit all of him in. He holds onto my hips, shifting me lightly.

“Ride me, baby.”

I start to move, going up and down. Moan after moan bursts from my mouth. I gain momentum, going faster and harder.

Reggie is completely silent, one hand guiding me gently, the other caressing my breast. I love feeling him in me, his hands on me.

“Ask a question,” he murmurs in my ear, his voice a rumble.

“What?” The sound comes out as a strangled grunt.

“Go on. What’s the next question you were going to ask me?”

My eyes are closing from the pleasure. I force them open and look down at my notepad, pausing so I can focus more clearly.

“Come on, Harper. I didn’t ask you to stop riding me.”

Fuck. He is torturing me.

And I’m enjoying it. Immensely.

I force out the first question before I start to ride him again, going more slowly and driving myself insane.

“What was your house like?” I’m barely able to get out the words, but I manage somehow.

“It was a three-bedroom,” he says easily, moving his other hand to my breast and pinching my nipple. “Had my own room. Made it easy to block everything out.”

I pause again, staring down at my notepad. And then, I feel it.

Smack. Right on my left ass-check.

“If I don’t tell you to stop, don’t fucking stop. None of those questions are worth me not seeing your ass bouncing on my dick.”

His dirty mouth turns me into jelly inside. I start to ride him again, as fast as I can.

“Second question.” He pushes himself up to his full seated height, and his front is crushed against my back as he whispers in my ear.

Goosebumps rise on my skin. “How... many... relationships... did... your... father... have?”

He tenses behind me. Holding my hips steady, he thrusts into me from below.

I let out a scream so loud, I’m surprised the hotel staff doesn’t come rushing in.

“No questions about him. Next.”

My eyes are streaming with tears of joy. I can’t even see the page anymore.

“I’m done,” I force through gritted teeth.

“Good,” he says, his breath causing the skin of my ear to tingle. “Because I’m just getting started with you.”

He holds on to my hips again, guiding my rhythm to a slower, more sensual pattern.

“Fuck, Harper,” he says, smacking my ass again. “You drive me crazy *every day*, you know that? This fucking ass. These tits. The way you forget your underwear when you come to meet me.”

My head is filled with a dizziness so absolute that I can barely think of what to say to him. All I can think is how much crazier Reggie drives me. By a long shot.

His hands come around my body. He cups my breasts in his gigantic palms and crushes them up against my body. I continue to ride him, feeling almost crazed by how good it feels to have him inside me. He is the man I have been yearning for all my life.

That singular thought bursts into a million little stars in my brain. Suddenly, I'm jerking in Reggie's arms as my orgasm hits me, hearing him grunt as he spills his fluid into me. I hold on to him, reeling from the crescendo.

This is far better than the last time we had sex.

Somehow, every single time surpasses the last.

I reach for my clothes as the haze of ecstasy starts to lift, slipping them on in record time. As much as I enjoy being around Reggie, I need a bit of space. Partly because I won't be able to control myself from begging for another round, but also because I don't want to spend too much time around him now.

When he could be triggered by the memory of us in that closet and remember I am the same girl he fucked a while ago.

Don't be ridiculous, I reassure myself. Reggie has had hundreds of women. There is no way I would stand out.

"I have to go." It's hard to focus when his dick is still hanging out and he is staring at the unbuttoned hole in my shirt. "Go... write the article."

"I was hoping you'd stay." He smirks, pushing himself back into his pants. "That you'd have some more questions for me.

I swallow, trying not to look at him. "Yeah... Maybe later."

A smile curls his lip upward. My cheeks burn.

We both know I'm not talking about asking more questions here.

I hurry out of the room before he can find another way to keep me in there. The hallway is clear, and I'm quite relieved. The last thing I want is to run into any of the other players right now.

It's a smooth journey back to my room. The moment I get there, I pull out my laptop. Reggie has given me more than enough information for my article, and I'm certain it's going to be a groundbreaking one.

Even if it hits a little bit too close to home.

For the second time, I shove the thoughts of what Reggie said about never being a good father to the back of my mind. Shame wells up in me as I recall how I cried when he said those words.

It's nothing to me, I remind myself for what seems like the hundredth time. Reggie never being a good father doesn't affect me or my son. And I ought to be grateful that he confirmed that being a playboy is less about his genetics and more about his resolve never to abuse another child the way he was abused. It means Carl will never have to inherit this messed up intergenerational trauma.

My fingers are perched on the keyboard to start the article when my phone starts to ring.

I reach for it, half-expecting—and hoping—Reggie is calling to ask me to come back. But it's only Dora.

"You'll be receiving the next installment in your email in the next twenty-four hours," I say by way of greeting.

"Glad to see you got through to him," Dora says with a dry yawn. "Can't wait to read it. But I'm not calling you because of the article."

I pause, confused. Why is she calling then?

"I'm calling about your son. You wanted us to fly him out to you."

My heart seizes with a mix of relief and hope. "Is that going to happen?"

‘Well... yes. For a couple of weeks. You’re leaving Boston soon for California, correct? He’ll be going with you.’

A stupid grin spreads across my face. “Thanks. I’m glad the budget expanded to accommodate me.”

“Well, not exactly,” Dora says after a brief pause. “There’s still no room in our budget.”

My brows furrow. “So how are you going to fly him to me, then?”

“We got a special donation.” Another, longer pause. “Courtesy of Reggie Turner.”

CHAPTER 16



REGGIE

From a distance, the mother son reunion unfolds in front of me. The door of a small Toyota flies open before the car even completely comes to a halt. That's not safe, I would think. A young, brown-haired boy launches out of the backseat, screaming as he runs toward his mother. A frazzled woman jumps out of the car after him, trying—and failing—to hold him back.

I must have been barking mad to ever think I would be okay with this.

Harper crushes the boy in her arms, squeezing the life out of him. He does not seem to mind. He is that happy to see her.

I get the feeling, champ.

My jaw tenses as I watch Harper greet the chaperone and briefly talk to her. Then she hauls her son's bag from the trunk. I should not be watching this intently, really. It would be creepy to an outsider: a large, tattooed man standing on his hotel room balcony and watching a family reunion in front of the hotel as though it is daytime TV.

But I can't look away.

Because I'm only just realizing what I did.

It was easy to make the call. To get Harper's bosses to fly her son in. I had not thought much of it. She burst into tears while conducting an interview with me because she missed her son that much. Since I could do something to help out, I did.

Sure, I'm not in the habit of going out of my way for others. But Harper is different. Every damned thing about her is different.

I stare down at them as they walk toward the hotel, holding hands. A strange feeling wraps itself around my belly as they draw closer to the entrance and away from my sight. It's not jealousy. I'm definitely not jealous.

Possessive is the word I'm looking for.

I already had precious little time to spend with Harper. Between my training and her job, it's damn near impossible to even see her most days. Also, the wily little minx is adept at slipping out of my grasp and making it impossible to track her down, especially when I wished she was bouncing in my lap.

Having her son around is not going to make that any easier to arrange.

My generosity is going to be the death of me. I spent the last hour watching her pace downstairs as she waited for the car service to bring her son to her. Time that would have been better spent with a more pleasurable activity, if I hadn't paid for her son's flight.

My phone pings. I look down at the screen, distracted. It's a text from Paul and he is excited about the fact that he just received two calls from reputable companies. He says we should discuss merits and demerits later tonight.

My jaw relaxes a little. Things are looking up. The scoop I gave Harper a few days ago about my childhood and not wanting children is a big hit with the media. All thanks to her. She found a way to put a nice, altruistic spin on my words in her article.

I scroll up and find the link to the piece, which Paul recently sent. I've read it about five times, but I can't quite get enough. My eyes scan it again, settling on the last few paragraphs at the end.

I'M NOT surprised that Reggie Turner had a toxic childhood. He's a stereotype, after all. Down to his playboy persona. Still, Reggie amazes me. He, unlike a lot of other playboys, seems to

have done the inner work and come to some conclusions: that, being unfortunate enough to be born into a family with generational trauma, the only way he can prevent the cycle from moving to the next generation is to break it. How? By deciding he's never going to have children.

This might seem extreme, and possibly unnecessary. Children are highly malleable. Almost every animal is born as a tiny imprint of the adult. Except humans, who are born like molten glass. This is why we can raise and train a child to be a Christian, or a Buddhist, a capitalist or a socialist, to be confident or broken. We know precious little of intergenerational trauma, but what we do know through decades of study is that traits can be unintentionally passed through the environment, rather than genetics.

Reggie's way of addressing his childhood trauma might not be right. But it's downright remarkable.

A SMALL BOOST of adrenaline floods me as I read Harper's words again. It feels like she pried into the deeper layers of my soul and laid them out in ink for me to see. She gave my words a lot more thought than even I have. And yet, nothing about the article made me want to claw into my skin.

With Harper, I like being seen.

And for the first time in my life, as I scroll through the comments from readers, I'm not automatically put off by either the positive or the negative ones. It feels *good* to read long-winded comments from people applauding me for my bravery and speaking about similar experiences. It feels like I could read them over and over and never get tired.

That awareness makes my chest brim with some strange, new emotion. Eager to avoid that feeling, I look down at the hotel grounds. Harper and her son have disappeared from view.

It's time for my training anyway, and so, I quickly change and head to the rink.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, I pace around my room with a few empty hours ahead of me. My usual past times of reading or

picking up a random girl don't seem enticing anymore.

Maybe I could take a walk.

For the next two days, at least, we are still stuck in Boston. And I would rather punch through dry ice with my bare fists than expose myself to more of this city and my childhood memories.

But then, this could be the last time I'm here. I only ever came to Boston to play hockey, and this is my last season.

I should go take one last look.

After throwing on a jacket, I wrench the door open and take the elevator to the lobby. A couple of my teammates are lounging on seats close by, and I give them a stiff nod. That's progress because I had avoided them outrightly only a few weeks ago.

As I make my way toward the exit, I'm stunned to see Harper's boy hunched over a game of Monopoly Junior.

Another feeling blossoms in my chest. This one is strange, uncomfortable. As much as I hated seeing Harper cry and would have done anything to transform her back into the fiery woman who got on my nerves, as much as I know I will enjoy seeing her happy with her son, I don't necessarily want to see *him*. Or have him close enough to be able to count the freckles on his nose or notice his missing baby teeth.

I should continue and walk out the open door. But, like Harper, something about him pulls me in. Maybe it's because he is an exact miniature of her, or maybe it's because he is playing a game of Monopoly all by himself. Or the absurd level of concentration on his face as he rolls the dice.

"I can't believe it," he mutters to himself. His voice surprises me. I have never seen this boy in my entire life, and yet, he seems so familiar. "I lost. Again."

"How could you lose? You're playing with yourself."

It's only when he looks up at me that I realize I spoke to him.

Now there is no turning back.

It's bad enough that I have to deal with him taking all of Harper's time this week. I didn't need to start up a conversation.

He looks wary for a few seconds. His gaze takes in my body, his eyes widening at my sleeve tattoos. Finally, he looks up into my eyes with an uncertain grin.

"I can lose. See?" he says, with all of the patience of a weathered professor. "I'm playing the car and the dog. But I like the dog better, so I hope it wins. I care more about a dog than about the car."

He rolls the dice again and slams the container down on the surface of the game. Double sixes. He seems annoyed as he looks at me. "See? The car's still winning."

A burst of amusement bubbles deep in my core. This has to be the first time in my entire life that I'm having a conversation with a child, and the outcome is... refreshing. But this boy isn't just any kid. Harper is delicately engrained in him.

Maybe that's why I find myself deciding to prolong this conversation a little more. I come closer, keeping a close eye on the board.

"You do this all the time." It's not a question.

He shrugs, looking up at me again. "Yeah. I don't have a dad, and my mom works a lot. She helped me with my schoolwork, but now she's on a call with her boss or something. So, she asked if there was a board game for me to play, and the lady at the reception there is watching me." He turns around and points at the woman sternly staring me down. "Monopoly is my favorite. I play by myself all the time." His eyes find my tattoos again, and he fixates on them. "Do you have a lot of brothers?"

"No. I also had no mom, and my dad..." I ignore the stab of pain "... was always busy too."

His eyes fill with delight. "Really? That's like my story. But..." his brows furrow "... what did you do for fun? You're old. Mom says there weren't many video games when she was

a kid. That's one of the reasons she won't buy me a PS4, so I have to play board games. She says they are better for your brain."

"She might be right." Alarm bells are going off in my head, and I know this is a very bad idea.

Still, I can't stop myself from taking the seat beside Harper's boy and holding out my hand for the dice.

"I'll play with you. I'll be the car."

He looks delighted for a second more, but then, wariness clouds his gaze. "If you're the car, you're going to win. The car's about to win, anyway."

I shrug. I'm not sure why the hell I'm doing this, but I don't have the power to stop myself.

"Okay. I'll be the dog. Give me the dice."

He looks even more wary. "But I prefer the dog."

"Right. So, I'll be the car."

He chews on his bottom lip. "That just means you'll win."

My amusement deepens. What is it about children and how they make you laugh when you should be annoyed?

I fold my arms and watch him. "What do you want to do, then?"

He stares at me for a few seconds, as if trying to decide whether to trust me or not. Then he turns back to the board, poring over the pieces.

Finally, with a sigh that sags his little shoulders, he passes the die container over to me. "Fine. You can be the car."

"You don't mind me winning, then?" I say, taking the little cup.

He shrugs again. "*If* you win..."

"*When* I win." I nod toward the board to remind him of the starting position.

He shakes his head furiously, tilting his head hard away from the direction of the board.

I bite down on my lips to keep from smiling. Harper's son really is all her.

“If you win, can I ask you something?”

“Winners usually demand from losers, not the other way around.”

He looks a little bothered. “But I *helped* you win. So, you could help me.”

For the third time, his eyes settle on my tattoos.

“If you want to know where to get one of these,” I say, raising my arms. “You’re way too young. Also, your mom would not be pleased.”

“I don’t want tattoos,” he says quickly, a nervous expression dawning on his face. “I just wanted to know...”

“What?”

He is playing with his fingers now. “How to become cool.”

The laughter that erupts from my mouth shocks me. I can’t even remember the last time I laughed like this.

“What do you even mean?” I ask, more intrigued—and confused—than ever.

His face is brick red, but I admire his determination to plow through to the end. “Allie Hoffman used to go to the playground with me, but she started going with Karl Lautner last week. Carol Kiperman says Allie only likes Karl now because he’s *cool*.”

I’m certain I have not been this entertained in a long time. “So, you want to become cool for Allie.”

He nods eagerly. “I asked Mrs. Paula what a cool boy is. She had this strange look on her face. But she said it meant someone with a whole lot of tattoos and a whole lot of trouble. Karl is a whole lot of trouble, but he doesn’t have tattoos yet. But you’ve got a lot of tattoos...”

“So, you think I’ve got to be one of the cool boys.”

“And you could show me,” he says, his face lighting up with expectation.

I restrain the urge to throw my head back and laugh. I have literally never felt that urge all my life. But it’s the right thing to do.

“Look,” I say, my eyes watering from the sheer ludicrousness of it all. “Why do you like Allie, anyway?”

He gets that thoughtful look on his face again. He seems torn when he looks up at me. “Dunno. She’s pretty, I guess.”

“Well, you could say that about all of the other girls in your class, can’t you? You could say that about Karen, even...”

“You mean Carol?”

“Carol,” I say, with a wave of my hand. “Trust me, pal. No girl is worth changing yourself for.”

“So, you’re not going to teach me?”

His disappointment makes me feel equal parts amusement and guilt. Leaning forward, I clap a hand on his shoulder.

“There’s nothing to teach. I got a bunch of tattoos because I felt like it. Also...” A warm feeling stirs up in my gut as I look down at the half-finished game of Monopoly. “... you’re already a pretty cool boy yourself.”

His eyes widen with surprise. “You really think so?”

The warmth turns into a pleasing sensation. I have never had a child look at me like that. Hell, I have never had anyone look at me that way, with eyes full of hope and adoration. Someone who seems to really care about what I think.

It makes shedding off my coat of distrust and anger at the world an easy task.

“You’re the coolest kid I ever met.”

There are stars in his eyes. “Thanks! You’re the coolest adult I’ve ever met.”

His words make me feel better than Harper's article and all the other comments combined.

And I hate that.

This is a one-time thing, I remind myself. It means nothing. Children can be fun to be around. And they are adept at saying funny things. I couldn't let myself feel too deeply about him.

I look down at the game. It's easier to focus on it than my marshaling thoughts.

"Right," I say, starting to roll the dice. "Let's play."

Still, the only thought that crops up in my mind as I bang the dice container down is how spending time with Harper's son is not exactly the worst alternative in lieu of Harper.

CHAPTER 17



HARPER

Maintaining a cheery expression in front of my son is a priority. But today is as hard as it's going to get.

The receptionist called to let me know Carl would be coming up with Reggie, giving me a few minutes to brace myself.

“What do you mean he’s your friend?” Even though there’s a six-foot-three, well over two-hundred-pound man right beside him—the same mountain of a man that threatened to drive me crazy over the past few weeks—I manage to keep my gaze on Carl. He is hopping from foot to foot in the throes of excitement.

That unsettles me. A lot. Because Carl is rarely ever that excited.

“You know,” Carl grins up at me, “I met him in the lobby. He played a game of Monopoly with me. Two games. And he lost. Both times. Can you believe it?”

He lets out a pearly string of laughter, the sound that has never failed to warm my heart and turn my face from his misdeeds.

Until now.

“Carl,” I say, stepping backward, but just enough so only a child can squeeze past me into the hotel room. “Go inside.”

Thankfully, Carl is too much of a well-behaved kid to argue with me. “Bye, Reggie,” he says, turning around and waving at him. “See you tomorrow.”

Heck, no.

Once Carl is safely in my hotel room, I step outside and pull the door shut behind me.

“Hi,” Reggie says, grinning.

My heartbeat quickens. Just one word, and I’m suddenly hyperaware that I’m wearing a white T-shirt without a bra.

Something that Reggie, no doubt, has noticed.

I glance up at him, expecting him to be halfway through roaming my body. But Reggie’s attention is squarely on my face.

That takes me aback. Also makes me feel a little... abandoned.

“You played Monopoly with him.” I decide to focus on Carl and how I feel about him spending time with Reggie. Sure, Reggie has said a lot of things over the past few weeks. Things that would concern any good mother if her son decided to start hanging out with him. Also, Reggie isn’t nearly as evil as he wants the world to think.

I’m not concerned about Reggie being a bad influence on my son.

More the exact opposite.

Because, unknown to either of them, they share DNA.

My heart picks up pace as I look into Reggie’s unsuspecting face. Only a few days earlier, I had to convince myself that it didn’t matter that Reggie is Carl’s biological father. Because, really, it doesn’t. Not then, anyway, when I was certain they were never even going to meet.

Now, though...

Worry pings through my brain. The chances that they will find out my secret are slim. But I can’t take that chance.

I also have other reasons to be concerned about them bonding. Reggie has made it abundantly clear he doesn’t want children. Allowing my son to attach to a man who is going to lose interest in him in a few days would be reckless.

I need to protect my child.

“Why were you playing games with him?” I say, folding my arms. That’s as nice a way as any to warm up to him.

“He desperately needed someone to pitch in.” Reggie’s voice is calm and clear. I have never heard him speak like this, with no sexual innuendos hidden underneath his words. “It was sad, watching him play alone like that.”

Heat rises to my cheeks, and I feel myself getting defensive. “I would have played with him, but I had to call the office to you—”

“I know,” Reggie says. His lack of argument shuts me up. “I know you do the best you can with him. Your son thinks the same. He adores you.”

I blink up at him. I’m almost sure Reggie’s playing a sick sort of game with me. But I can detect no trace of sarcasm in his tone.

He seems... genuine.

I’m suddenly thrown off by the whole affair.

“While you’re here,” Reggie continues, still staring directly into my eyes. “I want to tell you something.”

There is literally nothing to be scared about, but my shoulders square up anyway. “What?”

“If you’re free now, we should go and check out my childhood home. Together.”

I’m floored. For the past few weeks, I’ve had to use every trick up my sleeve to get Reggie to interview with me. Now, he is volunteering to show me the darkest part of his life.

“How come?” The last thing I want is to make him change his mind, but I need to know why he is suddenly open to sharing with me.

Reggie shrugs. “I had a fascinating conversation with your son about growing up with a single parent. I know you fill his life with more love and happiness than I was privileged to

have. But it made me remember my childhood in a different way.”

“How?” I’m not just interested because this will make a good story. I’m genuinely curious to know how my six-year-old made Reggie think of his younger life in a new light.

“Enough for me to want to go back to my past. You in?”

I hesitate. This could very well be a ploy to get me out of my room and on my back, and it’s not like I’m entirely opposed to that. The problem is I can’t leave Carl alone.

“The hotel babysitting service can watch him while we’re gone.” It’s like he is reading my mind. “But I’d really like to go see it. This is probably my last time in Boston.” A pause. “And I want you to come along.”

There is a strange look in his eyes. Something that’s not lust or anger or even pain.

Something... scared.

He looks like Carl after he wakes up from a bad nightmare.

Reggie doesn’t just want me around because I’m the journalist.

He wants me as a friend.

“I’m in.” The words slip easily out of my mouth.

Minutes later, Carl is safely in my room with a female staff member playing Jenga, and I’m dressed in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. I throw on my coat as I cast a last anxious look at my son. Then I close the door, barring him from my view.

“He’s going to be fine,” Reggie says, reading my thoughts once more. “Carl doesn’t need much babysitting.

I cast him a sidelong glance as we stroll to the elevator, a question I had not thought to ask before popping into my head. “What made you decide to play with him? Didn’t think you liked children much. And how did you become his friend?”

I’m surprised to see a wan smile on Reggie’s face. “He had some girl problems.”

My brows are high enough to graze my hairline. “What girl problems?”

Reggie’s smile grows even wider. I have never seen him grin this way, not unless he is about to say something dirty.

“Your son has a crush on a girl. Was convinced he needed to change something about himself to get her to like him.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry.” We walk into the elevator, and he punches the button for the lobby. “I convinced him to stay true to himself.”

I stare at the glassy gray doors in front of me, unsure of what to feel. “He’s never told me anything like that before.”

Reggie’s broad shoulders lift in another shrug. “Don’t take it too hard. Sometimes, all boys want to do is talk to men about their problems.”

My ears fill with ringing as the doors open again, and Reggie leads the way through the lobby.

All boys want to do is talk to men about their problems.

Is he right? Is the fact that I have been insistent on not having a romantic relationship for years affecting my son? Enough for him to see Reggie as a good father figure?

Barely aware that we are outside of the hotel, I gaze at the back of Reggie’s head. Could he be a good father figure? His advice to Carl was sound. Sure, he has some fears about turning out to be a horrible parent, but what if he really wouldn’t be? What if he turned out to be just what Carl needs?

The insides of my armpits are slick with sweat.

I don’t want to think about this. Not now. Not ever.

Reggie stops at a nondescript black car. “Here.”

We slip into the two front seats. Reggie backs up into the hotel driveway and veers onto the main road. I steal a glance at him. Maybe I should focus on what we are about to do and not what Reggie and Carl’s bonding means. They spoke once. I’m overreacting.

“Does your dad still live there?”

His fists tense momentarily on the wheel, but Reggie’s face gives nothing away. “No. The house was abandoned a long time ago. It’s only ten minutes from the hotel.”

“That’s why you’ve been in a foul mood since we got here.” I’m only just realizing that. Reggie has a reputation for being a pain in the ass, but everything he has done has been a little too much, and even I know that.

“Boston is not a city I cherish visiting. Hopefully, this is the last time.”

I glance at him again. For the first time, he is speaking about his life without my having to force it out of him.

What did Carl do to him?

And whatever it was, is Reggie going to want more of it?

My breath hitches. No matter what, I can’t let them see each other again. Carl is only going to stay with me for a short while. Keeping them apart for that long shouldn’t be too difficult.

“You’re not scared about going back to the house?” It’s a question that would have sent Reggie flying into a fitful of rage a week ago. Now though, he seems calmer, more willing to listen.

“I’m not,” he says easily. “But I haven’t been there since I was eleven.”

I narrow my eyes. “You left just before you became a teenager. What made you leave?”

His fists tense again on the steering wheel. “The house got raided. My father went to jail. I lived as a foster kid for a few months before one of his buddies took me in. When he got out, he got a new house.”

Bringing my notepad would have been helpful. I didn’t know that Reggie was a foster child or that his father went to jail. Strangely, my heart aches for him.

No more questions, I instruct myself. Things are getting way too personal. I already have no idea why Reggie wants to see this house. But I can't treat this like a regular interview.

I look out the window. We are gradually moving away from the busier parts of town and into a darker, less noisy area. There are very few cars on the road and fewer people on the sidewalk. I pay particular attention to the graffitied walls and boarded up shops.

"You grew up here." It's not a question. Even though this neighborhood is about the grimmest I have ever been in, I immediately know that it's Reggie's childhood home. Seeing this place makes me understand him a little more. His manner of thinking, his personality, the armor he has worn to face the world his entire life.

Reggie casts a disinterested glance outside the window. "Looked a lot different when I lived here. A lot of people moved out after the raid. One of the biggest busts in Boston PD history."

I keep staring at the empty houses. I felt next to nothing when I first entered the car. Now, the bleakness of the neighborhood penetrates my soul, till the only thing I feel is discomfort. I'm grateful Reggie is with me.

Then it hits me.

He didn't think he could face this alone.

I'm not the only person who doesn't want me to be a journalist tonight.

"Here."

My head snaps up. Reggie is pulling up in front of a house that seems, if possible, darker and grimmer than others. It's in such a dark area, I actually have to squint to see it. The vegetation has crept up onto the roof. Every inch of the walls is covered with graffiti over peeling paint. It looks like no one has stepped foot in the place for decades.

Reggie's hands shake slightly as he turns off the ignition. "This is it." His voice is even enough, but I don't need to hear

the emotion lining his words to know what he is feeling. I can sense how perturbed he is, looking up at this house.

Without thinking, I reach out and place my fingers over his larger, calloused ones. I expect Reggie to pull away. Instead, he squeezes my hand for a fraction of a second before opening the car and sauntering out.

I follow him, suddenly terrified of being left alone. Reggie is standing in front of the house, his shoulders hunched. I can't see his face, but I don't need to.

Even for a man of his size and badass-ness, I know he is scared.

I'm on the verge of walking over to him and taking his hand when he squares his shoulders and marches into the house. Maintaining a distance, so he can explore the place all by himself, I follow him in.

Reggie steps onto the porch, littered with bricks, animal droppings, and a lot of pungent smelling materials.

"Looks smaller than I remember," he mutters, before fishing his cell phone out of his pocket. He turns on the flashlight and directs the tiny beam toward the pitch darkness that's the main house.

Before he can do anything else, I step closer to him and fit my hand in his. Not because I want to support him, but because I literally can't walk around this house without knowing he is there.

Reggie's grip tightens. He takes a step, and I fall in line with him. We walk into his past together.

The darkness is overwhelming, making it impossible to see even with Reggie's flashlight. He directs the beam to one side of the dark room we are in, and then another. He does not seem to have any problems with sight.

"We had the most horrible, awful-smelling couch right here," he says, nodding toward the thickest area of darkness in the room. "Everyone did their thing on it. Crack, heroin, cocaine. Sometimes, two people would just go at it, right there."

My heart seems to be tearing into pieces within me. I think back to the defeated man I saw at the precinct. What sort of guy lets his child experience things like that?

The fact that Reggie survived and became successful is even more amazing than I previously thought. More amazing than anyone out there realizes.

“Thought the couch would still be here,” he says, spinning around the darkness and moving me right along. “Thought everything would still be here. That tired old rug we had, the tables they drew lines of coke on. Hell, even the crackpipes. But everything’s gone.” He lets out a bark of laughter. “It’s all dark and ugly. Kind of reminds me of what I used to think my father’s soul looked like.” His fingers curl in my hand. “Or what mine is now.”

“No.” My need to defend him is instant. I don’t think for even a second of doing anything else. I turn around to face him. My eyes are adjusting to the darkness, and I can see his face when I strain—the amused, almost spent look in his eyes. “You’re not... whatever this is. You’re not this house. You got out of here all by yourself, and you’ve grown into an amazing man.”

Reggie’s strange smile grows. “Sometimes, you can’t take certain things out of you. No matter how much you run.”

I shake my head. This should mean absolutely nothing to me, but I’m filled with a crazed passion to let Reggie know how much better he is than he allows himself to think.

“I don’t.”

“I know you cherish being stubborn, but—”

“I’m not. And I’m not saying this to be stubborn, or because I want to disagree with you. You’re completely off base.”

The tiniest bit of annoyance seeps into his eyes. “You don’t know my life better than I do.”

“On the contrary, you don’t know yourself as well as you think you do.” I’m pushing things a bit. But then, when have I ever let Reggie off easy?

“Whatever you’re about to say,” Reggie says, holding up his hand. “Save it.”

“You’ve looked at yourself from an unbalanced view your whole life. You hate your childhood and your father, and you’ve not entirely stopped to look at yourself. You’re different from him. As different as night and day. And I know because I’ve been shadowing you for almost a month now. And even though you’re the most infuriating man on the planet, you are not the horrible person your father is.”

Reggie actually looks like I stunned him out of speaking. Finally, he mutters, “You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do. The rest of the world does, too.”

He raises his brows. “The version of me you invented while writing the profile is not real, Harper. Get over it and yourself. Because a couple of people believe the sob stories you write doesn’t mean—”

I’m furious enough to stomp my foot, but I hold back. “Don’t you get it?” I’m nearly screaming. “The stories are you. You like to pretend that you’ve stashed your childhood in some bunker away from your real life and the adult you is a different person. That’s not true. You are the same person. Sure, you’re a dick now and then. But you’re also the guy that has had to overcome a million untold hardships to get to where he is today. You’re the dude selfless enough to decide not to fall in love in order not to trap his kids in intergenerational trauma. And you’re the first man I ever met who willingly sat through a game of Monopoly with my son.”

I regret the last sentence the moment I say it. I don’t want Reggie thinking of Carl more than he already is.

But when I look at his face, my regrets disappear. He looks... different. Hopeful. Like he wants to believe me but can’t bring himself to.

All I need is to give him a little push.

“I told you from the start that I wouldn’t lie while writing about you,” I remind him. “And I haven’t. You are the Reggie Turner everyone is so fond of now. You’re not a fake. And

maybe, just maybe, you'll realize this house is nothing more than a fallen monster that tormented you, and you are now free of it. You're not in this cage anymore, neither physically nor in your head."

He looks down at me, amusement dancing in his eyes. "You never give up, do you?"

"I will once you start agreeing with me."

Reggie tears his gaze away from my face and looks around the room again. "Whatever I thought I'd get from this, I didn't. Let's just go."

He is changing the topic—the most obvious tactic in the world. Frustration mounts in me. I want to show him just how much he has grown, how little the demons of his past matter. He has to understand he is in control, not his shadows.

I glance at Reggie, pieces of my plan falling into place. What he needs is to realize that he is in charge of his mind. He is no longer a helpless kid stuck in a house he hated with people he did not want around.

But there is only one way Reggie controls his environment.

My heart starts to pound in my chest. What I'm about to suggest is inappropriate, maybe bordering on ludicrous.

But I know it's the only way.

"I know that look." I snap my head up to see that Reggie is staring at me. "Usually means you're about to do something I'm not going to like."

"Maybe." Forcing myself to not think too deeply of what I'm about to do, I lean closer to him and brush my lips over his. I'm half-expecting him to back away, maybe even scream at me. This house is the origin of his lifelong trauma, after all, and he didn't bring me in here to make out with him.

Instead, Reggie lets out a low groan that lights a fire of desire in my belly. I know what that sound means: he is always going to be ready to be with me, no matter the circumstances.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

I take a step backward, emboldened by the depth of his need for me. I shrug off my coat, then slip my top over my head in one fluid motion, letting them both drop to the dirty floor. I don't break away from looking at him.

“Play with me,” I demand. “Right here, right now.”

CHAPTER 18



REGGIE

*H*ow is it that by sheer, dumb luck, I was assigned the craziest journalist in the history of the universe to write this profile?

Because Harper Morris isn't just the most aggravating woman on the planet. She is also the wildest.

Still, there is something about her I *cannot* look away from. Especially now as she reaches back to unhook her bra and let it drop to the filthy floor.

I start to harden as her breasts come into view. It has only been a few days since I saw them, but it might as well have been a year with how badly I want to stride over and touch them.

She is fucking perfect.

My instincts are simple: to get to her as fast as I can. But around us, the overwhelming darkness of this house is pressing in, making it a little difficult to focus on Harper.

I understand what she is trying to do—to show me how little this place means to my emotions and thoughts now.

But she is wrong.

Still, I keep my gaze on her as she steps out of her jeans. I want more than anything to see her in the light of day, but I settle for the weak beam of light from my cellphone. Harper is imbued with light anyway, and even in pitch darkness, it's impossible not to see her.

Soon, she is fully naked. And I'm standing a few feet away, my dick stretched to its full length. And still, I'm unable to move.

For the first time in my life, I'm restricted from acting on my primal urge to be with a woman in order to avoid the soul-crushing darkness around me.

And not just any woman, either. *This* woman. The woman that I have burned for longer and brighter than all women before her, combined. The woman I couldn't get enough of.

Harper is wrong.

This house still carries a lot of weight.

As much as I want to be with her, I can't do it *here*. I could hoist her into my arms and give her the best night of her life back in the car. But not here.

I want to tell Harper all of this. Yet another thing about this woman is how I want to share my feelings in ways I never even thought possible before. But it's more than a little emasculating to express that to her, especially when she believes that much in me.

Thankfully, I don't need to tell her. Because when our eyes meet, I see the realization dawn in Harper's eyes, along with the tiniest hint of disappointment.

She figured it out.

The weight of letting her down surrounds me, thawing out my desire inch by inch. I brace myself for what is going to happen next, Harper giving a quick apology and slipping her clothes back on. I'm already half turning away and back toward the car when a sudden movement from Harper catches my attention.

She is firmly rooted in the same spot. Right now, though, her fingers are at her breasts, her thumbs drawing lazy circles around her nipples.

The thawing out in my pants comes to an abrupt stop.

"What are you doing?" I hate the way my voice sounds. Thick with the gravity of my failure before her.

But also heavy with expectation and hope.

Hope. That damned feeling that bursts out in my chest now, filling me with joy at the fact that Harper isn't convinced I'm a lost cause yet. That she is still trying something to save me.

"Proving it to you." She holds her nipples between her thumbs and her index fingers and squeezes slightly. A moan spills from her lips.

Fuck.

For a millisecond, I'm distracted. For an even shorter time, I almost forget where we are.

Almost.

"Proving what to me?"

Harper continues to rub her nipples between her fingers. "That you're over this."

I cock my head to one side, choosing to focus on her face and not on what she is doing. "I know you're a fan of tough challenges, but this is one you can't win."

Harper's face hardens with determination. "Try me."

Her stubbornness, more than anything else, arouses me.

"As much as I want you, I want to get out of this house more."

The determination on her face seems to grow. "No, you don't."

"I know you believe you have a knack for seeing my innermost thoughts, but this time, you're wrong."

"You stripped me naked in the woods close to a police precinct and fucked me on the hood of your car. Location means nothing to you."

I fold my arms. Talking about this is about the most uncomfortable experience in my entire life. Still, Harper makes it easy to form words and put them out there. To ignore

the defensive wall forming around my heart and to say what I really think.

“That was different.”

“Yes, it was. If we’d gotten caught by the police, we’d be booked for lewd behavior and indecent exposure. But you were willing to take that risk because you wanted me. And you want me even more now.”

I look down at the erection straining against my pants. She is damn right, and she knows it. Every time I see Harper, I want her a little bit more than the last time.

“You should be inside me right now.” Her matter-of-fact tone is almost enough to get me to take one foot forward. Still, I’m held captive by forces I cannot explain. “But you’re standing way over there.”

“Because I cannot fucking be with you in here,” I spit through gritted teeth. Anger is flooding my veins, forming from the pent-up frustration I’ve had since Harper started this charade.

Harper doesn’t even seem to notice. “You can. I know you can.”

I open my mouth, but her left index finger is drawing a line down her abdomen, skipping her belly button and heading lower. I’m left speechless as her finger disappears between her thighs. Harper lets out another moan.

Fuck it all to hell.

She thrusts her finger in and out of herself. Her eyes close lazily, her head is thrown back, and she seeks her own pleasure, her moans alternating with her movements. She could very well be faking it for me, but I know she is not. The beads of sweat on her forehead, the tautness of her nipples...

She is going hard down there.

My entire body is vibrating with need. The need to go over to her, yank her fingers out of her pussy and replace them with me. To fuck her until we are both slick and sweaty and she is filled with my come. And to keep going until day breaks.

There is a slight tremble in my knee. I look down at my still feet, urging myself to move forward somehow.

But nothing.

I literally cannot take a step further.

Harper's moans are coming out in harsher, faster, grunts. She is about to come, and the fact that I cannot get over there and help her with it makes me angry enough to slam my fist into the wall.

Or into my stomach, even, since I'm apparently a pathetic coward.

Harper stops touching herself just as she is about to launch into her summit. Her eyes flutter open and she stares at me. This time, there is no determination or stubbornness in her gaze.

There is only passion.

"I want you to make me come. I need you."

Her words are simple, but they go straight to my heart and melt layers of emotional turbulence I didn't even know were present. They seem to loosen my knees a little more, to harden the depths of my desire for her.

"Come here," I manage to grind out.

I'm starting to believe that I can block out this darkness and have sex with her here. Still, I'm fairly certain I can't make it all the way to her. She is going to have to meet me in the middle.

Her eyes fixed on me, Harper shakes her head. "No. You can come to me."

Another storm of frustration floods me. "You know I can't."

She shakes her head again. "I know you can. With every fiber of my being. I know it the way I know I want you. Which is pretty damn badly."

Her words melt another layer of resistance. Suddenly, the house isn't that dark or penetrating. Harper's light seems to be

radiating out of her.

“That’s it, Reggie,” she coaxes, as though she is acutely aware of what is going on in my head. “Focus on me. Only on me.”

Focus.

The one thing I have promised myself all my life is that I would *never* make a woman my sole focus. Could never allow myself to embark on a road where I could father children who hated me.

But then, I think of what Harper said about me in relation to her son.

Being the first guy she has ever met who cared enough to entertain her child had to count for something.

Maybe, just maybe, Harper is right about this. She has been right about a lot of things in the past.

Maybe she is right that I’m not as fucked up as I think I am.

I gaze at her. The slow fall and rise of her heaving breasts. Her fingers tracking across her abdomen, still slick with her fluid. Her warm eyes. *Her.*

Something in me snaps. So hard I can almost hear it.

I’m suddenly able to move.

I take one step.

“Reggie,” Harper mutters. There is an outpouring of joy on her face and actual tears in her eyes.

It takes a mere second to close the gap between us. To crush her to me. Harper lets out a sound of victory before our lips meet in frenzied passion. I kiss her, dragging out the moment longer than I ever have, intent on enjoying every single minute I can get with her.

She pulls away from me, her entire face flushed.

“You did it,” she mutters.

In the end, I'm proven right. Harper was trying to show me that the house meant nothing. But the house will always mean something. Only, Harper will always mean more. And once I focus on her, everything else will fade into oblivion. No matter what it is.

Letting my fingers trail down her naked back and hips, I lift her up. She locks her legs around my waist, her fingers fumbling for my belt. It would be much easier to hold her up against the wall, but I keep her firmly in my arms. I don't know if I'm ready to share any part of Harper with a place this dark. Or with any place.

I spring free, fully erect and throbbing. Harper's small fingers wrap themselves around my dick, and pleasure surges through me. Two weeks ago, I would be out of my mind by now, brushing her fingers aside so I can plunge into her.

Now, with the last pillar of childhood trauma just extinguished from my life, I have a renewed appreciation for everything. I want to enjoy every single moment I get with her.

My fingers explore her, brushing her clitoris and pushing into her pussy.

Harper squirms in my arms. "Reggie," she moans. "Please."

Hearing her beg for me does not feel nearly as good as it did the last time. Now, my only pleasure comes from making her happy.

I drive two fingers into her, thrusting in and out. She cries out again, her fingers locking around my neck as she holds on to me for dear life. Feeling her this close to me, all of her, raises a kind of euphoria in me that I have never felt before.

As much as I want to prolong this moment, I also want to claim her. And give her all of myself.

Holding her weight just above my erection, I lean backward, so I can fit myself in her. Harper lets out another yell, her grip on me tightening. I close my eyes, my joy expounding with every inch that goes in. My hands cradle her ass, and I move her closer to me for a first, slow, thrust.

“Reggie,” she cries.

Hearing my name called like that, with so much need and desire, in the same place I grew up surrounded with hate, snaps the darkness away.

Now, all I can see is light.

All I can see is Harper.

I drive myself into her again, more patiently than I did the last time. Although slow has never been my style, Harper has uncovered yet another layer about myself that I didn't know. A layer that doesn't just want to get a bang and move on to the next girl.

A layer that wants to enjoy. To explore.

Someone that cares more about the pleasure of the girl than himself.

I go even slower the next time, focusing on how it feels for Harper. I expect her to protest. But she is whimpering with pleasure in my arms, apparently unable to speak.

She likes this.

Maybe she even likes this version of me better than the one she has met.

I have never been one to care about that. But this time is different. Being liked by Harper feels good. Just as much as being liked by her son.

I drive myself into her again, a little harder than the last time.

“Reggie,” Harper moans, literally trembling. “More.”

She's on the edge of climax. And she wants me hard.

I oblige her wishes, her need for satisfaction eclipsing my own pleasure. I drive myself into her again and again until her trembling turns into jerky, uncontrollable movements, and her moans become a long, high-pitched scream. Her orgasm triggers mine, and I spill into her.

The pleasure recedes, but I barely notice. I'm holding onto her, running my fingers through her hair, slick with sweat. Because holding her feels almost as good as making love to her.

Making love.

I didn't just fuck her. For the first time in my life, I made love to a woman.

And it was amazing.

"Lordy," Harper mutters after a few seconds. "This was... *everything.*"

I agree to the point that it scares me.

Harper is already pretty dangerous to me. She is like a drug, impossible to avoid or say no to. I want to bend her over every chance I get. Which is already insane, since I rarely have sex twice with the same woman.

But this new version of lovemaking is even more unsettling. Because I know that I'm never going to want to do that again with anyone else.

And because I know that I'm never going to get tired of doing it with Harper.

Maybe even for the rest of my life.

CHAPTER 19



HARPER

*I don't get scared easy. Never have.
But the house—it scares me. And why wouldn't it?*

I've heard a lot about Reggie Turner's dark childhood FROM Reggie Turner. No mother, drug pin father, a host of drug-addled sex workers in place of a maternal figure, a house that doubled as a front for criminal activities.

But there's nothing quite like seeing the darkness in the flesh. Stepping, with Reggie, onto the porch that has witnessed a thousand drive-bys during gang disputes. Stepping into the living room he walked into as a child to see two drug addicts having sex right in front of him.

The house has fallen apart. Not surprising. Since the raid of '13, this corner of Boston has practically remained off the map. But as I looked around the graffitied, broken walls and the desolation inside the house, I almost found it fitting. The house is in the exact state Reggie Turner believes he is, at least emotionally.

How many of us never get over our childhood traumas and spend the rest of our lives with that broken home inside of us?

Reggie was about to show me.

“WHAT CAN I SAY? It's perfect, Harper.”

I force a smile, even if Dora can't see me. It's more for me than her, anyway. To convince myself that I'm pleased about the profile gaining a lot of traction.

Perhaps I can't bring myself to be happy about it because I know the exact opposite is happening. Even if, to the outside world, things are going great. We have left the chill of the East Coast for warmer California, and Carl is excited by the opportunity to explore the beaches. I also have submitted a new article every day for the last three days.

Things couldn't be better.

Except in my head.

"Thank you." My tumultuous feelings can be unpacked at a later time. I don't have high hopes of ever getting to it, though, since all I have done is ignore my own sour mood for the past week.

"Have you been reading local news blogs?" As usual, Dora displays a complete lack of awareness about my true feelings. "Quite a number of them referenced the profile when reporting the last game."

"Oh."

"You did watch the last game, didn't you?"

"Yes."

But no, I didn't. I was too depressed to even pull myself out of bed. Carl was excited about watching the game, and so, I let him go with Coach Ernest. Dora's not going to catch me in my lie because my son happily gave me the highlights, telling me that Reggie scored a goal and was cheered on by the crowd and that he blew them a kiss, grinning ear to ear.

That news did not make my depressive slump any easier to bear.

"Some blogs are trying to compare Reggie's past and present behaviors. They are saying the reason why he's much nicer now is because he faced his fears head-on. They are talking about the benefits of therapy."

"I'm not a therapist. I merely asked him a couple of questions about his childhood." I ignore the guilty squirm in the center of my chest. I don't have to mention that I went overboard in freeing Reggie from his demons.

And that, right now, I almost regret it.

Exhausted, I collapse in my chair.

I'm glad Reggie's doing better. I'm glad he is becoming more open and more liked.

But I have to unpack what that means.

I have never done something that intense for anybody. To fight that hard for them, even to use my body as bait, while knowing I wasn't going to get anything in return.

And yet, I did it for Reggie.

That means that I care for him, maybe even more than I have for anyone else in a long time.

I don't know how I let that happen, but I have to stop. Reggie is not like all the other guys who have asked me out in the past. Guys who I found easy to dismiss because they could not understand me.

He is the only man I have ever met who not only fulfilled my dream expectations but also exceeded them.

I can't let myself fall for him. He is never going to be ready to be a father.

If I could turn back time, I would not have taken this job. I'm here now, though. And it's impossible to decide the best way out of this mess.

"I know you're not a therapist." There's an edge to Dora's voice. "It's just what the blogs are saying. You portray Reggie as a man strong enough to rise above his past. Now, the public is seeing a dramatic change in him. It's an amazing journey, really, and everyone is hooked on it. You should be proud."

"Yes," I say through gritted teeth. "I am."

There is a shuffling on the other end of the line. "We're meeting to decide what angle we want you to take for the next article. Someone brought up a fantastic idea—that you capture Reggie going out on a date. Maybe talk about how his views on dating have changed since he started facing his past."

I'm gripping my phone a little bit too tightly. "Reggie's views on romance haven't changed." It's imperative I make that clear to Dora.

To myself too.

She lets out a bored sigh. "Yeah, maybe not now. But he's the player that went from starting fights on the ice to blowing kisses to the fans. If he keeps this up, he's going to become America's next sweetheart. And we've got to play up that angle while the profile is going on. You know our readers *love love*."

"His views haven't changed. And they never will." I'm not in the habit of contradicting Dora, but the thought of following Reggie into an upscale bar and watching him strike up a conversation with a bright, doe-eyed girl makes all the cells in my body squirm in protest. Dora couldn't really expect me to cover the minutes before Reggie gets some girl's phone number.

Some girl.

I'm filled with more squeamish thoughts. *Reggie and I are not dating*, I remind myself. Right now, though, another layer of knowledge piles on top of my disturbed thoughts. Reggie is changing and is likely getting flooded with a new wave of feminine attention.

Enough for him to break away from whatever it is he is doing with me to explore fresher waters.

My stomach buckles with an emotion I can't name.

That's good, I forcefully tell myself. If Reggie draws away from me, I will have time to catch my breath. To maybe even discover that my care for him was just my type A personality refusing to lose.

"Well, if he's not interested in dating anyone, I've got another idea."

"What?" I ask, irritated.

"You could record him going out with his team. Just tag along with them for an evening."

I stay silent, mulling it over.

“Also you could propose that you two go for dinner or something like that. You’ve been hanging around him for weeks, and he trusts you. I’m sure he’s going to say yes.”

Hanging around him, and so much more. If only she knew...

And yet, I’m not exactly sure if he will say yes. Or where Reggie’s head is at.

“Dora, I really don’t think...”

I hear the door of my hotel room bang open. I spin around on the chair. Carl is standing in front of me, looking like he just rolled around in the dirt in front of the building, grinning ear to ear.

And behind him is Reggie, who looks friendlier and happier than I have ever seen him.

“Mom! Uncle Reggie says he’s going to take me to the beach today! Can you believe that?”

Uncle Reggie?

“What’s going on?” Dora is saying. “Is he there right now?”

“I’ve got to go.” Even with the confusion torpedoing through my body at Carl’s choice of words, it feels damn good to cut the conversation with Dora short. I stand up, rounding on Reggie instantly.

“The beach? Why would you promise him that?”

Reggie shrugs. He is not even looking at me. His eyes follow my son as he runs to the closet and starts pulling his clothes out. “He said he wants to go.”

Panic wells up in me. Reggie’s good-natured attitude toward my son means nothing, but I cannot help but wonder what will happen if he somehow manages to discover my secret.

Also, I’m not just worried about the secret anymore. I’m worried about how close Carl and Reggie are becoming. And

why on earth Reggie is so interested in my kid.

That feeling, more than anything, propels the next words out of my mouth.

“He can’t go to the beach with you.”

Carl’s movement abruptly stops. He turns to me, hurt in his eyes.

“Why?” Reggie’s arms are folded, and he looks like he is determined to fight me on this.

I feel a slight irritation. He has got no business—that he knows of, anyway—parenting my child.

“Because he can’t swim.”

Reggie raises his brows and turns to my son, who’s pink in the cheeks.

“Thanks, Mom,” he mutters, slamming the door of the closet.

My bewilderment grows. Is Carl embarrassed because I told Reggie that? How close have they become?

Reggie flashes him a reassuring smile—a *real* smile, something I have barely ever seen on his face. “Don’t worry about that, buddy. I couldn’t swim till I was twelve. And I can teach you.”

Carl’s embarrassment is replaced by a toothy grin. “Thanks, Uncle Reggie. I’d like to learn from you.”

I notice my son’s emphasis on the last statement, and my worry increases. It’s like I’m watching a huge portion of my life go down the drain, and I’m powerless to stop it.

“You can’t teach him.” I ignore the hurt creeping back into Carl’s eyes. As much as I hate causing him pain, I’m doing this for the greater good. Even if he doesn’t know it yet. “He’s going to be out of here in five days. You can’t teach him in that time.”

“Watch me.” Reggie’s smile curls up his face in a way that makes him, maddeningly, even more attractive than usual. “I learned to swim in one hour. All you need is a good teacher.”

Damn.

“Also, you don’t need to worry about his swimming,” Reggie adds. “It’s a bit too cold for that today. He’s merely desperate to see the beach. We’ll be in and out in one hour. I have to be back by four for tonight’s game anyway.”

I have officially run out of all my excuses. And judging from the victorious look on Reggie’s face, he damn well knows it.

Carl finds what he is looking for, his Celtics baseball cap, and pulls it over his hair.

“Alright, Uncle Reg. Let’s go.”

Reg?

My panic increases as I watch Carl run to him, and they start to walk out the door.

“Wait.”

Reggie looks amused as he turns back to me. “What?”

A memory from the last time we had sex flashes through my head, Reggie holding my naked body up against his chest as he thrust into me slowly.

Yes, *slowly*. Gently.

Like he was a different Reggie Turner than the one I had flown to Boston with. It’s the same thing here. His kindness around my son. His patience around me.

Dora is right. Reggie has changed. A whole lot. So much that I’m not even wary about leaving Carl with him for a couple of hours.

I’m only worried about the bond that will develop between them if I let him go.

A hot flush creeps up my body. It’s suddenly harder to breathe standing there in that room, watching my son slip his tiny hand into Reggie’s.

I need to keep this under control. Make sure not to hurt my son while this whole thing stops in its tracks.

“I’m coming with you.”

CHAPTER 20



HARPER

Fifteen minutes later, I'm stuffed in the backseat of a car with Reggie at the wheel and Carl right beside me in the backseat.

"You know what you said about Allie?" my son says. He has not paid me any attention since I announced I was going with them, other than a single disgruntled glance. Now he looks like he has even forgotten I'm along for the ride, with his gaze completely focused on Reggie.

"The girl you like—liked," Reggie says easily, eyes on the road. "Yes."

"Do you mean Allie Hoffman, the girl with pigtails?" I'm not sure what I'm bothered by more, the fact that Carl can now have full-fledged conversations about his emotions with Reggie, or that he had not come to me with this.

Carl turns to me, embarrassment clouding his face. "I'm talking to Reggie. This is why I didn't want you to come."

Ouch.

Reggie meets my gaze through the rearview mirror. "Don't sweat it, Harper. I'm sure Carl just wants manly input on this."

I feel a squirming in my gut. I can understand Carl not wanting to talk to me about this. I can even understand him shutting me out.

But I can't understand why Reggie is so cool with it. Why he seems so happy to be around my son.

I cast my mind back to the first day I met Reggie. No mother in the world would ever think that man would want anything to do with children. I half-expected Reggie to even be slightly pissed at Carl for coming over and hogging all my time.

But the opposite has happened. Carl and Reggie hit it off and became fast friends. And Reggie seems to be enjoying every single minute of it. So much so that he has not once looked at me with lust since the moment Carl arrived.

A niggling feeling rises in the back of my throat. I had no idea that bothered me so much. Now, though, I can admit that it does. Reggie looking at me with eyes filled with compassion and understanding is not what I signed up for. Watching his eyes soften like this makes me want to crawl out of my skin.

As does watching him have an empathetic conversation with my son.

Carl casts a furtive look my way. I can tell he wants to talk, but only to Reggie.

It's not personal, I counsel myself. Reaching into my pocket for my AirPods, I make a show of fixing them in my ears and staring down at my phone. I'm aware that Carl is not the only one looking at me now, but I don't look up.

The pods block out about 50 percent of the noise, but I can still hear Carl well when he says, "So you think I should start liking Carol now?"

Reggie's amused burst of laughter starts up a weird feeling in my chest. "Now why would you say that?"

"Because of you." Carl's voice is tense, like he doesn't want to disappoint Reggie. "You said that I deserved better than Allie. And Carol has been my friend forever. She has always been nice to me. Mom likes her too."

Reggie lets out a chortle. I force myself to keep my attention glued to my phone even as surprise floods my veins. I didn't even know Reggie could laugh.

"I don't think that's how it works, buddy," he says. I feel him swerve off the road and note we are approaching the

beach. “We like who we like. We can’t force ourselves to appreciate someone just because they’re nice to us. In fact, that’s a little creepy.”

“But you said I couldn’t like Allie anymore.”

Reggie lets out another bark of laughter. “No, I said you deserve better than her. But it doesn’t make your feelings invalid. Nor does it mean you can turn them off anytime you want to. It just means you’ve got to do a better job of setting your standards high.” The car comes to a stop, and I hear Reggie switch off the ignition. “Just be patient, buddy. You’re going to like several girls in the future. I promise you, one of them is going to make it worth it.”

My chest burns as I open the car door and slip out of it. I walk away from the car, not even thinking to wait for them.

What is going on?

The beach spreads out in front of me, miles and miles of white sand stretching out to the receding waves of the ocean. Only a handful of people are here. The salt-tinged air fills my nostrils. But instead of the calm I suppose I should feel, dread wraps itself closely around my heart.

What game is Reggie playing at? Is this some strange manipulative stunt where he tries to mess with my kid’s feelings for the hell of it? Or is he just bored and interested in passing away time by becoming a paternal figure to Carl?

I glance at them as they walk toward the ocean. Carl is gripping Reggie’s hand. Seeing any other man walk toward a large body of water with my son would fill me with terror.

But with Reggie, I feel absolute peace.

Because I know that Carl is always going to be safe with him.

That’s when I realize that Reggie is not playing a game with Carl. Maybe he is even as attached to Carl as Carl is to him.

But I still can’t figure out why. Did they recognize each other instinctively? Or has my profile changed Reggie so

much that he has broken free of his past and is finally letting people in?

Whatever it is, I can't let it go on for long. It's five days until Carl returns to New York. I need to find a way to keep them apart without hurting my son.

They are right at the waterfront, still talking.

I edge as close as I can without them noticing. When I pop my pods out, their voices carry over to me.

"... didn't know you were a Celtics fan," Reggie is saying now.

"I'm not." Carl's voice is muted, a little sad. "Mom just got me the hat because she liked the color. I also wanted to learn how to play baseball, but Mom doesn't really have the time, and Grandma hates sitting at sports games. Sometimes, I wish I had a dad, so he could tell me what team to like."

His last sentence tears at my heart. I know Carl doesn't mean anything horrible by what he is saying, but it's hard to hear your son telling someone that you are not enough.

"I didn't grow up with two parents, either. My mom died."

My brows furrow. I didn't expect Reggie to lead with that.

"And my dad was about the worst man you could ever come across."

I cast a glance at Reggie. I'm certain the conversation is going to cease if they find out I'm listening in, and so I'm relieved they don't notice me eavesdropping. Reggie's expression is relaxed.

He is finally talking about his childhood without an ounce of pain or stiffness.

Like he has let it all go.

"And when I see how hard your mom works for you and fights for you," he continues, "I think of you as the luckiest kid alive. Even if you don't have a dad."

Sudden tears spring to my eyes. I blink, nonplussed by my own reaction. Sure, I never expected Reggie to stick up for me

in that way, but it's nothing to cry about.

"I guess you're right." Carl sounds doubtful.

"Oh, I am. Because your mom is the most amazing woman I've ever met."

A wave of joy washes over me.

He is only just saying that to cheer up my son. I shouldn't let his words affect me too deeply.

"Also," Reggie claps his hand on my son's shoulder, "while you're here, I'll teach you some things your dad would have."

The violent reaction his words trigger in me almost forces me into walking up to them and physically ripping Carl away. But I manage to keep myself in check and keep listening.

"Like what?" Carl sounds more excited than I have ever heard him.

"First, how to swim. We're going to the pool this weekend, and your mom is going to have to deal with it."

"Yay!"

"Second, I've got a big game in two days. It's the quarter finals, and we're playing against the Philly Flyers. I'm going to get you a VIP seat so you can watch me. And Ray Lenard is going to be around."

I don't need to see my son to know his eyes are popping out of their sockets. Ray Lenard is his favorite sports hero in the whole world, and that Reggie knows that clues me in on the fact that they are even closer than I thought.

"Really?" Even with the circumstances surrounding us, my heart soars at hearing the joy in my son's voice.

"Really. And while we're at the pool, maybe I'll tell you other things. Like what basketball team to root for and how to know when you like a girl."

Carl jumps up and down with glee. "Yes. Yes, yes, yes. I can't wait for everything."

I stare at the sand in front of me as a fresh wave of tears fills my eyes.

I have regretted not getting Carl a male role model before, but it has never stung as much as it does now. I should have tried to do more for him, to give him someone paternal he could look up to.

And now that I have failed miserably in that aspect, I can't wrench him from the first man he has ever adored.

I steal a glance at them. Carl is hugging Reggie tightly, his arms closed around his midriff. Reggie looks happier than I have ever seen him.

I turn away from them again. I was always wary of Reggie's claim that he wouldn't be a good father because his father wasn't. Even when he was his worst self, he always had a level of self-awareness that was typical for thoughtful people.

Today is the day I know for sure that he is wrong. Reggie Turner is going to make an absolutely fantastic father, if he ever decides to settle down.

I have neglected to give Carl a father figure. He is only spending a few days here, and I can't keep them away from each other for my own peace of mind. The chance that they are going to find out anything is slim. Sure, they could end up becoming too attached to each other and get hurt when their time together has elapsed, but I could let them have their fun for now.

It's the decent thing to do.

CHAPTER 21



REGGIE

“*R*eady, Reg? Cause we’re either going big or going home.”

“Ready, Coach.” I fit my helmet over my head before I turn to look at Ernest, who’s clucking around the team with the air of a concerned father. Five weeks ago, I would have been appalled by what I thought was a ridiculous catchphrase. Now, I’m almost fond of him as I pick up my stick.

“Great.” He claps a hand on my shoulder—another move that would have sent me packing just weeks ago. “Cause you had a superb performance last game, and we need you to blow their minds this time too.”

“I’ll do my best.” I stride out of the locker room, past a throng of my team members. Weirdly, their chatter doesn’t irritate me as usual.

I’m changing. In place of my heart of darkness, there is a vulnerable, fluffy feeling in it that makes it easier for me to breathe and move.

And that thought does not scare me as much as it would have.

I take my position halfway in the lineup as we head onto the ice. Immediately, I spot Carl and Harper in the VIP box I got for them. Two seats away, Ray Lenard is slouched in his chair, looking bored out of his mind. Carl is pressed up against the wall of the box, waving excitedly down at me. My Lakers cap is slung over his head, covering half of his face.

I grin foolishly as I nod in his direction. The fluffy feeling in my chest balloons, until I can't remember if I was ever capable of anything else. I let my gaze linger on Harper for a moment. She has her attention on her phone and is typing rapidly. Feeling my eyes on her, she looks up and gives me an easy smile.

Joy sparks in the center of my being. I look away automatically, not wanting her to see how she affects me.

But there is no hiding it, I admit to myself as I take my position on the first line. A blind man could see it. The media is going crazy with my transformation. Fans love being around me. Paul's phone has been ringing off the hook with the dozens of brands interested in partnering with me.

No one knows the whole story, though. In every news article I read, the writers chalk up my change to the profile.

They have no idea it's because of the woman behind it. The woman and her son, the boy with whom I feel a real connection. He makes me want to score a goal for him.

And yet, I can't bring myself to be bothered by my feelings toward them.

The Philly Flyers are making their way to the ice. I spot Blake White instantly, a tall, blond player who has recently gained media attention because of a scandal involving his best friend, a fellow team member, and his sister. They had fallen in love in a rather public spectacle that gained national attention. Alex, his friend, had quit the Flyers shortly after.

Fallen in love.

I push away the thought before it starts to creep in. Yeah, I have changed. A whole lot. But that does not mean love is ever going to be on the table for me.

The game kicks off, and I'm immediately pulled into its frenetic pace. My mind clears of all distractions—thoughts of Harper, her son, and even the raucous cheers from the stands fade into the background. I focus solely on the ice beneath my skates, feeling the smooth glide as I maneuver across the rink. This is what I love about the game. The control I have over my

feet, over the stick and the puck. The Philadelphia team is a formidable opponent. Their defense is like a well-fortified wall. I carve into the ice, sharp and precise, weaving through their relentless opposition.

As the first period nears its end, the intensity ramps up. With only seconds remaining, I spot a narrow opening. My body and mind align perfectly, and with a flick of my wrist, I send the puck sailing toward the Flyers' goal. It cuts a swift path across the ice and slides just between the goalie's legs.

The buzzer blares, signaling the period's end, and the arena erupts in cheers. My teammates rush over, their elation tangible as they envelop me in a sea of congratulatory embraces. I bask in the moment, the thrill of the goal coursing through me. As the crowd's euphoria gradually fades, I skate toward our bench, my eyes searching for and finding Carl's amid the settling chaos. I expect to see him cheering down at me, but he is not. I ignore the momentary stab of disappointment to focus on what he is doing. He is right in front of Ray, looking like he is trying to have a conversation with his idol. But Ray's attention is on his phone, barely noticing someone is standing in front of him.

My disappointment changes to irritation. I force myself to look away from the scene, though. Perhaps Ray is just having a bad day. If I'm honest with myself, I have never liked the guy much, but I have to believe he would be decent enough to give a child an autograph and a smile.

The ensuing two periods unfold with a rapid, almost dizzying pace. I observe the second period from the bench with a mix of anxiety and anticipation. The Flyers, with their strategic gameplay and seamless coordination, manage to clinch the period, showcasing a display of skill that momentarily dampens our spirits. Their players sashay across the ice with a mix of grace and aggression, executing plays that are both elegant and effective. Their puck handling is smooth, their passes are sharp, and they capitalize on every small opening we leave.

The second period concludes with the Flyers in the lead. When the third period begins, I'm back on the ice, determined

to turn the game around. The team shifts into a higher gear, launching an offensive play, our movements fluid and purposeful. My skates cut sharply across the ice, the blades leaving fleeting trails as I navigate through the Flyers defense. I'm in the zone, the puck an extension of myself, sailing effortlessly with my stick.

The intensity of our play gradually tips the balance in our favor, as we start breaking through their defenses with a series of skillful plays and strategic shots.

The arena is alive with energy, every move we make amplified by the roaring crowd. As the final moments of the game approach, the anticipation builds to a crescendo. Finally, the buzzer sounds, signaling the end of the period and the game. The cheer that erupts from the stands is deafening, a victorious roar that fills the arena. We had successfully turned the game in our favor in the final period.

I have never felt so alive.

Until I look up at the box again. Carl is still standing over Ray Lenard, but this time, something is different. Ray Lenard is looking up, but not at Carl. His attention is on Harper, who is right behind her son. Even from the ice, I can see that Harper's shoulders are squared, the way it looks when she is about to get into an argument.

Something is wrong.

I push past the throng of celebrating team members and fans, heading off the ice and up toward the box. The closer I get to them, the more things I notice: the fury on Ray Lenard's face, matched only by the anger on Harper's. They are clearly arguing.

And Carl is rubbing tears off his face with his tiny fists.

That, more than anything, propels me up the stands faster than I ever thought possible. In a few seconds, I'm stepping into the box. With the exception of a pretty blond girl I instantly recognize as Blake's sister, it's completely empty.

Harper and Ray stop talking the moment I walk in. Carl looks up at me, but his face does not register the pleasure I

have come to expect when he spots me. I can now clearly see the tear tracks on his face. His sadness loosens something in me.

“What’s going on here?” I ask stiffly.

Harper says nothing. Ray’s expression changes from fury to begrudging praise. “Liked how you started the game. Looked good.”

I peg him instantly as one of those celebs who have their heads so far up their asses, they believe the only people that are worth their attention are other famous people. That fact does not make me like him more.

“What’s going on?” This time, I focus my attention on Ray.

He looks a little taken aback that I ignored his compliment. He recovers nicely, though, nodding toward Harper, who has her hand on Carl’s shoulder.

“Nothing. This lady is merely going ballistic because I refused to sign her son’s shirt.”

My fingers ball into fists, but Harper starts to talk before I can even form my words.

“I merely asked that you be nicer to my son,” she spits. “I’m not asking you to sign his shirt. But he adores you, and you’re the whole reason he wanted to come to this game. So, flinging his shirt to the other side of the box and calling him a pest is *not* cool.”

He did what? I glance at Carl. His shoulders, hunched with defeat, confirm Harper’s words for me.

Anger pounds through me. It’s a bit hypocritical, and I know it. I have turned down fans in crueller ways, up until every single one of them stopped approaching me. But even I know better than to treat a child this way.

I turn to Ray, ready to force him to apologize. But his beady eyes are focused on Harper.

“Big deal. I’m not going to dole out my signature so he can make a couple hundred bucks off it on eBay.”

Carl lets out a whimper. Harper tightens her grip on his shoulder. “If you’d signed the shirt, he’d have treasured it forever. And by the way, genius, he doesn’t have an eBay account. He’s six.”

Ray rises ponderously to his feet. “Yeah, whatever. If he really wants my autograph, he can go to a Nike store and get one of my sweatshirts. I’ll appreciate that. Right now, I see no reason why I should sign his shirt. He’s not a retarded or sick kid, and...”

Every fiber of my being is desperate to grind my fist into his skull. But I settle for pressing my hand hard onto his shoulder and forcing him back into a sitting position. He hits the seat hard and shifts backward a few inches.

“What the fuck are you doing?” He sounds more surprised than anything.

I notice the plain white shirt Carl is holding for the first time. Taking it from him, I throw it on Ray’s bewildered face.

“Sign it,” I say. “Before I’m forced to do something I’m going to end up getting arrested for.”

Blake’s sister is watching the altercation, and I’m almost certain that some people down on the ice have noticed us. But I can’t bring myself to care. Right now, my only concern is lighting up Carl’s face again.

“You’re kidding,” Ray spits, pushing the shirt away from his face. His face is brick red with consternation as he looks up at me. “You can’t make me sign an autograph for some random kid. Why do you care?”

“About you? I don’t.” I reach for the shirt again. Carl’s also holding a marker, and I collect it from him and push it into Ray’s hand. “On the other hand, he worships the ground you walk on. Heaven knows why, since you’re the slimiest being I’ve ever come across. As much as I’d like to fling you over this box and purge his memories of your existence, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I let you ruin this day for my kid.”

My kid. My words replay in my head, leaving my mind heady. But I don't feel the stab of concern I expect to feel over my wrong choice of words.

It feels right, referring to Carl as mine.

Ray's face grows purple with rage. I can see him mentally evaluating the battle, deciding whether he is going to challenge me or not. He is big but realizes quickly that I'm angry and that this is a fight he will not win.

I meet his gaze, silently confirming his realization.

"Sign it," I say. "Before I sign it with your blood."

Ray takes the shirt from my grasp. His fingers tremble as he sketches his signature on one corner. The moment he is done, he lets it fall to the ground along with the marker. Then, he storms out.

I turn to Harper and her son. It takes a while to realize I'm feeling guilty for assuming that Ray Lenard would not be a total fucking prick.

"I'm sorry." I have barely ever said those words, much less to a child I had done a favor to. But it seems right. For a strange reason, I feel responsible for Carl's happiness. And I just caused it to dim due to my bad judgment.

"It's fine." Carl's voice is muted, but he stopped crying and looks strangely calm.

I feel the slightest hint of another new emotion: worry. Has this whole experience changed the way he sees me?

I've never known how to handle uncomfortable situations. But this time, I'm determined to fix this and reverse Carl's horrible mood.

Squatting so I'm on eye level with him, I say, "There's an age old saying. 'Never meet your heroes; they may disappoint you.' Ray is in that category. I know you might feel off about him." The words catch in my throat for a minute, but I force them out anyway. It's the right, responsible thing to do. "But it's okay to keep liking him. He's still a fantastic player. Plus,"

I reach for the shirt and hold it out, “you’ve got his autograph.”

Carl stares at the shirt for a moment. Then he takes it from me. And as Harper and I watch, he flings it over the edge of the box.

I raise my brows.

“Why did you do that?” Harper asks, sounding shocked.

Carl shrugs, and a small smile forms on his face as he looks up at his mom. “Cause Ray Lenard isn’t my hero anymore.”

“Yeah, well, of course,” Harper says. “I know you’re hurt, Carl, but I need you to understand that not all of your idols are going to be like him.”

“I know that,” he says, with all of the certainty of a precocious six-year-old. “Because I got a new hero now.” He turns back to me. “You.”

My heart burns with a mangled mix of joy and pleasure. For what might be the first time in my life, I’m speechless with happiness. I can’t even think of what to say.

Thankfully, Carl doesn’t wait for me to respond. Making a show of tipping the baseball hat, he says, “I’m going to go down and look at the Zamboni.” He dashes out of the box.

Dazed, I rise up to my feet.

“Thank you,” Harper says, pulling my attention away from my towering surprise to her. “You were amazing.”

Another wave of indistinguishable emotion flows through me as I look down at her. “It was nothing.”

“No.” She steps closer to me, her lips trembling slightly. “It was everything. Having you here to get him to shut up was everything. Carl would have spent the whole day miserable if you hadn’t been here for us.”

Us. Knowing I was there for her as well as Carl strikes me in a huge way.

“It’s nothing, really,” I say, meaning it. “Especially since this whole thing was my idea in the first place.”

“Yeah, but still.” She takes another step closer, her eyes fixed on my face in a way that floods my body with desire. “You didn’t have to do anything. But you did. And you did that for Carl. You made sure he was respected, didn’t resort to violence in front of him, and even stopped yourself from cursing Ray out.”

“Surprised you noticed that.” Aware that Carl was standing behind me, it was shockingly easy to replace “fucking” with “freaking.”

“I think...” Her lips shiver. “... I think you’re going to make a really fantastic father one day.”

Her words tug at my heart. I stare back at her, speechless for the second time in five minutes.

But I do want to tell—or show—her, how much it means to hear her say that.

So, I lean over and brush my lips against hers. Harper moans, but the sound does not spark my primal desire to whisk her away and bury myself inside her. Instead, it makes me kiss her harder.

It’s when she kisses me back that I acknowledge the truth that I have known, to some extent, for weeks now. The truth that I thought was an impossibility until recently.

I’m falling in love with Harper.

CHAPTER 22



HARPER

*M*y heart flies to my throat the moment I hear the knock on the door. I know who it is, and I cannot pretend to be anxious or scared about seeing him.

Not when I anticipated this moment all morning.

I stare down at my yellow, two-piece bathing suit. It's borderline decadent, especially for a mom. My breasts are spilling from the top, and the bottom piece is so small that it leaves my butt cheeks hanging out scandalously. I had not exactly packed for a pool party when I started this trip, and this is the best I could find in the hotel shop.

But I'm not upset about it as I should be.

Not when it means he is going to see me.

I feel a sting of embarrassment at the thought. For nine days now, my son has been here, and he has been having the time of his life with Reggie.

But it has also been more than a week since Reggie has touched me. Or looked at me in that magical, panty melting, bad boy way. And it is beginning to make me feel like a mare in heat.

Maybe that's why I'm not so unhappy about the bathing suit.

Two birds, one stone.

I stride to the door, my head held high. Turning the knob, I pull it open.

Reggie is at the door. He is wearing his swimming trunks, short enough to show off his powerful thighs and reveal the edge of his birthmark peeking below the hem. Every single muscle on his upper body is on full display, slick with water from the pool.

A wave of heat gushes over me, pulsating in my center like a heartbeat.

I want him.

Reggie has a spark in his eyes, the same innocent, joyful glint he has been carrying around since my son arrived. His gaze remains maddeningly affixed on my face.

“You’re still here. It’s been a while since Carl and me went down.”

I know he is trying to make a joke, but something about his voice causes me to swoon more. Angling my head so I’m staring into his eyes meaningfully, I say, “Well, I trust you. Where is Carl, anyway?”

Reggie gives a small grin. “He’s at the pool with the Coach and a lifeguard. I got him a bathing suit, but he’s certain he wants a Speedo for his first jump. He’s gotten the idea that trunks cannot possibly stay on in water. Came to get you so you explain that it’s not true.” He shrugs, his grin slightly wider, while a groan of frustration wrenches itself from my lips. I need him to notice me. It’s getting harder to focus on what he is saying, especially when my nipples are tingling from him being so near and not making a move.

Reggie takes a step forward, genuine concern on his face. “Are you okay?” he asks, reaching out and cupping my chin delicately with two fingers. “You need to lie down or something?”

That non-sexual touch is everything I need to go from horny to crazy. I wrap my hand around his wrist, tugging it downward till his palm is flush against one of my breasts. My face goes red from pleasure and embarrassment, but I’m very clear-headed.

“I need you,” I mutter, keeping my gaze on him. “Now.”

His expression changes from amusement to confusion. I watch as his gaze finally drops to my breast, to the nipple beading underneath his touch. He does nothing for a while, and for a moment, I'm convinced he has forgotten what to do in the wake of my son's arrival.

Until he brushes his thumb over my nipple. I let out a moan, curling forward with relief.

"Harper," he warns, stepping closer and slamming the door behind him. A thrill runs through me as I look up at him. It feels less like a week and more like years since he has touched me, and I want him more than I have ever wanted anything or anyone before.

I expect him to turn me around, push aside my bathing suit and thrust into me. I want him to do that.

But Reggie merely takes me in his arms with all of the gentleness he would need to handle a toddler. Striding over to the bed, he lays me tenderly on the sheets.

My frustration mounts. I'm not used to being treated like this around him. I'm about to turn around, wanting to get on my hands and knees. But Reggie is already above me, kissing me with a soft, delicate passion. His fingers find my swimsuit bottom, slowly pushing them down. Then they are between my thighs, brushing apart my lips and plunging them into me.

My back curves from the bed as I let out a scream. My frustration is replaced with pleasure in an instant. He might not be treating me the way I'm used to or the way I expect from him, but this feels surprisingly good too.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, Harper." He pulls back from kissing me and stares at my face.

My heart is pounding. None of this is what I signed up for. And I'm not even sure if I'm entirely comfortable with it.

But what I do know is that I don't hate it that he calls me beautiful.

Reggie slips his shorts down his hips. He springs free, as hard as I have ever seen him before. My breath catches in my

throat at his glory. I run my tongue over my suddenly dry lips, eager to get a taste of him.

He does not even seem to notice. Positioning himself at my entrance, he drives himself through my lips.

I let out another scream, my arms going around his neck as my desperation to have him closer increases. Reggie keeps kissing me as he thrusts into me over and over. He is gentler than I ever knew he could be. With every passing second, I realize I don't hate it nearly as much as I thought I would.

But there is something about this—our lips locking and our faces touching as we explore each other—that fills me with an obscene amount of peace. And I know it's not because I'm letting myself enjoy basic, boring sex for the first time in seven years.

It's because of Reggie. With him, I want to do things I have never even considered doing before.

Maybe that's why I opened up to him from the first day we met, when I didn't even know who he was. And why he is the father of my child.

I hug him tighter, my pleasure winding closer to orgasm with each slow thrust. Reggie tears away from kissing me. His head draws back. Then he just stares at me, an unreadable expression in his gray eyes.

Something about that does it for me, and suddenly my walls are contracting around him. I close my eyes and give into it, letting myself scream as loud as I want to from how good it feels to have him in me. He groans my name a second later as he spills himself into me, and I wrap my legs around his waist, not wanting to let him go. Reggie collapses on me, his arms crushing me to his chest as he gives in to his own pleasure.

I hug him back, burying my face into his broad, inked chest. Even being this close to him after a sexual encounter feels good in and of itself.

Too good.

There, listening to the heavy breathing of the man on top of me, I finally acknowledge the truth I have been running away from for weeks now.

I have feelings for Reggie Turner. Real feelings. Enough to consider him as my partner.

An ache instantly starts in the center of my stomach. I close my eyes as panic spreads through me. I have run from the possibility of this exact situation for seven years. And now that I'm in this, I don't know how to handle it.

Reggie rolls away from me. Jerking his shorts on, he turns to me with a lazy smile.

"We should get down to the pool," he says lazily. "Before Carl takes it upon himself to find a Speedo."

The fear ravaging through my body is compelling me to collapse in his arms and hold on tightly to him, to get whatever semblance of safety I can. Even further confirmation of how deep my feelings have grown for him.

I force a smile back as I push that emotion away. "Sure." After I clean myself up in the bathroom, I slip on my bathing suit and head toward the door. Again, I expect Reggie's eyes to linger on my body, as it always does, but he is merely staring at my face.

My stomach buckles with discomfort.

Reggie and I started our partnership with no love lost between us. Could his feelings for me have changed as well?

Moments ago, we made love. Unlike all of the other times where we sought to satisfy our lust with each other, I wasn't just horny. I needed him.

Reggie's behavior ever since my son joined us has been strange. He is a softer, calmer person. Seeing him around Carl makes me happy.

On the other hand, though, Carl is a lovable kid. Everything about Reggie's recent behavior might have absolutely nothing to do with me.

I ignore the pang that thought brings to me. It's a good thing if Reggie doesn't feel the same way, I think, as we walk into the elevator and Reggie presses the button for the pool. No matter what I feel for him, I know the truth. We are incompatible at heart. Understanding that he doesn't feel the same way will make it a lot easier to move on when I return to New York.

I steal a sideways glance. He is staring right in front of him, but there is no denying the joy lighting up his features. He looks almost giddy.

“What are you smiling at?”

“Just looking forward to teaching Carl how to swim.” He looks at me, and my heart constricts at the tenderness in his eyes. I know he is thinking of my son, but a stupid, hope-filled part of my brain wants me to consider the fact that he is looking at me that way simply because he cares.

Panic rises in me again. I'm desperate to distract myself from my own head, to say anything to calm the ravaging thoughts of my feelings.

And there is nothing quite like converting those feelings into an irritation for the man beside me.

“Why?”

Reggie lets out a chuckle. “Because your son is going to be the most entertaining student ever. I can imagine him.”

I turn to him, my irritation increasing. “No, I meant *why*. Like why are you interested in teaching him how to swim? Why do you want to be around him so damn much?”

My words have the potential to hurt his feelings. Reggie recently confided in me about never feeling good enough to father a kid. He could interpret my question to mean I don't want him around mine.

But I'm more interested in getting a verbal confirmation from him that I'm in over my head thinking there is a possibility he is interested in us.

Reggie stares at me for a few seconds. His smile remains plastered on his face.

“Because I like having him around,” he finally says. “Your son is the greatest kid I’ve ever met. Not that I’ve met a lot of kids, but—”

“*Why?*” My irritation is morphing into panic-filled rage. If Reggie could say something about how Carl is a good distraction from his boredom, maybe the swirling emotions would seize. Maybe the stupidest part of my brain would hold off on thinking that there is hope here, somewhere.

Reggie’s upper lip curves in a strange smile. “I just told you, Harper. I like having him around.”

“But why?”

Reggie stares at me again. He takes one step closer, and then another. My heart starts to pound furiously against my ribcage. I want to back away, to put at least fifty miles between himself and me.

But we are stuck in this elevator, and there is nowhere to run.

He slips his arm around my waist and pulls me up against him. My heart beats even faster as I look up at his handsome face. Even now, with the uncertainty ravaging in me, I want nothing more than to have him kiss me.

He bends his head over mine. “He reminds me of you,” he murmurs. “And I never get tired of having you around.”

Just then, the elevator grounds to a stop and the doors open. Reggie releases his hold on me, walking out.

I stare after him for a moment, unsure of what to feel at his words. Did he mean what I think he did? Or am I reading into things?

“Harper.”

I jump at the sound of his voice. “Coming.” Leaving the elevator, I walk a few paces behind him as he leads me across a broad, empty corridor to the pool. I notice instantly that there

is no one there, except for two lone figures standing at the other end.

“I gotta run, guys,” Coach waves at us as soon as he spots us. “Bye, kiddo,” he ruffles Carl’s hair and turns to leave.

“Mom!” Carl calls the moment he sees me. He runs over, his grin evident even from a distance. “Reggie! Look, the lifeguard had an extra Speedo in my size.”

Reggie throws his head back and laughs. I stare at him, the joy bursting from his lips. He looks damn good when he is happy.

Then and there, I let the crazy hope I’m feeling in one part of my brain spread to every cell in my body.

True, I didn’t like Reggie much when we first met. And even right now, I have fears and anxieties about this, so many that I could bend over and throw up right now.

Still, I know that I want something real between us.

And that I’m going to broach that topic soon. I’m going to tell him everything, including how he is the father of my son. It’s going to blow his head to smithereens, but maybe, just maybe we would have a fighting chance when all our cards are out on the table.

Carl is still running over, and I can now see that he already has the Speedo on. A small niggling feeling arises at the back of my mind. Like I should be worried about something, but I can’t tell what it is. Carl is a foot away from the pool and in no danger of falling in.

He comes to stand in front of us, holding his arms out. “See? It looks and fits better. It’s not going to fall off.”

I turn to Reggie, my amusement increasing at my son’s theatrics. “Well, you can’t argue with him, can you?”

But Reggie is no longer smiling. He doesn’t even seem to have heard what Carl just said. His eyes are glassy, focused on the bottom half of my son’s body.

I raise my brows as I follow his gaze. Why is he reacting that way?

The moment I realize what he is looking at, my heart grinds to a stop.

Now that Carl has donned only a Speedo, his vast, vase-shaped birthmark on his inner left thigh is strikingly prominent against his fair complexion.

Turning back to Reggie, my skin erupts in fear induced goosebumps. I need to speak up, to make him understand this is just a coincidence.

But I can tell from the look on his face.

There is nothing I can say.

Because he knows.

CHAPTER 23



REGGIE

*T*his cannot be happening.

But I can't deny what is right in front of me. That vase-shaped mark on Carl's thigh. In the exact same spot as mine.

In the exact same spot I saw it on my father, that day twenty years ago when I walked in on him having an orgy with three women in the middle of our living room.

The world has gone mute. I can't know for sure whether Carl or Harper are still speaking. All of my senses are focused on that mark.

How?

Even as I stare at it, memories and bits of stored information come flashing through my head. The fact that Harper has never said a word about Carl's father. Her reaction to my birthmark the day we left the police precinct. How jittery she looked whenever I spoke about my father.

An icy feeling erupts in my chest, traveling upward and downward till every single layer of my being is freezing.

I don't know what the hell is happening, nor why it is happening.

But I need to leave here.

I blink, bringing the real world into focus. Carl is saying something, but I can't get my ears to work well enough to actually understand him. I'm also aware of Harper's stare.

Whatever look she has in her eyes will confirm that my thoughts are spot on. But I can't look at her now.

I turn around and head away from them. It could be that they are calling for me, asking me what is wrong. I can't tell for sure. Not with this ringing in my head, a sound that's blocking out the world.

It's my intention to head up to my room. But when I look around at my surroundings after a few seconds, I'm not back in the hotel. Instead, I seem to have walked into the changing room without even realizing it.

There, I collapse against the wall, breathing hard. I have never felt so out of control in my life, not since I was a kid.

I hate this feeling.

More than that, I hate the intense desire to understand what the hell is happening. This would be easier if I could just ignore what I saw, chalk it up to some genetic aberration.

But every time I try to force my brain to dismiss it, I can't help thinking of my own father. Of how the mark had shown up on me. How I always assumed that if I decided to have a kid, they would be cursed with that sign as well.

"Reggie."

As I turn around, Harper and Carl are standing in front of me. Her body is wrapped in a towel, and there are tears in her eyes. She is clutching her son's hand.

Our son's hand.

My heart crashes to the pit of my stomach. I was right.

Her reaction is all I needed to confirm the absurd thoughts in my head.

I HAVE way more questions than answers.

Later that night, I call her. My game was unfocused and sloppy, too unsettled to play well. I wish we could sit face to face, but this is the only way right now.

"I'm so sorry," she murmurs through sobs. "I didn't know how to tell you."

The last time she cried, I was bothered enough to want to do something about it. Including flying her son down here. Ironic that my act of kindness is the whole reason why my world is now turned upside down.

I'm unable to feel anything but dread. She has all the answers. Even if I don't want to, I'm going to pull every single one out of her.

"How?" My voice comes out in a pathetic croak. I hate how desperate I sound. But then, Harper is not exactly in a position to hold that over me.

She sounds more wretched than I have ever heard her. "I'm sorry, Reggie," she says again. "I swear to you, I—"

Her words merely serve to ignite fury deep inside me. Despair spreads through my ribcage. "*How?*" This time, my voice comes out with an edge.

"I was a student at NYU. I attended a college party seven years ago, when I was twenty-one," she whispers. "I didn't know anyone there, and I didn't know you. I didn't even know it *was* you."

Trying to cast my mind that far back makes my brain jam. Seven years ago, I was in my last year of college and drafted into the NHL. I frequented parties and bars during that time, and I had sex with tons of women, mostly up at our campus. But I always wore a condom. Harper was the first woman I fucked bare.

I stare at her, the buzzed feeling starting to dissipate. I remember that weekend when me and my buddies took a trip to the city. It was Halloween, falling on a Saturday, and I was already disappointed that I had come all the way from Cornell to a party full of girls I wasn't particularly excited about.

Until I spotted the woman at the kitchen counter, looking like she wanted nothing more than to leave. I didn't usually go for jeans-clad nerds. But something about her beckoned me. And when she answered my first question rudely, I wanted nothing more than to claim her and watch her submit to me.

Which is exactly the way I felt when I met Harper for the first time.

The realization hits me like a punch to the face.

Seven years ago, I had sex with Harper Morris. The condom didn't do its job, and she kept the baby. And now, that child, the same boy I have grown to care deeply for, is only a floor away, sleeping peacefully.

The absurdity of the situation is enough to make me burst into laughter. It's the stuff of movies, for sure.

"I should have told you when I realized," Harper whispers. "But I—"

"You knew."

She lets out a sharp exhale. "I didn't know when I met you. I put the pieces together."

Of course. Harper had been thrown off after we fucked for the first time. I had assumed she merely regretted letting me have her.

But that wasn't it at all. She'd figured out that I was her son's father. And she proceeded to keep that secret from me.

"Why?" I should not care about the answer. But I do. For some reason, I want to know why she kept it from me. Especially in light of all of the times I bared my soul to her and let her see every inch of darkness in me. The fact that she kept this secret for so long isn't just an oversight or a tiny little lie.

It's a betrayal.

Harper's eyes are filled with regret. "I don't know."

"Bullshit." Another wave of anger surges up in me. "You don't do anything without a reason. Tell me. Why did you decide to keep it a secret?"

"I just didn't know how to tell you."

"You're fucking lying." I yell into the phone. "Tell me the truth, Harper. *Now.*"

She lets out a small sob. I feel the tiniest hint of guilt and sadness at her pain. But I need to know.

She draws in a series of ragged, long breaths before she spits out, “Because I was scared you’d take him from me.”

“Again, *bullshit*. You knew I wouldn’t do that. And even if I tried, there’s no court in this entire universe that would take that boy away from you, and you know it.”

“Reggie, please...”

“*Why* didn’t you tell me sooner? I’m going to need the truth. You owe me that much.”

Harper’s swallow is audible.

“Because I was scared,” she finally hisses. “You told me so much about your dad. I didn’t want to face the fact that my son came from... there.”

Her words form a layer of dread that obscure every other feeling in my body. But I’m not as surprised—or as hurt—as I could be. From the moment I asked that question, a part of me knew what her answer was going to be.

Harper kept her son away from me because she didn’t want him becoming like me. Like *him*.

A few days ago, she told me I would make a great father, and her words made my whole world.

Now, knowing what she really thinks of me makes everything crash and burn.

My heart is pounding and pain is spreading through my body. My brain seems to collapse under the weight of grief I’m feeling. Seconds tick by in silence as I try to calm the hurt ravaging through me.

It shouldn’t even matter to me that one obsessed journalist kept her child from me because she didn’t want him to become like me. Two months ago, I would have advised her to do the exact same thing.

But it’s different now. Because I have fallen in love with that same journalist. And I have fallen even harder for her son.

For my son.

I'm still the same crooked person, though. The untrustworthy one.

"Reggie," Harper whispers.

I'm silent.

"Reggie." Her voice sounds firmer, and there is a hint of the stubbornness I despised at first and came to love over the past few weeks.

I can feel the tension in her voice, and I know she's about to say something utterly globe spinning even before she does.

"Do you want us?"

My head snaps back faster than the rest of my body, so fast that I develop an instant headache.

"Want... us?" Again, my voice comes out in a pathetic croak, but I barely notice that, too.

Harper is still crying, and as I listen, I imagine her hiding in the bathroom.

"Do you want me and Carl? Do you want us to be a family, a *real* family?" she repeats.

Her words are a bullet, ricocheting in the center of my chest and causing me to recoil.

A real family.

Unbidden, my mind goes back to the family I grew up in. Thousands of heroin deals, hundreds of days being neglected, dozens of orgies I witnessed in the living room.

Harper helped me burn down those memories.

But there is always going to be a part of that world in me. Making sure I am not the father I want to be.

The life Harper offers is the one I have started to want just recently. Where I would be with her and Carl forever. With a boy who, through the world's dumbest piece of luck, is my son. Meaning there is never going to be some dude popping

out a few years down the line wanting to contest for him in court.

It's like a match made in heaven.

But I'm never going to know if I'm good enough for them.

“Reggie?”

There is desperation seeping through.

I feel a jerk in the center of my chest. I want to answer her question. I want to tell her everything she wants to hear. A huge part of me wants to say it.

But I have never been able to lie to Harper Morris.

“I... don't know.”

Her breaths accelerate. She lets out a high-pitched, un-Harper-like sob.

I just broke her heart.

And my own heart tears in two. When push comes to shove, I still am my father's son.

Maybe Harper is right about me.

CHAPTER 24



HARPER

“*I*t’s happening again.”

My heart constricts the moment I hear my mom’s words. Sure, I half-expected it. I even prepped for it on my way to the store and back. But I still feel dread form in the pit of my stomach.

I drop the bags stacked with groceries on the counter. “I’ll be back.”

She gives me a nod. “Alright, but...”

I raise my brows. “What?”

She leans over the counter, worry darkening her brown eyes. “What’s up with him? What’s up with both of you?”

“What do you mean?”

She lets out a frustrated sigh. “Come on, Harper. It’s been a week since you and Carl returned from California. He has cried every single day since then and barely talks to me. Meanwhile, you have been walking around the house like a zombie.”

I feel a pang of surprise in the midst of the ever-present despair that surrounds me like a cloak. Carl’s attitude is clear to see, but I thought I was doing a good job of being normal.

My mom seems to read my thoughts. “Don’t think your pretending can fool me. You’ve been off since the moment you came back. I know the profile was supposed to be difficult, but...”

“Let me see what Carl’s doing.” I turn around and walk down the short hallway to his room, not waiting to hear more of her questions.

If only it could be that easy to ignore the thoughts causing a storm in my brain.

It has been one week, and I still feel like Reggie Turner dug a hole into my chest cavity and ripped my heart open. I have never suffered a heartbreak before, and I had no idea it would feel like *this*.

Luckily, Dora allowed me to leave California. I cooked up a fib about Carl’s health and assured her that Reggie had agreed to keep communication lines open for the next month, so I could complete the series.

The last bit is true—sort of. Reggie sent a text telling me to call him if I needed to know anything else. He is a lot more open to the series now that it started opening doors for him.

But I don’t see myself ever doing that. Even if it costs me the promotion I have been working toward, I can’t imagine picking up the phone to call Reggie Turner.

“Hey there, buddy,” I say with forced boisterousness, leaning against my son’s doorframe.

He is silent, buried under his duvet and sheets, just like he has been for the past week after coming home from school.

Sometimes, it’s hard for me to figure out who is hurt more by Reggie’s refusal of us.

I take a deep breath before I enter his room. I take a seat on the foot of his bed. My son doesn’t even budge. Finally, I ask, “Can we talk?”

His little body shivers as he considers whether to give in to my demand. Finally, he throws the covers off. His face is red and blotchy. Pain sears my heart. He looks like all he has done since I have gone to the store is cry.

“Want to tell me what you’re thinking?”

Carl gives me a shrug of his tiny shoulders, still mute. I’m not even disappointed. All week long, my attempts of getting

him to talk had failed miserably. As much as I want him to open up to me, I'm somewhat relieved by his silence.

Because I don't know what I can say to make him feel better.

"You want to play Monopoly?" I drape an arm over him. "I got us snacks. You can be the dog."

Carl merely shakes his head no.

My despair grows. I have never known my son to turn down a game of Monopoly.

A fake smile plastered on my face, I ignore the fact that I'm seconds away from bursting into tears myself. "Come on. You're scared I'm going to beat you, aren't—"

"Why didn't he want me?"

My words die in my throat. "Wh-what?"

Carl looks up at me, his eyes filled with unshed tears. "Why did Reggie leave without saying goodbye? I thought we were going to be friends forever. But, after the pool, he stopped..."

I pull my son's tiny frame closer to my body. "It's hard to explain, Carl." It's hard to explain to a child the intricacies of commitment in adult relationships. The fact that what I subconsciously feared from the moment I'd realized I had feelings for Reggie had come to pass.

I knew there was every likelihood that Reggie wouldn't choose us. And yet, it still crushed me.

"I know he hurt you," I tell him, holding him even closer. "And I can't really say he's got a good reason for it. But I know you're going to get over it. You're going to find way more people to be friends with you, people who will stay forever. I promise."

Carl says nothing for a while. I'm almost sure I have gotten through to him.

Until he whispers, "I thought he was going to be my dad."

I hold back the tears, lost for words.

Why didn't I stop it sooner? Why did I let my guard down around Reggie and let him get this cozy with my son? How could I have let Carl get this attached to him?

How could I have let *myself* become this attached to him?

The phone ringing in my pocket jars me for a second. I reach for it, already certain I'm not going to respond. But Dora's name on my caller ID forces me to reconsider.

"I'll be back soon." I stand up. Maybe within the next few minutes, I'll figure out the right thing to say.

I press the green button just as I walk out of his room. My mom is on the sofa, her head buried in a book. I walk past her and out of the apartment, into the huge corridor. Just in case I feel like losing it the moment I'm done with this call.

"Harper. I just read your new piece."

"Cool." I'm strangely comforted by Dora's lack of manners.

"I loved it. It was amazing! It was like my idea, but only better!"

I blink. "Really?" Dora's strange idea, for me to get Reggie on a date and record his transition into becoming a man with feelings, had been an arduous task to face. After Reggie turned me down, it became downright impossible.

So, four days after we got back from California, after a particularly tough night of tossing and turning in bed and crying, I thought it would be the best use of my time to journal. I wrote what I thought was a trashy piece about Reggie's skills as a father in relation to how he treated Carl. On a whim, I transferred the words to my laptop and sent it to Dora. I didn't expect her to even acknowledge receiving it, especially since it was so different from my usual style.

"Why wouldn't I?" Dora is positively chipper on the other end. "I mean, you did everything I told you to, only better. Screw seeing Reggie as the next romantic hotshot. This is way more addictive. What woman wouldn't want to read up on a drug pin's son who randomly starts to care for a child in the best of ways? I mean, the way he shut down Ray Lenard! He's

perfect! And what you wrote—a neglected child morphing himself into the best of parental figures—is wonderful. It’s the circle of life! Feels like a perfect ending.”

I grip my phone tighter to my ear. “Did you just say ending?”

“Well... yeah. Sure, I was raving to go on for four more weeks. I mean, six pieces hardly makes up a profile. But in this case, it’s so well done that I’ve just got to hand it to you. There’s no way to beat this. Let’s end it on a high note.”

My breath is coming in rapid, shallow pants. I don’t even know how I feel about this. Intense relief about the fact that I never have to contact Reggie again. A sharp pain caused by the same thought. An emptiness about this all coming to a close.

I hear Dora take a deep breath over the phone, like she is on the verge of saying something important.

“Congratulations, Harper. You’re in.”

“In?” I need to be absolutely sure I’m not misunderstanding her.

I can actually hear Dora’s smile over the phone. “As much as I’m going to hate taking you out of the field after this bomb profile you just wrote, you deserve it. You got the promotion. Effective immediately.”

I suddenly feel weak at the knees. I crash down to the floor in a squat that leaves me resting against the wall, still gripping the phone tightly.

I should feel pretty damn good about this.

But I don’t feel anything. The despair in me has swallowed whatever joy I could have gotten from my promotion, the one reason I embarked on this profile in the first place.

The one reason I came to know Reggie.

Dora doesn’t even seem to notice my lack of reaction. “I’ll keep you in the loop, Harper. Bye.”

The line goes dead.

I stare at the floor between my feet. I should go back to my son and find a way to cheer him up. Maybe mention that Reggie was never supposed to be his dad, and...

“You okay?”

I spring up, embarrassed that someone is seeing me in my miserable state. When I look up, I see Matthew.

The too-sweet guy I was always scared I would be too much for.

As I look into his kind eyes, I realize just how silly I have been. Even as a mom, I let myself believe for a stupid little moment that I could get commitment and adventure from the same man. That I could find someone who loved my son while turning my own world right side up.

I was so wrong.

My son is in there, crying about losing a paternal figure. It's my job to provide him with one.

Regardless of what I feel about it.

“Yeah.” I force my brightest smile ever. “Just got a promotion, in fact.”

His handsome face creases into a joyful smile. “That's wonderful. Glad to hear it.” He pauses for a moment. “I've not seen you in a while.”

“I was away doing a profile. But it's done now.”

He pauses again. It takes a moment for me to understand why. I usually disappear from his presence after he has the first sentence out. I have never dallied so long before.

I stay put, willing him to dare ask me. He meets my gaze, and I watch as the resolve forms in his deep blue eyes.

“I've been thinking about this for ages...” He shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “Would you go out with me? On a date? A romantic one... just to make my intentions clear.” He lets out a chuckle.

I keep my smile pinned to my face. The spark I have with Reggie is missing, but surely I will get used to it. Carl needs a

father. I like Matthew well enough, and maybe after a while, I could even start to love him.

I open my mouth to respond.

“No, that will absolutely not be happening.”

My heart is thundering. I would recognize that voice anywhere, even in the midst of a million other ones.

But I turn around, anyway. Matthew does, too.

Reggie is standing at the other end of the corridor. He is wearing jeans and a tight Henley that leaves his bulging muscles on full display. There is a strange, almost detached look in his eyes as he walks up to us.

Matt looks up at Reggie, who towers over him by a few inches.

“And you are?” he croaks. I can tell he is trying hard to put on a show, but he is shriveling inside at the sight of the muscled, tattooed man in front of him.

“Carl’s father,” Reggie says easily, so easily that my knees go weak again, this time with surprise.

I look at Reggie’s face, his focus on Matt.

“Oh, gotcha,” he near-whispers. Turning to me, he stares at a spot two inches from my face. “See you around, Harper.”

I have never seen a man scamper off that fast before.

I turn to Reggie, suddenly feeling naked underneath his gaze. Even my anger seems to die at being exposed to him like this. The last time we saw each other, I confessed my feelings for him, and he walked away. I couldn’t exactly look more pathetic than I do now.

“What do you want?” I ask, intentionally leaving a bite in my voice.

“You and Carl.”

I raise my brows. A week ago, I would have jumped with elation. But I have been let down and don’t trust him. I have a son to watch out for.

I'm too tired to even question him, and I turn toward my apartment door. From the corner of my eye, I catch Reggie pulling out his phone.

“We've been in practice all week, and I only just got to read this yesterday. Your new article.”

No, I think, panic gripping me. I knew he would read the piece, but I still don't want to him to read my most intimate thoughts about him out loud. In front of me.

But it's already happening.

“ ‘I never let men around my son. Most single mothers get this. No one wants their child developing an attachment to a guy who could decide they are done with their mother one day. I knew for sure that the relationship between Reggie and I would come to an end. This was a two-month profile, nothing more, nothing less.

And yet, from the moment I saw Reggie with my son, my heart melted. Not because he'd proven himself to be great around him. But because I knew, deep within my bones, that I could trust him. Every part of my being knew he was going to be a great father. Even before he stood up for my kid to Ray Lenard, and even before he gave him some pretty good advice on girls. He is going to be a great dad. Such a great one that I felt that my son might be better off enduring the heartbreak of losing Reggie rather than living in a world where he never knew him.’”

I feel even more naked by the minute. Still, I don't regret sending those words in to be published. Before Reggie hurt me, I betrayed him by keeping a secret from him. If he needs to hear those words to move on, so be it.

He puts his phone back in his pocket and stares down at me.

“When you told me you kept the truth away from me because you doubted I'd be a good father, it broke me.”

My eyes widen. Reggie has changed over the past few weeks, but I didn't expect he would share his feelings openly.

“I thought you meant you didn’t think I’d be a good enough dad. And if you didn’t trust me, I didn’t know how to trust myself. But reading this...” He nods toward the pocket. “... was life-changing.”

I look up at him, unsure of what to say.

“I’ve spent all of my life miserable, alone and depressed, Harper. And if you let it, loneliness interspersed with momentary excitement will make you believe it’s the best thing that ever happened to you. And I believed it, until you came into my life. You *and* Carl. You fill my life with more joy than I know what to do with. When you told me he is mine, I got scared. It was everything I wanted but didn’t allow myself to have because I wasn’t good enough. And maybe I’ll never know if I’m going to be the father your son deserves, or the kind of man you need. But I’m willing to spend my whole life trying.”

My throat constricts. I breathe willfully, forcing the enclosure open.

I don’t know what to say. I don’t know if I’ll ever know what to say.

But Reggie seems to have enough words for both of us. Wrapping his arm around my stiff body, he pulls me in.

“I love you, Harper Morris. I loved you even before I knew I was capable of it. And I love you more because you brought Carl into my life. I don’t ever want to lose the two of you, ever.”

My heart is hammering again, but this time, it’s filling my body with a different sort of emotion. Hope tinged with the heaviest layer of fear.

I want this more than anything.

But Reggie is still Reggie. I don’t know if I can trust him.

His head is bending over mine now. “I know we started off by me practically begging you not to speak,” he says, sounding almost amused. “But this is a good time for you to say something.”

There is a shuffle behind my apartment door that interrupts my train of thoughts for a moment.

“Carl.” I don’t mean to say his name, but I’m reminded that my son is still curled up in a ball crying because of the man who is holding me in his arms.

That gives me the ammunition I need to step away and open my front door. I can see most of my living room from the entrance, and I notice that my mom is still immersed in her book on the sofa. However, Carl is right in the center of the room, still wrapped in his duvet. It looks like he was halfway to the door, looking for me.

“Hey, baby,” I say, relieved to see that he is out of his bed. “You ready to play Monopoly?”

Carl doesn’t respond. He is not even looking at me. I follow his red eyes, where he is staring at the bulky form of Reggie.

It’s too late now. He spotted him.

I start for him immediately, wanting to shelter him in his room, to protect him from the man who broke his heart. At least, until I make a real decision.

But Reggie’s eyes are fixed on my son as well. The silence between them is weighty, too much for even me to try to break.

“Hey there, buddy. How are you doing?”

Carl says nothing. I feel a tiny relief. I don’t want him to open up to him as easily as he did the first time.

Reggie does not seem to care. Brushing past me, he crouches right in front of Carl.

“I missed you, pal.”

I feel another jolt of surprise. This Reggie, the one that’s so open about his feelings, is one I never thought I would face.

“Then why did you disappear?” My son’s voice is low and barely audible, but I hear the hardness in there.

“Because I’m a darned fool.”

I raise my brows, unable to believe Reggie just said that. And he is not done.

“I convinced myself that I was going to mess up with you, somehow. And I thought that I had to make it better by not seeing you anymore.”

Carl stares at him for what feels like a full minute. And then, he mutters, “You only messed up by leaving.”

I have always known my son to be super smart, but his words echo louder than anything he has ever said before. Reggie has been scared all his life of hurting people by never being enough. But all he had to do was stay.

“I know that now. And that’s why I’m going to promise you, right here and now, that I’m not going to leave you again.”

I look up to see my mom watching us, confusion on her face. I will have a lot of explaining to do.

Right now, I’m waiting with bated breath for my son’s response. It might be the one thing that will sway me into making my choice.

Carl stares at Reggie for a long time. And then, he holds out his pinky finger.

“You’ve got to pinky promise. You can never break it after that.”

Tears fill my eyes as Reggie holds out his bulky finger, and they make it official. As I watch my son go into the arms of his father, I let myself admit the truth too.

I want to make this work. Even with the tiny doubts ravaging through me.

I’m ready to take the risk.

When Reggie stands up, he is holding my son in his arms, duvet and all. Carl is clinging for dear life, as though he is never going to let go.

Can’t say I don’t understand.

“I’ve got to say,” Reggie says with the shadow of a smile on his face. “I’ve never seen you remain quiet for this long. It’s kind of odd.”

I take a deep breath, wiping my tears with the back of my hand. It’s finally time to respond.

“Yes.”

I don’t need to say anything more. Not when Reggie’s face morphs into a full-on grin as he steps forward and wraps me in his arms. I hug him and Carl back as tightly as I can.

My family is finally complete.

EPILOGUE



REGGIE

I have never been to a single wedding before, but I have to admit that the atmosphere is a lot tenser than I would have expected. Even with an almost eight-year-old ringbearer running around.

“You’ve got to sit still,” I tell him, looking up from my cufflinks.

Carl, who is pacing around the room for the hundredth time, stops in his tracks to look at me. “What if I drop the rings walking down the aisle? Grandma said it will be covered in petals, and my new shoes are kind of slippery.”

I bite back a smile. “I’m sure you’ll be fine. If that happens, everyone will merely think you’re cute.”

“I’m already eight years old, and I’m not cute anymore,” Carl protests, his words conveying his urgency. “Handsome is the word you are looking for, Dad.”

A surge of warmth floods through me at that word.

Dad.

As I ruffle his hair, I hear Blake’s voice. “Hey, look who grew an inch since the last time I saw him.”

My friend stops next to me, fumbling with his bowtie in front of the mirror. I barely knew him before the quarter-final match almost two years ago. But when I left the NHL a couple of months after that, he randomly chatted me up over a beer. Told me his sister had filled him in on what happened with Ray Lenard and how he always disliked him. Also, in his

words, “I’m in the market for a new buddy, seeing as the last one was rudely taken to the altar by my little sis.”

And now, he is my best man.

“This sucker is killing me,” he complains, tugging at his neck.

“You’ll get used to it.” Turning around to Carl, I point out, “You’re still seven years old, pal.”

The boy glares at me. “I’m two months from being eight. I’m eight.”

I open my mouth to call out his inconsistency, but he quickly adds, “I should get to the aisle and practice my walk again before the guests arrive.” With that, he dashes out of the room.

I feel laughter bubbling in my throat as I turn back to Blake. “Kids, man.”

He looks torn between amusement and exhaustion. “Is he always like that?”

“He’s getting funnier with each passing year.”

Over the past two years, we spent a lot of time together while Harper and me were dating. Even though we moved in together last summer, I’m still painfully aware that I missed many years with my son and am still catching up.

Blake lets out a sound between a huff and a laugh. “I like being your best man. Hell, I was even Alex’s best man when he sucker-punched me in the face and married my sister. I’ve got to admit that this whole marriage and kids thing has always been too much for me.”

“If this is not your first wedding, then you should know how to look presentable.”

As I straighten his crooked bowtie, female laughter ripples through from the other side of the door.

“There are some lovely ladies here. No need to play the stubborn bachelor forever.” I nod toward the door.

Blake scoffs lightheartedly. “And end up whipped like you? No thanks.”

I give his chest a pat. I know under his snark lies a sincere longing for connection.

“I hate weddings. No offense. Even this one seems too big with a hundred guests. But did you hear about that rockstar’s upcoming mega wedding?” Blake asks after a pause. “There’ll be more than a thousand people at the reception.”

“Which rockstar?”

“You know—the one who always sings about perfect love. It’s plastered all over the news.”

“Faye something, right?”

“She’s my sister’s favorite singer. Ask your bride. I’m sure she loves her just as much.”

I vaguely recall Harper showing me a TikTok earlier of a cute pop singer talking about how difficult it is to pick the right wedding dress.

I roll my eyes, patting his back sympathetically. “Careful, buddy. When you meet the right woman, she’ll turn your world upside down.”

Blake shakes his head adamantly. “That’ll never happen.”

“Famous last words...” I feel my amusement increase. “I used to think that too.”

“Yeah.” Blake shrugs. “But I know I’m never going to do it. You’re like Alex. You saw a lot of bad marriages and were certain you’d never see a good one. Means that you were always susceptible to changing your mind. Me? Hell, no.”

I shrug on my jacket. “Careful what you say. Because the first time I met the woman who’s going to be my wife, I wanted nothing to do with her.” Joy tingles in my heart as I dwell on Harper for what feels like the twentieth time today.

I expected the last couple years to be a lot of work, emotionally and physically. I expected to have to grovel a lot more to earn her trust again and to be a good father to Carl.

But it turned out to be the easiest thing. Waking up each day next to her, choosing her, and getting to love her were the best parts.

I'm done with the NHL now. The deals Harper's articles secured me mean that I will never have to work again and can comfortably provide for my family.

My life couldn't be better.

"If you give love a try, you'll wonder how you ever lived without it," I tell him as we move toward the door.

As much as I would like to go on talking about rockstars, I have more important things to do.

Like marry the woman of my dreams and walk into the sunset with my family.

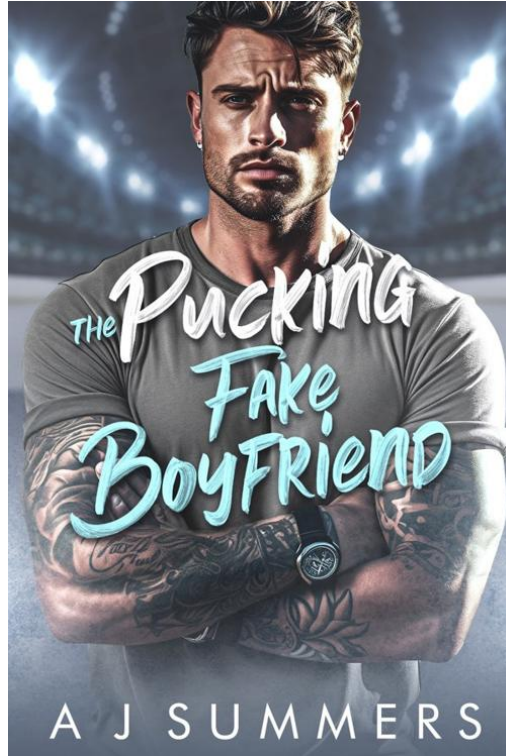
Everything has finally fallen into place.

THE END

ALSO BY A J SUMMERS

Did you like this book?

Then you'll love **The Pucking Fake Boyfriend**, an enemies to lovers brother's best friend hockey romance.



Fake dating my brother's best friend wasn't the worst idea ever.

Falling for him was...

My dad thinks I'm his perfect little princess, and he's determined to find me a rich husband of his choosing.

I want nothing more than to smash his plan.

Enter Alex Steinman. My brother's best friend and the hockey league's most notorious player.

He needs a good girl on his arm to wash off the stink of his latest puck bunny scandal.

I need a racy photo with a pretend boyfriend to get my dad off my back.

A fake relationship should be straightforward enough...

But before long, there are frenzied kisses, stolen touches, and dirty nothings he whispers in my ear that don't feel fake at all.

My brother would throttle him if he found out.

Soon, things get even more complicated.

I'm pregnant.

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**THE PUCKING FAKE
BOYFRIEND**

CHAPTER 1

After a brutal tussle with the relentless ice, the last thing I want is a massage. Picture this: my battered muscles, wrung out and contorted like a pretzel by a therapist who appears utterly indifferent to my pain.

Yet, you know what I secretly crave? The chance to challenge that same therapist. My favorite masseuse, Britney, is the sister of a teammate, and the daughter of the man who tolerated me squatting in his house for the better part of my childhood. She has this uncanny knack for unraveling my knots while concealing her emotions, turning it into a peculiarly delightful dance of torment and pleasure.

As I shroud my body with a white cotton towel and lie down on the massage table, she enters the room. I savor the moment her hands begin their work on my quadriceps, the muscles most desperate for her touch. Her golden curls are neatly secured in a bun, and she's adorned in pink scrubs, far more appealing than her usual floor-length skirts. Though I try to resist, there's a subtle longing in my center as my gaze lingers on her.

A fleeting, nearly annoyed expression flits across her heart-shaped face as she looks at me. Then her eyes shift elsewhere.

I can't help but sport a smug grin. She doesn't exactly savor the idea of being stuck with me as her client, and that's precisely why I insist on having her.

With a voice that's always just a whisper away from my ear, requiring my full attention to catch her words, Britney excels at blending into the shadows. It's one of the reasons I relish her touch. I get to push her buttons until she finally snaps in irritation.

Our little game never seems to lose its allure.

She gracefully navigates around me, reaching for a bottle of oil on a nearby shelf. "You have time for a massage?" She spreads some liquid on my upper leg, pausing to look at me with her frosty blue eyes. "Don't you have a fire to put out?"

I raise an eyebrow. It's the very first time Britney has initiated a conversation without my prodding, and I can't help but feel a flicker of intrigue despite my annoyance.

"I know this might be hard for you to remember, Brit, but hockey is played on ice." I grin at my own words. Britney's brother is in the league and her father is a team manager. Implying that she doesn't know what she's talking about will for sure get under her skin.

But she ignores my barb, pulling out my left leg and digging into the quad with surprising strength.

Britney doesn't talk much, but she is skilled at punishing me for annoying her.

"You know what I mean." Her words are even lower now.

I bite back a groan. "No, I really don't. I'm sure you'll enlighten me though."

She raises her brows. "Really?" She's evidently too surprised to even remember her usual vow of silence. "Your ex?"

A hint of distaste spreads on my tongue. Of course. Britney is talking about Janice Hatfield, a former ice girl for the New Jersey Devils, who's been raising a stink on social media about getting dumped by me after she quit her job to, in her words, "be with me." She's been going on for two days, and TikTok has exploded with memes and lip-syncs. Two coaches asked me about it before we got on the ice this morning.

It's mildly infuriating, but then again, this is not the first time a self-proclaimed ex would go on social media to let everyone know how heartless I was for dumping them.

"We were not dating."

I need to set that straight with Brit. And hell, with anyone else who thinks of me as the asshole Janice is painting me to be.

"My bad," Brit murmurs. Still, I can hear loathing in her voice, can even feel it as she kneads her hot hands even deeper into my upper leg.

A hint of unease spreads through my core. Half of the members of my team secretly hold the same revulsion for me as Brit.

"She was never my girlfriend," I spit.

Britney shrugs as though it's nothing to her, but her hands are kneading harder. Finally, she mumbles, "No. Just had your fun with her, then tossed her aside. A story as old as time itself."

I ought to be irritated by the claim, but the fact that the usually reserved and quiet Britney is expressing her feelings so openly brings a smirk to my face. While I have the chance, I want to push her buttons a bit more.

"She probably had way more fun than I did," I muse, thinking back to the lukewarm fucks I endured for six weeks.

Britney abruptly lets go of my leg, and when I look into her face, she's staring right back at me, glacier pale eyes sparkling with rage.

This surprises me. She usually wears a painted-on, polite smile. At times, I've witnessed flashes of anger, especially when a fellow player made a crude joke, or her father tried to boss her around. None of those came close to this.

"You let her quit her job for you." Her voice is a decibel higher than usual.

"She left her job all by herself," I insist. "She knew I wasn't going to have a thing with an ice girl. And even though

I told her that it's crazy of her to even consider quitting, she decided to hear only a part of what I was telling her. Did you ever consider that she was just sick of the gig and was looking for an excuse? She wasn't that good at it in the first place."

Brit looks like she's about to say something rude, but then she bites back her words. She reaches for my other leg, and the abrupt movement causes my towel to slip off halfway. Since I prefer not to wear underwear when I get a massage, my dick is now partially exposed. She's too incensed to even notice it.

As I begin to extend my hand toward the towel, a primal, almost childlike impulse to simply let it be washes over me.

So, I do.

She says nothing for several minutes, and the tension between us is thicker than I've ever known it to be.

Hating Janice for taking this tiny pleasure from me, I say, "Look at it this way, Brit. Would *you* quit your job for a guy?"

Her words escape her soft mouth, as malleable as candle wax. "For *you*? Hell, no."

I'm half-amused, half-annoyed. I do want to point out the ridiculousness of anyone giving up a career to be with someone, but I don't like her tone, like the only stupid thing about the whole affair was that Janice did it for *me*.

Though she may have a point. I'm far from being the most palatable item on the menu. Being abandoned by your mother and raised by a morally ambiguous father surely left its mark on my young soul.

I decide to let my annoyance go, especially if it means we can finish the massage in silence.

"Well, then, I don't see why you're blaming me for her foolishness."

Brit digs her fingers into my sore quad. "Yeah," she mutters. "Right."

"If you've got something to say, go ahead." I'm already having second thoughts about choosing Britney for today's session. I'd rather be with literally any other therapist now,

most of whom would probably be lightly flirting with me while they work.

Flirting.

A small smile forms on my lips in spite of myself. It is highly unprofessional to sleep with the masseuses, of course, and I've never crossed that line. But some of them were incorrigible cock teases, and I would find myself engaging in banter once in a while, out of nothing other than sheer boredom.

Of course, Britney always plays it safe. A part of me has always secretly hoped she might start to live dangerously, even when we were growing up. At ten, my mother decided she had enough of being a wife to an abusive alcoholic, leaving me at the mercy of my boozy dad. I had to grow up fast. Lucky for me, Blake became my refuge, and I practically lived at his place. Britney, still a kid herself, was often our target. We were oblivious to her own battles she was fighting within.

"No one would quit a career without reassurance," she mutters now, shaking my thoughts back in her direction.

We are *still* talking about Janice?

But I'm not as irritated as I was a second ago. Because I've got another play here.

"Well," I say with a shrug, "maybe she got all the reassurance she needed from the promise of fucking me. Maybe leaving her job was worth getting to bang me a few more times."

I expect Britney to react with anger at my use of profanity. Or fall silent with embarrassment. Or blush so hard that the roots of her hair turn pink.

What I don't expect is a complete lack of reaction and a nonchalant shrug. "Sure," she mutters.

I raise a brow, slightly disgruntled. "You don't seem convinced."

"Yeah." She yawns, covering up her mouth with her shoulder while she continues to work on my leg. "You're

probably not as good of a fuck as you think you are.”

My skin heats up. There’s no reason to be slighted, since Britney and I have not, nor ever will go there. And none of the women I’ve been with have ever complained.

However, the undeniable truth remains that she doesn’t seem the least bit impressed. And the frustrating realization that I’ll never have a chance to prove her wrong gnaws at me, primarily because I can’t bear the thought of jeopardizing my friendship with Blake over a quick romp with his sister, a woman I’ve never once admitted to finding appealing. Not to mention that I owe her father, David, for allowing me to practically live at their house, and eventually leading me down the path of hockey.

But I do have to acknowledge that my annoyance is mingled with curiosity. Britney is deathly shy, and I’ve never even seen her look at a guy before. I am well aware that David’s favorite pastime is watching over Britney like a hawk. Blake had even once told me, half-jokingly, that his dad might have secured the masseuse job for Britney only so he could keep a close watch on her.

My guess is that Britney is still a virgin. And yet, she has strong opinions about my sex life.

In spite of my bruised ego, I prod further.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because ...”

And then, I watch as her gaze dips lower, down my chest and abs, and even lower, until she stares coldly at my half-exposed dick,

“Because,” she drawls again, swallowing. This time, she has the shadow of a mocking smile on her face.

My hands ball into fists. Did Britney White just hint at not being impressed with my dick?

I want to stand up, throw her over this table, and show her how unforgettably good I can make her feel.

The moment that thought crosses my mind, I feel something that shocks me to my very core.

My dick stiffening. At the thought of fucking Britney.

I remain silent as she pushes me to sit and starts working on my neck and shoulders, hoping the feeling will pass.

Because I can not be attracted to my best friend's baby sister.

But my damned dick disagrees, getting harder at her soft fingers working out the tension in my neck. Her scent fills my nostrils, and when she moves right behind me, the hard muscles on my back are pressed against her tits, and I can almost certainly feel her nipples through the bra she's wearing ...

Oh, fuck.

I want her.

I've never felt the urge to punch myself this badly.

Abruptly, I surge to my feet, desperate to leave the room and whatever interim madness it filled me with.

I turn around and open my mouth to ask for a rain check, already making a mental note to never request Britney again. But before I can let the words out, my body tingles at the sensation of air wafting around my hips.

My bare hips.

I look down, cursing inwardly. The towel has completely slipped off. I'm fully naked, with my dick pointing at her in its full glory.

Grabbing the towel and apologizing would be the way to go, but an insane burning urge causes me to glance at Britney's expression first.

She's staring right at me. At it. Two rosy blotches are staining her cheeks, and her moist lips are slightly parted in surprise. But more than that, I notice the look in her eyes. It's a look I've seen hundreds of times before, and one I have no trouble interpreting.

Desire.

Her open awe rids me of every trace of disgruntlement that I carried with me for the last ten minutes. I don't care that she's managed to, without any effort at all, irritate me and make me want her in the same breath.

And from the way she looks at me, one thing is for sure. Britney is most definitely *not* a virgin.

I reach down for my towel, giddiness replacing my brief embarrassment. I could swear I hear the tiniest sound of protest, almost like she doesn't want me to cover up.

And while I'm not completely opposed to that, I'm aware that a lot of lines have been crossed today. Most of them unintentionally, and I can't afford to cross one more.

So, I flash a smile at her as I wrap myself up.

"You're welcome." I chuckle before I slip out of the room.

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