



WINNING

Goal

LAURA MARQUEZ DIAMOND

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Goal

Columbus Mavericks

Laura Marquez Diamond

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ABOUT THE *Book*

SABRINA

Dexter Whitby is the captain of the Mavericks, my best friend, and my husband.

We made a deal to get married so I can receive the medical treatment I need to recover from a car accident. It's the favor of a lifetime.

Unfortunately, no one told me about the most important rule for surviving a marriage of convenience.

Do not, under any circumstances, kiss your husband.

DEXTER

Sabrina Ramirez is a phenomenal goalie, my best friend, and my wife.

Living with this extraordinary woman is a gift to me, not a favor to her. But I can't let myself forget that this is a platonic arrangement.

Trying not to think about her *that way* is starting to feel like torture.

I wish someone had warned me that a marriage of convenience is damn inconvenient when your wife is the woman of your dreams.

*Portions of **Winning Goal** were included in **Melting the Ice**, a holiday hockey anthology, as "**Endgame**."*

Considerable edits and additional scenes have significantly expanded this version of Dexter and Sabrina's love story.

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Sneak Peek

Dedication

This book is dedicated to female athletes around the world who have devoted their lives to hockey. To aid their collective bargaining efforts, support the Professional Women's Hockey Players Association (PWHPA), a nonprofit that provides infrastructure and resources to players including fair pay and health insurance.

CHAPTER ONE

Sabrina

The first time I kissed Dexter Whitby was the day of our wedding.

When Dex convinced me to marry him in order to benefit from his health insurance, we agreed the arrangement was a means to an end. How else would I receive the post-surgery treatments ensuring my return to health and to the sport we both love?

You see, we're both hockey players. Teammates for years when I was the only girl goalie in Buffalo's Under-10 to Under-15 leagues. We eventually branched out to our men's and women's teams in high school and college. But despite the glaring differences in our athletic journeys, we've remained close friends through the years.

He's a first-round draft pick and captain of Columbus's NHL team, the Mavericks. I always knew he would be a superstar centerman in the big leagues. Dex deserves all the recognition he's getting. I'm so proud of everything he's accomplished.

I, on the other hand, have been working as a manager of a coffee shop in the suburb where we grew up. The job is a necessary supplement to the meager income I earn as a goalie for the Buffalo Blazers, a professional team of the Women's Hockey Federation.

Correction: I *was* a goalie, until the accident.

On a hot and sticky September evening, my car was T-boned by a teenager joyriding with friends.

At age twenty-six, I was still under my parents' health insurance. Even so, the bills piled up. My parents have hired an injury lawyer to recoup medical expenses, but that's led nowhere.

Meanwhile, my birthday loomed. At twenty-seven, I would age out of my parents' insurance plan.

Enter Dexter to the rescue. My oldest friend. The best guy I know. And, as of November first, my husband.

"Husband," I whisper to myself, trying out the word. "Husba—"

The knock on the window of the driver's side makes me jump. "Are you coming in or what?"

"You're home?" I sound confused and distracted. Probably because I am.

We agreed I would call him during the last leg of my six-hour drive from Buffalo to Columbus. It's not due of oversight that I didn't call. I needed to shore up some composure before I see him because today, a month after we applied for spousal benefits, I'm officially moving in.

"I canceled my meeting with the skills coach after practice," he says, blue-violet eyes crinkling at the corners. Dex's beard hides nothing of his soft lips shaped into a dazzling smile. "Pull into the garage," he instructs when one of the four garage doors open.

I roll inside, my newly purchased ten-year-old hatchback looking like the underdressed guest at a classy dinner party. On one side is a super-decked-out SUV that Dex uses to transport an equally decked-out boat. On the other side is a sleek sports car polished to a shine.

"That's it? That's all you brought?" Dax is referring to my pathetic cargo of two suitcases and one hockey bag as he checks my back seat and the trunk I popped open.

"A house as big as yours should already come with a bed."

"Four, in fact," he confirms, hauling out my stuff.

It's my first time here. He gave up his downtown condominium for this place during the darkest time of my recovery. I remember little from those hazy days and painful nights. Vaguely, I recall Dex called the house purchase an "investment opportunity."

"Urban farmhouse" is what the realtor's website called it when I finally had the energy to look it up. I found the term confusing until I studied the pictures.

"Farmhouse" signals that you have a sprawling mansion with wood beams on cathedral-high ceilings and no neighbors for a mile on all sides. The "urban" part is code for half an hour from downtown Columbus and worth over two million dollars.

From the garage, we enter the most beautiful kitchen I've ever seen. Everywhere my gawking eyes land, modern lines are accentuated by natural wood and faded stone. This is an interior designer's wet dream. Luxury and coziness merge in perfect harmony. Through floor-to-ceiling windows, the pink and purple tones of winter dusk creep over a snow-sprinkled landscape.

This is where I'm going to live for a whole freaking year?

"Holy shit, this is the ultimate *after* house on those before and after shows," I prattle.

"Thanks, I think?" He shuts the garage door and places my stuff at the entrance of a hallway.

Removing my shoes, I relish the heated marble floors. My eyes are drawn to a massive gas fireplace made of natural stone and surrounded by oversized couches with fluffy pillows. The hearth is bigger than most campsites. In front of that fireplace is exactly where I plan to park myself every chance I get.

"Can I grab you a vitamin water? Or something else?" he asks, opening a fridge with a door that blends with the kitchen cabinets.

Before I can answer, the patio outside snags my attention. Although calling it a patio is like calling a private jet a means of transportation. The dining area, entertainment center, and outdoor kitchen rival a five-star resort.

"If I'd known you were this loaded, I'd have married you sooner!" I tease.

He snorts before handing me a bottle with a label I don't recognize. I hope it's pumped with whatever supplements he takes to be more muscular every time I see him.

"If that's all it was gonna take, I would have flashed my cash sooner," he jokes back.

"Cheers to your cash, Dex!" I say before gulping the most delicious water I've ever had. It turns out rich people have better versions of *everything*.

"Cheers to you, Baby Brie. I'm so fucking glad you're here," he says with open arms. The simple sincerity of his words brings with it a wave of gratitude.

He only ever calls me "Baby Brie" when we're alone. The private nickname reminds me that Dex's wealth is the least amazing thing about him. It's his authentic kindness and unwavering friendship that truly matter.

Overwhelmed with emotion, I wrap my arms around his waist, melting into his bear hug and inhaling deeply. His aroma is as familiar to me as home.

But something is very different. Disturbingly different, in fact.

My best friend's burly chest lifts with each breath and his hands encompass my entire back. Offering a gentle peck on the crown of my head, he's as sweet and platonic as always.

The problem isn't Dex. The problem is me. My fingers, to be exact. They

move from his muscular neck, along his broad shoulders, and back again, eager to explore the hills and valleys of Dexter Whitby's masculine anatomy.

Wait, what?! How dare I reduce him to *masculine anatomy*? I shouldn't be thinking about his anatomy at all!

He's so much more than a handsome hockey superstar. He's generous and kind, funny and thoughtful. An honest-to-goodness lifesaver. By marrying me, he's enabling my recovery from a spinal disk replacement and the repair of an ear avulsion. That's a fancy way of saying a large glass shard ripped the skin and cartilage at the back of my ear.

I step back guiltily, avoiding eye contact.

It's the kiss. That damn kiss at the courthouse changed everything for me.

My parents are aware of the arrangement and had served as witnesses to our ceremony. "Kiss the bride," my mother had heckled. It doesn't matter how awkward a situation is, you can always depend on Mom to clown around.

However, when Dex kissed me, it was the farthest thing from a joke.

I was so shocked by the softness of his lips, I gasped, opening enough for our tongues to touch. The pleasure of his tongue's slow yet firm strokes astounded me. Warm hands cradled my face to tilt my head back. He delved deeply, heightening my senses and awakening my hunger. The sensual pressure of his lips weakened my knees, so I had to grab his shirt to keep myself standing. When his thumb touched the scar behind my ear, the subtle graze intensified the most erotic kiss of my life.

That's the moment I realized that I had made a stupid and reckless mistake. Why didn't anyone tell me that kissing my husband was going to mess everything up?

My face heats at the memory, so I clear my throat and ask, too chirpily, "Got any work for me today?"

Part of the arrangement is that I'll be functioning as his personal assistant in exchange for room, board, and, well, a chance to return to a normal existence after my world fell apart. I'm eager to earn at least a portion of the benefits I'm getting out of our arrangement.

Apparently, moving to this "urban farmhouse"—am I ever going to use that term without quotation marks?—comes with more responsibilities than owning a downtown condo. My focus, at least in the next month or so, will be furnishing and organizing his new home.

Dex is also the captain of a team amid a playoff-worthy season. Leading a young, dynamic group like the Mavericks, Dex will be expected to throw a few parties for his teammates during the year we're living together. My job will be to support him in all of his responsibilities, including celebrating the team's success.

"The only work you're doing tonight is stuffing your face with dinner," he declares confidently. "I made our favorite mac and cheese."

I clasp my hands in anticipation. "With smoked sausage?"

Before mac and cheese purists unleash their scorn, let me say: don't knock it till you try it. We got the recipe from a barbecue place we discovered during a summer trip years ago. It changed my life.

"Obviously, yes."

"Where can I freshen up?" I ask, walking toward my bags. "So I can get to work stuffing my face with your smoked sausage."

I stutter-step because what the hell came out of my mouth? He's a good friend, though, so Dex clears his throat and pretends I don't sound like a complete pervert.

I blame the kiss.

CHAPTER TWO

Dexter

Promising healthcare benefits instead of a lifetime of love does not make for an ideal proposal. But it was the essential proposal, nonetheless. Calculating the financial costs of Sabrina's injuries, I offered the solution of marriage before it even occurred to her to ask for help.

When Sabrina's parents called me with the news of her car crash, my vision had tunneled and my heart had stalled. The threat of losing my best friend hit me like my own crash.

It took a lot of convincing, but Sabrina eventually agreed to marry me. So, here we are: best friends for decades, husband and wife for a couple of months, and platonic housemates for the last two weeks.

Living with her is both the easiest and the hardest thing I've ever had to do.

Easy because Sabrina Ramirez is extraordinary. Within a couple of days, she's created a virtual team hub connecting her, my agent, the head trainer, and the skills coach to ensure my schedule is readily updated. We've organized my office together and unpacked all the moving boxes. She even wrapped the presents we picked for my parents and sister, who have invited themselves over for Christmas.

At the moment, Sabrina is decorating the fireplace mantelpiece with a fresh pine garland. It smells like a forest in our living room. Having lived alone for most of my adult life, I've never bothered with holiday decorations. That is, till my wife moved in.

My wife. I'm still getting used to the sound of that.

"Candles?" I ask, when she nestles white columns between pine cones. I'm no arson expert, but flames beside foliage seems uncharacteristically careless.

Sabrina has to remove the candy cane in her mouth to answer. She'd been sucking it while decorating, her cheeks hollowing at the effort. She waves the sharp point of the cane, the aroma of sweet peppermint wafting between us.

Her plush, reddened mouth glistens, snagging my attention. The tantalizing image of me leaning over and sucking on her candied bottom lip hits me so hard, I have to turn away.

“They aren’t real,” she clarifies. “Here, press this.”

She’s holding out a tiny rectangular object in her palm. I press a power button. Like magic, the candles flicker to life.

“Tada!” she says with arms out, making her cropped top lift slightly. My eyes sting at the effort it takes not to stare at the sliver of skin exposed.

By the way, that’s what I mean by *hard*. I’ve jerked off so much since she’s moved in, my right forearm is bigger than my left. Having Sabrina so close all the time, while trying to stay within the boundaries of a marriage of convenience, is torture. Imagining all the things I want her lips to wrap around other than candy canes is my new hobby. This unhealthy preoccupation has turned my balls permanently blue.

“Do you want this outside or here?” she asks, lifting a pine wreath. “Your family always had one over the mantel.”

She’s right. My mom always used to adorn the fireplace with holiday decorations. I wonder how much our shared memories factor into Sabrina’s initiative to design this Christmas setting. Does she feel obligated to re-create a version of holidays past? The thought of Sabrina feeling obligated to do *anything* makes me sick.

I hope she’s going through all this trouble for herself, too. I want her to love it here. Sabrina’s efforts at transforming our house into a home—the practical things like organizing and decorating as well as the intangibles, like the way she angles the large chairs to face the gas fireplace or her music playlist while we cook—cannot be only for me. I want Sabrina to put her mark on everything around us. The way a wife would.

“It’s really nice here. What do you think?” I ask, lifting my chin at the direction of the mantel.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Smiling, she unfolds the medium-height step ladder for me to use because this woman does not start a project without being fully prepared.

I climb the ladder to position the wreath.

“Move it to the right a bit. Yup. And lower,” she instructs from a few paces away.

“Good?” I’m holding it up and leaning forward. She doesn’t immediately

answer.

“Are you going to decide where this goes or just stare at my ass?” I tease.

What a hypocrite. I’m the one who’s been stealing peeks at her gorgeous backside. Does she know her tight black leggings are so old and worn, the fabric clearly reveals the outline of a thong? I doubt it. Though I would be the last person to point it out. Who am I to tell a grown woman what to wear?

“You wish,” Sabrina says with a snort. “It’s perfect right there.”

She walks closer, holding out a hook that sticks to the wall. My body tilts sideways to grab the object, but she drops it. Sabrina bends down quickly, pulling herself up so her face lines up with my . . . front.

We go stock-still with her half-parted lips inches from my crotch. She’s no longer handing me the hook for the wreath. In fact, she doesn’t seem to be thinking about the wreath at all.

Neither am I. My deranged thoughts stray to grabbing her hair and watching her eyes water at the effort of opening her mouth for me. I wonder if the taste of peppermint will linger on my skin.

Down, boy. I interrupt wayward thoughts and scold my cock for drawing all the blood from my limbs. Gray sweatpants are not conducive to subtlety. I might as well display my fantasies on a billboard for how obvious my lust is about to be.

Scrambling down the ladder, I tilt my body away from her gaze. “Why don’t you do it?” I suggest like I’m a horny teenager who’s never seen a beautiful woman before. Could I be any more pathetic?

Clearing her throat, Sabrina gathers herself and steps on the platform. Since she’s shorter, she goes a step higher. There’s a slight wobble to the ladder which prompts me to hold it stable.

Suddenly, the part of her leggings I had been glancing at all night is eye level. I’m not sure if this moment is a top holiday memory or the beginning of my irreversible depravity. Because right now, I’m obsessed with the satisfying plumpness of her round ass when I bite into it.

Did I say *when*? Wrong. There will be no ass biting, today or any day.

Objectively, anyone can see she’s an amazing woman: gorgeous, smart, funny, strong, caring, loyal. I could go on and on. She’s grateful for our marriage of convenience, although it’s obvious I got the better end of the deal.

But Sabrina is, first and foremost, my best friend who found herself in a

vulnerable, complicated situation. Things aren't simple when you have a history like ours and circumstances as traumatic as her accident. We're undergoing an unconventional arrangement, as it is. No need for things to get weirder by wondering what she'll do when I reach over and clamp her hips with my greedy hands.

Did I say *when*? Nope. Wrong again.

Unfortunately, every day she's my wife, the comfort of the past gives way to desperation. I should tighten the leash on my physical attraction before I do something stupid.

Like dip a candy cane in her pussy before I lick it. Fuck, yeah. I mean *down, boy*.

CHAPTER THREE

Dexter

“I don’t know about this,” she calls from her bedroom across the hallway. We’re heading to the Mavericks’ annual holiday party tonight. Sabrina is stressed about our first public appearance as a married couple.

Before I can offer reassurance, her frustrated groan fills the hallway. “Oh, Dex,” she says in worry, “are you sure you want me to come?”

Unfortunately, my body interprets the innocent question in an entirely different context. And by context, I mean sexy as fuck. I steal a glance at my bed where yes, I very much want her to come. There hasn’t been a night since she’s moved in that I didn’t imagine Sabrina on it.

But what if she feels, like, *obligated* to return my advances? The thought kills my erection quicker than jumping in icy water.

“It’ll be fine,” I say, trying to seem nonchalant. Instead, I sound unconvincing.

“I’m sorry you have to lie to your teammates in order to help me,” Sabrina says.

I grab my suit jacket on my way to console her. “Don’t be sorry. I—”
What I am is speechless.

She’s waiting under her doorway, hair flowing and makeup flawless. Sabrina’s dress is dark red and glistens when it catches the light. Her skin looks silky smooth, the bodice fitted to deepen her cleavage. I allow myself a brief glance at her rounded hips and shapely legs. When my wife steps forward and I get a whiff of her perfume, the aroma stirs my blood.

My wife.

“I’ve never seen that dress before,” I declare stupidly, struggling to keep my eyes away from the bodice.

“You think it’s fancy enough?” Sabrina’s hands are tightly closed, her elbows locked. It’s a pose of nervousness. I yearn to lift her hands to my face and run my lips along her knuckles.

“The dress is perfect,” I mutter.

You're perfect, I want to say out loud. Instead, I take her tight fists and invite them to unwind. Entwining our fingers, I tuck one hand into the crook of my elbow.

“What are you doing?” Her voice is hoarse, sounding as parched as I feel.

“If you’re worried about convincing everyone, we should work on, you know . . .” I lose my train of thought when she flutters her impossibly thick lashes.

“On looking like newlyweds,” she completes my sentence. In typical Sabrina fashion, the challenge is accepted. Her nervousness gives way to a generous smile.

“I bet you’ve researched it,” I tease. “What a newly married couple should look like.”

A blush blooms on her cheeks. I resist the urge to hold her face in my hands, like I did during our elopement. A forbidden thought slams into me: at least one more time I need to taste her, kiss her, sweep my tongue into her tempting mouth.

“We stay close and look honeymoony, I guess.” She shrugs. The movement shifts her bodice, the light quiver of her breasts daring me to look. I refuse to ogle.

“Honeymoony? I think I can manage that,” I say, facing away from her but continuing to keep our arms linked. Her body relaxing beside me feels like a prize.

When we arrive at the hotel, we cross the elegant lobby hand in hand. A realization hits me: I’ve never been this excited for a holiday party. Walking into the ballroom with Sabrina as my wife—my *wife*—is like no other experience I’ve ever had. There’s a mix of pride and possessiveness that sits on my chest, not like a burden, but like a medal.

We’re immediately flooded with congratulations. Everyone from the general manager, to our equipment staff, to my teammates and all their dates crowd into our space. There are introductions and pleasantries to get through, especially since I’m team captain.

Sabrina and I don’t drink, though. It’s an unspoken alliance. The asshole who crashed into her was intoxicated. I’ll never drive a car after even one drink if it reminds her of that night.

The festive evening morphs into a hodgepodge of food, chatter, and music. Everything blends together except for one person who stands out above all.

I'm hyperaware of Sabrina. Her tinkling laugh and delicate aroma. What she says and how she feels.

I've never touched her this much. We've always hugged in greeting and occasionally cuddled during a movie. Every summer, we take one vacation together. We aren't strangers to casual physical contact.

This is different. It's as if we're tethered, reaching out instinctively. Her shoulder is satin under my calloused fingers. Those breasts, which I refuse to gawk at, feel incredible against my chest when we dance. I keep our hips at a safe distance, though. Can't have my wife know I've been hard for her all night.

"So, what's the deal?" Gordon asks when we join a small group.

Sabrina needed to rest her feet. Since there was only one chair available at the closest table, I've nestled her on my lap.

I reach over to remove her heels. She moans "yes" and my cock perks up. *Down, boy.*

"You didn't even tell me you were dating." It's Logan, who I've known the longest of all my teammates. He's met Sabrina the most since she's occasionally been my plus-one through the years. He's smiling, but I hear the confusion.

No one in the organization saw my announcement coming.

His wife, Beatrice, reaches for Sabrina's hand and gives it a friendly pat. "We're thrilled to have you as part of the Mavericks family now, Sabrina. Let's sit together next time you're at a game. No rush though. I know how busy newlyweds can get."

"Thank you, I'd love that," Sabrina says graciously. "Dex's family will visit for the holidays. We're all going to the game on the twenty-third. I'll look for you at the box."

"You definitely kept me busy," Logan says to his wife.

I glance at them cuddling like *they're* newlyweds. He gets teased about Beatrice whenever we're out of town because he won't shut up about her. I get it, for once. Missing your wife so much that you find every excuse to talk about her makes perfect sense.

"I've always told Logan there's something between the two of you," Beatrice states.

Sabrina's body stiffens. I pull her to me, loving the way her fleshy outer thigh feels against my palm.

“Long-distance dating can be difficult,” Sabrina utters vaguely, her discomfort about lying taking its toll. Before she responds with a full confession to the next casual inquiry, I offer an explanation.

“It’s not easy to date long-distance,” I agree with her. “But after the car accident, I realized that every day we aren’t together is a wasted day. Nothing is guaranteed.”

I pause, enjoying her puzzled expression. One of Sabrina’s brows is arched much higher than the other. We didn’t plan this explanation, yet there’s no stopping me now.

“Why wait to get married when I already know she’s the love of my life?” I state casually, like it’s obvious. Like this isn’t the first time I’ve declared to the world that this woman on my lap is the love of my life.

Sabrina’s mouth opens in shock, but no sound comes out. I get an alluring whiff of the chocolate mousse she had for dessert. Sweet and rich and tempting. Looking away from her parted lips proves impossible.

“Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!” people around us demand. Others join the rowdy chant.

“What do you say, Baby Brie?” I whisper for her ears only. “Should we give the people what they want?” I ask.

As if anyone could want the kiss more than I do.

Her curved lips and a slight nod grant permission. I do what I’ve been eager to repeat since the first taste: crush my lips to hers.

Sabrina melts immediately, wrapping her arms around my neck as her hips wiggle over my thighs. My one hand cradles her neck and the other supports her spine when I tilt her backward. I seek her tongue and lose myself in our kiss.

She squeezes my shoulder just as I register the hoots of our enthusiastic audience. When we separate, dazed lust thickens the air between us.

“Are you OK?” I graze the tender scar behind her ear. “How’s your back?”

“My back is great. I’m not fragile,” Sabrina rasps, sounding as dazed and breathless as I feel.

“You are to me,” I blurt in all sincerity.

Her already heated cheeks tinge red. She looks away before grabbing a bottle of sparkling water.

It isn’t the first unplanned declaration I’ve made tonight. For everyone’s

sake, I hope it's the last.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sabrina

I look at my extensive checklist in preparation for the arrival of our Christmas guests. Dex is already at the arena for pregame skating, so I'm the one who will welcome his parents and sister into the "urban farmhouse."

The team completed a couple of away games, which means Dex and I have barely seen each other since the holiday party.

When he came home late last night, I stayed in my room, pretending to be asleep. Why? Because remembering my husband's skilled and delicious mouth is slowly annihilating my brain cells. One more kiss and I'll dissolve into a puddle of frayed nerves.

Who will prepare the house and welcome the guests then?

Thus, back to the checklist.

Number one: prepare varied refreshments and hot appetizers for when the Whitby family arrives. *Check.*

Next, clean and arrange guest bedrooms and bathrooms since this is the first Christmas we've ever hosted and I really want to impress my mother-in-law. *Double check.*

Also, arrange Christmas gifts under the tree and stock the fridge with everyone's holiday favorites. *So many checks.*

Finally, sleep in my husband's bedroom so we can sell the legitimacy of this marriage of convenience.

Cue the buzzer, because the answer is a resounding *negative.*

That changes in a few hours. We agreed that the fewer people who know of our ruse, the better. Which is why I'll be sleeping on my husband's bed for the next couple of nights.

Being a consummate gentleman, Dex offered to sleep on the floor for the duration of his family's visit. What if he's injured while sleeping on such a hard surface? What if he can't sleep at all? What if someone enters unannounced? Sleeping separately presents more risks than benefits.

It's an unnecessary precaution. After all, we have two things that will keep

the temporary sleep arrangement from getting awkward: a clear understanding of boundaries and a king-sized bed.

The doorbell rings, launching me out of my reverie. The guests have arrived.

Although Charles and Maxine Whitby are now happily retired in Florida, they raised Dexter and his sister in the same Buffalo suburb I grew up in.

I open the door to greet people I've known all my life. Instead of easy familiarity, however, everything feels new and loaded.

I'm no longer the child who played video games in their basement or street hockey outside their house. I'm no longer the kid they shuttled around during tournaments because Dex and I were a package deal when it came to travel carpooling. I'm no longer their son's little Filipina bestie who played goal because what she didn't have in size, she made up for in reflexes.

I'm no longer a girl at all.

I am the woman who married Dexter Whitby. Fake married, I mean. Knowing I'll be lying to his family twists the ever-present clench in my stomach.

The cringe-inducing "why didn't you tell us you were going to elope" confrontation already happened in Buffalo. Therefore, Maxine is cued up for a whole other conversation.

"When are you and my son giving us grandkids? This house is perfect for a family!" She offers a tinkling laugh like she's kidding. At least I *think* she's kidding.

"Mom was hoping you eloped because you were already knocked up," Julia whispers in my ear when we hug. I choke on air.

Julia, Dexter's younger sister, barely tolerates hockey. Granted, growing up with a superstar brother meant you were subjected to boring hours in countless arenas, watching or waiting for him. Now that she's moved to New York and works in the fashion industry, the occasional hockey game no longer brings her to tears.

"Would you like drinks and appetizers before a tour? Or maybe you'd prefer to freshen up in the guest bedrooms?"

Thank god I made a checklist.

"This place is huge!" Julia gushes while strolling into the living room.

"I told you it's perfect for a big family," her mother says while following Julia into the kitchen.

“These stuffed mushrooms look fabulous!” Julia calls out, having found the appetizers I laid out. From the foyer, I hear mother and daughter decide on which wine to open first.

Charles, the least chatty of the Whitby clan, enters with two rolling suitcases. A gentle giant, he gives me an amiable smile when I peck him on the cheek.

We tour the house while I offer an overview of necessities like Wi-Fi passwords and where Dex stores the hard liquor.

Maxine has already chosen the room that will serve as a nursery. It’s the one I’m currently occupying as the fake wife.

Irony is a guilt-inducing son of a joker, am I right?

Before we leave for the arena, I enter Dex’s bedroom to freshen up and gather myself. Three loud knocks make me jump. I open the door to find Julia holding a large box with a sparkly red ribbon on top.

When she gestures for me to take it, I voice my curiosity. “We’re spending Christmas together. Why don’t we open all our presents then?”

Looking mischievous, Julia lets herself in and plops on the bed. “Trust me, you don’t want to open this in front of our parents.”

“Why?” I ask before remembering a detail about Julia’s job. She’s the fashion merchandiser for Rose Lingerie.

“Just because you didn’t have a bridal shower, it doesn’t mean you don’t need the goodies that come with it.” Her tone is playful, but there’s a hint of hurt in it, too. The impulse to come clean makes me antsy, so I revert my attention to the gift.

“Do you want me to open it now or, like, later?” The thought of pulling out lingerie in front of Dex ticks up my heartbeat.

“Normally, yes, you can open them privately. But one of them will require a bit of a tutorial.”

“Um, why? Also, *one of them*?”

“Obviously, this is the start of your collection. You need to keep things spicy during a marriage.” She shrugs knowingly.

Is there a widely circulated marriage memo I neglected to read?

I open the box and find delicate pieces of lace and satin separated by rose-colored gift tissue.

“The first two sets are your usual push-up bustier with matching Italian thong.”

The material feels like butter between my fingertips. The first set is a shade so close to my skin tone, I'll probably look like I'm wearing patches of lace. The other set is the color of Dex's eyes: blue hydrangeas at the height of summer.

"There's a nationality for thongs?" I croak.

She guffaws like I've missed another memo. "No, silly. It's a style between a thong and a G-string."

"Julia, they're beautiful," I say in all sincerity. I've never owned anything this intricate. "Thank you so much."

"Keep going! There's more."

I remove the next layer to find what she calls a "baby doll." That's a misnomer because there's nothing babyish or dollish about it. The cups are completely sheer except for wires hidden under lace. The flowing bottom half is likewise a mix of sheer and lace in fiery red.

"This is adjustable," she says while pointing at a strap and standing up. "You want the hem to end right here." Her hand makes a sawing motion on her backside, right under her ass.

"Oh, yeah, of course," I mumble, laying the flimsy material on the bed alongside the lacy sets.

"I'll walk you through the last one," she says, making a hand gesture of hurry. "This is our best-selling teddy."

Why are lingerie names so darn cute when there's nothing cute about this web of black straps?

I hold it up for careful scrutiny. Seriously, *what goes where?*

"This is a three-point binding underwear with hollow webbing that you can adjust once we put it on."

"The only words I recognize are *put it on*. Everything else sounds terrifying."

She laughs. "The thing to remember is that when you step into it, make sure this clasp is up and behind you."

I'm about to write down instructions when we hear Maxine roaming the hallway. "Where is everybody?"

"Don't worry. I'll show you later," Julia says, indulging my cluelessness. I repackage the gorgeous gifts, glad to have opened it in relative privacy.

It might be risqué for some people, but I see Julia's offering for what it is. Clothes—or in this case, the sexy scarcity of clothes—is her love language.

In a unique and thoughtful way, she's welcoming me to the family as her sister. Although I can't imagine wearing this in front of anyone, especially my fake husband and platonic friend, I'm eager to try them on and experience why Julia loves them so much.

"Thank you. These are extravagant and beautiful things I couldn't begin to choose for myself. I'm so grateful."

"That's what sisters are for," Julia says when we hug.

Once again, irony rears its joker's head. Except now, it isn't funny or harmless.

Dex and I ironed out paperwork, timeline, and living arrangements. What we didn't do is take into account how others will process the breakup.

When we divorce next year, how will people like Logan or Julia take it? Maxine and Charles are already giddy at the thought of grandkids. Will they feel betrayed? Angry? Will this negatively affect Dex's relationship with his friends and family?

Oh shit, this could really backfire for him! I'm getting my life back while he's risking the trust of the most important people in his life.

What was supposed to fix a problem has the potential to create an even bigger one.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dexter

It's the last game before the league's holiday break. Everyone is ready, as usual, but there's an added restlessness in the locker room. As the captain, my job is to harness that restlessness into victory.

When Coach finishes his spiel, it's my turn to speak for thirty seconds. My teammates track my movements as I take my place in the middle of the room.

"We're at the top of the division. This is not the time to lie back. We came this far, but we aren't done. Not even close. So, tell me . . ." I pause before increasing my volume.

"Do we want to win more than they do?" I shout.

"Fuck yeah!" the room roars.

"Are we leaving everything on the ice for the next sixty fucking minutes?"

"Fuck yeah!"

"Tell me, boys. Are the Mavericks about to kick some Predator ass?"

"Fuck yeah!" Our cheers merge with the deafening roar of the arena when we skate on the ice.

I don't see them, but I *feel* my family and Sabrina's presence in the building. This is the first time the four most important people in my life are watching me together on the biggest stage of the sport I love.

It's invigorating.

Tonight's matchup is plenty fast and a little dirty, as expected. There's been a season-long rivalry between our power forward, Lance Jefferson, and the top Nashville defenseman, Victor Varlamov.

The NHL is a league of large men barreling down the ice at the speed of a car. Throw in sharpened blades on our feet, the largest sticks in organized sports, and a variety of vicious grudges, and you've got the best athletic event in the whole fucking world.

Every chance I can rock someone against the board with a solid hit, I take it. I love the physical part of the game. As centerman, my responsibilities are on the defensive as well as the offensive ends. As captain, I must remain in

control, especially when my teammates are this fired up.

Our goaltender, Jeremy, is a beast tonight. The entire team is fighting to keep his shutout, boosting our efforts to hold a 2–0 lead. The win is a great start to our three-day holiday break.

I'll be out soon, I add to a text thread my wife created for my visiting family. *My wife*.

I ordered them a car service on the way in, but we'll all be driving home in the SUV.

When I exit the locker room, the first thing I see is Sabrina wearing a jersey with *my* name. She's never worn any jersey except one with *Ramirez* across the back. That's a point of pride I've shared with her. She's a professional player, not a puck bunny. But with her back to me and her hair swinging in a high ponytail, the letters spelling *Whitby* never looked so good.

"There he is," my father says from my right side.

I'd forgotten about my family's visit. Flustered, I overcompensate by giving them all my attention. It's a warm, heartfelt reunion. We kiss and hug. I ask about their flights. Mom tells me she's picked colors for the nursery.

Wait, did she say *nursery*? My face must have registered confusion because everyone laughs. I chuckle along but can't shake a thought: raising kids isn't as alarming as I'd assumed it would be. Not if I'm doing it with Sabrina.

Seeking her out, I'm surprised to find the two Mavericks goaltenders—Randi and Jeremy—hogging her attention and leaning in too close.

A few brisk strides carry me to my wife's side. *My wife*.

"Oh, hey," she says, smiling up at me. "Do you like the jersey your parents got for me at the gift shop? They were appalled that I didn't already have one."

"It looks great on you, Sabrina," I say past my dry throat. She looks incredible. Different from the fancy holiday party and yet just as glowy. Is that even a word? It should be.

Sabrina is glowy. A source of light that makes everything around her sparkle.

"Are you netminders getting schooled by my goalie wife?" I sling my arm over her shoulders.

"We were asking about her disk replacement," Jeremy says. "It's cutting-edge back surgery, right?"

“How’s the recovery been?” Randi asks before Sabrina can answer. “Are you coming back on net, or is this it for you?”

“Hey, watch it,” I growl. The guy is infamous for his lack of tact. Still, I can’t believe he would say the unspeakable. Obviously, Sabrina is getting back on the ice. That’s what she wants, so that’s what she’s going to get.

“Not exactly,” she answers with no resentment or hesitation. “If I had a disk fusion instead of a disk replacement, I would have completely lost my flexibility. After the successful surgery and with the right physical therapy, I can at least start my fitness conditioning. We’ll see from there.”

“That’s right, one step at a time,” Jeremy adds. “Where are you going for PT in Columbus?”

Sabrina gives the name of the best physical therapy practice in the region.

“I’ve worked with them for years. They know what to do,” Jeremy says with confidence. “Make sure you ask for Kyle directly. He’s the top doctor and a retired goalie. Best guy for the job.”

I make a mental note to follow up on this information. If I have to throw my name around to get Sabrina the best care, I’m happy to do it.

We stay to chat longer, everyone wanting to talk to Sabrina because of course they do. The air is filled with the relaxed buzz of players settling in for a few days off. Finally, it’s time to go home.

Our family walks across the parking garage, Sabrina’s hand in mine. I open the door for her and, because everyone is watching and not because I’ve been thinking about it all day, I give her a lingering kiss on the lips. The entire ride home, I’m dying to do it again.

CHAPTER SIX

Dexter

I hang out with Dad in my office because he's the only one *not* talking about the possibility of a post-wedding reception in Florida. Mom clearly still feels left out by the elopement.

He talks about his new hobby: pickle ball. More than once, I make him explain what a "dink" is. Something about a two-hundred-pound guy demonstrating and saying "dink" is hilarious.

The other reason I'm shooting the breeze? It's the first night Sabrina will sleep in my bedroom. I'm as nervous as a teenager on his first date. We've spent countless hours together, even vacationing frequently. But we've always had our own rooms and never ventured beyond the friendship that came naturally from the beginning.

Living with her has made very clear that friendship is no longer enough for me. I'll never force the issue, but my body isn't as patient. I can barely watch her load the dishwasher without getting hard.

Sharing a bed with my wife will be torture.

"It's past midnight, you guys." Mom taps Dad's shoulder before giving me a hug. "Aren't you tired, honey?"

"Actually, now that you've mentioned it," my dad says, stretching.

"I meant Dexter! You didn't play a hockey game tonight, my dear," she says with a playful poke to his chest. He takes her hand and kisses the knuckles.

Julia and I roll our eyes at our parents' blatant displays of affection.

"Where's Sabrina?" I ask as we walk to the living room.

Julia hooks her arm into my elbow. "She's getting ready upstairs. You can thank me later." Julia winks.

"Huh?!" I swallow the tight ball of uncertainty lodged in my throat.

Sabrina is in my bedroom. Oh, shit! Sabrina is in my bedroom!

I didn't have time to wrap her gifts, thinking I'd have till tomorrow. Dammit, that'll ruin my surprise. Maybe she won't even go into the walk-in

closet, right? Did I leave things out or tucked away? Damn it, I can't remember.

Entering the room, I notice the bathroom door is closed with the light on inside. Whew, that's good. While she's finishing up in there, I'll put my gifts on a tall shelf and get ready for bed. A bed in which Sabrina will be sleeping inches away.

Down, boy, I say to my traitorous dick pointing up at the ceiling. I need to tighten the leash on my lust. I'm not some horny teenager; I'm a man in a complicated situation. My brain needs to take charge of my body.

Frustrated, I burst into the walk-in closet.

Sabrina is inside, her back to the full-length mirror as she twists to get a view of the fullest, roundest ass I've ever seen. I see red. Literally. Her red outfit is gorgeous, ending at the top of her thighs and barely covering the outline of a matching G-string. She jumps in surprise, making her breasts bounce in their lacy cages.

With a high-pitched voice, she rambles, "Oh shit, I . . . I couldn't see the full outfit in the bathroom. And, um, and Julia said this is supposed to end at the . . . at the . . . oh my god, Dex!" She's nearly shrill, embarrassment tipping over to panic.

"Say something normal or get out, please!"

Her hands wrap over her front to cover her breasts and apex, but the movement makes her bend forward. My eyes focus on the mirror where her ass is tilted up. My brain is no longer in charge.

"Those can't be my only two choices, Sabrina," I say, taking a step forward. "You can't be this fucking hot and expect me to walk away." My voice is so hoarse with lust, I don't sound human. "And there's nothing normal about what I want to say."

Her eyes roam my face. Sabrina's body sways, as if she isn't on steady ground.

"Say it," she rasps.

I close our distance and get a whiff of the lavender aroma of her night lotion. My gaze greedily devours her smooth skin and fluttering eyes, her shapely hips and grabbable ass. And when her arms slip down, I get a glimpse of her puckered nipples pushing against the sheer fabric of the bra.

"Turn around," I order.

As if in a trance, she faces the mirror. Sabrina staring back at me with

undiluted lust feels like I'm in the middle of an erotic dream. There's something surreal about watching ourselves through the mirror. Somehow, the fact that we're watching each other instead of looking at each other changes everything. I'm done holding back. Nothing short of an apocalypse will stop me from living this fantasy.

I graze my fingers over her upper arm, watching a trail of tiny hairs chasing the path of my touch. Her other arm gets equal attention. Sabrina shivers through an unsteady inhale. She flicks her hair back, exposing the delicate lines of collarbones and the plumpness of breasts pushed up by her crossed arms.

I step closer, letting my erection graze her lower back.

"Every time we kiss, I tell myself it's the last time," I whisper into her ear. "You signed up for a husband, Sabrina, not a lover. That's what I've been telling myself because I keep *forgetting*. The more I'm with you, the harder it is to remember why we shouldn't be kissing every fucking day and all damn night."

In the mirror, we continue to stare at each other. My voice is ground in glass. "I don't want you to think any part of our arrangement is connected to how much I want you. Do you understand? Me wanting you, *craving* you, that is entirely separate from helping my best friend."

"I know, Dex. I know you would never expect that from me. Which is why I, um, I—" She pauses when my finger caresses the scar behind her ear.

"God, why does that feel so good? This is a mistake, isn't it?" she asks pleadingly. "Then why does it feel so fucking good?"

"Good?" I chuckle at the inadequacy of the word. "Good isn't even close, Sabrina. If we're about to make a mistake, I promise you it'll be worth it."

Her breath hitches and eyes widen. I lower my head in order to graze my lips against her neck, never once unlocking our intense gaze.

"When I'm done with you, you won't be able to think about tonight without touching yourself. Just remembering my tongue inside your pussy will make you come. And if you let me sink this hard cock into your beautiful body, I'll fill you in all the ways you need to be pleased."

Everything I had been holding back bursts out of me. Sabrina should probably slap me across the face for saying the unthinkable. But she doesn't slap me.

Instead, my wife turns around and uncrosses her arms, giving me an

unobstructed view of her quivering breasts. Her diamond-hard nipples beg to be sucked till they rip through the fabric.

“I want you, Dex,” she whimpers desperately. “Whether or not it’s a mistake, I want you.”

“Are you ready, Sabrina? Are you ready for the best mistake we’ll ever make?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sabrina

Are you ready for the best mistake we'll ever make?

Yes, my body screams. I crash my mouth against his as my fingers grab his hair and my breasts rub against his chest. *Yes.*

I thought our past kisses indicated chemistry. I was wrong. This isn't chemistry. This is an inferno.

His hands are everywhere, down my sides and palming my ass, gripping my hair and pinching my nipple. My fingers roam his back and clutch at his shirt. Dex lodges a thick thigh between my legs. I grind against it shamelessly, chasing the pleasure of his muscles rubbing my sensitive apex.

A manly groan reverberates between our bodies and penetrates under my skin, unleashing electric currents into my veins. When he nips my lower lip and licks down my neck, liquid heat pools at my core. Dex gives each of my nipples a graze of his teeth. I arch for more and sigh with pleasure.

The contrast of his calloused palms and lush mouth, his rough stubble and coaxing tongue, his appetite and his skill—all of it overwhelms me in the best possible way. Underneath the passion, I feel his control. I'm desperate to surrender to it.

At the same time, imagining Dex with absolutely no control—wild and rough and potent—excites me.

Our mouths are fused, each taste intensifying my hunger. I've never been kissed like this.

I bet a lot of women say that, my insecurity prods. I've witnessed the way women look at Dexter. The man's sex appeal and gentlemanly ways have proven irresistible to many. As his childhood friend, I thought I was immune. Not anymore.

"Sabrina," he whispers in my ear as he gathers my hair in a fist. "Look at me."

My eyes flick up. I see the unspoken plea. Even at the height of passion, Dex never gets carried away. He paused because he wants me to be sure.

Suddenly, after a lifetime of friendship, I've never been more certain about a single fact: I'll die if we stop. I don't know what tomorrow brings, but friendship is simply not enough. At least not tonight.

"Don't stop. I want you, Dex. Take me to bed. Please, don't stop." I hump his thigh, my lingerie bunched and crumpled between us. I want him to rip everything off. We need to be skin to skin. He hoists me up and wraps my legs around his burly hips.

Tasteful sconces light the room, emitting a glow on each side of the mattress. He lays me down and steps back, eyes roaming my body as he licks his lips.

"Fuck, Sabrina. Now that I know what you look like under your clothes, it's gonna be hard to keep my hands off you."

"You don't have to keep your hands off me tonight." I barely hear my own voice because there's a gong where my heart should be. That word lingers in the air between us. *Tonight.*

We can contain this mistake to one night, can't we?

His eyes narrow, assessing my expression. I watch his features morph from hungry to determined.

"Everything about you is beautiful. Look at your hair down your back, and those breasts that belong in my mouth. Lie back and let me see the pussy I've been dreaming about."

My breathing stutters. Where did this dirty-talking sex god come from? It's still Dexter before me, with his searing blue eyes and infinitely capable hands. But it's as if he's revealing another dimension of himself. I can't tell if I'm scared or eager to see more. Probably both.

I crawl to the center of the bed though I don't lie back. My knees are tight together, calves tucked under a hip. In response to my reluctance, he raises one brow and shakes his head.

"Here's what's going to happen," he says gruffly and with a tinge of impatience. "You are going to lie down and open your thighs, nice and wide. Show me how much you want my mouth on your pussy. I like to appreciate my meal before I eat."

A gasp of disbelief comes out of me. "Holy shit, Dex, I had no idea."

"What do you mean?"

"That this is how you talk to women you have on your bed. It's freaking hot."

I've got no filter. Every bit of energy is spent holding myself in place instead of pulling him over me.

"Women?" His huff is indignant, like I insulted him. "The only woman on my bed is you, Sabrina."

"C'mon, you know what I mean."

He shakes his head while unbuttoning his shirt. It's mesmerizing, the way his fingers efficiently flick each obstacle out of the way, the fabric gaping till his gloriously sculpted torso is unveiled. The movement is slow and precise. I can't take my eyes off his hands as they clank the belt, promising to unleash the rigid length underneath. Then, he stops.

My eyes fly up to see his amused grin. I know bait when I see it. He rubs his groin, drawing my attention like a magnet. Thick and long, his bulge strains against the zipper.

"You're torturing me!" I declare incredulously.

"You want to see how hard I am for you? Then do what you're told, Baby Brie." His voice is soft and husky, but there's no denying the tone. It's an order. "Lie back and open your legs."

"What if I don't?"

Instead of answering, he puts one knee on the bed and leans in, his body looming over me. He smells of sandalwood and pine, our kiss lingering on his honeyed breath.

"You need convincing before you do what I tell you? I can work with that." There's a hint of mischief to his raspy voice, like a secret he's been saving for exactly this moment.

Dex kisses my jaw, the shell of my ear, and down my neck. It's light and playful at first before the kisses get increasingly urgent and insistent. He sucks the junction between my neck and collarbone, hard and harsh, before licking it. I fall on my back at the pleasure.

His mouth finds my breasts and he repositions his elbows on each side of me, using his ridged abdominals to rub against my groin. Dex shoves the delicate cups aside and worships my breasts, licking the valley between and pinching the sensitive tips. A heavy palm runs up and down one side, gripping one butt cheek firmly and tilting my lower half to grind harder and deeper. He draws my nipples into his mouth and sucks hard till I'm reduced to frayed nerves and delirious moans.

Sensations overwhelm me. It's as if I'm discovering my own body for the

first time. Dex makes me feel treasured and plundered, protected and ruined all at once. Ruined for anyone else, I mean. Because as much as I'm falling apart, his embrace makes me feel substantial. Whole.

Dex moves lower, creating a wet trail of erotic nips and kisses until he's over my mound.

He's right. I open my legs because he's right.

"That's it, Sabrina. Nice and wide, so I can see how wet you are."

"Dex, Dex," I chant. His breath lingers over my core and the aching pressure is nearly unbearable.

He licks me in slow, continual strokes. The flat of his tongue awakens every erotic cell in my body. There's a steady thrumming at my center. He eats me in a steady rhythm that intensifies, moving quicker and pressing firmer when I need him to. My desperation builds. Dex devours me with the enthusiasm of a man determined to relish every flavor. He carries me to a blissful precipice so acute it's sharp, nearly painful.

I've had a few boyfriends through the years. Nothing serious, but enough to know I love giving head. The other way around has never been as satisfying. Till now. This is what it's like when a man knows what he's doing. And like someone in complete control, Dex gives pleasure while withholding what my body craves the most. Release.

"God, you feel so good, Dex." I can barely speak as lust strangles me. "I need more. Please. I'm so close."

"What are you gonna do the next time I tell you to lie down and open your legs for me, *wife*?"

I gasp and look down between my thighs. His mouth and beard glisten with moisture, his expression possessive. We stare at each other while he resumes the deep French kissing of my folds. It's so freaking hot, my hips buck of their own will, chasing pressure. Dex's hands keep me in place while his mouth gets hungrier. Wilder.

"Hmm?" he asks with a deep baritone that vibrates through my sensitive walls. He feels incredible.

"I'll lie d-down. When, um, when y-you tell me to," I manage with stops and starts.

He buries his face deeper, his tongue penetrating my channel before he pulls back to graze my clit. My body scrunches up in response. Dex grips my ass firmly and bites the inside of my thighs, prompting them to widen.

“And when I tell you to open your legs?” His beard titillates my inner thighs and his nose nudges my throbbing center.

“I’ll open my legs,” I mumble obediently, teetering at the brink of an orgasm and desperate for him to push me over.

“That’s right.” Dex returns his attention to my wet folds, lapping his tongue and moving his lips with perfect friction.

Finally, long fingers press against my channel, churning my arousal, stroking my walls. He plunges deep just as he wraps his hot lips around my clit and sucks hard.

My climax whips through me like a live current, releasing jolts of electricity in forceful surges. The sensation arches my back and blanks my mind. I’m writhing and bucking.

When I come down from the climax and refocus on my surroundings, I’m treated to the wolfish grin of a devastatingly gorgeous man. I’ve known him for most of my life, yet never allowed myself to admit the truth: Dexter Whitby is the sexiest man alive.

“You’re looking very pleased with yourself,” I say, unable to hold back my own smile.

“Me? You’re not seeing what I’m seeing.”

I chuckle. No doubt I’m a portrait of sexual satisfaction.

“So, that’s, um, wow, it was . . .” I stop because my brain is malfunctioning. Words. I need words. Instead, my mouth stays open like a gaping fish.

“Take your time. We got all night,” he says.

But then what? What happens after tonight? Anything? Nothing?

It strikes me that *nothing* is the safest yet most terrifying answer of all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dexter

I almost came when her pussy squeezed my fingers and her climax flooded my tongue. I'm liable to explode before I sink into her. That would be a crime against the institution of marriage. I'm sure it's written somewhere.

"Talk to me, Sabrina." I lean my head on a bent arm, watchful yet restrained. There's no way to be sure of Sabrina's thoughts. Her expression is an enticing mix of contented and confused.

"You're already doing so much for me," she whispers.

The hint of nervousness creeping into her voice jars me. What the hell is she saying? That being with her is, what, a favor to *her*? That's ridiculous. Before I can say as much, she continues.

"Taking me in, helping with my treatments, giving me so much. I would have lost everything if we hadn't married."

"I'd do it again, Baby Brie. I'd do it a hundred times."

"Oh, Dexter, you're too good for me," she says miserably.

"What the hell?! We both know that's not true." I reach over to tilt her chin my way, forcing her to return my gaze. "Why would you say that?"

Instead of responding to my question, Sabrina pushes my chest so I'm the one on my back. She runs her hands up and down my torso, each stroke closer and closer to my cock which twitches in anticipation. My mind blanks. What were we talking about?

Sabrina lowers herself between my legs, licking and nipping the skin around my belly button.

I hiss because the sensation of her hot mouth so near my groin is mind-blowing. It's also painfully insufficient.

"You're so big," she whimpers while licking the moisture from the top of my erection. Her lips wrap around the head, tongue swirling.

"There's no need to—" I can't speak because she does some crazy tongue thing. Like, figure eights on the underside of my cock. Jesus, this woman.

“I know, Dex. I know I don’t need to.” Her breath shoots new sensations down my shaft. “I want to,” she says before stretching her mouth to envelop my shaft. Her eyelids go half-mast and she groans. “I’m dying to have your cock in my mouth.”

I don’t realize how much I need those words until I hear them. They unleash my lewd obsession. “Take it to the root, Sabrina. Take it and suck it like those fucking candy canes you suck to drive me insane.”

Her pink tongue darts out to lick her lips. Lust chokes my airways. I clutch at the bed sheets on each side of me, restraining myself from grabbing her hair while I plunge into that tempting mouth. The primal impulse to thrust floods my system.

She turns her head slightly and flicks her chin in the direction of one of my clenching hands. “Don’t hold back.”

A humorless chuckle escapes when I say, “I’d ruin your beautiful mouth if you let me. I won’t be able to control myself.”

“That excites me. Knowing you’ll lose control because you want me so much turns me on,” she murmurs.

“Yeah?”

By way of answer, she wraps her mouth around my cock and moves her head lower. The plunge is deeper each time, her mouth sucking and tongue moving in a swirling pattern. It’s driving me crazy. My hips push up to shove deeper.

She comes up for air and says, “Grab my hair.”

She delves deeply again, her moans vibrating through me. My leash on control is on the verge of snapping. I clench her hair in each fist and push up.

She hums and groans while licking and sucking. Chaos pools at the bottom of my spine, making my thighs shake.

“You like that, Baby Brie? Knowing you’re the one person who can make me lose control gets you off,” I say with animal grunts. “What a naughty wife, taking my cock like a needy little slut.”

She pauses. Before I can undo the damage of my filthy-talking mouth, Sabrina says with a devious grin, “This needy little slut needs your hard cock all night.”

The pace of her plunges quickens, the suction getting more forceful. My dick knocks at the back of her throat, her mouth stretched and eyes watery at the exertion. I shove upward roughly, relishing the way she relaxes her throat

to take more of me. Holding my climax back is heaven and hell together.

Dammit, I have to stop. The first time I come inside my wife, I want to sink so deep she feels me everywhere. Cupping her chin in my hands to tilt her head up, I put a stop to the best blow job of my life. She looks confused.

“Don’t you like it?” she asks.

How could she doubt that I do?

“Like it? I’m two shoves from exploding into your mouth.”

“Why don’t you?” This woman. Jesus, this woman.

“Because this can’t end yet. I’m dying to make love to you, Sabrina.”

That’s a truth I hadn’t allowed myself to fully acknowledge till now.

Her features soften with warm affection. She rubs her jaw against my palm like a submissive kitten. It’s adorable and sexy and intoxicating. That she wants me as much as I want her was unimaginable hours prior. Now? I’m on a high I don’t want to come down from.

“I’ve got condoms in the bathroom.” Regrettably, I’ll have to get out of the bed to fetch them.

“You don’t have any here?” she tilts her head toward my nightstand.

“My wife is the only woman who’s ever been on my bed.”

Sabrina looks puzzled and doubtful.

I’m not bullshitting. Any casual hookup through the years has always occurred while I’m away from home. Being the captain of an NHL team means there’s a lot of attention on me when I’m in Columbus. To keep things casual, I might invite a woman to an event, though never for an actual date. Hotel rooms and the occasional public quickie are part of being a hockey player with puck bunnies throwing themselves at you. It was fun the first couple of years. Lately, casual sex feels like an unwelcome intrusion into my real life.

It turns out the one woman who has always been in my life is the same one who belongs in my bed. I head to the medicine cabinet and grab a bunch of condoms. Stocking the nightstand sounds like a great idea.

Making a show of sheathing my rigid thickness, I relish Sabrina’s body quivering in anticipation. Her red lingerie is askew and her hair is a mess. With fiery eyes and a parted mouth, she’s the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen.

Leaning over her, I pull down a strap to expose one breast. She wiggles out of the fabric till there’s nothing but a swath of cloth over her belly. Using my teeth, I pull it down. She lifts her hips to free the fabric. I lick her seam a

few times before trailing kisses upward. When our bodies align, I grab my cock to swipe up and down her folds.

“Dex, please,” she whimpers. “Inside me, please.”

I want that so much, I can’t see straight. Sliding in slowly, I force myself to focus in order not to miss a single second.

The moment our bodies join as one will forever be lodged in my memory. Sabrina’s eyes roll to the back of her head, her mouth open in a silent scream. Giving her a few more inches, I churn the wetness that swallows my cock.

“Oh my god, Dex, you’re so big,” she says before releasing a low moan.

“I’m not even halfway in,” I say smugly. “You ready for all of me?”

She doesn’t answer with words. Crashing her lips to mine, she pushes her hips up and takes me all the way. Plunging my tongue with the same rhythm as my cock, I claim her as mine. With a controlled, steady thrust, I give her just enough force and friction to stay at the edge of an orgasm.

“More, Dex. Harder,” she groans and nips my bottom lip. She might as well have flicked a switch in my body. Suddenly, it’s impossible to hold back.

I tilt her head to the side so I can suck her neck, bite her shoulder, fist her hair. My hands squeeze her ass and angle her hips. Deeper, we crash against each other, grinding and groaning like animals. It’s both so primal and yet unbelievably intimate.

With a grazing of my teeth against her ear, I whisper, “I’ve dreamed about this moment, Sabrina. And not once in all my fantasies was it ever this incredible. My wife takes my cock so perfectly.” I chuckle at her hitched breath before pulling all the way out and slamming in.

“You’re.” Thrust. “Fucking.” Thrust. “Perfect.” Thrust.

It’s impossible to rein in control when she responds fervently, meeting my plunges with her legs wide, her walls vibrating, and her mouth whimpering *yes, yes, yes*. I invade deeper, sweat gathering between us. The sounds of heavy breathing and slapping skin fill the room.

“I’m there. Oh, my god, oh—” Her walls clamp around my cock. She bites down on my shoulder to hold back a scream. I move inside her, trying to prolong her climax while holding back my own.

Her limp arms fall outward but her hips remain lifted, welcoming my penetration.

“I want you on your knees, Baby Brie. Every time you bend over, all I

want to do is grab your round ass.”

Her eyes widen excitedly. “Every time?”

I recall the blissful torture of living with her: Sabrina reaching under the kitchen cabinets, or picking up her laundry basket, or checking the stove when she made Christmas cookies. There wasn’t an instance that my dick didn’t perk up, hoping for an invitation.

“Every time,” I confirm.

Her lips quirk in a half smile, half smirk. “Show me, Dex. Show me how much you want me.”

I pull out and sit on my heels, relishing the view of Sabrina getting on all fours and looking over her shoulder. Fuck, it’s glorious.

My chest glides against her back. “You want me to lose control? You sure about that?” Everything in my body tenses with sharp yearning.

Her response is to wiggle her ass against my cock and bob her head deliriously. “I want to know how it feels when you don’t hold back. I want all of you.”

I shove into her liquid heat in a powerful thrust, giving my wife what she demands.

My wife, I chant in my head as I plunge in and out of her pussy. My hands grip her hips tightly so I can thrust as deep as possible. I look down at her buttocks that jiggle with each shove, my thickness disappearing into her channel. I close my eyes because it’s too sensual to look at and feel simultaneously.

My body refuses to hold back the invasion. I couldn’t if I tried. Faster and faster, my control crumbles. I plunder without restraint, chasing an explosion that I know will change everything.

“Dex, oh god, Dex.” She pushes her face into the pillow to muffle her screams. The position lifts her ass at a new angle, unleashing the last of my drives.

We climax together, my hardness surging as she clenches around me. We ride the ecstasy through its peak, prolonging the orgasm by continuing to grind against each other. Rapture weakens our limbs and empties my body. When pleasure is done barreling through us, we collapse on the bed.

It takes a beat before my vision refocuses. When it does, I watch her go to the bathroom and close the door.

An anvil lands on my chest the same moment I recall her words before we

made love.

Taking me in, helping with my treatments, giving me so much, she had said.

At face value, her words seem correct. Yet at a deeper level, there's no such thing as "taking in" someone who has always belonged in your life. I'm helping myself when I help her. The marriage is a favor for a friend and a convenient arrangement for me.

On top of all that, what is happening between us is something else altogether. Making love to Sabrina is the farthest thing from convenience or favors or friendship.

You're too good for me, Dex. Bullshit.

We're good for each other. We're freaking *made* for each other. Tonight proves something I've always known but never fully acknowledged. It's always been her.

Tonight, Sabrina is my wife in name, in body, and in my heart. There's no point denying it now: I am deeply, hopelessly, and irrevocably in love with my wife.

CHAPTER NINE

Sabrina

I need a fucking minute to understand what just happened. To breathe and think and plan. What now?

I know I'll have to come out eventually. As soon as I figure out the answer to *what now?*

What if sex muddies an already complex situation? How could it not, when every part of me reacted to Dexter in ways I didn't realize were possible? I've never experienced a connection so complete, unable to distinguish where my body ended and his began. The physical reaction is only the surface. I'm brimming with unnamable, unrecognizable, overwhelming emotions.

Tonight changes everything. Breaks down borders between a favor and an obligation, between friends and lovers, between living with Dexter and risking our relationship.

Risking my heart.

That's what it comes down to. Our physical connection is shaking me to the core. Loving a friend is one thing; realizing my heart is as ready to submit to him as my body is something else altogether. The thought of surrendering to passion and risking a lifetime of friendship twists my insides. What if these turbulent feelings threaten the stability of our relationship? No. Never.

I won't risk my relationship with Dexter. I'd never recover from losing him. *I can't take another hit.*

A soft knock pauses my deep dive into an ocean of panic.

"Open up, Sabrina." His familiar voice is laced with worry. "Let me in, please."

"Yeah, um, give me a second. I'm just washing up," I respond, trying to sound normal before I throw water on my face. The mirror shows the evidence of our lust, my naked body marked by the red flowers of his greedy kisses. I attempt to cover my body with a towel before opening the door.

He's standing outside, boxers carelessly pulled low and failing to hide the

enticing arrow of manly hipbones. I refuse to let my gaze stray to his bulge.

“Are you OK?”

Blue eyes roam my body and stop at a mark I couldn't hide. Dex steps forward and moves my hair back to expose another hickey. He gently tugs at the towel, which I let fall.

I stand before him naked, vulnerable, and *marked*. Instead of shying away, I feel my body react to his gaze—puckering my nipples, tingling the soreness at my core, stealing my breath.

Maybe I shouldn't be turned on by his concerned scrutiny, but I am.

Warm, gentle hands encircle my waist. “Sabrina, did I hurt you?” His voice is low and tormented.

What? No, he's got it all wrong. “I'm not hurt. Not at all.”

His brows furrow. “But I lost control and that's not OK.” He steps closer, cradling my cheek against his palm while he presses a soft kiss to my temple.

I turn my head to kiss his hand. “I swear I'm not hurt. I just needed a minute because tonight . . . tonight was a lot.”

He wraps his arms around me and kisses me tenderly. “Tonight was everything,” he whispers cryptically.

Is this a good time to ask *what now*? Probably. But I'm not ready for an answer. Instead, I turn away and absentmindedly wash my hands again.

“I should, um, clean up. Gotta pee after sex. That's, like, a rule. It washes the cervix or you know, whatever is, er, there to avoid bladder infections.”

I'm rambling about gynecological care? Really?

He chuckles. “Does it now? Take your time. I just wanted to make sure you're good, Baby Brie.” He presses his lips to my temple before leaving the bathroom.

I can't help warming to his soothing tone. Dex is always considerate, caring, and generous. He's also the most amazing lover I'll ever have. It's awfully inconvenient when a marriage of convenience doesn't go as planned. I didn't expect one night with him to be more passionate than all my previous sexual encounters combined.

“Yes, thanks. I'll be out in a minute,” I call out casually, as if I'm not completely freaking out.

Alone again, I make quick work of washing up. All my clothes are in a duffel bag outside the bathroom. I quietly peek out the door.

Dexter's outline is on the bed, facing the middle, arms outstretched like an

invitation. His eyes are closed, his breathing slow and steady. Seeing my husband completely knocked out unleashes a flood of affection.

I'm also relieved. Skipping the *what now* conversation is a Christmas miracle.

After getting into pajamas, I kneel at the middle of the mattress and carefully pull at the bedding from his heels to bring the blanket higher to his thighs and over an impossibly muscular torso. Staring at Dex's serene beauty, I touch the strand of hair that flops over his smooth forehead.

His granite jaw, scruffy against my fingers as I cradle his cheeks, represents both strength and vulnerability. I'm holding Dex's face as he sleeps, loose jawed and trusting. My lips graze where my hands have been. Knowing I can do that—kiss Dex simply because I feel like it—overwhelms me.

One night with my husband has ruined me for anyone else.

CHAPTER TEN

Sabrina

I wake to the smell of waffles. It's the morning of Christmas Eve and Dexter has explained the family tradition of a massive brunch before the pastry factory begins. Apple pie, walnut rolls, and more cookies are on today's agenda. The Whitby family are foodie people.

The blinds are still drawn but a sliver of light streaks the floor. What time is it? Should I be downstairs right now? What is the protocol for daughter-in-law hosting duty?

The shower stops. I push off the bed to grab a sweater and pants from my bag. When the bathroom door opens, steam bellows around a tall, muscular silhouette. With nothing but a towel and a grin, my husband walks toward me.

"Good morning. You were sleeping so deeply. I didn't mean for the shower to wake you."

"It was the waffles," I say inanely.

He tilts his head and makes an exaggerated sniff. "I'm glad Mom is making herself at home."

"Shouldn't I be helping her?" I ask before answering my own question. "I should be helping her."

Dex hears my panic and steps forward. "Nah, we can tidy up after. Let's pretend to be asleep for a little longer."

"Dex, c'mon, I'm sure they're expecting us downstairs. I'll try to—"

"Let's do this again," he interrupts. "Good morning." This time, he crowds into me till the backs of my knees hit the bed.

"Good morning," I mumble before inhaling his clean scent. Turns out bath soap is an aphrodisiac. Who knew?

With nowhere to go, I lie down. Dexter follows, crawling over me slowly. Seductively. His face brushes against my stomach, between my breasts, on my shoulders. My fingers roam over his damp hair. I surrender to the manly bulk caging me in. But I do have some reservations.

“I haven’t brushed my teeth,” I squeak.

His chuckle is buried in my neck. “You smell like the bed we shared all night, Baby Brie. It’s so fucking sexy.” I feel his erection against my core. Of their own accord, my hips lift, desperate to cradle his hardness between my thighs. He pulls off his towel. My legs immediately wrap around his lower back.

One hand in my hair, the other tweaking a breast, Dex handles my body perfectly as he speaks against my ear. “Your underwear is soaked, Sabrina. Soaked. I want to—”

Three loud knocks on our door make us both jump. “Answer your phone, honeymooners,” Julia shouts from the hallway. “Mom sent me up to say brunch will be served in ten minutes.”

I scramble away and jump off the bed. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Dex lying on his back with his arms out. The picture of frustration.

“Go ahead downstairs, Dex. I’ll follow in a bit,” I call from the closet where I’m grabbing my clothes for the day.

“I’ll leave but only if you put on the sexy underwear in the box.” Naturally, he peeked inside the lingerie box I left in the bathroom.

“Maybe,” I answer vaguely, excited to wear the blue set.

He’s standing with his hands over the doorway of the walk-in closet, eyes straying to my bare legs. He won’t get out of my way, so I place my hand on his chest for a slight shove. He takes my hand and kisses it. The gesture is so tender, my knees buckle.

“I’ll save you a waffle,” he says and kisses me on the lips.

“Eew!” I squeal, appalled that I haven’t had the chance to freshen up. Even married couples need morning-breath boundaries.

“Delicious,” he says with a wink. I feel him track my every movement till I enter the bathroom.

Last night, he warned me that being intimate would be a mistake. It doesn’t look like it’s one he regrets.

Closing the door and leaning my forehead against it, I can’t deny that Dexter Whitby is not just a great guy and a convenient husband.

There’s never been a more loyal and generous friend. Being around him inspires me. Most of my joyful memories include Dexter in some way. But this is another part of me he’s claiming as his and only his. No man has ever been more important in my life. Last night ensured that no man ever will.

Despite the realization, my brain trips on the disturbing yet unspoken question: *what now?*

Apparently, it's hand kissing and morning cuddles, sexy-smelling soap and Christmas Eve waffles. Sharing our bedroom feels normal, despite last night's mind-blowing sexcapade. That is, if by *normal* you mean ridiculously affectionate and endlessly seductive. My heart clenches at the possibility of this being our new routine: waking up together and cuddling before we begin the day.

My phone rings, interrupting my gallop toward an unknown future.

It's my mother. She's never had a conversation she didn't want to extend so I consider sending the call to voicemail in case the Whitby family is tired of waiting for me downstairs. But I can't ignore my own mother at Christmas.

I realize, later, that maybe I should have.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dexter

The same thirty Christmas songs play on a loop and, surprisingly, the repetition doesn't drive me nuts. Not when I'm the middle of the best holiday break *ever*.

I'm hosting Christmas with my wife. There are presents under *our* tree and pies cooking in *our* oven. Sabrina was hesitant when she moved in, asking me where things go and such. Now, she's joyful and confident, entertaining our family and enchanting me by simply being herself. She looks like she belongs here because of course she does.

From the corner of my eye, I watch Sabrina laugh at something my sister said. Earlier, they both helped Mom make enough desserts for the hockey team.

Now, it's the men's turn in the kitchen. Dad and I will prepare the feast for tonight. He's famous for his prime rib roast recipe, perfected by serving it for every special occasion this past decade.

"Stop ogling your wife and chop the potatoes, son. Dinner will not cook itself." My dad nudges me.

"I'm not ogling," I mutter.

He snorts. "Not saying there's anything wrong with checking out your wife every two minutes. Just don't do it while you've got a knife suspended over your fingers."

We work quietly for a while, marinating meat and prepping vegetables.

"So, what did you get Sabrina?" my dad asks. "First Christmas together as a married couple is a big deal. I learned that the hard way."

"What happened? Did you give Mom a vacuum cleaner or something?"

"It was a Dyson!" he exclaims, and we both laugh.

We're alone in the kitchen, so I answer him. "Remember that picture of her in the paper? When the Buffalo Blazers won the championship? I had it framed professionally."

"Good one," he says with a nod. His approval encourages me to say more.

“Also, I never got the chance to buy her an engagement ring since the elopement happened quickly. So I got her a diamond tennis bracelet instead. She might want to choose her own ring, you know?”

He emits an exaggerated whistle. “Excellent choice. I bet that’s gonna blow her away. You’re going to make me look bad.”

“Why? What did you get Mom?”

“Her favorite chocolates and pickle ball lessons,” he says in all seriousness.

I guffaw. He better be kidding. “I’m definitely gonna make you look bad.”

While the pie cools and the roast roasts, everyone goes outside for a walk. There’s a park with hiking trails a few minutes away.

Sabrina and I are in the front of the group when she squeezes my hand. “Thanks for this,” she says.

“That’s my line, Baby Brie,” I mutter while leaning down for a kiss.

“Save it, guys! We gotta work out before eating dinner,” Julia whines behind us.

We trudge along as I steal glances at the woman beside me. For years, we’ve shared laughs and dreams and adventures. Yet this simple walk down a street and the easy companionship we share with family this Christmas is the biggest adventure of all.

Something unlocked in me last night: that place where I’ve shoved the thousands of ways I’ve been drawn to Sabrina through the years. Under the surface of friendship, there was always an unacknowledged reservoir of needs: to be closer, to touch more, to see everything. To *be* everything she needs. Last night burst open a Pandora’s box of my unspoken feelings and all the reasons we should be together.

She’s beautiful inside and out. She’s the only woman who truly knows me as a person and not just a successful hockey player. Her determination is inspiring and our chemistry is off the charts. Making sure she’s happy and healthy and fulfilled sounds like a great life plan to me.

I hear her sigh. “Are you OK, Sabrina? Do you miss your parents?” I ask. “They know there’s room for them here if they ever want to visit.”

“They know,” she answers. Her voice is nearly a whisper. I pull her to me for a side hug and kiss the top of her head.

“The trail starts here,” I call to my family while pointing ahead. They get in front of us.

When they're beyond earshot, she continues. "The last few months have been exhausting for them. Taking me to appointments when I couldn't drive myself. Helping me with my physical therapy exercises those first few weeks. It kills me, how much they've had to sacrifice when something so random changed our lives."

Slowing down to add distance from the group, I stop and turn her toward me. "It isn't a sacrifice to help you, Sabrina. It's an honor."

Her face softens, the anxiety melting like heated snow. It's the most natural thing in the world to kiss her. She tastes like Christmas: cinnamon and maple syrup and candy canes. Our kiss deepens before I feel her hand on my chest.

Pushing away, she gives me a scolding frown. "They're waiting for us."

"The trail is a loop," I say. "They'll end up here eventually."

She snorts. "You're a terrible outdoor guide."

"I have other talents," I tease, enjoying her exaggerated eye roll.

"I wasn't sure if we were going to be, you know, *ourselves* today," she says hesitantly.

"You mean obsessed with food and hockey? That's not changing any time soon, Baby Brie."

"Are you going to make me spell it out, Dex?" she asks. "When we talked about *making a mistake*, I thought it was for just one night. But this morning . . ."

I pull her to the next tree because she needs to hear me. Really hear me. Her back to the trunk, I engulf her in my arms and indulge in a nuzzle against her neck.

"You think you can stop after one night? I know for a fact I can't."

Instead of agreeing with me, she averts her gaze and changes the subject. "I talked to my mom today. Before I went downstairs."

"Did something bad happen?" I hope not. The last thing her parents need is more struggles.

"No, nothing like that. Let's talk about it after Christmas. It's not an emergency or anything." She's down to a whisper. Not a good sign.

"You've got me worried. Talk to me. Whatever the issue is, I'm here for you. We'll figure things out together."

"God, Dex, seriously? Why are you so damn helpful and considerate all the time?" Her eyes are wide and her cheeks flushed. "I thought you were an

amazing friend. It turns out you're a perfect husband, too! What the fuck?"

"You hear yourself, right?" I laugh and she joins me. I see the moment Sabrina decides to confide in me.

"She was super excited about news she got from the lawyer. There's been a shift in the defense's strategy. They've been playing hardball but reached out for a meeting after Christmas. It's a good sign that a reasonable settlement is around the corner."

"That's awesome, right?"

"Is it? Why did we go through everything if the resolution was around the corner?"

"What are you talking about?"

"This. Everything you're doing for me. All the risks and the lying and the pretense. How could I make you do so much for me when what I should have done was wait a little longer? The payout would cover all my medical bills."

"Are you telling me that if the settlement came, you wouldn't have . . ." I can't even say it.

"Why would I force you to marry me?"

"Force me?"

Is she kidding right now? I bite my tongue because I'm liable to say something loud and crass.

"You could be with anybody," she mumbles. "My injuries and the uncertainty of my health and career, you shouldn't have to worry about that. I dragged you into this and I shouldn't have."

"No one dragged me into anything. You couldn't be more wrong."

"You say that because you're a good man."

I press our bodies together, her softness pliant between my heavy groin and the tree trunk. "Would a good man put you on your knees and fuck you till you can't think straight?"

I sound like an asshole, but I don't care, because I'm getting upset. For some reason, I want her to be just as pissed. This conversation is so wrong, I'd rather have a fight.

Instead of matching my vehemence, Sabrina's eyes soften when she says, "Yes, Dex. Even when you put me on my knees and fuck me so hot my brain cells get fried, you're somehow still thinking about me. Caring about me. So damn good to me." Her voice trails off.

I barely hear her say, "*Too good for me.*"

I've had enough. I release her from my embrace in order to send a group text: **Sabrina and I are heading back now. Feel free to take a couple of turns.**

"Let's go," I exclaim, grabbing her hand.

She pulls back, surprised and unsure. "But they're waiting for us. Dex! Your family is—"

I reach down and sweep her into the cradle of my arms. Her squeal is adorable, but I cut it short with a wet, hungry kiss. She clings to my neck, our tongues entangled and mouths crushed.

When we come up for air, I state, "You are either walking back with me so we can talk about this privately, or I'm going to carry you all the way home so we can talk about this privately. What's it going to be?"

"I'll, um, I'll walk."

I put her down. Grabbing her hand, we set a brisk pace. We're both so heated from the kiss, the exertion, and the urgency, thick white mist follows us all the way home.

I lead her into our bedroom and point to the bed. "Wait here."

"But—"

"You expect me to eat your pussy every time I ask you to do something for me, Baby Brie? Because I'm totally fine with that."

"Dex!"

"Wait. Here." I leave to gather everything I need.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sabrina

I wait. My head is spinning and my heart is pounding but I wait. I've never seen him so determined. That's saying a lot. Few people are as controlled and resolute as Dexter Whitby.

He comes in with a folder, which he puts on the nightstand. Dex sits beside me and holds my hand.

"The fireplace downstairs. You noticed it right away. Why?"

Huh? I'm about to quibble about his question because what does a fireplace have to do with this urgent and important conversation? However, the seriousness of his expression stops me from complaining. I answer instead.

"Aside from the fact that it's gorgeous?" I sigh, deciding to elaborate. "Remember when we played in the finals at Denver? Sixth grade, I think. There was a fireplace in the hotel we were staying at. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"I do. In fact, I remember exactly what you said: *If I ever have a fireplace like that at home, I'll make smores every day.*"

"I did not say that!"

"You absolutely did." His grin stuns me. "Watching you sit in front of the fire with a book and a cup of tea is a major highlight of my day."

"What's your point?" I ask lightly. "That you have really boring days or that you thought about me when you bought the house?"

He lifts a brow in a wordless *what do you think*. My mouth gapes open because that can't be right.

Dex continues his mysterious line of questioning. "Whenever we vacation together in the summer, what's your favorite place to eat at?"

"For real, Dex? I'm freaking out about your family wondering where we are. I'm anxious about how the future will pan out. You, however, decide to quiz me about our vacations."

"Answer me."

“I don’t know. Anything with a view outdoors. Preferably a brewery with a patio.”

He smirks, handsome and smug. “I rushed to build the patio when I first bought the house, right at the beginning of fall. I wanted you to have it on the first sunny day next year.”

“What?” I rasp. My breathing turns shallow and my eyes prickle. “You are not making sense, Dex. Why would you do that?”

He opens the folder and shows me a document dated in October, weeks after my surgery and around the time he—

“You bought the house around the time we talked about . . . about getting married. You came to Buffalo and spent two days convincing me and my parents that marrying you was the only solution.”

He nods. “After my first visit in the hospital, a few days after the accident, I called a realtor to help me find a place. Nothing was fully planned in my head, but I knew that if you gave me a chance to take care of you, I couldn’t do it in a high-rise building. You’d fucking hate not having a backyard.”

“Dex.” It’s the only sound I can make as I choke on emotion and awe.

“The second I saw this place, I saw us here together.”

I’m shaking my head because it’s too much to take in. He got this place for us? Even before there *was* an us?

“I can’t wrap my mind around what you’re saying. We said one year. I’d get the necessary medical care and then we would split up.” Even as those last two words leave my mouth, they sound so wrong.

He shrugs. “I never said that, Sabrina. You did. For some reason, you required an end date, so I went with it. If I couldn’t convince you to stay after one freaking year, I didn’t deserve you.”

My body moves before my mind catches up. I throw myself at him to kiss his perfect mouth. “Don’t you ever say that, Dexter Whitby. Don’t you ever say you don’t deserve something or someone. You deserve the world.”

He buries his nose in my hair before planting a kiss on my forehead. “You always do that.”

“Excuse me, I don’t think so!” I exclaim, suddenly self-conscious. “I never threw myself at you. Well, till recently.”

A chuckle, low and sexy, accompanies his words. “I mean whenever I doubted myself, all these years, you always said some version of that. Jumped at every chance to provide confidence when I needed it. Made me

feel seen as a person and not only as a hockey player. You've always been there for me, Baby Brie."

My heart is in a vise and my nose is prickling. I can't decide if I want to cry or swoon or jump up and down. Maybe all three at once.

This man has always been the most amazing person. It turns out—I can now admit wholeheartedly—he's also the person I love the most.

"You are my everything," he says with searing blue eyes. "When I thought I was going to lose you to that accident, I realized how much you've always meant to me. More than a friend. More than anyone. All that mattered was keeping you near. I knew in my heart I didn't want this life if you're not in it."

"But Dex, why didn't you just say that?"

"Would you have heard me? You were too busy worrying about everyone else and too shaken by the situation," he explains. "I was willing to be whatever you needed. At the time, you needed a fake husband."

"Instead of telling me how you feel, you married me. That's some strategy." I chuckle at the delightful weirdness of it. "Was last night part of the plan?"

"I'll remind you I wasn't the one wearing a red fuck-me outfit."

"Excuse me, it's called a teddy! Or maybe a baby doll? I can't remember."

His features soften with affection. "I honestly didn't expect anything last night. Just wanted to take care of you, Sabrina. Figured everything would fall into place once we spent time together. Because it's always been you."

I swoon without restraint. "I'm glad it didn't take us all year to figure things out. Last night wasn't planned, but it was perfect."

He hauls me over his lap so I'm straddling him, my hips rubbing against his thick erection. Large hands grab my ass and squeeze hard. "I'm a patient man, but no saint. There's no way you were going to keep flashing this fine ass and expect me to stay away."

"I'm happy you didn't stay away."

The guests enter the house, making a ruckus so as not to catch us by surprise. I scramble to go downstairs. However, Dex holds my hand and puts a blue box in my palm. The Cartier logo at the top is partially hidden by a small bow.

"I never got you a typical diamond engagement ring. I'm hoping this will make up for it." There's a hint of uncertainty that I want to appease.

“An engagement ring? You kissed me in that courtroom, and I don’t think I would have noticed a ring one way or another.”

“I wasn’t going to pass up the chance to kiss you for the first time. Gotta impress my wife.”

“Is that what you were doing?”

“It’s what I’m always doing. Now open your Christmas gift so you can be impressed already!”

With shaky hands, I open the box. The diamonds on a tennis bracelet sparkle.

“Oh, Dex, it’s beautiful. Thank you. It’s the most amazing thing anyone has ever given me,” I gush. And then add, “Except for a beautiful home with a fireplace and patio. This is definitely a close second.”

He laughs and runs a finger over the back of my hand, urging me to wear his gift. He secures the elegant bracelet around my wrist.

I notice a detail. “What’s this?”

“I had the clasp custom made.”

“Two connecting hockey sticks? Oh my god, that’s incredible!”

Just when I thought the moment couldn’t get better, Dex falls on one knee.

“What are you doing?”

“Proposing to my wife.” His smile is wide and his eyes are sparkling. “Sabrina Ramirez Whitby, I love you. Will you marry me, knowing I want to spend the rest of my life with you?”

I fall on my knees in front of him and grab his hands so we’re linked.

“Yes, Dexter Whitby. I love you so much. I would marry you every day for the rest of my life.” I scoot closer to wrap my arms around his neck. “I’m yours forever.”

We share a hot, greedy kiss. When we finally part to catch our breaths, Dex speaks with his mouth still against mine.

“I’m yours too. It’s always been you, Baby Brie.”

THE END

Thank you for reading my snack of a story! Although [Winning Goal](#) is a short novella, I hope you found it emotionally satisfying and delightfully spicy.

With friendship as the foundation of their love, Sabrina and Dexter embraced a future together. I loved writing their angst-filled attraction. Sabrina deserved to feel beautiful and desired when so much of her body felt vulnerable as it healed. And Dexter was the perfect gentleman . . . until he wasn't. (In case you haven't noticed, I'm partial to the filthy talking golden retriever vibe).

[Please leave a review if you enjoyed their HEA.](#) Your feedback means the world to me!

Unlike traditional titles promoted by big publishing companies, indie authors like me can only reach new readers through your recommendations. Your ratings and reviews are essential. Word of mouth makes the biggest difference to ensure our community thrives. Thank you!

ABOUT THE *Author*

In Laura's books, the fall is hard, the steam is blinding, the groveling is glorious, and the passion all-consuming. For a list of her titles click here: <https://linktr.ee/romancinglauramd>

Winning Goal is part of [The Columbus Mavericks](#) series of interconnected hockey romances. Each standalone book features a diverse cast of irresistible heartthrobs and the audacious women they love fiercely. Get ready for uniquely satisfying happily-ever-afters in each book, although favorite characters have great cameos throughout the series.

For more witty banter and heartwarming emotion, check out my adventure-filled novellas. [Destination Love](#) has it all: naughty and nice, swoony and serious, laughter and love. Most of all, it delivers passionate heat to keep readers coming back for more.

Grab the first of the series for free!

[Swim & Slay](#) is an enemies-to-lovers, forced-proximity, banter-filled shenanigan of a rom-com sure to set your e-reader on fire. You'll get the novella for free and receive Laura's newsletter, where you'll find early updates on new releases, sneak peeks, bonus chapters, exclusive sales, and more.

Here are other ways to connect with Laura:

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Ready for a spicy sneak peek of other Mavericks hockey standalone novels?
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BREAK *Away*

He's only got one shot.

Laura Marquez Diamond

Lance

I'm surprised to get a text from Gordon Tomskey, first rate defenseman and party animal.

Unsurprisingly, he's out with a couple of other teammates. Few things are as satisfying as winning a game and heading to your town's bar where, as clichés would have it, everyone knows your name. Adrenaline is usually spiked after playing hockey. I've learned to channel it in ways that don't involve the temptation of women throwing themselves at me.

After the game, I had gotten into my suit, blazed through the screaming fans and eager puck bunnies, and dove into my car. While driving home, I compulsively scanned around the arena and my condo building. The only thing worse than Xavier showing up at my game is me not knowing why.

Instead of my past, however, it's the present that demands my attention. The text from Gordon reads: **Hanging out with your girls. You should come out and meet us at Lexi's.**

I know he means the dance club down the street from the arena. Although, what does he mean, *my girls*? Gordon clarifies the message by adding a group picture of him, Sergei, and Sean with Cassie and her three friends.

I do a double take. The last time I saw Cassie an hour ago, she was in a hoodie with her hair in a ponytail. Now? Her hair is seductively slung over one shoulder and her top is so low, I don't think it's legal. Or it shouldn't be. I had felt the fullness of her breasts when she lay on top of me, but I never *looked* at them. Fuck, they're glorious to look at.

Sergei has his arm around her waist, the Russian grinning down at her instead of looking at the camera. It's that predatory grin that launches me off my couch to get dressed and run out the door.

I don't text Cassie until I'm in the dance club. No need to talk to anyone else. I'm here because these guys are going to assume she's a puck bunny, dressed as she is. Hockey players like Sergei go home with a different girl nearly every night we're on the road. She might not thank me for looking out for her, but her brothers will. I'm simply doing what they would do if they were here.

Where are you? I text her. The place is packed and it's getting harder to walk through the crowd as more people recognize me.

Little Cassie: **Why?**

Me: I'm at the club.

I see the dots come and go. Straining my tall frame, I attempt to single out any of my teammates. I check my phone and Cassie still hasn't answered. *What the hell?!*

Making my way deeper into the club, I see a crowd gathering by a corner. Gordon's laugh booms over the music and I plow onward. When I reach their group, cheers erupt. I'm not fool enough to think they're particularly happy to see me. They're merely surprised because I never go out.

"I can't believe that worked!" Gordon says, clapping my back.

"I told you." It's Cassie's neighbor, Sadie, who I recognize because whose hair is that long?

"Where's Cassie?" I ask impatiently.

"She was here a second ago," Sean says, a girl splayed over his lap.

"On the dance floor," Sadie says with a sly grin. "I'll take you to Cassie if you promise to dance with her, Lance Jefferson."

"Sure, yeah, whatever," I say absentmindedly. The sooner I convince Little Cassie to leave, the better.

Sadie grabs my hand to lead me to a mosh pit. I see Sergei first because he's tall and burly. His hands are firmly clutching Cassie's waist, fingers spread so he's brushing the top of her full, round ass. I look away from her swirling hips encased in another man's grip. Releasing Sadie's hand, I storm over.

"Hey, man, watch it," I hiss.

Sergei looks dazed for a second before he registers who I am. "Hey, Lance. Shit, I can't believe you're out to party!" He gives me a pat on the back. I shrug off the contact. I'll deal with him later.

I turn to Cassie, set to explain exactly why dancing with a playboy Russian goon is a bad idea. Instead, I stall because...

"Cassie?" I croak. The woman looking at me has none of the amiable smile or glowing innocence of the girl I watched grow up. Her top is, indeed, ridiculously low, showing way more of her bouncing breasts than any man should be allowed to see. Me included.

That's not where my eyes stray, however. It's her face that captivates me. It's framed by tousled brown hair, her brows and lashes starkly black, her perky nose lifted, that red mouth shaped like the sexiest damn pout that ever pouted.

"Let's go," I say, cupping her elbow.

She pulls her head back like she's avoiding a hit. "Excuse me?"

I'm not ready for it. I'm utterly unprepared for the way she pushes her chest out and lifts her chin when she says those words with derision. I meant to rescue sweet Little Cassie and am instead faced with fury. She's no longer pretty. No, she's much worse.

Cassandra Atwood's green eyes are practically glowing with rage, and it is sexy as fuck.

"This isn't you, Cassie," I lean over to say.

My lips are by her ear in order to be heard over the music. I get a whiff of her subtle perfume and watch as she shivers slightly. It's that shiver that bolsters my need to protect. I take a step closer and place a hand on her hip. The soft curve against my palm feels too good.

Instead of allowing herself to be led away from this busy dance floor and a groping hockey player—I mean Sergei, obviously—Cassie pushes against my chest. I stumble back, not because it was a hard shove, but because I'm puzzled by her reaction.

"Who do you think you are, telling me what to do?" she strains over the music. "This is me," she huffs before turning around and storming away.

"Fuck man, what's your problem?" Sergei gripes, taking a step in her direction.

I don't have much sway over Little Cassie, yet I'm still the team's second-in-command as the alternate captain. I grab Sergei's arm and muscle him to face me. People are staring and I see the split second he decides not to make a scene.

"I need to talk to you," I state.

He gives one look in Cassie's direction before mumbling, "Sure. I'll catch her later."

My fist is wound so tight, I might snap a ligament. We walk to the other end where there's a stretch of hallway past the bathrooms. We still have to raise our voices to be heard. At least here a conversation is possible.

"Well?" he asks, looking nearly as pissed as I feel. "You never hang out with us, but you think you can tell everyone what to do? Fuck, Lance, there better be a good reason for scaring off that hot chick."

"That hot chick is not a puck bunny."

"I never said Cassie was a puck bunny."

The sound of her name coming from Sergei makes me cringe. "I know for a fact she has a boyfriend. He's an asshole so it's not gonna work out—"

“Yeah, yeah,” he interrupts. “She broke up with him, man. That’s why she’s out partying with her friends.”

“Oh,” I say stupidly, processing multiple reactions.

First, good for her. That Simon guy was a piece of shit. Second, the guy in front of me isn’t much better. He’s a stellar hockey player, but it comes to treating women right, he’s also a piece of shit. Lastly, I’m left with a bitter taste in my mouth. This guy knows Cassie is single before I do? That’s ridiculous. I’m practically family.

“Just do me a favor, OK? She’s off-limits. We grew up together because she’s my best friend’s baby sister. This isn’t who she is... picking up hockey players for a one-night stand.”

“Who says I want a one-night stand?”

“Fuck off, Sergei. No one got amnesia between now and the last time you went out.”

“You think I’m stupid enough to have a one-night stand in a city I live in? That’s what road games are for, man.” He shakes his head before donning a wolfish grin. “Besides, she’s awesome. I gave her my number.”

“Suddenly you’re dating material?” I huff my disbelief. “You’re full of shit.”

“I don’t need this. Go play daddy somewhere else. I’m finding Cassie.”

He pushes past me, about to storm off, when I blurt out, “She’s a kid.”

“What do you mean? She’s in her twenties.”

“I mean, like, *mentally*. She’s sheltered and young and... and innocent,” I say. And because I’m desperate, I bend the truth. “Cassie doesn’t even have a job.”

“She told me that she’s running a business. I asked what she does for a living.”

“She makes crafts, man. That’s not a job.”

“What?”

“Crafts. Like what kids do.”

His eyes flick over my shoulder and I know, I just fucking *know*, I fucked up. By the time I whip around, Cassie’s fleeting form is swallowed by the crowd.

Cassie

“I’m sorry, Cassie. Please call me back. *Please*. Fuck, I’m so sorry.”

Changed for bed, I listen to the third message Lance has left on my voicemail. He started leaving messages after his dozen texts went unanswered.

I kept my phone off as Stephanie drove us back to Cincinnati. My girls were set to grab food at the deli near the university. I begged to be dropped off first. Without getting into details, they knew I was upset when we left the club.

Upset barely covers it. I’m humiliated. Angry. Hurt. I never imagined Lance was capable of cruelty. Oblivious to my infatuation when he joined my brothers to tease me, sure. I never thought he saw me in an infantile way. And to say it out loud to a stranger? He might as well have punched me, for how my stomach twisted and my heart stopped.

I’ll never look at him again without hearing his ruthless insult of me and my passion.

Crafts. Like what kids do.

“Cassie!” A deep voice carries from beyond the apartment door. Three thumps on the door follow. “It’s Lance. Open up.”

I stand and walk towards the sound, hardly believing the gall of this asshole, showing up here and demanding to be let in.

“Go away, Lance.” I look into my peephole to find his chest wrapped in a perfectly tailored button-down. He came straight from the club. Everything about him is polished perfection from the neck down. His face, however, is contorted in worry.

“No,” he bellows, eyes glowering into the peephole like he knows I’m right there. “Open up and let me in, Cassie,” he urges more gently.

“You’ll wake the neighbors, be quiet!” I say by the door.

“Sadie’s the one who let me in. Open up.”

I’m going to kill Sadie. She’s been teasing me about Lance since she met him. It was her bright idea to send him a picture of the gang, promising Gordon it would get Lance running to the club in no time. She was right in all the wrong ways.

The last thing I needed tonight was Lance reminding me I’m not desirable as a woman. That I’m not even a woman! I’m a kid?! *Mentally* a kid?! What

the hell does that even mean? I know I've lived a privileged life, but *sheltered* and *innocent* aren't accurate, not when I've been supporting myself and my business for years.

I wasn't going to sleep with Sergei. Still, it felt good to be wanted. Not that any of it matters. After what he heard, I'm sure he deleted my number the same time I deleted his.

"I swear, Cassie, I'm going to break this door. I'll buy you another one tomorrow. But this door is opening, you hear me?"

"Fuck you, Lance."

He's quiet. I know he's still there. His presence is a magnetic field that affects me whether or not there's a door between us. I hear voices. No need to check to know it's the sound of Sadie's betrayal.

The lock turns before Lance bursts in.

"What the hell, Sadie!" I scream as she ducks into her apartment. I cannot believe she just handed him her key to my place. She's never getting it back, the traitor.

"Don't be mad at her," he says, closing the door behind him.

"Why? Because you said so? Because you know everything about me, you jerk?!" I ignore the tingling behind my eyes and stomp towards him, ready to open the door and throw him out.

I'm so discombobulated, I stumble when reaching for the doorknob. In a beat, his arms wrap around me. Lance hugs me so tightly, I'm lifted. He buries his face deep in my hair, his words muffled.

"I didn't mean it, Little Cassie. I didn't mean it at all. Please believe me. I'm sorry I said what I said, but I didn't mean it." Anguish makes him sound shaky in a way I've never heard before.

"Let me down." I push weakly, even if it's the last thing I want. I'm enveloped in Lance's warmth, his breath against my ear and his arms the perfect cocoon. He smells amazing, with the hint of manly sweat under sandalwood spice. I don't want our embrace to end.

Still, my pride won't let me forget. "I said let me down."

He gently restores my feet to the ground. Instead of backing away, his hands cradle my chin to tilt it up. Lance's brown eyes are nearly black, those perfectly shaped lips slightly open as if he's as breathless as I am.

"That's not what I think about your business and your talent and your dreams. The fact that you're launching something you're passionate about—that's remarkable. I said it because those guys, they don't deserve to know

you that way, OK? They hook up with a different woman every other night.”

“What do you care if they hook up with me? I’m not a woman, is that it? Here’s a newsflash, Lance Harper Jefferson,” I state, full of bravado. I straighten my back and wiggle out of his hold.

Gripping my hips like a daytime television diva, I exclaim, “I am a grown woman who can make my own decisions. Which means *I* can sleep with a different hockey player every other night if I want to.”

“That’s enough, Cassie.” His voice has lowered to a feral-sounding growl. It riles me up more.

“Sergei treats me like a woman,” I say more intently. “I like it, you know. Feeling how much a man wants me.”

He looks tortured and furious. “I said *enough*.”

“That’s not what Sergei said.”

I can’t believe what’s coming out of my mouth. I’ve sobered up since the club, yet the night continues its surreal quality, turning me into someone who *wants* conflict. Craves it. I’m desperate to discard the lingering hurt of being treated like a child.

“Shut up, Cassie,” he growls. “You don’t want a guy like Sergei.”

And there it is: Lance shutting me up like I’m a kid who doesn’t know what she wants. I’m not a kid. At the moment, I’m *obsessed* with proving it to this man.

“You’re right, Lance. It isn’t Sergei I want,” I pause, letting the words sink in. “It isn’t Sergei I dream about, is it?” My voice has a raspy quality I’d never had before.

His eyes narrow, his breath shallow when he states gruffly, “No, it isn’t.”

We’re both referring to the morning I woke up grinding on him. Lance searches my face like there’s a secret only he can unveil.

“You dream of *me*, don’t you, Little Cassie?”

That nickname again! I want to wipe it from the face of the earth. I shove him back so his butt hits the closed door. Then I step in and wrap my arms around his neck, pressing myself against his granite chest.

“There’s nothing little about me, Lance.”

I’ve noticed the way he glances at my breasts. I thought I had imagined it, but Lance’s stiff erection confirms he isn’t unaffected.

Who you calling a kid now, hotshot?

“You’ve made your point,” he mutters through gritted teeth.

“Have I? I don’t think so. There’s so much more I can do to prove my

point.” My voice deepens when I go on tiptoe and lean into his neck, my lips brushing the pounding pulse. “What did you call me, Lance? Innocent? Do you want me to show you all the ways I’m not an innocent little girl anymore?”

In a flash, Lance spins me around. I’m lifted and pressed against the door, his groin cradled in the wetness barely contained by my tiny sleep shorts.

“You’ve made your point loud and clear, Cassie. You’re a woman who’s determined to drive me crazy. A woman who makes me so fucking thirsty for your pussy, I can’t think straight. Now shut. The fuck. Up.”

“Make me,” I say before pulling his head down to crash our mouths together.

Lance

At first, I'm too surprised to stop the kiss. But when our tongues tangle with sweeping intensity, there's no fooling anyone. I'm kissing Cassie as hard as she's kissing me.

Her body is so goddamn soft and her spirit so fierce. Sweet honey is on her breath as she bites my lower lip. Helpless moans and assertive hands. I'm drowning in pleasure, yet greedier than I've ever been for a woman. Logic evacuates my brain when her legs wrap around my hips.

More. I want more. My hands are everywhere as we kiss. I'm grabbing Cassie's ass and moving up her ribcage. When a thumb brushes against a hard nipple, I pull back. I watch, mesmerized, as my large paws wrap around two perfect breasts that spill out of her tank top. She's still pinned to the door, entirely by my groin. My hands greedily knead her fullness, tweak her nipples. She pushes her tits out, pressing her palms against the door to arch her back. *More. I want more.*

"Tell me to stop, Cassie," I say, watching her jaw slacken as her mouth opens in a silent scream. "Dammit, tell me to stop."

"No. Don't stop. Never stop." She mumbles like she's just as intoxicated as I am. I'm alarmed at the possibility that she's drunk. When I stall, her eyes widen and hurt floods her features. I have to be sure.

"Were you drinking tonight?" I ask. "I'm not judging. It's just, this isn't something you would do if you were sober, right?"

"For god's sake, Lance. No, I'm not drunk. Could you be more clueless? I've been wanting to do this since I've figured out what *this* is."

I'm not sure what to do with that, so I hold her hand and walk to the sofa. "Can we talk, Cassie?"

"Sure," she snaps. "But if you say Little Cassie again, I'm never speaking to you."

I chuckle at her vehemence. "I won't. If I knew you were insulted every time I said it, I wouldn't have started. It's a habit from William and Theo."

"They're my brothers," she states with impatience. We sit and she turns to me, her bosom heaving. "You're not my brother. You've never been that for me."

Her eyes are glassy yet focused. I'm obsessed with her lips, moist and swollen from our kiss. I give her mouth a light brush with my thumb. She

smiles and traps my thumb between her wet lips before sucking it till her cheeks hollow. I pull away and stand. Thinking about her mouth wrapped around any part of me is torture.

“You are a grown woman, Cassie. I can’t believe I was clueless enough to make you think otherwise. You and me, though? Even kissing has gone too far.”

“Relax, Lance. Making out doesn’t have to mean anything. I recently ended a relationship, so I’m not looking for anything serious. Still, I’d be lying if I said I haven’t imagined being with you. A lot.”

I’m shaking my head, exasperated by my desperation. Hearing her obsession with me should repel me. Women’s desperate pleas for my attention usually do. Instead, I’m unbelievably aroused.

I want to grant my best friend’s little sister all the wishes she’d had about me. I want to *exceed* the unspeakable fantasies she’d harbored for years, like I’m competing with *myself*. It’s a dangerous notion.

“I shouldn’t be touching you, Cassie.” The words feel like eating glass. I turn away from her. Everything hurts, but I turn away from her.

Then, she says the last thing I expect. “Since you can’t touch me, Lance, watch me touch myself.”

I whip back to stare at her fingers, lazily grazing across the sliver of skin separating her tank top and sleep shorts. I should stop this. Now. I should stop this *now*. What do I do instead? I open my goddamn mouth.

“I shouldn’t want to watch you, should I?” I rasp. “But I’m dying to see how wet you are for me.”

Her breasts heave, quivering beautifully. She crosses her arms and tugs up, whipping the fabric off. Fucking hell, my imagination wasn’t even close. She’s pear shaped and heavy, dusty-pink nipples puckered to alertness. Cassie caresses her breasts, lifting them up, squeezing them the way I want to.

I can’t help it. I stroke my erection and growl with lust. She stares hungrily at my stiff rod.

“If I have to show you how wet I am, you have to show me how hard you are,” she murmurs.

“I don’t have to do a goddamn thing except make you come.” I grunt like a feral animal. “You need that, don’t you? Need me to tell you what to do to take the edge off. Need to know how I’d fuck you with my hand if I was allowed to touch you.”

“Oh god, yes,” she sighs and wiggles out of shorts and underwear. Once naked, Cassie crosses her arms around her stomach.

“No covering yourself up now, baby.”

“I probably don’t look like the women you’re usually with.”

“Trust me, there’s only one beautiful woman I’m thinking about. That’s you, Cassie. You’re all I see.”

I loom over her naked beauty. “I’m going to tell you what to do with that perfect pussy. And for the first time this goddamn night, you’re going to do what you’re told. Lie down.”

She lies down and opens her knees.

“That’s it. Stroke yourself nice and easy. Yes, just like that. So wet, so ready for me.”

“Yes, I am. Oh my god, Lance,” she’s panting, her hand shaking with the need to thrust. “I need to—”

“Shh, baby. Not yet. Use your knuckles and rub that eager clit. Yeah. You’re so fucking hot. I want you so bad, Cassie. You have no idea.”

“Show me.”

“This isn’t about me. Use your other hand to open those lips. Aw fuck, yes. Two fingers, up and down. Yeah, that’s incredible. I can see your cunt clenching. Ride your hand now. Right fucking now, baby.”

She impales herself while swirling her wrist. Cassie is a living, panting wet dream. Her back arches and her moans fill the room, blending with the sound of her wet pussy assaulted by an eager hand.

“You’re so beautiful. Cassie, just like that. Now press the heel of your hand on your clit.”

“Oh, oh,” she sighs. “I’m so close, Lance.”

“Baby, yes. Come for me.”

And then she stops. Opens her eyes. Removes her hand. And shivers like an icy wind descended into the room.

“No,” she says. “I was close, but no. I’m not coming without you.”

Is she fucking kidding me? “What the hell, Cassie.”

“If this is the only time we’re ever intimate, even if you won’t touch me, I want to see all of you, Lance. Please.”

“Need to see how fucking hard I am for you?” I can’t breathe. I’ve never been more aroused, more enraged, more pained. “What if I don’t?”

“I won’t come,” she says stubbornly. “If you don’t trust me with your pleasure, I won’t trust you with mine.”

Before I know it, I'm roughly removing my belt and tugging at my pants and boxers. My cock is excruciatingly stiff, veins snaking along its thickness. When my arousal is in full display, her eyes droop lower and her hand moves back to her cunt.

I begin the slow, firm pumps that will lead to the inevitable unraveling of my body. She might be the one lying down, yet Cassie is ruling over me. The movement of her hand determines the stroking of my grip. She swirls her hips, groans relentlessly, and watches my arousal twitch in response.

"You're incredible," she whispers. "How are you more incredible in reality than in my dreams?" she slurs like she's drunk.

"I'm gonna start choking my dick real hard and fast, baby. I want to see your gorgeous tits bounce as you shove your pussy down your fingers. Do it."

Her body moves perfectly, wiggling erotically.

I'm close. Lava surges down my spine. "You with me, Cassie?" I push through gritted teeth.

Her answer, "Yes, yes, I'm there," is followed by a hitched breath and a choked scream. She crunches up repeatedly, as if electric surges are in her veins.

I let go. Long white ribbons lurch in the air and drop on her stomach, her breasts, her hair. I'm wreaking havoc as my climax keeps going. When one streak lands on her lips, Cassie sticks her tongue out to lick it into her mouth. She smiles and hums like she's enjoying dessert.

Once my orgasm abates, reality punches me in the gut. I'm struck by inconvenient yet indisputable truths:

1. My best friend's baby sister has my cum smeared all over her body.
2. Cassie's breasts will make me hard for the rest of my life.
3. She's too good to get dragged into the dumpster fire of my existence.
4. It's going to kill me to stay away.
5. See number 1, an image etched in my brain till the day I die.

Did you enjoy this excerpt? The entire Mavericks hockey series is full of passion, on and off the ice. Follow me for all the updates on this series and other standalones in the works.