



Defending

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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



DEFENDING

A Fresh Start Hockey Romance

PORTLAND ICEHAWKS #2

JAMI DAVENPORT

CONTENTS

Prologue

1. Mr. Gorgeous
2. Will you go out with me?
3. New Path
4. Struggles
5. In Common
6. Creepy Guy
7. Chances
8. Burner Phone
9. Penalty
10. Dropping the Puck
11. Goodbye, Captain?
12. My Hot Hockey Player
13. Hot Buttered Rum
14. Intentions
15. Happy Holidays
16. Heat
17. Another Gone Missing
18. Something Big
19. Best Game
20. Where are You?
21. Your Sister
22. The Truth Hurts
23. Ashes
24. No Clues
25. Monkey Suit Madness
26. More Pressing Matters
27. The Closet
28. Bidding Wars
29. Clock Strikes Midnight

30. [Throwing Punches](#)

31. [Waiting for You](#)

32. [Silly Girl](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Complete Booklist](#)

[About the Author](#)

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.....
BLURB
.....

Much to my utter dismay, the Portland Icehawks chose me in the expansion draft, and now my estranged father is my hockey coach. No one on the team knows he's my dad. They think he's a distant relative I don't get along with. They're right about that last part. We hate each other. He blames me for the death of my sister, and I blame myself, too. He's unfairly targeted me, and his constant criticism is destroying my confidence and my game.

The only thing I look forward to is my time working with the underprivileged, especially with one feisty, attractive female, but neither of us do relationships because those require trust and commitment, and we're too scarred to take the risk.

Can we conquer our demons so I can rescue her from the streets, and she can rescue me from my past before we're beyond saving?

To all you true-crime junkies like me. I hope you enjoy my subplot!

If you're an avid reader of my books, you know about my obsession with true crime. Every once in a while, I have to feed that obsession in my books. The first three books in the Icehawks series are doing just that. I hope you enjoy *Defending Briggs and Michella's* story comes next.

PROLOGUE

First Day of Icehawks Training Camp

~~Grady~~

I'd been dreading this moment ever since the Portland Icehawks chose me in the expansion draft. There was no more avoiding it. The moment of reckoning had come.

I walked into the spacious Icehawks locker room and searched for my name and number on one of the stalls. I found it halfway around the room and headed that way, nodding to a few guys I was familiar with. For the most part, the majority of the men seated in this room were strangers to me, other than a cursory knowledge of their careers and stats.

I slumped onto the bench seat in front of my locker, attempting to be as inconspicuous as possible while taking a measure of my surroundings. Rather than the loud, raucous locker rooms I'd been in over the years, this one was strangely quiet. Guys talked in hushed tones and weren't gathering in groups to catch up after a long summer.

Surreptitiously, I surveyed my surroundings. The entire facility was brand new and first class. Our practice jerseys were spiffy and bore the Icehawks logo in the center in either white or black. A white one hung in my locker.

I glanced at the guy next to me and did a double take. At twenty-eight, Briggs Pierce was a legend in this league and one of my personal heroes. He'd run into trouble the last couple years, which had him moving from team to team. I didn't know why, and I didn't care to ask.

“Hey, I’m Grady, and you’re Briggs. I’m really honored to meet you. You’re a legend.” I was gushing like a fangirl and hated myself for it, but this guy was one of the best defensemen around. I held out my hand to shake with him.

He turned his icy gaze toward me. His expression tightened to one of hostility combined with disdain. He glanced at my outstretched hand and back to my face. After grunting something unintelligible, he turned away, effectively dismissing me. I quickly withdrew my hand and felt the heat of embarrassment rising from my neck.

Not knowing what to do next, I shifted my attention to the guy on the other side of me. He met my stare with a wide, welcoming grin.

“I’m Jarrett.” He thrust out his hand, and I gladly shook it.

“Grady,” I said.

Jarrett beamed and leaned forward to whisper conspiratorially. “Don’t take Briggs personally. He doesn’t want to be here, and he’s making his displeasure known.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” I muttered sarcastically, drawing a snort of laughter from Jarrett. “Have you played with him before?”

“Nah, I only know him by his rep. He’s an ass.”

“A talented ass,” I added, deciding not to further tread onto that minefield. Briggs’s rep had been severely tarnished these last few years.

“Now that guy”—Jarrett indicated one of the veterans seated across from us—“he’s Dash Bates.” He spoke in a tone of pure reverence. He didn’t have to tell me who Dash was. Every guy here knew of him. He’d been in the league for a long time and had had some stellar years, along with awards too numerous to mention.

Jarrett continued, eager to share his dirt on our new teammates. “And that’s Drakos Lenkov. He had a disappointing year last season, which is the only reason he was exposed in the draft. Braden Slater played his entire life with his twin and now he’s here. Goalie Roman Daniels, young but

has lots of promise. Loves to party and drink vodka. Kirby Darkhorse, another outstanding defenseman. Don't let him fool you into thinking he's always serious. He has a wicked sense of humor and can play pranks on unsuspecting rookies with the best of them."

"How do you know all this shit?"

"I'm nosy."

I nodded and let him talk. He had a wealth of knowledge, though I didn't know him well enough to determine if his perceptions of our teammates were spot on or bullshit.

Before he had a chance to give me the rundown on more players, the locker room door opened, and the coaching staff filed in.

I jerked my gaze from the middle of the room, where the coaches now gathered in a line, before I made eye contact with *him*. He had to know I was on this team. Fuck, he might've even played some part in my being selected. If he had, most likely he planned on extracting some form of penance from me.

I so didn't want to be on this team. *His team*.

But my only other option was to quit hockey, and I'd be damned if I'd let that bastard take away the one thing in my life that still brought joy and light to the darkness in which I dwelled.

Instead, I grabbed my stick and concentrated on taping it carefully and with exacting precision. The head coach, Duke "Jeffs" Jefferson, began to speak, and I chanced a glance upward. I hadn't seen him this close up in years, only a few times when he'd been coaching a minor league affiliate my team happened to be playing. We'd ignored each other then, and we ignored each other now.

I half expected him to call me out for taping my stick while His Majesty was imparting wisdom to his subjects, but he didn't, proving he didn't want this confrontation to be public any more than I did.

In truth, I didn't want any kind of confrontation with him. He was my coach, and I was his player. Plain and simple. Nothing more, nothing less. Those days had long passed. The damage done was irreparable. For both our sakes, I prayed he treated me like any other player and didn't single me out for a talk. This was his first head coaching gig in the majors, and he wouldn't want to mess up by causing undue conflict with one of his players, even a rookie.

Or at least, I hoped that was the truth.

Even better, maybe I'd get my ass traded and be out of here soon. Being sent back to the minors would be better than seeing and hearing that man every day. While I was still considered a rookie, I'd been called up and played in several games during the last month of the previous season. I'd fought and scratched my way onto that team and had been a shoo-in to win a spot this year until they'd left me unprotected and allowed Portland to steal me away.

I'd be lying if I didn't admit I was still bitter toward my old team. A part of me understood this was business and nothing personal, but it still hurt to not be valuable enough to be protected. Yet my old team had left more experienced and proven players exposed, and it made no sense why the Icehawks had chosen me except for revenge.

The coach did his rah-rah stuff, and I fought to keep my stomach from turning. All this positivity, team building, and attitude crap coming out of his mouth was hypocritical. I did everything I could to keep my mouth shut. He even handed out scraps of paper for us to write our goals on, which drew a derisive snort from Briggs next to me.

Briggs had made dissenting remarks throughout the coach's speech, and I'd given a few indications I agreed, which only encouraged him.

I had an ally in my surly teammate, even if he was a dick. We had one thing in common that'd bind us together this season—we both despised our head coach.

We saw through his bullshit positivity to the real guy underneath, but I had one thing Briggs didn't have—my

tumultuous history with this man I was now forced to call *Coach*.

The man who'd once been my mentor, my biggest fan, my supporter, and never would be again.

Unknown to anyone in this room, that man was unfortunately my father.

Chapter One

.....
MR. GORGEOUS
.....

Two Months Later

~~Aspen~~

I never thought I'd be one of those starving artists. Yet here I was, worse than starving. More like destitute, one step away from being homeless, and barely scraping by. Not having a place to call my own wasn't how I'd envisioned my life, nor was dropping out of college. But then nothing had gone according to my carefully laid-out life plan.

I'd come to Portland two years ago to find my missing mother and never returned home to Seattle. Portland's weirdness fit my own corresponding quirkiness, and I liked it here. Even if I didn't, I couldn't leave the place where my mom was last seen without knowing what happened to her.

After getting off the bus, I took a shortcut through an alley and hurried past the back door of a dive bar. This place gave me the creeps, but most of the guys standing outside for a smoke were too busy drowning in their own sorrows to pay attention to me. A few made rude remarks, but thankfully none of them expended the effort to do more than that. I scurried past them, around the corner, and onto the uneven sidewalk toward the Rainbow Unicorn Studio, where I lived with the director of the Uni, as many of us fondly called it.

Desmond Hall owned or leased the decrepit building that housed the studio and lived in the apartment above. I'd met him shortly after I came to Portland two years ago. When I ran out of money, he offered his pullout couch for a minimal fee, and I'd lived here ever since. Living on a couch in this part of town wasn't my ideal choice, but I made the best of things, all

part of the sacrifices I'd made in the effort to find the person who meant more to me than anyone else in my life.

Desmond was safe. Not just because he was gay but because he was a genuinely caring and kind individual, one of those rare people in my world. I adored him.

Usually, I was attentive to my surroundings and projected a fake confidence I didn't feel. Today I had my head down, my mind occupied elsewhere by the news I'd gotten earlier in the day. I hadn't been street savvy when I'd moved to this area two years ago, but I was now, or I usually was.

A hand reached out and grabbed me, jerking me around so hard my backpack fell to the ground. I stared up into the eyes of a large, hulking man, missing most of his teeth and with the breath of a gorilla. I'd never seen him around here before, as I knew the majority of the street people.

"Where you going so fast, darlin'?"

Definitely a transplant with that Southern accent. I drew back instinctively, causing him to smirk in satisfaction.

"None of your fucking business." Gathering my courage, I glared at him and rose to my full height of five foot three. He snorted, not the least bit impressed with my show of bravado.

"My brother and I are new to town. We have a place at the Briar Hotel. You should party with us tonight."

The Briar was a run-down hotel a few blocks south, home to drug addicts, sex workers, and unfortunates struggling to make it in a tough world.

I quickly assessed this guy and suspected he worked somewhere nearby, perhaps one of the warehouses. He didn't have the look of an addict, more like an alcoholic.

"No thank you." I attempted to pull away, but he dug those dirty fingernails into my arm. I flinched from the pain.

"That wasn't a question, honey. More like an order."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

“Now that’s not very hospitable to newcomers. Show us a good time, and there’ll be something in it for you.”

“Fuck off.”

He sneered, unmoved by my tough-girl act. “Let’s go.” The man turned and began to drag me down the street. I kicked him in the shin, but to his credit he didn’t loosen his hold.

“You little bitch, you’ll pay for that.”

I opened my mouth to give him some choice words, but my protest was interrupted.

“Leave. Her. Alone.” The speaker punctuated each word with menacing precision.

The jerk and I both turned to stare at the newcomer with the darkly threatening voice. I stared up at the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen in my entire life. He wore clean jeans, a T-shirt, and an expensive leather jacket. He didn’t belong in this neighborhood and stuck out the way I would’ve at a five-thousand-dollar-a-plate charity gala.

“Let her go,” he growled and took a step toward my would-be abuser. They were almost the same height, but Mr. Gorgeous was muscular and fit, whereas the jerk was soft and weak.

He assessed his adversary for a long moment before he did as ordered and released me. Backing away, he held up his hands in surrender. “Not a problem. Just a misunderstanding. I’m outa here.”

He turned and disappeared into the darkness of the nearest alley. My savior watched him until he was gone and then swung his attention back to me. “You okay?”

I nodded, unable to speak in the presence of such exquisite male beauty. I met his gaze, and my heart did cartwheels in response. Every part of my body reacted to him despite my life having been in peril. I dragged my eyes from his and gathered my wits about me.

Slowly I began to realize the dangerous situation I'd been in only seconds ago.

"I'm fine," I said finally in a voice quavering with a delayed fear reaction. I'd come so close to being... I didn't want to think about what might've happened, briefly wondering if my mom had met the fate I'd escaped.

"Can I walk you anywhere? You shouldn't be alone in this neighborhood at night." His blue eyes were filled with concern, and I immediately knew he was one of the good guys. I wanted to fall into the safety of his arms. Such a reaction to this stranger was plain weird, and I attempted to shake it off.

"Tell me about it," I scoffed, choosing to be flippant rather than break down in tears or something equally embarrassing.

He studied me for a long moment, and I fidgeted under his intense scrutiny. I knew what he saw. Not the carefree college girl I once was, but someone who was at a low point in her life and scrabbling to get her head above water. Or did he see that? Maybe he only saw the physical, my tattered clothes, worn backpack, the holes in my coat, my lack of makeup. To him, I probably appeared to be a drug addict or sex worker.

"Thank you for your help." I made a move to extract myself from his overpowering presence.

He blinked a few times as if unable to figure me out. Or more likely, he'd never encountered someone quite like me. I got that a lot. He stepped in front of me in a move incredibly quick for one so large. "I mean it. I'll walk you to somewhere you'll be safe."

Puzzled by his almost desperate tone, I studied his expression closely. Though he hid it well, I saw a mixture of fear and sadness lurking there. What did a guy like him have to be afraid of?

"I'm going to the Rainbow Unicorn Studio, just a few blocks up the street."

His eyes opened wider as if he was surprised. "So am I."

"You are?" I sounded incredulous to my own ears. What would a guy like him be doing at the Uni?

“Yeah, I’m volunteering to help with some cleanup or something. The team has some affiliation with the place through the owner’s granddaughter or something.”

Now that made sense. *Team*. He played on Portland’s hockey team. He was a rich athlete soothing his guilty conscience by doing an hour of volunteer work with the homeless and downtrodden just to show what a good person he was. I glanced around, surprised he hadn’t brought cameras to record his good deed. I knew the type. They showed up, took some pictures with a couple of homeless people, and never came back.

“Are you helping with the cleanup, too?” he asked.

I blinked at him, surprised he mistook me for a volunteer and not a homeless person. After all, I had a backpack almost as big as I was.

He watched me closely while I battled between being honest and being snarky.

“I’m going there to paint.”

“Oh. Lead the way.” He didn’t have anything else to say after that. Instead, he walked with me to the building that housed Rainbow Unicorn. I stopped in front of what appeared to be an abandoned building, but I knew better. He didn’t and stared down quizzically at me.

“This is it.”

His brow furrowed in confusion. “This is the studio?”

“Well, it’s in the back. You have to go through a warehouse area to get to it.” The studio was in an old car parts warehouse. The front of the building had once been the sales area, while the back was divided into a few rooms and mostly had been used to store old car parts. Several of us had cleaned out one of the rooms to make a studio.

He looked skeptical but stepped forward. The main door was usually kept locked, and I was surprised it opened when he pushed on it. I followed him as he cautiously entered the dimly lit building, glancing from side to side as he progressed deeper into the gloom.

“This way.” I pointed toward the light seeping through a closed door. The door swung open and hit the wall next to it with a loud bang.

Desmond, in all his gaudy splendor, rushed from the back room. He gave me a huge hug. “Aspen, darling, where have you been, girl?”

“I had some personal business to take care of.”

Desmond’s eyes bored into mine, but he didn’t press any further. One of the things I liked most about him was that he knew when to push and when to back off. He turned to my companion and eyed him up and down. Judging by his expression, he liked what he saw. “And who is this man?”

“I’m Grady.” The guy stepped forward and held out his hand, not the least bit put off by Desmond’s perusal. He was probably used to attention, being a pro hockey player, and took it in stride.

“One of the Icehawks?”

“At your service.” Grady flashed a smile with gleaming white teeth. I briefly wondered how many of his teeth were original and how many were implanted. I knew little to nothing about hockey other than they liked to fight and usually had missing teeth.

“You’re the first one here. Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“I’d love one.”

“Follow me.” He briefly turned his attention back to me. “Aspen, check out the new paints we got today. If you could unpack them?”

I nodded but didn’t move. Instead, I watched Grady and Desmond walk off together. My eyes fell to Grady’s ass, clad in a pair of faded jeans. I don’t believe I’d ever seen a finer ass anywhere on a man.

“I can’t blame you for staring. I’d give him anything he wanted for free.”

I jumped at the sound of Heidi's voice and cringed inwardly at being caught gawking. Heidi was the first friend I'd made in this town when I'd come here a few years ago to look for my mother. She'd recently left her abusive pimp boyfriend and gone solo, advertising online to pick up customers. I worried about her, but she insisted she made too much money to quit. Heidi was a few months away from completing a cosmetology program while looking for her own Richard Gere to save her from this life. I didn't have the guts to tell her such things only happened in the movies, and she was adamant that she had things under control. She was the oddest combo of streetwise and innocent.

Heidi laughed at my reaction to being caught ogling one of our volunteers.

"Ready to paint?" I said, moving toward the back of the building and my sanctuary from all that was bad in my life.

"I'm ready."

We left the dark and dreary room for the brightly lit studio. Inside, drawing tables and easels occupied most of the floor space. The walls were painted in brilliant colors, and artwork from various students decorated the walls. I loved being here. I lived for the moment I was able to enter this room. Desmond worked two jobs and only opened the studio when he was present or one of his trustworthy volunteers was available. Sadly, he'd tried to make things more accessible, but the shadier and more destructive element residing in this area made doing so impossible. In exchange for my rent, I helped with the studio when I wasn't working one of my two jobs.

With one more glance over my shoulder at Grady, I entered the room and shut the door behind me. I turned toward the box of paints Desmond had mentioned, unpacked them, and put them on the proper shelves. Desmond was a neat freak and insisted everything be put in its place.

Standing before my easel, I continued to work on my watercolor I secretly called *Home*. I'd never lived in anything like the cozy farmhouse with the rail fence, but I'd had a long-standing dream of residing in such a pastoral setting. My own

style was somewhat more modern and slightly abstract compared to Thomas Kinkade, but I did draw some inspiration from his work. Often my subjects were darker and more ominous, but lately I had the driving desire to lighten things up by doing a series depicting my idea of home. I'd started with a backyard garden oasis in the first watercolor. Now I was putting finishing touches on the cottage itself. The next painting in the series would be a close-up of roses growing in the garden to the side of the house.

I glanced over at Heidi, who was working on one of her signature charcoal portraits of street people. I found it interesting she chose to work in the gray world of charcoals, but I minded my own business.

Art was art. It was individual, personal, and with its own style and message.

And there was always a message, subtle or not. Perhaps someone who created art merely for commercial purposes didn't feel this way, but I certainly did.

After my day today, I wasn't in the mood to paint happy scenes with bright colors. I stared long and hard at my painting, debating on what to do next, if anything.

"What did you find out?" Heidi asked, eyeing me with sympathy.

I turned toward her and blew out a breath. "They won't know until the DNA tests come back."

"But the remains could be your mother's?"

"Possibly. The physical size and age are right, but the body was so badly decomposed they couldn't tell."

"Not even by looking at dental records?"

Heidi and I were true crime junkies, me out of necessity and her out of an interest in human psychology.

"The skull had no teeth."

"Wow." She absorbed my words for a long moment.

"Yeah," I said.

We didn't talk after that, and I was grateful she held her tongue, even though I knew she had one hundred questions she was dying to ask. Heidi was one of the few people in Portland who knew about the extent of my mission to find my missing mother.

"Hey, gang, how's it going?"

We both turned to welcome our other partner in crime, Leila. She lived with a gay couple in one of the decrepit apartments in the building across the street. Since it was only a one bedroom, she, too, slept on the couch. Leila worked nights as a bartender at the Portland Puck and days at a diner within walking distance. In the past couple weeks, I'd started filling in at the Puck on weekends or whenever they needed me.

Heidi, Leila, and I were doing the best we could with the hand we'd been dealt. The Rainbow Unicorn gave us something positive in our lives, as it did so many others.

Leila nudged me. "Who's that hot guy with Desmond?"

"He came in with Aspen," Heidi supplied happily.

"Ohhhhh. Don't hold out. Tell us the entire story." Leila's attention focused on me, as did Heidi's.

"There's nothing to tell. Not really. I was walking toward the studio when some old drunk accosted me, and Grady stepped in."

"Grady? You're on a first-name basis?" Leila elbowed Heidi, who giggled like a schoolgirl.

"He introduced himself. Then we found out we were going to the same place. He's doing some volunteer work here." Bitterness crept into my tone.

"I'd be going after that fine ass." Heidi's eyes tracked Grady as he followed Desmond through the studio and into a back room.

"I'm not. Not my type."

"Are you crazy? Anyone with money is my type." Heidi joked, but she was half-serious. She'd been looking for a sugar daddy for a while now.

“How do you know he has money?” Leila asked.

“You can tell. Look at that jacket. Even his casual clothes indicate he’s loaded.”

“He’s a professional hockey player,” I said.

Leila nodded. “Oh, of course, doesn’t Everly’s family own the team?”

“They do.”

I adored Everly. She hung out down here as if she were one of us, even though she had been raised in extreme wealth. She ran the coffee shop at the hockey practice facility, from what I recalled, and had probably coerced some of the players to assist Desmond in cleaning out these rooms to make more studio space.

“She brought a guy in here a week or two ago who was on the hockey team. I think they were pretty tight.”

“She did?”

“Yeah, I can’t remember his name, but he was hot, too. Older than Grady, but still freaking hot.” Heidi had a one-track mind, and I feared her obsession with hot, rich men would get her in trouble someday. She was living in a fantasy world, looking for her billionaire. Only real life wasn’t like that. She should know better than anyone.

I didn’t get much done on this particular night because I was too busy keeping an eye out for Grady, who came and went, carrying boxes to the dumpster behind the building, stacking items that were sellable in a corner, and putting others in a recycle pile. He wasn’t the only Icehawk present, but he was the only one who distracted me from my work through no fault of his own. That in itself was wild, considering I could concentrate in the middle of a chaotic street fair enough to paint people’s portraits.

His simple act of kindness, when most people chose not to get involved, especially in this part of town, warmed my heart.

Maybe I was so used to being invisible to everyone but the few I called my friends that having a hot, rich guy like him

notice me caused me to overreact.

And I was overreacting.

Even though I caught him looking in my direction a few times.

Desmond sidled up to me as most of the other artists put away their tools and paints for the night. “Stick around and help me clean up?”

“Absolutely.”

Within the half hour, the place had cleared out. I snagged brushes off some of the tables and took them to the scarred and stained sink in the back to wash them out. Everyone was responsible for cleaning anything they used, but we always had a few who didn't give a shit. Usually, they were people who'd wandered in from the street and had no interest in creating art, only hanging out in a warm, safe place as long as possible. I couldn't blame them for that, nor did Desmond.

“Hey, you need any help?”

I jumped inwardly at the sound of a male voice close to my ear. “I, uh, no, I'm fine.”

Grady stood just a few feet from me, watching me with those eyes of his. Something about him unsettled me, pulled me out of my comfort zone, and made me want things I knew I couldn't have.

“Okay.” He hesitated as if he wanted to say more. I concentrated on scrubbing the brushes, unsure what more to say. We had nothing in common and came from two different worlds, as far as I could tell.

I heard him sigh and the sound of his footsteps as we walked away. By the time I had the guts to glance upward, he was gone. “Out of sight but not out of mind” had never been so true.

I didn't recall ever feeling so attracted to someone the first time I'd laid eyes on them, but he was my exception. Most likely, I'd never see him again.

I finished my cleaning up, climbed the stairs to Desmond's apartment, and settled on the couch. Wrapping up in a cozy blanket, I closed my eyes and fantasized about a certain hockey player with blue eyes and a lock of hair that fell over his forehead.

Chapter Two

WILL YOU GO OUT WITH ME?

~~Grady~~

Over the past two months, my father and I had settled into a somewhat dysfunctional relationship, strictly coach and player. My teammates were curious since the coach and I shared a last name, and unfortunately we did look alike.

I wasn't hiding the fact he was my father, but I wasn't advertising it either. The few teammates who dared ask me if we were related, I would be evasive and say *yes, but we're not close*.

That seemed to pacify most of them. A quick Google search would reveal the truth, but so far no one had done so or chosen to tell me they had. I was a quiet guy and a private person. The guys respected that.

I'd established close friendships with a few guys on the team. Braden, Jarrett, and I shared a three-bedroom condo, though most of the time it resembled a frat house after a wild party, including the bra and panties of a random woman hanging off the living room lamp. I didn't care. I wasn't fussy about tidiness, and neither were my roommates. The bedrooms were spacious with great views, and I often holed up there when I'd had enough partying for the night. I might be the same age as my teammates, but my life experiences made me years older.

A few days had passed since I'd volunteered at the Uni, as the artists fondly called it, and I still couldn't get Aspen out of my mind. I wasn't sure why images of this particular woman

had stuck with me when I had countless puck bunnies willing to give me any form of pleasure I desired. Yet there was something about her...

Maybe I had some deep-seated need to rescue a damsel in distress or some such shit.

Head down, I trudged down the hall in the practice facility toward the rink. I was contemplating what all this meant in the greater scheme of life when I bumped into someone coming around the corner.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, not glancing up.

“Grady.”

At the sound of his voice, I froze. Stiffening, I met his gaze, so like my own, yet so different. “Yeah?” Nothing in my tone invited further conversation, but he wasn’t that easily intimidated. The fact that I’d made it two months without having private words with this man was amazing. I’d assumed neither of us wanted to talk.

He sized me up with those unforgiving eyes that laid the blame directly at my feet. He didn’t need to do that. I’d beaten myself up enough over the years, even though my mother tried to convince me that I couldn’t know what would happen that night. My father did no such thing. He blamed me, and he’d never forgive me.

“What do the boys know about our relationship?”

The team. He was always worried about the team. He’d always been that way and would always be. “The few that’ve asked, I’ve led them to believe we’re distant relatives who aren’t close. That about sums it up.” Did I detect a flash of regret in his expression? It was gone as quickly as I imagined it.

“It does,” he agreed.

“We ceased being father and son years ago,” I added, unable to keep my mouth shut.

Again, he nodded, his expression as hard and unreadable as I’d ever seen it.

“You know, you don’t have to ride me so hard. The guys have noticed.”

“Maybe I do. I don’t think you’re reaching your full potential.”

“What the fuck do you care?” I blurted out and was immediately sorry for my outburst. I didn’t want him to think I cared about him or anything else to do with him.

“You’re one of my players, and I’m not being any harder on you than anyone else.”

“Right.” Bitterness and hurt crept into my tone. I didn’t exist as anything but a hockey player to him.

“There’s more to it than that, and you know it.”

“Do I?” I challenged him.

“Yes, you do. Grady, I want you to succeed. You have all the tools. You need more experience and seasoning. You also need to work on your attitude.”

“My attitude?”

“You’ve been hanging out with Briggs, and he’s bad news.”

“Are you speaking as my coach or my father?”

“Both.”

“Wrong. You haven’t been my father since...” I let my voice trail off. We both knew when the huge split between us had happened, and neither of us had a clue how to bridge the gap or if we wanted to.

“Then as your coach, I’m warning you that Briggs is undermining your confidence. I’ve watched him pick at you since the beginning of the season.”

“And you aren’t?”

He flinched, and I knew I’d hit my mark. “I’m trying to make you better.”

“So is he. You have no right to dictate my friends to me.” I pushed past him and strode down the hall, half expecting him

to call after me, but he didn't.

At the end of the hall, I punched the Down button on the elevator. Just as the doors closed, Jarrett slipped into the elevator with me.

“What was that all about?” He jerked his thumb in the direction of where Jeffs had been standing.

I shrugged. “Nothing.”

“You two were having some words back there.”

“He's butting into my private business.”

“What is he? Your uncle or something?”

“Something like that.” I refused to admit this man was my father. To do so would dredge up all the pain of the past and put it in front of the people in my life. I wanted a fresh start, and I'd gotten it until the Icehawks had drafted me.

The elevator stopped, and the door swished open to reveal the parking garage. “You wanna get a drink?”

I hesitated and made a quick decision. “Yeah, sure, why not?” We didn't have a game until tomorrow night. Why not have a little fun?

The Sunday night crowd in the Puck was sparse, and I was grateful, not in the mood to fend off selfie seekers or puck bunnies.

We found a seat in a booth and settled in to watch *Sunday Night Football* while talking about all things hockey. I rarely came to this place on a weekend because it was always so packed with hockey fans, but Sundays were a safe bet.

I glanced up as the waitress approached and did a double take. She stopped in front of our table and did the same.

“Aspen?” I hoped I didn't sound as befuddled as I felt. WTF was wrong with me? I barely knew her or anything about her, yet she had this profound effect on me and my libido.

“Hi, uh, Grady? Right?” She looked everywhere but directly at me and fidgeted with the stack of menus she carried. It dawned on me she might be as off balance around

me as I was around her. I couldn't explain why I was drawn to her, only that I was.

"Yeah, I didn't know you worked here." I'd be coming here a hell of a lot more from now on. My heart did this little bump at the sight of her, and I welcomed the distraction from my troubles. Maybe she was just what I needed. Or not.

Fuck, I was so confused.

"I fill in for staff who want time off. Mostly on Sundays."

That explained why I hadn't seen her. I usually came in during the week after practice.

Aspen was dressed in a formfitting T-shirt and jeans that molded to her curvy body as if they were made specifically for her. Her bleached-blond hair with streaks of pink and purple was tied in a sassy ponytail, and she wore black ankle boots that were faded from wear.

Jarrett cleared his throat, drawing our attention to him.

"Uh, sorry," I said contritely. "This is Aspen. I met her when I volunteered a few days ago."

"Hey, Aspen, good to meet you." Jarrett beamed with interest, but then he was interested in every female that crossed within a hundred feet of him.

I bristled, feeling oddly possessive of Aspen, I didn't have any idea why, but I aimed a glare in his direction. The bastard's grin broadened. He was onto me.

Niceties dispensed, Aspen was all business. She handed out menus and took our drink orders with efficient movements as if I were just another customer. Was I? Had I imagined a connection between us? I'd made a habit long ago of pursuing what I wanted, and I wanted her. I wasn't one of those guys who jumped in with both feet. I preferred to wade into the deep water and then dive in. I took my time, but got there just the same.

I watched her walk away, hypnotized by her incredible ass and legs encased in those tight jeans. My dick twitched in response. I cleared my suddenly dry throat.

“Hey, buddy.” Jarrett snapped his fingers in front of my face, and I pushed his hand away. “You got a thing for her, or what?”

“Maybe,” I admitted, knowing Jarrett would abide by the bro code and not pursue someone I might have an interest in. He was loyal.

“Okay.” He sounded disappointed. “You gonna ask her out?”

“I might.” Funny, I hadn’t really considered asking her out until he’d spoken those words, but that wasn’t a bad idea at all.

“You want to, and you know it.”

I shrugged, never admitting weakness, and an attraction to a woman was a weakness Jarrett would exploit if I knew him. He hadn’t earned the title of team gossip for nothing, and he deserved it.

We were opposites, Jarrett and me. He was the joking, constantly jabbering one, and I was the quiet, serious one. Yet so far, our friendship has worked. We weren’t prone to deep discussions, but we enjoyed each other’s company.

For the next few hours, we talked about all things hockey and nursed our beers until Jarrett received a text message at about eight p.m. He tapped out a message and grinned at me. I knew that grin.

“Trudy?” I guessed.

“Yeah, she’s lonely.” Jarrett was already digging in his wallet for his half of the tab. I was being replaced by a female, no surprise there. Trudy was a regular hookup of Jarrett’s but nothing more than that, as far as I could tell.

“I’ll cover the tab. You get it next time.”

“Okay, thanks, bud. You leaving now, too?”

I glanced at Aspen, currently behind the bar mixing a drink. “Nah, I think I’ll stay awhile.” I had nothing better to do. After that confrontation with my dad, I didn’t feel like going home to an empty condo, and Braden was out, too.

Jarrett's gaze followed mine, and he smirked knowingly. Winking, he headed toward the exit, pausing to call over his shoulder, "Good luck, lover boy."

I flipped him off, but he was already gone and in a hurry to get to his booty call.

I waited for Aspen to approach my table. "Are you ready for your tab?" she asked, her pretty face a mask of cool professionalism.

"Not yet. I think I'll stick around for a while. When do you close?"

"Ten on Sundays, unless it's quiet, then we close earlier." She skirted past me and cleared the table. I watched her, enjoying her graceful movements and the ease with which she balanced the stack of plates and glasses. I followed her to the bar, where only a few patrons remained, and took a seat. She placed the pile near the bar sink and glanced up at me. Our eyes met, and I wasn't able to drag my gaze away from hers. Those deep-brown eyes were in stark contrast to her pale skin and white-blonde hair. She was stunning in an artsy kind of way. I noted she only had one visible tattoo on her shoulder. I'd expected a free spirit like her to be sporting a full sleeve or an entire chest full of tattoos, but not that I could see. I strained to read what it said without being too obvious. Nestled within a bunch of roses, the heavy script read: *I will search until I find you.*

Without warning, my stomach squeezed, and for a moment, I wondered if she'd lost someone as I had or if the wording wasn't literal, maybe a lost love or even the death of a pet?

"Do you want another beer?" I jerked my head up, feeling guilty at being caught staring.

"Sure."

She poured another and slid it across the counter, but not before casting a confused glance my way. She had no idea why I was hanging around and was suspicious. Maybe in her world, motives were questioned, and maybe she had every

right to question mine. I really didn't know why I was hanging around other than I felt this weird, unexplainable bond with her.

I sipped on my beer for the next hour and watched the game on the television overhead, just hanging out. I was comfortable here and didn't feel like going home yet. I wanted to talk more to Aspen. By now, there was only one table of guys who appeared to be regulars. They'd already paid their bill and were catching the end of the game.

"Another one?" she asked as she removed the empty glass and placed it in the dishwasher.

"Yeah, if that's okay?"

She hesitated. I expected her to tell me she was closing, but she didn't. "Of course it is."

Soon I had a beer I didn't really want on the counter in front of me. I racked my brain for a clever segue into a conversation her as she went about her nightly duties behind the bar.

"Are you a hockey fan?" I blurted for lack of anything else to say.

She faced me and smiled, a genuine smile that had me ready to wrap her in my arms and absorb some of her warmth. "Not really."

"You could become one," I suggested hopefully.

"I'm not big into sports. Honestly, I don't have time to watch them, nor the money to go to games."

Hockey wasn't a big conversation starter. I tried another tactic, even as I wondered why I was working so hard at this. "I like your tattoo."

"Thanks." She continued her duties behind the bar with her back to me.

"Does it have special meaning?"

She stopped what she was doing and stiffened. Immediately, I realized I'd asked the one question I shouldn't

have.

“I’m sorry. It’s none of my business.” I rushed to correct my mistake.

After an uncomfortably long moment, she turned toward me. “It’s okay. I should keep it covered up if I don’t want people to ask about it.”

I waited, not pushing her or changing the subject. I’d let her take this conversation where she chose. Admittedly, I was curious about her tattoo.

She set her jaw with visible determination and looked me in the eye. She appeared to have made a decision. “It’s for my mother.”

“I’m sorry. Is she gone?”

“Not the way most people think of it. She’s been missing for two years.”

Something inexplicable had drawn me toward Aspen, and now I knew what it was. We had experienced the same devastation of a missing loved one. “Do you want to tell me about it?” I leaned forward and waited.

The last patrons in the bar left, and she crossed to the door and locked it, cleared their table, and wiped it clean. Patiently, I waited for her to return to the bar. We were alone, just her and me. Perhaps she’d open up to me. I didn’t know why it was important, only that it was. I didn’t share my own story with her. Not yet. I’d save that for another time.

She didn’t continue, and I was more disappointed than I should’ve been.

“I’m tired,” she said wearily. “Are you done with that beer?”

I stared down at my half-finished beer and nodded. I wasn’t in the mood to drink. She wiped the bar and gave me my tab. I paid my bill and knew my time here was done. Regardless, I stayed. I wasn’t done. Not yet.

“I’ll let you out.” She grabbed the ring of keys and walked toward the door, leaving me no choice but to follow her.

“Could I give you a ride home?”

Her gaze clouded over for a moment, and she shook her head. “That’s taken care of, but thank you.” She unlocked the door and held it open.

“I was wondering...” I stopped and gathered my thoughts. She leaned against the doorframe and regarded me with a hooded gaze.

“Wondering what?”

Damn, but those lips of hers were begging to be kissed. If we were somewhere else, I’d have kissed her, but we were at her place of work, and I doubted she’d appreciate the gesture. I sucked in a deep breath and dived into the abyss.

“Would you like to go out with me tomorrow night?”

Chapter Three

NEW PATH

~~Aspen~~

I could've been knocked over with one of Desmond's colorful peacock feathers he kept in a vase by the door of his apartment.

I blinked several times, trying to process what this gorgeous man had just said to me. I had to have misunderstood him.

"Excuse me?" I said dumbly.

"Would you like to go out tomorrow night?" he repeated. The man looked so adorably anxious I couldn't dash his hopes with what would've been my usual rude response. Nor did I want to.

"You want to go out with me?" I sounded incredulous and mentally chastised myself for it.

"Yeah, I do. I...I think we have a connection."

"Is that a line you give to all the girls? If it is, you might want to brush up on your delivery."

He laughed, and I joined in. "No, not a line I've used, and it probably shows."

I liked him. He seemed like a nice guy, and in my current world, nice guys who weren't gay were few and far between. I wanted to say yes more than I'd ever wanted to say yes to a guy before, but my latent insecurities held me back. Fantasizing over him was one thing, but actually going out

with him was another entirely. Leila would've told me to jump in with both feet and go for it.

I opened my mouth to accept, but something entirely different came out.

"I don't think I can right now. I'm really busy." I'd succumbed to that inner voice telling me to play it safe, and it was too late to take it back. Besides, I did have a commitment tomorrow night at the Uni, though I probably could've gotten out of it.

His face fell, but he accepted my refusal with grace. "Okay, well, then, I'll be seeing you around."

My stomach sank and left me with an emptiness I hadn't felt since my mom had first disappeared. "Sounds good. Maybe another time?"

"Yeah, sure." His expression was unreadable, but I'd rejected him, and some guys didn't handle rejection well. He lingered for a moment, and those blue eyes of his slipped to my lips and back, giving me hope I hadn't heard the last of him.

Something long dead inside stirred to life. I wanted him to kiss me. Before I acted on the thought, I shut the door, locked it, and returned to my closing duties.

I warred with myself for not saying yes. I deserved a little fun in my life.

After my mother had disappeared, I'd dropped out of college and moved to Portland. My first year here, all I'd done was search for my mother night and day. In my desperation to find her, I'd run through every penny in our mutual bank accounts until my financial situation was beyond tenuous. I'd lost my car. Her home had been foreclosed on. My credit cards were maxed out. Bills went unpaid. The PI I'd paid stopped his investigation when I could no longer afford his fees. I was an emotional mess and a financial wreck. I'd lost everything and didn't know much more than I'd known when Mom had first gone missing. If it hadn't been for Desmond's offer to stay on his couch in exchange for helping out at the Uni, I'd be

on the streets. Even more horrifying, if my mom was found, she would have nothing left. But deep down, I knew she wasn't going to be found, not alive anyway. She'd been gone without a word for two years, and the local police were no closer to solving the mystery.

This past year, I'd pulled myself from the depths of grief and forced myself to get my life back on track. Thanks to my connections at the Uni, I'd been hired as a barista at Pumpkin Rose Roasters and had been contracted to do the artwork for specialty coffee bags featuring Icehawk players. All the money I earned beyond a nominal amount I used for personal expenses went toward paying off the overwhelming debt incurred during that dark year when I hadn't cared about anything but finding my mom.

My phone rang, and I answered it. "Desmond? What's up?"

Desmond was a bit of a night owl prone to disappearing late at night and not reappearing until early morning. I didn't know if he was cruising bars for a pickup or moonlighting somewhere. What he did was none of my business, and the two of us respected each other's privacy.

"Making sure you have your key on you."

"I do. You're going out?"

He was silent for a long moment. "Yeah."

"Okay, I'll see you later."

"Later." He ended the call. I suspected Desmond had a boyfriend he didn't want anyone to know about. Everyone assumed he was gay. While he didn't dissuade our assumption, he also didn't confirm it. The poor guy probably had parents who didn't accept his lifestyle and was still stuck in the habit of sneaking around. I felt bad for him and wished I could do something, but we didn't have the kind of relationship where we'd bare our hearts to each other.

I was still contemplating Desmond's reluctance to be open about his lifestyle when Leila knocked on the window. I hurried to the door to let her in.

“I knew I’d find you here,” she said as she slung her coat over a chair. “It’s colder than a witch’s tit out there.”

“That’s pretty cold.” I laughed. “You’re out late.”

“I know, I borrowed my roommate’s car. I left my glasses here last night, and I’m blind without them.”

She wasn’t exactly blind, but she did need them to read. Leila did drama better than anyone, but she did it in a self-deprecating, humorous way that didn’t grate on a person.

“Did I just see hot stuff come out of the bar?”

“You did.” I didn’t bother playing coy. We both knew who she was talking about.

“What’s up with that? Are you guys a thing?”

“Hardly. He was having drinks with a friend. He didn’t know I worked here.”

“Yet he stayed until you closed. He had to be the last one to leave.”

“He was.” I hedged, debating on how much to tell her, and decided to go for it. “He asked me out.”

Her eyes widened. “He did? You said yes, didn’t you?” She scowled at my expression. “Didn’t you?” she repeated.

“I have to work tomorrow night at the Uni.”

“Dez would’ve let you out of it. Why would you turn down a date with such yumminess? Even better, as a hockey player, he has money. He’d show you a good time in more ways than one.” She waggled her eyebrows dramatically, and I giggled in spite of myself.

“Dez depends on me, and I don’t care about Grady’s money.” And that was the truth. I never saw myself as someone with money and never wanted to be. I only wanted enough money to live a comfortable life, make people happy with my art, and hire someone to help me find my mother. That wasn’t asking too much of the universe, was it?

“I know, but sometimes money is fun.” Leila winked at me.

I shrugged and wiped off the bar counter.

“Why did you tell him no?” she pushed. “When are you going to start living your life?”

“I do live my life.”

Her skeptical expression said she didn’t believe me. “No, you don’t. You live in purgatory because your mom is missing. It wasn’t your fault. She wouldn’t want you to give up everything for her. And paying off all those debts is dragging you down.”

“Like I have a choice.”

“Maybe you don’t have a choice regarding the debts, but you shouldn’t turn down opportunities to enjoy life, especially with a rich, hotter-than-hot hockey player who is definitely interested in you.”

“Therein lies the question. Why me? What’s he see in me?”

Leila snorted as if I were too dense to see the truth. “He sees what I see—a kind, thoughtful, loyal, and beautiful person inside and out. Maybe a little lost and trying to find her way.”

“Definitely lost.”

“Did you ever think he might be lost, too? Maybe he senses a kindred spirit, someone he can share with?”

I stared at her. “Who are you and what’d you do with Leila?”

“I’m still me. I was abducted by aliens last week, but after less than an hour, they threw me back. I guess I drove them crazy.”

“I’m sure you did.”

Leila was right about one thing. My mother wouldn’t want me to give up everything. She’d want me to get on with life and honor her by being the happiest I could be. I was working on it. I’d come a long way in the past year. I’d stopped spending all my waking hours searching for the one little clue

that'd crack my mom's case. I'd backed off, more out of necessity than need. A girl had to eat sometime, but I kept up on her case and called the detectives once a week to hound them.

And I held out hope I'd see her again someday, even though I knew deep in my heart she was gone. I didn't know if anything or anyone would ever be able to fill the void her absence caused inside me, but I had to forge my own path, looking to the future rather than the past. It's what my mom would want.

And to start down that new path, damn it, I should've said yes to Grady.

Chapter Four

STRUGGLES

~~Grady~~

A few nights later, I sat in a quiet locker room as we mourned another loss. I wasn't happy with my performance either, though playing well wouldn't have made up for another embarrassing loss. Nobody who plays a team sport enjoys personal success when their team is struggling at the bottom of the league.

I'd been feeling pretty defeated lately, and I fought against falling into a deep, dark hole. My father had been ruthless in his criticism of me, and I was forced to take it without comment. I wanted to chew his ass right back, but I wanted to play hockey more.

Add to that, I'd asked out the first woman I'd met in this town who truly intrigued me, and she'd shot me down. Not a good week.

I glanced at Briggs sitting at the stall next to mine. He hadn't moved since he'd sat down. Instead he stared straight ahead, still fully dressed, and barely blinked. I hung with him enough to know he was gritting his teeth and fighting to control his temper. The guy had a short fuse and a chip on his shoulder the size of the Columbia Green Arena, the Icehawks' flashy new home. LA had given us a lesson in how to play hockey tonight, and we'd floundered like an amateur team.

My dad—I should quit thinking of him as that, but old habits die hard—Coach came in to give us his usual rah-rah speech, but by now, most of the team stared at him with glassy

eyes or complete disinterest. Briggs roused himself enough to mutter under his breath. Up until a few weeks ago, he'd made his complaints public. According to our team gossip and my roommate Jarrett, Dasher Bates had had a private meeting with Briggs. After that, Briggs was still his same surly self, he just didn't vocalize his discontent in front of the entire team.

I sided with Briggs more often than not. We had a lot in common, the biggest thing being that we didn't like our coach. Briggs was actually more vocal, calling him a fucking idiot or a moron, though so far, not to his face.

After Coach left, Briggs pulled off his jersey. "Fucking dumbshit," he grouched. "I've had all I can take of his *positive* attitude." He said the word positive as if it were the nastiest word in the world.

"I know what you mean." I agreed with him because my father was a hypocrite of the worst kind, and listening to him talk about sacrifice, teamwork, forgiving mistakes, and moving on was more than I could bear the majority of the time.

After we showered and dressed, Briggs stopped in front of me as I shrugged into my coat. "Going for a drink?"

I shifted my gaze to Braden and Jarrett, who stood nearby. They both nodded. "Yeah, let's get out of here."

"Good, I could use a drink. Meet you at the Puck. I'll buy the first round." Briggs pivoted on a heel and stalked toward the door. I watched him for a minute, musing at how everything he did, even something as simple as walking out of the locker room, was done with simmering anger. I'd embraced the anger, too, since coming to Portland, but anger wasn't sustainable if a person wanted to have a happy, productive life. Did I even deserve a happy life when my sister had lost hers, and I'd been the catalyst?

My dad didn't think I deserved good things, but my mom would disagree. She was my biggest supporter and had been my rock during those early days when my father should've also been there for me but wasn't.

I put the brakes on the depressing path I'd started down and hurried to follow my buddies from the locker room. Dash watched me with a frown on his face. I ignored him. Dash was a good guy, but he attempted to carry the team on his shoulders, and I didn't appreciate his interference in my life.

I walked briskly as an ice-cold breeze cut through my thick coat and sank into my bones. Portland could be way chillier than its reputation revealed. Gratefully, I pushed open the bar door, and a rush of warmth hit me in the face.

I hesitated and surveyed the room for an empty table where we wouldn't be the center of attention. None of us would be in the mood to interact with fans tonight. I found a private booth near the back of the bar, and we headed for it. Tossing my coat in the corner of the booth, I sat down.

What a shitty night.

Briggs had been on my case during the game to the point where I didn't know which end was up. I should be used to his verbal abuse by now, but tonight he was especially brutal, eroding my confidence with every critical remark. I tried to dig myself out of the hole he buried me in every game. I knew he was right. My placement in front of the net obstructed the goalie's view. I missed too many easily blocked shots. My timing was off on my passes. I deserved his criticism.

I couldn't help but guess that my dad paired me with Briggs to destroy my career, such was the depth of his distaste for me. My mom warned me often about falling into my father's trap, and she was right.

Trying to distract myself from the crappy game, I surveyed the bar, looking for a glimpse of white-blonde hair with streaks of pink and purple. Behind the bar was a familiar face. It wasn't Aspen, but a friend of hers I'd seen at the studio last week.

She caught my eye and smiled. Grabbing a few menus, she sashayed over to our table and handed them out. "How're you doing, Grady?"

“Good,” I said, unable to recall her name. I sucked at names.

Jarrett elbowed his way into the conversation, leaned across the table, and held out a hand. “I’m Jarrett. And you are?”

“I’m Leila.” She giggled as if he were the most amusing person she’d come across in a long time. Briggs rolled his eyes, Braden snorted, and I blew out a long breath.

Jarrett burst into an off-key rendition of a classic rock song, “Layla,” made famous by Eric Clapton. I recognized it because my mom loved classic rock and played it constantly. Leila was thrilled and clapped her hands while the rest of us groaned at the assault on our eardrums. He only knew a few lines, so we weren’t tortured too long, but Leila was smitten.

“You’re adorable,” she squealed, and Jarrett beamed.

“I’ll have a whiskey and Coke,” Briggs growled and interrupted their flirting.

Leila sobered and was all business, but she kept casting sly glances toward Jarrett. We ordered our drinks, and she strutted off with a seductive grin over her shoulder. Jarrett watched her every step of the way.

“I’m in fucking love.” He held his hand over his heart and pretended to swoon, drawing gagging from Braden and me.

“You’re a fucking idiot,” Briggs countered. None of us took his insults seriously. We’d become impervious to them unless he called out our mistakes on the ice, which he did with alarming regularity. No one wanted to be on the ice when Briggs was, least of all me.

Jarrett shrugged. “You’re just jealous, Briggs.”

Briggs shot him a glare that should’ve cut him down to size, but Jarrett was currently flying high and oblivious to our surly teammate.

“Maybe you should find yourself a love interest. It might improve your attitude.” All heads swung toward the interloper who’d approached our table. Before I even saw his face, I

recognized the accent as belonging to Drakos Lenkov, one of our first-line forwards from Ukraine.

The entire table lapsed into silence, waiting for Briggs's reply. Briggs narrowed his gaze and met Drakos's challenge with a steely glare. The rest of us held our collective breaths. Drakos and Briggs had been heading toward a confrontation like two cars speeding toward a head-on collision on a one-lane highway.

Drakos perched his hands on his hips and stuck out his chin, his entire attitude one of belligerence worthy of matching Briggs's own.

"My personal life is none of your business." Surprising us all, Briggs looked away, picked up his beer, and took a swig. He wasn't taking the bait, and I'd never known him to back down from a fight on or off the ice. He loved to drop the gloves, just not this time.

I gaped incredulously at the man who was both my idol and my worst nightmare. There had to be a catch. He never let anyone get away with talking to him like that, especially in front of the younger players on the team.

"Drakos, come on." Trent, our other first-line forward, appeared and tugged on his buddy's arm. Drakos held steady for a moment. With one last withering look at Briggs, he followed Trent to another table across the room.

Collectively, our gazes swung back to Briggs. His face had hardened into one of his typical unreadable masks. We held our breath as the seconds ticked by. Briggs did nothing to relieve the tension at our table. If anything, the asshole relished it.

Briggs stood. "I've had enough of this bullshit for one night." He grabbed his coat and stood. Without another word, he left.

We stared at each other, wondering what had just happened.

"Drakos hit a nerve, didn't he?" Braden said.

“I’d say he got more than a hit with that comment. More like a home run.” Jarrett reached across the table and poured the remainder of Briggs’s drink in his empty glass. The guy had no shame.

“Well, that was fun. I’m going to make some pretty lady lucky tonight.” Braden sauntered off to a table of giggling females, leaving Jarrett and me alone at the table.

“Did we just get stiffed with the bill?” I said.

Jarrett shrugged. “Guess so. We could join Braden.”

I glanced at the women. They were beautiful, and normally I’d be all in on such an idea, but tonight I wasn’t in the mood. I’d had a crappy game, and I was out of sorts. Washing away my sorrows with alcohol didn’t seem to help either.

“You go ahead.” I waved him off.

“Nah, I have something better in mind.” He stared pointedly at Leila. “I think she might need some more serenading.”

“Yo, bro, there’s such a thing as too much of a good thing.”

“Not when it comes to me. Women can’t get enough of this guy.” He pointed at his chest and grinned with his usual cockiness. Now that Briggs’s oppressive presence had gone, Jarrett was freer to be himself without repercussion. “I wonder when she gets off work?”

“Why don’t you ask her?”

“I will.”

As I watched, Jarrett cozied up to the bar and leaned forward. He said something to Leila, causing her to laugh. I sulked as he spent way too long hanging out at the bar, leaving me to fend for myself. After a while, I realized he wasn’t coming back. I’d been deserted.

I glanced at Drakos and Trent, surprised when they waved me over. I didn’t want to sit with the veteran players. I’d sided with Briggs, and they’d expressed their displeasure. Sitting with them seemed disloyal. On the other hand, now that they’d

invited me over, I couldn't very well ignore the invitation. We were part of a team, after all, even if that team was broken AF.

I skirted past Jarrett at the bar and caught Leila's attention. "I'm moving to that table. Jarrett will pay the tab."

Ignoring Jarrett's scowl, I strode over to my teammates and took a seat. Kirby, one of our top defensemen, had joined them. He was an enigma, didn't talk much but listened intently. I was pretty damn sure nothing got past him.

"Hey, the rookie's here. He's treating, boys. What'll you have?" Drakos grinned evilly and waved Leila over. She broke off her conversation with Jarrett and hurried to our table while I accepted my fate. If I got away with only paying for these three guys, I'd be getting off cheap.

Drakos and Trent ordered top-shelf liquor and the most expensive steak on the menu. Kirby opted for a milkshake and salmon. I admitted defeat and ordered the steak and fries.

"Tough game tonight, rook," Trent said with sympathy. "Sometimes shit goes like that."

"On this team, it always seems to go like that," I groused bitterly.

My teammates exchanged knowing glances, which left me out of the loop and irritated the fuck out of me. I'd gone to the den of the enemy. Stupid, considering we were on the same team, but there it was. They'd completely bought into my dad's bullshit philosophy, and I resented the cooperation they showed toward him, even as I recognized how unreasonable I was being. When it came to Duke Jefferson, my emotions won over logic and team unity every time. Even I'd admit that was some screwed-up shit.

"You had some good moments," Kirby said. He so rarely gave out compliments that I was stunned.

"I, uh, I didn't feel that way."

"That's because you let negativity into your life to the point where it quashes anything good."

Okay then, I didn't like the direction of this conversation. His words were a thinly veiled attempt at pointing the finger at Briggs. I bristled, feeling protective of Briggs. Someone had to have his back.

Kirby's direct gaze bored into mine, and I squirmed. The guy made me uncomfortable. I swore sometimes he read minds or some weird shit like that. Being around him unbalanced me.

"What's the story behind you and Jeffs?" He asked the one question the entire team had been dying to ask me and hadn't in the past couple months.

"There's no story." Every muscle in my body tensed. I was a cornered wild animal ready to make a break for freedom at any moment, and possibly die doing so. Or, at the least, be mauled by my teammates. I'd never been on a team as divided as this one. Losing didn't help. Team unity was easier to achieve when said team was winning. We weren't winning. We sucked.

"You have the same last name." Kirby's voice was calm, almost hypnotic, but nothing lessened my current stress level.

"Distant relatives would be an accurate description." I spoke the truth. We were as distant as a father and son could be.

"Your family and his don't get along?"

"No, we do not. Bad history."

Kirby nodded sagely and didn't ask any additional questions, much to my relief. We sat at the table in strained silence until Leila dropped off the drinks.

"You really did have some good stuff out there, kid," Trent said in an attempt to be encouraging.

"I stank. Call it what it is."

"I wouldn't go that far. This is your first full season in the league. There'll be growing pains."

"Briggs isn't an easy guy to be paired with, especially not as a rookie. He's too übercritical," Drakos added.

I bit my tongue to keep from blurting out what I believed was the truth. My dad had set me up to fail, hoping I'd either get traded or be sent down to the Icehawks' farm team. He wasn't on my side. He never would be.

My heart squeezed as memories flooded back of days long gone when he was my biggest fan, always encouraging and building my confidence while pointing out areas of improvement. He'd coached the first few hockey teams I'd been on. I'd learned my basics from him. When I had turned ten and my parents divorced, I was devastated. Dad had taken an assistant coaching job in college hockey, and my mom had refused to move with him. My sister and I stayed with her and spent summers with our father when I wasn't in a hockey camp. Those were good times that seemed like part of another life.

Sadness coursed through me, and a longing for what once was but would never be again.

Tonight had gone from bad to worse, and I'd had enough. I guzzled the last of my beer and nodded at my teammates. "I'm tired. I think I'll call it a night."

We said our goodbyes, and I waved to Braden, who had two hotties hanging on him, and to Jarrett, who was still hustling Leila. Pushing through the door, I stepped into the cold, damp Portland night and walked the four blocks to my condo, deep in thought.

If only Aspen had been there tonight. I could've used one bright spot in my life. Then I recalled she'd turned me down. So much for one bright spot.

Chapter Five

IN COMMON

~~Grady~~

We started December with losses to Vegas and Calgary. Things didn't improve much the following week after a five-game road trip, but at least we squeaked out one win against a lethargic Columbus team. We flew into Portland from St. Louis on Sunday night. Considering we played an early game and the time zone difference, we landed at eight thirty p.m.

Jarrett, Braden, and I had carpooled to the airport. We arrived back at the condo garage a little after nine. Once I dropped off my bag inside the apartment door, I was too restless to call it a night.

"I'm going out. You guys wanna come?"

Jarrett was on the phone and shook his head. Braden was already stretched out on the couch watching a movie. If there'd been a neat and tidy one among the three of us, we'd have stayed and cleaned up this mess, but we weren't into housecleaning. Sticking around in this chaos was the last thing I wanted to do tonight.

I was on my own. I wasn't fond of drinking alone, but I'd make an exception. With a sigh, I grabbed my coat from where I'd slung it over the back of a chair and headed out.

I walked aimlessly for a while, letting the soft rain hit my face. After being in the humid south, I welcomed this weather.

A glutton for punishment, I paused at the entrance to the Portland Puck. It was Sunday night, and I peered into the

windows hoping to catch a glimpse of Aspen. There were a couple tables of patrons watching replays of games and some regulars sitting at the bar. Aspen glided across the room with a trayful of drinks balanced on her palm. She stopped before a table of six and served their drinks with her usual efficient precision, knowing exactly what each one had ordered.

Staring at her through the window, I felt like a bit of a stalker. Pushing the door open, I sauntered inside as casually as possible. I took a seat at the bar and waited for her to return behind the counter. Aspen had her back to me and hadn't noticed me yet. She was talking with a table of guys, and a couple of them were clearly vying for her attention. Her sweet laughter rang through the large room. She wore the same tight jeans and ankle boots I'd seen her in before, with a black sweatshirt splashed with color. I wondered if it might be one of her own designs. One of the guys reached out and squeezed her arm. She bent down and hugged him. He held on to her a little too long. My hands curled into fists as something foreign sat hard and heavy in the pit of my stomach.

I didn't like how I was feeling. I had no right to react with jealousy. Even if she had become the one bright spot in my gray world over the past two weeks, I had no claim on her. What did it say about my life that the woman I'd met twice occupied too many of my thoughts on a daily basis when hockey became too unpleasant to think about? Especially a woman who'd shot me down once, but I was nothing if not persistent.

Aspen was a safe distraction from the situation I'd found myself in. That had to explain my insane obsession with her. I wasn't that guy. I didn't get attached. I didn't fall for women at the drop of a hat, especially not one I barely knew anything about. Hell, one of the dudes sitting at that table might be her boyfriend. That thought didn't do much for the dark cloud hovering over my head.

I turned away from her and hunched over the counter, staring into the mirror over the bar. My own reflection stared back at me. I had to admit I wasn't bad looking. Most women might even consider me handsome. I wasn't a clotheshorse

like some of the guys, and I wore the same inexpensive suit on game days. If I had my way, I'd live in jeans and T-shirts. To hell with dressing up. I avoided charity galas and celebrity weddings because wearing a tux was a special kind of torture.

Aspen skirted behind the bar, sat down her tray, and glanced up at me. She did a double take and met my gaze. Her big brown eyes widened for a moment, and her welcoming smile warmed my cold places. At least someone was happy to see me. There was still a chance.

“Hi,” I said huskily, betraying how much she got to me. If she noticed, she didn't give any indication. Without asking, she poured me the same draft beer I'd ordered the last time I'd seen her. I was flattered she remembered but tried not to read anything into it. A good bartender took note of what her customers ordered. Her tips depended on it.

She laid down a cardboard coaster and placed the glass on top of it.

“What if I wanted something else?” I teased with a lopsided grin.

Her eyes gleamed wickedly as she regarded me for a moment. “I'd tell you to deal with it.”

I laughed, basking in the glow of her smile. She lifted the heavy weight I'd been carrying around for too long, even if only temporarily.

I wasn't the type who fell hard and fast. In fact, I didn't fall at all. For my entire life, it'd been all hockey. Aspen had me wondering if I'd been missing out. She had me wondering a lot of things I'd never wondered before.

“Tough game,” she said.

“You watched our game?”

“It was on in the bar earlier. I caught pieces of it.” She leaned against the back counter. Unable to help myself, my gaze immediately dipped to her breasts, which were pretty damn incredible. She crossed her arms over her chest in a protective manner, and I guiltily lifted my eyes to her face. I'd been caught red-handed ogling her.

Her beautiful eyes narrowed, and I scrambled to come up with the words to excuse my blatant perusal, but none came to me. Calling myself out would only make it worse. As I struggled to find a way to redemption, she burst out laughing. I stared at her in confusion.

“You should see your face right now.” Still giggling, she strolled off to empty the dishwasher of clean drink glasses and place them on a shelf.

“Let me take you out to dinner, and I promise I’ll be a gentleman,” I blurted, hoping the second time would be a charm.

“Who says I want a gentleman?” She snorted, enjoying getting the best of me.

“That’s even better.”

She cocked her head at me and raised a brow. “Grady, why me? You can have any woman in this town.”

“Because I don’t want any woman in this town. I want you.”

“But why?” she pushed, not satisfied with my answer.

“We’d be good together.”

“I don’t think so. We’re from two different worlds. Nothing in common.”

“We have something in common. Something big.”

She squinted at me as if trying to push aside the layers to peer inside my heart. “We do?”

I nodded and glanced around the room. The table of six had finished their drinks. The other table had left. “Yeah, I’ll explain once we’re alone.”

She set her jaw, as if not wanting me to stay, but she didn’t ask me to leave.

I bided my time for the next half hour as the final patrons paid their tabs and left. I was encouraged since she hadn’t said no. I’d have a date by the end of this evening. I watched her surreptitiously, enjoying my view immensely. Aspen had a

rockin' bod, great ass, nice legs, and a pretty face. To top it off, she wasn't fazed by my being a professional hockey player. I doubted she cared one way or another. That alone was refreshing.

Aspen locked the door after the last one and turned back to me. She poured herself a Coke and me another beer and sat down at the bar, leaving a stool between us. She cut right to the chase.

“What is it we have in common?” I'd piqued her curiosity.

Suddenly pensive, I swallowed and stared at the colorful bottles of different liquors on the glass shelves backed by a mirror. I hated telling people about my sister. In fact, it'd been a long time since I'd talked to anyone but my mother about her.

“Grady?” I heard the concern in Aspen's voice and was surprised when she reached out and squeezed my hand. She didn't hold on but immediately withdrew. Her small act of kindness encouraged me.

“I have a missing sister.” I blurted out the words before I lost my nerve.

Her face softened to one of sympathy and understanding. “When did she go missing?”

“Six years ago.” My voice was thick with emotion.

“You must've been pretty young.”

“I'd just gotten my license.” While part of me was sorry I'd brought up the subject, another part needed to talk about that horrible night to someone who wasn't a family member and who didn't have a stake in what had happened.

I paused and lifted my gaze to meet hers. She was leaning forward, all ears, and her expression was encouraging. I cringed inwardly at what I might see on her face when she heard my story. Repulsion? Rejection? Recrimination? Any and all of it I'd seen on my father's face. If it hadn't been for my mom through those dark times, I'm not sure I'd be here today.

She didn't say a word, just waited patiently. I pushed aside the crushing guilt and continued on.

“Back then, I spent the summers with my dad. He was a college hockey coach in Vancouver, BC. My sister was in college and was visiting him, too. I gave her a ride to an exercise class, and I was supposed to pick her up in two hours. Dad was out for the evening, and I took advantage of no parental supervision. I went out with my buddies, played video games, and drank beer. I lost track of time, and I was late picking up my sister. My phone had blown up with messages from her, and she was pissed at me. That class hadn't been in the best part of town, and she didn't like being stuck there at night. When I saw the messages, I texted back and didn't get a response.”

Aspen held her hands over her mouth. She knew where this was going.

“I drove as fast as I dared, but she wasn't standing out front like her many messages claimed she would be. I checked the texts again and noted the last one had come in almost a half hour before. I tried the doors of the building, but they were locked, and it was dark. There wasn't anyone in the parking lot or anywhere nearby. Thinking she might've walked to a bus stop, I drove to the nearest one, only to find out that the last bus of the night had been before her most recent text message. I drove aimlessly around the area for another hour, praying I'd find her. I didn't.” I choked on those last two words. Aspen slid to the seat next to me and put a comforting hand on my knee.

I cleared my throat and swallowed back the lump clogging my airway. Now that I'd started, I had to finish. I didn't know why, but I did.

“I didn't know what else to do but call my dad. He was furious. I mean, really furious, and he still is all these years later.”

Her eyes were filled with sympathy instead of disgust. “Did you ever find her?”

“Never, and it’s all my fault for being an irresponsible brother.”

“Oh, Grady, I’m so sorry. What a horrible burden to carry. The guilt must have been overwhelming.”

“It still is. My dad blamed me, and I blamed myself. My mom was my rock. Sure, I’d screwed up, but I was a kid, and she forgave me. My dad never did. We haven’t really had a relationship since then, even though...”

“Even though what?” Her expression clouded over.

“Even though he’s now my coach.”

“Your hockey coach?”

“Yeah, it’s my own special kind of hell.”

“Wow. I can’t even imagine.” She seemed blown away by my admission and my stark honesty over my untenable situation.

“Trust me, you can’t. He’s on my ass constantly. There’s no pleasing him, regardless of what I do. If Briggs screws up, it’s my fault. If Briggs does something good, I should’ve done it. I can’t win. Between Briggs and him, my confidence has taken a huge hit.”

“Grady, I’m so sorry.” She stroked my arm and almost undid me. “If it’s any consolation, I know all about that empty hole in your heart that can never be healed. Beating yourself up over whether you could’ve done something differently to change things. Constantly wondering where they are, what happened to them, were they suffering or had they suffered.” She leaned into me briefly and squeezed my arm. “I know. I really know.”

I gazed into her eyes and saw the same sadness she had to be seeing in mine. It was all there as she bared her soul to someone hurting as badly as she was. The depth of the tragedy left its mark on her as it had on me. The bone-deep agony of not knowing cut out pieces of her heart as it did mine. The multiple times she got her hopes up, only to have them body-slammed to the ground and stomped on. I’d been there. We

knew each other in ways not even our oldest and dearest friends would ever know us.

What did it all mean? Were we brought together by fate or merely coincidence?

Fuck if I knew.

I steeled myself against the emotions slamming into me from all directions. My life was what it was. I could only hope to be traded sometime this year. The way things were going, I'd probably have a better chance of being sent down. That'd be fine with me. At least I'd be away from the critical eye of my father and Briggs's sharp tongue. They were literally ripping me apart.

"Tell me about your mom." I shifted the conversation to her. I'd bared my soul. It was Aspen's turn. The second the shutters slammed down over those expressive eyes, I knew she wasn't going to tell me anything.

"Another time," she said evasively.

I considered giving her shit for dragging the truth out of me while she held back, but I decided not to be an ass. "Now you have to go out with me."

She smiled sadly. "When were you thinking?"

"Tomorrow," I said hopefully. I grasped her hand and held it, loving the feeling of her small hand in my much larger one.

"I'm busy. I promised to help Desmond. We're remodeling the warehouse to enlarge the studio. We're running out of room, and we can't afford to pay anyone to do the work."

That wasn't what I wanted to hear, but at this point, I'd take any chance to be with her. "Okay, I'm in. Tell me what time."

She stared at me for a long while, and I couldn't help it. I placed my palm against her cheek, leaned in, and brushed my lips across hers. Just a faint brush, no tongue or anything, but an electric shock zipped through my body as if we'd done way more than that. I sat back and studied her.

Aspen blinked several times as if to get her bearings. “Any time after five or six.”

“I’ll be there.”

She stood and moved behind the bar, giving me the impression she had to put space between us. No matter, I may not have an official date, but I’d get one.

I guess the third time would be a charm.

Chapter Six

CREEPY GUY

~~Aspen~~

First thing Monday morning, I got out of bed and brewed a pot of Pumpkin Rose French roast. Desmond's door was closed. I was a sound sleeper and had no idea when he'd gotten in last night. He might've been in his room when I arrived home. Dez and I left each other alone and came and went as we pleased. He was a great roommate, neat, tidy, and easygoing, if not a little mysterious at times, which I understood, or thought I did.

Grady had brought me home last night and walked me to my door. I'd seen in his eyes that he wanted to kiss me, but I'd lost my nerve, thanked him, and quickly shut the door behind me, effectively locking him out.

I'd lain awake for at least an hour, mulling over and over why I hadn't let him kiss me. It wasn't that I didn't want him to; my concerns regarding him ran deeper and were ultimately scarier. Not because of him but because of me. I was vulnerable to Grady, and I didn't want anyone to possess that amount of power over my life. I'd spent a nightmarish year being vulnerable to a shadowy figure who'd taken my mom and might be back for me at some point in time. As ridiculous as it sounded, I didn't want anyone to have control over my life like that nameless person had for too long. I had the debt and ruined finances to prove it.

I poured myself a cup of coffee, unsure as ever how to handle the Grady situation. What would my mom have told me? She'd have liked him. He was a polite, well-spoken guy

with a lucrative career. What wasn't there to like? And I'd been instantly attracted to him.

My mom would've told me to go for it. I missed her so damn much. We'd been all each other had had for years, ever since my dad had died in a five-car pileup on I-5 in Seattle when I'd been only four years old. With a guilty start, I realized I hadn't called to check on her case. I always contacted the detective at eight every Monday. My phone displayed 10:06.

I dialed Detective Rice on his direct line. He picked up on the second ring, almost as if he were waiting for my call.

"Rice," he said briskly. That was him, no nonsense, no sugarcoating, just the facts and only the facts. I appreciated that about him.

"Hi, this is Aspen Bedford. I wondered if you had any new leads regarding my mother."

He was silent for so long I thought we'd been disconnected until I heard him sigh. "The body we found wasn't her. The DNA didn't match. I was about to call you. I just got the report."

I was both relieved and sad. If that'd been her, at least I'd have known what happened to her.

"Aspen, I'm sorry." He shed his businesslike attitude long enough to sincerely express his feelings. Rice and I had butted heads in the early days of the investigation. I'd felt he hadn't taken my mom's disappearance seriously and had hired my own PI. He'd resented that I didn't trust his abilities. Once I'd run out of money for the PI and no longer had him feeding me with misinformation on the Portland PD, Rice and I had come to appreciate each other.

"I know. I'm disappointed. I'd hoped this body would give us answers."

"Sometimes it goes like that." He didn't point out things had gone like that every time for this case. Every clue, every lead, every possible identification didn't pan out. For all

intents and purposes, my mom had dropped off the face of the earth.

“Any other news for me?”

“I’m afraid not.” He sounded genuinely sorry. I’m certain he was. He’d been working on my mother’s case since I first reported her missing. He’d gone above and beyond, to no avail. We simply lost her tracks after she left the bar late on that fateful night.

“Well, thank you.” We said our goodbyes and ended the call.

I sat back in a chair and sighed. My heart was heavy, as it always was after my weekly calls. Pushing to my feet, I checked the time. I had to get to work as a barista at the Pumpkin Rose several minutes away by bus.

Everly, one of the volunteers at Rainbow Unicorn, had commissioned me to do the artwork for the team coffee blend bags. She’d also been instrumental in helping me snag a part-time job as a barista a few months ago. I didn’t know anything about being a barista, but I learned fast. The hours were flexible, which gave me time to concentrate on my artwork.

Michella was finishing up her shift when I arrived. Her parents owned the coffee roasters, and she worked most mornings when the best tips were. This morning a guy was hanging around. I’d seen him before, both in here and at the bar. He might even be a hockey player. He was the dark, broody type who didn’t talk much, but he and Michella seemed to have a thing, even though she denied it.

When he saw me, he paid for his coffee and slipped out the door without another word.

“Who is that guy?” I asked Michella.

“Oh, him, just someone I know.” She waved her hand in the air.

“He sure hangs around you a lot.”

“Yeah.” Michella didn’t offer any additional information, even his name. She was strangely secretive about this current

guy.

In contrast, I'd heard all about her previous boyfriend, Gordon, and what an abusive bastard he was. In fact, he wasn't allowed near her, but I'd seen him lurking down the street on occasion. The guy gave me the creeps. There was something about him...

"I saw him sitting with some of the Icehawks the other night in the bar."

"He plays for them. His name is Briggs."

"Oh, okay." The name rang a bell. "Seems kind of grumpy."

Michella laughed. "That he is. He wears his crankiness like a badge of honor. I swear he's proud of it." She whipped off her apron and folded it, putting it in a bag to take home and launder. "What's new with you?"

"Not much. Same old shit. I'm working two jobs, trying to get my artwork to pay enough for a place of my own, paying off bills, and just surviving."

"I know that story."

She didn't. Not really. She had an apartment. Even if she did share it with Everly and another friend, she had a place to call home. My home consisted of Desmond's couch. Not that I was complaining—exactly. I appreciated his generosity, which afforded me a safe place to sleep for a minimal amount as I worked my way out of the deep hole of debt I'd fallen into.

"See you tomorrow."

I waved to Michella as she breezed out the door. Only then did I notice Briggs loitering outside. They fell into step together and disappeared around the corner.

A wave of sadness swept over me for what was and never could be again. I longed for the days when my biggest problem was what to wear on a date or studying for finals. After the turn my life had taken, I missed those carefree years. Those lost months would take countless ages to dig out of, and I didn't even achieve my goal of finding my mother. When I'd

thrown myself into the search, body and soul, I never imagined I'd still be looking two years later.

Damn, how I missed her.

I thought of Grady and how much guilt he had to be carrying. At least I didn't have that weighing me down, not that I felt any better for it. I couldn't imagine how hard it'd been for him since his sister went missing, especially with his father blaming him.

I was flattered he chose to tell me something that life altering and traumatic and also a little ashamed I hadn't opened up more when he'd asked. He was right. We did have something in common, and that something was big.

I'd forgotten what it was like to put my needs ahead of searching for my mom and basic survival. I wanted to go out with Grady. I deserved a little fun in my life, yet I wasn't in Portland to have fun. I was here to get answers and to get my art career to the point where I made a living out of it. I didn't need much. I wasn't high maintenance.

But perhaps I needed more than I thought I did. Maybe I needed Grady, and he just might need me.

Heidi showed up that afternoon to say hi. Business was slow, so I took advantage of a crisp but sunny December day to bundle up and sit outside with her at one of the small bistro tables on the sidewalk. The sun felt good after all the rain we'd been having. She sipped her tea while I drank Pumpkin Rose French roast, black, just the way I liked it. The stronger, the better. Working at a coffee shop did have its perks. I loved coffee, especially good coffee, and this was some of the best.

"Did you talk with Detective Rice today?" Heidi knew I called him every Monday.

"Yes. Nothing new. And the remains they found weren't my mother's."

"I'm so sorry. I mean, it's good and bad, right?"

"Yeah, it is. I want to know what happened to her, yet I dread finding out."

Heidi nodded her understanding. She may not have lost a parent under suspicious circumstances, but as a product of the foster system, she understood loss and being completely on your own in the world.

“I’m coming up on the two-year anniversary in a couple weeks.”

“That’s brutal she disappeared around Christmas. Does it ruin the holidays for you?”

“I try not to let it, but I don’t really celebrate anymore. I’m sure you can understand that.”

“I do.”

I noticed a man sitting a couple tables away. His hoodie pulled up to shadow his face. Even though he had sunglasses obstructing his eyes, I had a creepy feeling he was watching us and listening to every word.

I lowered my voice. “That guy behind you is staring at us.”

Heidi turned around, and the stranger rose slowly, almost menacingly. He cast one long glance at us again before he turned and strode down the sidewalk. His clothes were too baggy to get a sense of his build other than height, which seemed about average.

“Was that Michella’s ex?” Heidi asked.

I did a double take, realizing why he might’ve seemed somewhat familiar, but he was gone.

“I don’t know.”

“He walks like him.” Heidi noticed shit like that. I didn’t. She was very good at details and body language, perhaps because of her profession.

“He creeps me out.”

“Me too. He’s dangerous.”

I regarded her with concern. “I worry about you.”

She blinked a few times as if wondering how I’d shifted this conversation to her. “I’m fine. I’m careful, and I can take

care of myself.”

“Said many of the Green River Killer’s victims.” I pointed out the infamous Seattle serial killer who preyed on prostitutes. He also had victims in Oregon. Traveling the I-5 from Seattle to Oregon was an easy trip.

“Really? Come on. I’m armed.” She held up her purse but didn’t reveal what was inside. I didn’t want to know.

“I still worry about you.”

“Honestly, most of my clients are repeat customers. Once I get my cosmetology license, I’ll stop, but this pays the bills until then.” Heidi attended a hairstylist school five days a week. She had a few months to go before graduation from the program. I’d been her guinea pig on multiple occasions and had her to thank for my multicolored hair.

I was relieved she’d have a viable career at the end of her studies. I often wondered if I was a fool to think my art would eventually provide financial independence. The possibility I’d always need a side job was very real. I knew tons of starving artists living on the streets or in hovels who’d been at this longer than I had been.

I wasn’t going to admit defeat. I was young, and I was willing to sacrifice to get where I needed to go. As long as I had a roof over my head, I’d continue to chisel away at my debts and work toward my future. Desmond, most of all, appreciated my presence as I did everything I could to lessen his burden. I cooked, cleaned, opened the studio when he was kept late at one of his jobs, and I dived in wherever needed.

I’d hoped that the gig designing the Icehawk coffee bag graphics might yield some additional work. So far, it hadn’t, but I held out hope.

A couple customers entered the shop.

“I have to get back to work. Will you be at the Uni tonight?” I asked. Uni was what we fondly called the Rainbow Unicorn Studio.

“I will.”

I waved at Heidi as I hurried back inside. My step was a little lighter. I'd see Grady tonight, and he was a bright spot in my often dreary day.

Chapter Seven

CHANCES

~~Grady~~

I grabbed my coat off the back of an easy chair and pulled it on, anxious to get to the studio to see Aspen.

“Where are you going?” Braden asked from his usual prone position on the couch. How the guy could be a lazy ass one minute and a dynamo on the ice the next was beyond me. He claimed he hated to expend excess energy. There was nothing lazy about him when it came to hockey. He was the guy I could see lounging on a pool chaise with women feeding him grapes while he dozed in the afternoon sun. Naked women. Braden wouldn’t have it any other way. He was a ladies’ man, but even attracting ladies didn’t require much effort from him, most likely because he was the best-looking guy on the team, or so I’d heard from more than one puck bunny.

Jarrett was his complete opposite. Always moving. Always looking for trouble. He came out of his bedroom wearing running gear. The guy ran everywhere. He loved to run. I did it to build stamina. He did it because it was a hobby or something weird like that.

“You’re leaving too?” Jarrett noted the coat I had on.

“Volunteering. Doing my Icehawk community outreach.”

“Gotta keep management happy,” Braden called from the couch.

“And Coach. He was all over my ass at practice.”

“I didn’t notice him on your case any more than anyone else’s.” Jarrett rubbed his head as if confused.

“He’s pissed at me.”

“Why?” Braden actually bothered to sit up from his prone position on the couch. He scratched his abs and yawned.

“I’m breathing. That pisses him off.”

Braden exchanged a private look with Jarrett.

“He’s pissed at all of us. We suck,” Braden said.

“He’s not targeting you. Not that I’ve noticed.” Jarrett’s appraising gaze made me uncomfortable.

“Then you’re not paying attention.”

Neither of them appeared pacified by my response.

“Trust me, he’s undermining me, singling me out, and being a dick.”

“He did pair you with Briggs,” Jarrett added thoughtfully.

“I like Briggs. He’s just trying to make me better, and he does know his stuff.”

“As long as he’s not eroding your confidence,” Braden added, and my two friends appeared skeptical.

Oh, he was, but I’d still defend him. I’d played like shit on that road trip, but so had everyone else. We couldn’t seem to get our acts together, and nothing made it better.

“He needs to trust you more rather than try to cover the entire defensive zone by himself.” Jarrett studied me intently. Normally, we didn’t criticize our fearless leader, so I was surprised to hear him doing it. We’d been on Briggs’s side in a divided locker room. This was the first time I’d seen a crack in our alliance. Braden and Jarrett didn’t seem as on board as they had been.

Briggs disliked my dad almost as much as I did. Of course I sided with my defensive partner, even if he was a critical asshole most of the time.

“According to Coach, it’s all my fault for being in the wrong place, wrong time.”

“Briggs is hampering your ability to make the plays,” Jarrett pointed out.

“Briggs is being Briggs. I’m the one that needs to learn to play within his parameters. He’s one of the best defensemen in the league.”

My two friends exchanged one of those glances again that left me out. I hated that.

“What?” I demanded.

“You should study how Kirby plays. He’s the top defenseman on this team, not Briggs. He’s an unselfish team player and a calming, positive influence in the locker room,” Braden said.

Jarrett jumped in. “Braden’s right, you know. Briggs isn’t the player he was even two years ago. His attitude is a detriment.”

I took a moment to digest what was going on here. The mutineers were mutinying against their own cohorts. “You guys need to quit drinking Coach’s Kool-Aid. We suck, and it starts with coaching.”

They both shrugged. I threw up my hands in frustration and headed for the door.

“Text me if Leila’s there,” Jarrett called after me. I flipped him off.

I didn’t like what I’d just heard. We’d banded together, and now I sensed a break. I needed to get away and think because, deep down, I was concerned they might be right. Briggs was negative, and he did erode my confidence. I couldn’t do anything right, according to him, and Coach’s continual criticism backed him up. Jumping on my case and blaming me was the only thing those two agreed upon.

And now my buddies were downplaying how my dad singled me out and questioning Briggs’s influence on us.

What the fuck?

I sped down the freeway and careened around the off-ramp, fishtailing with screeching tires. I'd better slow down before I rolled this thing. Continuing at a more leisurely pace, I arrived at the Rainbow Unicorn ten minutes early. I parked next to the building. The street was deserted on this rainy December night, with not a soul in sight. Down the street, only a few cars were parked outside the dive bar. Monday nights probably weren't conducive to going out.

I sat in my SUV for a few moments to gather my jumble of conflicting thoughts. What if Jarrett and Braden saw things more clearly than I did? Impossible. They weren't living in my hell. Of course they didn't notice the shit I did.

Heaving my troubled self out of my car, I walked to the door, rang to be let in, and entered. The lights were on in the main part of the warehouse. I advanced a few steps inside and paused to let my eyes adjust to the glare.

"What're you doing here?"

I whipped around to face our team captain, Dash. He wore a ratty T-shirt, faded jeans, and an Icehawks baseball cap, looking ready to get down and dirty and do some work. He even wore a tool belt around his waist.

"I guess the same thing you are." His gaze took in my own faded jeans and sweatshirt, but he saw more than that, making me uncomfortable. I didn't appreciate being dissected by anyone, including our team captain. Because of my alliance with Briggs, I felt as if friendly conversations with Dash were a betrayal to Briggs.

"Are you handy?" Dash finally asked.

"Yeah, I can handle a hammer and saw, even power tools."

I'd been the man around the house for years, and I'd learned to do simple repairs for my mom. Home improvement shows were my jam.

"Good." Dash smiled at me and handed me a well-worn tool belt. As much as Briggs tried to convince me otherwise, our team captain was a genuinely nice guy. Everyone liked him except Briggs, who groused he was captain because of his

purported relationship with the owner's granddaughter. While that might've influenced the team's choice, he'd been the captain of his old team for years and clearly had the most leadership experience. I'd never say anything out loud because I was in Briggs's corner, and I wasn't disloyal to my friends.

"We're knocking out that wall and building a new one to make this room bigger and capable of handling more artists." He pointed at the massive wall. When I grimaced, he added, "It's not load bearing, if you're concerned about that."

I shrugged, not willing to be overly friendly with my captain. I'd keep my distance. Dash was in tight with the coaching staff, and he wasn't going to be around much longer. He was trade fodder, and the team would surely use him as such, especially with our crappy record to date.

Dash led me to a small group of my teammates, consisting of Kirby, Trent, and Drakos. All of Coach's disciples, Dash's buddies, and Briggs's adversaries.

Crap. I'd never considered that coming here might put me in a precarious situation with my already volatile defensive partner. Regardless, I was staying. I told Aspen I'd help, and I kept my word, especially when I was trying to impress someone.

Surveying the room, I didn't see her anywhere. Masking my disappointment, I turned back to the group.

My teammates seemed genuinely happy to see me, but I was a suspicious guy, and I assumed they had an ulterior motive of winning me over to their side. Somewhere inside, a small voice whispered that a team divided would never be a winning team, and I might be on the wrong side of what was right for my team. I suppressed that annoying smidgen of conscience. I didn't want to be on this team, and the sooner they sent me elsewhere, the better. Only this was my big chance to make the pros. I was a lowly rookie, and I was failing at playing the political game. I'd always been a team player before, but I'd never been forced to be coached by this incarnation of my father, either.

I focused my attention back on the chore at hand and listened to Dash's instructions and got to work slinging a sledgehammer. I actually enjoyed the physical labor. Sweating profusely with my muscles screaming for relief took my mind off other things.

A few hours and lots of sweat and muscle aches later, the four of us had destroyed the wall. Now for the hard part—cleaning up our mess. We carried the debris to a dumpster in the alley. I grabbed a broom and began sweeping, ignoring the others.

Once I was done, I straightened. My back hurt from slinging that sledgehammer, but I'd survive. I'd tolerated more pain than this after a tough game.

Kirby sidled up to me. "A few of us are practicing before the game. Why don't you join us?"

"I have plans." I didn't conceal my surprise at being invited. The team had optional skates on game mornings. I usually went, but I was aware these guys often stayed longer and worked on drills.

"Okay then, you know where we'll be at ten a.m."

"Thanks." I had no intention of joining them, even though part of me wanted to. Kirby was a top ten defenseman in the league, and I'd pick up more constructive tips from him than from Briggs, and I felt disloyal thinking that.

Kirby studied me for a long moment, nodded, and moved off to join his friends. I'd seen Aspen slip past a while earlier and into the studio. I wasn't going anywhere until I talked to her. The others put on their coats and left. I waved to them and headed for the back.

Aspen was cleaning brushes in the large sink while her friend, I think her name was Heidi, put away paints and cleaned tables. I paused, watching Aspen for a moment. She hummed to herself as she worked and wore a little smile on her beautiful face. Obviously, this was her happy place. My gaze slid down her body, appreciating every luscious curve

and wishing I could see what was under her tight sweater and jeans.

Someday, I vowed. I wanted her, and I was relatively certain she wanted me. I wasn't one to give up easily. Forcing my gaze back to her face, I approached her.

“Hi.”

She glanced up from her work and smiled at me. “Hi, yourself. I saw you out there being all he-man.”

I laughed. “Did you like what you saw?”

“Maybe.” She looked away from me, but I caught her sly smile. She liked me, but I had to get her to admit she did.

“How about a nightcap? I'm buying.”

She hesitated. “I promised Heidi I'd get a drink with her.”

“Invite her to join us. My treat.”

“Okay.” She was reluctant, but I wasn't taking no for an answer.

“What's the closest decent pub near here?”

“There isn't one.”

“That's fine. I have wheels, and I can take you guys home when we're done.”

Her face clouded briefly, but I had no idea what I'd said wrong. Then a brilliant smile broke out on her face. “Okay. That'll be fun, but I'm warning you, I'm starving, and I can put away food with the best of them.”

“I'm a hockey player, remember? I doubt a little thing like you comes close to what hockey players devour.”

“You'd be surprised.”

“You're on. We'll see.”

We drove out of this depressing area to another neighborhood that was in the process of being reclaimed and found a nice brewery still serving food at nine p.m.

With both girls on my arm as we entered, I was feeling damn good about myself and my chances with Aspen.

Chapter Eight

BURNER PHONE

~~Aspen~~

When we left the Uni, Heidi and I followed Grady to his luxurious SUV parked at the curb. He unlocked the doors, and Heidi took the back seat. I hopped into the passenger seat and belted up. As Grady pulled away from the curb, I noticed a man loitering at the end of the block. His hands were shoved in his pockets, and a hoodie was pulled down over his face.

He looked very much like the guy I'd seen earlier at the coffee shop, the one we thought was Michella's ex. He couldn't be. Why would her ex be in this neighborhood?

I had a moment of fear. What if he wasn't stalking her but Heidi or me? That was ridiculous. I didn't even know the guy, nor had I spoken one word to him. I was imagining dark scenarios, something I'd done since my mom had disappeared. Most people breezed through life thinking something as heinous as murder only happened to other people's loved ones. When that bubble of safety is burst, a person sees murderers around every corner. I'd lost my innocence two years ago. Despite telling myself over and over that lightning wouldn't strike twice, I wasn't convincing that part of me who dwelled in the darkness.

I shook off my paranoia and returned to the present.

Grady took us to a nice brewpub in a once run-down part of Portland, now being reclaimed. It wasn't too far from the studio, yet worlds apart.

Heidi sat down opposite Grady in the booth and took her half in the middle. She collected our coats and put them next to her, leaving me no choice but to sit next to him. I shot her a scathing glance, and she merely smirked.

Not necessarily unhappy with the seating arrangement, I slid into the booth, which was small enough our thighs touched, and my heart fluttered at the contact. Fighting my feelings seemed ludicrous. I had a crush on Grady, and he was interested in me. Why in the hell did I keep resisting? Using my mom as an excuse no longer worked. So what was holding me back?

I'd been out of the dating scene for so long, I wasn't sure how to handle the situation, but continuing to turn him down wasn't the answer. Not if I was truly serious about returning to a somewhat normal life.

I made a show of perusing the bar's extensive menu. I barely took notice of the items because of the warmth of Grady's thigh against mine. My shoulder rubbed his, and another thrill of excitement coursed through me. My body tingled with expectation. I tried to place a damper on my reaction, but that was about as effective as leaving a bowl of Tillamook caramel toffee crunch ice cream on the table without tasting it. Not happening. I might as well admit it.

The bartender wandered over and took our drink and food orders. I opted for a double cheeseburger with onion rings because I hadn't been kidding when I'd told Grady I was hungry. Heidi ordered the chicken strips and Grady the rib eye. We each added one of their brews on tap to our order and made small talk until our beers arrived. All the while, Grady's presence distracted me to the point I missed most of the conversation. No one seemed to notice as Heidi was especially chatty tonight, going on about new hairstyles. Grady listened intently, even though I was pretty sure he couldn't care less. His kindness toward my friend melted my heart even more.

"This is good," Grady commented after taking a sip of his beer.

"Really good," I added.

“Thank you for inviting me. I really appreciate it.” Heidi beamed at us. The poor thing rarely got a night out because most of her work was after hours.

“My pleasure.” Grady’s smile was warm, and I felt that he really meant what he said. He was a good guy, and in my world I didn’t know too many good guys.

“What do you do, Heidi?” he asked innocently, having no idea what a loaded question that was.

Heidi handled it smoothly. “I’m going to school to be a hairstylist.”

“Oh, cool. That’s why you’re up on current styles.”

“You have great hair, by the way. If you ever need a shave or haircut, let me know.” Heidi was right. He did have great hair. The kind of hair a woman wanted to run her fingers through, dark and wavy with one errant lock that kept falling over his forehead. My fingers itched to reach up and push that lock back in place.

Grady chuckled, amused by Heidi’s observation. “You think?”

“Definitely.”

“Well, thanks. I never really gave my hair much notice as long as it’s not bugging me or falling in my eyes.” He ducked his head as if embarrassed. I liked that about him. He wasn’t some cocky athlete believing he was the best thing that happened to this town. In fact, I found him to be rather humble.

“Would you ladies like to come to one of our home games? I can get tickets.”

We glanced at each other. Before I was able to say no, Heidi nodded vigorously, so excited she was bouncing up and down in her seat.

“I’d love to,” she squealed.

“And you?” Grady turned to me as though I had a choice.

“She’ll be there,” Heidi answered before I had a chance to formulate an excuse. Grady winked at his fellow coconspirator. I was being railroaded, but I wasn’t resisting too much. After all, going to a game would be fun, even if I knew nothing about hockey. I’d enjoy watching Grady in his element.

“What about Leila? Can we ask her?” Heidi always thought of us before herself.

“Absolutely.”

“I’ll text her right now.” Heidi bent her head over her phone and a few seconds later looked up with a radiant smile on her face. “She’s in.”

“Cool. It’s a date. We have home games this Wednesday and Friday, then we’re on the road for a week. Do either of those days work?”

Heidi looked to me for clarification. I glared at her since she hadn’t asked my opinion about anything else so far. She smiled innocently, giddy with excitement. “Friday night.”

“That work for you?” Finally someone was actually including me.

“I guess so.”

“You don’t sound overly excited.” Grady’s face reflected his disappointment, causing a twinge of immediate guilt. I was being a brat by responding to his generous offer with a lack of enthusiasm.

“I’m sorry. I...I...just don’t go out into large public groups often. I don’t know what to wear.” Okay, a stupid, feeble excuse for my behavior, but it was the best I came up with on a moment’s notice.

Something buzzed in Heidi’s purse, and she pulled out a burner phone. “Oh, I have to take this.” She quickly moved outside to take the call. Grady frowned. He’d noted she had a regular phone and burner phone.

I knew what he was thinking. Who carried two phones? Drug dealers? Criminals? Someone engaging in something

illegal.

He turned to me. A thousand questions on his face. “What’s up with that?”

“That’s her business phone.”

“Business? What kind of business requires a burner phone?”

“She cuts hair on the side. Some of her clients have weird hours.” I didn’t meet his gaze. He’d see the lie for what it was.

His eyes narrowed. He scrutinized me and found me lacking. “That still doesn’t explain the burner phone.”

“It’s really none of our concern.”

“Are you worried about being involved with someone who’s into illegal activities? You never know if the fallout might extend to you.”

I was touched by his interest. He barely knew me, but he did tell me all about his sister, so I guess we were closer than I cared to admit.

Heidi came back to the table and grabbed her purse. “I’m sorry, I have to go.”

“What about your meal?” The food hadn’t been served yet.

“I don’t know. I can’t wait.” Heidi was jittery and kept looking over her shoulder.

“Are you okay?” Grady asked.

“I’m fine. Really. I have to go. Thank you for everything. See you Friday night, if not sooner.” She hustled out of the pub without looking back.

Grady frowned but didn’t press for more answers, which I appreciated. “Any more word on your mom?”

“No, I talked to the detective this a.m.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. You know how it is.”

“I do.” He reached out and took my hand. “I’m glad you’re attending the game on Friday.” His blue eyes lit up, and I had to admit I enjoyed knowing I’d made him happy. He didn’t release my hand but held on firmly while gazing into my eyes. I gazed back; I couldn’t help myself. Looking into his eyes made me feel alive again, as if none of the bad things had happened and everything would be okay. I leaned into him, gathering comfort from his presence. Contentment I hadn’t felt in a few years washed over me. I was exactly where I wanted to be and with the man I wanted to be with. Maybe that sounded crazy considering how little we knew each other, but I felt as if I knew him.

“I’m looking forward to it,” I admitted.

“I’m glad.” He squeezed my hand. I lifted my head to his. Only inches separated us, and I craved the feel of his lips on mine. As if by some mutual agreement, we closed the gap and our mouths touched once again. My mouth lingered on his, relishing this simple brush of our lips, while my entire body celebrated this chaste kiss with an enthusiasm usually reserved for making out for several minutes.

He did this to me. No one else had ever made me feel like this with such small gestures.

Reminding myself we were in public and I’d never been prone to PDAs, I reluctantly withdrew. My head reeled, and my heart thudded while certain lady parts woke up and demanded more.

He watched me with knowing eyes and a crooked smile on his face as if he knew what I was thinking when I wasn’t even sure what I was thinking.

Chapter Nine

PENALTY

~~Grady~~

The week zipped past, and I didn't have much time to concern myself with anything other than hockey and Aspen. I wasn't able to go to the studio the rest of the week, as I had team obligations in the evenings and a game against Seattle on Wednesday, which we lost. Friday night was upon me before I knew it.

I worried about Heidi sucking Aspen into some kind of illegal activity, but there was nothing I could do about it at this point. Aspen and I weren't a couple, and I had no right to dictate her friends to her, not that I would even if we were a couple. I wasn't the controlling type.

I relived that brief kiss with Aspen multiple times over since Monday, but my imagination took things way beyond a kiss, especially when I lay in bed at night or in the shower in the morning. She'd gotten to me in ways I didn't usually let women get to me, and I wasn't sure why. Whatever chemistry we had went beyond our mutual grief over our losses and ventured into uncharted territory for me. I'd concocted a simple game plan: win her over and be persistent. Nothing more complicated, and I was making progress.

The dazed look in her eyes when we'd broken off that kiss had encouraged me. She felt the same as I did, even if she didn't know it yet.

If only the rest of my life were progressing as well. The game Wednesday had been another disaster. Briggs constantly

yelled at me on the ice, berated me when we returned to the bench and took his frustration out on me. My father pulled me aside in practice yesterday and lectured me on defensive positioning as if I were a peewee player or something. His scolding was fucking embarrassing. I'd taken it without a word, but my defiant stance had only irritated him all the more. I wished he and Briggs would just leave me alone. Let one of the assistant coaches help me out. I'd get further that way, but I didn't dare approach either of them with such a suggestion. After all, I was a lowly rookie.

Rumors flew around the locker room, centered on this being our captain's last game as an Icehawk. I was torn between my loyalty to Briggs and genuinely liking Dash. I wondered if Briggs had softened somewhat toward Dash. I caught him at one time deep in conversation with him, and Briggs wasn't wearing his usual belligerent expression.

Friday night I did my usual game prep, listened to my father spout his pregame pep talk, and took to the ice for warm-ups. On my second circuit of the ice, Jarrett elbowed me and pointed to the glass near the bench.

“Our ladies are here.”

Our ladies.

I liked the sound of that. A lot.

I didn't react at first, not wanting to appear overanxious, but I altered my circling of the ice to take me past where they sat. Heidi wasn't there, but Michella sat with Leila and Aspen. I tapped my stick on the glass as I leisurely skated by and grinned, meeting Aspen's gaze briefly. She wore the jersey I'd had delivered to the studio a few days ago. Jarrett was at my side and saluted the women, but I knew he was only interested in Leila. To my knowledge, he was having a hard time getting a date with her, just as I was with Aspen, but my drought was about to end. I was sure of it.

We sped up once we were past them, grinning like fools.

“Grady!” Coach bellowed and called me to the center of the ice. I gave Jarrett the side-eye and skated toward my father.

The man was tense and irritated, a far cry from his usual upbeat persona. I was in trouble and had no idea why, but I was about to find out.

I did a sideways stop, spraying him with ice. He grimaced, but I didn't give a shit.

“Get your head in the game and quit flirting with the fans,” he ground out through gritted teeth.

“That's not a fan. That's my girlfriend.” I didn't know why I said that, probably to poke at him a little to show him he was wrong.

“I don't care what the fuck she is to you. You can't afford any distractions.” His threat hung between us, and I tamped down my temper. Like it or not, he was my coach, and I had to find a way to coexist with him until such a time as I was off this team.

“Yes, sir.” I saluted him and skated off, expecting him to yell at me, but he didn't. After all, too much negativity would tarnish his rah-rah reputation. My teammates never seemed to notice how much he singled me out for a dressing down. After all, Jarrett had done the same thing, and he didn't say a word to him.

I raced around our end of the rink and slapped pucks toward the net, taking my frustration out on innocent pieces of rubber. Despite Coach's warning, my gaze slid to Aspen. Her eyes followed me around the rink, causing my heart to soar. I raised my stick slightly in acknowledgment. Let my dad chew my ass again. I didn't care.

Briggs, who'd been doing his usual loner warm-up, skated past where the girls were sitting and rapped his knuckles on the glass. Michella raised her hand slightly but didn't break a smile. In fact, both of them wore grim expressions.

What the fuck was up with those two? This wasn't the first time I'd seen something going on between them. I shrugged it off. None of my business, and I had enough going on.

My gaze slid to where my father stood with his assistants. His eyes were on me. His expression was thoughtful, not

hostile. I looked away quickly before he caught me gawking. I didn't want him to think I cared what he thought about me or my game other than on a professional level.

"Don't let that asshole get to you," Briggs said from my side, surprising me. I hadn't heard him skate up.

"I'm trying not to."

"Talk to your agent. Get a trade. That's what I'm doing."

I nodded. I'd tried that route, but my play was shitty enough no one was interested so far. I had to up my game to garner interest from other teams, but that was a double-edged sword. If I played better, the Icehawks might want to keep me, and I didn't want to be here.

Except for...

My attention was drawn back to Aspen.

I wasn't sure I wanted to leave before I had a chance to explore what we might be to each other. How stupid was that, considering I couldn't even get a date with her? I'd be a fool to avoid a trade based on my nonrelationship with Aspen.

But she was here. That meant something. And her eyes were glued to me. Even when I took my spot on the bench, I felt her gaze like a gentle, soothing stroke. I was smitten and dumbfounded as to why her of all the women I'd been around. I knew the answer immediately. Aspen and I shared a soul-deep anguish very few people would ever have the misfortune of sharing.

The puck dropped. I pushed my thoughts of her to the back of my mind and focused on the game.

Arizona struggled worse than we did, and we capitalized on their mistakes. For once, we weren't the ones being exploited by the other team. Toward the end of the third period, we were up four to one. I had one assist and two blocked shots, a good night for me. As I came off the ice during my shift, Briggs sat down next to me. I'd avoided sitting by him because I was playing well and didn't want him to ruin the good feeling.

“You let their last shot through to the goalie,” he grumped.

“Roman checked it. They didn’t score.” I hated having my parade rained on. I was playing well, and Aspen was in the stands. I didn’t need to be called out by my partner or anyone else.

“No thanks to you,” Briggs sulked.

“You and my dad must compare notes and come up with new ways to tear me down,” I spat back at him. Beyond irritated, I’d had enough of the two of them.

“Your dad?” Briggs glanced around as if looking for my father. “Is he here?”

“No, he watches on TV,” I lied, but Briggs saw right through the lie. His eyes narrowed as he attempted to make sense of my remark, but I saw the wheels turning.

I was saved from further attacks because our shift came again. I leaped over the boards onto the ice and powered toward Ike Carlen, the Arizona forward with the puck. I made a dive for it, probably not a wise move, but too late to stop now. His feet tangled in my stick, and we both went down.

Carlen kicked out to disentangle himself and shot to his feet, dropping his gloves. I was slower to get up, and he hit me with a hard right before I knew what was happening. The guy was peppering my face with his fists. I dropped my gloves and got in one good shot before the refs pulled us apart.

Both of us headed toward the sin bin. I brooded for two minutes and watched Arizona score twice on the penalty play. We couldn’t lose this game in the last couple minutes of the third. If we did, that loss would be on me.

Once my two minutes were up, I burst onto the ice and immediately fell on my ass. Briggs berated me, and I ignored him. My face burned with embarrassment, and I didn’t dare look Aspen’s way.

We held out and won the game, much to our fans’ joy. The way they celebrated, a person would’ve thought we’d won the Cup. No matter how bad we were, those fans were with us. I gave them props for that. I shook off the humiliation of the last

few minutes and looked back to the good things I'd done in this game.

“Grady.” Coach waited for me as I emerged from the tunnel into the hallway near the locker room. I rolled my eyes and sighed.

“What?” I said defensively, prepared for an ass chewing.

“Are you okay?”

“I'm fucking fine.” If I hadn't been too busy licking my wounds and being defensive, I'd have taken note of the concern etched on his face. Instead, I refused to recognize the emotion for what it was.

His expression hardened. “No more stupid penalties. You almost cost us the game.”

“He dropped the gloves first. What was I supposed to do? Take it?”

“Get that eye taken care of.”

I bit back a retort and pivoted on one skate to leave, but my dad had to get the last word in, of course.

“And Grady...”

I hesitated. I should've ignored him and kept walking, but I didn't. I glanced over my shoulder.

“Learn how to throw a punch.”

I muttered a couple choice curses under my breath and stomped into the locker room, grouchy as hell. This wasn't how I wanted the night to go, not when I'd played lights-out up until that penalty and should be riding high.

I relieved some of the tension after a hot shower. Changing into street clothes, I hurried to leave the arena. I'd arranged to meet Aspen at the Puck after the game. While it wasn't a date, I saw it that way.

Briggs fell into step beside me as I headed for my car.

“Going to the Puck?” he asked.

“You know it. We won.”

He grimaced but didn't do his usual negative bullshit. "I'm coming, too."

"Suit yourself." I was still a little peeved at him for the shit he gave me when I was having a good game.

Briggs grunted and turned toward his large pickup.

I puzzled over why he wanted to join me but shrugged it off. He'd joined us for drinks before, and we had won. My immediate thoughts switched to the woman waiting for me, and a smile spread across my face.

I wouldn't let the penalty ruin my day, not when everything else was going right.

Chapter Ten

DROPPING THE PUCK

~~Aspen~~

I'd never seen a hockey game in person, and I enjoyed every minute of it, especially the part where Grady acknowledged me. I'd seen his dad call him aside and hoped he hadn't gotten in too much trouble for taking his mind briefly off the game.

Grady was a work of athletic art, in my opinion. He skated with power and confidence throughout the evening. I was mesmerized by how he moved on two thin blades better than most people moved in regular shoes. If I hadn't been falling for him before, I would have fallen deeper on this night. His expression was intense and determined as he sped from one end to another, chasing the puck and doing all the stuff hockey players do. Michella filled me in on what to watch for. Novice that I was, I didn't understand the different positions and what their duties were. This was nothing like football. Hockey players appeared to operate under accelerated chaos and somehow managed not to run into each other.

When Grady got into that fight with a guy much bigger than him, I held my breath. I wasn't thrilled with this part of the game. When he came roaring out of the penalty box two minutes later, he tripped and slid across the ice ass first. I laughed along with all the people in my immediate area. Grady leaped to his feet and chased after the puck. Even from this distance, I could tell his face was bright red.

After the game, I was jacked up, having been sucked into the excitement of the fast-paced game. Watching it in person

was more fun than on television, and I learned more tonight than I had from catching glimpses of the games in the bar while I was working.

Heidi had texted me just before the game and canceled on us. I wasn't entirely surprised. She canceled more often than she showed up.

Michella hustled us out of there as soon as the final tugboat horn sounded. The three of us headed for the Puck. We made our way through a boisterous crowd celebrating the win and into the bar. The team often gathered in a private room near the back of the bar. Since Leila and I worked there, no one questioned our right to sit with the team. Besides, Michella knew the drill and walked past everyone into the room as if she owned the place. No one dared question her.

We were the first ones to arrive, but soon other WAGs joined us. Everly wasn't in the group, and I was surprised. I'd understood she was dating the captain. Michella would know.

"Where's Everly?"

Michella frowned briefly. "She's not coming."

"Oh." Her response didn't invite further questions, and I didn't know her well enough to ask. Michella introduced us to some of the WAGs. Most were very nice and stunningly beautiful. One WAG in particular gave us the once-over and turned her back on us to whisper with her group of giggling friends.

"Ignore Trinity. She's a bitch. She's gone out a couple times with Roman, the goaltender, and has pushed herself into the group as if she belongs. If I had my way, I'd boot her out of this room, but the guys like her and her friends because, well, you can guess why."

I could guess why. Trinity and her two girlfriends were definitely showing off their assets. Not that there was anything wrong with that. I'd been known to do the same thing a time or two or three.

I shrugged and turned away, secure in the knowledge that I'd been invited here by a player and didn't need to vie for

anyone's attention or view other women as competition.

The guys trickled in several minutes later.

Grady ambled in and paused in the doorway. I waited for him to notice me. When he did, a slow, sexy smile turned up the corners of those so-kissable lips. I grinned back at him, and he nodded, heading straight for me. I'd put my purse in the chair next to me, so I slung it over the back of my chair to make room for him. Jarrett and Braden were on his heels. Jarrett's gaze immediately went to Leila, but I didn't pay much attention to them as Grady had taken the seat next to me. He slid his arm across my shoulders as if staking a claim among all his teammates.

My head spun with the implications, only I had a hard time finding anything negative in his possessive gesture. It wasn't as if he was obsessive about it.

The guy I knew as Briggs joined Braden and Jarrett. They pulled chairs up to our table and sat down. Someone ordered pitchers. Soon the entire room was full of raucous hockey players celebrating a rare win. Guys were yelling and downing shots. Jarrett was in the middle of it all. He appeared to be one of the instigators of anything going on but in a good way.

"Wild, huh?" Grady said into my ear so I could hear him over the din in the room.

"Really wild. You played a good game."

"Thanks."

"There's one thing I don't understand. What was the coach upset about?"

"My penalty."

"But that other guy started it."

"Yeah, I know."

I frowned, not understanding this nuance of the game. While I didn't know much about hockey, Michella did. She'd praised Grady's game and pointed out all the good things he'd done. From what she said, throwing punches for a reason wasn't a bad thing as it often ignited the team. I didn't like it,

but Michella and Leila got into the fights, showing me a side of them I'd never seen. I'm glad they were my friends.

"I don't understand. You were only defending yourself. Even I could see that, and I know next to nothing."

"Thank you. You don't know how good that makes me feel."

"I think you're the best player out there." I blushed, uncomfortable by his remark but glowing because of his words.

"I hope so," he chuckled and squeezed my shoulder affectionately. His face was incredibly close to mine, and his eyes drew me in, making me forget for a moment that we were in a bar with his partying teammates.

"Grady doesn't know how to defend himself in a fight," Briggs grumbled, speaking loud enough to be heard over the crowd.

Grady shot him a withering glare, but nothing withered Briggs. He shrugged unconcernedly. His gaze shifted to Michella. She pointedly ignored him, focusing her attention anywhere but on Briggs. Currently, she flirted with Braden. Grady's roommate was playing with fire because Briggs fisted his hands on top of the table. He wasn't happy.

Normally I wouldn't like someone as grumpy as Briggs, but something about this man made me feel for him. He was hurting, and he lashed out at everyone because he didn't know how to handle the hurt. I'd done the same thing after my mom had disappeared, blaming everyone from her to the detectives to the city of Portland. Thank God I moved beyond it, though a little worse for wear and a lot more broke. Shit happens, and all a person could do was roll with the punches and not let them destroy them. Briggs was letting his problems destroy him.

We all had a story, and some of us let that past consume us while others rose above it. Grady's story was tragic, and I doubted Briggs had a worse one, but he didn't handle his trauma as well as Grady. In my book, that made Grady

stronger than Briggs, which I'm sure his grumpy ass wouldn't appreciate hearing.

"Drama is afoot," I whispered to Grady, leaning in so only he would hear. I lingered for a moment reveling in the clean-soaped smell of him, which was hot as fuck. I wanted to run my tongue across his jaw, his cheek, his neck, but I resisted. My lady parts protested, but they weren't getting their way.

"Yeah, this is normal from what I've seen."

"They're a strange pair."

Grady chuckled. "Yeah."

Dragging his gaze away from Michella, Briggs directed his attention briefly to Grady. "Meet me in the workout room tomorrow morning at ten, and I'll teach you how to throw a punch."

The table suddenly grew quiet, and all eyes were on these two guys. Grady sat back and gaped at Briggs. Obviously, he hadn't expected any kind of help coming from that man. Grady composed himself and did a great job of pretending the offer wasn't a big deal. "Okay."

Briggs didn't react. His moment of being human gone. With a grunt, he stood, cast one final murderous glare at Braden, and left. Michella, who'd given the appearance of not noticing Briggs, suddenly glanced around. Our eyes met, and I shrugged.

"I'll be right back," she said, leaving a surprised Braden in her wake as she hurried out the door after Briggs.

Braden narrowed his gaze and scratched his stubbled chin. "What the hell just happened there? Was I being used to make Briggs jealous?"

I snorted. "Even more important, Briggs is jealous."

"Where've you two been? That thing between them has been going on all season." Jarrett rolled his eyes.

"You would know." The team teased Jarrett unmercifully about being the team gossip. He didn't mind. In fact, he basked in the attention.

“I guess I’d better move on to someone else or violate the bro code.”

“I would,” Grady said.

The conversation drifted back to hockey and whether or not the captain would be traded before the upcoming road trip on Sunday. I listened, fascinated by the ins and outs of the hockey business. There was so much more to it than my artistic mind could ever fathom.

As the night wore on, I noticed Grady nursed the same beer most of the night. On the other hand, I took advantage of the free-flowing booze and was pretty buzzed by the time the party broke up. I’d have never imagined I’d have so much fun hanging around a bunch of jocks. These guys were nothing like the football players who’d harassed me in high school because I was different and one of the oddballs. The Icehawks were genuinely nice guys. Perhaps when an athlete reached the professional level, he didn’t have to drag others down to build himself up—well, except for Briggs.

“Could I give you a ride home?” Grady asked as we stood to put on our coats. I swayed slightly, balancing myself by planting my palms on his chest. He grasped my shoulders gently until I steadied myself. I gazed into those serious blue eyes and lost myself once again. I’d been around couples who were really into each other and always teased them for being so ridiculous. Now I got it.

If we hadn’t been around several friends and teammates, he would’ve kissed me, or I’d have kissed him first.

After several seconds of forgetting where we were, Braden nudged Grady. “Hey, earth to Grady.”

Reluctantly, he lowered his arms, but his eyes stayed on mine.

“I’m heading home,” Braden said, sounding annoyed.

“Okay, I’ll be along in a while. I’m giving Aspen a ride home.”

“You are?”

“You’re not taking a bus this late at night, even if they’re running.”

“It’s okay. I’ll catch a ride with Leila.” I had a problem with being told what to do, and I bristled. It was a quirk of mine.

“Leila appears to have other plans.” Grady jerked his chin in the direction of the door where Leila and Jarrett were about to exit.

Grady was willing to go out of his way to take me home. “Thank you,” I said simply, feeling as if I hadn’t been the most gracious. I had to stop giving him mixed signals. I wanted him to take me home because I wanted to spend as much time as possible with him. Why pretend otherwise?

We walked side by side to his SUV, not touching. He opened the passenger door for me, and I heaved myself up into the tall vehicle and strapped on my seat belt.

Grady settled into the driver’s seat and grinned at me. He had the most spectacular smile, and every time he showed it, he owned another piece of my heart. That damn stray lock of hair fell across his forehead, and I willed myself to keep my hands to myself.

We drove in silence for the first few minutes before my curiosity got the best of me. “What’s Briggs’s story?”

Grady’s jaw tightened in response to my question. “No idea.”

“Has he always been grumpy like this?”

“Grumpy? That’s a nice way to put it. I’ve never played with him before. Rumor has it that something changed him two years ago, and he became a different person after that. He’s been moved from team to team. Word around the league is the Icehawks are his last chance.”

“And Jarrett doesn’t know what it is?”

Grady chuckled and shot me a bone-melting smile. “If he did, he’d be telling everyone who’d listen. The guy doesn’t know how to keep a secret.”

“I guessed that.”

“I’m glad you came to my game.”

“I loved it. Everything except for the fighting. It’s pretty incredible what you guys can do on skates.”

He shrugged. “Most of us have been skating since before we could walk. It’s as natural as being in sneakers.”

“As someone who can’t skate without falling on her ass, I’m impressed. Hockey is much more dramatic in person. The action is faster than I imagined, and the hits are more brutal. I don’t know how some of you can keep skating after being slammed around like that.”

“Hockey players are tough, and we’re hard to keep down.” He winked at me, and I grinned back.

Grady pulled to the curb, and I was surprised to see we were already at the Uni. I put my hand on the door and turned slightly to him.

“Thanks for the—”

“Don’t go yet.” He was almost pleading, and I placed my hands in my lap and faced him. My heart slammed in my chest while other parts of me sang with joy. I hated to disappoint certain parts, but nothing was happening tonight.

I met his direct gaze and shouldn’t have because he hooked me and pulled me in, making me forget everyone and everything but him. Everything that’d been important to me a minute ago was no longer part of my thoughts.

I wanted him to kiss me, really kiss me this time.

I leaned closer and tilted my head. A few seconds later, the rest of my world tilted.

Chapter Eleven

GOODBYE, CAPTAIN?

~~Grady~~

If that dreamlike expression in her eyes wasn't an invitation to be kissed, I didn't know what was.

My gaze dropped to Aspen's lush pink lips, and I swallowed. I was completely smitten and under her spell. I had no idea why Aspen got to me like this, but she did. There wasn't any denying the power she had to make me forget anything and everything but her.

"Aspen," I whispered huskily, not sure if I was asking permission or giving her a warning. Her lips parted slightly, and I suppressed a groan. She was killing me, and my dick was telling me all about it. Try as I might, I couldn't keep him out of the conversation. He had plans, big plans, and I hadn't thought beyond a real kiss.

Aspen leaned closer, and I met her halfway. The first touch of our lips was tentative, like two people who were out of practice and not certain they wanted to take themselves where they were heading. She felt so good my doubt faded, to be replaced by the sure knowledge that what we were doing was exactly what we should be doing.

I placed my hands on either side of her beautiful face and deepened the kiss. She gladly accepted the invitation, and our tongues entangled in an exploration of what was and could be. She buried her fingers in my hair, pulling me tighter to her. I didn't need much encouragement. The way her eyes fluttered

shut and her tongue danced with mine was more inspiration than I needed.

I felt her in every bone in my body and in some places that weren't bones. I felt her as if she were a vital part of me, as vital as my lungs breathing and my heart beating. I was completely immersed in the kiss as I'd never been before. Her scent intoxicated me, leaving me dizzy with lust, but how I felt went beyond that. Yeah, I was a guy in my early twenties, and lust always entered into the equation with a woman I was attracted to. This was different, though. This was freaking deeper. What I was experiencing made a guy write love songs or sappy poetry. This wasn't me, yet with her it was, and I went with it, embracing the newness of our connection and wallowing in the emotions.

Aspen drew back first, and I was crushed. I could've kissed her forever. She blinked and stared up at me with these big round brown eyes as if she were in awe. I was the one who was in awe. She'd given me the best kiss I'd ever had, and I wanted more.

"I need to get inside. I have an early morning." She hastily gathered her purse and opened the door before I had a chance to protest. Stunned by the kiss, I didn't move fast enough, and she was inside the studio before I was able to say good night.

I stared at the closed door long after she shut it behind her. I picked up my phone to text her *good night and sweet dreams* before realizing I didn't have her number.

Well, crap.

I banged my forehead against the steering wheel a few times in frustration. Nothing left to do but go home, take a shower, and work off this hard-on I'd built up.

I waited a few more minutes, but she didn't reappear. Sighing, I pulled onto the empty street.

A couple teenagers in dark hoodies loitered on the corner while another man was curled up in a doorway. The teens tracked me with their eyes as I drove by, and I sped up a little.

My vehicle was nicer than the ones normally hanging around this neighborhood. They were probably scoping me out.

I hated the thought of Aspen living in this part of town, but I didn't have any vote in what she did, even if her location concerned me.

I parked in the underground garage, took the elevator to my floor, and let myself into the apartment. My usually hyper roommate was sprawled on the couch staring mindlessly at the hockey channel recapping tonight's games. Our game highlights popped up. I tossed my coat over a chair, moved some crap off another chair, and collapsed into it.

"I can't believe you're home," I said.

"Sloppy win tonight," Jarrett grouched, ignoring my thinly veiled dig.

"A win's a win."

"We suck."

"You sound like Briggs."

"Yeah, well, we do suck."

I opened my mouth to commiserate but changed my mind. Negativity was dragging us down. I hated to sound like my father, but in a lot of ways, I grudgingly admitted he was right. We had to believe in ourselves and play for one another rather than being a team full of points chasers or blame layers. I didn't voice my opinions, though. My hyper roommate was in a funk, and he wouldn't appreciate any obvious attempts at drawing him out.

"Can you believe Briggs volunteered to teach me how to fight?"

"He's using it as an excuse to beat the crap out of you just out of sheer cussedness."

"Well, aren't we Sally Sunshine tonight. What's the problem? Couldn't find a willing participant in your extracurricular activities?"

“Fuck you.” Jarrett threw a pillow at me. I ducked and tossed it back. He didn’t have the energy to retaliate. He really was low tonight.

“What’s stuck up your ass?”

“What do you think?”

I nodded, not needing to go into detail. Jarrett was as horny as they came, and he wasn’t getting any tonight. Sometimes things just went that way. I didn’t get any either, but I did have one epic fucking kiss, and I foresaw more on the horizon. I didn’t rub salt in his wounds, though.

“Looks like you struck out, too.”

“Yeah, I did,” I lied. I was getting somewhere, but Jarrett wouldn’t understand, and I chose not to enlighten him. The entire locker room would know by tomorrow morning if I told him anything.

“Jeffs was in a mood tonight.” Jarrett watched me closely. He had his suspicions about the coach and me, but for once he kept them to himself.

“No more than usual.”

“You think? Getting up your butt about that fight made zero sense.”

I shrugged. “He has it in for me. If I’m lucky, I’ll be traded before the deadline.”

“Yeah. I’m sure most of us are hoping for the same thing.”

I questioned the accuracy of that statement. There were lots of guys on the team who appeared to like Portland, the staff, and the coaches. We were all a little down right now, knowing that our captain had one foot out the door.

As if on cue, I saw Dash’s face on the television and listened.

“It’s believed that the Icehawks are close to making a deal regarding captain Dashed Bates for undisclosed players and draft picks.”

“He’s deserting our sinking ship.” Jarrett slouched lower.

I wasn't sure I blamed him. As captain, he'd taken the entire team on his shoulders, and we hadn't made it easy. I'd been so wrapped up in getting under my dad's skin, I'd become one of those teammates everyone dreaded being around. The guy dragging the others down? Nah, I dismissed such thoughts. That was Briggs, not me.

Or was I part of the problem?



The next day I met Briggs in the morning as planned. We practiced throwing punches by using the punching bag in the team's workout room. As usual, he was brutal in his criticism, but the guy knew how to fight, and I learned a lot from him in that short session. He didn't promise another one but instead left me standing alone as he headed for the locker room to prepare for the team's optional skate.

The skate was short. There weren't too many guys present, as it was our last weekend home before a five-day road trip followed by Christmas. My roommates and I didn't decorate except for a sorry-looking Charlie Brown tree Braden had dragged home from somewhere yesterday.

After the skate, my father waved me aside. I stared longingly at my teammates filing off the ice, wishing I were with them. I propped my hands on my hips and regarded him with disinterest or what I hoped looked like indifference.

He studied me for a good long time with an expression I wasn't able to read. For once, I didn't see disgust or anger but something more deeply troubling. His wrath made me defensive, and that I could handle, but this? Something else was going on here. He looked like a concerned father, as if I mattered to him.

"I think we should talk privately over dinner," he said.

I stared at him, unable to fathom why we needed any more conversations than we'd already had. "It's a little late for that. There's nothing left to talk about." I spun around and headed off the ice. He called after me, but I kept going. My brain was

jumbled with conflicting emotions, and I struggled to handle them. Memories of the sacrifices he'd made to help my game and be there for me flooded through me, and I fought them off. I couldn't succumb to those memories. That man didn't exist anymore. He'd died the same night my sister had disappeared.

I was confused and upset when I pushed open the locker room door and stopped in my tracks. I glanced at the long faces. Most of my teammates were still fully dressed in their practice uniforms. No one was talking. Music wasn't blaring. Guys weren't joking or arguing. The silence disconcerted me as much as my short conversation with my dad had. Sitting down in front of my stall, I turned to Braden.

“What's going on?”

Braden didn't respond right away. He stared right through me for several seconds before he brought his gaze back to me. Sadness pulled down the corners of his mouth. “Dash is going to be traded to Chicago sometime today, or so the rumor is.”

Surprisingly, my stomach clenched, and a dark cloud descended over my head. I might not be Dash's biggest fan, but I had to admit he was a good captain. He'd done the best he could in this weird situation. I didn't blame him for wanting out, though. We were going nowhere fast, and his old team was a Stanley Cup favorite.

“Well, fuck,” I said and slumped against my stall. Dash hadn't been present at the skate, and I should've realized his absence was a red flag. Our captain never missed a practice, setting a good example as usual. I felt sick inside at how I'd treated him over the past few months. He hadn't deserved my disrespect, yet he'd taken it like the champion he was. And what did that make me?

I didn't want to think about it.

I showered, dressed, and trudged to my car. Since I didn't have Aspen's number, an oversight I intended to rectify as soon as possible, I wasn't able to bounce the rumors off her. Once I arrived home, I called my mother. She'd been trying to reach me, and I'd avoided talking to her. I loved my mom, and she'd been my biggest ally back in those dark days and still

was. She did have a tendency to butt into my business and find ways to get me to open up. That wasn't a bad thing, and tonight I needed someone to talk to.

“Grady, where have you been?” My mom scolded me immediately upon taking the call. I suppressed a smile. She was a force to be reckoned with, and I'd never understood how my stubborn father and equally stubborn mother had lasted as long as they did. I recalled the fighting, which became a nightly occurrence toward the end. Their divorce had been acrimonious to say the least, and my mom had gone for the jugular. I'd taken it harder than my mom or sister because my dad had been my best buddy, my personal hero, and my coach. Life without him had been brutal, and we talked on the phone almost every night. I remembered those days and how torn I'd been between my two parents. My mom, like many parents made bitter by divorce, had pressured us to take her side. My sister had originally, but I'd resisted. I'd missed my dad and looked forward to our court-mandated visits with him for holidays and vacations. We'd spent those times immersed in our mutual love for hockey. If it hadn't been for my dad, I'd have never had the basic skills to make it as far as I had.

These melancholy memories of him were shadowed by the disappearance of my sister, my overwhelming guilt, and my father's obvious anger. My mother had been my rock during those times, and I'd never spent another vacation with my father or even corresponded with him much after the first week my sister had gone missing. We talked on the phone occasionally, but our conversations were stiff and uncomfortable. As time went on, we'd gone our separate ways until now.

“Sorry, Mom, I've been busy.” I tempered my tone with just the right amount of contriteness to calm her down somewhat.

“Too busy to talk to your mother?”

“I'm a bad son.” I sighed. My mom excelled at guilt trips. I'd become somewhat immune to them over the years even though her transparent attempts to shame me into her way of thinking irritated me at times. I hadn't lived at home since I'd

been sixteen and played in the juniors, which looking back was probably a good thing.

“Grady, don’t be so dramatic.”

I didn’t think I was being dramatic. She actually was, but my mom did a bang-up job of projecting.

“How’re things going? I’ve caught a few of your games. You’re playing well.”

“Thanks. Things are tough as you’d expect with a brand-new hockey team. We’re trying to learn one another’s quirks and moves. It’s tough.”

“I can only imagine. You’re not playing with the confidence I’m used to seeing from you.” Mom loved hockey and had played herself in college. She and Dad had met at the rink and fallen in love. When he’d gone into the NHL, she’d followed him.

“I know.” I stared out the large windows at the view of Portland city lights. “I’m struggling.”

“Is it because of your father?”

“Partially. He’s on my ass all the time. I can’t do anything to please him. He’s singled me out, paired me with our most difficult defenseman, and sabotaged me every step of the way. Mom, I think he’s trying to destroy my career out of spite.”

She was quiet for a long time. There was no love lost between my mom and dad. Normally, she’d jump at the chance to trash him, but this time she was quiet. I had the distinct impression she was planning her response carefully.

Finally, she spoke. “Grady, you know I don’t care for your dad and rarely have much good to say about him, but I think you might be overly sensitive.”

I held the phone away from my face and gaped at it as if I’d find an explanation for her statement. Of course I didn’t. “Why would you say that?”

“Because he’s not that type of man. He loves you, Grady.”

“He has a fucking bad way of showing it.”

“Oh, I know he was a jerk when Nancy first went missing. He was hurting, and he lashed out, blaming you, but I know how important you are to him.”

I couldn't believe I was hearing this. My mom never defended my father. “What are you trying to say?”

“I think you should give him a second chance and stop looking for ulterior motives. As little as I think of him as a husband, he was a good father to both of you. I can't fathom why I'm defending him, but I am. Possibly because your estrangement hurts you as much as him.”

I'd expected commiseration from her, not this. I didn't want to discuss my dad and thought of the one thing that'd make her abandon any further talk about him. “Mom, I've met a girl.”

My mom literally gasped. She'd often lamented she'd never have grandchildren due to the toxic relationship I'd witnessed between my father and her, asserting they were the reason I'd never had a long-term girlfriend.

“What do you mean?” Skepticism leaked into her disbelieving tone.

“I've met someone I'm interested in dating.”

Silence.

“I'm thinking about an exclusive relationship,” I clarified, interpreting her silence as shock.

“Grady, who is she, and how did you meet her?”

I knew my mom would want all the deets, so I gave them to her. She listened without comment until I finished. “An artist? I can't see an artist as a good match for you. Does she love hockey?”

“She doesn't really know anything about it, but she enjoyed my game last night.”

More silence.

“Mom, aren't you happy for me? You've always been worried that my childhood exposure to relationships might've

ruined me for one of my own.”

“I was worried.”

“I’d love for you to meet her next time you’re in town.” I’m not sure I was ready for that, but she was on a cruise during Christmas and probably wouldn’t be venturing to Portland for a while. “Mom, say something?”

“Oh, Grady,” she sighed with what sounded like exasperation. “I’m happy for you, but I’m worried. You’re too young to be serious about a woman. You have your entire life ahead of you. Have fun. Play the field. Learn what you do and don’t like. But don’t get pinned down to one woman until you know what you want.”

“I’m not giving her a ring anytime soon.” I grabbed a puck off the coffee table, clenched it in my hand, and threw it hard. I pegged an empty beer can on the coffee table and knocked it over. It clattered to the floor and rolled halfway across the room.

“I should hope not. How long have you known her?”

“A couple months.”

“For God’s sake, Grady, wear a condom. There are plenty of women out there looking to trap a wealthy hockey player into marriage.”

“I’m a rookie. I’m not that wealthy.” I blew out a long breath and sighed. My mom exasperated me at times, most times actually.

“You are by most people’s standards. Regardless, please be careful.”

“I am careful, Mom. Always. I don’t want an unplanned pregnancy at this point in my career.”

“Good.” I heard her relief.

This conversation hadn’t gone the way I’d expected. In fact, I’d gotten the opposite reaction on two topics. She defended my dad, which was unheard of until now, and she didn’t push me to have a girlfriend as she normally did. Sometimes she made my head ache.

My roommates chose that moment to burst into the condo. “Hey, Mom, I gotta go. The guys are here, and we have plans.”

“Okay, honey. I love you, and don’t wait so long between calls next time.”

“I won’t. I promise. Love you.” I ended the call before she lectured me one more time on using a condom. Maybe I should be happy she didn’t expect me to be celibate, but I’d prefer not to discuss any aspect of my sex life with my mother.

Braden and Jarrett were jabbering excitedly about something as they tossed their coats on nearby chairs.

“Did you hear about Dash?” Jarrett bounced on the balls of his feet, brimming with knowledge I didn’t have and dying to share it. I considered being an ass and not responding, but my curiosity got the best of me.

“No, why? Is he gone?”

“Nope.” Jarrett grinned from ear to ear as if he’d ordered the last steak on the menu and left Braden and me to eat hamburgers.

I swung my attention to Braden. “What then?”

Braden opened his mouth, but Jarrett drowned him out.

“He’s staying with the Icehawks. He signed a two-year extension on his contract.” Jarrett literally fell over himself, tripping on a shoe I’d discarded on the floor. The guy loved being the one to break the news.

“Wow. Really?” I sat up straighter and absorbed this unexpected development. I’d been certain Dash would abandon us for greener pastures and the chance at a Cup. I probably would’ve.

“Really,” Braden clarified.

“What do you suppose happened?” I asked my roommates. “I was sure he was out the door and on a plane to Chicago by now.”

Jarrett was knee-deep in something on his phone. Both Braden and I waited impatiently. If anyone had the scoop, our

nosiest teammate would. After keeping us in suspense, he shifted his attention to us with a self-satisfied smirk.

“Spill it, asshole,” Braden growled.

Jarrett sat back and crossed his arms over his puffed-up chest. “Not if you’re going to talk to me like that.”

“Oh, fuck you, just tell us.”

I chuckled. They argued like two brothers, not that I’d ever had a brother, but how I imagined brothers would be.

“From what I can gather, just as the team was putting the final touches on the trade deal, Everly and her grandfather burst into the GM’s office.”

“Everly? The team barista whose grandfather owns the team?” I clarified.

Jarrett nodded. “Yeah. Whatever happened behind those closed doors, Dash came out with a contract and a girlfriend.”

“Well, damn,” I said, and we burst out laughing. I’d heard the rumors Dash had something going on with Everly. We all had thanks to Briggs, who accused our captain of only getting the *C* on his jersey because of his relationship with Everly. My grouchy *D* partner saw conspiracies everywhere he looked, rather than admitting someone might’ve gotten where they were via hard work and talent. Sometimes, in fact more often lately, I wondered why I put up with Briggs.

Dash’s staying was good news for a team that could use some good news. I wondered if his decision had more to do with Everly than with the Icehawks.

Love did strange things to a guy.

Chapter Twelve

MY HOT HOCKEY PLAYER

~~Aspen~~

There was a time I swore I'd never be one of those women wrapped up in a guy to the point I couldn't think about anything else.

Never say never.

Daydreams of Grady and memories of that last kiss distracted me to the point I was almost worthless for anything else.

That kiss.

That kiss had been a palette of colors I hadn't known existed until his lips touched mine.

And it'd been more than a kiss, but short of what I defined as making out. Not that labels mattered. What mattered was the substance, and there'd been plenty. I'd never been kissed as though I were the most precious, desirable woman on earth until Grady kissed me.

I imagined Michella saying to me, *Well, girl, I'm guessing you've never been kissed by the right man until now.*

I'd have to agree.

I hadn't seen Grady since last Friday night. He left on a three-game road trip a few days later. Their final away game had been an evening game last night in Vancouver, after which they should've flown home.

I missed Grady more than I had a right to. I'd rushed away so quickly after the kiss I hadn't taken the time to get his cell number, nor did he have mine. I'd slogged through the next several days with Grady on my mind constantly. I messed up a few orders at the Pumpkin Rose, using whole milk when the customer wanted skim milk or giving them a single shot when they'd ordered a triple shot. I was a hot mess of emotions, both looking forward to him coming back to town and fearing it. What if he didn't contact me? I wouldn't be the first woman to be ghosted by a man she'd had a connection with. All I could do was keep on keeping on and stay busy. Indulging my pathetic schoolgirl crush, I followed the team as best I could, watching them every chance I got, my eyes glued to the television in search of number sixteen.

Adding to my discombobulation was my dread of yet another holiday season without my mom. She'd been so into Christmas and always decorated to the nth degree.

Desmond had family staying with him over the holidays. I volunteered to sleep elsewhere, knowing his small apartment wouldn't fit all of us. Last night and tonight, I worked for Leila at the Puck as she'd gone home for the holidays. I'd been able to sleep here, but as of Christmas Day, I needed another place to crash. I'd tried everyone I could think of, and no one had room because of visitors. Others couldn't be reached. Leila lived with a gay couple who embraced drama daily. I didn't want any part of that.

I tried to keep my mind on more positive events in my life, knowing if worse came to worst, I'd rent a cheap hotel room. I'd never had to do that before and wasn't thrilled at the possibility of staying in a sleazy hotel, which was all my budget could afford.

I'd been approached by Everly to design additional graphics for the team's coffee brand. Once I had that extra money in my pocket, I'd splurge on something just for myself. Until then, I had to be thrifty.

I'd watched last night's game while I tended bar. The team should've been home before the bar closed down. I'd secretly held out hope Grady might drop by after they landed, but he

didn't. The Icehawks had beaten Vancouver. I'd screamed louder than anyone when Grady stole the puck and raced down the ice to slide it between the goalie's legs for a score. The radiant grin on his face when he'd scored had made all my troubles slip away for a short while.

Tonight was Christmas Eve, and the bar was buzzing from late afternoon into the evening. My boss had given me permission to close early, but I wouldn't as long as I had customers. I had nowhere else to go anyway. Keeping busy was the best thing for me right now and kept me from fretting too much over why I hadn't seen or heard from Grady. When I did have downtime, I worried he'd found someone else, or he'd grown tired of me, or God knew what.

On a positive note, I'd had a good tip night so far. Up until six p.m., the tables were crowded with coworkers celebrating the holidays, friends exchanging gifts, and hockey fans discussing last night's game. I didn't have time to slow down, let alone think.

By seven, the majority of my patrons had gone home to loved ones. Only a half dozen tables were occupied, and the decibel level in the large room had gone from deafening to a minor buzz. A few stragglers came into the bar for a nightcap, and every time the bell tinkled over the door, I glanced up expectantly, only to be disappointed.

Desmond showed up and took a seat at the bar.

"What're you doing here on Christmas Eve?" I was surprised to see him.

"I had to get away for an hour or two. My sister has three kids, and they're unruly brats."

I laughed, imagining finicky Desmond watching three kids trash his tidy apartment. Without asking, I served him his usual whiskey on the rocks and was rewarded with a grateful smile.

"You know how to make a guy happy." He took a long sip and made a show of closing his eyes as if in ecstasy.

The bell alerted me, and I looked up eagerly with a welcoming smile on my face. I attempted to disguise my disappointment when Pria, one of our regulars, sauntered in. She was a striking single woman in her midtwenties who lived in a nearby apartment building and had an air of confidence that had men eating out of her hand.

Within minutes she and Desmond were laughing together like old friends. That was Dez, always a girl's best guy friend. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was smitten. Pria had that effect on guys.

I bused and cleaned tables, glancing up every time someone came in the door. The bell tinkled again. My gaze immediately tracked to the door. A tall, attractive man dressed in a coat and knit hat sauntered in the door and stopped, surveying the bar. I didn't recognize him at first because of the hat, but when he swept it off his head to reveal that golden-blond hair and turned his pale ice-blue eyes on me, a shiver of fear slid down my spine.

Michella's abusive ex.

His smile was mirthless and predatory as he looked me up and down. With a smirk, he dismissed me and panned his gaze around the room. He zeroed in on Pria.

I finished my cleanup and made my way back to the bar. Setting down my tray of dirty dishes, I forced a smile and approached him. He had a right to be in here when Michella wasn't present. Even if he gave me the creeps, he'd given me no reason to boot him.

Pria had been engaged in a lively conversation with Desmond but forgot all about him when Gordon slid onto the barstool next to her. By the way her eyes lit up, she liked what she saw.

"I'll have a rum and Coke and buy this beautiful lady another of whatever she's drinking." He turned his megawatt smile on Pria. She was taking his bait, and he was reeling her in. I couldn't watch. I wanted to warn her, but I had to get her alone first. He turned to Pria and held out his hand. "I'm Gordon."

“I’m Pria.” She gazed into his eyes as if she’d just hit the man jackpot. She hadn’t. At least now I knew his name. I had to admit the guy was charismatic when it suited him.

I glanced at Desmond. He frowned at the two of them and scratched his forehead. I shrugged, letting him know I didn’t get it either.

“I guess I should be getting back to my family.” Desmond rose from his seat and put a twenty on the counter. “See you later, Aspen. Keep the change.”

“Thank you. Good luck with the kids.” He hesitated, glancing at Pria, but she didn’t notice him. Rolling his eyes, he left the bar.

I served their drinks and delivered another round for one of the tables near the back. When I returned, I had a new customer sitting several seats from Pria and Gordon. He must’ve sneaked in when Desmond left, as I hadn’t heard the bell.

“Hi, what can I get you?” Without looking up, I slapped a coaster on the table and multitasked by putting glasses in the dishwasher.

“How about you?”

My head shot up, and I met the amused gaze of the one man who’d dominated my thoughts all week. Unable to stop myself, I burst into a huge smile. “Grady!”

His eyes took me in as if he’d been hungry and had finally discovered what he had a craving for. I could live with that. I’d gladly take care of any craving he happened to have.

“Did you miss me?” he teased, and my answer was as honest as they came. I’d thought about us over the past several days, and I was willing to throw caution to the wind and ride this ride wherever it went.

“Yes. I missed you. I wanted to congratulate you on your goal last night, but I didn’t have your number.”

“Thanks. There were several times on that road trip when I wished I had your contact info, too. We’re definitely rectifying

that here and now.” He pulled his phone from his pocket, punched a few buttons, and looked up at me.

I recited my number as he put it into his phone’s contacts, and then I did the same. That simple exchange of numbers crossed a bridge we’d both been reluctant to cross. Now we’d taken that step, and I wouldn’t go back for anything. I’d done so much looking back in the past couple years, looking forward appealed to me, especially with Grady in the picture.

I took a moment and savored the feeling of being someone special to a guy like Grady. I’d been the girl in high school that the jocks treated with disrespect and would never ask on a date. To be pursued by a hot professional athlete left me reeling and still with some measure of disbelief.

I locked eyes with my hot hockey player. Damned if that *thing* didn’t happen again. By thing, I meant the entire world disappeared around us until we were the only two in it. The undisguised heat in his gaze warmed me from head to toe and surrounded me in a comfortable cocoon that the outside world didn’t reach. I leaned toward him, drawn closer by our invisible connection, and driven by a strong desire to touch him, kiss him, show him how happy he made me.

A loud bang startled me, and I jumped back. Grady’s head snapped toward the noise, and his gaze narrowed.

“We’d like another round,” Gordon snarled, effectively betraying his true colors.

Startled by his aggressiveness, Pria scowled and gave me a side-eye as if to say, *What the fuck is up with this dude?* I shot her one of those looks that said *watch out for him*. Getting my message, she nodded slightly. “Thank you, but I’m good. I’m done for the night. I’ll take my tab.”

“I insist. Please have another one. Don’t leave a lonely guy to drink alone.” The charmer was back, but she’d seen under his polished exterior, and Pria didn’t put up with that shit.

“I’ll take my tab.”

The guy glowered. Barely controlled anger bubbled below the surface. He didn’t like not getting his way. Grady clenched

his jaw, and tension radiated off his body.

“I insist you stay.”

Across from me, Grady made a guttural sound from deep inside.

“You heard her. She’s not interested. Give it up.” Grady stood with clenched fists and faced Gordon. I’d never seen such menace etched on his face.

Pria chewed on a fingernail and watched the two men. I hurried to get her tab so she could escape this asshole before we had a fight on our hands. I’d clue her in next time I saw her, not that she’d give Gordon a second chance after his performance tonight.

“Mind your own fucking business,” Gordon threatened, and his eyes burned with murderous intent.

“I am. You’d best leave now. The lady isn’t interested.”

Gordon vibrated with fury. He studied Grady as if sizing him up, probably assessing his chances in an altercation. I held my breath in fear of what might happen next. From what I’d heard, it didn’t take much to unhinge this volatile guy. For several tense seconds, the two men stared each other down.

Gordon backed off first.

“Fuck you,” he spat at Grady, but he left, slamming the door behind him. Grady watched him go, walked to the door, and peered outside. After a long minute, he returned to the bar.

“He went into another bar down the street,” he informed us.

“Thank you,” Pria said. “I’m going to take off now while he’s busy making trouble elsewhere.”

“He’s bad news. He dated a friend of mine. Abusive bastard,” I said.

“Thanks for the warning. I’ve seen enough. He’s definitely bad news.”

“Do you want me to walk you to your apartment building?” Grady offered.

“No, that’s not necessary. I’m only a block away. Thanks for the offer, though.” She hurried out the door before Grady could argue. He watched her go, concern furrowing his brow.

“Are you sure she’ll be okay?”

I glanced at the door. “I think so.”

Grady cocked his head and regarded me. “Was that douche Michella’s ex?”

“In the flesh.”

“Does he come in here often?”

“I’ve never seen him before today. Maybe he thought Michella might be here.”

“I’ll be right back.” Grady hurried to the door, pulling on his coat. Once outside, he gazed up and down the street, turned, and came back in.

“I didn’t see her on the sidewalk.”

“She lives on the next block. I’m sure she was inside by the time you got outside.”

He nodded. “I hope so.”

So did I. Gordon wasn’t someone to mess with.

I wasn’t going to ruin my evening with thoughts of Gordon, not when Grady sat at my bar and showed no signs of leaving. I’d stay open all night as long as he kept me company.

Chapter Thirteen

HOT BUTTERED RUM

~~Grady~~

*B*etween the road trip win and seeing Aspen, I was in a good mood. Not even an altercation with that creepy-ass ex of Michella's brought me down.

"That guy is disturbing on so many levels." Aspen's gaze moved to the window as if checking to make sure he didn't come back.

"I know, right?" I drew her attention back to me.

"We should turn Briggs loose on him." Aspen laughed, music to my ears. She had one of those laughs that made me grin from ear to ear and lessened any load I might be carrying.

"That's almost happened a time or two. My money would be on Briggs."

"He wouldn't know what hit him." Literally. I had firsthand knowledge Briggs knew how to fight, not just boxing, but street fighting.

We shared another laugh, lightening the mood considerably.

"What can I get you to drink?" Aspen shifted back to bartender mode, but her eyes still sparkled with amusement at the thought of Briggs pounding Gordon.

"What? You're letting me pick my drink rather than forcing one on me?"

"It's Christmas Eve. I'm in a giving mood."

“How about a hot buttered rum?”

“You’re in luck. I made a fresh batch yesterday. You haven’t lived until you’ve tasted my hot buttered rums.”

Aspen made my drink and watched as I took a sip. “Well?”

“Impatient, aren’t we?” I loved teasing her. She faked a pout I found adorable. I longed to wrap her in my arms, kiss the hell out of her, and find a private place to do more than that. My gaze surveyed her body from the cute elf sweatshirt to her usual tight jeans and back to her face.

“Do you like it?”

“Huh?”

“The hot buttered rum. Do you like it?”

“Yeah, uh, yeah, it’s every bit as good as you said.”

“Thank you.” She grinned with satisfaction. “I’m the master of hot Christmas drinks.”

I’d like to be the master of her. I mused about tying her naked to my bed and doing as I pleased, with her permission of course.

“Why don’t you come to my place for Christmas dinner?” I’d been debating this invitation for the last couple days. “And you can ply my roommates and me with more alcohol in exchange for our superior company. Well, at least my company is superior.”

She studied me for a long time, and I expected to be turned down. I almost resorted to begging. I didn’t believe she had any family in the area, and I wanted to spend the holiday with her.

“What’s for dinner?” Her sassy smile lit up my life like a bright star on top of a Christmas tree.

“I left that up to Braden. He’s the only one of us who even pretends to cook.”

“I can help. I’m a decent cook.”

“You’re hired. We can use all the help we can get.”

We smiled at each other. Christmas Day had suddenly changed from a day I dreaded to one I'd look forward to. If I was lucky, we'd spread some Christmas cheer in my bedroom long into the evening.

"It's a deal then. I hope you have the groceries purchased already."

"No idea." I shrugged. I wasn't much help. My culinary knowledge consisted of reading the directions on the backs of frozen meals. "But I'll make it worth your while." I flickered my gaze over her body and settled it on her lips, making my intent obvious.

Aspen's mouth formed an *O* before her sexy grin melted my heart and hardened my dick. "I'll hold you to that."

"Hey, can we get our bill?" a patron shouted from a nearby table.

"Oops." Aspen hurried to take care of her customers. I sat back and enjoyed the view of her nice ass before focusing my attention on one of the TVs over the bar. Our game from last night was being rerun.

I hadn't seen the game except from the bench, and I watched it with one eye while keeping the other on Aspen. The team looked good, almost like a cohesive unit; even Briggs and I had moments of harmony. Not a lot but some. Clearly last night's game was the best we'd played all season and my personal high point during my short time in the pros with my assist and a goal. Not that I received any praise from my dad or Briggs, but the other guys on the team congratulated me.

I didn't hear Aspen come up behind me a few minutes later. "You played a good game." She spoke into my ear. I turned my head slightly to find her standing beside me.

"Thanks. You watched?" I placed a hand on the small of her back, staking my claim with one gesture. She didn't move away from me.

"I was working, but I caught bits and pieces. I saw your goal."

“We did all right.”

“Your dad had to be happy with that.”

“I don’t know. He didn’t say anything to me directly, just congratulated the team as a whole.”

“I’m sorry. That makes me want to chew his ass for you.”

“I appreciate the sentiment.” I shrugged as if what my father thought meant nothing.

“Anytime. I have your back.” She leaned into me briefly and kissed my cheek. The gesture wasn’t overly sexual, but tell that to my dick. Where Aspen was concerned, it didn’t need much encouragement.

“I’ll give you a ride home,” I offered as Aspen finished up the last of her closing chores.

“I’m fine. I don’t need a ride.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive, Desmond is down the block at another bar. He’ll give me a ride.”

Aspen refused to meet my gaze. She was a shitty liar, and for some unfathomable reason, she was lying to me right now. I couldn’t figure it out.

“Okay, well, where can I pick you up tomorrow?” I tried another tactic. If I had my way, I’d take her home with me tonight. Hell, why not ask? “You could come home with me tonight if you want.”

She hesitated as if considering my proposition. “Oh, no, that’s not necessary.” She walked toward the door, giving me my cue to leave.

Damn it.

“Where can I pick you up?” I insisted. I wasn’t leaving without a location. She wasn’t getting a chance to bail on me in the morning.

“Here.”

“Here?”

“Yes. I have some paperwork to do in the morning.”

I had the distinct idea she wasn't being straight with me. “Can you bring some of that hot buttered rum batter? I'll supply the rum.”

“Absolutely. I'm looking forward to tomorrow.”

I stood in front of the door, reluctant to let the night end this way. I'd enjoyed her company the entire evening. “Okay, then, I guess I should go.”

She unlocked the door. I didn't move. I wanted to kiss her again. In fact, I had to kiss her again. I took a step forward, and she met me halfway. With one hand, she gripped the front of my jacket. I wound my arms around her waist and tugged her close. Our lips met. The deeper the kiss, the more we pressed into each other. She had to feel how hard she'd made me.

I drew back first this time. If I kept kissing her, I'd be picking her up and doing her on the counter for any passersby to witness. As hot as that sounded, I wouldn't disrespect her like that.

“You should go.” Her eyes were telling me to stay, but I did as she asked. I'd see her tomorrow, and we'd finish what we'd started.

“Good night. Sweet dreams.” I leaned down and brushed my lips across hers. Straightening, I smiled and exited the bar. I stood on the other side of the closed door and waited for her to lock it behind me. She gave me a small wave and a smile full of promise, dimmed the lights, and disappeared down the back hallway.

I waited a little while, but she didn't appear again. With a spring in my step, I strode to my car and headed for the nearest open store to buy presents and Christmas decorations, not an easy feat on Christmas Eve. After several minutes of driving around, I finally found an open Walmart.

I was going to make this the best Christmas I'd had since my family was together.

Chapter Fourteen

INTENTIONS

~~Aspen~~

The man lurked in the shadows waiting for just the right woman. His hunting had paid off tonight, and he'd found exactly what he'd been looking for. She was a little older than his usual victims, but her striking good looks drew him in. He'd approached her in the bar, and she'd dismissed him. Being treated so callously enraged him. He'd make sure she was sorry.

He was careful, and the cops would never suspect him. They weren't smart enough to match wits with his superior intellect.

The woman finished her drink and left the bar. He waited a few seconds and followed her. Sauntering out the door as if he hadn't a care in the world. She stopped ahead of him on the sidewalk and glanced left and right. He slipped into a recessed doorway before she spotted him.

She continued toward her car, and he went into stealth mode. Once she opened her car door, he was on her. Her eyes bulged out of her head when she caught the glint of the knife in his hand. The scream died in her throat.

I woke with a start and sat up. My gaze darted around the dark room. I gasped for breath, and my heartbeat pounded out a deafening warning of possible danger. I was close to panic before I recalled where I was.

I'd had a nightmare about my mother's disappearance. I'd had similar dreams before, all with similar variations of the

same theme. Toward the end of this particular dream, my mother wasn't the one with the knife to her throat, I was.

I wiped the cold sweat off my forehead with my sleeve and took deep, calming breaths. When my heart had slowed to an almost normal rhythm, I swung my feet to the floor. I wouldn't be going back to sleep. I rubbed the back of my neck to work out the kinks after spending a night tossing and turning on the worn-out couch in the office.

I hadn't experienced this nightmare in a few months. Something had set me off and brought it on.

Nothing to do with Grady, of course. He was the best thing that'd happened to me in a while. My fear must've come from the appearance of Gordon last night. He always gave me the creeps. Something about that man was unbalanced and dangerous.

When I'd checked the locks last night, I'd stared out the windows at the rain-soaked streets. They were deserted that late at night, but an eerie chill sliced through me, as if evil lurked in the shadows.

My mother had always teased me about my overactive imagination. She'd said it came from having an artistic mind. Right now, my ability to picture murderers and burglars on every corner wasn't serving me well. I chastised myself for being ridiculous. I was merely freaked out because Gordon showed up, and I'd had a nightmare.

Glancing at my phone, I saw it was five a.m. I groaned at the early hour. I'd taken a shower last night before my shift at the Puck. I padded in my socks to the bathroom, splashed water on my face, ran a brush through my hair, and donned clean clothes. I'd put on makeup later. I stared in the mirror, dissatisfied with my red sweater and jeans, but they'd have to do. Buying clothes wasn't on my priority list.

Needing to do something productive and feeling more awake, I made my way to the kitchen. Gathering ingredients, I concocted a large batch of my hot buttered rum batter.

Hal, the owner of the Puck, wouldn't mind me using his supplies if I replaced them, which I'd do. He was a crusty old guy originally from the Bronx, and he loved hockey. Hal worked the day shift as bartender. He was great to work for, and his employees loved him. The tips were great, too.

I poured my batter into plastic containers, washed the pan, and wiped down the stovetop. Finishing that chore, I glanced around for other ways to burn time while I was waiting for Grady to pick me up. Keeping busy took my mind off my fears and soothed my apprehension.

Since it was Christmas morning, I dialed Heidi, no answer, and briefly spoke with Leila, who was busy with family stuff. I polished the bar counter until it gleamed, wiped down all the tables, and mopped the old hardwood floor. My mother had loved old things, and she'd have loved this floor. The scratches and dents only gave it character, or so she'd say. I'd inherited her love for old things, but I also appreciated the stark, minimalist decor that seemed to be all the rage.

When I had my own house, I'd like an older house with character. I'd refinish the original hardwood floors and modernize the home while maintaining its charm. I smiled at the thought of making a place mine. Someday, I promised myself, someday.

My mom had bought such a house when she'd moved to Portland but hadn't been around long enough to enjoy it. She'd been upside down on the mortgage but hadn't been concerned. She'd planned on making that house her home for a very long time. She had no way of knowing a month after she moved in, she'd be gone. In my grief, I'd held on to the house too long in hopes she'd return. When I finally admitted I needed to sell, I was thousands behind on payments and had no equity in the house. I was still paying off the debt from that house sale.

I poured a glass of water and sat on a barstool. I glanced around the empty bar with its Christmas lights blinking in the large windows. It was Christmas morning, and my mother had loved Christmas.

“Mom, where are you? What happened to you?” I said into the great unknown. I’d gone to the last place she’d been seen a hundred times, and each time, that building refused to reveal its secrets.

I shook off those negative thoughts. Today I’d remember the good times and create more memories. I looked forward to this holiday, and I had Grady to thank for that.

He expected me to stay the night, and I fully intended to do so.

~~Grady~~

I hopped out of bed early and pounded on my roommates’ doors. “Time to rise and shine, boys.”

Minutes later, Braden and Jarrett shuffled from their bedrooms, yawning and scratching their chests.

Braden glowered as he took a seat at the counter. “I need coffee.”

Jarrett was already pouring himself a cup. He took a sip and spun around. “What the fuck? Why’d you get us out of bed?” If murder wasn’t punishable by life in prison, I’d be dead.

“Merry Christmas. Ho ho ho!! I didn’t want you to miss a minute of this lovely holiday.”

Braden narrowed his gaze and shared scowls with Jarrett. They both faced me.

“Fuck you,” they said in unison.

“Get moving, we have a lot of work to do.”

“Work? It’s Christmas, as you so joyfully pointed out.”

“It is, and we’re having company.”

After appreciable grumbling and even a little snarling, I put the guys to work cleaning our disaster of a condo. We threw crap into closets and piled it in our bedroom closets.

“I don’t see why we have to change our lifestyle because Aspen’s coming for dinner.” Braden muttered obscenities as he washed dishes. He longingly gazed at the couch, which was where he’d expected to spend Christmas Day.

“Just shut up and keep washing those dishes,” I ordered. He gave me the middle finger, causing me to chuckle in response.

Jarrett shot me a sideways glance. “Seriously, Aspen strikes me as down to earth. Why are we going to all this trouble?”

I ignored him and opened a closet to get the vacuum cleaner. Unfortunately, I had to dig for it since we’d buried it under the crap we threw in there earlier. “You don’t want her to think we’re slob.”

“We are slob,” Braden said. “And proud of it.”

“Yeah!” Jarrett crossed the room to fist-bump Braden. I sensed mutiny on the horizon.

“The place doesn’t have to be spotless. Just tidy up a little.”

Both my roommates heaved deep sighs.

“She’s cooking the dinner. It’s the least we can do. Are you sure we have all the stuff she’ll need?” I addressed Braden, who’d done the shopping.

“Hope so, but I make no promises.”

“We’ll figure it out.” I wasn’t as confident as I sounded.

“You really have a thing for Aspen,” Jarrett remarked.

“She’s just a friend.”

“We don’t go to this kind of work for a friend. You’re hooked on her. Not that I blame you. She’s got a hot bod, a cute face, and she’s sassy. I like that in a woman.” Braden grinned at me, and I glared back at him. He was jerking my chain, and I’d stupidly taken his bait.

I turned on the vacuum to drown out any further remarks either of them might make. Braden had hit too close to the

truth, and I wasn't ready to admit it. I was attracted to Aspen, but hooked? Fuck, maybe I was hooked. Maybe Braden knew me better than I knew myself.

I vacuumed at the speed of light, missing a lot of spots. My vacuum job left a lot to be desired, but the floors looked better than they had.

I glanced at my watch. It was noon. "I gotta scoot, boys. Finish up here."

"Sure, not a problem," Jarrett snorted.

"Yeah, the place'll be spick and span by the time you get back." Braden's voice dripped with sarcasm. They both threw back their heads and howled like two single wolves howling at a full moon.

Grabbing my coat out of my room, I shrugged into it and hustled to the door. One glance over my shoulder told me all I needed to know. Braden and Jarrett were already lounging on the couch playing a video game.

I sighed. The place was as clean as it was going to get.

I didn't give the condo another thought as I started my car and drove onto the street. Snow fell in big flakes and stuck to the sidewalks and roads. We already had a couple inches. Judging by the gray clouds, it showed no signs of stopping. At the rate it was coming down, I had just enough time to pick up Aspen and get home before the streets became treacherous.

Getting snowed in with Aspen sounded like the perfect way to spend Christmas.

I grinned and belted out "White Christmas" as I navigated the city streets.

Chapter Fifteen

HAPPY HOLIDAYS

~~Aspen~~

The second I unlocked the door for Grady, he slipped inside and pinned me against the wall. I gasped in surprise as his hot mouth came down on mine, hungry and demanding. His tongue mated with mine, and I collapsed against him with a satisfied sigh. His hands roamed freely over my body, and who was I to complain. Instead, I wiggled against him, reveling in how hard he was for me. I buried my fingers in his hair and pulled him closer. He responded by placing his hands on my ass, picking me up, and putting me on a barstool, never breaking our kiss as he did so.

I was panting like an out-of-shape marathon runner greedy for more and more and more. He stepped between my legs and slid his hands around my waist under my sweater. His rough palms grazed my skin, and I groaned. Those big hands of his gravitated to my breasts. My nipples were erect against the thin fabric of my one lacy bra. He rubbed his thumbs over those nipples, sending lightning bolts of exquisite pleasure thundering through me. If he'd stripped me naked on this barstool, I wouldn't have complained.

Grady found the strength I didn't have to end our make-out session. He panted and didn't speak as he tried to rein in his lust. His thumbs continued to scrape across my nipples. As if he finally realized what he was doing, he moved them downward and clutched my hips. I was so wet and so horny I rubbed against him and whimpered, protesting their absence.

“As...much...as...I’d...like...to...keep...going...” He paused and composed himself further, stepping back to hold me at arm’s length. “My roommates would hunt me down and kill me if we didn’t show up soon.”

Unable to summon the gift of speech, I nodded mutely.

We loaded up the SUV, and Grady navigated through the snow-covered streets like a man born and raised in Ontario, which he was. We were at his condo in no time.

I’d never been here before, but the condo was in a reclaimed building in a trendy area of Portland. I probably couldn’t afford a day’s rent here, let alone a month. Grady warned me that the three of them weren’t good housekeepers, and I prepared myself for the worst.

The guys’ efforts at cleaning and decorating for Christmas left a lot to be desired, but I’d give them a B-plus for the effort.

They hadn’t started dinner, and I realized they’d been waiting for me. I found an apron and went straight to work. Grady stayed out of my way, but I felt his eyes on me. A few times, I glanced over my shoulder, and he was bursting with pride. Talk about feel-good moments.

I wasn’t the world’s best cook, but I knew how to follow recipes. I had to send Jarrett and Braden out to find an open market and pick up a few last-minute items, such as potatoes and pumpkin pie. A person couldn’t properly celebrate Christmas without either, in my opinion.

I shoed the guys out of the kitchen as they were more trouble than help and set to work. I’d never cooked a large meal like this, and I was nervous.

I put the large spiral ham in the oven and peeled and sliced potatoes for the scalloped potatoes. Then I prepared a traditional green bean casserole and a big salad. I’d never been overly fond of cooking, but I was actually having fun. Keeping busy took my mind off my mother and Christmases past, not to mention carnal thoughts of jumping Grady’s bones.

I constantly swatted the guys' hands when they attempted to sneak a bite here and there during commercial breaks from their football games.

“Who wants a hot buttered rum?” I shouted to be heard above the din in the living room.

Three hands shot up in the air.

“Grady, you mix the drinks.”

“Bossy, isn't she?” Jarrett joked. He winked at me, and I winked back. Grady's roomies were good guys, and I liked both of them.

“Yeah, she is, but I do what she says 'cuz she scares me.” Grady made a show of cowering before me, holding his hands up to his face. I rolled my eyes and swatted his ass with a towel.

“Get to work,” I ordered.

“Yes, ma'am.”

Under my direction, Grady made four hot buttered rums and served them to each of us. They were stronger than I'd have made, but what the fuck? None of us were driving.

Hours later, the condo smelled amazing, and we were seated at a card table with folding chairs. The guys weren't much for furniture other than the sectional and large television.

I set the food on the counter in whatever I'd cooked that dish in as they didn't have serving bowls either. We'd dish up buffet style. None of us were into formalities.

“You can cook for us anytime. This looks fucking incredible,” Jarrett exclaimed as he heaped his plate with helpings of potatoes.

Grady didn't wait for an invitation. He grabbed a plate and piled it high.

“Where's Braden?” I asked. Glancing around, I didn't see him anywhere.

“Who cares?” Jarrett snorted. “Probably in the bathroom.”

“I’ll get him.” I walked down the hallway and knocked on Braden’s door. At first he didn’t answer, then the door swung open.

“Dinner’s ready,” I said.

“Oh, thanks.” He didn’t meet my gaze, and his voice was dull and hollow.

I hesitated, at war with myself. Braden’s personal life was none of my business, but I wasn’t able to walk away and let him suffer alone. “Is everything okay?”

He appeared to be going through an inner struggle. Staring at the phone in his hands, he stayed silent. I waited him out. Finally, he raised his head and met my gaze. He reminded me of a little boy who’d lost his last friend.

“I’ve been talking to my family. This is the first time I’ve missed a Christmas with them. I guess I’m homesick. Sounds stupid, doesn’t it? A grown man being homesick?”

“No, I don’t think it sounds stupid at all. I think it’s admirable you care about your family so much that you miss them.”

“Do you miss your family?” he asked.

“Yes, I do, but I don’t have a family. Not anymore.” I met his gaze with a sad smile of my own.

“Oh, shit, I’m sorry.” He ran a hand through his thick hair and sighed. “I always say the wrong shit.”

“You didn’t say anything wrong. You couldn’t know. Let’s eat. I promise it’ll be epic.”

“It smells incredible.”

“We’d better get out there before there’s nothing left.”

Braden managed a lopsided grin. “Yeah.”

Jarrett and Grady sat at the table waiting for us. Surprisingly, they hadn’t started digging in yet. We piled our plates and joined them.

Grady's gaze swung to his friend. His brow furrowed with concern. "Everything okay?"

"Just missing family."

"Yeah, I know how that goes," Grady agreed.

"I'm not used to a quiet Christmas," Braden admitted.

"Pretty noisy at your house?" Jarrett took a big bite of ham and chewed thoughtfully.

"Yeah, I have five sibs, various aunts and uncles and kids. Tons of kids. It's chaos at its max."

"That sounds horrifying." Jarrett made a face before he dived back into his dinner. "Aspen, this is fucking good. You can cook for us anytime."

"Thanks, I think."

They laughed and toasted me. Grady grasped my hand under the table, and his blue eyes sparkled as he looked into mine. If I'd been a cat, I'd have flopped onto my back and purred with joy.

~~Grady~~

Braden and Jarrett staggered to their respective beds around nine p.m., full to the brim with Christmas dinner and hot buttered rums. I glanced around the messy living room. Flames danced in the gas fireplace, and that Charlie Brown tree looked pretty good in the dark with its lights twinkling merrily.

"Want another one?" I asked. We hadn't been guzzling them like my roommates, but I was feeling the buzz. Judging by Aspen's slightly glazed eyes and contented smile, she was too.

"Why not? Just cut back on the ram...uh...rug...uh...rum!"

I chuckled and mixed our drinks while she surfed through the streaming choices on our obscenely large flat-screen TV. Before returning to the living room, I slipped down the hall to my bedroom, returning with a small package, which I shoved in my pocket. I snagged the glasses off the counter and carried them to the couch, dimming the lights on the way. I pushed aside a few piles of paper and sat the glasses on the coffee table.

“Your condo is really nice.” Aspen smiled up at me as I sat down next to her, close enough our thighs rubbed each other.

“It definitely looks like a bachelor pad.”

“Minus a few naked women hanging around.”

I chuckled and decided to be honest. “Sometimes there’s that, too.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

I shrugged. “Those two are horndogs.”

“And you’re not?”

I gazed into her eyes and let her see the lust burning like a roaring fireplace. “No, not really. Lately there’s only been one woman I want to see naked.”

Her sweet giggle did something to me and my dick. She was beautiful and special and hopefully mine. I dug into my pocket and produced the small box. “I have a little something for you.”

She stared at the rectangular jewelry box and gasped, covering her mouth with her hands. “You didn’t need to buy me a gift.”

“I know, but I wanted to.”

“I didn’t get you anything.”

Before she got all worried about not reciprocating, I stepped in front of her guilt and blocked her shot. “But you did. You cooked for us and made your incredibly fucking fantastic hot buttered rums. I’d say we’re even.”

“Well, if you put it that way.” Her wicked smile sent pulses of pleasure rippling through me.

“And if you think it doesn’t, you can make it up to me tonight.”

“I can do that.”

“Open it.”

She turned the box over in her hand as if savoring it. I held my breath and waited. I’d never bought a girl jewelry before, but the salesclerk had been more than helpful. She’d promised I couldn’t go wrong with this particular piece of jewelry. I held off my impatience and let her take her time, even though it was killing me.

Slowly, she lifted the lid and peered inside. My heart thumped in my chest in fear she might hate my gift. She lifted the necklace out of the box and turned it around in her hands, examining the diamond pendant from all angles.

“Do you like it?” I wrung my hands together. Realizing I’d betrayed my nerves, I placed them on my thighs. She made me wait several long, torturous seconds.

Lifting her head, Aspen broke into a radiant smile that made her face glow and her eyes shine. “It’s beautiful.”

“You like it then?”

“Oh, I love it. I’ve never had a nice piece of jewelry like this, but it’s too much too soon.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You don’t?”

“Nope, and I want you to keep it. Please. No matter what happens between us, this is my gift to you because you’re a very special person, Aspen Bedford, and I wanted to show you how special.”

She gazed down at the pendant again. “Would you put it on me?”

“Absolutely.” I grinned from ear to ear, happy enough to burst out in song, but I spared her. In my young male head, I’d

planned on heading straight to bed after giving her my gift, but now that seemed cheap, as if doing so devalued what she meant to me. There'd be plenty of time for sex later, though parts of me didn't agree with my noble attitude. I pushed those complaints aside and turned to Aspen.

"I feel bad. I didn't get you anything."

"Oh, I can think of a gift you can give me." I leered at her and winked. She threw back her head and laughed out loud. We stared at each other for a long minute. I could've picked her up and taken her to bed, but I didn't. This had to be special. I wanted an evening to remember, not a roll in the hay and the walk of shame in the morning.

"How about a Christmas movie?"

She blinked a few times, surprised by my question. "I'd love that. What's your favorite?"

I thought for a moment. "I guess it'd be *A Christmas Carol*. And yours?"

"Oh, you like the classics. So do I. In fact, I love *Scrooge*."

"Let's watch it."

We sat together on the couch. I put my arm around her shoulders, and she leaned her head on my shoulder. Being with her felt like the most natural thing on earth. Concentrating on the movie wasn't easy considering what I wanted to do to her tonight, but somehow I managed. We talked during the movie, making comments and laughing at times over goofy things either she or I said. Then she grew quiet. After several minutes, I paused the movie.

"You're quiet. Tell me what you're thinking."

"I'm wishing I could go back in time and see where things went sideways."

"Sideways?"

"With my mom."

"You're missing her, aren't you?"

"Immensely."

“I’d like to hear what happened if you’re ready to tell me.” My dick would have to wait a little longer for satisfaction. Aspen needed me.

She rubbed her eyes and buried her head in her hands. When she lifted her head, there were tears brimming in those beautiful brown eyes. Without even thinking, I reached up and brushed away the lone tear that escaped down her cheek with the pad of my thumb. She clutched my wrist and squeezed it. Her sad smile broke my heart.

“It’s only fair that I tell you, since you bared your soul to me.”

“This isn’t a contest. If you don’t feel comfortable telling me...”

“You’re probably the only person I do feel comfortable telling, because you’re the only person who truly understands the bone-deep sorrow and unexplainable emptiness I feel every day.”

I nodded, knowing exactly what she meant. Aspen cleared her throat and clasped her hands in her lap. She didn’t look at me but focused on the Christmas tree. I doubted she saw the multicolored lights, but most likely something only she could see.

“Before you start, and if you don’t mind me asking, what happened to your father?”

“He died when I was four in a five-car pileup on I-5 in Seattle. I don’t really remember much about him.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. That was a long time ago. It’s been just my mom and me as far back as I can remember.”

I nodded and didn’t say another word, letting her talk when she was ready.

“My mom had been in Portland a month or two when she disappeared. She was an RN and had moved from Seattle for a better job in a Portland hospital. I was in my second year at Tyee University, also in Seattle. She bought a house in an

older neighborhood in the process of being reclaimed. Mom loved to refurbish old houses and was handy with a hammer and skill saw.”

“That sounds like fun. I’ve always wanted to do that.”

“I don’t know if I’d describe living among sawdust and construction debris as fun, but it’s rewarding.”

“Go on,” I urged her, anxious to hear the entire story as she knew it.

“My mom and I always talked two to three times a week. I spoke to her on a Friday night, but I wasn’t able to reach her for the rest of the weekend. Her phone went straight to voice mail. I assumed she’d gotten neck-deep in some project and hadn’t been paying attention to her phone. She had a habit of doing that.” Aspen paused, visibly composing herself. I took her hand and held it, hoping to give her a measure of comfort and strength. She inhaled and exhaled, then pushed onward.

“On Monday afternoon, the hospital called me. My mom hadn’t shown up for work or notified anyone that she’d be absent, which was completely out of character. I tried and tried to reach her for the next hour or so. I had this sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach something was horribly wrong. I borrowed a roommate’s car and drove as fast as I dared to Portland.” The last few words came out in a croak, and she stopped.

I waited patiently. This was hard for her, and she’d never told anyone the entire story before, except probably the detective.

“I immediately went to her house. Her car was gone, and the porch light was on even though it was daylight. I used my key and entered, afraid of what I’d find, but I found no clues to her whereabouts. Her bed was made. Nothing was disturbed other than the usual construction rubble. All signs pointed to her going out for the evening and never coming home. When I’d talked to her that Friday night, she’d mentioned joining some coworkers for dinner and a drink.”

I squeezed her hand to encourage her.

“I drove to the police station and reported her missing. At first they didn’t take me seriously, but her car was found burned out and abandoned on a logging road. That got their attention. They searched the surrounding area but didn’t find her. She wasn’t there.”

“Did they find any other clues?”

“They talked to the coworkers, who reported they’d gone to a bar. Most of them left early, but my mom was singing karaoke and didn’t want to leave yet. You can see her on the security cameras. When she left, no one followed her. The last camera reported her walking from the bar toward the back parking lot. That was the last record of her being seen. The detectives did what they could with what little they had to go on. The case went cold within a month or two. Though they loosely tied her case to similar cases of missing women.”

“Like maybe there’s a serial killer in this area?” I went cold inside at the thought. I’d often worried my sister had fallen prey to a bastard like that.

“Maybe. Portland PD has discovered one body, but there’re three other women missing under similar circumstances. Anyway, here I am. Trying to find my mom on my own, but I exhausted all my leads and my money a year ago.”

“So you dropped out of school and moved to Portland to help find her?”

“Yes, I did, but I didn’t have a lot of choices, either. My mom always lived paycheck to paycheck. She owed more on her house than it was currently worth. What little was in the bank I used to live on while I was searching for her until there was nothing left, and I forced myself to move on and get a job.”

“I’m sorry. That had to have been tough.”

“It still is.”

I studied her for a moment, wishing she’d volunteer more information, but she didn’t. Instead, she cuddled closer to me. I loved giving her comfort, hopefully easing her burden a bit. I

turned my head toward her. She gazed up at me, and the restraint I'd exercised all day broke. Before I knew what was happening, we were kissing deep, sloppy, and passionately. We couldn't get enough of each other.

If we didn't slow down, I wouldn't be able to stop. Not that I needed to stop, but we weren't doing it in the living room where my roommates might find us. I wasn't that guy and never had been. Now Braden, he didn't care who was watching. If it was being offered, he was accepting the offer.

I had to put us on Pause until we got to the bedroom.

With great effort, I placed my hands on her shoulders and separated us.

"What's wrong?" Stricken, she gazed at me with big dark eyes.

"Nothing's wrong. In fact, it's all very right, but if we keep this up, we'll be naked on this couch." I managed a tense smile. It was hard to smile when your dick was throbbing and demanding satisfaction.

"I wouldn't be averse to that." She lowered her lashes and did a great coy act. I fell for it. In fact, I ate it up.

"Neither would I." I leisurely ran my gaze up and down her body, letting her know exactly how we'd be sharing that bed. "If my roommates weren't here, that is."

Aspen's mouth fell open. "I forgot about them. Let's continue this somewhere private."

Once again surprising me by taking the lead, she rose to her feet and reached for my hand.

Chapter Sixteen

HEAT

~~Aspen~~

I'd been dying for sex with Grady since I'd first laid eyes on him. Originally, my desire had been based on how purely gorgeous and fit he was. Later, when I got to know him, I wanted him even more. Not just because of our shared tragedies but even more because of the good, kind person he was.

Grady grasped my outstretched hand. I hadn't been sure how he'd react to a woman being the aggressor, but he seemed secure enough in his manhood that he didn't care. I reached the limit of my tolerance for this slow-burn thing he had going. I'd been burning long enough. Now I needed action. I was readier than I'd ever been and primed for a good time.

Just one touch from him in the right spot, and I'd probably orgasm. I was so close to losing control I'd probably orgasm after he touched any spot.

I literally dragged him to the bedroom. He was laughing as I pulled him along, but when I glanced in his direction, the heat from his gaze belied that laugh.

He shut the bedroom door, locked it, and turned on some music. I was already tugging at my clothes in my haste to get naked. He watched me for a short while, his eyes following my every move.

After pulling off my jeans, I paused and straightened. Wearing nothing but my underwear, I let him drink his fill.

He sucked air between his teeth and whistled. The heat of his gaze roamed over my body, scorching every square inch he could see and some parts he couldn't.

“Fuck, you're gorgeous.” His husky voice reverberated with lust tempered by reverence. My body tingled with anticipation of the night ahead.

Hands perched on my hips, I faced him. With a seductive smirk, I jerked my chin toward him. “Your turn. Let's see some skin.”

“You're awfully bossy to someone who has you outweighed by about a hundred pounds.”

“A hundred? I doubt that,” I scoffed.

“Give or take a few.” Rather than wasting time arguing who weighed what, Grady took his time unbuttoning his shirt; either his fingers weren't functioning correctly or he was toying with me again.

I licked my lips as his clothes came off until he wore nothing but his boxer briefs. He was everything I imagined he'd be and more. He didn't have a ton of ink, but I liked that. Most guys I'd dated were the artistic type and had believed the number of tats corresponded to their artistic talent.

There was a tat for a hockey team he must've played for and one in memory of his sister with a broken heart and her name and date of birth.

He caught me staring at it and shrugged.

I nodded, not wanting the mention of his sister or my mother to ruin this moment. He didn't either because he stepped into me. Our bodies grazed each other each time we exhaled a breath.

His eyes held mine captive, and I reveled in the sweet capture.

Grady rested his hands on my hips briefly and slid them up my sides. Pausing at the swell of my breasts, he drew circles around my erect nipples through the thin fabric of my lacy bra.

I arched my back, and a guttural moan emerged from my throat.

“You like that?” he leaned in and whispered in my ear. His tongue flicked along my earlobe, drawing a shudder. His hard erection pressed against my midsection, and I ground against it. A tortured groan rumbled through his chest. Served him right. If he hadn’t played the long game, we’d be into our second or third orgasm by now.

“I don’t know where to start,” he growled against my neck. “You’re like a box of chocolates, and I can’t decide which one to sample next.”

I slipped my hand between us and rubbed on his cock through the material of his boxers. He responded by sliding a hand behind my back and deftly unhooking my bra with one hand as if he’d done this a thousand times before. The thought of Grady with other women didn’t discourage me. In fact, I was encouraged to make all of them pale by comparison.

I moved back a step and let my bra fall to the floor. His gaze traveled straight to my breasts and stayed there. I had great breasts, not too big, but big enough. He cupped them in his hands, pinching and tweaking my nipples until he bent his head and sucked one into his mouth. A sharp jolt of lust shot through me, catching me off guard. My knees buckled, but Grady was prepared. He held me up without stopping his worship of my nipples.

“I need you to fuck me,” I pleaded. “Enough of this take-it-slow shit.”

He chuckled but didn’t comply. He took his time, building my lust to a fever pitch I didn’t think I’d survive. Just when I swore I’d pass out from the headiness of desire, he stopped, backed me up to his large bed, and lifted me onto the middle of the mattress.

Standing back, he hesitated long enough to gaze upon my body once again before hooking his thumbs in his waistband and kicking off his boxers.

Oh. My. God.

He was superb. Exquisite. A Greek statue of pure male beauty with a muscular hockey ass.

Girls, it doesn't get better than that.

Grady grinned wickedly at my perusal of his cock and ass, but he didn't linger long. He grabbed a condom from his nightstand, tore it open, and rolled it onto his dick. With a determined grin, he stalked toward me and knelt on the bed. Tugging on my panties, he slid them down my legs before discarding them with a flick of his wrist.

Climbing up my body, he held himself over me, grinning down at me.

“Now what did you say you wanted?”

“I want you to fuck me. Like now.”

His cock twitched in response to my demands, but his expression remained etched in stone. I saw through him to the steely hold he had on his passion. I was impressed but also challenged to break that hold, just because I could.

I grasped his cock and wrapped my fingers around it. I stroked and squeezed the tip until he shut his eyes and growled deep in his throat.

“You're playing with fire.”

“Maybe I'm an arsonist.”

He barked out a strained laugh. “You know how to light me on fire.”

“You haven't seen anything yet.”

He bent his head and took my mouth. His tongue did what he held his body back from doing. I wasn't into delayed gratification. I wanted him now, and I had the tools to entice him to give up his game.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I lifted my hips and pressed against him.

“You're killing me.” He sounded like a man in agony, but he didn't have to be.

“That’s the idea.”

“Evil.”

“I know.” I threaded my fingers through his hair and tugged on the back of his head. He didn’t resist but kissed me again, long, hard, and wet. Our tongues made love to each other until the rest of our bodies demanded equal attention.

He lowered his magnificent body toward mine, and I helped guide him to heaven on earth. He slid into me bit by bit. I’d never had anyone as large as him, but he was careful and considerate of my comfort, despite the difficulty he had holding back, and I knew it was hard for him. I saw a vein pulsing in his neck from the strain.

The last inch or so, I was the one who lost control. No shock there. I rocked my pelvis against his and took his entire length inside me with a gasp of surprise and pleasure.

“Oh, fuck.” Grady’s eyes rolled back in his head before he squeezed them shut in an effort to maintain control. I’d make him lose that control because I was wicked like that. Raking my nails across his bare back, I arched into him. He groaned and grabbed my wrists. Holding my hands over my head with one of his hands, he grinned down at me.

“You have to stop that if you don’t want this to end quickly.”

“Just fuck me. Stop talking and fuck me.” I wriggled underneath him, torturing him with my body, and was rewarded with a guttural growl.

“You’re evil.” His blue eyes burned into mine, but I rubbed against him more vigorously.

“Shit.” He sucked in a deep breath before blowing it out. Without further urging, he withdrew a few inches and slid slowly back inside. Now it was my turn to groan. I struggled to free my wrists from his grip, but he didn’t release me.

Instead he lowered his mouth to mine and amped up my desire with his lips and tongue. As if his cock wasn’t already enough. All the while, he thrust in and out. Unbearably slow and torturous. He wasn’t taking his time without taking a toll

on his own body. Grady was strung as tight as a bow. The muscles in his neck strained from the effort he expended to restrain himself.

I forgot the game of power I'd been playing and thrashed my head back and forth on the pillow.

"Say my name," he demanded through gritted teeth. "Say it."

I was more than happy to comply.

"Grady! Grady! Oh, yes, yes, yes."

A satisfied smile turned up his lips, and he rewarded me by thrusting faster and harder.

I was going to die right here in this bed. I would breathe my last breath because no one could survive such intense pleasure and live to tell about it. Every part of my body begged to be released from the sweet agony of desire.

I was on the edge. So close.

One look at Grady, and I knew he was close too. We'd go together. A few more hard thrusts and stars exploded, taking with them every nerve ending in my body.

Grady moaned. "Oh, fuck. Fuck. Aspen."

His cock jerked several times, and we soared together. Blown apart by emotions. Yet somehow seconds later, put back together again.

Grady collapsed on top of me and rolled to the side, pulling me to him. His chest heaved, and our sweat mingled as we fell into a dazed stupor. Words would only ruin the spirituality of our experience, and neither of us spoke. We didn't need to. His thoughts were as clear as if he'd written them in a book, and mine were to him.

I'd never bonded with anyone like this. Never.

No other man would ever satisfy me as Grady had.

I don't know how long we dozed, entwined together in his big bed. Grady's chest was rumbling, and I didn't register that he was speaking at first. Pillow talk. I was good with that.

"My mom thinks I'm reading too much into my father's behavior." Grady toyed absently with a lock of my hair as I snuggled closer to his warmth with my head on his muscular chest. We both basked in the glow caused by the aftermath of stupendous, unparalleled sex. If that sounded like I was exaggerating, I wasn't.

"Mmmm-hmmm." My reply was muffled against his chest.

"My teammates believe he isn't much harder on me than anyone else. Lately, I've been doubting myself. What if I'm being overly sensitive and seeing more than is there?"

I mulled his question over in my mind. I'd never seen him interact with his dad other than that one time at the game. If I hadn't known Grady, I'd have assumed all I'd observed was a coach-player interaction. Nothing more, nothing less.

"What if they're right, and he's treating you fairly?" I suggested, not wanting to make the wrong assumptions.

"If that's the case, why did he pair a rookie like me with a confidence destroyer like Briggs?"

"Maybe because adversity builds character?" I shrugged. I didn't know why any good coach would do that.

"Then I've acquired a lot of character since September."

"We all make assumptions based on past experiences, but they're not necessarily correct. If he wasn't your father with all this baggage between you, what would you do?"

Grady gazed down at me and frowned in concentration. "I guess I'd ask him what the plan was for my development and why he paired me with Briggs."

"Then ask him."

"You make it sound so simple."

"What if you're wrong, and he doesn't hold you responsible for your sister's death? What if you're the one

who does? Maybe you're overcomplicating things. It's easy to do. I've done the same by creating possible scenarios regarding what happened to my mother when the simplest answer might be the best. That she had the bad luck of running into a predator that night." I sat up and studied his face, absently stroking his bare chest.

"I know one thing I'm not overcomplicating." His grin was wicked. "I need you again."

Chapter Seventeen

ANOTHER GONE MISSING

~~Aspen~~

The day after Christmas, I arrived an hour early for the four o'clock shift. Because of regular staff on vacation for the holidays, I'd been scheduled for a lot of hours at the Puck.

I literally skipped into the bar, walking on air. Nothing would ruin my good mood. I'd spent the most epic evening and morning of my life with Grady, and I was beyond smitten. Yeah, me, smitten.

I nodded to the current bartender, Connie, who was about to go off shift and moved behind the counter to stow my purse and put away my coat. Connie's brows shot up, and a knowing smirk crossed her face.

"What?" I asked.

"Someone got some last night. Merrrry Christmas!" She laughed and pushed her salt-and-pepper hair off her forehead. Connie was as much a staple at the Puck as Hal, the owner. She'd worked there for a few decades as far as I knew.

I winked slyly at Connie, not bothering to discount her claim. She'd see right through any denials I might make.

"Nice pendant. Looks real. You must've found a rich prince over the holidays."

"You could say that." I laughed, fingering the diamond pendant hanging around my neck.

“We have company.” Connie jerked her chin in the direction of a woman standing off to one side talking to Hal. She wore black pants and a corresponding black polo, not exactly fashionable but certainly functional. Her hair was tied back in a haphazard ponytail, as if she couldn’t be bothered with styling it. Large circles under her eyes indicated she hadn’t slept in a while. I felt as if I’d seen her somewhere before, but not in here. She definitely wasn’t a customer.

Hal waved me over. I leveled a glance at Connie, but she just shrugged. I walked to the pair.

“Aspen was working on Christmas Eve. She may have seen something,” Hal said to the stranger.

Alarmed, I realized where I’d seen this woman. She was a Portland detective. She hadn’t worked on my mom’s case, but I’d seen her during the multitude of times I’d gone into the office to speak to Detective Rice.

“Is something wrong?” My euphoric mood fizzled as I studied their serious expressions. I tamped down my panic, but my stomach rolled, threatening worse if the news was as bad as expected.

“Aspen, this is Detective Wright from the Portland PD. She’s investigating a missing person.”

My eyes widened, and fear coated the pit of my queasy stomach. “A missing person?” I gasped, having flashbacks to my own experiences with a missing person. Detective Wright sized me up. I shifted from one foot to the other under her measuring gaze.

“Yes, one of your patrons. Her family believes she was in this bar on Christmas Eve. She didn’t show up for Christmas dinner, and they’ve been unable to reach her. We suspect foul play.” The detective was all business. Not an ounce of touchy-feely in this woman, but they didn’t pay her to be tactful.

“Who is it?” My voice cracked with fear. I had a feeling something had been wrong that night. Perhaps my intuition deserved more credit.

“Pria Evans.”

“Pria?” My voice shook, and I clutched at my stomach as it lurched in response.

“Do you know something?” The detective’s eyes narrowed as she scrutinized me closely. I knew the drill. Everyone was a suspect until cleared.

“She was in here that night, sitting at the bar, chatting with another customer. At first, everything was fine, but then he got a little pushy. A friend of mine came to her rescue. I thought we might have a bar fight, but her harasser backed down and stormed out of the bar.”

“Does this *harasser* have a name?” She poised her pen over her pad, ready to write.

“Gordon. I don’t know his last name, but I can find out. When he left, my friend watched him go and said he went into a bar down the street. Pria left a few minutes later.”

“Did you see anything after she went out the door?”

“Nothing. No one followed her from inside the bar. She only lives a block away.”

“By all appearances, we don’t believe she made it home. Her purse was found in an alley several blocks away with her ID, credit cards, and cash still in it.”

“Oh no.” I slapped my hand over my mouth to stop a sob from escaping. I felt responsible, as if I should’ve done something to prevent this.

I spoke to the detective for a few more minutes, giving her every bit of information I recalled. She left me with her card and requested I call if anything else came to me. I’d been through all this with my missing mother, the major difference being that I hadn’t been a witness but a family member.

I wanted to do something, but I didn’t know what I could do other than get Gordon’s last name from Michella. He’d be a good place for the detective to start.

I texted Michella and asked for Gordon’s last name, and she texted back, wanting to know why I needed it. I promised her I’d explain tomorrow at the coffee shop.

Hal left for the day, and I busied myself cleaning behind the bar and taking care of my few customers. Business would pick up further into the evening, but right now, the place was quiet, too quiet. Grady was at the practice facility. He'd promised to stop by afterward.

I resisted the urge to text him about Pria, but I didn't want to interrupt his day. I'd wait until I saw him later. Knowing Grady, he'd assume responsibility for Pria's disappearance, and I'd do what I could to convince him otherwise.

Grady, Braden, and Jarrett ambled into the Puck a few hours later. Braden and Jarrett took one of the high tables near the bar while Grady crossed the room. He pulled me into his arms and gave me a huge kiss in front of everyone. I didn't pull away until the clapping and hooting in the room finally penetrated my dizzy brain.

"I have to serve that table, and then I'll take your order." I extracted myself from Grady's arms and beamed up at him. He winked and trotted off to join his buddies.

Of course, the bar started to fill up now that I'd welcome a little free time. I wasn't able to spend any time with the guys other than taking their orders until an hour later. After checking with my other patrons, I took a break, pulled up a chair, and sat down at Grady's table.

The four of us chatted for a while about nothing consequential. During a lull in the conversation, I turned to Grady. "I have some bad news." While I addressed him directly, I also glanced at his two roommates, giving them an opportunity to go elsewhere if they preferred. They didn't move.

"What's up?" Grady searched my face, his own cloudy with worry. I put a hand on this thigh.

"Remember that entire incident with Pria and Gordon on Christmas Eve?"

"Yeah, of course I remember." He turned to Braden and Jarrett to briefly fill them in. I waited until he was done.

"Well, there's a problem."

Grady sat up straighter and his face lost all expression. He knew me well enough to know this wasn't going to be good.

"A Portland detective was here earlier today. Pria's missing."

"What do you mean—missing?" he asked in a raw voice.

"She never showed up at her family's house for Christmas dinner. They found her purse blocks away from her apartment. As far as they can tell, she never made it home that night."

Grady didn't react. He froze and stared at me as if he weren't able to process what I said. I waited for the shock to wear off. He was probably having flashbacks, as I had when I heard the news. His roommates' gazes shifted from him to me and back again.

"Grady?" I touched his arm, and he turned haunted eyes toward me.

"I should've walked her home. It was only a block."

"This isn't your fault," I rushed to tell him. "You saw Gordon go in the bar down the street."

"Yeah, but did he stay there?"

"We don't know if Gordon is responsible for her disappearance. This is not on you." I reached for his hand. He gripped mine tightly while rubbing the back of his neck with his free hand.

"Fuck. I did it again." He sounded tortured.

"You didn't do this."

His devastated gaze met mine, and I knew he didn't believe me. He was taking the blame. Braden and Jarrett watched us with confusion, causing me to realize they didn't know about Grady's sister, and it wasn't my place to tell them.

"I have no idea what you mean by doing this again, but you didn't cause her to go missing. You had no way of knowing. You did what any of us would do. You thought she was safe," Braden said.

“Really? Did I really? I bet one of you would’ve walked her home.”

“You can’t know that. We weren’t there. Don’t make those assumptions.” Jarrett’s tone was definitive. He wasn’t letting Grady take the fall for this. “I know there’s something tragic in your past. I don’t know what it is, but we’d be shitty friends if we hadn’t sensed your pain.”

“Everyone has personal pain, Grady. We all have regrets and secrets. You can’t let them rule your life, nor can you continue to take responsibility for others’ actions,” Braden added.

Grady wasn’t convinced. He was torturing himself with the knowledge that Pria was missing, and he didn’t do what he thought he should’ve done in hindsight.

“Grady, she turned you down when you offered to walk her home. You aren’t responsible. Pria was a grown woman able to make her own decisions.” Only after I spoke did I realize I’d said *was* instead of *is*.

I didn’t utter the same false words of comfort my friends had voiced to me when my mother had disappeared.

She probably needed some time alone.

Maybe she wanted to get away for a while.

She might’ve met someone, and she’s off on an adventure.

All of those things people tell you to give you false hope.

No, the handwriting on this wall was too clear, not showing up or calling on Christmas Day, the dropped purse, no sign of her ever returning to her apartment that night.

One of my patrons waved me over to their table. “I have to get back to work. Your order will be up soon.”

I hugged Grady. “It’s not your fault. She had walked that route a thousand times before. Who would’ve thought this time would be different?”

“Yeah, I know.” He looked beyond me with a tightened jaw and a hooded gaze. He wasn’t listening. He’d already been

his own jury and convicted himself without a fair trial.

“Damn it, Grady. Do not blame yourself. Do you understand me?” I shook a finger in his face, surprising him with my impassioned declaration.

He stared at me long and hard, then barked out a mirthless laugh. “Yes, Sergeant.”

“Good.” After one more pointed glare, I marched away, encouraged that I’d gotten a slight smile out of him.

For two more hours, I was running, barely having time to breathe. I kept one eye on Grady, though, and he appeared to be having a relatively good time with his friends. As my customers finally began to trickle out, I was able to check on him again.

“You okay?” I asked, sliding up to his side and placing my arm around his waist.

“Yeah. I have to be, or you’ll kick my ass.” His soft smile reached his eyes. I was getting through to him, or so I hoped. Braden and Jarrett nodded their agreement with big grins on their faces.

“You got that right.” I leaned in and brushed my lips across his, lingering for the briefest of moments but giving him as much physical comfort as was allowed in public or by my boss.

Chapter Eighteen

SOMETHING BIG

~~Grady~~

I hung out as Aspen went through her closing routine at the Puck. I watched her every move, imagining what she looked like under those clothes and secure in the knowledge I wouldn't have to imagine much longer. My dick hardened at the thought, but it was always hard around Aspen. The horny devil.

I fought against the gut-wrenching belief I'd screwed up again, but try as I might, I wasn't able to take my mind off of it. I watched Aspen remove her apron and place it in a laundry bin with the dirty towels. She glanced up and caught me watching her. Her face clouded over, and she walked around the bar to stand next to me.

"Grady, you're still blaming yourself."

"I'm struggling with ridding myself of old habits."

"I know how to fix that." Aspen leaned into me for a kiss. I nodded slowly, loving the way she thought.

"I bet you do."

"Let me get my coat and purse."

I followed her toward the back office and waited for her. "I'm not sure I can wait that long."

She spun around in the hallway and bumped into me. Dropping her purse on the floor, she stepped closer and wrapped her arms around my neck. "I can help you with that."

“Really? How?” I perked up, always ready for sex outside the bedroom if she meant what I hoped she meant. My dick was rock hard and straining against the zipper of my jeans.

A sultry, seductive smile teased the corners of her lips. I swallowed and backed against the wall, needing something stable to hold me up because my knees were shaking.

Aspen knelt in front of me, and my eyes almost sprang out of their sockets. She wrapped her hands around the waistband of my jeans. Glancing up at me with a dirty gleam in her eyes, she refocused her attention on her work. And could that girl work.

She unbuckled my belt and opened my fly, inching the denim down my legs until my jeans were pooled around my feet like leg shackles. She could chain me to her bed anytime, and I’d take my punishment like a man.

I anticipated she’d free my cock from my boxers next, but she didn’t. Nope, the naughty girl licked my navel while fondling my balls. Holy shit. Pulses of lust-fueled fire ignited through my body. I threw my arms out to the side and placed my palms down on the wall, hoping to steady myself. Falling on my ass when she was trying to give me head would pour water on my fire.

By some miracle, I locked my knees, and I managed to stay upright.

Aspen rolled my balls around, squeezing them carefully in her palms as she slid her tongue over my abs. I sucked air in and held it.

The imp giggled and cast a sly glance at me before returning to her task.

Finally, she took pity on me and moved her attention back to my dick. Pulling down my boxers, she freed it from captivity. She eyed it intently, almost reverently, running her fingers up and down my shaft in a featherlight contact.

I exhaled with a whoosh, having to breathe or pass out.

“You’re killing me here.”

One more sly glance my way. “That’s the idea.”

I buried my fingers in her silky hair and tried to guide her where I wanted her to go. She didn’t put up much resistance. After licking the tip, she took it in her mouth. I banged my head against the wall and groaned.

I couldn’t take my eyes off the sight before me. My beautiful Aspen’s head bobbed up and down on my dick as she gallantly attempted to take as much of me in her mouth as possible.

“I’m going to come,” I warned her as my brain gathered up its last ounce of resistance and then succumbed to a higher power—my cock. I loosened my hold on her hair, but she didn’t back away. Instead she relished my release and swallowed.

“Fuck. That was fucking fantastic.”

Aspen smiled up at me. “Think that’ll get you home?”

“Barely.” I snickered. I cleaned myself off in the bathroom. Aspen was waiting for me when I came out, dangling my SUV keys in her hand.

“Ready?”

“Always.”

Once we got home, we picked up where we had left off.

After a marathon lovemaking session, Aspen and I were both spent. I lay on my back, and she cuddled up next to me. Cupping her bare ass with one hand, I stroked her hair with the other.

“It’s amazing how fucking puts things into perspective.”

“How so?”

“Everything else pales by comparison.”

“I’m glad you decided to stay the night.”

“If you hadn’t asked me, I’d have asked you. To be honest, Pria’s disappearance has me a little spooked.”

I nuzzled her hair, inhaling the scent of her. “Me too,” I admitted.

“Are you still blaming yourself?”

“Somewhat, but that’s me. Hard to let old habits die.”

“You need to forgive yourself for your sister and not take the blame for Pria’s decision.”

“I’m trying. I really am.” I meant what I’d said. Just having Aspen in my life had gone a long way toward healing my wounds. She made me feel worthy and valuable again, rather than a total and complete failure.

I shifted her onto my chest and stroked her rounded ass. Damn, I loved that ass. “How about you? What do you need to do to move on?” I turned the tables on her. We’d talked enough of me.

“I’m getting there. I’m still finding my way.”

“You have skills. I’ve seen your artwork.”

“Sadly, creating art is a difficult way to earn a living, which is why I work as a barista and a bartender and have no real home.”

I wanted to tell her she had a home with me, but I didn’t. We were too early in our relationship to make such a statement. But I had another plan. I didn’t want her going back to the Uni when I wasn’t in town to protect her. I wanted her safe in my secure condo building with its doorman and alarm system.

My stomach rumbled, reminding me I’d expended a ton of energy without replenishing myself. She giggled and hopped out of bed, pulling on a pair of my sweats and an oversized T-shirt.

“Let’s get you some food.” She faced me with hands on hips, and then she was gone. I leaped out of bed and threw on some shorts, hurrying after her. I caught up with Aspen in the kitchen and wrapped my arms around her waist.

“You’re making it hard for me to cook. Go sit down.” She extracted herself from my hold and swatted me with a towel,

snapping it on my stomach. I backed away and put the counter between us, sliding onto a stool. I watched as she gathered ingredients together for breakfast. I was starving, and I'd have eaten cardboard at this point.

“Sooooo, I have a favor to ask.”

“And what would that be?”

I'm certain she expected a favor of the sexual variety, but I surprised her. “We're going on a five-day road trip tomorrow. Would you be willing to house-sit? I'll leave you my car keys, too, so you don't have to ride the bus.”

“You don't need a house sitter.” She eyed me skeptically, sensing an ulterior motive.

“Yeah, we do,” Braden interrupted. He sauntered into the kitchen, opened the fridge, and took several long gulps out of the milk jug.

“What do we need?” Jarrett asked, snagging a coffee mug and making a cup of coffee.

I rolled my eyes. “Who invited the two of you into this conversation?”

They both ignored me.

“We need a house sitter, and Aspen has volunteered.” Braden addressed Jarrett. Aspen narrowed her gaze, looking from one to the other.

“Hey, that's great. I worry about leaving this place empty for long periods of time.” Jarrett gave Aspen a huge hug. “Thanks for doing that. We'll pay you.”

“Well, we won't. Dipshit here will.” Braden jerked a thumb in my direction.

“Why don't we split it?” I suggested.

“You really don't need to pay me. I'd be glad to stay here.” Aspen accepted her fate and hugged my arm and smiled gratefully up at me. She knew I was doing this because I was worried about her.

“I pay for services, and this is a service.”

She nodded, knowing me well enough to realize arguing was futile when I made up my mind about something. Relief rushed through me. I wouldn't fret about her now. She'd be safe here, and that meant something to me.

Something big.

Chapter Nineteen

BEST GAME

~~Grady~~

The team left early the following morning on a three-game road trip. I hated leaving Aspen alone in our condo, but I'd rather she stayed there than Desmond's couch at the Uni. Not that I minded Desmond. Actually, I liked the guy even if he was a weird, artistic type. Then again, so was Aspen. I guess everyone was weird in their own way.

The plane ride to San Jose was too short. Aspen and I had gotten very little sleep the previous night, and I fell asleep as soon as my ass hit the seat. With a smile on my face, I might add. I hadn't been this happy since my family had been a cohesive unit years ago, and I fully intended on holding on to this feeling and Aspen indefinitely. She'd become the drug I couldn't get enough of. Unlike most drugs, Aspen was a positive influence. Until she'd entered my life, I hadn't realized how sad and miserable I'd been. For once I had hope for a brighter future, one I hadn't thought I deserved for many years.

We hit the practice rink as soon as we landed in San Jose. Coach always insisted we get a feel for the ice before the game.

Sleep hadn't been a priority the night before. Today I paid for it. My skates weighed me down like they were made of concrete, and my muscles refused to fire as I stumbled down the tunnel to the rink. All I wanted to do was get to the hotel and take a nap.

Jarrett fell into step beside me as we emerged from the tunnel onto the ice. “Don’t look now, but Jeffs is deep in conversation with the captain and the assistants. Something’s going down.”

“And I’m sure you’ll find out what it is.”

“Damn right. I take my position as the team gossip seriously. If we’re lucky, they’ve either cut or traded Briggs.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him that my dad prided himself on being able to fix anyone. He’d view Briggs as the ultimate challenge.

I glanced in my dad’s direction. He met my gaze, and I averted mine quickly, but not before I saw his thoughtful expression as he studied me. The attention directed toward me made me damn uncomfortable as I tried to get my legs in sync with each other and almost fell on my ass. Face burning from embarrassment, I regained my balance as my asshole teammates teased me about my lack of coordination.

“Looks like the rookie’s hungover,” Drakos roared with laughter and sprayed all over my legs on his way by.

“He’s hungover, but it’s not from alcohol.” Trent grinned evilly.

“Oh, a sex hangover?” Drakos snorted so hard he scrambled to stay on his feet.

I took their good-natured taunting like any good first-year player. This was all part of the rookie hazing, and arguing would only make them worse.

“Grady, over here!” my dad shouted to me. I shot a grim look at Jarrett. His brows shot up, and he mouthed *good luck*.

Faking confidence I didn’t feel, I skated lazily to where the small group stood. Surely my dad wasn’t going to chew my ass in front of the coaches and captain. I searched my recent memory for something I’d done to merit getting called out. I hadn’t even skated three strides before he’d singled me out.

With a grim smile, I stopped before them. “What’s up?” I displayed none of my usual surliness toward him, still off

balance from my discussions with my mom and Aspen about him. My father almost smiled, and I blinked several times. Sleep deprivation had me hallucinating.

“You’ll play in the first pairing tonight with Kirby.” My dad spoke matter-of-factly and without emotion.

I stumbled on my skates and almost went down, drawing a snicker from our captain. “I, uh, okay.”

Kirby skated up as if he’d been waiting for his cue. “Let’s go, kid.” He’d already known about this change. I turned slowly so I didn’t get tangled in my skates again and followed my new partner.

“Why is this happening?” I asked him.

Kirby took the measure of me with those all-seeing brown eyes. “To see how you do outside of Briggs’s cloud of negativity. You earned this. Enjoy it.”

“Okay.” Suspicion reared its ugly head, and I racked my brain as to how this change might affect me negatively. I came up with nothing.

“Take it at face value, kid. They think you’re good enough to play on the first pairing.”

I nodded slowly, still unconvinced but more optimistic than before. Kirby was a straight shooter. He wouldn’t be involved in some scheme to take me down. The only person who saw nefarious intent in this change was me.

He slapped me on the back so hard I flew forward several feet. Laughing, he skated off and waved for me to follow.

I couldn’t recall ever having a practice as good as this one. Kirby boosted my confidence and gave praise when deserved and constructive criticism when needed.

A few times, I chanced a glance toward my dad. I caught him smiling once as he watched us. I must be delusional, but I thought I saw pride in his eyes. Everything I’d believed for so long about him was starting to unravel, leaving me confused and wondering if I’d misread him all along.

Long after everyone else had left the ice, Kirby and I worked on my technique. I'd forgotten how tired I'd been earlier in my enthusiasm to soak up everything I could from this man.

"You're a good student," he said as we walked off the ice and down the tunnel.

"You're a good teacher," I countered back in complete sincerity.

"You're ready for tonight." His rare smile boosted my confidence. Kirby was a serious guy most times, but he had a sense of humor that could hit you from out of nowhere.

"Thanks." I ducked my head so he wouldn't see me blush. I felt more ready than I ever had.

I'd never enjoyed a pro game as much as I did this one. Kirby was a patient teacher. I learned more skating with him in one game than I'd learned all season skating with Briggs. Kirby was positive and encouraging but not afraid to offer constructive criticism.

The Icehawks won, and I had an assist and a goal. I couldn't wait to get back to the locker room to text Aspen. Funny, sharing with her was the first thing I thought of when I stepped off the ice. I hadn't been able to talk to her earlier after practice and before I'd taken a nap. We'd exchanged a few text messages, but that was all. I decided not to tell her about the defensive change. I'd let her see it for herself. She'd be working at the Puck tonight, and the game would be on every television in there.

I clomped down the hallway, sweaty and bone-tired but triumphant. The training and equipment staff cheered for me with fist bumps all around. Damn, but I felt good about myself.

"Grady, a word with you." My father stood at the end of the tunnel, blocking my access to freedom and the locker room.

Fuck. I didn't need him to ruin what'd been an epic night.

“Okay.” I spoke grudgingly. He led the way, and I followed him to a cramped office provided for visiting coaches.

“Come in.” He held the door open for me and stood back to let me by.

Stiffly, I walked past him. I leaned against the wall and crossed my arms over my chest. I was hot and sweaty and tired, but a good tired. Whatever that man had to say, I wouldn't let him rain on my parade. Kirby had praised the improvement I'd made in such a short time, and I'd embraced my partner's comments.

“I'm tired. Can we make this fast?” I refused to meet his gaze. I didn't want to see the censure or disappointment I always saw in his eyes. Not tonight, not when I'd played the best game of my professional career.

My father didn't answer, and I risked a glance in his direction. He scrutinized me with the saddest expression on his face. I almost felt sorry for him, almost. He crossed to the scarred metal desk and sat on it but still didn't speak. I sensed an internal war going on inside him, and I braced myself for more blame and the corresponding pain that'd come with it.

I waited him out. Not saying a word. Nor would I admit I was dead tired on my feet, running on empty and standing on skates wasn't helping any.

“Grady, I don't know how to start this conversation.”

“Then just say what you have to say and get it over with.” Bitterness overflowed from inside me, and I glared at him. He didn't glare back. Regret flickered in his gaze, and I steeled myself against whatever might come next. I raised my hand and rubbed the tight muscles in the back of my neck.

“You played a hell of a game tonight.”

My hand dropped to my side, and I blinked several times, certain I'd heard him wrong. He must've said I played like hell, right? Only he hadn't. I'd heard him with my own ears, and there was nothing wrong with my hearing.

My knee-jerk reaction was to spit out a rude remark, but I didn't have the heart for it.

"Thanks," I said simply.

"You're welcome." His tone sent me back to when we were close, and I was shaken to the core by the loss of those good times. I'd wrapped myself in a cloak of defensiveness and self-flagellation for so long I never allowed myself to miss him.

"Kirby is a great partner. He's a master when it comes to defensive strategy." I had to give credit where credit was due.

"He is all that, but he also needed the raw material to work with, and you gave that to him."

Thank God I was leaning up against a wall, or I'd have toppled over. I opened and closed my mouth, but nothing came out. Finally I snapped it shut and gathered my wits. He waited, not pushing me or dismissing me, giving the impression he wanted more from me, so I gave it to him.

"Why did you pair me with Kirby?"

My dad rubbed his chin and stared at the ceiling for a moment. "I pride myself on being a good coach, but I haven't been a good coach to you. I wanted you to learn toughness because this league demands it, but there's a limit to what anyone's confidence can take. If you'd been any other rookie, I wouldn't have paired you with Briggs this long. He's been damaging to your development as a defenseman. You're loaded with talent but need experience. Briggs should be with an older, more confident guy who feels empowered to deal with his bullshit."

I clenched my jaw. I got it. This wasn't about me and him as a father and son. This was about a coach and his rookie defenseman. I didn't know whether to be angry or grateful.

My dad wasn't done talking yet. "I wanted you to succeed, but I went about it the wrong way."

I shrugged. "I dealt with it. Why did you ever let the GM take me in the expansion draft?" This was the question that'd been burning in my soul since this summer.

“I asked for you.”

Being slammed up against the boards would have had less of an effect on me than those words. I reached for the back of a chair to steady myself.

“You wanted to screw me over. You don’t need to keep making me pay, Dad. I’ve tortured myself enough since that night.” I narrowed my eyes. Right now I liked this man less than I ever had. He’d wanted vengeance by setting me up to fail at the one thing I loved most in my life.

He met my gaze, but all I saw in his eyes was something I only dared imagine. I saw my dad, the dad I’d once had.

“Is that what you really think?”

“Of course it is. You haven’t shown any indication of any motive other than that.” I’d had enough of this conversation. I had to leave. My hands were shaking, and I didn’t want to embarrass myself in front of him or all people.

Without another word, I marched from the small room, gaining a bit of satisfaction by slamming the door with a loud bang.

Kirby stood in the hallway as if he’d been waiting for me. That guy had an uncanny knack for being in the wrong place, wrong time as far as I was concerned. His expression was unreadable, but I sensed censure.

“Have you ever considered he might want to make amends? Maybe he’s sorry. We’re all only human.”

I tamped down my temper, not wanting to take my anger out on Kirby, who had been my savior tonight. “What do you know about him and me?”

“I know you have a tragic history together.”

I gaped at him. He knew Coach was my father and about our mutual grief. I hadn’t purposely kept it a secret, but I hadn’t advertised it either. I wondered how many other guys knew about our relationship but had chosen not to butt in.

“You have to forgive yourself and others before you can move and reach your full potential.”

“I don’t deserve a happy life,” I ground out through gritted teeth.

Kirby merely stared at me. “You need to come to terms with that. You’re still here. Would your sister want you punishing yourself indefinitely?” He didn’t wait for my answer but turned toward the locker room, and I followed him. I glanced over my shoulder. My father watched from the doorway of the office. The expression on his face reminded me of the same one I’d seen when my sister had gone missing.

I showered and dressed, moving about the locker room in a fog. At first I didn’t notice Briggs glaring down at me. I glanced up at him.

“Fucking prick. Did you complain about me to the coach?” he snarled.

I squinted at him. “What?”

“You’re not my partner anymore. I’m guessing you bitched about me.”

“I never said a word. This was Coach’s decision. Braden’s a more experienced player than me, anyway. You’ll have less to complain about.”

Shit, did I really say that to Briggs?

He tensed and narrowed his gaze, his glare so intense I squirmed a little. “Fuckhead. You’re setting me up.”

“Why would you say that? You want off this team anyway. You’ve made that pretty clear to everyone in this locker room.”

“Briggs,” shouted Dash as he strode across the room. The entire place grew deadly quiet as my teammates watched the unfolding drama. He didn’t stop until he was toe to toe with Briggs. “Leave the kid the fuck alone.”

Briggs’s anger boiled below the surface. He curled his fingers into tight fists and leaned forward on the balls of his feet, ready to strike if provoked. Dash didn’t back down. Our captain had guts. Not too many guys would challenge Briggs in front of everyone.

Kirby, Drakos, and Trent positioned themselves to break up a fight if necessary. I sat still, not wanting to enrage Briggs any more than he already was. I didn't need our team captain to defend me. I preferred to handle myself, but I wisely shut my mouth.

"Does the rookie need our cap to coddle him?" Briggs curled his lip and snorted.

"No, but the team needs you to stop being a jerk and pull your head out of your ass."

This confrontation had been brewing a long time and had very little to do with me. I'd only been the catalyst and Dash's last straw.

"Do you want to be on this team or not?" Dash demanded. This time he leaned into Briggs's space, and Briggs stepped back, surprising everyone in the room that he'd backed down. He broke eye contact and looked down. His shoulders slumped in defeat.

"I want to play hockey," he muttered.

"Then play hockey and stop creating drama on this team. I will not tolerate it."

Briggs mumbled something I'm pretty sure was uncomplimentary, but Dash chose to let that go. He spun around and swept his gaze from one player to another until we all turned away and busied ourselves at our lockers. Briggs didn't say another word to me and left the locker room shortly after.

"Wow, that was intense." Braden sank down on the seat next to mine.

"Yeah. I wasn't sure who'd win that one."

"Then you underestimate our captain."

"Maybe," I conceded.

"You played lights out tonight."

"Thanks. I'm sorry you're stuck being his partner."

“Don’t be sorry. I can handle him. I’ve dealt with his type before. It’s cool.” Braden winked at me and lowered his voice. “I’m not starstruck like you are when it comes to Briggs.”

Starstruck? Is that what I was? Initially that’d been true. Now I was disillusioned and brimming with regrets at how I’d let him suck me into his negativity, mostly because I wanted to align myself with people who didn’t like my dad. I’d never been labeled a troublemaker on any team I’d been on. Clearly, I’d become one on this team.

I vowed to behave like a professional and do my job to the best of my ability without the corresponding drama instigated by a guy like Briggs.

On the bus to the plane, my teammates left me alone, for which I was grateful. This evening had been one long roller-coaster ride from the change in pairings, to my good game, to the weird convo with my father, then the drama with Briggs in the locker room.

We boarded the plane, and I took a seat near the front behind the coaching staff. The veterans always took the back of the plane. The rookies got what was left over.

All I wanted to do was talk to Aspen, but we’d be wheels up for Vancouver soon, and she was working at the bar tonight. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and smiled when several messages popped up. I’d been so upset I hadn’t checked earlier.

Aspen: *You’re a star!*

Aspen: *SCORE!*

Aspen: *You played lights out!*

Aspen: *Kirby is good for you.*

Me: *Thank you. It means a lot. About to take off. Will call when we land if it’s not too late.*

Aspen: *Call when you can. I’ll be here until 1:00 a.m. or so. Big party in this place tonight after you guys won.*

Damn, but I missed her. I’d only been gone for a day, and I couldn’t wait to see her radiant smile again, gaze into those

brown eyes and strip her naked. Especially strip her naked.

Chapter Twenty

WHERE ARE YOU?

~~Aspen~~

Smiling, I put down my cell, still glowing from my brief text convo with Grady. Something wonderful was happening between us, and I savored every moment. Since my mom had disappeared, I'd developed the bad habit of assuming nothing good would ever happen to me again. While my fatalistic side still insisted this was too good to last, I urged myself to believe in Grady and what we had together. I was getting better about things, too.

One of my regulars, Sentara, hurried into the bar at eleven. The party of hockey regulars was still going strong. I'd be cutting a few of them off pretty soon. She glanced nervously over her shoulder as she placed her coat over the back of the barstool and sat down. Her hands shook slightly, and I approached her, alarmed at how discombobulated she was.

"Is something wrong?"

"There's a creepy guy hanging out on the sidewalk, almost like he's hunting for a victim or something." She giggled nervously. "Or maybe I watch too many true crime shows on TV, I guess."

"What did he look like?"

"He had a black hoodie obscuring his face. My boyfriend and I drove around the block a few times and watched him follow one woman out of the bar down the street. We stopped our car and let him know we were watching. He turned and walked the other way."

“Where’s your boyfriend now?”

“He parked the car and went after the guy. I hope he doesn’t get hurt.”

Sentara’s boyfriend was a former pro football player and built like a brick wall. I doubted he’d be the one to get hurt. Regardless, I watched the door until Demetris entered. His hands were shoved in his pockets, and he wore a grim expression.

“He got away.”

“What were you going to do if you caught him? You could’ve been hurt.” Sentara glared at him, clearly annoyed her boyfriend had taken off in some act of bravado after this stranger.

“Some cowardly punk terrorizing women walking alone isn’t gonna hurt me, baby. I didn’t grow up in the ’burbs, after all. I know how to street fight.”

Sentara scowled, and I left them alone to figure things out after serving their drinks.

Sentara’s report disconcerted me. I wandered over to an empty table by the window. Pretending I was cleaning it, I scanned as much of the block as I could see. Nothing was amiss. The guy was gone, probably not coming back tonight. Maybe he was nothing more than a homeless person looking for a handout. Or maybe he was something more sinister. Whatever he might be, Pria was still missing. I couldn’t shake the fear this area might have a killer roaming the streets. Admittedly, with my past, I often jumped to that conclusion.

My table of rowdy hockey fans began to break up and paid their humongous bill along with a generous tip. I loved those guys, not just for the money, but they were a fun bunch. Even drunk, they weren’t rude to staff. On the rare occasion one of them stepped out of line, a group member would straighten them out. I never had to. They policed their own.

My phone buzzed. I pulled it from my apron pocket. A slow smile spread across my face.

Grady: *Can you talk?*

I hurried over to Fantasia. Hal always had a second bartender on duty on game nights, along with waitstaff. Most of them went home around ten or eleven, while I stayed to close.

“Can you hang around for about fifteen more minutes? I need to take this phone call.”

She smiled slyly at me. “Certainly. Take your time.”

I hurried to the back room and dialed Grady. He answered on the first ring.

“Hi,” I said, sounding breathless and needy.

“Hey, beautiful, great to hear your voice.”

“You were a stud tonight.”

“It helps having a good partner.”

“I saw you were paired with Kirby Darkhorse. How did that come about?”

“Coach moved me.”

“Your dad?” I was incredulous. Grady believed his father sabotaged his success. I wasn’t so sure, and now I doubted it even more.

Grady told me all about his meeting with his father after the game and the puzzling things he said.

“Do you think he wants to reconcile?”

“Funny, that’s what Kirby said, too.” Grady hesitated as if carefully considering his next words. “I’m guessing an outside source intervened. I doubt he did this out of the goodness of his heart. Like maybe the GM questioned why he’d paired a rookie with a troublemaker.”

“You might be right, but what if you’re wrong?”

“I don’t know. I’m so confused right now.”

“Take it as the gift that it is. Whatever the reason, you benefitted from it. I’ve never seen you play so well.”

“Kirby is an awesome partner and patient teacher. He sees plays develop and points things out to me I’ve never noticed

before. I'm excited to see where I can go with this."

"I'm so happy for you."

"What's new with you?"

"I'm at the Puck. It was a wild night tonight. Lots of celebrating. We did have one odd thing happen."

"What's that?"

I told him about the stranger on the street that Demetris chased but didn't catch.

"I don't like the idea of you working there late at night and being the last to leave."

I didn't either, but I didn't want him to worry. "I'll be fine. I'm careful, and I have Mace. This isn't the bad neighborhood the Uni is in, and I've done just fine there."

"Yeah, but still... Be careful. I worry about you."

His concern warmed my heart and made me fall a little more for him. "I'm okay. Your SUV is parked outside the back door. I'll make a run for it, and I'll check the alley camera before I leave."

"Okay. Text me when you get home. I don't care what time it is."

No one had shown such concern over my well-being since my mother disappeared. Sure, I had Heidi and Leila, but they had their own issues to deal with. Damn, but I was falling for this guy.

"I will." I walked back toward the bar. Fantasia glared at me, not nearly as patient as she claimed she'd be.

"I have to get back to work. I'll see you in a few days."

"Looking forward to it. Have a great evening."

"Grady?"

"What?"

"I miss you."

“I miss you, too.” His voice took on a husky quality that sent little shivers of excitement down my spine.

I ended the call and returned to the bar.

Sentara and Demetris stayed with me until I closed and walked me to my car. I appreciated their concern. As I drove out of the alley and onto the street, I glanced around, but I didn't see anything suspicious.

Michella and Everly picked me up on their way to the Uni on Thursday night. I didn't know Everly well. She'd volunteered at the Uni for longer than I'd been going there, and she'd gotten me the work with the Icehawks, for which I was eternally grateful. It wasn't as if we hung out as friends or anything, though.

I'd never done much to cultivate friendships outside of Heidi and Leila, but I did enjoy Michella's and Everly's company. They both seemed like good people.

Everly parked at the curb right outside the front door of the Uni and turned to look at me in the back seat. “Are you dating Grady?”

I considered her question and decided that, yes, we were dating. “I am.” I couldn't stop the smile lighting up my face at the mention of his name.

“He seems like a nice guy. Quiet, but nice.”

“He's a great guy.”

“Guess where we're going for New Year's Eve?” Michella gushed, practically bouncing on her seat.

“Where?” I had to smile. Her enthusiasm was contagious.

“We're flying on Everly's family's private jet to Vegas for the game.”

I was instantly jealous even though I was happy for her. “That's great.”

“It'll be fun,” Everly said. “Michella needs a break. Gordon has been doing creepy stuff again.”

“Oh, speaking of Gordon...” I told them the entire story about Pria being missing and Gordon leaving just before Pria did. As soon as I blurted out my story, I wished I hadn’t because I poured water on their joyous evening.

Everly and Michella exchanged worried glances.

“Do you think he did something to her?” Michella asked, her voice wavering.

“The detective told me he has a rock-solid alibi. He was in a bar down the street, which was backed up by other patrons, and a woman who claimed she went home with him.”

Michella blew out a long breath. “Oh, good. I think his bark is worse than his bite.”

Everly’s expression was one of skepticism, but she kept her thoughts to herself. “Let’s go in.”

We went inside, and I took a seat at my usual easel and continued working on a new watercolor of my version of paradise. My paintings were my escape into another life. I’d painted a clearing in the woods with the sun shining through the limbs of the trees in beams of light and bunches of wildflowers growing among the green grass next to a small pond. I wanted to build a house in that clearing. In my imagination, that’s exactly what I would do someday.

“Hey, girlfriend. Long time no see.” Leila ran up to me and we hugged.

“Finally back from your mother’s place?”

“Yes, got back a few hours ago. The guys are having a huge screaming match, and I had to get out of there.”

“They need counseling or to go their separate ways.”

“Like I haven’t told them a million times over. I want to move out, but I have nowhere else to go but the streets.”

“I know that story,” I said in commiseration. I looked over at Heidi’s easel. The dark charcoal drawing she’d been working on sat on the easel. Nothing had changed about it since I’d last seen her. That was troubling. She often came in here between clients and worked diligently on her artwork.

“Where’s Heidi?” I asked.

“I haven’t seen her since before Christmas.” Heidi disappeared once in a while, so I wasn’t overly concerned. She had a few wealthy clients who often took her on expensive trips. She lived in a small studio with her on-again, off-again boyfriend. Currently he was off again. Thank God.

“I’m sure she’ll surface shortly.”

I nodded, but a little tendril of fear curled inside me. Strange things had been happening lately, including Pria’s disappearance.

I pulled my phone from my purse and texted Heidi.

Where are you?

I waited, but she didn’t respond. Her silence wasn’t unusual. If she was busy with a client, she wouldn’t be checking her phone. I hated the idea of her selling her body for money, but she made good money and refused to give it up until she had her cosmetology license.

When Grady got home, I’d talk to him about my concerns. He’d understand if anyone did.

Chapter Twenty-One

YOUR SISTER

~~Grady~~

The Icehawks dropped the second game of the road trip and lost in overtime on New Year's Eve. I played three solid games with Kirby as my partner during this road trip. With his help, I worried less about messing up and more about seeing plays develop and anticipating where the puck was going. The only thing raining on my parade was the Icehawks' crappy record. We were at the bottom of our division and of the entire league. Team morale wavered. At times we played like a team vying for the Cup. Other times we sucked. The consistency wasn't there. We'd have one lights-out period and two mediocre ones.

The season was long and grinding, even longer when a team is losing every two out of three games. The fans stuck behind us. Most were happy to have a team.

The team owner hired a band and rented a banquet room and threw a huge party in Vegas. All I'd wanted to do was go home to Aspen, but we wouldn't be flying out until the morning.

Since New Year's Eve was always a busy night at the Puck, and I hadn't been home, Aspen volunteered to bartend with Leila. She'd promised me we'd have our own party when I got home, and did we ever. I rented a waterfront hotel room on New Year's Day, and we spent the entire time naked and sipping her hot buttered rum between lovemaking sessions.

Lovemaking?

When had fucking become lovemaking?

Probably when Aspen entered my life.

I had to think on that one and what it meant for my future.

On Sunday we played Colorado and squeaked out a win. I had an assist and a couple blocked shots. Monday was practice and working out, followed by a home stand of games. After working the afternoon shift as a barista, Aspen went to the Uni. I volunteered to pick her up. No way was she riding a bus as long as I was available, especially after she'd told me about Heidi missing and the weird guy hanging out by the Puck.

I rang the bell to be let into the studio. Walking past the once cluttered and dusty front area, I noted with satisfaction how much better things looked. I'd helped clean this place up, but it was still a work in progress. Much more needed to be done.

Aspen bent over her painting, carefully applying the brush to canvas. I cleared my throat to get her attention and not surprise her. After a quick kiss on the cheek, I wandered around the room, enjoying the varied artwork, talking to the artists and enjoying myself. I paused in front of an elderly lady who I guessed to be in her eighties. She smiled up at me with a mouthful of missing teeth and turned back to her painting.

"What're you working on tonight, Hazel?" I asked, though I had a good idea. Hazel painted different variations of the same charming cottage with a white picket fence and flowers in the front yard.

"My yard," she said in a voice so quiet I bent closer and tilted my head. I had the impression she seldom spoke out loud anymore, and her voice was rusty from disuse. According to Aspen, she ended up homeless after her husband died and she couldn't afford the taxes on their little house any longer. As far as I knew, she didn't have any children or close relatives. The thought of more elderly people like Hazel living on our city streets disturbed me.

Reaching for my wallet, I pulled out a couple hundred-dollar bills and tucked them in Hazel's coat pocket, as I always

did. Her sharp eyes caught the motion, and she gazed up at me. “You don’t need to do that.”

“I do.” Guilt consumed me. I wasn’t doing enough, but I didn’t know what else to do. I couldn’t save them all, but I hated seeing her out on the street. I had an idea, and I walked into the outer room and made a few phone calls. Minutes later, I returned to stand near Hazel. I scribbled an address on a piece of paper and handed it to her.

“What’s this?”

“I rented you a room in a nearby hotel for the next couple weeks until I can find you a more permanent place to live. I’ll give you a ride over there when you’re ready to go.”

She opened her mouth, but no words came out. Her wise old eyes filled with tears that slid down her wrinkled face. I smiled and squeezed her bony shoulder. I wanted her to know she wasn’t alone anymore. I wished I had done something sooner, but I’d been so wrapped up in my own personal turmoil.

“Thank you. You’re very kind.” She sniffled and wiped her face with a paper towel.

I grunted, suddenly overcome with emotion. Nodding, I moved on before I embarrassed myself by crying. Strolling around the room, I chatted with a few others until Aspen finished up. I wandered over to her easel.

“That’s the view from my condo,” I said, surprised.

“You like it?”

“I fucking love it. You have to let me buy it.”

“It’s not for sale.”

I frowned, not understanding why she wouldn’t be selling the painting.

“It’s a gift for a very special guy.”

“Would I happen to know this guy?” I grinned.

“Intimately.”

I leaned in and brushed my lips against hers. “I can’t wait to have it framed and hung. I know just the place for it.” Our walls were pretty empty, but the big wall behind the sectional would be perfect.

“Guess what?” Her eyes sparked with joy, and I grinned back.

“What?”

“The Icehawks bought Pumpkin Rose Roasters, and Everly is going ahead with her plans to open an art studio showcasing many of the artists here. She asked me to pick several watercolors for display and hopefully to sell. I don’t have any idea what to sell them for, but her mother’s helping with the pricing. She buys a lot of art from local artists.”

I hugged her. “That’s awesome. You’re going to make a full-time job out of this yet.”

“I am,” she said confidently. “But until then, you and I both work for the team. How cool is that?”

It was really cool, and I was so fucking proud of her. She’d come so far in such a short time.

“Ready to go home?” I asked. “I have to drop off Hazel first.”

“Where at?”

“I rented her a room. I’m going to find her a more permanent place.”

Her smile warmed up every dark corner in my soul. She threw her arms around me and hugged me. “You are the best man I’ve ever met.”

My face felt hot, and I suspected it was red from embarrassment. “Thanks.”

She hesitated. “I can stay here tonight if you’d like some guy time.”

“Guy time? With those bozos? No thanks. I’d rather have some naked time with you.”

Aspen laughed and reached for my hand. We hadn't spent a night apart since I returned from the road trip. Things between us were moving at light speed. Sometimes how quickly I'd fallen scared the shit out of me, but being with Aspen felt so right, and I wasn't going to fight something that felt this damn good.

We took Hazel to the hotel, checked her in, made sure she got into her room safely and drove home.

Braden and Jarrett were in their rooms when we got to the condo. We both stopped inside the door and surveyed the disaster. The living room resembled the aftermath of a hurricane and barely resembled the tidy place the three of us had come home to on New Year's Day, thanks to Aspen's cleaning.

"Fucking amazing. Looks like a frat house after a big party." Aspen sighed as she gazed around the room at the destruction.

"Sorry." I cringed at the mess, knowing full well I'd played a part in creating it. My shoes were partially under the couch. My sweatshirt hung over the arm of the chair. I'd contributed to the assortment of beer bottles littering the coffee table.

"You guys are slob." Aspen turned toward me, hands on hips, and I knew I was in trouble.

"I'll flush them out of their rooms, and we'll clean this up."

She arched a brow, not buying that for a second.

"I will." I meant what I'd said. Now that Aspen spent so much time here, the state of this condo embarrassed me. I hadn't cared when it'd been inhabited by three busy bachelors with zero interest in housekeeping.

"Uh-huh." I didn't blame her for sounding skeptical.

My phone buzzed, and I glanced down. The number was an unknown one. I started to ignore it when the message caught my eye.

Unknown: *We need to talk ASAP.*

Normally, spammers didn't start their messages in that manner, nor did they follow up an unanswered call with a text. My heart raced, fearing the worst and running through scenarios in my mind brought about by my history. Had my mom gone missing? Or worse? Had she been in a car accident?

Me: *Who is this?*

Unknown: *Your father.*

I stepped back and stared at my phone as if it'd turned into a monster with the power to destroy my life.

Aspen's brow furrowed as she read my expression. "Is everything okay?"

No, everything was not okay. He rarely contacted me outside of the rink. He'd texted *Merry Christmas* on Christmas day, and I'd texted back. That'd been the extent of our personal exchange.

"My dad wants to meet with me."

"Did he say why?"

I held up my phone and showed her the messages, drawing a deep frown from her.

Before I could answer, my nosy roommate poked his head around the corner. "Your dad? I knew it."

I sighed. The time to come clean was now. "Where's Braden?"

"In his room."

"Get him, and I'll explain to both of you at once." No way did I want to have to repeat myself. The truth was painful enough without reliving it twice.

Puzzled, Jarrett studied me briefly before doing as I requested. My phone buzzed again.

Unknown: *I need to meet with you. It's important. ASAP.*

I didn't respond. Dread overwhelmed me. Something was going on.

Unknown: *I'll be at the Puck in a half hour.*

Me: *Okay.*

Aspen watched me with concern in her beautiful eyes. She reached for my hand, and I needed her touch more than I'd ever imagined. I wanted to hug her and hold on to her as if she were my lifeline, because she'd become just that. Damn, I was grateful I had her on my side.

"He's going to be at the Puck in thirty minutes. Will you go with me?" I held her hand tighter. God, I needed her support. Aspen was soft yet strong, possibly stronger than I was deep down inside.

"Are you sure you want me there?"

"Positive. I need you there. Anything he has to say can be said in front of you."

"I'll go."

"Thank you."

We were interrupted by Braden following Jarrett into the room. They took seats in the chairs opposite where I now sat on the couch with Aspen, clutching her hand.

"You know I have the same last name as the coach," I started out, lamely stating the obvious.

"Well, duh," Braden scoffed and rolled his eyes.

I shot him a withering glare and drew a shrug.

"There's a good reason for that, and I haven't wanted to go there."

They both silently stared at me.

"Coach is my dad."

If I was expecting shock or surprise, I didn't get either. They exchanged looks before focusing back on me.

"I hate to tell you, buddy, but I think the whole team pretty much knows that *secret*," Braden said.

“They do?”

“Uh, yeah.” Jarrett grinned but sobered quickly. Something in my eyes triggered him to not be his usual flippant self.

“You’re obviously not on good terms with your dad. What happened?” Braden asked.

I told them the entire sordid story starting with my sister’s disappearance and my estrangement from my father, our recent conversation, and the latest in this text message.

“Wow, that’s brutal that Jeffs would blame you,” Braden said.

“You were just a kid,” Jarrett growled angrily. They had my back, and I appreciated their support.

“That’s what I keep telling Grady.” Aspen leaned her head on my shoulder and gave me a squeeze.

“Are you going to meet him and see what he wants?”

“Do I have a choice? He’s my coach, and he controls my destiny as far as the team is concerned.”

The guys nodded, and Aspen watched me with concern on her beautiful face.

“You know, Grady, I don’t think Coach singles you out any more than the rest of us.” This wasn’t the first time I’d heard this from Braden and others. Perhaps I’d be wise to do some soul-searching to figure out how much of this was my guilt talking and how much was accurate. Right then, I didn’t have time for that.

“I guess I’m going.” I sighed. Meeting with my father was the last thing I wanted to do tonight, but I didn’t see an option.

Minutes later I walked into the Puck holding Aspen’s hand. My stomach churned like the ocean in an epic storm. Thank God for Aspen. She was my rock and my courage. We paused inside the door and surveyed the large room. My dad sat by himself toward the back in a booth.

“He’s here.” She spoke with a breathlessness that betrayed her own nervousness. She’d never met him before, but his opinion of my girlfriend didn’t matter to me. Maybe it did to her.

I bent down and kissed Aspen’s forehead. “Here goes nothing.”

“I’m here. You’re not going through this alone, but I swear if he’s an ass to you, he’ll answer to me.”

I grinned at her. Damn, but I adored her. Hell, maybe I even loved her.

“Let’s do it.” Hand in hand, we wound through the maze of tables. My dad looked up as we approached, but he didn’t say anything, just watched us. I searched his face for signs of irritation or anger, but all I saw there was deep, profound sadness.

We took a seat across from my dad. He glanced questioningly at Aspen. I’d blocked him from my personal life for so long I realized he’d never met a girlfriend of mine.

“This is Aspen. Aspen, this is my coach, Duke Jefferson.” It wasn’t lost on me when he cringed at my introducing him as only my coach.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Jefferson.”

My father smiled warmly at her. “You can call me Duke.”

She nodded, but she didn’t smile back. She was playing hardball with him, and I loved her for it.

My father’s expression switched from friendly to grim and he refocused his attention on me. “Does she know the story?”

“She knows everything.”

“Okay then.” He rubbed his palms on his jeans, and I realized he was as nervous as I was. Imagine that. I’d always seen my dad as this strong, invincible figure who weathered every storm.

“Vancouver PD called me today.”

Everything inside me went ice cold. My blood should've frozen in my veins, and my heart should've stopped beating. But neither happened. I was silent and waited for him to continue.

"There's no easy way to say this. They found Nancy's body."

I sat back as if I were smacked across the face. My vision blurred, and things began to spin out of control. Aspen squeezed my hand harder and brought me back from the brink.

"Where?" I croaked, on the verge of reliving this entire nightmare.

"In the woods outside of Vancouver in a shallow grave. The dental records appeared to match." Dad's voice cracked, betraying how fragile his armor really was.

"Fuck." I couldn't think of another word to say.

"I didn't want to tell you until a positive ID was done. They finished the autopsy this afternoon, and the detective called me."

"What...what was the cause of death?" My voice squeaked as it hadn't since I'd gone through puberty. That storm began to brew again in my stomach, but I wouldn't get sick in front of this man.

"Blunt force trauma to the head. It wasn't pretty. She suffered before she died."

I fought against the nausea agitating in my stomach. "Fuck." Pulling my hand from Aspen's grasp, I buried my head in my hands and shut my eyes, trying to block out horrific images of how my sister died, but I couldn't. Aspen leaned into me and wrapped an arm around my shoulder, pulling me close. I lost control and sobbed quietly. I didn't give a shit what my dad thought at this point. He could go to hell as far as I was concerned.

Several minutes passed before I got myself together and lifted my head. My gaze met my father's. I expected to see disgust and recrimination written there, but I didn't. He looked almost...sorry? I had to be wrong, fabricating what I wanted to

see when it wasn't reality. My mother's and teammates' words flooded back to me. Maybe I was the one who had the problem, not my father. Maybe my punishment to myself had been to lose him because I didn't deserve him?

Shit, hell if I knew.

Dad reached across the table and put a supporting hand on my shoulder. "Son, it wasn't your fault. I hope you know that."

I shook my head to clear it, but I hadn't imagined his words. He'd said them. I didn't know what to say, nor did I dare say a word because I'd lose it all over again.

"I'm sorry for my part in this. I was furious at you those first few days, but I haven't blamed you in a long while. You've suffered as much as any of us. You had no way of knowing something would happen that night. Instead of comforting each other, we let tragedy rip us apart."

I swallowed hard, but the words still wouldn't come.

"I don't blame you for hating me for blaming you initially. That was fear and grief talking. Maybe someday you'll find it in your heart to forgive me."

I glanced up at him but said nothing.

"I miss you, son." With resignation on his face, his brief smile was sorrowful as he rose from the table. With slumped shoulders, a defeated man left the bar. I watched him go, my gaze glued to the door long after he'd exited.

I had to forgive myself first before I forgave him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE TRUTH HURTS

~~Aspen~~

I'd been prepared to dislike Grady's father. The second I'd laid eyes on him, anger boiled inside me for Grady's sake. I fought the darkness because I tried so hard not to be a hater, even when someone gave me a good reason or I believed they did. My mom used to always say *we do the best we can with what we know at the moment*.

She was a huge proponent of cutting people some slack, understanding their struggles, and not judging them.

Mr. Jefferson was only human with faults and fears like the rest of us. He was a father who'd lost his beloved daughter, and he'd lashed out at the next person closest to him, subconsciously wanting Grady to feel the same pain he felt. At least, that was the way I tried to see it. And Grady wasn't blameless in their estrangement.

I wasn't sure I was ready to jump on the "like" train for Mr. Jefferson yet, but I appreciated he had the guts to admit he was wrong, even if it was a long time coming.

Grady stared at the door for a very long time. His face showed no emotion, but he clenched and unclenched his jaw while squeezing my hand a little too hard. When I wiggled my hand to get the circulation back, he loosened his vise grip and smiled apologetically.

"Sorry."

"It's okay. Really," I assured him.

“I didn’t hear what I thought I heard, did I?” Our eyes met, and confusion replaced his stoicism. He blew out a long breath as if he’d been holding it until he was about to pass out.

“You did because I heard it, too. He’s sorry.”

“Why? Why now?”

“Perhaps because your sister’s body has been found, and the realization you’re the only child left has smacked him upside the head.”

“It’s a little late for that.” Grady scowled. He wasn’t willing to let his father off that easily, and I didn’t blame him.

“Maybe, maybe not.” I walked a fine line between being protective of Grady and knowing how important family truly is.

“I don’t know how to handle this. It’s too much all at once.”

“I’m sure. I don’t know how I’d handle similar news. You don’t have to do anything right now. You don’t have to forgive him or become his new best friend. Not yet. But keep that door open a crack because someday, possibly sooner than later, you might want a relationship with him. You’re all the family he has now.”

He swallowed and closed his eyes for a long moment. “And I’m lucky I have you.”

“You do. I’m here for whatever you need.” I wanted to tell him I’d always be here, but our relationship hadn’t progressed to that point, and I didn’t know where we were going.

“Thank you for being here. It means more than you can imagine.” He hugged me, holding on longer than he should’ve, considering we were in public, but neither of us cared.

“Kirby told me when we were on the road trip that I needed to forgive myself first.”

“Wise words. You told him about your sister and father?”

“No, I didn’t, but that guy always seems to know things. It’s uncanny and disconcerting at times.”

I absorbed this information. I didn't know Kirby at all, but perhaps he was more in touch with his intuition than most of us, or he'd simply done his research on Google.

"How are you feeling about what happened to your sister?"

"Relieved and sad. Relieved because now I can move on and deal with her death. Sad because I guess I always held out hope that she'd disappeared on her own and would resurface when she was ready."

"I know exactly what's going on inside, but I guarantee you that knowing is better than having false hope."

He put his arm across the back of the booth, and I rested my head on his shoulder. We sat like that for a long time, not talking, each lost in our own thoughts.

"I know my sister, and I bet she fought like a lion." Grady broke the silence.

I lifted my head and smiled at him. "I bet she did, too."

"I hate thinking that she suffered."

"Me too. She's not suffering anymore."

"Yeah, I'd like to think she's in a better place."

"You have to believe she is."

"I know I am, and I have you to thank for that. Do you think the guys are right? That maybe my dad hasn't treated me any differently than any other guy on the team? That I'm imagining it or creating my own reality?"

"Grady, I don't know, but I'd say there's a chance."

"My mom told me I was wrong about him, too, and my mom hates him."

"Why don't you work on taking his comments at face value and not assigning emotional motives to everything he says?"

"I could do that."

"I know you can because you're one of the good guys."

Grady nodded and lapsed into silence. He was in an introspective mood, and so was I.

We needed each other in ways we hadn't defined yet that went far beyond sex. I met his trusting gaze and was struck by how far we'd come together in a relatively short time. Another thing struck me.

I was in love with this man.

Me? In love? I'd had crushes before, but nothing like this. What I felt for Grady was all-consuming and indefinable by mere words. What I felt for him wasn't something I could explain. It just was. And it had to be love, which was wonderful and scary and awesome and frightening.

"What're you thinking?" Grady cocked his head, watching me closely.

I was startled by his words. I hadn't realized I was that transparent. "Uh, nothing."

"Not true. You had a look on your face, and I'm hoping I put it there."

"A look? What kind of look?"

He shrugged. "Hard to explain."

I smiled. "I'm glad we have each other."

"Me too. More than you can imagine."

I doubted that because right now, I dared imagine quite a bit. "I hope someday I have the answers to my mom's disappearance, even if they're not what I want to hear."

"I hope you do, too." He cocked his head and studied me. "This might be a weird time to ask you this based on everything that's transpired in the past hour, but maybe it's the right time."

"What do you want to ask me?" My brain churned with the scary and amazing possibilities. I was never one who did well waiting to open Christmas presents or playing guessing games. I wasn't all that patient about stuff like that.

"Would you do me a favor?"

“Absolutely.”

“Would you attend a charity gala with me Friday night?”

“A gala?” Of all the things I expected him to ask me, this wasn’t one of them.

“Yeah, a black-tie gala. We’ll dress up, eat a great dinner, and dance all night.”

At first, I was flattered and thrilled by his request, but then my lack of self-confidence reared its ugly head. I didn’t have anything appropriate to wear to a black-tie affair.

“I don’t know what to say. I’m not a gala type of girl.”

“I’m not sure why you’d say that. What is a gala type of girl?”

I hesitated, knowing he wouldn’t accept my answer as my insecurities were getting the best of me. “Someone who travels in wealthy circles. That’s not me.”

“You travel in my circles just fine.”

I sighed. He was going to make this difficult. “That’s different. You might have money now, but you didn’t always, nor did your friends.”

“You like Everly, and her family essentially owns Portland. Besides, this gala is raising money for Everly’s art gallery project. How can you say no to that?”

“Going to a function together seems so official.” I tried another tactic.

“Official?” He chuckled. “What does that mean?”

“Like we’re more than hanging out.” I regretted making that remark. I’d only done it as an excuse to say no and now realized I looked like I was fishing.

“Aren’t we?”

I shrugged, afraid to say more for fear of being rejected.

“Okay, I’ll make it official. We’ve bared our souls to each other. We’ve shared laughter and tears. We enjoy each other naked and clothed. So would you be my girlfriend?”

I gaped at him, struck silent by his bold request. “I...I didn’t mean to force you into anything.”

“No one is forcing me. Do you feel like you’re being forced?”

No, I felt as though I’d just been given the world on a silver platter. I shook my head.

“This might be premature, but can I be brutally honest with you?”

“Of course.” I held my breath, fretting over what might come next.

He cleared his throat, staring at the wall before refocusing on my face. “When I first saw you, I knew. It was like my soul said, I’ve been waiting for you, and here you are.”

I was struck speechless. That part of me that’d become used to disappointment and despair denied what my ears had heard. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes to both.”

“Both?”

“That you’re my girlfriend, and you’ll go with me.”

“I absolutely say yes to being your girlfriend, but the gala? I don’t have anything to wear.”

“Are you worried about money? I’ll pay for it.”

“No, I could never accept that. I’m a great thrift shopper. I’ll find a gently used dress that’ll knock your socks off.”

“I’m counting on it. In fact, you can knock more than that off.”

I rolled my eyes, and we both laughed together, easing some of the tension from a tension-filled night.

Chapter Twenty-Three

ASHES

~~Grady~~

I hadn't exactly planned on asking Aspen to be my girlfriend or pouring out my most intimate feelings. Not that I didn't want her to be. I wanted us to be exclusive, but I usually spent more time thinking things over before making a decision as important as a committed relationship, even though being exclusive had been percolating in my head for a while now.

Last night had been traumatic in so many ways, and for some unfathomable reason also seemed like the perfect night to put a label on our relationship. I wanted Aspen and me to be official. I needed that type of permanency more than she—or I—imagined.

Knowing my sister's fate had crippled me with overwhelming grief as intense as those first few days when Nancy had gone missing, compounded by my father's attempt at reconciliation. I battled a dark cloud of doom that threatened to block out any light in my life. Aspen was the beacon penetrating the darkness, reminding me I wasn't alone. Without her, I'd have fallen into a deep chasm of self-flagellation and misery. With her, I'd get through this and emerge stronger on the other side.

As far as the gala, I'd planned to ask her earlier in the day but hadn't found the right time to do it. I'd gladly pay for her dress, but she had her pride, and I wouldn't do anything to lessen that.

Aspen stayed the night last night, and we consummated our boyfriend-girlfriend relationship with another one of our epic sexathons. When we weren't screwing each other's brains out, we talked about my sister and her mother. Exposing my bare belly of pain was cathartic and healing. By morning, I felt better about myself, knowing I'd suffer relapses of guilt but would fight through them.

Once again, I was dragging by the time I entered the arena for morning skate before our game that night. I managed to pull it all together when I was on the ice somehow. Kirby kept casting odd glances at me. As savvy as he was, he'd noticed I was a little off this morning, but he didn't push or prod. That wasn't Kirby's MO. I caught my dad watching me closely multiple times, which was disconcerting. Not once did he point out my mistakes or call me aside. We tiptoed around each other, uncomfortable with the changed dynamic between us. In some ways, it'd been easier when we had been sworn enemies, or at least that's how I'd seen it, accurate or not. Now I was off balance and in strange yet familiar territory.

I contemplated officially telling the team that Coach was my dad, but Jarrett took care of that. Bless his big fat mouth. By game time the entire team knew our head coach was my father. I wasn't mad at Jarrett. In some ways, I was grateful he'd done the dirty work for me.

Most of my teammates came up to me in the locker room and made a comment of support or acknowledgment. Even if they'd known or suspected, my connection to Coach was out in the open.

Briggs approached me last. I hadn't expected him to approach me at all. We hadn't spoken one word to each other since he'd been a dickhead in the locker room and Dash had interceded on my behalf.

He stood before me, wringing his hands and shifting his weight from one foot to the other, atypical Briggs. "Jeffs is your dad? That's tough. I'd heard rumors but didn't pay attention."

I nodded and didn't make any comment. Now that everyone knew he was undeniably my father, it didn't seem right to pile on with those who opposed him like Briggs.

"You're better off without me, kid, and it shows." Briggs lifted his head and scrutinized me pointedly. I met his gaze, unable to come up with a retort to his comment. Instead of being surly and angry, he reminded me of a guy who'd given up the fight. I liked him better when he cared enough to show anger than this complete apathy.

"Briggs, I..." I had no words. I wouldn't lie by claiming he'd helped my career. For all the damage he'd done to me and the team, I didn't want to hurt him the way he'd hurt me.

His mouth tightened into a firm line. He watched me for a moment, then left me standing there and walked away.

"Damn. Is the world ending tonight?" Blake asked from beside me.

"It must be." I turned back to my locker, not wanting to discuss Briggs or anything else going on in my life. All I wanted was to see Aspen.

I was almost out the door when my dad approached.

"Grady, a word please."

Reluctantly, I followed him down the hallway to a more private area. I half expected him to chew my ass about the gossip going around regarding him being my father, but I hadn't started it.

"They would've found out eventually," I said before he had a chance to tell me what he wanted.

His brow furrowed with puzzlement before my meaning dawned on him. "This isn't about the team knowing you're my son. I'm fine with that. In fact, I welcome it."

"Then what's it about?" I attempted to gather my cloak of defensiveness around me but found I no longer had the heart for it.

“They found trace DNA on your sister’s clothes. Blood from someone other than her.”

“Nancy got her licks in,” I said, feeling proud in a tragic sort of way.

“She did. They’re expediting the test and comparing the sample with known offenders. I hope to have details in a week.”

I nodded. “Keep me up to date.”

“I will.”

“When...when will they release the body?” I’d been dreading the answer to this question.

“I’m having her cremated, if you’re okay with that.”

“I’m good with it. She’d always mentioned she wanted to be cremated and her ashes spread on Lake Erie.” I hated talking about this, but it had to be done.

Dad nodded. He’d heard Nancy mention the same thing, though we’d all joked about how she didn’t need to worry about things like that because she had a lot of years left. Turns out we were wrong, and she must’ve had a premonition her life would be short.

“Maybe in the off-season, you, me, and your mom can rent a boat and fulfill her wishes?” Dad sounded hopeful, almost pathetically so.

“Yeah.”

He swallowed and didn’t move away. I had the distinct impression he wanted to say more but didn’t.

“Okay, thanks.” I sprinted back to the locker room, eager to get away from him. Aspen was waiting, and I needed her more than ever.

Chapter Twenty-Four

NO CLUES

~~Aspen~~

I stumbled through the next couple days in a strange state of euphoria and sadness. Euphoria that Grady and I were official and sadness over Grady's loss. I attended Grady's game last night, which they won. He played well but was distracted. Of course he was dealing with the news of his sister and his father's efforts to reconcile. He had another game tomorrow night before the gala on Friday. I was torn in several directions with my two paying jobs and volunteer work at the Uni, not to mention my own artwork. I still felt obligated to help Desmond as I hadn't formally moved out of his apartment. I might as well have, but Grady and I hadn't discussed me moving in permanently, and I wouldn't make that assumption.

As I finished my shift at Pumpkin Rose, I heard the door open and glanced up. Leila hurried into the coffee shop. Her disheveled appearance caught me off guard. Her eyes were wild and her hair a mess, not typical Leila.

"Something's very wrong." Leila bent down and held her sides, gasping for breath as if she'd been running to get here. "I can't reach Heidi. She's never gone this long without contacting me."

I was alarmed when I realized I hadn't heard from her in a few weeks. I was a sucky friend. I'd been so wrapped up in my own life and drama I'd let time fly by without thinking of my friend.

“Do you know how to reach any of her relatives?” Leila said.

“No. Does she have any she speaks to?”

Leila shrugged. “Not that I know of. What should we do?”

“Let’s check out her apartment. See if we can find any clues there.”

We both knew where Heidi lived. At times her abusive, asshole boyfriend had lived there, but the last we knew, they’d broken up for good. We’d never been in the apartment. Not only was Heidi a private person, but we didn’t know if she entertained clients in that place.

“Let’s hurry over there before it gets dark.”

I agreed. This wasn’t the kind of neighborhood I liked to walk around in once the sun went down. I had to go to the Uni tonight anyway. I considered calling Grady, but he was working out, and I didn’t want to interrupt him.

We got there late afternoon and rapped on the door. No one answered.

“Someone’s in there. I can hear a television and someone moving around.” Leila pressed her ear against the door, straightened, and met my concerned gaze. I lifted my hand and pounded on the door, not stopping until I heard the locks click.

Much to our surprise, Heidi’s ex-boyfriend, Lonny, yanked open the door. He battled drug addiction and appeared to be using again. He squinted as if he couldn’t quite recall where he’d seen us before. I craned my neck to see around him into the one-room studio apartment. The place was a mess, with beer cans and assorted trash everywhere. Heidi would never allow her haven to be in such a state, which meant she probably hadn’t been here in a while.

“Lonny,” I said firmly to get his attention. He swung his unfocused gaze toward me, swaying on his feet. “We’re friends of Heidi’s, and we haven’t seen her in a while. Do you know where she is?”

“Nope.”

“When’s the last time you’ve seen her?”

He contemplated that question as if he had no concept of time. “I don’t remember. Sometime before Christmas I came here to crash. She wasn’t here, so I got the landlord to let me in. He’s a friend of mine.”

“She hasn’t been here since you’ve been here?” I chose to ignore that her landlord had let someone in her apartment without her permission, but I’d guess he was a druggie, too, and could be bought.

“Nah.” Lonny shrugged indifferently as if Heidi’s disappearance was of little concern to him. I caught sight of movement and glimpsed a young girl sitting on the ratty couch in the apartment, smoking a cigarette. She probably wasn’t all of sixteen.

We weren’t getting anywhere with him. Either he did something to her, or he didn’t know anything. “So you haven’t seen her, and she wasn’t here when you got here?”

“Did I not just say that? I don’t know where the fuck she is. Probably shacking up with one of her rich clients.”

“Were her purse and phone in the apartment?” Leila asked.

“No, that’s why I figured she was gone. I’m done here.” He tried to shut the door, and I stuck my foot in it. “If you see her, let her know her rent is due.”

“I won’t let her know anything, you piece of shit. If you did anything to her—” Leila’s eyes flashed fury. Lonny advanced toward her but was brought up short when I produced Mace from my purse.

“Get back,” I ordered, and hoped the guy didn’t pull out a knife and gut us both right there in this dirty hallway littered with needles and who knew what else. I grabbed Leila’s arm and began pulling her toward the rickety stairwell. Lonny didn’t follow but slammed the door shut.

“Wow, what an asshole.” Leila made a face.

“I know.”

“We need to report her as missing. It doesn’t appear anyone else will.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Do you think he did something to her?”

“Hard to say. I wouldn’t be surprised.”

An hour later, we arrived at the local police precinct and filled out the paperwork for a missing person. The female officer who took our report didn’t seem the least bit interested in Heidi’s disappearance, especially after we admitted that Heidi was a paid escort.

Discouraged, we caught the bus back to the Uni and went inside.

“I’m not holding out any hope we’ll find Heidi,” I said.

“Neither am I. I don’t think they’ll put much effort into looking for her. Aspen, I have this horrible feeling something bad has happened to her.”

“I do, too.” But then, I always jumped to the worst conclusions when someone came up missing based on my history.

Lakita, one of the street people who came in here on occasion, glanced up from her charcoal drawing and watched us warily. I didn’t know the quiet young woman well. She kept to herself and was afraid of her own shadow. Heidi had once told me that Lakita’s abusive boyfriend pimped her out. If she didn’t earn enough money, he’d beat her. I’d seen the black eyes and bruises on her. She was just one of many sad stories on the streets of Portland, and any other city, for that matter.

I sat down at my easel. Unblinking, Lakita stared at me. When I caught her gawking, she ducked her head. A few minutes later, she bundled up in an old coat and left the studio. I craned my head to see what she’d been working on. Her painting was really dark, not just in color but in its message. Most of her work had an ominous tone to it, but this was one of the grimmest I’d seen her do. She’d painted an alley with a dumpster and a stray cat on a rainy evening. Leaning against the dumpster was a bloody woman whose eyes stared vacantly

out of the canvas as if she were dead. The realism was astonishing and the subject matter disturbing.

“Why was she staring? I got the impression she wanted to say something. Do you think she knows anything about Heidi?” I asked Leila.

“She seemed afraid.”

“But she’s always afraid of something.”

“I know, but look at that. Did she see something like this?” She pointed at the canvas and shivered, hugging herself. I didn’t blame her; the image gave me goose bumps.

An hour later, Grady strode into the Uni. He waved in my direction and stopped to talk to Desmond before wandering over with a huge grin on his face. His smile lit up what had turned into a dark day.

“Hey, beautiful.” He bent down to kiss my cheek. “What’re you working on?” He cocked his head at the cheerful garden scene, a continuation of my cottage series. I’d never told him this was my dream house, but he’d probably guessed it was something like that. I needed the light of that painting to help me out of the dark of this day. Grady’s smile slipped off his face. “What’s wrong?”

“We reported Heidi missing today.” I swallowed around the sudden lump that appeared in my throat and reached for his hand. He entwined his fingers in mine and studied me with concern.

“Oh crap. So no word from her?”

“None. Talked to her asshole boyfriend. He didn’t know shit.”

Grady frowned. “You talked to him? Where did you see him?”

“We went to her apartment, and he was there.” My admission drew a deep scowl from him.

Grady ran a hand through his thick hair and shook his head. “Why didn’t you wait for me? I’d have gone with you.”

“I had Mace.”

He grimaced, not liking my answer. “That’s what my sister always said. She thought she was invincible, too.”

He had a point.

“That was somewhat stupid of us,” Leila admitted.

“See? I worry about you when you’re in this part of town.”

“I won’t do it again.”

“Can I have that in writing?”

“Probably not,” I joked, and Grady did laugh.

“What’d the cops have to say?” he asked.

“You know how it goes. They weren’t interested. She’s an adult and can come and go as she pleases. Blah. Blah. Blah.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I do know. Would you like some good news?”

“Oh God, yes.” I craved good news.

“I talked to the charity coordinator for the Icehawks. She found Hazel a nice room in an assisted living community. She’ll have a safe, warm place of her own, three meals a day, and all sorts of activities.”

I threw my arms around him and kissed him soundly. “You’re the best.”

He actually blushed. “Thanks.”

Leila glanced at her phone. “I gotta go. See you guys later.”

“Can I give you a ride anywhere?” Grady offered.

She waved at us over her shoulder. “Thanks, but Jarrett’s waiting outside. Aspen, I’ll meet you at the coffee shop tomorrow, and we’ll check out some consignment shops for formal dresses.”

Before I had a chance to answer, she was gone.

“I’m sorry about Heidi.” Grady’s expression turned grim. We both knew she’d been out of touch for too long for this to be good. We’d been there, lived through that. Unfortunately.

“She knew the risks of her profession, but she was as careful as someone can be in her line of work. I think something’s happened to her. Something bad.”

Grady didn’t offer false hope or try to minimize her disappearance. I appreciated him being grounded in the stark reality of things, even if I’d love to bury my head in the sand and imagine Heidi sunning herself on some Hawaiian beach with her new billionaire sugar daddy.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

I thought about his offer for a long moment. “I’d like to question some of the street people. She knew a lot of them. They might have heard something.”

“Tonight?”

I nodded, expecting him to talk me out of it. He didn’t.

“I’ll go with you.”

We bundled in our coats and stepped into the frigid January air. The night was cloudy and dark, with not a sliver of moon in sight. Grady reached for my hand, and I gladly took it.

“I’ve done this before,” he said.

“Me too.”

“Doesn’t bring back good memories.”

“No, it doesn’t, but I’ll bet someone knows something.” First Pria and now Heidi had gone missing, not to mention my mother and several other women I’d been tracking. Not in the same location necessarily, but in the same general area of Portland.

I pointed across the street where a few women loitered and a young man lay in the doorway in a sleeping bag. “Let’s try them.”

The two women watched us approach. They dismissed me immediately and both their hungry gazes feasted on Grady. I didn't blame them. He was eye candy of the sweetest and sexiest kind.

"Hi," I said, holding up my phone to show a picture of Heidi. "Do either of you know her?"

Neither of them bothered to look and shook their heads, their attention completely on Grady.

He flashed one of his lady-killer smiles. "Look again, ladies. She's a friend of ours, and she's missing. We'd truly appreciate your help."

They turned and leaned closer to study the image.

"Her name's Heidi. I don't know her street name," I said.

The taller of the two consulted with her friend, and she nodded. "That's Fawn. We know her."

Fawn? Somehow that name fit. Heidi was tiny and somewhat skittish with big doe eyes.

"When's the last time you saw her?" Grady nudged. He'd done this before and knew the right questions to ask. I stood back and let him fire away.

The shorter one cocked her head and tapped her lower lip as if trying to remember. "Right around Christmas."

"She'd had a couple clients earlier who were regulars and was hoping for one more date," said the taller one.

"Did she get that date?" Grady asked.

"Yeah, some guy in a dark sedan, kinda creepy, picked her up. That's the last we saw of her."

"Can you describe this guy?"

"Not really. It was dark. He had a hoodie pulled over his face. He was a white guy."

"We've seen him around here before, haven't we, Satin?"

Her friend nodded. "That's all we know."

I wanted to ask more questions, but they'd already mentally shut down. Even Grady didn't interest them any longer, and they wandered off to peer in the window of a car that'd pulled up.

"We need to report what we've discovered to the detective handling her missing person case."

"I will, for all the good it'll do."

Grady put his arm around my waist and hugged me to his side. "You have to keep on them. Be a thorn in their side, but I'm not telling you anything you don't know."

"Sadly, you aren't."

We ventured a few blocks farther but didn't get any other useful information before walking back to the Uni.

"I can stay here tonight. I've been at your place every night for the last few weeks. I don't want to overstay my welcome." I don't know why I brought this up. Perhaps because I hadn't left his place for several days, and I wanted his assurance my continued presence wasn't intruding on his guy time.

"You're my girlfriend, remember? You aren't staying here tonight. Not when I have a bed that gets pretty damn cold without you in it."

"I don't want to be a burden."

He barked out a laugh as if I'd said the funniest thing. "You aren't. Let's go home."

The word *home* reminded me I didn't have a real place to call my own and struck me hard with another realization. Despite us taking our relationship to the next level, I was still worried this thing between Grady and me would be temporary, and I'd kept my options open. I wasn't committing one hundred percent to our future because I didn't know how much of one we'd have. For so long, I'd convinced myself that good things happened to everyone but me. What if I was wrong?

Was I sabotaging a possible future with Grady to protect my heart?

I must place more value on myself and believe wholeheartedly I am worthy of happiness.

I'd start with the gala. I'd never seen myself as Cinderella, but perhaps I'd allow myself the luxury of being the girl the handsome prince fell for.

Chapter Twenty-Five

MONKEY SUIT MADNESS

~~Grady~~

I was a jeans and T-shirt guy. I hated wearing suits on game days and usually didn't wear a tie. For the gala tonight, I'd forced myself to play along and not be grumpy. I hated tuxes even more than I hated suits, but I'd do this because I knew something Aspen didn't. Some of Aspen's artwork would be included as part of a silent auction tonight. She'd previously given Everly permission to sell the paintings in the soon-to-be-opened art gallery, and Everly's mom had chosen two of her paintings for the auction.

I wiped my sweaty palms on my thighs and poured a finger of whiskey into a glass. Nerves weren't usually a thing with me, but I wanted this night to be perfect for Aspen in every way and worried things might go sideways, even though I had no reason to think that way.

Aspen and Leila took over my bedroom and wouldn't let any of us in. Jarrett and I settled in to wait, not sure how long this would take. Regardless of how long, Aspen would be the belle of the ball.

I tried to picture my girl all done up for this formal affair. I doubted my imagination would do the real deal justice, but right now it was all I had until those two emerged from my bedroom.

"They've been in there for hours," Jarrett grouched while pacing the floor. He tugged on his bow tie and grimaced. "How fucking long does it take? I got dressed in ten minutes."

“Liar.” I called my buddy out. He’d been primping in his bathroom and messing with his hair and beard for at least a half hour. Then he’d come out looking the same as when he went in there.

“Like you’re any better?” Braden snorted from the couch. The asshole lounged around in his sweats while we suffered in our monkey suits, and he was way too smug about it.

“Yeah, Grady, you spent a while in Braden’s bathroom since the ladies have taken over yours.”

I shrugged and grinned. “So? Braden, why don’t you get dressed up and join us? I’m sure there’ll be single women all over that place.”

And there would be. I’d never attended one of these that wasn’t teeming with gorgeous young women vying for the hockey players’ attention.

“No thanks. I can’t dance.”

“You can’t dance?” Jarrett was incredulous. Braden might have said he couldn’t skate for as shocked as Jarrett was.

“No, I can’t, and you don’t have to spread that all over the locker room.”

Jarrett winked at me. “I see a new nickname coming in your future. Two-Left-Foot Slate.” Slate was Braden’s nickname based on his last name of Slater.

“Fuck you.” Braden pegged him in the head with a pillow. I slyly escaped the ensuing pelting with pillows, couch cushions, and any other items they chose to throw. I didn’t want to mess up my hair, if the truth be told. I slipped into the kitchen and sipped on a beer until the two of them collapsed in the living room.

“Jarrett, are you going to go like that?” I said, feeling distinctly evil.

Jarrett brought a hand up to his hair and combed it with his fingers. “Crap.” He stalked off toward his bathroom. Braden’s and my laughter followed him. I glanced at the time on my phone and shook my head.

Striding down the hallway, I knocked on my bedroom door. “Hey, ladies, how much longer are you going to be? We’re going to miss dinner if we don’t get going, and Jarrett is a grumpy ass when he doesn’t eat.”

Jarrett chose that moment to walk by and smacked me on the back. Hard. I glared at him.

“Give us ten more minutes,” said Leila.

“You said ten minutes over an hour ago,” Jarrett added.

They didn’t answer. We wandered back into the living room and settled on the couch to watch a hockey game being played in the Eastern Time zone.

“We’re ready.” I recognized Aspen’s voice, stood, and turned.

I froze and gaped at her, struck speechless by the beauty in front of me. Aspen was a vision. Her white-blonde hair was devoid of the usual colors. I liked her colorful hair, but I also liked this look. Her hair was piled on top of her head with tendrils in front of her beautiful face and topped off with an actual tiara. She wore more makeup than I’d seen her wear. It accentuated her brown eyes, making them look even bigger and doe-like. Red lipstick on her lips made me want to kiss it right off, but I didn’t want to wait another hour while they redid her makeup.

And that dress.

OMFG.

I was heating up already, and we hadn’t arrived at the gala yet, let alone started dancing.

Her little black gown was slit to her hip. It hugged every inch of her and revealed a vast expanse of curvy leg and delectable cleavage. Rhinestones made the dress sparkle.

“Do I look okay?” Aspen said self-consciously.

“You look fucking fantastic.”

Her face broke into a radiant smile. I glanced at Jarrett. He looked as shocked as I had. Leila was beautiful in a long, dark-

blue gown, but I only had eyes for Aspen.

“You’re stunning. Both of you,” Jarrett croaked, struggling to find his voice. He fanned himself to drive home his point, drawing a giggle from both of them.

“Everly lent us a couple of her dresses. You should see her closet,” Leila gushed. “I could’ve spent a week in pure heaven wallowing around among those clothes.”

“It was a sight to behold.” Aspen’s smile faded before she recovered it. I wasn’t sure why, but I’d do everything in my power to ensure she had the most memorable evening ever.

“Are we ready then?” I held out my arm. Aspen took it and our happy group left the condo. Instead of taking the elevator to the parking garage, we got off on the first floor. Aspen looked questioningly at me.

“We aren’t taking your car?”

“No, we aren’t.” I grinned at her and led her outside to the waiting limo.

“We’re going in that?”

“We sure are.” I bowed down low. “Your carriage awaits.”

“Thank you, kind sir.” Aspen giggled.

A uniformed driver opened the door, and the four of us settled into the luxurious seats. We were on our way. Seeing the radiant, wondrous smile on Aspen’s face made wearing this straitjacket of a monkey suit worth it.

Chapter Twenty-Six

MORE PRESSING MATTERS

~~Aspen~~

This entire night was surreal, and we hadn't gotten to the gala yet. I'd never been in a limo. I'd never been to a gala, and I'd certainly never attended a formal affair with a man as handsome as Grady. He rocked a tux like no man I'd ever seen, and I was proud to be on his arm. I hoped he was proud of me, too. By the fire burning in his eyes, Everly's choice of a dress for me had been spot on.

Our limo turned up a tree-lined driveway. Expensive cars and limos were parked in every spare space. As we rounded a corner, a large, stately mansion lit up like the brightest of Christmas trees came into view. I found it hard to believe one family lived there instead of dozens.

"Wow," I said, and the other three in the car agreed with me. I gawked at the mansion. I'd never seen such a regal residence up close, let alone been invited to a party in it.

"This is where the team owners live?" Leila asked.

"Yes, but I've never been here," Jarrett said.

"Everly grew up here?" I was amazed. "She doesn't seem the least bit pretentious."

"She isn't," Leila agreed.

"I hope everyone has their cell phone with them in case we get lost in there," Jarrett quipped and held his up.

We laughed, grateful he'd broken through our nervousness.

The limo door was opened by an alert valet. Grady got out first and reached in to help me. I carefully alighted from the limo, making sure my dress didn't show more than I intended for it to show. Jarrett and Leila followed us.

I glanced nervously at Leila. She swallowed and gazed back at me. We were both thinking the same thing and having a moment of panic. What the fuck were we doing here? As if reading my mind, Grady took my hand and squeezed it. He smiled down at me.

"I know what you're thinking, and you're wrong. You belong here. You'll be the belle of the ball. Don't you let anyone tell you differently."

We mounted the front steps, and two doormen posted at the double doors swept them open for us.

I stepped into the entryway and gazed around in wonder. I'd only seen grand staircases in photographs, and none of them came close to this. Two stories up, a majestic chandelier hung from the ceiling, its crystals twinkling in the reflection of the lights.

Grady nudged me. Swallowing, I took his arm, grateful for his steady presence. We walked down the stairs to a large ornate ballroom. I didn't know people still had actual ballrooms in their houses. I guess Everly did. I couldn't fathom what it'd been like to grow up surrounded by such wealth and opulence. Everly had somehow managed to stay grounded and not let all this affect her in negative ways.

The huge room resembled one of those grand ballrooms I'd pictured when reading a Regency romance. During my brief stint in college, I'd worked as a banquet server to earn extra money. Our ballroom never looked like this.

We ventured farther into the room, making our way to a table reserved for some of the Icehawks and their significant others. Each seat had a gold-embossed nameplate. I found Grady's and mine and placed my small purse on my chair. I immediately regretted that move, as I had nothing to do with my hands.

“Could I get you a glass of wine?” Grady asked.

I nodded appreciatively. Wine might take the edge off and allow me to relax. Right then, I was experiencing full-blown imposter syndrome. Grady and Jarrett wandered off to the bar, stopping to chat with friends on the way. Next to me, Leila blew out a long breath.

“This is intimidating,” she admitted.

“That’s an understatement.”

“Do you find yourself asking, *Why am I pretending I belong when I know I don’t?* I’m one step from being homeless. I work menial jobs people like these pay people like me to do for minimum wage. I’m wearing a dress that cost more than my entire wardrobe.”

“We have every right to be here,” I said with more conviction than I felt. As tempting as it was to fall into the trap of comparing ourselves to the rich and famous in this room, I spoke words of encouragement I didn’t feel.

Leila side-eyed me. “If you say so.”

“I say so. Let’s enjoy our Cinderella moment. Doesn’t every girl dream of this?”

“Yeah.” She didn’t sound convinced. In some ways, helping her helped me get past my inferiority complex.

Standing around our table were a couple clusters of WAGs, including Trinity, who’d been at a few of the games and was dating the goalie. I’d avoided her for the most part. She was a mean girl, and I didn’t hang out with mean girls.

Trinity and her friends were comparing their Louboutins, while I’d never actually seen a pair in the wild until now. Leila and I exchanged glances. I turned away from Trinity’s group and joined Everly’s conversation.

“Granddad offered us his private jet, and we’re flying to Hawaii during the All-Star break. I’m so excited. The family has a beach condo there,” Everly gushed, her face lit up with joy. I was happy for her. I really was. Grady hadn’t mentioned anything about the All-Star break. Probably an oversight.

“Oh, that’ll be fun. We’re staying closer to home and going to Mexico,” said a stunning blonde dressed in a beautiful gold-sequined dress. I didn’t recall her name, but she was married to one of the veterans on the team.

“Jarrett and I are going to Cannon Beach for a few days,” Leila admitted.

“What about you, Aspen?” Everly turned toward me with a smile on her face. The other women in the group swung their gazes in my direction. Their expressions were friendly, but I was still uncomfortable.

“I don’t know. We haven’t made plans yet.” I chewed on my lower lip and forced a stiff smile. These women were out of my league. I wanted to make a good impression, but I was having a hard time believing I’d ever fit in with the WAGs. That was my problem, not theirs. This particular group of women treated me like one of them. Regardless, they were all so perfect, perfect nails, perfect hair, perfect makeup. And then there was me, my usual artistic mess.

Before I had time to fret even more, the guys returned with our wine, which I gratefully accepted. I restrained myself from throwing back the entire glass and drinking it all in one large gulp, which was what I wanted to do. Instead, I sipped daintily and smiled up at Grady. The intense longing in his eyes bolstered my confidence immensely and made me forget my misgivings about being a WAG.

“Let’s dance.” His voice reverberated from deep inside with a raspy huskiness I usually only heard during sex. His sexy tone made me forget about my nervousness. I placed my wine in front of my name tag and accepted his outstretched hand.

Grady led me to the center of the dance floor where several elegantly dressed couples danced closely together. I recognized a few of his teammates, but I didn’t know anyone else. They certainly weren’t part of my social circle. Grady sensed I was on the verge of falling down a black hole and pulled me gently into his arms.

I felt his eyes on me and looked up. His gaze held mine, preventing me from glancing around and playing the comparison game. A small smile played at the corner of his lips. “You are the most beautiful woman in this ballroom.”

I bit back a sarcastic, self-deprecating response and settled for gracious instead. My mom would’ve been proud. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Of course, this comes from a man who hopes to get me naked later tonight.”

“Naked later or not, you’re still the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“I had my hair dyed to remove the colors so I wouldn’t stand out as much.”

“I’m crazy about you either way.”

My heart sang with joy at his declaration. He might not be pledging his undying love, but being crazy about me was a good thing.

“I’m crazy about you, too, but you’re especially hot in that tux.”

“You think?” He grinned, eating up the compliment.

I leaned into him. He gladly pulled me closer as we slow danced around the floor. The man could dance; good thing I knew a step or two.

“Who taught you to dance?” I asked.

He sobered, and the light went out of his eyes. “My sister.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to remind you of her.”

“Don’t be sorry. You didn’t know.”

He dipped his head and captured my mouth with his, savoring the taste of my lips as if I were a delectable treat. My body shivered with anticipation of later tonight.

“We could leave right now if you’d like,” he offered with that dirty smile I loved so much.

“I do like, but we just got here.”

He shrugged, and the dance ended. We sauntered back to the table, and I pondered whether or not it'd be in poor form to walk out fifteen minutes after arriving. I picked up my wineglass. The least we should do was finish one drink.

“Do you really want to leave?”

“We can't leave, but we could find a private place for a quickie. We have an auction coming up.” His blue eyes burned into mine with promises of a night to remember.

“Let's finish our drinks and sneak out for a few.”

“Good idea.” He glanced to his right and stiffened.

I followed his gaze and saw his father enter the ballroom with a gorgeous brunette on his arm. She had an air of elegance and confidence about her and appeared perfectly at home in this fancy place.

“Your dad has a girlfriend?”

Grady shrugged with fake indifference, yet his eyes kept going to his father and this woman. “No idea. Don't know her.”

“She's pretty.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“And age appropriate. I mean, he didn't show up with someone twenty years younger than him.”

“True.”

“Aspen, I need a moment with you.” Everly's blue sequined dress shimmered as she walked like she was a mythical fairy creature.

I exchanged a glance with Grady. We were trapped. No quickie for us now that the hostess had ambushed us.

“I have a surprise for you. Grady, do you mind if I borrow her?”

Grady shook his head but didn't let go of my hand, as if he didn't want me to go away. He exchanged a private look with

Everly. What was that all about?

“You can come, too.”

Everly led us to a section of the ballroom where artwork in beautiful frames was displayed. I gasped when I recognized two of my paintings, along with many other works of art from the Uni. Desmond, dressed to kill, flitted around nervously, talking to the guests who were looking at the paintings.

“I had no idea you were doing this.”

“We’re auctioning them off. Half of the proceeds will go to each artist, and the other half will be donated to our homeless causes.”

“I’m speechless.” I turned to Grady, who was grinning. “Did you know about this?”

“I might’ve had a clue.”

I was about to chastise him when I had a horrifying thought. “What if no one bids on my work?”

“I will,” Grady said enthusiastically. “I need more artwork for my bare walls.”

“And so will I.”

We turned as one and were surprised to see Grady’s father standing nearby with his date. Grady immediately stiffened, and I rushed to cover up the tension between them.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Jefferson, but you don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t have to, but I want to. These paintings are so real I feel as if I can step right into that garden. I’d be proud to display them in my home. And please call me Duke.”

“Okay,” I squeaked. This night had gone from overwhelming to surreal. I was floating around in a dream, and I’d wake up any moment. Cinderella must’ve felt like this.

Duke introduced us to his date, Sandi. She smiled warmly at me and turned to Grady. “You’re as handsome as your father. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

Grady stiffened visibly, and I squeezed his arm. This poor woman was trying hard to overlook the tension between father and son.

“Nice meeting you,” I said to break the uncomfortable silence that settled over us.

“Nice meeting you, too.” She beamed at me. Grady gave a curt nod and led me back to our table.

“I guess we’re captive until they auction off your paintings,” Grady said.

“I guess so.” I hugged my stomach. Nerves threatened to take over. I’d much rather leave before the auction, but doing so would be the ultimate in rudeness. Everly had done so much for the homeless art community, I wouldn’t disrespect her like that.

We danced a few more dances, filled up plates from the extensive buffet table of mouthwatering food, and sat down to dinner. The auction wouldn’t start for another hour, and I was getting more nervous by the second. Leila, on the other hand, seemed excited her artwork was on display and spent several minutes chatting with society matrons in front of her paintings with Jarrett proudly at her side. I wanted no such recognition. This was frightening enough without being identified as the artist of my paintings. By staying anonymous, I’d be able to crawl away in embarrassment if no one bid on them.

“You’re more tense than I am when I see my father heading my way,” Grady half joked. He danced me toward the edge of the floor. “Follow me. I have just the cure for that.”

We hurried down a back hallway.

“What if we get lost and they never find us again? I left my cell at the table.”

He snorted. “So did I. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. Right now I have more pressing matters.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

THE CLOSET

~~Grady~~

I opened door after door, looking for any room that'd suit our purposes. Never in my life had I been this crazed over a woman, not even in my randy teenage years.

"Fuck," I cursed, unable to find somewhere to do the dirty. Aspen pushed open the door to a large closet.

"In here." She tugged on my hand.

"It doesn't lock."

"I have a cure for that."

I was intrigued. "I'm game."

She pulled me into the closet, and I shut the door behind us. The room was cramped and full of cleaning supplies, shelves of towels, and various other items.

"You're sure about this?" I couldn't believe I was the one hedging.

"Are you afraid?"

"Fuck no. I'm a hockey player. We aren't afraid of anything." She'd taken the lead long enough. Time for me to reassert myself. I tossed my tux jacket over the broomstick and unzipped my pants. Before ridding myself of them, I pulled a condom out of a pocket and rolled it on.

"You came prepared," she noted.

"A guy always has hope."

Aspen hiked up her dress and pulled off her panties.

“What’s your plan?” I panted.

“Against the door. That way, no one can open it.”

I blinked several times before my sex-muddled brain deciphered what she had in mind.

“Fuck you up against the door?”

She grinned, and I did just that. I lifted her off her feet. She braced her back against the door and wrapped her legs around my waist, digging those spike heels into my back.

I’d love a picture of this.

“Give it to me, big boy.”

And I did. Knowing we were on borrowed time before we’d be missed, I dispensed with foreplay. We’d be doing that all night anyway by dancing with each other and enticing the other with our bodies. Both of us were ready for the main event.

I entered her hot, wet heat in one forceful stroke. Aspen threw back her head and screamed. I had to silence her with my mouth on hers, but most likely they heard us all the way into the ballroom.

I enthusiastically thrust into her as her whimpers drove me to the pinnacle and beyond. I came first, but she followed a split second later. I sank to the floor with her, and we lay there for a moment, breathing heavily and fighting our return to reality.

We staggered to our feet and cleaned ourselves off as best we could before getting dressed. I opened the door a crack and looked up and down the hall.

“Coast is clear.” Aspen and I sneaked out of the closet. She slipped into a bathroom to freshen up. I waited patiently, musing whether or not it’d be obvious what we’d been doing when we returned to the ballroom.

It’d be so tempting to sneak out of here and pick up where we’d left off, but I wouldn’t deny Aspen her triumph. She

might not know it, but I did. Her paintings were going to set the world on fire.

While I was waiting in the hall for her, my father's date strode toward me with her eyes on me. I held my breath as she came closer, feeling a bit like a cornered animal.

"Grady. A word, please."

Every bone in my body stiffened as I waited for what might come next. All the good feelings from my closet tryst faded in the wake of what I knew would be an uncomfortable conversation, and one I didn't want to have.

She didn't wait for me to answer but stepped closer to me and lowered her voice after glancing around. "You probably don't realize it, but your dad and I have been dating for close to a year. I *know* him. He misses you and deeply regrets the part he's played in your estrangement."

I vacillated between a rude "mind your own business" and "thank you, but not interested." Instead, I clamped my mouth shut and said nothing. She studied me for a long, uncomfortable moment.

"He loves you, Grady."

"Right," I spoke through gritted teeth. I so did not want to have this conversation with my dad's girlfriend.

"I'd like to invite you and Aspen to dinner sometime. I know your schedule is crazy, so let me know what date would work out."

Fully intending to decline her offer, the words that came out of my mouth weren't the ones I'd expected. "I'll have Aspen arrange it with you."

She beamed at me as if I'd given her the best present ever. I scowled, not wanting her to see this as a peace offering. Digging in her purse, she scribbled her phone number on a piece of paper and handed it to me. I shoved it in my pocket.

"He's very proud of you. I hope you know that."

Okay, this convo was over. "Thanks. Later."

Her smile slipped at my rudeness, and I cringed inwardly at what an ass I'd been to her.

"Okay, well, I look forward to hearing from Aspen." She gave me another long, appraising look, only this time, I came up short of her expectations. I watched her walk away, torn between what I wanted and what I thought I wanted.

"What was all that about? She didn't seem too happy." Aspen slid up beside me and curled her fingers around my arm. Her gaze flickered to my pocket and then followed Sandi until she was out of sight.

"Nothing," I snapped and immediately regretted my burst of temper, especially taking my frustrations out on her. Hurt flashed across Aspen's face, but I truly wasn't in the mood to talk about my conflicting feelings regarding my dad. I grabbed her hand. "The auction is about to begin. Let's get a glass of wine and enjoy your debut as a professional artist."

I put my hand behind her back and guided her to the ballroom. I felt like shit for oh so many reasons; most of all, I'd upset Aspen, but somehow I'd make it up to her.

"Let's get a drink," I suggested, and she nodded, unusually quiet.

We stood in line at the bar, and I found myself staring at the tux-clad back in front of me. I knew that back. When the guy turned his head slightly, I had to bite my tongue not to gasp in shock. "Briggs?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

"I didn't know you were coming."

"I wasn't until the last minute. I like art."

Now that statement could've blown me over with a feather. Briggs and art didn't go together. Not at all. I guess he was more complex than I'd realized. More likely, the *art* he came for wasn't on canvas. He followed us to the table and pulled out a chair between Drakos and Jarrett, his eyes on Michella, proving my point. She pointedly ignored him.

This night was getting more and more interesting.

I exchanged a glance with Aspen and reached for her hand, giving it a squeeze. She smiled at me, and I grinned back. All was forgiven, or so I hoped.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

BIDDING WARS

~~Aspen~~

Grady was keeping something from me, and I didn't like it. His dad's date had been talking to him when I'd come out of the bathroom. By the tension on Grady's face, they hadn't been having a friendly chat.

My nerves were already frayed at the thought my paintings were about to be auctioned off. What was I fretting about? I'd just had hot sex with a hot guy in a coat closet in a mansion. Everyday stuff, right? I muffled a giggle, and Grady shot me a questioning look. I beamed at him, and he grinned back. His eyes shone with heat, and his smile reflected fondness. I had nothing to worry about other than myself. He'd tell me about his family issues later.

I sucked in several deep breaths and exhaled slowly, even closing my eyes and willing myself to relax. Everything would be fine. I had to believe that. I had to break my mold of thinking that the worst would happen, even if it had happened twice, which was way more than enough for one person, losing both my mom and dad.

Clutching my wine, I took my seat and waited for the auction to begin. Grady placed his arm casually across my shoulders while engaging in a lively discussion with a few of his teammates, including Dasher Bates, Everly's boyfriend, and Jarrett, along with a few other guys I didn't really know but recognized. I'd been introduced when we'd first entered the ballroom, but I was awful at names. Michella sat next to Everly and was here as the date of one of Dash's friends. I

think his name was Trent. Watching them, they seemed friends more than anything. Briggs wasn't so certain; he glowered at them from across the table.

"Where did you take off to?" Leila studied me closely with a smirk. She knew exactly why we'd disappeared.

"Do I really have to tell you?"

"No, but I'm nosy, and I want all the deets."

"Not happening."

She made boo-boo lips, and I laughed at her.

I leaned closer. "Are you having a good time?"

"Not as good as you, obviously. I didn't get a quickie in some obscure mansion bathroom."

"It was a closet," I admitted. "A big one."

We shared a laugh.

"Are you nervous about having your work displayed to all these people? I'm about to throw up. What if no one bids on it? What if people hate it? What if?" She clutched her stomach dramatically to prove her point.

"I'm feeling the same, but I'm trying to get beyond it. One of these guys will bid on our paintings, so we won't be left to flounder without a sale."

"That's true."

"What's he doing here?" I heard Michella say to Everly. I looked in the direction they were and drew in a breath. Gordon had entered the room. My skin crawled every time I saw him. Briggs glanced up, and his expression went from annoyed to murderous.

"His parents are here, so I'm not surprised he showed up," Everly said. "I'm sorry, I didn't invite him, nor did my mom, but he probably insinuated himself onto his parents' invitation."

"It's not your fault. He's stalking me."

"He is," Leila whispered to me, and I nodded.

“Don’t you have a restraining order against him?” Everly asked.

“It expired. He hadn’t been bothering me, so I let it go.”

I didn’t hear anything else the women said because I didn’t want to be caught eavesdropping. Gordon made a show of walking close to our table, and his eyes never left Michella. She refused to look in his direction. She’d clasped her hands on the table, and they trembled. Briggs sat up straighter. He narrowed his eyes, and his gaze followed Gordon.

Leila and I exchanged knowing glances. There was no love lost between Briggs and Gordon. Both men had had flings with Michella, and both men still seemed interested in her. The biggest difference was Gordon had been abusive while Briggs had been, well, Briggs.

“Attention, please,” called Avery’s mother from the lectern. My stomach clenched and unclenched. I gripped Grady’s hand too tightly, but he didn’t complain.

“It’s starting.” Leila choked out the words.

Grady leaned into me with an encouraging smile. “You’ll do fine. Don’t worry.”

The first piece of art to be auctioned off was one of Heidi’s dark charcoals of a small girl huddled under a ratty blanket in the doorway of a decrepit downtown Portland building. It was dark and depressing but incredibly moving and hauntingly beautiful at the same time.

Briggs surprised us all by starting the opening bid at five thousand dollars. Behind us, someone raised the bid to ten thousand. I glanced over my shoulder. That someone was Gordon, who was seated at the table behind Michella. He was making a statement.

Briggs’s mouth settled into a firm, grim line, and his eyes burned with determination. He raised a hand to get the spotter’s attention. “Twelve thousand.”

The two of them went back and forth, refusing to concede to the other, while the audience gasped with each increase in bid.

At twenty-five thousand, Gordon muttered loud enough for most of my table to hear, “Fuck it, you can have it. I didn’t want it anyway. Just toying with the bastard.”

Briggs shrugged as if he didn’t give a shit. “I love it. I’ll hang it in my house.”

“I wish Heidi were here to see this,” Leila whispered.

I nodded, my eyes misting with tears. I dabbed at my face with a napkin and composed myself. Since half of the money went to the artist, Heidi’s share would’ve allowed her to finish school without selling her body.

Thinking of our lost friend temporarily sucked a bit of the joy out of the night. She would be so tickled and so proud that her artwork had such value. I didn’t have time to dwell on Heidi as Leila’s painting came up next and mine would follow.

Leila’s sold for fifteen thousand to Jarrett, but there’d been several other bidders up until the end.

Grady winked at me and held my hand, knowing me too well. “You’re the most talented artist here. Don’t fret.”

Of course I’d fret. Fretting was what I did best.

The next few minutes zipped by in a haze of shock and disbelief. The bidding was fast and furious on my painting of a colorful flower garden.

When the gavel fell, it sold for twenty-two-five.

I was flabbergasted. Grady grinned from ear to ear and held up his glass. I clinked mine with his and swallowed hard, rendered speechless.

“I knew you had nothing to worry about.” Grady winked at me, and I smiled through the haze of happy tears in my eyes.

My second watercolor was the one I secretly titled *Home*. I hated selling that one, but a true professional doesn’t hang on to their works, and Everly had been certain it’d fetch a nice price.

My nerves returned as it was next on the auction block.

~~Grady~~

I puffed up with pride for Aspen. She was in shock, while I was grinning from ear to ear. I dropped out of the bidding on her first painting at ten thousand. I'd have gone higher, but it was important she sold to a stranger rather than to me. She needed to see her work had value. In the end, her painting of the garden sold for twenty-two thousand five hundred dollars.

She had one more painting on the auction block, and I really loved this one. This one was of a farmhouse in a pasture of wildflowers with a rail fence along the front of the property.

"That's my favorite," I said in her ear as it was placed on the easel to be auctioned.

"Mine too," she admitted.

"Really?"

"Yes." Suddenly self-conscious, she looked down and clutched her napkin so tightly her knuckles turned white.

I nudged her with my shoulder. "You have nothing to worry about."

"I'm not worried. Not exactly."

"Uh-huh." I kissed her forehead and bent my mouth close to her ear. "I can see myself living in that scene. It's beautiful."

She turned to face me, our lips inches apart. Her big brown eyes were luminous and drew me in. "So can I. It's my dream place." She spoke wistfully, and my heart thudded faster in my chest. I wrapped my arms around her and gave her a quick hug.

I had to have this painting. I wouldn't let it go to anyone else. Based on what her last watercolor went for, I'd most likely stretch my rookie salary to the point of discomfort, but Aspen was worth it.

The bidding started at twenty-five thousand. A matronly woman dripping in diamonds started things out. She'd bought Aspen's other watercolor and clearly wanted the set. I secretly dubbed her the queen as she resembled Queen Elizabeth minus the tiara.

I stayed in as long as I dared, but at fifty thousand, I was about to admit defeat.

“Grady, stop, I’ll paint another one, and you can have it,” Aspen begged me.

“One more bid.” My competitive nature reared its ugly head. I didn’t want to lose this watercolor, even if it meant dining on fast food for the next month or so. I’d go up a couple thousand more, and I did, but the older woman easily kept going. As the price climbed and climbed, more bidders dropped out, including me. At seventy-two thousand, the queen appeared to have won her prize when someone across the room bid seventy-five thousand. I looked around to see who it was and met the blue eyes of my father. He nodded at me and smiled. I wasn’t sure what he was trying to convey to me, but seconds later he was the owner of Aspen’s farmhouse watercolor, and I had no idea why.

All was not lost though, as the queen approached Aspen after the auction and promised to commission multiple watercolors.

I stood by proudly as Aspen spoke with several more attendees and exchanged contact information. While I waited patiently, I entertained myself by watching Briggs and Michella. Briggs had eyes only for Michella while she studiously ignored his presence. The interaction between the two of them was a fascinating study in human psychology, though I wasn’t enough of a student in psych to spend much time analyzing their weird nonrelationship.

Trinity and her catty girlfriends stood off to one side, whispering to each other. The way they kept glancing at Aspen insinuated they were gossiping about her. I shot them a death glare, but Trinity wasn’t easily intimidated. She shot me a brilliant smile with a mouthful of obscenely white teeth. I looked away. Not interested in her or her friends. Roman had his hands full with that one. Hopefully, he didn’t make it beyond a casual relationship. Our young goalie was inconsistent enough on the ice without having someone like her mess with his head.

Aspen excused herself to take a bathroom break. If I knew her, she probably had to get away from the people fawning over her and ground herself. I glanced toward Sandi and my dad. They stood in a group that included Icehawks' upper-level management and ownership. Too blue for my blood. I'd stay right here with the working-class hockey players.

And my girl.

Definitely my girl.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

CLOCK STRIKES MIDNIGHT

~~Aspen~~

“*W*asn’t I right?” Grady leaned in close to me. “You *are* the belle of the ball.”

I didn’t have time to refute what he’d claimed as another patron of the arts approached me about my work.

Avery had suggested I have business cards available for tonight. I’d almost blown off her suggestion, but she insisted, and I acquiesced just to get her off my case. Turns out she was right. The sheer volume of people who showed interest in commissioning a painting overwhelmed me. I’d given out a few dozen business cards if not more. At this rate, I’d need to quit one of my jobs and find my own private studio, which was surreal. Surely I’d wake up in a few hours and this would all be a dream. Or maybe I should start believing my life wasn’t all about tragedy.

Grady stood next to me the entire time with a proud smile on his face. He didn’t say anything, but his quiet presence shored up my courage and comforted me.

After Mrs. Morano took my card and said she’d be calling soon, I clutched Grady’s arm. “I need a break. I’ll be right back.”

His gaze clouded over. “Everything okay?”

“Absolutely. I’m just overwhelmed. I need to escape and regroup.”

“I understand.”

I doubted he did. He played in front of twenty thousand people every other night. His life was displayed and dissected for all the public to see. I wasn't used to the kind of attention I'd gotten tonight.

I pushed open the bathroom door, grateful to find the powder room area empty. I stared at myself in the mirror, reapplied my makeup, and tried to come to terms with how overwhelmed I was. Tomorrow I'd bask in the glow of my triumphs, but tonight my head was reeling, and part of me was certain I'd imagined everything. Sooner or later, I'd wake up and be that girl living on a couch in a run-down part of town.

I reapplied my lipstick and tucked a couple stray strands back in place. All in all, I'd fared relatively well considering the quickie we'd had earlier. I smiled at the thought, relaxing a little. Grady was in my corner. He was too good to be true, but he was there.

The sounds of giggling and laughter floated to me from the other room. They didn't attempt to conceal their words but spoke loudly so anyone could hear.

"Did you see them trying to pretend like they belonged here?" I recognized Trinity's voice and stiffened.

Her friend snorted with cruel laughter. "Seriously? I know. They had paintings auctioned off, so obviously they're homeless or street people."

"I wonder what kind of a deal Everly made with Jarrett and Grady so they'd escort them?"

"She is the owner's daughter."

"Right, but it's so obvious neither of them belongs here. Imagine them thinking they fit in with this crowd or even with the WAGs."

"It's laughable. They can't even walk gracefully in heels. They're nothing but poor white trash."

"Grady and Jarrett will tire of them."

"Of course they will."

"Grady was eyeing me all through dinner."

“What about Roman?”

“Oh, who knows. I’m getting bored with him.”

I heard the *click-click* of their heels as they approached where I was standing. I straightened, stiffened my spine, and faced them with a confident smile I didn’t feel.

“Oh, hi there, Aster,” Trinity said with venom. Whether she didn’t recall my name or was purposely misusing it, I didn’t know.

“Bye, Trixie.” I smirked and waved my hands to dismiss them. “Have a nice evening.”

They muttered expletives I didn’t care to hear as they strode out the door.

I leaned my hands on the counter and pressed my forehead against the cool mirror. I closed my eyes and tried to find my happy place, but the memory of their words penetrated my defenses. I swallowed the lump in my throat and willed myself not to be sick.

I was appalled, humiliated, and demoralized. I didn’t belong here with these wealthy people who wore dresses that cost more than my entire wardrobe, flew in private jets to Mexico for a weekend, and dined on caviar and expensive wine. I wouldn’t know a bottle of expensive wine if it bit me in the ass.

“Aspen? Are you okay?”

I jumped, startled someone else was in the powder room with me. I hadn’t heard anyone come in. Whirling around, I came face-to-face with Sandi. Sympathy shone in her eyes, and she stepped forward.

“Are you okay?” she repeated.

I rallied and forced a fake smile. “I’m fine.”

Her serious blue eyes clearly said she didn’t believe me. “Girls like that don’t deserve to take up any space in your pretty little head. They’re just jealous.”

I nodded. To my horror, tears blurred my vision, and I was about to break down. She stepped toward me and put her arms around me. I wasn't one to appreciate strangers touching me, but I caught a whiff of something. That scent. My mom had always worn Summer Rain. A dam broke inside, and I cried as I hadn't cried in a year or more. She held me just as my mom had, patting my back and whispering words of comfort. I clung to her until my tears had dried and my sobs were reduced to hiccups.

Suddenly uncomfortable, I pushed away from Sandi. She smiled kindly at me. With great embarrassment, I rushed to explain my outburst. "I'm so sorry. I guess I lost it."

"No reason to apologize, honey. We're almost family."

"What?" I grabbed a tissue and wiped my face.

"Duke and I are engaged."

"Oh. Congratulations." My words were lame, but what else did I say to a woman I didn't know marrying a man I didn't really know?

"Thank you. Grady gave you my number, didn't he?"

I gaped at her, not understanding.

"So we can plan a time for the two of you to come to dinner?"

"Oh, yes, of course." That's what she'd been talking to Grady about earlier. Why hadn't he told me when I'd asked? The doubt monster loomed large, casting dark shadows along with misgivings. Maybe I didn't belong here. Maybe I was deluding myself. Maybe I was out of my league.

"Good. I'll go back to the ballroom while you put yourself together. Take your time. I'll let Grady know you've been held up."

"Thank you," I croaked, almost on the verge of tears again.

She patted my arm, and I managed a feeble smile.

"Please don't tell Grady about my meltdown."

"I won't. Us girls have to stick together."

Stop it, I told myself. *Stop this right now*. I deserved to be here. I deserved a good man like Grady. Damn it.

With a reinvigorated fierceness, I reapplied my makeup, taking my time to get it right. I was irritated with Grady for keeping his father's dinner invitation a secret and was in no hurry to return to the ballroom. Let him sweat it out. Childish of me but in line with my mood. Once I finished, I walked into the grand hall that stretched the length of the ballroom and boasted portraits of past Barlowes. With dour expressions, they sat stiffly and gazed from their gilded frames, oblivious to us common folk.

I sat down on an ornate antique bench, digging in my purse for my phone. I held it in my hand, then shoved it back in my purse. I wasn't going to text him.

Maybe this was a test I required Grady to pass, but I needed him to search for me. I wouldn't be hard to find. All he had to do was walk out the ballroom door and glance toward the end of the hall. The music floated in the air. One song passed, then the band must've taken a break. Piped-in music filled the hallway. I heard a commotion inside the ballroom, but I didn't get up to see what was going on. Most likely the team had engaged in a drinking game or something. After a while the live band played on. By their third song of this set, I was struck by the sinking realization he wasn't looking for me. I'd been sitting here for close to a half hour. No texts. No phone calls. No Grady.

As if in response to my unspoken question, an old grandfather clock across from me chimed, striking midnight and Grady hadn't bothered to look for me.

Like Cinderella rushing out of the ballroom as the clock struck midnight, I hurried into the cold night. I had a dilemma. There weren't any buses in this part of town late at night. I started to pull out my phone to call an Uber when I spotted the very limo we'd arrived in parked at the curb.

"Hello, ma'am," the driver said, recognizing me.

"Do you think you could give me a ride somewhere?"

“Certainly.”

I slid onto one of the leather seats in the limo and gave him directions to the Rainbow Unicorn. His brows shot up in surprise, but to his credit he nodded and drove down the street without further comment. Driving a limo to that part of town probably wasn't something he'd ever done before.

I settled my head against the headrest and tried to sort out the jumble of mixed emotions I felt after a night full of extreme highs and some lows. The distinct feeling of not belonging. The triumph of the art auction. Grady not telling me about the dinner invitation. Doing Grady in the closet. Lastly, the hurtful words of Trinity and her friend and Grady not coming to find me after I waited for a long time.

The one part of the evening that overrode all the good feelings. Grady didn't bother to look for me. What did that say about our relationship? I knew the answer to that, and I found it hard to believe. We'd come so far. We'd been each other's rocks. We'd been so close.

My heart literally ached from the pain of being cast aside so easily.

“You can let me off here,” I said to the driver.

He turned to stare at me, concerned about the neighborhood. “Here?”

“Yes, here.” I held my head high. Not waiting for him to open the door, I emerged from the limo. Several street people gaped at me as I jaywalked across the street to the Uni. I pulled the key from my purse and fumbled with putting it in the lock. Then I dropped it.

“Crap,” I cursed as I glanced around. I was being watched, not just by the street people. I sensed a sinister presence that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. A man in a coat with the hood pulled over his head approached me. A scream died in my throat as I stared wide-eyed at him.

“Aspen, it's me.” Desmond pushed the hood off his head, and I almost collapsed into his arms.

“Oh, Dez, you scared the crap out of me.”

He took the key from my hand and unlocked the door. I followed him inside.

“What’re you doing here rather than with your hockey player? Did you have a fight?”

“You could say something like that.”

We entered the small apartment and hung up our coats. “You had a great night. I’m proud of you.”

“You did well, too,” I noted. Desmond’s artwork had also been offered and brought top dollar.

“Better than expected. Well, if you don’t mind. I’m tired and have had enough to drink. I’m going to bed.” He stretched and yawned to prove his point. I was relieved he didn’t stick around and attempt to get me to pour my heart out.

“Good night.”

Desmond entered his bedroom and shut the door. I still had clothes here and gathered up some sweatpants and a T-shirt, then went into the bathroom to change.

When I came out, I slumped on the couch, knowing I’d never be able to sleep. I was too amped up, confused, and heartbroken.

As often happened, I played through the last hour of the evening and how I could’ve done it differently. I should’ve strode into the ballroom when he didn’t look for me and told him that his disinterest hurt me. He might’ve had a logical explanation, but at least I wouldn’t be sitting here fretting about why he didn’t care enough to find me.

He didn’t care...

And I was having one hell of a pity party with myself as the only guest.

Chapter Thirty

THROWING PUNCHES

~~Grady~~

Poor Aspen. She was overwhelmed. I watched as she left the ballroom to take a bathroom break. She wasn't used to all this attention, nor was she the type who liked to be fawned over. She'd have to get used to it. She was going places. I was certain of it. If I had my way, we'd be going places together.

I loved her, and I planned on telling her tonight. The closet hadn't seemed like an appropriate place. I'd decided I'd accept my dad's olive branch and join them for dinner. It was long past time. I was beginning to realize he hadn't been any harder on me than on my teammates. I'd seen more than was there. Besides, my sister wouldn't want to be the wedge between my dad and me.

Full of hope for the future, I joined a few of my teammates standing on the edge of the dance floor.

I tipped my beer glass toward Dash. He clinked his with mine and smiled at me. "I'm glad you chose to stick it out with us." I gave him a wry grin.

"We'll get better. The more we learn about each other, the more we'll gel. It takes time, and we can't let our record get us down."

"Yeah, we will." Getting there was a hard thing to do, and we both knew it. Every other team in the league had had years to know one another as a team and linemates. We'd had four months.

He reached out and gave me a brotherly punch in the shoulder. “Glad you’re with us, Grady.”

“I’m glad I am, too.” For the first time since I’d joined this team, I meant it. Being paired with Kirby made hockey fun again, and I looked forward to taking the ice every day.

Drakos, who’d had a little too much to drink, swayed on his feet, a huge grin on his face. “To us, win or lose. We’re a team.”

“Here, here.” We toasted each other, and I took a long pull of my beer. I’d had enough to feel a nice buzz, but I wasn’t messed up like a lot of the guys were. Briggs, for example, had been throwing whiskey back. With each shot, he sank lower in his chair and brooded all the more, if that was even possible. He watched us with a belligerent scowl, his arms crossed over his chest, looking as if he hated the world. Maybe he did.

My dad had his hands full with that guy. For the first time I appreciated what a tough job my dad had taken on. He’d been taxed with melding this group of misfits into a team, and he was giving it his best shot. I hadn’t made his job any easier. I was ashamed of my part in dividing this team.

The next few minutes happened like a dream, not reality. I felt as if I were watching everything in slow motion. Michella walked off the dance floor where she’d been dancing with one of the older gentlemen in attendance.

As she approached our table, Gordon stood and blocked her path. She tried to shove him out of the way, but he didn’t move.

“Dance with me,” he growled.

“Go fuck yourself,” she snarled equally fiercely.

“I’d rather fuck you,” he hissed, but those of us nearby heard him. Considering his family was one of the sponsors of the gala, I was in disbelief he’d make a scene, my head denying what my eyes saw and ears heard.

Any one of the guys standing in a circle with me would’ve rescued Michella, but we didn’t get the chance. With a feral roar, Briggs rose to his feet, shoving his chair back so hard it

fell on the floor. He whipped around. Displaying those lightning-fast reflexes he displayed on the ice, he nudged Michella to one side and stood toe to toe with Gordon. To give Gordon credit, the little dick didn't back down. He lifted his chin in defiance and glared up at the much taller, larger man.

I took a moment to glance around my circle. My teammates stood frozen in shock for a split second before we began to move toward Briggs as one unit. Following Dash's lead, I was poised to pounce if the others needed help getting Briggs to back down. Not that I had any special rapport with him. Quite the contrary. Though I suppose I knew him better than anyone on this team, which wasn't saying much.

Briggs was an enigma, and his relationship with Michella was shrouded in gossip and mystery. Neither one of them cared to dispel any of the rumors or discuss who and what they were to each other. I got it. Guys weren't as into that touchy-feely shit as women, but Michella wasn't even spilling her guts to her closest friends from what Aspen said.

Aspen?

Where was she? She'd left for the bathroom several minutes ago. I glanced over my shoulder but didn't see her standing near the hallway entrance. Before I had time to consider what was taking her so long, I heard Michella cry out. I whipped my head back around.

"No!"

Gordon pulled back his arm and slammed his fist into Briggs's jaw. His head snapped to the side. Who'd have thought Gordon could pack a punch? Briggs stood still for a long second before he attacked with a flurry of punches Gordon had no chance of blocking. The ballroom broke out into chaos. Women were screaming. Men were yelling. Chairs went flying. Tables were turned over.

My teammates and I jumped into the melee. Pulling Briggs off Gordon was like separating two fighting grizzly bears. Dash managed to get a shot to his chin when he grabbed for Briggs's arm. My former defensive partner threw punches left and right, not caring who they hit. He'd lost all control.

Shit. He was going to kill Gordon if we didn't pull him off. The other man bent, protecting his head with his hands as best he could. Drakos, Dash, Trent, and my dad grappled with Briggs. Dash's lip was split and Trent took a right hook to the eye. Jarrett and I attempted to pull Gordon to safety and were pummeled in the process, but we stood strong.

I was vaguely aware of the chaos around us, but I focused on rescuing Gordon because Briggs had completely lost it. Jarrett and I placed our bodies between Briggs and Gordon and pushed Gordon back until we'd set him free of Briggs's lethal fists.

Chests heaving, we gasped for breath, but Briggs wasn't done yet. He lunged several more times for Gordon, shouting obscenities and threats. Gordon, realizing he had the upper hand now, stood back and let his mother minister to his wounds while he garnered the sympathy of most of the wealthy guests.

"That man is a barbarian," one older woman declared.

"That's what happens when you invite hockey players to a gala," another added.

And so it went. We tried to explain that Gordon threw the first punch, but no one was listening.

Before I had time to gather my wits about me, the police arrived. Briggs was handcuffed, and those of us involved in breaking up the fight were hustled off to the police station to make statements. Everything happened in a whirlwind of turmoil and confusion. Before I knew it, I was sitting in an interrogation room by myself, waiting for a detective to talk to me. They'd separated us immediately. I guess so we couldn't come up with a story favorable to Briggs.

The wall clock showed after midnight. I reached in my inner tux pocket for my phone. I had to call Aspen and explain. Surely she'd witnessed the commotion. I don't know how anyone could've been in that mansion and not known about it.

My phone wasn't in my pocket. Damn it. I must've left it on the table or dropped it in the middle of the tussle with Briggs and Gordon.

I put my head in my hands and sighed. Aspen would understand, but I still felt like shit that her beautiful night was ruined by two men fighting over a woman who didn't want either one of them.

Chapter Thirty-One

WAITING FOR YOU

~~Aspen~~

Grady never texted me. I finally turned off my phone and fell into a fitful sleep for a few hours, waking at five a.m.

What had happened to Grady? Had being among all those gorgeous people made him realize I didn't fit into his life? Was he having second thoughts about me? Had that moment in the closet meant nothing to him when I'd thought we'd become more than a couple? More like soul mates.

He'd even said as much.

When I first saw you, I knew. It was like my soul said, "I've been waiting for you, and here you are."

Had that all been bullshit? Had I been fooled by a con man? I'd fallen too fast and too hard. Now I was paying for it. I'd been so cautious about any personal relationships since I'd lost my mom, but I'd let my guard down with him.

And this was what came of it.

I couldn't imagine any excuse he might have that'd make this any better. Unable to bear my own questions any longer, I turned on my phone and dialed his number, ready to confront him. His phone went straight to voice mail. I considered texting him but didn't want to seem as desperate as I was.

Checking my text messages, I saw I'd missed a few. Holding my breath, I opened the app. Nothing from Grady, but I did a double take.

Heidi?

Heidi: I'm okay.

Aspen: Where are you?

Heidi: I can't tell you, but I'm okay.

Aspen: Where've you been?

Heidi: I saw something. It's not safe for me to come back. I can't tell you any more than that. I just wanted you to know I'm okay.

I texted her a few more times, but she didn't respond.

What a fucking night this had been.

Part of me was relieved I'd heard from her, but another part was worried about what had happened to her.

It was too early to call Leila to find out what she knew about Heidi or Grady.

This uncertainty was making me nuts.

I sat on the couch and had a good cry. One of those cries that was cathartic, purging all the ugly and leaving me feeling hopeful rather than defeated.

I should be thinking about the good things. My share of last night's auction proceeds would allow me to quit one job and seriously pursue a career in art. If even a portion of the guests from last night followed through, I'd have enough commissions to get me through the next several months. A dream come true, and one I'd never thought I'd see.

I should be walking on air. Flying in the clouds. Singing to the heavens. Instead, I was down in the dumps.

All because of Grady.

Inconsiderate, disappearing Grady.

Damn him for ruining my perfect night.

I embraced my anger rather than being pulled under by sadness. If he'd gotten cold feet, decided we'd moved too fast, or wanted a break, I'd accept his wishes with my head held

high. But damn it, he wouldn't ghost me. He'd have to tell me to my face.

The team had a game tonight. If necessary, I'd go to that game and wait for him afterward. The security staff knew me and would let me in.

I had a plan, and I felt better for it. I padded into the kitchen in my socks and made a cup of coffee. I sat down on the couch in the quiet apartment and glanced around. Desmond might not have money, but his place was tastefully decorated with thrift shop finds. Shabby chic and artistically weird would be a good description.

With a shaky smile, I sat back and sipped my coffee. I was strong. I was resilient. I'd get through this, whatever "this" turned out to be.

But I couldn't deny how much my heart hurt, a deep emotional wound that manifested into a physical ache in my chest.

I'd hurt like this when my mom disappeared, and I'd survived. If Grady and I were over, I'd survive that too.

We'd had such a connection, an invisible bond I'd never felt with another person. He'd said the same.

How could he abandon what we had together before we'd had a chance to fully explore things?

The front doorbell rang, signaling someone was at the door. At five thirty a.m.? Instantly I was wary. No one came around this early in the morning. No one. Desmond was a night owl, and all of his friends and acquaintances knew not to bother him before noon. He was a regular grouch if he was woken in the morning before he'd had his eight to ten hours of sleep. At least he was a heavy sleeper.

The doorbell rang again. Whoever was out there was stubborn and insistent.

With a grimace, I wrapped my bathrobe around me and ventured downstairs. I had no intention of opening the door to a stranger or anyone else this early in the morning.

Irritated at the intruder, I peered through one of the dirty front windows, but the person was standing off to one side, and I couldn't see them.

"Who is it?" I called through the door.

"It's Grady. Let me in."

Grady?

My heart sang a song of love, ready to lie down at his feet and forgive him anything; the rest of me, not so much.

I unlocked the multiple dead bolts on the door and let him in, locking them again after him.

I turned to face him, but before I had a chance to look in his eyes or ask him any questions, he gathered me in his arms and pulled me close, burying his head in my hair.

I stood there with my arms stiffly at my sides, but he didn't seem to notice. At first.

Finally, he drew back, placed his hands on my shoulders, and gazed down at me. He looked like hell. His hair stood on end every which way. Big circles had formed under his eyes. There was a cut on his chin. All in all, he looked like a guy who'd been in a drunken brawl.

"Have you been crying?" he asked and brushed a thumb across my cheek.

"No," I lied.

"You're not crying because of me, are you?"

"Should I be?" I shot back. "Where in the hell have you been?"

"Me? What about you?" Now he was indignant.

"Me? I waited for you in the hallway forever, and you never came out of the ballroom. Finally I went home."

He narrowed his gaze as if he didn't quite believe me. "You don't know what happened there? You didn't hear anything?"

I frowned. "In the ballroom?"

He nodded.

“I heard a commotion, but I just thought it was hockey players being hockey players.”

“You didn’t get up to look?” His tone was accusatory. Perhaps I deserved it.

“No,” I admitted meekly.

“Aspen, Briggs got into a fight with Gordon, and they hauled all of us down to the precinct to make statements—at least, those of us involved in breaking it up.”

I covered my mouth with my hands, shocked at what he was saying. I took a few minutes to process his words before I had questions. Lots of them.

“Over Michella?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that how you got that cut?”

“Several of us got in the way of Briggs’s fists trying to break up the fight.”

I touched his wound with my index finger, running it gently over the cut.

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“I forgot my phone on the table when they ushered us out of there. Once they finally released me, I came straight here to explain.”

“I thought... I thought...” Now it was my turn to bury my head in his chest, more from shame than anything else.

He placed his finger under my chin and lifted my head so I had to look at him. “You thought what?”

“I thought you...you were tired of me.”

He furrowed his brow in complete confusion for a few moments before barking out a laugh. “You’re joking, right?”

“No, I am not.” I straightened and threw back my shoulders with indignation.

He chuckled, which angered me even more.

“It’s not funny.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just amazed you would think such a thing after the night we had.”

“But you didn’t tell me about your dad inviting us to dinner, and those women...” I stopped, choking up again. I willed myself not to cry in front of him.

“I was going to once I figured out if I wanted to go to dinner at their house. I already knew you’d want me to, but I had to make that decision on my own.”

“Oh, but those women...”

“What women?”

“Trinity and her friend. They said I don’t belong. That I’m not the type of girl you’d want to be seen with once the novelty wore off.”

“Oh my God.” He pulled me back in his arms again and stroked my hair. I heard a rumbling in his chest.

“Are you still laughing at me?” I lifted my head and glared at him.

He framed my face with his hands and brushed his lips against mine, still smiling. “You’re silly.”

“I’m silly?”

“Oh, baby, you are so wrong. I’m not tired of you. I can’t get enough of you.”

“Really?” I grasped his arms, gazing up at him.

“You haven’t figured that out?” He sounded incredulous, and I wasn’t sure how to respond. Had I let my fears get the best of me?

“I mean, I...”

“Aspen, you’re the one. For me. The one.” He leaned in close, his voice a husky whisper. “I love you.” He kissed me, backing up those three little words with a kiss that curled my toes, made my heart flutter, and sent my head spinning.

“I love you, too. I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“You should be.” This time when he laughed, I joined him.

“Did we just have our first fight?”

“I guess we did.”

We smiled into each other’s eyes. I flung my arms around his neck and kissed him with everything I had. Relief and joy and all the good feelings poured over me.

I had come home.

Finally.

Chapter Thirty-Two

SILLY GIRL

~~Grady~~

*B*y the time the taxi had dropped me off at the Uni at six a.m., I hadn't slept in twenty-four hours, and I had a game tonight. I was dragging ass, but I had to talk to Aspen.

After discovering what dark hole she'd gone down in my absence, I'm glad I made the trip to see her.

"You're a silly girl, doubting me like that," I declared as she clung to me. I grabbed her around the waist and twirled her around in circles until I was too dizzy to stand up. We staggered to the couch and collapsed. I pulled her onto my lap. Arms wrapped around her waist, I smiled into those chocolate-brown eyes of hers. I saw hope, and I saw tentative joy. I'd work on that. She'd be sure of how I felt before I left here.

"I guess I am." She laid her hand against my chest over my heart. I felt it beating under her warm palm. I placed my hand on top of hers, leaving it there, joining us together, and making a silent promise for the future.

"You trust me, don't you?"

She gazed down at our hands, then lifted her head with a shaky smile. "Yes."

"Good, because I trust you, and we're in this together for the long haul."

The light came back into her eyes and the brilliance returned to her smile. "We are."

I tenderly kissed her, deep, slow, and filled with meaning. I was a guy who'd been holding back my emotions for so long I had a hard time expressing them.

Aspen drew back. Her face glowing with joy I'd put there. "I love you."

"I know. Of course you do."

She laughed and swatted my arm. I snorted and gave her a quick hug. The soft comfort of her body against mine was like being wrapped in a warm cocoon and sheltered from the rest of the cold, cruel world.

Aspen's smile faded, and she sobered for a moment as if something bothered her. "What happened to Briggs?"

I blew out a long breath and leaned back against the couch, tucking her under my arm. "Mr. Barlowe convinced Gordon and his family that pressing charges wouldn't be in anyone's best interests. They agreed, but I'm pretty sure Briggs will be suspended, though I don't know for how long."

"Was he sorry?"

"Not in the least."

"What's wrong with him? Is he on a mission to destroy his career?"

"Something like that. Honestly, I can't figure him out. He told me once hockey was all he had, yet he does stupid shit like this." I explained how the entire fight came about, my trip to the precinct, and the aftermath of the fight.

"Do you think Gordon pushed his buttons on purpose?"

"Highly possible. No idea. He came out of this the victim, not the instigator."

Aspen shook her head and sighed. I caught a flash of anger in her eyes. She didn't like Gordon and for good reason. "Guys like him always come out smelling like a rose."

"He did. All these women were fawning over him and offering their sympathy. He ate up the attention."

"The Barlowes must be furious."

“Oh, they are. Trust me. He might get his wish if they can get another team to trade for him.”

“Why would anyone want a guy who disrupts the locker room and causes dissension and division?”

“I can’t imagine.”

“I almost feel sorry for him.”

I squinted at her and frowned, certain I’d heard her wrong. “You feel sorry for him?”

“Yeah, I do. He’s a lost soul. So alone and in pain. He lashes out like a wounded animal.”

This wasn’t the first time she’d said this. I respected her ability to be gracious to someone who didn’t deserve her compassion, but I wasn’t a big enough person to forgive him for last night. The Icehawks were a new team, and this type of shit gave us a reputation as brawlers and assholes. We didn’t need that.

Aspen laid her head on my shoulder, and we lapsed into a comfortable silence. Outside I heard a siren wail, a common sound in this part of town. Rain pelted the window in a steady but calming rhythm. Portland’s heart went on beating just as ours did.

An hour later, I woke up with Aspen’s head on my shoulder. My legs were cramped from the awkward position I was sitting in, and I shifted Aspen’s weight on my lap. She stirred and blinked at me. We grinned sleepily at each other.

“I should go home and get some serious sleep. I have a game tonight.” I was reluctant to leave, but I had obligations to the team. “Come with me.”

“Do you think we’ll sleep if I do?”

I chuckled, pretty sure the heat in my eyes was answer enough to that question. Regardless, Aspen changed and came with me.

“Grady, I heard from Heidi,” she said as I navigated the rain-soaked streets. One of the drainage grates was full a block

from the Uni, and my SUV plowed through several inches of water.

“You did?”

She held up her phone and read the text messages.

“What do you think that means?”

She shrugged. “Heidi has always been secretive and has disappeared before, just never for this long.”

“Do you think she’s okay?”

“That’s what worries me. I don’t know.”

“Heidi’s a big girl and free to make her own choices. All we can do is be there for her if she needs us.” I grasped her hand, hoping the simple gesture absorbed some of her pain. I’d gladly take a bullet for her if necessary or move heaven and earth, all that romantic stuff that used to make me roll my eyes. Now I got it.

“Let’s think good thoughts. So much has gone on in the last twenty-four hours, it’s hard to process.”

“That it is, but I’m glad you heard from her.”

“Me too.”

I pulled into the garage and parked in my spot, leaning over for one more kiss.

“I really do love you,” I said with more conviction than I’d ever felt about anything in my life.

EPILOGUE

~~Grady~~

Two weeks later, Aspen and I sat at the dinner table at my dad's house. If I said it wasn't awkward, I'd be lying. It was, but we were trying. Dad's fiancée bustled about, placing serving dishes on the table and topping off everyone's wine.

"Sandi, sit down. You've done enough." My dad beamed at her, and they shared a look of pure love. I'd like to think it was the same look Aspen and I exchanged with regularity.

My gaze shifted to Aspen. She watched them with what could only be described as a dreamy expression on her beautiful face. Every woman loved a happily ever after. Guys did, too, if we were being honest. Unless we were fucked up like Briggs or drama queens like a few other teammates I could mention. Most of us normal guys liked things to be on an even keel in our personal lives.

My dad caught Sandi's hand and gently tugged it. She took the hint, placed the wine bottle in the center of the table, and sat next to him. Aspen and I were seated across from them. The food smelled delicious, and my stomach rumbled in protest of having been deprived of food most of the day. As I studied the spread in front of us, my mouth watered: prime rib, twice-baked potatoes, an incredible salad, and rolls fresh from the oven. Sandi could cook.

I realized I didn't know anything about her. Where she came from. What she did for a living. How they met. And I

wanted to know all those things. Just as I wanted to know what had gone on in my dad's life over the years.

Dad raised his wineglass, and the rest of us did the same. "To many more dinners like this over the years." His eyes were misty, and he blinked several times. I took a big gulp of wine. This evening would be easier to get through with a good buzz going.

Aspen squeezed my thigh under the table and winked at me. I winked back.

"Let's dish up," Dad declared.

No one had to tell me twice. I picked up the closest plate, speared a couple pieces of medium-rare prime rib, and passed it to Aspen. Within a minute, I'd heaped my plate with food.

Resisting the urge to dig in and be rude, I waited until everyone else had dished up and my dad had taken the first bite.

I cut a piece of meat and popped it in my mouth, chewing appreciatively. The savory juices of the perfectly done meat beat any prime rib I'd had in a restaurant. I finished chewing and turned to Sandi.

"This is epic. Best prime rib I've ever had."

Sandi smiled, almost seeming embarrassed. "Thank you. Cooking is a passion of mine."

"Maybe you could teach me some tricks," Aspen said. "I can manage, but there's so much I don't know."

"I'd love to." Sandi beamed with joy, obviously all in for a cooking lesson or two.

While the women talked cooking, I caught my dad's attention. "Briggs is off suspension next week."

Dad concentrated on his food and didn't say anything at first, but I noticed his fork wavered midair when I brought up Briggs's name. He wasn't looking forward to him coming back any more than the team was. We'd won four out of six games without him. Granted, our wins were against teams as bad as we were, but they were still wins. I'd been getting

better every game, thanks to Kirby. The locker room atmosphere was energized and united. Reintroducing Briggs's sour attitude was sure to put a damper on team building.

"Between us, is he staying on the team?" I poked my dad for information.

"He's been shopped around. No one is interested. Especially not at his salary. Even though the Icehawks volunteered to absorb some of his cap space, not one team came calling."

"That's brutal for someone of Briggs's talent. Does he know?"

"Not yet, but I have a meeting in the morning with him. We're discussing his future with the team and with hockey. I'm laying it on the line for him."

By my dad's grim expression, I surmised Briggs was being offered one last chance before he kissed hockey goodbye.

"The ball's in his court, son. He's damn lucky the Barlowes are willing to give him another chance."

My dad called me son. He hadn't uttered that word in years, and it felt good. Really fucking good. The resentment and guilt that'd coated the pit of my stomach in poisonous anger for so long had dissolved, giving me hope my dad and I would once again be not just father and son but friends.

"Dad, I'm so sorry about everything. About Nancy. About thinking you were out to get me. About not talking it out with you sooner."

His smile was sad but hopeful. "I'm sorry, too. I was your father. I should've tried harder rather than wallow in my own grief and frustration." He leveled me with a steady gaze. "I love you, kid."

"I love you, Dad."

Sandi and Aspen started clapping. We hadn't realized they'd been listening in.

"Well, now that that's settled," Sandi said, "we'd be honored if the two of you would attend our wedding this

summer.”

“We’d love to,” Aspen gushed, then shot me a questioning look.

“We would,” I assured all of them.

“What plans do you two have for the future?” Sandi was a nosy woman, but I decided to use her nosiness to announce those very plans, even though Aspen hadn’t heard them yet.

“I’m looking at a couple acres overlooking the Columbia. There’s a completely refurbished craftsman-style house with a separate studio. If Aspen approves, I’ll make an offer on it.”

Aspen’s mouth dropped open. She tried to speak, but no words came out.

“That is if you agree to put up with me indefinitely.” I met her gaze and waited for her answer. She took her time, staring thoughtfully off into space while I held my breath. I saw a ghost of a smile on her face. Before I knew what was happening, she threw her arms around me and hugged me so tight I gasped for air.

But I had my answer and my reason for living.



Thank you for reading DEFENDING. The Portland Icehawks series continues with Briggs and Michella’s story in [ROUGHING](#), Release date: 6/29/23

I’m the star defensemen for the Portland Icehawks and the guy everyone loves to hate. Not that I don’t deserve their hatred. After all, how can you like a guy who doesn’t even like himself?

Michella is the one woman I can’t let go, yet I can’t be with her either. We’re like a drug to each other, and addictions aren’t a good thing. I’ve messed up a relationship before and destroyed the one person I loved. I can’t do the same to Michella. I’m ready to walk away one final time when a child of the street in need of rescuing forces us back together.

To make matters worse, Michella's new job with a private investigative agency puts her in the crosshairs of Portland's elusive serial killer. I have to protect her and this child, even if staying causes more destruction than leaving.

For news on upcoming Jami Davenport books, [sign up for my newsletter by clicking here.](#)

If you loved *Defending*, you'll be sure to love the rest of the [Portland Icehawks](#) series.

Did you find any errors? Please email me so I may correct them and upload a new version. You can reach me via the contact page on my website: <https://www.jamidavenport.com/contact/>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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USA Today bestselling author Jami Davenport writes sexy contemporary, new adult, and sports romances, and has recently dived into Romantic Suspense with her new series, *Gone Missing*.

Jami lives on a small farm in the woods near Puget Sound with her Army-Ranger-turned-plumber husband, a Newfoundland drool monster, and a prince disguised as an orange tabby cat.

Jami worked in IT for years and is a former high school business teacher but recently achieved her life-long dream and is now a full-time author. A horse lover since birth, Jami showed dressage horses for over thirty years. Now she gardens and goes RVing in her green Winnebago Minnie, along with other traveling adventures. She's a lifetime Seahawks and Mariners fan and has season tickets for the Seattle Kraken. Jami still misses her SuperSonics. An avid boater, Jami has spent countless hours in the San Juan Islands, a common setting in her books. In her opinion, it's the most beautiful place on earth.

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