

A romantic close-up photograph of a man and a woman about to kiss. The woman is on the left, with her eyes closed and a soft smile. The man is on the right, leaning in towards her. The background is dark with soft, out-of-focus lights, creating a dreamy atmosphere. The text 'melanie ting' is overlaid at the top in a white, serif font.

melanie ting

I hate nate

a Vancouver Vice Hockey novel

I HATE NATE

MELANIE TING

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ISBN: 978-1-9991926-7-9

Cover by Melanie Ting adapted from a design by Murphy Rae Design

Editing by Kimberly Cannon

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VANCOUVER VICE

Vancouver Vice players in this book

Player/Nickname

Nate Jones/Jonesy

Marty Devonshire/Devo

T.J. Amato/ T.J.

Seb Söderlund /Sods

Todd Cerny/Todd the Bod

Rico Aleppo/Lepper

Marcus Fox/Foxy

Paul Thiebault(captain)/Tibbs

Mark Pillsbury/Doughy

Lionel Entwistle

Jas Singh/Singer

Marc-Andre Boileau/Boiler

Eric Fairburn/Burner

Dave Dominick/Dom

Cedric Williams /Wills

Josh Craig /Craggy

Gabe Olsson/Ollie

Hank Gill/Gilly

Jim Park/Parks

Leo Gauthier/Goats/Head Coach

Ian Lee/Assistant Coach

Chris Luczak/Lucky /VP Hockey Ops

Amanda Richardson/VP Business Ops

FREAKY FRIDAY

CAMILLE SALANG

NAKED AND HANDCUFFED to a bed wasn't the best time to decide to break up, but I've never been someone who planned ahead.

Bill's blue plaid boxer shorts were the last straw.

As he sat at the end of his bed and pulled off his khakis to reveal navy dress socks and those stupid boxers, I got upset. How many times had I worn special lingerie at his request, but he couldn't remember to buy some nice boxer briefs? I was a very visual person.

This was the first time we were acting out one of *my* fantasies and the mood was already crushed. I was so done here.

"Bill," I said. "Tomato."

His longish hair flipped as he jerked his head around. "The safe word? But I just cuffed you. Does it hurt or something?"

"Take the handcuffs off. Please," I added.

"Oh, okay. Where did I put the key?"

He searched every pocket of his pants before realizing it was in his shirt pocket. That was another strike against him. He acted like cuffing me was a crime. I wasn't into S&M or rape fantasies, I just liked feeling helpless. But that fantasy didn't work when Bill kept asking if everything was all right. Once we started, he was supposed to take over.

Right now, my only fantasy was getting out of here.

"Hurry up," I said.

"Aww, baby. We haven't even done it yet," he pleaded. His eyes went up and down my body and then his cock tented out of those stupid boxers. It was all so predictable. "You look hot right now."

"I always look hot." I jangled my wrists, and he finally unlocked the right cuff. There was a clanging as the metal of the cuffs hit the wrought iron of the bedpost. Ugh. I flipped my freed hand around to get the circulation going. I had wanted the fuzzy cuffs in hot pink, but no, Bill insisted on the "realistic" leather and metal ones. But he wasn't the one wearing them.

He leaned over to unlock the other side. As his body hovered over mine, I breathed in the tobacco scent of his expensive cologne. It reminded me of overflowing ashtrays, and I recoiled a little.

"Is something wrong?" Bill asked.

I couldn't hold back any longer. "Yeah, this isn't working out. Us."

"What?" He sat back on his heels. "Camille, what are you talking about? We're so good together. You're the best girlfriend I've ever had. I even introduced you to my mother!"

Bringing up that event wasn't making his case. Mrs. Fletcher had been a total snob who let me know exactly how lucky I was to be dating Bill.

"I don't know. We're just not compatible." As in, I'm fun and you're not. The problem was that I was attracted to guys with qualities like reliability, stability, and self-control. Strengths that I admired—mostly because I didn't have them. But those qualities were boring in the long run.

"Not compatible? Of course we're different. That's the nature of male/female dynamics." Bill's tone was lecturing and whining at the same time, which was doubly irritating.

I tried to sit up, but my cuffed wrist pulled me back. "Look, undo me first. It's impossible to talk like this."

"If I free you, you'll leave." He scowled and his lower lip jutted out. "I don't want to break up."

Well, he was no dummy. The millisecond I was uncuffed, I would be dressed and outtie. Once I decided to break up, it was over. What was the point of autopsying something that was already dead?

Our emotional standoff was broken by a familiar ringtone.

"Oh shit. That's work." Like a robot, he rose and picked up his phone from the bedside table. "Bill Fletcher. Sure, Donny. No, you're not interrupting anything."

Excuse me??? I jangled my captured wrist, but he was already in zombie work-mode.

"Let me get to my laptop and see if we can resolve this remotely." He turned towards the door.

"Bill, noooo!" I screeched. But he plodded out and the last thing I saw was his blue plaid butt. How long would he be

gone now? His job as a systems administrator for a large financial firm meant that he got urgent work calls at odd times. That was the downside of a real career—apparently you were never off the clock.

Damn. If only I had waited five more seconds to mention breakups. Now I had to lie here until he finished guiding some clueless coworker through their stupid computer problems. And then he'd keep whining and pleading before he released me. That would be a torture worse than whips and chains.

Maybe I could free myself? I wriggled my wrist and tried to pull my hand out, but no dice. And pulling on the chain only made my arm sore.

“Why does it always look so easy on detective shows?” I muttered. Veronica Mars would have unlocked the handcuff with a nail file by now. Wait, did I have any tools? My purse was far away, but my clothes were lying beside the bed. I spotted a bulge in my jeans pocket: my phone.

Perfect. I could call my sister to come and get me. That would speed things up.

Easier said than done though. First I had to get the jeans. I stretched my foot towards the jeans. No dice. Okay, maybe if I rolled my body closer. I extended my leg as far as it would go—ugh, to have model-length legs right now. Just a little more...and success! My big toe landed on denim. I pulled on the jeans. It took ages, but finally I grabbed my phone.

I exhaled in triumph and dialled Elaine. But her phone went straight to messaging.

“Ugh. What a time to need privacy.” My older sister was soooooo responsible, why would she shut down her phone? Oh right, because we had planned a complicated lie so both of

us could sleep over at our boyfriends' places without Mom knowing. It was ridiculous that we were in our twenties and still scheming to stay out. How many times had she lectured us about men not respecting women who slept with them before commitment?

Mom had no clue what it was like to be young and dating in the 21st century. Women were equal to men, and that included the freedom to hook up. I did a mental eye roll as I called Marty Devonshire, Elaine's boyfriend. Unfortunately, he didn't answer either. He was too busy respecting the heck out of my sister.

Okay, one last option left. How desperately did I want to get out of here?

Answer: very desperately.

I exhaled and dialled my last resort.

A cheerful voice answered. "Is this a booty call, Peaches? Did you finally come to your senses and decide you want to do me?"

Marty played hockey for the Vancouver Vice, and his roommate was his teammate, Nate Jones. Nate was ridiculously persistent, but he was the last person I'd go out with. Or stay in with. He even had a nickname for me, which I refused to ask about since it must be sexual. Everything was about sex with Nate.

I heard Bill moving around in the living room and dropped my voice to a whisper, "I'm trying to get a hold of my sister and she's not answering. Can you knock on the door and tell her it's an emergency?"

"Uh, well, I'm not actually at home. I'm playing poker at Lepper's place. Marty asked for a little privacy tonight. Did

you know your sister is a screamer?”

“Oh god, don’t tell me stuff like that. I can’t un-hear it. What am I going to do?”

“Do about what? Why are you whispering? Is something wrong?”

“Yes. My boyfriend won’t let me leave. He knows I’m going to break up with him, so…” My voice trailed off because I really didn’t want to explain my situation to Nate, of all people.

“Are you kidding me? Is he hurting you? What a sick fuck. I’ll be right over to get you,” he declared and then hung up.

I did my second eye-roll of the night and turned my phone to mute. One minute later, it vibrated.

“Uh, Camille. Where are you?”

“Look, he’s not hurting me. We were doing this bondage thing, and I’m cuffed to the bed. I mentioned breaking up at the wrong time, so now he wants to talk me out of it.”

“Oh.” Nate thought this over. “So, where is he?”

“He’s on the phone in the living room. Working.”

Nate laughed. “Y’know, I can’t believe you won’t go out with me, but you’re dating this complete loser.”

“Stop it. Unit 34. 2140 Beta Street.” There was no point telling off the guy who could rescue me from this stupid predicament. “Bill Fletcher is the name on the buzzer.”

“Is this going to get weird?” Nate asked. “He doesn’t have a gun or anything, does he?”

“Not unless you count the controller for his PS4,” I said. “You could take him easily. You *are* a hockey player.”

Whatever his personality defects, Nate had an excellent body: big, muscular, and totally cut.

“Okay. Sit tight.” Nate snickered. “Like you can do anything else. Hey, are you naked? Or are you wearing one of those tiny leather outfits?”

I hung up. Yikes. It was one thing to be naked in front of Bill, but another to be naked in front of a horndog like Nate. If Nate found me naked and chained to a bed, he would have sex first and ask questions later. That turned me on in a way that Bill’s playacting never had, and I shook my head to get rid of the disgusting thought.

I began worming my way into my skinny jeans, but with only one hand it was tough. Too bad I hadn’t worn my boyfriend jeans. As I finished zipping them up, Bill returned and sat beside me.

“I’m so sorry about that. Donny always has the same issue with his—hey, how did you get into your jeans?” he asked, looking down with confusion.

“With difficulty. Now will you undo me?”

He shook his head. “Not until we talk. Is your period due or something? Because you’re not being rational. We’ve got a good thing here. Maybe I’m jumping the gun, but I can see us having a future—once you settle down and find a real job, of course. I know women want commitment but there are stages for these things.”

Seriously? How many ways had he just insulted me?

“Here’s a tip for your next relationship, Bill. Don’t tell a woman all the things that are wrong with her while she’s trying to break up with you. Now, uncuff me.”

He frowned. “You mean the period stuff? But that’s the only logical explanation. I know you’re into me. Last weekend, we talked about living together.”

Ugh, were we going to relive our whole relationship? This was why quick breakups ruled. “We never said anything like that.”

He nodded with eyes wide and owlish. “We did. I said, ‘Too bad you live at home and can’t sleep over anytime you want.’ You said, ‘Yes.’ Then I said, ‘If you lived here that would solve that problem.’ And I meant that.”

I tried to sit up again but fell back onto the bed. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, that was just conversation.”

He leaned forward and took my free hand. “I’m not like other guys, Camille. I mean every word I say. You’re so pretty and so much fun. I feel like my life has improved ever since we began going out.”

The utter ridiculousness of this situation struck me, and I began to giggle. Bill was holding my hand and acting like this was some normal, romantic situation—but I was half-naked and chained to his bed. Wasn’t this the exact scene from a horror movie?

“Why are you laughing?” he demanded. “I’m really upset here.”

Oh no. If I didn’t watch out, I’d never get out of here. I made my expression solemn and stifled my inner scream. And for the first time ever, I wished Nate Jones were here.

THE EDGE OF SEVENTEEN

NATE JONES

“SORRY, BOYS, I GOTTA JET,” I said as I gathered up my winnings and stuffed them into the pocket of my leather jacket.

“No fair, you can’t leave while you’re ahead,” said T.J. Amato. I played on the top line of the AHL Vancouver Vice with T.J. and Seb Soderlund, and we were best buds off the ice too.

“To be fair, Jonesy hardly ever wins,” said Rico Aleppo. Lepper was hosting this poker party in his condo.

“And that’s why we love playing with him,” T.J. said. “The guy never knows when to fold. But, seriously, you can’t leave poker night for some booty call.”

“It’s not a booty call,” I said, even though I had my hopes. “I’m rescuing a damsel in distress.”

“Who is she and why the fuck is she in distress?” Sods asked. His English was accented with Swedish and profanity.

“It’s Camille Salang and her boyfriend won’t let her...go.” I wasn’t telling these horndogs that she was handcuffed to a

bed or they'd want to ride along just for the view.

"That doesn't sound right. If he's holding her against her will, you should call the police." Lepper was a big worrier.

"Ehhh, it's not quite that serious. She just needs a ride home," I hedged.

"Why isn't Marty getting her? She's Elaine's sister, right?" said Foxy. Marcus Fox was a wide-eyed rookie and a good guy.

"Marty's busy with Elaine," I said. That explanation was greeted by hoots and rude remarks.

"But Marty would be a better person to rescue someone. He looks big and scary," Foxy said.

Marty was the team enforcer and looked menacing enough, although he was a big pussycat.

"Don't I look scary? I'm big enough," I protested. I was 6'2" and built. Jesus, I spent enough time in the gym.

T.J. shook his head. "You're as scary as a little puppy dog. Have you even had a hockey fight?"

"I'm a lover, not a fighter." Sure, I'd been in a few skirmishes after the whistle, but I'd never dropped the gloves for real. There was a skill to fighting and not everyone had it. I ran a hand across my jaw. "Don't want to mess up a good-looking face like this."

My buddies groaned in response.

"Jonesy, maybe you should have a backup plan," Lepper suggested. "In case things go south."

That wasn't a bad idea. "Like what?" I wondered.

"Why don't you pretend to be a cop?" Foxy said.

“How? Just say so?” I asked.

Foxy shook his head. “Your clothes don’t look right.”

“No cop wears jeans that tight,” T.J. said.

Lepper rooted around in his closet and found a Gortex jacket in bright yellow. “Wear this with your black Vice ball cap and you’re good to go.”

“And don’t smile,” Foxy added. “My cousin is an RCMP officer and he always looks angry when he’s working.”

I pulled on the outfit and struck a pose by making my hands into a gun. “Freeze, motherfucker.”

Everyone laughed, which was all I’d wanted anyway. Hopefully, I’d waltz right in there and get Camille without needing to pretend anything.

“Why are you going to all this trouble for someone you’re not even dating?” T.J. asked.

Sods snorted. “Do you not know? Jonesy has a huuuge crush on Camille.”

“That’s bullshit. Sure, I like her, but I’m not obsessed with her. Anyway, tonight’s my chance. She’ll be grateful that I came to her rescue and finally go out with me.”

“You wish. How many times have you asked her out?” T.J. said.

“A few,” I said.

“Sixteen times,” said Sods.

“Jesus, Sods. Shut the fuck up.” I’d made the mistake of talking to him about Camille on a road trip. He had a talent for recalling hockey stats that apparently applied to dating stats too.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” T.J. sounded shocked. “Why do you keep asking her out?”

Yeah, this was embarrassing. Whenever Camille came to games and team events with Elaine, I was drawn to her. I liked her energy and confident attitude, and that pretty face and rocking body didn’t hurt. After she shot me down, I’d resolve not to ask her again but all those resolutions went out the window as soon as I saw her.

Besides, I got the vibe that she liked me too—but she kept that tamped down. Maybe it was because I’d asked Elaine out first. But that was before I’d even met Camille. Camille was a fun, party girl, and we were way better suited.

“I think we’d be really good together,” I said.

“Well, I think I’d be good with Margot Robbie, but that doesn’t mean it’s gonna happen,” T.J. said as he shuffled the cards.

“I don’t understand how you can have a crush on someone and still go out with so many other women,” Foxy said.

“I’m a multitasker,” I said. Sure, I had my share of girlfriends, but I wasn’t seeing anyone right now.

“Well, good luck tonight. Maybe seventeen is your lucky number,” T.J. scoffed.

“Later, boys,” I said.

I hopped into my Mustang Mach 1. My dad owned a Ford dealership back in Ontario, so I always had a sweet ride.

As I cruised down Willingdon Avenue, I lowered the window to let in the warm night air. Springtime meant playoffs, and we were close to clinching our spot.

I grinned. Life was good. A nice ride. Playing on the team's top line. Riding a six-game points streak. And now... maybe Camille was finally coming around.

Her boyfriend lived in a low-rise condo building. I rang the buzzer a couple of times and nobody answered. But a young guy held the door open for me as he exited. Maybe I did look like a cop.

I went up to Bill's unit and knocked on the door. Once again there was no answer, and I started to worry. Camille wouldn't take any shit, but if she was cuffed to a bed, she didn't have a ton of options.

Then I heard a faint *help* through the door. The sound of Camille's voice exploded me into action. I pulled down the ball cap, put a scowl on my face, and started pounding on the door.

"This is the police. You need to open up right now. Or else."

Or else what? I had no fucking clue. The door was solid wood so there was no way I could break it down. Maybe I'd have to call the real cops.

Finally I heard some noise on the other side of the door. I banged again. "Open up!"

The lock clicked and the door swung open. I had to bite my lip to stop from laughing. Camille's soon-to-be ex-boyfriend stood there in blue plaid boxers. He had a Gumby body and a baby face. His pale complexion was splotted with red. *Seriously, Camille? You turn me down to date guys like this?*

"Is there a problem, Officer?" he warbled. Sweet, the disguise was working.

“Corporal Jones, R.C.M.P. Are you Bill Fletcher? I understand you’re keeping a young woman here against her will.”

“Oh my god, no! It’s my girlfriend. She agreed to everything. In fact, it was all her idea,” he said.

Fucking A. I knew she had a kinky side.

“How did you even know?” he asked.

As I tried to figure out an explanation, Camille’s voice drifted out, “Help. In here.”

I glared at Bill. “That doesn’t sound like a person who has agreed to everything.”

I barged by him and down the hallway into the bedroom. I stopped in the doorway.

Holy fucking hell. Camille lay on the bed with one wrist handcuffed to the bed. Her wavy black hair spilled across the pillow and her curvy body was encased in tight jeans. But the best part was that she was half-naked. Sure, she was doing her best to cover up those luscious breasts, but that only made her look hotter—like she was squeezing her own tits. I loved that shit. I was sure I’d had this exact fantasy before—starring Camille.

But once I tore my eyes away from her body, I noticed Camille’s face looked totally pissed.

I gave her a smile and a wink. Now that I’d seen Bill, this rescue was going to be a piece of cake.

I put the cop scowl back on and turned to face him.

“Release this woman. Immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” he said. *Sir?* Fuck yeah.

First, he had to search the room before finally finding the key. Then his hands were shaking so badly, I was ready to grab the key before he finally unlocked the cuff. Much to my regret, Camille managed to roll off the bed and gather her clothes to her chest without revealing any nipple at all.

Now, Bill started whining. “I promise you that this was completely consensual. Camille’s my girlfriend. We’ve been going out for more than two months. I have photos.”

He fumbled for his phone, and I raised a warning hand. “Stop. Keep your hands where I can see them. It sure looks con-sexual. Pretty kinky, in fact.” I turned to Camille, who was edging towards the door. “What’s your name, Miss?”

She was trying hard not to laugh. “Camille Salang. Officer,” she added with sass.

“Miss Salang, would you like to press charges against this man?”

Now she was really struggling to keep it serious. “No. I’d just like to go.”

“Fine. I’ll see that you get home safely.”

I turned back to Bill. “Mr. Fletcher, stay away from this young woman. If I find out that you’ve been contacting her by phone or on social media, I will come down so hard on you that you won’t even know what happened.” Bill was slack-jawed in shock, and I couldn’t resist adding, “And there are a lot of guys in prison who would enjoy a pretty boy like you.” I added an obscene hand gesture for emphasis and all the colour left Bill’s face.

By the time I got to the front door, Camille was still clutching her clothes to her chest, but she had managed to put

on her shoes and grab her purse. I draped her coat over her bare shoulders and opened the door.

“Let this be a lesson to you,” I said over my shoulder to Bill, who was watching us in stunned silence. A lesson in don’t-mess-up-with-your-hot-girlfriend-while-I’m-around.

I heard a whimper as the door closed.

PRETTY IN PINK

CAMILLE

FINALLY, fresh air and freedom! Nate guided me to his car in silence, but once we got inside, both of us began to laugh hysterically.

“Fuck! Did you see his face? I thought the guy was going to shit his pants,” Nate said.

I was almost crying with relieved laughter. “I could not believe that. I mean, poor Bill, but he was being a total idiot.”

“What the hell was he wearing? His granddad’s underwear?”

“I know. I hate those boxers so much. That should have been my first clue it wasn’t going to work out.” I looked up at Nate. “You were great. Have you, like, been arrested before?”

He grinned. “Nah. I’ve seen a lot of movies though.”

His eyes dropped to my chest since I’d let my bundle of clothes slip a little. I suddenly felt way too naked.

“Okay. I’m getting in the back seat to get dressed.”

“Why, baby? The front seat has more room,” Nate said.

“It also has you in it. Face forward and don’t turn around.”

I crawled through the gap between the bucket seats, which was quite a task in a Mustang. With my back to Nate, I pulled a lacy pink bra out of the pile and began to put it on.

“Nice bra,” he commented.

When I looked over my shoulder, he was staring straight into the rearview mirror.

“Stop it. I told you not to watch,” I scolded.

“Nah, you said not to turn around. C’mon, you’re topless in my car. Of course I’m going to watch.” Nate snorted. “Besides, now I know it does up in the front. That’s going to save time later when I take it off.”

“In your dreams,” I replied.

“In yours too,” he said. “You know, I was hoping you were going to be naked and chained up to the bed when I got there.”

“I was before. But I managed to get my jeans on after I phoned you.”

“Damn. Shoulda driven faster. Seriously, the guy left you cuffed to the bed after you did it? What a douche.”

I pulled on my top, then dug out my brush and makeup bag from my purse. I began brushing my hair. “We never did it.”

“What. The. Fuck.” Nate turned around completely. “You were completely naked and handcuffed to the bed, and he didn’t even fuck you?”

I pulled out a light-up mirror and fixed my eye makeup. “I mentioned breaking up, and he got all upset. Then he got a call from work.”

Nate laughed. "I'd fuck you first. I'm so good that you'd change your mind about dumping me."

I applied lipgloss with my little finger. "You're so full of yourself. Here's a newsflash: your dick isn't the magic wand you think it is."

Nate ignored my insults. "You're smokin', baby. And finding out that you're kinky makes you even hotter. Hey, you forgot this." He reached down onto the passenger seat and dangled my pink thong at the end of his forefinger. When I went to grab it, he pulled it back.

"Maybe I'll keep it for my collection," Nate teased.

"That's exactly the kind of collection you would have. Or nude pics on your phone."

His shocked expression proved that I was right. I took advantage of his surprise to grab back my underwear, then stuffed it in my purse and crawled back into the front seat. Nate helped by cupping my ass and pushing me forward.

"You're such a gentleman," I commented.

"You know it. So, my place?" Nate asked.

"Your place? I thought you got kicked out."

He started up the car, and the engine roared to life. "Marty's too nice to kick me out all night. I wasn't supposed to come home before midnight."

"Is it midnight already? You can take me home." I felt much better now that I was dressed. Being partly naked with Nate made me feel nervous...and oddly turned on too. "Oh wait. I can't go home. I have this deal with Elaine. We're pretending to be out for a girl's night and sleepover for a

friend's birthday. If I go home, I'll totally blow the fact that she's with Marty."

"Okay. It's back to my place then. And you can totally blow something else instead."

"Nate, please. I really appreciate that you came and got me. You were awesome, but that doesn't mean I'm going to do you."

He grinned. "Why not? That's how it always happens in the movies. The good guy rescues the chick from the bad guy, and then she's all grateful and they end up in bed."

"I've escaped from enough beds tonight. I can sleep on your living room couch."

"Really? Because my bed's a lot more comfortable. Not to mention all the benefits of a night with me."

"The couch is fine. I'm a lot smaller than you," I pointed out. Nate was tall and muscular. If it wasn't for his personality, he'd be very attractive.

"Besides, my bedroom has all the fun toys. If you're into handcuffs, I have something you'd like..."

Was my rescuer the more dangerous option here? "Euw. I wouldn't ever use sex toys that a guy had used on someone else."

Nate squinted at me. "Why not? I could see if it was a butt plug or something, but velcro restraints aren't a big deal. It's not like they have germs."

I couldn't help but giggle at his genuine curiosity. "You're unshockable, dude. Anyway, couples should shop for that stuff together. It's like foreplay. You get a chance to talk about what you're into and your limits."

“Yeah, that makes sense. Most chicks are too embarrassed though.” As we passed a restaurant, he looked over at me. “Are you hungry or anything?”

“No. We went out for dinner first.”

“Seriously, why did you go out with such a doofus? I only saw him for five minutes, and I could tell he was a huge loser.”

I made a face. “I’m attracted to guys who are responsible and mature—but then I get bored. Thanks to you, at least this breakup was quick and final. Maybe I’ll call you to do this every time. You’re like the hitman of breakups.”

We both laughed.

“And is that why you won’t go out with me? Okay, I’m not mature but I’ve got a good job—I’m a professional hockey player.”

“Nate, we’ve gone over this many, many times. I won’t go out with you because...” I raised two fingers. “One, you’re a total player. And two, you’ve got Asian fever.”

“Just because I like a certain look doesn’t make me a racist or something. In fact, I’m like a reverse-racist! I prefer Asian women.”

Was he serious? “I can’t even. Do you even know all the things wrong with what you’re saying?”

His forehead creased. “No. What’s wrong with liking Asian women?”

“Okay, tell me what you like about them?”

“Asian chicks are the hottest. Everyone knows that.”

He followed this up by staring at my breasts—undoubtedly recalling how he’d seen me half-naked. I crossed my arms

over my chest.

“Asian chicks are not a group, we’re all different. Filipinas, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Korean, I mean Vancouver has so many different kinds of Asians. And we’re all different generations too, a lot of us were born here.”

“Who cares? You’re all hot.” He wore a blissful smile.

Nate was a hopeless case. He pulled up to his place. He and Marty lived on the upper floor of a house in North Burnaby. Inside, everything was dark and silent.

“I guess Marty and Elaine are asleep,” Nate said.

That was a relief. “Good. I wasn’t looking forward to a lecture from my perfect older sister.”

“Are you tired?” he asked.

“Not really. I’m kind of wired after everything.”

“Yeah. I get that adrenaline rush after games.”

We sat down on the living room sofa, and Nate pulled out his laptop.

“A little Netflix and chill?” he asked with a slimy grin.

I growled, “I knew you were going to say that. I could have bet money on those exact words coming out of your mouth.”

Nate leaned closer. “Is that yes?”

“No.”

“Maybe we should watch in my room, y’know, so we don’t disturb anyone.”

“No.”

Nate slid closer until his warm thigh was touching mine. “So, do you wanna watch something sexy?”

“No.”

He ran a hand through his light brown hair in what was probably his patented seduction move. I remained unmoved.

“Is ‘no’ all you’re going to say tonight?” Nate asked.

“Yes.”

“Aha! You said yes instead of no!”

“Shut up.” I took over his laptop. “I am so over guys right now. No movies with love, romance, or any of that crap.”

“Hey, how about *Clueless*? You kinda remind me of Cher,” he said. Hold up, was macho Nate into teen romcoms? That was weird.

“I said no romance. Hey, this looks good.” I clicked on a true crime show.

Nate pulled a blanket over our laps, probably step two in his seduction moves, but I countered by keeping the laptop between us.

He sighed. Obviously, tonight wasn’t working out the way he had hoped. I felt a tiny bit sorry since he had really bailed me out.

The show turned out to be about a small-town murder. To my shock, big, strong Nate found the crime scene photos too gory and hid his head under the blanket.

“Why do you like to watch this shit?” he asked once his head emerged.

“I love trying to solve the crimes before the end. In this case, I’m pretty sure that the principal of the school is

involved.”

“No way. That guy’s too legit. He reminds me of my dad,”
Nate replied.

I stifled a yawn. It had been a long, exciting evening, and everything was starting to hit me. I snuggled under the blanket. My eyelids kept closing, so I rested them and listened to the narrator drone on about illegal police searches.

FIRED UP

NATE

FUCK. Mornings were the worst. And I'd woken up with a raging boner.

How long had it been since I'd had sex? Too long, obviously. As I drifted to consciousness, I could feel the tightness in my balls and an almost painful erection. Did I have morning practice? Umm, no. So, I could rub one out and go back to sleep. I gave my cock a stroke and opened one eye. There was long black hair on the pillow beside me.

Oh hello. Who was this anyway? And why was I so horny if I'd fucked someone last night? Her back was turned to me, but even through sleep-crusted eyes, I could tell she was hot. Hot Asian chick radar was one of my many talents.

I turned towards her and pulled her body into mine.

"Morning, baby," I murmured into her ear and then kissed the lobe. I reached down and grabbed a handful of soft tit. She made a throaty noise and wriggled her ass against my stiff cock.

But everything felt wrong. Rough fabric brushed against my skin. Why the hell did she have all her clothes on?

“Bill, you’re so bad,” she murmured as she ground harder into me. Then she turned her head and opened her eyes.

Holy fuck. Did I finally bag Camille Salang? Then how come I had no memory of the score of the century and why was she calling me—

Camille screamed and jolted me into full consciousness.

“Oh my god! Get off me.” She tried to push me away, but ended up on the floor along with the duvet.

“Nate! You’re naked! What happened last night?” She started patting herself all over. “Did you have sex with me while I was unconscious?”

Okay, everything was coming back now. “No, no. Chill out. You fell asleep on the couch, and I carried you in here to sleep. Nothing happened.” I motioned towards her. “Look, you’re wearing all your clothes.”

Instead of looking at herself, Camille’s eyes were glued on me. Actually on my cock. Couldn’t blame her. All the screaming had wilted my boner, but it still looked pretty impressive.

“Then why are you naked?” She stood and pulled the duvet around her like a shield even though she was fully dressed.

“This is how I sleep.” This whole deal was unfair. C’mon, she was the one who couldn’t go home, and I’d been a complete gentleman.

“Also, what the actual fuck? You can’t feel someone up when they’re asleep. C-O-N-S-E-N-T: learn it, live it. What

else did you do?” She examined her clothes to make sure everything was intact. All I took off were her shoes. Course, if memory served she had no panties on, was I going to get blamed for that too?

“Nothing happened—last night or this morning.” Well, except what she knew about. Should I mention that she was into me feeling her up until she discovered I wasn’t Grandpa Bill? Nah, she was too pissed.

There was a tapping on the door. We both froze. Elaine’s soft voice called out, “Sorry, Nate, but is Camille in there?”

I threw back my head. “Perfect. Why don’t we have a family reunion on my bed?” I searched for my sweatpants. “Just a sec.”

I pulled them on and went over to open the door.

Both Marty and Elaine stood there. Marty looked rumpled and tired, but it was the good kind of tired—like someone who had spent the night nailing his sexy girlfriend. Lucky bastard. Elaine looked hot even though she was wearing one of Marty’s grey Vice t-shirts and it came down to her knees.

Elaine peered around me. “Camille? What are you doing here? And why were you screaming?”

Marty crossed his ham-sized forearms. “Jonesy, have you been disrespecting Camille?”

“Jesus, no. Nothing happened.” I cast a guilty look back at her. If she told on me, Marty would not be a happy man. Not only did he have Elaine on the world’s highest fucking pedestal, but her whole family was out of bounds. He’d told me more than once to stop bothering Camille, as if hitting on her wasn’t a compliment.

Camille's calm voice interrupted. "I fell asleep on the couch last night, and Nate carried me in here. Nothing happened, but I was surprised to wake up in his bed." She opened up the duvet to show she was fully dressed. "See, I'm fine."

I exhaled in relief. She was a stand-up chick.

"But why are you even here? I thought you were spending the night at Bill's place," Elaine said.

Camille looked down. "We broke up."

"Oh, Cami. He's such a nice guy." Elaine shook her head. "You never stick with anything."

"Give me a break. Do you want me to stay with a guy just for the sake of staying with him? He was boring."

I nodded. "Yeah, the guy was a complete wuss."

Elaine stared at me. "You met Bill? What exactly happened last night?"

As I opened my mouth, I noticed Camille shaking her head. "Well, I uh, picked up Camille. She needed a ride, and she couldn't go home."

"But why didn't you—oh, no!" Elaine looked at her wrist, but there was no watch there. "Camille, don't you have to be at work soon?"

"Oh crap!" She dropped her duvet cloak. "What time is it?"

Marty checked his phone. "10:40."

"Oh my God!" Camille bolted out of my room, but I could still hear her. "Where's my jacket? Where's my purse? Damn it, Nate, where did you put everything?"

Why was everything my fault this morning? I followed everyone to the living room. “I think you dropped your stuff in the hallway when you walked in.”

Elaine took charge. “You can’t go to work in jeans. Where’s your stuff?”

She groaned. “I forgot my overnight bag at Bill’s. I left kinda fast.”

“I’ll give you my clothes from last night. Go to the bathroom and get cleaned up.” The two sisters disappeared down the hallway. There was a lot of discussion, which mainly sounded like Camille freaking out.

Marty ran a hand through his messy hair. “I think I’ll go out and get us all some coffee.” Even though his team role was being an enforcer, he hated conflict. And it sounded like the sisters were building up to a fight. He grabbed his wallet and shuffled out.

Finally Camille emerged, looking pretty damn good considering everything. “Nate. Can you please, please, drive me to work?”

“Me? Why isn’t Elaine—” Then I noticed the fierce expression on Camille’s face. “Okay, one second.”

As soon as I was dressed, we left. As we were pulling out, Marty returned. He handed us two cups of coffee through the car window without a word.

“Gah. Caffeine. I need this so bad.” She peeked under the lid. “Euw. Black coffee sucks. Is latte not in his vocabulary?”

“Marty likes everything straight up.” I passed her four packets of sugar, and she dumped them all into the cup along with two creamers. She took a big sip and made a pleasure noise that was hot. Everything she did was hot.

“Ka-ching,” I said.

“What is that?” Camille pulled down the passenger-side visor and looked into the mirror. She pulled out mascara and began applying it. There seemed to be an entire cosmetics store in her large purse.

“Ka-ching is the sound of your debt to me building up. I rescued you last night and now I’m rushing you to work. We are so going out on a date soon.”

Camille applied lipgloss and snarled without moving her face, which was quite an accomplishment. She finished and started brushing her hair.

“Now that I know how messy your bedroom is, I’m never going back there again. Euw. If I ran a black light over your sheets, they’d light up like a Christmas tree.”

“Please. What happens between the sheets is more important than what’s on the sheets. Besides, you were too busy checking out my package to see my room,” I said.

“Yet another reason not to date you,” she said.

“Oh c’mon, admit you were impressed.” There was absolutely nothing wrong with my cock. Camille muttered something about it being too early for this crap.

“So, Cactus Club on Lougheed Highway, right?” I asked.

“Uh, no, I don’t work there anymore. I’m at this place called Mortimer’s now. It’s on Kingsway near Metrotown.”

I had seen Camille at Cactus Club just a few weeks ago, but whatever. “What time are you supposed to be there?”

She glanced at the dashboard. “Fifteen minutes ago. Drive fast, okay? That’s why I didn’t want to go with Elaine. She

drives like she's 90 years old. And look at her outfit. I look like a grandmother."

Did grandmothers wear shiny striped blouses and black skirts? My grandmothers wore jeans or pantsuits. Camille undid the two top buttons of her top and started pushing her boobs higher in her bra.

"Whoa. Can I lend a hand there?" I offered.

"Can you not?" said Camille. When she was done, her cleavage was way more visible.

"What are you doing?"

"This is one area I'm an expert in," Camille said. She began turning the waistband of the skirt to make it shorter. And with legs like hers, that was a good idea. "If you look hot, you're less likely to get fired."

I turned onto Highway One. "Why would they fire you for being a few minutes late?"

She scrunched up her nose. "It's not the first time. And my manager said that if it happened again, that would be it. He's such a stick in the mud."

Soon we pulled into the parking lot of her restaurant. Camille eyed the cars. "Damn, it's busy. I hate brunch crowds." She opened the door before I had even stopped completely.

"Thanks, Nate," she yelled back as she dashed towards the restaurant.

I watched her run. Man, she was hot. That curvy body. That long wavy hair. That gorgeous face. She was a walking wet dream. And she was checking me out this morning. Why did she keep fighting the inevitable?

I headed home feeling aimless. We had a game tonight, but Coach Gauthier had cancelled the morning skate for some reason. Goats was tough to figure out. The guy was super-smart and very intense, but he was always pushing me to do stuff I didn't understand. Most coaches wanted me to execute things exactly the way they said, but Goats kept on me about initiative. How the fuck was I supposed to do things I didn't even know?

The music dimmed, and my phone rang. When I glanced at the console screen, it was Camille. I hit the handsfree button.

“What's up?”

“Um, Nate.” Camille sniffled. “Are you still near here?”

Shit. She'd been fired.

“I'm turning around right now. Sit tight.”

Camille was standing on the sidewalk. She looked smaller than usual, maybe because she was shivering and not doing anything—not even looking at her phone. The moment I stopped, she was inside.

“Go.” That was all she said. She looked straight ahead. She wasn't going to cry, was she? I never knew what to do when chicks cried. Of course, they were usually crying because I'd fucked up. At least this wasn't my fault.

I pulled onto the street. “You okay?”

She sighed. “No. It was totally humiliating. He's such an ass.” She took out a tiny mirror, checked her face, and ran a finger under one eye.

There was a long silence. Camille was blinking a lot, which wasn't a good sign.

“You wanna go back to my place?” I asked.

“I guess. I’m getting a lecture from Elaine if I go there, or one from my mom if I go home. Same diff.”

“It’s a fucking shame. Did you like your job a lot?”

“No. I hated it. The waitstaff were super-clique-y, and the managers were idiots.” Camille scrunched up her nose and fiddled with her purse. “Damn, this handle is broken. I’ve been saving up to get this gorgeous Jaquesmus satchel, but now I’ll never be able to afford it. Everything crappy happens at once.”

Then a tear ran down her cheek. Oh shit.

“It’s okay. I’m sure you can find a better job,” I said.

She rooted in her big handbag and pulled out a tissue. She dabbed at her eyes and then let out a huge sigh. “My family is going to kill me. They say that if I keep getting fired, my resumé will get worse and worse, and eventually I won’t be able to get any jobs.”

“How many jobs have you had?” I wondered.

“I don’t know. Tons. I give really good interview,” she admitted.

That was a whole world I knew nothing about. All I’d ever wanted to do was play hockey and that’s what I’d done. Summers I worked at a golf course and at our family business.

“What is it that you do anyway?”

“Hostess, usually. They like to start you as a hostess before you get to be a server.” Her shrug signalled that she rarely got that far.

“So, is that what you want? To be a server?”

Camille shrugged and stared out the window at the storefronts rushing by. “I have zero clue. The money’s better

because you get tips.”

“Find work you love and you’ll never work a day in your life,” I said.

“Thank you, Mr. Motivational App.” Even without looking, I knew she was rolling her eyes.

I dropped the subject because it was clear that she didn’t want to talk about jobs anymore. But then she piped up, “I’d really like to work in the music business.”

“Doing what?”

“Anything, really. I love music.” She was smiling now. That was another good thing about Camille. She got upset quickly, but she never stayed mad long.

“Sounds good.” I didn’t know much about music. Rap, rock, country—I liked them all, except that techno crap. “Feel free to switch the radio.”

“Oh, you have satellite radio?” She began scrolling through and checking out the different stations.

“Gotta have that for my long drives home.”

Camille settled on a pop music station. She began seat-dancing, which was cute and hot. “Where’s home?”

“My parents live in Hanover. Ontario,” I added at her blank look.

“I’ve never heard of it,” she said.

“It’s not a big place, but it’s got a Junior C hockey team.”

“I’ve only been to Ontario once. Toronto,” she replied. “But I haven’t been to many places. With our family, it’s back to the Philippines or nothing.”

“Were you born there?” I asked.

“Yes. But we moved before my first birthday, so Vancouver is really home to me.”

“Do you speak Philippines, or whatever it’s called?”

“It’s called Filipino, but there are tons of dialects. We’re from Manila, so we speak Tagalog. I can understand it, but my speaking is not great. My relatives can’t believe it. But I’ve lived in Canada my whole life. My lola is the only person I need to speak Tagalog to.”

“Is that your mom’s name, Lola?”

Camille giggled. “No, lola is the word for grandmother. For someone who only dates Asian chicks I thought you’d know that by now.”

“I never make it to the meeting-the-grandmother stage. Or even parents,” I replied.

As we got closer to home, Camille’s mood darkened again.

“Ugh, I really don’t want to have to explain what happened. Do you know what it’s like to live with a perfect older sister?”

“Sort of. I’ve got two older brothers. One is a bank manager, and the other one works with my dad. So, they’re doing real good.”

My parents had always supported my hockey. My dad said that the further I went in hockey, the better I’d do at business. He owned a big car dealership, so I had a guaranteed job to fall back on. Lately, he’d been hinting that it was time to join him in sales. At 23, I was almost aging out as a prospect. But there was no way I’d give up my NHL dream when it was so close.

I looked over at Camille, who still seemed smaller and quieter than usual. How could I cheer her up? Well, hockey always made me feel better.

I reached over and squeezed her arm. “Hey, I’ve got a game tonight. Would you like to come? I can get you a free ticket.”

“Oh, sure. I love hockey.” Her smile was back, and that made me feel good. Then she added, “But it’s not a date, right?”

“Nope,” I replied sadly. Guess seventeen wasn’t my lucky number either. Or was it eighteen?

SUPERBAD

NATE

I WOKE up from my afternoon nap feeling groggy. Luckily my pregame routine was so set in stone I could do it blindfolded.

Shower. Shave. Blow-dry my lettuce. Get dressed.

Oh shit. As I pulled them on, my lucky gonch blew up. True, they were pretty worn out because I'd been wearing them since junior hockey, but still. I chose a new pair, got dressed, and went down to eat.

Marty was already at the kitchen table, so I sat down across from him as I nuked my chicken, broccoli, and brown rice.

“My lucky underwear died.”

“Well, it barely deserved the name underwear anymore.”
Marty had zero sympathy.

Sure, it was pretty shredded, but I had scored a hat trick in it when I was seventeen. That was how lucky underwear was born.

“It’s a bad omen. What if I have a shitty game tonight?”
The microwave beeped, and I retrieved my dinner.

“You’re too superstitious. Think of it this way—tonight you’ll have a great game and then whatever you’re wearing will be your new lucky underwear. Or maybe you won’t need lucky underwear anymore.”

“Luck doesn’t work that way,” I said.

“Sure, it does. You can grow. Your pregame meal used to be chicken and pasta but after that nutritionist talk, you switched to brown rice and veggies.”

I nodded. Marty was a good guy, and I appreciated his advice. Of course, I didn’t always take it because I was more into fun than him.

“So, big game tonight.” If we beat the Ontario Reign tonight, we would clinch a playoff spot. But we still had six games left in the season, so it wasn’t yet a must-win.

Marty nodded.

“How long since the Vice have been in the playoffs?” I asked.

“Since before I joined the team. Maybe five, six seasons?”

Everyone knew how important playoffs were. NHL teams loved guys who came up big in the playoffs.

I pulled out my phone. Something weird was happening on my social media. There were emoji comments from complete strangers: butterflies, black hearts, and angry faces. Maybe it had something to do with rival hockey fans? But we were playing the Reign. I didn’t even know what a Reign was, but it had to do with kings, not butterflies. No rival team was called the Butterflies, that wasn’t a macho enough name.

Was this happening to everyone? I couldn’t ask Marty since he had no public accounts. Earlier in the season, Amanda

Richardson, who ran the business side of the team, gave us a lecture on the dangers of social media and how fast crap could go viral. After that, Marty deleted everything except a private Facebook profile and Knightley's accounts. His cat was the "spokescat" for Elaine's cat charity. Knightley was a chill dude, but it was ridiculous that a cat had more followers than me.

Besides, social media was the easiest way to meet chicks. They were already following you, so checking out their photos and then sliding into their DMs was a breeze. Even on the road, DMs made it easy to hook up. Being a pro hockey player had many perks, including lots of eager chicks.

Once I got to the rink, I had a routine there too. Taping my sticks calmed me down and got me into game mode. And the buzz of anticipation in the room energized me. Nothing like an important game to bring the guys together.

I dressed for warmup next to T.J. and Sods.

"Hey, have you had any weird comments on your socials lately?" I asked.

"Weird? Like weird-what?" T.J. asked.

I pulled out my phone and noticed some new DMs. I showed them my phone screen. "Whoa. Check this out. Two chicks begging me for dick pics. That's a first."

"You're a lucky fucker," said Sods.

Todd "the Bod" Cerny shook his head. "Solicited dick pics. That's something new."

"Did you send them yet?" T.J. asked.

"Nah, I just got these messages." Too bad I hadn't taken a photo of this morning's boner. That had been a beauty. And

completely wasted. “Besides, I have to check out the chicks first.”

Sods nodded. “Yeah. You don’t want to waste your hog shot.”

Lepper whistled. “You guys send photos of your dicks to women you’ve never even met?”

“Fuck, yes,” Sods said. “Hotties DM us. That is how it starts.”

“Besides, it’s a big turn-on for them,” I said.

Bod snorted. “Jesus H. Christ. Have you ever asked an actual woman if she likes dick pics? None of them do. You guys need to grow up. Whatever happened to meeting women in person first?”

“It’s how our generation communicates,” I said. Bod was ancient. He was almost 30, for fuck’s sake. If dick pics didn’t work, how come so many chicks responded to them? “This way everyone gets what they want.”

T.J. laughed. “We don’t meet women at the disco anymore, Grandpa.”

“Oh, suck my dick,” said Bod.

“You wouldn’t have to ask me if you got DMs like us,” T.J. said.

Lepper shook his head. “I agree with Bod. I’d never show my junk to a total stranger.”

Sods nodded. “Well, sure, don’t do it if you’ve got a tiny little dick.”

The conversation descended into a series of “fuck yous,” and I looked back at my phone. What was with all the emojis?

Were the weird DMs connected? I shifted on the bench and remembered that I wasn't wearing my lucky underwear. Those bad vibes returned, and my stomach churned.

Then, once the game started, something was off. Whenever I got the puck, there was more noise in the arena. Not cheering or booing, but more like hissing. I tried to ignore it, but it was weird. And it wasn't Ontario fans because it only happened to me.

"What the fuck's going on?" Tibbs asked. Paul Thiebault was our captain. "Someone bring a snake to the game?"

Foxy pointed. "Holy fuck, Jonesy. Check it out."

There was a group of women dressed in blue in the upper bowl. They had signs and a banner that read "WE HATE NATE."

"Are those your exes or something?" Lepper asked.

I squinted over at them. Half of them were young Asian women, but nobody looked familiar.

"Dating all those Asian chicks is coming back to bite you on the ass," Bod said.

"Fuck. I didn't date any of those women." Besides, how could all my exes know each other? It wasn't like there was a club or anything.

My queasiness grew. All the hissing and booing threw me off my game. Why would all those women hate me? It wasn't like I stomped puppies in my spare time. I was a nice guy.

Next shift, Sods set me up with a perfect pass in the slot. I whiffed on my shot, and the puck flew way over the net. Those women all cheered.

“Tough crowd,” said Tibbs as he skated by. He slapped my shoulder. “Shake it off, Jonesy.”

“Fuck.” I sat back down on the bench.

The guys kept speculating on what was happening, but I had no fucking clue.

Having a whole gang waiting for me to screw up was nerve-racking. I missed my check, and an Ontario forward ended up scoring the first goal of the game. From there, things went completely to shit. I whiffed on the easiest passes and even tripped while carrying the puck into the zone. And when I got crushed by a big Ontario defenceman, a cheer went up from the Nate Haters.

T.J. nudged me on the bench. “Don’t listen to them, Jonesy.”

Usually, our line was the most carefree on the team, but now it felt like there was a hippo on my shoulders. “Why are they mad at me?” I asked.

Sods shrugged. “Maybe they take turns with everyone. Your name is easy because it makes the rhyme: hate and Nate. They don’t find a rhyme for Söderlund, well not in English anyway.”

But that didn’t make sense. Why buy tickets just to diss one player, especially at a home game?

Tibbs leaned over. “They do this in Winnipeg. Boo the best player on the other team. So it’s like a compliment.”

Sods laughed. “It should be me then.”

Well, normally I *was* one of the best players. But tonight, I was sucking big time.

We lost 3-1. So much for our playoff spot. At least we had another chance to clinch tomorrow night. Nobody said a word, but I felt responsible for the loss. I had fucked up when my team needed me.

Then after showers, someone said that the coach wanted to see me.

Shit. That was never good news.

When I got to the coach's office, Amanda Richardson was there too. Worse and worse. Amanda wasn't as scary as Goats, but she made me nervous. She was super-smart and used words I didn't understand and asked questions I couldn't answer. Plus her family owned the team. You never wanted to piss off the owners.

I reassured myself that I'd done nothing wrong, but how could I be sure?

"Have a seat," the coach said. I plunked down in the hot seat.

Amanda cocked her head and smiled. "You've gained some notoriety, Nate."

Shit. Already with the \$50 words. I swallowed. "Have I?"

"Do you know why those women were booing you tonight?" she asked.

"Sorry. I have no clue." But my stomach flipped again.

"Well, there's a popular K-pop group named Indigo Butterfly and their current hit is called 'The Valley.' It's about a bad boyfriend. And the group's fans have figured out that it's you."

"Me?" My voice changed to a high squeak. "But how? I don't even know this Blue Moth group."

Amanda held out her phone. “Here’s the video.”

All three of us watched as a quartet of pretty chicks sang, mostly in Korean, and danced in short skirts. There were short segments where a young guy—who did look a little like me—mistreated his girlfriend in slapstick ways. There was one clip of him skating badly in a plain black jersey. The only line I understood was the English chorus: *I hate Nate!* The grand finale involved the singers whacking the male character with hockey sticks as he cowered on the ground.

Both the coach and I winced.

“Did they kill him?” Goats asked.

Amanda shook her head. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

I pushed my now-sweaty hair back from my face. “But I don’t know those women. Why do they hate me?”

“Well, I chatted with them in the stands. They told me that one of the singers, Bo-Bae, gave an interview where she revealed that the song was inspired by her friend’s bad boyfriend experience while she was studying in Canada. Fans of Indigo Butterfly have done some sleuthing. They discovered that her friend lived in Vancouver. From the video, they knew that he played for a professional hockey team. And then they found you.”

My head felt like it might explode. “But, surely there must be other guys? What if Nate is like one of those pseudonyms?”

“Have you ever dated a Korean student?” Amanda sounded like a TV lawyer.

“Yeah, I think so.” But I’d dated a lot of women since I moved here, all of them Asian.

From the looks on Amanda's and Goats's faces, this wasn't the right answer. "You don't know if you've dated a Korean student?" she asked.

"I'm pretty sure I have." I pulled out my phone and began scrolling through my contacts. "Is Tran a Korean name?"

Amanda shook her head.

"Zhao?"

"No. And it's not *zow*, it's *dj-ow*," Amanda said.

I looked up. "What?"

"You're pronouncing your ex-girlfriend's name wrong."

C'mon, I spent more time making women cry out my name than saying theirs. I returned to scrolling.

"Nakamura?"

"Reyes?"

Each time she shook her head, Amanda looked more disgusted.

"Kim?"

"Yes. That's Korean."

My satisfaction crumbled quickly. "Uh, I've dated more than one girl with the last name Kim."

Amanda's sigh echoed in the small office. "Of course I'm familiar with the reputation of hockey players when it comes to women." She was dating Lucky Luczak, who was an ex-hockey superstar. "But the fact that you've dated so many women and you seem to find their ethnicity interchangeable is quite disturbing." She eyed the hockey sticks in the corner of Goat's office like she too wanted to pick one up and whack me with it.

“We don’t interfere in the personal lives of our players unless it starts affecting their games,” said Goats. “Let’s face it, you sucked out there tonight—I don’t know if it was the booing or something else. But tonight was a must-win game, and that didn’t happen. I’m gonna have to scratch you for tomorrow night’s game.”

“But, Coach, I was just surprised. I’ll be better tomorrow,” I protested in panic. Not getting to play an important game would be a huge black mark on my record.

Goats shook his head. “The game is too big to have unnecessary distractions. Those women were bothering everyone. And I don’t want personal crap like this messing up our playoffs either. You need to fix this right away.”

“How?” How could I fix something I didn’t even know I’d done?

“You might not be able to repair the problem, but figuring out who she is, what you did, and then apologizing would be a good first move,” Amanda said. “In human terms, it’s the very least you can do. In publicity terms, there’s a news cycle. We don’t want to give this story legs. The sooner you can resolve it, the sooner it can go away.”

Oh, no problem. Find a woman when I had zero clues except that she was Korean. Then apologize for who knew what. Easy fucking peasy.

Whatever unlucky underwear I had pulled on today, I was burning it when I got home.

MEAN GIRLS

CAMILLE

“UGH, it’s so disappointing that they lost,” declared Kristi, a tall blonde who was one of the ringleaders of the wives and girlfriends. We were lingering in our seats after the game since the guys would take a while to be ready.

“Totes sucks,” agreed Donovan, a curvy blonde and Kristi’s best friend. “We had a celly party all planned out if they clinched their playoff spot.”

“That’s bad luck,” said Morgan. She was a former college hockey player and Elaine’s best friend here. They were the only ones wearing their boyfriend’s jerseys.

I came to games whenever Marty had an extra ticket. In fact, this was exactly the life I was meant for: being a hockey girlfriend. I loved hockey and I had the right look. Except I wasn’t a blonde, but I wouldn’t mind doing a few streaks.

“Camille, you should start dating someone on the team,” said Donovan, who seemed to be reading my mind.

“Who’s single?” I asked.

“Didn’t Nate give you your ticket?” demanded Jamie. She was married to the goalie who, in my opinion, had let in a very easy goal. And Jamie seemed to get bitchier the worse he played.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean we’re going out,” I said.

“Really? Because he does have an Asian fixation. Although his girlfriends usually don’t sit with us,” she sniffed.

Did she mean they sat in some special Asian section? Or they weren’t good enough to sit here? Was this one of those race microaggressions that my friend Hannah was always telling me not to ignore? But people who said those things were usually idiots too, so it was hard to distinguish.

Donovan shook her head. “You don’t want to go out with Nate. I’ve never seen him get serious about anyone. How about Marcus Fox? I don’t think he’s had a girlfriend all season.”

I tried to remember what he looked like, but came up with nothing, which wasn’t a good sign.

Kristi sniffed. “Foxy? He’s too innocent. Camille would eat him up and spit him out.”

I giggled. When it came to boyfriends, sweet and innocent was not my type.

“Seb is hot, but he’s an even bigger player than Nate,” Donovan said.

“Hmmm,” I said. He was cute but he also looked like a teenager. At 23, I wasn’t going there.

“What about Todd the Bod?” Donovan asked.

“Euw,” said Morgan. “His shirts are always unbuttoned too low and he uses self-tanner.”

We all groaned and then giggled.

“Oh my gosh, don’t look now but it’s those girls who were hissing at Nate,” Kristi said in a loud whisper. Of course we all looked and shot death stares at the large group of women. They had signs that read I hate Nate, Nate Sucks, and similar sentiments. During the game, we’d decided they were to blame for the loss. They’d certainly messed up Nate’s game. He’d played like the puck was a hot potato.

What did these women have against Nate? They were a mixed bunch; the only thing they had in common was most of them were wearing the colour blue—jeans and turquoise tops. Some even sported blue face-paint or blue hair.

“I wonder what their deal is,” I said.

“No idea. But nobody needs their bad vibes here,” said Donovan.

As we made our way to the family room, Elaine pulled me closer.

“If you want go out with someone on the Vice, I can ask Marty to fix you up,” she offered.

“It’s okay. I’ve only been single for 24 hours,” I replied. This was a complete reversal of our roles. Elaine used to be the serious one who had a career plan and seldom dated. Whereas I was the wild card who went through jobs like tissues but always had a steady boyfriend.

She squeezed my hand. “I know you were upset earlier. I’m glad to see you out here enjoying yourself.”

I smiled back at her. Sometimes, Elaine acted like my extra mom, but she was a sweetheart.

The family room turned out to be pretty minimal. There were worn couches and a corner with kids' toys, but no kids. Most of the girlfriends were too young to have kids.

Kristi noticed me checking out the furnishings and explained, "They're slowly fixing up the arena, but they haven't made it this far yet. It's not part of the customer experience."

Donavan sighed. "You should see the NHL family room, it's gorgeous. When Lionel played his exhibition games with the Millionaires, I got to go to Pac Tel Arena, and it was first class. They bring your drinks to your seat and everything."

"Oh, shut up, Donny," declared Kristi. "You've only told us about this a hundred times, and I'm totally jelly. When Josh gets called up, I'm going to strap a Go-Pro to my head so I'll be able to relive every moment of the game."

"But do they even want to get called up now?" Morgan asked. "The Vice have a better chance to make the playoffs than the Millionaires."

Kristi shook her head. "Doesn't matter. It's a chance to show you can play NHL hockey. Lots of AHL players get trials at the end of the season when the games don't matter."

Elaine said, "Eric Fairburn has been playing for the Millionaires for nearly a month now." Eric was Marty's good friend, but all I could remember was how good-looking he was. If Marty could fix me up with him, I was there. But if he was in the NHL, he'd have his choice of women.

Morgan sighed. "I wish they'd send him back down. He's a pure goal scorer, and we could use that. When Eric and Dave Dominick were here, we were first place in the Pacific."

“We’re in second place right now,” Donavan said. “And we just need to win one more game to guarantee our playoff spot.”

Then there was silence. Of course, it sounded easy to win one game when the team had five left, but they hadn’t looked good tonight.

The mood got lower when the players started to show up. Obviously these guys hated losing. Kristi made a “yikes” face at us when Josh showed up and summoned her with only a toss of his head.

Of course, Marty wasn’t like that. He greeted Elaine with a kiss and smiled at me.

“How come you’re not crabby like everyone else?” I said.

“Well, I’m not happy, but I’m certainly not going to take it out on you two,” he explained.

“Are we all going out to eat? Where’s Nate?” I asked.

“He had to talk to the coach, so he’s going to be late.” Marty looked down the hallway. “We’ll wait with you.”

“It’s okay. I’ll just stay here,” I said. Even though I was the only one left in the room, Nate had mentioned meeting me afterwards.

“Are you sure?” Elaine asked.

“Of course. Just let me know where you’re going.” One thing I knew about Marty was that he got hangry. A body that large needed refuelling.

I sat on the cracked vinyl couch and pulled out my phone, keeping one eye on the doorway. I edited and posted a photo of me at the game.

Something flashed in my peripheral vision. Was that Nate? Seriously, was he leaving without looking for me? How was I supposed to get home?

I jumped up and made it to the doorway just in time to see Nate's brown jacket disappear around the corner.

"Wait, Nate," I called out. But he didn't even turn around.

I ran after him, but between my high heeled boots and his long stride, it was tough.

"Nate," I screeched louder. He disappeared through the door at the end of the hallway.

But I wasn't the grade seven 4x100 champion for nothing. I caught up as he unlocked his car and hopped in on the passenger side. Then I collapsed breathless against the seat.

"Ugh. I haven't run like that in ages," I puffed.

Nate's trademark grin was gone. "What are you doing in my car?"

"Hello? Did you forget that you invited me to the game?"

"Shit. Sorry, I forgot all about you." He sat numbly like a robot, not even looking at me. "Did you see what happened tonight?"

"You mean those women with the I Hate Nate signs? Of course, I noticed."

"Fuuuuck." Nate drew out the word like a groan. "It was how I played once I saw them—like shit. We missed a chance to clinch a playoff spot."

"You've got another chance tomorrow night though," I said.

Now he looked even more miserable. “Well, the rest of the team does. Not me. I’m not playing.”

“Oh no. Why not?”

“Because the game is so important that Coach doesn’t want me to fuck it up.” He stared out the front windshield. “You know what? I’ve never been a healthy scratch before. Never in my life.”

It was the first time I’d seen Nate like this—angry and sad. I’d taken his good nature for granted, because he was so easygoing.

“I’m really sorry this happened. But it’s only one game, right?” I said.

He groaned in frustration. “It’s only one game if I can fix this situation, but I have no idea how.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“It’s all about some stupid fucking song. Have you heard of a group called Indigo Butterfly?”

“Duh. They’re huge,” I said.

“Shit. Anyway, they wrote a song that’s supposed to be about me. How I hurt a woman when we went out in Vancouver. And that’s why all those chicks are protesting me.”

“Really?” Honestly it was almost impressive. How many people get songs written about them by an internationally famous K-pop group? Of course, the situation wasn’t ideal, but still. Then I noticed how miserable Nate still looked. “Can’t you just ignore them?”

Nate nodded. “Yeah. I hope so. But...”

He fiddled with his keys in the ignition but didn't turn on the car. "It's weird, but everyone likes me. My teammates. People in high school. Most chicks. Even my exes—maybe they get mad at me at first, but it doesn't last. I don't know how to deal with shit like this."

"Just tell her you're sorry." Even if she didn't forgive him, he'd feel less guilty. Or whatever it was he was feeling.

He ran a hand through his hair, which was unusually messy. "I wish I could. Really. I feel shitty that I hurt someone this badly and didn't even realize it."

"So fix things." He wasn't going to invoke some dude statement like "I don't do apologies," was he?

Nate finally started the car. "I can't. I don't know who she is."

Um, what? Sure, I knew that Nate had dated a lot of women, but this seemed extreme. But I wasn't going to shame him. "Figure out who she is and then apologize."

"Easy for you to say. I don't know what the fuck I'm going to do." He turned onto the road. "Hey, I'm kind of hungry, but I really don't want to go out. You know, just in case."

I bit back a smile. Nate was acting like he was on the Interpol Most Wanted list. Sure, Indigo Butterfly were big, but not BTS-big. "Let's get takeout and go to your place."

"Is pizza okay?" he asked.

"Sure, but get a Caesar salad too."

We drove along in silence, another first because Nate was usually so chatty. We picked up the pizza and salad on the way home. Knightley came running up to greet us, and I patted him on the head. Nate hustled off to change out of his suit.

We took the food and a couple of beers into the living room. He turned the TV on, then off as soon as the hockey highlights came on.

“This sucks so much. I can’t enjoy any of the stuff I usually love.”

We ate pizza and salad in silence. Maybe it should have felt weird, but I was comfortable here already. Also I was intrigued by Nate’s vulnerable side, which he’d never shown before.

Once the carbs hit his system, he perked up a little.

“Hey, I’ve got a great idea. You can help me figure out who the chick is.”

I swallowed my last bite of salad. “Me? Why would I be able to do something that you—the person who actually went out with her—can’t do?”

“Are you kidding? This is right up your alley. It’s just like all that true crime shit you love.”

Hmmm, that was true. My inner Nancy Drew started to kick in. This was an actual mystery, and I’d always wanted to solve one.

“Hey, who helped you out when you were handcuffed to a bed?” Nate asked.

“So? This is probably going to be a lot more work than five minutes of pretending to be the RCMP,” I replied.

“Please, Camille. Swear to God, I don’t have any other women friends. You’re my only hope.”

That was easy to believe. Nate was the kind of guy who saw women as potential conquests instead of people.

He pressed on. “How about if you find her, I’ll get you that designer purse you want—Jack Mouse or whatever.”

Tempting, but this was getting into Pretty Woman territory. “No. I can’t accept something that expensive.” Well, maybe I could, but not from someone I wasn’t dating.

“I’m desperate. If I can’t figure this out, I could be scratched for the rest of the season. You understand Asian women, K-pop, and dating. You’re the perfect person.”

I couldn’t help but feel a little flattered. Guys never identified my brains as my best characteristic. And I had a lot of free time on my hands now.

“Okay, I’ll give it a try. How are we going to start?”

“Well, first you can sort out which ones are Korean.”

I frowned. “You don’t even know the nationalities of the women you dated?”

Nate massaged his temples. “Of course I knew where they were from when I dated them. It’s just that I can’t remember now.”

“How many women are we talking about here?” I asked.

“Don’t worry, it’s not that many. I’ve only been in Vancouver for two seasons. Of course, there’ve been a few one-nighters, but it can’t be them.”

Gross. Part of me was tempted to bail, but Nate hadn’t passed any judgement on my mishaps of the past 24 hours. In fact, he’d been pretty turned on by them, but that was the old Nate. The current Nate was weirdly nonsexual.

“Okay, write down all the women you’ve dated and everything you can remember about them. That will be our starting point.”

Oooh, what I really wanted to do was make one of those collages with photos of all the “suspects” like in police shows. I eyed the blank wall of their living room. But would Nate even have photos other than nudes?

Clearly, he would make a terrible witness. Writing a list of his ex-girlfriends was harder than passing a university final. I’d never seen so much gnawing of pens and checking of phones. To help, I scrolled through his Facebook feed—set to private as of tonight—and showed him photos of women he was tagged with. All cute Asians, of course.

Finally, he handed me a sheet of paper with a dozen names and cryptic notes. I read through it with growing queasiness.

Daiyo Chen, doggy-style, dirty talk.

Tamiko N, anal and spanking.

Ha-Eun, missionary, hates oral

Colette Nguyen, bondage, edging

Eri Nakamura, public sex

“Euw. Is this a list of your girlfriends and what kind of sex they like?” I asked.

Nate’s face was surprisingly innocent for someone who had just written water sports and pearl necklaces. “Yeah. You said to write down everything I remembered about them.”

“I was hoping it would be something helpful. Are their sexual preferences the only thing you remember?”

“Well, yeah. You don’t date a hockey player for deep philosophical discussions. Plus, I really like having sex, so why not do whatever makes them want to fuck more?”

“Do you always do what the women want?” I asked.

“I like to make my girlfriends feel real good,” he said with zero bragging.

I swallowed. The memory of Nate’s large, erect penis glowed in my mind like a neon sign flashing the words: Ride Me. There were a few things on this list that I was into and many I hadn’t even tried. I also enjoyed sex a lot. After all, I was the one who got Bill to handcuff me so I could enjoy that feeling of helplessness. Damn my Catholic guilt.

He sighed. “That’s why it’s so confusing that someone hates me. I’m always up front with chicks. I’m here for the good time, not the long time. Everyone has fun, and nobody gets hurt.”

“Until now. Well, good orgasms aren’t easy to come by. Maybe she really fell for you,” I concluded.

Ordinarily, I wouldn’t even mention sex with Nate in the same hemisphere, but he was too upset to notice. Confusingly, I felt attracted to him for the first time. After all, he was a professional athlete—and one who was apparently into oral. I closed my eyes and imagined being tied spread-eagled on a big bed with Nate feasting on my now wet pussy. And then pounding that big cock deep into me with his face tensed. I imagined his O-face, and what he would cry out as he—

“Camille. Are you falling asleep again? How about figuring out which one she is first,” Nate nagged.

“Okay, okay.” But I was still fascinated by the list. While I was pretty upfront about sex, most women were not. “How do you find out what their sexual preferences are? You can’t just ask them.”

Finally a smile quirked up a corner of his mouth. “Well, I’ve got my methods. The first time we fuck, I watch for stuff

they like. You know, if they like having their tits squeezed or getting it doggy-style. Then the next time, I push the things they're into."

"And what about what you like?" Guys were pretty selfish. There had been more than a few times I had to get myself off when my boyfriend fell asleep after his orgasm.

"Honestly, I like sex all ways. Especially when the chick is really into it. The only thing I don't like is when she says she can't come, and I should 'just go ahead.' That makes me feel like I haven't done my job."

"Um, you know that's pretty generous, right? More than most guys."

He shrugged. "I told you, I suck at being a boyfriend. I mess up on the everyday shit, so the least I can do is make sure my girlfriends are well-fucked."

I squeezed my thighs together and felt the seam of my jeans pressing into my sex. Never had I wanted to sleep with Nate more. But never had he seemed less interested.

When I checked my watch, it was late. "Look, I've got to go now. I'll take a good look at this list tomorrow—hey, I'll get my friend Hannah to help. She's Korean and an Indigo Butterfly fan."

"I'll take you home. Thanks for all this," Nate said. "And the faster you can figure this out, the better."

I closed up the pizza box and took it to the kitchen. Nate trailed after me.

"Hey, there's something else I've been wondering about." He pulled out his phone. "I got these DMs in the past 24 hours. Chicks asking me for dick pics. I mean, it's not like it hasn't happened before, but usually after we've been sexting for a

while. Not out of the blue like this. Anyway, do you think they might be related to this song thing?”

I looked at the messages. “Yeah, I do. For starters, these photos aren’t real. That one is a Korean actress.”

“So, why do they want photos of my—” He motioned towards his jeans, and I remembered exactly what lay under the faded denim. I didn’t need a dick pic because I’d already seen the real thing.

“They’ll use the photo to humiliate you in some way,” I guessed. Attending the game was only one way to hate on Nate.

Nate looked positively nauseous now.

“Oh no. You didn’t send one, did you?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Luckily, I’ve been too busy. But I’ve made up my mind. I’m not going to have sex until this whole thing blows over.”

WHAT A GIRL WANTS

NATE

“WHAT’S HE DOING HERE?” a scowling Asian girl asked when I walked into the bubble tea shop with Camille.

“He insisted. He wants to help us with the search.” Camille sat down at the shiny white table across from her friend. “Hannah Park, Nate Jones.”

“Ah, the notorious Nate.” Hannah glared. Women hating me at first sight had only happened for the past two days, but it was already getting old. And of course, Hannah was hot. I would expect nothing less from one of Camille’s friends. Hannah was short and extremely curvy. Everything about her was plump and pretty, from her manicured fingertips to pink, pillowy lips that promised soft, wet blow jobs.

Her lower lip curled in disgust. There was no way she knew what I was thinking about, was there?

“Don’t you get tired of being a caricature?” Hannah asked.

“What are you talking about?” I played dumb but braced myself.

“When you meet someone, you should get to know them. Not immediately picture them as a potential conquest. You rice chasers are all alike.”

A smart man wouldn't alienate someone who could help him, but nobody had ever called me smart. Besides, I hadn't even checked out her rack—that had to earn some points. “Hold up. I'm not being racist here. You're hot. If guys don't check you out when they meet you, they're dead from the waist down.”

To my relief, Camille laughed. “Can't argue with that logic, Hannah.”

She tossed her hair and pointedly turned away from me.

“Can I get you guys drinks?” I offered.

“Yes, please. I'll have the brown sugar pearl milk,” said Camille. Hannah asked for a matcha.

I went up to the counter to order. Dating so many Asian women meant that I had often ended up at bubble tea places. But when I went back home, nobody even knew what boba was.

As I waited, I watched Camille and Hannah talking. Camille always looked extra-special. Today, she was wearing tight jeans and a sunny yellow top with a teardrop cut-out that revealed her tempting cleavage. Hannah was wearing a pink t-shirt with a cartoon character on it, a short skirt, and thick white socks. She could star in schoolgirl porn, but apparently she was doing a sociology degree at the University of British Columbia, so she must have a big brain. Maybe it was a mistake to come, but I wanted to help things along. The sooner we fixed this, the sooner I got back on the ice.

I set the drinks down on the table.

“Oh thank you,” Camille said. She poked the fat straw into the cellophane topping and took a big sip. “Delicious.”

The two women were already going over the list of my ex-girlfriends. Camille had typed up the list—removing the sexual preferences—and put it on a spreadsheet. She asked questions about age, hometowns, schools, and other details I couldn’t remember. This was a new side of Camille. She was like a TV cop, except way hotter.

“You know, there’s an easy way to sort out his Korean exes,” said Hannah, who was ignoring me. “Just figure out which ones are on Kakao Talk. It’s the big messaging app there.”

Oh shit. Hannah wasn’t going like my answer. “Well, it was getting too confusing for me, you know having Kakao Talk, WeChat, LINE or whatever on my phone. So I get my girlfriends to switch to WhatsApp.”

She looked at me like I’d just run over her favourite pet, then turned to Camille. “Tell me again why you’re helping him?”

“Why *we’re* helping him,” corrected Camille. “Because we love solving mysteries.” If I had hoped for a defence of my character, it wasn’t coming. “Hannah, tell us all about ‘The Valley’ song.”

“Okay, Lee Bo-Bae is the one who wrote the song. She said she was inspired by the experience of her high school friend.”

“But she never mentioned the friend’s name or anything?”

“No. I’ve searched but I can only find two interviews she did about the song. It was a while back when their new album came out. ‘The Valley’ only blew up when the song was used

on a K-drama soundtrack and after that they made the video.” Hannah permitted herself a smile. “The video where *he* gets whacked to death.”

I winced.

“What do we know about Bo-Bae’s past?” Camille asked.

Hannah took a sip of her bubble tea. “Bo-Bae is from Seoul, so that doesn’t help to eliminate people. I found out her high school though.” She paused. “If only he could remember more about the women he’s hooked up with, this would be easy.”

I was so busy watching Camille suck on that pink straw that I almost missed the latest slam. How was I going to keep my vow not to have sex? I was used to getting my snake drained on the reg. I repeated my new mantra: *I will not think about sex.*

“Well, nobody our age uses Facebook anymore, but it’s the best place to find what schools someone went to. Can you see if you’re still friends with some of these women?” Camille asked.

I pulled out my phone. “I’ll check.”

“I’m sure that this woman would have blocked him by now. She hates him,” Hannah said.

“Yes, but that would be a clue too. If she’s blocked him, that puts her higher on the suspect list.” Camille was going full *Law & Order.*

“Unless she’s so smart that she’s remained his friend, so he *won’t* suspect her,” Hannah said.

Fuck. These kinds of female mind games were way beyond me. “Are you into all this true crime shit too?” I asked

Hannah.

They exchanged glances and smiled. Camille answered, “We got totally obsessed with crime podcasts in high school. We even joined an online group that tries to solve cold cases.”

“I don’t get it. Why are you into such gory stuff? Camille made me watch some murder show that was scary as fuck.”

“It’s a protective measure,” Hannah explained. “If you prepare for all the possible outcomes, you feel safer.”

“Seems like a lot of work,” I said.

“That’s because you’re a guy. And a big...beefy one.” Hannah choked back whatever complimentary word she was thinking. “It’s not safe to walk around as a woman. There are dangers everywhere.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Catcalls. Stalking. Harrassment. Sexual assault. Murder.” Hannah reeled off the list easily. “And these days, Asians are targeted for random assaults. It’s historic, when something goes wrong, they single out the visible minorities.”

Oh, come on. I wasn’t getting lumped in with actual criminals, was I? I’d never even done any of those things. Well, maybe catcalls when I was a teenager, but not since I learned how to talk to chicks.

If Camille and Hannah didn’t watch so much true crime crap, maybe they wouldn’t be paranoid. I didn’t watch horrific hockey injuries so I could avoid them. Shit happened and no amount of worrying prevented it. Like the situation I was in right now. Of all the chick problems I could have predicted, getting dumped on by a K-pop group would not have been one.

Camille was still scrolling through my phone. “Can I look at your DMs?”

“No.” I couldn’t remember any specifics but there was sure to be stuff in there that she wouldn’t like. “It’s private.”

When Hannah began to argue with me, Camille over-rode her. “Look, it’s a first step in respecting women. Would you like it if your ex showed your convos to someone else?”

Hannah sniffed. “Nate, you know you’re going to need a personality transplant before this is over, right?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Well, once we figure out who this woman is, what’s your next move? Because *Hey, I’m sorry for whatever I did, woman-I-can’t-even-remember* is not going to cut it. Someone like this is going to want to know that you’ve really changed.”

“But you don’t even know her. Or me,” I said. At least I had dated the woman, and once we figured out who it was, I would remember more.

“Why do you think this song exists? It’s to warn women about guys like you.” Hannah’s long fingernails looked like glittery weapons as she poked one into my chest. “Nobody could have predicted that this would get so big that you’d get protestors at your hockey game, but Bo-Bae wrote the song to make it harder for guys like you to get dates.”

“I wonder if that will even work,” Camille said. “You know how women line up to date serial killers if they’re cute.”

“Jesus, I’m *not* a serial killer.” Oh wait, did Camille just call me cute?

Before I could bask in this, Hannah began her interrogation. “Why do you date Asian girls?”

“Because they’re nice.” That wasn’t racist, was it? I didn’t say a word about how hot they were.

“Oh, right. Nice is a euphemism for quiet and docile,” she said.

I shook my head. “I’ve been asking Camille out for months. Nobody would call her quiet and docile.”

Even scary Hannah smiled at this but then continued, “Okay, what made you start dating Asian women exclusively?”

I considered her question. There was no big moment when I decided to go full-Asian. For starters, Vancouver had a lot of Asian women, way more than back in Ontario. When I went to bars here, the Asian chicks I met were really nice. They would giggle at my jokes and make me feel good. I never got typed as a dumb jock.

And then I’d started dating Asian students who were only here for a semester. I hated breaking up with girlfriends. I’d never ghosted chicks, but if things petered out naturally that was fine. But with students, they went home at the end of their course and that was it. Nobody ever suggested long distance when they were moving halfway around the world.

A guy had to know his limits. I was good at physical things like hockey...and sex. I wasn’t good at long-term relationships. And although Hannah wouldn’t believe it, I hated hurting anyone.

“It just happened.” I wasn’t going to explain my insecurities.

Hannah barely bothered to roll her eyes at my answer. But I didn’t fully get why she had such a low opinion of me.

“Can I ask—why is this such a big deal? Don’t you have a type of guy you like, you know maybe a blond or someone tall? Or maybe you only date white guys. Isn’t dating Asian women the same?”

Camille shook her head. “It sounds the same on the surface, but it’s creepy when a guy likes you—without even knowing who you are.”

“But you’re both hot. Guys are gonna come on to you based on how you look.”

Hannah shook her head. “It’s not the same. Asian women have been sexualized by white men for decades. The exotic east. Schoolgirl anime, mail order brides, comfort women—they’re all stereotypes of women who are little more than sex dolls to western men—women they can barely communicate with. Isn’t that right? If you had really communicated with your girlfriends, you’d know who had done this.”

I shook my head. “It wasn’t like that. We did get to know each other. Until last night, I didn’t know that any of my exes were upset with me.”

Hannah leaned forward. “Want to know my first experience with a rice chaser? We went out for a month, and it seemed like he was really into me. After we had sex for the first time, we’re lying in bed and he says, ‘Hey, that’s weird. I always heard that Asian chicks had sideways pussies, but yours felt normal.’ I’m thinking, ‘Great, I just let an ignorant racist inside my vagina.’ I could not get away from him fast enough.”

I saw that this still bothered her. “That’s so stupid, I would never say something like that. I wouldn’t even think it.”

But I had bragged about how tight my tiny Asian girlfriends were. That was the kind of thing guys said to each other, meaning that your dick was so big. Deep down, it made zero sense. Women popped babies out of there and bounced back. Back home, I'd dated a chick who'd had a kid, and sex with her was plenty hot.

“So, do you guys date a lot of Asian guys?” I asked.

“I've dated a couple,” Camille said.

For the first time, Hannah's edge slipped. “Not really.”

I sensed an advantage. “How come you haven't?”

Her voice remained low. “I don't know. I'm not really attracted to them.”

“Ooooooh,” I cooed. “And I'm the racist here?”

Hannah's energy sparked back up. “Do you want my help or not? You're the one who's not getting to play hockey. And by the way, isn't this really your own psychological issue? If you didn't let these women get to you, you wouldn't need us.”

Well, there was no point in arguing with someone who went nuclear right away. “I messed up *one* game. I'll be ready next time.”

I sure as hell hoped I was only out for one game. Solving this would help my mindset.

Meanwhile, both Camille and Hannah worked away on their laptops, looking up social media sites.

“Okay, we've got the list down to three women, assuming that she is Korean,” said Hannah.

Camille slid the highlighted list to me. “Tell us everything you can remember about these women.”

Kim Ha-Eun. Kim Ji-Yoo. Daisy Choi.

I searched my memory banks.

“Um, Ha-Eun. Well, we dated a long time ago.” What I wouldn’t tell Hannah was that I had called her Kim at the beginning. Well, she introduced herself as Kim Ha-Eun, so who wouldn’t think that was her first name? But she’d been so shy that she didn’t correct me until our second date. Also she had giggled at everything I said, even serious stuff, which threw me off. Later I found out that she laughed when she was embarrassed, which made sense now. I had very few memories of Ha-Eun, but if I had made cultural mistakes with anyone, it would have been her. She was only the second Asian chick I had dated. My one recollection was that Ha-Eun just liked it missionary, but that was another fact Hannah wouldn’t like. “To be honest, I don’t remember much about her. We didn’t go out long.”

“Why did you break up?” Camille asked.

“I guess we got bored. She was studying ESL and her English was pretty shitty. We couldn’t really talk much.”

Hannah scowled. “You mean you got bored?”

I shook my head. “It was mutual.”

Ha-Eun had this idea of what a North American boyfriend was like from watching movies. I had disappointed her when I didn’t do all the romantic stuff she expected. But I wasn’t a rose-petals-on-the-bed guy, I was more of a be-grateful-I-changed-the-sheets guy. And Ha-Eun couldn’t even ask for what she wanted.

I moved onto the next name: Kim Ji-Yoo. I could remember a lot more about her. She had this innocent look that was the opposite of her personality. She’d been a real

firecracker and a freak in the sack. She was the one who hit on me first. “She was really fun. I got the feeling that things were pretty strict for her back home, and Canada was her chance to go wild.”

“No need to go into the gory details,” Camille interrupted. Last night she’d been both shocked and turned on by the inventory of my sex life. She’d be a wild one too—if only she’d give me a chance. Then I gave myself a mental head slap: no sex. Not even thinking about it, and especially not sex with Camille, who was doing me a solid here.

“How long did you go out, and how did you break up?” Hannah had her pen poised to take notes, her intensity contradicted by her pen’s pompom topper.

I scratched the back of my head. “It’s hard to say. We saw each other off and on for a while, but we didn’t really go out.”

Hannah sniffed. “By seeing each other, you mean sex, right?”

“Like I’m supposed to turn down a booty call?” But in reality, it wasn’t like that. Ji-Yoo called me up to meet her at a club, we’d party together and then go home and have sex. Weeks could go by and I wouldn’t hear from her. Sometimes, I’d hit her up if I needed sex to de-stress, especially before a big game. I wasn’t too proud to go through my contact list if I needed a fuck. But Ji-Yoo was usually busy anyway. She went out every night. That’s why she didn’t make sense for this. I’d just been one in a long line of guys she’d partied with. “I really don’t think it was her. She never seemed that attached. Things never really ended, I messaged her one night, and she’d gone home.”

I turned to the last name on the list: Daisy Choi. She’d been so pretty and nice. I had really liked her. I preempted

Hannah's questions, "We went out for a while, maybe two months? And she broke up with me." That wasn't the whole truth. Daisy broke up with me because she caught me chatting up another girl. I wasn't cheating on Daisy, but she was leaving soon, so I was looking ahead. What Daisy wanted was for me to be broken-hearted when she left, so she was doubly offended.

"I think it might be Daisy," I said.

"Why?" Hannah asked.

"Well..." I couldn't tell them everything. Daisy had been a virgin, so our relationship had been a big deal to her. Not that she wasn't important to me, but hockey always came first. Daisy got pissed off about that, she treated hockey like a hobby. We used to have fights and then make up. Since making up always involved sex, that was good—but I could have skipped the angry parts. "She was more attached than the other chicks."

"Do you not have normal human emotions?" Hannah demanded. "All these women, and it sounds like you didn't really care about any of them."

"I liked them all. But most of them were leaving anyway. It wasn't like they wanted some big relationship."

"Incredible. Not only do you exclusively date Asian women but you choose students so you can avoid commitment too." Hannah turned to Camille. "You know, this guy really deserves every bad thing that's happening to him. Why don't we leave him to face the consequences?"

I waited for Camille to pile on too. Was it only two days ago that I was on top of the world?

“Look, maybe Nate’s been a jerk in the past,” Camille began. “But he’s a decent guy under it all. He’s bailed me out a couple of times. Besides, he’s asking us for help. Would you rather complain about yellow fever or make changes?”

Her support warmed me. Right now, even half-assed compliments were welcome.

Hannah’s narrowed eyes drilled into me. “All right. This is what’s going to happen next. We’ll look into Daisy and see if there are potential connections between her and Indigo Butterfly. But we won’t ignore the other two completely—just in case. Meantime, I’m going to send you some readings to raise your consciousness, and you better do them.”

I wanted to protest that I didn’t read much, but Hannah was too scary. I swallowed and nodded.

Camille straightened up. “I’ve got an idea. We could go undercover and infiltrate the I Hate Nate gang at tonight’s game. Maybe they know who the girlfriend is.”

“Wow, that’s genius,” I said. “I knew you were going to be good at this detective shit.”

Hannah nodded. “It is a good idea, but I have a family thing tonight.”

“Fine, I’ll go by myself,” said Camille.

“I’ll give you some fangirl tips,” Hannah said.

“It’s not going to be dangerous, is it?” I asked. “Well, I’ll be at the game. If you need help, just message me.”

Camille scoffed. “It’s a bunch of K-pop fans. Unless they kill me with cuteness, I’ll be fine.”

I didn’t agree with that. Women were dangerous, especially when they were mad at you.

SHE'S ALL THAT

CAMILLE

ONCE I GOT HOME, I wanted to spend the afternoon researching Nate's case and Indigo Butterfly fandom, but my mother had other ideas.

"Did Bill drop you off?" She peered out the window but Nate's sports car was long gone.

"Uh, did I not mention that I broke up with Bill?" I tried to sneak off to my bedroom, but I wasn't fast enough.

"Oh my gulay! You lose your job and your nice boyfriend at the same time? Anak, you think your mother will always be here to take care of you? Worrying about you is adding years to my age. What will happen if you keep quitting everything?"

"Don't worry, Mom. I'll find a new job in no time." I added no guarantees on a new boyfriend.

She kept fussing, so out of guilt I promised to start job hunting.

Elaine was already doing homework in our room. I sat on my bed and started looking through available hospitality jobs.

There were always a million, which was another reason I never worried about quitting or getting fired.

My sister removed her noise-cancelling headphones—her secret weapon for studying in our busy house—and turned to me.

“What are you up to?”

“Job hunting,” I said. Okay, maybe I had peeped at the Indigo Butterfly fansites, but it was 90% job search.

“Show me.”

I handed over a scribbled sheet of paper with notes, phone numbers, and email addresses. She speed-read them and shook her head. “Can I offer some advice?”

I nodded. Elaine had known exactly what she wanted to do from when she was 16, unlike me.

“I believe you don’t really like your restaurant jobs.” My sister’s eyes met mine, so I knew something big was coming. “You complain about being objectified, yet you keep taking jobs where appearances are important.”

Elaine, the original “I woke up looking like this” woman, didn’t understand. I was cute too, but I worked hard for it. I took full advantage of my assets: good looks and an outgoing personality. “I don’t have any other job skills.”

“Cami, you’re young. You could learn anything. You just need to apply yourself.”

“You sound like my teachers. It’s easy for you, you love accounting stuff so you don’t mind studying,” I said.

Elaine frowned at me. “Nobody loves studying accounting. But it’s a job that I will enjoy, so I’m willing to put in the work to get there. You need to do something that you’ll enjoy.”

She took over my laptop and came up with a career website. “Why don’t you take a personality evaluation to find out what job you’re best suited to?”

I obediently began the quiz. It was actually a lot of fun—if only talking about myself was a job. A series of questions posed two choices.

Are you more: easygoing and free-spirited OR serious and disciplined?

I hit the button for “easygoing and free-spirited.” This quiz was easy. I clicked rapidly: yes to working with people, no to planning ahead, and bleh to science and math.

“Girls, can you help me,” Mom called.

Another interruption? I really needed to research Indigo Butterfly before tonight’s game. I paused the quiz and tucked my laptop under my arm. We went to the kitchen, which looked like a bomb hit it. Our mother always made way too much food when people were coming over. Nobody left the Salang house hungry.

“It’s almost dinner time, and I still haven’t got the table set up.” Mom was stirring two pots at the same time.

“Don’t worry, everyone will be late,” I said. Filipino time meant people would be at least half an hour late.

“Where’s Tita Alice?” I asked. Usually our auntie came over to help when we hosted Sunday dinners. Alice would have this kitchen spic and span in no time. As a kid, I loved to hang around in the kitchen while the two sisters talked, sang, and laughed as they worked. I loved Elaine, but I couldn’t imagine us having as much fun together as our mother and her sister.

“She had a big meeting at the church. A fundraising thing.”

“I’ll set the table,” Elaine offered and went to the dining room. I tied on an apron and began on the Mount Everest of dishes. I sang “We Are Family” as I worked, and Mom joined in the chorus.

“You have such a beautiful voice,” my mother said. “Can you sing ‘Amazing Grace?’ So perfect for a Sunday.”

I obliged my mom, and in no time the dishes were all done. Then I sat down at the kitchen table and finished up the personality quiz. There was a pause while my score was calculated.

“Are you done?” Elaine pulled a chair over and sat beside me.

“What are you two doing?” Mom asked.

“A personality test to determine what kind of job I’m best at.” A long list of jobs appeared. I scanned them and picked out the interesting ones. “Flight attendant? That sounds good. I’d get to travel.”

Elaine shook her head. “The airline industry is in trouble these days, and they’ve been cutting costs. You can apply, but there aren’t a ton of jobs.”

“Oh, what about hotel concierge?” I could easily imagine myself sitting at a desk in a stylish lobby and doling out advice to tourists.

“It’s a great job, but it takes a ton of knowledge about Vancouver. That’s not a job you can just walk into, you’d have to work in tourism or hospitality first.”

The front door opened.

“Kumusta? I’m finally here.” Tita Alice bustled in. She looked so much like my mom, both were short and curvy with glossy black hair and smooth skin.

“Ah, you’re finally here. I’m almost done,” Mom said.

“Sorry, sorry, Izzy. At least I’m in time to dry dishes,” she said, eyeing the pile that I had stacked Jenga-style. “Hello, girls.”

She kissed both of us and looked at my laptop. “What’s all this?”

“Jobs I’d be good at,” I said.

“Is sleeping in a job?” teased Tita Alice. “Oh look, working in a care facility is there. You want to join your mom and me at Oceanview Lodge?” Both worked at a seniors’ home.

I hated when everyone started telling me what to do. “You know I’m not into anything medical.”

My mother nodded. “Too bad. Being a nurse is a good job, people always need nurses.”

I wasn’t going to point out that although my mother was a nurse, she wasn’t getting paid as one since her credentials weren’t recognized here.

“I’m not into bodily fluids.” And I wasn’t the nurturing type.

Tita Alice continued, “Still, there’s a job you might like. Shannon—you know, the activities manager—she’s looking for an assistant. Part-time and you have to work weekends but it’s a start.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Mom said.

“Why not?” Tita Alice asked. “Cami is friendly. Everyone enjoys having a young person around, and she doesn’t need any special training. Shannon would help her.”

My mother turned from the counter where she was chopping vegetables. “Cami, if we recommend you for this job, you’d have to really buckle down. Work hard and no quitting. If you mess up, it doesn’t look good on us.”

I threw my hands up in exasperation. “Why are we even talking about this? I don’t want the job.”

To be honest, I knew what Shannon did and the job itself might be okay. I liked older people, and everyone at Oceanview seemed nice. But I didn’t want to work with my mom and my aunt. That would be like having three bosses, a real one and my hovering family. I loved them, but I craved independence. I had zero privacy here. I longed for my own place, but sky-high rents in Vancouver made that impossible.

I looked back at the screen. Cruise Ship Entertainer/Activities Manager. Must be able to perform in nightly cabaret or shows. May have additional responsibilities coordinating daily activities.

Yes! I could easily see myself doing this job. I loved performing. I could wear a cocktail dress or perhaps a costume? With a band behind me and an audience in front of me. And during the day, I’d be happy to lead activities. Shuffleboard, trivia quizzes, whatever. I was good at persuading people to do things. And I’d finally have my own space. A tiny cabin or something, but I’d be independent. I’d get to see the world and meet all kinds of people. This was my perfect job!

An unfamiliar thrill went down my spine. Was this my dream? Was this how Elaine felt about accounting, a job so

boring it made my eyes cross? More likely it was the way that Nate and Marty felt about hockey. It was their dream to get paid to play hockey, and they had achieved it. Maybe that was the key: find something you love to do and get someone to pay you to do it. Wait, when Nate said exactly that, I had mocked him. Oopsy.

I pointed. “There. That’s my dream job.”

Everyone pushed in to see, and I continued, “I would rock that job.”

Tita Alice’s head bobbed up and down. “Camille has a lovely voice. Remember how good she was in that show in Stanley Park?”

I’d always sung, but my biggest role was in *South Pacific* in Theatre Under the Stars. Since I’d started working nights at restaurants, I’d given up my musical theatre.

“I’ve always said Cami should be on *The Voice* or some show like that,” my mother agreed.

That was my fantasy too. But the reality was that while I had a good singing voice, there were thousands of women who had equally good voices plus training in dance, acting, and musical instruments. I couldn’t even compete for chorus jobs at professional venues, much less leading roles.

“You know, Marcella’s boyfriend, Rocky, used to work on a cruise ship,” Mom said. Marcella daSilva was a family friend.

Tita Alice nodded. “Lots of Filipinos work on the cruise ships. We should ask around and see if we can get an interview for Camille.”

Finally, a break. I’d seen so many friends get good jobs because of their connections. Job-hunting—when you didn’t

have a degree or experience—was all about who you knew. And it was rare that my family knew anyone. Well, anyone in an area where I wanted to work.

“Thank you! That would be wonderful,” I said.

My mom frowned, and I knew exactly what she was thinking. “Don’t worry, Mom. If you help me get this job, I promise I’ll stick to it.”

“You’ll have to,” said Elaine. “I think they make you sign long-term contracts. And you can’t leave a ship in the middle of the ocean.”

My tita giggled. “At least you can’t be late if you’re already living at work.”

Ugh, my nagging family. Did I have time to escape and read up on Indigo Butterfly? Then the doorbell rang and answered that question. I left to put away my laptop and change clothes.

When I came back, my mom and aunt had been plotting and they turned to me. “Meantime, Cami,” said Tita Alice. “You still have to get a new job. You should call Shannon and find out more about the activities job.”

Luckily, more guests arrived and saved me from answering. Tonight was a relatively small dinner—only ten people and one tiny baby. We crowded around a table covered with food, dishes, and glasses. Everyone exclaimed at how amazing the dinner looked and even took photos. My relatives were worse than Foodstagrammers. All the while, my mother pretended that producing all this food was nothing, instead of the hours of work it actually took. Once we all managed to squeeze in, Tita Alice delivered a brief prayer and the eating began.

There was something comforting about these Sunday family dinners. Having decided on my dream job, I felt nostalgic for something I hadn't even left yet.

"Where's Marty tonight, Elaine?" Tita Alice asked.

Elaine said, "He has a game tonight. Actually, I better start getting ready to go."

"Oh no. I made enough food for Marty too." Mom looked ridiculously sad since Marty showed up at least once a week to eat. Of course, he did eat enough for three people.

"I'm going too." I took my dish into the kitchen and followed Elaine.

"I didn't know that you were coming to the game," my sister said as she pulled out some dark jeans, a t-shirt and her Marty Devonshire jersey.

"Yeah. It's a spy mission." Between discovering my dream job and now getting to do something stealth, I was happier than I'd felt in weeks.

RISKY BUSINESS

CAMILLE

“ARE you sure you know what you’re doing?” Elaine asked as she pulled into the arena parking lot.

“Absolutely,” I replied with fake confidence. What began as an exciting mission was now a little scary. Hannah had given me a crash course on Indigo Butterfly trivia, but I meant to study instead of doing all that career planning stuff. I pulled down the passenger side mirror to check my butterfly face paint. “Don’t forget, pretend not to know me if we see each other. And tell the other WAGs.”

“I hate the word WAGs,” Elaine said. “It makes me feel like an appendage. I’ll tell Morgan, but I’m not sure that any of the others will recognize you in that outfit.”

I was wearing jeans and a bedazzled turquoise sweatshirt that I’d found in my mother’s closet. It was bulky and garish and so not my style, but it was the perfect disguise. From everything I’d seen at the last game, the more blue the better.

“Well, be careful. If you need help, just DM me and I’ll come over. I’ll try not to look at you too much in case that

blows your cover.” My sister was a big worrier. “And we’ll meet back here after the game?”

“Yeah. And don’t worry. It’s not like I’m parachuting into some war zone.”

“It is very James Bond though,” Elaine said, and my mood lifted. I was ready to be a kick-ass spy. I parted from her and headed off.

The Indigo Butterfly fans—or Sapphires as they liked to call themselves—were very organized. One peek into their online chatroom gave me all the details on where they were sitting, available carpools, and even banner instructions. I didn’t make a banner or sign because that would be like kicking Nate in the balls.

“Hey, are you a Sapphire too?”

I turned to find a young woman my age. She had auburn hair, a baby blue coat, and blue face paint. My first Nate Hater in the flesh.

“Yes, I am. But this is my first game. Did you come last night?” I asked.

She nodded enthusiastically. “It was great. We totally threw him off his game. I can’t wait to see what happens tonight.”

Well, nothing would happen since Nate wasn’t playing, but that was insider info.

“I’m Audrey,” she said as we made our way up to our section.

“Camille,” I replied automatically. Oops, should I have prepared an alias? There were so many things to consider when going undercover. You were supposed to choose a name

similar to your own, so you'd react to it. Like Cecile or Lucille or Big Meal.

“So, what are your top five Indigo Butterfly songs?” Audrey asked.

Total brain freeze. All the titles deserted my head.

“Well, I love ‘The Valley’...and um, ‘Love So Truth.’” That was their mega-hit. In desperation, I improvised, “Um, I love that song, you know—about a heart thief?” I sang the chorus. It was in Korean, but I knew it phonetically. Hannah did it at karaoke.

“‘Frozen Heart!’ Oh my God, that sounded amazing. You have a beautiful voice. Are you Korean?”

“No, Filipina.” Luckily, my new friend was distracted from the fact that I couldn't name five Indigo Butterfly songs. That was an advantage to being pretty, nobody blinked if you said something idiotic. Maybe playing dumb would be a good way to get information.

“Here we are,” Audrey said. There were at least 20 women, all clad in various blue tones. I saw the large banner from the last game which proclaimed *We Hate Nate!*

Audrey greeted a couple of people, but few of the women seemed to know each other well. They were only bound together by their fandom.

“How did all this get started?” I asked Audrey.

“Well, you know the lyrics to ‘The Valley,’ right?”

I nodded.

“It's so incredibly sad. This innocent girl comes to Canada and hooks up with this guy. He uses her and breaks her heart. Anyway, we all love the song—I cry every single time I listen

to it—and everyone thought it was fictional. But Bo-Bae gave this interview on Korean TV. ‘The Valley’ is based on a true story that happened to her best friend from high school. After the interview, Sapphires started sleuthing online. We took hints from the lyrics and the video to determine that it happened in Vancouver and the guy was a hockey player. There’s only one professional hockey player here named Nate: Nate Jones. So, fan club members in Vancouver offered to come and picket his game.” She beamed with the righteous indignation of wronged women everywhere.

“But how can we be sure it’s him? What if it’s a fake name, you know one that rhymes with *hate*?” Part of me hoped that this was all a case of mistaken identity.

The women sitting behind us leaned into our conversation. Both were Asian. One wore a blue knit beret and the other wore a blue wig with thick bangs. We were all Brand Blue here.

“We know it’s him. Because after we posted photos of our protest on the fan account last night, Bo-Bae herself liked the post!” said the bewigged woman.

Well, that seemed definitive.

The women introduced themselves. “I’m Nora,” said the beret woman. “And this is Riri.” Riri had been glaring at me ever since I asked if Nate might be a pseudonym.

“Sorry. I’m so clueless about this stuff,” I said.

“It’s okay, I was the same last night,” said the woman beside me, a smiling brunette with braces. “Hi, I’m Lexy.”

Everyone here was really friendly, and I could see the appeal of joining the Sapphires. Once you finished school, it was hard to find a girl gang.

The players skated out, and everyone's attention went to the ice. After a few minutes, there were loud mutterings.

"I can't find Nate."

"Where is he?"

"He's number 29, right?"

One woman pulled out binoculars and scanned the ice. "I don't see him anywhere."

"Do you think he got fired for what happened last game?" Audrey asked excitedly.

"I don't think you can get fired in hockey," I said. "Traded maybe."

Lexy waved her phone. "It says here that he's a healthy scratch."

"Oh gross, what does that mean?" Audrey asked. "It sounds like he has an STD."

"It means that he could play, but the coach has decided he won't play," said Riri, her high voice even squeakier in excitement. It was like getting lectured by a chipmunk. "You know what this means, Sapphires?"

"What?" a few women called back.

Riri stood and raised her fists into the air. "It means we have won. He is being punished for what he has done. In a way it hurts him the most!"

They all cheered, and I joined in. It was easy to get carried away because righting wrongs was so satisfying. Too bad I couldn't organize a protest against the manager who fired me.

I leaned towards Riri, who seemed to be one of the ringleaders. "Since we won, does that mean we're going to

stop now?”

The blue wig twirled as she shook her head. “Oh no. He must learn not to mess with Indigo Butterfly fans. We are going to keep coming back to make sure he suffers more.”

Poor Nate. How did he go from being someone I couldn't stand to someone I felt sorry for? I looked around the arena, wondering where he was sitting. Of course, if the Sapphires spotted Nate, they might attempt some sort of intervention. I saw Elaine sitting with her friends from the team. All of them were laughing and having fun.

I sighed, and Audrey patted my hand. “I know it won't be as much fun as booing him whenever he's on the ice. But our victory over him is great news.”

Time to get back to work. “You know the woman that he hurt? Does she still live in Vancouver? Is she here too?” I raised my voice so the others could hear too.

“I don't think so,” Audrey said.

“Of course not. She must have moved back to Seoul if she's seeing Bo-Bae again,” said Nora.

“Do we know who she is?” I pressed on. The mystery woman wasn't here because I'd already memorized the faces of Nate's three exes. But I'd take any leads I could get.

Everyone shook their heads.

“She must be cool if she's friends with Bo-Bae. But I feel sorry for her because he broke her heart,” Lexy said.

“What did he do that was so horrible?” I asked.

Riri glared at me again. What was her deal?

“I mean, I’ve broken up with people before and I hope they can move on...” My voice faltered. I’d broken up with Bill and never given him another thought. Was I as heartless as Nate?

“He dates only Asian women—many of them. They are interchangeable sex objects to him,” declared Nora. “Surely, you must have experienced that yourself.”

“Of course,” I said. But I’d learned to recognize the signs. If a guy was obsessive about Asian cultures or tried to speak to me in Tagalog, I rejected him immediately. If he came onto me without getting to know me, he was suspect. Like Nate—he’d asked me out as soon as we met. But I already knew from Elaine that he was into Asians.

“You must listen more closely to the lyrics,” Riri said. “Then you can feel her sorrow.”

I had listened to “The Valley” a dozen times and never heard that interchangeable sex object stuff. It was more like the story of a naive woman and a player.

“He led her on,” Audrey said. “She was an innocent victim. That’s what I hear in the song.”

Lexy began describing an Indigo Butterfly concert that she had attended, and I only half-listened.

Once the game started, Audrey proved to be an excited if slightly clueless fan.

“This is only my second game, but I really like hockey.” She pointed to the ice. “That player, Seb Söderlund, is really cute.”

I nodded and remembered the WAGs describing him as a huge player. Audrey might have a chance with Seb—for one night only.

She lowered her voice to a whisper. “And don’t tell anyone, but Nate Jones is cute too. I mean, he’s an awful person, but he’s so big and hunky.”

I tried not to smile. Nate would love hearing that. “For reals. That’s why he needs to come with a warning tag.”

Then the Vice scored a goal, and the arena exploded. Audrey jumped up and cheered. Then she sat down, looking embarrassed.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be cheering,” she said to Riri, who was the fun police.

“No worries,” said Riri. “If the team does better without Nate, he will get scratched all the time.”

Given the green light, the Sapphires proceeded to cheer on the Vice, waving the *We Hate Nate* banner for every goal, big save, or power play that happened.

“Is this a bigger crowd of Sapphires than last game?” I asked Audrey.

“Oh yes, and it’s still growing. I’m having a great time. I’m meeting lots of people I only knew from chatting online. And the games are so exciting.”

Well, this was one way to get new fans, but probably not one that Nate would recommend.

There was a different Vice goalie in net tonight, and he stopped almost everything. Our Nate-less team won 4-1 and clinched their playoff spot. As the guys celebrated and saluted the fans, I felt mixed emotions. Sure, I was happy that the Vice had made the playoffs, but somewhere in the arena, Nate must be feeling lonely and useless.

JAWBREAKER

NATE

“LET’S GO, let’s go. We’ve got to be ready for the playoffs,” Coach Lee yelled as we began our skating drills. Our assistant coach was running a high tempo practice.

To celebrate clinching our playoff spot, Coach Gautier had scheduled our morning practice one whole hour later than usual. Guess he didn’t want us celebrating too hard.

Not that it mattered. I still felt like shit even after last night’s win. Sure, I went out to celebrate, but it wasn’t like I’d contributed at all. And those Nate Haters were growing. I still hadn’t heard back from Camille—even after I messaged her five times.

But I couldn’t wallow in my shitty mood. Today Goats had a new goal. If the Vice finished first in the Pacific Division, we would get a bye straight into the second round. Right now, we were in second place, five points behind the Henderson Silver Knights. But with four games left including a two-game series against Henderson, we could make up those points. Goats explained that a bye would be huge. It was like winning

a round, and it would give us more time to practice and heal up. At this point in the season, everyone was pretty beat up.

I took out my frustrations by working my ass off on the ice.

“Good effort out there,” Coach Lee said. But he didn’t mention whether I was playing in the next game or not. Then Amanda stopped me in the hallway when I was leaving.

“Have you been able to take care of that problem yet?”

“I’m on it,” I said. “We’ve narrowed down the list to three women. Once we figure out who it is, I’ll work on the best way to contact her and settle things.”

“Okay. Keep me posted. I want to get in front of this before it turns into a media issue. And one more thing...” Amanda’s expression was serious, and my gut clenched.

“What is it?” Fuck, why did my voice always go up when I talked to her? She probably thought I was still going through puberty. Amanda didn’t make hockey decisions, but her boyfriend did, and they must discuss the Vice.

“I think that you should talk to someone.” She produced a business card. “Petra Hiemstra is a sports psychologist who works with the team. She can help you overcome any performance anxiety you’re having.”

Seriously? I wasn’t nuts or anything. “Amanda, I’m fine. Sure, I got thrown off last game, but now I’m ready. Next time I play, it’s not going to affect me at all.”

“Nate, I’m not suggesting there’s anything wrong with you. All the top athletes use sports psychologists—it’s part of their preparation. Leo agrees with me. It’s important that you do this before you get back on the ice.”

“Okay, sure.” What else could I say? If Goats said I had to do this before I played again, I was fucking well doing it.

So, I called the shrink as soon as I got home. Her office seemed to be expecting me, and I got an appointment for the next day.

Since I was already doing shitty things, I started reading through the many links that Hannah had sent. The easier articles were written for magazines, but a few were university research papers that were ridiculously complicated. My brain felt fried.

Marty and I ate lunch at the kitchen table together. That was another thing the nutritionist recommended: conscious eating. I missed the old days of mindlessly scarfing down junk food while watching hockey games.

“What do you know about consent?” My mind was still on those articles.

“Conshenk for whaa?” Marty’s mouth was full.

“For sex.” I had sex on the brain. I’d been shocked when Camille had warned me about the dick pics. Would I be able to trust women again? What if they all knew about that song and were out to get me? Would my dick or crappy reviews of my sexual performance end up all over the internet?

Marty swallowed his last bite of bean salad. “You have to have consent. And it doesn’t count if the other person is drunk or out of it.”

“But did you know that you’re supposed to ask at every stage? Like you kiss her, but before you grab her boob, you’re supposed to ask again.” Frankly, that seemed crazy—to be in the middle of making out and have to keep asking. It was a mood killer. If a woman did that to me, I would say she had a

free pass to do whatever the fuck she wanted to my body. No painful shit though.

Marty shrugged. “If you’re just getting to know someone, it’s a good idea.”

“Seems like the fast track to Blue Balls City,” I said glumly. “Do you think I’m a creep?”

“No.”

Of course he didn’t think I was a creep. All my teammates liked me. And my other friends envied my life: playing hockey for a living and scoring tons of women.

I scraped the fork along my empty plate. “It’s so weird. You hardly dated anyone and then *bam*—as soon as you met Elaine—you got all serious. It’s nuts.”

“What’s so strange about that? That’s what dating is for—finding the right person. And I found her.”

Sometimes Marty was like a Martian. “That’s not what dating is for. You go out to have fun and sex,” I said.

The first time that a girl came on to me after a game back in junior, I did an actual double-take, *You talking to me?* Because why would some hot chick who would ordinarily ignore me, suddenly be interested? But when it happened again and again, I realized that it was a benefit of being a good player.

Marty shook his head. “All this fooling around is starting to interfere with your hockey.”

“Yeah.” There was no arguing with that.

He stood and took his dishes to the sink. Over his shoulder, he said, “Look, if you really want my advice, here it is: get to

know women before you have sex with them. It's not the quantity of sex but the quality."

I scoffed. "I've had a high quantity of quality sex."

But until I worked out my issues, I wouldn't be having any sex at all.

After lunch, I tried to do some more reading but it was tough to concentrate. When I checked my phone, Camille had finally replied to me.

Sorry. I have a thing going on with my mom. And no news from last night's game.

Damn. I hoped she'd figure this out in no time. Well, at least getting a full update would make me feel like I was doing something.

Want to get together? I wrote.

Can't was all she wrote back. I went back to my readings but that didn't last long. I really wanted to see Camille. Maybe I'd have to sweeten my approach.

Do you like ice cream? I asked.

I didn't hear back from her for a long time, then: *Seriously? It's pretty chilly out there.*

Time to dial up the sales pitch. I know a great place.

Aren't you supposed to be eating clean?

I had salad for lunch. I deserve this.

She didn't answer right away, so I sent her a delicious ice cream gif.

God, you're a pain, she responded.

Since that wasn't no, I waited. The next article was called "The Fetishization of Asian Women in Cultural History." Shit, if the title was this hard, what was the article like? As I read through it, I mentally protested, *I'm not like that*. But if women like Camille and Hannah faced a constant stream of this stereotyping shit, it would be easier to reject guys who even showed hints of an Asian fetish. Like me.

Finally, Camille wrote back, *Well, I'm free now*.

Pick you up in 15, I wrote before she could change her mind.

I pulled up at her townhouse, and Camille came out immediately. She looked gorgeous, as usual, in a pale purple coat, black jeans, and high-heeled boots. Her feminine, sexy look was always a turn-on. Too bad I wasn't allowed to be turned on these days.

"Hello, Mr. Persistent," she said as she got in.

I couldn't help grinning as we drove off. Persistence was how I succeeded in hockey, and it usually worked for women too.

But Camille wasn't her usual cheerful self.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Oh, I had this argument with my mom. Apparently being out of work for two days is too long." Camille crossed her arms, which made her boobs stick out. I turned to focus on the road. Playing hockey again was my priority so I had to avoid temptation—especially when it wore a purple coat and low-cut top.

"I finally decide on my perfect job, and she thinks I'm dreaming. 'First you have to learn to keep a job, Cami,' she says."

“What is your perfect job?” I asked.

“I want to be a cruise ship entertainer.” Finally a smile was back on Camille’s pretty face.

“Like, on the ocean?” I asked.

“Uh, yeah. There’s not a huge demand for cruises that stay in ports.”

Of course, it was a stupid thing to ask, but the idea of Camille leaving Vancouver bothered me. “So, what would you do? Sing and dance?”

“Well, not dance. I mean, I can dance but not stage dancing. But I can sing.”

“Really? Can I hear you sing?” I asked.

“I’m not a performing pony.” She pulled out her phone. “But I’ll send you my YouTube channel.”

I sort of agreed with Camille’s mom. A singer did seem like a fantasy job. I’d once dated a chick who wanted to be a singer, and I never thought she could make it. But then, becoming an NHL player was a fantasy job too.

“Anyway, so she’d chill, I agreed to interview for a job at her care facility,” Camille said.

“What kind of job?”

“The weekend activities coordinator. I’d be organizing activities for all the seniors there.” Her pretty smile was gone again.

“It doesn’t sound like the most exciting job,” I agreed. “But old people can be chill.”

She nodded. “Yeah. It’s not about the residents, I’m fine with that part. And the job itself sounds okay. But having my

mom and aunt watching my every move will be scary.”

We parked off Hastings and I took her to this retro ice cream parlour.

“Oh, Glenburn Soda Fountain. I’ve always wanted to come here.” Camille hummed, her mood upbeat again.

Inside, the tiny place was straight out of the fifties with uniformed staff and vintage signs. Luckily, there were two empty bar stools at the long counter.

“It’s all so cute.” She spun around on the barstool. We watched a family getting served sundaes with a mountain of whipped cream. “Those portions look humongous. I doubt I can even finish one.”

“Why don’t we share a banana split?” I suggested. Sure I was cheating on my diet, but bananas were healthy.

She nodded happily.

“So, how did it go last night? At the game,” I said.

“Oh. Well, it went fine. I didn’t find out who she was; it doesn’t seem like anyone there knows. All they know is what was in the song.”

She described her evening. I was irked to hear that she had had fun because she was supposed to be on my side.

“So they’re not going to stop coming even though I got scratched?” I asked.

Camille shook her head. “It’s turned into a social event for them.”

“Luckily our last four games are on the road,” I said.

She turned on the barstool and faced me with a huge smile that almost knocked me back. “I do have some good news for

you: I've eliminated Ji-Yoo from the list."

"Already? That's awesome. How did you do that?"

"Found her wedding photos on social media. Since she's married, I'm sure she wouldn't want a story about her hockey player ex out there."

"Married? That's hard to believe. All she did was party while she lived in Vancouver," I said.

"Why not? Get all the partying out in another country, then go back to your regular life."

It did make sense once Camille explained it that way.

"Well, great work. Thank you," I said.

Our banana split arrived. It was big: three scoops of ice cream each topped with whipped cream, chopped nuts, and a red cherry.

"Wow. This looks amazing." Camille took a photo and posted it to her Insta.

"It looks like something straight from *Grease*," I said.

"What is it with you and old movies?"

I shrugged. When life got complicated—like now—retro movies were a good way to escape into something fun and predictable.

Camille dipped her spoon into the dessert. "Mmmm, it's got three different sauces: chocolate, strawberry, and I think this one is pineapple."

I dug in. It was delicious.

"This is real whipped cream. Not that artificial stuff," she said. I watched her pick up a cherry by the stem and then tip it into her mouth. The cherry disappeared between Camille's

glossy lips. Shit, that was hot. I turned away. If I watched her eat the banana, my stiffy might burst through my jeans.

Unfortunately her little hums of pleasure were hot too, and I couldn't shut my ears.

"You can have the extra cherry," she said.

"Great. I can say I took your cherry." My mind could not get off sex no matter how hard I tried.

"Ha, ha," Camille replied.

I watched her lick a smudge of whipped cream from her lips. Fuck.

"Delicious. But I'm all done," she declared. The long glass dish was still half-full.

"It is good." These days I was missing all the things I enjoyed: hockey, sex, and desserts.

After a brief silence, I steered the conversation back to my issues. "So, you know what my latest problem is?"

"What?" she asked.

"I'm supposed to see a sports psychologist before I can go back on the ice. Isn't that fucked up? There's nothing wrong with me."

"You're going to therapy? Are they paying for it?" Camille sounded weirdly excited.

"Yeah, the team is paying." When I made the appointment, the woman reassured me about that.

"Oh my god, I wish I could go. All the big musicians go—Ariana, Selena Gomez, even Bieber. And everyone says it really helps them, you know, to deal with their problems or open up their creativity."

She sounded so genuinely envious that my attitude did a 180 degree turn. “Well, I’m sure it’ll help me too. I’m going tomorrow.”

Because talking to Camille felt so good, I decided to unload my last problem on her.

“You know, I’ve been reading all this sh—stuff that Hannah sent, and I have a question.”

“Yeah?”

“I mean, this consent stuff, does it happen in real life?” I never did anything if the woman wasn’t into it, but I wasn’t asking for permission either.

She lowered her voice, so the people around us couldn’t hear. “Duh. Of course you’re supposed to ask. I haven’t forgotten that you felt me up while I was sleeping.”

I still remembered how good her breast felt, all firm and bouncy. Probably the last tit I’d be feeling for a while, so I had to treasure that memory.

“That was different. I woke up in bed with you, so I assumed that we had already fucked,” I protested. If only.

“Can I point out all the problems with that? You shouldn’t have put me in your bed while I was asleep. You shouldn’t have slept naked beside me. And you shouldn’t have touched me until both of us knew what was going on.”

“I told you I’m sorry. How many times do I have to apologize?”

“I’ll settle for one apology where you understand why you were wrong,” she said.

“Look, I’ve slept on the couch before, and it’s really bad for your back. I was saving you from that.”

She side-eyed me.

“I’m serious as fuck. I could have left you there, but I carried you to bed instead. And you were dead weight,” I said.

“Yeah, insulting me isn’t helping your case.”

“I’m not. You have an amazing body, and you know it. All I’m saying is it’s different to carry a chick when she’s helping versus when she’s passed out. And I didn’t even look down your top.”

Camille snort-laughed. “I’m not giving you points for doing the right thing.”

Since she wasn’t mad anymore, I relaxed. “If I knew I wasn’t going to be having sex for a while, maybe I would have peeked.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel sorry for you? At least you can jerk off in privacy,” she said.

I was stunned by her frankness. “What do you mean?”

“Try sharing a bedroom with your sister, the light sleeper. When friends suggest getting a vibrator, I laugh. I literally have zero privacy.”

“Couldn’t you, uh, rub one out in the shower?” That was my go-to on the road.

“Please. One bathroom for four women. I’m lucky if I can put on my mascara before someone’s knocking on the door.”

“Wow. No wonder you like having sex—it’s all or nothing for you.” I wanted to offer that any time she wanted to...relax, I was ready, willing, and able. But my vow to be good had to last longer than a few days.

I dipped a spoon in the melting ice cream. I'd have to settle for eating my horniness away.

BOOKSMART

CAMILLE

“REMEMBER TO WORK HARD. Do everything that Shannon says,” my mother said as she drove me for my Wednesday training shift at Oceanview Lodge. My interview turned out to be five minutes on the phone that concluded with my new boss asking me to come in for a training shift on Wednesday. Easiest hiring ever. But after ten minutes in my mom’s car, I was already regretting my choices. Served me right for doing something that my family thought was a great idea.

“Mom, we’ve been through this before. I know what to do.” Of course, knowing wasn’t the same as carrying out.

“Yes, but you lose so many jobs. And if you get fired, it makes me and Alice look very bad.”

“You’ve been working there for years. They couldn’t run that place without you.” With my mom, Oceanview had all the advantage of someone with medical training who wasn’t getting paid as a nurse. This was exactly the kind of injustice that drove Hannah crazy.

“Now that Elaine and I are working, you could take time off to get your nursing certification,” I suggested. “Then you

could get a real nursing job.”

Mom shook her head. “Why would I want to do that now? Too many different shifts. Besides, you don’t make enough money to support yourself.”

“Elaine will be making bank soon.” One more year and she could get a real accountant job.

“I like my job. I like the people I work with,” Mom said.

Well, if she was happy, so be it. My mother and I were the same: we enjoyed life and weren’t super ambitious. Elaine was the driven one in the family. Still, I enjoyed the things that money could buy. I looked down at my black purse. Mom had fixed the handle, but it still wasn’t a Jacquemus satchel.

Once we arrived, my mother paraded me around, introducing me to some of the residents as her “baby girl”—the perfect start for my independence here. Luckily, she had to start her shift, and I escaped to find my new boss. Shannon Reilly was a thin, dark-haired woman in her thirties. She was half-Asian, and it was easy to see how she got her job—she was full of energy and enthusiasm.

“We really believe in the importance of activities here at Oceanview. Being busy and involved in the community here vastly improves the lives of our residents. And it has incredible health benefits.”

This sounded like the spiel you’d give to potential residents and their families, but it made me feel more important. After all, nobody lived or died if they didn’t get their Moscow Mule or hot wings.

“Initially, I’ll lay out a schedule of weekend activities for you to follow.” She pointed to a wall-mounted calendar. “We post this every Monday. People like to know what’s going to

happen so they can plan. And remember, you should remind people when activities are starting. Those in wheelchairs may need help attending.”

Today’s schedule started out with a class called Chair-exercise. Then there was a bowling tournament in the late morning and a craft session after lunch. At 4 p.m. there was a “cocktail hour” with mocktails and music. Every evening there was a movie. Tonight they could watch *Wonder Woman*.

“You’ll work every Saturday and Sunday from 9:00 to 5:00,” Shannon said. “But before you leave, you’ll need to set up the activities room for the evening movie. One of the aides will put the actual movie on.”

“Sounds good.” Things looked pretty straightforward.

“I’ve heard you’re a good singer,” Shannon said.

“My mom told you that?”

“Yes. You’re so lucky. I can’t carry a tune in a bucket. Do you know any older songs? Because I was thinking that instead of playing music for the cocktail hour, would you feel comfortable singing? Our residents love live music—choirs, bands, anyone we can book, we do.”

“Sure. I’d be happy to.” This job was getting better all the time.

“We have a karaoke machine, but it doesn’t get used much. People prefer singalongs.”

Shannon’s enthusiasm was rubbing off on me. “I can do singalongs too. I used to help with those at church.”

“That’s wonderful. Once you get the hang of things here, you can help to plan the weekend activities. Of course, I’m not here on the weekends, so you’ll be in charge.”

Wow. When was the last time I'd been in charge of anything?

Shannon taught the beginning of the unpronounceable Chair-ercise class and then let me take over. There was a printed outline with easy hand and arm movements. The class was all women, and they immediately began assessing me in loud voices. Apparently some were hard of hearing.

"She's very pretty," said a lady with a fancy sequined hairband. She turned to me. "You're very pretty."

"She's Izzy's daughter," said another in a red pantsuit.

"Who?" asked a tiny woman who looked about 100.

"Izzy," yelled the lady in red. "Izzy Salang. She works on the first floor."

"Do you have a boyfriend?" another asked.

"No. I broke up with him on Saturday night," I said. Was that too much information? At least I didn't mention the handcuffs or Nate being a fake cop. I shot Shannon a guilty look, but she was busy distributing small exercise balls.

"That's the way to treat men," the red pantsuit lady said. I really had to learn everyone's names. "Don't let 'em take you for granted."

The day flew by. Shannon praised me for catching on so quickly. I guess I was used to taking care of my lola as well as older titas.

At the mocktail hour, Shannon offered to dig out the karaoke machine.

"It's okay. I have an app on my phone." In fact, I had two karaoke apps, one for online singing and another for parties. "I can just connect it to your TV or speakers."

“Wow. I didn’t even know such things existed,” Shannon said. “That’s why it’s good to have someone younger working here.”

Only four people showed up for mocktails, including a man who kept complaining that he wanted a real drink.

“We got a lot more people when we served wine or beer,” Shannon said. “But we had complaints from some of the families about alcohol not mixing with medications.”

For heaven’s sake, what harm could one drink could do? It wasn’t like these people had to drive anywhere. My lola enjoyed a drink whenever we had a family party. If I made it to 80, I deserved a drink or three.

“We have a special treat for you today,” Shannon announced. “This is Camille. She’s going to be our weekend activities coordinator. And she’s a wonderful singer, so she’s going to sing for us.”

There were a few nods, but not much reaction. I stood in front of the little group.

“Good evening, everyone. I’m happy to be here. And I can take requests if you like.”

Nobody had a request, but that wasn’t unexpected. Once I sang something, they might be reminded of other songs they wanted to hear.

I decided to go with The Beatles. My lola liked them, so this group might as well. I tested to make sure that the speaker connection was working, and then sang the first line of “Yesterday.” All the chatter stopped as the little group stared and then began smiling. By the time I was done, the group size had doubled and a smattering of applause broke out.

“That was lovely,” one lady declared. “You have a beautiful voice.”

“You certainly do,” Shannon agreed.

“I love The Beatles. Can you do more Beatles?” The red pantsuit lady, whose name was Gwen, had joined the group.

So I sang a Beatles medley. The residents seemed to like early Beatles better, so I added more of those songs. The time passed quickly, and Shannon rose to wrap things up. We herded the residents straight into the dining room and then headed upstairs to arrange the chairs for movie night.

“I think your singing is going to be the hit of the weekends,” Shannon said. “We got three times the people we usually do. What a talented performer you are. Have you done it professionally?”

“Just the usual: choir, musical theatre, and showcases.” But I’d done enough that I felt at ease in front of a crowd.

“Well, I wish I had a talent like that.” Shannon was such a nice, positive person that I wished we’d get to work together. “I’m surprised at all the old songs you know.”

“I was a big ham as a kid. If I did songs that my grandmother and aunts liked, I got to perform longer. I like all kinds of music, but this didn’t look like a Billie Eilish crowd.”

She laughed. “You’re going to fit in very well here. You speak to everyone in exactly the same way.”

“Really?” I usually got in trouble for not showing enough respect to my elders.

“Yes. I interviewed one woman who kept using baby-talk with the residents. No one likes to be infantilized.”

Wow, I'd actually beaten out other people to get this job. I figured that with my mother and aunt vouching for me, I'd been a shoo-in.

Shannon continued, "I'm so glad you're joining us. Since Marcy quit, there's been nothing happening on weekends, and I've felt so guilty. And it's not easy to find the right person. I can see that the residents are already responding well to you—music is such a universal language."

"I heard about these old people who were put in a time warp house, with the old music and tv shows of their youth. And they ended up feeling years younger," I said.

"Ah yes, Ellen Langer's experiment." Shannon immediately understood my vague description. "There were questions about her scientific rigour, but the basic premise is a good one. We have had Alzheimer's patients who can only be reached by music. Songs can trigger our memories."

She surveyed the room. "Well, we're all set up now. Thank you for coming in today. Do you have any questions about this weekend?"

"I don't think so." I pointed to the activities binder that Shannon called her bible. "Besides, you've done a great job creating all these detailed instructions. I can read that if I don't know something."

Shannon assured me that I could call anytime, then my first day was over.

Now, I was supposed to ride home with my mother, but she finished an hour later than me. I reached for my phone. I hadn't had time to check it all day, and there were tons of messages, including one from Nate:

Want to get together for dinner? You can update me on the case.

No case updates, I've been working all day, I wrote back.

He responded right away: *Your new job? You can tell me about that.*

OK. But someplace cheap. I had zero money, and my social life was already suffering.

I'll pay. I owe you for everything you're doing for me.

Fine with me, but I still had to check on one thing. *Not a date though.*

Nope. No sex, remember?

Ha, Nate Jones, neutered. If the mystery woman knew this, she'd probably be very happy.

Nate offered to pick me up, so I sent Mom a message to let her know I was going out, then headed to a washroom to fix myself up. My giant purse meant that I was ready for any emergency. Well, a fashion emergency anyway; it wasn't like I had a first aid kit or anything. I dug through my purse and came up with a satiny top that was better suited to an evening out than the t-shirt I'd worn all day. Then I pulled out my fully-loaded makeup bag.

By the time I was ready, Nate was already sitting in the lobby talking to a couple of residents. Naturally, one of them was Gwen. She seemed to be anywhere that things were happening, and she was eyeing Nate in a very obvious way. Not that I could blame her. Whatever his personality flaws, the guy knew how to look good. He was dressed in a leather jacket, a baby blue t-shirt, and dark jeans. His form-fitting clothes showed off his athlete's physique: broad shoulders, wide chest, narrow hips, and muscular legs.

Nate and a tall man were talking hockey.

“The Vice are in the playoffs this year,” Nate said.

“How far can you go?” the man asked.

“Who knows? Once you get in the playoffs, anything can happen.”

I stopped in front of them. “Hey, Nate.”

“Hey. You ready to go?” He leaped up. “Good talking to you, Bob.”

“You too. Good luck in the next game.”

“I thought you didn’t have a boyfriend,” Gwen said with a dramatic wink.

“Nate and I are just friends,” I explained.

“He’s pretty easy on the eyes. Why not take a flyer?” she asked.

“That’s what I keep telling her,” Nate said.

I didn’t encourage them. “Bye, Gwen. Bye, Bob.”

Nate’s sports car was parked in the guest lot, and many eyes watched us leave. As long as nothing got back to my mom, that was fine. Older people loved to gossip; better they gossip about me and Nate than each other.

We went to a fancy burger place that Nate chose and got a booth.

“This is nice,” he said. “You look really good for someone who worked all day.”

“Thank you.” All the primping was not for nothing. I looked over the menu. “Oh, Happy Hour specials. Half-price Tequila Sunrise. I’m going for it.”

Nate laughed. “Sure.”

I continued, “I had the best drink last week: Extreme Pamplemousse. It’s got La Croix, mezcal, Aperol and a bunch of other stuff. So pretty. I love pink drinks.”

“Is pink your favourite colour?”

“Definitely. I mean, I’m not into a total Barbie look, but pink just calls to me, you know.”

“You sure look good in pink.” Nate said.

“When have you ever seen me in pink?” As much as I liked pink, I saved it for accessories. I hated getting mistaken for a girly-girl.

“That night I rescued you from Bill, you were wearing pink.” Nate’s lopsided grin made me realize that he meant my underwear.

“Eat your heart out because memories are all you have these days,” I replied.

He laughed loudly. “You don’t take shit from anyone, do you?”

“Not you, for sure.” My drink arrived, and I admired its ombre colours. I stirred the grenadine at the bottom and then took a long sip. “Ahhh, that really hits the spot.”

“You’re in a really good mood today,” he said.

“Yeah.” I considered this. “It’s weird, but I’ve never worked at a place where everyone is so nice. Shannon—she’s my boss—kept telling me what a good job I was doing. And all the residents were happy to see me. They enjoy having someone new around. Someone younger.”

“What usually happens to you at work?”

“I get a lot of criticism, my managers are always complaining about something. Or they’re micromanaging me, like telling me what to do all the time when I know. It’s like they expect the worst from people, so that’s what they get.”

Nate drank his beer and considered this. “Do you think the new place is nicer? Or maybe you’re better suited to this job.”

I nodded. “Probably both. I never really liked hostessing, but it was an easy job to get. I wasn’t looking forward to working at Oceanview, but it’s a lot better than I expected.”

And I had that cruise ship job to aspire to. I was feeling that perfect buzz: when things are already good and then you pile on more great stuff. My drink was delicious, and Nate was being so nice—like he was really interested in my life.

Our burgers came, and I cut mine in half and pulled out the onions. I hated their aftertaste. By the time I had taken six bites, Nate had cleaned his plate.

“Are you going to eat that?” He pointed to my untouched half-burger.

Wordlessly, I put it on his plate. I was used to Marty, who could put away an enormous amount of food, but Marty was built like a brick wall. Nate was built like a shapely wall, if such a thing existed. He had an incredible physique. I tried not to notice his tight t-shirt, but a tiny splat of ketchup above his left nipple kept drawing my eyes. I wanted to lick it off.

“Um, did you go to therapy?” I asked.

“Yeah. It was interesting. She didn’t make me talk about my childhood, like I expected. Instead, it was pretty practical. Shit I can use right away.”

“Like what?” Since I couldn’t ever afford therapy, maybe I could learn from his.

“Well, I guess I’ve always thought I was a pretty confident guy. My old buddies always tell me how much they envy my life. But Petra talked about external vs. internal motivation. She said that real confidence comes from within.” He tapped a fist on his broad chest, and again I averted my eyes.

“What does that have to do with all the Indigo Butterfly stuff?”

“It’s not all the chicks protesting, but how I react to them that’s important. Like why do I give a crap what strangers think of me?” His words sounded brave, but I could tell he didn’t quite believe them.

“If it helps, most of them don’t actually hate you,” I said.

Nate leaned forward. “Really? Then what’s going on?”

“Well, it’s that mob mentality stuff. All of them love Indigo Butterfly, so they’re responding to the song’s message. You’ve become a fantasy—every guy that’s ever been mean to them.”

He scowled. “I’ve always wanted to be every woman’s fantasy, but not like that.”

“All I’m saying is that it’s not personal.”

He drained his water glass. “I just hope I get to play this weekend. I’ve been busting my ass in practice, but it’s all out of my hands. Do you think there will be Nate Haters in Winnipeg?”

“No clue, but I can look into it if you like. I’ll snoop the fan groups. Then at least you won’t get blindsided again.”

“That’d be great.” He held up both hands with crossed fingers. “I really hope nothing happens there. But if it does—and I get to play—I’ve got to rise above it.”

I nodded. He leaned closer, and his scorching stare made me catch my breath.

“Camille, you’ve been so great about all this. Would it be okay if I call you while we’re on the road? Talking to you really calms me down. You’re so chill.”

“Uh, sure.” I shook off the ridiculous attraction vibes. But Nate had changed so much in less than a week. He’d gone from an overconfident player with swag coming out of every pore to...a nice, normal guy. Now that I wasn’t fending him off every second, I could appreciate how hot he actually was. How ironic that once he stopped coming on to me, I got interested. Luckily, he had taken that vow of chastity.

He nodded. “That’s great. We’re leaving for Winnipeg tomorrow, so I won’t see you till next week.”

“Hopefully, I’ll have news for you by then,” I said.

“That’d be great. What’s next on my case?”

“Well, I have the day off tomorrow, so I can research your last two exes.” I also planned on sleeping in. Getting up so early this morning had been brutal.

Nate’s smile was surprisingly perfect for a hockey player. “Thanks. I feel so much better knowing you’re on top of stuff.”

I smiled back. Today felt like Camille Salang appreciation day.

SAVE THE LAST DANCE

NATE

“AGAIN,” Coach Gautier yelled.

I blew through the drill once more, even harder this time. By the time I finished, sweat was running down my face and dripping off the tip of my nose. Every muscle in my body protested that I was pushing too hard, but I didn’t give a shit. Practice was now my only chance to work off all the shit in my life.

Last night’s Winnipeg game totally sucked. Camille had warned me that the Nate Haters would be there and they were. Way fewer people than Vancouver, but they were still there with their stupid fucking signs and their crummy blue outfits. I was starting to hate the colour blue. But too bad, so sad for them—I got scratched again. They missed their chance to boo and hiss. And of course, I missed my chance to play—which was only my fucking job, my dream, my everything.

So I poured all my energy into practice. I hit Bod so hard in scrimmage that he cursed me out. I skated until my lungs screamed.

When Goats finally blew the whistle to wind up practice, I stayed behind to help Foxy and Singer clean up the pucks and nets. It was a job for rookies, but right now it was my only way to contribute.

“Jonesy,” Goats called out to me when I skated back to the bench.

“Yes, Coach?”

“Good practice today,” he said.

“Thanks.” I was grateful for even a hint of praise at this point.

He clapped a hand onto my shoulder. “This is what I’ve been telling you to do—go full out at practice. I knew you were holding back. You’re gonna see a big change next time you play.”

I couldn’t help asking, “Will that be tomorrow night?”

Goats gave a slight shake of his head. “Gotta see what Craggy and Parks have before the playoffs.”

Shit. Three games out of the lineup was an eternity.

Weirdly, I couldn’t find any of my buddies after practice, and nobody even answered my messages. Since I had no clue where the guys had gone for lunch, I ended up eating alone.

Were my teammates dumping me now that I wasn’t playing? Maybe I wasn’t a real part of the team anymore. Usually road trips were the best: getting to hang with the boys, exploring new cities, and everything scheduled. I loved all that team bonding shit.

As I poked at my soup and sandwich, I realized how much things sucked right now.

So far, nobody had made a big deal about the Nate Haters. Our team knew, as well as anyone who went to our last three games, but nobody had reported on it—probably because making the playoffs for the first time in six years was the bigger deal. And last night, Bod made a huge hit and knocked one of their players out of the game—which was the big media focus afterwards.

But if the Sapphires kept showing up, then it would become a big deal. And that would mark me out as a guy who caused distractions, and nobody wanted that crap.

After lunch, I went back to the room for a video chat with my lifeline.

“Hey, Nate.” Camille smiled at me, and something in my chest eased.

“What are you up to?” I asked her.

She lifted a notepad. “I’m brainstorming ideas for my new job. I was thinking about tech sessions. I could teach the residents Zoom or look up stuff. We could search for long lost friends and relatives online.”

“What if they’re dead?” I blurted.

Camille shrugged. “I thought of that, but when I do it for Lola, she’s happy just to find out what happened. Older people are weirdly into reading obituaries.”

“Oceanview is lucky to have you,” I said.

“Thank you.” Her cheeks flushed. I’d noticed that Camille shrugged off compliments on her appearance, but enjoyed praise for stuff she did.

“Hey, you can tell Hannah that I finished all those readings and they hurt my brain. One of them was someone’s PhD

dessert-whatever. I'm a guy who can barely spell PhD."

She tried not to laugh. "Yeah, Hannah gets carried away. But did all the articles help?"

That was a good question. "Well, yeah. I learned a bunch of things. But..."

"But, what?" she asked.

"I understand the stereotyping stuff. It happens to me all the time. People think if you're a hockey player, you're going to be some dumb, partying bro—" I paused so Camille could point out that was exactly what I was, but she didn't say a word. "But honestly, I didn't stereotype the chicks I dated. Sure, I find Asians attractive, but I'm not like those guys in the articles. I don't watch anime or K-dramas, and I've never even been to Asia. I'm not obsessed."

"Then how did you end up dating so many Asian women?" she asked.

"There are a lot in Vancouver. Maybe I went to the places where they hang out."

She looked me straight in the eye. "I can tell there's something you're not telling me."

There was no bullshitting Camille. Well, at least her opinion of me couldn't get any lower.

"Okay. I'm not, you know, a rocket surgeon," I began.

"I think it's rocket scientist. Or brain surgeon," she said.

"See, that's what I mean. I get shit wrong and then I feel like an idiot. When I date Asian students, they don't point out when I'm making mistakes or I don't know about stuff. Not sure if it's politeness or because they don't know either."

My issues had started when my high school ex had pointed out all the shit her new university boyfriend knew and I didn't. Stuff like philosophy, political science, and literature.

"It's like you haven't grown at all, Nate," she'd said, even though I was two inches taller and twenty pounds heavier. But what she really meant was that I wasn't good enough to date anymore.

"So, you can't date Canadian women because they'll find out you're stupid? That seems kind of limiting." Then Camille softened her tone. "Ugh, the same thing happens to me too. Because I'm a party girl, guys never take me seriously. They interrupt me or correct me—or the worst thing, when nobody listens to what I say and then five minutes later some guy says exactly the same thing and everyone agrees with him."

Relief flooded me. Camille knew the truth about me, and the world didn't collapse. In fact, she totally got it.

"So, seriously. What's wrong with me dating Asian women? Like Sods only dates blondes, but he doesn't get in shit about that."

Camille gave me a long look, and for a moment I didn't think she was even going to answer me. When she spoke, her voice was soft and hesitant.

"Because it hurts. When someone asks you out, you think they like you as a person. But to find out that you're only a fantasy for them, really sucks. It makes me feel like less than a person."

She looked down. "At least I live in Vancouver where there are tons of Asians. I have cousins in Winnipeg and they suffer through this stuff constantly. It's worse any place where you stick out more. And I've lived here almost my whole life,

but no matter how Canadian I feel or sound or act, people judge me by how my face looks.”

The pain in her voice made me feel really shitty. Did my mystery woman believe that I’d seen her as less than a full person?

Camille looked upset. I wished I could put my arms around her—not even in a sexual way, but just to make her feel safe.

But all I had was words. “What you’re saying is more important than all those essays. I promise you I won’t be like that anymore.”

She arched an eyebrow. “And how are you going to do that?”

“Honestly, I’m still figuring it all out. But I will change.”

To start, I’d treat my future girlfriends better. And I’d be nicer and listen more and understand them—beyond their sexual needs. I’d always figured that being good in bed was enough for a relationship, but clearly it wasn’t.

But right now future girlfriends seemed impossible. I’d settle for just doing something new in my free time.

“So, Marty tells me that you’re having a family party this week. Can I come?” I asked.

“Seriously? Give me one good reason why,” Camille said.

“The food. Marty brings home all kinds of delicious shit. Even the doggy bags are legendary—once he came to a team meeting with leftovers and a fight broke out over the fried chicken.” Not only was the food delicious, but Marty came home full every time. Marty, the human garburator, who was both huge and had a great metabolism.

“That must be my Tita Fernanda’s fried chicken. It is really good,” Camille admitted. “Okay, sure. Come with Marty. But one warning, my family are the worst matchmakers. They’ll be trying to fix us up, so just ignore them.”

What if I don’t want to ignore them, I wondered but I didn’t say. I wasn’t ready for rejection number 20.

Instead I told her about being ignored by my teammates. Camille blew it all off as coincidence.

“So, you think my friends are just busy today.” But how could everyone be ignoring me at the same time?

“I can tell you’re still worried,” Camille said. “But seriously, even if they were all mad at you, what can you do about it? Do you really think people blame you for the Indigo Butterfly stuff?”

“Hannah does,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, well, you’re never going to win her over. She can’t get over the fact that I ditched her at a party in grade ten. One time, and I’m still getting grief. Pfffft.” She made adorable chipmunk cheeks, and I chuckled.

“Thanks so much, Camille.”

“Uh, you’re welcome? Not sure what I did,” she said.

“I don’t know, you’re so chill about everything. You make my problems feel like no big deal. You’re better than my therapist.”

She smiled. “I forgot about her. Didn’t she give you some advice? That’s probably what you should be doing.”

“Good idea. I’ll tackle that next.”

Camille had to go, so I reluctantly said goodbye. I could have talked to her for an hour.

I started on the gratitude journal Petra had suggested. The first thing I wrote was: *Camille*. In only a short time, she'd become the person I most wanted to hang out with. She was so smart and grounded, nothing seemed to faze her. If only she wasn't so attractive, she could be my first female friend ever. But I could still see her topless and handcuffed to that bed. Shit, that had been hot.

The keycard sounded in the lock. Finally, Sods was back. But when I looked up, Lionel walked in the room, followed by a bunch of other guys.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“We have a surprise for you, Jonesy.” Lionel rolled the desk chair to a space at the end of the beds. “Have a seat.”

Mystified, I sat down. The other guys arranged themselves around the room, with Lepper still holding the door open.

Then Lionel produced an MP3 speaker. I heard a few notes of familiar music that made me feel queasy. What was it? Oh shit, it was “The Valley!”

But before I could tell Lionel to shut the damn thing off, something strutted through the door.

Something was the world’s ugliest woman: very tall, with neon pink hair, a shiny blue dress, and...dark scruff on her chin. As her hips swayed in time to the music, I realized it was T.J.!

“What the fuck?” I said. T.J. was followed by Sods in a bright yellow wig. Alarmingly, with his pretty boy looks, he actually made a good-looking woman. As did the slender Foxy who sashayed in next in a green wig. But I wasn't ready for

the last person: Marty. A 6'4", 200+ pound guy in a short blue dress that showed off his gigantic hairy legs—well, nobody was ready for that.

Once in position around me, they started dancing to the music. Incredibly, they were in sync with the song and each other. They couldn't mimic the intricate dancing of Indigo Butterfly, but they were pretty damn close. I was slack-jawed in amazement, but when the quiet Foxy accompanied a dramatic hip jerk with a sexy wink at me, I released a loud snort of laughter. The guys around me had been holding back, but now they laughed too. Everyone was screaming and hooting. The whole routine was nuts.

When they began circling me with jerky dance movements, I could see how hard they were working. Beads of sweat were forming on Marty's forehead under his bright orange bangs. The usually cocky T.J. silently counted out each step. Foxy was concentrating hard. Only Sods seemed to be enjoying himself, smiling and lip-synching in perfect time. Well, the guy loved dancing.

When the song drew to an end, I knew what was coming. Sure enough, Lionel and Wills yanked my chair away, and hockey sticks magically appeared in the hands of each dancer. But when they began whacking me with the sticks, a scene that had been haunting my nightmares lately, I could not stop laughing.

The music died away, and I looked up at all the grinning faces around me.

"That was fucking incredible," I said.

"We want to cheer you up," Sods said.

“Yeah,” T.J. agreed. “You’ve been a fucking black cloud lately.”

Wow. I’d gone from feeling like everyone hated me to this. “Thank you, guys. This was...I don’t even have the words to describe how I feel. I mean, I’ve always wanted to see you guys in dresses.” As my voice cracked with laughter, someone smacked my ass with a hockey stick.

Then they all started telling me who did what. Lepper, Wills, and Gilly had gone to the creepy mall near the arena to buy the wigs and dresses. Lionel and Craggy had been the dance choreographers. And of course, T.J., Sods, Foxy, and Marty had worked their asses off practicing.

I thanked them all again. I was an idiot to ever think that these guys would desert me when shit went down. We were a team, and we had each other’s backs.

THE BREAKFAST CLUB

NATE

“Is that what you’re wearing to the Salang’s party?” Marty eyed my faded jeans and t-shirt.

“Guess not.” I went up and changed into nicer clothes. Marty’s nervousness made me feel like that loser kid you can’t take anywhere. We got into his car and took off.

“You need to chill,” I said.

“Don’t mess up tonight. Elaine’s family is important to me,” he replied. “If this is about food, I could have brought back as much as you wanted.”

“Well, it’s not just food. I want to see what Camille’s family is like.”

He looked over at me. “Why? Do you like her?”

“Well, I think she’s pretty cool.” Camille was the person I most wanted to be with all the time. At first, I wanted to nail her, but now I really enjoyed hanging with her.

“She’s not one of your usual girlfriends,” Marty warned. “You can’t just fool around and then dump her.”

“It’s more likely she’d dump me.”

“Yeah, that’s probably true. That would be okay,” he said.

I winced. “Ouch. Some friend you are.”

“Look, I’m really serious about Elaine. And since you and I are friends, whatever you do reflects on me. That’s why I want you to treat Camille with the utmost respect.”

“The utmost respect? Fuck, did I walk into Downtown Abbey or something? Forsooth, I am not worthy to touch the hem of her skirt.” That conjured up the idea of lifting the hem of Camille’s skirt and checking out all the goodies underneath.

“See, you’re thinking dirty thoughts about her right now. Cut it out,” said Marty. “Also, it’s *Downton Abbey*.”

Jeez, first Camille and now Marty could read my mind. Did my face have some horny bat signal that everyone else could see? “Don’t worry. I’ll be good.”

We pulled up to their townhouse. Marty reached into the back seat and pulled out a gift bag.

“What did you bring?” I felt guilty because I had nothing.

“A flowering plant for Fernanda’s birthday. And Izzy really likes Roger’s chocolates, so I got her a box.”

Inside the house, it was chaos. People were jammed in everywhere, and there was loud chatter and music.

“Marty! Marty!” A voice rang out over the crowd, and a petite woman squeezed her way through. She hugged Marty tightly even though he was twice her size. “And you brought a friend!”

“Yes, Elaine said it would be okay. This is Nate. He’s my roommate. Nate, this is Izzy, Elaine’s mom.”

“Of course, it’s okay! I tell my kids that all their friends are welcome, and you’re like my kid now.” She greeted me with such enthusiasm that I felt like a celebrity. “Nate, welcome, welcome. Have you eaten yet?”

She didn’t even wait for my answer before dragging us through the mostly female crowd into the dining room. There was food crammed onto every surface and more seemed to be coming from the kitchen. All of it smelled amazing.

Izzy seemed to have more than two hands as she filled plates for both of us.

The names of the dishes overflowed my brain: pancit, adobo, lumpia, sinangag. And she called every dish Marty’s favourite.

“Oh boy, there’s that fried chicken,” I said.

“You like Fernanda’s fried chicken?” Izzy asked and then added enough to my plate to fill a KFC bucket. Now I was grateful that Marty had stopped me from eating that burrito.

“Make room for Marty and Nate,” Izzy declared as she hustled us into the kitchen where women were chatting as they continued to produce more food. She turned to me. “Marty prefers to eat at a table, is it okay with you?”

“Of course.” Because I couldn’t imagine balancing this much food on my lap. The chicken alone must have weighed two pounds.

My first bite of chicken was perfection: salty and crispy on the outside, sweet and juicy inside. I was in carnivore heaven. Unfortunately, every time my mouth was full, one of the ladies would ask a question.

“Are you a hockey player like big Marty?” asked Fernanda, maker of the legendary chicken.

“Yeah, I play for the Vice too.” I had an urge to tell them that I was the second leading scorer on the team because they would greet that news with all the admiration given to the Art Ross Trophy winner.

There was a huge difference between my home and Camille’s. My family was sociable too, but there was always an agenda. They entertained for business and relationship building. It made my dad happy to have important people over.

But here at the Salang house, everyone welcomed me without knowing a damn thing about me. This place was like a big hug. No wonder Marty came over all the time, it wasn’t the food, it was the warmth. But the food sure didn’t hurt. I crunched into a spring roll and there was an explosion of flavours: spicy pork, carrot, and cabbage.

“Must try with sweet and sour sauce.” Izzy pushed a red dish towards me. She seemed to be everywhere at once.

A tiny older woman sat down at the table. Izzy introduced her as Dora. She must be Camille’s grandmother.

“Kumusta?” I asked.

There was a moment of total silence. Oh man, did I mess up? I meant to ask how she was but maybe I’d cursed or something. Served me right for trying to learn Tagalog from an app.

The ladies broke into excited chatter. Dora answered me, and I understood nothing. That was the problem with language apps—if people didn’t respond like you expected, you were hooped. I nodded, which seemed to satisfy her.

“You speak Tagalog?” Izzy asked, which seemed pretty optimistic based on my one word.

“Just a few words.” I pointed to my plate. “Masarap.” I knew the word delicious was going to come in handy tonight.

More praise was heaped on me, and Marty gave me the side-eye.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Alice asked. She was Izzy’s sister.

My mouth was full, this time with a masarap noodle dish, so I only shook my head.

All the ladies cooed in shock that someone as wonderful as me would not have a girlfriend. My chest puffed out a bit. This was how a man liked to be treated.

“Have you met Camille? Elaine’s sister,” asked Alice. “She’s very pretty.”

I nodded and swallowed. “Yeah.”

“Where is Elaine?” Marty asked.

Just then Elaine and Camille walked in the back door with big trays of barbequed skewers. Camille was dressed up in a fancy red top and black pants. For a moment, I stopped chewing and just stared at her. Not only did she look beautiful, but it was good to see her familiar face in this big crowd.

“Hey, Camille,” I said.

“Oh hey, Nate.” She flashed a quick smile and then turned to her mother. “The barbeque is ready.”

“Give some to Marty and Nate,” Izzy said. “Make sure they get both pork and chicken.”

Elaine leaned over and kissed Marty, then held out the platter of skewered meats.

“Lainey, you never told us about Nate,” scolded Izzy. “A big, good-looking hockey player—just like Marty.”

With zero subtlety, Alice pulled out the chair beside me. “Here, Cami, I’ll take out the barbeque. You sit beside Nate. Make sure his beer glass stays full.”

Camille plunked down. “Did I not tell you this would happen?” she whispered as she topped up my beer. Then she poured herself a glass.

“Maybe you should stop fighting the forces of the universe and go out with me,” I said.

“Didn’t you take a vow of chastity?” she asked.

Distracted by the warmth of Camille’s body against mine at the crowded table, I had no memory of why I’d made that vow.

Fernanda returned with a big plate of food, which she slid in front of Camille. “Did you know that we’re celebrating Camille’s new job?”

“Oh really? I thought it was your birthday,” I said.

Fernanda waved a dismissive hand. “At my age, is not a big deal. Camille has a new job, and she is very talented. You’ll see when she does the karaoke.”

“Why do I feel like cattle on the auction block?” Camille muttered, too low for anyone but me to hear. Then in a louder voice, she added, “This *is* Fernanda’s party.”

“Can celebrate two things at once,” Izzy said. “Do you want more food, Nate?”

“Actually, I’m getting pretty full,” I admitted. Izzy’s face fell so I quickly added, “But maybe one more of those lumpy things?”

“Lumpia,” Camille corrected and transferred two from her plate to mine. “My mother’s specialty.”

“They’re so delicious,” I told Izzy. “You’re an amazing cook. Well, everyone here is. This is the best meal I’ve had in ages.”

That was clearly the right thing to say because the women assured me that I would be invited to every event for the rest of the year.

“You’re such a suck-up,” Camille said softly.

“It’s the perfect match. I like to eat, and your family likes to feed people.”

After we finished eating, I followed Camille through the crowded house. “I want to find Rocky—the cruise ship guy—and talk to him.”

She led me out to the garage where a big group of men were talking, drinking, and—of course—eating. As quickly as I’d been served food, I now had a drink in my hand. Filipinos must be the most hospitable people on the planet.

Rocky was a short, stocky man with deeply tanned skin and cropped black hair. Camille explained about her cruise ship dream.

“You want to work on the dock? You need big muscles. Like your boyfriend.” He grinned and motioned to me.

“He’s not my boyfriend. And no, I want to work *on* the ship. What’s it like?”

Rocky scowled. “It’s not a job for a nice girl like you.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“What do you want to do?” he asked.

“I’d like to work as an entertainer. And also do activities stuff.”

The scowl remained on his face. “Hard work and long hours, even if you’re on staff. I was crew, so even harder. But being trapped at sea so long—some people cannot handle it.”

“I think I’d be great,” Camille said. “I’d love to travel, I’ve never gone anywhere. And I love to sing.”

“You’re too pretty. Too many men bother you,” Rocky declared.

I nodded. Camille was so hot that men probably hit on her when she walked down the street. How bad would it be if she was stuck on a boat?

“I am perfectly capable of telling a man no,” she declared. Well, I knew that from months of rejection.

Rocky shook his head. “It’s different. You’re out there for so long, same people all the time. Very lonely. Lots of drinking. People do stupid things.” The more I heard about this cruise ship business, the more it felt like the wrong job for her.

“What exactly would a cruise ship entertainer do?” asked Camille.

“Two kinds of singers. Some work for the cruise lines, but maybe it’s better to be in a party band.”

“What’s that?”

“They have their own group—musicians and singers—all apply together and the cruise ship hires all of them. Party bands always looking for new people. Tough job though.” He shook his head again. “Not what I would want my daughter to do. If I had one.”

Yet another petite older woman appeared. She wrapped her arm through Rocky's and laughed. "You had good times too, Rocky. You always joke about the Filipino Mafia."

Finally he smiled a little. "Maybe not all work."

She leaned forward and introduced herself. "Hello, I'm Marcella."

Camille turned to Rocky. "So, do you have any contacts at the cruise ships? Anyone I could talk to?"

He grunted. "Not really. That was a long time ago."

Marcella interrupted. "Cami, your grandmother was asking to hear you sing. And I think maybe Nate would like that too."

Camille muttered something else about cattle, and we went back into the house.

The karaoke was in the living room. Singing had been going on throughout the party. Initially I thought it was recorded music because holy crap, there were a lot of good singers here. A short, stocky man dressed in head-to-toe denim got up to sing. When he chose some sappy ballad, I was prepared for the worst, but when the guy opened his mouth he was better than Michael Bublé.

I leaned back with Camille perched on the arm of my chair. After all that food, a nap would feel good. The vibe in her house was so friendly and happy. No wonder Camille had confidence, being raised in such a positive atmosphere. I knew she worried about disappointing her family though.

"Camille, you come and sing next," one of the ladies called out, and other voices seconded that request.

I whistled and cheered, "Ca-mille! Ca-mille!"

She scowled. "Not you too."

Alice gave her a push. “Up you go. Impress your new boyfriend.”

Camille groaned. “He’s not my boyfriend.” But she went to the microphone anyway.

Alice leaned over and patted my leg. “Wait until you hear her sing. She has the voice of an angel.”

I leaned back to enjoy. Whatever her voice was like, it was a good excuse to stare at Camille for four minutes without getting in trouble.

When the instrumentals of an Adele song began, I remembered someone saying never to choose a karaoke song by a great vocalist because you’d sound crappy in comparison.

But that warning didn’t apply here. Camille’s voice transfixed me. Her voice was strong and melodic, but over and above that she added emotion. As she sang, I believed that she had suffered through the painful breakup in the lyrics. Was she vulnerable under her tough exterior?

When she finally finished singing, there was a hush. The noisy room had quieted as everyone listened. To be honest, her whole cruise ship dream sounded like a fantasy, but now I got it. Of course she should be on a stage, sharing her talents.

I started clapping, but I stopped when I was the only one. But when Camille smiled at me, I was glad I’d done it. This feeling came over me. I didn’t just want to sleep with Camille. I wanted something bigger, something big enough that even Marty would approve.

When she sat back down beside me, I felt honoured. She fanned herself, picked up her drink, and took a long sip. Camille beamed. Maybe performing made her extra-happy, like hockey did for me.

“How about you now, Nate? Lola would like to hear you,” Alice called out. She was beside Camille’s grandmother, who sat in an upright chair like a tiny queen in her court.

Panic swept over me. “Uhh, I’m really sorry, there’s no way. I cannot sing at all.”

“Haven’t you ever done karaoke?” Camille asked.

“Yeah sure, but only drunk karaoke. And by that I mean not only was I drunk but everyone in the room was too.”

“Oh, come on,” Alice urged me. “Everyone does it. Nobody will judge you. And besides, Cami will help you.”

Yeah, but everyone else here could sing. I swallowed hard.

Camille jumped in. “We shouldn’t make guests do something they hate, Tita Alice.”

Her aunt waved this off, but luckily a duet of teenaged girls took over the microphone and saved me.

I turned back to Camille. “You were amazing. Not only your voice—which is as good as any pop star—but the way you add feelings.”

“Um, thanks.” She looked a little skeptical, like this was some new come-on.

“No, I really mean it. Have you ever thought about going on one of those talent shows like *The Voice* or *Canada’s Got Talent*? You’d win for sure. You’re the complete package.”

“It’s no big deal, Nate. Lots of people are better singers than me. Including some in this very house.”

I pushed on. “You don’t have to be modest. Like me, I’m really good at hockey so it’s not bragging if I say so. Anyway, I can see why you want to be a cruise ship entertainer. You’d

be amazing. When you were up there, I couldn't take my eyes off you."

She turned away, but not before a smile lifted her cheeks.

"Peaches, when I met you, I thought you were really hot. But the more I get to know you, well, you're way more than that. Everything you've done, you know, for my c-a-s-e." I tried to keep things stealth.

"Uh Nate, everyone here except the baby can spell."

"Oh right. Seriously, you have a lot of talents."

She muttered a thank you, then popped up. "I need a drink."

I followed her to the kitchen. Marty and Elaine were sitting there, holding hands and talking, in their own world as usual.

"I think we better get going, Jonesy. Early practice tomorrow," said Marty.

"Already? I'm having a great time," I said.

"You're enjoying our party?" Camille sounded incredulous.

I nodded vigorously. "I wish my family was like this."

Her mother appeared bearing two enormous foil-wrapped containers. "Don't forget your doggy bags."

Marty rushed to help her. "Izzy, Nate and I live together. You don't need to give us both food."

"You two have big appetites. I know this will be gone in no time."

I took my container with a huge smile. "Wow. I'm not going to say no. Your cooking is so good. And now I'll be eating like a king all week."

Izzy beamed. “Marty, you bring Nate over anytime. Maybe next time, Camille will invite you.”

“That’d be great,” I agreed with eyes glued to Camille.

Her mom reached into the fridge and produced yet another container. “Cami, you take this out to the car for Nate.”

“I’m sure he can handle it.” Camille put the container on top of the one I had.

“Then you help him with the door,” her mother said. And in the smoothest move since T.J. at a Vegas nightclub, she asked Marty to help her move a chair in Dora’s room—thus ensuring us some privacy.

Camille shook her head as we headed outside. “Just ignore my family’s ridiculous efforts to fix us up.”

I lifted the hatchback of Marty’s SUV and put the food inside. Then I turned to Camille.

“What if I don’t want to?”

Her eyes widened. Under the shelter of the hatchback hood, I moved closer. So close that I could feel the warmth of her body heat. She smelled like barbecue, sweet fruit, and that sharp musk that was Camille’s real scent. The closer I got, the more she flooded my senses. I’d always wanted Camille, but now everything was complicated. I needed her, and not just to find out who my ex was. I liked hanging out with her, talking to her, and getting her advice. Camille was someone I’d grown to depend on.

I rested my hands on the silken fabric covering her shoulders and drew her closer. She felt soft and yielding under my tensed palms. Our bodies were touching now, her legs against mine and her rounded breasts brushing my torso.

I bent my head down. My hand cradled her downy cheek and lifted her face until our gazes met. My eyes were half-lidded with lust, but hers were wide and unreadable.

“Is it okay if I kiss you?” The words felt awkward, but I had to prove I was trying. I wasn’t the asshole I used to be.

I held my breath as I waited for her answer. It felt so important.

She frowned. “This is such a bad idea.”

Something lurched inside of me. Was I headed for rejection number 20? Then she laughed softly. “But when have I ever done the right thing?”

She pressed her body tighter to mine, and a groan caught in my chest. Heat surged between us.

Our faces came closer. I felt the hot exhale of her breath and then the velvet softness of her lips. We kissed gently at first, then I went at her hungrily, nipping her lower lip and then crushing her mouth against mine. After being with Camille so often and wanting her so much, actually kissing her made desire flood my veins until my whole body overheated.

When we finally separated, I rested my forehead against hers. “I’ve wanted to do that for so long.”

Camille’s eyelids fluttered, but her voice was mocking. “Is that all you want?”

I chuckled. “Not even close. But it’s a good start.” I leaned closer to kiss her again and this time she wrapped her arms around my neck. She tasted delicious, more masarap than anything I’d eaten tonight.

Ahem.

Marty's loud throat-clearing was a warning. By the time he and Elaine appeared, we were a polite distance apart.

"Thanks for having us over," I said.

"No problem." Camille shivered, and I longed to warm her.

I didn't say much on the way home because my mind was racing. Was I finally going to get a chance with Camille?

Marty didn't say a word on the drive home, but as we parked, he turned and looked at me like somebody's stern father—except even scarier.

"I respect her!" I said. But respect wasn't exactly the right word anymore. It wasn't about desire either, the way I felt about Camille was something new and maybe a little scary.

BETTER LUCK TOMORROW

CAMILLE

HANNAH and I met at Starbucks for an update on the case.

“I have news,” we both said at once and then laughed.

“You go first,” Hannah said.

“Okay, I want to eliminate Kim Ha-Eun. I don’t have anything specific, but everything I’ve seen about her online doesn’t match the right profile. She’s from Busan not Seoul, she’s very involved with her church, and she works in a law office. She seems like the last person who’d want to get involved in a public scandal.” Sometimes, a detective had to go by instinct.

Hannah looked over the links I’d bookmarked, reading the Korean captions. “Yeah, I agree. She seems to be all about positivity. And a little on the naive side.”

“Okay, that only leaves Daisy Choi. Have you got any news?” I asked. It had been impossible to find anything on Daisy, so Hannah had sent a desperate friend request. Since Daisy had lived in Vancouver, they actually had a friend in common.

“Yup. She accepted me,” Hannah replied happily. “I saw her profile, and she didn’t go to the same school as Bo-Bae.”

“Could they have met anyway?” I asked.

“Possibly, but I looked on a map. Their schools were on opposite sides of Seoul. And there’s a three year difference in their ages. It feels very unlikely.”

“So, do you think we can cross her off?” I asked.

Hannah nodded. “Judging from her updates, she doesn’t seem to be pining over Nate.”

“Damn. We’ve eliminated all three Korean ex-girlfriends, but we’re no closer to finding our mystery woman,” I said.

“We need caffeine first. I’ll get it,” said Hannah. I counted out loonies to pay for mine. My weekend job was great, but I needed another one.

“Here you go.” She handed me my favourite: the pink drink.

“Thanks so much.” I poked my straw through the plastic lid. Two cute guys walked by, and one of them smiled at me. I blinked back at him. What was wrong with my flirt game? This was all Nate’s fault. He was taking up too much of my brain space: talking to Nate, hanging out with Nate, and... kissing Nate.

“Ungh,” I groaned.

“Something wrong with your drink? Besides the disgusting colour and the artificial flavour?”

“Hey, I like these,” I protested. “And it’s not my drink, it’s Nate.”

“What’s he done now?” Hannah asked eagerly.

“He’s a lot nicer than I thought. And attractive. He has the best body of any guy I’ve ever met in real life.”

Hannah’s lip curl was Olympic-level. “Don’t make me admit he’s hot. His body is killer, and I’m sure he’s got abs for days.”

“He does,” I affirmed, and she shot me a suspicious look.

“Is he one of those guys who takes his shirt off at every opportunity?”

If only.

“I accidentally saw him naked.” *With a mega-erection*, I added silently.

“Do I want to know?” she asked.

“Nope. But it wasn’t done on purpose.” Unless you call slipping in bed beside me naked “on purpose.” Hannah would probably classify it as the first step in sexual assault. But as someone who had done her share of messing up, I was more forgiving.

Her eyebrows shot up. “Why are we talking about him this way? It doesn’t matter how good his body is, it’s still attached to his head. Didn’t you say you wouldn’t go out with Nate Jones if he were the last man on the planet?” Before I could answer, she continued, “I knew this. I could tell by the way you two were looking at each other that something was going on.”

“Nothing is going on.” One kiss didn’t count, even if it was already in my kissing hall of fame.

“Good. Because what part of racist manwhore do you not understand?”

Maybe he'd dated only Asian women before, but he was trying to change. He was open to advice and guidance. Nate's mistakes seemed to come out of ignorance. Once he understood why things were wrong, he stopped doing them. That was more than I could say about most people, male or female.

"He's not like that anymore. Last night he came to a family party, and he had learned a few words of Tagalog to speak to my grandmother," I said.

"He did that to impress you—so you'd sleep with him."

"No. He didn't even do it in front of me. My mother told me afterwards. He did it because he remembered she doesn't speak much English. He actually listens to what I say."

"Isn't that the bare minimum?" she asked.

"Please. How many times have you had to tell a boyfriend something over and over?" Nate's listening skills made me feel almost...treasured.

"Wait—a boyfriend? You're not already..." Hannah's voice dropped away in horror.

"No, I'm not." But I was considering it. Nate had always been attractive, but that was erased by his sleazy ways. Now I wasn't sure if I liked him because I knew him better or because he had changed. Whatever, the end result was that I was very attracted to him. And we had a lot in common: we were both extroverted, fun-loving, and spontaneous.

"Seriously, you could do a lot better," she said. "You always aim too low."

"Really? What kind of guy should I date?"

She squinted at me. "You want the truth?"

“Like you’d say anything else.”

Off she went. “You don’t value yourself enough. Choose someone who really appreciates you. Not guys who think they’re the shit and look down on you—like all you are is arm candy. Like Nate. He’s a hockey player—their girlfriends have to be hot because it’s part of the image. And maybe he’s trying, but if you go out with him, you’re only enabling his stupid fantasies—”

I interrupted her, “Enough about Nate. What do you mean about valuing myself?”

“Well, like after high school. Why didn’t you go to university or college?”

“I was fed up with school. And I didn’t have money for tuition,” I explained. Hannah’s family was rich, so she never understood that all of us couldn’t do an arts degree while we dreamed up our futures.

“Okay, but why do you keep working at restaurants?” she asked.

“I’m not doing that anymore,” I said defensively. “In fact, my new job’s going really well. My tech sessions are a big hit at Oceanview.”

All anyone wanted was to make Zoom calls with grandchildren or watch soccer games in Europe, so it wasn’t exactly high tech. But everyone was happier, which was the main thing.

Hannah nodded. “It’s a better job, but it’s only part-time, right? And your idea about being a cruise ship entertainer is okay, but I think you should do something that involves your brain.”

“My brain? I’m a straight C student.” Why was she dumping on my dream—now that I’d finally figured it out?

“Don’t confuse good marks in school with being smart. There are lots of reasons people don’t do well in high school. Like dyslexia. Or family issues. Or illness,” she said.

But I didn’t have any of those problems. Maybe I’d been a little attendance-deficient, but I’d tried. “I disagree about self-worth issues. I think I’m a very confident person.”

“Nobody is a monolith. Of course you’re confident about the things you’re good at: dealing with people, your appearance, your friendships.” She tapped her coffee cup on the tabletop. “Look, I’m never going to be on Team Nate, but at minimum you need to wait until we find his ex-girlfriend. Once he talks to her, you can get a read on whether he’s really changed.”

“So, let’s find her.” I pulled out my file folder. We went over our notes one more time, looking for that one last clue that detectives always found before breaking a case. But we’d already eliminated the three Korean women that Nate had dated, so what now?

I pushed away my laptop. “Well, what would Sherlock Holmes do? We need to go back to the beginning and question all our assumptions. Let’s throw some new theories out there. What if Bo-Bae made it all up and there is no friend?”

“Or maybe Nate is a fake name and the real hockey player is in the NHL or something?” Hannah suggested.

If that was true, at least Nate would feel better. But we wouldn’t have solved anything.

“Let’s watch that video where she talks about her inspiration for the song again. Maybe we can tell if she’s

lying,” I said.

We pulled up the Indigo Butterfly interview. Bo-Bae was gorgeous in an almost artificial way. She wore a sequined mini-skirt and her legs were ridiculously long. Her luminous eyes widened with sympathy as she discussed her good friend from high school and what she went through after dating Nate.

“So, it’s like a warning to other women to look out for guys like this?” the unseen interviewer asked.

“Defo. If we can stop innocent young women from hooking up with...predators like him—then I’ll be satisfied.”

I could hear Nate’s protests: *I’m not a predator. I’m a normal horny guy!*

But something else about Bo-Bae’s answer nagged at me. “Where did she learn to speak English so fluently?”

“I think she taught herself by watching *Friends*, just like R.M.,” Hannah said. “Or maybe that’s the English language origin story all the K-pop stars use.”

“Yeah, but *Friends* uses American slang. She used the word *defo*, which is Australian slang. Come to think about it, I’ve heard her use other Australian slang,” I said.

“So? There’s lots of travel between Asia and Australia. Maybe she has Aussie friends.”

But this felt like a clue. “How do we know where she went to high school?”

“Because there’s a video of her graduating. The whole group went to celebrate with her—you know, in the days before they were famous.”

“Maybe she went to another school before that one,” I insisted.

Hannah shook her head. “We’ve looked and never found any evidence that she was anywhere else. Besides, it’s not like a fourteen-year-old can take off on her own. Oh wait. Maybe we can find out if her father ever worked outside Korea.”

“Hannah Park, you’re a genius,” I said. “Where does her father work?”

Hannah scrolled her notes. “Let me look. It’s a Korean car company. Here it is. He’s a manager at KIA.”

I logged into my new, meagre LinkedIn profile and looked up Bo-Bae’s father. Like a conscientious middle manager, he had listed all his various jobs at KIA.

“Ah ha!” I turned my laptop to face Hannah. “He lived in Sydney, Australia for nine months. Exactly the right dates for her to attend high school there, although briefly.”

“And what if she had bad dating experiences there? Maybe she already had her knives out for men who have an Asian fixation,” Hannah said.

“So we were wrong to assume that the ex-girlfriend was Korean. If Bo-Bae went to an international school, then the ex could be any race.”

“Good thinking,” said Hannah. “But how does this help us? We’ve only eliminated three women and Nate’s ex list is ridiculously long.”

“Okay, let’s try the easiest method first. I’ll ask Nate if he remembers if any of his exes went to school in Australia.” When Hannah made a skeptical face, I added, “Look, he’s more likely to know that. For starters, their English would be better.”

“If that doesn’t work,” Hannah said, “we can cross-ref his list with Bo-Bae’s age. It’s most likely someone exactly her

age, or one year older or younger. I'll look up all the international schools in Sydney. Maybe one of them is claiming her as their own now that she's famous."

"We are really good at this stuff," I said. "Too bad it's not a career."

Hannah nodded. "It feels like it should be. We understand social media and youth culture. If you were a middle-aged detective, you could hire us to ferret out information. We could do a social media search. We could do undercover work too. Guys are way more likely to brag to a young woman. Or underestimate how much we understand and blab in front of us. We can use their prejudices against them."

"That would be awesome." Even being a cruise ship entertainer would come second to being an actual detective. "But going undercover could be dangerous."

"You infiltrated the We Hate Nate gang. That was very badass."

"Yeah, but I messed up. I couldn't even name five Indigo Butterfly songs. Next time, I'd prepare a lot better," I said.

"Did you know they have a mini-scandal going on?" she asked.

"Who, Indigo Butterfly?"

"Yes. Cherie has secretly been dating a guy from 5Hands for a year."

I frowned. "Why is that a scandal? They're adults, they should be able to go out. Unless it's true that they have no dating policies in their contracts."

"Nobody admits it. But in this case, they both work for rival entertainment companies." Hannah kept explaining, but I

tuned out. I enjoyed K-pop, but I wasn't into all the gossip and drama. And if everything was true about all the training and rules, the perfect pop songs came at a ridiculously high price. I let my mind wander back to Nate—more specifically Nate's talented mouth. He kissed like that *and* he liked to give oral sex. Yes, please.

“Okay, I've got an essay to complete, so we better wrap up. Can I drop you somewhere?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah, let me message Nate and see if he's home. I'd like to ask him about his exes as soon as possible.”

She made a sucking sound. “And you have to do this in person? You're not going there to hit on him, are you?”

“Of course not. It's strictly business.” Still it would be the first time I'd seen him since our kiss, so who knew what would happen.

BRICK

CAMILLE

MARTY OPENED the front door and looked behind me hopefully.

“I’m alone. Are you expecting Elaine?” I hung my jacket on their coat rack. Knightley ran up to say hello, and I scratched his chin. Then he took off on his cat business.

“Yes. We’re supposed to go out for dinner tonight. She’s coming over after work.”

“It’s a bit early. She wouldn’t even be off work yet.” At Marty’s disappointed expression, I added, “But I’m sure she’ll be here any moment.”

Nate was in the living room looking at his phone. He looked up at me. There was a slight awkwardness between us—like, how do we act now?

“Hey, Peaches,” he said with elaborate casualness.

Oh no, not even his stupid nickname bothered me anymore. I had grown accustomed to Nate’s ways. The man himself looked pretty tasty today. His blue t-shirt stretched taut

across his broad chest and his jeans were artfully faded and frayed.

I resisted my body's urge to sit right beside him and plunked down in an aging plaid armchair. "I've got good news and bad news."

"Hit me," he said.

"Well, the good news is that we eliminated both Kim Ha-Eun and Daisy Choi."

Nate's brow furrowed. "So, it's not either of them?"

"Yeah, that's the bad news. We're back to the original long list. Don't worry, we have a new lead. But it's going to take some work from you."

He looked less than enthusiastic. "I tried before. I mean, I remember stuff about my old girlfriends. It's just not the stuff you want."

I was ready to talk him through this. Any true crime fan knew that people didn't realize the importance of what they remembered. "Let's start out easy. Did any of your exes live in Australia?"

He shook his head. "Nobody ever mentioned it."

"Maybe one of them used Aussie slang," I suggested.

"Like what?" Nate asked. "G'day? Shrimp on the barbie? Nobody ever said shit like that."

"Did you notice anyone using words that are English, but not quite what you expect? Like lollies, piss up, bogan, or cobber. Those are all Australian slang words."

He looked at me blankly. "How do you know all this?"

“I have cousins in Melbourne.” I had cousins everywhere—well, we called them cousins but who knew if they were really related. I moved onto an even easier question. “Did any of them speak English better than the others?”

Nate thought hard about this. “Yeah. Angela, Collette, Ting, and Eri. And Ji-Yoo, but you said it’s not her. They were all pretty fluent.”

I highlighted those names on the ex list. It was a good starting point. “Do you know any of their social media accounts?”

He reached out and put a warm hand on my shoulder. There was a tingling feeling where his thumb touched my skin.

“Camille. Are we not going to talk about what happened the other night?”

I couldn’t meet his eyes, so instead I looked at the rip in his jeans where I could glimpse a muscular thigh with fine blond hairs. Despite Hannah’s warnings, this attraction between us was almost palpable. But with Marty lurking in the next room and Elaine arriving at any moment, it wasn’t the right time.

“Look, let’s just focus on this right now. Finding her is the priority. We can talk later. Besides, you’re the one who wanted to fix this before the playoffs.”

He sighed, but reluctantly opened his laptop so we could check out his exes and look for connections to Australia. He pulled up the Instagram accounts of the four women he had mentioned. What Nate’s exes had in common was that they were all hot. I wasn’t sure if this made me feel better or worse.

“I wonder if that beach is in Australia? Looks like it.” I pointed to a photo of a short woman in a bikini. “Whose

account is this?”

“That’s Eri. I think she’s Japanese.” He scratched his head. “This reminds me, once we went to Kits Beach and she said the funniest thing. There was a guy in a skimpy Speedo and she joked that he was hiding a bird in there. I forget her exact words.”

I was only half-listening as I zoomed in on one of Eri’s handbags which looked like a genuine LV. Lucky. Then something clicked. “Wait. Did she say budgie smuggler?”

Nate laughed. “Yeah. That’s it. How did you know?”

I sat up straight. “Because that’s Aussie slang!”

I immediately honed in on Eri’s IG account, but it didn’t go back as far as her high school years. Most of the photos had so many friends in them that you could hardly see the backgrounds anyway. “Are you guys Facebook friends?”

“I don’t know. I hardly use Facebook anymore.” Nate’s casual tone drove me crazy. Did he not understand that this was a breakthrough? If we could see her FB account, then her schools might be listed. At the very least I could sort through her friends and see if any of them had gone to an Australian school.

With agonizing slowness, he pulled up his account.

“Guess not. I can’t even find her,” he said.

I opened my own FB account. I found Eri Nakamura with no issue. The tiny profile pic of a smiling Japanese woman looked familiar. All this sleuthing was making Nate’s exes so recognizable that I’d probably end up greeting them by accident if I ever met one.

“She’s got you blocked,” I said. “Which is definitely an important clue.”

The next few minutes were a flurry of activity. I searched Eri online for any links to Australia or Indigo Butterfly and messaged Hannah.

Hannah called back immediately.

“I’ve got news,” she said.

“Me too. I’m putting you on speaker,” I warned her, although it didn’t matter. Hannah never edited herself in front of Nate.

She sounded excited. “All I needed to do was search Lee Bo-Bae and Australia. She went to the Sydney Harbour International School. There’s even a photo of her visiting when they were on tour. Don’t know how we missed this before.”

“It’s because we went in with the wrong theory. Next time, we’ll know,” I replied.

“Next time? I wish,” said Hannah. “What have you got?”

“Eri Nakamura. She’s been to Australia and she’s got Nate blocked on FB. But I can’t find anything connecting her to an Australian school or Bo-Bae.”

“Eri was kinda possessive,” Nate chimed in. “She hated when I talked to other chicks and got pretty mean about it.”

That was important info. Normally all Nate said was that his exes were nice, so Eri must have been really bad.

“How did you guys break up?” There was a catch in my voice. This could be a glimpse into our own future.

He looked away. “I broke up with her. I hate doing shit like that, but she was a lot of work—you know, always fighting. I couldn’t keep up with her moods and it was distracting me from hockey.”

“How did she take the breakup?” I felt like a real detective.

Nate’s face fell. “Not great. She got really upset and threw something at me. Then afterwards, she called or dm’ed me constantly and when I didn’t respond, she started showing up places where I would be.”

“A crazy bitch,” said Hannah. “Which makes her an even better candidate.”

“Yeah, that’s what T.J. said. ‘Don’t stick your dick in crazy, Jonesy.’ But how do you know they’re crazy in the first place?”

Hannah sniffed. “Hmm, check for gouged out eyes in photos of her exes, boiled family pets, or hey, I’ve got a real crazy idea: maybe get to know them before you have sex with them?”

As the two of them bickered I considered whether Eri was the one. Ever since I got here, I’d been struggling to keep my hands off Nate, but now all I wanted to do was strangle him. How could he not mention her earlier? Obviously, Eri should have led the list of “exes most likely to cause a backlash against me.” But I wasn’t jumping to conclusions again. “Were there any other exes who took your breakups badly?”

“Not really. Maybe because I started dating more students. At least they were leaving. Then we could avoid all the breakup shit.” He scratched the back of his head. “Oh wait. There was one chick who keyed my car. Would that count?”

“Yeah, that would count. What’s her name?” I added Eileen Tran to our new list of suspects. “Okay. What are our next steps?”

“Your next steps. I still have an essay to write,” said Hannah. “But Eri does feel like our best suspect. Why don’t you check out the school website and their Facebook page to see if there’s any mention or photos of her?”

“On it. And I’ll look into the four others too. We’re getting there. Process of elimination,” I said.

Hannah made a derisive snort. “Sure. Three down and 997 to go. Not only have you stuck your dick in crazy, but it’s been everywhere else too.”

“Hey,” protested Nate. He glanced over to see if I was upset. But Nate’s long list of exes was old news.

“The truth hurts, rice chaser,” Hannah said.

After she hung up, I did a quick search for Eileen Tran. Perfect, she was one of those people who used the same user name for all her social media. While most of her profiles were set to private, her profile pic showed her with a guy. Since it wasn’t Nate, that was a good sign. I kept digging and found her TikTok account. The same guy appeared there, and they were definitely dating. Eileen had clearly forgotten all about Nate.

“Cami? What are you doing here?” Elaine asked. She was wearing a new green dress for her date with Marty. I made a mental note to try it on later to see if it looked as good on me.

“Hey, just working on Nate’s case,” I said.

“Oh, okay. Does Mom know you’re here?”

“Ugh. Thanks for reminding me. I’ll text her.” I grabbed my phone and sent a message. I added that I was with Nate, which would thrill my mom and prevent a lot of explanations.

“You’re welcome to stay for dinner. We could order in,” Nate said.

“Or would you guys like to come out with us?” Marty asked.

I shook my head. “I’m getting close here, so I’d really like some uninterrupted time to focus on my research.”

To my surprise, Elaine came over and hugged me. “I’m so proud of you. I told you when you did something you enjoyed, you’d be so good at it.”

“She’s amazing,” Nate agreed.

My cheeks flushed. All this praise was unexpected. “Wait until I actually get some answers.”

“You will,” Marty chimed in. “Nobody works that hard without results.”

“Besides, I feel better just knowing that you’re doing all this stuff,” Nate said.

I felt almost tearful, but managed to mutter thanks. Once Marty and Elaine were gone, Nate asked, “What should I order for dinner? Pizza?”

Pizza again? I wanted something healthier. “What were you planning to eat if I wasn’t here?”

“Grill some chicken, make brown rice and a big salad.”

“That sounds good to me,” I said. “I can help if you want.”

“No, it’s okay. You keep working,” Nate said.

With Nate in the kitchen, I got down to work. The Sydney Harbour International School had a generic, appeal-to-rich-parents website which emphasized academics and quality staff. They had a private messaging board, but I was no hacker, only a dogged user of social media. The school Facebook page would be more likely to mention Bo-Bae, so I scrolled through their posts.

Nate reappeared and put two drinks on the table.

“Hey, Camille.”

“Yeah?”

“You know all that stuff that Hannah said about me sleeping with too many women?”

“Mmmm.” I was trying to listen and search at the same time.

“Is that how you feel too?”

My attention was snagged by a note of desperation in Nate’s voice. “What do you mean?”

“Are you, I don’t know, disgusted by what I did before?” he asked.

“No, of course not. Look, people gossip about me because I’m someone who enjoys sex, so I would never slut-shame anyone. Besides, it’s different for guys, right?”

“Yeah. But I left home when I was 16 to play junior hockey in Peterborough. So, sometimes what I think is normal isn’t what other people think.”

This was something I had already noticed about Nate, that he had the value systems of a teenaged bro. Now it all made sense.

“That’s pretty young to be away from your family,” I said.

Nate moved closer, until I could feel the warmth of his body next to mine. But it didn’t feel sexual, more like he craved some human touch. “It sucked. But they made fun of guys who got homesick. So I manned up.”

“That’s really awful.” My hand hovered over his, then I put it down and squeezed.

He gave me a weak smile. “It’s just, when you didn’t want to talk about it the other night, I thought maybe you feel the same way as Hannah does.”

“Nate. Have you ever known me to lie to you? I say what I mean. We’re getting close and I really want to solve this case—for your sake and mine. Then, we can talk.” Hopefully, my feelings for him would be clearer by then.

Nate nodded. “Okay, I’ll get out of your hair now. Dinner coming right up.” He half rose, then sat down again. “Just so you know. I’m totally healthy. Like maybe I’ve slept with a few women, but I always use protection and I get checked out regularly.”

Was that TMI or good to know? I turned back to my laptop, and he finally left.

Back to work. I scrolled through endless photos of student activities, the Sydney Opera House, and Bondi Beach. Every single girl was making duck lips or peace signs. Kill me now.

“Dinner time,” Nate called. “Where do you want to eat?”

“In there.” I needed a break. I got up and stretched, then made my way to the kitchen.

“You cooked all this?” I asked. Dinner was pretty basic, but not bad, especially the colourful salad which had carrots,

purple cabbage, cucumbers, and cherry tomatoes. Maybe he used one of those meal delivery services

He nodded. “I’ve been learning this season. We had a nutritionist who warned us about the amount of sodium and bad fats in restaurant meals.”

“Doesn’t hockey burn off all the calories?” I asked.

“Yeah, but it’s not about calories, it’s about feeding your body the right way. Then you can play at peak performance.” He grinned. “I mean, I’m no purist. You’ve seen me eat all kinds of crap. But it’s important right now.”

“Why? For the playoffs?” I asked.

“Yeah, that. And to make the NHL. It’s my time to get noticed.”

“What are your chances?”

Now Nate looked serious. “Well, based on my stats, not bad. I’m one of the top scorers. All this Indigo Butterfly stuff isn’t helping though.”

I nodded. This was why he was so desperate to find his ex. But so far, the Nate Hate hadn’t become a big deal in the media or anything.

“You don’t want to get a rep as a problem. Like Sods. He’s on my line, and he’s a good buddy. But he got in trouble almost as soon as he moved to Canada. And he’s never been called up—even though he’s a really good player.”

“What kind of trouble?”

Nate looked down. “Girl trouble.”

Shocker. “Don’t hockey players sleep with random women all the time? What makes his sex life worse?”

“Bad publicity. Sods fucked two women at once, and photos got out. Then when he was sent to live with an ex-player’s family for guidance, he fucked that up too.” Nate made a face. “These days he’s been keeping his nose clean. But it’s too late. The team thinks he’s immature and a troublemaker.”

“Will he never make it to the NHL?” I asked.

“Oh, he’s a first-round pick, so he’ll get a chance. But not until they believe he’s fixed his issues.”

“Are you a first-round pick?”

“Nope. Second rounder.” Nate finished the last of the salad. “So, no guarantees.”

“What happens if you don’t make the NHL?” I’d never considered this problem before. Elaine said that all the guys on the Vice made a decent salary, so I assumed they were happy to stay there. Marty had no aspirations to play at a higher level.

Nate looked off into the distance. “There are other leagues. But the NHL is the real deal. Most good players make it around my age. But you never know. A few guys play their first NHL game in their thirties. Depends on luck and opportunity.”

His easygoing attitude had disappeared. It was obviously the one thing he worried about most.

“I think you’ll make it,” I told him confidently even though I had no clue. But the last thing he needed right now was someone else riding on his insecurities.

He smiled at me. It was a boyish smile, so unlike the horny leers he used to give me. A sweet Nate Jones was unnervingly attractive.

I jumped up. “Let’s do the dishes. Then I can get back to my search.”

He stretched lazily and then stood. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of this.”

When I began to protest, Nate reached out and grasped my wrist. My skin tingled under his warm touch.

“You’re doing so much for me, Camille. Don’t know how I’m going to repay you.”

My normal sarcastic responses were trapped in my tight throat. I pulled away from his touch and went back to the living room. I sat down, released a long breath, and then got back to work.

Eventually, Nate returned and sat beside me on the couch. But by that time, I was deep into scanning old posts and photos. He started gaming with the volume on low.

Just when my eyes were watering with boredom, I found something: a small, unidentified photo of students at a sports day. But even with unplucked eyebrows and an adolescent body, it was Bo-bae. And the girl beside her looked like Eri.

“Nate? Can you come here for a sec?”

He hurried in, and I pointed to the photo. “Do you think that’s Eri?”

“It looks like her, but...” He squinted at the screen, so I enlarged it as much as possible. “Yeah. It’s her. She’s got a big mole, here.” He motioned to his neck.

I sat back. “Oh my God. We did it. We found her.”

There was a moment when time slowed. After all this effort, I’d done it. Me! I’d solved an actual mystery.

I was a real detective. I stood, raised my arms in triumph, and jumped up and down.

“Yay, yay, yay,” I squealed.

Nate laughed and stood next to me. He offered me his hand for a high five and I smacked it. As I bounced around, he pulled me into his arms for a tight hug.

“This is the best news ever!” He lifted me off the ground and swung me around. I threw back my head and screamed in pure joy. Like when I was a four-year-old being twirled by an older cousin.

When Nate finally lowered me to the floor, he kept his arms around me. I could feel the taut strength of his chest and legs against my body. God, his body was so incredible. As if in response to my desire, his erect cock poked against my stomach.

Nate noticed. “Oh shit.”

He released me and the space between us felt charged. For so long I’d been turning down Nate for good reasons, which had fled my desire-clouded brain. But the real question was whether he had changed. I told Hannah he was different now, but was I willing to take that risk?

I looked up at Nate and he was watching me with concern.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to... I can’t control how I, ugh, react to being close to you.”

That sweetness decided me. I placed my hands against that firm expanse of chest.

“You don’t have to apologize.” I tilted my face up to kiss him.

“Oh yeah,” he murmured as he lowered his mouth to mine. His mouth was firm and confident, and I relaxed into the heat between us.

BRING IT ON

NATE

WHEN DID sex get so complicated?

Camille was kissing me. Camille, my obsession. I went to sleep fantasizing about her. I woke up remembering every detail of that time her head was on the pillow beside me. I wanted to be with her all the time, and yet when we were together, I wanted more. I wanted to kiss her and touch her and yeah, fuck her senseless.

I tried to let things roll out naturally. *Concentrate on the now and stop fucking worrying.*

Her soft lips pressed against mine, and it felt fucking incredible.

I wrapped her in my arms and pulled her even closer. She smelled so good—like tropical flowers. Wait, was that a racist compliment? What if she demanded to know why I didn't think she smelled Canadian? What did Canadians smell like anyway? Moose? Snow? Bacon?

Fuck. My mind was all over the place. Coming on to women used to be so easy, but now I couldn't stop second-

guessing myself.

Once my cock got hard though, it was like my brain disconnected. And then I could easily fuck things up. She pressed her soft breasts and tummy against me, and all I could think about was fucking her.

Shit, shit, shit. I groaned.

She broke off the kiss. “What’s wrong?”

I lowered my eyes to meet hers. “Camille, I like you...a lot. And it’s not just sex. I like how smart and fun you are. I like talking to you. And I really appreciate how hard you worked to find Eri. I owe you big for that.”

“But?” she asked. Of course, because she could read me like a book.

“But...right now, if what I hope is going to happen is going down here, I don’t want to mess up. If I tell you how much I like your hair, your tits, or your ass, are you going to say I’m objectifying you?”

Camille laughed, and the musical sound eased my tensions. “Nate, I know you like me. And we’ve spent enough time together—without sex—that we understand each other.”

I gulped. “So, I can relax?”

“Sure. We’re both into sex, right? I want you to feel and do whatever comes naturally.” She shot me a look that was pure molten heat. “Because after reading your girlfriend list, I was very...intrigued.” She punctuated that welcome news with a pivot of her hips that rubbed against my cock in all the right ways. Not that there was a wrong way.

I took a deep breath and dove in.

“Baby, you’re so hot,” I murmured. I kissed along her ear and nipped at the lobe, pulling it out with my teeth. My hands pulled her tight against me, and I shoved one leg between hers. To my delight, she raised herself up and rode my thigh—rubbing herself on me.

I kissed her on the forehead, the cheeks, and finally on the mouth. She yielded in a way that seemed like permission to go even further. But instead of rushing to strip off her clothes and finally feasting on her tight little body, I lingered on the kissing. I alternated between her open mouth and her silky cheeks, then moved down to her warm neck. When I kissed her throat, she let out a little breathy sound that made my cock even harder. My mouth travelled down, lingering at the hollow above her breasts. I inhaled her true musk under the sweet florals. I reached between us with my hand tracing a line from her throat down to her cleavage.

“Oh god,” Camille breathed.

“Is this okay?” My free hand paused over the top buttons of her blouse.

Camille giggled. “C’mon. Can’t you tell I’m enjoying it?”

“Fuck, yeah. But I know I’m supposed to ask at every stage.”

Her expression mocked me. “Ask me for everything now. And make it hot.”

It took a moment for me to get what she wanted, but I was more than ready to oblige.

“I want to strip off your clothes and see you—all of you. I want to touch you. To squeeze and suck those magnificent titties until you’re totally turned on. To feel that sexy ass and stroke your pretty pussy. I wanna kiss and lick and suck every

inch of you. And then I want to fuck you—hard. I want to watch you come apart on my cock. I wanna make you scream out my name.”

Christ, I was ready to come after imagining all this. Camille’s eyes were wide, and the pink tip of her tongue ran over her lips.

“Sooo,” I asked. “Is that okay with you?”

All she could do was nod. Her attitude was gone now, replaced by straight-up lust. After all, she hadn’t been getting any either.

I scooped her up and walked to my bedroom. Ever since her comment about my messiness, I’d been keeping things tidy—hoping that this moment would come. I tossed her onto the bed where she landed with a sexy wiggle. Then I closed and locked the door and turned on the overhead light.

She put a hand over her eyes. “Not exactly romantic lighting.”

“Sorry, but I want to see every fucking inch of you,” I growled.

Camille smiled. “Oh, me too.”

So I yanked off my t-shirt and lay down beside her.

“These muscles are pretty yummy.” She ran her palm over my chest, her fingertips lingered on my nipples, her touch sending sensations through me.

“Not as nice as what I’m going to see.” I swiftly unbuttoned her silky blouse and pulled it apart. Her breasts were encased in a red lace bra.

“Red is my favourite colour,” I said.

“I thought you liked me in pink.” Her lower lip stuck out in an adorable pout.

“Actually, nothing at all is the best.”

She laughed at this and the laughter made her tits jiggle. Fuuuck. I pulled off her top completely and unsnapped her bra. She tossed it aside.

Her tits were everything I had imagined: round with fat dark nipples. I couldn't resist taking one in each hand and squeezing. I let my thumbs flick the tips of her nipples until they stood up in hard points.

“Ugh. That feels so good,” Camille grunted. She was busy too, running her hands over my pecs, arms, and abs. All that gym time paid off for more than hockey.

Those taut nipples called out to me. I leaned down and sucked hard on one side and then the other. Camille's breathing grew ragged and loud. Well, that was something to remember, her left breast was more sensitive. The nipple grew and elongated and I sucked even harder. When I bit down—gently—she almost flew off the bed.

“Nate, I need more. Let's get naked,” said my greedy little Camille.

I was more than good with that suggestion. As I reached down to unzip my jeans, she did the same. I put a hand over hers.

“Stop. Let me undress you. I've only been fantasizing about this forever.”

“You're ridiculous,” Camille said but she was smiling.

After pulling off my socks and jeans, I unzipped her jeans and pulled them down. Underneath she was wearing a red

thong that matched the bra. In one smooth motion, I shucked her of the tiny piece of fabric. Now she was completely naked, and I stood back to admire the view.

Camille stretched across my bed, totally comfortable being naked and admired. She was magnificent—rounded tits with still erect nipples, curved tummy with a tiny piercing in her navel, thighs that were wide and smooth, and the little surprise: her pubic hair neatly trimmed into a heart.

“I like your attention to detail,” I said, as my forefinger traced the outline of the heart. Camille shivered and raised her hips to meet my touch. Her open desire was fuelling mine. I finished undressing, and Camille giggled when my hard cock popped out of my briefs.

“I think your cock is even bigger than last time I saw it.” She reached out a warm hand to stroke it, and that felt amazing.

“Oh fuck.” When she started jerking it, I had to pull away. That felt too good and I didn’t want to be a one-pump chump.

To catch my breath, I took one step back and motioned for her to turn over. She looked sulky, but did it anyway. Finally, I got to see her ass. I’d fantasized about Camille naked, but everything was better in reality, including her plump, gravity-defying ass cheeks.

“Nice ass, Peaches.” I took an ass cheek in each hand and squeezed. Fucking heaven.

“Is that why you call me Peaches? Because my ass looks like the peach emoji?” Camille tried to sound pissed, but the husky undertone of her voice gave away how much she enjoyed the ass play, especially when my thumbs lingered

around her asshole and pussy lips. Her whole body was one big erogenous zone, and I wanted to find all the sweet spots.

“Sort of,” I admitted. So many parts of Camille made me think of peaches: her ass, her cleavage in low cut tops, and even her pouty lips. And maybe one more juicy place.

This was like a buffet where everything looked so tasty, I hardly knew where to start.

I lay down on the bed, and pulled Camille on top of me, positioning her so I could suck on those fat nipples while running my hands over her back, her hips, and her thighs. In response, she ground her pussy against my cock which was wedged between us. She was into the friction, which did feel pretty fucking amazing.

“You’re such a horny little thing,” I teased her.

“Oh, and you’re ready to stop now?” She lifted herself off me, and my cock sprang up like it was magnetically drawn to her core.

“No fucking way.” It would take nothing short of an earthquake to stop me from fucking Camille. And it would have to be a big quake. I raised my hand to finally give her the clit action she clearly craved. And all the nipple play made Camille wet. I could feel the moisture as my forefinger traced a line from her pussy to her clit.

“Oh yeah. Touch me there. Rub it,” she pleaded. So I rubbed harder, making little circles and pressing down on her sensitive button. From her ragged panting, she was close to coming, but there was still so much about her body I wanted to learn.

“I haven’t seen your pussy yet,” I said.

“God, you make it sound like a tourist attraction,” Camille replied.

“One of the wonders of the world.” I pulled her hips up and positioned her over my face. Her pussy was as pretty as the rest of her body with dark purple folds around a deep pink interior. I parted her to see a tiny clit already red and swollen from my touch.

I pulled her closer and darted my tongue out to tease her clit. Camille’s body stiffened and she spread her legs even wider to give me easier access. I licked her with fast, irregular strokes and she wriggled with pleasure.

When I looked up, all I could see was the underside of her breasts. I reached one hand up and pinched that stiff left nipple.

“Ahhh yeah,” Camille cried out, so I pinched harder. She let out a moan of pleasure. I pulled her down hard onto my mouth and started to tongue-fuck her. She was so hot inside and tasted both spicy and sweet. Sweet as a peach. The tension in her body meant she was close, so I stopped and pushed her off me and back onto the bed.

“Nooooo,” Camille cried out. “I was almost there. I need to come.” Her pretty face was both pouty and hot.

“I want to see your face when you come,” I said. Nothing would be sexier than seeing the cool, confident Camille coming apart as I fucked her. The only problem with that was that my favourite position was doggy-style, but I had a solution for that too.

I dug a condom out of the nightstand and pulled it on. Then I held out a hand to Camille.

“Are we going somewhere?” she asked as we stood up.

“Paradise,” I said, and she laughed.

I took her over to the dresser and positioned her in front of me.

“Hold on here.” I put her hands on the edge of the dresser, and then lifted her hips until she was on tiptoe. I spread her legs until her juicy little opening was at the perfect angle. I slipped the tip of my cock into her. I could see her face in the mirror and her eyes widened as I eased my whole length into her. God, she felt fucking amazing inside, so hot and snug around my cock.

“Remember what I promised?” I whispered into her ear and then kissed the lobe.

“You’re going to fuck me hard,” she breathed.

“And watch you come as I do it,” I promised. And then I started the motion, pulling my cock almost fully out, waiting for an excruciating second, and then plunging back in. Trying to fill her up, touch all the sensitive places inside her, and make her feel good. Because this was best feeling ever, finally fucking Camille, my number one fantasy.

All my senses were short-circuiting. I could hear her grunts of pleasure and the wet smacking sound of our hard fucking. I could smell the heady musk of her sweat and desire. When I rolled my tongue, I could still taste the tang of her pussy. And every time I thrust into her, I could feel her squeezing down on my aching cock and the trembling of her body as she tried to maintain her tiptoe position while I rammed her hard.

But best of all, I could see it all in the mirror. The rocking of her tits with every thrust, my face straining with the

exertion of sex, our bodies coming together, and her sweet face as she cried out.

“Oh, Nate, yes. I’m so close,” she panted. I added an extra hip twist as I went deep and that was enough. Her whole body froze, her mouth opened in a soundless scream, and her eyes unfocused. Then she just looked blissful.

I exhaled in relief. Now I could stop holding back. I lifted her legs so she was off the ground, then spread them wider so I could go even deeper. She clung to the dresser to keep her balance and I thrust into her with mindless, jerking strokes until I felt the rush of my release.

When the blood rush wore off, I pulled out of Camille and carried her to the bed. After laying her down, I tossed the condom and then got back into bed. I wrapped myself around her.

Satisfaction washed over my entire body. Camille pushed her ass into me. She turned her head and looked up at me through half-lowered eyes. “I’ve still got about an hour before I need to go home. We could have a lot of fun in all that time.”

I chuckled. Satisfying Camille was going to be a challenge. But with the way her soft ass felt against my spent cock, it wouldn’t be long until I could go again. And round two would be even better.

BRING IT ON AGAIN

NATE

THE MOMENT my alarm went off, I jumped out of bed. Why did I feel so good, so energetic? Then I remembered—Camille. Last night had been so fucking amazing. I knew we'd be good together, but not even I could have predicted last night's fireworks.

I couldn't stop grinning as I got ready for practice. Until I remembered that I had to contact Eri.

Fuck my life. What should I say to her? Part of me really wanted to put this off, but Camille had worked so hard. Besides, maybe getting Eri onside would help get me back on the ice.

What had Eri been like? At first, we'd gotten along great. She spoke English well so there were no miscommunications. She was smart and fun. Sex was good. She'd been an exhibitionist, which was a first for me. I didn't mind having sex in semi-public places, but I didn't want to land my ass in jail. After all, I was kind of famous. But Eri's jealousy was why we'd broken up. I hated all the fighting, especially when I hadn't done anything wrong. I was a friendly guy, and I

couldn't be rude to fans. Eri could never see the difference between talking to women or hitting on them. Even makeup sex didn't balance out the bad shit.

I pondered my first move, then finally sent her a vague message: *Hey Eri. How you doing? Just wondering what you're up to these days.* It sounded casual and didn't mention anything about the song.

Eri didn't answer right away. Who knew where she was now? It could be Japan or Australia or Seoul.

I pocketed my phone and headed off to the rink for practice. My good mood returned once I got on the ice. I had tons of energy, and afterwards I was meeting Camille.

I couldn't wait to see her. We could make plans. Now she could come to all my home games in the playoffs. I had to be playing by then. I could show her off to the guys—most of them already knew her but now she was with me. Course, we hadn't discussed any of this yet, but what we had between us was huge.

“Good work out there today, Jonesy,” Tibbs told me. As captain, he acted like an extra coach sometimes. He'd been on my ass when my playing sucked in December.

“Thanks. Feeling strong.” That was an understatement. I could take on the entire Henderson team right now and whip their asses.

After practice, I ran into Amanda Richardson in the hallway.

“Hello, Nate,” she said. “Any update on your...issue?”

“Yeah! Good news. We've figured out who she is. I've messaged her and hopefully we'll get to talk and fix things up.”

“Oh, that’s great. Let me know if you need any communications guidance.” She looked thoughtful. “Of course, it’s not like we can put the genie back in the bottle, is it?”

As usual, I had no clue what she meant, so she quickly added, “They won’t change the song or video even if you apologize.”

“Yeah, I get that. But the main thing is that I’ll feel better. Like those chicks can protest if they want, but what really threw off my game was not knowing why they hated me. Now I get how I screwed up before and I’m not gonna do it again.”

Amanda cocked her head to one side. She reminded me of my elementary school principal. They both had icy blue eyes that could see right into my brain.

“It sounds like this incident has made you mature a lot. I’m sure that will serve you well in hockey as well as your personal life.”

The happiness bubbled up again. “I’ve actually got this great girlfriend now. She’s really smart, and she’s the one who figured out who my ex was.”

Amanda wore a TMI expression, so I shut up. Telling management about my love life was a boner move, but I wanted to show I’d improved.

“Good work, Nate,” she said and walked away.

I rushed home to refuel and change before I met Camille. I got to the boba place early because I couldn’t wait to see her again.

When she finally appeared, I waved eagerly. She strolled over, looking hot in jeans, a cropped top, and a long sweater. Her green top clung to her rounded tits and brought back

memories of those puffy brown nipples. Fucking her last night hadn't eased my desire for her. She was full of fire and surprises.

I stood and pulled Camille close to me. "Looking gorgeous, as always." Then I kissed her. It was a public kiss, but the way her soft mouth yielded gave me a semi.

Then she pushed me away with both hands and sat down.

A stab of panic went through me as I sat across from her. Did I get this wrong? Was last night a one time only event?

"What's wrong? I thought we were, you know, going out now." I said.

"We never said that." Her voice was stern.

"Seriously?" I asked. Last night we couldn't stop making out even in front of her house. Camille was as into everything as me.

"Yes. I've been thinking: if you really want to show that you've changed, maybe you shouldn't date another Asian woman right away."

"I don't understand. You mean I have to date someone else before I can go out with you? That's nuts."

"Why is it nuts? It would show people that you're different now. Everyone knows what you're like, your teammates and their girlfriends." But I could tell that Camille wasn't quite convinced either.

I reached across the table and took one of her hands in both of mine.

"I have changed. And that change means I won't date someone based on their race or appearance. I want to go out

with you because I really know you. You're smart and fun and generous. I feel better just hanging out with you."

"Oh." She let out a little puff of breath.

"That's the best proof. When people see us together, they'll know that things are different. We're so good together."

Camille looked down at our hands. She wasn't her usual decisive self.

"Unless," I began. "Maybe you don't feel the same way about me." After all, Camille knew all the crap in my life.

She let out a long sigh. "I do, but..."

I waited. Her next words felt so important.

"Maybe I shouldn't admit this, but I don't usually date guys like you. You're such a player."

I flashed back to Camille saying that she dated guys who were more serious. "I thought you said you didn't hold that against me—you know, all the chicks I'd dated."

"I don't. But it's more than that, it's how good things are between us," she said.

That chill of worry dissolved. She was saying our relationship was too good. "Last night was next level for me, and I think it was for you too. Why would you want to avoid something that great?"

Her eyes met mine. "Last night was incredible. But the more I thought about it, the more I wondered if it was all real. I mean, I've seen how you operate."

That was the problem with having a past, it was hard to move beyond it. First Marty, and now Camille wondered if I could really change.

“Can I trust you?” She stared like she was trying to see right into me.

Convincing her I was different now was my challenge. “Well, I have changed, but it’s a process, right? But you’ve said I’m getting better, and it would be even easier with you beside me.”

Because Camille was the one who’d pushed me in the first place, and I was stronger inside now. I *was* a better person.

She nodded slowly. “We’d have to keep being honest with each other.”

I sensed her coming around and my happy energy returned. “That’s why this will work. You see right through my bullshit. How can I lie to the great detective?”

At last, she smiled. “Okay, we can give us a try.”

“Yes!” Wow, was every step in my relationship with Camille going to feel like an accomplishment?

I leaned back on the bench seating. Something nudged my leg, and I reached down.

“Well, if you’re my girlfriend, I guess this is okay then.” I passed her a shopping bag.

“What’s this?” Camille looked inside. “Oh my god!”

She pulled out the Jaquesmus handbag that she’d mentioned on the day she got fired—way back at the beginning of us.

She frowned in confusion. “I told you not to get this. You don’t have to pay me for what I did.”

I reached over and stroked her arm. “Yeah, I know. But I’ve seen how hard you had to work—all because I messed up.

I wanted to get you a thank-you gift, and luckily I happened to know what you wanted.” I remembered the brand, and Elaine had helped me get the right model and colour.

She caressed the leather. “It’s so beautiful. Thank you!” She slid onto the bench beside me and circled her arms around my neck. We kissed again—this time a deeper kiss where I tasted her sweet mouth.

Camille sat back and examined the handbag, opening it up and unzipping all the little compartments. “How did you buy it so quickly?”

“Actually, I got it a while back,” I admitted. “You were working so hard that I was going to give it to you no matter what happened.”

“Where’s my gift?” Hannah plunked down across from us.

“Oh hey, Hannah.” So much for fun times.

“Sorry, I should have mentioned that she wants an update on all our big developments.” Camille turned to her friend. “I should really be sharing this purse with you.”

Hannah shook her head. “Pink’s not really my colour. Besides, it’s been fine.”

She didn’t want to admit that it had been fun in front of me. I pulled a striped envelope out of my pocket. “I did get you something.”

Hannah blinked and opened it. “Oh, it’s a gift card for this place. Um, thanks a lot.”

“No, thank you. You two have been so good at all this stuff. If I was trying to solve this myself, I’d still be stumbling around.”

“That’s for sure.” Hannah waved her card around. “I guess drinks are on me today.”

When she went up to order, Camille leaned closer. “That was nice of you.”

“I want your friends to like me.” Especially Hannah, whose opinion was important to Camille.

“You’re such a romantic.”

I captured her hand and brought it up for a kiss. “Can you come over this after this?”

“I guess. I’m free but it depends on when we finish up.”

“We’re leaving for—” I stopped when Hannah slammed the drinks down on the table.

“Is something going on between you two?” she asked.

“Yeah. We’re going out,” I said proudly. Camille tried to pull her hand away, but I held on.

She glared at Camille. “I thought you were waiting until this whole thing was settled.”

“I did. We didn’t do anything until after I figured out who it was.”

I looked between the two women. “What’s the big deal? Why shouldn’t we go out?”

Hannah’s fierce face was back. “Have you talked to Eri yet?”

“I sent her a text.” I’d forgotten all about Eri in my hurry to see Camille. I pulled out my phone and scrolled through the messages. “Nothing yet. Do you think I should call her?”

“What if she’s got you blocked on her phone too?” Hannah asked. “Make sure you have your read receipts on. If you don’t

hear back, send another one later today.”

“I’d be surprised if she’s blocked his phone. At some point, she’s going to want to know how he’s reacting to all this. After all, it’s very personal,” Camille said.

I swallowed. That sounded pretty creepy. Camille noticed and gave my hand a squeeze.

“You know what I think?” Hannah’s voice was shrill. “Now is not the best time for groping each other and looking lovestruck.”

We looked around the bubble tea place, but other than two teenagers, it was empty.

Camille wrenched her hand free and inched away from me. “You’re being ridiculous. Nate would recognize her if she were here.”

“Besides, we don’t even know if she’s in Vancouver.” I really hoped she wasn’t. The farther away she was, the easier the apology would be.

“We need to assume the worst case. So, don’t flaunt your relationship too publicly.”

“Really? Because I want everyone to know that we’re going out,” I said proudly.

Camille smiled at me, and Hannah groaned.

“Do what you want then,” she said. “It’s not like I can stop you. But let’s talk about how you’re going to handle your apology. If you don’t do this right, you’ll be back to square one.”

“Great. Just what I need, more pressure,” I said.

“You’re a professional hockey player, you must be used to pressure,” scoffed Hannah.

“I’m not a professional apologizer.”

“Did you remember anything else about Eri?” Camille asked.

Something clicked. “Yeah. She was big into ‘dreams’ which were like her goals. It was weird.” Sometimes I felt like she was projecting her fantasies onto me, and not sexually—which I would have been into.

“How did you guys break up?” Hannah asked.

“She got mad about stuff I couldn’t change. Like if I couldn’t do something because of hockey. Or if I talked to other women—even at a fan event. I got tired of all the hassle, so I told her I was done. To be honest, she seemed unhappy with me too, so I didn’t think she’d mind that much.”

“Did she try to contact you after the breakup?” Hannah sounded exactly like a real detective.

“Yeah.” I couldn’t remember all the details. I’d deleted her messages without reading them. I hated all that negative stuff. But I could remember the last time we’d seen each other.

“One night, she came to my place. After a game, it was really late. When I got home, she was waiting there.” I paused. “Well, I had another chick with me.”

Both women winced.

I looked down at my untouched drink. “She got pretty upset and yelled at both of us. She said I was an asshole. And she warned the other chick that I was just going to use her and dump her. Wasn’t exactly the best night.”

“You sure you want in on this crap?” Hannah asked Camille.

She patted my thigh under the table. “Stop it, Hannah. Nate’s changed a lot since then. You need to see that.”

All I wanted was to get back to how great I’d been feeling earlier. There was a short silence and then Camille excused herself to go to the washroom.

Once she was gone, Hannah leaned across the table. “It’s pretty clear that you’re not even going to try to keep your hands off Camille.”

Fuck, what was her deal? “What happens between us is our business. How come you’ve got such a hate-on for me? I’ve jumped through every hoop you set up.”

“God, you’re still an idiot. For once, could you pretend the world doesn’t rotate around you?”

I had no idea what she was talking about, but I was getting sick of Hannah’s insults.

“Just think about this: that Eri woman has already done a lot to get back at you. She bears this huge grudge. Can you imagine what she might do to Camille if she found out that you were dating her?”

I remembered how rude Eri had been to my date that night. But I never got the feeling that she’d hurt anyone. “I don’t think she’d take her feelings out on Camille.”

“Right. Yesterday you didn’t even know who she was, and now you’re a good judge of her character. Can you not keep it in your pants until this whole matter is settled?”

We lapsed into a resentful silence. Camille returned and put her new purse on the table.

“What did I miss?” she asked.

Nobody answered this question. But Hannah was right about one thing: Eri knew where I lived so it wasn't a good time for Camille to come over. Our relationship was like a video game where every time you thought you were at the end of your mission, a new mission came up.

My hookups used to be easy. We'd have fun, we'd fuck, and we'd break up. But that was how I'd gotten into this mess in the first place. Going out with Camille was going to be different.

I tried to gather up my spirits. “But once I apologize, everything's over, right? There's not going to be some course on toxic male behaviour I have to pass next?”

Hannah sniffed. “Believe me, if I could have found one you'd already be enrolled. But no, you're done. Honestly, the apology might not make any difference to her, but you're going to feel better. You get that part, right?”

“I guess. But as Camille said, I've already changed and I feel good about that.” Wasn't that enough? Why did I have to tell Eri how shitty I felt? Couldn't I just send her a message? Hannah was all about balance and justice. She'd be a good judge, except she'd probably execute every poor guy who stood before her.

“Look, I got stuff to do,” I lied. I mean, I wanted to be with Camille, but not like this. I was feeling shittier every moment. “Do you need a ride anywhere?” I asked Camille.

“Thank you, but I still have to finish telling Hannah everything.” Her eyes followed me as I stood up. “Hey, don't forget your drink.”

“You can have it.” I looked at Camille one last time. She glowed with a special energy, and I wanted to warm myself in that. But it felt awkward to even kiss her goodbye in front of Warden Hannah.

Outside, the sky was getting darker. Great, it was going to rain. That fit my current mood.

THE HALF OF IT

CAMILLE

“WHY ARE YOU SO TWITCHY TONIGHT?” Elaine asked.

After a very satisfying debrief with Hannah where she praised my detective skills and managed not to slag Nate too much, I’d come home in a great mood. I’d even cooked dinner, so now I was in my mother’s good books for at least a week.

My sister and I were in our bedroom. She was studying an accounting textbook which would have put me to sleep in 90 seconds. I was busy too, multitasking. My skin had been acting up lately, so I wore a Korean purifying mask while redoing my nail polish in Vancouver Vice colours: black, silver, and deep pink. Nate claimed it was actually ‘light red,’ but *pfft*.

“I’ve been waiting for ages to hear back from Nate.” He’d looked like a kicked puppy when he left the boba place, and I felt so bad about how we’d left things.

“They’re leaving for their road trip tonight. Nate always does his packing at the last minute, so he probably hasn’t had time to call you.”

“How do you know all this stuff?” I asked.

“He drives Marty crazy. Marty likes to be there in lots of time. So, now they both take their own cars to the airport.”

I sat up on my bed. By some miracle, Elaine had not come back to Marty and Nate’s last night, so she still didn’t know that anything had happened. Beyond her natural suspicions.

“What do you think of Nate?” I asked. This was a dangerous question because Nate had asked Elaine out several times when they’d first met and she turned him down flat. It had been hate at first sight. At the time, we’d agreed he was a big jerk.

“I like him a lot. He’s a good person.”

This answer shocked me. “Really? Why?”

Elaine closed her book and turned to face me. “He doesn’t make the best first impression, but he’s the one who helped Marty and me to get back together, you know.”

“But what about the Asian fever stuff? We both said we’d never date a guy who only dated Asian women.” I set up my own reservations like bowling pins, hoping Elaine would knock them down.

“You and Hannah are taking care of that, aren’t you? From what Marty says, Nate is having his consciousness raised.”

“I guess.” This was exactly what I’d argued to Hannah: that he’d really changed. Did I not believe it? “But that’s just one part of him.”

“Nate is a bit of a lost soul. He left home too early and he got fully immersed in bro culture. So he acts exactly like you’d expect a stereotypical hockey player to act. But inside, he’s really quite sweet.”

I was speechless at this defence of him. Elaine had a prissy side, and Nate could be so offensive. But then both she and Marty tried to see the best in everyone.

My sister continued, “Why are you asking me this? You guys have spent so much time together lately—you must know him better than me.”

“What would you think about me dating Nate?”

Elaine broke into an open-mouth smile. “I knew it! I told Marty that something romantic was going on between the two of you.”

“So, you approve?” I wanted to bite back the words. I’d never asked for anyone’s approval of my dates before. But Nate had been on my no-fly list for so long. I didn’t regret sleeping with him, but I was worried about the reaction to the news we were dating.

“Of course,” Elaine said. “And I think all the Vice wives and girlfriends will too.”

“Really?” Had I dropped into Backwards World?

“Yes. Nate’s like an irritating little brother—we all hoped he’d smarten up one day. You’ll be a good influence on him. And if he’s in a steady relationship, he’ll play better.”

I flopped back onto my pillow. “Mind. Blown. I thought nobody was going to approve of us.”

Elaine’s smile was positively smug as she reopened her textbook. “I knew something was going on.”

Then my phone buzzed and I took a look. Finally, Nate.

I put in my earbuds and connected the video chat. “Hey.”

“Hey. You look...kind of scary.” He squinted at me.

Oh no! I'd forgotten all about the mask. Oh well, if he couldn't handle me at my worst... "I'm doing a cleansing mask. It takes work to look this good."

"Can't argue with the results," he said, passing his first boyfriend test.

"Where are you? And why are you whispering?" I could hardly make out Nate's face in the semi-darkness.

"The plane's getting ready to take off. We're supposed to power down everything," he said. "Besides, I gotta keep my voice down because some of the old guys need their beauty sleep."

I heard a faint *Fuck you, Jonesy* in the background.

"Where are you going again?" I asked.

"Nevada. We're playing Henderson. This is the big series. Winner takes first place." He sounded confident but there was a little twitch that made me think he was nervous.

"What are you worried about?" I asked.

His voice went even softer. "I'm going to be playing this weekend. Do you think those chicks will be in Nevada? The Nate Haters?"

"Just a sec." I pulled over my laptop and did some searching. When I bent down, the mask slid down, so I yanked it off completely.

"Nope. I think you're safe," I said.

"I want to believe you," he began.

I held up two fingers. "First off, 'The Valley' song is not charting anymore, so it's old news. Indigo Butterfly is big, but

not Blackpink big. They don't have huge fan clubs everywhere."

Nate nodded.

"Second, I just looked up the demographics of Henderson. Their Asian population is a lot smaller than Vancouver's, so there are probably fewer K-pop fanatics there."

He visibly relaxed.

"I feel bad about today at the boba place. You looked so sad when you left. Are you okay now?" I asked.

Now he smiled. "Wow, you could tell all that? You're so good at all the emotional intelligence stuff."

Once in a while, Nate would say something unexpected which I chalked up to his continuing therapy sessions.

"I really wanted to leave with you, but Hannah deserved a full debrief. I know she's hard on you, but she'll come around." If we kept going out.

Even in the dim light, I could see the heat in Nate's half-closed eyes. "Thanks for giving us a chance. You know, right now all I want is to be with you."

My breath caught in my throat. This was my real issue with Nate—when he was so sweet, I could imagine myself really falling for him. "When are you back?"

"Not until Tuesday." His voice softened. "I really miss you."

"I miss you too. Last night was so...incredible."

"Baby, I know. I wish you were here right now so we could—"

A faraway voice interrupted, “Oooh, who you talking to, Jonesy? Bet she’s smokin’.”

“Shut up, it’s my girlfriend. But yeah, she’s a dime.”

No chance for sexy talk while his teammates were all around. How ridiculous that I was disappointed.

“I guess I better go. I just wanted to talk to you before I went to sleep.” He seemed more subdued than his usual self.

“Oh I have good news,” I said. “I’ve got an interview next week with Seven Seas Cruise Lines. Rocky came through.”

“Wow. Congratulations,” said Nate, but once again his reaction seemed muted.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah. Just tired. I’ll feel better once I get back on the ice,” he said.

We said goodbye. I frowned at the black screen. Nate had been so happy last night, and now he was so low energy. Poor guy.

I got ready for bed.

Today had been so weird. I’d always been decisive about boyfriends, I knew right away if I was in or out. But with Nate, things were different. Finding out how adorable he was under all the bravado made him really appealing. And then last night, sex between us had been fiery and amazing. So why had I hesitated today?

In the darkness, I confessed to my sister, “Going out with Nate feels a little scary.”

“In what way?” she asked.

I tried to explain, “Being with him—in a relationship—feels like an out-of-control rollercoaster.”

To my surprise, she laughed. “It’s because you’re used to being in charge of your relationships. Like with Bill, he definitely liked you more than you liked him.”

“That’s crazy talk. At least Bill was mature and stable. I mean, Nate Jones. Is there any guy who is a worse bet for a relationship?” I asked.

“That’s why you’re scared. Because going out with him means taking a big risk. It could flame out. Or he could break up with you for a change.”

Seriously? Why would I care if Nate broke up with me? It wasn’t like I was considering a real future with him.

Yet—I couldn’t imagine how things would end between us. Because right now, everything was so enjoyable. We liked going out and also staying in. He was fun and interesting in unpredictable ways. And he genuinely appreciated me for my mind.

“Maybe I shouldn’t go out with him,” I declared, but that idea made me feel even worse.

“Do you want to play things safe or take a chance on something bigger?” she asked.

Why was my sister—the budding accountant student asking me that?

“*I’m* the one who’s a risk taker.” Out of the two of us, I was the one to try things first, to mess up, and to get in trouble.

Even in the darkness, I could tell she was smiling. “Looks like I’m the one who takes more chances around love.”

“I like a safe relationship.” Ugh, I sounded like a total wimp.

“In finance, there’s something called the risk/return trade-off,” Elaine said.

“I’m sorry, how did my love life become a finance lecture?”

“Just listen. What it means is if you invest in something completely safe, like Government of Canada bonds, your capital is safe and you’ll earn an interest rate of, say, 3%. But say you invest in something riskier, like a junk bond, you run the risk of losing all your money.”

“Why would you invest in a junk bond then?” I asked.

“Because to get you to invest, they offer an interest rate that’s at least twice the safe one. You could make 6 or 7%, which is a lot better than leaving your money in the bank.”

“So, Bill is a Government of Canada bond and Nate is a junk bond?” I asked.

“Exactly! With Nate, you take a bigger risk, but the reward can be much greater.”

I groaned. “I can’t believe that you’re stealth-teaching me finance.”

“I told you this last night. Now that you’re applying yourself, you have so much potential.”

It was funny. If Elaine had said something like this a couple of months ago, I would have dismissed it. But these days, I believed in myself.

Elaine reached over to shut off the light, and I turned onto my side. Would my dreams be about sex with Nate or a wonderful new job? Either was good.

EUPHORIA

NATE

“WE DID IT! We fucking did it!” yelled Lepper as we floated into the dressing room after the game.

We’d won both our games against Henderson. Tonight, my line with Sods and T.J. had been on fire. We combined on a nice tic-tac-toe passing play and Sods put in an early goal. After we scored another, Henderson seemed to lose energy. By the final buzzer, we had a 4-0 victory. But since we were in enemy territory, we saved our celebration for the room.

The whole team was ecstatic. Most of us hadn’t been here for the Vice’s worst times, but players like Marty and Lepper knew what it was like to be at the bottom of the league. And now, we had finished in the top spot in the Pacific Division—it was huge.

Even Goats was flying high. “Guys, you’ve done a great job here, together. The toughest test is still ahead of us: the playoffs. But thanks to us putting our faces to the grindstone, we get a bye into the second round. That’s huge. We’re going to use that practice time to really sharpen ourselves.”

He paused and seemed to decide something in his own head. “But tonight, you should celebrate. You’ve done good, boys.”

We all cheered. Goats giving us a night off was rare. And we weren’t leaving until noon, which gave us time to sleep in.

A load of guilt was off my shoulders. If we’d lost, that home game when I choked in front of all the Nate Haters would have loomed large as a wasted opportunity. But now we were exactly where we wanted to be, and I could relax. And Camille was right: not a single Nate Hater showed up here.

I loved the room after a win. Everyone was happy and jokey and chatty—we’d achieved something together. And the bigger the stakes, the bigger the high.

The whole team, including our coaches, went out for dinner at a nice steakhouse. The vibe got even better when we found out that Lucky Luczak was paying for dinner. He was eating at the coaches’ end of the table, and stood up to toast the team.

“Good work, boys. Keep it going.”

“It must be nice to be that generous,” I said to Lionel who sat beside me.

“Well, he made millions in the NHL. And he’s dating Amanda Richardson, whose family is the one of the richest in Vancouver.”

“Still, he didn’t have to do this.” My AHL salary was the most money I’d ever made, but it wasn’t NHL bucks.

“He’s no dummy. He waited until after the dinner to say he was paying,” Lionel pointed out. True, if Lucky said he was paying ahead of time, guys would have ordered the most

expensive things on the menu. Food was one thing, but booze could put you over the top.

The guys were debating what to do next, so I slipped out to the lobby to call Camille.

“We won,” was the first thing I said when she appeared in the video chat.

“I know. I watched it.” She was smiling and looking so pretty.

“Did you go to the viewing party with the other girlfriends?”

“No, I stayed home with Elaine. Your line rocked!”

Her comment warmed me. Of course, girlfriends complimented me on hockey before, but having Camille—whose opinion I enjoyed hearing on any topic—say this felt extra special. Was this what Petra had been talking about? Impressing the right people instead of everyone.

“I felt really good out there.” It had been a combination of everything that had happened in the past month to improve. Harder practices, talking to Petra, and powering through all the bad shit.

“You’re stronger mentally now, right?” Camille asked. That was exactly what I’d been thinking. Even if there had been chicks booing me, I could have played through.

“You get me so good.” All I wanted was to feel her soft body against mine. I wanted to kiss her sweet mouth, inhale her sexy scent, and hear her giggle. Of course, I wanted to fuck her, but just being together would be enough. I could not wait to get back.

“Hey, we’re going to celebrate tomorrow night. Not a big party because we’re gearing up for playoffs, but we’re getting together at the club we always go to. I want you to come.”

“I’m so sorry, I can’t. Lola is going for day surgery tomorrow, and I have to look after her in the evening since everyone else is out.”

“Oh no. Is she okay?” Camille’s grandmother seemed pretty energetic when I met her.

“Yes, it’s only a dental thing. But since she’s having an anaesthetic, someone has to keep an eye on her afterwards. If it was really serious, my mom would skip her church meeting,” said Camille.

I could see T.J. waving at me. “Look, I have to go now. But would it be okay if I dropped by when we get back?”

“Oh sure, I’ll be around. Just message me first,” she said.

“I can’t wait to see you,” I said.

She laughed. “It’s only been a few days.”

“Feels like longer.”

We said goodbye, and I made my way towards the guys. Marty fell in beside me.

“You coming out now?” I asked. Last night, both of us had gotten take-out dinners and gone back to the hotel. It turned out to be a good thing since the coaches saw us having an early night. I needed the brownie points.

“Sure, I’ll go for one round.” Marty wasn’t a partier at the best of times, and on the road he preferred to go back to the hotel for long chats with Elaine. I’d always thought he was nuts, but I was beginning to see the appeal.

After some debate, we went off to a club that Todd the Bod knew about. Everyone went, even the old, married guys.

“Do you even remember how to party?” T.J. asked Gilly, who rarely came out.

“I remember how to beat up punk kids,” Gilly growled. T.J. ducked away.

“Can you get into a club here?” Lepper asked Sods. Sods was underage, but he looked older. Usually we didn’t get asked for ID.

“In Sweden this would not be a problem. American laws are strange, but I am ready.” He flashed his fake ID.

Foxy walked beside me. “This is so great. Can you imagine what it would be like if we won a round?”

“Don’t go there.” I was too superstitious to talk about future results, but he was right. Winning in the playoffs would be the best thing to happen in my short AHL career. So much rode on these games.

The place was busy for a Sunday night. Of course there was gambling too. A few guys took off to play slots or cards. But I went towards the thumping bass with my boys, Sods and T.J.

“Can you believe that Goats gave us a free pass? And here we are in Cali.” Sods started singing an off-key version of California Gurls.

“We’re in Nevada, asshole,” T.J. said.

“Oh, right. Are there Nevada songs?” Sods asked.

“How about ‘Waking up in Vegas’ or ‘Viva Las Vegas?’” I suggested.

“Don’t encourage him,” T.J. said as Sods began wailing the Katy Perry tune.

T.J. draped his arms over our shoulders. “We played our asses off and now we get our rewards.” He motioned towards the dance floor, which was mainly women.

“American women are so hot,” Sods said.

“Is there a nationality of women you don’t like?” I asked.

“I have not met them yet,” he replied.

“He’s an equal opportunity lover. Not like you, Jonesy,” T.J. said.

“Jonesy has a girlfriend now,” Sods said. “Last night, when I got back, he was baby-talking to her.”

“Was not.” Camille would laugh her ass off at me if I did.

“Is that why you wouldn’t come out with us last night?” T.J. asked.

“Yeah, my fucking around days are over,” I said.

“Noooo,” T.J. said. “We’re in goddamn Vegas. And you know what they say about Vegas—besides, having a girlfriend never stopped you from partying before.”

“She’s different.” I didn’t explain that I was different now too, since that might piss off the guys. It meant the end of an era.

“Well, you can party anyway. You don’t have to take it all the way,” T.J. said. “You can’t desert the Young Guns line.”

T.J. had dubbed us that after our line had some success on the ice. We were younger than many of our teammates, and T.J. loved shit like nicknames.

“Are you gentlemen celebrating something?” the bartender asked. She was an older blonde.

“Yeah, a hockey victory,” said T.J.

“Oh, you’re hockey players,” she said. “Well, congratulations.”

Being a hockey player in Canada made attracting women easy. Down here, we weren’t as big a deal but being a fit, good-looking athlete was enough. Soon, we were chatting with some chicks who were there to celebrate a birthday.

“I was afraid one of you was getting married, which would break my heart,” said T.J., smooth as always.

The music was thumping and the dance floor beckoned. I was in the mood to celebrate, so I was happy to dance with these chicks but I sure as shit wasn’t leaving with anyone. We drank and laughed and partied. It felt good to kick back and not have all those worries weighing me down. Well, I still had to deal with Eri, but right now that seemed very doable. Maybe she wouldn’t even get back to me, and I could avoid the whole apology.

Sods was trying to convince a cute redhead that he was a big deal hockey player. I leaned into their conversation.

“It’s true,” I said. “Seb here is a legit prospect. Next year, you’ll be able to watch him scoring goals in the NHL.”

She shook her head. “You’re his friend. How can I believe you?”

I pointed to myself. “You can trust a face like this.”

T.J. snorted. “Also, he’s a terrible liar.”

The redhead giggled. “Three against one. Okay, let’s dance. And we’ll see.” She sashayed towards the dance floor

with her hips swaying to the music. Sods followed but turned back to give us a wide smile and two thumbs up.

“See,” I said to T.J. “I’ll still use my powers of female persuasion to help you guys out.”

He clinked his beer against mine. “Here’s to that. Now, help me with that tall blonde.”

ADVENTURES IN BABYSITTING

NATE

THE FRONT DOOR swung open and revealed Camille's beautiful smile. She wore a flowered blouse that bared both her shoulders and made me want to pull it all the way down. Also, did that mean she had no bra on?

"You look hot," I said.

"Don't I always?" she asked.

"Well, yeah," I admitted. Except the other night when she had that weird face mask on, but no smart man would mention that.

I pulled her in for a kiss, then heard her mother call out, "Is that Nate?"

I released Camille and followed her to the kitchen. "I thought everyone was going out tonight."

"You're early. My mother's just leaving for her meeting, and Elaine's getting ready for her night school class."

"Hello, Nate." Izzy greeted me with a warm smile and a hug. "Did you have dinner yet? We can make up a plate for you, if you like."

“Really? That would be awesome. I did eat something, but your cooking is so much better.” My mouth started watering the moment I walked in here. I wasn’t sure if it was the food or Camille.

“Oh, you’re sweet.” She hustled me into a chair. “Cami, you put together a nice plate for your boyfriend. Make sure he gets the chicken gising-gising.”

They huddled behind the fridge door, and Camille emerged with an armload of containers. She made a face at me.

“Do you need help?” I asked.

“It’s fine. Camille is very good in the kitchen,” her mom said.

“Yes, I’m the queen of heating things up,” Camille said. “Mom, go ahead to your meeting. I’ll make sure Nate gets fed.”

“Okay, I’ll look in on your lola once more. I left the paper with all her care instructions on her dresser,” said her mom.

“That you’ve only gone over ten times already,” muttered Camille, but only I could hear her.

“Hi, Nate. Bye, Nate,” said Elaine as she flew by with a big messenger bag. “Bye, everyone.” Izzy left right after.

I got up and circled my arms around Camille’s waist from behind. Touching her again felt so good. I brushed her hair aside and kissed the back of her neck and down her exposed spine. She shivered.

“Don’t forget, we’re not alone,” she said.

I planted another kiss on her bare shoulder, then pulled back. “I know. Should I go say hello to your grandmother?”

“Maybe later. She’s asleep right now,” Camille said.

“Really? Maybe we should take advantage of the moment then.” I spun her around to face me and kissed her. She tasted so good. Finally, she pushed her hands against my chest. “You’re starting something we can’t finish.”

“Really? Not even a quickie? How good is Lola’s hearing?”

She laughed. “Too good. Besides, I thought you were hungry.”

“More like thirsty.” I stuck my forefinger down her top and pulled it out. “Well, that’s disappointing.”

“You’re not supposed to say that when you look at my breasts.”

“It’s not about your breasts, which I worship. I’m disappointed that you’ve got a bra on.” It was a nude lace one, pretty but not as pretty as what was underneath.

Camille pushed me back towards the chair. “Silly boy. I’ll finish fixing up your dinner.” I watched her working in the kitchen. It was so domestic, yet weirdly hot that she was doing all this for me.

“Watching you make my dinner is a turn-on,” I said.

“What doesn’t turn you on?” She put a plate in front of me. It was rice, chicken, vegetables, and some of those lumpia I loved.

“Do you guys eat like this every night?” I took a bite of chicken. It was tender, sweet, and spicy.

“You mean Filipino food? Not every night, but most of the time. Even when we have spaghetti, it’s Filipino style—super

sweet.” She munched on a spring roll and sipped some iced tea.

“Seems like a miracle to me. When I cook, it doesn’t turn out as delicious as this,” I waved a spring roll in the air.

“You’re in such a good mood right now. I could have put a crust of bread and a glass of water in front of you and you’d be gushing,” Camille said.

I bit into the crunchy lumpia. “How could I not be in a good mood? We won first place, and I have an amazing girlfriend.”

“Explain to me again what finishing first does for you,” she said.

“It means we go straight into the second round. The other six playoff teams in the Pacific division have to duke it out, while we wait. It’s like we’ve already won a playoff round.”

She nodded.

I eyed her magical top. Was it my imagination or was it slipping down? “Hey, you know what? I play my best if I’ve had sex the night before.”

She shook her head. “I’m sure I don’t want to hear about the research that went into this.”

“Actually, I play my very best if I have sex the day of. Just before my pregame nap. And you’re free in the afternoons! This is gonna work out so good.” I could not wait to fuck her again.

“So, were there any Indigo Butterfly fans in Nevada?” she asked, and my horny mood went poof.

“Nope. I was sure glad to see that.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful. I couldn’t hear anything but I wasn’t completely sure.”

“I hope that Nate Hate shit will be over in Vancouver soon.” As soon as I remembered I had to apologize to Eri, the dinner sat leaden in my stomach.

“Did you hear back from Eri yet?” Camille asked.

“Nope. Hey, if she doesn’t get back to me, then I don’t have to talk to her, right?” I pulled out my phone. Oh shit. Eri had finally messaged me. She’d congratulated me on our win. Did that mean she was still watching our games? I held out the phone to Camille. “Looks like she’s actually in Vancouver. She wants to meet up tomorrow.”

I had a sick feeling in my stomach. I was hoping to do this over the phone. I hated conflict and seeing Eri in person was bound to be a shit show.

Camille reached out and squeezed my hand. “It’ll be fine. You’re different now, and Eri will see that.”

I looked into Camille’s brown eyes and believed her. Or maybe I just believed in her faith in me. How did I get so lucky? Camille was 90% sarcasm and smartass comments, but she knew when to be real.

“What do you think I should say to her?” I asked.

“I can’t answer that. I don’t know what she’s like or what she wants. Obviously, she was really affected by your relationship. Maybe she wants an apology? Or maybe she wants to get back together?”

“Fuck, no. That’s not happening in this lifetime.” Not only because of Camille, but because now I knew that Eri was kind of unhinged. For the first time ever, I wished Hannah was here. She’d be happy to type up a script of my exact apology.

“That’s only an example of the different directions your conversation could take. Look, if it was me—not that I can imagine wanting anything to do with an ex—I’d want you to be honest. You know, sincere.”

“Okay.” I had finished most of my dinner and I wasn’t really hungry anymore. “Can we maybe go into the living room and talk about something else?”

“Sure. Let me check on Lola and see if she needs anything.” Camille disappeared. I cleaned off my dish and put it in the dishwasher, then wiped down the table. The Salang kitchen had a cozy feeling, like it held the spirits of all the good meals made in here.

I went to the living room and turned on the TV but kept it muted. I didn’t really feel like watching anything, even hockey.

Camille sat down beside me, and I put my arm around her. I stroked her bare shoulder with my thumb.

“How’s Lola?” I asked.

“She’s fine. She’s awake now, but not hungry or anything. I gave her a bell to ring if she wants me, and I’ll keep checking on her.”

“Should I say hi now?”

Camille laughed. “I asked, but she said no. She’s actually a bit vain, and she doesn’t want you to see her when her face is all swollen.”

I laughed. My grandmothers never seemed to worry about their appearance, but all Camille’s relatives looked a lot younger than they were.

“Well, I tried to do the right thing,” I said.

“She likes you. She told me I’m lucky to have such a guwapo boyfriend.”

I grinned and pulled her closer. “Does that mean good-looking?”

“Oh, you know my Tagalog is not that good. It might mean ‘guy with a big butt.’” Camille tried to keep a straight face but dissolved into giggles.

“Are you insulting my hockey butt?” I asked.

She slipped a hand underneath me and squeezed my ass. “No. I like it. I enjoy watching you leave. Speaking of that, aren’t you going to the club soon?”

I leaned against the couch. “Nope. I’m staying here tonight.”

Camille was shocked. “What? Don’t you want to celebrate with your team?”

“We went out last night in Vegas. I’d rather be with you.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You’d rather be with me even if we’re not going to...”

“Seriously, no sex? Not even a hand job? Maybe I *should* go,” I joked.

“Please. My family thinks I’m a good girl,” Camille replied.

“Oh, I think you’re good too. Excellent even,” I said.

“Somehow I don’t think we’re talking about the same thing.” Her teasing smile was adorable.

I kissed her cheek. “I can’t wait to introduce you to the guys as my girlfriend.”

“I know most of the WAGs already,” she replied. “From all the games I’ve been to. So, what are we going to do now? Are you sure you’d rather stay here?”

I nodded. “One hundred percent.”

We got caught up on things that had happened while I was on the road, including her big cruise ship interview next week. Then Camille went off to check on her grandmother again. I’d never seen this nurturing side of her.

She came back and snuggled into my side.

“It feels like a throw-back, right?” I said. “Like in high school when you’re together in the living room but you can’t do anything because someone might walk in.”

“So we’re forced to converse?” Camille asked.

“I like talking to you,” I said.

“Seriously, who are you and what have you done with Nate? You told me you were a terrible boyfriend.”

“I used to be. But I’ve changed.” Was it the whole deal with the Nate Haters that made me change? Or was it how I felt about Camille? Maybe both.

She leaned against my shoulder. I kissed the top of her head.

She turned to look at me. “You’re so much sweeter than I thought you’d be. When I first met you, you were always bragging and acting all macho.”

“I thought that was what women liked,” I confessed. Just when I was wondering if I’d been too honest, Camille leaned over and kissed me gently on the mouth.

“I underestimated you in so many ways.” Her voice was soft. While I wished she would list all those ways, I savoured the compliment. We held hands and enjoyed the bliss of just being together.

“Tell me something about you that I don’t know,” she said.

“I won the scoring title in my Bantam year,” I said.

“Ugh. Not a hockey thing. Tell me something personal... and embarrassing.”

“Shit. Don’t you know all the embarrassing stuff already?” I pondered. “Okay, here’s something: my guilty pleasure is high school movies. I love that shit.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Everything. Name something.”

“*Do Revenge? The DUFF? The Kissing Booth?*” she said.

I nodded. “Told you, I’ve seen them all.”

“*Booksmart?* Elaine liked that one,” she said.

“Yup. All the old ones too: *Clueless, Grease, 10 Things I Hate About You, Say Anything, Heathers, Young Blood*. Seriously, if it’s set in high school, I’ve probably seen it.”

“Why do you like them so much?” she asked.

This was something I’d wondered about too, especially when I got mocked for my tastes. “Could be a bunch of reasons. Maybe it was all the bus trips where they’d throw on a DVD and we’d watch whatever the coach owned. My junior coach’s wife was a big fan of those John Hughes movies. Maybe that’s what started it.”

“That’s where you get your crazy ideas from, like putting a tie on the door knob if you have a woman in your bedroom,”

Camille said.

“Yeah. Although that one came from a college movie,” I said.

“What are the other reasons?” she asked.

This was harder to talk about. “Maybe because I didn’t have a normal high school experience. When I went to school during the hockey season, me and my teammates were a pretty big deal. But we missed a lot of classes and social shit. Then when I went home to Hanover, I really didn’t fit in anymore. I still had a few old friends, but I didn’t know what was going on and school was really tough because I was always trying to catch up.” I felt really stupid then, but I wasn’t telling Camille that.

“That’s too bad. I loved high school, and my friends were a big reason why. I’m sorry you didn’t get to experience that.”

Her sympathy was enough to ease my old beefs. “Thanks. Now you tell me something embarrassing.”

She considered this. “Hmm. How about the time my pants fell down on the playground slide when I was three.”

“Yeah, is it wrong that I’m getting turned on by that?”

“As long as you’re not imagining three-year-old me, it’s fine,” Camille said.

“I’m always imagining you with your pants off. Speaking of that, any chance you can come over some afternoon this week? Not tomorrow, of course.” I gulped, thinking of my meetup with Eri.

“Don’t worry, Nate.” Camille caressed my hair, and I leaned into her touch. “Just think, once you get things straightened out with Eri, even Hannah will have to approve of

our relationship. And we can spend oodles of time together. Alone.”

Her dark eyes were full of need and heat. We were such a good match.

CRUEL INTENTIONS

NATE

I DROVE to the west side coffee shop where Eri wanted to meet. Once inside, the whole place felt a little off. The front lobby was partitioned from the rest of the place, and I couldn't see into the back room.

“Hi there, welcome,” said the perky young Asian woman at the front counter. “Admission for one?”

“Admission?” I asked. “Isn't this a coffee shop?”

“Well, yes, we do serve coffee. But we're also a cat café. Most people come here for the cats.”

Now that she mentioned it, the place was totally cat-themed. There were cat decals on the wall and cat merchandise on the shelves. Through a glass doorway, I could see into a jungle-themed room.

“Yeah. Admission for one.” Eri had been crazy about cats.

“Thank you. If you want a drink or snack, you order it first. Lattes are our specialty.” She reeled off a long list of flavours.

“Just a caffe latte, please,” I said.

She turned around and manipulated the complicated coffee machine. In Vancouver, everyone took their coffees seriously—even cat cafés.

“Here you go.”

I looked down. The latte had the back of a cat on it, including a tail and tiny butthole. “Gee, thanks.”

“Oh, I almost forgot. Here is the list of rules for interacting with the cats.” She pushed a laminated sheet towards me. One quick look showed it was geared to people who were more cat-crazy than me. Thanks to Knightley, I knew that cats needed their space.

“Thanks,” I repeated and moved towards the cat section.

“I don’t think you had time to read all the rules,” she said. “But the most important one is not to chase or pick up the cats. Let them approach you.”

I chuckled. “It’s okay. I’m a professional hockey player, I don’t have to chase pussy.”

She scowled at me. Apparently cat people didn’t have a sense of humour.

The back room was weird too. It was decorated with painted trees, leaves, and flowers that were straight out of an animé cartoon. The larger wooden cut-outs turned out to be cat trees. Most of the cats seemed to be sleeping.

I looked around. There were a few people sitting at tables and others sitting on the floor playing with cats. Eri was at the back with a white cat on her lap, looking alarmingly like Dr. Evil.

“Nate,” she called out. She was smiling, which had to be a good sign. She wore a woolly grey sweater and long skirt,

looking exactly the same as when I'd last seen her over a year ago. She always wore these baggy clothes that hid her body, which seemed like a waste.

I walked over. "Hi, Eri."

This felt awkward. Should we hug or what? I wasn't used to meeting up with exes. Luckily, the cat prevented Eri from moving much.

I sat down and put my coffee on the table. There was an awkward silence. "Uh, how have you been?" I asked.

She smiled again. Or maybe she hadn't stopped smiling. "Great."

"Have you been in Vancouver all this time?" I asked and immediately regretted it. It reminded us that the last time we'd seen each other was that shitty night outside my place.

"No, of course not. I went back to Japan. And other places."

Like Seoul? I wondered. All Eri's answers were conversational dead ends. And I'd forgotten how girlish her voice was, it was irritating in contrast to Camille's lilting, sexy tones.

But I had a job to do here. I blew out a breath.

"Look, I wanted to talk to you about when we went out."

She waited, her eyes wide and fixed on me.

My brain blanked out, and I began again. "Well, back when I moved here, I started dating Asian women. And then I ended up dating only Asian women. It's not like there's anything wrong with that, but lately I've learned that maybe the way I did things might have offended some of those women. Maybe even you. And I regret my attitudes and

prejudices. Not negative race prejudices, but you know, preferences.”

Eri’s eyebrows were knotted. “I don’t understand.”

No shit. I’d practically tripped over my tongue trying to sound as politically correct as all of Hannah’s articles. If I messed up now, all Camille’s work would be pointless.

As I braced myself for another go, a tabby cat came over and curled through my ankles.

“Hey, buddy,” I said, welcoming the distraction. The cat stood and put his front paws on my knee. I rubbed his head, and the cat purred loudly. He settled onto the cushion beside me.

“You like cats?” Eri sounded shocked. “I thought you were allergic.”

“Really? Why?” I asked.

“You said you were,” she insisted.

I wasn’t allergic to anything, except long talks on where a relationship was going. But why would I have lied? Then it hit me. Eri was crazy about cats, and she’d wanted me to adopt one because she couldn’t have one in her rental. Shit, I’d been such a wuss. I should have told her no instead of making up crap.

Fuck this. I wasn’t devious enough to figure out what Eri wanted to hear. None of this shit would have happened if I’d told her the truth in the first place: you were too jealous and possessive and that’s why we broke up. Then she would have known it wasn’t a race-thing, it was a her-thing. All I’d said was that it wasn’t working out. And I didn’t help by dating another cute Asian chick afterwards.

The only way to apologize was to tell the truth.

“Look, Eri, I know it was you. You know, that Indigo Butterfly song that’s about me.”

She didn’t reply. Eri would have been a good poker player. It was tough to tell if my knowing surprised her or not.

“I’m not exactly sure what you wanted to happen, but it changed a lot of stuff in my life. First off, I started playing like shit. Knowing that there was someone out there who hated me that much made me feel really bad. I know you’re not going to believe this, but I don’t like hurting anyone’s feelings.”

Zero response. But she was listening intently, so I kept going. “I didn’t have the first clue what to do, so I asked a friend to help me. Actually, two friends.” It was safer not to mention their names in case Eri got more upset and took it out on Camille and Hannah.

“They told me that it was wrong to date Asian chicks just because they’re hot. And I get that now. I want to get to know a woman as a person before we, you know, do it. That way we can both tell if we’re really compatible. I’m taking my dating life more seriously.”

There was another silence.

“Why are you telling me all this?” Eri finally asked.

“Well, I want to apologize. I’m sorry if I made you feel like you were only one in a long line of Asian chicks I was scoring with. That really wasn’t what happened.” I couldn’t undo the past or pretend that our relationship had been real and important. Obviously, she had cared more than I had—I hadn’t even thought about her until Camille had pressed me to remember.

When the white cat jumped off her lap, Eri looked down and brushed off her long pleated skirt. “I thought you were the perfect Canadian man. You played hockey and wore a Canadian tuxedo.”

Now that Eri was in front of me, I recalled a lot more. How she loved weird things like Audrey Hepburn, obscure anime, and K-pop. In fact, she’d talked about Indigo Butterfly—shit, if only I’d remembered that earlier. But it was hard to regret the hunt that brought me and Camille together.

And for Eri to call me the perfect man was typical too. She was obsessive about shit like that—she was big into achieving her “dreams.” She’d slotted me into a role that didn’t have anything to do with what I was really like. So maybe we’d both fooled ourselves.

“Together, we were a perfect couple,” she stated this like it was an unarguable fact. But she used the past tense and I didn’t get a sexual vibe off her. After all, she’d obviously spent a lot of time hating me.

“I’m not perfect by a long shot,” I said. Jesus H. Christ, how long had we gone out—two months? And she had been thinking we were a perfect couple, while I thought it was fun and games. Our relationship had a communications gap a mile wide.

“Not the perfect man, the perfect Canadian man,” Eri corrected.

What was the point of arguing over the past? I took my first sip of the now cold latte and inhaled foamy cat butt.

A black and white cat came skittering over. Eri dangled a woolly toy in front of him and he pounced on it several times. Then he ran away again.

“So, you’ve learned your lesson?” Eri asked.

What lesson did she mean? Not pissing off crazy exes or the whole Asian fever thing?

“Yeah,” I agreed. That seemed to be the best answer.

She clapped her hands together and the tabby who had been snoozing beside me woke up with a start.

“Oh sorry, Mr. Cat.” Then she beamed up at me. “I am happy that you have learned about the strength of girl power. You will behave better in the future.”

I swallowed down my irritation. Sure, I had behaved like an asshole with her, but how come Eri didn’t have to take any responsibility for being a psycho girlfriend who made some ridiculous assumptions about how serious we were?

At least she had forgiven me. Time for a more neutral topic.

“Do you remember my roommate, Marty? He adopted a cat, Knightley. And now he’s kind of my cat too.” I pulled out my phone and showed her a photo of me gaming with Knightley on my shoulder.

“Oh, he’s so cute,” she exclaimed even though Knightley, who had a big scar on his head, was never going to win any cat beauty contests.

“He’s the smartest cat I’ve ever met,” I bragged.

“Oh, tell me everything he does.” Eri’s enthusiasm reminded me why I’d liked her in the first place. I described Knightley’s early life: how he was a stray who’d been attacked by some animal and dragged himself to a house to be helped.

“That’s so sad.” Her eyes were shiny. Shit, was she crying?

I quickly switched to Knightley's happier times. "He ended up starring on the cover of a charity calendar. It featured hockey players and cats."

"Oh my. Were you in it too?"

"Yeah. With an orange cat." She wasn't going to ask that cat's name, was she? Because I had no clue.

"I'm glad you are enjoying a cat now. I wonder why you thought you had allergies."

"No clue. Maybe I outgrew them," I said. There was a time for truth and a time for white lies. I didn't want to upset the good vibe we had going now. Anyway, wasn't this enough chat? The room felt claustrophobic.

"Well, I guess I better get going," I said. "Are we good now?"

Then Eri gave me a look that was alarmingly familiar in this setting: that of a cat about to toy with a terrified mouse.

"Are you dating an Asian girl now?"

Shit. Should I tell her the truth? If I said I was dating Camille would I look like a liar who was still nailing Asian exclusively? And hadn't Hannah warned me not to say anything?

"Nah. We've got playoffs coming up, so I'm keeping my focus on hockey," I said.

"Ahhhh," she said. "Good for you."

She looked towards the entrance. "May I ask you a favour? Could you drop me off at the Skytrain station?"

I swallowed. It was one thing to be in a café together, but another to be alone in a car. But refusing might piss her off

again.

“Sure? Which one?” We rose and walked towards the exit.

“Broadway, please,” she said.

The weather was a bit overcast when we got out. I unlocked my car, she got in, and I went around to the driver side.

“You have a new car now. You used to have a white convertible,” Eri said. I was surprised she remembered.

“Uh yeah. This is a Mustang. My dad owns a dealership.”

“Yes, I remember.” It was a little creepy that she recalled so much about me. I turned up the radio so we didn’t have to talk.

“Well, here we are.” Broadway station was only a few blocks away, thankfully.

“Goodbye, Nate.” Eri smiled at me.

Once she got out of the car, I exhaled. Getting this over with was a huge relief. As I drove away, I relaxed completely for the first time in weeks.

THE SPECTACULAR NOW

CAMILLE

I WONDER what they're doing now kept looping through my brain. Nate was meeting Eri at this very moment. If only I could have spied on them. So much was riding on him getting the apology right—including our relationship. I didn't want to have to look over my shoulder every time we went out in public.

I paced around the house until my fed-up mother suggested I go for a walk.

“Ugh, you know I'm not the nature type,” I protested, even though we lived in the middle of suburbia.

“You are making me and Lola crazy,” she said. They were watching some Filipino drama and didn't want any distractions.

Instead of arguing, I went up to my room to find walking shoes. As I surveyed my closet floor, my phone went off.

Nate, finally!

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Course. Were you worried?”

Really? Was he this clueless? Look at all the damage Eri had already done. Maybe she couldn't hurt him, but she was exactly the type to plan some kind of public humiliation.

“Ugh. Just tell me how it went.”

“Why do it on the phone, when we can talk in person?” he replied.

Relief shot through me. Now that I knew he was all right, I could not wait to see him. “Where are you?”

“I'm just pulling up outside your place.”

Perfect. I grabbed my purse, dumped the running shoes for a strappy pair of sandals, and headed out with only a brief goodbye to my family who were still glued to the television.

“Hey, Peaches.” Nate had one muscular arm resting on the steering wheel and a grin on his face. I was so happy to see him—all in one piece. I flung my arms around him.

“I'm so glad you're okay,” I said, my face crushed against his warm neck.

Nate hugged me back. I could feel the rumble of his laughter. “You're acting like I went into battle.” Then he brought his mouth around to mine and gave me a soft kiss. “Not that I mind.”

I kissed him back, feeling heated and happy. We separated with effort, but we couldn't go on making out on my street. What if my mother looked outside?

Nate pulled away from the curb. “You hungry? Want to go out?”

I shook my head. “I had dinner, but if you want something, I'll go with you.”

“I’m good too.”

There was a charged silence. Both of us wanted to go to his place and finally have sex again, but for once Nate was holding back. He was trying hard to be a better boyfriend, so I went along with it. Plus it was fun to watch him wrestle with self-restraint.

“Why don’t we go for a drive? I want to hear what happened with Eri.”

“Okay, sure.” He headed east on Hastings.

“So, spill,” I said.

“It went good. She forgave me, so that’s all we wanted, right?”

“Naaaate, come on. I want more.”

“That’s what you always say.” He laughed. “Okay. Well, turned out it wasn’t a normal coffee shop,” he began. From the cat café setting to his description of Eri as Dr. Evil, Nate’s story was surprisingly hilarious. Was his sense of humour something else I’d never appreciated before? Or was it just giddy relief? Finding Eri had been the high point of my detective career, but here was the real ending of the case.

“I feel so good that we solved this whole mystery,” I said.

“That *you* solved this whole mystery. And Hannah helped. Hey, I’m just glad it’s over.”

“So, I hope this means the end of the Nate protests,” I said.

He nodded. “They’re putting ticket prices up for our playoff games and games are selling out. Not sure if those chicks could afford to come anymore.”

“I saw on the Vancouver Sapphires fan page that they’re meeting up at different places now.” I giggled. “Just think, you brought all these women together.”

“I’m happier that this whole mess brought us together.” He reached over and held my hand. “Now I can show off my girlfriend.”

“To who?” I asked.

“My teammates. The world.” He motioned out the windshield.

I scoffed, but he was adorable.

“And I’m gonna be a great boyfriend,” he boasted.

Now I understood that his boasting covered insecurities. He said things that he wanted to be true. Maybe that was how he stayed so positive.

“You will be,” I reassured him. “As long as you’re honest with me.”

“Of course. Wait. I haven’t messed up already, have I?”

I kept my face solemn. “Well, you lied to me.”

“Did not. When?”

“When you asked if I wanted to go out for dinner tonight,” I said.

“What the fuck? That was no lie,” Nate said.

“Well, maybe not a real lie, but was that what you really wanted to do?”

He squirmed a bit. “I just wanted to be with you. Touch you.” He rested his hand on my thigh, and I shivered.

“Nothing more?”

Finally Nate clued in. “You mean, like sex? Jesus, Camille, of course I want that. I always want that.”

“Then, let’s go back to your place.” Because I always wanted that too.

After an insanely short time when land speed records may have been broken, we got to Nate’s. Once inside the front door, we started making out right away. Messy kisses and clumsy clutching, all driven by insane need to be together. It was only a week since our first time, but waiting had felt like years. I wrapped my legs around Nate’s waist and he carried us up to his room. I was so focussed on Nate that Marty and my sister could have been watching and I wouldn’t even have noticed.

Nate slamming the door of his bedroom was like a starter’s pistol. We shed our clothes like it was a race. I won and tackled Nate onto the bed while he was hopping on one foot, trying to take off his underwear.

“I’m so ready for this,” I said. I mounted his thick thighs and stroked his beautiful, hard cock.

“Fuuuck yes,” Nate groaned, then shook his head. “Wait, don’t you want foreplay first? What if you don’t come?”

What a man. Even when we were both so horny, he still cared about my needs.

“If I don’t come, you can take care of me next time.” All I wanted was Nate inside me right now. I ached with an emptiness that only his stiff cock could fill.

He clutched my shoulders and kissed all over my face. “And the third time, the fourth time and every time after that.”

God, was any guy ever so sweet and dirty at the same time? Sex with him was going to be an adventure.

“Stop being such a sweetheart, and let’s do it.”

He laughed. “I’ve finally found someone who wants sex more than I do.”

He stretched out and pulled a condom out of his bedside table.

“I’ll do it.” I opened the package and eased the condom over Nate’s cock, running my fingers over every pulsing vein. It sprang up in my hand. “It’s like your cock is saying hello.”

“*Hello, Peaches,*” Nate squeaked. “Oh wait. Should my cock have a low voice? *Hey, baby.*”

I was giggling so hard, I almost lost my grip on him. But then I parted myself and eased his thickness inside me. It felt so good, so right. I raised and lowered myself on him, slowly and rhythmically.

Nate watched like he was memorizing the sight of me fucking him. His hands caressed my hips and ass, but he let me take the lead. But when I started pounding harder, his eyes closed tight as he experienced the intense friction of our bodies coming together.

I bit my lip. I’d been dreaming of this all week, Nate’s gorgeous body and his fat cock stretching me. I rotated my hips so I could feel him everywhere.

“Fuuuck,” Nate groaned and closed his eyes. “It’s so fucking good.”

“Look at me.” I knew what he liked, and I wanted to blow his mind.

His eyes flew open, and I ran my hands over my tummy and waist as I rhythmically rocked my centre around his

erection. When I took a breast in each hand, his eyes widened in pleasure, then he swore as I squeezed my own nipples.

“You’re so fucking hot,” he said.

I kept my eyes locked on his face as I put my forefinger into my mouth and sucked on it and then took my wet finger and placed it directly on my clit. As I rubbed myself, the sensations were incredible—his hard cock inside and stimulation on my most sensitive spot.

“I’m loving the view, but that’s my job,” Nate growled. He pushed my finger aside and replaced it with his calloused fingertip, pulling wetness from inside me and gently circling my clit then rubbing it with faster strokes. When I was almost dizzy with pleasure, he pinched my clit firmly and sent me over.

“Ow, Nate,” I huffed. “Hurts. So good.”

My bouncing was erratic now but enough for him to come too. I felt him tense under me. There was one last thrust and he was done.

I exhaled and fell onto the bed. Turning, I studied Nate’s profile. He was quiet and unsmiling, unlike his usual hyper self. He had changed so much in the past few weeks. If we had gotten together when we first met, the sex would have been good but it wouldn’t have been as mind-bendingly good as it was now. We understood each other. And Nate’s playfulness around sex was amazing. I rubbed my thighs together, letting out a little purr of satisfaction.

“Am I the best fuck you’ve ever had?” he asked.

Ah, the return of egotistical Nate. “You’re okay,” I lied.

“Shit, woman. What do I have to do to make you happy?” He pulled me closer. “Well, I got off, which is what counts.”

If he was trying to bug me, it wasn't working. I understood him too well. Nate prided himself on satisfying his partners, and watching me come was his kink—if you could even call it a kink. It was the best kink ever.

Nate ran his hands down my back and squeezed my ass, pulling me towards him. I could feel his soft cock against my belly. Time to stop thinking about past sex and think about our future sex.

I put my hand against the broad expanse of his chest. Nate's body was incredible. Of course he was a professional athlete, but wow. He looked like an underwear model, except without the underwear.

I made my way down and sucked on one nipple and then the other. His nipples were pale and tiny on his big chest, but they still responded to my mouth. Then I kissed my way down the ridges of his taut torso.

Nate groaned loudly when I caressed his balls. He was hairless down here, something I preferred when it came to blowjobs. His cock was still limp, but growing bigger as I gently scratched my nails across his balls.

His cock tasted salty as I enveloped it in my mouth and sucked gently. He reached down and brushed my hair away from my face. Of course, he was very visual—like me.

I sucked harder now, my cheeks hollowing with the effort. Nate cursed under his breath as he watched me. His cock grew bigger and harder. At the beginning, I could take it all but now he was overflowing my mouth, so I used my hands to stroke and pump the base. His body jerked up with the sensations as I squeezed and sucked even harder and faster.

“Stop, Peaches,” Nate’s voice was hoarse and strained. “I want to fuck you again, not come this way.”

I looked up at him, knowing how much he would enjoy seeing me like this—naked with my stiff nipples rubbing against his hard thighs, my cheeks bulging with his hard cock, and my lips stretched and glistening. As usual Nate’s room was brightly lit so he could get off on watching us, and I drew on my inner exhibitionist.

He swore as I went at him harder and faster, and his cursing and moans communicated how good it all felt.

“I’m gonna come,” he gasped and moments later, he spasmed and released in my mouth. I swallowed, then sat up and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

Nate hadn’t stopped watching me. “Fuck. You’re my wet dream.”

I lay back down, raised my arms up and stretched out.

His hands instantly captured my breasts. “Now it’s your turn for some fun.”

“Already?” Most guys needed a rest after coming or even fell asleep.

“Well, it’s not like you can stay over, right?” He knew that my mom was pretty strict. “And there’s so much shit I want to do with you.”

That idea turned me on a lot. What would Nate do next?

Despite my looming curfew, Nate worked slowly. Lying face-to-face, he made lazy circles around my breasts moving closer and closer to my tightening nipples but never touching them.

“Touch them,” I commanded in frustration.

Nate only laughed and then began kissing my breasts, again in those wide circles. When I raised my hands to cup them myself, he captured my wrists and held them behind my back. Then he licked a deliberate circle all around each nipple.

I was so turned on now. He was doing everything I craved: slow foreplay, a little domination, and built-up sexual tension. How did he know?

When I tried to thrust a nipple into his mouth, he pulled me back by the wrists.

“Ask me for it,” he said.

“Please. Do it.”

“No, tell me exactly. Use my name. And make it hot,” he echoed my words on the first night we had sex.

My voice was low with desire. “I want you to suck my nipples. Hard. Please.” Then I added, “And then make me come. With your fingers, your mouth, and your big cock. Please, Nate, please.”

The expression on his face was smug and conceited, but that didn't lessen my excitement. And when he finally fastened his mouth to my nipple and sucked hard, I almost came just from the release of it.

“Feels so good,” I gasped.

Nate was equally slow exploring the rest of my body. He planted butterfly kisses on my thighs and soft strokes on my ass. His delicate foreplay set my whole body aflame.

When he finally got to the main event, he spread my legs and just looked for the longest time. I was proud of my body, but what I really wanted was some tongue action. But I'd

already learned that the more I complained, the longer he took. It was the sweetest torture.

“You are so pretty down here,” he said as he spread my thighs even wider.

Stop looking and fuck me, I wanted to scream. My patience was rewarded when he finally stroked my clit.

Wise to Nate’s tricks, I steeled myself to show no signs of my building excitement. I was already so turned on that it only took a few strokes of his tongue until a little wavelike orgasm hit me. Then when he inserted two fingers inside while sucking my clit, I almost exploded off the bed.

“Ahhhh, I’m coming,” I cried out. Of course, he stopped immediately.

“You jerk.” I thrust my hand down and roughly played with myself. This time, he didn’t stop me, but watched everything with his hand stroking his cock.

“Unnnh,” I came loudly and dramatically.

“Was that as good as when I do it?” he asked.

“No. But at least it happened in this century,” I replied sulkily. Of course it wasn’t as good as coming with his cock inside, filling me up and hitting all the right places, like before.

Nate’s voice remained calm and clinical. “When we do some edge play, I think you should be tied up. Because you’re so impatient. Good things happen to girls who know how to wait.”

And to prove this, he lifted my hips and fastened his mouth to my clit with hard suction. Then he finger-fucked me at the same time. The sensations were so intense that I came again,

but Nate didn't let up at all. He kept sucking until I was almost incoherent with the pleasure, gasping and crying out how good he was. Finally he stopped.

Eyes closed, I heard the crinkle of the condom wrapper. I wondered with nervous excitement which position we'd use this time. Nate started out in missionary.

"Unnh, this doesn't seem like you," I gasped between thrusts. I raised my hips to drive his cock even deeper. "Too vanilla."

He grinned again. "But missionary has its advantages." He reached out to squeeze a breast with one hand. With the other, he fingered my clit. God, that felt even better and I wrapped my legs around his back to hold him inside.

"Oh Nate," I screamed out as I came.

He reached back to grab my ankles and pushed my legs towards my shoulders. "I wanna go deep into you."

"Yes. I want—unnh—that too," I gasped as he thrust and twisted. Because Nate had come twice already, this time he was fucking me like a machine. But he was totally into it, watching me like he was mentally filming our sex.

"I'm getting close," he grunted. "How do you want to finish?"

Oh, there was one position I loved but it worked best when the guy was big, strong, and hung...like Nate.

"Do you know lotus?" I asked.

He nodded, sat up and crossed his legs.

I sat on his lap. "Oh, this is going to be great."

I loved the friction that my clit got in this position. But the only thing I forgot was the extra intimacy of this position. Face-to-face, noses almost touching. I had to look deep into his eyes the whole time. Dangerous emotional territory.

He pulled me up and slid his cock back inside, and I shivered with the sheer pleasure of it. I wrapped my arms around his neck and rocked on his cock. He stroked in and out, his movements both fast and erratic. I could read every expression of pleasure on his face, moving and squeezing to make it better for him.

“So freaking good. I wish I could fuck you forever.” Nate’s voice was strained.

A few last strokes, and then he froze on his last thrust and cried out. After he came, we both collapsed in a tangle and lay there, sweaty and satisfied. I wasn’t going to feed his ego, but Nate *was* the best I’d ever had.

THE PERFECT DATE

NATE

“DAMN IT, Wills, you can’t just cancel on me like that. I need four couples per room,” Lionel growled across me to Cedric Williams. We were getting dressed after a tough practice.

“Sorry, but I forgot that it was our anniversary tonight. Can’t mess that up,” Wills replied.

“Going to an escape room is a good anniversary date,” Lionel suggested. Wills laughed in reply.

“I could go instead,” I offered. Why wasn’t I invited in the first place?

Lionel shook his head. “It’s a couples event.”

“I have a girlfriend.” Finally. I’d passed every quest and slayed the fucking dragon and my reward was Camille. My in-your-fucking-face, she’s-all-mine girlfriend.

“No offence, but an escape room takes a lot of problem-solving skills. It’s not going to be much fun for one of your ESL babes.”

A flush of anger came over me. In the first place, Camille was as Canadian as me. But the bigger deal was Lionel dissing

every woman I'd ever dated—that was racist. Had he even spoken to any of them?

“That’s straight-up bullshit. Just because a person doesn’t speak perfect English doesn’t mean she’s not smart. In fact, she’s probably smarter than you—she’s the one who’s travelled halfway around the world to study and experience a new culture.”

“Fuck’s sake, chill, Jonesy. I didn’t realize you were dating these women for their minds,” he scoffed. “If you want to come so badly, you can come. I didn’t think it would be something you’d even want to do.”

I was still pissed, but maybe he was right. It wasn’t something I’d normally be into, but Camille would be.

“I’VE ALWAYS WANTED to do an escape room,” Camille said as she clicked on her seat belt. She looked beautiful as always in a fancy top and jeans. She stuck out one foot in a bright blue sandal. “I wasn’t sure what shoes to wear. We’re not running around, are we?”

“No clue. These escape rooms are all about puzzles and shit, aren’t they? The only choice I had was if I wanted the zombie room or not.”

“What did you choose?”

“No zombies. Those things are creepy as fuck.” Did that make me sound like a chicken?

“Zombies are horrible,” Camille agreed.

“Really, you’re afraid of zombies, after all that crime scene shit you love?”

“That’s all photos. If some actor dressed as a zombie jumped out at me, I’d probably pee my pants.”

I chuckled. So would I, but there was no way I was admitting it.

We arrived at some nondescript building where a bunch of my teammates and their girlfriends were waiting. The women were checking out Camille, big time. Of course they were because she was amazing.

“Hey, Jonesy,” they called out.

“Hey, guys. You know Camille, right?” I said.

“Of course,” Kristi said. The girlfriends welcomed Camille with hugs and coos. I overheard them questioning her.

“I knew you and Nate were dating,” said Kristi. “Why did you deny it at the game?”

“We weren’t dating then,” Camille replied. “We just started going out.”

“I hope you know what you’re in for,” Donovan said. Seriously? What was wrong with dating me? Then they lowered their voices and I couldn’t hear them anymore. Jesus, did every woman hate me now?

Sods nudged me. “So your dream finally came true?”

“What dream?” I asked.

“To date Camille,” he said. “How did you change her mind?”

“That would take too long to explain.” I almost said that I had to change my entire personality, but that wasn’t true. When I’d had to tell Camille all the bad shit about me that had freed me up to be myself. And all my struggles lately forced

me to figure out what my real values were. Playing hockey and having good relationships—with my teammates and my inspiring girlfriend, that was what was important.

“Listen up, everyone.” Lionel split us into two groups. “One change of plans. Only Lepper wanted the zombie room, so we’re now doing an Egyptian room and a prison room.”

Camille and I were in the Egyptian room along with Lionel and his girlfriend, Donovan, Josh and Kristi, as well as Foxy and Sods. More cancellations had forced Lionel to relax the couples rule.

Once inside the lobby, we were greeted by our game guide, Brian, a bearded guy with glasses. After a brief introduction speech, he confiscated all our phones to prevent cheating or filming.

“I feel naked without my phone,” said Kristi, which made me think about Camille naked. Not that I needed any encouragement, since her tight jeans covered that amazing ass like white on rice. Oh shit, was that racist?

Brian guided us into our room, which was actually pretty cool. It had dark faux stone walls, fake torches, and big cobwebs.

“Looks like the set of *The Mummy* movie,” I said.

Brian explained that we were all archaeologists trapped under the pyramids because of a cursed tomb we had opened.

“You have 60 minutes to escape the tomb before the mummies come to life and destroy you,” he said cheerily. “Just use the walkie-talkie if you have questions or need clues.”

Then he closed the door behind him.

“It’s pretty creepy here,” Donovan said in a shaky voice.

“I’m already getting claustrophobic,” Kristi said.

“Relax,” Lionel said. “We can leave out the back door anytime we want. But in order to win, we’ll have to get out that door.”

He pointed to a fancy door which was covered with strange patterns and crevices.

Well, nothing like mentioning winning to stir up a bunch of competitive athletes.

“Not only do we have to get out, but we’ve got to beat the other group’s time. Losers have to buy a round afterwards,” Lionel said. “Someone needs to take charge, so I’ll be the leader.”

This was typical of Lionel, who played American college hockey and saw himself as way smarter than guys like me who played junior. Sure, he was smarter, but I didn’t appreciate the attitude.

Lionel continued, “So, let’s start looking for clues. Anything you find, you can bring it to the table.” He pointed to a big slab in the middle of the room which held only a laminated sheet with the game rules and a few water bottles.

Camille and I started looking in the far corner of the room.

“Wish I had my phone flashlight,” Camille said. Not surprisingly, she was right into this and immediately found some symbols on the wall which she began puzzling over.

“What’s this?” I asked, pointing to a small grate in the floor.

“Oooh, I’m sure that’s important.” She put her eye right up to the grate. “Something shiny is down there. How do we get it

out?”

I pulled at the grill but it was tightly fastened. “Too bad we don’t have a screwdriver or something.”

We tried twisting and prying, but the grate was welded shut.

“Okay, let’s move on. We know it’s there so maybe something will turn up later to open it,” Camille said.

Foxy and Sods let out a shout of triumph. “We found this thing. What is it?” They held out a gold triangle shape with hieroglyphics all over it.

“Put everything on the table, and we’ll deal with it in a minute,” Lionel barked.

“Wait,” said Camille. “Bring it to the locked door.”

The four of us gathered around the fancy door, and Camille pointed to the large circle in the middle. “See, I think it goes there.” The circle had four empty spaces in it. One was triangular.

Foxy pushed the triangle in and there was a distinct click.

“Yes!” Sods did a fist pump. “The first clue solved.”

Lionel came over, grumbling about people not listening to the leader. “What are you guys going on about?”

“Now we can see what we’re looking for,” Camille said. “These four shapes will open the door.”

We needed a square, a circle, and a hexagon to complete the pattern.

Unfortunately, none of the other shapes were hidden in plain sight. There were locks and secret codes to unlock the locks, and then we had to figure out that codes. But I enjoyed

doing it all with Camille. She kept joking and laughing even while we were working hard. In fact, with the exception of Lionel, who kept trying to boss us, everyone was having a blast. When we found the circle and square shapes, we all celebrated with shouts and high fives.

Now, we only had to find the hexagon.

“I found a code,” called out Foxy from under the table. The quiet rookie was turning out to be a pro at this.

We all looked at the code, which was a weird mix of pictures.

“Since we’re under a pyramid, it must have to do with Egyptian hieroglyphics,” Lionel mused. “Is anyone here familiar with the Coptic alphabet?”

Seven blank faces looked back at him.

Camille interrupted. “Look, I think you’re overcomplicating things. Let’s write down the names of each picture and look for patterns.”

We tried that, and then Camille pointed out that the first letter in each word spelled out a message: bird slide.

“I think Camille should be in charge,” Foxy muttered, but not loud enough for Lionel to hear. Ha, my girl was kicking this thing.

She was already searching the room. “Isn’t there a bird drawing around somewhere?”

“Yes,” Kristi said. “It’s over here.”

The two women stared at the outline of a crow-like bird. Then Camille put her palm on top of the panelling, and it slid open!

Inside was a locked compartment.

“Damn. Where is the key for this?” Lionel asked.

“I’m pretty sure it’s in the grate in the corner that Nate found at the beginning. I could see something shiny inside,” Camille said.

Everyone rushed over to the corner and tried to pry it open, but even Josh, who was the strongest one here, couldn’t budge it.

“God, this is so frustrating. Just when we think we’re almost there, a new challenge pops up,” Donovan said. “And now I’m getting hungry. I wish I had my purse, I have energy bars in there.”

“There’s water on the table,” Kristi said.

“Is it okay if I take one?” Donovan asked. “Gosh, there’s only three bottles. Why did they cheap out instead of putting out enough for everyone?”

“Wait. Don’t drink any water,” Camille said.

Donovan pulled her hand away like it was burned. “Oh my god, why? Do you think it’s poison or something?”

“Maybe it’s acid,” Lionel guessed. “That’s how we dissolve the grate.”

“I think it’s just water,” Camille said. She carried the bottles over to the grate and started pouring them into the drain. By the time she had used up the third one, a key attached to a plastic buoy had floated to the top where she could fish it out through the wide grate.

“Voilà.” She waved the key in triumph and turned to me. “Since you found it, do you want to do the honours?”

I went over to the compartment, unlocked it, and found the missing hexagon shape. I held it high in the air. “Ladies and gentlemen, the last key.”

Lionel insisted on inserting the final shape. There was a click, then a whirring noise, and another click. Lionel pushed down the door’s lever and it opened now.

Everyone cheered and we rushed out. Brian came over and congratulated us. “Forty-two minutes. That’s an excellent time.”

“Are we out before the other group?” Lionel asked.

When Brian nodded, we all cheered again.

Camille smiled up at me. “That was really fun.”

“Yeah, you were so smart. We would never have done it so fast without you.”

“All my useless talents are coming in handy,” she said.

“None of your talents are useless.” I pulled her pliant body in for a tight hug. I felt a mixture of pride, joy, and horniness. Everything was better with Camille.

BREAKER HIGH

CAMILLE

“WELL, YOU’RE CERTAINLY A TALENTED SINGER,” Laurel Piggott began.

My cruise ship interview had been going pretty well, but the expression on Laurel’s face meant that bad news was coming. She was a dark-haired, energetic woman in her thirties. Her foot had twitched throughout our talk and she kept popping up to refill her coffee. Once all the caffeine kicked in, Laurel would probably blast right off.

“To be honest, we’re always looking for staff. Not necessarily entertainers, but since you’re willing to do more than just perform, the chances are even better.”

She patted my C.V. on her desk. “But your employment history is very spotty. You haven’t stayed at a job longer than”—she paused as her eyes scanned the paper—“three months.”

Laurel leaned forward. “That’s the one area where we have to be especially careful. We need people who will stick with the job and work well with the crew. You can’t quit a job in the middle of the ocean.”

“But I wouldn’t quit. I told you, this is my dream job. I’d work so hard.” I tried to project seriousness. “Honestly, it’s the first time I’ve really thought about what I wanted to do for a career. All my other jobs were just about earning money.”

Laurel smiled. “I believe you. But saying that also shows how young you are. Look, Camille, we’re constantly doing intake. Why don’t you contact me in nine to twelve months? If you can demonstrate greater job stability and related work experience by then, we’ll be in business.” She stood up and opened the door of the tiny office.

“Okay, thank you.” I paused at the door to add, “I will call you back in nine months.”

She nodded. “I’ll look forward to that.”

But my brave front fell once I left. I blinked back tears until I got into the car. Then I had a short, therapeutic cry. Was I stupid to assume that my singing would be enough to get a job? Rocky had emphasized that this interview was only informational, but Laurel needed staff. And everything she had said about the job only convinced me that it was perfect. Sure, the hours would be long and I’d be working hard, but being a professional singer was a dream I’d given up on long ago.

I pulled down the mirror, tissueed off my tears, and fixed my makeup. Good as new.

As I drove home, I passed the turnoff to Nate’s street. On a whim, I turned around and parked at his place.

Marty answered the door. “Oh hi, Camille. Come on in.”

The living room was empty. “Is Nate not here?”

“No. He’s still at the rink.” Marty looked down at his phone. “But he should be back anytime. Did he know you were coming?”

I shook my head. “Not exactly, but he said to drop by and tell him how my interview went.”

“You had an interview? How did it go?”

“Okay.” Again, I blinked rapidly, trying to keep my composure. But I’d been so close. Nothing was ever that easy for me. A tear rolled down my cheek.

Marty’s eyes widened. “Oh no, you’re crying. Er, don’t cry. Sit down. Would you like something to drink?”

I nodded. I could use a moment to compose myself. He bustled around in the kitchen and returned with a tray with a glass of water, pop, an energy drink, a bottle of beer, a juice box, and a can of iced coffee. I couldn’t help but smile at the wide selection. Marty was so sweet.

“I didn’t know what you wanted,” he explained.

“Thank you.” I plucked out the juice box and popped the straw inside.

He sat down across from me. “I messaged Jonesy, and he’s on his way home. Did you want to talk about what happened?”

My shoulders slumped. “I met this woman, Laurel, she works for Seven Seas Cruise Lines. She was nice, and she thinks I’m talented enough but she won’t hire me because she thinks I’m a flake who quits all my jobs two minutes after I start.”

Marty reached for the glass of water. “Well, that’s too bad. Uh, what job is this?”

“Oh sorry. I want to be an entertainer on a cruise ship.”

He drank some water and then said, “Well, there are lots of other cruise ship companies.”

“I guess. But I have quit a lot of jobs. Or been fired.” The hardest part of Laurel’s observation was that it was exactly what my family said: if I kept leaving jobs, eventually I’d have trouble getting a new one. Honestly, I could have stayed in any one of them. All jobs had nice people and a-holes, stuff I enjoyed and stuff I hated, and the pay was the same.

“Hey, Camille.” Nate walked in and sat beside me on the couch. He leaned over and gave me a kiss on the cheek. He looked over the drink assortment, grabbed an energy drink, uncapped it, and had a big glug. “Sorry. I didn’t know you were coming over. So, did you get the job?”

I shook my head and began blinking again.

“Jesus, Jonesy,” Marty said. “Camille’s already upset. Don’t ask her that.”

“How was I supposed to know? That’s what you ask after a job interview.” Nate took my hand and squeezed it. “What happened?”

Ugh, I managed not to cry this time because I hated being stupidly emotional. It was good to get all this out before I went home. Besides, sympathy was exactly what boyfriends were for.

“It wasn’t all bad. She thought I was good, but there’s too big a risk that I’ll quit mid-cruise and they’ll have to send me home in a life raft or something.”

Nate scowled. “Well, that sucks. You would rock that job. They should give you a break.”

“I know. And I wouldn’t jam out on them. But she did say that I could contact her again in nine months.”

“Well, that’s great,” Marty said. “So, you’ll get another chance then. Sounds like she did like you.”

“I guess. But she wants to see that I’ve kept a job this whole time.”

“That’s easy. You like your job at the care home,” Nate said.

While I appreciated their attempts to cheer me up, I wanted to wallow a bit longer. “And she’s also looking for related work experience. How am I supposed to get that without being on a cruise ship?”

“You need to get parallel experience. You figure out the actual tasks of the job and then find a job with something similar,” Marty replied.

“How do you know all this?” Nate asked.

“At the end of last season, Coach Gauthier told me to think about what I wanted to do after hockey. So I started getting experience related to what I want to do.”

“What’s that?” I wondered. It was tough to imagine Marty or Nate being anything other than hockey players.

Marty looked down at his shoes and muttered something.

“I didn’t hear you,” I said.

He raised his head. “I want to be a preschool teacher.”

I burst out laughing. A huge hulking enforcer with three- and four-year-olds? Wouldn’t the kids be terrified of him? Then I noticed Marty’s embarrassed expression. “Oh, I’m sorry. But you don’t seem like a preschool teacher type.”

“I know. But I really like kids. When I was a kid, I didn’t have a dad and my Granddad was the only man in my life. I always wished for an uncle or someone younger who would play sports with me. I thought maybe I could be that guy for other kids.”

For the second time tonight, Marty warmed my heart. “That’s so nice. But still a preschool teacher—why not a teacher? There’s way more men in teaching.”

He shook his head. “I’m not smart enough. And I can’t do five years of university after hockey, it’s too expensive. But I could do a short college program. And in the meantime, if there’s any team stuff dealing with kids, I’m there. I’m getting related experience.”

Nate seemed to know about this preschool thing already, so he wasn’t as shocked as me. He asked Marty, “Why do you think Goats told you to think about your future?”

“He said it helps players not to grip the stick too tightly. It puts the game in perspective, so you don’t worry so much about the future. Then you play looser.”

“Hmmm.” Nate’s forehead wrinkled. Clearly every word Coach Gauthier said needed to be analyzed like it was part of a complex puzzle. “But wouldn’t that distract from making the NHL?”

“You’re too superstitious about the future.” Marty turned to me. “So, break down the job you want and see if you can do something similar.”

I blew out a loud breath. “But that’s impossible. It’s tougher to get singing gigs on land.”

“Are there any other job duties?”

“Yes, I’d be organizing activities during the day—keeping passengers busy.”

Nate squeezed my hand again. “Perfect. It’s what you do at Oceanview, isn’t it?”

I considered this. “Oh, you’re right. Thanks so much, guys. You’ve been so helpful.”

Nate laughed. “My parents went on a cruise, and my dad said the passengers were all senior citizens and their parents, so you’re good there.”

“Plus I won’t quit because my mother *and* my aunt will kill me if I mess up.” And I wouldn’t get fired either. Just yesterday, Shannon had called me to pass on some compliments from the residents.

Marty’s phone buzzed, and he left the room to answer it.

Nate put his arm around me. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I was so close though. I could see her making up her mind during the interview.” I sighed.

“I think you’re kick-ass just for doing well at these interviews. Obviously, she did like you. All she said was not now.”

“Interviews aren’t a big deal,” I said.

“They are. I’d be shitting myself if I had to do one. I’ve never had a job interview in my life,” he replied.

“How can that even be?” How could someone reach their twenties and never interview? I’d had dozens.

He shrugged. “The only jobs I’ve had are playing hockey, working at a golf course, or doing stuff at the family car dealership. You don’t interview for hockey, except maybe at the combine. I got offered the golf job because I’m a good golfer and the manager knew me from hockey.”

“Wow. I never thought about interviewing as being a skill,” I said.

“Just like your internet sleuthing skills,” Nate said. “You think just because you’re good at stuff, that it’s not a big deal. You should be proud of that stuff. Like I am about hockey.”

While it was true that Nate bragged about hockey—and lovemaking—it was also true that he was really good at both things.

“So you think I should be more conceited?” I asked.

“You do have a lot to be conceited about. Aren’t you dating the famous Nate Jones?”

I laughed. “Infamous, more like.”

“And I’m dating the amazing Camille Salang.” He ran a hand down my thigh and nudged my skirt up until he could see my panties. Then he ran his forefinger over the satiny fabric. Damn, he was turning me on.

“Nate. We’re not alone.” I smacked his hand and pulled my skirt down.

“Do you have time to fool around a little?” Nate asked.

“Nope. I have to get my mom’s car back to her.” I got up and Nate followed me.

At the door, he put his arms on my shoulders. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m sort of glad that you won’t be going off on a cruise ship right away.”

Initially, I felt irritated then realized I agreed. Things with Nate were really good right now.

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” Then I kissed him, enjoying the heat of his mouth against mine.

VERONICA MARS

NATE

WE WERE DRIVING BACK from a movie with Lionel, Josh, and their girlfriends. I reached over and took Camille's hand.

She smiled up at me. Even in the dim light, her face glowed.

"You get along so good with everyone," I said.

"No big deal. They're all really nice. Kristi is a hoot," she said.

"You're an extrovert, right? Me too. We like going out and being with people."

"True. We're proof that it's not always opposites that attract," she said.

I squeezed her hand. "My smart girlfriend makes yet another good point."

Going out with Camille was next level. I knew that our sex life would rock, but what I didn't anticipate was how much I would enjoy just hanging with her. Nights out with teammates were a blast, but last night a Salang family dinner was equally fun. Izzy cooked this amazing beef stew called mechado with

a spicy sauce that made me want to lick the plate clean. And her family was so nice and positive, it made me happy just being there.

“Going out with you is the awesomest,” I said.

Camille laughed. “Your enthusiasm is adorable, but really?”

“You know I’m not the best at words. All I know is how I feel—fucking fantastic.” I kissed her hand before letting go to park in front of my place.

She sighed. “I have to be home in half an hour. That doesn’t leave us much time.”

I put my arm around her and pulled her close as we walked up to my place. “Well, if we can’t fuck, we can still make out a little. I can get my baby all hot and bothered.”

“You want me to be frustrated?” she asked with widened eyes.

“Think of it as long-term edging. I know you’re into that.” She’d been slowly confessing her fantasies and there were many. Another way we were very compatible.

“Is Marty already asleep?” she asked. Judging from his closed bedroom door, I assumed so. I grabbed cold drinks and we headed into the living room.

“No beer for you?” she asked.

“Nah. Keeping it healthy since it’s nearly playoff time.” We’d been practicing every day, and I had logged a ton of gym time too. We were watching the ongoing playoff games and video highlights so we’d be ready for whoever came out of the first round. I felt fully prepared.

“I guess you’re not the same guy who ate a tub of popcorn tonight,” Camille said as she put down her drink.

“Where’s your respect, woman?” I tackled her onto the couch and tickled her, running my hands down her silky top as she squealed underneath me. “I wanna hear you say, ‘Popcorn is a healthy food.’”

“No way,” she screeched between giggles. I kept tickling her, slipping in some stealth feels. Finally, breathless, she gasped, “Popcorn is a healthy food.”

I let her sit up, but kept her tight to me. Her clothes were all messed up now, and her silky blouse was unbuttoned to reveal a shiny pink bra and rounded tits. Her panting breaths only highlighted her sexy cleavage. To my cock’s delight, she didn’t bother to straighten out her clothes.

Then she leaned against me and whispered, “Three tons of butter and toppings are not healthy though.”

I laughed. There was no getting the last word with her. I kissed the top of her head. “You look so hot now, Peaches.”

“Mmmhmm?” She snuggled closer, and ran an eager hand over the bulge in my jeans. “You sure you don’t want a blow job now?”

I groaned and pulled her onto my lap. We kissed, our mouths warm and messy. “Of course, I want a quickie. But your mom gave me the curfew lecture last night, and I’m afraid of her.”

Camille took my face in her hands and dotted kisses on my cheeks, nose, and chin. “How can a big, strong guy like you be afraid of a tiny woman like her?”

“I’m afraid she’ll stop cooking for me.”

My girlfriend shook her head. “Hey, I made some of that dinner too. Not a huge part, but still.”

“Really? You are incredible. How did I get so lucky?” It was a question that I asked myself a lot. The fact that my screwup led me to going out with Camille was a fucking miracle.

We made out a little longer, then I got up and pulled her to standing. “Time to go, Cinderella.”

“Unh. I don’t want to go home. I’d rather sleep with you,” she complained.

I groaned. “Don’t you think that’s exactly what I want too? I mean, waking up with you would be the best.”

She buttoned up her top and tucked it into her jeans. *Bye, bye pretty titties.*

“Not to mention the times when we’re not sleeping,” Camille said.

I held her close and squeezed her ass cheeks. “Speaking of sex, can you come over tomorrow afternoon after practice? I’m starting to get stressed about the playoffs, and I could use some relaxation.”

“Sounds like fun. You’re such a worrier for someone who is relaxed about almost everything else in life,” she scoffed.

“Only about hockey. Our first playoff game is so important.” My NHL prospects rode on my playoff performance. Spending time with Camille helped keep me from dwelling on the negative possibilities.

“Ugh, I’m too tired to put these complicated shoes back on,” Camille fake-complained, holding up her red sandals which had long laces that held them on.

“Then don’t. Hop on.” I crouched down and she got on my back, wrapping her arms around me. I stood and piggybacked her towards the car.

She was giggling all the way. “You’re such a he-man.”

“You love it.” And I liked having her body next to mine at any time.

Then a voice cut through the darkness. A high, angry voice. “You’re such a liar, Nate.”

I peered into the dark night and saw a short woman standing on the sidewalk.

Shit. It was Eri.

I lowered Camille and stood between her and Eri, who was walking towards us.

“What’s going on?” Camille asked.

“It’s Eri,” I hissed. “Get in the car and let me handle this.”

Of course, Camille came even closer because a word from me and women did whatever they wanted.

Exhibit B stood right in front of us. Eri’s voice was a taunting sing-song. “*Oh no, I don’t have a girlfriend. I’ve learned my lesson about dating Asian women.*” She shook her head. “I never believed a word you said.”

Eri didn’t even look angry. She looked happy to be proven right. But she also looked scary.

“That’s not true. I meant my apology and everything I said about changing. Because I have changed,” I said. That was the truth, even if she couldn’t see it.

“Really? Because here you are with yet another Asian.” She turned to Camille. “Do you know what you’re in for?”

You're nothing more to him than a sex object, once he gets bored with you, he'll be on to the next pretty woman he meets. As long as she's Asian."

Camille was staring at Eri with widened eyes. She wasn't going to fall for all this, was she?

"Don't listen to her," I began, but Camille spoke directly to Eri.

"I know you. You were at the hockey game. In a blue wig. You said your name was Riri." Camille's eyes flashed with the same excitement as when she first found Eri's identity. "You're the woman in the song, and you've been leading the protests too. You are obsessed with Nate."

Eri tossed her hair back. "I'm not obsessed. I'm trying to help his victims—women like you. You should be on my side."

"Let's all calm down here," I said, and both of them glared at me.

Eri stared at Camille. "Why were you at the game with all the Sapphires? Did Nate send you to spy on us?" She turned to me. "You get your girlfriend to do your dirty work? You are so pathetic."

Eri spun and walked towards a sedan parked across the street. Had she been there when we got home? Was she spying on us the whole time?

Before she got inside, she called out, "See you at the game, Nate. Get ready to be booed."

Oh shit.

We stood there gaping as Eri peeled out, watching her tail-lights disappear.

“I better get you home,” I said. We got into my car in numb silence.

“I don’t understand,” Camille said. “I thought you said that your apology with Eri went fine.”

“It did,” I said. “I was upfront with her about what I’d learned, you know from you and Hannah. And I said I felt bad for hurting her. She seemed happy that I had gone through a lot of shit. We chatted about, um, cats. I told her about Knightley.”

“That all sounds good, so what are you not telling me?”

Sometimes I really hated Camille’s talent for ferreting out bullshit.

“Well, everything was going great. Then she asked me if I had a girlfriend. An Asian girlfriend.” I blew out a long breath. “I told a little white lie. That I wasn’t dating anyone, I was focusing on the playoffs. I didn’t want to mess up when she had already forgiven me. I wanted everything to be over.”

There was another long silence. How come things that seemed like the right thing to do at the time felt like a really bad idea later?

I couldn’t handle the quiet. “What do you think she’ll do now? She won’t try to hurt you, will she? Hannah thought that might happen. And Eri’s wrong—when you guys met, we weren’t even going out then. You barely tolerated me then.” I was babbling, but I couldn’t stop. I felt guilty for putting Camille into the middle of all my shit.

“I don’t think she’s going to do anything to me; you’re the one who’s in trouble. But I’ll be careful anyway. Are you going to be okay if the I Hate Nate gang is at the game?”

“Of course. I did all that therapy, right?” Sure, it was only three sessions but it felt a lot longer. However I’d stopped worrying once Eri had forgiven me. Knowing that she was angry and out there plotting more revenge restarted my nervousness.

“Are you mad at me?” I asked.

“I’m not mad at you, but why didn’t you tell me everything that happened? Then we wouldn’t have let our guard down.”

I sighed. “I honestly thought it was over. She didn’t give off any vibes like she was still into me, so I figured she’d be satisfied that I went through so much shit and leave me alone.”

Camille nodded. “I think you’re right. It doesn’t feel like she wants to get back with you, but more like it upsets her to see you being happy.”

Crap. Eri wanted me to suffer. And I had suffered, but apparently not enough.

“What do you think I should do now?”

Now it was her turn to sigh. “I have no idea. You know her best. What do you think she’ll do now?”

“I don’t know.” But it would be something shitty. I parked in Camille’s driveway, but she didn’t get out. She seemed oddly excited. Her True Detective mode was kicking in again.

Sure enough, she began talking quickly. “You know what’s weird? Why was Eri there when we left? If she wanted to confront us, she would have waited outside your house like she did the first time. She would have talked to us when we arrived.”

“I guess,” I said. What did it matter when it happened? It was shitty anytime.

Camille nodded. “So, Eri arrived after we got to your place. If your car was already home, you would be in for the night. Why would she bother staying around?”

“I have no clue,” I said.

Camille put her fingertips up to her temples. “After all, she couldn’t have been following you all night. You went to my place, to the movie theatre, to a restaurant afterwards, and then back home. Even if she saw us go in the house, how did she know we’d come back out? Usually your girlfriends stay overnight, right?”

“Yeah, sorry.” Obviously, I wished Camille could also sleep over too. It was tough that the woman I wanted the most, I got the least time with.

She waved a dismissive hand at me. “Don’t worry, I’m thinking. It’s weird. It’s like she knew our routine. Is this the same car you had when you dated her?”

“No. In fact, Eri commented on that when she got in. My last car was a convertible.”

Camille turned to me, her eyes bright even in the darkness. “Eri rode in this car?”

“Yeah, she asked me to drop her off at the Skytrain station. I thought it was kind of weird because it was only a few blocks away and it wasn’t raining or anything. But I did it to be nice.”

“And she sat here?” She pointed to the passenger seat.

“Yeah. Does that bother you?”

Camille pulled her phone out of her purse and turned on the flashlight. Then to my surprise, she started searching my

car. She pushed the passenger seat back as far as it would go, then kneeled on it.

“Babe, what are you doing?” I asked.

“Oh my god! Check this out!” She pointed underneath the seat. When I bent down, I could see a tiny grey disc with an Apple logo stuck on the bottom of the seat.

“What is that?” I asked.

“It’s an Airtag. Eri put it there when she got in your car. She’s been tracking you ever since you met up. She sees everywhere you go. She knew all about us before she faked that confrontation tonight—she even knows I have a curfew.”

“How is that fucking legal?” This was unbelievable.

“It’s controversial. It was designed to find stuff you lose, but now guys use it to stalk women, even women they’ve just met.”

Was this what it was like to be a woman? I felt totally violated. I reached down. “Let’s get rid of the fucking thing.”

Camille put a hand on my wrist. “Wait. We can use this to our advantage. If Eri thinks we don’t know, we can trick her into thinking you’re somewhere you’re not. Let me think about this. I’ll discuss it with Hannah. She’s going to love this.”

“I can’t believe it. Not only are you not upset about what happened with Eri, you’re excited,” I said. The last time Eri confronted my girlfriend, she cried for an hour, and then broke up with me a week later. “While I feel like shit.”

“Oh no.” Camille put a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry, Nate. Everything will be fine.”

But I couldn't believe that. Eri was still pissed at me, and she was way too devious for me to figure out. All I wanted was to turn back the clock one hour—to when I was happy and worry-free.

DO REVENGE

NATE

WHEN I GOT to the rink the next morning, I felt like shit. All night I had weird nightmares where Eri messed up my life in bizarre ways. I woke up as wrung out as if I'd battled through four periods of overtime.

My life had turned into one of those video game quests where you can't save your progress. I had to go back to the beginning and apologize to Eri again. And I'd have to keep doing this until it worked. The trouble was that I had no clue what to say. Flattery wasn't going to work. Lying wasn't going to work, but the truth bothered her too. What the fuck was I supposed to do?

There was no way I could go into the playoffs with a big distraction like this hanging over me. I had to do something. So once practice was over, I called her. I figured she wouldn't answer, but I wrote out my new apology so I could leave it as a message.

Bringggg.

“Hello, Nate.” Eri's voice was super-cold.

“Oh hey.” I was so surprised that she answered, that my mind blanked. I cleared my throat.

“Uh, look, I wanted to apologize again. I totally meant it when I said how sorry I was for hurting you. And I have changed. I don’t see Asian women as objects or stereotypes... not that I ever did, but even less now.”

I paused, but she didn’t respond. As usual. “Look, the only thing I lied about was my girlfriend. And that was because I didn’t want to upset you when we were getting along again.”

“If you had really changed, you wouldn’t have lied,” Eri said.

“Maybe you’re right. But it’s hard to fix everything overnight.”

Eri had impossible standards. That’s why Camille was so great, she never expected perfection from me. She would never call me “the perfect Canadian man.” In fact, she’d laugh at the very idea.

“Why are you calling?” Eri asked.

Well, if she wanted honesty, I could deliver. “Because it’s the playoffs and they’re really important to me. I don’t want to have to worry about you still being upset at me. Look, Eri, you’re a good-looking chick, shouldn’t you be moving on to the next guy?” Instead of wasting so much time torturing me.

She laughed, and the sound reminded of that cat and mouse vibe from before.

“I’m not obsessed with you. This is only a fun little hobby. I saw my opportunity when the song got big.” She laughed again. “Even I couldn’t imagine how well it would work. You fell apart completely, your hockey playing sucked. Even your team didn’t want you after that performance.”

Shit, she sounded exactly like one of those Bond movie villains, gloating over her crimes. But those villains never won—in the movies, anyway. Maybe I was no James Bond, but I was different now. Mentally stronger.

“Okay, go ahead then. Your stupid protests won’t work anymore. You’ll see.”

“Oh, Nate, how little imagination you have. Do you think I will do the same thing over and over? You should know me better than that—but then you don’t really know me at all, do you?”

“I do know you,” I said, but it was a lie. If I’d known what a psycho she was, I would have never touched her, no matter how hot she was.

“The playoffs mean more media attention. Maybe tomorrow night, our story will get bigger—more people can find out what you’re really like,” she said.

Fuck me. She wanted to give interviews now? To make sure that everyone found out what a terrible guy I was. And by everyone, I meant NHL GMs. I would get a reputation as a problem player, which would tank my chances of getting called up.

“Is that what you want? To fuck up my hockey career?” I asked.

“Ah, yes, hockey. Always your number one priority.” Eri’s voice had a gleeful tone that was unnerving. “What would you do for hockey?”

“Anything.” The answer popped out with zero hesitation. Almost twenty years of hockey led up to these playoffs—my biggest stakes games ever. A good performance could get me a chance in the NHL next season.

“Maybe you should focus on hockey then,” she suggested.

Was this another puzzle that I had to figure out? “I am. I’m practicing hard, watching video, working out.”

“You should also eliminate any distractions from hockey,” she said.

“I’m trying. That’s why I called you.” She was the biggest distraction right now.

“I’m not the only distraction in your life,” she said. Every sentence seemed to hold a hidden meaning.

“Look, I’m a simple guy. Just tell me. What will it take to get you to drop all this crap and let me get back to my life?”

Eri laughed her crazy laugh. “Why should I make things easy for you?”

I let out a frustrated breath. “Okay, fine. I’m not a mind reader. All I’m trying to do here is make things right with you.”

“Of course. Because all you want is everything: to be a hockey star, to date a beautiful Asian, and to have everyone like you...even your ex-girlfriends.”

“What’s wrong with that?” What was wrong with aiming high? But it was creepy how well she knew me when I’d forgotten almost everything about her.

“You can’t have everything. You must choose,” she replied.

Then it hit me. Eri wanted me to suffer because I’d hurt her. She knew how much I loved hockey so she tried to take that away. Now that she saw my happiness with Camille as another opportunity to get back at me.

I tried to stay calm, but my throat was dry and I could barely choke out the words. “So, if I break up with Camille, you’ll stop all this crap?”

Eri’s horrible laugh was the last thing I heard before she hung up.

DAZED AND CONFUSED

NATE

“WHAT’S the best way to break bad news to a chick?” I asked T.J. in the weight room. We’d finished our workouts and were stretching on the mats.

His eyebrows went sky-high. “What the fuck, Jonesy? You’re breaking up with Camille already? You guys just started going out.”

Sods leaned into our conversation. “Ja, seriously? You’re really into her too. I can tell.”

“Back up, boys. I’m not breaking up with her. I just have to tell her something she may not like,” I said.

“What?” Sods asked.

I debated telling them. There was no way I was going to break up with Camille just because Eri told me to. But I figured that we could *pretend* to be broken up until the playoffs were over. It felt like a genius idea, especially since Camille loved that stealth shit. But it was still bad news though. Not seeing each other would suck.

“I can’t tell you. That would spoil it,” I said. Maybe Eri had spies on the team. I couldn’t remember her being friends with any of the girlfriends, but maybe it had happened. The only thing I was sure of was that she was one step ahead of me.

“Okay, Mr. Mystery,” T.J. said. “If I’m breaking up with someone, I do it at a nice restaurant. The chick is less likely to make a big scene there.”

“Seems like a waste of money,” Sods said. “I would only take a chick to a nice place to impress her. Or maybe for her birthday or an anniversary?”

“When have you ever gotten to an anniversary?” T.J. scoffed, then turned back to me. “And give them your credit card info beforehand. Then if you have to make a quick getaway, you’re good. I once got hit with a full glass of red wine because I had to wait to pay.”

“Fuck,” I said. This sounded like exactly the kind of conflict I wanted to avoid. Plus, if Camille got all dressed up to go to a nice restaurant, I wouldn’t want to spoil her evening.

“He’s not breaking up with her, so he doesn’t have to run away,” Sods said.

“True. Then maybe buy her a gift? To make her feel better,” suggested T.J.

“Oh, that’s a great idea.” I could get her another one of those purses, but in a different style.

“I’m glad you’re not breaking up with her,” Sods said. “I like Camille. She’s fun. And you’re in a good mood all the time now.”

At first, T.J. and Sods had been pissed that I wasn’t going to go out with them as much, but now they were coming

around. Sods said that Camille was just like one of the guys. Personality wise, anyway. Nobody would describe that body as masculine.

After I got the gift, I went to pick Camille up.

“Are we going to your place?” she asked, and my cock perked up at the idea of Camille in my bedroom. But I couldn’t nail her and then say we had to cool it. Besides, Eri was still stalking me.

“I have something I need to tell you,” I said.

“Uh oh. That doesn’t sound good. What is it?”

My eyes flicked to the passenger seat. “I don’t want to talk here. Ever since you told me about that tag-thing, I feel creeped out in my own car. I went to practice with Marty today.”

“Well, we can take it out once we figure out what we’re doing about Eri. I spoke to Hannah this morning, and—”

“Camille. Stop. We need to go somewhere and talk.” I actually felt nauseous.

She directed me to a park about twelve blocks from her house. We got out and sat on a park bench.

I reached into my duffel. “Here, I got you this.”

She pulled out the handbag. This time it was a tiny one in yellow. Sunny colours always reminded me of Camille.

“Another Jacquemus? It’s really cute, but what’s the occasion?” She gave me a questioning look, her lovely face full of curiosity. My heart did a flip.

“I talked to Eri. She said a bunch of stuff, but the biggest thing is that she’s going to do something worse. Unless...”

Again a wave of nausea came over me.

“Unless what?” Camille asked.

“Unless I break up with you.” The words hung in the air, and Camille froze. Her posture stiffened, and her animated face turned into a mask.

I rushed to fill in the rest. “I’m not going to do it, of course. But I was thinking, maybe we could pretend to be broken up, you know, just until the playoffs are over.”

There was a pause. Camille’s voice sounded faraway. “How would that work?”

“Well, we couldn’t see each other—in public at least. Maybe you could sneak over, like in the back of Marty’s car or something?”

She made a noise between a laugh and a snort. “As if. When do the playoffs end?”

Great, another thing I hated talking about. “That depends. Could be in a week. But if we go far, it’ll be in June.”

“Don’t you go home once hockey is over?” she asked.

“Well, yeah, but I could stay a week or two. Maybe we could go on a holiday or something. I really don’t like to plan ahead because I’m superstitious about the end of the playoffs.”

There was a long silence. Camille’s expression was still unreadable. Then she straightened her shoulders and reached into her purse. “Here.”

I looked down. It was the playoff tickets I’d given her.

“Oh. You’re not going to my game.” I mean, I knew that, but now shit felt real.

“How can I? Eri will be there and she’ll see me. Besides, I can’t explain your scheme to the other girlfriends.”

“So, you’re good with this plan?” I asked.

“I’ve got one improvement.” Camille’s eyes met mine, and her gaze was fiery. “Instead of pretending to break up, let’s actually break up.”

“What are you talking about? I don’t want to break up,” I said.

“Well, it’s all about you getting everything you want, isn’t it?” she said, her words eerily echoing what Eri had said. “Let’s take a reality check. Everything you’ve said to me: Camille, I need you, I want you to meet my friends, I feel so good when you’re at my games, I appreciate your brains. All that stuff goes out the window once Eri tells you what to do. You just do it. But not really, because you’d rather lie and fake things. All you’re doing is proving that you are an awful boyfriend.”

“It’s not like that. But she wants to fuck up my hockey career. She’s threatening to talk to the media. Then I’ll get a bad rep, and I’ll never get called up.”

“I know hockey is important to you. But this is crazy. How can we split up and then get back together without explaining to everyone that we’ve been puppets in your ex-girlfriend’s revenge scheme? And why should I wait around for weeks or months, just so I can spend a week with you—when we’ll break up anyway once you go back to Ontario?” Camille’s voice was so cold that I actually shivered.

“I’ve never assumed that we’d break up this summer,” I protested.

“Right. You never think further ahead than the next game. Because you’re too superstitious.”

“What do you think I should do then?” I asked.

She looked at me like I was a piece of gum stuck to her shoe. “That’s the thing that bothers me the most. All this time, I felt like we were a team. I helped you when you needed to find your ex. And you supported me when I was upset about not getting the cruise ship job. But instead of telling me what Eri said and trying to figure things out together, you do exactly what she wants.”

“I’m so sorry. I know I fucked up. Can we forget everything I said and start again? I’ll tell you everything she said, and...”

Camille stood up. Her new purse fell to the ground. “And this gift. You actually thought that I was so shallow that giving me a designer bag would make up for all the pain of treating me like a disposable object.”

Her eyes were shiny with unshed tears and her whole body was trembling. Camille wore her brittle, sarcastic exterior like armour, but she was caring and sensitive inside. How could I have thought for a minute that this plan wouldn’t hurt her?

“Babe. I’m so sorry. This was my worst idea ever, can’t we go back? Just tell me how I can make up for this.”

She shook her head. “Stop this. I’m not the boss of you. That’s the real problem here. Even when you know what the right thing is, you do the easiest thing. You can blame Eri or hockey, but it’s all on you.”

She walked away. I picked up the purse and ran after her.

“Camille. Stop, please.”

She turned around and glared at me. Her face was flushed and angry, yet I couldn't look away.

“Leave me alone, Nate. I mean it. I don't want to talk to you ever again. I'm going to block you and don't use Elaine or Marty as messengers either.”

I watched her leave. She wasn't walking with her usual bounce. Instead she moved slowly, like she was made up of fragile pieces that might shatter at any moment.

Finally, she turned a corner and disappeared. I couldn't believe how badly I'd fucked up the best thing in my life. I got into the car and hit my head against the steering wheel. When I looked over at the passenger seat, I was filled with rage. I found the stupid fucking Airtag and pitched it out of car as hard as I could.

I regretted that immediately too. Camille would have done something smarter. I got out, and searched on my hands and knees until I found the disc. One of those meal service vans was parked on the corner, and I jammed the disc into its bumper. Let Eri figure that one out.

As I drove home, a memory of Camille's ex Bill came back to me. How I'd laughed at how clueless he was and claimed that I'd never fuck things up if she gave me a chance. And yet I'd done exactly that.

My biggest playoff game ever was happening tomorrow night and my head could not be any more fucked up. And Camille was right, as always. I had nobody to blame this on except myself.

I should have let Eri do whatever the fuck she wanted. My teammates would have had my back. Amanda would have helped me handle any media crisis. And most importantly,

Camille would have given me all the emotional support I needed.

How pitiful that I didn't understand all that until she was gone.

CLUELESS

NATE

“Do I ask for a lot from you, Jonesy?” Marty said. My usually kind and gentle roommate loomed over me in a threatening way that I would normally find terrifying. But right now I was too numb to feel anything.

“No,” I replied.

“Seriously, I only asked you for one thing: don’t hurt Camille. Now she’s upset, Elaine’s upset, and their mom’s upset.”

“How is Camille?” I asked. It was all I could think about: how much did I hurt her? What was she feeling right now? I wanted to apologize a million times and hold her in my arms and make her feel better. Anything to get her to forgive me and take me back.

Marty shook his head. “Nope. I’m not supposed to tell you anything about Camille.”

“But I’m worried about her. And she won’t take my calls.” Camille had blocked me on every type of social media by the time I got home. I couldn’t even find her profiles anymore. It

was like she had disappeared totally from my world. All I had were a few photos. I wished I'd taken hundreds more.

I turned my cheek towards him. "Go ahead. Hit me."

Marty recoiled. "What are you talking about?"

"I deserve it. Besides, I couldn't feel any worse."

My roommate sat down beside me and blew out a breath. "Oh Jonesy."

I shook my head. "Have you ever done something and as soon as you did the thing—like the very second the words came out—you realized what a mistake it was?"

He shook his head. Of course, Marty had never done something so boneheaded because he thought before he acted. I thought I was outsmarting Eri. But I never considered how Camille would feel. I'd taken her support for granted since she was always in my corner. But I'd made her feel like she wasn't important to me.

My original plan was to message Eri and tell her I'd broken up with Camille so she'd call off her gang. But now that we'd actually broken up, there was no way I was telling Eri a fucking thing. Besides, if I didn't tell anyone, I could pretend that we were still together.

I deserved the boos and the banners because I *was* a terrible boyfriend. Anyway, if I gave in once to Eri's blackmail, who knew what she would do next?

But life rolled on. Today was game day, and it was time to get ready for battle. I'd tell Amanda the Nate Haters would be back, so she could prepare. And I had to play through whatever Eri threw at me. Her taunts would be my motivation.

Maybe Camille would be watching, and she'd see that I was a different man. The kind of guy who wouldn't mess up if she'd give him another chance.

"I'm going to the gym," I told Marty. I needed to do something physical or I'd go crazy. A light workout would be a relief.

When I got to the arena facility, it was almost deserted. Not surprising, since we'd gone at it hard already this morning.

The only person there was Tibbs, our captain. Some of the older guys on the team had a whole series of stretches and physio exercises that they needed to do just to get ready.

Tibbs nodded at me, and for a moment I thought of asking him for advice. But Camille's words still echoed in my head. I needed to stand on my own two feet and figure out my own shit.

I hopped on a stationary bike. No way I could do a full-on workout after this morning's tough training session. All I wanted was to burn off some of my frustrations.

I cycled and watched Tibbs stretching. The Vice had a wide range of hockey players. Most were guys like me in their early twenties. But there were also teenaged prospects like Sods whose careers were just starting. And guys in their thirties like Tibbs, who had played in the NHL and then come back down here.

Wouldn't that be humiliating? To have played in the big leagues, made mega-bucks, and then have to go back to the buses, the cheaper hotels, the crappier teammates. I always figured that once I made the NHL, I'd stick. I'd play there until I retired. But Tibbs had been a really good player until a

serious injury blew up his leg and his whole career. You could never predict how hockey would go.

Right now I felt physically invincible, but how long would that last? I looked at the long white scar on Tibb's thigh. It took a warrior to battle back from that. And I'd seen photos of his big house in Quebec, he had the coin to retire if he wanted, but he kept playing.

The doors of the gym burst open and two young kids came in. They ran over and flung themselves onto Tibbs. He caught a child in each arm and pretended that they had bowled him over. The kids were squealing and laughing. Then Tibb's wife, Sylvie, walked in. She was a beautiful, stylish blonde in jeans and a long jacket. Apparently she came from a wealthy family. Tibbs said she was the best thing to come out of his NHL years, a chance to "marry up."

She spoke to Tibbs in French, and he nodded. He got up and greeted her with a passionate kiss. Those French-Canadian guys were smooth.

Then he picked up the kids and the four of them left. Sylvie nodded to me on the way out.

Once they'd left, the gym felt even emptier. I'd caught a glimpse of Tibb's real life—away from the rink. Happiness surrounded the four of them like a bubble. His perfect wife didn't care if he played in the NHL or the ECHL. His kids loved roughhousing with their dad, not the team captain.

Tibbs had a full life outside hockey. His confidence didn't depend on how many goals he scored or what his professional future was. He had balance.

I thought back to Camille and how good it was when we were together. I wasn't thinking about marriage, it was too

fucking soon for that. But Tibbs said if you got a chance at someone who was out of your league—just because you were good at hockey—you can't fuck that up.

Camille was so many things: fun, sexy, honest, caring, beautiful, and smart. I was so used to putting hockey first, I hadn't even realized her importance in my life. But now that I knew, I wanted to explain how I felt and ask her for a second chance. And I'd have to do it in a way that showed I did it all myself.

TO ALL THE BOYS I'VE LOVED

CAMILLE

“TAA DAA!” Hannah put a bubble tea in front of me with a flourish. We were at our usual boba shop, where she'd forced me to meet her with a promise of important news. My unsupportive family had also insisted I “stop moping and get out of the house.”

I stared at the deep purple drink.

“It's ube flavour! Why aren't you more excited? Ever since I had purple cake at your house, I always associate purple food with the Philippines. But they call this drink purple yam milk with brown sugar.”

“Ube is purple yam,” I said.

“Aren't you even going to take a photo?” she asked. “All your Filipino friends would love it too.”

I dutifully took a photo but I didn't bother to post it. What was the point? Who cared about likes and comments?

Hannah was determined to drag me back to the land of the living with her tough talk and infusions of sugar. She surveyed

my appearance with an eagle eye. The messy bun and minimal makeup were not impressing her.

“Okay, I will admit that I am the president and chairman of the Dump the Rice Chaser Club, but are you sure about this breakup? I’ve never seen you so down. You’re happier once you dump a guy. The next night you’re out at the clubs or going to parties.”

“Our relationship wasn’t going to work out long-term anyway.” But she was right. I had zero energy and I felt like someone cut a big part out of me.

“Also, I’m still not quite straight on who exactly broke up with whom here?”

“It’s complicated,” I said. But Hannah wasn’t taking that for an answer and kept bugging me.

“Fine, this is what happened: Eri told Nate he had to break up with me or she’d bring on the full force of the I Hate Nate crew. So, Nate decided that the best thing would be if we pretended to break up. And I was so insulted that I decided that we should actually break up.”

Hannah nodded. “That *is* complicated. But you did the right thing. What is his problem? When you guys had sex, did you notice if he actually had balls? Because it sure doesn’t seem like it.”

“Ha ha.” I didn’t want to think about Nate’s balls or any other part of his very attractive anatomy.

“Okay, I have some thoughts on Eri. But first of all, let’s talk about this Airtag thing.”

I sighed. I really didn’t want to rehash anything to do with Eri, Nate, dating, sex, or hockey, but Hannah was relentless.

“Can I say how badass it was that you figured out she was tracking him?” she said.

“Thanks.” I perked up a bit. “I think he was shocked that I didn’t wilt like a flower when she showed up. But it was exciting.”

“I wonder why he never got any notifications that he had an Airtag on him?” she asked.

“Easy. He doesn’t have an iPhone. His is a Google phone.”

Hannah scowled. “And because he’s a guy who doesn’t have to worry about randos following him home from bars, he hasn’t downloaded the notifications app.”

“That’s not quite true,” I point out.

“Fair,” she agreed. “Maybe he has it now.”

“So, didn’t you say you have news for me?” I desperately wanted to stop talking about the breakup, which I’d mentally rehashed a thousand times already. And I wasn’t someone who looked back.

“I do. But first let’s discuss Eri,” she said.

I braced myself.

“I’ve got a whole theory here. What if Eri masterminded your breakup? She knew how hot and heavy things were by all the times he went back and forth to your place. And then she saw how sickeningly happy you two are in person, something I’ve experienced myself. So she challenged Nate to break up with you—knowing that he’d never do that but he might wimp out and suggest a stupid alternative which would cause you to break up with him instead.” She raised her hands in triumph. “Am I good or am I good?”

“You’re good. Anyway, why does it matter?” I finally put a straw into my ube boba and had a sip. The taste was sweet and rich, but not even that could lift my spirits.

“It matters because you’re falling into her trap. You’re doing exactly what Eri wants. She wants Nate to be miserable—which he is. The fact that you’re unhappy too is just a bonus for her. Are you going to let the hannya win?”

“The what?” I ask.

“It’s a jealous female demon from Japanese mythology. Driven mad after being spurned by her lover. Perfect fit, right? My Asian Studies classes are paying off.”

Oh god, save me from one of Hannah’s cultural history lectures. I closed my eyes.

“All I’m saying is that the two of you staying together and being happy would drive Eri absolutely crazy.”

“Yes, I’m definitely going to live my life to spite her,” I said. “Can we move on?”

“Did I mention that Nate contacted me?”

My eyes flew open. “What?”

“Yes, he wanted to make sure that you’re okay. The guy must be desperate if he’d risk my wrath—which you bet I unleashed on him. You can’t hurt my friends and get away with it.”

I wanted to know if he was okay too. After all, he had a big game tonight. But I wasn’t going to ask because we were over. I wasn’t a person who got back together with exes.

Hannah was still watching me intently. “I can see you’re too proud to ask, but he’s not in a great place. He lacked his

usual irritating positivity. I dislike normal Nate, but sad Nate is even more pitiful.”

I definitely did not want to hear about how miserable Nate was. “Can we move on to why you insisted on meeting me?” Instead of letting me wallow in chocolate and reality TV in my bedroom.

“Fine. But think about what I’ve said. You guys were really happy before Eri interfered.”

She pulled an orange and pink striped folder from her purse and laid it on the table.

“I think we might be able to get more business for detective work.”

“Really?” My assumption was that the odds of doing this again were less than zero.

“I’ve been thinking about other people who could use our help. And who would be willing to pay for it.” She paused for dramatic effect. “And you know who I came up with?”

I shook my head.

“Lawyers! I was talking to a friend in law school and she said that the law firms hire private investigators all the time. And someone else told me that social media is a big resource for divorce lawyers. So I did this.”

She opened the folder and produced business cards and postcards with Virtual Investigations on them. There was a geometric graphic that looked very professional.

“Wow, these are great.” Now I felt a glimmer of energy. I picked up a postcard and flipped it over. It listed our services as social media researchers with special skills in Asian social

media and youth culture. “You make us sound so professional.”

“I figured out what our strengths are. Let’s face it, we think that everyone can do what we do, right?”

“So true.” I’d always figured that my only strength was stubbornness, but Nate had praised all my so-called useless talents. Ugh, no more Nate thoughts!

“But let’s say you’re a forty-year-old white male lawyer. You might not even know what KakaoTalk is. And you’d have no clue how young women message or the slang they use.”

“It’s like when you have to help your parents with technology.” I had to “fix” Lola’s iPad daily.

“So, I’m going to send these out to lawyers with cover letters. My friend is helping me figure out a mailing list.”

“This must cost a lot of money,” I said. “Should I be chipping in?”

“No big deal. I want to do a website too, but I’m waiting until my exams are done. I’ll expense all this stuff once we start making money. I’ve figured out pricing too. An hourly rate for internet research and more if they want us to do something in person like when you went to the hockey game.”

Hannah slid a rate sheet in front of me.

“We can charge that much?” The research rate was three times higher than minimum wage. And the in-person rate was even higher.

Imagine making that kind of money part-time. I’d been considering getting another job on weekdays. But if we could get another one of these jobs, that would be even better.

I felt energized at the prospect. “I can get a start on our website. Do you really think there’s a chance we’ll get more work?”

She nodded vigorously. “They’re doing the research anyway, and our rates are way lower than regular private investigators. We just need one chance to prove ourselves. Then we can get a recommendation for the next job.”

Nate could give us a recommendation, but I wasn’t asking him. My mind went back to everything Hannah had said about Eri, and I blurted, “I can’t believe you’re encouraging me to get back with Nate. You can’t stand him.”

“Truth. But he was starting to grow on me. Like mold. Besides, the most important thing is your happiness. I want my sassy, sarcastic friend back.”

I wanted that version of me back too. Had I been too hasty in breaking up with Nate? If Hannah—the Anti-Nate—believed I should give him another chance, should I?

When I got to my bedroom, Elaine was putting on make-up. As soon as she saw me, she took off her jersey and pretended she wasn’t getting ready to go to the game. This was typical of my sister, the Queen of Nice.

“It’s okay. I’m probably going to watch the game anyway,” I said.

“Really? It won’t bother you? I don’t think I could watch a Vice game if Marty and I broke up.”

“Like that could happen. Anyway I’m kind of invested now.” I was interested in seeing if Nate could overcome his issues with Eri’s revenge schemes. Would he play well or mess up? “And can you tell me if the Nate Haters are there?”

“Sounds like you’re still interested,” said Elaine.

I stripped the sheets from my bed. Wallowing and eating in there had made a total mess. “Don’t you start too. Hannah thinks I should get back with Nate just to spite Eri.”

“Do you want to get back together with him?” Elaine asked.

“You know me. When it’s over, it’s over.” My theory about relationships was that they were like teacups. Once you broke them, you could glue them back together, but then tea would leak everywhere when you tried to drink out of them. At least that was what happened when I tried to fix stuff.

“I know, but...” Elaine’s voice softened. “You seem so unhappy. Maybe you’re regretting the breakup?”

When I had told my sister what happened, she hadn’t agreed that Nate was a complete jerk. In fact, she’d said something about how far he’d come in such a short time and how he was still learning. And followed that up with a lecture on relationship communications. I missed the days when I was the boyfriend expert around here.

“Does it even matter? He’s leaving once the season is over. We can break up now or in a month,” I said.

“Not everyone breaks up when the season ends,” Elaine said.

“What are you and Marty doing when the summer comes?”

A faint blush coloured her cheeks. “He’s decided to stay in Vancouver this summer. Coach Gautier has offered supervised training for players who want to work hard in the off-season.”

But it wasn’t just for training, Marty must be staying because he didn’t want to leave Elaine. Wow. “Will he get a summer job too?”

“Yes, he’s already lined up something at a kid’s athletic camp. And of course, he’ll visit his mother. I’m coming along to Saskatchewan.”

“Oooh, Lainey. Meeting his mother, that’s a big step,” I teased. “After spending so much time with Marty lately, I’ve realized what great guy he is. He almost deserves you.”

Now Elaine’s cheeks were bright red. “Anyway, this isn’t about me. It’s about you. I thought that you were very happy with Nate—the happiest I’d ever seen you with a boyfriend.”

I remembered Nate’s warm praise for everything I’d done for him, and how good things had been. So good that I’d made the mistake of relaxing into his supposed affection.

“Things were fine, but once he proposed that stupid fake breakup, I was done with him. It’s humiliating.”

Elaine watched me carefully. “Was it a shock?”

“Totally.” When Nate mentioned breaking up, it was so unexpected that I couldn’t even breathe for a moment. Things had been going so well and then—wham! Of course, it turned out he didn’t really want to break up, but his idea of sneaking around was almost worse, like he was ashamed of me.

“Did he regret asking you to ‘fake break up?’” she asked.

Gah, what was this? Analyze Camille’s Love Life Day? First Hannah and now Elaine were cross-examining me. “Yeah, almost immediately.”

“But you knew he was a work-in-progress. How was this different from all the other times you had to give him guidance on what to do?” she asked.

“Because it hurt me,” I blurted. I was shocked at how painful it felt when I believed I wouldn’t see Nate anymore. I

made up my mind right then that it was over. I hated giving a guy that much power over me.

“Oh, Cami.” My sister’s voice was full of sympathy, but I didn’t need it. I was able to look after myself just fine. But my mind blanked on any reassuring comebacks.

Finally, Elaine said, “Do you ever think about how not having a father affected us both so differently?”

I looked at her numbly.

“I hardly dated anyone, but you were the opposite—you went out with a lot of guys. But we were the same because we didn’t trust men. I had high dating standards that were impossible for men to meet. While you never let anyone get close enough to really care about.”

As much as I wanted to argue, I knew she was right. I had dated a lot of guys but as soon as things seemed to be getting serious, I bailed. Short relationships weren’t a big deal in high school, but now that I was in my twenties it was getting more awkward. One of my friends jokingly dubbed me the Runaway Bride.

“It’s weird because Mom never talked about our dad. Yet I feel like I do know him—and none of it is good,” I confessed. My impression was of a man who was a gambler, a liar, and a cheater. “He wasn’t someone you could count on.”

“Well, Tita Alice dropped a few hints. We probably filled in the rest with our imagination,” she said.

“That’s why I can’t understand why Mom pushes us into having boyfriends. You’d think she’d have learned her lesson about depending on men.”

Elaine shrugged. “Maybe she’s a romantic. Or maybe their relationship wasn’t as bad as we think.”

Trust my sister to take the most positive view. But even she couldn't deny that he never been there for us in any financial way. We lived comfortably, but there wasn't money for any extras.

"In any case, you're going to have to take a relationship risk at some point," she said.

"What kind of risk?" I asked.

"The risk that you'll get hurt. Because you can't find love without putting yourself out there."

"Oh my god, did you get that message from the bottom of a scented candle? It's so corny." My life was not a lesson in female empowerment.

Besides, I wasn't in love with Nate—far from it.

Yet, if I was honest, there had been something different about our relationship. Not love, but a possibility of something bigger than like. And that wasn't something I'd ever felt before.

SAY ANYTHING

NATE

OUR FIRST HOME playoff game resulted in a humiliating 7-2 loss to Colorado. As bad as I felt about the loss, I had zero shame about my performance. Eri and her Nate Haters were at the game, although fewer of them than before. But I ignored them and went out and played a good game. Well, as good as it could be in such a lopsided loss.

I was even prepared to take media questions about the Sapphires—thanks to Amanda. She'd drilled me on the best answers to diffuse the situation.

But I was saved by our goalie Mark Pillsbury. He threw a huge hissy fit when he got pulled, and it was all captured on video. Nobody gave a shit about a few women in blue sweaters once they saw Doughy breaking a goalie stick and almost decapitating one of our d-men.

When I went to the next day's practice, the only thing I knew was that I hadn't fucked up. Nobody could predict what Coach Gauthier was going to do. Sometimes when we lost, he kicked our asses with brutal practices and long video sessions where each mistake from the last game was pointed out in

embarrassing detail. Other times, he was a sympathetic dad who reassured us that we were much better than our last game and boosted our confidence.

When Goats spoke before we went out on the ice, he went with the good cop routine.

“Guys, you gotta adjust your mindsets,” he said. “Sure, it was the first time we make the playoffs in six seasons, and we all got excited. Maybe too excited. Making the playoffs is not the goal. Winning the Calder Cup is the goal. But to win a series, you have to win one game first.”

I nodded. It was true, I’d been thinking about too many things at once. I was an emotional player, so I needed to get my emotions in order. And that meant fixing things with Camille. And during last night’s game, I’d gotten a brilliant idea.

Goats continued. “You gotta reach down and make sure you’ve done everything you can to play your best tomorrow night. Your routines, your mental prep, your good luck charms—whatever it takes for you to be ready to battle.”

The practice was a light one, with a focus on fine-tuning our game. After showers, I dropped by Amanda’s office. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Sure. More problems with the Sapphires?”

“No, nothing like that. You know that hockey superstition about changing things up after a loss?”

She nodded but looked skeptical. Amanda was all logic and facts.

“I was thinking that we need to replace the anthem singer. Because of last night’s loss.”

“What’s this really about?” she asked.

Of course it came to this. Amanda was like Camille, Eri, Hannah and every other woman in my life. They were all smarter than me, so there was no bullshitting them.

“I messed up with my girlfriend. I want to show her that I understand her and support her.”

“That seems like a good idea,” she agreed. “But what does that have to do with the anthem?”

“She’s a singer—a really good one. But she needs more experience singing on her résumé. So I was hoping maybe she could sing the anthem.”

“Will that fix everything?” Amanda sounded doubtful.

“No, but it’s a start.” I pulled out my phone. “This is her singing. She’s really good.”

Amanda watched the video from Camille’s YouTube channel briefly, then passed the phone back.

Was she going to turn me down? I panicked. “Maybe I didn’t choose the right video. She’s really good.”

“No, no, I can see she’s very talented. Camille Salang, is she related to Elaine Salang?”

“Yeah, they’re sisters.”

Amanda pulled a file out of her desk drawer. “Ordinarily, I wouldn’t ‘fire’ someone who was already scheduled to sing. But you’re in luck, I was asked to rotate anthem singers—you’re not the only superstitious person in this organization. I haven’t called anyone yet, so I can put Camille in instead. But can you guarantee that she can make it? Otherwise, I’ll have to call someone on very short notice.”

I nodded. “She doesn’t work nights, so I know she’s free.”

Unless she had a date already. But she’d break it for a chance like this, she’d love to sing the anthem. The bigger problem was getting her to take me back. Luckily, my extensive knowledge of retro movies was finally paying off. If something worked for Hollywood heroes, it would work for me too, right?

Camille

I COUNTED the crowd gathered for the cocktail hour. Shannon would be impressed if she could see them. On my first day, there had been only a few people and now there were 30. In fact, it was the biggest group I’d ever seen for any event here.

Dori, one of the care aides, helped me pass out drinks and appetizers. Then I went up to the front.

“Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the cocktail hour. Has anyone got a request?” I asked.

“Yeah, I do.” A low, familiar voice spoke from the back of the lobby.

I blinked. Was that Nate? How could it be Nate?

But it was him. He was there in the flesh, and Nate in the flesh was more real than other people, all muscle and confidence and energy. Seeing him again reminded me of how much I’d missed him.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, my voice sharper than I’d intended.

“Following my heart,” he said. That was a completely un-Nate to say. Maybe I was hallucinating this whole episode after getting too close to someone’s oxygen tank.

“It’s just like a movie,” Gwen said. People around her nodded.

As much as I wanted to find out exactly what he was up to, I was on the clock. “Look, I’m working now. Can we do this later?”

Nate flashed his familiar grin. “Don’t worry, I asked Shannon. And your mom and everyone else here if it was okay.”

Then I noticed my mother at the back of the lobby. Wait, did everyone in the room know that this was going to happen? Was that why I had such a big crowd?

“Let him say his piece,” Gwen called out loudly, which confirmed my suspicions.

Nate bent down and held up a retro boombox—just like in *Say Anything*, one of those ridiculous high school movies he loved. This corny move was 100% Nate.

When he clicked the music on, instead of Peter Gabriel, there was another retro song, “Baby Come Back.” The lyrics were full of regret and apology. Obviously, he’d chosen it to convey his message.

Part of me was ready to forgive Nate anyway, but his serenade was adorable. Music was huge for me.

Once the song finished, he strode up to the front. A faint oooh went over the crowd as the ladies appreciated Nate’s handsome face and excellent body in his suede jacket, fitted t-shirt, and snug jeans.

He faced me and began, “I wanted to say how sorry I am for asking you to do something ridiculous to accommodate me and my hockey career. I was selfish and thoughtless. But what I really didn’t get until you were gone was how much I need you. Life is so boring without you. I want us to be together—long-term.”

There were oohs and ahhs from the crowd, and Nate gave them a modest head nod.

“And I promise I will never put anything ahead of you. Not even hockey.”

He stared at me, like he couldn’t tear his eyes away.

“Hurry up and take him back,” Bob called out.

“He hasn’t asked yet,” I said.

His smile returned, and something melted inside me. “Will you take me back, Camille?”

I finally let loose the joy that had been bubbling up ever since I spotted him at the back of the room. I couldn’t help grinning, but I kept my voice cool. “Okay.”

“Woohoo,” Nate yelled. He lifted me into the air and swung me around. I could hear cheers, applause, and Gwen’s voice demanding that we kiss.

Happy to oblige, I gave Nate a kiss. It was a public kiss since we were on display, but feeling Nate’s firm body against mine and the familiar sensation of his warm mouth was still pretty fantastic.

Nate put me down, but kept holding my hand. He nodded towards the residents. “Thank you for your support. Now, I’ll let Camille get back to entertaining all of you.”

There was a low murmur of dissatisfaction.

“We want a duet,” Abigail called out loudly.

Nate blanched. “Uh. I’m no singer.”

But the crowd demanded its happy ending.

He shrugged and turned to me. “Can you make me sound good? Or at least, less bad.”

“I got you.” Because as usual, Nate needed me. “I know the perfect song.”

He squeezed my hand. “Of course you do.”

And then I cued up the perfect song, the one that brought together Danny and Sandy in *Grease*, a movie I was sure that Nate knew all the choreography to.

I flipped up the collar of Nate’s jacket, and we got ready to declare to each other: “You’re the One That I Want.” And it was all blazingly true.

CAN'T HARDLY WAIT

NATE

I WAITED AROUND until Camille's shift was over. A lot of the old guys here liked to talk about old time hockey which I enjoyed too. One of my coaches used to tell stories about the Original Six teams. Hearing these stories reminded me of my granddads.

"There'll never be another player like Gordie Howe," one man said. "The toughest guy in hockey."

This began an argument about tough guys. Apparently I was a wuss for even wearing a helmet.

Camille flew by, mouthing the words, "I'm almost done."

"Take your time," I called out. Now that we were back together, I had all the patience in the world.

Soon, it was time for the old guys to head into the dining room. I helped wheel a couple to their tables. The food didn't look half bad here, or maybe I was starved.

Camille found me in the lobby. "I'm all set. Thanks for waiting."

“No problem.” I draped an arm around her as we headed out. Having her next to me felt familiar and right.

When we got inside the car, I couldn’t stop looking at her. “I missed you so bad.”

She glowed with that special Camille energy. “I missed you too.”

I tilted her face up and leaned down for a kiss. The sensation of her full lips against mine ignited that spark that simmered whenever we were close. Kissing Camille felt great, but it was also the appetizer for the full meal deal. My body strained towards hers, longing for more.

“God, I missed that,” I groaned when we finally fell apart.

Her only answer was the slow nod of someone just waking up. Then she pointed. “I think we have an audience.”

The window of the dining room showed the curious faces of all the residents lucky enough to have a view. I gave them a wave as we pulled out of the parking lot.

“I hope it’s okay that I came to your work. You were avoiding me so hard.”

“It’s fine. Gwen told me that our relationship is better than any soap opera. I don’t mind giving them something to talk about. You know, Oceanview Lodge does a really good job taking care of people physically, but they need more stimulation. Too bad that the place doesn’t look out onto a busy street. That would be better than TV.”

“You’re really good at your job,” I commented.

“Please. We’re back together. You don’t have to butter me up.”

“No. I mean it. You connect with the people there, and they appreciate you.” I tried to put my observations into words. “Everyone was really excited for you when I asked to come in.”

Despite my bumbling, Camille understood. “Thank you. And you’re good with the residents too. I saw your hockey fan club. And did you know that some of the women think that you’re Cary Grant handsome?”

I laughed. “I’ll have to look him up. So, you want to go out for dinner?”

“Sure. You don’t have any hockey stuff?”

“Nope. Game day tomorrow. And we have to do a better job than last night.” I said that without regret because getting back with Camille meant I’d already done everything I could to guarantee a good game.

“Sorry that you lost. I didn’t watch the whole game but I saw the highlights. What happened?”

“Sometimes it’s like that. Our team had the bye week and Colorado were on a roll after winning their first series. But we’re the better team—we beat them in the regular season.”

“You sound a lot more confident than Marty. From what Elaine says, anyway.”

“What can I say? I’m a positive guy.”

“Did anything happen with Eri?” she asked.

“She was there with some of the Sapphires. But you know, I hardly noticed. The playoff crowd was pretty loud. I just went out there and played my game.”

“Good for you,” Camille said.

Yeah, and now that we were back together, I'd feel even better out on the ice. "Is Japanese food okay?"

"Sure. I love Japanese food," Camille said.

"Are there Filipino restaurants?" I asked. "It's funny because there are Japanese or Chinese places on every block, but I've never seen any Filipino ones."

"Sure. If you like fast food, we have a Jollibee now. And there's a great place on Commercial Drive where they serve Kamayan dinners—they lay all the food out on banana leaves and you eat with your hands. But you have to get a big group together since it takes up a whole table. I heard it's fun, but my mother insists her cooking is better so I've never been allowed to go."

"Maybe we can get a bunch of my teammates to go," I suggested.

Her forehead creased. "Did you tell them we broke up?"

"Nope. I was hoping hard that we might get back together."

"Looks like your dreams came true," she said. We both laughed.

Camille steered me to a restaurant she knew. We sat in a booth. She seemed a little twitchy which made me nervous. But I hadn't done anything in the past hour to make her break up with me again.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

She nodded and reached across the table to take my hand. Her hand was soft and comforting. Phew, she wasn't going to lay any bad news on me.

“What you did today was adorable, and I loved it. But I was at fault too and I’d like to apologize.”

“No way. I’m the—” I began, but she interrupted. “Please, Nate, let me finish.”

I sandwiched her hand between mine in silent support.

“I shouldn’t have broken up with you like that. I know you’re trying to be a better boyfriend, but I could be a better girlfriend too.”

I shook my head. She was already a fantastic girlfriend. Of all Camille’s moods, I’d never seen her like this: serious and maybe a little sentimental. It was adorable. But I kept quiet so she could get everything out.

“I can be too impulsive. In the past, I’ve always bailed if things got tough. With us, I’m going to work hard. I’ll communicate better, and we can work on our problems.”

I waited, but she seemed to be done. “Yeah, in the beginning you called me out on my shit, so why not keep it up?”

Her nervousness vanished. “And even though I’m close to perfect, you get to call me out too. Maybe we’ll think up a codeword you get to pull out if I’m being a teensy bit unreasonable.”

Now, this was the Camille I was used to: confident, funny, and wanting to make everything into spy stuff. There were so many layers to her, it would take ages to discover them all.

I waited until after we ordered to tell Camille my really great news.

“I’ve done something big. I wanted to show you how much I appreciate everything about you. And how I support your

career—you know the cruise ship entertainer one.”

Her expression was guarded. “Really? What is it?”

We were still holding hands—I didn’t want to lose our physical connection—and I squeezed hers tightly. “I spoke to Amanda Richardson, she’s the VP in charge of marketing for the Vice. And I got you a gig—singing the national anthems before tomorrow night’s game.”

Camille stared blankly for a long moment.

“Me? Sing the anthem at a Vice game?”

Oh shit, Camille sounded nervous. I’d assumed that she’d jump at the opportunity.

“Hey, if you don’t want to do it, I’ll take care of it. They have a whole list of singers,” I said, although Amanda would not be happy.

“Oh no. I’d love to do it. I just never dreamed I’d get a chance like this.”

I exhaled in relief. As she wrapped her head around the idea, she looked delighted.

“Oh Nate, thank you.” Camille jumped out of her chair and hugged me. Her arms wrapped around my neck and her body mashed against mine. She kissed all over my face. Now this was the kind of reaction I was hoping for.

She sat back down, her face flushed with pleasure. “Is there anything I have to do to get ready?”

I passed her a Vice business card. “Just contact this woman. She’ll give you all the details. Uh, you don’t actually get paid, they just give you tickets to the game and a concession voucher. But I have your old ticket anyway.”

“That doesn’t matter. I’ve always wanted to do something like this. Um, what happened to the regular anthem singer?” she asked.

“Well, we’ve been rotating different people all season. And some people are superstitious so...after we lost game one, they wanted to change anthem singers.”

She leaned back against her chair. “This is the best news. Actually, I have something huge to tell you too. Hannah and I got a new case.”

“Really? Another jealous ex?” Now, I could joke about it.

“Close. It’s actually a divorce case. I’m not supposed to talk about it, but it’s a deep dive into someone’s social media.”

“Way to go, babe. You’re killing this.” I took a bit of credit for her accomplishments. After all, I was the one who started her on this path.

Camille nodded. “Perfect timing. I’ve been looking for a weekday job in addition to my weekend one. But this will make more than any minimum wage one.”

Our dinners came, and I dug into my teriyaki chicken meal.

“I’ve got one more thing to tell you. I hope you’ll think it’s good news,” I said.

“What is it?”

“I’m going to stay in Vancouver this summer. Coach is running development programs, and I’m going to do them. Then I’ll be really ready for next season.”

“Wow, this is a big change from Mr. Superstitious who won’t talk about the future,” she said.

“I want to be sure I get enough time with you before you sail off into the sunset. And even then, we don’t have to break up if we don’t want to.”

Camille’s forehead creased. “That’s a complete reversal. What happened?”

“I wised up. It’s really shitty not having you in my life. Other chicks don’t measure up, so why even bother?”

“Well, you’re going to like this then. I’ve decided not to apply to any other cruise ship places. I’ll follow up with Laurel, but I’ve been having some second thoughts.”

“Really, how come?”

“I don’t know. I’d miss everyone—my family, my friends...and you. Plus, I read all these first-person accounts of what it’s really like living on a cruise ship. I won’t even get my own room.” Camille frowned. “People always think I’m a flake because I change my mind so much.”

I put down my chopsticks and stroked her soft arm. “I don’t think you’re a flake. You’re smart, and you make new decisions when you get more information. Anyway, count on me to support you in whatever you choose to do.”

“You are in the running for best boyfriend ever,” Camille declared.

We ate and got caught up on everything—even though we hadn’t been apart that long. After a good meal, we walked hand in hand down the street in the warm spring air.

“I guess I better get you home.” I wished like hell she could come home with me.

“Yeah. My mother is going to be waiting to hear about how everything went.” Then she slid her body closer. “So

what's your pregame routine tomorrow?"

"It's always the same. Morning skate. Lunch. Late afternoon nap. Shower, dress up, and head to the arena." The routine got me psyched to play.

Camille's hand found its way into the back pocket of my jeans, and she squeezed my ass. Fuck, it was hard enough to keep my hands off without her teasing.

"Didn't you say that there's something you enjoy before the nap?" Camille purred.

I shook my head. "Umm, I'm not sure what I said."

She laughed. "Sex! You said it was the best way to relax before your nap. And to have a good game. Or was that just another one of your lines?"

Holy fucking awesome idea, Batman. "Not a line. Nothing can make me play better than a good fuck. Especially with a beautiful woman who just happens to be my girlfriend."

"I don't know how you can say that since we've never had sex before one of your games. But I'm willing to do my part to get a Vice win."

"And the team appreciates your sacrifices, ma'am." I pulled her closer and kissed her, first on her luscious mouth, then along her jawline and then finally her earlobe. "Of course, I'll do everything I can to make it fun for you too."

"Oh, I know you will." When my girlfriend looked into my eyes, all was right in my world.

PITCH PERFECT

CAMILLE

“Do you know all the words to the Star Spangled Banner?” asked Nancy, who looked pretty star-spangled herself with jewelled false eyelashes and an armful of bangles.

“Absolutely.”

Unlike most people, I was calm before a performance. I loved singing for an audience so why would I be stressed? But everyone who worked for the Vice seemed to be nervous. First Tamara, a young woman who was in charge of in-house entertainment, guided me into this back room and quizzed me about my knowledge of both national anthems. Then Amanda Richardson, who Nate held in awe, popped in to say hello, and also mentioned the American anthem. And now the fabulous Nancy was here.

“Don’t worry. I’m a professional.” Well, I’d been paid to sing before, so that made me a professional, right?

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Nancy said. “We’re all a bit on edge after losing the first playoff game. And earlier this season, we had a new singer who sang something about ‘the toilet’s last cleaning.’ People were offended.”

I tried hard not to laugh, but my giggles bubbled out. Then Nancy laughed too.

“Even Amanda couldn’t keep a straight face when she made the apology.” She took a second glance at me. “Hey, you look great. Love that jersey.”

“Thank you.” I had taken a Vice jersey and outlined the logo in fake crystals. After all, if I was in the spotlight, I needed some glitz. Of course, I’d had an argument with Nate about why I wasn’t wearing his jersey. But the anthem singer couldn’t play favourites even if her boyfriend got her the gig.

Tamara popped her head in. “Two minutes until we get you out there.”

I took one last look in the smudged mirror and smiled at my image. Not only did I get to sing two anthems, but the game was being televised. Only on some small cable sports network, but still. And Shannon had arranged for the residents at Oceanview to watch the game tonight, although I suspected that many of them wouldn’t last until the end. Bedtime came pretty early there.

Tamara guided me out to a large door where the Zamboni went in and out. There was an aging red carpet ready to be rolled out for me.

“Don’t forget, it’s slippery underneath,” Tamara said, but I wore low-heeled boots under my black jeans in preparation for this. I preferred stilettos, but going ass over teakettle was not the way I wanted to be remembered.

Then the arena lights went down and there was an excited hush.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome your Vancouver Vice!” boomed out the announcer’s deep voice.

A spotlight turned onto the player's entrance, the crowd roared, and out they skated, led by the captain, Paul Thiebault. I recognized everyone: the partying Seb and T.J., Marty towering over everyone, and Nate. He skated out with no helmet and his hair perfect. The spotlight cast his face into a chiselled handsomeness like a superhero. Maybe Super-orgasm Man?

Again I held back my giggles. Tonight, everything made me happy.

Nate stood at centre ice with his linemates and a small girl in minor hockey gear. When the starting lineup was read, including Nate at left wing, there were only cheers. If the Nate Haters were here, they were vastly outnumbered.

The announcer continued, "And now, please stand, remove your hats, and get ready for the singing of the national anthems. Tonight's anthems will be sung by Camille Salang."

Then the spotlight swept over to where I was already in position with my mike at the ready. I took a deep breath and began. First, the American anthem with correct lyrics, which must have thrilled the Vice management team.

And then I moved onto "Oh Canada." A memory flitted through my mind of the last time I sang the national anthem. It was at a party to celebrate my mother becoming a Canadian citizen. I had started the anthem, but my family and all our friends had joined in the singing as well.

And now as I sang, the crowd also joined in. We were united in being here, celebrating that most Canadian of sports in a city full of immigrants. I made my rendition straightforward so everyone could keep singing. Okay, I held the last "thee" for a long moment. But anthems weren't for showing off your singing, they were for uniting people. People

hoping that the Vice would fulfil their expectations and win tonight.

THE TEAM HAD OFFERED me a seat in a suite, but I wanted to sit with all the girlfriends. Thanks to the short time we'd been broken up, nobody except Elaine even knew about the rift in our relationship. Which was a relief because I didn't want to be seen as a flake or a heartbreaker.

"Camille!" all the girls called out as I made her way to their section. I had changed jerseys and was now wearing one with Jones across the back. I wasn't superstitious like Nate, but I'd done my part this afternoon to make sure he played his best, and the jersey was the last step.

I sat down beside Elaine and was immediately showered with compliments.

Morgan leaned over my sister to say, "You were great out there." I liked all the WAGs, but most of them were paired off as besties, like Morgan and Elaine or Kristi and Donovan. Maybe once I got to know them better, I'd find a bestie too. Or maybe it was too late in the season for that.

Kristi leaned over my shoulder. "You know who you guys remind me of? Carrie Underwood and Mike Fisher! She sang the anthem at a Nashville Predators game and people went crazy."

"That's nice of you to say, but Carrie Underwood is a big country singing star, and I'm just lucky to get this chance."

"You were way better than Friday's singer," said Donovan. "He was over the top."

“What about that woman who got the words of the American anthem wrong?” asked Jamie. “She was the worst.”

Elaine nudged me. “Nate was watching you the whole time you were singing.”

“That boy is gone,” Morgan agreed.

“Can you sing like that too, Elaine?” Donovan asked.

Elaine laughed. “No way. I only sing in the shower and even then my family complains. Cami got all the talent.”

Meanwhile the game was on. The Vice seemed a bit tentative at first, but when Marcus Fox got called for tripping, they had to wake up. Colorado, fresh from their win in the first game, were shooting from everywhere.

Kristi gasped when her boyfriend blocked a shot and then lay on the ice writhing. “Oh no. What happened?” she cried out.

Morgan winced. “I think he took it in the family jewels.”

Some of the girlfriends started giggling.

“Hope you weren’t planning on having kids.” Donovan snickered.

Kristi flipped her hair. “I’ll kiss it and make it better.” Everyone shrieked at this answer, as Josh was helped off the ice.

But unfortunately, Colorado scored a power play goal on the next shift.

“Oh no. This is exactly what happened last game,” said Morgan. “We got behind early and never got on our game.”

The way the girlfriends spoke, it was like we were all on the team. I enjoyed that camaraderie. And singing the anthem

made me feel like I was really part of the Vice.

Lately, I felt more confident about my future. I was working on that new investigation project, and I had the future cruise ship option—if I wanted to take it. And Nate was so supportive. I couldn't wait to hear what he would say about my singing.

“Don't worry, we're going to come back. The Vice are the better team,” I said. After all, they'd finished first in the conference.

For the whole first period, it didn't seem like my prediction was going to come true. The Vice looked nervous and weren't playing with their full out skill and speed. Morgan called it a trapping game, and if it was a trap, then the Vice had fallen right into it.

Between periods, I stayed in my seat. “Anyone have binoculars?”

Morgan produced a miniature pair. The WAGs liked to check out exactly what was happening on the bench or in the stands.

I scanned the crowd until I finally saw a flash of blue.

The Nate Haters were a much smaller crowd tonight, maybe eight people. Their banner was gone, replaced by a few tiny signs. I suspected that this might happen. The fans had moved on. Indigo Butterfly had a new song and a forbidden romance to get excited about. Nate was the past. And playoff tickets were a lot more expensive.

As I focused the binoculars, I could see Eri. She did not look happy, and who could blame her? When I sang the anthem, it must have been obvious that Nate and I were still together. And he was playing so well. Truly, it was time for Eri

to give up and move on. And if she didn't—well, Nate and I, along with Hannah, would be able to counter whatever she tried.

Honestly, I hoped that she could find someone to focus her energies on in a positive way. If she put all that effort into a new relationship, she'd be a lot happier.

“What are you looking at?” asked Elaine who had returned with drinks for me and Morgan.

“The end of an Eri,” I joked and handed the binocs back.

When the Vice came out for the second period, they looked like a different team. They were rushing up the ice with passes connecting perfectly and their shots blasting right on goal.

“Goats must have given them a real pep talk,” said Lily, who sat beside me now. She was a tall, willowy blonde who was dating the back-up goalie, Gabe Olsson. He was in net tonight.

“I haven't seen you at games before,” I said. “Of course, I haven't been coming that long myself.”

“Oh, you don't know how much I've wanted to be here. But I'm still at university and I've had so many end of year exams and assignments. They're all done now though.” Lily glanced around before continuing, “Besides, I don't always come if Gabe's not playing. Is that awful of me?”

“It's fine. It's not like anyone's keeping score.”

Lily made a face. “You'd be surprised.” Oh right. Jamie must be the culprit, especially since she was married to the other goalie. I had zero patience for that kind of thing. Besides, Jamie's husband was the one who had gone ballistic after Friday's loss. All Gabe had to do was keep his temper

and let in fewer than seven goals, and he'd be an improvement.

The Vice kept coming in waves, and excitement built in the arena. So many shots, but every one was blocked or pinged off the post.

Finally there was a huge scrum in front of the Colorado net. There were so many players there that I didn't even realize that the Vice had scored until the red light went on and the horn sounded.

The entire crowd rose up and cheered.

"Goal scored by Marty Devonshire. Unassisted," intoned the announcer.

Elaine received hugs and congratulations for Marty's goal.

"What happened?" I asked Lily, who seemed to be a hockey expert. Even after watching the replay, I had no idea how the puck went in.

She lowered her voice, "I think the puck hit Devo's butt then went in off the Colorado defenceman's skate."

I fell into helpless giggles, and Lily joined in.

"Well, they all count," I finally managed to say. I had one more question, but it was a delicate one. "Can I ask you, why didn't your boyfriend start the first game?"

I'd watched the highlights of the Vice's 7-2 loss, and some pretty bad goals went in. Mark Pillsbury, or Doughy as he was called, had been pulled and Gabe had replaced him.

We both glanced at Jamie. She was a row away, looking peeved.

Lily leaned close so only I could hear. “Gabe’s brand new to the team. He only joined in February. And he doesn’t have any playoff experience. So I guess they thought that Doughy was the best choice.”

“Clearly not,” I said.

But Lily was more generous. “Doughy is a good goalie. But he really tenses up in high stress situations. Whereas Gabe is cool as a cucumber. I’ll be running around like a headless chicken, and he’s like, ‘Lily, you must calm yourself.’” She did an eerily good impression of Gabe’s Swedish accent, which I had only heard once. Gabe was pretty quiet.

“I hope they stick with him for the rest of the playoffs,” I said.

Lily lifted one shoulder. “Depends what happens tonight.”

I focused on the game and saw Nate zooming up the ice with Seb. Seb had the puck and when a big defenceman came at him hard, he feathered a pass through to Nate, who roofed it!

2:1 for the Vice. If the cheers for the first goal were loud, now it was a roar of ecstatic screaming. We were winning!

“Way to go, Jonesy,” Kristi screamed, and everyone hugged me. I accepted the hugs, but managed to watch Nate skate back to the bench and slap gloves with his teammates. He looked so happy, and I felt his joy vicariously.

Of course, for the fans the hardest part of a lead was the tension of wondering if the team could maintain it—especially a team that had lost so badly before. The Eagles came on even stronger, determined to even up the score and started peppering Gabe with shots.

“I can’t look,” said Lily. She put her hands over her eyes, but kept peeping between her fingers.

I patted her leg. “Don’t worry. He’s playing awesome.” And then to distract her, I asked, “Do you do anything to help him get ready for the game?”

“Like what?” Lily asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe he has routines. Or maybe you help him relax?”

Now she turned her full attention to me. “I don’t under— oh my god, wait. Do you mean sex?” She began to laugh and her laugh was surprisingly loud with a huh-huh-huh noise. Lily looked like an ice princess on the outside but she was earthy and real. Maybe we could become hockey besties?

Lily finally stopped laughing and then asked, “Did you? Help Nate relax?”

I nodded and the two of us giggled until Kristi asked what was so funny. Fortunately, the Vice’s rush up the ice distracted everyone and I didn’t have to explain. It was a good scoring chance, but nothing happened.

“The best defence is keeping the puck in the offensive zone,” muttered Lily. Dating the goalie must be the most stressful role.

But Gabe was up to the challenge and turned away every puck fired at him. Finally, with four minutes still left, Colorado pulled their goalie and added an extra man to the attack.

Lily was biting her fingernails as the Eagles moved the puck around the zone. Nate was on the bench. I could see him leaning over the boards and urging his teammates on. Finally an errant pass was caught by Marcus Fox, who rushed the

puck out of the zone. The Colorado defenceman hacked at him, but Marcus stayed upright and then shot the puck hard.

Empty net goal!

Again the crowd rose and cheered. I released all the nervous tension in my body in a jumping, hugging dance with Lily. Then the Vice closed out the final seconds with a strong defence that allowed no close shots on net. The final buzzer sounded and everyone cheered. Finally, a playoff win.

As we made their way to the family lounge, Lily said, “Of course, you know what this means, don’t you?”

“No, what?” I asked.

“You’re good luck. You’re going to have to sing the anthem at the next home game too.”

Wow. Things could get better.

BONUS CHAPTER

NATE

“I HATE YOU, NATE JONES,” growled Camille. And judging from the fiery look in her eyes, she would be happy to scratch my chest with her long pink fingernails.

Fortunately for me, she couldn't. Camille was currently naked and tied spread-eagle across my bed—with pink satin cords we'd chosen together. And my impatient girlfriend, who never wanted to wait five minutes for anything, had been waiting 40 minutes for her orgasm.

“Edging was your fantasy,” I said, although I was enjoying it too. When my hard-on had gotten too painful, she had obligingly sucked me off. That was at the beginning though, right now I wouldn't put my cock anywhere near her teeth.

“Ungh. It's so frustrating. You get me so close and then... nothing.” She dropped her voice to a husky whisper. “Please let me come.”

“Soon,” I promised her. It was almost time for my pregame nap anyway. I looked down at her. “Fuck. Look at how turned on you are right now.”

Her splayed body quivered with need. Her nipples were as pointy as I'd ever seen them. Her pussy was shiny with her own juices and the lube I'd applied so she wouldn't get sore when I teased her with my fingers. And the expression on her face was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen—anger, passion, and pleading all mixed up.

“You know what would be fun?” I kept my voice calm. “If I start fucking you *while* you're coming. Maybe that would start an orgasm avalanche.” Was that good science or just another dumb idea from my sex-obsessed brain?

“Damn, I'd settle for one orgasm.” Camille's angry glare was contrasted by her shiny parted lips and breathless voice.

I rolled a condom on, then moved down between her legs and started licking her pussy, with special attention to her clit. The trembling in her thighs meant she was getting close, but this time instead of stopping, I intensified my efforts.

“Oh my god. Yessssss,” Camille cried out, her body bowed up against the restraints as she began to come. I sat up, switching to fingering her and then spreading her pussy lips and shoving my cock deep into her. She screamed with pleasure. Judging from the way she was spasming around my erection, she was still coming. I kept plunging into her warm, wet depths, pulling out to the tip and then going balls deep. Hard strokes that felt so fucking amazing.

I reached back to untie one ankle, then raised her leg so I could go at her from a new angle.

“Nate, god. It's so good,” she panted.

“Oh, I know, baby,” I said. Sex between us was in-fucking-credible. I fucked her faster, only conscious of how good it all felt. Finally I pushed in one last time, and came in a huge rush.

Drained, I rolled off her and untied her arms and remaining leg. I massaged her wrists and ankles.

“You okay, Peaches?” I asked.

She rotated her shoulders. “Uh huh.”

I lay down beside her.

Post-orgasm Camille was one of my favourite sights: her flushed skin, her swollen nipples, her messy tangle of hair, and best of all—the peaceful expression on her face. Usually Camille was prickly and guarded, but after sex she was open and relaxed. Who knew that I would be into vulnerability in a woman?

The afternoon sunshine made her look golden and beautiful.

“That was incredible.” She giggled. “You keep asking, so let me say it first. You *are* the best lover I’ve ever had.”

“Finally, my true talents are being recognized,” I said.

She reached out to touch my cheek, and I leaned into the caress.

“Are you going to fall asleep now?” she asked.

Tonight was huge. We’d split the games when we went to Colorado and tonight was the final game in our best of five series. Winner take all.

“Can’t you nap with me?” I asked greedily. I was drowsy, but I wanted to sleep with Camille beside me and wake up next to her soft, naked body.

“I have to go home and get ready for the game too.” She sat up, and I admired the curve of her back as she stretched and then smoothed her long hair.

Since we had won the game when she sang the anthem, everyone insisted that Camille sing again tonight. It was what I wanted, and I didn't have to do a thing

“Take my car to go home then,” I said.

She whirled to look at me. “Your car? You love that car. Are you sure you trust me to drive it?”

“Of course. I want to make sure you get home safe.” I'd heard about women getting hit on by rideshare drivers. And Camille looked so hot that every guy would want her. “Take my extra key. You can park in the player's lot. I'll get a ride to the game with Marty, and we'll leave together.”

I said nothing about what would happen after the game, whether we'd be celebrating a first round win or...I wouldn't consider the other possibility. Some superstitions could not be shaken.

“Okay. You're so sweet.”

Already half-asleep, I watched Camille roam naked around my room searching for her clothes. I was almost out when I felt her kiss on my forehead.

“Bye, babe. Good luck tonight,” she said. And then she was gone and I drifted into unconsciousness.

“EVERYTHING WE'VE LEARNED all season, all the wins we had, it all comes down to one game,” Coach Gauthier said. “Don't underestimate the other guys. Sure, we finished higher than them in the regular season, but the playoffs mean that we're all beginning at the square again.”

“At square one, you mean,” Lionel muttered beside me, but not loud enough for the coach to hear. Sure, Goats got his

sayings mixed up but I didn't give a shit about that. The coach was passionate about our success, and that was what I liked. Goats believed in me, when he scratched me it was for my own good. I'd gone through all that shit, and now I was a better player—I could motivate myself instead of needing other people's approval.

“Your captain's gonna read out our starting lineup for tonight,” Goats said. It was the final step in the pump-up for tonight's game. He handed Paul Thiebaud a piece of paper.

Tibbs stood up. “Okay, boys, you ready?”

There were muted cheers. It was that nervous time—after the warm-up but before the real deal.

“I said, are you fuckin' ready?” Tibbs yelled, and now the response was thunderous.

“Okay, at centre, the Italian Stallion himself, number 13—big T.J. Amato.” Everyone cheered and clapped as Tibbs slapped hands with T.J.

“On left wing, he used to be a pretty boy but now he looks like a real hockey player. Number 33, Seb Söderlund!” Tibbs smacked his shoulder as Sods ducked his head. In the last game, he'd taken a high stick to the face and now had two black eyes and a swollen nose. But we'd scored on the resulting power play, so it was worth it. For the team anyway; Sods had been complaining nonstop.

“And on right wing, the only guy who's gonna get a hard-on during ‘Oh Canada,’ number 29, Nate fuckin' Jones.” I hooted with the rest of the team as Tibbs reached over to grasp my hand.

“On defence, the guy with the ugliest salad on the team, number 5, Wills O'Connor.” The big defenceman pushed back

his thick shock of red hair in mock protest as we all cheered.

When Tibbs described the other d-man, his good friend, Marc-Andre Beaulieu, he said something in French which I could tell was mainly profanity.

“And in goal, our tall wall of Swedish meatball, number 31, Gabe the Babe Olsson.” Tibbs clapped Ollie on the shoulder. Wait, was that a smile on the big goalie’s face? Nah, couldn’t be. Ollie the Goalie was famous for being quiet and emotionless, but I was glad that he was getting the start. Sure, Doughy was much more experienced, but he was too up and down. With Ollie back there, we settled down and played more confidently.

We finished getting ready. The vibe in the room was excited and nervous. If getting to the playoffs was a big deal, then winning a round would be huge. Everyone knew that playoff victories were huge—for our futures in hockey.

When we skated out for real, the excitement in the arena was almost visible. The crowd roared louder as each player hit the ice. When they read out the starting lineup, the cheers made me feel like Superman. If anyone was still booing me, they’d have been drowned out.

Then the announcer introduced Camille. She stepped out and the spotlight fell on her. She was so gorgeous in her sparkly jersey that I wanted the Jumbotron to flash out: Nate + Camille.

I’d never paid much attention to the anthems. Sure, I tried to look serious and patriotic when I was standing at centre ice, but the anthems were a time to get ready. To switch into compete mood. But once Camille opened her mouth, I was transfixed. That powerful voice coming out of her petite body was like a fucking miracle.

Even Sods was full of admiration. “Fuck. What a set of lungs.”

I wasn't sure if he was talking about Camille's voice or her tits. Hell, both were incredible. And to think that only a few hours ago, she'd been in my bed, naked and screaming out my name as we'd screwed our brains out. Fuck, Tibbs was right. I had a hard-on during ‘Oh Canada.’ Good thing I was wearing hockey pants so the crowd of 17,000 couldn't see how horny I was.

The game was tight, but we were the better team by a mile. We were outshooting Colorado badly. After two periods, the shots were 27:15 for the Vice. Trouble was that the Eagles goalie was totally dialled in. Worse still, we were down two players. Todd had blocked a shot that hit him in the ankle and had to leave the game. And Lionel got hit hard into the boards and was now in concussion protocol.

“We're getting goalied here,” Lepper complained on the bench during the third period. Coach told us to keep shooting and to trust the process, so that's what I was doing.

“We've got to get him moving. Side to side. Create some space to shoot,” I said to Sods and T.J.

“Yeah, too many of our shots are hitting him in the crest,” T.J. agreed. When a goalie was on, he always seemed to be in the perfect position to stop every shot.

Next shift, we headed out with a plan in mind. T.J. had been killing it in the face-off circle tonight, so he won the puck and we blew into the offensive zone. Sods made some of his sweet moves, deking out two Colorado players. He stopped up on the half boards and passed the puck to T.J. who took it behind the net. Both me and Sods tried to get open for a pass, forcing the goalie to try to cover both sides at once. When the

pass finally arrived on my stick, I one-timed it. The goalie was a fraction of a second late to cover that side of the net and my shot blew by him.

Pling. The sound of the puck hitting metal.

Fuck. I'd beaten the goalie but not the goalpost.

Back on the bench, we schemed more. "So fucking close," I said. "Let's try it again next shift."

The next time our line was out, I brought the puck down the boards and passed it to T.J. who once again drove behind the net. But of course, we couldn't make the same play twice without Colorado adjusting. This time, the d-man was right on T.J., so he made a hurried pass to me.

Time slowed, and I could see everything happening on the ice. I knew that there was a Colorado winger coming down on me from behind, that T.J. had just been shoved into the boards and taken out of the play, and I knew exactly where Sods, Wills, and Boiler were.

But most importantly, I could see the Colorado goalie cheating to the side of the goal where I had shot last time. So instead of one-timing it, I slid a hard pass to Sods, who had some open net to shoot at.

And Sods made no mistake. Goal!

The red light glowed. The goal horn sounded. And the crowd went crazy. Now we were ahead.

Sods pointed at me, and all of us on the ice came together in a joyous celebration hug. It was the best feeling, only amplified by the hand smacks as we did the skate-by.

"Good job, boys!" Coach Lee slapped all of us on the back once we were back on the bench.

The game wasn't over yet, but there was a good feeling on the bench. Once a goalie stopped looking invincible it gave us all confidence. Sure, it was only one goal, but if we could make it stand up that was all we needed.

“Lock it down now, Ollie,” Boiler said to the goalie when we skated out for our next face-off in the defensive zone.

Ollie gave the faintest of nods. Perfect, he was in the zone. But we could do our part by keeping the puck in the other fucking end of the ice. Since we didn't want to give up any Grade A chances, T.J. stayed back, but me and Sods did our best to rag the puck in O zone and kill off the precious seconds. Used to be I was only an offensive threat, but this season I'd learned how to defend a lead too. Goats told me that a two-way game was what they looked for in the NHL. And the fact that we were frustrating the hell out of Colorado was only a bonus.

The clock wound down slow but sure. The Eagles pulled their goalie with three minutes left. And then Foxy managed to chase down an errant pass and skate the puck right into the Colorado zone. He shot.

Empty net goal! His second of the series. Foxy was Mr. Clutch!

The goal horn sounded extra loud. The crowd let out a collective breath of relief. The cheering carried on throughout the last 90 seconds of the game.

We want Stockton. We want Stockton. The crowd screamed the name of our second-round opponents—if we won. Colorado tried, but they were down and discouraged. When the final buzzer sounded, the bench cleared and everyone launched onto Ollie in a crazy dog pile.

After the handshakes, we whooped and hollered as we made our way back to the room. I hadn't felt this good since... well, to be honest, since this afternoon as I was fucking Camille. Fuck, this must be better. I had set up the winning goal. And now onto the next round. Stockton were a really good team, so we would have our hands full.

A line of guys waited to high-five us on the way back to the room. Everyone from the trainers, equipment manager, to the guys that hadn't played—the injured guys and the healthy scratches. Now that I knew what it was like to get scratched, I felt a ton of sympathy for those guys. To watch your team and not be able to help. But hell, playoffs were a grind. With two guys injured tonight, we needed reinforcements.

I wondered if we'd be drinking in the room, but Goats set us straight. "Big win, guys. Only three more rounds to go. Take tonight off, we're back at it tomorrow at 2:00pm." Well, at least we got to sleep in.

Still the mood was pretty high. We were definitely going out after the game. Even the old guys promised to stay for one drink.

Then there was a commotion in the doorway. "Hey, guys. Great game."

I looked up and saw Eric Fairburn and Dave Dominic. Both were Vice players who had been called up to the NHL team.

"What are you fuckers doing slumming it down here?" Lepper called out.

"We got eliminated tonight. So, we're back," Burner said.

Fucking A! The best forward and the best defenceman were suddenly back on the team? Our chances in the next

round were looking a lot better.

WHEN I CHECKED MY PHONE, there was a message from Camille that she would meet me at Top Shelf. It was our usual watering hole, close to the rink and the best place to celebrate a big win.

When I got there, she was in the midst of a laughing crowd of the wives and girlfriends. The players weren't the only ones celebrating.

She had shed her jersey—my jersey actually—and was now wearing a glittering top that outlined her curves and ended high enough that I could see her tiny belly button piercing. She looked hot. She was the woman in the room that I wanted to be with the most. In the room? On the whole planet.

Then Camille turned and saw me. Her smile was brilliant, and I hurried over.

“You won!” she said and wrapped her arms around my neck. I put my hands on her waist, feeling her hot bare skin. I leaned down and buried my face in her neck, inhaling her and kissing her soft skin. The thrill of scoring with new chicks was nothing compared to this. Maybe, like Sods said, I was getting old and boring. But settling down was way hotter than I'd ever expected.

“You two need to get a room,” one of the girlfriends joked.

“Can't contain something this big,” I said.

Her body felt so good under my palm. I made semi-circles with my thumbs on her bare skin, widening them until I could

feel the bottoms of her tits and dipping into the waistband of her jeans at the other end.

Camille let out a puff of breath. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to turn you on.”

“Give up,” she said with her usual sass. But her erect nipples told another story.

“You love it,” I said.

“C’mon, let’s dance.” Camille pulled me by the tie towards the dance floor. Sure, I could burn off some of the adrenaline still coursing through me. Camille moved her body in slow wave-like motions and I followed along. She made a leisurely 360° turn as she danced and I drank in all of her.

We partied and celebrated. Some of the older guys left after one drink, but my crew was still here. On my way to order drinks, I passed Sods and T.J. chatting up some random women at the bar.

“Jonesy!” Sods hauled me over. “This is the guy who set me up for the game-winning goal.”

The women giggled and made some flirty compliments, but I barely looked at them. I felt different now. Older? Or maybe it was that maturity that Goats was always encouraging. Besides, since I’d already won the lottery, I didn’t need to buy tickets anymore.

I wound my way back to Camille.

“Look. They make that drink you love.” I passed her a pink cocktail.

“Oh my god! An Extreme Pamplemousse.” She gave me a hug and cheek kiss before taking the drink and taking a big sip. “Delish. Thank you so much, Nate.”

Well, that wasn't the way I'd pronounced it, but as long as she was happy.

"So, how late can you stay out tonight?" I asked, hooking my thumb into the loop of her jeans and resting my hand on her juicy ass.

Camille's expression was smug. "Actually, I have some good news for you. My mom and Tita Alice took Lola to visit friends in Seattle."

It took a moment for this to sink in. "Really? For how long?"

"They won't be back until late tomorrow." Camille leaned into me. "So I can sleep over tonight."

"Seriously?" This was amazing news. Although it also felt like my reward for a hard-fought battle—like George fighting Biff in *Back to the Future*. The most I had hoped for tonight was a quickie in the car, and now I had a whole night with my gorgeous girlfriend.

"Fucking A. Why didn't you tell me sooner? Let's blow this joint." I chugged my mineral water.

"Because I knew you'd want to leave right away and I wanted to party." Camille giggled and took another sip of her pink cocktail.

"Drink up, baby. We are going to party—hard." I pulled her back to me and kissed the base of her neck. Camille shivered with pleasure but still tortured me by finishing her drink with deliberate slowness while she chatted with her friends. Saying goodbye to everyone took more excruciating minutes.

"You are so paying for this when we get home," I said as I hustled her out.

“And that’s why I did it,” Camille said, and I gave a snort of laughter. Fuck, she was my perfect match.

The End

AFTERWORD

Thank you so much for choosing to read *I Hate Nate*. I hope you enjoyed it. For all the readers who asked when this book was coming out, I apologize for how long it took. (Five years, but who's counting?) There were so many roadblocks that I wondered if the planets were aligned against me, so it's doubly satisfying that you're holding the book now.

If you'd like to leave a review on your favourite book site, I would really appreciate the support. And if you want more Camille and Nate, there's a deleted scene about the WAGs when you sign up for my newsletter [here](#).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So many people helped me with this book and I'm extremely grateful. First of all, I'd like to thank the wonderful romance authors who read this book and offered their advice on how to make it better. To Jenny Holiday and Kate Willoughby, thank you for your excellent notes during my editing crisis. To Jaymee Jacobs, thank you for your enthusiasm when I needed it. To Fortune Whelan, thank you for your knowledge of romance *and* Filipino culture.

I'd also like to thank my writing chat group: Michelle Lawson, Sara Rider, and Stacey Agdern for their emotional support as I went through prolonged stages of writing and editing. My NaNoWriMo buddy, Sarah Vance-Tompkins, encouraged me to power through and finally finish this book. Thanks to Zoe York for posting videos on how to make book covers, which empowered me to believe I could do one myself. And thanks to Sadie Haller and Elle Rush for always providing excellent business advice.

The romance writing community is so generous, and I could not have finished *I Hate Nate* without their help. I encourage you to seek out the excellent books of all these authors and read them. I do!

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Melanie Ting is a Japanese Canadian who enjoys eating every kind of Asian food in Vancouver, B.C. She also likes watching high school movies starring actors in their thirties and listening to true crime podcasts. She hopes to solve a real life mystery someday, like finding someone's missing cat.

Find out more at www.melanieting.com.



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