



USA Today bestselling author

ainsley booth

**THE
PLAYING
GAME**

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AINSLEY BOOTH

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*For paediatric nurses everywhere, but especially those who
wear toques while they watch hockey*

GLOSSARY

aka WTF is a toque (and how do you pronounce it?)

The Playing Game takes place in Canada, and is written in Canadian English, which looks and sounds a lot like American English, except for when it sometimes looks and sounds a little bit like British English, or like with the first word on our glossary, it's actually French! Bienvenue au Canada!

This is a glossary of words that I discovered in the writing of this book are not actually universal, like **toque** (pronounced like the number two with a hard k on the end; two-k) and dressing room.

Toque - a knit winter hat (also called a beanie)

Dressing room - where hockey players put on their uniform (also called the locker room)

Sweater - another word for a hockey jersey; divisive even among Canadians!

Ward clerk - a hospital employee who provides clerical support to a team on an in-patient hospital floor

CHAPTER 1

KIERAN

Season Opener, 82 games to go

In recent years, the bar has been set high for a hockey expansion team to debut into this league fully formed. And not just on the ice, but as a brand, too.

In Vegas, they took pregame light shows to the next level. In Seattle, they adopted the identity of a fearsome mythological creature and set a new standard for eco-mindedness.

In Hamilton, we're having our season opener in a (newly renovated, but still) almost forty-year-old arena, after having our starting line-up heralded by a wild boar dressed as a bagpiper.

None of this fills me—a professional hockey player with almost fifteen years of league experience—with confidence.

The argyle hockey socks were another *what the actual fuck did you do, Marsh* trigger when I first saw them, and looking down at my uniform now, I'm still not sure.

But I follow Tilman and Hale onto the ice for our first home game as Hamilton Highlanders, the starting line of the league's newest team, and the crowd goes nuts.

That.

That's the actual fuck. That's why I do this, that's why I'm here. Because nobody roared for me like that in Arizona or Anaheim, and I missed the sound of people giving a fuck. I want to end my career in a town full of rabid Canadian hockey

fans, even if it means joining an expansion team with a Scottish-ish bagpiper as our mascot.

And after that moment of self-doubt, I put it in the box, where uncertainty belongs when I'm playing. Because everything else about the start of this game feels better than any other I've played in the three years since Montreal unexpectedly traded me—their captain—away for...well, it doesn't matter. That's in the past.

And the present is a shiny new season in a hyped-for-me city.

One more chance to reclaim a former glory I once thought would gild my entire career.

I don't even care that the first period is a bit slow. We're a brand new team with a lot of young guys. There will be kinks to work out. I already know what I'll say to the media if we lose this first game, but something tells me we won't.

The stats don't agree. We're being outshot by almost fifty percent but numbers don't tell the whole story.

They don't explain why I'm excited to once again be the third-best player on a team, once again left out of player leadership. Contrary to Twitter chatter, I think it makes sense that Tilman's the captain. His star power hasn't started to fade yet. His best years aren't behind him. And I might have once been butthurt about not even getting the A on my sweater just for being a fucking elder statesman—at thirty-five, that makes me cringe—but not this year.

From the owner down through the senior management, the decisions made by this team make sense. The fans are on board, and training camp and the preseason games...we could all feel it.

So when they picked only one alternate captain to start the year, and went with Hale—local boy, Hamilton born and bred—I could see the logic. It doesn't matter that his stats don't

quite match up against mine. He's young and bright. Smart, on and off the ice, and an excellent ambassador of sport to the marginalized communities we all know need to be better represented as the face of this game. Not to mention that in training camp, he shined as the natural group leader. *More than Tilman, by a long shot.* Jenson Hale is the future of this team, and I'm only here for a few years at most.

Maybe only this year, if we don't make the playoffs, and they can trade me for magic beans instead of waiting for my free agency to kick in.

We're going to make the playoffs.

It's been my entire focus for almost two years. Train smarter. Be better. Get back to a team that can actually contend, before my body realizes it's thirty-five and we can't do this much longer.

Get to a team good enough to make the playoffs.

The Highlanders were the best I could do.

So now I have eighty-two games in front of me to make something happen with this team.

And it doesn't matter how well our opponents are playing tonight.

Hale isn't going to lose his first home game in front of his hometown. It isn't going to happen.

I won't let it happen.

This will be my legacy. I'm his wingman, after years of being the one out front and centre.

Keep repeating that to yourself, the media, and front office. It sounds almost good enough to be true.

It will be true, though. In time.

And Hale is so fucking happy. Even though we're trailing 1-0. He grins at me as he takes a slug of energy drink while we catch our breath after a line change. "Gotta give them some false confidence, right?"

“You know it.” I glance away from the golden boy, past the coaches and into the seats near our bench usually filled with friends and family. My parents weren’t interested in flying in from Winnipeg, and I don’t have anyone else in my life right now. So like other players with spare tickets, I gave them to the PR team to pass on to health care workers.

I catch sight of a woman in a toque.

Almost two years after the hottest one-night stand of my life, it’s still an unwanted gut punch, that spark of recognition in an implausible setting. A distraction I don’t need, but my subconscious cannot give up on the anonymous girl who disappeared on me when morning came. The woman who made me want more, so much more—but that wasn’t in the cards.

It’s not the first time I’ve imagined Jersey Girl sitting in the stands. Her glossy brown hair spilling out from under the knit hat in waves. Her cheeks pink from the cold and her soft, full lips pursed in concern.

After more than a decade of avoiding commitment, now I fantasize about an imaginary person worrying about how my game is going, wanting it all to click into place so we can celebrate when we get home.

Even in profile, this girl’s face is painfully familiar.

She’s sitting just behind us, to my right, and there’s a lot going on—like a fucking NHL hockey game.

So I can’t look at her for long. Need to lock down those memories. But I want it to be her more than I like.

Besides, it can’t be her. She doesn’t wear the home team’s sweater. A personal rule, for reasons I never got the full story on. I didn’t get her name, either. Only that she was in Buffalo for the night, and she let slip that she’s a nurse.

It should have been just another one-night stand. I’d had enough of those over the years in between casual relationships that stretched on for a few months before ending with mutual agreement every time.

Instead, that single night with a hot-as-fuck woman who swore up and down she didn't like hockey changed everything. Maybe it was just the timing. Maybe it was how she looked at me—before I talked her into a drink at the bar—like I wasn't worthy of her time, because I was just another player, doing player things. Playing foolish games with girls I didn't care about, like an overgrown boy.

Not exactly off the mark, either, until that night. Until the universe put her in my path and for the first time ever, I felt an inexplicable need to chase.

And then laugh by laugh, I got her to come around. And holy fuck, had she liked it when I made her laugh, and she really liked it when I buried my head between her thighs.

Really great job on locking down that memory, Marsh.

I miss a pass and have to chase the puck down, but I make up for the gaff by getting it back to Hale, who gets it to Tilman, and we score our first goal.

Back on the bench, I slug back some water and look in the direction of the phantom Jersey Girl. She's still there, her head twisted away. The hair isn't quite the same, but it wouldn't be after all this time.

And then she glances in our direction. She looks almost all the way over at our bench, and I lose my fucking mind.

Because it doesn't just look like her.

It *is* her.

The recognition is one-sided. I jolt to my feet, and Armstrong beside me laughs and yanks me back down. "Not yet," he says, the words tinged with his accent—and laughter. "Fucking daft in your old age?"

"We're the same fucking age, Russ."

"But I can keep track of line changes."

I ignore him and look back at her. She's *here*. "I need to—" I start to say to one of the trainers behind us.

"Marsh, Tilman, Hale out front," our coach calls out.

Fucks sake.

“Mitchell and Jovanović on D. Let’s go, keep the pressure up.”

I storm onto the ice. Thirty seconds later, I get checked into the boards just down from our bench, my face pressed against the plexiglass, and all I can see is her. She’s looking at our bench with careful concentration.

Behind me, a whistle gets blown, but I don’t care. Mitchey grabs the guy who checked me, f-bombs and an endless, taunting “come on, bud” flying as fast as his fists.

Time slows as I watch her watch the equipment manager. I think she’s tracking his hand, specifically, and how he follows who is on the ice, whose stick he needs to have ready at a moment’s notice.

My secret anti-hockey hockey fan.

Here. In my barn.

Hale bumps into me, dragging me towards the face-off.

I force my gaze to the action on the ice, my heart pounding in my chest.

Another forty-five seconds of nothing goes by and I manage not to fuck anything up.

Back on the bench, I wipe my face. And for the first time, I can feel her looking at me.

All of my baser instincts are screaming at me to turn my head and lock my gaze on her face. Let her see how fucking poleaxed I feel. How much I’ve missed her.

But that’s unhinged, and I know it.

Also, I’m pretty sure she doesn’t know that I can see her. Best peripheral vision in the league is a very niche factoid most people wouldn’t know, even if they are sitting in some of the best seats in the arena.

I wait until she glances up at the scoreboard, then turn just enough so when she looks back, her gaze glances off mine. Just enough eye contact to test the waters, not enough to reveal

the turmoil in my depths. There's a raw sizzle for a split second, but then she jerks her chin up, suddenly very interested in the Jumbotron.

Oh, her pink cheeks are very pretty.

Look back at me.

It doesn't take long.

And when she does, I'm very fucking careful. I don't give her the Marsh classic grin. I tried that two years ago and it didn't work. I eventually talked her into a drink, but reluctantly on her part. I had to get real to have a chance with her that night, and if there's anything I remember with crystal clarity, it's that I *really* wanted that chance.

I want another one now.

So now I just look my fill as her eyes go wide again, and her full lips part. Time slows again, and it's only a split-second look of shock on her face that warns me before Hiro Watanabe is slammed over the boards and into our bench.

And onto my lap.

Because I was looking at her. She's laughing at me when I finally glance back, after the bodies are untangled and everyone is ascertained to be fine.

The black and white pom pom on the top of her hat is bobbing, and her arms are crossed now over her jersey.

My jersey, I imagine, although the number on the arm is hard to see.

And just as I'm trying to figure out a subtle way to have someone grab her for a lowkey "meet and greet" after the game, the buzzer sounds. End of the period.

She twists away, talking to the person next to her, and all the air in my lungs turns to fire, because that's my name on her back, arching above *my* number.

Fucking hell.

I jump up, and Hiro and Russ laugh and shove me towards the tunnel.

As we file towards the dressing room, I grab one of the trainers. “There’s a nurse in our friends and family section.” I describe where she’s sitting and what she’s wearing. *My fucking jersey.* “Can you invite her to meet the team after the game?”

“Sure thing.”

My head spinning.

She’s here.

Close enough to reach out and grab, and that is all I want to do. Grab her and hold her tight. Make her tell me her name so I can say it over and over again as she rides me.

I’m fine, I tell myself. I listen to the coaching staff as they refocus us for the second period. We have a plan. We aren’t going to get bogged down by the other team’s aggressive start.

We aren’t going to get distracted by shiny brown hair and pink cheeks.

We are going to win this game.

Then I’m going to get the girl—again. And this time I won’t lose her before the morning.

CHAPTER 2

HARPER

“I have to go.” I say it to myself, in my head at first, and then when I don’t move, I say it out loud. Which makes it more real.

This was a mistake.

All of it. The jersey, the lower bowl seats—so close to his bench, *what were you thinking, Harper Anne Roberts?*

I wasn’t thinking. I gave in to my worst instincts, and now I need to disappear before some clever cameraman catches on to the cute girl in the stands wearing Kieran Marsh’s jersey, who Kieran Marsh can’t stop looking at.

Oh, now you’re cute?

Jesus, my brain really wants to beat me up tonight. Isn’t it enough that I was foolish and self-indulgent, and now I’m going to miss the rest of the game because—

Grant catches my wrist as I stagger to my feet. “Hey,” he says quietly. “You okay?”

Nope. Not on any level.

I look at one of my best friends since preschool and lie to his face. “Yeah, just need to use the ladies room.”

And Grant, bless his minding-his-own-business heart, goes back to the text message chat he’s having with someone about how the team looked in the first period.

I make it as far as the concourse before my legs give out and I have to lean against the wall, right beside an oversized

poster featuring some of the top Highlanders players.

Kieran is to the right of Max Tilman, the captain. The two white men are bracketed on either side by Jenson Hale, the Hamilton-born-and-bred Black left winger who is probably going to be a Highlander for the rest of his long and glittering NHL career, and Hiro Watanabe, a Japanese-American centre who may be too talented and expensive for the team to hold on to in the long run, but is very exciting to watch while we have him this year.

We.

Ha.

Fuck me, it's opening night, and I'm already sucked in to Highlanders Nation. How could I resist the chance to see their opening game, when this team promises to be everything this city has ever wanted and more? Jack Benton, who sold his stake in one of the two Vancouver teams a few years ago, has surged back into the NHL ownership space with a triumphant collection of expansion draft picks and very smart off-season acquisitions.

At first people in Hamilton were wary of the west coast billionaire being the latest to try and make fetch happen, since so many others had failed. Even though we're a rabid hockey town, being only an hour from Toronto in one direction and an hour from Buffalo in the other, along the curve of Lake Ontario, has always been a dealbreaker for getting an NHL team of our own in the modern age.

But Benton worked magic, finally bringing us a franchise for the first time since 1925.

And I've secretly gobbled up every bit of the news, even when it feels like I shouldn't, like I'm betraying my mother. Even when I get that weird, gross feeling in my stomach, wondering which of the players are behaving badly off the ice while being hailed as newfound heroes by the press.

So when Grant—a sports medicine doc who has been tapped to be one of the assistant medical directors for the team—scored a pair of tickets to tonight's game, I convinced his

sister Kiley to let me go with him instead. I played a guilt card, because ever since she moved back to Hamilton, she's been mooching rides to and from work.

Which I don't mind.

I love having her close, after years of her being a roaming nomad. I went to preschool with the Forge twins and we've been thick as thieves ever since. Grant and I even lived in the same apartment building for years—and when Kiley moved back, she moved into his place and he finally bought a condo downtown.

So I used every tool at my disposal to get to tonight's game, and—for what?

I can't go back to that seat.

He was right there.

And he will be again in the next period.

I pull out my phone and text Grant.

HARPER

Something didn't agree with my stomach. I'm going to call an Uber.

GRANT

You sure? I should probably stay. But I can get you home and then come back.

HARPER

No! Stay! I'm fine.

GRANT

Do you want to go to my place? I've got a medicine cabinet you can raid. Or I just restocked Kiley's first aid kit, too.

I roll my eyes at the overprotective big brother energy. As if I don't have my own pharmaceutical supplies for this imaginary gastro problem. I'm a grown-up nurse, not a child.

But also...Kiley. Fuck fuck.

HARPER

Can we not tell your sister about this? She'll be so mad I ditched when she wanted to come with you.

GRANT

No worries. Your secret is safe with me.

Probably not, though. After tonight, it feels like my secrets aren't safe at all, with anyone, and I have only myself to blame.

CHAPTER 3

KIERAN

The first thing I see when we return to the bench is Jersey Girl's empty seat. *Fuck*. The trainer who I sent to intercept her comes over. "I couldn't find her, sorry."

"Yeah, she's gone."

The guy who is sitting next to her empty seat looks up and smiles, waving.

The trainer waves back.

"You know him?"

She laughs. "Yeah. You do, too. He's one of the sports medicine docs at McMaster. He came to training camp, and will be travelling with the team as an alternate medical director for some of the road trips."

Ah. Right. "What's his name?"

"Dr. Grant Forge."

I nod. "Thanks."

I keep an eye on the doctor for the rest of the game. His gaze is glued to the ice and his phone, a constant back and forth. When Mitchey drags someone to the ice, the doc's on his feet until our D-man is free of the tussle and clearly fine. Definitely giving strong team focus vibes.

The seat next to him stays empty to the final buzzer.

Which makes our 3-2 victory taste only *close* to perfection. Hale scores the winning goal, and I get the assist.

In the locker room, the head coach says a few words of praise, then turns it over to Tilman, who gives Andrew Mitchell a nod for getting under the other team's skin the best, then due props to Hale for the winning goal. And we all applaud our goaltender, Makinen, for keeping his shit together in the last period when it got rough.

Then it's time for media access, and I manage to shower first. If Jersey Girl watches the coverage tonight, I want her to see me at my best.

Everything I know about her, which isn't much, spins through my head. She's a nurse. She's got her reasons for not looking me up, even after I move to what I'm certain now is her city. She knows one of the team doctors well enough to come to a game with him, maybe, or get a ticket from him. Either way, she left before him.

Because of me?

As soon as I'm done with press questions, I go in search of the kid from the PR office who posts shit on TikTok. Interns always know who gets the real work done. "Hey, do you know if anyone who organizes the community outreach stuff is still here?"

One way to find a hot nurse in this town is to go where the hot nurses work.

"That's Mabel. I'm pretty sure she's gone for the night, but she'll be in tomorrow."

"Thanks, bud."

"No problem. Can I get you to sing a line from a song—"

I wince. "How about a thumbs up for the camera instead? Show off my suit?"

It'll probably be B-roll at best, but I'm not in a singing mood tonight. Or ever.

After he gets what he needs from me, I go to the publicity team's office, and as predicted, Mabel is gone.

Two years ago, I hit a dead end when I returned to Jersey Girl's room after our one night together in Buffalo, and found

her gone.

Now? I'm not stopping until I find her. I scrawl Mabel a note and include my phone number. I'll come find her in the morning, but it's nice to give someone a heads-up that a favour is going to be asked.

Back in the locker room, most of the guys are gone. Tilman's still there, holed up in the corner on his phone, fighting with his wife.

"No, baby, I can't see you tonight."

Correction. The captain is fighting—and now maybe grovelling?—with someone who probably isn't his wife.

A messy situation I want no part of. *What a fucking loser*, is my first reaction. My second is a rapid-fire risk assessment of what this means for the team. Probably nothing. Monogamy isn't something pro athletes are known for, and most know how to manage it. *Most don't have pleading conversations with their girlfriends in the locker room, though*. It's a possible sign he's losing control of a private disaster. Something I used to care more about when I was captain, and should keep my nose out of now that I'm not.

And I've given Tilman way too much of my post-game thoughts.

I've never understood wanting to juggle multiple relationships. It's rare that I ever successfully handled one, let alone two, and they never lasted, although the same rules always applied for one-night stands and casual girlfriends. Nobody gets hurt if everyone knows the rules. We're together as long as we're together, and then it's over. No muss, no fuss, no drama.

And in the last two years, it's just been easier to keep my head down and take care of myself with my right hand.

Thinking about Buffalo...

Fuck.

I slam my locker shut harder than is strictly necessary, and Tilman shoots me an annoyed look. Right. Losing one's head

over a woman is nonsense. Some of the things I've seen guys do over the years... And now Tilman's doing it over *two* women? Because I know he's still hung up on his wife, too.

I've met his wife. Shannon is smart, sexy, and funny. He should be googly eyes for her and her alone.

But love doesn't work like that.

Love doesn't work at all, unless you have a relationship like my parents' and one person gives absolutely everything.

Who the fuck would want that?

Nobody in their right mind.

On the other hand, being celibate sucks, too.

That's the burning thought that drives me home. The arena is downtown, and the house I bought is up the Mountain—which isn't a mountain, it's just an escarpment ridge that splits the city into two halves.

The lower half of Hamilton is a compact urban space, and the upper half is sprawling suburbia. A bunch of guys bought houses in the same subdivision just off the highway, on the outskirts of the city.

Since I like to be where the action is—and by action, I mean breakfast made by Hale's wife—I told the real estate agent to get me a place near my teammates.

The five-bedroom newly built house with a three-car garage is a bit over the top for a single guy with a single truck, and it doesn't feel like *home* yet. And there's enough room that if my parents come to visit, I'll be able to retreat to the primary suite and have a pregame nap undisturbed.

In another universe, I'd be able to fuck a girlfriend in private there, too, but this fucking dry spell makes that a hypothetical situation only.

Is she with the good doctor?

And that's the wrong question. Jealousy shouldn't be eating me up inside. Not when I could be thinking about how

cute she looked in that toque. How her hair may have changed a bit, but those pink lips were the exact fucking same.

I can hear her husky laugh like it was yesterday, refusing to tell me her name, because she doesn't like hockey players.

It's clearly been too long since I've been on a date. Now fuzzy wool hats and memories of a drunken night—with a woman who expressly was not interested in staying in touch with me—are making me half hard.

I dump my bag on the floor just inside the front door—*need to get a bench or something*—and head straight to my den, where I throw myself onto a tufted leather couch that a decorator found for me when I showed up to this empty house with a bespoke wardrobe and not much else. I'll put on the highlights from the other games played tonight in a few minutes. I just need to... Closing my eyes, I grip my swelling shaft through my suit pants, thinking of the way her cheeks bloomed with rosy colour as I pinned her with my gaze.

A fuzzy wool hat and nothing else. Just pink cheeks, and golden bare skin, maybe flushing that same shade of pink as she watches me slowly jerk off. Would her chest flush?

She's never contacted you.

It doesn't matter. In my fantasy, she's all in. She asks me to pull my cock out, show her how much I want her. Parted lips, little inhale of shock as I prowl towards her, my dick heavy in my fist.

I'm fully hard now.

Would she listen if I growled and told her to keep showing me all her secret bits?

This is what you do to me. I'd show her the moisture beading up on the tip as I stroke myself. Tell her she did that. She got my balls aching to release.

Touch yourself.

She starts with her breasts, and fuck, that makes me hard. Her soft flesh in her little hands, skin everywhere. Tight nipples peeking out between her fingers. Then she arches her

back, her gaze hooded as she keeps her attention locked on my slicked-up erection. No more hiding. We're both panting hard.

Her legs fall open. My mouth waters at the first sight of her glistening pussy, and that's all I get, because her hand drops to where she's wet—

Fuck, I want to hear that. Her fingers working hard.

We did a lot that night. Licked, sucked, fucked. But I didn't watch her get herself off, and a new ache settles into my chest.

Has it been too long?

This has to be a sign. She was at opening night, right behind my bench. With someone who works for the team, at least tangentially.

But she was wearing my fucking jersey.

And now that's all I see in my fantasy. Jersey Girl draped in my colours. My number. The ache spins back to need, and I fist myself again, remembering how cute she looked in a jersey, how soft she felt beneath it, and I'm coming for her, hard and fast.

Making a mess, in more ways than one.

Except the post-nut clarity doesn't feel messy at all.

Tomorrow, I'm going to figure out how to track her down. And I'm getting a second date.

CHAPTER 4

HARPER

Six days later

“Did you see the game last night?”

The question isn't for me. I'm working on a computer in the corner of the break room, checking my email, when the paediatric resident and one of the medical school students come in with breakfast sandwiches from the cafeteria.

Yes, I want to tell them. They should have won it, but Tilman cares more about scoring himself than setting up assists for the new kid, Calhoun.

I don't say anything, because I don't mix business and pleasure. Even if I do have opinions about the line changes. Tilman works best with Hale and Marsh, because they have the egos to demand passes from him, and—I imagine—have figured out in practice how to let him think his assists somehow mean more with them.

The coach switched up the lines last night, putting Hayden Calhoun with Hale and Tilman, swapping Kieran onto the second line. And, well, they lost. The only bright spot in the game for the Highlanders was that an undrafted rookie defenceman, Roan Dodaj, scored his first NHL goal. His entire extended Albanian-Canadian family was in the stands, as they have been for all of his home games so far, and that was genuinely heartwarming.

“I caught the highlights this morning after rounds. Wanted to know what to say to them when they come in.”

“You’re not going to get to *talk* to them,” the resident says dryly. “Didn’t you read the email?”

I have it on the screen in front of me. A note from the nurse manager that we’re going to have some visitors from the new NHL team. Kieran’s name might as well have neon lights decorating it, because that’s pretty much all I can see until I force myself to keep reading. Included in the email is a list from public relations on the dos and don’ts with these VIP guests, for those of us who are on shift today.

Which includes me, because like a dummy, I didn’t check my work email on my two days off. If I’d seen this sooner, I’d have traded this shift with someone who actually wants to come face to face with Kieran Marsh.

Ever since I ran away from the arena, I’ve lost my private battle to not follow the team, but I genuinely do not want to have another close call.

What I want, apparently, doesn’t matter to the universe.

I glance over my shoulder at the med student and give him a reassuring smile. “I bet they’ll talk to you, don’t worry.”

The resident winks at me. “They’ll talk to *you*, Harper. That’s for sure.”

I roll my eyes.

The student perks up. “My roommate is hot. Can I invite her to—”

And my sympathy for the hockey fanboys disappears. The resident and I both bark “No” at the same time, and I log out of my email, which expressly says that those who are not on shift may not come in and meet them.

This is going to be a monthly coordinated effort between the team’s charitable foundation and the children’s hospital. There will be lots of opportunities to be a professional and represent this institution well down the road.

Lots of endless opportunities for me to come face to face with the hottest mistake I’ve ever made.

The Highlanders are doing better than expected. Everyone is raving about their luck. *My* luck, though, has run out.

I guess I knew this would happen eventually. As soon as the trade was announced, my brain started running through the various scenarios. Would he remember me? Did I want him to?

After opening night, the answers to those oft-repeating questions are, yeah, I think he does, and...I don't know.

No, the answer is no. I don't want him to remember me. It's too complicated. So I'm going to do my best to dodge him today, but I'm starting to think it's inevitable that we'll come face to face.

Hamilton isn't big enough to avoid him forever. If today is the day we rip off the that-night-was-a-mistake bandage, so be it.

At the nurses' station, I spy Grant's sister, Kiley. Like her twin brother, she's tall and athletic, although Grant is more of a bruiser and Kiley's got stacked curves for days. And where Grant is a straight-forward academic type, Kiley is a goth girl with wanderlust who simply applied for a ward clerk position on the paediatric floor six months ago because we encourage dressing up like it's Halloween year-round. I'm grateful every day that she stuck around because she ended up loving the admin job.

I wave to get her attention, then head into the prep room where I keep my personal belongings. There's another student in here—Mac is a teaching hospital and there are always students underfoot, but it seems like especially today. Almost as if they all want to catch a glimpse of famous people.

I sense Kiley sweeping in behind me as I log in to a computer to double check orders.

"The floor is lava," she announces with cheery venom.

Without taking my eyes off the screen, I hop onto my chair as the student panics and tries to crawl into the sink because that's the only space big enough for her on the counter.

She fails, and Kiley gleefully makes lava burbling sounds as the student slumps to the floor, the loser of our impromptu game.

It's a little bit of joy before a long day of serious work and equally serious dodging of a one-night stand I never thought I would see again.

I'm still giggling when Kiley plops herself next to me. "So what's your strategy for Hot Hockey Player Day?"

"Don't let the nurse manager hear you call it that."

"That's not an answer to my question."

"How about that?"

"Did you see the video posted last night of them all arriving at the rink? Grant sent it to me this morning and told me to behave. As if I'm not always a complete professional." She shoves her phone in front of my face.

I don't tell her that yes, of course, I saw it. I have a throwaway social media account expressly for the purpose of following the team.

One by one, the team struts past the camera, wearing custom suits that show off their personalities.

Watanabe is the first to arrive. He's wearing a dark purple suit.

Kieran is next, wearing a black three button suit I'm pretty sure I've seen before, and his Highlander branded toque that is flying off the shelves.

He looked good.

He always looks good.

Now he's on my best friend's phone, and I pretend to think it's boring as all get out.

I shove her phone away before the video finishes. "Your brother is right to remind you to behave. Everyone is going out of their minds over this visit. So no, I don't have a strategy. They're just people."

“Hot people. And you—”

“Have work to do.” I shoo her away.

The players arrive on the paediatric floor just after lunch for our young patients.

I’ve carefully managed my day around this moment. Did all my vitals checks, delivered everyone’s meds, and triple-checked that each of my patients had someone else with an eye on them—a parent, another health care worker—so I could be a lily-livered weasel and sneak away.

I get as far as the prep room, and then lurk there in the doorway, hiding behind Kiley’s shoulder, as they stroll in flanked by team and hospital PR people.

Russ Armstrong is a menacing enforcer, a big, dark-haired white guy with a light Scottish accent—the only Scottish player in the league, and of course a team called the Highlanders wanted to snag him in the expansion draft. He’s tall, brooding, and handsome in a “looks like he could kill you” kind of way, and he sounds like he was born to wear this team’s uniform.

He is more popular here than he has been on any other team before, because he’s only an average hockey player. Good, solid, but has never been to the All-Star Game.

Behind him are Dodaj, Hale, and Watanabe. I like that the Highlanders have a diverse team, and I appreciate it even more that they have picked players for this first visit who look and sound like the patients we have in the hospital.

I barely have a chance to absorb how everyone responds to them, though, because Kieran steps into view behind his teammates. Big and powerful, commanding the energy in the room. And when his slightly furrowed brow smoothes out and that classic, handsome smile splits his face, it lights up the entire ward.

His hair is longer than last season, like getting it trimmed was not his priority over the summer. From the heavy tan on every inch of exposed skin, it looks as if spending time at his family's cabin on the lake was more important.

You don't know about the cabin. Or his stats from last season, or anything else. You haven't thought about him once in the last two years.

He's dressed down today, having traded his game day suit for a training day Highlanders t-shirt and jeans.

I wondered if maybe, through twenty-one months of illicit fantasies, I'd have overhyped just how commanding his presence is. But I didn't. If anything, another two years of confidence and gritty fight and finally returning to an excited hockey market has added something extra to his persona. He moves with a tight, fluid grace, even though there's a lot of bulk under his team t-shirt.

More bulk than before? His shoulders look extra big and round, his chest stretches the limits of the cotton.

I guess I've only see him in uniform, layered up with gear. And a suit. And once upon a time, naked for a few hours, where I got to explore the parts of him that aren't tan at all...

Even in recent pictures on the internet, the solid heft of his thighs has never been quite this obvious. His jeans look expensive—like they're maybe cut for a hockey player's body—and they're still fitted and tight in all the right places.

You don't care about those places. It was a mistake to ever think about them.

I should leave now, go out the back door of the prep room and head to the cafeteria for my own lunch, before he sees me. Go grab a coffee while everyone is in the thrall of a sports god who has clearly shifted up his workout routine—

“Hey, I thought you said we were supposed to act like professionals,” Kiley mutters under her breath as they stop in the doorway to the playroom where some kids are gathered. “Eyes off Marsh's ass.”

I jerk my head up, but not before Kieran's head swivels to the side.

"You witch," I hiss back at her, embarrassed that she caught me looking.

She snickers as the back of his neck darkens.

It's nothing compared to what my face is doing.

He moves deeper into the group playroom, like we're a distraction from the much more important task of bringing a bright moment to a child's afternoon. Which is the truth. We were a distraction, and what he's doing *is* important.

Would he feel differently if he knew who made the inappropriate comment?

I grab Kiley by the hand and drag her into the prep room behind the nurses' station.

"Sorry," she gasps in between gulping laughs. "I didn't think he'd hear that. But you were really gobbling him up with your eyes. What happened to Harper Doesn't Care?"

"Maybe he didn't hear it. And I don't care."

"He definitely did. And you clearly do."

"Shut up."

She closes her eyes and nods. "Right. We need to be more professional."

"Yes, Ms. Floor-is-Lava. We do." But I try to laugh it off. Let her think it's because we're being childish and not because I'm freaking out. "Fuck off."

"Seriously. Pull your shit together." Tears are leaking out the corners of her eyes.

"Kiley Jane Forge."

"Harper—" She's cut off from first-middle-and-last-naming me because there's a knock at the door behind me.

It might be Kieran. It might not. I'm not sticking around to find out. I grab her hand. "Cover for me," I whisper. "I have to go."

“What? Why?”

“I’ll explain later.” I’m never explaining this. I’ll think up a cover story as I’m hiding in a linen closet.

She crosses her arms over her snug witchy t-shirt and pins me with a look I know all too well. “You’re acting weird.”

The knock sounds again.

I don’t wait, I just spin around and slide out the back door.

CHAPTER 5

KIERAN

I don't know what the fuck I'm doing. I tried to stay in that room with those kids. I will get back to them shortly.

But I swear I saw Jersey Girl slide into this room, and I will hate myself if I let another opportunity to find her slide through my fingers.

When the door finally opens, though, she's not inside. Standing where I thought I saw her is a taller woman, cute in a "might put a hex on you" kind of way, with a suspicious look on her face that immediately falls away and is replaced with a too-bright smile. "Yes?"

I'm looking for a woman I slept with. No, I don't know her name. She didn't want me to find her. That's not a great thing to admit, so I go with a watered-down version of the truth. "Thought I saw someone I knew."

"Oh?"

That's when I glance down and catch her the name on her badge. *Kiley Forge.*

And things start to click into place in a *Don't go there, Marsh* kind of way.

If Jersey Girl knows Dr. Grant Forge, and disappeared into a room with a woman named Kiley Forge, there is a solid chance I don't want to admit my intentions right here, right now, to this stranger.

"Must have been mistaken." I give her an apologetic smile. "Gotta get back to the kids."

“You sure?” She looks like she wants to grill me, and something tells me I do not want to be in her crosshairs.

I’ll find another way. Like a return visit to this ward. And maybe using free tickets for all the nurses on the floor to figure out a list of potential names for the girl I’m obsessing over.

I join Hale as he emerges from the group playroom, and we head down the hall to see kids who are too sick to come to the common space.

Kids who have bigger challenges than I’ve ever had to face. Like a brave little boy named Martin, from a Francophone town in Northern Ontario, whose parents are thrilled to hear that Jenson and I both speak passable French.

And a little girl named Isabella, who’s having a nap under a Highlanders blanket. Her dad explains that Izzy’s older sister is a big fan, and Isabella likes everything that her sister likes.

I promise to come back another time when she’s feeling more up to company, and the way her dad’s face lights up is a gut punch. Giving back to the community—with our time, first and foremost, but also our money and our energy—is the least pro hockey players can do.

Spending time with kids who have the brightest spirits and the fiercest hearts is also an important bit of perspective for us. So we appreciate the gifts we have. All the kids I meet today have more fight in them than most NHLers. It makes me grateful to have this opportunity, and I make a private pledge to myself to lead the Highlanders’ efforts with the hospital foundation this season.

And I actually manage not to think of Jersey Girl most of the time.

My focus dissolves as soon as I leave the hospital, though. Instead of driving home, I point my truck toward downtown and the arena.

If I can't be trusted to be alone with my thoughts, maybe I can burn through an extra hard afternoon workout.

And if I bump into any of the junior players on the team and can bond with them, even better.

My role on the newest NHL expansion team is clear. I'm the elder statesman, one of the more recognizable faces to the public, and the example setter in the locker room. Not my strong suit, but for a new lease on my professional hockey life, I'll fucking fake it if I have to.

Five years ago, I was on top of the league. I wore the C on my sweater, and I loved my team. But this game is also a business, and one cannot make the mistake of thinking your team loves you back.

They do not.

They love what you can do for them, what contribution you bring to the stats stew, but they can and will trade you at the first opportunity to save a few bucks. Or in my case, to shave ten million dollars off their salary cap.

I don't blame them. I sort of blame the next front office, who I felt fucked me around a bit, and then the last team I was with...well, the less said there the better.

Hockey Twitter says enough about it for all of us.

I can hear my father's voice in my head telling me not to read that shit. And while I don't need the criticism, thanks old man, he's not actually wrong. It is shit. It also gave me life for ten years, as my career soared higher year after year.

The criticism didn't stick then. Now? Now I shouldn't read it. The old man is right.

But he's in Winnipeg right now, and I'm in Hamilton, so before I head into the arena I pull out my phone and open the app that I have a love-hate relationship with.

I search for my name. A few tweets from the hospital and the team about the visit today, which feels unnecessary. I'd rather we do stuff like that on the down-low, but that's not how

life works. And I know it drives donations to the hospital foundation.

An article from The Scoreboard that's mostly critical of Tilman's weak shot conversion compared to last year also manages to get a dig in at me—*stop reading this shit, Marsh*—before being more complimentary than I expect.

I click back to read the comments because I'm a masochist sometimes, and I chuckle at the first one, left by an anonymous troll with the name **yourpucksucks**.

yourpucksucks

The only way Tilman works well on a line is when his wingers know how to manage his ego. Someone needs to tell Calhoun to stroke the captain's stick a little harder.

They're not wrong. From my own anonymous account, I give that a like, then close the app.

Time to get my sweat on.

Inside, I head to the players' area behind the dressing room. Having played in four home arenas in three years, I have a very healthy appreciation for the facilities Jack Benton built for us.

The overall arena might be a bit of a relic, but the team spaces? No expense was spared.

We have a massive gym space over two levels, a great viewing room for watching game tape, and some flex space that can be used for team meetings, group physical training, and dining space at meal time, depending on the time of day.

I can hear Macklemore's "Can't Hold Us" playing in the gym, which means there are at least a few players getting in a workout this afternoon.

And it smells like the team chefs are cooking.

They don't feed us all dinner on days that we only practice, but if they're cooking in advance for the next day, prepping bread and soup and chopping hundreds of pounds of vegetables for the week, they'll happily throw a steak or a

piece of salmon on the grill for those of us who come back for a later-in-the-day workout.

I poke my head into the kitchen and let them know I'm here and if they're offering, I'll eat any protein plus rice they have for me.

They give me a thumbs up and scratch my name onto the white board, below Gustafsson, Dodaj, and Calhoun.

I find those guys in the weight room and join them for a workout as the soundtrack shifts to Down With Webster's version of "Saturday Night," my own personal favourite goal song.

They're working with one of our trainers, who loops me into the workout circuit with ease—and then cautions me twice to not push as hard as I seem to need today.

"Sorry, sorry," I mutter under my breath as I force myself to slow down and keep my heart rate in the zone she wants.

Gustafsson minds his own business, on brand for the stoic big guy.

Calhoun, on the other hand, decides he needs to know what's gotten under my skin. "You okay, Marshie?"

I make a face at the nickname. And the question.

Gustafsson grunts something approximating a laugh and we dig into another set of exercises.

Again I get a caution to slow down.

"You know, some of us are old and we need to go extra hard to keep up with the young kids," I point out.

The trainer laughs. "You know, some of us can see right through that because we know you know better."

"Don't go easy on him," Calhoun protests. "If the old guy wants to hurt himself, then some of us might get more ice time."

"Zip it," I bark at him. "You're not ready for my ice time, son."

Last night, we actually had almost equal ice time, but his is precarious and depends on him learning to read Tilman's mind, and we both know it.

The trainer ignores both of us, changes the music to Lizzo's "Truth Hurts," and claps her hands together. "Okay, we're all going to do some split squat holds next. We'll start at twenty second holds and work up a progressive ladder."

This is smart from a training point of view, because I can't beat my body up.

But it gives Calhoun twenty seconds, then thirty seconds, and a little bit longer each time to chirp happily at me about how something is clearly bothering me, and I should just share with the class because then I'll feel better.

"Maybe I don't think you're old enough to understand."

"Are you feeling butthurt about getting a colonoscopy?"

"No."

"Get it? Butt. Hurt?" He laughs at his own joke.

I stand up from our final split squat hold, my thighs shaking. I give him a slow grin. "We aren't all anal retentive, kid. I don't have any qualms about that stuff. Medically or sexually." I wait a beat, getting the surprised reaction that I want. Then I lean in and layer all the inappropriate inuendo into my voice. "Especially if it's your mom."

Another guy might get offended.

Not Hayden. His grin back is just as calculatedly wicked as mine. "Gosh, Marshie, you're a little old for her, don't you think?"

That makes Gustafsson actually crack up, and mouth "Bad Bitch" along with the song at exactly the right moment. Even Dodaj laughs, although he's clearly trying his damn best not to be disrespectful. That kid was raised right, and he's rapidly become one of my favourites.

I flip them all the bird.

The trainer shakes her head and tells us to roll out well before we eat.

As we stretch, I think about how to change the subject to Tilman. By the time we're heading over to the kitchen, I haven't come up with anything diplomatic enough, so I leave it alone.

After we grab our food and thank the chefs, we tuck in. Dodaj scarfs his meal fast, then heads out, because single twenty-one-year-olds have better places to be than hanging out with older teammates—and Calhoun, who's a bit of an unlikely old soul.

When Gustafsson drifts off to make a phone call, Calhoun brings up the Scoreboard article. I guess my efforts to look like the guy everyone can talk to are paying off. "Not looking forward to tomorrow's practice after reading that, I gotta admit."

I wave it off. "Max doesn't read press."

Hayden frowns. "Not worried about him."

"Oh?"

"Dick."

We're down to communicating in single syllables as we eat. "Ah."

The general manager doesn't scare me. Maybe it takes a certain amount of time in the league to understand a man like Richard "Dick" Dorrian, because I know he intimidates others.

But if Calhoun picked up on a vibe that anyone in the head office or on the coaching staff thinks yesterday's loss was on *him*, that's quite different than my reading of the situation. "Did someone say something to you?"

"Coach said I was brought up from the farm team because they were under the assumption I knew how to forecheck." He grins reluctantly when I laugh.

"Sorry, but that's funny."

"Yeah."

I push my almost empty plate away. “Getting your turnover stats up will definitely help.”

“Hale is better at it. But when I pick up the puck...” He trails off, not wanting to be too critical of our captain.

I nod, refocusing him. “That’s a good competition to get into. Chase his stats. Figure out what Hale does that’s different.”

“He passed to *you*, that’s what.” Calhoun flexes his hands.

“And I would find Tilman in the slot. Where are you finding him?”

“Further back from the net.”

“Yep.” I tap the table. “Coach isn’t unhappy with you—except on the forechecking, maybe. I think we’re all going to have some drills tomorrow about getting closer to the net. And when we do, when it goes well, hype that shit. Be his hype man. Fuck, be your own hype man when it’s warranted. Reinforce success. You know?”

Understanding dawns. He laughs quietly under his breath. “Yeah. Got it.”

“Good.”

His phone vibrates, and his whole face transforms as a picture of a young woman and a little boy appears on the screen. He picks it up, reads the text message, then types one back.

I watch and wait until he’s done. “Where’s the family right now?”

“Up north, staying with relatives.” Hayden isn’t quite as local as Hale, but he’s another Ontario boy, same as Dodaj. “We’re holding off on getting a place until I’m sure they’re going to keep me here. It was different in Chicago, because the AHL team was just outside the city.”

And Calhoun is on a two-way contract. Lots of prospects slide back and forth between the NHL and the AHL affiliate as their skills develop, no shame in that. But if he gets sent down to our AHL team, it’ll mean moving eight hours away,

stranding his family in an unfamiliar city without him for who knows how long—or constant upheaval if they go with him.

I don't tell him that if they're regularly playing him with Tilman, he's staying. I can't say that for sure, because it might not be true, even if it feels right in my gut.

And I know how much it sucks to attach too much hope to a situation that is entirely out of one's control.

Professionally and personally.

“Where are you staying?”

He jerks his head in the direction of the apartment buildings nearby. “One of the team condos. Have it all to myself right now, but they warned me the second bedroom might be needed for another player if they make a trade or bring someone up. We're not moving Becca and Charlie down here only to have a roommate, you know?”

I like the protective fire in the way he says that. Hayden and his girlfriend had a little boy right after graduating high school, and he hasn't shared the whole story, but everything I've seen of him now says he's got his priorities right. His life is so different than that of other twenty-two-year-olds in the league who have never had to worry about anything beyond protecting their slapshot ability and getting better each year at playing a game they love.

And since I gave him a hard time earlier, and he still earnestly asked me for advice, I make sure he knows that I see the hard work he's put in on his personal life. “Hey, you seem like you've figured out a good thing with Becca.”

A startled look flashes on his face, then he smiles. “She's everything.”

It's hard not to compare him to the shenanigans I've seen from other players. Maybe the only way you get it all in this perfect, uncomplicated way is if you come into the league with a family, and that's not a situation you could see as a gift until it's in the rearview mirror.

I wasn't mature enough to have a kid when I was eighteen.

Fuck, I've never been ready to consider that. I've carefully managed all of my non-relationships to avoid ever having to have that conversation, so I could give hockey my all. And here's Hayden, doing that and putting his family first, too.

"You got any pictures of your son?"

He flips his phone around and shows me some of the latest Becca has posted and tagged him on. Charlie is a cute kid for sure.

I'm about to say something about hoping they get to be back in the same city soon when I recognize a name on one of the comments under one of the photos.

Kiley Forge

Nothing like Pine Harbour in the fall. Love the Bruce!

What are the chances?

I almost rip his phone out of his hands, but Gustafsson returns just in time to stop me from acting on the impulse. We scrape the last bites off our plates, then take the dishes back to the kitchen.

The whole time, I'm telling myself I'm not going to look up the woman who helped Jersey Girl disappear today.

I am, of course, lying to myself.

I wait until I'm home. At this time of night, after rush hour ends, it only takes fifteen minutes to get up the Mountain. Inside my house, I drop my phone and keys on the kitchen counter and force myself upstairs and into the shower.

Then I apply liniment to the sorest muscles, and pull on a clean pair of sweatpants before I head back to the kitchen.

Grab a beer.

Stare at my phone.

Is this some kind of low, trying to find her through social media?

I snatch it before I can second-guess this plan and type in Kiley's name. Her profile picture is a pair of boots, but a quick scroll down confirms it's the woman I saw earlier. Heart pounding, I swipe the screen again, looking back through her photos.

Hoping to find Jersey Girl.

Praying that they aren't related by marriage or some shit like that.

It's been almost two years.

And then I see Grant, the sports doc. Side by side, the family resemblance is clear. Definitely siblings.

Scroll.

Scroll.

Then a smile I would recognize anywhere. Even through the still image on the screen, I can hear a husky laugh. I click in to the picture, wanting it to be bigger, to fill the screen.

There's a caption below, but I don't look down immediately. I just drink in the first lingering, unlimited look at the woman who has lived in my dreams for months on end.

Then my eager gaze drops to the text.

Summer vibes at the cottage with Harper.

No tag, but a name. *Harper.*

I click through to her friends list and scroll, looking for something like Harper. Looking for her photo. Anything.

Nothing.

But it's a start.

Grinning like a fucking fool, I go back to Kiley's account and scroll back, looking for another glimpse at her.

Harper. Jersey Girl. *Harper.*

When I find another picture, it feels like winning the lottery. This is in the spring, and they're posing under a sign on the side of the highway.

Halfway home! Car is working well (knock on the woody side panels!). Need to find some lunch. 2222 kms done, 2222 kms to go...

With a jolt, I realize I recognize the stretch of the Trans-Canada Highway they're standing on.

It's just outside my mom's hometown in Manitoba.

I try to do some calendar math. I flew home in April. Went straight to the lake for a week to sulk in private over not making the playoffs. Then I spent a few days with my brother and his kids in Brandon. Was that about the same time she'd have driven down that stretch of road between Brandon and Portage la Prairie?

I scroll a little further. In a few swipes, I learn a lot about both Jersey Girl—*Harper*—and her friend. Six months ago, Harper flew out to British Columbia and helped Kiley pack up her apartment, then they drove across the country in a car that looks like it was on its last legs before the trip started.

Most of the pictures barely have Harper in them. Just a glimpse here and there.

I scroll back up to the one where she stopped in my fucking hometown for lunch and click on the photo to enlarge it, but instead of it getting bigger, a red heart appears on the screen.

“What the fuck?” I stare at the photo.

The like icon is lit up like a red beacon.

I tap it, unliking the picture.

Fuck, does that delete the notification?

I tap it again, because the only thing worse than stealth-liking someone's six-month-old photo is them getting a notification of that and then finding out the like was withdrawn.

Then I get a notification.

A friend request from Kiley Forge.

I drop my phone on the counter with a clatter.

CHAPTER 6

HARPER

“Hey, babe...” Kiley kicks at my chair.

I hold up my hand, because I’m almost finished charting this patient and I don’t want to lose my train of thought.

Five more minutes and then the world’s longest shift is over.

“Hang on,” I mumble.

“This is important.”

I look up and roll my eyes. “Go bug Grant.”

“He left an hour ago.”

“Jerk,” I say, not meaning it.

She snorts. But then she’s quiet, and I finish my chart. The second I close the digital patient file, though, she is on her feet, bouncing with a weird energy.

“What is it?”

“Hang on, I’m not sure I want to ask just yet.” She gives me a searching look. “Not here.”

“Then why did you...?” I sigh. The longest, strangest shift ever.

And I’ll be back again tomorrow for another twelve hours, so the sooner I get to bed, the better. Today was the first of three day shifts in a row, and it put me through the ringer.

We head out to the parking garage together after I hand over to the night nurse. Kiley’s car died two days after she

moved back from Vancouver, and since she moved into the same apartment building Grant and I live in, which is on a decent bus route if she needs it, she hasn't bought new wheels yet.

Which is fine—I like having someone else to drive to and from work with.

But not when she snatches my keys out of my hand right before I put them in the ignition.

“Hey! What the hell?”

“We're not going anywhere until you tell me why a hockey player liked a six-month-old picture of you and me on Instagram.”

Blood rushes to my head and my mouth goes dry. “He did what?”

“You don't even ask which player?” She gasps. “I knew it! Something was weird this morning when you were hiding from him!”

“I wasn't hiding from anyone.” But my denial doesn't even land with her. She hands over her phone with a smug, *got you* smile.

I tap in her security code and there's a picture of us from the death drive home from Vancouver.

And underneath it, like a fucking poisonous trap, it clearly says: **Kieran Marsh and others like this.**

Kieran. Marsh.

I click on his name, my fingers shaking, and it says Request Pending.

Shrieking, I toss the phone back at her. “What the fuck did you do?”

“What did I do? He liked my photo! I sent him a friend request.”

“You're not allowed to do that.”

“Why the fuck wouldn’t I be allowed to do that, Harper Anne Roberts?”

“Fuck you, that’s why.”

“That’s not a fucking answer.”

“Stop fucking swearing.”

“I fucking cannot. What is happening?”

I snatch the phone back and cancel the friend request.

Then I stare at the profile.

It’s him. It’s an account that only has maybe twenty posts total. I’m intimately familiar with all of his social media accounts, and this is really him.

“He liked a photo of us?” I repeat faintly.

“One that he probably scrolled way back on my account to find, because you’re allergic to living your life on the internet.”

Only with my own face.

Only in ways that people might ever be able to recognize me, not that anyone would ever have any reason to recognize me.

I’m nobody.

She slowly reaches over and takes her phone back. “You want to tell me why you were hiding from this guy earlier today?”

Because he’s everything I can’t want. Because I’ll never forget how warm his skin is, stretched tight over muscles that are still up for multiple rounds of hungry sex after a brutal game of hockey. Because I never thought I’d see him again, and now it physically hurts to think about how I hid from him today. “Not really.”

She waits.

I don’t say anything else.

Finally, after what feels like a lifetime, she hands me my keys. “Your place for wine?”

“My place for ice cream.” My voice is so faint I can barely hear it.

“You okay to drive?”

“Mmm.” I blink. Then I nod and put the key into the ignition.

We live in a four-storey walk-up apartment building halfway between the hospital and downtown, in the shadow of the escarpment. Her brother found this place first, moving out of his parents’ place the year he started medical school. I’d just graduated my nursing program, too, and was still at home. Kiley had joined a theatre troupe that was touring fringe festivals, and when she came home for a visit and crashed on Grant’s couch, I joined the sleepover, and fell in love with the shabby chic apartment.

If I squint and describe it only by its best attributes, it sounds pretty amazing. A century-old building with stained glass windows and soaring ceilings. Tons of character.

I need to leave out that I have to park my little sedan on the street, and there isn’t a single surface in the entire building that is level. My bedroom has no storage space and my furniture somehow barely fits in it. The original windows leak heat in the winter and seem to attract it in the summer.

None of that deterred me. As soon as I got a full-time job, and the apartment below Grant’s came available, I moved in. And now Kiley lives upstairs, which is very convenient for when I need to freak out after work.

Kiley follows me up half a flight of stairs to my apartment on the second floor. She stays quiet while I pull out raspberry sorbet—the closest thing I have to ice cream, why don’t I have a better supply on hand? Past Me has failed Current Me in a big way—and a bottle of red wine, plus two glasses.

She waits patiently until I shove a full glass at her, then she lifts it in a toast. “To secrets?”

I laugh weakly. “Yeah.”

“Is he a jerk?”

“No.” It’s instinctive, a gut reaction. “I don’t have any reason to think he is.”

“Did you sleep with him?”

I wince.

“Harper!”

“It was—”

“There is a bestie code. You always tell me about the good lays.”

“That’s not a thing.” If anything, I’m more likely to tell her about the bad ones.

“Then you *always* tell me about the famous lays.”

“I haven’t had any other famous...things!”

“But this was a thing?”

“Yes.”

“Was it good?”

It was incredible. “We were drunk, so...beer goggles, you know? But it was a fun night. That’s all it was. A single night together, two years ago, in Buffalo.”

Her brows pull together, and I wait for her to ask me what I was doing in Buffalo, but she skips ahead to the good stuff. “And you haven’t tracked him down again for another booty call?”

I shake my head violently. “Nope. Not interested in that.”

Her frown deepens, like that doesn’t line up.

I don’t expect it to make sense to her. “Please don’t ask too many questions about that part.”

“Is this about your father?”

I shrug. Then sigh. “Probably more about my mom, I guess. But yeah.”

“All right.” She sips her wine. “So it was one wild, amazing night. Tabloid worthy.”

I roll my eyes. But I don’t deny any of that.

“And now he’s here.”

I gesture wildly at the arena ten blocks away. “Right fucking there.”

“But you went to the game opening night. You talked me out of going with Grant!”

I wave off her protest. “He’ll get more tickets.”

“Did you tell him?” She crosses her arms over her chest, like that’s the biggest issue here, which Forge sibling knew my secret first.

I stab at the sorbet, which is hard as a rock. “No, I didn’t tell him.”

“Do you think you might have put him in an awkward position?”

And now we’ve pivoted to the fierce twin devotion that overrides twin jealousy. “Why would I think that?”

She slides her phone across the counter. “Because Kieran wants to know if there’s a way to contact you. If I ignore him, do you think he’s going to ask my brother for your number?”

My spoon clatters to the counter. “I thought I cancelled your friend request.”

“He was clearly enjoying our little game of digital cat and mouse, so he sent one back.”

“When?”

“About forty-five seconds ago while you were attempting to murder that gallon of sorbet.”

“And then the message arrived after that?”

She nods.

“So he’s...DMing you. Right now. About me.” I can’t breathe.

Somewhere in this city—my city—the hottest man I have ever licked is asking my best friend for my deets.

“How did he find you, anyway?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I live my life online. I’ve been following some of the team. He’s boring, so not him, but —”

“He’s not boring,” I protest hotly. He left bite marks on my thigh. He’s definitely not boring. His safe word is avocado. That’s not boring. He has the dirtiest mouth I’ve ever heard. He’s *really not* boring. He made *me* say dirty things like—

“Mmm, interesting.” Kiley is watching my face like it’s telling a story I don’t want her to know, and she’s enjoying it immensely.

I grab the spoon and vigorously attack the sorbet, grateful that some of it gives way. The sweet, tart coldness is exactly what I need right now to distract me from—

“What are you doing?” I mumble around the melting stickiness.

“Messaging him back.”

“Don’t.”

“*Harper says I can’t message you back,*” she says with a laugh, pretending to type. Then she gives me a serious look. “Do you want me to blow him off? *I can’t give you her contact information. Please don’t ask Grant for them, either.*”

My stomach goes into freefall.

She would do that. As much as my best friend likes the new team, and the exciting vibes they bring to our medium-sized city, she’s ride-or-die for me above all else.

And I don’t know Kieran that well, but I’m pretty sure if she sends him that message, I will never cross paths with him again. He’ll send other players in his place to the hospital, and donate his time to visiting retired veterans or a teen shelter downtown instead.

“I don’t know what I want to say to him,” I finally say, quietly, so my voice doesn’t crack.

She nods slowly. “But you know you want to talk to him?”

Of course I *want* to talk to him. What I want really isn’t the point, though. “I need to make it clear I can’t—I’m not interested in—you know.”

She nods. “Of course. I mean, no, I don’t know. Because what you just said borders on gibberish. But it’s clear that *you* know what you mean. And you want to see him.”

I scoop another big mouthful of sorbet to avoid admitting she’s right.

Then I grab her phone.

CHAPTER 7

KIERAN

I'm kicking myself for looking up Kiley on my main Instagram account—I have a burner for Twitter. It's probably not too hard to create one for Insta, too. Although creating a second account just to check out a friend of the girl who fundamentally changed my life might be a bit extreme.

This whole thing is ridiculous.

And just when I'm about to delete the Instagram app from my phone and throw myself into a punishingly cold shower, I get a new message.

KILEY FORGE

Are you free tomorrow?

Fuck. Yes.

Maybe using my main account was some kind of gift, after all.

I type out **I have practice** and then delete it without hitting send. **I have to work** feels not quite right either. I really want to type back, *how about now? I'm free right fucking now*. I settle on a simple **yes, first thing, or after one in the afternoon**.

And then I wait. I drink my beer and think about how much I want to crawl through my phone and demand to know everything.

My famous patience and coolheaded nature has abandoned me, and I pace back and forth, finishing one beer and grabbing another.

It takes ten long minutes for my phone to ding again.

KILEY FORGE

Harper works until seven.

KIERAN MARSH

I can meet her anytime after that. Anywhere she wants.

KILEY FORGE

Eight o'clock at the Locke Street Bakery. And be warned, she has to be in bed by nine. She'll be at the end of her second shift of three in a row.

I nod, even though nobody can see me. And I gobble up that little detail about her life.

I don't know what it is about this woman. I know very little about her, but almost two years after our single night together, I remember every small detail of her laugh and her sharp gaze and the way she made me feel. There is a reason she was thrown in my path at my lowest point, professionally. And it wasn't to save me—I had to do that myself. But deep down, she sparked a burning desire to be better. Better on the ice, better off the ice. A better man, just in case we ever crossed paths again.

She is worth wanting to impress. I knew that then, and I feel it in my bones now.

It's the longest twenty-four hours of my life. I don't sleep great, so practice isn't great, which gets the trainers on me and I don't want to explain that I'm tangled up in weird feelings, so I dig deep and do better.

All in all, it's not a great day so far, but I shake it off, because that's what pros do.

And when Dorrian calls Calhoun into his office just as I'm about to leave, I tell him to keep his chin up.

Then I stick around until he makes it back to the locker room.

"Everything all right?"

He shrugs, his face taut. Then, after leaving me hanging long enough, he grins. "Yeah. They just made my contract one way. I'm staying for the rest of the season."

All right.

I exhale happily, then laugh. "You little shit."

"I can't pull that with Becca, you know? Had to have a bit of fun."

"Yeah." I scrub my jaw. "You gonna let her go house hunting now?"

"She's had a short list of places she likes since the start of the season. If they're available still, I bet she'll have an offer in on one by the end of the night."

"Glad to hear you'll have them close again."

He sags back against the locker, his relief palpable. "Yeah. Same. It's hard enough with the travel, you know?"

I don't, not really. I've always managed to avoid attachments like that.

But then I think about getting on that plane the morning I found Harper's hotel room empty in Buffalo, feeling like I'd missed a chance at something real.

The one and only time I've ever been twisted up about flying away from a city.

Hard not to look at the hope I have riding on her probably reluctant agreement to see me tonight, and recognize that as aching for a do-over.

I think about the way the calendar's only going to get busier over the next month or two, and how I'll fit in seeing her as much as I fucking can, if I get a fucking chance, which is all I really want to turn today around.

A second chance with the girl who got away.

A chance to show her I'm not the playboy she met two years ago. I haven't been that guy not even once since her, because there was no point. I didn't want anyone else. And I never will. She was it for me, even before I knew her name.

Now I need to find a way to hold that inside—because that's the kind of pressure no woman needs—but still show her that she has a lock on my attention.

The bakery is ten blocks from the arena, in a popular, walkable retail strip in the middle of a century-old residential area. Even though it's a cool fall evening, every patio is full, with people crammed under outdoor heaters.

I catch a few curious glances, and try not to make eye contact with anyone. In my haste to actually connect with Harper, I didn't think to suggest we meet somewhere...not busy. Fucking rookie mistake.

I push open the door to the bakery and see her immediately. She's sitting at a table just inside the entrance, and for a split second, just as I did at the arena, my brain refuses to believe it's actually her after all this time. Her slim body is twisted tight, one denim-clad leg slung over the other, bobbing in the air. Like me, she's wearing a baseball cap, but it doesn't hide her soft, pink mouth, or when she lifts her head, her wide eyes.

Shock rolls over her expressive face as I step inside. "You're early."

Oh, that sweet, husky voice. Two years did not dull how much I like it.

I've never forgotten how she said, *I won't let you make me feel special*. She said a lot of hotter things that night—and her laugh, I remember her laugh, too—but the line I've gone back to over and over again when I think of her is that warning.

She told me she only wanted one night, and she didn't want me to play games with her.

This feels like a miracle. Of course I'm fucking early. I take a deep breath. "So are you."

She glances around, nerves rioting across her face, and fuck it—yeah, we could do this here, but it's going to be awkward. "Do you want to go for a walk?" I glance at her jeans and a hoodie. "Are you warm enough?"

"Yeah." She nods and stands up. "Yep."

I hold the door open for her, and she looks up at me as she steps past, a brief smile flitting across her face that gives me a rough surge of hope. Fuck yeah, I've missed that smile.

"Thanks for meeting me," I say softly as she passes by me.

The corners of her mouth twist up a little more, and I'm feeling good. It lasts ten seconds, just long enough for me to jog after her, down the steps to the street—where someone recognizes me.

Two guys, one of whom points at me with a big, beefy finger. "Hey, you're Kieran Marsh."

Fuck. "Yeah, hey. Nice to meet you."

"Can we get a picture?"

Harper turns away, but not before I catch a look I don't like. "Sorry guys, I'm in the middle of something here."

Right thing to say for principled reasons, but wrong thing, too, because it draws their attention to her, and I don't like the appreciative gleam the guy in front gets in his eye when he looks at Harper.

I don't like it at all.

I put myself between them and her, my back to them, my hand ghosting just behind her shoulder.

“Sorry about that,” I say under my breath.

I get another shrug, and her expression smooths out as she stares ahead. “I picked the location, you don’t need to apologize.”

“Still—”

“We can walk this way.” And she takes off.

For a little slip of a woman, she can move.

Taking a deep breath, I jog after her.

CHAPTER 8

HARPER

Kieran catches up to me in a few long strides.

This was a mistake. All of it.

Suggesting the bakery on a busy street. Did I know he'd be recognized? Probably. Did I want to see what that was like, because I'm a glutton for punishment? In the same way I wanted to know, two years ago, what it was like to be the girl picked by a hockey player for a night of fun?

All of my interactions with Kieran Marsh are clichés and I'm smarter than this. Except now we're walking alone together down a dark street, and my pulse is racing, because I'm not actually smart at all.

We are alone.

Again, after two years.

Me and an Olympic gold medallist, former captain of the Montreal team, and one of the highest paid athletes in the league. A future Hall of Famer, an unrepentant player on and off the ice—

“So, it's been a while.” His tone is carefully light. “You're a hard girl to track down.”

Two can play the casual game. “Not that hard, if it took you twenty-two months.”

I mean it as a joke. It lands totally wrong. It comes off sounding like I wanted him to find me, and I need him to know I genuinely did not.

He catches my elbow, just long enough to stop us. Then his hand swings away again as he turns to look at me. “I came back to your room that morning, you know. You were gone.”

Because I had to be. Because I shouldn’t have been there in the first place. It was a risk, and this conversation—so close to home, where we could be photographed together—is even riskier.

“Yeah, I—”

“I’ve looked for you since. In the stands when I returned to Buffalo for games. Other games, randomly. Any time I get within a few hundred miles of Buffalo, to be honest. Knowing there was a real connection between us, and so damn sure you’d find me. But you never did. So imagine my surprise when there you were at our first home game.”

I go for another joke. Jokes feel like the only possible solution to the wild, helpless feeling inside my chest. “Maybe it wasn’t me at the home game.”

He ignores that. “You haven’t been back. So what happened?”

“I warned you I’m not a big hockey fan.”

As I square my shoulders, his gaze rakes over my deliberately dressed-down look. Old jeans, old hoodie. Bright pink sneakers, because I couldn’t find any ratty ones in my closet. And back up again, this time slower. By the time we’re looking at each other again, I’m squirming under the intense scrutiny—on the inside.

I’m supposed to look unappealing. A scruffy nurse on the wrong end of a twelve-hour shift.

But I wasn’t supposed to look appealing two years ago in Buffalo, either. Kieran was attracted to me in leggings and a hockey sweater. And he’s looking at me exactly the same way now, like he couldn’t care less what I’m wearing, because he’s already looking forward to it all being on his floor.

I don’t let him see that he’s affecting me. He’s not allowed to affect me, no matter how attracted to him I might be.

Because for all his differences compared to my father, Kieran Marsh is not a man I can bring home to meet my mom. And if I have to choose between the only parent I've ever known, the only parent who has ever loved me, and a super hot stranger who now just happens to live a lot closer to me than he once did...I'm choosing my mom. No matter how much I wish the choice were different.

"I don't believe you," he finally says. "Either you wanted to sit that close because you *are* a fan, or you wanted to see *me*. Which is it?"

Neither. Both.

I go for misdirection this time. "This town has wanted an NHL team for a long time, so everyone is a fan in one way or another." I gesture back toward Locke Street. "For example, what we just ran into. Of course I was curious. But it was a mistake."

"You were wearing *my* jersey that night. That was no mistake." He sounds so certain.

Two years have passed.

He was supposed to forget about me. I bet he did, until he saw me again. Maybe he thought of me when he was in Buffalo, or whatever, but there are a lot of other cities on road trips. A lot of other girls.

"Come on, Harper." He grins. "Look, I didn't even know your name until last night."

"I was hoping we could keep it that way."

"Yeah, I got that two years ago. But now that fate has brought us together—"

Whoa, no. Hard no on fate having anything to do with me and this guy, no matter how much my body likes his looming over me. "I thought you tracked me down?"

"Sometimes fate needs an assist."

That's cheesy enough to trigger an eye roll. "It's a small city. At some point, you'll probably bump into everyone who ever attends your games."

“I don’t want to bump into everyone. Just you. The beautiful girl I haven’t been able to stop thinking about since that night together.”

My breath catches in my throat as he holds my gaze, looking deadly serious. So much for sarcasm and eye rolls.

He’ll never understand. All he sees when he looks at me is a hot night in a hotel, and he wants that again. Hell, I want that again. But I’m more than that girl, and the rest of me? Totally off-limits.

“You don’t know what it would do to my—” Fuck. My voice shakes, and I twist away, looking towards the escarpment. I picture my mom dancing around her art studio, listening to Joni Mitchell. I remember all the pinched faces, the sharp hurt I inflicted on her over and over again. At four, at eight, at twelve. Telling her that I know my father loves me, he’s just very busy. *He’s a famous hockey player,* I once screamed at her. *And you’re nobody.*

And at eighteen, when I should have been old enough to know better.

Fuck.

I won’t hurt her now. I’m a twenty-eight-year-old woman. I’m attractive and I’m gainfully employed. Good enough in bed to leave an impression on Kieran Marsh.

I can find someone else. Anyone else but this man who will remind my mother on every level of the asshole who stuck her with a baby and never looked back.

“Harper.” He says my name like we’re negotiating something here.

We are not doing that.

I am not available.

Period. End of conversation.

And I can maintain that hard line just so long as I don’t actually look at him. “I can’t do this,” I say as firmly as I possibly can. “For reasons that have nothing to do with you.

Please don't ask me about the details. It's not just my life I'd be laying bare."

Then I slowly turn and allow myself to look at him again, aching want rolling through me. I can't deny it, but I can't allow it, either.

His face sets up, stoic and square-jawed. He's heard me, and he doesn't like it, but he knows what I'm saying. "I guess I figured that out, on some level. But I needed to hear it directly."

"I'm sorry." I shove my hands in my pockets and turn, resuming our walk. Silence falls, and that's not better, because the silence fills with inconvenient memories. Him chasing me down outside that hotel suite.

His sweet charm, his cajoling ways.

The hot, slick need I felt then. The way I crave it still now, because nobody else has ever lit up my body the way he did.

Nobody else has stripped me bare and then admired how wet I get. *Look at you, all turned on for me.*

"Okay, so you don't want that to be any of my business?" Kieran says quietly as he hunches his shoulders beside me. "It's cold tonight."

"Well, conveniently, you've walked me home." I stop in front of my apartment, carefully not looking at him. I don't need to see his reaction to my tiny little rundown abode. "Sorry to make this brief, but it's cold and you should get back, and—"

He cuts me off. "Let's do this again."

"Excuse me?" I tilt my head to the side, looking up at him. "Same time next week for another *it's not you, it's me* let down?"

He shakes his head. "I don't feel let down. It's all good."

"But I *can't*," I say firmly. No more thigh biting. No more dirty talk that goads me into saying dirty things back.

His gaze carefully locks onto my face. “I know. We’re not going to hook up again. Fine. But I’ve thought about you for two years. I still don’t know your last name, or where you went to school, or what you would have ordered at the bakery if we’d stayed long enough to have a real conversation. There’s a shit ton you don’t know about me, too. Right? We’re perfect strangers, but the thought of not seeing you again... that’s not it. I can’t walk away from you again. So I think the only answer is that you and me should be friends.”

I laugh. “What?”

“Come on.” He grins again now, and it doesn’t matter that it’s cold outside, because that smile is fucking hot. I feel it down to my toes, an infectious sizzle. “I see game nights in our future. More frosty evening walks to get the blood pumping.”

Against my better judgement, my gaze flicks down his body for a split second.

Just long enough that he’s grinning when I snap my attention back to his face. “I can be good,” he says with total confidence. “A Boy Scout. I promise.”

“I’ve never done a game night,” I say, flailing wildly for any retort.

He shrugs. “Text conversations about hockey plays. Movie marathons. Whatever else you do with your friends.”

A movie marathon sounds fun.

Too bad it would end with me on my back and him talking about my little tits being perfect. And we can’t have that.

Why can’t we have that, again?

I hate that horny little voice in my head. She’s being deliberately obtuse.

I grab onto the first thing I think of that might dissuade him from this hairbrained idea. “Double dates?”

He grimaces. “Who has time for dating? Nah. We won’t be doing any of that.”

I laugh again, despite myself. And no, I don't have any interest in dating anyone else. And I definitely don't want to date anyone in front of Kieran.

He glances past me to my apartment, then leans in. "Friends make each other laugh, Harper."

Do friends melt when they hear their name said like that? I swallow hard.

"You have a good night. I'll see you soon. Tell Kiley I got you home well before nine."

That wasn't Kiley, I want to protest. *That was me, trying to guard against exactly this moment.* But he didn't even need a full hour to work the Marsh Magic on me.

When I get inside, I realize it's not even eight. The time we were supposed to meet so I could let him down easy is one minute away, and somehow he's already come and gone and declared us friends, which I don't believe for a hot second.

Something tells me there will be nothing easy about convincing Kieran we aren't going to have another wild night together.

Inside, I run a bath and call my mother.

She answers on the first ring as she always does. "Home from work?"

I skip over the brief walk I had with a man she would never approve of. "Uh huh. How was your day?"

There's an uncertain note in my voice. She doesn't pick up on it, though, so maybe it's just my guilty conscience hearing something that's not there.

She tells me about spending the day in the art studio, and I tell her about my day at the hospital. Work is a safe topic.

Also safe are her plans for the weekend—schoolwork, because three years ago, when she was forty-five, she went

back to university. She intended to go to business school, to build on the career she had as a bookkeeper while I was growing up. And then she discovered the Fine Arts program, and after a lot of angsting, changed her major to reflect her true passion of painting.

And because she's still a mom, there's also the grocery status check.

"Do you need to go to Costco?" She has a membership and I don't.

I smile. "Yeah, I'm running low on protein drinks."

By the time my tub is full, we've covered all of our usual topics. I haven't told her the one big thing I should probably divulge, but I don't know how to.

So when she asks if anything else is new, I lie and say no.

I feel hollow when I hang up the phone.

Kiley texting me to ask how coffee went doesn't help, so I ignore her to have a bath. And then the warm bath doesn't help. Crawling into bed doesn't help.

The worst part is that I don't feel guilty enough. Bigger than my complicated feelings over keeping this from my mother, who would never understand, is a larger, bubblier feeling: anticipation about Kieran insisting that we're friends, and the definitely non-zero chance I'm going to see him again very soon.

HARPER

Tell me not to be stupid

KILEY

Sounds like you want to be stupid

HARPER

My mom called and I didn't tell her about...this

KILEY

Do you want to tell her?

HARPER

I tell her everything

KILEY

You didn't tell her about that one night in Buffalo

HARPER

Because it was supposed to be totally out of character! Not really me! Never to be repeated!

KILEY

And now...

HARPER

He said he understands I'm not interested, and he wants to be friends

KILEY

Wait, I missed something

HARPER

I'm all confused

KILEY

Clearly

KILEY

I'm coming downstairs

KILEY

Like that's ever stopped me before

I hear her footsteps overhead. She's serious, so I get up and open the door for her. Unlike me, she's not dressed for sleep. Her generous curves are poured into jeans and a v-neck silky tank top.

"Are you...dressed for a date?"

"You aren't the only one who had coffee after work."

"I didn't dress up for my thing."

"You didn't get stood up, either." She waves her hand. "It's fine. Let's talk about the whole *he wants to be friends* thing. And your mom. And...all of it."

"I'm now out of both wine and sorbet." I lead her into the kitchen. "Can we do this over..." I trail off as I open the fridge. "Kombucha?"

"That's more motivation fuel than commiseration balm."

I grab it anyway. "Maybe I want some motivation."

"What exactly happened tonight?"

"I don't even know." I pour myself a glass of booch. "Want some?"

"No."

"Tea?"

"Water. And talking."

I take a long, fizzy sip. "He thinks it's fate that we crossed paths again."

"What do you think?"

"I don't believe in stuff like that." But there's a lot of coincidences. That after decades of failing to get an expansion

team, Hamilton's gifted the chance right after I break my never-ever rule with hockey players. And then one of the players they win in the expansion draft is the guy I slept with.

Then the ticket I manage to talk my way into for opening night just happens to be close enough to see Kieran's pupils?

And he shows up at the hospital—to my ward—just days later?

I'm not sure how Kiley's internet activities factor into it exactly, but it's a lot of right place, right time.

I list them all for her, finishing with tonight. "He was recognized immediately. And he blew them off, which was..."

Kiley smiles. "The right thing to do."

"I guess. And unexpected."

"Not all hockey players are jerks."

But enough of them are exactly like the one who acted as a sperm donor twenty-eight years ago and spun my mother's life out of control that I don't want anything to do with any of them. "Some of them are. You pay attention to stuff like that. What's the gossip about the Highlanders?"

She makes a face. "Some of them are definitely working their way through the available horny population here, that's true. But I don't think Kieran's one of them. Zero rumours about him. And he doesn't follow girls back on the socials."

"Except you."

She laughs. "Only because I'm his Harper delivery device."

Heat zaps through me. But then I shake my head. "Even if he's not a jerk, it's just too much."

"And yet you want to do something stupid," she reminds me gently. "So maybe there's a way to have your cake and eat it, too. You said he wants to be friends?"

I take a deep breath. "It won't stay just friends, though." There's too much chemistry for that.

I know when I crawl back into bed, I'll be touching myself to the sound of his voice, fresh again in my mind after two years.

She shrugs. "Maybe that's what you need. A few more secret nights. Why don't you call him?"

With a start, I realize I don't even have his number. "I can't. We arranged this through your DMs, remember?"

"You didn't give him your deets?"

"I tried my best to blow him off!"

"So the ball is in his court now." She grins. "I like this. I like this a lot. What do you think he's going to do next?"

I have no idea. And that both scares and exhilarates me.

CHAPTER 9

KIERAN

I resist the urge to text her friend again and beg for Harper's number. Fifteen years of professional hockey has taught me to play the long game in more ways than one.

Now that I know her name and where she works, it's easy enough to add regular visits to the children's wards to my weekly schedule.

First rule of being friends with Harper is probably going to be meeting her where she's at. Figuratively and literally.

And I have hockey to focus on first. The next afternoon, we fly to Winnipeg for a game the day after. My brother, who lives two and a half hours away in Brandon, rarely comes to town when I have a game. My sister, who I sometimes meet up with, is in Mexico with her boyfriend. Which means it's just me and my parents for dinner. The least ideal combination, because my parents—both academics—have never understood my career, and have probably spent the last fifteen years assuming it's going to end at any moment.

I wouldn't know, exactly. We've never been dig-deep-into-the-truth-of-our-feelings family.

We meet at a nice restaurant of their choosing, where they look pained when I make specific food requests of the waiter.

"The chef doesn't like—" my father starts, that annoyed grumble in his voice making me feel like I'm fifteen and a total disappointment again.

"We are happy to accommodate food sensitivities," the waiter hastens to add.

Is *I don't eat dairy the day before an NHL game* a food sensitivity? Most of the time, a charming smile and an explanation that I'm a professional athlete covers it. But I don't play that card in front of my parents.

So I make appreciative noises, and change the subject. "How's work?"

My father is happy to launch into a complete rundown of his classes and his new grad students, which fills the time until our food arrives. Then we change gears and talk about my mother's work on a new non-profit board of directors she's been tapped to lead, which carries us to our plates being cleared away.

I'm about to brace myself for an argument about why I won't try the dessert when Gustaffson, who played in Winnipeg until Hamilton grabbed him in the expansion draft, strolls in with Calhoun and Watanabe.

Gusty and Hiro wave like normal people.

Calhoun calls out my name, "Marshie!" in a way that draws attention from across the whole restaurant, and my parents both look mortified. I shouldn't enjoy that. I *don't*. Much.

I do. A little.

I give them a placid smile and stand up. "Excuse me. Go ahead and order dessert, and I'll be back shortly."

"Yes, of course," my mother says faintly.

I stalk across the restaurant and throw myself into an empty seat at the table the guys have just sat down at. "Calhoun, do you always need to be the centre of attention?"

He grins. "Preferably. Those your folks?"

"Yeah." And for the second time tonight, I change the subject. "Didn't know you guys were heading out tonight."

Gusty nods toward the kitchen. "The chef here is a big fan." He winks. "Even after I switched teams. He'll make me whatever I want."

Wish I'd known that at the start of the meal. I'd have played the "I know Magnus Gustaffson" card. "Any dessert recs?"

"He does a raspberry sorbet that's pretty killer."

I glance across at my parents, who are still studiously examining the dessert menus. "I should get back."

The waiter arrives just as I slide back into my seat. "I hear you have a raspberry sorbet on a secret hockey player menu."

That makes him smile, and I don't care what my parents think of that anymore.

And after they give their orders, I launch into an unsolicited briefing on my own work, not that they care about it.

We lose the next day, our third loss in a row. So now it's a streak.

In the visitor's dressing room, the coach looks frustrated. "Short flight home tonight, so we'll do a practice in the morning and sort some shit out. Understood?"

The team all nods as one.

"We're going to work on holding our passes. If it's not the right pass opportunity, you throw it away. You don't fucking give it to them. And why is that, Calhoun?"

Hayden winces. "Because—"

He wasn't looking for an actual answer. He's going somewhere else with this. "We play Miami next week on the start of our first long road trip. Who plays for Miami, Hale?"

Jenson makes a face. "Ty Connor."

The league-leading goal scorer. Ahead of both Hale and Tilman already, although the season is young. And he's leading because he's the king of takeaways. Which burns,

because we had way too many fucking turnovers tonight. Again.

Coach growls. “And what happens when you give the puck to Ty Connor, Marsh?”

I open my mouth, but he keeps on going, sounding exasperated.

“He fucks you in the face with it.”

Right.

That.

“Tomorrow, all of you are Connor. Tomorrow, you’re going to fuck each other up if you can intercept the pass. Take what we can from this game and fucking learn from it so we’re more defensive before we get back on the road. See you all on the plane.”

The plane. One of the perks of being a new team owned by an engaged fan with deep pockets.

Winnipeg might have the win tonight.

But they don’t have our sweet private jet, courtesy of Jack Benton. And sure, it’s got the bizarre wild boar playing the bagpipes on the tail, but inside, it has experienced flight attendants, none of whom want to get into a hockey player’s pants and all of whom remember our drink preferences, and extra large seats with enough leg room for a king. Individual climate and lighting control, and nice pillows and blankets make it a pretty comfortable ride home at the end of a rocky day.

As I settle into my seat near the back, I get a text from my mother.

MOM

Nice to see you smiling despite the loss.

I blink in surprise and fire back a quick thank you message.

MOM

We didn't watch the game. But we saw you on the news.

I huff out a not surprised breath. Well, at least it's something that she didn't change the channel. And she still texts me regularly. More than can be said for some parents. Less than can be said for others. It's a take the L kind of a day, though, so I tap a quick heart reply and leave it at that.

Dick Dorrian drops into the seat beside me, and I drop my phone in my lap. "Sir."

He makes a face. "How long have we known each other, Kieran?"

"Long enough."

That makes him laugh. "We played on an All-Star team together once, didn't we?"

Twice. The first year was extra memorable, but not for any hockey related reason. Dick made headlines that year when he was discovered with the wife of another player right before the All-Star Weekend—and both players made the divisional team I was on.

That was one tense fucking dressing room.

It was a fucked-up, cautionary tale type of welcome to the NHL.

Now Dick is married to that woman, and her ex is one of the best coaches in the league. Famously still single, though, and I don't blame him.

I clear my throat. "A long time ago for both of us."

He's unfazed, clearly more comfortable with his rocky relationship past than I am. "But still. Don't call me sir."

I nod. "All right."

"How's it going?"

If this were anyone else—a journalist, for example, or hell, even any of the other three GMs I've worked for in the last

four years—I'd have given the standard non-answer answer here. *I'm focused on the next game, and our team coming together.* And there's truth there.

But Dick...I dunno. There's something about the guy. Rumour has it, his wife's ex—a fearsome 6'4" former defenceman named Jasper Pike who never hesitated to throw off his gloves—spends holidays with the Dorrians now.

Dick is a straight shooter.

“Best dressing room vibe I've had in five years,” I tell him honestly. “It's frustrating when that doesn't convert onto the ice every game.”

“What can we do to foster what *is* working? That vibe?”

Full credit to Benton and Dick's team—they brought together a disparate group of players from all corners of the league, and from day one, they made it clear they were serious about Highlander pride. We had a solid training camp, and once the team was picked, we headed to a thermal spa and golf resort near Jack Benton's cottage for two days of relaxation and bonding.

We started the season *right*.

The truth is, I've just bounced through two teams that weren't competitive because there was a lack of competitive drive from the top down. That's not the issue with us. But on the ice, we're not gelling enough yet for any of us to be putting up impressive numbers. Which isn't on them, it's on us.

“We have to do the work ourselves,” I tell him truthfully. “I want it, though. I want the wins. And I know they do, too.”

He nods. “It's a long season. We'll get there. And you're getting close to a thousand points. We want you to know how proud we are that you'll do that in a Highlander jersey.”

I grin. “I'm going to like that, too. A lot.” This team—and the city—has rapidly imprinted on me. Argyle socks and all. But a lot has to change before I can dream of properly returning to career highs. “It'll feel better to celebrate that this year if we're within range of a playoff spot.”

“We have faith in you.” He glances towards the front of the plane, where Calhoun and Hale are sitting together, heads bowed over a shared iPad. “They’re good together.”

“Yeah.” I think about Calhoun’s difficulties with Tilman. “I’d like to see them on a line with Hiro.”

Dorrian doesn’t react.

But the next morning at practice, the coaches put Watanabe on a line with them, after pulling Tilman out for a media availability thing I’m pretty sure Dorrian invented.

And I like what I see. I like it a lot.

CHAPTER 10

HARPER

I'm at home, watching yesterday's Hamilton-Winnipeg game, when Kiley texts me from work.

KILEY

Guess who's here?

And because she's not one for subtlety, she immediately includes a photo—taken from behind—of Kieran, leaning against the doorframe of one of the patient rooms.

HARPER

There are strict rules about interactions with our VIP guests and they include not taking pictures of their butts

KILEY

If you noticed his butt in that photo, that's on you. I was just sharing that he came in on his own. No PR team.

I almost type back that he was probably looking for me, but there's no way that doesn't sound conceited, so I delete the words before I hit send.

HARPER

Don't encourage him

KILEY

He doesn't even know I'm here

Somehow I doubt that, but I don't say anything else. She'll give me the complete rundown when she gets home from work.

In anticipation of that, I put sorbet on my shopping list for the afternoon, then return my focus to the game, which is horrible.

I'd avoided online chatter about it yesterday, but oof. Now I go to Twitter, and dodge around all the Winnipeg fanboys who are trash talking Hamilton and find my favourite commenter, who sums up how I'm feeling about the game better than I ever could.

Then I make the classic mistake of reading the replies. And since people are being wrong on the internet, I dive in with snippy responses.

I'm on my third tweet when my mom calls.

"Hey Mom," I say distractedly. "Are you on your way?"

She laughs. "I'm outside, honey. Didn't we say we'd go shopping at one?"

"Crap, I lost track of time. I'm not dressed yet, sorry!" I turn the TV off. "Come on up. I won't be long."

The game and the sniping at armchair critics will have to wait.

I unlock my front door, then race to my bedroom. I've got my jeans pulled on when she calls out that she's here.

"I brought you some groceries so I'll just put them away."

I cringe as I countdown to the lecture in three, two, one...

"Harper, there is nothing in your fridge."

"I know, Mama, that's why we're going shopping." I yank on a sweater. Where are my clean socks? Laundry tonight. I

whirl around, looking for the balled-up pair I tossed on the bed this morning when I meant to get dressed the first time. *There.*

She appears in the doorway. As always, she looks effortlessly beautiful, even though she's wearing jeans she clearly painted in at some point. She manages to make them look like she bought them that way, instead of being her new uniform since she went back to school. "There's no rush, Harper."

"I just lost track of time." I'm out of breath.

She waves her hand. "Do your face. I'll wait."

I roll my eyes as she disappears again. Do my face. There's nothing wrong going shopping with a bare face, but Angela Roberts never leaves the house without at least mascara and a careful lip line and gloss.

I'm about to tell her I'm going make-up free this week, for my skin, when I hear the TV turn on.

Crap.

I forgot to pause the game, which means by the time I get to the living room, she's got her arms crossed and she's scowling at the screen.

"The hockey fever in this town is ridiculous," she snaps. "Replaying games in the middle of the day, now?"

I hold my breath, hoping she doesn't clue in that I've clearly recorded last night's game and am watching it on demand now, that it's not just mysteriously playing on the TV.

"Let's go," I say breezily. "Do you want Starbucks on the way? Drive thru order is on me."

"You didn't put any make-up on."

"I know. I'll never find someone going out looking like a hideous troll. That's fine. I don't expect to find my future husband at Costco, anyway."

"It's not just about finding a husband, honey. You don't need a man. It's about looking polished, for a lot of other reasons."

Like spending twenty-eight years looking perfect just in case your famous ex ever sees you again. Those kinds of reasons. “Uh huh. I’m fine.”

She turns her attention back to the TV. “Can you believe this shit?”

“I try not to think about it too much.” Which is the truth. I definitely try hard not to think about hockey anywhere in her vicinity. “Turn it off, let’s go.”

With a fierce tap at the controller, she gives me a bit of breathing room again. But now her attention is wholly on me. “You’re acting strange. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Maybe I’m hungry. Should we grab lunch first?”

Her gaze sharpens as she searches my face, but she lets it go, nodding.

I do not like having secrets from my mom. At all. But telling her I hooked up with an NHL superstar is a non-starter.

Telling her that same hockey player has decided we should be friends...and has started visiting the hospital I work at...

I imagine introducing her to Kieran. How charming he would be, too charming, and the guard she would throw up. Whew. No, I’m not signing up for that anytime soon. Maybe if he’s still intent on my being my *friend* at Christmas, I could come clean then.

It’s better to beg for a bit of grace later on than have to justify the early days of flirting with someone who might disappear from my life as fast as he entered it.

And there’s no rule in the Mother-Daughter Besties Handbook that says I need to tell her about casual flirtations, even if she’d like there to be. She’s just as bad as Kiley for trouncing all over personal boundaries.

Some secrets are best kept to myself. I pivot us to a safe topic. “How’s Darnell?”

“He’s good.”

And that's the extent of the conversation we have about her long-time boyfriend. They've been together since I was in university, and he loves her enough to accept her rigid boundaries, which is more than I could ever ask for her.

Like her, he's the child of immigrants to Canada. And he's divorced. Unlike her, he'd like nothing more than to remarry, but that's not in the cards with my mom.

I'm so, so tempted to ask her what she's ever told Darnell about my father.

But then she'll want to know why I'm asking, and...not today. Maybe in the depths of winter, if Kieran is still giving me smiles that heat my blood and make my toes curl.

CHAPTER 11

KIERAN

Yesterday's practice went better than expected. My trip to the hospital went well, too, even without a Harper sighting, so I'm planning to repeat the day exactly in the same order again.

Get on the bike with Tilman and stroke his ego, so by the time we hit the ice for morning skate, he's in a good mood to run drills.

Wonder why the fuck he's the captain, when Dorrian should see through him. Shake off that thought, because the head office decisions are not for me to worry about.

Run some good plays with Hale and Calhoun.

Think about what it would take to get back to All-Star stats, and if I care about that as much as just sticking in the game long enough to hit my career longevity goals. I've played more than a thousand games. I'm at nine hundred and fifty-seven career points, so at some point this season, I'll cross the thousand mark there, too. Do I have another two or three seasons in me, to hit five hundred goals?

I fucking hope so.

I give myself lots of extra time to get to the arena. In the month I've lived here, traffic has never once done what I expected it to do—and I'm not rolling the dice that today is a good flow day.

So I'm early enough for a leisurely breakfast, then a good warm-up, before Tilman stalks in toward the end of food service. I wave him over.

He gestures that he's going to dump his bag in the locker, then grab a smoothie.

While I wait, I scroll through Twitter troll comments. That anonymous account with the good takes is back.

yourpucksucks

It's a long season. Better conserve your energy so you can sustain this bitterness across the next seventy-seven games, when they start applying some shit that makes you extra mad.

I tap the follow button, because they make me laugh out loud. Do they realize how much they sound like our GM? Damn straight we're going to make them mad.

Tilman joins me on the mat. "What's so funny?"

Just wondering if Dorrian has a burner account, too. I clear my throat. "One of your fans chirping at the other teams."

He grins.

All right. If it's going to be that easy to make him happy, today's practice should be a cakewalk.

And it is. For the second day in the row, I watch Watanabe light up in some new line combinations, and say a silent prayer of thanks for hockey scouts everywhere, who scored us this guy for at least this year.

When we finally do click—and we will—we're going to go on a hot streak that's going to feel fan-fucking-tastic.

Andrew Mitchell skates to a stop beside me. He's wearing our Military Appreciation Night warm-up jersey, for our next home game, because the PR team is taking photos of us in them ahead of the game. Mitchey might be our chirpiest, most attitude-laden muscle on the ice, but off the ice he cares the most about the Everyone On The Ice initiatives the league has started. Our first EOTI night will celebrate our Armed Forces fans, and our second, next month, will be Indigenous Celebration Night. Pride Night will be in January, and right

from the start of training camp, Mitchey made it clear to the team that he wanted us all to be all-in on all of those events.

Hale and Tilman backed him up, and I was right there with them.

“Nice jersey, bud,” I say out of the corner of my mouth.

He grins. “Stop hitting on me, Marshie.”

“I’ve gone fifteen years in this league without that becoming my nickname, you know. Two months on a team with you and Calhoun, and all my hard work is undone.”

“Gotta keep it real, Marshie.” He juts his chin at Hiro. “Is it just me, or is he suddenly getting better?”

“He was already good.”

“Mmm. But now he’s like, quietly great.” He whistles at a lightning fast twist, stop, and go. “Fucking All-Star juice, right there.”

He’s not wrong. I’m not sure I’d beat Tilman or Hale for our All-Star spot anyway, but if I was in the running, Watanabe might just have me beat anyway by the middle of the season.

When I head out to have a picture taken in my own army jersey, I find myself whistling just like Mitchell.

This elder statesman role is fitting better and better each day.

For the second afternoon in a row I head to the hospital straight from the rink.

I don’t expect to see Harper. The nurses I talked to yesterday didn’t think that she was going to be working today, but I’m planning to go every day until she has a shift again. Plus it’s not like it’s any hardship to go and hang out with the kids and their parents for an hour. I like it even more when it’s just me, without the PR people from the hospital or the team.

That truly is at the front of my mind as I round the corner and enter the paediatric ward, but then I see the glossy swish of a dark ponytail and hear that husky laugh.

My heart kicks into high gear and my smile slides into one that's private and just for Harper. My shoulders roll back and I get a little taller.

Fuck, I know she doesn't want me to be this overly confident guy. But I can't help it. I slide to a stop and lean against the nursing station as she swings around and the expression on her face is worth everything.

There's a part of me that wants more of this look of delighted surprised on her face over and over again, every day for the rest of my life.

Fuck. Me.

Because I also know—I *know*—that this woman only wants to be my friend.

I know that she's got her reasons for not repeating what we did in that hotel room in Buffalo. What we did over and over and over again, until we were exhausted and hungry and ready for room service.

Shuddering exhales. Low, sexy laughs. Teasing touches and a careful inspection of a condom.

The friend plan is a good plan, because that's how I keep Harper within arm's reach, but right now, all I can see is the hitch in her breath as she takes in my close proximity. The way she holds it at the top of the inhale, her whole body pausing as if she's just realized she's at the top of a tricky ski hill.

Then she lets it out with more control.

"You," she says coolly.

I like how quickly she pulls it together. Slick, my Jersey Girl is.

"Me," I say cheerfully.

"I heard you came in yesterday."

“And you hoped you’d see me today.” I don’t give her a chance to lie and say not really. “So we can continue to explore our new friendship.”

“Friendship,” she repeats, and I can’t tell if it’s amusement or disbelief in her voice.

“Yep.” A light goes off above a patient room, and she twists to look at it.

“Friends let friends get to work,” I say, and she might think I can’t see her smile, but she’s wrong.

I catch the soft curve of her cheek plumping up, and it’s everything I needed from today.

Mission accomplished.

She takes off without looking back, so I head in the other direction.

Isabella is feeling better. We got to meet properly yesterday, and got on like fast friends.

We have lots we can chat about.

And then it turns out Harper is Isabella’s nurse today. I swear I didn’t know that, but sometimes luck smiles on me. So I get some good gossip in between discussions of good birthday presents for hockey players, since her sister is turning thirteen in a week (we agreed game tickets were top tier, and I’ll make that happen) and how early is too early to start watching Christmas movies (never too early if you’re stuck in the hospital for a few weeks). I learn that Harper prefers apple sauce to chocolate pudding, and has never seen *Frozen*.

She comes in to give Isabella meds right after that factoid is revealed, and she groans when Isabella starts giggling. “What did you tell this stranger about me?”

“That you haven’t seen *Frozen*.”

“I’ve seen parts of it a hundred times,” Harper says with a smile. “And I like those.”

“But you need to watch it from start to finish, no interruptions.”

“I don’t have a lot of time for no interruptions movie watching.” Harper hands over a cup of water. “Pain on a scale of one to ten?”

“Four.”

“Okay. I’ll get you something for that. Is this guy bothering you?”

Isabella giggles again and shakes her head. *No.*

Harper points at the clock. “Ten more minutes. Then I’m kicking him out so you can rest, all right?”

Isabella sighs heavily, but I nod. “Sounds like a plan. Gotta keep our strength up. I take a nap almost every day.”

“Really?”

“Really. Lights out, eyes closed. Coach’s orders.”

“That’s horrible,” Isabella says gravely.

We make the most of the time before she agrees to give the horrible nap a try.

“When is your birthday?”

She shrugs.

Her dad leans forward. “In December, but we promised Isabella she can have a party in the new year if she’s not up to it before Christmas.”

“My birthday’s in February,” I tell her. “Deep into hockey season. I haven’t had birthday cake in February in *years*. So you know what I do? I buy myself a cake in the summer. Just swap the date out.”

She giggles. “That’s silly.”

“I know. But sometimes we need a little silly something to look forward to.”

“What kind of cake?”

“Chocolate.”

“Obviously.” She sighs and her eyelids flutter shut.

I take that as my cue to duck out.

I find Harper at the nursing station on my way, and other than someone sitting at the far end, engrossed in their work, she's alone for a hot second.

I take full advantage. "So my takeaway from this afternoon is that we need to watch *Frozen* together."

"Who has time for dating?" She gives me a challenging look. Yeah, that was my line the other night, and I know she's parroting it back at me.

"It's not a date. Friends watch movies together."

"I don't know, Kieran. We just don't have a lot in common."

That's not true at all. "I haven't seen *Frozen* either."

She laughs despite herself.

I lower my voice. "We have other things in common, but they're neither appropriate for the hospital setting nor within the bounds of friendship, so I'll refrain from itemizing them."

"Refrain from..." She trails off, her voice faint.

I didn't mean to make her think about how good we were together. Not really. But it's done now, and the way my pulse is humming, I don't regret it.

She crosses her arms over her chest. "Well, since those *are* out of bounds, let's see how comfortable you are with the things I do talk to my friends about."

"Shoot."

"I vent about work. How many bodily fluids are you comfortable with?"

"All of them."

She narrows her gaze. "I complain about people who don't get their CPR certification."

"Good news. Mine is up to date."

Her eyebrow lifts. "Really?"

"My family has a remote camp. We all do the training each summer. I know how to use an AED, too."

She blinks.

I grin. “Surprised?”

“A little.”

“Good.” I don’t want to press my luck. I pivot towards the exit, but my attention stays locked on her face. “See you later, Harper.”

CHAPTER 12

HARPER

I spend the next week consuming way too much hockey news. It's not just every game of their road trip, but I also devour their press interviews.

They're having a really good road trip, too. They win against Miami, one of the best teams in the league, and Kieran has this back and forth with Ty Connor, the Florida team's star, that makes all the highlight reels.

Then Tilman, the Hamilton captain, is injured in a tight game against North Carolina.

After the game, Grant was interviewed—a first, and therefore a big night for the Forge family—because he's the team doctor travelling with them this week. He explained that Tilman didn't need surgery, but would be placed on the injured reserve list for a while. That sucks for Max Tilman, but privately I think it works out better for the team. Kieran moves back to the first line, playing right wing with Hale and Calhoun, and he starts racking up the assists, even more than he got with Tilman at the start of the season.

By the end of the road trip, he's jumped way up the points leaderboard, and I'm secretly pumped for him.

But on a personal level, I'm conflicted. This is the type of superstar dazzle I cannot be swept up in. And it's a stark reminder of just how different we are. How we live in different worlds, and fundamentally are not compatible as anything other than passing acquaintances.

When I'm old, I'd rather remember Kieran Marsh as my once-upon-a-time thrill ride, and not the out-of-my-league celebrity who broke my heart and left me to deal on my own with the reckless consequences of flying too close to the sun.

So it's fine that I kind of miss him.

That dull ache inside is something I need to get used to, and learn to live with, for as long as he intends to maintain this flirty friendship thing.

We should watch Frozen.

I should invite him to a pottery painting night or something just to get back at him for that. Teach him a lesson about what friends really do together. Get that line nice and clear between us.

Because one day, he just won't come back. It's what hockey players do, even the good ones. They get traded to the other side of the continent.

Then the dull ache will throb for a while, make me feel stupid—but I won't be, because I'll be prepared—and *then* I will get over him. Preferably, all on my own, without the curious meddling of my best friend. Which means I need to manage her expectations now.

It's hard when her brother works for the team, and she knows their travel schedule as well as I secretly do. And she knows enough about what's happened that she just assumes I care.

I don't care.

I'm not counting the hours until their plane lands back in Hamilton. I tell myself I've enjoyed the reprieve from Kieran's daily drop-ins at the hospital.

“Grant sent me a photo of the Atlantic Ocean this morning.”

I squint at the grey clouds hanging ominously low in the grey sky just beyond the grey overpass next to the dog park we've brought Grant's dog Puck to. “So nice for him.”

Kiley snorts. “I know, right? How about Kieran? He doesn’t post any social media stories. As far as a famous online friend goes, he’s a bit of a dud.”

I roll my eyes. “I wouldn’t know.”

“What?”

I shrug.

“You really aren’t following him online?”

“I checked his accounts out.” Many times. “He doesn’t post much, as you say.”

“Does he text you, though?”

“Can’t. He doesn’t have my number.”

“What? Why?”

I wish I could say it’s because I refuse to give it to him. “He hasn’t asked for it.”

She leans over as Puck races back with a disgusting tennis ball we didn’t bring with us. “Who does this belong to, baby?”

Puck pants happily.

Kiley offers her a stick instead, which the chocolate lab doesn’t want. Always the good aunt, Kiley sighs, puts on a latex glove, picks up the ball, and whips it to the far end of the park.

Hospital supplies come in handy when dogsitting.

I shiver and pull my jacket tighter around me. Should have worn a scarf.

“You could ask for his number, you know.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because you’ve been pouting since he left on this road trip, and if you had his number you could text him.” She gives me an innocent smile. “As a friend.”

I groan, hating that she’s noticed my depressed vibe. “I can’t like this guy, Kiley.”

“Because he’s exactly like your dad.” She says it like she’s skeptical of my reasoning, but it’s not exactly like that.

I doubt my father ever spent even five minutes playing video games or reading a book with a kid in a hospital bed. And to the best of my knowledge, not that I have much in this area, he’s not the kind to watch a kid’s movie, even as a joke not-a-date. “Because there are enough similarities to make it weird.”

And no matter how nice he is now, the end result will be the same.

“Is this all about you not wanting to tell your mom who you’re banging? Because most of us just keep that secret. You should try it sometime. Like, tomorrow, when they get back.”

I stick my tongue out at her. “I don’t tell my mom who I’m banging.”

Or at least I haven’t in...well, two years.

Kiley narrows her gaze at me. “Is that because you’re in a long, off-limits-hockey-player-induced drought period?”

I clap my hands as Puck bounds back. I’d rather be the next one to toss her the manky ball than answer that question.

Because yes, it’s been a while, and no, I don’t want to confront what that means.

Luckily Kiley’s phone goes off, distracting her from my issues. And best friend nosiness goes both ways. “Who are you texting with?”

She blushes. “Nobody.”

“Clearly.”

“It’s nothing.”

“That’s my line.”

That makes her cackle. “I started a new online dating profile, that’s all.”

After she deleted one last week. We’ve ridden this roller coaster before. “Maybe we both need to get dressed up and

brave a club or a bar or something. What do you think?"

She searches my face, then nods. "I'll ask Grant where the team goes."

"And we'll go anywhere but there." My voice catches. Because now I'm trying to picture Kieran in a bar...here...in my city. Wrapping his hand around a beer bottle as he chats up someone else, the way he did with me in Buffalo.

A hot slide of misplaced territorial feelings rush through me.

Is that how he felt when I teased him about double dating as friends?

"You sure?"

One thousand per cent. At best, Kieran is going to be a secret fling. Most likely, he's going to move on because I've stuck him in the friend zone. I cannot have possessive thoughts about him. And going out will be a fast way to gain some much-needed perspective.

We don't go out that night, because Kiley has Puck overnight, and then we don't go out Friday night, because I have to work on Saturday.

Which means I still haven't properly processed my feelings when Kieran appears in front of me early Saturday afternoon, his first visit to the hospital in eight days.

Not that I'm counting.

I'm filling out one of my patient's charts, and he patiently waits, leaning casually against the door. He pulls out his phone—it's big, one of the newest ones—and he swipes lazily on the screen, like he's got all the time in the world, when I happen to know he's a very busy man with a tightly controlled schedule.

"You're back?"

He sets his phone down on the edge of the portable cart I'm working at. "Got back yesterday. Missed you."

Damn. It. "Uh huh."

I can't see his distracting smile today, because there's an infectious outbreak on another floor, and all the staff and visitors are wearing masks. It turns out, the crinkle of his eyes also makes my toes curl and my belly pull tight.

We'll see how we react after a proper night on the town, I think to myself.

"Watch any of our games?"

All of them. "Didn't have time."

He gamely ignores my lie. Does he see it for what it is? Can he tell I'm trying desperately to maintain a distance I don't even like? "We're playing better."

I return my focus entirely to the chart in front of me. "I wouldn't know."

The mask obscures his reaction, but his words sound more honest than teasing. "You wound me, Harper."

Fuck. I'm wounding both of us.

But I've picked this course, and I need to stick with it. It's for the best, even if it feels like the worst. So I go for over the top levity. *Friends make each other laugh.* "We have burly nurses who can tend to that for you. Pack it full of gauze, maybe apply a vacuum suction..."

He chuckles, and that at least feels better. "You're busy."

I stop and give him my full attention. Behind my mask, I'm smiling despite myself. "A little."

"I'll see you later?"

And I'm nodding before I realize it.

Then he's gone again.

I huff a distracted breath and get back to work. It's only after I finish going through everything and take the next set of

patient vitals that I realize his phone is propped on the edge of the cart still.

Glancing down the hall, I don't see him anywhere.

Should I have him paged? *Can the visiting hockey player with the jacked thighs and sizzling gaze please return to Harper Roberts's end of the hallway for another ten seconds of confusing interaction?*

Does he even realize he doesn't have his phone on him? What if he leaves the hospital imminently?

I poke my head in on my patients, both of whom have parents with them this afternoon. "All good in here?"

They all give a thumbs up. Then I indicate to the other nurse at my end of the hall that I'm going to take a quick walk to look for our visitor.

When I grab his phone, the screen lights up. There's a text message alert. One message from his Mom.

I roll my eyes at the sweetness, and set off down the corridor.

CHAPTER 13

KIERAN

I've just lost a round of NHL22 on a portable Xbox cart when Harper appears in the door to Isabella's room.

"Excuse me," I say to her and her parents, unfolding myself from the visitor's chair. "You've levelled up in the last week."

"Sucks to be you," Isabella says cheerfully.

I grab my chest, and she giggles. "See you tomorrow, kiddo."

Harper leads me back into the hallway, then holds up my phone. "You left this on my cart. You have a text from your mom."

"Did you read it?"

"What? No."

I grin behind my mask. "Missed opportunity, friend. You could have had the real dirt on me."

"Friends don't go digging for dirt." She looks genuinely appalled.

I want to lean over and tug her ponytail so badly, I have to shove my hands in my pockets to keep them to myself. Which makes it hard to take my phone, which makes her laugh.

She glances back down the hall. "I have to get back to work."

"Okay. I'm going. I have a game tonight. But if you wanted to continue this conversation over dinner tomorrow..."

She laughs. The corners of her eyes crinkle, and she sticks her tongue into the corner of her cheek, her whole body shaking now. When tears appear at the corner of her eyes, I give in and join her.

“You’re relentless,” she whispers, grabbing a tissue from the wall and dabbing at her eyes.

“I’m not usually.”

She blows a raspberry. “Excuse me, we all know what kind of a player you are. And I have personal experience of that, so...”

“I’m a changed man, Harper.” I’d started changing before we hooked up in Buffalo, for that matter. But our night together definitely accelerated something inside me that was tired of shallow relationships that lasted but a hot minute. “In fact, I’m so out of practice on all of this, maybe this is like a horny bear coming out of hibernation.”

“Does that make me a berry patch or something? Am I just the first convenient girl in your path?” Her work phone goes off, and her whole demeanor changes, and she waves at me, a clear dismissal. “This was fun, Kieran. See you round.”

Fuck. Walked right into that one. Why would I call myself a horny bear, even if it does feel like the awkward truth?

Now she thinks she’s just available flesh. I catch her arm, just for a split second. I know she has to go. “There’s nothing convenient about how I feel about you,” I say quietly. “For you or for me.”

Her eyes go wide before she races off.

That’s not even the whole truth of it. I burn for her and her alone, in a way I never thought I’d experience in my life. But she doesn’t want to hear that.

Damn it.

I shove my phone in my back pocket with one hand, rake my other through my hair in frustration, and head out of the ward.

It's only when I get to my car and set my phone in the dash that I realize I didn't check that text message from my mom.

But when I unlock my phone, there's an unexpected text message at the top of the screen. From my phone, to a phone number I don't recognize.

MARSH

This is Kieran Marsh's phone number. In case you need to congratulate him on winning the Cup someday.

I smile and text her again.

MARSH

You little phone hacker. How did you manage that?

Then I put her number in my address book. Harper.

She doesn't reply right away, so I flip over to my other messages.

MOM

Do you have flights booked home for Christmas? Your brother and sister have other families to consider as well, so we need to get organized, especially if we're going to the lake.

I bite back an irritated growl. My siblings don't have a tight seventy-two-hour break for the holidays, either, and if they all want to gather at the cottage I bought, shouldn't it be on my schedule, not theirs?

But there's no point in pulling the sports star card with my mother. Best-case scenario, she just talks around it, and worst-case, she mentions it to my father, and then I'll hear about my fucking out-of-touch attitude for the next decade.

There's a text from my publicist, about an interview for The Scoreboard, and a few friendly snipes on a couple of group chats I have with fellow players.

The Highlanders group chat is still brand new and we're still figuring out the vibe. The one with the guys who I'm still close with from Montreal is the one I check first. That conversation that has been going on for three years now, since I left the whole team group chat with an "it's been great, but I guess I'm on another team now..." This one has a firewall between hockey and life. We mostly talk about fantasy football, and it's comfortable, like a perfectly worn-out sweatshirt.

The other active conversation I've got going on is a loop with Tilman, Armstrong, and Gustafsson, the other veteran players on my current team.

I tap in to that one. I have a favour to ask of Tilman, and he's more likely to respond if I ask in front of other people.

MARSH

Can I get your wife's number?

ARMSTRONG

I'm not married

MARSH

Then I'm not talking to you, am I?

GUSTAFSSON

I'm not married, either

MARSH

And you never will be

GUSTAFSSON

You don't have Shannon's number already? She must like me more than you.

ARMSTRONG

You could get your own wife, you know

GUSTAFSSON

Sounds like projection, bud

Tilman responds with a contact file attachment, and ignores the rest of our chatter.

I add Shannon to my phone book, then give her a ring.

“Hi Kieran,” she says as she answers. She sounds like she’s running.

“Did Max tell you I’d be calling?”

“Yep.”

“Cool.” I’m not exactly sure where to start. “Listen, you know Mabel, right? You work with her on the team foundation stuff?”

Another single-syllable confirmation.

“I’d like to look into how to organize a birthday treat for a kid I met at the hospital. And it’s a little too big of a thing to ask someone who works for the team to fully take on, but we’re about to head out on this road trip, and—”

“I can do it.”

“Yeah?” I sigh in relief. “I don’t want to impose, but you’re the first person I thought of who might be able to read my mind.”

She stops running, her breaths heavy in my ear. “No problem. This is the part of the season where I start to feel lonely and am ready to take on projects, big and small. What do you need me to do?”

I tell her my idea. “I’ll bring it up with the parents when I get back. I just want to know what’s feasible on our end first. Can they come to a game? Can we find space in the arena that’s safe? What sort of transportation might be needed, and can I foot the bill for that?”

“We had a box like that in St. Louis, reserved for kids who had medical needs, and their families. I bet it’s something you could sponsor here. Do you have a manager you want looped in on the financial side of that?”

“Not yet. Just...” I shove one hand through my hair. “Whatever it costs is fine. I just want to make this family’s life a little brighter as we head into winter.”

I’m on the ice that night when Harper finally responds to my text asking how she managed to text herself from my phone. Which means I don’t see it until I’m in the dressing room post-game. There’s a camera crew interviewing Tilman next to me, and it’ll be my turn next, so I check my phone real quick. I’m hoping to see her name, but the deep thrill I get at finally seeing the notification I wanted all day is even more satisfying than I expected.

HARPER

You have Siri set up to send text messages from your locked screen.

It’s not exactly flirty, but I’ll take it.

MARSH

Clever.

HARPER

Good game tonight. I caught the second half.

MARSH

That was the better half.

HARPER

It's a long season, and you guys are getting better every day.

I grin. She might pretend not to be that into hockey, but Harper is dialled in, and I like it a lot.

Then the cameras swing in my direction. I shove my phone back in my nook as the reporter shifts over to talk to me.

“You shrugged off the first period and came from behind to tie it up. What happened back here in the dressing room?”

Ha. Like I'm going to answer that honestly.

“There's a lot of learning that comes out of a night like tonight,” I say, which is true. “We have the talent, obviously, so it's about putting it all together. And we're getting better at doing that on the fly. We've got a great coaching staff, and their feedback is invaluable. It's a long season...” I frown, tripping over the familiar words. Then I yank it together and look straight in the camera, hoping Harper will see this, too. “We're getting better every day.”

“Thanks, Kieran.”

“Yep.” And then they're pivoting again.

I get out of the rest of my gear, hand it off to the equipment guys, and head for the showers.

It's late by the time I get home. I forgot to ask Harper if she's working tomorrow, and I don't want to text her if she might already be sleeping, but when I stretch out in bed, I scroll back through our very short chat history and absorb every letter she typed.

Including her last text. What is her deal? She says one thing and then reveals another. If she weren't so earnestly kind, I'd say she's lying to me. Maybe she's lying to herself.

Two years ago, I knew there was something about her. The girl who didn't have time for players, but dressed herself head to toe like a real fan.

It's not easy to get at her secret layers, but the more I figure out about her, the more captivated I get. The girl is a puzzle, and I need to figure her out.

I sleep in the next morning, our first day off in a week, and when I wake up, the first thing I do is grab my phone and text a good morning meme to Harper.

KIERAN

Friends send each other funny shit to start the day right.

She doesn't reply for two agonizing hours.

I second-guess the casual expletive a dozen times.

I'm not even pretending to be chill by the time my phone chirps, just as I arrive at a park to run stairs up and down the escarpment. Two texts, the first one a laughing emoji, and then an apologetic explanation.

HARPER

Sorry, I was out for the morning. My phone must have been on do not disturb.

She attaches a picture...of the stairs I've just arrived at, I'm pretty sure, from the bottom.

I laugh and snap a photo of my own, from the top looking down.

KIERAN

That's a familiar view.

HARPER

Looks like I just missed you.

KIERAN

I should come earlier tomorrow.

HARPER

Maybe you should.

I tamp down the urge to sprint down the stairs and run in the direction of her apartment, hoping to catch up to her. I have an XBOX date at the hospital that I can't miss, and more details to find out about a ten-year-old's ideal birthday party.

Plus the pursuit of Isabella's pretty nurse requires more strategy than just operating on horny instinct.

That patience is rewarded many hours later.

I'm back at home, sprawled in my den, slowly doing ankle mobility exercises as I watch game tape loaded to the team's private video account.

I'm about to put some cooling gel on my quads when my phone vibrates.

HARPER

Not too early tomorrow, okay? I'm going to need to sleep off a little indulgence.

This time, the attached photo is of a dangerously large cocktail. I set down the muscle liniment and sit up carefully, taking in all of the details in the image.

KIERAN

You have a driver to get you home?

HARPER

We'll walk. It's not that far.

Who the hell is *we*? I'm on my feet as I send the next message.

KIERAN

Where are you?

CHAPTER 14

HARPER

“Uh oh,” I whisper as Kieran strides in the front door of the bar we’re at with Russ Armstrong beside him.

Kiley can’t hear me over the arcade game sounds blaring around us.

As far as a mission to find hot guys who aren’t hockey players or online weirdos, we’ve completely failed. The club we thought we’d go to isn’t even open on Sundays, and now we’re almost too dressed up for where we did find drinks...at a pizza and arcade place.

Which is also full of people on dates. We’re surrounded by couples and at least one throuple, and nobody is checking us out.

This was already the exact opposite of a great night out with my bestie before I accidentally texted too much information to the wrong guy. Someone who is used to taking charge of situations, so he decided I need a chaperone or a chauffeur.

Kieran hasn’t seen us yet, in part because the whole place took notice of their arrival. Two very tall, very built, slightly familiar even out of context, confident men in expensive looking jeans and sweatshirts, because they know how to dress for an arcade-themed bar.

Over the din, I clearly hear someone yell, “Hey, are you guys Highlanders? Marsh, right?”

He laughs, even as his gaze doesn’t stop sweeping for me. “I get that a lot.”

Oh my God.

The bartender I spent the last fifteen minutes trying to flag down finally drifts my way. I order two more shots of tequila, because that's right in front of us, and shove one into Kiley's hand as soon as they're poured. "Quick," I whisper. "The fun police just showed up."

"The what?" She tips the shot back—attagirl—then spins around, the empty glass dangling from her fingers. Kieran is right in front of her. "Oh."

I take advantage of being shorter than my bestie and duck.

I'm not sure what I'm hoping to accomplish by hiding, since I'm the one who initiated tonight's...whatever this is. Accidental intervention?

"Did you call him because we're having a terrible time?" Kiley asks.

"We are having a *great* time," I insist.

"Is that why you're hiding?" That's Kieran, who's stepped around Kiley, and is now braced above me, both of his hands on the bar. "Hi."

I straighten my spine, stretching to the full extent of my five feet, two inches. "Hi, Hot Shot."

His grin widens.

I haven't called him that since the last time I was drunk in his presence, and that night two years ago ended very happily. More than once. Reminding him of that was not my intention. "I wasn't *hiding*."

He rakes his gaze over my black silk shirt, clinging to my slight curves, and my dressiest jeans.

"Good." He leans in all the way, his lips brushing my cheek. "Friends don't let friends hide when they're having a *great* time."

"What are you doing here?"

"You didn't answer my text asking if you had a drive home."

“Yes I did!” I grab at my phone and show him the screen. “I told you that we can walk.”

“Oh, my apologies. You didn’t answer my text satisfactorily. Because then I asked where you were, and you ignored me.”

“So how did you find us?”

He taps the napkin on the bar. “Superior deductive reasoning skills.”

“And you brought a friend in case we might put up a fight? Refuse to be removed from the premises?”

He’s laughing at me now. “Nobody said you have to leave. Maybe we wanted...” He peers sideways at the empty glasses on the bar. “A margarita and a tequila shot?”

“Lucky guess.” I wave for the bartender, who also recognizes the hockey players, and makes a beeline for us. “Our friends want something to drink.”

“Definitely. What can I get you guys?”

“Club soda for me,” Kieran says, handing over a credit card that looks fancier than my car.

“Hey!” I thump him on the chest. “I know you can drink me shot for shot, mister.”

He catches my wrist and holds my hand against his body. Then he keeps talking. “Russ, bud, you want a beer?”

“Nah, soda’s all right for me as well.”

“Make that two. And we’ll pick up the girls’ tabs, plus buy a round for the house.” Kieran winks down at me. “See, I can be fun.”

I wrench my hand from his grasp, my fingers already itching to squeeze against his chest again. “I’m familiar with how fun you can be.”

That night we shared in Buffalo started in a bar, and he wasn’t drinking soda water that night. This is a different man in front of me tonight, and I don’t know what to do about that fact.

Kiley leans in and wraps her arms around us both. “I’m not. Could we have a proper introduction?”

“Kiley, Kieran. Kieran...Kiley. I believe you’ve already met twice and cyber stalked each other in inappropriate ways.”

“It’s a pleasure,” Kieran says, and while he gives her an amused grin, I can take a split second to really look at him.

He shaved. I’m catching a whiff of nice smelling aftershave, and his jaw looks...soft. Well, hard, but the skin is smooth on top of it, and Harper of two years ago kissed him right there.

“And this is...” Kiley turns to Kieran’s teammate, who introduces himself in his Canadian-tinged Scottish accent.

“Russ Armstrong.”

“You came to the hospital a few weeks ago.” Kiley nods, as if this is all making sense.

Russ shrugs. “I guess I missed these two meeting then?”

“We all missed a lot that day,” Kiley says breezily. “But now we’re all here together. With club sodas on order! The party has just begun.”

Wait, that’s not breezy.

She’s being sarcastic.

“Kiley,” I warn under my breath.

She rolls her eyes and takes off for the pinball machines.

Kieran nods after her, and Russ follows along, either because Kiley’s pretty, or maybe because he owes Kieran a favour. Maybe both.

I slump against the bar. “You didn’t need to come out tonight. We’re fine.”

“This is more fun than what I was doing.”

“Which was...?”

“Tending to sore muscles.”

“I imagined you having a more exciting social life than that.”

“Only when I’m in Buffalo.”

“That’s not true.”

He laughs. “The team hasn’t found a home bar to hang out at yet. Unless you count Jenson Hale’s house.”

“Is that where the wild parties are?”

“On a Sunday night?” His drink arrives. “You want another?”

I shake my head. That newest shot is starting to make itself known.

“Want to play a game of something?”

I shrug. He grabs both glasses and somehow leads me from behind, his arm curved around my shoulders in a way that could be friends-ish if you squint. We find Russ, who is getting his ass handed to him by Kiley on pinball. Kieran hands over his soda, then points me to a racing car game.

Hey, if I can sit for a second, he can beat me on the track.

“This is a fun place,” he says.

“It wasn’t my first choice.”

He only looks amused at my mulish answer. “And what was?”

“Dancing. But I apparently don’t know when clubs are open. So... here we are.”

“And you accuse me of being a wild partier.” His amusement has only grown. “Any chance you want to go dancing with me? As friends? Although I’m typically busy on Saturday nights...”

“I hadn’t considered that.”

“In your assessment of my wild party life?”

“Maybe.”

“This is the wildest night I’ve had since I moved here, Harper. Feed the game and let’s go.”

After exhausting all the credits on my game card, Kieran settles up at the bar. Kiley grills him on just how generous his tip was, which he seems amused by. And then we’re being ushered into a very nice full-sized truck.

The drive to our apartment is so brief it barely registers, and then Kiley piles out first, waving her keys in the air by the time Kieran’s around to my side to help me out. “I’ll just— I’m going to— Okay, night all.”

And then she’s gone, into the building, the front door screeching a little in her wake.

Kieran has a wordless conversation with Russ, then his truck starts up behind us as he pushes me gently toward the door. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“I’m— Where is he going?”

“His house.”

“Where are you going?”

“My house, in a few minutes. I’ll call a car.”

“Wait, I—” And then I stumble, which is ridiculous, because I can hold my liquor. I went shot for shot with this very man, two years ago in Buffalo, and then not only rocked his world twice, but sobered up and did it again. “I’m not *drunk*.”

“Maybe you’re just tired.”

I’m definitely tired. I yawn, as if on command. “I don’t need you to see me inside.”

“Maybe that’s just for me.” His hand settles against the small of my back, warm and big and sure. “Up we go.”

I stop protesting and get my keys out. I crane my neck and look up at the second floor just in time to see Kiley’s living

room light come on, then I'm at the front door and I'm letting us in.

“My place isn't fancy.”

“I'm sure it's lovely.”

“Not really. I mean I like it, but—”

“Harper, my apartment in Anaheim looked like I couldn't afford furniture.”

I whip my head around, which I immediately regret because the lights streak around him, making me wobble again.

He chuckles. “It's a long story. I have furniture now.”

“I have furniture, too.” Which doesn't sound as impressive a retort as it did inside my head.

I blink hard, focusing on the few steps up from the foyer landing to my door.

“This isn't what I had in mind when I suggested we go on a double date,” I mutter as I work the key into the lock.

“What were you thinking instead?”

I push the door open and stop, looking up at him. “I wasn't. Just wanted to push your buttons.”

“Ah, Harper.” He drags in a slow, controlled breath, then reaches past me to hold the door open wide enough for me to step into the dark of my apartment. “You do that every day.”

There's something about having this conversation in the shadows that makes me bold. “Why didn't you ask for my number?”

He looks over my shoulder, the sharp planes of his face carefully staying in place. “Something about boundaries.”

I want...more. More explanation. More reaction.

I step back, fully inside my apartment now. “You've been inside me.”

He follows me inside, finding the light switch before he lets the door swing shut. The lamps on either side of my couch

flicker on, illuminating the cozy space and the wall of travel and family photos above the sofa. “Trust me, I never forget that fact.” He takes a deep breath and swings an appraising glance around my front room. “But you don’t want to do that again, remember?”

I cannot, in fact, remember precisely why that is at the moment. “Right.”

His gaze slides back to my face, and there’s a heat there so wild it takes my breath away. “If that ever changes in the future, you just let me know.”

I sway closer to him. “You’d want—”

He cuts me off, brushing his thumb over my lips. “Don’t finish that question tonight.”

“Why?” I ask against his hand.

“Because drunk Harper reminds me of off-limit things.” His words are slow. Careful. Loaded. And he drags his fingers away from my mouth, along my jaw, to squeeze the back of my neck. Like a friend. Sort of. “And I’m not drunk with you tonight, so we’re just going to get you into bed. Alone.”

“Okay,” I breathe, even though it feels very much not okay.

He leans down and presses his lips to my forehead. “You want to brush your teeth before bed? Maybe take a pain killer and drink some water?”

“Don’t be sweet, Hot Shot,” I mutter. I’m not sure I can handle any more of that without melting completely into a puddle of need that will only be fixed by him crossing lines I asked him not to cross, and he’s firmly stated he won’t, anyway. “But yes please.”

He releases me, and I carefully make my way to the bathroom. I pee, wash my face, and brush my teeth. Take a pain killer and drink a full glass of water, as suggested.

When I return, he’s looking at my photo wall. “You like to travel?”

I don't know how to answer that. I can't see myself ever telling him about the road trips Kiley and I have taken, driving around the clock, sleeping in the passenger seat, because we couldn't afford even coach airfare. Or the last-minute discount deals my mom and I have grabbed over the years, to try and squeeze as much out of a limited "life is too short not to live" budget.

I don't want to talk about my mom at all.

It's a simple question, Harper.

But I wouldn't trade my life for anything. I certainly wouldn't give up any of those moments for the splashy travel I imagine he's done. *Travel you're jealous of, Harper Anne Roberts?*

My head spins. It's definitely travel I wish I'd had a taste of growing up, instead of seeing my father live that life with other people. The wives, plural, that followed his brief marriage with my mother.

But that has nothing to do with Kieran. That's an echo from the past. This man in front of me just wants to know if I like travel, and I'm spinning around on echoes from a lifetime ago.

Simple. Question.

"I'd rather keep our friendship separate from the rest of my life," I finally say. Well, at least tequila is honest.

His brows lift in surprise, and for a second, I think I see a flicker of hurt, but he nods and it's gone. "Got it."

"I should get changed."

The corner of his mouth lifts a little. "Probably shouldn't sleep in jeans."

"I'll just—" And then I escape, like a coward. A drunk coward.

But I immediately run into a problem that Past Sober Harper didn't consider. My lovely, form-fitted shirt has a snug zipper up the back, and I cannot for the life of me get it down far enough to snag with my fingers when I reach back.

How did I...?

I'm squirming and panting when I hear Kieran clear his throat from the doorway. "As entertaining as this is, would you like some help?"

I spin around. "I'm fine."

"Clearly."

"I put it on just fine."

"Mmm."

"But the thing is..." I sway, and lean over, bracing myself on the bed. "Okay, I might need a friendly unzip."

His footsteps are quiet as he crosses to me, then eases me upright. His fingertips brush the nape of my neck, then the zipper releases, and the tight squeeze of my shirt gives way, releasing me from its confines.

I squeak and hug the silk to my front as he bares my back.

Then he inhales audibly.

"Harper."

"Mmhmm?"

He drags his fingers back up my bare spine. "You didn't wear a bra under this shirt."

"It doesn't need it," I whisper.

He tugs on my ponytail, bringing my back against his front. "That's twice I've undressed you to find you keeping secrets under your clothes. Do you even own bras?"

I squeeze my eyes shut, my cheeks heating up. "Yes."

He rumbles something, a sound that feels like the deepest pleasure, then steps away from me. "Where would I find something for you to sleep in?"

And that's when I realize he's looking around my cramped bedroom, which I do not want him to do. Now, or ever.

"Out, out, out." I gesture for extra clarity. *Out.*

He laughs. "I'll close my eyes."

I don't care if he sees my *body*. Well, I don't care as much as I don't want him to see my *mess*. "I bet you have a massive bedroom with a walk-in closet."

"Two of them."

"Life is not fair."

"Your bedroom is adorable."

"I have too many clothes."

"Agree to disagree." A drawer opens, and I look over my shoulder in time to see him rummaging through my top drawer.

Also known as, my underwear drawer. Which is classically understood to be off-limits, because it's where girls keep their vibrating friends. "Not there!"

"I wasn't sure." But he says it innocently enough that I'm quite sure he was sure, and he wanted a peek anyway.

"You're less of a gentleman than you make out to be." I point firmly at the second drawer. "There's a really big t-shirt in there. Dark blue."

He pulls it out, then groans. "The Leafs?"

I give him an evil grin. "My favourite sleeping shirt."

"You've got to be kidding me."

It's not, of course. But it's the only thing I have that I can think of big enough to drape over me and allow me to wiggle out of my jeans—but still flash enough thigh to make me feel...something.

Don't play with fire.

Too late.

He tugs the shirt over my head, then I snake my arms into it, and once it falls down my body, I shimmy my silk shirt off and hook it over the back of my Clothes To Deal With Tomorrow chair.

Then I hold his gaze as I reach under the shirt and unbutton my jeans.

Work them down my hips, and step out of them.

It would be the ultimate power move, if I didn't stumble at the last beat and fall backwards.

He catches me with ease, preventing me from hitting the bed or landing my ass on the ground.

"That's enough," he says under his breath, scooping me up and depositing me on the bed. "So Tequila Harper is a different beast, huh?"

"No, it's all me..." I yawn and kick my blankets down so I can squirm under them.

He immediately tugs them up, his fingers grazing my thighs just long enough to make me whimper before he covers me up all the way to my chin. "I really hope you want to talk more about that tomorrow."

"We can talk about it now." I push the blankets down, feeling restless.

He grunts something I don't catch, then covers me again.

"Stairs in the morning?" I scrunch up my face, trying to picture my calendar. "Late morning. I have to have a nap in the afternoon."

"Why, do you have a game tomorrow night?" he teases.

"Sort of. Back to back night shifts."

"Ah." He smooths his hand over my hair with a nice heavy pressure that could make me fall asleep if he only did it three or four more times. "More important than a game, then."

"I should warn you," I mumble. "I don't run the stairs. We aren't all professional athletes."

He chuckles from far away, but his hand is still on my head. Still stroking my hair. "How do you know I run them?"

"Just a fantasy I have." Maybe that's not something I should've said out loud.

Because then there's a long pause, and he stops stroking my head.

I blink my eyes open, and he's looking down at me with an expression so heavy with need it takes my breath away.

"Go to sleep," he says roughly.

I should tell him that his hand on my head was sending me in that direction already.

Instead, I open my mouth and say something I know is so far across the friends line, there's not going to be a way to reconstruct it in the morning. "I usually masturbate before I fall asleep."

The stretch of silence is even longer this time. His whole body expands with a visible inhale, then his eyelids hood a little as he sets his jaw. "Nobody's stopping you."

CHAPTER 15

KIERAN

Her eyes flare wide with surprise. I know, I know, I know. I can't fucking encourage her. She's drunk and I'm not.

I swallow hard and brush a kiss against her forehead. "I said I wanted to tuck you in. My job is done. I'll give you some privacy. But don't think I won't be imagining you using something from your top drawer."

She lets out a little moan that goes straight to my cock.

Fuck.

I should stand up. Leave. Instead, I brush my fingers against her cheek, so close to her mouth. "You want me to get you a toy?"

She slides the tip of her tongue between her teeth and looks at me with big, *don't make me say it* eyes.

Fuuuuck.

I turn and pull open her underwear drawer. She has a couple of toys, neatly stored in a soft-sided box on the right-hand side. I recognize one from our night together in Buffalo, and grab that, because I'm not going to stand here like a pervert and play with all of them. I click it on to make sure it's charged or has batteries, whatever, and then return to her just long enough to hand it over.

She takes it, her fingers brushing mine, and I swear we're both shaking.

"Good night," I say hoarsely, not disguising at all how I'd rather be the one to use it on her.

I make it to the door before she turns it on.

A quiet click and a loud-in-the-silence buzz that—God help me—gets muted just a bit as she slides it under the blankets.

Behind me is my most frequent fantasy. Harper, touching herself. Getting herself off.

I grip the door frame.

She sucks in a breath, and for a second, the low vibrating sound stays steady. Like she's waiting.

I'm not sure if my tight hold on the wooden trim is to keep me from leaving or to prevent me from storming back to her bed and taking over. Maybe both.

And then she presses it against herself, the sounds changing with her movements. My cock throbs as I picture the toy brushing against her pussy lips, her legs spreading wide. Making room for her to play with it however she likes best.

My fingers curl tighter into the wood as she shudders, sucking in a quick gasp.

She says a dirty word, under her breath, a little drunken expletive that feels so fucking intimate it hurts.

We said a lot of dirty things to each other that night in Buffalo. A part of me locked that down, sure I'd never hear her groan like this again.

And this is riding a line I probably shouldn't cross, but fuck if it isn't the hottest thing since that night.

I turn my head, and she's looking at me, her gaze glassy and unfocused.

She's. Drunk.

I'm not going to move from this spot.

"Come for me," I say with a growl. "Be a good girl and come so you can fall asleep."

Her breath hitches and her body arches beneath the blankets. My mouth waters to be a part of this, to taste the spill

of her release, how slick her sweet little cunt will get in a second when she reaches that peak.

Her eyelids drift shut and her pink lips part. A flush crawls up her neck and onto her cheeks as she rocks against her vibrator.

“You’re so pretty.” The words rip from me. Probably saying too much, but I can’t hold back now. “Needed to find you tonight. Always want to come and find you. But didn’t think it would end this sweet... Fucking gorgeous, watching you do this.”

She gasps, then her whole body bows. Under the blanket, her legs curve up, and I imagine her hand and that vibrator caught between her twitching thighs.

I groan, long and low.

And she smiles, a sleepy, loopy, beautiful little expression.

I want to make her do it again. But I’ve pushed the line far enough already. Heart in my throat, I release my hold on the door frame and silently cross to her.

Leaning in, I breathe in the scent of her as I brush a soft kiss against her temple. “Good night, beautiful girl.”

She exhales, releasing the final hold she has on consciousness.

My pulse pounds in my neck, my belly, my groin.

And then I make myself leave.

I take an Uber home.

Go to sleep with a hard-on, the flashes of Harper’s tawny thighs and the long, smooth stretch of her bare back haunting me in the best way. The sound of her coming still rings in my ears.

I wake up in exactly the same condition, with an added layer of morning clarity that she might not look back at the

off-the-charts heat of last night the same way I do.

Damn it.

I really did try my fucking best not to get turned on last night. I failed so hard.

My cock throbs as I reach for my phone.

Quarter after eight. Definitely too early to text her, or expect a message. And it's a dice roll whether I'll get one, once she wakes up and remembers the things she said to me and what I made her do.

There is a very real chance that Harper only likes me when she's drunk, and if that's the case, I'm fucked.

I'd rather keep our friendship separate from the rest of my life. It's the second time she's given me a direct warning that she doesn't like my reality mixing with hers. Her best friend knows about me, but that's probably as far as it's going to go—and if that's not a warning that we have a fixed expiry date in her mind, I don't know what would be.

A steady, quiet drum of rain on the roof finally grabs my attention, and I groan as I look out the window at a grey sky. Speaking of fucked. If this weather keeps up, my hopes of Harper wanting to hit the stairs together will be dashed. Which is shitty, because it was her suggestion, and it seems safe. So of course I'm hitching my hopes to it.

Either way, I need to get a first workout in now, before she wakes up.

An hour later, I'm dripping with sweat and properly fatigued. I check my phone, then hop in the shower.

It's another hour after *that* before she messages me, and when she does, it's not good news.

HARPER

Good morning. Weather isn't great today. Rain check on the stairs?

I wince. No mention of the end of the night. I take a sobering breath and follow her lead.

KIERAN

Sure, anytime. Looking forward to it when the weather cooperates.

And then because I need to keep talking to her, and I can't think of any better questions, I ask her if she slept well. It's a long, long time before she texts back. At least seven or nine minutes of utter silent torture.

HARPER

Yeah, slept like the dead. And thank you for the company...but I don't know what got into me. Hopefully it won't happen again.

Hopefully?

Fuck. I take my time composing a response that leaves a window open for her, but doesn't come off as too...Kieran Marsh. I want to tell her that putting her to bed and listening to her come—and then watching her fall asleep—was the highlight of my entire year, but that's definitely across some clearly established lines.

KIERAN

It looked like you needed some fun. And it was the most fun I've had in a while. All of it, but especially the tuck in.

She replies back with a smile, and that's it.

I head over to the Hale house for brunch, lecturing myself about patience and boundaries and all that good shit.

My cock, however, is all out of patience.

It spends the rest of the day begging for attention. Ideally in the soft cushion of Harper's thighs, but in a pinch, it will accept the tight grip of my hand and either a montage of memories from Buffalo, or last night, or my vivid imagination

about making maximum usage of Harper's cozy little bed, which is at exactly the right height to take her from behind, her dusky slit peeking out between her slim legs.

The visual of her ass curving in my hands, lush and ripe, as I watch my cock sink into her tight pussy is more than enough to make me spurt my release in a high, arcing mess.

Splat.

I sag back on my bed, relieved and content.

Fall asleep.

Wake up at dinner time, cock thick and aching all over again.

I watch a Boston and Pittsburgh game to distract myself, and just as I'm thinking about turning in for the night—and jerking off again, because my cock is thick and insistent about needing attention—I get a text message.

HARPER

Short-staffed tonight, might be a rough one. Wanted to take a second while I have it to say thanks again for last night. And sorry if drunk me pushed at the friends line a bit. I don't think I said that earlier.

KIERAN

It's your line. Push it whenever you want.

She doesn't reply for more than an hour.

HARPER

What I want and what I need are two different things.

This time, I'm the one who doesn't reply right away. Because she's right. I'm pretty sure that in this context, I know what she wants—I want it, too. We've had a taste and it was the best night I'd ever had.

But I can't let the ego stroke of her pretty much confirming she wants me, to overshadow the second part of her text.

What she needs is mostly a mystery to me.

Space. Boundaries. She's shown me that over and over again.

What else does she need?

KIERAN

Friends can multitask. But if it needs to be an either/or, let's go with what you need.

HARPER

Funny memes are a good start.

I go into the folder where I save the best stuff that gets shared in team group chats, pick a fave, and send it to her.

She immediately hearts the image, and I feel like I've done something right.

Friends send each other funny shit.

All right.

Then I toss my phone halfway across my bed, because fuck, I'm tangled up for a girl I barely know, based on...what? A couple hot nights, and some clearly drawn lines in the sand?

Pink cheeks. Pink sneakers, and honest apprehension.

It's her raw honesty that makes me want to tuck her into my side and never let her go, even though that's the last thing she seems to fucking want.

I frown. Apprehension.

What does she need to get over that?

Fuck.

Patience.

I palm my cock, because post-nut clarity is a real thing, and jerking off is often a good antidote to restless uncertainty,

albeit a temporary fix.

Instead, I go for a quick run outside, which brings zero clarity, and have another shower, where I give in and jerk off because I'm only human. Then I pass out with game tape playing quietly on the TV in my bedroom.

So when I wake up in the middle of the night, grinding against the mattress, I have to laugh at myself.

Like, did my libido just finally snap?

And why the fuck am I up so early?

I grab my phone to see what time it is—and see a text message from Harper, sent forty minutes earlier. There's a selfie attached, a close-up of her face. A mask is dangling off one ear, and she's giving me a tired smile.

Jesus Christ. Here I am thinking about my dick and she's keeping kids safe, all night long.

Figuring out whatever this woman needs has to be at the top of my priority list.

CHAPTER 16

HARPER

I have a new patient tonight, one who isn't likely to be on our floor for very long because he'll transfer to a small-town hospital in a day or two, as he improves. But he doesn't know me at all, which makes it harder to get him to trust that I want to help him get on top of his pain so he can sleep.

That's on top of caring for an extra patient for part of the night until someone is called in for a half shift.

So after I do my next vitals check and—blissfully—find my poor pain kid is finally asleep, I'm gagging for a good cup of coffee.

Since that's not likely, I'll settle for a shitty one in the break room.

But just as I get close to the break room, Kiley jumps in front of me. "You can't go in there."

"I don't like it when you work nights with me," I say impatiently. "Coffee is in there. I want coffee."

"I know."

"I *need* coffee."

She nods. "Yep."

"So get out of my way."

"Can't do that. I need your opinion about my new book idea." Kiley studied creative writing and journalism at university, with a minor in drama. And since there are no jobs in journalism, and writing takes a while to get into, she's

spending her time standing between me and caffeine. Making the most of her acting ability—acting annoying.

“Tell me on the way home.” I step to the left.

She goes with me. “It’s important.”

“Seriously?”

“I think so?”

“Oh my God.” I deke right, making her move, then push past on the left anyway.

I shove the door open and then skid to a stop.

Kieran is in the break room.

“I tried to stop her,” Kiley calls from behind me.

I spin around just in time to see her close the door.

Maybe she didn’t have a book idea. Maybe her acting skills are better than I gave her credit for in that low-caffeine moment.

When I turn back, Kieran is grinning. “Hi. I was just getting this set up. Coffee?”

The table is covered in takeout bags. “What did you do?”

“Picked up some breakfast for you. And then thought that might be presumptuous, so covered my ass by getting breakfast for everyone you work with, too.”

My mouth falls open.

He shoves his hands in his pockets.

I try to formulate a response and fail. My head tips to the side and I try again.

Silence stretches.

“I wasn’t sure how you take your coffee, so I got a traveller pack of black coffee, with cream and sugar and oat milk. All the options. Or I got a tray of lattes, and then there’s a tray of tea, too.”

I blink.

“For food, there’s the always good breakfast burrito. Some egg bites. Oatmeal, if you’re not an egg girl—”

“I like eggs,” I whisper.

Relief floods his face. “Oh, good.”

“Kieran, this is too much. And it’s five-thirty in the morning.”

“Kiley said it was quiet right now.”

“You should be asleep.”

“You’re worth missing sleep for.” He looks a little sheepish at saying that, then adds, “You said you might have a rough night. I wanted to make it better.”

I don’t know how to handle that amount of me-focused energy, so I grab at something else that has to matter. “Don’t you have a game tonight?”

“I’ll take a nap.” He gestures to the table. “You get first dibs. Then Kiley will tell everyone else that this is here, so...”

I snatch a latte, breathe in the scent of it—the good stuff, the really good stuff—then take a long, glorious sip.

And moan.

I can’t help it.

“This is really good.” I give him a crooked smile. “Thank you. You really shouldn’t have, but I’m going to enjoy the heck out of this.”

“Good.” His gaze drops to my mouth. “Have another sip. I liked hearing your reaction.”

I laugh quietly as I lift the cup again. This time, I don’t moan, but I do make an appreciative hum after, which he visibly likes, too. This awareness of him watching me is heady. It takes me back to the way he reverently tells me I’m pretty, and it feels so true it fills my whole body with a wild need.

It’s a need I’ve only felt with him. And despite all my denial, it’s always been special to me.

I move around the table, looking at the breakfast options. “Isabella dressed up as you for Halloween last night,” I murmur as I consider what I want. “She’s having a procedure this week so they cut her hair. For tonight only, she had a Kieran Marsh flop.”

He frowns, like he wants to ask more. Then he nods. Because he’s been hanging around long enough—or maybe he was prepped well. Possibly both. He knows he can’t ask me about her care. I shouldn’t have even said the word procedure. *Damn it.*

“I shouldn’t have said—”

“It’s fine. I don’t need to know. Her parents told me it’s not cancer, and they’re figuring stuff out. It’s fine. She’s a great kid.” He just kept going, steamrolling over the little wobble for me. “I’ll come back later and see her hair. Maybe I’ll match whatever she does next.”

“Don’t make her a promise you can’t keep.”

“I keep all my promises. But I’ll be careful not to promise too much.”

The double meaning of our conversation isn’t lost on me. I finish rounding the table and stop beside him. Look up. “I don’t think you’re playing games here. But—”

“I’m not playing games.” It’s the firmest I’ve ever heard him be, and he looks on the verge of being offended. “If this was going to be another attempt at asking you out on a friend activity that I could sneakily double as some kind of stealth date, I promise I wouldn’t have done it at five in the morning.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?”

I take a deep breath and nod. Of course I know he’s pursuing me. But have I not shown him repeatedly that I like it, despite my misgivings?

And I did really want a good coffee this morning.

I don’t know how exactly he anticipated that’s what was needed to win me over—Kiley helped, presumably—but it’s

worked.

“And really,” he says softly, so quietly even if anyone else was in this room with us, it would still be for my ears only. “The ball is in your court. I suggested a really awesome movie date.”

“I did think about suggesting we go to a pottery painting class,” I confess.

“Pottery painting?” His eyes crinkle, and something takes flight in my chest.

“Or any kind of painting. We could both try our hand at doing something by Van Gogh. They even have, like, build your own macramé plant holder date nights.”

As I say the last two words, his whole face lights up. He really likes me saying *date nights*, and I like it, too. More than I expected. I like saying things that make him smile that way, as if there’s no limit to the fun we can have. Because I’m not throwing up road blocks any longer.

“That would be genuinely fun with you. I don’t have any plants yet.”

“Probably hard to move them as an NHL player.”

He doesn’t take the bait. He’s still grinning about date nights. “Good news. I’m not planning to move anytime soon.”

The reassurance in his voice connects squarely with some of the lingering doubt I’ve been holding on to, and knocks it out of the way. Add that to the fact that he brought me—and all my co-workers—breakfast at five in the morning, and I can’t get around two important facts.

First, he’s being a good friend, because he’s a good man.

And second, he really matters to me.

“Good to know that you’re not moving,” I say faintly. “I can help you pick out a ficus.”

“I’d like that.” He looks like he’s going to say something else, but he stops.

And in the silence that follows, I realize I need to tell him something really important.

“All of this is really far outside my comfort zone,” I admit. “For a lot of reasons. But I like you. A lot. More than I should.”

He rocks back on his heels and does that thing where he shoves his hands in his pockets.

Enough of that.

CHAPTER 17

KIERAN

She steps around me, her fingers gently tugging on my hand before letting go. *Follow me*, she clearly signals.

Outside, she sets her latte down next to Kiley. “Tell the vultures breakfast is served.”

Then she leads me around the corner and shoves me into what looks like a linen closet.

“You know what?” she asks as the door latches shut behind me.

I correctly read her question as rhetorical and stay fucking silent as she presses her body against mine. Lifts her head. And rewards all of my patience with the best words I’ve ever heard.

“I’m tired of saying no when I really want to say yes.”

We come together in a desperate clash. Her mouth is soft, so fucking soft, and she sucks in a little breath as I lick against her lower lip, wanting in. Needing to taste her again after all this time.

But it’s her tongue that pushes inside first, thrusting against mine in a hungry swipe. Her swallow that seals our mouths together, pulling me into her taut little body.

Once upon a time, she kissed me like the girl next door, all tentative licks and smiles, and I told myself to be gentle with her. Now she’s bold from the word go, and there’s so much *yes* in her kiss it makes me ache to be more alone with her than we are right now. I need her bare beneath me. I need hours for this

kiss, for all the kisses, for an endless parade of tasting every inch of her body.

Jersey Girl is in my arms again, and it's only a stolen moment.

Not enough.

She imprinted on me and I found her again. Now I need to set her down—fuck, when did I pick her up and press her against the wall?

She rocks against my cock, throbbing and hard against the straining denim of my jeans. “Yes. *Yes*. Missed this.”

Damn it, that's my line, but words are not working. And I'm ten seconds away from coming in my pants, especially when she pants my name.

“Kieran...”

I grip her hip and drag a ragged breath. “I've missed *you*,” I manage to say. “I want you so damn much. Want you naked...” My head swims with how much I want that. I kiss her again, because I can't stop, but we need to. “Need more time,” I mutter against her lips. “Need to do this right.”

She nods, a little shake of her head that makes me want to howl and beat my chest. *Yes*. She wants to say yes.

I'm so fucking relieved. I press my forehead against hers as she blinks up at me. “Do you know how much I want you?”

She lets out a breathy laugh. “I can feel it.”

“That's...” I look down at where she's riding my body. “That's just the start of it, Harper. I want you so fucking much. On every level. And I want to show you exactly how much when we have more time, and a lot more privacy.”

“Oh fuck,” she breathes. “Oh God, I'm sorry.”

I laugh a little desperately. “Jesus, don't be sorry. But we should stop.” And then I kiss her again, because stopping is easier said than done. Hard and horny and full of anticipation, this is a kiss that makes all the promises. “Where can I wait until your shift is over?”

I end up going for a walk outside, because the hospital gets busy in the two hours before her shift change. Doctors doing rounds, she explains, and I don't hear the rest of it, because all I can focus on is that she's agreed I can take her home when she's done.

Her hospital sits on the edge of a university campus, which is still quiet at this time of morning. Light standards illuminate the path along a quad, leading to a cluster of ivy-covered buildings. I wonder if this is where Harper went to school, or if she studied elsewhere.

I snap a picture and save it to send to my parents at a more civilized hour.

Then I duck through an arch and continue exploring. I find the athletics complex, which is lit up already, and head inside. There isn't anybody on the ice yet, but the Zamboni driver is doing his thing, prepping the surface for the first skate of the day.

I take a picture of that, too, just for myself. To remember this morning, this pause where I hold my breath and wait for my girl to be finished with work. Where I get to anticipate taking her home and kissing her again, a lot, before I tuck her into bed.

What a fucking gift of a morning.

By the time she's finished handing over her patients to the nurse coming on for the day shift, I'm back in the hospital, waiting in the lobby.

Her whole face lights up when she spills out of the staircase and sees me leaning against a pillar. "Kiley took my car home," she says as she pulls abreast of me. "So I'm hoping you'll give me a ride?"

"As many rides as you want," I murmur, tugging her close. "Can I kiss you here?"

I don't kiss people in public. It's one of the important rules I've learned over the years. You never know who has a camera.

But with her?

I couldn't care less, unless she does.

She lifts her face and smiles. "As much as you want."

"That's probably illegal." I settle for a soft, only slightly indecent taste of her mouth. Then I hug her close and rest my cheek against the top of her head as I wait for the resulting throb to subside.

Her giggles don't help.

"You can feel that, huh?"

"It's hard to miss."

Hard indeed.

"How often do you have the same shift as Kiley?" I ask when we're finally walking over to the underground parking garage.

"Our schedules line up about half the time. If we had our choice, we'd always work together, but it doesn't always work out."

"You've known each other a long time."

"I met her and Grant in preschool. We sort of ganged up on him for a while, but now we're the Three Amigos."

"He's a good guy." I swallow back my other questions about the doctor.

She picks up on my territorial prowling anyway. "He's genuinely like a brother to me. I'm the third twin."

"They're *twins*?" I cock my head to the side. "I guess I see it. If I squint. And does he live on the third floor of your building?"

That makes her laugh. "No, he has a nice condo downtown now." She pauses. "But he did live in Kiley's apartment before

her. And she would take turns sleeping on our couches when she visited.”

“How very *Three’s Company*.”

She spins around as we stop by my car, and grabs the front of my coat. Her eyes sparkle. “Do I need to repeat that he’s like a brother to me?”

“It can’t hurt.”

She groans and yanks me down. Her mouth is hot and sweet and giving, and she tastes like she’s amused by my caveman confession. “You’re all I think about,” she whispers, her voice shaking a little when she pulls back. “You’re all I want.”

I groan and haul her close again. “You keep saying what I’m thinking. Let’s get you home before I do something I shouldn’t in public.”

It’s a short drive. I like the way she looks curled up in the passenger seat, talking animatedly about her work.

I like the way she explains the ins and outs of street parking around her apartment even more, suggesting I’ll need this information on an ongoing basis. Where I can park for two hours, where I can park overnight.

I follow her up the stairs and into her building. Up another half flight to her apartment.

It looks different in the cool, early morning light.

The other night I was so focused on the drunk girl and the healthy friend boundaries that all I took note of were the carefully arranged photos above her couch. Pictures of Harper and her mother, Harper and her friends, and Harper alone. Selfies and pictures taken by others on travel adventures. A wall of joy. A life full enough, sweet enough, that the chaos I might introduce isn’t welcome.

But now I look around the space again, trying to guess at what else she might need that runs counter to what she wants.

Because now I know for sure she wants me. My body, my mouth, my hands. My attention and teasing and flirting.

I hand her my coat and she tucks both of our jackets away in a tiny closet just inside the entrance.

Maybe she wants me, but not...me.

She never wanted to date a hockey player. And now I'm here, again. I waged a campaign to be in her life, and she got tired of saying no. She *wanted* to say yes. But she needs to be wary, and I need to respect that.

After she tucks her boots away, I sit on the sturdy arm of an upholstered chair and tug her into the space between my legs. We're eye to eye.

"I want to kiss you," I tell her, making her smile. And it could be that simple. Maybe it should be.

Except...I want more than just a physical connection here.

And I need to show her I'm paying attention.

"But I want to put something on the table first. And I know it's the end of your day. I know you need to rest. This doesn't need to be a big conversation or anything." I watch her face carefully, trying to figure out if I'm going down the right path. "I just want you to know that if there's anything from the past...any ideas you might have about my history...we can talk about that any time."

Nothing. She just stares at me. No reaction.

I grin, self-deprecatingly. "Or it doesn't need to come into this moment. It doesn't need to affect how much you want me to kiss you."

She leans in and brushes the tip of her nose against mine. "I think I get it. But no, it's not about you."

"Good. Okay. Because this moment? This is just you and me. Doesn't matter what you've encountered before. Whoever was a jerk to you. I'm not that guy."

"You're a lot like him." It slips out of her, an unexpected admission, and then her face goes tight.

She didn't mean to say that at all.

But now that she has, I can't just tell her, again, that I'm not that guy. Maybe I am just like him, because there's a type in pro sports, and for a long time, I didn't try to be anything more than that.

I take a deep breath. "I really am different now. I've been different since...well, since I was traded away from Montreal, but then also since you. I know we can seem like overgrown boys at times, players who lean into being...players. But I promise you, I'm a grown man who knows what he wants, and all I want is you. All I see is you. I'm not going to play with your heart, or your trust. This is real for me."

"I'm scared." She sucks in a breath. "I'm scared, and I don't like admitting that, but I want you anyway."

"Oh, that's brave. You're a brave girl, Harper." Fuck, I just want to wrap her up in my arms. "Can I tuck you in again?" Need beats against the inside of my chest. *Let me take care of you. Let me hold you. Let me be what you need, until that apprehension fades away and all you can see is how much I want you.*

"It was a long night..." She trails off, her thick dark eyelashes brushing her cheek as she blinks down, then looks up at me. "I was thinking of a shower first before bed."

"I'll wait."

She tips her head back. "Yeah?"

"Of course."

"Mmm. That's so...nice...of you." She pats my chest, then tightens her fingers, fisting the front of my t-shirt. "But I was thinking you should join me."

CHAPTER 18

HARPER

Somewhere between the front door of my apartment and the steam swirling around our naked bodies in the shower is a haphazard trail of clothes. I have no idea where any of it landed, because Kieran was carrying me, stripping me, and kissing me all at the same time.

Now he presses me back against the tiles, angling the shower head this way and that to wash off my long shift. My limbs feel heavy and worshipped. Heat swirls low in my belly, licking up to my breasts and down to the tops of my thighs—both places he’s stroked and squeezed.

His cock is hard, lifting up to brush against my belly, but he removes my hand every time I try to get my fingers wrapped around. “This is for you,” he says firmly.

As if.

That’s for me, too.

But I’m exhausted, and his touch feels good, so I let him be bossy.

He turns me around. “Brace your hands on the wall,” he murmurs, sending a fierce new lick of heat straight up my core. “I’m hungry for the taste of you.”

The water sluices down my back, then his hands follow. His fingertips curl around my sides, grazing the curve of my breasts, then my belly, before squeezing my hips.

Then his mouth follows, kissing a hot path down my spine. When I shake, he wraps his forearm around my waist, holding

me in place.

His teeth sink into the top of my hip, and I cry his name out loud.

“Yes,” he groans. “Tell me you need this.”

“So much,” I pant as he nudges my thighs wider apart, his breath hot against my ass cheek before he bites me again, a nibble he immediately soothes with his tongue. “Oh...”

And then he’s licking between my cheeks, tilting my hips up so he can taste every inch of me, and my eyes squeeze tight.

Oh.

His tongue is electric, a primal spark to something bigger than I remember, something deep and elemental and raw.

He pushes my thighs wider and my hands slide down the wall. I’m spread open, slick and hot and swollen against his mouth. Pulsing already, trembling as he works me closer, closer, then backs off, replacing his tongue with his fingers.

Sure, strong. Thick against my hole, clever against my clit.

And all of it just enough to drive my brain into a needy space. Not enough to trip me into a release I can feel just out of reach.

“Best fucking taste,” he murmurs, low words that might be for him as much as for me.

Then his mouth is back, latching onto my clit, and it’s so good, so right and perfect, and I start to crest, crying out for him, sobbing—

He pulls off me, spinning me around. Making me whimper.

“I’ve got you,” he says roughly as I gasp, almost slipping in the water. “Fuck, Harper. I need to see your face as you come. Can you come on my fingers?”

He tightens one arm around my waist again, bracing me with his thigh as his other hand drops between my legs.

I loop my arms around his neck and nod dumbly as he works one finger slowly inside me, then a second before sliding his thumb up one side of my clit, then down over the other. His gaze burns but I can't look away from him, our breath like one as he finds the right spots, inside and out.

“There?”

“Yes.” I sob it.

“Harder?”

“Please.”

“Come for me. Come on my hand. Let me see it.”

“Kieran...”

“I've got you, beautiful. I'll never stop.” The rough promise goes straight to my core and wraps itself around my aching centre. My breath hitches and he pushes me deeper into that need. “You look so fucking sexy. Dreamed of this. I—”

That does it. I climax on his hand, riding his fingers. He watches my face as I shudder in the tight space between his body and the tiled wall, then kisses me with a harsh growl, then a rough, rumbly purr, as aftershocks rack my body.

“Good one?”

I laugh weakly. “I'm going to sleep for eight solid hours for sure.”

He lifts my chin, clearly wanting me to see the look of satisfaction on his face. “Good.”

I meet his smile with a shaky one of my own. “Your turn.”

“Nope, I'm—”

I wrap my hand around his cock and squeeze. “You're not the only one who's dreamed of this for two years.” The words rush out of me, but they're the truth. “I never thought... And I remember...”

He groans and braces his forearms on either side of my head as I lean back. “What?”

“The look on your face as you came,” I whisper.

“You thought about me like that?”

Far too often for a fantasy I never thought I’d get a redo on. “Yes.”

“Fuck, Harper. Tell me you touched yourself.”

“Yes.” My whole body shakes as I take a steady inhale.

He drags a hand over my shoulder to my breast and squeezes gently. “The things I thought about doing to you...”

“Tell me...”

He laughs hoarsely. “Gonna come too fast to talk through it. Missed your fingers.”

“One thing, and then you can come.”

“I like that you think there’s any control behind this,” he grinds out, his hips jerking as I stroke his full length.

“I remember your control as excellent.”

He shudders and drops his head beside mine, his breath loud and uneven. The best sound in the world. “That was before I knew how long it would be until we did this again, Jersey Girl.”

I gasp and my fingers tighten up, and he comes with a loud cry, hot spurts coating my hip and belly and shooting up to my tits.

“Shit.” He gulps air.

I twist my head and kiss the side of his face softly. “That was really hot.”

He laughs. “That was embarrassing.”

I poke him in the side. “No it wasn’t.”

His mouth curves up, then he slowly turns to meet my gaze. Our faces are so close it’s hard to focus, so I don’t. I just absorb the blurry closeness of him. My one-night stand with an off-limits star had achieved iconic, legendary status in my brain.

And a very human, very fast mutual orgasm in the shower just surpassed it as the best sex I’ve ever had.

“I’ve really missed you,” I tell him, and it’s true.

He kisses me.

It’s soft and slow, lingering strokes, quiet and patient in between as we both catch our breath. It’s the kind of kiss lovers who know each other share, and that’s a scary thought, but not nearly as scary as when we first climbed the stairs to my apartment.

After we wash up again, and he’s dressed me in PJs—not the Leafs shirt again, I couldn’t play a mean trick after such a nice shower—I tell him again how good I feel.

“This was really, really nice. The perfect way to unwind after a shift.” I yawn and snuggle into his chest. “And for you...I hope that was worth losing some sleep over.”

“Absolutely.”

“I know how sacred game day routines are. Sleep... risky...”

“You are worth risking everything.”

That can’t be true, but it’s nice to hear all the same.

CHAPTER 19

KIERAN

I can't fall asleep because I have morning skate. I can't fall asleep because I have morning skate. I can't—

My eyes blink open, my heart racing, but it's only quarter to nine.

And Harper lives ten minutes from the arena, even when traffic is busy.

She's racked out hard, exhausted after a full night of work. She doesn't stir when I carefully extract my arm from beneath her soft body, my fingers itching to hold on tight. Instead, I lean in and kiss her before easing myself out of her too small bed that feels a hell of a lot like perfection.

How many times in the last two weeks have I relived our night together in Buffalo? Examined it from every angle, wondering what the fuck happened that it changed me so much—and her not enough, maybe, if she only wanted to be friends.

But no, it wasn't that at all.

She was just scared.

And I don't have all the puzzle pieces yet. We're still getting to know each other. Two very long, short weeks.

Quietly, I stride naked into her living room and pick up our clothes. Her uniform at the door, then my t-shirt. Her underwear in the space between the living room and the kitchen. My jeans and boxers, and all of our socks, in a pile at the bathroom door.

I get dressed, then put her clothes in the hamper in the bathroom. I set an alarm on my phone for when I think she might need to wake up, in case she doesn't have one programmed, but she probably does.

And now I'm just procrastinating, because I don't want to leave.

I want to stay here, in this tiny one-bedroom walk-up, because I don't know what will happen *after* I leave.

And I don't want this miracle second chance to evaporate.

Just...fuck, an hour ago? Harper told me she was scared, but she wanted to do this anyway. And then she looked so damn beautiful coming apart in my arms. And I didn't see a hint of fear in her face as she fell asleep.

Nope. That apprehension crawled out of her and took up residence between my ears.

And I have a game tonight, so I need to lock this shit down.

I didn't have a plan, really, beyond *keep her in my life, however we can*. That was step one, and it felt so monumental I didn't let myself think about what else might happen. It's like you can't dream of the playoffs if you're not near the top of your division standings. First you gotta claw your way up into contention.

Every game is a new chance to gain points.

But this thing with Harper isn't a game, and it's not a guaranteed full season of X number of dates, either.

I'm nervous because I want this so much I taste blood when I think about her running scared, for reasons I don't understand.

Because I could be all in with her, so fucking easily. And I've never wanted that. With anyone.

I have always—always—been pretty dismissive of that kind of commitment. Grew up watching my mother manage my father with kid gloves, and not get a lot in return. Swore to

myself I'd never be that kind of guy, to anyone...and then I grew up.

And I saw more of my father in me than I liked. He might not appreciate the comparison, but we're both hyper focused on our careers.

When I got to the NHL, a good chunk of the guys more experienced than me were either divorced or on the way there—and the ones who made marriage work were often with their high school sweethearts, like Calhoun. And the ones who I could relate to the most were happily single.

Of all the options in front of me, the last category made the most sense—until I chased this girl down a hotel hallway and she gave me a pink-cheeked, dark-eyed glare.

After that night, nothing made sense.

And now I'm...

Fuck.

I turn in a slow circle, exhaling slowly as I take in her quiet, cozy apartment.

Now I need step two. We're more than friends. I have to show her an honest slice of just how much I want her.

I see a notepad on her kitchen table, and I scrawl her a note.

I pull into my parking space at the same time Tilman is climbing out of his car. He hurt something in his shoulder in our game against North Carolina, and now he's stuck doing rehab with the trainers instead of playing. None of us like being taken out of the game.

Our captain handles it with less grace than most.

“Morning,” I say anyway.

He nods.

Good enough.

Inside, smoothies are pretty much all that's left for breakfast, so we both grab those, then he heads to the injured reserve side of the gym and I do a basic warm-up.

Today's goal is to be nice and gentle on my body, warm it up for the game tonight, and then rest as much as I fucking can.

Hale, Makinen, Calhoun, and Armstrong are all playing soccer in the hallway outside the dressing room, and playing Fuck Marry Kill at the same time.

With food.

"Penne, spaghetti, or shells." Calhoun boots the ball to Armstrong.

"Kill penne. Nothing sticks to it." He passes sideways to Makinen.

"Fuck spaghetti. That's an occasional indulgence." He looks askance when everyone laughs. "What?"

Hale jabs his foot out and steals the ball. "There should be nothing occasional about fucking, you sad, sad man. But I have to agree, spaghetti is the side piece. And shells are who you marry, because she can take alllll the sauce."

"That's disgusting," Armstrong groans. "Go again."

Hale rests his foot on the ball. "Chicken, steak, or fish."

I tap the ball from behind him, snapping it across the circle to Calhoun. "Time to get dressed, boys."

"Oh shit, it is." Hale, ever the good alternate captain, spins on his heel.

They all scramble ahead, except Armstrong, who slows to a stop beside me and frowns at the clock on the wall. "That's twenty minutes ahead of my phone now."

"Hmm. Wonder how that happened." I jog over to the ball and pass it to him. "Let's play this right. Vegas, New York, or Miami."

“Places to visit or places to play?”

I grin. “I meant visit, but I like the way you think. Cities to play in.”

“Marry New York. Madison Square Garden forever.” He screws up his face. Then, together, we say, “Kill Vegas and fuck Miami?”

Sounds right to me.

After we hit the ice, we have a team meeting. The trainers lead off with a health update. One of our defencemen, Mo Ahmadi, has a broken thumb, and he’s out for eight weeks. Tilman has a better update, and his timeline for returning has been updated to four to six weeks. It’ll be good to have him back on the ice before Christmas.

Then we move to the scouting report. The team we’re playing tonight has the highest number of penalties called in the league so far this season, which means some of their goons are on the refs’ radar. *And* their coach protests every call, which means those protests are more likely to fall on deaf ears.

“Push them. Make them mad. Make them stupid, and get those penalties called against them. That’s the game plan tonight. All right? Rest up this afternoon, and we’ll see you back here in a few hours.”

That kind of game can go two ways. It can be deeply entertaining—and we are in the entertainment business—but it can also be frustrating.

Definitely need my head on the ice.

I *need* a good nap.

And there are two ways this pre-nap plan can go. I can pretend I’m not going to think non-stop about Harper.

Or I can take myself in hand and think about her in great detail.

CHAPTER 20

HARPER

I wake up at two in the afternoon, and for a split second, I think Kieran's next to me, because I can smell his aftershave.

But my apartment is quiet, and it's mid-afternoon. My brain—always eager to provide hockey information—reminds me he has a game tonight, and he's probably napping right now.

Our sleep schedules are at complete odds.

I stretch, then grab my phone and text Kiley to see if she wants to walk to grab “breakfast.” She doesn't reply, and I can't hear any movement upstairs.

In the kitchen, I find a note written in big, bold letters.

Hard to leave your bed this morning. You're fucking beautiful. Have to go to work. I'll call later, or if you wake up, you can call me whenever. Text or carrier pigeon. Won't pretend to be cool here. I'm standing in your kitchen, really not wanting to leave. Can't wait to kiss you again.

I press my fingers to my lips as I read it again.

Won't pretend to be cool.

He makes me ache in the best worst way.

But I can't call him right now, even if he said that, because he needs his sleep before his game tonight.

I sent a countdown alarm to call him at four, because I think he'll be up by then. Then I text my mom to find out where she is before poking my best friend again.

HARPER

Kiley, wake up. It's an emergency.

I hear footsteps above me. Then on the stairs, so I open the door for her.

She's already in jeans and a sweater.

"You weren't sleeping."

She frowns. "No. Why?"

"I texted you about breakfast."

"Oh, I was..." She blushes. "Doesn't matter."

"Diner? Here?" My phone vibrates. "Hang on, it's my mom."

"Let's go to your mom's house for afternoon brunch!"

That is always a good plan, and I love how much Kiley loves my mom. On the other hand, there is the looming Kieran Question. "Can we go a whole visit without you mentioning hockey players?"

"For an Angela Roberts homecooked meal? I know nothing." She mimes zipping her lips.

And after a quick text back and forth, that is exactly the plan we land on. She runs upstairs to grab her coat and some pages she wants to show my mom—her biggest fan, which is a big deal for an unpublished author. I get dressed and try to look like I didn't have an earth-shattering orgasm earlier in the day.

But once we're in the car and we're talking about my mom, it's easy to shift gears.

Growing up, the Forges lived two blocks away, in a bigger house, but it was the Roberts house that became girl central.

Kiley's parents have since moved, but my mom is still in the little bungalow I grew up in on the Mountain.

I park behind her car in the single lane driveway with worn tire tracks in it.

This house represents so much freedom for my mom. She bought it with the help of her parents when I was in grade one, after living with them for four years to save up the down payment.

“Mama, we're here!”

“I'm in the kitchen.”

She's wearing a painting smock, which currently doubles as an apron, and under that she's wearing jeans and a black t-shirt. Bare feet. Hair braided and twisted on top of her head. And because we warned her we were coming, her face is carefully made up.

“Hello my lovelies,” she says, accepting a kiss on the cheek from Kiley. “Hungry girls?”

“Always.” I give her a hug, then go to the fridge for the veggies and dip.

My mom always has veg cut up and at least three kinds of dip—it's like magic.

Kiley leans over the stove. “What are we having? Chicken soup?”

“With onions and vinegar. Harper's favourite.”

It's true. This is a recipe I grew up with, something my grandmother used to make to stretch a small amount of chicken into something that would feed us for a whole week, and I'm suddenly so glad we came here instead of the diner. I needed to sit in my mom's kitchen for the afternoon and be fed good food that reminds me of my childhood.

Mom points to the cupboard for bowls, then serves up three hearty servings.

As we eat, we talk about a course I'm thinking of taking, and Kiley's writing, which she's abandoned in recent days to

start an Instagram account for Puck, and Mom's art.

She tells us she's heading to campus for a seminar right after we eat, and that she's been selected to be part of an art show in December, so it's going to be very intense between now and then.

Which I shouldn't take as a reprieve from the "Come Clean to Mom" plan, but she's really excited about the show. It would be mean to throw a stress factor at her when I don't need to.

But after this morning, I know that Kieran and I are racing full speed towards something I shouldn't keep from her.

Kiley shoots me a warning look. I must look guilty as hell. Right. Be a good daughter, and ask about the art show. "Can we bring flowers and jack the bidding up on your pieces?"

Her cheeks bloom with rosy pride. "There won't be bidding on anything. You girls will be the only people who want to buy anything."

Kiley shakes her head. "I bet that's not true. It's part of Nuit Blanche, right? That's a huge thing. There will be tons of foot traffic."

Nuit Blanche is an arts festival that takes over downtown cores. This year it's happening on the Winter Solstice, the longest night of the year. Which gives me a few weeks—almost two months—to figure out just what exactly I am doing with Kieran.

"Do you know what you're going to put in the exhibit?" Kiley asks.

"Yes, let me grab my portfolio."

I gather our empty bowls. "I'll wash up."

I leave them chatting as I clean and dry the bowls. I listen with half an ear as Mom pulls out her portfolio for Kiley to flip through, and Kiley hands over her new story idea for my mom to read. But my brain is mostly careening wildly from thought to thought, trying to rationalize this new plan. At the

end of the day, telling her now is just too complicated. And I don't even know what I'm telling her yet.

And it's my private life.

For now, it can stay private.

Suddenly the quiet in the kitchen is interrupted by my phone alarm going off, and I jump.

My mom turns around and gives me a look from the table, as if she knows the alarm on my phone has an incriminating label.

She can't know.

But I blush anyway, because I know it says, *Kieran's nap is probably over! Call him!*

I tug out the phone and tap the stop alarm button on the screen, ignoring the way my pulse jacks up. *Play it cool, Harper.*

There is no way I can text Kieran in front of my mom and not get busted for having feelings, so I excuse myself and head down the hall to the bathroom. I close the door, and lean my forehead against the pale pink wallpaper beside the yellowed plastic light switch.

HARPER

Hey you. Liked the note. (A lot)

KIERAN

Hello, you. (And good!) Thought about you non-stop today. Did you sleep well?

They're just little words of greeting, so why do they make me push off the wall and dance in a hyper circle?

At least I know I'm not the only one who's being kind of dorky about this connection.

HARPER

Starting to be a regular thing, you asking me that.

KIERAN

That's my plan.

Oh, I cannot handle that. I cover my mouth and silently squeal. Then I take a deep breath.

HARPER

How about you? Did you nap?

KIERAN

Like a pro. Ready for the game tonight.

HARPER

Good luck.

KIERAN

Thanks. I have tickets with your name on them if you want them.

HARPER

Can't tonight. I'm working.

KIERAN

Okay. Breakfast tomorrow?

I inhale again, this time shaking a little.

HARPER

It's a date.

CHAPTER 21

KIERAN

The thing about deliberately pissing off twenty highly skilled athletes—or two highly skilled athletes, four oversized goons, and a bunch of other guys wearing the same uniform as them—is that there are going to be some consequences for that goading.

Don't get me wrong, it's worth it to win.

But this has been an ugly game and halfway through the third period, I'm fucking tired. And bruised in places I won't be able to apply liniment to myself, so I'll be spending some time with the team therapists after we're done.

I suck back some water and watch from the bench as Roan Dodaj challenges a player who's been acting like a tough guy all night. Our rookie gets in his face and this motherfucker turtles hard. The crowd goes nuts, the gloves come off, and just as he has every shift so far in this game, Dodaj makes his presence *felt*.

With his fist.

Everyone on the bench winces, then cheers as he immediately backs off. He's a good fighter. Young enough to throw his six-foot-four body around and not feel it too hard the next day.

And then he chirps a bit at the ref, even though he's grinning as he's directed to the penalty box.

"Let's put these kids to bed," I say before we swing over the boards and onto the ice.

I like playing with Calhoun and Hale, although the three of us on a single line reduces the number of high scoring minutes each game. I see the Twitter trolls thinking this is a good thing—**yourpucksucks** has had a lot to say about it, and I appreciate the enthusiastic support, even if that clearly-a-fan position definitely ruled out my hilarious theory that it was the GM on a burner account—but we're weaker with Tilman out, over the whole of sixty minutes, night in and night out.

It doesn't matter how good one line is if the other three lines can't get anything done.

Even winning more often over the last few games feels more like luck than anything else. Luck, and a lot of credit to our blueliners, who are getting between the puck and the net every time our bottom nine can't hang on to control of the game. And it's not their fault. But in those bottom six forward positions in our lineup, only three guys—Armstrong, Sumner, and Gustafsson—are really up to the eighty-two-game grind. They're also the only three who have any playoff experience. Two rookies playing with us, Fortin and Khan, are going to develop into solid, deep career players. *Going to* being the operative words there. Fortin has the speed to be a star, but he needs to put on a solid twenty pounds of muscle before he gets more than five or eight minutes of playing time each night. And Khan is so green, I wouldn't be surprised if he was sent back to the OHL before we hit the forty game limit.

But for the two minutes we're on, every five minutes or so, the three of us are fucking fire, and that *does* feel good.

Our passes flow, the shots line up, and opportunities are created.

Like a wide open space just now, between the defencemen at the other team's net. I see it. Calhoun has already seen it, and is picking up phenomenal speed to get into position.

I snap the puck to Hale.

He chips it forward to Hayden.

Calhoun slams on the brakes, spins around, splits the difference between the defence, and scoops the puck up,

lacrosse-style, and whips it into the top corner of the net.

The TikTok dance celly he does as he circles around their net might be a bit much, but the crowd?

They fucking love it.

Getting to bed after a game is hard, but especially one as rough and tumble and adrenaline-filled as last night's match.

So when my alarm goes off at six-thirty, I'm running on only a few hours' sleep. I still shoot out of bed like it's noon.

Grab the world's fastest shower, pulse jacked a little. Like I'm getting ready for a game, although nothing about Harper is a game to me.

Pull out of my garage and it's still dark out. It reminds me of heading to the rink for early practice back in the day.

There's a sharp nip in the air when I arrive at the hospital, and people are hustling from their cars to the entrance. I park in the short-term spaces, text Harper that I'm here but no rush, and hop out of my truck to get a better view of the impending dawn.

For the second day in a row, I have a few minutes to think about how different my life would be if I had given up competitive hockey twenty years ago. Would I have enjoyed university? Followed in my parents' path, and maybe ended up here on the same campus as Harper somehow?

When I was approaching draft eligibility, none of the Canadian players my age even considered going the American route and getting a hockey scholarship. Not like that would have made my parents happy either, but I know Tilman has a degree. He did two years NCAA and then did summer school until he graduated.

"Hey."

I jolt, spinning around. Harper's right there, bundled up in a parka.

I kiss her, then kiss her again before hugging her tight.

“Good morning,” she murmurs as I curve over her, her lips brushing the side of my face. Warm mouths and cold cheeks are a good combination.

Warm mouths meeting again is even better.

It’s like there’s a rush of relief every time I see her, and I can’t get enough of this. Her taste, her sounds, her whole being.

“God damn it,” I finally groan, pressing her tight against me, knowing the hard tension in my body isn’t going anywhere for a bit. “Breakfast?”

“We could go back to my place.”

“We could. Maybe we should.” My voice rasps on the need. “Fucking want you. Do you know what you do to me?” Even through winter clothes, I think it’s obvious the effect she has on my body. My cock rapidly thickened up, and the way I’m holding her against my body, she can probably feel every throb.

She laughs softly. “The feeling is mutual.”

“But I promised you breakfast. An actual meal. And I want an actual date before I have to get on a plane and zip away again.”

“I *am* hungry.” She says it bashfully.

I nudge her chin up, wanting her to see how good I am with literally anything. Everything. “Then let’s feed you.”

We go to a diner she likes. It’s not far from her apartment, and she explains she comes here a lot, recommending a dozen different things from their menu.

I order three eggs, scrambled, with a side of bacon and a bowl of oatmeal, no toast. Black coffee. She gets a veggie and goat cheese omelette with extra toast. And like yesterday, she goes for the latte.

When our drinks come, and I wave away the cream, Harper asks about it. “Is that just preference, or is it a training

diet thing?”

“Black coffee during the season.” I nudge her latte. “I’ll join you in these in the summer now.”

“Is oatmeal the same?” She asks it with a sweet, genuine curiosity, totally different from the judgment I get from my parents. “It’s an unusual side for scrambled eggs.”

I shrug. “Short answer is, that’s what the nutritionists tell me to eat. Oatmeal takes longer to digest? Long answer is, my body is a machine and the older I get, the harder it is to keep that machine working exactly as I want it to, so I’m not going to fuck it up by eating something off the meal plan, when I know that plan works. Twenty percent paranoia, forty percent trusting experts, forty percent I think I can feel a difference.”

“Interesting.” Her dark eyes sparkle from behind her mug.

“Is it?”

Now I’m pretty sure she’s hiding a blush. “Yeah.”

“I find *that* interesting.” I stretch my legs out under the table, bracketing her calves between mine. “Can I ask you questions about your career?”

Her turn to laugh. “Sure.”

“Where’d you go to school?”

“Here. I lived at home with my mom until I graduated and got a job.”

“At Mac?”

She shook her head. “Not at first. I did three months of rotations at another hospital, then got hired into a casual position in paed, and juggled both for a while before I was able to get a full-time position with kids.”

“So you’ve always lived in Hamilton?”

“Pretty much. I was born in Toronto, but my mom and I moved here before I started school.” There’s something... cautious...in her expression. “My grandparents live in Mississauga, but that was too expensive for my mom. She found a job here, knowing she would want to buy a house she

could afford on a single salary. For a year, she commuted back and forth, and then we moved.”

I’m trying to read between the lines. Mom mentioned twice, single salary. “Did you live with your grandparents before that?”

“Yeah.” A beat of hesitation, then a rough exhale. “My parents were married for a very short period of time. Divorced when I was a baby. I never got a chance to know him. He never...wanted me. We don’t talk about him. He’s off-limits with my mom, and there was a period when I was a teenager that I was convinced he’d be more fun to live with. That was hard on her. Really hard. I regret hurting her like that, because of course she was right. I guess you could say he gave me his name, and nothing else.”

“Sorry that I asked.”

She gives me a tight little grimace. “There’s more to it than that, but it’s not...”

I sweep my hand in the air when she doesn’t finish that sentence. “It’s fine. It’s not like my family life is anything to rave about.”

“Oh?”

“I left home at fifteen.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Really? I didn’t know that. That definitely gets left out of the official biography online.”

I grin. “Did your reading, huh?”

This time, there’s no mug to hide her blush behind. “Maybe.”

“There’s a lot of nonsense on the internet.”

Her gaze glitters with a friendly challenge. “Like your extensive dating history.”

Part of me wishes that was only nonsense, but there’s truth to most of that. “Which stopped two years ago.”

She sucks in a quick breath and holds it. Then nods. “Yeah.”

We've talked about my jealousy—and how Grant Forge is just a friend to her. We haven't talked about hers, because I can't assume she feels the same territorial claim to me.

But fuck, I need her to know there's no competition with anyone else. "You're the only woman I have any interest in," I say carefully, my voice low. Just for her. Always for her. "I want to get to know you better. Take my time and explore this...friendship."

"Nice pause." Her lips quirk up.

"Pauses can be convenient. A fill-in-the-blank space. Whatever you want it to be."

"A sexy friendship?"

I swallow hard. "An exclusive friendship."

Her cheeks darken. "Just us."

"Nobody else."

She reaches across the table and squeezes my hand as our breakfast arrives. Once we're alone again, she points her fork at me. "But stop distracting me with the promise of not touching anyone else."

I laugh out loud. "Distracting you from what?"

"You were going to tell me about your rebellious teenage years."

"Ah." I clear my throat. "Less straight-out rebellion and more of a quiet divergence of opinion about what my adult life should look like."

"At fifteen?"

"That's hockey."

"Ooof." She says it softly. "This difference in vision was between you and...?"

"My parents." I shrug, because it is what it is. "They're academics who expected their children to go the university."

"You have siblings?"

"A brother and a sister. Both younger."

“I had no idea.”

“I keep my personal life off the internet.” I pause as I realize how that sounds, given that my dating history is pretty public. “The real stuff. Family, I mean. They don’t want...”

I trail off, because it’s not easy to describe, exactly.

Something flickers across her face, and I hope to fuck it’s not pity, because I didn’t mean to make it sound like I’m wounded by this. I try again, offering, “I just had dinner with them when I was in Winnipeg.”

“Family can be complicated.” The theme of our breakfast, it seems.

“Yep. Is your mom still here?”

She smiles broadly, and as I eat, she gives me a detailed explanation of her mother’s bookkeeping career and recent return to school. “I really love that she’s getting into art. It’s like, it’s never too late to return to your original passion.” She fidgets her fork against her plate. “And I’m glad that having me didn’t derail her from that forever.”

“Hey, I bet she’s proud of you.”

“Oh, yeah. She’s my number one fan.” Her minky eyelashes dust her cheek as she looks down at her plate, then she gives me a wide-eyed look. “Sorry for the parent brag.”

I laugh. “It’s fine. I have lots of number one fans on the internet to make up for my family’s lukewarm appreciation of what I do.”

“I’ve seen that, too.” Her smile grows as we gaze at each other.

“Wait, so you’ve searched me out *and* you know what the fan chatter is... Does that mean that you’re online? Kiley didn’t have you tagged in those photos I found.”

She shakes her head. “Not really. I mean, I lurk, but no. I guess I’m like your family in that regard.”

There’s not a chance in hell she’s anything like my family.

“Hey, how did you find her, anyway?”

I laugh. “Do you know Hayden Calhoun? He was showing me pictures of his girlfriend and son, and I recognized Kiley’s name in a comment.”

She groans. “Oh my God, she’s commenting on his girlfriend’s posts?”

“I think it was a post Hayden was tagged in. It’s fine. Kiley’s great.”

“She really is, but don’t let her know you think that, or you’re going to find yourself making social media content with Puck.” Harper pauses, then when I frown in confusion, she adds, “Grant’s dog. Unless she’s already asked you?”

“Not yet. Thanks for the warning.” I wink, and she groan-laughs.

I really do like laughing with her. Which makes it that much harder to say goodbye for a couple of days.

Which she brings up as we leave the restaurant. “Listen... I know you’re leaving on a road trip. And that has a big game in Montreal in the middle, right?”

Saturday night. Hockey night in Canada. I nod.

“I don’t want to distract from that.”

“I like that you know my schedule. I like that a lot. But you’re not a distraction. You are my reward for hard work.”

That gets me a push at my chest that feels good. “Kieran...” The glow in her face feels even better than the push.

“Too much?”

“Probably.” She sways closer. “Don’t stop on my account.”

I hook my arm around her waist, letting my hand rest low on her hip, and I squeeze her tight for a minute, savouring how she feels in my arms, before I let her go. I wish the walk to her apartment was longer. “I have a very inconvenient set of phone interviews with sports talk radio shows in forty-five minutes, so I can’t invite myself up to your apartment to be even more

over the top this morning. And then our plane takes off at three this afternoon.”

“Right when I wake up.”

“Can I have a rain check on tuck-in number three?”

“Maybe we can work something out where you actually stay the night.”

“God damn it, I was hoping you’d say that.” We stop in front of her front step, and she folds into my arms again like she’s meant to be there.

I can’t stop hugging this girl.

I find her ponytail, thick and glossy, and wrap her hair around my fist. Then I tug gently.

Her eyes widen, and her soft, pink lips part.

“I’m going to miss you,” I whisper. “Just need you to know that.”

Her gaze is locked on mine. “Text me whenever you can.”

“The second I have phone signal after we land.”

“And we can talk tonight?”

“Can’t wait.” I drop my eyes, looking at her mouth. Wanting her mouth. Needing— “Ooof. I need to go.”

“So go!” She laughs.

And still neither of us move.

“I’ll see you in two days,” I say, just to be clear. It’s only two days.

“Yes.”

“And talk to you tonight.”

“Mmhmm.”

“I have this radio thing...”

“You said that.” She bites her lower lip, as if she’s holding something back, then bounces a little as she grins and lets it

fly. “Do you want to come in and do it here? I need to shower. And then we could—”

I surge into her, picking her up and carrying her up the stairs as she laughs and shrieks my name.

Yes. Fuck yes. More time together is good.

CHAPTER 22

HARPER

“Make yourself at home.” I gesture to my couch. “How long will you be?”

“Half hour, give or take. I have four calls to make, and there’s a bit of buffer time in between.” He helps me take off my coat, then tugs on my ponytail.

I yawn despite myself.

He nudges me in the direction of the shower, and I want him to join me so much it’s silly. “Can I watch you do the first one?”

It’s kind of interesting, how he’s doing the rounds of the radio affiliates to the TV broadcaster for the game. Everyone wants to get the veteran player’s take on how the team is doing, almost a month into working together.

It’s both nice and surreal to see him sprawl out in my apartment. Hear his confident voice and infectious laugh as I give in to the fatigue monster and drag myself to the shower.

He’s just started another call when I step out of the bathroom. I quietly head straight to my room to grab some clothes, but he clears his throat, stopping me in my tracks.

His eyes do this funny thing, go a bit unfocused as he takes in the towel that skims the top of my thighs, and his gaze is heated he drags it back to my face.

He grins lazily, a sexy smile that curls all the way around my body and tugs at me even before he gestures with two fingers. *Come here.*

As soon as I'm within arm's reach—and Kieran's arm reaches a lot further than I expect—he drags me into his lap. His phone stays carefully wedged against his ear, somehow, and he wraps his forearm around my waist, his hand squeezing me through the towel.

My bare thighs rub against his jeans, making me squirm.

He strokes his thumb up and down my arm, as if he's soothing me, saying, *shhh, it's okay, calm down*. I relax against him and he drags his fingers up to my shoulder, and does the same lazy back and forth stroking on my collarbone.

A zap of excitement shoots through me, and my breath catches.

His eyebrow curves up. *Yeah?*

Yeah, what? Is this hot? I nod.

I like you on my lap, he mouths before answering the next question smoothly. “Definitely a whole team focus on depth.”

It's startlingly impressive how he slides from Mr. Capable, his voice casually warm, to Mr. Intense for me alone. *I want you naked for me*.

I wrap my arm around his neck, curling into him. His hand sweeps down my side, tugging my towel loose. It falls around me as he settles a possessive grip on my bare ass before he gives another answer, something about D-men and holding a line.

The longer we sit, the more I squirm, and the more I squirm, the firmer his grip on me gets.

And the tighter he holds me, the more I sink into a new kind of ache, one that throbs inside me and makes me crave something I can't quite name.

Never in my life have I had a moment quite this erotic. The stillness, the pooling heat, the anticipation.

He's fully dressed, and I'm practically naked. It's a heady, overwhelming feeling, swirling heat inside me, building to something like a fever.

And then, when I look up at him, he mouths, *Need to touch you right now.*

He needs me? I nod again, even as my heart races.

He rearranges me in his lap, so my back is against his and my legs are spread wide, hooked around the outside of his thighs. My towel is barely hanging on around my waist.

He drags his hand back up to my neck, collaring my throat this time. Nothing lazy about his touches now. His hand is a heavy weight against my racing pulse, holding me still as he ends the interview. “Thanks for having me, guys. Talk again soon.”

As soon as he drops his phone, he turns my head and takes my mouth in a hard, demanding kiss.

I’m panting when he breaks it off. “Can you be quiet?”

Oh God. No, probably not. Fuck. Yes? “Maybe?” I squeak.

He kisses my temple. “Good. That was so hot. Yeah?” I nod, and that same lusty expression flickers over his face. “Fuck, you’re such a good girl.”

I shiver and nod again, a tremulous wave of feeling crashing over me.

He cups my face and strokes my lower lip with his thumb. “One more call. Do you want to be very good for me?”

“How?” I sound so eager, even to my own ears.

“I want to make you come before I finish it.”

“Wait, Kieran—”

But he’s already dialling as he casually pushes me down onto the couch, flat on my back. He puts his phone on speaker and sets it on the coffee table.

My eyes go wide. *No.*

He grins boyishly. *Yes.*

Someone answers, their smooth voice ringing through the quiet living room. “Kieran Marsh, thanks for joining us.”

“Happy to be here,” he says smoothly as I clutch the towel around me, some desperate attempt to keep my cool—why is he so chill about this?—while he firmly presses my thighs apart again.

“Ninety seconds until we’re back from the break.”

“Great.” His gaze slides lazily over me.

His intent is clear. He’s told me he wants me to come.

I cannot do that while he’s on the phone, on *speaker phone*.

And yet when he flicks the bottom of the towel away like it’s rudely in the way of what he wants, I tilt my hips up, my body on board even while my brain is screaming.

His thumb grazes my sex first, then his thick fingertips drag through my slick heat.

I press my lips together, the panicky sounds already on the edge of slipping out.

Oh God. He hasn’t even pushed into me yet and—

He finds my entrance. One finger. But he only teases at my hole before he pulls that slick up to my clit.

I tremble.

The finger returns, and my pussy clenches around just the tip. Needing him now, needing to be filled. He teases a wide circle, then adds another finger, pressing against my opening, then sliding in with an out-of-this-world perfect stretch.

Fuck, I can hear that. If I can hear that, can it be picked up on the phone? I panic squirm and he firmly presses my hips down.

I shake and rock my hips, needing it now. *Please*.

His eyes glitter as he thrusts his fingers into me. And oh no, this was a mistake, it’s too hard to be quiet, I can’t, I can’t...

“I can’t believe how perfect you are,” he says under his breath, but not silently. His gaze is molten. “Look at you.”

Taking my fingers.

Yeah, he has to mouth the last three words because this is not a thing he should be doing during an interview!

And yet as he strokes me, his expression utterly confident in my ability to come for him, and his compliment ringing in my ears...

Maybe I can.

And then the announcers are introducing him.

He drags his fingers out of me and pauses, just the fingertips still inside me, as he says, cool as can be, "It's great to be here. Always a good time."

Then a controlled slide back into my slickness.

"We know you're busy, Kieran, but can you give us a quick snapshot of the mood in the dressing room this week?"

I hear his voice, confident and pleased, but I don't absorb the words. All I can feel is him fucking his fingers in and out of me. Leisurely, endlessly. Like he's in no hurry, but his thumb is in the mix now, rolling over my clit.

He wants that orgasm, and he wants it while he's talking.

He's fingering me, live on the radio, and I can't, I can't, I

But then he looks at me again, and I'm lost in his gaze, because why me? Why do I have this effect on him?

He wants this, and so I can.

Liar, this is for you, too.

I try to hold in my desperate, needy noises as the heats rolls faster and faster inside me. I arch my back, my nipples hard and straining against the towel I'm clutching against me. But then I have to let go and cover my mouth, a cry wanting to escape, and Kieran yanks the towel away, baring my torso.

They're asking him another question.

He answers as he cups my breast, his thumb teasing just at the edge of my nipple.

Please...yes...

The sound inside me is getting bigger and bigger until I can't hold it in anymore. It comes out in an almost silent scream, leaking out around my trembling hands as he finger fucks my aching, swollen pussy.

His eyes glitter with a sharp pride, and just like in the shower yesterday, he holds my gaze fiercely. My orgasm is his, he needs to see every part of it. It's a possessive demand, hot and primal, and it reaches inside me and pushes something that feels shockingly, deeply right.

I breathe his name, my whole body surging up off the couch, then go taut as the climax storms through me, just as he is asked a final question.

“You know guys, it's a long season, and we're only a few weeks in. So early days yet, but I'm really liking the routine I'm in now. Early mornings. Good long nap in the afternoon. And spending as much time as I can getting to know the people of Hamilton better.”

“Great answer. Kieran Marsh, always good to talk to you. Good luck with your return to Montreal tomorrow.”

The call ends, and you could hear a pin drop in my apartment.

My heart is hammering.

My thighs are still shaking.

Without a word, he unzips roughly and leans over me, his long legs spread wide. He takes his cock in his fist and jerks it roughly, his gaze never leaving my face.

My name is on his lips as he erupts, painting my torso in long, bold strokes of his come. Thick spurts followed by startling splatter droplets, all of it warm and slick, immediately pooling and sliding against my skin.

“Fuck,” he gasps, the first out of control sound he's made since before my shower.

Then he grins and uses my towel, still tangled around my hips, to clean me up. “You made me explode. Good job.”

I blink up at him. I didn't do anything.

He exhales in a heavy, pleased sound of satisfaction. "All right. Bed time for you."

"I could just sleep right here," I admit, my voice sounding a little thick and ready for rest.

He ignores that and scoops me into his arms.

I wonder if his contract has any rules about unnecessary lifting of able-bodied adults. God forbid he strain something.

But he's fine, and I nestle into him as he transports me to my bed.

"Naked?"

"Yes please."

"Fucking sexy. You're just..." He growls and slides his hand down to cup me between my legs, where I'm still twitchy and sensitive. "I'm going to miss you. And just when I discover that this pretty little pussy likes to be fingered in secret."

I bury my face in my hands.

He squeezes my sex and kisses my forehead at the same time, a top-shelf pairing of shocking and sweet that I like way too much. "You liked that, didn't you? Having to be quiet. Such a good girl."

My hands fall away so I can glare at him with incredulity. "They could have heard something!"

"I make calls like that from the gym all the time. They don't know what they heard. You weren't that loud."

"Oh my God."

"You tried your best, and—" I cover his mouth and he starts laughing. "Too much?" he asks from behind my fingers.

"It's just settling in. You know, what we just did."

"Had some hot morning sex, that's all." He gazes down at me with a tenderness that feels unreal. "I promise that you

weren't in any danger of being heard, or anything like that. I'd never expose you that way."

I drag in a dodgy breath, then exhale more carefully.

He nudges me over and slides in beside me. He's barely settled before I curve into the warmth of his body.

"I wasn't born yesterday," he murmurs. "I know how to use a mute button."

Right. He could have smashed that at any moment. Plus he stayed in control the whole time.

If a hockey player cuts out mid-interview, they'd always assume something just happened with his tech.

"It *was* really hot," I whisper, the waves of it rolling back over me now. The hot looks, the unexpected dirty talk. Who knew compliments were so sexy?

CHAPTER 23

KIERAN

The road trip is busy enough that I don't crawl out of my skin with missing Harper. We talk a lot, which helps. And while we lose two games—to Minnesota and St. Louis—we win against Montreal, which I'm happy about.

We land in Hamilton just after midnight. The WiFi on the plane wasn't working properly, so I haven't texted Harper since before the game started. Post-game was a blur of getting gear off for the equipment team to pack up, then a shower, and dress to get on the bus to go the airport—and then I got cornered on the bus for a penalty-killing debrief discussion.

But as soon as our plane touches down, I turn off airplane-mode and send her a text to let her know I'm finally back in the province.

KIERAN

Just landed. Two days off and I'm available for early morning breakfasts or anything else you need (or want).

She doesn't reply right away, so I'm assuming she's asleep, but my phone dings just after I get in my truck.

HARPER

You must be exhausted.

Nah, I'm not going to sleep for a while. How about you? Tired?

Instead of texting back, she calls me. "Hey," she says breathlessly.

God, her voice sounds good. And also, wide awake. My thighs flex as I adjust myself, suddenly full of restless anticipation. "What are you doing?"

"I'm at the grocery store."

"Late night shopping?"

"Post game munchies."

"You watched." I'm pleased.

This time, the noise she makes is noncommittal. "I caught part of it."

"Liar." I say it affectionately, gently. Naming that I know she's not-so-secretly a fan, but I understand she keeps that facade up for her own reasons. And that's fine, but she better understand I see right through it. I see her, and she doesn't need to hide from me. Her secrets are safe with me. "I think you watched the whole thing, missed dinner, and got hungry."

"Maybe." She draws it out, teasingly. "What are you doing?"

"Driving home. Feeling restless. I have some excess energy I need to burn off. And I missed you."

"I missed you, too."

"Any chance you feel restless, too?" I lower my voice, even though I'm alone in my truck.

She sucks a little breath, not missing the emphasis I put on restless.

"You know how an orgasm helps you sleep? We could try that tonight. Restless energy is best confronted head on, don't you think?"

“Well, if you need help getting to sleep...”

“I do, Harper. I really do. Might even need two orgasms. They don’t even need to be *mine*.”

She makes a thinking sound. “Two?”

“At least. I’m *very* restless.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Where are you?”

“The ice cream aisle.”

I laugh out loud. “And geographically? In the city? Should we meet at your place or mine?”

She tells me where she is, at a twenty-four-hour grocery store on the Mountain.

“My house is five minutes from there. I’ll text you the address and the security code.”

“I should take my groceries home, though...”

“I have a fridge and freezer.”

She hesitates for a second. “I wasn’t prepared for a date tonight.”

“I don’t care if you didn’t shave your legs.”

She laughs.

“No, seriously. I’ll shave them for you, if you want.”

That makes her laugh harder. “It’s not my legs.”

“I’ll shave anything you want. Or not. I like you exactly as you are. Horny bear, remember?”

“It’s my outfit, okay? I’m a shlub tonight.”

“I bet you look gorgeous.”

“I look like it’s laundry day and I’m wearing the last three clean pieces of clothing I could find.”

“At least they’re clean.” I ignore her next protest. “Whatever you’re wearing is fine. It’s going to be peeled off

your body as soon as I see you. And if you'd rather be naked when I get there, that's great, too."

"Horny bears don't care?"

"I care so fucking much. Just not about the fluff." I grip the steering wheel and check the dash to make sure I'm not speeding. "I know once upon a time you met this guy in Buffalo and he seemed like a super smooth player, but I have zero game when it comes to you. Just the most earnest need to get inside your body."

"Mmm, good answer. I'll be in the kitchen making nachos." She laughs and hangs up.

Sure enough, when I walk through the door, I hear her in the kitchen, listening to post-game analysis. I shuck off my overcoat and suit jacket, leaving them on a hook in the foyer before I stride towards the back of the house.

She's not naked. She's in an oversized pair of grey sweatpants, with the waist rolled over a few times, and a little white t-shirt, and when she turns around, I realize she's not wearing a bra under it, which is even better.

"Welcome home," she breathes as she flies across the room, leaping into my arms. Her arms go around my neck and I hoist her up so she can wrap her legs around my waist.

I cross to the counter in a few long strides, then set her down so I can properly kiss her and use my hands and—*Fuck*. Just touch her all over.

Her mouth is soft and warm and wet, and the combination of her sweet kisses and those two words—*welcome home*—ricocheting around my brain is enough for me to go from horny to desperately needy in the blink of an eye.

God. Damn.

I groan as I slide one hand up her shirt. *Perfect fucking tits. Jesus Christ*. "Do we need to turn the oven off or anything before I drag you to my bedroom?"

"No, I was just chopping vegetables." She pushes against my chest. "Want to give me a tour on the way?"

“You found the kitchen. Hot tub is out back.” I help her off the counter, pointing wildly in a few different directions, rapid-fire style. “The big sectional in the family room is very comfortable. Not as good as my bed, though, so let’s go.”

She laughs as I tug her into the hallway.

“That’s my den. Probably my second favourite room in the house. Spend a lot of quality time in there. Since we’ve reconnected, I’ve had quite a few filthy fantasies of you in there. Want to bend you over the arm of that couch, too.”

“Good to know.”

I navigate her up the stairs. Ahead of us, motion-triggered lights slowly come on, one of my favourite features of the upper level. “In that direction are a bunch of rooms I don’t really use. In theory, they’re for visiting family. And through here is—”

She stops short at the entrance to my private space. “These are your closets?”

I should have carried her all the way to my bed. Buried her face in my neck, distracted her with dirty talk.

“Kieran, your closets—each of them!—are bigger than my bedroom.” She turns in a slow circle in the hallway that leads to my room.

Technically, more of a suite than a single room, with glass doors on either side of us. Inside the closets, lighting fixtures picked out by a decorator add a glittering detail to a space I rarely think about.

But now I see it through her eyes. Above us, there’s a skylight, which during the day brings some natural light into the hallway. At night, the closets on either side glow with a soft prettiness.

And while she can’t see it all yet, I know that each of the closets also have a door into the bedroom on the other side, and then there’s a big bathroom and a sitting room, too.

It’s a nice space.

It’s a nice house.

And it didn't occur to me until this moment, as she stands stock still, taking it all in with a tense set to her shoulders, that it might be too fucking nice.

CHAPTER 24

HARPER

One minute, I was at the store, trying to choose between orange sorbet and a dark chocolate gelato as the perfect chaser to my nachos dinner plan, and the next I was speeding towards a house I'd never seen before, to meet a guy who's definitely got more experience with a midnight hookup than I do.

I didn't really think this through.

And sure, I had a beat of, *oh right, you're rich as fuck*, when I parked my car in his driveway, but his kitchen isn't over the top or anything.

This part of the house, though...this is ridiculous.

He essentially has a whole wing of the house to himself. His *room*, he called it. But it's the kind of space that we crammed fifteen girls into for one night in Vegas, and thought we were on top of the world.

This is how he lives every day. With chandeliers and rooms inside rooms and custom cabinets to house hockey awards.

"Do you have a separate room for a bathtub?" I joke.

His non-answer tells me that he does.

Right.

"This is why I thought I should at least put on some make-up." I say it as lightly as I can, but I'm wearing thrift-store sweatpants and a t-shirt I got for free in college.

"All right," he growls, scooping me up from behind.

I shriek and cling to him as he strides through the glittering, closet-dotted hallway to the bedroom ahead. There's a click, and some lights turn off behind us, and a lamp flicks on beside a big-ass bed centred on the far wall. He cups my head, holding me tight against his body until I'm flat on my back and he's braced himself on top of me.

"You're perfect," he says, with just a hint of exasperation. "And I missed you. Can we not derail?"

"It's just a lot," I whisper.

"For reasons."

"Yeah."

"You want to tell me about those reasons?"

"No."

"Then do they really matter?"

I shake my head. *No*.

He grazes his thumb along my jaw, his gaze tracing the same path. Heat spikes inside me. "Does this feel wrong?"

Another shake of my head.

"I need to hear it, Harper."

"This feels right," I whisper.

"You told me you wanted to keep *us* separate from the rest of your life."

"I—"

"Shhh." He ducks his head and kisses me softly. "Let me finish."

I press my lips together and nod.

"I... My instinct is to push through that, I won't lie. I don't want to partition us into a secret space. I like you so much. I can't stop thinking about you. I want to tell the world about you. How fucking lucky I feel to know you, to have you in my arms, and my bed. But if you need those careful boundaries—and that's fine—then let's use them here, as well. I'm just a guy, lying on top of a girl, aching to make her feel good."

Fuck. Of course he's right.

I roll my hips, wriggling until I can feel the thick wedge of his cock against my pussy. "I just had a little mental speed wobble there. I want to do this. Bring on the restless energy."

He grins. "Speed wobbles happen. Good to be able to talk through them, right?"

I nod.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Yes!" I say cheerily.

"That's better." He grinds against me. "Such a good girl, aren't you?"

I whimper and nod. "Trying to be."

"Succeeding, Harper." He shifts and skates his hand up my side and under my shirt. "You're always so good. And you know what?"

"What?"

"You don't have to be quiet tonight." He flashes a wicked grin as he squeezes my tit, making me gasp. "In fact, I'd prefer it if you weren't."

"Oh."

"Think you can do that for me? Be nice and loud? Tell me what you like?"

"Yes." I whisper it. A mistake.

He pinches my nipple. "Pardon?"

"Yes!"

"That's better. Lift up for me..." He peels off my t-shirt and groans in a toe-curlingly way as he gazes down at my chest. "Love your pretty brown nipples. Dream of them."

His words and the heat of his attention send a race of goosebumps across my flesh and the nipples he's staring at pull tight.

He exhales so roughly I feel that in my clit, then falls on me again, his mouth sucking half my breast against his tongue while his fingers find the other nipple and cover it.

I cry out, and he mumbles praise against my heated skin.

Can you do that for me? Be nice and loud?

My mind races as he feasts on my tits, back and forth.

“Feels so good,” I murmur. It’s true, and it’s a start at telling him what I like. And even if it wasn’t loud, it makes him smile.

I like that most of all.

“I want your shirt off, too.”

Instantly, he rears up and unbuttons just enough to be able to pull his dress shirt up and over his head.

He’s so beautiful. “Oh my God.” I try to surge up, too, but he’s got me pinned with his thighs. “Kieran, I need to touch you.”

He leans over me again, bringing his perfect chest down to my level. I ghost my hands over his pecs, circling my fingertips around his nipples. If he thinks mine are pretty, I think his are gorgeous. Flat, tight discs. And the way they pebble under my touch makes my mouth water.

I lift my head and lick at his skin.

He buckles above me then catches himself. “Do that again,” he groans. “Love your little licks.”

I squirm higher, then latch on to his nipple and tug.

He makes an unholy sound that I *love*.

“Jesus, Harper. Fuck fuck fuck...” He drags himself down my body and yanks my sweats off, pulling my panties with them.

My legs fall open. “Yes, Kieran, please...”

“Tell me,” he rasps against my inner thigh. He looks up the bed at me as he hitches my legs over his broad shoulders.

Getting closer to where I want him. “Tell me what you want. Please, what?”

“Please lick me.”

“Where?”

I tip my head back. There’s another chandelier above the bed. Oh my God. “Please lick my pussy, Kieran. I want your mouth on me so much.”

“Good fucking girl,” he growls. “Always tell me what you need.”

The moan he wrings from me is low and lusty, and matched by a flood of arousal I know he can see—and then, as he gives his mouth as I asked, he can taste it, too.

He licks me like he needs this, too.

A slow, desperate stroke. A lick that doesn’t end, that swirls up and around my clit, then down again, all the way down.

“Every fucking day,” he growls between licks. “Need this always.”

A shiver races through me. He has done this every time we’ve been together, in one way or another. I’ve never been wanted this much.

This is real. This isn’t a fantasy.

I cry out again, and this time there’s an edge to it that I hope he doesn’t hear. I feel suddenly desperate, the pleasure twisting and sliding into need. “Kieran, more, please.”

“Always.”

“Suck me...”

He latches onto my clit and I lose it, my hips thrashing beneath his mouth. My release soars, sending me flying, every inch of me launched into the stratosphere. And when I tumble down, he’s got me in his arms, holding me as I tremble through more rippling sensations.

“That was incredible.” He shifts up the bed, never not touching me as he settles beside me.

I tug at his belt. “Just the start. Get naked.”

He pulls his wallet out, grabbing a condom.

I push it aside. “Wait. I need to taste you.”

He’s panting as I get my fingers around his cock. “Later.”

“Now.” I press him to lean back against the headboard. “I want this, Kieran. Please?”

“Harper. Two years.”

“Yeah, I know.” I grin at him. “Two years since I’ve had my mouth on you, too. And you said we’ll both have two orgasms, so shouldn’t the first one be...” I lean over and lick the slick tip of his cock. Then I blink up at him. “Where I want it?”

He flexes his powerful thighs, rocking his legs wider. “You want it in your mouth?”

I nod.

He holds my gaze for a long, heady beat. And for a second, there’s a spike of something else, something more than late night horny energy. Something a lot like, *we’re not doing another two-year break on anything.*

I shiver.

But I don’t look away.

His eyes get hooded, his mouth works around a wordless reaction for a moment, then he nods. “Then be a soft little mouth for me. Show me how much you want it.”

I flatten out on my belly between his thighs and open my mouth.

“Are you that fucking eager?”

“Yes.” It rips out of me. I lick him again, then take more into my mouth. I love the way he throbs in my hand and against my tongue.

He swears and tangles his hands in my hair. I lose myself in the taste and scent of him, the fullness in my mouth and the dirty, dirty words he groans as I swallow the first drops of precome down my throat. “Hungry girl. Dirty girl. My girl, holy fuck. Harper. Your mouth... Jesus.”

I pop off, leaving the thick, pulsing shaft wet and and shiny from my mouth. Flicking my gaze up, I catch a slice of that raw expression I saw earlier on his face.

This feels right.

The more I try to make this about sex, the hotter and more lewd it gets, the faster I spin back this feeling that he’s really going to hold on tight. The way he said *my girl* and it felt to the depths of my soul like he meant it.

I slick my hand up his cock, then down again. Make him wet all over. Tight hand. Squeezing.

Wanting to be the best he’s ever had. The most he’s ever had.

I can’t say any of that out loud. I’m not that brave. I can be loud about sex but...this is more than sex.

He strokes my cheek as I jerk him off, holding his gaze.

“Stroke me. Faster. Yes...” His hips twitch, then his head falls back, his throat working as he groans. “Put your mouth back on it. Fuck, I’m going to—”

I gobble him up, swallowing and stroking, and he comes on a long, guttural groan.

“Oh God, oh shit, yes, fuck...” He pulls me off as his erection starts to soften.

He stares at me for a beat, then hauls me up onto his lap. I straddle him as he cups my face.

His thumb traces my lower lip, making my breath catch. He smiles slowly, a sexy curl that goes all the way up to his eyes. Then just as they crinkle, he leans in and kisses me.

Slow.

Deep.

He licks into my mouth and pulls my tongue against his. He groans and swallows and kisses me again, even harder this time.

Then he pulls back. His gaze is glassy and his mouth is swollen. “Good call,” he says softly. “Now you taste like you’re mine.”

CHAPTER 25

KIERAN

I can be ready to go again soon. Very soon. But Harper's tummy growls, so I zip up my dress pants, shove the abandoned condom in my pocket, and give her one of my t-shirts to wear.

She finishes making a fresh salsa, then we grab the bag of nacho chips and some gauc and chicken she bought at the store and move to the other side of the island, where I have some sturdy bar stools.

As we snack, I bracket her body with my legs, keeping her right where I want her—within touching range at all times.

And as the nibbling slows down, the kissing and touching escalates. I can't help it. Even when I'm asking her questions I really do want the answers to, I keep distracting us both.

"It's hard to think," she whispers, her voice hitching. "When you..."

"Tell me later, then." I pull her onto my lap, food forgotten. Her thighs ride up my waist, her legs wrapping around my hips.

She breathes my name.

It's jet fuel to my need.

She clings to me as I rip open the condom and sheath my cock.

Then I ease her down—*two fucking years*—and flex my thighs to drive my cock up.

She whimpers and works her hips, just as frenzied as I am to get our bodies locked together.

And then I'm all the way inside her, fully buried.

Fucking perfect.

The sounds she makes as I work her up and down my cock, getting deeper and deeper into her are...no, what's even better than perfect?

I'm glad we had a first round upstairs, because this is going to end fast.

"Need to feel you come," I growl.

"That. Keep doing that." She cries out, and then I feel the hot, tight squeeze of her climax.

With a roar, I drag her down one final time, banding her tight against me as I bury myself deep.

I had a lot of growly, possessive thoughts earlier. Like, no way am I waiting two years again. And I think she read my soul on that account. But the truth is, I would wait another two years. And two after that. If all I could have for the rest of my life was a single night with Harper, every other year, I'd take it and be fucking grateful.

But I'm greedy, and I want so much more than that.

I want it all.

She kisses my damp cheek, then drops her forehead to my shoulder as I rock us through the aftershocks.

Harper falls asleep before me. I play with her hair, still damp from a shower, until her eyelids flutter shut and don't open again.

I love watching her drift off.

And this time, it's in my bed, which—fuck, I like that. A lot. Wanted this for a very long time, and didn't think it would

happen.

The restlessness I felt when I landed tonight wasn't just post-game jitters. It was also...can we take this next step?

The way she said welcome home, too. Never thought I'd be a man who would want that, but fuck if I'm not already feeling comfortable with that idea.

There's no reason we can't be together in a more serious way now.

I've been thinking about that carefully constructed boundary she likes, separating the parts of our lives that don't fit together well. For the first time, I've paid attention to how other players do it—especially those who keep their private life truly private.

I can anticipate and dull the impact for her of the worst of my reality as a celebrity. As we get closer, I want to do everything in my power to protect her from the sharp, chaotic parts of my world that she doesn't like. I chose that life, but she doesn't have to—she can choose me, and not hockey, if that's what she wants.

When she rolls over, then wiggles back against me, sliding into a little spoon position, I wrap my arms around her and say a silent promise to meet her where she wants us to be.

I just want Harper. I don't care about anything outside these four walls.

Before I found her again, I thought maybe my endless dreams about her and the way I couldn't move on was simply unresolved lust. Like we didn't have enough time together in Buffalo, and nobody else would stack up compared to her because it was simply the hottest night I'd ever had.

But now that I have her again, and we've finally been together again in all the ways we were that night—sure, yes, the sex is fucking fantastic. But that's not what I was missing.

It's the immediate sense of joyous relief when I pull her into my arms that I longed for. That edgy, restless need to follow her down that hotel corridor?

That's what I felt tonight on the drive home.

This isn't just about scratching a very specific itch. It's not just about sexual compatibility and the so-called "perfect girl" I've been obsessing over.

Harper feels like a part of me I didn't know existed until I found her.

And then as quickly as I found her, she was cleaved away from me, impossibly out of reach, and I ached for her that entire time. So when I saw her again, there she was—this other part of me that I instantly recognized again.

But still impossibly out of reach because of her wariness.

Now, though... Fuck. I smile down at her sleeping form. Joy doesn't even really touch how I feel about her finally saying yes to us.

The truth is, I'm falling in love with Harper Roberts. It's too soon to tell her that, but I'm gone for this girl.

CHAPTER 26

HARPER

The two days we have off together go by in a fever dream. Kiley texts me for proof of life at one point, and I send an embarrassingly happy photo back.

There might be an edge of a chandelier in the background.

I don't care.

I promise to be back at my apartment in time to drive us both to work for our next shift, and then I turn my phone off.

Then it's back to real life. A week goes by, and he leaves for another road trip just as I come off a string of day shifts. I catch up on laundry and grocery shopping. I climb the stairs we still haven't visited together and FaceTime him from the top. He's in Edmonton and it's already snowing there.

"If the weather turns while we're on this west coast swing, you could go and stay at my place. There's an extra garage door opener in a drawer in the kitchen," he says.

I'm only half listening to what he's saying, because he's also rolling out his legs, and I'm hypnotized by the gymnastic-like strength he has balancing on top of the foam roller.

"Harper?"

"Mmm?"

He whooshes closer to the phone camera. "Hey. Like what you see?"

"So much," I admit. Then I shiver. "I think it's going to rain here."

“Rain, snow, whatever. You could stay at my place. That’s what I’m saying. You should be able to park inside if it storms. It’ll make leaving for work in the morning easier.”

“I have to drive with Kiley some days, so it’s okay.”

“All right. But the offer stands. It would make me feel better if you weren’t scraping off a car on a city street at six in the morning.”

I make a face. “Nobody likes that.”

“Exactly. Consider it for me, will you? Give me some piece of mind. And if Kiley wants to come too, there’s lots of room.”

I blush, but then I find myself nodding. “Maybe.”

“Good girl,” he says with so much fondness it makes my chest ache.

The day before he returns, I get my period.

HARPER

Lower your expectations for sexy times. It’s the time of the month when I’m a crampy, sad, sweatpants-wearing girl.

KIERAN

I love your sweatpants, but will move heaven and earth to fix the sad and crampy part.

KIERAN

And you still have ice cream in my freezer, so that’s convenient.

KIERAN

Unless you’d rather stay at your place...?

KIERAN

(he asks, casually, hoping for an invite to swing by after the plane lands)

I'm laughing as I type back that if he wants the amazing company of me and my heating pad, he's welcome any time.

The next night, he shows up on my doorstep at one in the morning with a shopping bag full of ice cream, and two unlabeled tubes of top secret, custom-blend topical pain relievers from the team trainers.

"Hot sex rain check for next week," I promise him, when I'm sprawled on top of him after we've kissed hello for what feels like an hour. Against my belly is a thick hard-on that would be distracting on almost any other day.

It's still slightly distracting tonight.

He tugs on my hair. "Whatever you want, Jersey Girl. Whenever you feel like it."

"I..." I lift my head, curious at the tone in his voice. The way he puts emphasis on *whatever* and *whenever*. "Do you feel like it? Even...now?"

He gives me an unrepentant grin. "I always feel like it. I'd prefer to have a part of me inside you around the clock. Not if you would be uncomfortable, of course. But orgasms are excellent pain relief."

I whimper. "Maybe not inside me..."

So he carries me to the shower, and makes me feel good with his fingers on my clit, careful as can be, and his mouth on my tits.

And then, after ice cream and a careful application of the magic potions on my belly and lower back, I put my head in his lap, because it's late and I'm tired—but he's not, and he's going to watch some game tape.

He strokes his fingers through my hair, massaging my scalp.

I always feel like it. I'd prefer to have a part of me inside you around the clock.

But here he is, taking care of me. The part of him that's taken up residence inside me isn't physical at all. It's just this big, warm, irresistible vibe. And he seems happy enough, even pushed my hand away from his cock in the shower, because it's late.

But it's not *that* late.

I turn my face and nuzzle against his cock, half-hard and thick against my cheek.

He grunts and just looks down at me.

I blink sleepily and trace my finger up and down his growing length, inside the loose sweatpants that now live at my place. They smell like my laundry detergent, and when I tug his waistband down, his cock—warm, solid, thick—makes my mouth water.

“You don't have to,” he says softly.

“Watch your game tape,” I say back, just as softly.

I lick the pearl of seed at the tip, then close my eyes and pull him into my mouth.

“Oh, you...” He sucks in a breath and his thighs flex as he adjusts himself beneath me. “So good. Look at you. The best girl with the sweetest mouth. Feels so fucking good.”

He goes back to stroking my hair, and I fall asleep like that, with more than one part of him inside me.

CHAPTER 27

KIERAN

One advantage of spending time in Harper's cozy little walk-up apartment—it's very close to the arena. Not quite close enough to walk on a blustery mid-November day, but a quick five-minute drive.

She has a night shift tonight, so I leave her napping when I head out the door to go to practice.

As I step out of her apartment, I almost trip over her best friend.

"There's the man who is consuming all of my bestie's time," Kiley says cheerfully. She has a young-looking chocolate lab on a leash, who gives me an eager sniff, then leads us down the stairs.

"Who's this?" I offer my hand when the pup comes back for another sniff.

"Puck, this is Kieran. Kieran, meet Puck. She's my brother's dog, but when he's on call at the hospital or travelling with the team, she stays with me." She shivers as we step outside. It's grey, and the sidewalk is slick with freezing rain. "Puck, why do you need so many walks every day? Even when it's gross?"

"Do you want to come to arena with me? I have practice, but some of the players bring their dogs, and they have a whole area where they can play. It's not warm, exactly, but it's not—" I make a face at the threatening sleet.

"If it's fine for Puck and I to crash this doggo party—are you sure?—count us in."

Like I would miss an opportunity to impress Harper's best friend.

It's a short drive to the arena, but I'm going to maximize the opportunity—and if she gets some Instagrammable content for Puck out of the deal, I'll feel slightly less mercenary.

“Got any plans for the Christmas holidays?” I ask as I start my truck.

“Just the family usual thing. You?”

“We'll have a few days off. I used to go home to Manitoba, but this year I'm not sure. Haven't talked to Harper about it yet, though.” I'm at the first traffic light of six between here and the arena. “Has she said anything to you about her plans?”

Kiley smirks in my direction. “Is this supposed to be subtle research?”

I make a *no big deal* face. “More of a casual digging for information.”

“Why don't you ask her?”

“Because I'm not sure what she'll say, and I don't want to scare her off.”

She laughs. And not just like a little giggle. She's laughing *at* me.

“What?”

“You're not going to scare her off. She's head over tits for you.”

That makes the back of my neck heat up in a good way. “It's definitely mutual. But I don't want to wreck it by expecting too much, too soon. Or overdoing it for Christmas if she wants to take things slowly.”

“The fact you're thinking of this probably means you won't push any of her buttons. I'm happy to help with little surprises or like, measuring her ring size for you, but anything in between, I think you should talk to her directly.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, no, you're right.”

“I am. And the thing is, Harper deserves that. It’s not just the right thing to do, but it’s also what she needs to trust you as much as she wants to trust you.”

“She wants to trust me?”

“Dude, where have you been?”

Living in a weird liminal space between denial and hope. “You’d find out her ring size for me?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“No. Right.” I wipe my hand over my face. One more traffic light to go. “Is this the part where you tell me you’ll break my legs if I break her heart?”

“Why would I go easy on you like that?” She smiles brightly at Puck. “But he’s not going to hurt Harper, is he?”

And now I’m glad we’ve arrived at the arena. I pull into the underground parking and navigate to my spot.

The makeshift indoor dog park is in a previously unused space on the very top level, so I take them up there first. Puck trots along beside Kiley, curious about where we are, but responding immediately to her firm commands.

“You can hang around if you want a drive home when I’m finished, or take any of the stairs back down to street level and just let yourself out if the weather looks good enough to make it back to your apartment. If anyone asks why you’re here, just tell them you’re a guest of mine.”

“Thanks.” They take off for the far end of the space, and I go downstairs.

Maybe it’s because we’re still recovering from the road trip, and everyone would rather have a day off instead of practice, but the first fifteen minutes are a mess. Half-assed efforts, a couple of guys wandering off the ice for no reason, and a general slowness to respond to the coaching staff.

Our head coach is unimpressed.

Fuck.

I clear my throat. “Come on guys, let’s pick it up.”

Hale echoes my encouragement, but it's too late.

Suddenly Coach sends a piercing whistle echoing off the ceiling, then grabs the nearest stick—Gustafsson's—and smashes it against the ice. "What the actual fuck is going on?"

Everyone slowly circles around to look at him.

Rest in peace, Gustafsson's stick.

"Are you going to do the drill properly? Or is this a waste of my fucking time?"

Nobody replies.

"You are all paid to perform at your best, on command. When we tell you to, both here at practice and in a game. You are on this team because you are capable of excellence. So far today, I haven't seen any of what I know you are capable of. Which means, you are wasting my fucking time, and that is fucking rude. It's disrespectful to me, and it's disrespectful to the coaching staff. Am I making myself clear?"

A few of us nod and say in tandem. "Yes, sir."

"What about the rest of you?"

"Yes, sir," we all say in chorus, louder this time.

"Don't fucking call me sir. I don't want respectful fucking language. I want respectful fucking actions. Do the fucking drill, and do it with your whole God damned body. Again. Line up."

There's a lot of cursing in hockey. A lot of yelling. A lot of fire in the belly, especially with players and coaches of a certain age. It's what I grew up with, but I know Calhoun and Dodaj—and even Hale—bristle at the barking.

I see Dorrian watching us from the upper level.

I'm distracted as I drive forward, passing the puck, skipping past Gustafsson—

Except I don't.

The big guy smashes into my shoulder, and maybe his knee clips my leg. It feels wrong from the moment of impact. I

spin out. It's my own fault, I realize as I go down. I was off-balance, stupid mistake. Should have been a clean, routine hit, but it feels bad from the second my feet fly out from under me. I try to tuck my head before I land on my back, but I'm not fast enough. My helmet hits the ice with an ominous whack I feel inside my skull.

Ah, fuck.

I don't move, even as the guys ring around me.

"You okay?" Calhoun asks, frowning.

Gustafsson winces. "Sorry, man."

"I'm fine." But I'm not sure I am.

Our head athletic trainer appears next, then the assistant coach. They agree that a concussion protocol needs to be engaged, and I need a full assessment.

There's no doctor in the house, because it was just a practice, so the options are paging one of them to come to the arena, or transporting me to the hospital.

"I was heading there anyway," I joke.

Nobody laughs.

Right, not funny to have me maybe on the injury list for a week or more.

They check me for neck pain, which thankfully I don't have, and limb strength, which is fine.

"Let's get you up."

My head spins, and I feel like puking, but I get up onto my skates, and with only a little support, I see myself off the ice with the trainer right beside me.

Coach follows us into the dressing room, and Dorrian strides in a minute later. And then, with a quiet whine, Puck rounds the corner, hustling at Kiley-speed.

"Are you okay?" she asks, panic all over her face. Then before anyone can ask who she is, she adds, "I'm a friend of a

friend. And my brother happens to be one of your doctors. He's on his way now."

"He doesn't need—" But then I turn green, and someone's handing me a garbage can so I can heave into it.

"Yes he does," Kiley says grimly. "We need to have you on the mend by the time Harper wakes up or there will be hell to pay."

That's not how concussions work. But I'll let her brother explain that to her.

Since she went ahead and texted Grant, they put me in a dark room with ice packs around my head, letting me wait until he arrives to complete the rest of the assessment. In the distance, I can hear the regular bustle of the medical treatment space. There are concerned murmurs, and reassuring voices, and then nothing.

I like the nothing a lot.

It's been years since my last concussion. More than a decade.

Zero out of five experience, do not recommend.

Then Grant arrives, and I hear, "Why is Puck here? Why are you here?" and "Just fix him!" and then "I feel like I've been left out of the loop on something important, Kiley."

The door swings open, and he steps inside with our athletic trainer, who is holding a familiar looking tablet.

Every training camp, we all have to do baseline testing, and I've sailed through this assessment a few times in recent years after a knock to the head didn't actually do anything.

Today, we could do away with the assessment. I know I'm hurt already.

"Hi Kieran." Grant gives me a reassuring smile. "I am going to ask you a few questions, all right? Please listen

carefully and give your best effort. First, tell me what happened?”

“I skated into a Swedish brick wall and went down like a sack of potatoes.”

He smiles faintly. “Where are we today?”

I name the arena.

“What were you doing here?”

“Practice.”

“When was your last game?”

“Two nights ago.”

“Who did you play?”

“Montreal.”

“Did your team win that game?”

“Yes.”

Our trainer hands over the tablet, and I manage to read the preamble paragraph on the symptom list. Then I rate my symptoms, which is enough of a list to be alarming, but most of them aren't at the top end of the scale, which I guess is good.

Could be worse.

There's a bunch of cognitive and balance testing that follows, and I just grit through that.

When we're finished, Grant tells me I'll be out for at least a week, probably two. “We'll keep checking on you. First step is going home for forty-eight hours, and as close to absolute rest as possible. Do you have someone who can stay with you?” A brief flash of humour crosses his face. “And is that person my sister?”

I laugh, which hurts my head. “Kiley's just a friend. I can probably—”

The sister in question pushes into the room.

Grant glances down, clearly noticing that she's lost his dog. "Where's Puck?"

"He made a friend." She gives me a *don't say anything* look. "I can take care of Kieran tonight. And Harper's right downstairs, so you don't need to worry about him."

Grant visibly relaxes. "All right. That's a good plan. If anything changes, go the hospital immediately and I'll meet you there. Otherwise, we'll evaluate you again in two or three days."

Everyone leaves and Kiley gives me a winsome smile. "Hey, so...about that..."

I carefully sit up. "I wasn't going to ask Harper to take care of me. I can hire someone."

"What? No. She'll want to— But she hasn't told Grant— It's just—" She crosses her arms over her chest and presses her lips together.

I sigh. "Something about wanting to keep her personal life in nice, neat little boxes?"

"She really is head over heels for you," Kiley says softly. "Give her time."

I scrub my hand over my face. "Yeah. Of course. I need to shower."

"I'll go rescue Puck and we'll be ready whenever you are."

Kiley drives my truck back to their apartment building. I half-arsed argue about her plan here, because Harper works tonight, but she points out that I can't *not* tell her about the concussion.

Which is fair.

Worst-case scenario, I climb a few extra stairs before Kiley drives me home, and then Puck can have the run of my

backyard until a personal support worker can show up to watch me sleep or whatever the plan will be.

The lab stays pressed to my side the whole way, a warm, comforting weight as I keep my eyes shut.

Kiley, to her full credit, is an excellent driver, and parallel parks my truck on a side street like a figure skater landing a jump nice and clean.

Puck stays with me until she comes around to the passenger side and opens my door.

“She’s a good dog,” I say quietly as I swing my feet out of the truck, trying not to think about just how fucking much my brain hurts.

“She’ll stick beside you all day if you need her to.” Kiley laughs softly. “Except for at least two more walks I’ll need to take her on.”

I grunt. “I’m glad you came with me today.”

“Me, too.”

Inside the building, she stops at Harper’s door, and waves off my protest. “She’d want you here.” She finds a key on her keychain. “Come on in.”

We’re barely through the door when Harper appears in her bedroom door, wrapped in a sheet.

Right, because I left her sleeping in nothing but a pair of panties.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, her eyes wide, as I give her a sheepish wave, then immediately wince.

“I hit my head but I’m fine,” I say at the same time as Kiley says, “Severe concussion.”

“Kiley!” Harper and I say that at the same time, me with a *come on* sigh and Harper with pained shock.

“What? She’s a nurse. You’re a nurse. You should know what we’re dealing with here.”

Harper takes two steps towards me, remembers she's wearing a sheet, and twists around immediately.

She's gone for the briefest moment, just long enough for me to lie down on the couch, then reappears wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt. She shoos Kiley out the door, after a murmured conversation, then sinks down on her knees beside my head.

"Hi," she says softly. "You bonked your head, huh?"

Up until this moment, I've never had any Nurse Harper fantasies. I have all sorts of Harper-in-every-other-way fantasies, but that she's a nurse is...professional. Off-limits.

But now that she's turned on that sweet, caring voice?

There's no undoing how my lizard brain heard that. I make a slight grunting noise, which is all I can manage now.

She trails her fingers over my temple, then down to my wrist. Taking my pulse.

"Do you want to go to your house?"

"Want to stay here for a bit." I want to stay with her, if I can, but I know she has to work.

Maybe I mumble something about that out loud, because she replies to that worry.

"I'm going to call off work tonight. There's time for them to find a replacement for me, and I— No, it's fine. Seriously. I don't take time off, and I haven't really had enough sleep. It's *fine*." She says it firmly enough I don't argue. "You can sleep here, or in my bed..."

I don't move, even though I want to be in her bed. Today, always.

Her lips brush against my cheek. "Before you drift off, can you tell me where we are right now?"

"Your apartment," I mutter. "In Hamilton, Ontario. Passed the cognitive questions. Head just hurts."

"Then sleep, Hot Shot. I'll be here when you wake up."

I drift off, and the next thing I know, a beautiful vision is hovering over me.

“I’m up,” I mumble. “I’m awake.”

“You can keep sleeping, I was just checking your vitals.”

I blink as she comes more into focus. She’s changed again, and is now wearing workout clothes. A sports bra and a tiny pair of shorts. “Did you do a workout while I was out?”

“And I read a book.” She lifts her wrist so I can see her watch. “You’ve been asleep for three hours. Good stuff.”

“You took my pulse while I was sleeping?” I sound a bit slow. I feel a bit slow.

“A few times,” she says softly, then adds, “In a professional capacity.”

I track a drop of sweat sliding into the cleavage peaking out from her sports bra. “I like your at-home scrubs.”

She props her hands on her hips, giving me an even better view of her curves in the bright blue spandex. “Har har. But I like that you’re feeling flirty.”

“Always do.” But my eyes are already sliding shut again.

Her hand is cool on my forehead. “Want to move to my bed? I’ll join you.”

“Mmkay.”

She helps me sit up, then slowly stand. She hooks a reusable water bottle and carries it with us, then hands it to me after I’m sitting on the edge of her bed.

I drink the whole thing.

“Stretch out,” she murmurs. “I’ll take a quick shower, then be right back.”

I close my eyes, because that feels good, but I don’t fall asleep again. I listen to her shower turning on, then the water splashing against the tile on the other side of the wall.

When she comes back, she’s in the sweatpants and t-shirt again, and she curves right in front of me, the little spoon I

want to cling to all night.

“Can I text Grant about your medical care?” she asks, total business, even as I nuzzle my face into the back of her neck.

“You don’t have to if you’d rather keep this quiet. Kiley told him she was going to watch me all night.”

Harper holds her breath for a long beat, then exhales. “She told me that. Do you mind if I tell him we’re...you’re...here?”

“Why would I mind?”

She doesn’t reply to that.

“You can tell anyone anything you want.” I mean it. “So yes, you can tell the good doctor how much I like you, my pretty nurse.”

She laughs. “I might start with just telling him you slept all afternoon.”

“And I’m going to sleep all night, too.”

“Good.” She taps away on her phone for a while, then turns in my arms. “Can I have a quick peek at your eyes?”

I let her do all her neurological checks, then she strokes my forehead and urges me to get more rest.

“I want to spend Christmas with you,” I mumble. “If you don’t already have plans.”

Her fingers are replaced with the soft press of her lips against my brow. “Christmas, huh? What do I get the man who has everything?”

I only need her. “Just you,” I mumble. And then I’m asleep again, my brain throbbing.

CHAPTER 28

HARPER

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, I wake up to the sound of a key turning in the deadbolt, and someone unexpectedly opening my apartment door.

Yesterday, it was Kiley waking me up from my nap with a concussed Kieran.

Today at—I grab my phone—seven in the morning, it’s not likely to be my best friend, and only two other people have a key.

Grant, who didn’t ask too many questions, but definitely got the gist of why I care so much about Kieran’s recovery when I was texting him last night.

And...my mother.

I shoot out of bed, grateful to be wearing clothes this time, and do an Olympics-worthy triple jump type of leap to my bedroom door just in time to see her quietly tiptoeing to my kitchen.

I pull the door shut firmly behind me. “Mama!”

She spins around, looking guilty. And a little...wired.

“What are you doing?” I flick my gaze to a familiar bakery bag in her hand.

“I’m just on my way home, and I didn’t want all of these treats, but it’s a better value to buy six, so I was just going to leave three of them for you.”

“Home from where?”

“School.” She laughs, her face softening with wonder. “Pulled an all-nighter working on a sculpture.”

Oh, I love that for her. I’d love it even more if I wasn’t hiding a secret hockey player in my bedroom right now. “That’s amazing. You must be tired and ready to head home.”

She wobbles her head back and forth. “Well...I did have quite a lot of coffee. So if you’re up...”

“I...” My cheeks heat up. “I’m not alone.”

“Oh!” Her eyes go wide. Her attention darts to my bedroom door, and I force myself not to look back. It’s still closed. I’d have heard it open. “Company!”

“Yep.”

“So I’ll go.”

“Please.”

“We’ll talk later?” She shoves the bakery bag onto the counter. “You can keep all of these. I already had the cruffin I wanted. And maybe your guest...”

I doubt he’ll eat anything in there, but I’m not explaining that right now. “Thanks.”

“I didn’t know you’d started seeing someone,” she says as I herd her towards the door. “Or is this a casual, one time only thing? What? I can’t ask that?”

I take a deep breath. This is an opening. I could take it.

But on the other side of my bedroom door is a man who held me like his life depended on it last night. Who wants to spend Christmas with me. And while there was a time when I thought the biggest barrier to our relationship was what my mother might think of him—nothing good, I’m sure—right now, all I can think about is, how will he feel if I tell my mother about him before I tell him about my father?

This conversation will have to wait. “He’s someone I like a lot. And it’s new and private for now.”

She blinks in surprise. I’ve told her about all of my crushes and dating ups and downs since I was eleven years old and

almost kissed someone, but chickened out and burst into tears. Her brow furrows, for just a second, but then she pats my cheek. “All right. I’m off to bed.”

“Drink some water,” I remind her. “Hydration is important after mainlining caffeine all night.”

That gets me a warm smile. “Yes, Nurse Harper.”

I see her out, then make sure I flip the security latch, which I rarely use, because Kiley and I come and go so frequently from each other’s apartments.

The apartment is only still and quiet for a few seconds before my bedroom door swings open, and Kieran looms in the doorway. “You’re up early.”

I whirl around. “Hi.”

“Was Kiley just here? I heard voices.”

That was close. I swallow. “My mom.”

He frowns.

“She stopped at the bakery. Wanted a cruffin. There’s a discount if you buy six. She thought she’d leave half with me. And then I told her I wasn’t alone and she left all of them.”

“Ah.” He scrubs his jaw, his arm and abs flexing as he also braces himself against the door frame. He’s not wearing a shirt, and his grey sweatpants are riding low on his hips. And if he didn’t have a look of pain on his face, I’d gobble up the sight of the long, flat planes of his powerful torso pulling into deliciously defined ridges.

“I woke you up,” I say apologetically. “Do you need something? Water? Grant says you can have acetaminophen.”

I have a list of instructions on my phone. Only a certain kind of painkiller for the first twenty-four hours. Nothing that taxes his brain or makes him think. No TV, no reading. Almost certainly no complicated conversations about my parents.

And maybe Kieran knows the same list by heart, because after looking at me for a long beat, his gaze curious, he drops his head into a careful nod. “Yeah. Tylenol would be great.”

I get him a pill, and he downs a big glass of water.

Then we curl back up in bed, and he asks me what a cruffin is.

When I stop laughing, I realize he's serious.

"It's a croissant in the shape of a muffin, filled with lemon curd, in this case. Similar to a cronut."

"A croissant donut?" He looks genuinely perplexed.

I grin. "Yes."

"And is that what you would order at the bakery?"

"I'm more of a morning glory muffin kind of girl. But I like a cruffin."

He smiles, all the way to his eyes, crinkling the skin there in a way that makes my heart flip-flop. "Good to know."

Kieran is an excellent patient. He understands the brief: stay in bed, or on the couch, eyes closed as much as possible.

"Do you want me to drive you home?" I ask mid-morning, when it's clear he's slept as much as he's going to sleep for a while, and he's just lying on my couch being beautifully still. I'm reading Twitter on my phone

"Do you want me to go?"

"No!" I could sit and watch him for days. "But you might be more comfortable in your own space."

He doesn't reply to that immediately. But after a few minutes, he quietly says, "I don't think I've ever been as comfortable as I am in your space."

I cross to him and sit on the floor beside the couch. Eyes still shut, he cups his hand gently against the side my head and tugs me down, until I rest my cheek on his warm side.

"I'm not going to pretend I don't like hearing that," I tell him honestly. "But your house is beautiful."

“My house is empty.”

It’s not. Not really. At least, not what I saw of it, which wasn’t that much beyond his kitchen and his bedroom. And his hot tub.

But arguing—even good natured—is on the list of things Kieran can’t do, so I don’t push the point. “Do you mind if I do yoga?”

He huffs a surprised breath. “Mind? Harper, if I could lock us in a room and only watch you do yoga for a month, that wouldn’t be long enough. Please, be my guest.” He grins, wide and easy, even as he keeps his eyes closed. “Are you going to wear next to nothing and get all sweaty again?”

“Maybe.”

He makes a satisfied hum that vibrates through my cheek and pours into me, filling me up until I feel it deep in my belly. “Good. That’s...really fucking good.”

CHAPTER 29

KIERAN

I am highly committed to minimizing the trauma to my brain and maximizing my rest. Concussion recovery is drilled into professional hockey players. Total rest means total rest. Eyes closed, zoned out. No watching TV, no reading, or anything like that.

But watching my girlfriend do yoga sure as hell sounds restorative to me.

She disappears into her room, and returns in another sexy sports bra and stretchy short outfit, same as she wore yesterday. Different colour. The lime green makes her skin pop, golden and soft looking. Makes me want to see her in a barely there bikini on a private beach.

Or no bikini at all.

Is it too soon in our relationship to suggest an All-Star week getaway to the Caribbean?

Probably.

Might do it anyway.

She's a girl with a wall of travel photos, after all. A few days reading under palm trees sounds like the perfect Christmas gift to get her.

Stop thinking about travel. Stop thinking about anything.

I close my eyes and drift.

When I open them again, she's in a downward dog position, slowly pumping her legs. Working her hips higher

and higher in the air.

No thinking required for my body to react to *that*.

And then she holds it, the curve of her ass high in the sky, her back straight and strong, her fingers splayed wide on a yoga mat that looks like she's had it for a long time. Utterly beautiful.

I'm smiling as I let my eyelids fall shut again.

Every few minutes, I blink them open and check on her progress. Warrior pose. Tree. The last time I look, she's curled forward over her knees, head on the floor, arms stretched long in front of her. Dark hair spilling forward, and at the base of her neck, little swirls of shorter strands.

I'm motivated to rest and recover so I can get on the ice. I'm motivated by my contract, and my performance bonus, and the roar of a crowd as I emerge from the chute.

But right now, the strongest motivation I feel is to get better so I can curve myself over her body and kiss her there, where her neck is a little darker than the rest of her skin. Where I know she smells like sunshine, even as we march into the depths of winter.

//Fri, Nov 18th//

I feel better that night, but the next day, my headache feels worse. Enough that Grant makes a house call, Puck in tow.

"I was going to leave her at Kiley's tonight, anyway," he says when I tell him he didn't need to come to us.

"She can stay with us until Kiley gets home from work," Harper offers.

So once I get the all clear to keep resting—and a prescription for even more water, and stronger pain meds—Puck curls up against my side.

When she wants to go out, I decide it's time to stretch my legs.

“Just so she can pee,” I insist to Harper, who looks worried. “And if she needs a longer walk, you can take her without me.”

The fresh air is good. We walk around the block, and then I fall asleep on the couch again.

Puck naps with me, until she gets restless. I wake briefly when Harper whispers that she's going to take Puck for a long walk.

When I wake up a second time, they're both in the kitchen. Puck's skittering around on the tile floor, and Harper's laughing at her.

I take a long, slow breath, carefully doing a quick little check on myself. I actually do feel rested.

In the kitchen, I find Harper chopping what looks like cilantro. Beside her is a mixing bowl, and I smell lime juice and onion, and I see what looks like mango in it, too.

I lean against the counter. “What are you making?”

She gives me a quick kiss, then returns to her task. “Ceviche. Stepping up my nacho game. I have both whitefish and shrimp marinating in the fridge.”

“Wow. How long was I asleep?”

She laughs. “This is actually one of the few dishes I'm always prepared for. I keep fish in the freezer all of the time. One of the first cooking lessons I learned from my mom. Frozen fish is cheaper than fresh, and it's perfect for ceviche. I was thinking about what you maybe could eat, and getting some good vitamins into you. I placed a grocery order for the fresh fruit and veg, and we picked it up on our walk.”

“That's incredible.” And then my stomach rumbles on command.

She points to the fridge. “There's guac in there if you want to get started on that. Another Mom lesson—always have dips for food emergencies.”

“Your mom sounds smart.”

I like the way she smiles. Like she’s proud of her mother, and happy for an excuse to brag on someone she loves. “She is. She’s so good with money. She learned the food tricks from my grandma—my grandparents were immigrants, so money was tight for them, too. It’s a generational thing. And my mom was a young single parent who didn’t want to live at home forever, so...nothing is ever wasted. She accomplished a lot. Bought a house, all on her own. And paid it off, too, so now she can go back to school.”

I nod. “That’s amazing. I’ve been thinking about what I might do after I finish playing, and going back to school is on the list.”

“What would you study?”

I shrug. “Business, maybe. My father is an economics professor, and my mother is a social worker who also teaches at the university. They’re both the first generation in their families to go to university, so the fact that I didn’t get a degree remains an issue.”

Harper frowns. “Even now, after all your success?” Her eyes twinkle. “You have chandelier money, after all.”

That makes me laugh. “Yeah. Even now. It was basically a direct line from, *most NHL players don’t even make it to a full pension and then what are you going to do, to, you can’t spend the rest of your life investing and playing golf, you have to do something meaningful.*”

“No.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s awful.” She exhales carefully. “But do you play golf? Because that might be a dealbreaker.”

I laugh again, then wince, because that hurts my head a little.

She gets a stricken look on her face. “Oh, shit, we’re taxing your brain.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine. Just...low-grade chuckles are more my speed right now. And yes, I play golf.”

“Get out.” But she says it so softly, so sweetly, I can’t quite believe she’s mine.

“Want me to teach you how to play?”

Her cheeks turn pink. “Maybe.”

“Good.” I bite my lower lip, thinking about her wiggling her ass against me as we talk about strokes. “Something to look forward to in the off-season, then.”

She holds my gaze.

That’s right, I’m not letting you go.

“My grandparents were farmers,” I say suddenly. Wanting to show her I’m more than chandeliers and golf clubs. “My parents grew up in the same small town. Actually, you’ve been there.”

Her double-take is hilarious. “Pardon?”

“The photo I liked on Kiley’s Instagram. You were just outside Austin, Manitoba. I know that stretch of the Trans-Canada Highway pretty damn well.”

“No way.”

“Yeah. My grandmother came to Canada in the 1920s, from Poland, as a baby. And my grandfather’s family goes way back. British settlers. How about your family? Where did your grandparents immigrate from?”

She pulls out the fish and shrimp as I give her probably too much information about my family. *She gets it, Marsh, you’re an ordinary boy from Manitoba.*

“Belize,” she says as she she adds the seafood to the mango pico de gallo. “My grandmother’s family was British, too.” Her lips twitch. “But I don’t know much about them, because they disowned her when she married my grandfather. He was on his own—he had family in India and Tanzania, but he went to Belize on his own—and they were so awful to him. My grandmother said that made her choice easier, because

they showed their true colours. They eloped when she was eighteen.”

“Wow.”

“They have an amazing love story. Grandpa was a few years older than her, and he told her he would wait for her forever. She ran away so they could get married, and he tried to make her go back, but she refused. And then after that, she found out she was pregnant, and he was over the moon.”

“Your mom?”

She nods. “At the same time, there was some upheaval as Belize gained its independence from Britain. There was a window of opportunity for them to emigrate within the Commonwealth, and so they came to Canada. My mom was born here. But we have this kind of connection back to Belize through my grandma’s favourite foods, food that I grew up on.”

“Like ceviche.”

“Yep. And a lot of rice and beans,” she says with a laugh. “Chicken and onion soup. Tortillas. Pupusas. It’s all really delicious and it tastes like love. Tastes like home.”

“Like Belize?”

“Like my grandma’s kitchen.” She shrugs. “I’ve never been to Belize. It’s on my bucket list to take my mom there one day.”

I think about her wall of photos. “What else is on that list? Where else do you want to go?”

“Japan,” she says without hesitation. “Italy.”

I fucking love how dreamy her eyes get. “Where in Italy?”

Her blush returns. “Tuscany, of course. Places I’ve seen in movies. But anywhere.” Her eyelashes dust her pink cheeks before she lifts her gaze to meet mine. “Have you been?”

I nod. “We had a lock out ten years ago.” I give her a teasing grin. “Not sure if you’re old enough to remember that,

but a bunch of us went to Europe to play while the players' association was doing their thing here.”

She gets a funny look on her face. “Yeah, I remember.”

“I played in Switzerland. So...Italy was close by. That's where I spent Christmas that winter.”

“It sounds magical.”

I shrug. “I was ready to come home.”

“Home is Winnipeg?”

“Yeah. But that winter, I was homesick for Montreal.”

She glances at the bowl, then to the table. “We should sit. And eat? And then back to bed for you.”

“I'm feeling pretty good,” I reassure her.

“Good. Let's keep it that way.” She shifts over, getting right in front of me and presses her whole body against mine. Her strong little arms wrap around my waist first, a tight but gentle squeeze, then she lifts her head and cups my face in her hands. “I want to hear more about Switzerland.”

CHAPTER 30

HARPER

I return to work the next day. It's harder than I expected to be away from Kieran all day, even though he's still being a model patient. It's different when the patient isn't really a patient, but the guy I can't stop thinking about, can't stop worrying about, and want to race home to at the end of my shift.

Someone from the team picks up him and his truck, and they take him to the arena for another medical assessment before driving him home mid-afternoon.

I get a chain of text messages, complete with photos, documenting the whole journey like a travelogue.

KIERAN

made your bed

KIERAN

not that we'll need it for a few days

KIERAN

my ride is here...locked up your place, was extra careful on the stairs

KIERAN

look at this young kid, do you think he's old enough to drive my truck?

KIERAN

Passed my screening with flying colours!

KIERAN

Cleared for light activities, like ordering you the dinner of your choice tonight

I read the last two as he's sending them, watching the dots appear. I like his enthusiasm, but he should still be resting.

HARPER

I can pick something up?

KIERAN

Woman, let me order you dinner

He texts menu links for two restaurants I've never eaten at, because they're out of my price range.

And I want to push back, but I don't *really* want to. If he got the clear from his doctors—and it's just ordering food!—why not let him? It's nice to be spoiled. So I pick a lobster pasta that sounds incredible from a steakhouse near Kieran's house.

He texts back that I'm a good girl, and a reminder to drive safely because it's snowing.

The bossy-caring tone is secretly my favourite thing about the whole exchange. We've already agreed to spend the night at his place, with my car safely tucked into his garage so I don't have to scrape off ice and snow the next morning. And yes, this concussion has tumbled us into something that feels more like a serious relationship that I ever really expected us to have, but it's...nice.

And there's not a chance in hell I'm letting him sleep alone until he's fully better, anyway. I even managed to switch off a week of night shifts, so I don't have to worry about those again until the new year.

For the next month, we can cocoon and order in dinner and just focus on getting him back to one hundred percent.

“I could get used to fancy takeout,” I say happily as I use some fancy garlic bread to catch the last bits of fancy lobster sauce.

That I’m wearing slightly sweaty bright orange scrub pants and a lime green long-sleeve t-shirt which says I Love My Poke Buddy...well, that brings the fine dining experience back down to earth a bit.

But the food arrived two minutes before me, and it was hot. I wasn’t waiting for a shower.

“I like watching you eat it.” Kieran got a steak with rice and broccoli, which I’ve learned is one of his standard go-to meals. “Sorry it’s not homemade.”

My eyebrows hit the roof. “Could you make this from scratch?”

“Asks the girl who makes ceviche.”

“Literally, just chopping things. Zero cooking skill required.”

“A bit of knowledge.”

I nod, granting him that. “I have that. But I don’t know how to make this. It’s...” I swipe the last of the sauce with my fingertip, then suck that into my mouth and moan. “So good.”

“Do that again,” he says huskily.

I flutter my eyes open—hadn’t even realized I’d closed them—and find his gaze locked on my mouth.

And after I eat, we get in his hot tub and watch fat snowflakes fall lazily around us.

“Do you want to talk about how it went today?” I ask.

He tugs me onto his lap and slides his hand into my bathing suit top.

“I’ll take that as a no.”

He nips my shoulder with his teeth. “It went fine. Another week of light activities only.”

“This probably doesn’t count as light activities.” I force myself to ignore the flutter of need in my belly.

“Says who?”

“I should ask Grant if you can—”

“You are not texting your friend to ask if we can have sex.”

“He’s your doctor.”

“He can mind his own business about my light activities.”

“Kieran! Your brain is precious! It makes important hockey decisions every day. I’m pretty sure the entire city of Hamilton would run me out of town if I sprained it further with a too-good orgasm.”

“I like that.” He grins, igniting a sizzle I can’t ignore any longer. “We’re going to be fine, though. You’re a very careful girl.”

I squirm happily at the praise. But then I realize what he’s doing. “No! Don’t distract me with compliments.”

His cocky grin doesn’t diminish one iota. “I’ll distract you with whatever I can use to achieve my aim.”

“You’re ready?”

“Very ready. I can’t not be inside you for another day. That’s worse than a concussion.”

“Spoken like a man who’s suffering from a head injury. Questionable decision-making skills.” But I don’t mean it. My thoughts are racing ahead to how we can do this very carefully. Because I’m a very careful girl, and I’ve missed him, too. I slide across his lap to straddle him. “Remember your safe word?”

He chokes on a surprised laugh. “When did I— Oh.” In Buffalo. We both grin. “Avocado.”

“Mmm.” I suck in a sharp breath. “Promise to use it if you feel anything even a little off?”

“Scout’s honour.”

I kiss his jaw, then lick down his neck. He tastes like chlorine and pent-up need, all of his muscles taut and his skin pebbling with goosebumps. “Remember to breathe.”

He exhales slowly. Between my legs, against my bikini bottoms, his cock strains and flexes. I’m going to be so good to him tonight.

I sink my teeth into his shoulder, lightly, the way he likes to bite me, and he shudders. His fingers find the strings on my bikini and it falls away, both top and bottom.

“Missed you so much.” He groans. “Just found you again, and then my dick was put on ice. That was torture. God, you feel good. Don’t know how I went without sex for two years.”

Water splashes around us as I snap my head up, abandoning the trail of nibbles I was laying across his chest. “What?”

He blinks. “Don’t stop. Your mouth feels so good.”

“Two years?”

Emotion ripples across his face, slashing his cheeks with a dark flush. “Yeah.”

“You didn’t...you haven’t...”

He tips his head back, looking up at the sky. I watch his throat work as he swallows. “There hasn’t been anyone else since you. It just wasn’t what I wanted.”

His hands tighten on my hips under the water. Like he’s holding on to me no matter how I react.

I don’t know what to say. “*That’s cool, me too,*” seems inadequate. And I don’t want to think about how different our sex lives were *before* we met, either. Because for me it wasn’t that much of a shift. I’d dated, but there were often weeks or

months at a time when it was just me and the things in my top drawer.

Instead, I breathe his name.

He slowly lifts his head and looks at me, his gaze hooded. “Don’t worry about it.”

I bring my fingertips to his mouth. Trace his lips. My heart is in my throat. “I’m not worried,” I whisper. “Just surprised.”

“I know it wasn’t the same for you.”

A whole new wave of surprise rocks me. “What wasn’t?” Heat twists inside me, making me ache. “I haven’t been with anyone, either. Nobody else would compare.”

“Fuck.” He surges his hips up against me. “Harper, I need you. Now.”

“I know.” I’m panting, too. “We need to go slow, though.”

He grunts in frustration, then kisses me, hard and deep, before pressing his forehead against mine. “I don’t want to go slow. I want to fucking claim you, because you’re mine, and only mine, and I’m yours and only yours.”

My heart is beating so fast it could sprout wings and take off. Holy shit. “But I need us to go slow here, because you’re mine. Because you’re important to me, and you’re only cleared for *light* activities, remember?”

“I’m important to you?” He kisses me again, and it fucking feels like he’s smiling as he does it.

“Yes, damn it,” I mutter as I wind my arms tighter around his neck.

He groans deep into my mouth. “Out of the tub.”

“I’m naked.”

“I’ll go first and wrap you in a towel.”

I giggle and slide off him.

His cock is a thick jut at the front of his swim trunks as he climbs out, water streaming off his powerful body.

He holds up a towel, blocking me from any potential faraway neighbour sightings. The hot tub is in a corner of his deck, so behind me is fully surrounded by the wall of his house and a tall fence.

I step into his arms and he wraps me in the thick cotton, then we race inside.

On the other side of the patio door is a counter, and he hoists me onto it before I can protest that lifting a grown woman isn't a light activity either.

He yanks the towel off me and covers me with his body, his hands everywhere. Squeezing my ass, cupping my tits. Curling around my throat and holding me still while he kisses me.

“Fuck,” he growls against my mouth. “Need to get you upstairs.”

I push at the waistband of his swimsuit. “Why?”

“Condoms.” The word grinds out of him.

“Do we need them?”

CHAPTER 31

KIERAN

My pulse is hammering in my neck, so I'm not sure I hear her correctly.

I've turned to stone as she works at my wet bathing suit. It hits the floor with a slap, and my cock rises between us. He heard what she said. He understood the invitation perfectly.

She leans back, bracing her hands behind her and giving me an even better view of where I want to be. She catches her tongue between her teeth for a second, then sucks in a breath. "I'm on the pill. Would that be safe enough for you?"

My mind goes blank.

"Kieran? Have you been tested recently?"

"Yeah. Last year." After I was with her. When I was deep in my *might never sleep with anyone else, ever again* funk. "All good. What's the opposite of avocado in this situation?" I'm breathing hard now. Fuck. *Fuck*. "You sure?"

She nods. "Are you sure?"

I love you. I swallow *that* back, because that is still way in the distance for her. *Too fucking soon*. I catch her wrist and move her hand to my chest. Let her feel my heart hammering.

Her eyes are wide. "I want to feel you inside me. Just you."

I shove the towels and wet bath suits away.

Moaning, she reaches between us. Our fingers tangle as we both work desperately to get our bodies together.

The first touch is electric. Wet heat and nothing else. I don't rush, because rubbing the head of my cock against her slick skin and working it between her swollen lips—just at the entrance, then up to her clit, and back again—is something I've dreamed about for two years.

When I sink into her bare, nothing between us, it's going to be because we both need it and can't wait a second longer.

She breathes my name. "Is this okay? Standing?" She looks at me with caring concern and I stare back at her with absolute wonder.

"Yes, this is—" I pause, because *I'm important to her* and I need to show her that I really am being careful. "This is perfect."

It's surreal. With all the ways I thought we might come together like this—all my fantasies of taking her nothing between us. Not just sex, not just fucking. Pushing inside her, bare skin again against slick, warm flesh—I never thought it would be standing in the kitchen.

She clings to me, working herself feverishly against the big, hard tip of my cock, wanting me inside her as much as I desperately need to thrust home.

"You feel so good. I don't want to rush."

"Yeah." Her breath hitches as I drag my length her again, then notch the tip at her entrance again. Her glistening arousal pushes around it, spilling down my length. "Kieran..."

Maybe rush a little, her moan says.

And fuck.

With a groan, I enter her at last. Her heat slides up my length, a slick welcome home unlike any other. I find her mouth with mine and kiss her as I sink into her body.

"You're taking me so well. Fucking tight. Feel how big you make me? Feel how much I needed this?"

She whimpers and nods.

“You’re fucking soaked, Harper. Did I do that? Make you drip for me? Make you slick and needy for my cock?”

“Yes,” she gasps. “I need you.”

“All of me.”

“Yes.”

“Bare.” I say, sinking into the swirling need of the moment. “Just us. Nothing between us.”

Her pussy clenches around me at the bald claim.

She’s mine.

Every thrust is so much more than unmatched pleasure.

Every tight controlled snap of my hips is a promise to her. *I’m never letting you go. I am yours because you are mine. I can never be anyone else’s.*

I cradle her in my arms, holding her as I fuck her. Her tits brush my chest, and I’m consumed with the need to taste her there, right fucking now. I bend her back, her spine tensing, then softening into the hold I have on her. Trusting me as I lay her back on the granite and bow over her. I suck one tip and then the other into my mouth, licking and pulling at her swollen little tits. Hot and needy. Aching flesh.

The best feeling in the world, making her climb toward this release. She rocks against my cock, working just as hard as I am to get us there.

Because we both need this. Need to come. Need to mark each other in a messy, raw, perfect way.

She shudders and cries out my name.

Fuck. “Are you fucking close? God, Harper, if you come, you’re gonna make me spill myself inside you. Is that what you want? Tell me you need it. God, you’re such a fucking good girl. A good fucking girl. I waited for you. This is yours. Only yours. I’m yours forever.”

It’s dangerously close to spilling the whole truth of how I feel about her, but I cannot hold back.

Her dark eyelashes blink, wet from the hot tub? Or wet from overwhelming emotion? Her eyes are wide as she locks onto my gaze. “Give it to me Kieran, fill me up. Make me yours. Mark me. Come inside me. I need it, too.”

“Mine,” I growl. Pounding her now. A good kind of tension twisting up my spine.

She cries out, then shatters, her body shaking, trembling beneath mine. Her legs climbing up my sides and wrapping around me, locking me against her as her climax rips through her body and tears my release from mine.

One more thrust, deep and powerful, moving her entire body, bringing her right to the edge of the counter so I can fall on top of her, bury myself deep inside of her as my cock twitches and spends, spurting come and filling her up. Nothing between us.

Raw and perfect.

CHAPTER 32

HARPER

Now that he's been cleared for light activities, and we've resumed having sex with no side effects—something he's tested every single night for a week—Kieran is gagging to get back on the ice.

And the previously model patient has turned into a complete grouch, because he has to watch his team lose on TV like everyone else.

The Highlanders are now losing two games for every one they win, and it's painful. They're missing both their captain, since Tilman's shoulder is still fucked up, and their most senior player, who is currently screaming at Makinen to stay the fuck in the crease.

"I don't think he can hear you," I murmur under my breath.

The arena is seven kilometres away.

But the way the goalie is hanging his head, maybe he did hear his teammate.

Kieran shoves his hands in his hair. "I need to go to practice tomorrow."

I drive him, because I need to go to my place anyway to get more clothes. We did laundry yesterday and he put my stuff

away in one of his walk-in closets, which did funny things to my insides.

But before my next set of shifts in a row, I need a few more uniforms and my second pair of sneakers. Because I'm staying at his place until he's back on the road, I've decided.

We could stay at my place. It's closer to the arena, and he keeps telling me he likes it more than his house, which is ridiculous, because his house is incredible.

I like his house a lot.

I do feel a bit bad about just totally ghosting Kiley, though. When I tell Kieran that, he texts her and tells her to come to practice.

“Problem solved,” he says, showing me the screen.

KILEY

I'm already at the arena.

I grab his phone.

KIERAN

This is Harper. Why are you at the arena?

KILEY

I do exciting things when my best friend abandons me for dick.

KIERAN

That's on his phone now.

KILEY

I think he knows you appreciate the Vitamin D.

KIERAN

Stop texting.

KILEY

Do you want fruit salad? They have a buffet, did you know that?

“She’s eating your food.” I hand the phone back to him. “Don’t read the last few messages.”

He reads them immediately and gets a shit-eating grin on his face. “This is going to be a great day.”

When we get to the rink, Kiley is nowhere to be seen. I send her a text, letting her know I’m here and ready for bestie lectures about work-life-dick balance.

“Want to meet some of the guys?” Kieran asks.

I take a deep breath and nod. “Sure. Yes.”

He keeps his hand in the small of my back, a strong, warm reassuring presence, as he leads me into the space where I’m guessing Kiley stole fruit salad.

Two dozen curious pairs of eyes lock onto me as we step through the double doors, just for a second, then someone yells out, “Marshie’s back!”

Kieran holds up his other hand and grins. “Hey, guys. This is Harper. Please be on your best behaviour.”

There’s a dizzying array of flashing grins and quick handshakes after that. I recognize all the players, but they’re different up close. Andrew Mitchell is closest. The chirpiest Highlander, I usually see him getting in a ref’s face or howling from the bench, but today he’s all easy, handsome smiles. After the Coast Salish defenceman from British Columbia, I’m introduced to his linesmate, Mo Ahmadi, who’s just returned from an injury of his own. Then some forwards, Hiro Watanabe and Magnus Gustafsson, followed by Jenson Hale, who asks me what high school I went to, because we’re both local.

Turns out his sister was only two years behind me, and we were in some drama productions together.

“Small world.” He holds out his phone. “Can I send her a picture of us?”

“Absolutely!”

He leans in and snaps a selfie with me. “She’ll be thrilled that this is real life related. She doesn’t have a lot of time for the hockey stuff.”

Kieran chuckles. “They’ll have that in common.”

I poke his side. “I like hockey more than I let on,” I say softly.

He gazes down at me. “I know.”

Behind us, there’s a noisy clatter that I’d recognize anywhere—a toddler is on the loose. We all turn around in time to see what looks like a three-year-old storm into the room, being chased by his parents.

“Charlie, slow down!” a pretty brunette with perfect blonde highlights races after him. Behind her is Hayden Calhoun, pushing a stroller and carrying a couple of winter coats.

“Sorry, sorry,” Hayden’s girlfriend says as she dodges around us, scooping up their son in her arms. She gives me a sheepish smile when she pulls them both upright and she’s right in front of me. “I’m Becca. We haven’t met.”

“Harper.” I give her my best *I like toddlers* smile. “And this is Charlie, I take it?”

“He’s a little excited about seeing his dad skate today.”

“Down!” Charlie protests, thrashing his body.

She shoots Hayden a glance, and he nods.

Charlie gets put down, and father and son disappear somewhere at top speed.

Before I can say something else, Grant strides in. Great, so both Forge siblings are here today—although where Kiley is remains a mystery.

He greets Kieran first. “I hear you want on the ice today.”

“I feel good.”

“We’ll get you into a no-contact jersey. See how it goes.” Then Grant shifts his attention to me. “You going to stick around and watch?”

“Yep.” I pop the p. *Don’t make a big deal about this, Grant, please notice that I’m just being very chill about all this Hockey Life Stuff.*

Either he reads my vibe, or he leaves it be because he’s a professional, because he says he’ll find me later in the stands, and then disappears through a door that has an *Among Us* Med Bay sign on it.

“I should go get dressed,” Kieran says.

“Leave her with me.” Becca loops her arm through mine. “Come on, I’ll show you where we can watch.”

On the way, she collects Charlie from his dad. Hayden tells her they’re practicing on the main ice, not the practice rink. My head spins a little from all the new information.

Then we pop out into the stands, and the arena looks totally different when it’s empty. Smaller, somehow, and bigger at the same time.

Off-limits and private, but here I am.

There are people scattered around. Up above us, I recognize the General Manager, Dick Dorrian, speaking to what looks like some press.

And in front of us are a white woman and an Indigenous woman, both dressed very similarly to Becca, with tight jeans and expensive looking sweaters, chatting with friendly familiarity.

“Hey folks,” Becca says cheerfully. “Found a new friend. This is Harper.”

“Hi.”

“Shannon Tilman,” the blonde says. “And this is Ani.”

“Aniibish Hale,” the native woman says. “Jenson’s wife.”

“Oh!” I grin. “I went to school with his sister Lauryn.”

Ani tipped her head to the side. “Sherwood?”

“You too?” I sit down in the seat beside her. “I was two grades ahead of Lauryn.”

“We would have just missed each other. I was three years behind her.” We compare notes on teachers as Becca tries to convince Charlie that he should sit, because climbing concrete stairs isn’t safe.

He doesn’t listen to her at all until the first player comes out. It’s Mo Ahmadi, who knocks a pile of pucks onto the ice. Charlie climbs up onto his mom’s lap and slaps at the plexiglass as each guy appears.

Hayden does a loop in front of them, then stops to exchange a few high-fives with his son.

Kieran catches my eye and grins, but then he’s all business in his special white “don’t hit me, don’t throw things at me” jersey, zipping pucks up and down the ice for his teammates to take shots on their back-up goalie, a kid who came up from the farm team, Ani explains.

But that brief bit of eye contact is enough to make me blush.

I squirm, feeling a bit revealed, but Ani keeps the conversation on Charlie. “Has he started skating himself yet, or is he still holding onto Hayden?”

Becca launches into a cute story about their regular visits to the practice rink now that they’ve moved to Hamilton. “And it all started literally the day we moved here. My dad had tried to get Charlie to skate when we were staying with family back home, but he only wanted Hayden to teach him. So as soon as we moved down here, Charlie asked if we could practice. Like, that same day. Three-hour drive, got keys to the new house, movers are arriving, and he found his skates and dumped them at Hayden’s feet.”

“What did Hayden do?” Shannon asks, her eyes dancing.

“Picked up Charlie and said, ‘I guess we’re going to the rink.’ And I got two hours to myself in the new house to unpack. Or, pretend to unpack, and just let it all sink in.”

“So now he’s a little pro?”

“Getting there. It’s terrifying, because he’s not super verbal yet.”

“Boys are sometimes slower to speak,” I add.

“Do you work with kids?”

I nod. “I’m a paediatric nurse at Mac.”

“Is that how you met Kieran?” Becca asks.

I trip over the question, but just for a second. “Sort of, yeah. We met after a game, but then he saw me at the hospital.” All true. I take a deep breath. “And then he won me over when I saw how good he is with the kids there.”

Shannon nods. “It’s really sweet, what he’s doing for that little girl’s birthday.”

I force myself not to frown in confusion. What birthday?

Charlie climbs off his mom’s lap and tugs at her hand. Becca laughs. “All right, we’re going to find our skates.”

“Yours, too?” Ani asks.

“Yep. Now that Charlie’s able to skate on his own, Hayden says it’s my turn for lessons.”

It’s sweet and romantic and wholesome.

For reasons I really do not want to think about, I get a lump in my throat.

As Becca pushes the door to the hallway open, there’s a familiar bark. Kiley and Puck stroll in like they own the place.

I wave her over. “Where have you been?”

“There’s an indoor dog space up there.” She points in the general direction of the upper bowl. “Kieran brought me and Puck here the day he got the head bonk, because it was gross outside. Now it’s Puck’s favourite place to play.”

I introduce her to Ani and Shannon. “Kiley’s brother is one of the team physicians. And Ani went to Sherwood!”

They repeat the small world conversation, so I spend a few minutes watching Kieran on the ice. He’s at the far end of the rink now, talking to one of the coaches as he does some foot work. I realize Shannon’s husband isn’t on the ice, then remember he’s on the injured reserve list, too.

“Is Max here?”

She nods. “He’s in the gym, working with the trainers. He’s getting closer to returning to play. I haven’t actually come to a practice in ages, so this is just good timing. Hopefully we’ll see you at a game soon?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Kiley pokes me. “We’re definitely coming to a game.”

I take a deep breath. “Yeah.” I crane my neck around, and spot Grant up where the GM was before. He’s alone, but he gives me a wave when he sees me. “Come on,” I say quietly, tapping Kiley. “Let’s go see your brother.”

I tell Ani and Shannon it was nice to meet them, and Kiley promises them we’ll see them at a game very soon.

“What was that about?” she asks as we climb. Puck bounds ahead.

“I don’t know.” Except I do. It’s about not feeling like I fit in, even though they seem nice enough. It’s about not knowing how to skate, and secrets I should have shared earlier, and edging myself out onto a ledge that feels scary.

When we reach him, the elder Forge twin pins me with his cool, assessing gaze, and crosses his arms. “So, we have a lot to catch up on, eh?”

“Did you know Jenson Hale’s sister went to our high school?”

“Yes,” he says simply.

“There we go. We’ve both been keeping secrets.” I plunk down in the seat next to him. “I’m sort of dating Kieran

Marsh.”

“I gathered.”

“There’s nothing sort of about it,” Kiley says, sitting next to me. “She’s gone for him.”

“Shut up,” I mutter. But I’m grinning, because yeah, I am.

“I don’t think she’s told him about her father yet.” Kiley looks across me at her brother.

He slowly nods, understanding sinking in. “Oh.”

“I’m right here.”

Grant loops his arm around my shoulders. “We see you.”

“Kiley is back on the dating apps,” I mutter, trying to change the subject.

He laughs. “I know. Did she tell you that I helped her with her bio?”

“No!” I smack his sister. “Everyone is keeping secrets! We don’t do that, you guys.”

“It’s been a busy fall.” He squeezes my shoulder, then points down to the ice, where Kieran is watching us. “Does he know I’m gay?”

I burrow into his side, laughing. “No. I should tell him, eh?”

“Jesus, Harper.”

I blow Kieran a kiss, and he catches it with his glove, then goes back to skating. I sigh. “He was supposed to be a walk on the wild side, you guys.”

Grant shakes his head. “Leave the wild-side walking to the Forges.” His pager goes off. “I gotta go return a call.”

“We were going to catch up!” I protest.

He’s already gone, lost to the business of being a doctor.

I lean the other way, resting my head on his sister’s shoulder, and think about how to tell Kieran that I’m just a big scaredy-cat.

CHAPTER 33

KIERAN

I'm riding a high as I quickly shower after practice. I feel good, albeit tired, and I'm looking forward to a world class nap with my girl.

But when I find her, she's quiet and subdued, and that persists all the way to her apartment.

"Hey, you okay?" I ask as we climb the stairs.

"Yeah. Yep."

Pretty sure two quick, inauthentic-sounding affirmatives in a row is actually a four-alarm *No*.

I take a different approach when we're inside. I sprawl on her couch, and tug her on top of me. "I liked seeing you in the stands. I liked that a lot." It feels lucky. "You'll come again?"

"Yeah." She toys with the front of my shirt. "I guess that means people will start to know we're doing...this."

"This?" Is that what she's worried about?

"Dating?"

I chuckle a little. "Is that a question?"

"I'm trying it on." The corners of her mouth tip up.

Well, I like that a lot. "How does it feel?"

"Good. Scary. Nice."

"I don't want it to be scary."

She buries her face in my neck. I wrap my arms around her, and she takes a deep breath. “I should pack,” she says, her voice muffled. “Since I’m sleeping at my boyfriend’s house a lot these days.”

I grin. “Yeah you are.”

There’s a long stretch of silence, and a small voice in the back of my head tells me to let it ride. Let her lead this conversation, because something is on her mind, and it’s only going to come out at her own pace.

“I need to tell you something,” she finally whispers.

“Anything.”

“I should tell you other things, too. There’s so much...” She lifts her face up, and her eyes are suspiciously bright, although her face is carefully composed. “First, I need to tell you how hard it was to leave Buffalo that morning.”

I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t this. I nod carefully. Trying not to grin. *Don’t be a cocky shit about this.* But I like hearing that it was hard for her, too.

She chews on her bottom lip for a moment. Less composed now. “I should tell you how I wound up in that hotel suite. I was invited sort of by accident. There was a girl in line for the washroom, and she was dressed...nice. I was...well, you remember. I was wearing your jersey.” She gives me a wobbly smile.

“Yeah you were,” I murmur.

Sucking in a big breath, she continues. “She recognized your jersey and she needed a friend, because she was going to a party where pretty girls bring pretty girls. That’s the price of admission, she told me. She had to bring someone, and I was...hot enough. Plus she thought that I was wearing the team jersey...I don’t know. The point is, I wasn’t supposed to be there. It was an accident.”

“Or fate.”

“Let me get to that,” she says, and her voice cracks.

Shit.

I nod, more serious now. “I’ll shut up.”

“So there are lots of pretty girls to choose from.” Her voice goes a bit distant as she says that. “I knew that was the deal. That was what I was walking into, and I had... I guess it was a morbid curiosity I wanted to satisfy. To know what it was like, what hockey players wanted. And, I guess too, maybe what those girls wanted. So I went to a hotel suite, and I waited. They started drinking, lots of gossip flying. I felt so odd-girl-out. An hour went by, and I spent that time wondering if anyone else had baggage like me. Probably not. I spent that hour thinking about my mom, and my father...”

When she trails off this time, she climbs off me and starts pacing.

I slowly sit up, thinking about that night from her perspective.

It doesn’t put me—or anyone on my former team—in a good light. I want to tell her that we don’t have parties like that on this team. That I would never do that now.

But she’s not done, and I told her I’d shut up.

“I told you I don’t like hockey because, um, growing up, *we* have never liked hockey. Me and my mom. But the thing is, *I* have always had a curiosity about it. You were right, when we met. You saw right through me. You took one look at me and you knew I was secretly more of a fan than I let on.” She stops and points at me, her voice watery now. “You are the only person who has ever known that. All my other fandom behaviour is secret. Like, anonymous account on Twitter kind of secret.”

“What kind of anonymous account?” I think about things she’s said. Things have sounded familiar.

It’s a long season, for example.

Which, yeah, a lot of people say.

But I don’t think it’s an accident that she was invited to that party that night, and whatever she’s building up towards, it might make her feel better if she knows we have more

connections than we should for two random people in this universe.

She waves her hand in the air. “Literally anonymous. Totally... I’m not on social media because I don’t want my father to find me. I don’t want him to see any part of my life. But I’m there. And that night, you told me that I could look you up if I changed my mind. ‘Let me tell you about this thing called an airplane.’ You said that.”

And she hasn’t forgotten it. My heart leaps.

“Do you know how many times I looked you up in those two years?” Her voice is anguished now. “And I never messaged you, because you couldn’t be real. I couldn’t bear it for you to be real.”

And my heart cracks. “It’s okay.”

“It’s *not*.” She wipes her face furiously, as fat tears fall. “When the team was announced—when it was announced that *you were coming here*—it took everything I had to not break into a thousand pieces. Because one night with you shattered everything I thought I knew about myself, and about hockey, and about players. I couldn’t do that to my mother. Because I have hurt her enough, with some seriously stupid shit. With childish dreams of larger than life fantasies.”

“Your father was a hockey player.”

She nods, her eyes swimming.

“Jesus, Harper. I’m sorry.” I stand and cross to her, taking her in my arms.

“Remember how you were telling me about playing in Switzerland?”

Shit. Yeah. She’d had a funny look on her face then, too, but I’d been freshly banged up and forgot to ask her later if that conversation had made her uncomfortable. “Yes.”

She screws her face up, then exhales. “My dad moved to Europe when I was a teenager. I thought I’d get to go and stay with him there—which was pure fantasy, he’d never had me for any visits when he was here in North America. Anyway, it

was a weird coincidence. I didn't think you'd have actually known him or anything."

I can feel my brain trying to piece together what she's saying, but I'm tired.

She twists out of my arms, slowly, her hands trailing over my body as she turns and kneels.

There's a beat-up dresser next to the front door, that serves as the place where she keeps her keys and winter hats and gloves. She wrenches open the bottom drawer and a bunch of papers spill out. Ignoring them, she grabs a brightly coloured envelope, like the kind photo prints came in, back when people printed photos all the time.

She turns and thrusts it at me.

I take it, but don't open it right away. "Hey," I say softly. "Whatever it is, it's okay."

She gives me a tight smile. "Look at the pictures first."

Inside, there are three photos. All I see in the first one is Harper as a teenager, with people on either side of her. Slimmer than she is now, with thick, wavy hair, wilder than I've ever seen it. Then a picture of a couple with a baby, who probably is her, too, with a shock of dark hair and big eyes. But she's not in the third photo, so it's suddenly clear who her father is.

I stop.

The third photo is a picture of a hockey player.

The same man in the other two pictures, I see now, as I flip back. He's holding the baby, and standing next to the teenager.

A man I know. A man I've looked up to.

A man I even played hockey with, briefly, as my career was taking off, and his was winding down.

Larry Roberts.

Her father isn't just any hockey player. Not some douchebag AHLer-for-life who abandoned his family.

Her father was one of my heroes. A Canadian superstar. Drafted by New York. Returned to Toronto as soon as he was a free agent. The golden boy, but his time in Toronto didn't work out, and a year later he was traded to Los Angeles, where he played for a decade.

I didn't know he had children. What the fuck?

"Is he—" I'm not going to use the word father. "Was he the asshole who left your mother?"

Her eyes swim with unshed tears. She doesn't need to nod again. I know the answer is yes.

Her father wasn't just a hockey player, he was a playboy who married at least four times?

Some wounds run deeper than any amount of chemistry can repair. Holy fuck.

And when she met me, I was living my best player life—just like he did. Because Larry Roberts never left a post-game party alone, I'm sure of it.

"Harper..."

"I should have told you sooner." She crosses to the couch and sits, looking so fucking small. She pulls her legs up, turning herself into a tightly wound ball of worry. "I'm sorry."

"Why the fuck are you sorry?" I'm reeling, yeah, sure, but not because of her. "That's a hard secret to share with someone you don't know."

"I know you're nothing like him," she whispers. Then the tears start to fall again.

I throw the photos on the coffee table and wrap myself around her. "Fuck him," I growl. "This is why you're nervous about dating me?"

"My mom..."

"Yeah." I swallow back my bitter rage, because that doesn't do her any good right now. "We'll figure it out."

"He's around," she whispers. "In the hockey world. I think he's working as a scout."

“Whatever you need. I can make sure he never comes within a thousand feet of you. He’ll never have anything to do with this organization.”

“It’s not me you have to protect.” Her voice is more broken now than before, and I cannot handle that. It gets worse when she adds, “But he might want a piece of you.”

Let him fucking try.

He doesn’t want his daughter? Then he’s poison, and that isn’t happening in my barn for any reason.

“It’s always you I have to protect,” I say roughly. “Always you. Understand me? He tries to get a piece of me, and I will destroy him. For you. Deliver you his heart on platter, if that’s what you want.”

“I don’t want that. I don’t want to ever think about him.”

I kiss her temple and rub her back.

I think about the conversation we had when I walked her home that first night. *Please don’t ask me about the details. It’s not just my life I’d be laying bare. And today, I couldn’t do that to my mother.*

“Is that boundary for you? Or for your mom?”

She doesn’t answer.

“Tell me to fuck off if I’m overstepping,” I say quietly. “But there’s no wrong answer there. I—” *I love you* almost spills out. I take a slow, careful breath instead.

“You’re not overstepping.” She shudders and relaxes in my arms. Her mouth finds my cheek, then the corner of my mouth. The softest butterfly kisses. “There’s a lot of layers there. It’s for me and my mom. I was...my preteen years were hard on her. And that...” She twists and points at the photo. “That photo was taken when I was eighteen. It was the first time I’d seen him, really, in my entire life. I have the photo from when I was a baby, but of course I don’t remember him. I have an arms-length relationship with some of his extended family. I knew his parents when I was little, but then they

passed away. I know his cousins. One of them invited me to the family reunion, and I went.”

“Did he know you were going to be there?”

She shakes her head, and fresh tears fall. “No.”

Fierce, protective rage burns inside me. “What happened?”

“He posed for the picture, then left. Didn’t actually say anything directly to me. I stood there feeling foolish and stupid and utterly ashamed, because everyone was talking about how he came and went so quickly. I ruined the reunion.”

“He did that. You didn’t.”

“He didn’t want me there.”

“You’re his *child*.” I almost roar it, and I wish I could take it back, because she shrinks. “No. Oh, shit, Harper. I’m sorry.”

She shakes her head. “But this is...see? This is why I thought I couldn’t do this.”

“Date a hockey player?”

“Or any famous person, probably. I can’t even be online as me.”

I trace my fingertips over her cheek. “What will happen if you’re thrust into the public sphere?”

She gives me the saddest look. “When we break up, everyone will know that you didn’t want me after all.”

She’s shattered. I did that to her, because I wanted her no matter what. Except, no, *I* didn’t do this. *Larry Fucking Roberts* did this to her, when he abandoned her as a baby.

“We’re not breaking up,” I tell her. “That’s not happening. Because I will always want you. *I will always* want you. You hear me?”

She nods. It’s jerky and reluctant, but she lets it sink in.

“Does it feel like he showed the world he didn’t want you?”

She bursts into tears, and I want to go and find her father and shove him into a concrete wall. But I want to hold her

even more, so I gather her into my arms and smooth the errant strands of hair off her face as I rock her side to side.

“It’s his loss,” I tell her, my voice rough. “He’s an idiot.”

She shrugs and shakes her head. “You sound like my mom.”

Maybe there’s some small chance I can meet this woman one day. I think about how I almost did. “How scary was it when she showed up and I was asleep in your bed?”

She chokes on a surprised laugh. “Terrifying. I wasn’t ready for that conversation.” She pauses. “I’m still not. Because it’s such a... I really boxed myself in, mentally, when I realized how much our night together affected me. And then once you found me, that was so confusing. If I let myself need you, everything has to change around that. If I let myself be yours, everything would change, forever. And so I told myself I couldn’t.”

Earlier in our relationship, those words would scare me. Not today, though. Not after everything she’s shared. Right now, I hear how carefully she’s saying these things. Brave, vulnerable words in a watery but unwavering voice. All in the past tense.

This is the most important thing she’s telling me today. And I’m going to focus on this part above all else.

She takes a deep breath and looks me right in the eye. “But everything has already changed. Because I was already yours. And now... And now I’m scared that you don’t know how big my feelings for you are. And I’m scared of how big they are! For myself. I’m scared for you, feeling like I’m not in this with you, when I am. I’m just scared.”

“That’s a lot to hold inside. Nobody should have to carry all of that alone. You don’t have to carry it alone anymore. I’ve got you.” I exhale and rock her against me. “I’ve got you.”

Our hug starts fierce, a wild cling to each other. My heart is pounding and hers must be, too. Fuck. But as we breathe

together, it softens and turns so fucking tender, I want to never let her go.

I find her mouth and kiss her, tasting every bit of her fear. I swallow her sharp need and give her back a forever kind of strength. Showing her she doesn't need to doubt that I'm always in her corner, no matter what.

Then I take her face in my hands and make her a promise. "I want to know everything and anything you want to tell me."

She smiles. Ducks her head. Buries her face in my neck again, which I don't mind at all, because holding her is a gift.

Finally, she says, in a quiet voice, "I don't know how to skate."

It's a specific thing to share, and kind of funny, because she's a funny girl, but in a deeply vulnerable way, so I don't laugh. "Okay."

"I never learned." Her voice is thick, and soft, and vulnerable.

"I could teach you," I murmur. "If you wanted to learn."

There's the world's smallest nod, then a little shudder.

"Okay," I breathe. "So we're going to teach you how to skate."

CHAPTER 34

HARPER

After my emotional dam burst, we had a long nap at my place, then Kieran packed a bag for me, and we went back to his house, where I discovered that he is a very efficient packer—not only did he fit all of my uniforms and some workout wear into the duffle bag, but also the entire contents of my underwear drawer.

Including the vibrators.

“They wanted to stay at my house for a while,” he says with the confident, easy smile of a man who knows those vibrators—like their owner—are a sucker for a really nice closet.

It’s the kind of possessive move that reinforces some of the things he lets slip in the heat of the moment. Things like, we’re never breaking up.

I don’t know how I feel about that.

Right now, when he’s not travelling and it’s just us, all the time, it makes total sense. But I don’t know if I can handle rest of the hockey lifestyle for the long term. The endless absences. Always wondering and worrying about what was happening in other cities.

I would hate that.

But then I think about Becca and Charlie, and how centred they are in Hayden Calhoun’s life.

Could I have that, with Kieran?

We're not there yet. We're still getting to know each other. We've literally just had the "are we dating?" conversation.

But then he does another load of laundry, giving more of my underwear a permanent residence card for his house, and my heart whispers that this man is going to teach me to skate.

If he wants me forever, I'm a goner.

Our first lesson is the next day. I pick up a half shift in the morning, so Kieran drives himself to the arena, but I meet him there when I get off work.

The security guard recognizes me today and calls me Miss Harper.

I stop and tug off my gloves, then hold out my hand. "Did we meet yesterday?"

She shakes my hand. "No, miss. But you're on our list of approved guests." She shows me a printed out list of names—and faces. They have a photo of me.

"Oh. Cool. Thank you."

Another staff person finds me as I head down the hallway, pretty sure I'm going in the right direction. "Ms. Roberts, right?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Mabel from PR." I must look alarmed, because she gives me a warm smile. "I just happen to be heading to the ice myself."

"Does the entire building know I'm here?"

"You're on our—"

"Approved guests list?"

"That's it!"

I take a deep breath. "Right."

“Our goal is for players and their families to be comfortable here.”

“Oh, I’m not—”

The door in front of us opens, and Kieran comes bounding out, wearing a Highlander hoodie and fitted jeans, snug to his thick thighs. “Hey,” he says, slightly out of breath. “I got the call from security that you were here. Hi, Mabel.”

She waves and disappears.

He tugs me close, wrapping his arms around me. “On a scale of one to nervous because we’re sort of in public, where would it fall if I kissed you right now?”

“You put me on a list.”

“Yeah.”

“Yesterday?”

“No.”

“When?” I search his face.

His eyes are endlessly warm as he holds my gaze. “The afternoon after I did the radio interviews at your apartment.”

My heart kicks into a gallop. “You can kiss me here.”

He brushes his lips against mine, softly at first, then more firmly, kissing me until a door opens somewhere behind us. Then he squishes me against his chest in a bear hug. “Okay, let’s do this. Ready to skate?”

“Nope.” I laugh nervously. “But I’m excited anyway.”

He takes me into the dressing room. Big fans are running, making it hard to hear him. He leans in. “That’s to air this place out to keep it from being too disgusting.”

“Great!”

He chuckles as he has me sit in his stall and take off my boots. He’s sourced a few pairs of skates in a couple different sizes. The first ones he tries on me are hockey skates, like his, just miniature in comparison. But they’re too small, so he

grabs the next pair. White figure skates, and these fit like a glove.

“Just had these laying about?” I ask as he laces them up.

He winks at me. “Sure did. How does that feel?”

I wiggle my ankles. “Nice and tight.”

He sits beside me and quickly gets his own skates on. Then he gives me a helmet to wear, and tells me to put my gloves back on, before he helps me stand. After a first wobble, I get the hang of walking in the skates, and we march to the hallway.

Instead of turning toward the practice rink I saw briefly yesterday, that Becca mentioned Hayden uses for their lessons, we go the other direction.

“Where are we...” But I know where he’s heading.

Down the slickly decorated hallway that proudly shouts Highlander Pride, and around the corner—I’ve seen this path on TV a dozen times now.

We’re heading to the main rink.

Where NHL games are played.

The lights are on, but the space is completely empty. We get to the open door in the boards, and Kieran steps onto the ice. I stop just short.

“It’s gonna be slippery,” he says with an encouraging smile. “But I’ve got you. And this is just the first lesson. We’re gonna take this nice and slow.”

“Says the guy who secretly put me on a friends and family list weeks ago without telling me.”

His smile just gets bigger. “The slow part there was in how I broke the news to you that you’re just that important to me.”

That makes me laugh. “As if I’m a wild animal you need to handle with kid gloves.”

He holds out his hands. “Oh, you’re a wild animal all right. Kissing in public and saying the dirtiest things in private.”

I reach for him. “I do not.”

“You do, too. And I like it.” He tugs me forward, and I have to step over the ledge to stay upright. But as soon as my foot makes contact with the ice, my front leg shoots forward, and I almost do the splits.

He catches me by the waist and hoists me back up.

My back leg comes on the ice, too, and then he’s turning me, so my back is against his front, and his arms wrap around my waist. “I’ve got you,” he murmurs. “Just get used to being on the ice. Feel it under your feet. Ready? I’m going to start skating. Slow as can be. Feel the power in your legs as we move, all right?”

What I feel is the complete opposite of power. My legs shake as he glides us forward.

“Skating is a side to side rocking motion. That’s what’s going to help you soar. Side to side. Push, and glide. Push, and glide. And then we stop.” His lips brush my cheek. “Can you rock back and forth for me?”

I blink my eyes open. We’re in the centre of the ice now. Really far from the boards. Oh shit.

But we aren’t moving. We’re just standing here, and he’s holding on to me.

I shift my weight from left foot to my right foot, slowly, finding my balance, then back again.

“Good. That’s really good. Look at you. Now lift your foot a little as you shift to the other side. Not backwards, but to the side and out. Yep, that’s it. Good girl. Look at you! Here, let me...” He doesn’t let go, but he somehow manages to do a big, sweeping circle around me, so he’s standing in front of me. And he grins again. “This is fun.”

“I’m shaking like a leaf.”

“Felt really good against my cock, too.” He winks as I gasp at him. “Come on. Show me what you’ve got. Push out and back. Good. Other foot. Strong little legs. I know how

strong they are. They like to wrap around me and not let go, don't they?"

My right foot skitters a little wide, and he catches me. "Don't distract me," I mutter.

Out and back.

Out and back.

"Why?" He rocks us both side to side now, his legs showing me the rhythm, doing what he wants me to do, only backwards. "If I tell you how much I like it when you beg for my come inside you, does that distract you from the fact that you're skating?"

"What?" I jerk my head up and look around. The boards are floating past us, because we're moving. "Oh my God!"

My feet lose their coordination, and Kieran doesn't miss a beat. He swings around, behind me again. Nestling me against him. "Strong little legs hold me deep, Harper. Greedy girl."

"I'm trying to focus here."

"I'm focused enough for both of us. Don't overthink it."

"Your ability to turn on the dirty talk is really remarkable, you know that?"

"Yeah? Thank you. You bring it out in me." He sounds genuinely pleased.

I think about that idea, that *I* might inspire him to be extra filthy. It makes me think of the Twitter meme, where you quote tweet something that seems unlikely, and add, *Big, if true.*

He reads my doubting mind. "You don't believe me?"

"It's just surprising."

"Which part? That you inspire it? That better not be it, Harper. You gotta know how fucking sexy you are."

I smile despite myself. "Thank you. But no. The other part. That it's not just your natural horny bear state."

“I have said things to you that I’ve never said to anyone else. Done things...you’re the only person I’ve ever given a battery operated bedtime assistive device to, for example.”

Battery operated bedtime assistive device. What? Oh. Heat wooshes through me. “That was really hot,” I whisper. “I liked you watching.”

“I liked me watching, too. We should do that again.”

I twist my head a little to the side. “I want to watch you.”

He grips me tighter, and I feel the press of a growing erection behind me, and my legs find a little more strength and control.

My pulse pounds in my ears as he whispers instructions to me. What I should do with my legs now. What I could do with my mouth later.

And before I know it, we’re skating again, and my legs don’t feel as shaky as before. We do a few more laps around the rink, then he points us to the gap in the boards. “All right,” he murmurs in my ear. “That’s enough for one day. You’ve made me hard as a rock. Love these leggings you wore today. They’d look even better around your knees and hooked over my head. Skate to the boards, and I’ll show you just how fast I can make your little pussy come.”

I focus on the boards. Push with my legs, strong. Out and back. I glide into them slowly enough that I don’t trip, and then I take a triumphant step over the ledge. “I did it!” I twist around, expecting to see Kieran right behind me.

He’s ten feet back, watching me proudly.

“You let go.”

“Knew you could do it.” He crosses to the boards in two powerful strides, then steps out. “Was that fun?”

My heart trips painfully as I nod.

His brow furrows, and he catches my chin with his fingers. “Was it a little overwhelming, too?”

“Maybe,” I whisper.

“You are always welcome here, understand? This part of my life is not off-limits to you. You are a very important part of my life and there are no walls between you and this space. You should have grown up at the rink. I’m sorry that you didn’t. We’re gonna fix that.”

And as he kisses me again, I feel a little broken piece of my heart notch back into place.

“There are other things you aren’t telling me,” I say to Kieran that night, as we make a stir fry together for dinner.

“What was the first thing I didn’t tell you, again?”

I stick my tongue out at him. “That you put me on some kind of secret security list.”

“It’s not secret.”

“But I didn’t know.”

“Because you hadn’t come to the arena on your own yet.” He leans in and kisses me, his lips very distracting before he gets us back on track. “But what else am I not telling you?”

“Shannon mentioned you’re planning a birthday party for a patient at the hospital.”

“Ah. That.”

I poke him. “Yes! That!”

“I didn’t want you to think it was about getting in your pants.”

I close my eyes and count to three. When I open them, he’s right in front of me, grinning. “Is this Isabella?”

“Yeah.” He pops a piece of green pepper in my mouth, probably so I can’t be lippy while he explains what’s going on. “When she was in the hospital, I was prepared to organize whatever care she needed for a safe trip to the arena, or, if that wasn’t an option, something closer to the hospital. I thought maybe we could do something at the university ice rink. But

then she was discharged, and her parents are telling me she's doing really well at home, so I think she'll be able to just come to a suite like regular guests. No biggie."

I finish the green pepper. "It's really nice."

"I like her family." He shrugs. "And I want to do more for the community here than I maybe did in my last two cities. I was pretty deep in my feels about my career, you know? But putting down some roots here and building ties to the community—that's just as important as playing a good game."

"So when is her birthday?"

"Next week. I *was* going to tell you."

"Sure you were."

He gives me a sheepish grin. "We've had a lot going on. But also, I didn't want you to think I was doing that to impress you. In the best way possible, that didn't have anything to do with you. It was just about her, and I wanted to make that happen on my own. And I was going to tell you, once we were in a good place. As more than friends, you know?"

Oh.

Yes, I know. Because *that* is exactly, very carefully, for me. How am I supposed to resist that?

Kieran really is a man who keeps his promises—to little girls, and grown women who have scared little girls hiding inside them.

I'm not supposed to resist him. That's become crystal clear. "If I can help with the birthday stuff, though..."

"Yeah?" He scoops me up. "Fuck yeah. If you want to, I'd love that." He breathes in deeply, then pauses.

And groans.

"Actually, while we're doing the full disclosure thing, I think there is something else I should tell you."

"What?"

He puts me down and gives me a sheepish look. “Do you have your phone?”

“It’s...” I glance around. “Not sure where I left it.”

One down side of a big house—there are more places to lose a phone.

“It might be in my den.”

I leave him with the last of the veggie prep and go in search of it. His den is one of the two rooms that he hired a decorator to finish before he moved in, and it’s really something. Walls of bookshelves, an ornate brass bar stand, and a huge TV opposite a tufted leather sofa, all anchored by a carpet that looks more expensive than my car.

He watched a game in here when we got home, and I curled up with my feet in his lap and read for a while—on my phone.

Sure enough, I left the sleek little device under a velvet throw cushion when we headed to the kitchen.

The screen lights up when I pick it up, and I’m surprised to see a Twitter notification. I haven’t been on the app for a few days, and I haven’t been picking many hockey fights lately anyway. Kind of busy with a real-life hockey situation. The only thing I tweeted today was a correction to someone else who said the Highlanders were getting shortchanged by Jack Benton because they don’t have a separate practice facility.

They have a practice rink inside the arena! And they aren’t the only team in the league with that set up. People are so weird.

I cringe as I see that I have a direct message. That can’t be good, since the only thing I do is shitpost about people’s bad hockey takes and they’re misunderstandings about the game.

I click in to the app. Sure enough there’s a DM from a Twitter account called `giga453852`, who I guess follows me, but I’ve never noticed them in my replies before.

But it’s not an attack.

giga453852

There's just something about the way you slay Twitter trolls that makes my horny bear sit up and take notice.

I slowly put my phone down and look up to see Kieran in the doorway. "Uh...is that you?"

"Yeah."

"You found me on Twitter?"

"This one, I swear, is a brand new secret. I didn't think it was you until yesterday, when you said you have an anonymous account. But I genuinely laugh at your tweets on the regular. And today's tweets sealed it for me."

"Quite the risky move, sliding into a girl's DMs and self-identifying as a horny bear."

"I was pretty sure this girl would know I meant it in only the most earnest of ways. Because we're meant to be. I was drawn to you even behind an anonymous Twitter account. Followed you weeks ago. Liked your sass."

"You already followed me?" I stand and cross to him.

He yanks me into his arms, his hands curving down to my ass in a possessive grab. "You are, at every turn, the woman for me. And I hope I can keep showing you that I am the right man for you."

Which makes me want to cry, and I don't *want* to cry, so I kiss him instead.

CHAPTER 35

KIERAN

I get the all-clear to play again just in time to go on the road. Which means I have two very time-sensitive tasks before we take off tonight: visit Isabella at home, and hire a publicist outside of the team.

I go back and forth on whether I'm being paranoid with the second to-do list item, until Isabella asks about Harper, and if she's agreed to be my girlfriend yet.

"That's private," I tell her.

"I think that's a yes."

I change the subject to my concussion. "Hey, so I had to spend a week resting my brain, just like you."

She gives me an exaggerated sigh. "Did they make you nap?"

"They did. But I like naps, remember."

"Yeah. Grown-ups are weird." She gives me a too-clever look. "Was Harper your nurse?"

She sure was.

And I change the subject again.

But if an eleven-year-old picked up on our chemistry, it won't take long for the world to notice. And the internet is a Whole Damn Thing. Plus, there are bots that scrape social media for any and all interactions. It would be just my luck for a rumour to get started that Kiley—my most recent mutual follow online—is my new girlfriend.

I would hope that both Harper and her best friend would think that's either funny or awkward or both, but if we can avoid it completely, that would be best.

Also at some point, I hope a good PR person can work with Harper to figure out what—if anything—she's comfortable with in the public space.

Can I take her to gala events? Can she sit in my seats at games? Will they keep an eye on the random WAGs content generating stuff to make sure Harper doesn't pop up there?

I'll pay whatever it costs to have them do their takedown magic if her name appears without her consent.

On my way home from Isabella's, I have a phone call with a publicist Shannon Tilman recommends. Publicists, because it's a team, and I like them all immediately.

By the time I get home, I'm ready to hire them. Almost. "I need to run this past Harper."

"Of course," the agency lead says. "If she wants to have a separate call with us, we can be available as needed."

"Thanks." I tap the garage door opener on my visor, then pull my truck ahead.

I expect my garage to be empty, because Harper's at work today, but her car is in the right-hand spot. *Her spot.*

I park and hurry inside. "Hey, you home?"

"Upstairs!"

I take the stairs two at a time. She emerges from the bedroom, wrapped in a towel and drying her hair, as I reach the landing.

"Everything okay?" I search her face.

She stretches one arm up and leans against the doorframe as she toys with the cinch on her towel with the other hand. "Everything is great. Thought I might surprise you for a quick goodbye before you leave."

I drop my phone on the carpet and cross to her, picking her up and carrying her all the way to the bed in a single motion.

“Not quick,” I growl. “I’m going to fucking miss you. We’ll take our time and say goodbye properly.”

“Even better.”

“And then I want to talk to you about hiring a PR team.”

“For what?”

“For you.”

“Kieran!”

“Shhh. We’re saying goodbye properly first.”

Three hours later, I stride onto the Highlanders plane wearing a midnight blue suit and brown tie Harper picked out from my collection.

And I’m not the only one returning from the injured list today. Tilman is right in front of me. He goes to the back of the plane.

Calhoun snaps his arm out and stops me. “Marshie.”

I sigh and put myself in the seat beside him. “What’s up?”

“You really aren’t a nickname guy, eh?”

I’m not about to get into how I hear my father’s dismissive voice in my head. Not with Calhoun. “It’s fine.”

“Lines are going to change.”

“Our lines *need* to change. Don’t get your head on the wrong way about this, bud.”

He makes a face. I don’t blame him for stressing. The fans and commentators alike are tearing us up, and team meetings have been tense.

So I really should stay off the internet. (Fifteen years of telling myself this, and I will never learn)

Not because I can’t handle the trash talking. I don’t love that, but it’s part of the game.

The more dangerous thing one might stumble across online, though, is the start of a rumour that should be quashed before it gathers any steam. And being in the terrible position of not being able to stop it, because unlike personal life stuff, publicists have limited power when it comes to the fandom side of hockey.

That's exactly what happens to me.

When Hayden pops his headphones on to watch a movie for the flight, I put on a hockey podcast—only to discover I'm the topic of conversation. And because it's like listening to a trainwreck, I cannot turn it off.

"In hindsight, I don't think we gave Kieran Marsh enough credit for what he did in Montreal."

"Probably not. It wasn't until Denny Robichaux got injured—and that was after the Marsh trade to Arizona—that we really saw the gaps."

"What do you think Marsh would say about that?"

"He's probably trying to convince Jack Benton to acquire Robichaux in a trade."

I snort. I like that they think I have the ear of the team owner for trade advice—or that Dick Dorrian would let that kind of over-his-head communication happen.

"Benton won't spend that kind of money for an overpriced, injured goalie."

"He might if Marsh and that injured goalie could inspire a team of rookies to go deep into the playoffs. And Makinen is in a slump. Gauthier is good as a backup, but they need more depth in goal."

Isn't that what I'm supposed to be doing with Tilman? How many superstars do we need to inspire rookies? Jesus.

"Big if."

"Sure is. But if they recreated some of that magic from Montreal, it wouldn't be an overpriced contract after all, would it?"

“From your lips to Benton’s ears?”

“Oh no. You aren’t blaming me if that happens. I’m just talking here.”

“Since we’re just talking here, what if the trade went the other way?”

“Which way? Marsh back to Montreal?”

“Why not? Get the gang back together for another shot at glory.”

“Both Montreal and Hamilton are going to be scrambling for a wild card spot.”

“It’s a long season. Anything can happen.”

“We say that in October. We say that in November. By December, some patterns start to set themselves in stone, and it’s better to be realistic and aim for the draft lottery instead of the playoffs.”

“Those are not words Kieran Marsh wants to hear, though.”

No, They really aren’t. Because if we aren’t going to make the playoffs, my name will be on a trade list.

Fuck.

It was always going to be a dice roll if we could make the playoffs this year. Most expansion teams are shit their first year.

When I agreed to sign a one-year contract with Hamilton, it was because I wanted an out. So if this doesn’t work out, I will get to decide where I go next as a free agent. Decide where, if not here, I might go to end my career and maybe just maybe land on a contending team again.

But that was before I found Harper again. Before a too-small apartment, and a too-big house—with too many chandeliers and a kitchen island at the perfect height for fucking. Before I bonded with this team, and started to think about what my legacy might look like if I retired happy.

No Cup, but not alone, either.

Maybe it's the need to prove to that I am worth every dollar in a full-price contract for next year—with a no-trade clause, since in my fantasies I get to be greedy.

But the next night, I'm on fire.

First period, Ottawa goes on the attack right away, putting pressure on our D-men, but our offensive line is fired up to fuck their shit up, too.

When a drop pass gets away from a guy beside me, suddenly the puck is mine. Armstrong is with me, two on one as we charge to the other end of the rink. I pass it to him, he passes it back, and I use the defenceman in front of me as a screen. Find the shot, snap my stick, and the puck careens into the net.

That's one.

Five minutes later, I've got the puck again. It goes right to Russ in the slot and the goalie doesn't have a chance. End of the first period, we're up two-nil, and both goals came from our line.

Second period, Watanabe adds a goal, and then Ottawa gets mad. Mad at him and Calhoun, and once we switch lines, the viciousness continues with me and Russ.

There's pushing, and shoving. Some slue-foot tripping bullshit, not that it helps them at all. We push and shove right back, all the way to their end of the ice.

I hack at the puck and it sails across the front of the slot, bouncing off someone's skate, and rattles into the net.

A fucking lucky goal, can't call it intentional, but we'll take it. Now it's a four-nil game, and I have two of those goals.

As soon as I'm on the bench, the coach is behind me. "Don't settle for two, Marsh. You've got the fire tonight. Go for the hat trick."

“That was a fluke.”

He laughs and bumps my shoulder. “That was getting your stick on the puck in every possible way. Do it again.”

Stick on the puck. Stick on the puck. It becomes my mantra, and Ottawa is viciously trying to do everything they can to keep me from making contact.

They score. And then they score again.

But deep in the third, with just three minutes to go, I snap my stick out and scoop up the puck from an offensive effort on their part. Another breakaway, and this time I’m alone.

Stick on the puck, the whole way down the ice. And then it’s puck on the stick time, a scoop and it’s in.

My first hat trick of the season. And a thousand career points is suddenly only ten points away.

They’re not going to trade me, I think as baseball hats and toques alike rain down on the ice.

Both teams take a pause while the ice crew haul out giant buckets to collect everything. The hats will be donated. “I want some of those for the kids at the hospital,” I tell the trainer behind me.

She nods.

I drag in a big, restorative breath.

All I have to do is play top-tier hockey, and everything will be fine.

CHAPTER 36

HARPER

While the Highlanders are on their road trip, I have a zoom call with the PR team Kieran wants to hire.

At first I was adamant that it had nothing to do with me. Then he explained all the ways they could help keep me out of the public eye.

So I agree to meet with them, because this is part of dating a hockey player.

And that's a thing I'm doing now.

From the first moment, they make it clear they are committed to being my anti-publicity team.

I take a deep breath, and explain everything about my family. My limited interactions with my father, and how I believe him to be a narcissist who forced my mother to change her name to his, only to leave us behind when he was traded to Los Angeles.

How she never received a cent of child support from him, and the mindfuck his lawyers had done to her in those early days. How young she'd been.

Over and over, I ask them to repeat for me that this was confidential, and they do every time.

“It's up to you, of course, but down the road, telling that story is an option. On your terms,” they say at the end of the call.

I shake my head. No, never.

“We can do a social media audit for you.”

“I don’t use social media under my legal name.”

“If you decide to set up any accounts, we can help with that. The big one to keep in mind is, be careful who you follow. Follow lists are weak points in the security chain.”

I haven’t even followed Kieran’s burner account back yet.

Which is something I think about a lot over the next few days.

Obviously, I don’t *mind* that Kieran figured out who I was on Twitter. But it’s slightly strange being not entirely anonymous, even if the only person who knows I’m **yourpucksucks** is someone I’ve come to trust completely.

So I find myself checking hockey news less often. I pour myself into work, picking up shifts while he’s gone, and rearranging my schedule requests to align with his time at home.

And I spend time with my mom. Her art show is less than a week away, and she’s finished her other school work for the term.

One morning, after a night shift, I meet her in a studio space on the university campus.

“I haven’t seen you in weeks,” she says, squeezing me hard. “What is going on with you?”

“I’ve been busy.”

She gives me a raised eyebrow. “With that mystery man who was in your bed early in the morning?”

Heat chases up my neck and swarms onto my cheeks. “Yes.”

“What’s going on? Where did you meet him?”

I wave my hand. “Not now.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want to see your pieces for the show!” I laugh. “Come on, just...”

“All right.” She hooks her arm through mine and leads me past some of her classmates’ sculptures to her paintings on the far wall.

I’d recognize them anywhere. She’s been painting my whole life, although she’s learned more technique this year than ever before.

She loves cityscapes. One painting is of Darnell, I’m pretty sure. A landscaper at work as dawn rises on a city in the distance. Another is of McMaster in the early dawn, with a student weighed down by a backpack in the foreground. And the third is...

“Is that me?” I crouch to look at the picture better. Someone in scrubs, dark head bent, hair curtaining her face. On a rooftop, with a line of traffic lights spilling out behind her—as if the painting was done from a certain vantage point on the hospital roof.

“Yeah.”

I cock my head to the side. “It’s so good. And really captures a rough shift.”

“You told me about this once. Going up to the roof to get some fresh air.” She looks both shy and pleased at the same time as I straighten up. “I talked my way up there last week to take a reference photo.”

“Mama! That’s so clever. And I could have taken you up there.”

“You’ve been busy.” She says it so casually, her hand waving me off in that way we do. Like it’s no big deal, because work is important.

But I haven’t only been busy with work.

“You didn’t text me...”

“No. No, I didn’t. I just...” She tugs at me, until I’m right against her and she can hug me. “Call it a mother’s instinct. I’m happy for you, sweetheart. It’s fine. And I got to surprise you with this, which is nice, right?”

I blink away silly tears. “Yep.” I kiss her cheek. “It’s wonderful. I can’t wait to fete you properly at the opening night.”

She laughs. “Lower your expectations. Our little art show is in an abandoned storefront at the mall.”

But it’s part of a larger string of festivities, and I know it’s going to feel like magic. “I can’t wait.”

Then Kieran comes home, and everything else fades away. He lands earlier than expected, so I’m still at my place. He meets me there and kisses me against the inside of my apartment door until I’m moaning his name.

And that’s the last thing I say until we’re done, because he growls non-stop filthy instructions, demands, and praise as we consume each other.

“Need to be inside you.”

“Need your scent on me.”

“Fucking missed the taste of you.”

“Get your fucking clothes off.”

“Who’s my good girl?”

“Mine. Fucking *mine*.”

And finally a long, happy exhale as he trails his fingers down my damp back. “I like coming home to you.”

We have a day off together, then I have a seven to seven shift the same day as their next home game. I tell Kieran I wish I could go, and promise to watch.

“There’s a ticket with your name on it for every game,” he says at quarter after six in the morning, as he puts his favourite toque on my head before I head out the door.

The earnest way he says it—and the delighted look on his face at my interest in attending—stays with me all day. So when my handover to the night nurse is quick, and I'm not exhausted, I decide to head to the arena anyway. I give my name at the will-call window and they print me a ticket, and I slide into a front row seat halfway through the first period.

I don't see Ani, Becca or Shannon, but recognize Roan Dodaj's father sitting just a few seats away from me, and I like watching him enthusiastically cheer on his son and the rest of the team.

"That's my boy," he yells out a thick Albanian accent when Roan throws gloves down just in front of us. "Show them how we do eet in Hamilton."

Kieran hustles over to help the refs break up the fight, and he gives me a big, surprised grin when he spots me. And for the rest of the game, he goes out of his way to tap on the glass in front of me or wave his stick in my direction whenever he can.

Nobody gives me a second glance, and it's kind of fun to have such an amazing seat and still be just an anonymous hockey girl, shlubbing it in scrubs and a parka. And the second line centre's toque. Plus I really like the feeling—whether it's true or not—that me being there gives Kieran a little extra something.

He's so fucking beautiful to watch on the ice. Dangerous grace and shocking speed. The way he accelerates when he sees a play *about* to develop is... It just takes my breath away.

I'm immersed in the game, so it takes me a minute to realize a couple of fans are arguing behind me about players not being tough enough to handle adversity, and my blood runs cold.

"Larry Roberts was a fucking legend," one guy says. His voice drips with admiration. "That guy was ten times the man of any of these young players today. He never took a personal day or any of that bullshit."

My stomach turns. It's a common enough last name, but I really hate the idea of anyone ever connecting me to Larry, and if Kieran and I keep going down this path—dating, I'm his girlfriend, why can't I say that yet?—then the fact people are still talking about my father in this arena means someone's going to make the connection to Kieran, too.

Hot, unwanted tears prick my eyelids.

At the far end of the rink, there's a penalty called, and I take this opportunity to duck out. I'm tempted to run away, to go home and text Kieran and tell him that I can't see him tonight.

But I picture him seeing my seat empty for the third period, and then seeing that text message.

I don't like the way it feels to even think about that. So I take a walk instead. I head to the stairwell, then climb up to the top level. I don't have a ticket for any of the seats up here, but it doesn't matter, they don't check. Some people have left early, and others have moved down, so there are lots of seats in the very back row. I throw myself into one that's got a bunch of space around it, and I let myself have a good old stupid cry.

For the little girl who never got to see her dad skate.

For the twelve-year-old who thought she'd get to fly to Europe by herself.

For the eighteen-year-old who showed up at a Roberts family reunion thinking everything might be different now that she was a grown-up.

And most of all for the twenty-eight-year-old who is falling in love with someone who deserves more than to be saddled with those ghosts.

I deserve more, too.

Then I go back to the main level, get a hot dog from the concession stand, and return to the friends and family section so I can cheer on my boyfriend's hockey team as they lose four to three in overtime.

But it feels like a win to me.

And when Kieran comes home that night, and slides into bed with me, he asks me how far out my shifts are scheduled.

I roll over and look at him. “Why?”

He gives me a long, careful look. “Thinking about the Christmas break.”

When he was concussed, he said he wanted to spend the holidays with me, but we didn’t come back to it. There’s been so much going on.

My heart drums a heavy beat against my ribs. “Those shifts are set. They were set in November.”

His face falls. “Ah, okay. I’ll remember that for next year.”

I reach up and touch his cheek. “I have five days off at Christmas. I pulled the New Year’s week of work this year. What do you want to do?”

I love how his expression immediately lightens, but he stays careful. “What are your plans with your mom?”

This feels like an early Christmas gift I can give him. “I’ll spend the twenty-third with her.” When he has a game in Philadelphia, because I’ve memorized his schedule. “And then she’s going away for a week with her boyfriend. He’s a teacher, so that’s his week off, and—”

Kieran kisses me, cutting off the rest of the explanation.

It doesn’t matter.

“What are we going to do?” I ask, breathlessly, when he finally releases me.

He presses his forehead against mine and grins. “Can it be a surprise?”

“Sure.”

“Do you have a passport?”

Holy shit. “Yes.”

“Good girl. All right.” He kisses me again. “It won’t be very long. I only have three and a half days off.”

“Whatever.” My pulse is racing. “It’ll be an adventure, right?”

“Fuck yeah.” He exhales happily. “It definitely will.”

CHAPTER 37

KIERAN

Two really shitty things happen the morning of Isabella's birthday.

The first is that she's readmitted to the hospital, putting our plans for her special party at our game that night on hold. Her dad's text promises that it's not an emergency, and she'll be happy to have a visitor in the afternoon.

The second shitty thing is that the "should Marsh be traded if the Highlanders can't get back up over .500?" conversation that has started to hum in podcast circles jumps over to mainstream hockey media.

The latter thing is total bullshit, and I know I shouldn't let it rattle me. Especially when there are more important problems in this world.

But the radio weather-slash-sports guy *really* wants to talk about it on my drive to the arena.

And when I check my phone during warm up before the morning skate, it's trending on The Scoreboard.

Great.

I fire off a quick text to Harper.

KIERAN

Hey, just ignore any chatter you see about me on the internet today, okay?

HARPER

What kind of chatter?

KIERAN

Anything. Stupid shit.

HARPER

You have a secret baby I don't know about?

Fuck. I tap her name. She picks up on the first ring, and I make myself sound as reassuring as possible. Light, with a touch of laughter, which hopefully hides the roil of nausea in my belly. “Nothing like that.”

“Okay.”

“It's...Hockey Twitter is having fun theorizing about shit.”

She's quiet for a moment. “I haven't been on Twitter much.”

I'd noticed that. “Today isn't a great day to go back. It's just...it's trade rumours. And they're noise. They don't make sense.”

“I should ignore it?”

“Please.” The clock on the wall ticks over. Two minutes until skate starts. “I have to go. Can't be late for ice time. See you at lunch?”

“Yep.”

Love you. It's on my tongue all the time now. This is not the moment to break it out. Maybe tonight. She needs to know how much my priorities fundamentally changed when I saw her again.

Sure, I wanted to be on a contending team. Would still love that—if this team can pull their shit together.

But there's no guarantee about anything. That's true for hockey, women, and love. And if I'm going to gamble on

anything, it's not going to be this game. It'll be on the girl.

I'm not an idiot.

If I leave Hamilton, I'll be leaving Harper behind. This is her home, this is where her mother is. Her friends, her job, her life. Her happy fucking life, that I bomb in and out of.

That first night together in Buffalo, I wanted to see her again. She didn't. I joked that planes existed for a reason, and she made it clear that was a non-starter.

I'm not about to suggest it again.

So after the world's shortest morning skate for me, I go looking for Dick Dorrian.

I find him huddled at the top of the arena with two of his AGMs, Hannah Stein and Werner Schmidt. Hannah and Werner give me warm smiles as they leave us alone.

Dick's a busy guy, and I don't want to waste his time. I take a deep breath. I have a list of things I want to say. *Don't trade me* is at the top, but that's fantasy talk. If he needs to, he will, and that's fine. *Let me come back* is next, but I can hear my agent howling in my ear at the sweetheart offer I'd need to make to ensure that stays on the table. *I'll retire before you can trade me* sounds churlish and ungrateful.

And I'm not ungrateful.

At all.

So I just go with what I know to be true. "Rumour mill has taken off."

He nods. "You bothered by that?"

"A bit." I exhale. "I don't think you're in a hurry to trade me."

"That's accurate."

"But come trade deadline time..."

He raises an eyebrow.

I shrug. "If I were you, I'd trade me then, if we weren't going to make the playoffs."

“Sounds like a reason to make the playoffs—if you want to stick around.”

“Yeah. I’m motivated, that’s for sure.” I look down at the ice, where some players are still on the ice. “I don’t want to move, Dick. It feels good, being here. Really good. I’m getting attached to the community.”

And some specific families inside this community, too.

Fuck, I’m rattled. I know it, and Dorrian knows it.

“So why let the rumours get under your skin? You know that’s just talk.”

I make a face. Then I say, carefully, “We haven’t found our footing just yet. But the team *is* coming together. In the dressing room, on the plane. You see that, right? Team meetings and even in our group chat. We want to figure this out so we can get more than two wins in a row. We’re focused.”

He nods. “We see that.”

“If it makes any difference...I can see this squad making it to the playoffs. If not this year, then next.”

He frowns. “Why not this year?”

I open my mouth. Close it again.

“Come on, Kieran. You came to find me. Why. Not. This. Year?”

“Too many injuries.”

“Yeah. Definitely a factor. What else?”

I glance around. It’s just us. “We need more structure. And we’re light on centres. But I understand the realistic limitations of our salary cap. The only reason to justify having three top centres is if we can pull the team together and have three solid offensive lines, night in and night out. So it’s a chicken or the egg thing, isn’t it? We need to play better before you consider buying us another hot centre before the trade deadline...but we need another body—and some better luck on the injuries front—in order to be playing better.”

He rocks back on his heels. “You angling for a job as one of my assistant GMs, Marsh? You know the cap numbers inside out, too?”

Maybe. I shove my hands in my pockets. “I’m not done playing. But I see the business side of it, too. Can’t help but learn the equations over the years.”

“I fucking hope you’re not done playing. But I like hearing your thoughts. They echo some of the conversations we’re having. And between you and me—because I know that you know things can and will change—we aren’t looking to be sellers at the trade deadline. You making the playoffs would obviously help. All right?”

“I appreciate that, sir.”

“Were you thinking of coming up here and telling me you’d take a pay cut to sign a no trade clause deal?”

“The thought occurred to me.”

“Your agent would lose her fucking mind.”

“Yeah. The thing is, I’ve met someone, and this is her town.”

“Hockey players get traded.” He frowns. “You sure a girl who doesn’t understand that is right for you?”

“She’s right for me.”

He claps me on the shoulder. “Be sure about that, son, before you go signing away millions of dollars on a romantic gesture.”

I stop at the drugstore on the way home. A new idea is rattling around in my head. If I can’t host Isabella at the arena, I can at least visit her and make that special.

But when I get home, my plans to ask Harper to cut my hair go out the window, because she’s doing yoga in my den, in the tiny shorts and little sports bra that turn off my brain and

activate the part of me that wants to growl and prowl and claim her.

I watch her move for a minute, her muscles flexing and stretching. She takes a deep breath, then exhales slowly, before turning her head.

“You’re staring,” she murmurs.

“Always.”

“How was the rest of practice?”

I tug off my Highlanders t-shirt and prowl towards her, gratified that her gaze goes glassy at the sight of my bare torso, the same way I turn to a feral man when she pushes her hips into the air. “Cleared the air with the GM.”

“What does that mean?”

I drop to my knees behind her and tug her shorts down. “Told him how important you are to me. How much I like playing here.”

She wiggles her hips. “Here?”

Fuck. Me. I put my hands on her and squeeze, loving how fucking warm her flesh is. How soft and sweet she feels under my hands, as I spread her wide open.

Every inch of her on display for me. Her sweet juicy pussy, her tight little asshole. *Mine*.

“Fucking love to play here,” I croon as I tilt her hips even higher so I can lick up the first evidence of her arousal. “And here.” I trail my tongue all the way up between her cheeks.

She trembles and then goes still.

My breath puffs against her back entrance. “This what you want, Harper? Want me to play here?”

Her breaths are loud and uneven in the quiet of my den.

I lick around her tight hole, savouring the taste of her, her scent driving me wild. *Mine, mine, mine*.

She rocks back, just a little, and I grip her hips tightly.

“Ask for it,” I whisper against her skin.

She whines. Her whole body is trembling now, tight and needy.

I sigh and pull away.

She gasps. "Please, Kieran."

I wait.

"Please lick me. Everywhere. It feels so good." She moans as I do exactly as she asks. "You make me want so much."

"Fuck yeah. Tell me what you want. I'll give it to you. Everything you want."

"I want you inside me."

I slide my fingers through her slick folds, making her buck against my face. Her clit strains, eager, when my fingers find it. Hard little bud on a horny good girl.

She keens my name again, a beautiful, aching whine.

I pinch her clit, making her asshole clench against my tongue, and I rear up behind her.

Fit my cock against her ripe little pussy, and rub my thumb against the warm, wet asshole I was just tonguing.

She loses it, thrusting back against me, taking what she wants. Me inside her, thick and throbbing. Nothing between us because there hasn't been anyone but each other since the very start. Because she's the one. There will never be another for me.

This wild, secret girl is my forever, and when I think about that for even a second, I'm flooded with primal need. As she spreads her legs wide, I take over, gripping her hips and lifting her against me. Holding her tight so I can fuck her hard, fuck her deep, and make her as desperate and feral as I feel.

"You're so snug around me," I growl. "Fucking wet, too. Hot and perfect. I never want to be outside your body."

"Fuck me forever," she breathes. "Love how you fill me up."

That makes two of us. Her fucking gorgeous hips and ass flare out around the tight, pink space I've invaded. My gaze drops to where our bodies meet. The wet, slick evidence on my cock when I pull part of the way out. The give of her flesh when I snap my hips forward.

How her body stretches around my cock, and my thumb, rubbing her tight rear hole again.

She whimpers at the return of that added pressure.

“You want me to fill you here one day?”

She cries out, an actual sob of need. “Kieran...”

“Need every inch of you, Harper.” I push my thumb harder against the tight sphincter, her ass fluttering and then giving way—and then pulling me into her, just enough to make her lose it.

She comes with a shout, her whole body grabbing on to me and not letting go. My balls churn for her, tighter and tighter until I'm dizzy with need, and then I roar my own release.

I hunch forward, burying my face in her hair as I rut my bigger body over and into her tightness. As I ride an orgasm that rips out of me, stealing my control and my thoughts. Leaving me only with possessive, simple feelings.

Mine.

Protect.

Home.

“I really like this room,” she mumbles after the last drop of come is milked from me, and I roll her over and brace myself above her.

I glance around, my chest heaving. Such a fancy looking room for an animalistic fuck. “It's not too stuffy?”

She shakes her head slowly, a loose, happy smile on her face. “Always wanted to feel like a princess.”

I'll buy her a God damn castle. And then rail her in every room to mark it with our scent. “Good. This is your yoga studio now.”

She yanks me down on top of her and squeezes me tight.

Laughing, I roll to the side, taking her with me, so I don't crush her.

"Never stop holding me tight," I murmur before kissing her.

"Same to you, Mr. No I Don't Have a Secret Baby."

"I panicked a little about you hearing the trade chatter," I admit. Which is true, but it's not the whole truth. I drag in a rough breath. "And I know you can't talk about patients, but I was worried about Isabella. It was a weird morning."

Her face softens, and her eyes turn to dark pools of understanding. "There's always layers, huh? Underneath our feelings?"

I nod, relieved that she understands. "But I'm just glad we can talk about it."

"Do you want to tell me more about the trade stuff?"

I shrug. "Do you find it interesting?"

She pokes me. "Yes. Everything about you is interesting."

I roll onto my back and tug her into my side. She lays her head on my shoulder and I explain, in as abstract and high-level a way as I can, about the multi-year process for building a contending team. How a good GM will layer existing talent with a deep prospect pool and quality draft picks. How all of that is constrained by the salary cap—both the maximum a team can spend, and also the cap floor—and the way teams who are looking to rebuild next year might dump high-value players before the trade deadline if it looks like the team won't make the playoffs.

When I finish, she props herself up and puts her hands on my chest, and her chin on her hands. She looks at me with solemn concern and says, "So what you're saying is you have to make the playoffs so we can keep having fun midday sex?"

I laugh. "Yeah."

She scrapes her lower lip through her teeth. “And right now you’re a few positions out of making the playoffs?”

“Yep.”

Her gaze goes steely. “You’ll do it. I know you will. Starting tonight.”

“Yeah? You going to be my lucky charm?”

She nods, her gaze never wavering. “Damn straight.”

CHAPTER 38

HARPER

After a shower, Kieran touches base with Isabella's family and decides a birthday visit is probably too tiring for her, but she'd probably be up for it tomorrow.

"Can you watch the start of the game tonight? If not, you can catch it on replay, but I'll make sure I get a pregame interview and send a good thought to her that way," I hear him say before he hangs up. "Sounds good. All right, hang in there."

I'm smiling when he turns my way.

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"All soft and appreciative. It makes me want to fuck you again."

"I don't see the problem with this plan." I giggle as he crowds me against the bathroom counter.

"We need to have a nap."

"Right. Yes."

"And I want you to cut my hair."

"Pardon?"

"I owe Isabella a matching haircut. Thought I'd surprise her tonight with a birthday shout out before the game. I bought clippers at the drugstore on my way home."

Well, that's just going to get him laid extra hard after the game tonight. My heart wants to burst, but I nod as casually as I can. "That's a great idea."

He grabs his new purchase, and then a stool from one of the empty rooms on the other side of the house.

Then he parks himself in front of the mirror in the bathroom. I stand behind him, clippers in hand. "Last chance to go get a pro to do this," I tease.

"Nobody I trust more."

I take a deep breath and turn on the clippers. It's a simple buzz cut all the way around. The sound fills the room as I run my fingers through his soft, wavy hair and start to buzz it away, cutting it short and even.

As I work, he watches me in the mirror, his gaze hot and intense. I blush. "Speaking of dangerously hot looks...*you* need to stop looking at me like *that*."

"Like I ate every inch of you until you screamed my name into the rug, and made you beg for my cock?" He grins. Unrepentant. Perfectly cocky.

"Mm-hmm. It's distracting."

"You're doing a great job."

I'm trying. I carefully trim around his ears and neck.

Finally, I turn off the clippers and brush away the loose hairs.

He runs a hand over his head. "What do you think?"

Gone is the sweet flow that gets all the buzz on the Highlanders TikTok account. In its place is a no-nonsense cut that looks like it could be regrowth after a head shave—or a ready for battle aesthetic.

"You look fierce." I meet his gaze in the mirror. "Isabella will be thrilled that you match. Now we need to eat and have a nap. You have a game to win tonight."

He grins. "I like that this is a team effort now."

“Team Kieran Stays In Hamilton. Damn straight.” I return his smile, but inside, my heart squeezes tight. If only that was within my powers to make happen.

When he leaves for the rink, three hours before the game starts, I drive downtown as well. I go to my apartment and have dinner with Kiley.

It’s started snowing, but it’s one of those nice, snow globe nights where the sky is quiet and heavy, insulating the city, so we decide to walk to the arena.

The city glows around us the whole way there. It only gets loud a block away, as people stream from the parking lots to the north and west.

“This makes up for missing the opening game,” she says as we settle into our seats—which are front row, to the right of the Highlander bench. Two rows in front of where I sat when Kieran saw me that first game of the season. The box that we were going to watch the game in with Isabella’s family has been donated to another family from the hospital who could make the trip downtown.

I don’t mind moving to these seats at all, and neither does Kiley, it looks like. “This is very cool.”

“I’m getting used to it.” I wave when I see familiar faces. Ani and Shannon arrive together, and right behind them is Becca.

“No Charlie tonight?” I ask as Hayden’s girlfriend takes the seat beside me.

Ani slides past us to sit next to Kiley, and Shannon takes the seat on the other side of Becca.

“My dad and stepmom came down to visit for a couple of days with my baby sister, so they volunteered to be on bedtime duty for both kids.”

“How old is your sister?”

“Almost one.” She laughs at my expression. “I know. It’s a whole story. Kerry was actually my midwife and they met at my first prenatal appointment. Slightly awkward when I finally found out he was gone for her, but he kept that to himself until after Charlie was born.”

“Long time to keep a secret.” Not quite as long as two years, but higher stakes.

She nods. “He was really cute when he told me they were going on their first date. All nervous—and you have to understand, my dad is a big guy. He’s got three inches and at least thirty pounds on Hayden. He’s a teddy bear on the inside, but looks pretty growly. Nervous is not his usual look. But it was a really big moment, because he wasn’t asking my permission. He was going on a date with her whether I liked it or not. That was how I knew it was serious.”

I swallow at the unexpected similarities to my own situation. Except I was still on the haven’t-told-my-mom-yet side of being nervous. “How did you react?”

“I told him not to break her heart.”

I press my hand to my chest. “That’s really sweet.”

“I love Kerry. She’s exactly what my dad needed. He was really silly to think I’d have had a problem with it, but whatever.”

And that’s where the similarities end. I meet her smile and shove those thoughts away.

From the other side of Becca, Shannon leans forward. “Oh, Harper...Ani and I are taking Becca to a day spa tomorrow, while her family is in town to watch Charlie. Would you like to come?”

She names a spa that is way outside my wax-at-home budget.

“I have to work tomorrow,” I say regretfully, but on the inside, I’m grateful for the excuse.

“Another time,” Becca says. “This will be my first ever fancy pampering thing, but they promise we’re going to go

monthly.”

Shannon holds her finger up to her lips, like it’s our secret. “We do so freaking much for them, it’s the least we deserve. And I put everything on Max’s credit card, so don’t worry about that.”

Ani leans in conspiratorially. “The spa has wine with lunch.”

Kiley clears her throat. “*I’m* not working tomorrow, so...”

They all laugh.

“No, yeah, absolutely,” Shannon says. “We need a bigger girl gang, anyway. This team doesn’t have enough wives and girlfriends yet.”

The team skates onto the ice for warm up. I lean over to Kiley. “She makes a good point. Most of those guys are single. And at least a dozen are probably straight.”

She nods. “Mm-hmm.”

“What are you not telling me?”

Her cheeks stain pink. “Uh...nothing?”

“Not nothing. Have you met someone?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

She sinks lower in her chair. “Grant’s dating app advice worked a little too well. I’m now picking up guys left and right. So I’ve committed to a super slutty year of online chatting and one-night stands only, no exceptions.”

“Excuse me?” I hiss back at her. “How well is too well? And I thought we had a bestie code where we told each other about the good lays.”

“They haven’t exactly been *good*. Nice! Some have definitely been nice. But you voided that bestie code by not telling me about the very good, very famous lay, remember?”

I remember. “That’s in the past. This is the present. Spill.”

“Can’t. We have a hockey game to watch.” She points at the ice. “Kieran’s looking at you.”

My heart does the usual happy wiggle when our gazes meet. Then he glides to the edge of the ice and tugs off his helmet.

“Hey, did he buzz off all of his hair?”

“Yeah. Oh! He’s doing a thing now!” I tap her arm and point as he puts on a broadcast headset and looks at one of the TV cameras.

We watch him talk to someone on the other end of the broadcast, back and forth for a minute or two. Then he waves into the camera, takes off the headset, and re-dons his helmet.

“What’s the thing?”

I go to The Scoreboard app on my phone—because now I’m the girl with *that* subscription—and find tonight’s broadcast. Rewind a few minutes, and hand it to Kiley, along with one of my wireless earphones so we can actually hear it over the excited chatter in the stands.

I prop my chin on her shoulder and watch as Kieran explains that his haircut isn’t a superstition thing, but an homage to a new friend he made at the children’s hospital. “There are some really brave, fierce little people going through long recoveries. I had a nurse give me the same zip zip than my friend Isabella got, because a little birdie told me she had my haircut for a hot second on Halloween, before taking it all off for treatment. And today is her birthday.” Now we see the wave he gave the camera, from the other angle. “Happy birthday, Isabella. You’re one year closer to appreciating naps!”

The announcer chuckles. “Sounds like there’s a story there.”

Kieran grins. “I’m discovering that one of the most important roles a hockey player can have is being a nap ambassador. An emissary or a go-between for parents and health care workers who need to sell kids on the value of rest.”

They ask him a bit about his concussion recovery, and then he signs off.

Kiley hands me back my phone. “He’s a pretty good guy,” she says.

Yeah. He really is. The most pretty good guy I’ve ever met.

It’s a rough game. A good game, and a terrible game when they get behind by two goals. But then they score, and score again, and it’s tied again with ten minutes left in the third period.

Holy crap, my pulse is pounding.

The Calhoun, Tilman, and Hale line comes off the ice, and the other team uses the switch time to put pressure on the Highlander defence of Jovanović and Mitchell. There’s a battle for the puck, and Andrew Mitchell is knocked into the boards just in front of us.

I leap to my feet to see the action.

Mitchey snaps his stick out, managing to keep the puck with him, but the other team’s big, brutish fourth-line forward is after it, too.

And then Kieran’s there, too.

They’re all jammed up against the boards, kicking and hacking at the puck, none of them giving an inch.

There’s grunting, and someone is yelling that the puck is still loose.

And then the jackass from the other team *kicks* Kieran, and that’s not allowed, and it’s also dangerous.

“Hey!” I scream, slamming my hand on the plexiglass. “Stop that, you fucking goon!”

He ignores me, because he’s a professional athlete who is trained to ignore fans. And maybe because it’s hard to hear me

through the glass and over the noise.

Someone behind me, though, tells me to sit down.

I ignore them, because I'm a brand new hockey girlfriend who does not want her boyfriend *kicked* by a *knife blade*. I scream at the ref, who does nothing, but then a stick catches Mitchey on the cheek—oh my God, that's *blood*—and the whistle goes.

Maybe I don't need to sit quite so close to the ice next time. Or only for the games when they play elegant teams instead of teams filled with mean bruisers.

Apparently, the person grumbling behind me agrees. "Hey, sweet cheeks, you're prettier with your mouth shut. And your ass in the seat."

"Excuse me?" I spin around. Sure, maybe I got caught up in it, but people stand at hockey games all the time. And yelling is normal, too, so what the actual fuck?

"You don't need to yell quite so fucking loud." He leers at me. "You can make it up to me with a kiss."

"I—"

There's a hard crack against the glass behind me and this guy's face goes white.

I glance over my shoulder and see Kieran staring bloody murder at the jerk.

His gaze slides to me and his expression goes soft. It doesn't matter that there are fifteen thousand other people in this arena right now, because that look on his face is *mine*. I put it there, and I love it.

"You okay?" he asks, loud enough for everyone in the nearby vicinity to know that if my answer is no, he's coming over the boards, plexiglass be damned.

"I'm good." I toss my hair over my shoulder. "Being *real* fucking loud."

"That's my girl." Then he snaps his gaze back to the asshole behind me. "Leave her alone," he snarls. "Or get the

fuck out.”

Then he takes off again, because he has a game to play.

I turn back to the heckler. “Anything else to say?”

From the sour look on his face, I’m guessing that’s a no.

A minute later, a security guard appears at the end of our row, and stays there until the Highlanders win in overtime. Another grind of a game that went past regulation time, but tonight they finish on top.

Thirty-three games down, twenty-nine to go until the trade deadline.

And for the one hour I get to see Kieran after the game, before he leaves for the airport and another road trip, I breathe easier than I did all day.

CHAPTER 39

KIERAN

After that game at home against Boston—where Harper lost her shit on them for pushing the limits of rough play, which, to be honest, was one of the hottest things I’ve ever seen—we find a new inner toughness ourselves, as a team.

Roan Dodaj, already making fans happy with his willingness to toss off the gloves, levels up his smack talk and his smackdowns.

When one of the Vancouver forwards slams into Makinen in our net, Mitchey rightly shoves him hard. It’s a clean hit, just protecting our goalie, but the fucker grabs Mitchey’s collar and won’t let go.

I force myself between them, and get an arm around the neck for my efforts.

Dodaj slams into the mix, says, “You have three seconds to let go of him,” which gets him a terse f-bomb.

“Three. Two.” Roan snaps his arm between us and drags the guy off me, then cocks a fist off his jaw, sending him down to the ice.

I pull him back as the refs approach. “All right, we’re done here, no drama.” Then under my breath. “You didn’t give him the full three seconds.”

Roan grins. “Asswipes like him don’t deserve a fair heads-up.”

“Attaboy.”

We help Mitchell up and skate to the bench, getting almost all the way there before Dodaj is diverted by a ref to the penalty box.

Calhoun swaps with me, then spins past the sin bin to give him a high five against the glass. “Way to have their backs, Roanie!”

I’m laughing as I grab a drink bottle. I rinse out my mouth, then yank off my gloves. “Can I see that play?”

One of the coaches hands me one of our bench iPads, in its oversized rubber case. The video is already cued up, and I just have to tap play.

On the ice, the Vancouver players are still beaking off about how more penalties should be called, but nah, that’s bullshit.

That night, Harper texts me as I’m eating with some of the guys in a private conference room at the hotel, a late second dinner arranged by the team. It’s late in Vancouver, which means it’s middle of the night in Hamilton.

HARPER

I don’t like the fighting when you’re in the middle of it.

I text her a picture of me, next to Roan.

KIERAN

Look at us, both unharmed, just eating hotel catering like winners. Are you on break?

HARPER

Yep. Just watched the highlight reel while I scarfed a seven-grain salad.

KIERAN

It's almost like we're having dinner together.

HARPER

Almost. Miss you.

KIERAN

Miss you, too.

KIERAN

If we were normal people with 9-to-5 jobs, we'd be asleep right now.

HARPER

Well that's boring.

KIERAN

Of course, if we were asleep right now, we could wake up all sleepily and have middle of the night sex.

HARPER

That's not boring.

KIERAN

Never gonna be boring between us, Jersey Girl.

By the time I get back to my room, she's well finished her break, but I slowly stroke myself as I read back through our messages.

When I fall asleep, it's to slices of thoughts about the future, and finding time together when the career I've chosen drags me away from her so fucking constantly.

After a day off in Vancouver, where it's warm enough to go for a run along the sea wall, we head south to Seattle, then to Los Angeles.

The West Coast trip will take almost an entire week. Then we're home for two days, one of which has the Highlander Ball, a charity gala I haven't really been tracking, other than I'll be expected to show up and spend money, and the other has our final home game of the season. That starts a back-to-back against Philly, and the next day we fly to their barn for the second game on the twenty-third.

Then it's a short break for Christmas, and I'm going to make the most of it with my girl.

While we're on the road, I'm making plans. Travel details, accommodations. I even order clothes for her, so she doesn't have to pack anything other than universally needed essentials like her birth control pills and her toothbrush.

We win as many games as we lose, which we're pretty happy about, but the Twitter fandom isn't thrilled.

And I notice Harper's burner account liking a lot of comments about it not being good enough. Which I know better than to engage with. Let the fans be fans, and we just play the games.

But she's my girlfriend.

And I'm worried her likes are a little red flag about bigger doubts she isn't sharing with me.

So like a dummy, I bring it up on a phone call from my hotel room in L.A.

"Hey, so stuff on Twitter..."

"I know, just ignore rumours." She's putting away groceries as we talk. "It's fine."

"Are you sure? Because Twitter suggests tweets you've liked, and they're all a little...panicky."

She's silent on the other end.

"Harper? You there?"

"Yeah. Uh..." She sighs. "Maybe you shouldn't follow me, then? If it's getting in your head?"

"It's not—" I sit up straight and discard the ice pack I was using on my chest, where I blocked a shot last night. "Hey, sorry. Let's start this over again. *I'm* fine. I just wanted to make sure you weren't worried about our record on the road."

"My handle is **yourpucksucks**. I like all sorts of things, and none of it should be taken too seriously."

I frown. "But I took all the enthusiastic stuff seriously. Why wouldn't I—"

"Because it's just Twitter! It's just shitposting!" She sounds exasperated.

"I shouldn't have brought it up."

"No, it's fine. It's..." She exhales. "It really is fine. Sort of weird, that I know you can see me being a feral fangirl, you know? But that's not why I'm grumpy."

"You're grumpy?" I tease, trying to lighten the mood.

It doesn't work. "My mom's art show is four days away. I've been using it as an excuse to not tell her about us, but that's coming to an end. If I don't tell her before we both leave for the winter break, she'll be pretty mad at me."

I think her mom is going to be irritated one way or another, and Harper should just do whatever feels right, but I'm not going to say that out loud. "What do you need? What would help?"

"I'm just avoiding this. Hardcore, which makes me anxious."

"I took the coward's way out with my family. Texted them with regrets that I'm not able to come home for the holidays. Zero explanation."

She laughs. "Oh no. That's... Will that come back to bite you in the ass later?"

“Eh, maybe. And then they’ll get over it. That’s the thing about putting stuff in the rearview mirror. It gets smaller, you know?”

“Is that some top-tier sports psychology?”

“Maybe.”

She takes a deep breath. “How do you feel about being traded from Montreal now?”

The question surprises me. “Huh. You know what? I honestly haven’t thought about it in months.” Two months, almost exactly. “Since the season opener. Since I saw you.”

“Oh, come on.”

“No, seriously. Everything changed in that moment. Everything I wanted. Everything I thought I knew. I don’t remember what I thought was important before you, but from that moment, I knew with absolute clarity that I was meant to find you again. And all the waiting was worth that moment. The miserable months in Anaheim. Fuck, I’m in California again, and I haven’t even thought about how much I hated playing here. It’s all just a part of the journey to you now. So yeah. All of that is way fucking smaller in the rearview mirror.”

She’s silent again.

“Harper?”

And she starts crying.

Fuck. Me.

“Hey, avocado.”

“What?” She snuffles. “No, I’m fine.”

“Maybe I’m not. So I’m using my safe word.”

“That’s not what that means.”

“Sure it is. Let’s have a little timeout.”

“I’m *fine*.”

“You’ve used that word a lot today.” I hate that we’re doing this on the phone. I don’t know why, exactly, but I think

this conversation is about to go sideways. “I don’t want to have a fight.”

“We’re not going to have a fight.” But her voice sounds tight.

“Can we switch to video?”

She hesitates.

“Harper?”

Now her voice gets small. “Okay, I’m a little upset. But it’s not you.”

I tap the video call button.

She accepts, and the video pixelates for a second, then she comes into view. “I told you I was grumpy.”

Her eyes are red.

“Grumpy and upset aren’t exactly the same thing, though.” I cross to the desk so I can prop the phone up and keep icing my bruise.

Her eyes go wide when more of me comes into view. “What happened?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

“I didn’t watch last night,” she says softly. “You didn’t say...”

“I blocked a shot. That’s all. We were talking about you.”

She made a face. “Not willingly.”

“Humour me?”

She laughs, but it’s not funny. It’s sharp and a little wounded. “I don’t like unpacking it all, okay? It’s hard to say out loud, because it feels petty and small and insignificant. And I know most of it is childhood trauma stuff, echoing into our relationship, and I *hate* that. I want to shove it into a box and lock it up under the bed.”

“Oh. Yeah. Okay.” I give her a lopsided grin. “That’s fair.”

“I miss you,” she whispers. “That’s part of it.”

“Road trips are hard, and this is a long one.”

“You’re so far away.” Her voice is full of longing.

And then it hits me. Fuck, I’m a dummy.

I’m in L.A.

Where her father went when he abandoned her. The land of supermodels and actresses—and he married one of each, after getting a quiet divorce from Harper’s mother.

The PR team I hired built a really robust dossier on Larry Roberts so nothing would catch them by surprise. The guy is a narcissistic piece of work who, despite his legendary status as a player, can’t get work at the highest pro level anymore, because he’s a toxic mess.

“Hey, I miss you, too.” I put the ice pack down and reach out to touch her face on the screen. “Can I say something kind of heavy?”

“What?”

“I’m not your father.”

Her face falls. “Fuck. Fuuuck. I know. I know that, Kieran. Seriously. I do.”

“Maybe we just need to name it sometimes. Like...when I’m in Los Angeles, for example. It’s okay.” I hold her gaze, wishing so fucking hard we were together for this conversation. “I’m never going to cheat on you. I’m not going to leave you. And I don’t care if this comes up sometimes. If you need reassurance that I’m just hanging with the guys, or in my hotel room—alone. That’s fine.”

She screws up her face, then nods.

“I think we were destined,” I say quietly. Seriously. “So I’m going to do the hard work and stand in the storm with you.”

That earns me a soft, small smile. “Shouldn’t destiny be easy?”

“Where’s the fun in that? I’ve had it easy for a long time. It wasn’t enough. It wasn’t you.”

She sucks in a big breath, and just as she's about to say something, there's a loud knock at the door. "Marshie!"

"Fuck off!" I call back.

"It's okay," she says, giving me a brave smile. "Go. We can talk later."

"I'm doing some interviews this afternoon." And with the time difference, by the time I'm done, she'll be at work.

I've put her schedule in my phone, and I look at it multiple times a day, figuring out when the next opportunity to talk to her is.

"Then we'll text." She blows me a kiss. "Go. Be awesome. And I can't wait to see you in a few days."

The next day we play L.A., then the day after that we play Anaheim, before packing up to crawl onto the plane at midnight on the West Coast.

A red eye flight home isn't ideal, but it's a Sunday night a week before Christmas. Guys just want to get home, even if it'll be at seven on a Monday morning by the time we land back in Hamilton.

I'm just giving the equipment guys the last of my gear when my phone vibrates.

HARPER

Amazing game.

KIERAN

You're still up.

HARPER

Couldn't miss seeing you fly down the ice like an avenging god.

KIERAN

That was a good breakaway.

HARPER

The best. I love you.

I stare at the screen. More dots appear.

HARPER

I shouldn't have said that in a text the first time????

I glance around. Jenson is closest. "I need a minute for a call. If they get antsy on the bus, I'm...on my way."

Then I jog down the hall, looking for a private room. I push into a space used by our therapists earlier. Now fully cleared out. Our team moves fast.

I tap Harper's name, my heart pounding in my chest.

She answers. "Hi."

"I love you, too." I laugh. "Oh, fuck, it feels good to say that out loud."

She laughs, too. "Yeah, it does. I love you."

Fuck. My whole chest feels like it could explode. "Wanted to say that for a while."

"Me, too. I was scared."

"I know."

"You make me so happy. And that makes me feel just... fearless."

"Good." I lower my voice. "You are the best. I'm getting on the plane soon. Where are you?"

"Your place." She lowers her voice, too, which makes me smile. "In your den. Kind of worked up."

I groan. “Do something about that. Right there, on my couch. And then do it again upstairs in my bed.”

She giggles. “Okay.”

“Good girl.” I take a deep breath. “See you in six hours or so.”

On the flight, I try to sleep, but I can’t. I scroll Twitter and listen to some hockey podcasts. I think about deleting my Twitter account, so it won’t be weird for Harper, but decide to lean into how much I love her instead. Instead of **giga453852**, my name there is now **jerseygirlcrush**. And I make a bio, too, just so she knows exactly where I stand.

Deeply in love with a hockey fangirl. Only here to make sure she knows that.

When we land, I drive home as if in a dream. Let myself in, and quietly go upstairs, where I find her curled around my pillow, her dark hair spilling like silk.

I strip down, then ease in behind her, gathering the strands of her silky hair and tugging it out of the way so I can kiss the back of her neck and her bare shoulder.

She squirms as I lift the blanket, but stays asleep. I wrap my arm around her waist, tugging her sleepy softness against me. She slept nearly naked in my bed. Only a soft cotton pair of panties cover her, and those are riding low on her warm hips.

I love you. Harper watched my game, and in an excited outburst, broke the dam we’d both been holding up out of a sense of...what? Fear, I suppose. Fear that our feelings wouldn’t be returned.

She loves me.

“I love you so much,” I breathe into her hair as fatigue starts to drag me under. And then I fall asleep, bone-tired and

desperate for the kind of rest I haven't had since I last slept with her in my arms.

I dream of outdoor hockey games. The slap of sticks and delighted laughter. Harper reluctantly joining in, and then gamely holding her own in a face-off against me. Murmuring something I don't quite catch, but it sounds dirty, and I like it a lot.

Pink cheeks and dark eyes.

A table surrounded by people. But the only one I can see clearly is Harper at the other end, sharing a secret smile with me. A smile that says she can't wait to go to bed, can't wait to be alone. Can't wait to make love.

I dream of the kind of forever I think a younger Kieran Marsh might have wanted once, before realizing that family isn't all its chalked up to be if you don't meet your parents' expectations for anything. And I wonder how my life would have gone if I hadn't been so busy proving myself to parents who had never cared.

Can't be sad that I didn't realize how fucking amazing love is before I turned thirty-five, though. Maybe I was meant to wait for Harper.

And then my dreams slide past the wholesome goodness, to hornier need. To soft lips brushing over my chest, and my hands pulling, guiding, pushing her to where I want her. Her silky hair brushing against my belly, and her tongue—

“Harper,” I groan.

“Mmmm.”

My cock is hard, dripping seed, but it's not spilling against my belly because her mouth is wrapped around it.

I blink my eyes open to a vision. Harper kneeling between my legs, the blankets in a tangle.

Her mouth is warm and wet, fucking perfect, and when she realizes I'm awake, she slides up my body. "Missed you," she whispers as she straddles my hips, fitting us together.

I growl as she sinks onto me, then I grip her hips and hold her still. "You have a wicked little mouth."

"Mmmm." She smiles, pleased.

"But I want you to use it for something else." My eyelids are still heavy, and the wild arousal gripping me doesn't help. I drag her down on top of me so I can feel every inch of her soft skin against my flesh. "Tell me again."

She smiles, a brilliant flash of wonder, and then her expression softens. Serious and perfect. "I love you," she says, careful and precise.

I crush her to me, our mouths fitting together just so. A hard kiss full of need and promise. And then I begin to move her against me. And with each pleasure-filled roll, I tell her just how much I share that love. "Love you, too," I say as I bury myself inside her. "Forever."

CHAPTER 40

HARPER

Three things happen the day before my mom's art show.

I get added to a group chat with Shannon, Becca, and Ani. They invite me to an afternoon of pampering at Ani's house the following afternoon—for a charity ball I'm not going to, because of the art show. And they don't take no for an answer.

ANI

You don't need an excuse to be pampered!

BECCA

We need a fourth person for balance anyway.

SHANNON

Wear a button-down shirt so you don't mess up your make-up when you change for the art show thing. Which sounds like maybe even more fun than we're going to have? So send us snaps!

ANI

What she said.

BECCA

And invite us to the next one.

I'm at work when this all goes down, my second last shift before the holiday break, and I make myself put my phone

away after saying yes, I'll come over and visit.

Then I pull it out again and text Kieran quickly.

HARPER

How late is your event tomorrow night going to go? I'll be dressed up for my thing, too...we could go somewhere fancy for drinks after?

KIERAN

I'll leave the second you're free.

HARPER

No rush.

KIERAN

Always a rush.

KIERAN

If you were coming with me, it might be fun. Since you can't, it'll be a Thing I Have To Do (and I'll do it with a smile because it's for a good cause). But I'll definitely be counting down the minutes until I get you alone in a dark, sexy cellar bar.

Ani and Jenson live a block and a half away from Kieran, in a house that is so similar, it feels familiar when I step inside—except now I understand why Kieran feels like his place is under furnished.

Ani's personality is all over the entryway. The star of foyer is a large Six Nations of the Grand River Territory map, overlaid with a red stamp that says, *You Are Here on Native Land*. Surrounding that heavy wood-framed piece are other art

pieces, small mirrors, and a couple of framed hockey pucks, and above all of that are a collection of travel posters, bright and cheerful.

“This is gorgeous,” I say reverently, gesturing up the impressive wall. “I love your style.”

“It’s a work in a progress.” She takes my coat and disappears into the room that is Kieran’s den at his house. I follow and discover a craft room. A tall, heavy wood table is in the centre, and bookshelves, loaded with supplies, line every wall, except the one with the window. Where Kieran has heavy curtains on his, Ani has a big, built-out window seat, and there are piles of books at one end and a mound of cushions at the other.

She hooks my jacket on a coat rack just as laughter breaks out from deeper in the house. She gives me an excited smile. “Come on through to the kitchen.”

Shannon claps her hands when she sees me. “You made it!” She gives me a one-armed hug, welcoming me into the group around the kitchen island. “This is my stylist Jess, and Magda and Kieu who work with her. They’re our aestheticians today. Do you want some cucumber and mint water?”

“Sure, yes, thank you...” I greet them all, then Becca, who hands me a glass of ice water.

And then when Shannon and Jess return to their animated conversation, Becca leans over and whispers, “I don’t have a stylist.”

I smother a laugh and take a sip of water. Then behind the glass, I murmur, “Is it that obvious that I’m a little out of my depth?”

“You and me both. I grew up in a town of six hundred people and my aunt does my hair in her salon-slash-real estate office.”

I flick a surprised glance at her perfect tresses. “Seriously?”

“What? Small towns can have cool hairdressers.” She grins. “They just need to also be the local real estate agent.

And run the high school business club.”

I laugh out loud at that. “Your aunt sounds cool.”

“She is.” Becca sighs happily. “But I’m not gonna lie, it’s fun to be pampered by someone who doesn’t go home to my uncle at the end of the day. I might even go for a full...” She mimes a Brazillian bikini wax.

Oh. *Oh*. “Is that...can we...” I glance at our new friends. “What services can we...”

Kieu hands over a card. “This is everything we’ve brought supplies for. Magda’s set up in one room upstairs, and I’m in the other. Make up will be last, and some hair setting should happen first, but in between we can wax anything, do nails, you name it.”

“Anything,” Shannon repeats.

“Anything,” Becca breathes, clearly excited.

And I think about the mystery trip Kieran’s taking me on in a few days. Anything and everything sounds like a great idea.

While Shannon and Becca get their hair set in rollers, Ani gives me the rest of the tour of her house.

They have a huge entertainment room in the basement, with two pool tables and a few vintage arcade games.

“Have you been to the bar in Hess Village?” I ask. “Kiley and I went there a few months ago. Kieran rode in to rescue me when I texted him after one too many tequila shots. I’ve been meaning to go back.”

She claps her hands together. “Double date?”

“I’d really like that.” And I mean it.

“So what is this art show that you’re going to tonight?”

I tell her about my mom going back to school. “This is her first show. It’s a big deal. And Kieran and I are still...new, you know? I’m not in a rush to do the whole *official plus one* thing to hockey events. No offense.”

She shrugs. “None taken. I’ve been with Jenson since high school, so it wasn’t something I was dumped into the deep end on. Same with Becca, right? And Shannon was already in this space when she met Max. None of us know what it’s like to suddenly start dating a Hall of Fame destined player when he’s already famous.”

“He hired a PR team to coach me on how to be online.” And other things. “It’s a lot. I’ll come to next year’s Highlanders Ball. Probably.”

“The way he looks at you? Count on it.”

I fill in the rest of what she means. It’s fine to be private at the start of our relationship. But we’re not just fooling around. We love each other.

At some point, that’s going to mean walking in the light, holding his hand, and dealing with the drama that comes from that visibility. My carefully constructed private cocoon is no longer the only entirety of my life.

Now a big part of my life plays hockey on TV four or five nights a week, in front of millions of people.

Four hours later, I return to Kieran’s house polished from head to toe. He takes one look at me and presses me up against the wall.

“Don’t mess anything up,” I whisper as he braces his arms on either side of me and just...*looks*.

“I won’t.” He rakes his gaze up and down me. “Wish you were on my arm tonight.”

“I was thinking about that.” I take a deep breath. “Soon. Not...now. But...soon.”

“Whenever you’re ready.” He carefully unbuttons my shirt, stopping halfway down the row. He flicks the shirt open, just enough to circle my nipple with his fingertip. “Harper, when

you don't wear a bra, it's very, very hard to not mess you up when I discover you like this."

"Mmm."

He pinches the eager tip, making me squirm.

Then he lets go. "Something for us both to look forward to tonight, then."

I gasp as he grins and saunters up the stairs.

I chase after him, but he won't be swayed. No messing up, that was the rule.

"Pretty sure we could carefully fool around."

"Mmm." He nods, echoing the sound I made downstairs. "But I like the idea of you being a little frustrated. A little... needy."

My breath catches in my throat. "I'll be thinking about you all night."

"Good." He catches me by the back of my neck, his fingers carefully tucking under my sleek, flat-ironed waves. He holds me still for a moment as he smiles down at me. "Fuck, you're pretty."

Then he spins me around and points me to my closet. Half my clothes are here now, including the outfit I've picked out for tonight. "Get dressed. I'm hopping in the shower."

CHAPTER 41

KIERAN

I'm not going to lie, I don't really know what's going on at this gala, other than I bid on—and won—another Christmas present for Harper. I caught an Uber with Jenson and Ani so I could have a drink or two, and that turned into three.

Which has to be my limit, because as soon as Harper texts me that she's free, I'm going to take her to this place that Hiro and Russ really like, a gothic Brothers Grimm inspired bistro.

We have two more games before the break, but with the Highlanders Ball happening on the Winter Solstice and the festive spirit downtown as the larger Nuit Blanche event spills out everywhere around us, it really feels like the holidays have begun.

And I am ready to celebrate—privately—with the woman I love.

I light up when she texts me, which she's done three times since we went our separate ways.

Her most recent one is a selfie taken with a painting her mother did.

KIERAN

Your mom is really talented.

HARPER

Thanks. I hope you can tell her that yourself one day soon!

KIERAN

I'll be on my best behaviour when I do.

HARPER

I know you will. Love you.

That still gives me a fucking thrill. I grin.

KIERAN

Love you more. Might have bought you a Christmas present tonight.

HARPER

Oh, is that a thing we're doing? Gifts?

She adds an angel emoji.

KIERAN

You don't need to get me a single thing.

HARPER

I need to get you exactly as many presents as you get me, I'm big on fairness.

KIERAN

In that case, you need to get me two presents.

HARPER

Phew! I already got you three!

I heart that message, then slide my phone into my jacket inside pocket.

Jenson pulls up beside me. "Have you seen Ani? She disappeared a few minutes ago."

I shake my head.

Then Hayden strolls up. “Have either of you spotted my fiancée?”

Jenson laughs. “Shit. What are the chances they’re together?”

I glance across the dance floor to where Max is standing alone, holding one of the Nuit Blanche programs. “A hundred bucks says they’re with Shannon somewhere.”

“Probably.” Hayden scruffs his hand through his hair. “But where?”

Fuck if I know. But something tells me I’m about to get pulled into a search for their wives.

CHAPTER 42

HARPER

The whole mall is glittering tonight, and in what were three side by side empty storefronts near the entrance last week, now there's a full-on art gallery. Three different collections, each featuring a few student artists.

Mama's art show is in the middle space. Her paintings hang on the wall halfway towards the back of the freshly painted store. The walls are white, the floor is a minimalist black, and it's all very impressive.

There's even sparkling wine circulating. I snatch a second glass from a passing tray and look around for Kiley, who disappeared while I was talking to my mom's art professor.

And my mom is chatting with someone who has circled the space twice, and came back to her pieces. I'm smiling with pride as I turn in a slow circle, but the smile falls off my face when I catch sight of three familiar faces.

And then because that's a shitty reaction, I force my expression back to something like pleasant surprise as Shannon, Ani, and Becca hurry towards me. They look so excited.

Well, that makes three of us.

"Hey, guys... What are you doing here?"

"You said your mom had an art show, but we didn't realize it was so close." Ani holds up a glossy card with the Nuit Blanche map on it. "We were just through that walkway to the convention centre. And honestly, everyone there only wants to see our husbands. We wanted to see you." Her gaze slides

eagerly past me, and I know my mom is there even before she speaks.

“Hello there, ladies. Welcome to our exhibition.”

I turn and introduce her. “This is my mother, Angela Roberts. She’s one of the artists tonight. Mom, this is—”

“Aniibish Hale,” Mom says warmly. “I follow you on Instagram. I love your beadwork.” She does that Mom thing where she reads more than I like into the briefest of moments, and her voice takes on a more guarded note. “How do you know each other?”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. There’s a long, mortifying pause where everyone waits for me to explain our connection, and I just...can’t.

Becca jumps in. “Ani went to school with Harper and Kiley.” She smiles winsomely. “And my fiancé works with their husbands. And I’m new in town, but a big fan of making connections, so here we are.”

Mom’s face lights up. “Sherwood?”

I don’t know how Becca knew that would be a good immediate explanation, but it works. Ani searches the pop-up gallery for Kiley, and before panic can fully latch onto me, they’ve spun a whole story. What a small world it is, that sort of thing.

And then Ani asks about the painting behind me, the one of Darnell, and I’m given enough space to start breathing again. I look at Becca and mouth, *Sorry. Thank you.*

But Becca looks delighted. Like she’s not sorry, at all. She flings her arm around me and leans in. “Remember how I told you about my dad falling in love with my midwife? Did I mention that I was eighteen? Managing parents—and a whole pile of overprotective uncles for me, too—is kind of my superpower.”

“Thanks. I’ve kind of fucked this up,” I whisper. “I should have told her about Kieran sooner, but it’s a whole thing.”

“Sounds like a longer story than we have time for.”

Fuck, Becca sounds so understanding. And she doesn't even know the half of it. I give her a grateful smile.

She nudges me. "But I'd really like to hear it someday."

I'd like that, too.

I take a big sip of wine, then catch Kiley's eye. *I fucked up*, I mouth.

She does a double-take at our visitors, then immediately heads our way. Bestie to the rescue. Maybe we can talk about high school for the next hour. I'm thinking, this is all fine, this is going to work out, when the universe decides to lean hard on the *Harper Roberts, Secrets Are Not The Safe Space You Think They Are* button.

First, I get a text message.

KIERAN

Incoming. Sorry. Know this is awkward, will play it cool.

KIERAN

But not gonna lie, looking forward to seeing you.

What?

Oh, shit.

I look up just in time to see Calhoun and Hale stride in, clearly looking for their women. Behind them is Max Tilman, and last but definitely not least is Kieran, who really is doing a good job of looking as if he truly doesn't know anyone in this space other than his teammates. He heads to the far wall and starts to look at each piece of art very, very carefully.

So carefully, I know he's actually looking at me every time his body is angled even a little bit in my direction.

After that, I can feel him watching me the whole time. And I know that I can't wait a second longer. I have to tell my mom right now how I feel about him.

Shame roils through me. I used this art show—and her joy around it—as an excuse to not tell her about my relationship with Kieran. For my own reasons. Selfish, cowardly reasons. And now I'm considering dumping confusing news on her in the middle of it?

I can't do that, either.

Fuck fuck fuck.

Maybe Kieran said something to his teammates, because Hayden and Max scoop Becca and Shannon up and head out the door.

I wave goodbye to them, then turn my attention to where Jenson and Ani are talking to my mom.

It's so hard to read her expression. She's being smooth and professional and warm, because she's good at all of those things. But that's a hockey player she's talking to. *We hate hockey.*

Of course, Jenson's sister went to Sherwood. He didn't, I don't think. I'm pretty sure he went to a private prep school that had an elite hockey program, but I really hope that doesn't come up.

Probably the only thing my mother hates more than hockey is private school education.

But if my mom thinks she's talking to Sherwood kids, then this is fine. Ignore the metaphorical flames licking up the walls closing in around me, everything is fine.

Kieran is almost all the way around the room now. He's three feet away from my mother. Two feet.

I snatch another glass of sparkling wine off a passing tray.

Kiley deftly takes it from my hand before I even have a chance to lift it to my mouth, and replaces it with a can of sparkling water. "Hang in there," she whispers as she passes by.

I watch, heart in my throat, as Ani introduces Kieran to my mother, and then drags her husband across the room to the

check out counter. I already liked her. If she buys one of my mom's paintings, I will love her forever.

Kieran doesn't linger. He says something that sounds complimentary, at least through the buzzing in my ears, then gives her the warmest, most sincere smile I've ever seen cross his face.

He casts one last appraising look at her paintings, gives her a second, very quick smile—every inch a polite, wealthy celebrity making a turn through a student art show—before turning in my direction.

Time slows as our gazes lock.

And then he brushes past me, close enough for me to catch a hint of his aftershave, and for my heart to try to leap out of my body and into his. Then he joins Jenson at the counter in the centre of the space.

I spin around and give my mom a too-bright smile that she sees right through.

“What's wrong?”

How do I reassure her that nothing is *wrong*, exactly, but once again I've followed my selfish heart instead of thinking about the consequences of my actions?

“There's just been a lot going on,” I say as lightly as I can, which isn't that light. It comes out a little strained. “Good but complicated stuff. And I thought maybe I'd tell you later this week, but...”

Her eyebrows raise. “But?”

“But I want tonight to be exciting for you. And only about you.”

She closes the gap between us and cups my cheek. Her fingers are, as they always have been, warm and reassuring. “Honey, it hasn't been only about me for twenty-eight years. If you have something going on, I want to know.”

“How about I take you out for a drink after this?”

She snorts. “We’ll go home for a cup of tea. I’m still your mother, and you’ve had enough already.”

I text Kieran and promise to keep him posted, but I can’t go to the cellar bar he wanted to take me to. Not tonight.

KIERAN

Of course. Let me know if you need anything.

KIERAN

Will you be coming over tonight? Want me to meet you at your place later?

KIERAN

I’ll wait up.

KIERAN

...

My heart pangs at the dots appearing, then vanishing. I see him. He’s trying to say all the right things to soothe me, but I don’t need soothing. I need to be a big girl and fix what I’ve broken by being careless.

I can just imagine how he’d roar if I said all of that, though, so I leave it with the most reassuring response I can think of.

HARPER

Love you.

I swear I can feel his sigh of relief from across King Street.

KIERAN

Love you, too.

Kiley and I are the last guests to leave. She's made a friend in one of the other artists.

"You don't mind if I head out? Grab a drink with him?"

I wave her off. "Go. It's better if I face the music alone."

My mom is standing in front of her paintings. At some point in the last half hour, sold stickers were added to all of them. She's standing so still, her gaze locked on one of those little sticker dots.

I cross to her and wrap my arms around her shoulders. "Proud of you," I whisper. "You're so talented."

She leans her head against mine. "I never dreamed I could do this. And now I am, and it's not a dream anymore."

"This is just the start for you. I bet you'll have a whole gallery to yourself one day soon."

"Will you bring your new friends to that, too?"

"I—" I swallow around the lump in my throat. "I didn't tell them to come. But I would, if I thought you might like it."

"I don't know."

I nod softly. "Yeah."

"Ani Hale is a talented bead artist. Did you know that?"

I shake my head. "We don't know each other that well. Honestly. She's a few years younger than me."

She screws up her face. "She married Jenson young."

I don't know what to say to that. It's probably true. It's also their private business. And Jenson isn't my dad, just as Ani isn't my mom. "Come on. Let's go home."

She says good night to her classmates who remain, then we head out into the cold, December night.

“My place is closer,” I say, shivering.

She nods.

We pile into her car, and we get to my apartment before the car even has a chance to warm up.

Inside, I flick on the lights. It’s been a couple of days, but I’m here often enough the air can’t feel stale. That’s in my imagination.

Just like the safety I thought I’d found in keeping my life carefully compartmentalized was imaginary.

I put the kettle on, then pull down a few boxes of herbal tea.

At first I think she’s going to let me stretch this silence on forever with the busy work of making us tea.

But then she shakes her head and goes back to the surprise visitors. “So how did they end up coming to the show, again? If you didn’t invite them?”

I swallow hard. “It was a whole festival, Mama. Your art show was listed on the program. And they were at the convention centre for a...thing.”

“They were very dressed up.”

“It was a dress up thing.”

“And they came over to the mall to see my show?”

“Yep.”

“Randomly.”

“Not randomly. Just...unexpectedly.” The kettle whistles.

I pour the water into our mugs.

She makes a thinking sound. “I didn’t expect to see four hockey players tonight, that’s for sure. What is that, like half the team?”

I laugh despite the tension crawling up my neck. “Mom. Come on.”

She throws her hands in the air. “I don’t know how many people are on a team!”

Because she’s blocked out the very brief period in her life when she was around hockey. Except maybe she wasn’t around it at all.

She looks at me. Waiting for something. “Well? How many people are on a team? Ten?”

Twenty-three. But it’s a rhetorical question and I shouldn’t know the actual answer. Not Angela Roberts’s daughter. *We hate hockey*. “About twenty.”

She sighs deeply. “So much money to pay people to play a game. Imagine the good that could be done, spending that directly on feeding the unhoused.”

Agreed, but that’s not how life works.

It’s time to rip off the bandage. “Mom, I have to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve started seeing someone.”

She looks confused, but only for a second.

Maybe the rest of the story is spelled out in my expression. No amount of fancy make-up can give me a quality poker face.

Understanding dawns and she straightens up, disappointment and concern warring for top reaction. “Harper Anne Roberts. Please tell me you aren’t *dating* a hockey player.”

I don’t say anything.

Her eyes get even wider. “Is it serious?”

Well, Mom, my vibrators live at his house now. I can’t say that, though. “It’s pretty serious.”

“He was—” She turns and looks at my bedroom. “That was *him*?”

I nod.

“Was he there tonight?” She searches her memory. “The last one?”

The only one who didn’t have a partner to wrangle back to the gala.

I wince. “Yes.”

“What was your plan? Just never tell me?”

“Not never. I didn’t want to derail your joy about the art show.”

“I’m a mother. I can walk and chew gum at the same time.”

“Well, it was complicated! And to be a little fair to me, I honestly didn’t know if it would turn into anything beyond a fling.”

“But it has.”

“Yes.”

There’s an awful, long stretch of silence, and then her voice rings into that vacuum with stunning sternness. “He will break your heart.”

“No.” It hurts to tell her she’s wrong, but on this point, she is. I can’t tell her that he loves me. That feels too sharp. “He cares about me a lot.”

“He pursued you?” Her voice cracks, and I know she’s remembering being a nineteen-year-old girl who thought that pursuit was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

“He’s...” *Not Dad.* “I’m...” *Not nineteen.* “It’s different,” I finally say, my voice cracking now, too.

“How is it different?” She gives me an incredulous look, and I feel small.

But it *is*, and the only way to make her see that is it spell it out.

I almost choke on the words, but I grind them out anyway. “He isn’t anything like Larry Roberts. He isn’t that kind of guy. I thought he was, honestly. I thought he was the worst kind of player when we first met. But he isn’t. He is deeply kind. And when I told him I couldn’t see him—and I did, Mama, I tried—he told me that was fine. He just wanted to be my friend.”

“That’s a line, Harper. You know better than that. Come on.”

“Mom!” I suck in a harsh breath. “Look, I— I should have told you sooner. But you can’t assume you know him. I want you to get to know him. And then you can make your judgement about his character. Not before.”

She takes a long, slow breath. Picks up her mug of tea and blows on the steaming liquid.

Then she nods. But it’s immediately followed by another shake of her head. Nope. She doesn’t get it. Her genuine confusion would be hilarious if I weren’t feeling lightheaded.

She puts down her tea mug. “But we hate hockey.”

My whole adult life, I’ve joined her in that sentiment. The first time we flipped off hockey players together, I was eighteen and I’d just had my heart broken by my father for the fifth and final time.

The worst part was, I’d hurt my mom at the same time. But when I crawled back to her, full of apologies and finally understanding why she had so much disdain for Larry, all she had was love and understanding.

And then, when we turned on the TV later that night and there was a game on, she blew a raspberry at the screen, and then gave them the finger.

I laughed and joined her.

For the decade since, if we are together and we happen to see a hockey game on TV, we flip them off merrily.

But I can’t do that anymore.

“I don’t hate hockey.” My throat is dry. “I haven’t, really, ever. I hate Larry. *Hate* what he did to you. Hate what he did to me, and the wounds that I carry from that. Hate that he never taught me to skate, and hate that I never got to go to the arena.”

I take a deep breath, because I need to get this out before I fall apart. “Becca...the youngest of the girls who came tonight? She has a three-year-old son, Charlie. Her fiancé adores them both. And I had some complicated feelings when I saw them interact the first time, at the arena.”

“At the arena,” Mom repeats faintly. “That’s a thing you do, now? Go there?”

I just look at her softly. “Yeah.”

“Holy shit, Harper.” She exhales roughly. “Please be careful.”

“I told you—”

She holds up her hands. “Fine. He’s nothing like your father. But *you’re* still *you*.”

I jerk back. Her words feel like a slap across my face. “What does that mean?”

Except I know. I know what it means. My eyes brim with resentful, hot tears.

“Harper, don’t...” And she’s crying now, too. Great.

“No, say it.” I swipe at my face. This is why wearing make-up is stupid. Mascara streaks my fingers, and I probably look like a horror film extra. “What is it? You think I’m romanticizing him?”

“How could you not? You have a soft heart. A good heart. And he’s larger than life, right? Remember when you had that crush on that doctor a few years ago?”

That wasn’t anything like how I feel about Kieran.

“Of course an elite athlete who *isn’t anything like your father*—but just happens to have exactly the same career as your father—is going to catch your eye.”

“I don’t— No, this isn’t— It’s not because he’s—” I cut myself off.

And then I burst into a fresh wave of tears.

“Oh, honey.” She crosses to me and wraps me in her arms.

“I’m sorry,” I blubber against her shoulder. The words sound as broken as I feel.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. It is okay to have a crush. It’s even okay to have a fling. Just don’t lose your head.”

How many times can she warn me about that?

She rocks me back and forth until I stop crying. Then she dries my cheeks with her thumbs as she searches my face. “How did you meet him?”

I make a face.

She makes the same face back at me. “I don’t want to know anything you don’t want to share, but give me something. Was it one of those apps? Or did you—”

“It wasn’t an app.” I take a deep breath. I don’t want to lie to her, but I also don’t want to tell her that I’ve been keeping this a secret for two years, either. “We had some chemistry the first time we met, but I didn’t...you know. We hate hockey! That was a pretty big barrier. So, uh...then he saw me at the hospital, when he was visiting some patients, and then he found me on Kiley’s social media. And *then* he said we could be friends if I couldn’t date him.”

“Because you told him about your dad?”

I shake my head violently. “No. Noooo. God no. Not then. I didn’t tell him anything for weeks. It was really gradual.”

“Weeks.” She lifts her eyebrows. “Gradual.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You should be.”

“I feel terrible.”

“You shouldn’t.” She nudges me to the table and makes me sit down. “Drink.”

I sip at my tea, and it helps.

“He’s handsome.”

My heart flip-flops. “Yeah.”

“And you’ve been in such a drought.”

“Mom!”

“So... He’s handsome and rich and—”

“*Despite* those facts, he has won me over. A little, at first, and then a lot. By being funny and kind and doing things on my terms. I think I like him even more when he fails to be charming, if that makes any sense.”

Her brow doesn’t unfurrow. Her gaze doesn’t lose any concern. But she nods.

I don’t know how to break down those walls and make her truly see that this is different. I don’t want to even try just yet. Because what if it’s not actually as different as I think?

What if she’s right, and I’m a hopeless romantic who wants to see a fantasy instead of reality?

CHAPTER 43

KIERAN

I don't get a text from her until after midnight. I've taken off my tux and gone for a long run around my cold, snowy neighbourhood.

HARPER

On my way to your place.

I meet her at the door. She falls into my arms, and I hold her tight. "Want to talk about it?"

She shakes her head.

"Want to go to bed?"

A nod.

She's scrubbed off her make-up, but her hair is still in the extra fancy curls, a little stiff with hairspray.

"Bath first?"

She thinks about it, but shakes her head.

Okay. What she needs is crystal clear. No talking, no more decisions. Just a hard chest for her to fall asleep on in seven seconds.

I hold her for a long time before I drift off. And all I can think, over and over again, is how wrong it felt to pretend like I wasn't deeply in love with this woman, for even a hot fucking second. I'm never doing that again.

The next day Philly comes to our barn, and we lose.

But the day after that, we go to Philly, and we fucking destroy them in their own house. Six-nothing, a shut-out for Makinen.

We're back on the team plane one minute after eleven. The whole team is boisterous, singing Christmas carols and asking the flight attendants for festive cocktails they don't have the ingredients for.

I sit by myself at the back of the plane, mentally running through my packing list.

When Dorrian drops into the seat beside me halfway into the fifty-minute flight, I shove the short to-do list aside in my mind.

For twenty-five more minutes, the boss gets my attention. Then I'm all Harper's for three and a half days.

"Heading home for the holidays?" he asks.

"Not this year."

"Spending it with your girl?"

I grin. Try to keep it cool. Fail. "Yeah."

"Good. Good." He looks down the aisle. Maybe checking to see who has headphones on and who's asleep. "Miami after the break."

I nod. "Tough start back."

"Connor's on fire."

"Maybe he'll get a sunburn over the next four days and have an off game."

He laughs. "I'm not planning on it."

"He's just one guy. Having a career year, but they gutted his team after the playoffs last year. We're not scared of one guy."

“He’s definitely missing a strong left winger.”

“Aren’t we all,” I mutter.

He raises his eyebrows.

I shrug. “I like my line. That was just Christmas countdown talking.”

“You want a better left winger in your stocking, Marsh?”

I laugh. “That’s a little short notice. But my birthday’s in February.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

We land in Hamilton at five minutes to midnight.

There’s a lot of critiques of playing in a medium-sized city, instead of a major centre like New York or Toronto or Los Angeles.

But there’s something very sweet about getting off the plane, getting in my truck, and being home in twelve minutes.

Harper worked today, her last shift for a week. So I’m not surprised to find her passed out cold in my bed.

I drop a kiss on her forehead, then head back to my closet where I’ve dumped my carryon on the deep counter at one end—a custom-built suitcase landing zone, because I pack and unpack this thing like fifty times a year.

There’s a rhythm to it now, after all these years. The suit I wore to travel yesterday comes out. Pockets checked, then hung in the “for dry-cleaning” corner of my closet. Laundry dumped in the hamper. Toiletries checked and replaced if I’m running low. Charging cables re-wrapped in a more orderly fashion.

I like a neat suitcase. It adds a touch of civility to the chaos of constantly being on the road.

Then I pull out what we need for this getaway. My clothes, her clothes. Not much, because we won’t be gone for long. The gifts I bought for her—three of them, to be fair. The last thing I do before crawling into bed with Harper is plug in the iPad to charge overnight.

And then I force myself to sleep.

It feels like ten seconds later when the mattress shifts beside me and Harper swings her legs out of bed.

“What time is it?”

“Six,” she whispers. “I just hit snooze on your alarm.”

I didn’t even hear it go off. “I’m up.”

She giggles. “Your eyes are still closed. I’m going to have a shower. Take another fifteen minutes.”

The next thing I know, she’s leaning over me, damp hair brushing me lightly as she snoozes my alarm again.

This time, I stay half awake and listen to her sing to herself as she gets dressed. I manage to open my eyes just in time to see the t-shirt I set out for her fall over her torso.

With a groan, I push myself up. “Okay, let’s do this.”

She twists around. “And what is it that we’re doing?” She gestures down her body. She’s wearing a white t-shirt and black leggings. “This outfit gives me zero clues.”

“That’s intentional.”

She laughs. “What time is our flight? We have to leave at eight, right?”

I asked her for her passport details, so she knows we’re leaving the country. I let her assume whatever she wanted about the flight details.

This question, though, I’m not answering. She’ll find out soon enough.

“You’ve packed all the clothes I will wear when I’m there?” She’s running through the same questions we’ve already been over.

“Yep.”

“No clues?”

“Not yet.” I cock my thumb to the shower. “I’m just going to...”

“Can I look in your suitcase?”

“And spoil the surprise?” I kiss her. “You won’t do that.”

After a shower for me and breakfast smoothies for both of us, we hit the road. I have our suitcase. She has a tote bag for her own essentials, and a second small bag of neatly wrapped gifts.

The drive back to the Hamilton airport takes slightly longer now, with daytime traffic, but we’re at the terminal in twenty minutes.

Harper, who had been chattering away to me about Isabella, goes quiet when she realizes where I’m parking.

“Kieran...”

I grin at her. “Let’s go. Your chariot awaits.”

I whisk her through the private charter terminal and out the other side. The small private jet I’ve chartered for this trip to the Bahamas is waiting, stairs down. The captain is standing on the tarmac next to it, and greets Harper first, as I’ve instructed.

“Ms. Roberts?”

“Yes?”

“I’ll be your captain for this trip. There’s a first officer inside the cockpit. You and Mr. Marsh can board. I’ll take your bag, sir.”

She gives me a look of wide-eyed wonder, then climbs the stairs.

Inside, the cockpit is to the left and four oversized passenger chairs are to the right, in facing pairs on either side of the aisle. Between them are tables. Beyond them is a small

bar area, with two leather couches, and past that is a kitchenette and the bathroom is at the back.

“This is too much.” She sets her tote bag on one of the chairs, then turns in a slow circle. “Kieran!”

“We don’t have a lot of time for this trip. Thought I would maximize it with the most efficient travel possible.” I bite my lower lip as I lift her chin with my fingers. “Every minute of the next few days is just the two of us.”

Behind me, I hear the door being latched.

She smiles. “And the pilots,” she whispers.

“For the next three hours.” I wink. “But they’re discreet.”

“Ready to take off?” the pilot asks.

When we nod, he points to the back of the plane. “Help yourself to a drink. We’ll take off in five minutes.”

She leads the way. I show her how to open the console with the drinks, recessed in an ice bin. She takes a bottle of green tea, and I go for an iced coffee.

Take-off is smooth. It’s fun to watch Harper experience her first private flight, and I’m seeing it fresh through her eyes again. The casualness of the pilots, the way we can see what they’re doing. There is a small door on the cockpit, but they don’t close it, so she can watch what they’re doing.

Once we’re in the air and levelled off, I lean over and unbuckle her seat belt. “Come here.”

With a quick glance at the cockpit, she scrambles into my lap and settles sideways across my thighs, her back against the bulkhead, her head curved towards mine. “Hi,” she whispered. “This is really magical. Where are we going?”

“South.”

She sucks in a quick breath. “A beach?”

I stroke my thumb along her jaw and up to her lower lip. Rub back and forth, savouring the softness of her mouth. “Three nights in a cottage on the ocean. Right about now,

someone is stocking the kitchen with all the food and drink we might need.”

She whispers my name and leans in, kissing me. My hand plunges into her hair, gripping her tight. Her hot little tongue spears into my mouth, her kissing turning hungry. My cock responds, thickening with anticipation.

“Three days to do whatever we want,” I rasp, low and private. “Starting now.”

“We can’t,” she breathes.

“You’re so good at being quiet.” I lick the corner of her mouth. “Remember how hard you came on my fingers when we were on the radio?”

“*We* weren’t on the radio,” she protests. “You were. They didn’t know I was in your lap. This is...”

“Worse?” As if that would stop me. I hunger for her even more when the stakes are higher.

“More,” she breathes.

Not worse.

More.

“Do you think they might glance back and not see you?”

She shudders.

I tug at her waistband, working it down her hips. She trembles beneath my touch.

She looks towards the cockpit. In my seat, against the window, they can’t see us. They can see she’s gone, and imagine where she must be. *Where she belongs.*

But they can’t see anything.

“Do you think they might be able to hear us?”

She sucks in a shocked breath.

“You can always use avocado,” I murmur against her ear. “But I want to feel your tight little pussy ride my fingers right here.”

“Oh my God.”

That’s not a safe word. Breathing hard, I slide my fingers over the curve of her mound and tease the soft line of her slit. She jerks, her ass rocking against my erection. I grind up against her as I stroke her soft pussy lips. “Feel how hard I get when I touch you? How much I love making you feel good?”

She nods, pressing her lips together. Her eyes are wide and her breathing is shallow already, her nostrils flaring as she trembles through another caress.

“I love having your scent on my fingers. All over my whole hand. Want you so messy it imprints on me. You know what I want for Christmas, Harper?” I drag in a long inhale. “Your sweetness on every part of my body. Soaking my face, my chest, my cock. Want you to ride my thighs on the beach. Climb on my back and drip your need all over me as I carry you back to our bed.”

“Shhh...” She’s shaking now, her slick pussy clenching around me.

“I don’t care if they hear me,” I growl. “They’re paid to mind their own business. It’s safe here. I know you can be quiet, I know you’re the best girl, but you don’t have to hold it in. You’re allowed to have as much pleasure as you want right now.”

“Kieran, I can’t.”

“You can.” I kiss her, so she doesn’t have to choose. I swallow the sounds she wants to make, muffling her enough so she can lose herself. Let go and just thrash her hot little cunt against my fingers, ride my hand—shoved tight inside her leggings—and cover it in a flood of perfect juices.

We both shudder as the orgasm rocks through her. Her thighs clamp down around my hand, and I wrap my free arm around her even more, curling her against me.

Safe and secure against my body. Just the two of us.

And maybe two pilots who know how to mind their own fucking business.

CHAPTER 44

HARPER

By the time I've come down from my orgasm, we need to buckle up again because of turbulence. Kieran buckles me in, calls me a very good girl, and spends the rest of the flight with his chin propped casually on his left hand.

Every time he inhales, the lazy, satisfied grin on his face gets a little more wicked.

The sun gets brighter and the ocean gets bluer, and then we're descending.

When we land, it's in paradise. The air is hot in a way that makes me want to be naked, and the air smells like salt and tropical flowers. We're whisked into a waiting car that takes us to a boat launch. Kieran is perfectly at ease with the luxury of it all, and he keeps me within the circle of one of his arms at all times.

After a short boat ride across a channel to another island, we collect a golf cart from a friendly vendor.

Kieran holds out the keys. "Want to drive?"

"Where are we going?"

"I'll navigate." He kisses me on the forehead. "Get in."

Heart pounding, I slide behind the driver's seat—and then promptly pull out onto the wrong side of the road, face to face with a truck. I squeak, swerve to the other side, and pull over. "You can drive."

Kieran's laughing. "You sure?"

I shove the keys at him, and slide over, wedging myself against him. “Please.”

“They drive on the other side of the road here.”

“Mm-hmm.” But I’m grinning at him.

“You were fine.”

I’m too busy folding my leggings up into capri length to discuss my brief golf cart driving career with the sexiest hockey player on earth. “Drive, Hot Shot.”

“Whatever you say, Jersey Girl.”

We pass a few resorts, then properties start to stretch out with space between them. Kieran slows down, looking at house numbers, then pulls into the driveway of the final property in this stretch. Beyond it is nothing but island greenery.

The house is a bright white cottage, with a wide verandah and bright blue shutters. Inside is a wide open space with a full wall of windows on the other side, looking out at dunes, the beach, and the ocean beyond.

I don’t even look around the house, which is beautiful, I can tell. I go straight through, dropping my tote somewhere near a couch. The back door opens easily onto a deck, and I kick off my running shoes here.

Kieran is right behind me.

He doesn’t say anything as he takes my hand, and we walk together, fingers entwined across the hot sand and into the crashing waves.

“Your pants are getting wet,” I laugh as he sweeps me into his arms.

“Don’t care. Love the look on your face.”

“You put it there.”

“Happy Christmas Eve,” he murmurs before kissing me silly.

The first thing I do when we get inside is text my mom and let her know we've made it. She's already on her own flight with Darnell, and won't get it for a few hours, but I want her to have something waiting from me when she gets back online.

The second thing I do is unpack Kieran's presents. There's a small Christmas tree decoration on the long dining table, so I set the gifts around it.

He watches me, then disappears and returns with three gifts of his own—all smaller than mine.

I gesture down at my outfit. "Can I ask for a change of clothes?"

He gets a wicked glint in his eye. "What if I say no? That my master plan is for you to be naked the whole time?"

I pull off my shirt. "Fine by me. There's something about the Caribbean sun..."

He glowers, even as he prowls closer, his gaze lingering on my tightening nipples. "I might let pilots who have signed an NDA listen to your quietest moans, but I don't want anyone to see you naked."

Heat races through me. "You don't?"

The expression on his face when he lifts his gaze to meet mine is deeply possessive. And I like it so, so much. "There is a cove we can go to if you want to go skinny dipping."

I wriggle out of my leggings. "And inside?"

"Definitely no clothes inside," he growls, picking me up and carrying me naked to the bedroom, lazily slapping my ass as we go.

He dumps me on the bed next to the open suitcase, and I go to rifle through it, then stop. "Do you want to show me what you packed?"

"I do." He looks at me wolfishly. "It's not much. Two bikinis and a one-piece, so you have some swimsuit variety."

The first one is a barely-there black string bikini. For someone who doesn't want anyone else to see me naked, he

clearly doesn't have a problem with me being ninety-seven percent naked.

I like that plan a lot. I take it and put it on, modeling it for him until he gets all grabby hands on my bum. Then I push him towards the suitcase to show me the next one, which is a sportier teal suit.

I try it on next, and it fits perfectly. "You are an excellent shopper."

"I did my research in your underwear drawer."

That makes me laugh.

The third swimsuit is white, all one piece, but like the black bikini, there isn't much of it there. A deep V, all the way to my belly button, and the legs are cut so high, I'm really glad I got the full kit and caboodle waxed off.

But it's so sexy. I smooth it over my body, and Kieran's expression turns ravenous.

"Fuck, Harper, the things you do to me." He kisses me, his mouth demanding and hot. And when he pulls away, his lips swollen and shiny, I sink to my knees.

Because I love him.

Because this is incredible. All of it. The house, the way he packed for me, the erotic treat of it all.

But most of all, I tug his zipper down and go all grabby hands on his cock—hard, throbbing, and pulsing for me already—because I really love having him in my mouth.

The freedom, the power.

The joyful act of giving gets me going, and that's what these three days are all about—us going and going, fully exploring each other. No limits.

Whatever we want, however we want it.

And right now, I want him to come down my throat.

I blink up at him as I lick up a pearl of pre-come, savouring the taste of him, before swirling my tongue around

the flared crown. Licking along the soft edge of his foreskin and making him grow even more.

His hands sink into my hair and he starts to tell me how good it feels. “Just like that. Fuck, yeah. Stretch my foreskin all the way down, that’s a good girl. Love your fingers on me. Makes me want to come.”

I kiss around the tip, then lick down between my fingers, all the way to the base of his shaft. Getting him slick so when I pull back, I can push the whole length of him into my mouth.

The groan I get in response is worth everything.

His thighs flex and strain as he roots himself to the spot, turning into an oak tree as I bob my head faster, fucking him with my mouth.

The scent and taste of him floods my senses. I want more of the heady earthiness. My fingers find his balls and cup, then squeeze. His warm skin tightens, because of me. My mouth. My hand.

His fingers drop from my hair and push the straps of my bathing suit off.

I look up at him again, making eye contact as he throbs in my mouth.

Fuck, he mouths. Gonna come.

I nod and go deep.

With a strangled yell, he bows over me, his legs jerking, his hips snapping forward. I swallow what I can, then pull off, gasping. He catches my jaw in one hand and his still spurting cock in the other.

Holds me still as he paints my neck and my chest with the last few warm drops of seed.

Then he leans in and kisses me. Long, slow, claiming.

“That’s my best girl.”

The rest of the house and property exploration happens at a slower pace. The kitchen is stocked with fruit and vegetables and seafood. There's chocolate ice cream and mango sorbet in the freezer.

Kieran carefully applies sunscreen to every visible inch of my body, and just under the straps of the bathing suit too, just in case, then we return to the ocean for a long, lazy swim.

There's a cabana bed on the beach for an afternoon nap. We take full advantage.

I gorge myself on pineapple and guava.

We go for a long walk along the beach, and then sprawl in the cabana again. We talk about parents. His, mine.

He trails his fingers down the deep V in my bathing suit. "Do you ever think about being a parent?"

My tummy trembles beneath his touch. "Sure."

"I didn't used to." He circles my belly button. "I spent a lot of time thinking, *I don't want that*, but *that* was the family dynamic my parents chose."

"And now?"

His gaze is liquid and warm as he looks at me. "I can see how it would be different."

For us, I imagine him adding.

I lick my lips. "I always thought...when my biological clock started ticking...I'd be a single mom. I looked at what my mom did, and it was so hard, but we were always tight. We still are. So I guess I was the opposite. My default was, *yes, do that, it's hard but safe.*"

His whole chest swells with a careful inhale, then his muscles contract as he lets it out. "And now?"

My own question. My own fault. *I can see how it would be different. For us.* Fear clogs my throat. Can I see that, as clearly as he can?

It's so tempting to dive headlong into the fantasy. There were two other seats on that private plane.

Can I imagine a dark-haired little boy winging a mini stick around on the beach, turning seashells into pucks?

Way too easily.

Like it might be everything I've ever wanted, and couldn't bring myself to admit.

"Lots of time to think about that," he murmurs, ducking his head. He kisses the bare stretch of skin between my breasts, then climbs off the lounge bed. "I'm going for a swim."

I sit up and watch him stride into the water. Long, powerful legs dusted with soft hair. Tight muscles beneath taut skin.

I chase after him.

A wave crashes into him as he turns to catch me, water spraying his sunglasses. Behind him, the sun is setting.

We have two more nights like this. And I want to be as real and raw and honest about everything as we are about sex.

Because this moment? Where the warm, golden light of the hour is catching every plane of his body, highlighting how chiseled and fierce he is, and setting the sea on fire, too, transforming it from the glittering turquoise of the day to something more like a dark opal... this moment is perfection.

It deserves more than fear.

I wind my arms around his neck.

"No pressure," he whispers in my ear as we sink into the water together.

"I know." I close my eyes and press my cheek against his. "I can see how it would be different with you. Some day."

His arms crush me against him, tight steel bands.

We stay up late. He makes a video call to his family once they've all gathered at the lake house. I'm sitting beside him, just off camera, and while he's casual as can be, he's got a death grip on my hand.

Family drama comes in all shapes and sizes. From the outside, his family seems supportive and loving. His parents are together, his brother and sister are fans. His mom texts him regularly.

But he still feels like he'll never measure up to the idea his father had for a son, before he was ever born.

And that sucks.

He confesses that he bowed out of the trip home because he needed some time alone with "someone really important."

I smile as they all gasp at that.

He frowns, almost imperceptibly, when his father says, "I guess there's a first time for everything, the boy caring about something other than hockey."

I'm glad I'm off screen, because my frown is very perceptible. For one thing, he's not a boy. For another, he cares about a lot of things beyond hockey, and I'm honoured to be on that list. And lastly, there's nothing wrong with liking hockey.

At least my mother has a reasonable excuse for hating it—and she reacted with more grace than I expected when I told her about Kieran.

"Hush," Kieran's mother says. "It's exciting to see him happy." She looks at the screen, her brow furrowed just a little. I recognize that small frown. Kieran does it, too. "Well? Can we meet her?"

Heat slashes across his cheeks. "She's right here, holding my other hand."

He turns the phone to include me, and I wave. "Nice to meet you all. Merry Christmas."

"Harper, this is the Marsh clan. Everyone, be nice and do not tell her that she can do better than me."

I lean in. “That’s a really nice cabin.”

He nuzzles his nose against my temple. “Maybe we can go there for shined week.”

I gasp and turn towards him. “Bite your tongue. Don’t you want to make the shined team?”

He laughs and shakes his head. “When your next skating lesson could be on Clear Lake? Heck no.”

On his phone, there’s a cough. We glance back at his family, who are (almost) all beaming at us.

His brother looks the most amused. “Harper, you really can’t find a nicer guy than Kieran. And we do miss him this Christmas. But it is good to see him with someone who can give him a good what for, and it sounds like you two are having an amazing time down south.”

After he hangs up, we have ice cream, then another shower, this one all slow and steamy. Part winding down for bedtime, part winding up because who are we kidding?

Then we tumble into bed.

He nudges my thighs open, putting me on display for him. Looking his fill, but not touching yet. He strokes his hand up my side and catches my hand. Brings it up over my head and pins it there as he works through something on his mind.

I hold my breath, which he notices.

“Keep breathing,” he murmurs.

“I love this.” I squirm against his grip. “I love you. I want you.”

“I want to take my time. Make love to you tonight. I want to make you ache so good, Harper. I want you to know without a shadow of a doubt just how much I love you, too.”

I do, I want to protest. I do.

But also, deep down, I know I’m still settling in to believing that with every part of my being.

So I breathe, and let him arrange me so he *can* touch me, not that he actually does any touching just yet. Not *there* or *there*. Everywhere but. He traces his fingers up my torso, between my breasts, then down again, this time around to my flanks then up to my quivering belly. Blazing a path along my nerve endings even as he avoids my nipples.

The careful route around my most sensitive parts just makes them ache more. I gasp when he smooths his hand over my shoulder and his little finger trails across the top of my breast.

When he hunches on top of me and sucks one peak into his mouth, I cry out loud at the absolute pleasure of it. My whole body arches beneath him, my legs spreading wide.

He groans as he licks and sucks down my body. Can he feel my desperation now? Does he fuel his own desire?

He stops at my bare mound and presses his nose against the top of my cleft, where my clit is throbbing.

“Fucking hell, Harper, tell me this is all mine.” He laps at me, his nose nudging against my clit. “Need you all over me. Forever.”

“I’m yours.”

His mouth feels electric against my bare pussy. My very wet, wide open, on display sex. My slick—

He slurps at me.

That’s beyond slick. I’m dripping all over him now.

I reach for his head, my fingers skimming his shorter hair. Too short to hold on to now, so I need to cup his whole skull in my palms and pull him into me.

He makes a happy growl and sucks my clit into his mouth, then hums against it.

“Wait, oh God, wait...” I’m on the edge, but... “Kieran, please.”

He lifts his face. “What do you need?”

“You inside me.” I reach for him and he surges up, his cock ready. “I need you.”

He pushes inside me, filling me so fully I feel it in my heart.

“My Harper,” he murmurs. “My life.”

“Want to feel you come with me.” I’m so close already. I’m panting in his ear as he bottoms out and holds himself there. “Don’t hold back. Don’t wait. Just take me, Kieran. If I feel you come, I’ll follow.”

“You come first.” He braces himself above me and starts moving, his whole body flexing and releasing to drag his heavy cock through my folds. “Give me one, and then we’ll come together. Use your fingers. Let me feel it. Make that pussy sing.”

I shove my hand between us. Not for me, but for him.

He holds my gaze, his expression fierce, as I rub my swollen clit.

“That’s it. Good girl. I can feel you clenching. God, watching you get close is so fucking beautiful. That’s it. Yes, gorgeous. Come for me. I love you. I love you so fucking much.”

I go flying, and he grabs my hand, sucking my sticky fingers into his mouth as he holds still, letting me ride through the aftershocks.

“Good fucking girl,” he breathes once I stop shaking.

He rolls us, effortlessly, and arranges me on top of him so he can suck on my breasts.

Then he starts fucking me again, slow and steady, from below.

My brain short circuits and I start babbling about how much I love him, how happy I am, how much I want him to fill me up. And then I start begging.

“Please, I need it. Please Kieran...”

“Tell me,” he says, breathing heavily. “You can have it.”

“Let go. Just use me. Show me how much you love me. Give me your come. I want it inside me, please...”

He pins me down and thrusts faster. “I’ll give you everything you need. Forever.”

“Take what you need,” I breathe.

“I just need you.” His eyes roll back in his head and his face contorts. Then I feel his cock swell inside me, and I rub myself again, desperately now, losing myself in the churning wave of his release, pulsing deep in my belly.

“This is yours,” he moans as he rolls his hips, still half thrusting. I ride an edge until I feel him start to slip out of me, and then I tumble into a second orgasm.

My pussy clutches at him and he roars, pushing deep once again. As if he needs to feel every bit of my release the same way I did his.

“That was really incredible.” Kieran kisses my damp shoulder. “Mmm.”

I blush and push my face into the pillow.

“I like how cute and shy you get after begging for my come.”

I laugh desperately. Then I turn my head so I can see him again. “Right?”

“Super hot.” He exhales with satisfaction and stretches. “Sort of related... How many kids would you want?”

I gasp and shove at him.

He catches my wrists and pulls my hands to his mouth so he can kiss my fingers. His gaze glitters the whole time, never wavering, never looking away. “It’s a serious question.”

And I want to give him an honest, serious answer. “I always pictured myself with one. A little girl. But today I imagined a little boy.”

“Did you?” His face lights up.

I nod. “Wielding a mini stick. Whacking at seashells.”

I love how his gaze goes unfocused, like he’s picturing it, too. I reach out and trace the soft lines on his forehead. “How about you? You’re the oldest, right?”

“Yeah. And it was three of us as long as I can remember, my sister was born when I was four.” His expression turns a little sheepish. “I always thought it would be none for me. But I do like kids. Always have. Just didn’t think...”

He trails off.

“I understand,” I whisper. “Kids, plural?”

A shameless grin splits across his face. “If you were game for more than one, yeah. We could have one of each.”

We...

Why does that sound so right? How does it feel so right?

“Is that too much? Too soon?”

The honest answer comes fast. “No.”

“Good.” He squeezes the back of my neck and exhales. “Whatever you want. Whenever you are ready. I want it all with you.”

We keep talking, but his eyelids grow heavy. And for the first time since we started dating, he falls asleep first. It’s been a long, perfect day, and he didn’t get much sleep last night, coming in late.

I think of all the times he’s put me to bed, and how good that feels. It makes me want to hold him all night long.

And that’s both wonderful and weird, because I’ve never felt this kind of fierce protective instinct ever before. Not about a man.

If anything, I had some really brittle boundaries because of lifelong trust issues.

When I try to remember myself before Kieran—this gentle giant who has been all in for me from the very first moment—

most of what I feel is a dull ache. Especially for those two years when I could have reached out to him and had another visit. Gotten on an airplane and seen what a second date might have been like.

But that girl wasn't ready. I couldn't see how patient he would be, because what I saw was the echo of my father. And I projected that on Kieran.

He never deserved that.

But also, I didn't deserve that. I've been carrying around so much resentment. It almost stood in the way of my happiness.

I could have broken my own heart because I didn't trust enough.

And it's easy to see this now, in the quiet of this perfect retreat from the world. But there will be times in the future when the universe will show me echoes of my dad again. I can't let myself—or let anyone else—twist that into some sort of lie about Kieran.

Because he wants it all with me. No matter what.

CHAPTER 45

KIERAN

Christmas morning in paradise starts with a swim, then a fruit tray breakfast for my love.

Then we exchange selfie photos in a text message exchange with her mother, which makes Harper so happy we could call the holiday as done and dusted. Perfect achieved.

Except we still have presents for each other.

“When do you want to open these?” she asks, trailing her fingers over the bright red shiny wrapping paper on one of the gifts she brought for me.

She’s wearing the tiny black bikini today, and of the four options in front of me, the gift I want to peel open the most is her. Again.

She catches my eye, reads my mind, and tugs at one of the strings.

We’re naked when we return to the present much later.

“Should we get dressed for this?”

“Fuck no.” I sit at the table and tug her onto my lap. “Merry Christmas. This is perfect, actually, for your first gift.”

I reach out and grab the one I want her to open first. “Let’s start with a bang. The other two are more fun.”

She wiggles with excitement as she rips open the paper on the rectangular velvet jewellery box.

Inside is an extra-long gold chain with a diamond pendant hanging from it.

Her dark eyelashes sweep her cheek before she looks up at me. There are a lot of things that I imagine she could say. *You shouldn't have* or *this is too much*. *It's beautiful* or even *thank you*.

Her lush pink mouth curves into a happy smile. “Did you picture me wearing nothing but this? Swinging over and between my breasts?”

I swallow thickly. “Yes.”

“Good.” Her eyes flash. “Put it on me?”

It's long enough to slide over her head, but I undo the clasp anyway. It feels like I've waited a lifetime to give someone a gift like this, and I want to do it right.

She sweeps her hair out of the way and I settle it in place.

Then she turns back, settling the plump curve of her bottom on one of my thighs so we can both look at the diamond swinging low between the swells on her chest.

“It's perfect.”

I'm ready to carry her back to bed, or take her here. Ready to tell her that *she's* perfect, but she scoots off my lap. “My turn.”

My pulse thuds heavy in my neck as she hands over a small, flat rectangle wrapped in shiny red paper. She brought these gifts for me all the way from Canada. They sat beside us in a bag, while I fingered her on the plane. Waited here under the mini Christmas tree while I've been all over her, everywhere in this beach cottage.

I've been a glutton for her, with her, all over her for two days straight.

And while I wanted to spoil her, yes, she also correctly named my gift for her as having that wicked erotic edge to it.

Even before I open it, I know this gift is different.

She goes quiet as I work the paper open.

“Rip it.”

“No.” Everything she makes for me needs to be treated with care.

It’s a picture frame. I see the back of it first, then turn it over.

Carefully mounted in a shallow shadow box is a plastic hotel room key and a ticket to a hockey game from two years ago.

I get choked up.

I know she loves me—now. I felt her feelings shift as we’ve gotten closer.

But I would have bet even money she didn’t keep anything from that night in Buffalo.

I’d have lost that bet. “You kept these?”

She wraps herself around me and presses her face into my neck. “I wasn’t ready then, to think about *why* it was so special. But I never got over it, either.”

“This is an incredible gift.” My voice is scratchy and I don’t care.

She lifts her face, cups my cheek, and smiles. “Good. Merry Christmas, my love.”

And *that* is also a gift.

The next present I hand her feels so silly after that. It weighs nothing. It’s a small, square gift box, and inside is a card.

“A year of ice cream?” Her eyes light up. “Delivered to my door? How fancy.”

“Or my door,” I murmur.

First I moved in her vibrators. Now I’m stocking my freezer with her favourite foods. By the end of the season I’ll

be casually suggesting it's just easier if her couch stays at "my" place, too.

She presses her lips together, amused, and grabs another gift. It's got some weight to it.

"This one isn't as romantic as the first one." She tilts her head to the side, her hair spilling like silk over her shoulder. "Well, depends on your definition of romance."

I'm chuckling as I work the wrapping paper off. Two boxes, that had been taped together, fall into my hands.

I stop laughing.

She fidgets against me as I look at the "Best for Anal Sex" lube and a three-pack of teal silicone plugs, three different sizes.

"They're for training," she whispers. "Because I think it's wise—"

I shove them onto the table so my hands are free to rearrange her on my lap. "It is. Very wise."

"I did some research."

My cock pulses so hard against her inner thigh it spurts precome against her skin. "Tell me everything. Serious articles? Dirty videos?"

She laughs. "Both."

I groan. "I love it. You really surprised me."

"I wasn't sure." Her chest is fluttering, nervous, shallow breaths.

"It's. Amazing." My head swims with her secret research. I squeeze her bottom, my fingers stretching to stroke her crease. "You want that? Feel nicely full? That pretty teal plug will look so good in your ass."

She nods.

My cock throbs.

She looks down, then smiles. "We have two more presents."

“Right.” I force myself back to the here and now. “Your turn again.”

She picks up the last of the three gifts I got her. It’s hard to hold in a laugh as she opens it, but then we’re both chuckling together when she holds up the DVD case. “You got me *Frozen*. And in DVD no less. Not even a digital rental.”

“We still need to have that movie night date. And I wasn’t sure if we could stream a whole movie here on the satellite internet. But they have a DVD player.”

“It’s a date.” Her cheeks are pink and her eyes are dancing as she hands over her last present for me.

It’s a leather notebook that has *Gratitude Journal* embossed on the front. “Open it up,” she encourages. “There’s something written inside.”

In neat, careful handwriting on the front page, she’s written out the passwords for all her streaming services. Starred the one that has *Frozen* on it. Wrote the name of the movie, and put ***Movie Night!*** next to that.

And on the next page, she’s listed pottery, macrame, and plant shopping under the heading, ***Date Ideas***.

“Remember when you didn’t think we had that much in common?” I say huskily as I return to her second gift.

“Mm-mmm.”

“I think we have a lot in common now.”

“We both really want that *Frozen* movie date,” she says innocently.

I open the lube.

She shivers in my arms.

“What else?”

“We both really like pineapple. And the ocean.”

I slick a bit of lube between her cheeks, circling her tight back hole. “We both appreciate yoga. And plants...”

“I’ve never seen you do yoga.” Her breath hitches as my finger settles right against the knotted swirl of soft, delicate skin.

“I was thinking more about coming home and finding you with this ass in the air, and diving in face first.”

She whimpers and rocks her hips, then winds her arms around my neck. Holding on tight as she straddles me, rubbing her wet slit against my cock as I start to finger her ass.

“But we can do yoga together,” I whisper. “Anything you want.”

Because what we really have in common is endless curiosity and appreciation for the other person.

I lift her up and set her on the table. Put her right in the middle, my Christmas feast, and bend over so I can watch her soft, slick sex, all warm and swollen already, bloom even more as I get her ready for her first plug.

She did her research. She wants this, and she wants it to be good. I’m going to make it feel so fucking good.

More lube. Pressing deeper with one finger, getting her slick all the way inside. Past the second sphincter, which is so fucking tight, my balls churn at the thought of her body ever taking my cock there.

Her clit throbs, visibly pulsing, and I flick my attention up to her face, making sure she’s with me, before I lean in to lick her there. She’s so fucking responsive, her ass fluttering around my finger as I trace the length of her firm little bud.

And then I feel it, finally—like a wave of need rolls in and washes away the last of her nervous tension, her body goes soft. I fuck my finger in and out of her with increasing ease, as her clit pulses against my tongue, and she gets so close.

It’s hard to pull off, hard not to give her that ultimate pleasure, but I want her riding that edge as I fit the plug in her the first time.

Wrenching open the packaging, I slick the smallest plug with lube, and press it against her hole.

“Relax for me,” I whisper as I lean over her. Her body trembles for me, but she takes it in one smooth thrust. I kiss her and tell her how good she is, how fucking sexy. Then I pick her up again and stand her on shaky legs.

She clings to me, her nipples diamond tight as she sways.

“Put your bikini on.” I squeeze her tight. “Let’s go for a swim.”

“But...” She gives me a wide-eyed, protesting look. “I was so close.”

I grin. “Good. Let’s keep you there.”

By the time we fly home two days later, she’s got the medium-sized plug wedged inside her and as soon as we take off, she’s in my lap.

Having a plug inside her makes my girl very, very horny.

“I want to suck you off,” she whispers.

And very hungry, too.

She slides down to her knees and unzips me. I fist her hair in my hands, guiding her head up and down my throbbing length. Just a few thrusts, I tell myself, because I have another plan.

We’re not going to take two private flights and not fully join the mile high club.

But fuck, her mouth.

Fuck.

She gets me close, and fast. More than one spurt of precome shoots down her throat before I wrench her off.

I don’t even bother to put my cock away before I move her to the back of the plane. The couches are tempting, but the bathroom is more private.

The pilots can hear some things—if it makes Harper squirm, if she likes the risk of being “discovered” in a way.

Nobody gets to hear my girl come on my cock, though.

That’s for me and me alone.

In the bathroom, she gets one leg out of her leggings before I’m bending her over the counter and working the fat knob of my cock against her wet pussy. Her slick channel feels even tighter with the plug in her ass.

Her hand slaps against the mirror as I push home. I reach around her hip and slot my fingers around her clit.

“Gonna come fast,” I growl into her ear. Watching her face in the mirror. “You want me to use you like a hot little hole?”

From the way her pussy clenches down, that’s a yes.

“Next time we fly somewhere, this cock is going in your ass.” I thrust my hips, driving my weight against the plug, and my cock right to the depths of pussy. “You want that?”

“Need it,” she whimpers, her gaze locked on my reflection. Her eyes are wild, her mouth hanging open. “Please. Now, Kieran. Give it to me now. Before we get home.”

I ease back. Stare down at the lube-slicked hole I plugged up before we departed. At my come-slicked cock below that, dragging out of her pussy.

Her clit pulses against my fingers.

Her voice cracks as she begs me again.

As if in a dream, I pull out of her pussy. Ease the plug out of her ass. Fit my cock against her back entrance and push in, slow as can be.

Careful with my good girl, my horny girl, my needy girl. But claiming her, too. Making her mine in every possible way.

She whines and slaps at the mirror. Her body tenses and her hips tremble, but her clit keeps pulsing.

“Breathe, baby,” I whisper. “Find your breath.”

She exhales. Holds still. Then pushes back, and my cock disappears inch by inch into her body.

It's like nothing else. Tight, trembling heat. Rippling sensations that will milk me sooner than later.

But that's just fine, because her body goes taut, and as I rub her clit, she starts to fuck me, and on the third tiny push back, she comes.

“That's it. God, I love you.”

Her whole body starts to shake, and I let myself go, too, curving over her and burying my seed deep in her soul as she cries out that she loves me, too.

And that is fucking everything.

CHAPTER 46

HARPER

Kieran's thousandth career point happens in their first game back after Christmas, a home game against Miami. He has two assists, and it's the second one that hits the milestone. He follows that up with a goal of his own as well, but while it's a good game personally for him, the team still falls short against Ty Connor having a huge game of his own.

It was a battle of two veteran centres, both having career years. I fully expect Kieran to be in a complicated mood when he comes out of the dressing room. I've hung around, because we talked about going out tonight.

When he appears, it's hard to read his expression. He's glancing at his phone, then flips a quick look at me, before going back to his phone.

I wait.

He makes his way to me and puts his phone away. His hair is damp from the shower, and he has a good cut on his cheek, held together with steri strips. "There's my girl."

I beam up at him. "A thousand points! How do you want to celebrate?"

"How do you feel about helping me find a chocolate cake?" He slings his arm around my shoulders. "I was just texting with Isabella's dad. She stayed up late to watch the game, and she's up for some company. Since we missed her birthday, I thought giving her a puck from tonight—and bringing belated birthday cake—might go over well."

So that's what we do. We stop at Sobey's, find a cake, and drive to her family's house. It's not far from where my mom lives on the Mountain.

Kieran parks on the street, then hops out.

Inside, we're greeted by her entire family. He's clearly visited before, from the way he moves around their little bungalow with ease, carrying the cake to the kitchen before returning to the living room, where I'm getting an excited play-by-play of the game I just watched.

It's nice to watch him with an ordinary family. It's really nice to watch him with a kid who he has clearly bonded with. But also, seeing how he talks to her parents—and remembers specifics of what they've been going through, not just with Isabella's health journey, but also their jobs and holiday plans—reinforces that all the closeness we had over our Christmas getaway wasn't just a vacation fantasy. He really is a good guy who shares my values in life, and he's built real connections in his community that have nothing to do with me.

Kieran Marsh is a Hamilton Highlander through and through. And I love him so much for it.

CHAPTER 47

KIERAN

The next day, we have practice, and it's just like all the other thousands of practices I've done in my life. Achieving a major milestone the night before doesn't change the fact that we lost, and the goal here is not Kieran Marsh Has One More Good Year.

It has always been Time for the Highlanders to Win More Than Two In A Row.

We are not achieving that goal.

So before we get to actually skating, there's a real talk lecture from our coach. "All right, guys. We had a short break. We played one game. That's done and in the past. Tomorrow, we go on the road, and the next few weeks will be season defining for the Highlanders. We have a chance now to reset our team narrative. Right? Do we want to seize that opportunity?"

We all nod. Yes, we fucking want that.

He looks at us grimly. "Then we need to make some changes. Mentally, physically. I have all the confidence in the world that this is a team that can make the playoffs. You have the skill and you have the passion. The question of whether or not you will use that skill and passion to get it done...the answer is in your hands. So don't sleep on this chance. We have a month until the next break. You'll get another rest then. And on the other side of that is a hard, hard push. Don't wait until then to turn it on. All right? Let's make this a good one. Let's get in the zone."

It's not the first lecture like this we've had this year. But something about it hits differently, and we really do have a good practice.

And then we have a good game in New Jersey, and another very good one in Columbus.

When we board the bus to head back to the hotel, our fourth night on the road, Calhoun drops into the seat beside me. "Hey."

He's nervous. Fidgety.

"What's up?"

"Did you see the list of scouts in the house tonight?"

"Nope." That kind of shit fucks with your brain. But I'm a sucker, too. "Why? Who jumped out at you?"

"Miami." He shoots me a sideways glance. "And Montreal. A few others, too, but..."

I frown. Try to think about who those teams might be interested in. "They were probably looking at Columbus. Not us."

But he doesn't look convinced.

And when I get back to my room, and hop on Twitter, I see a lot of chatter that suggests he was right to be worried. Hockey Twitter seems convinced that the Highlanders just aren't good enough to gain the ground needed to make it into the playoffs.

Which means Dorrian will need to regroup for next year. And sell what assets he can this year, before it's too late.

Fuck.

By morning, though, I've managed to convince myself not to bite on Calhoun's nerves. We have a good team breakfast, then we head to the Columbus airport.

But after we load on the plane, the stairs don't get moved away. The door stays open, and we sit on the tarmac. Five minutes go by, then ten.

Whispers start to slither from seat to seat, and they gain in volume when we realize Dorrian is pacing outside on the phone—ignoring the chill of the weather hovering just above freezing, and looming clouds, heavy with rain.

Everyone has started chattering about what's going on. There's a vibe.

That instinct proves correct when he finally climbs the stairs and gestures for Alexandre Gauthier, our backup goalie, to come have a chat.

They disappear into a small cabin at the front, then Gauthier reappears a minute later with a half-cocked grin.

“You know how it goes, boys,” he says in his Quebecois accent. “Some of us have to go to Miami and inspect all the string bikinis.”

Miami.

What the fuck?

Dorrian gives Alexandre a minute to grab his stuff, then he makes an announcement that rocks the plane. “The Highlanders have a new centre forward. We've acquired Ty Connor in a trade for Gauthier and two future draft picks.”

“No way,” Dodaj says from the seat in front of me. He smacks Khan beside him. “Can you believe it?”

Even with how jaded I am, this is still a big fucking deal. An unexpected blockbuster trade that will dominate the news cycle and get people excited about our next few games.

And it shows that Dorrian probably isn't a seller in the march towards the trade deadline. Fuck, I hope that stays true.

As we get ready to finally take off, one of the AGMs confirms Connor is going to meet us in Montreal for our next game. I start mentally rearranging our lines in my head. This could give us depth down to the third line. Or I could play left wing again and we'd have two rock-solid top lines.

Then I start doing cap hit math, because this has to be close to maxing us out. GMs don't get to play fantasy hockey. There are real world math limitations to how stacked a team can be.

I resist the urge to check Twitter real quick to see what the chatter is. I know it'll be a mix of "Dorrian's a genius" and "fuck this guy, spending Benton's money" and "the odds just went up that the Highlanders might beat the Habs in their own barn." I don't need to read any of that.

Instead, I put on my headphones and listen to a playlist Harper made me.

The flight to Montreal is short. Ty's flight doesn't land for another two hours, so we all go to the hotel to check in, and team dinner is bumped back until our newest player arrives.

I take the opportunity to stretch out and call Harper.

"Ty Connor?" she gasps in my ear as soon as she answers.

"No, Kieran Marsh, actually, but glad to know you're a fan of his."

"Sorry, I don't really know how to talk about breaking hockey news with you yet. Uh...how do you feel about the trade?"

"It took us all by surprise. It's good, though. Really good. Hope he's cleared in time to play tomorrow night."

"Why wouldn't he?"

I give her a primer on the weird immigration hoops the team has to do for an American to move to Canada mid-season. "And vice versa. When I was traded to Arizona, that was in the summer, so they could do my exceptional athlete visa application with a stack of others. It takes a few weeks. But we don't want to wait weeks mid-season, so there's this person back in Hamilton—our director of team services—and some lawyers who are making magic happen."

"Quite the different experience to any other migrant worker," she says dryly. "Sorry, that was my mom's voice slipping out."

I chuckle quietly. “My parents have said similar things. They aren’t impressed with the exceptions. For me or anyone else.”

Harper’s quiet for a moment. Then her voice tentatively starts again. “You do know how special that is, right? The privilege?”

“Fuck, yes. Of course. And I don’t take it for granted. We try to give back as much as possible to the community.”

“I know. I see that at the hospital.”

“If you ever have any other ideas about stuff we can do. The team, or me...” I wish we were having this conversation in person. “You can always call me on shit. Okay? You can tell me if you think I’m being a rich dick, or you think I should put my money where my mouth is. I only have a few more years left in this career, and after that, I promise I’ll do something more significant.”

She doesn’t reply for a long, long moment. “You...won an Olympic gold medal. That’s pretty fucking significant.”

Does a team event count the same as an individual medal? That’s my father’s voice, and I physically recoil from it.

“This would be easier in person,” she whispers in my ear.

“I thought the same thing.”

“But I don’t want you to *ever* think that I think you haven’t already done something hugely significant.”

“So...just the gold medal, huh? Not the thousand games played?”

“Oh, is that how many you’ve played?” she asks innocently. “Do you have a lot of points, too?”

“Point taken.”

“I never asked you about those points, though. Were they mostly assists, or...?”

“Oh, I see how it is. You’re going to brat your way to making me hype myself.”

She's giggling now. "It seems an effective strategy."

"Brats get spanked."

"Oooh, Hot Shot's kinks are just tumbling out now." She sucks in an eager breath. "Take me over your lap?"

"Any day of the week," I growl. "Might get distracted and just grope you, though."

"I like that, too."

"I like everything with you."

"When are you home, again?" She sounds horny. I know the feeling.

But before I can suggest phone sex, there's banging at the door. "Connor's meeting us at the restaurant. Apparently he's hungry," someone hollers. "Let's fucking go!"

"I'm being dragged out of my room," I grumble.

She laughs, a lovely lilting sound I want to drag inside me. Beneath me. Hold on top of me. "Text me if you get bored."

"I'll text you no matter what."

And it's true, I do. Funny memes, horny secrets. Questions about her days and suggestions for her nights.

We walk to the restaurant, because it's fucking Montreal and we can do that, even though it's minus 10 Celsius. A significant change from Columbus.

"What is that in Fahrenheit?" Watanabe asks his fellow American, Ahmadi.

"Fucking cold," Mo grumbles.

Ten minutes after we're seated at a couple of big tables in a private room, Ty Connor strolls in, looking a little shell-shocked. Mo's not alone in being surprised by the sudden drop in temperature—and it was even more drastic for Connor.

I shake his hand first. "Nobody told you to pack a warmer coat?"

"Fuck off, Marsh. I was rollerblading in a pair of shorts this morning, okay? And then I get a phone call and told to get

on a plane to the middle of Siberia.” He claps me on the shoulder. “Introduce me to everyone? And let’s leave out the colourful bits.”

I’ve known Connor for a decade, since he was drafted. Impressive from his rookie year, he’s always been a hard guy to play against, and a lot of fun off the ice. Too much fun for me these days. Ty is exactly the unrepentant playboy I used to be—worse, even. He’s what Harper once imagined I was.

He’ll find Hamilton quite the provincial adjustment compared to Miami.

I start with Tilman, who he’s played with at shined games. Then Hale, and Armstrong. Watanabe, Khan, Ahmadi. Sumner and Makinen.

Everyone remembers at least one fierce clash with him on the ice.

As we settle back down at the tables and order food, the guys get to see a different side of him—his teammate side, which turns out to be a lot of fun.

And we all want to know more about this morning rollerblading along the beach that he can’t do anymore. We really rub it in, although Armstrong makes a point to describe how much he likes living right on the bay in Hamilton. “It’s really nice in the first two weeks of September,” he says with a straight face.

Ty flips him the bird. “I’m not giving up my Miami Beach apartment.”

I lift my glass of whiskey. “That’s goals.”

He taps his glass against mine. “Right? How about you? You used to play here—sure, Siberia, but it’s a pretty fucking awesome city anyway. How do you feel about the transition to Steel Town? Do you miss this?”

“I used to.” It’s the honest truth. Montreal was an exciting city to live in, diverse and vibrant. For a kid from Winnipeg, it had felt cosmopolitan and sexy. After a decade here, Arizona was a shock to the system on every level. (Although it was the only place I’ve ever lived that my parents were happy to visit.)

And then Anaheim...whiplash of a different sort. The location was great, but never have I felt less seen as a player. It was only after landing in California that I realized that here in Montreal, it wasn't the city that had made the difference. It was the fan base. I'd valued them, of course, and knew across that first year playing in Phoenix that I missed the people.

I thought I missed the city, too.

But in Hamilton, Ontario—where night clubs are only open on the two nights a week we almost always play a game, and the hottest date location I've experienced so far is a diner breakfast joint—I've found everything I've ever wanted.

Fans that give a damn, to start, and for that reason alone, I'd be able to honestly recommend that he embrace playing in Hamilton.

But that's not why I stretch my legs out in front of me and lean back, shrugging. "No, man. I don't miss it at all." I grin.

Armstrong laughs. "He's in love."

Connor looks surprised. "No shit. Really?"

It feels good to brag about Harper and how awesome she is. "Yeah. Met someone. She's the real deal. She's a nurse. She works really hard. Like...you can't imagine what her shifts are like, the stuff she deals with. Going out? Here? Pales in comparison to picking her up at the hospital after a night shift."

"Yeah?" Connor's laughing at me a little, I can tell. I don't care. "Does she know any other nurses who might want to welcome me to the city? A pretty best friend?"

Across the table, Armstrong chokes on his beer. "Yeah, Marsh," he strains out after he recovers. "Should we introduce Ty to Kiley?"

I narrow my eyes. "No."

"Who's Kiley?"

"Off-limits, that's who," I say dryly.

Dodaj swings into the conversation, leaning over Armstrong. “Who wants another drink?”

I glance at my watch. “One more.”

“Dad says it’s okay!” Dodaj pumps his arms in the air. “Yeah, baby.”

“When did I get the dad label?” I protest. “I’m in for another round. I’m buying.”

Dodaj gives me a goofy grin. “Hale’s our mom, if that makes you feel better.”

“I feel like I’ve been left out of an important conversation.” I mock-glare at Armstrong. “Did you know about this?”

He shrugs. “You do have some good dad qualities.”

“Shut the fuck up and go find our waiter. It’s Friday night. Let’s go.”

But despite my hot talk, Hale and I do both have our eyes on the clock. We get everyone back to the hotel and safely tucked into their rooms before curfew. Where I at least pretend to protest the ribbing, Hale enjoys his alternate captain duties of checking everyone is in their rooms a little too much. Especially because our actual captain, Tilman, couldn’t give less of a fuck where people sleep.

Connor uses his first text to the team group chat to chirp at Hale about the squeaky rule following, earning him adoration from all.

So we’re riding into Saturday on a nice high, but word starts to spread by lunch that they’re having trouble getting Ty’s emergency visa application accepted.

Something about it being a weekend, or a paperwork backlog, or maybe both. Hell, maybe some planet is in retrograde, too.

Nerves are high as we head to the Montreal arena.

The team waits as long as they can before submitting the full roster and the starting lineup for the game to the officials.

Everyone in the visitors' dressing room is on edge, waiting for the news on whether Connor has been cleared to legally play for a Canadian team.

But when one of the assistant coaches walks in a grim look on their face and shakes their head, we know our brand-new hired gun is going to be watching this game from the stands with fifteen thousand Habs fans.

And the odds on us winning just got worse.

Despite me getting an early goal in the first period, we lose in Montreal. At a point in the season where every win feels like it matters more than usual, that's hard for us all.

For me, personally, every loss in this barn is hard—especially now that I'm back in the same division as the team I once led as their captain.

The online chatter is that we just weren't strong enough without Connor—a thesis that picks up steam over the weekend.

So we're all relieved when he is cleared for our game in Minnesota, and the energy is high for our pregame meeting.

“We have a trend that's starting to become clear, fellas. You're playing two good periods of hockey every game. And sometimes that's enough to win. Sometimes it's not. Last night was not one of the games where it's enough, but I don't want the L to distract from the fact that you played two very good periods of hockey. Okay?” Dorrian sweeps the visitor's dressing room, making eye contact with all of us. “Tonight you're going to have another two good periods. Statistically, that's what we do. One of the three periods is going to suck. Don't let it get away from you. Own the periods where it all clicks, and you'll get the win.”

“Yes we will,” Hale echoes. “Come on boys. Let's do this!”

The tunes get cranked back up and we slide into our pregame headspace.

The first period is not our best work, although we manage to hold them off from scoring until fourteen minutes in.

But we're scoreless by the first intermission.

In the dressing room, the mood is edgy and frustrated.

"Jesus fuck," Makinen barks as he flops into his stall to yank off his goalie pads. "*Fuck.*"

There's muttered agreement.

Everyone looks like they're wondering what Connor is thinking.

He quietly goes to his stall and sits down, then leans his head back, his eyes closed.

I pull off my jersey. I took a puck to my side, and need a trainer to look at it, but I think it's fine.

"So...that wasn't one of your two good periods, right?" Ty finally asks, his eyes still closed.

I laugh—and it doesn't hurt my side, so that's good news all around.

Beside me, Armstrong chuckles too, and then everyone is laughing.

Conner nods his head. "Then crank the fucking tunes, assholes. The game starts when we go back onto the ice."

CHAPTER 48

HARPER

One of my patients tonight is watching the game against Minnesota, so I park my computer outside his door and keep an ear out.

They're not having a great road trip, but the addition of Connor to the line-up should help.

On the other hand, sometimes it takes time for lines to gel, and time is not on their side right now. They're four points out of the wildcard spot and they aren't the only team gunning for it.

After the disastrous first period, Mitchey does a good job of drawing a penalty, and the coach puts out a new power play line-up of five forwards. Kieran running it, with Hale beside him, and Calhoun, Tilman, and Connor across the front.

And it happens at the top of the hour, just in time for a vitals check.

My heart is in my throat, but there's no reason to be nervous. They have this. They score thirty seconds in, and then again, tying the game within the two minutes.

I go to check on my other patients, confident that they have this.

But when I return with meds near the end of the third period, Minnesota has roared back.

"They dialled up their D," my patient complains bitterly. "Five on five has been brutal."

“Sorry, bud.” I give him a sympathetic, *what are you gonna do?* shrug.

But honestly, while it’s still a tied game, the Highlanders look *good*. Like they’re still warming up, and this isn’t the end of sixty minutes of gruelling hockey.

Instead of watching the end of the game, I get back to work. I smile to myself when I hear that they win in OT.

And when I get home at half past seven the next morning, I pull up the end of the game to watch it by myself.

I’m glad I didn’t stick around in my patient’s room last night when I hear the conversation that takes place between the colour commentators, during the break before the overtime period.

They’re talking about Kieran being an elegant, controlled player, and how he narrowly missed having a penalty called against him.

“That’s the mark of true experience. Knowing how to manage the game, and anticipate how refs will call something.”

“And that will help his team immensely when they get to the playoffs.”

“If they make it to the playoffs. If we tighten up our view of their game, to the last twenty games, for example, they’re not trending in the right direction.”

“Sure, they have to get there. But if there is a chance they will, then they’re not going to trade him, right?”

“Right. Playoff hockey is just different. The calls are different. And it’s such a different style of play that a team that is loaded with young guys who haven’t experienced that in volume are at a real deficit.”

“So the Highlanders need Marsh.”

“They really do—if they’re playoff bound. If this trend continues, though, and it looks like they won’t make the playoffs, then it would behoove Dorrian to trade him before the deadline.”

“There will be a lot of teams out there who would like him as a rental for the playoff season, aren’t there?”

“There sure are. And then he’s an unrestricted free agent in the off-season.”

“Would Hamilton sign him back?”

“Would he want to come back to yet another team who traded him away?”

“Probably not.”

“Probably not,” the other broadcaster agrees. “And if he is traded to a contending team and they go far, wouldn’t you assume he can get another contract with them?”

That’s a lot of ifs, I think to myself, wanting desperately to not care about any of this, and still listening to every painful line.

“Listen, if I were a GM, and I could get Kieran Marsh on a winning team for the next two years—after the leadership he’s shown on the Highlanders, and having one of the best seasons of his career—I’d lock him in. He’s doing something right in Hamilton, and they might just be too young for where he’s at in his career.”

“What do you think, a three-year contract?”

“His agent would be smart to push for that. Three times eight at least, with performance bonuses.”

Three times eight. Twenty-four million dollars. *Plus performance bonuses.*

It’s so much money it takes my breath away. It’s the kind of money that is impossible to turn down. Not that Kieran would even think of turning it down. He loves playing hockey.

He’s so good at it, too.

I wouldn’t want him to turn it down.

And it’s a hypothetical situation. He’s not going to get traded.

The day Kieran is going to come home, I go for a winter hike with Grant and Kiley and Puck, just to get out of the house, because I can't sleep. I picked up a bonus shift last night, knowing I'd be antsy, and want to tire myself out.

Plus work is good. I like to remind myself that real life continues, even as he sweeps me deeper and deeper into this fairytale romance—that may or may not be disrupted, sooner than later, but *his* real life, which men in suits control completely.

But I had a few too many coffees, and when I get off work, I'm wired.

So I head to Albion Falls with the twins. I chase after Puck and endure the good-natured ribbing about travelling by private plane. I confess my worries about the trade deadline, and we talk about what I would do if Kieran was traded.

I stop short of confessing that I would probably follow him.

In my heart, it's a no-brainer. I'm a nurse. I can work almost anywhere. And Mr. Private Plane Getaway can certainly carry our living expenses until I sort out my certification if it's a cross-border move.

But I don't want to say that out loud. Not to Kiley and Grant, and not to Kieran.

Not until I have a chance to talk it out with my mom.

I fucked up the first time by holding things back from her. I won't do that again.

So after we've taken all the Instagram content Kiley wanted, and our legs are good and tired from trekking through the freshly fallen snow, I ask Kiley if she can head back to our apartment building with Grant. Since I'm already on the Mountain, I might as well see if my mom is home.

No time like the present to rip off the bandage.

But when I pull up in front of her house, my stomach turns over, because there's a familiar truck parked behind her ten-year-old hatchback.

A big, expensive, driven-by-a-hockey-player-I-love-who-has-never-met-my-mom-before truck.

I check the time, confused. But I guess our hike went longer than I thought, because yeah, he would have landed a half hour ago.

I park on the street, heart pounding, and head up the walk. Might as well let myself in, if he's already inside.

"Hello?" I call out when I don't find them sitting at the table drinking tea and having a staring contest. Kieran's leather dress shoes are neatly set on the boot tray by the front door, though.

"Harper?" My mom laughs from the back of the house. "Well, this is funny."

I make my way down the hall, to what was once my bedroom, and is now her studio.

And there's my boyfriend, holding the painting of me from the art show.

He's still in the suit he'd have travelled in. He's wearing an overcoat, too. So the only thing he took off were his shoes, like he wasn't going to stay long.

"Hi," he says calmly.

Hi.

"Mmm," I say, because a sound is as good as anything, and I don't really have any words. Just buying a little thought processing time. "Hi?"

Not the most clever question, but it does the trick.

"So..." He goes for charming.

He's very good charming.

"The thing is, I got an email from the coordinator of the art show yesterday, with the address of where I could pick up the

painting I bought.”

My mom looks like she’s already heard this explanation. Her face is a neutral canvas.

“So I called the number, and explained that I’d just landed, and would this be a good time to pick up the painting.”

“And I said yes,” My mom said smoothly. “I’m always happy to have visitors to my studio space.”

I glance at him. Back to her. Then back at him.

He shrugs. “I didn’t realize until my GPS delivered me here that it was clearly just a house. I realize, Ms. Roberts, that I could have identified myself when I called, but—”

“Honestly, I think she might not have ever introduced us if you hadn’t come by like this, so—”

“Hey!” I yell it with more force than is really required. Then I take a deep breath. “Mom, this is Kieran. He plays professional hockey for a living. Kieran, this is my mother, Angela Roberts. You met her briefly at the art show, so you already know she’s incredibly gifted. You are both very important to me. I love you both so, so much. But I have worried about how to do...this...for *months* now. So please don’t make light of *this* happening by accident, okay?”

My mom blinks at me.

Kieran rocks back on his heels.

She sucks in a sharp breath. “You love him? *So, so much?*”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“I told you it was serious, Mama.”

“I know.” She wrings her hands. “Right. Well, then we should have tea.”

She pushes past us into the hallway.

Kieran turns, as if for a split second he thinks he should follow her, and I like that instinct. Maybe he’ll be as protective

of her as he is of me, and that would only make me love him more.

But right now, she needs a minute.

Before I can stop him, he catches himself, and slowly turns back. He sets the painting down on her work table, where it looks like she was about to start packing it up for him.

“I really didn’t know I was picking this up from the artist herself.” He winces. “I’m sorry about this. Maybe I should have texted you when I pulled into the driveway.”

I turn around, gesturing to the space. Nothing about it has any visible connection to my childhood, which is fine. My school medals are out in the living room, and my bed and books are all at my apartment. But still, I think he should know where we’re standing. “This used to be my bedroom. Growing up.”

He wraps his arms around my waist from behind, hugging me gently. “It’s a nice little room.”

“She made it nice.” I drag in a ragged breath. “You bought her painting of me?”

“Yeah. I didn’t use my real name. That was fun to explain when she opened the door.”

I laugh. “Oh no.”

“Yeah. She was gracious.”

“I hope you didn’t have any plans for the afternoon. We’re here for the duration. There’s going to be baby photos. You will be grilled on your ethical investment portfolio. She will ask you if you want to stay for dinner, but it’s not a question, okay? That’s a trap.”

He kisses my cheek. “But I want to stay for dinner.”

“I haven’t slept since yesterday afternoon!”

Now he’s laughing. “That’s okay. You can nap on the couch while I’m looking at baby pictures.”

“You can’t look at those unsupervised!”

From the kitchen, the kettle whistles.

Kieran turns me around and cups my face in his hands. “Your mom and I are going to be just fine.”

I reach up and squeeze his wrists, holding him in place. “She doesn’t know...” And then I trail off. Because the only secrets I want to have are the fun ones we keep for our own reasons. “I think we should tell my mom about Buffalo.”

He raises one eyebrow.

I blush. “Just the PG-13 parts.”

I lose my battle to try and stay awake.

When I wake up from a nap, I hear Kieran in the kitchen with my mother. I sit up with a panicky start, but then I hear him laugh, low and slow. The good kind of laugh. And then my mother says something, and he does it again.

My heart rate settles down, and I quietly push myself up. Pad as stealthily as I can in that direction.

I’m rewarded handsomely. His suit jacket and tie are both gone, and his shirt sleeves are rolled up to his elbows. He’s leaning back against the counter, and my mom is standing on a stepstool, looking at the top shelf of her pantry.

“I would never stand between Harper and a sweet treat,” he says, still chuckling over whatever was funny. “What about raisins?”

My mom shoots him an affectionate glower. “Bite your tongue. This is a chocolate chip house.”

He raises his hands and ducks his head. “My bad.” He pauses a beat. “So are dates a complete non-starter, or...?”

She catches her chest, as if he’s shot her, and makes a wounded sound. “And you seemed like you had such promise.”

“They’re nature’s candy!”

“Nature doesn’t make candy. That’s why God invented chemists.” She hands him down a bag of semisweet chocolate chips. Then she hands him down a bag of raisins. “They don’t belong in cookies, but I’ll make an exception for you.”

I clear my throat. “Hi.”

They both jump.

“You’re awake.” Kieran’s eyes rake over me, his gaze lingering on my face after he’s given me a once-over assessment. “Was that enough sleep?”

“For now.” I yawn. “Making cookies?”

“It was something to do while our chicken roasts.” My mom climbs down off her perch and pats my cheek. “Did you know he’s anti-candy?”

I laugh out loud. “Uh...”

He gives her a beseeching look. “Only during the season. And only for myself. Other people are allowed to have candy.”

“Because I’m a grown-up who controls my own destiny,” I add dryly.

My mother nods. “Right. I’m more concerned about my future grandchildren, thank you very much.”

I squeak.

Kieran grins.

Ah. So they’ve gotten on just fine while I was asleep for apparently a hundred days. My cheeks flame, but I’m willing to take the bright burst of embarrassment to see them like this.

I manage to convince Mom I don’t want cookies, not tonight, because I’m still exhausted, and Kieran must be, too, since it was a travel day home.

She feeds us, and makes Kieran promise that he’ll return for dinner soon.

When we’re putting on our coats at the door, I remember why I came over in the first place.

I catch Kieran's hand and tell him I'll meet him at his place.

Then, after we watch his truck drive away, I catch my mother by the arm, take a deep breath, and tell her my worst fears about him being traded.

She listens to me babble about playoff rentals and performance bonuses for players over thirty-five. About how scary it would be to quit my job, but maybe less so if I knew in advance I could find work anywhere he might want to move.

I stopped more than once to say, "I know this must be weird for you, I'm sorry," until she asked me to stop that.

"It wasn't the same for me." She shrugs. "Larry never looked at me the way that man looks at you. And I can't be mad at myself for falling for him. That short marriage gave me you. But it's long-buried now. Let's leave it in the past where it belongs."

And then, after another rush of explanations, she stops me for the last time.

"Harper. Honey. I'm not the person you need to be talking to about this." She gestures at the street. "Go. Tell *Kieran* all of this. I bet he's worried, too."

CHAPTER 49

KIERAN

I'm halfway through unpacking when Harper barrels into my closet.

“Would you want me to come with you?”

“Pardon?” I drop my toiletries kit.

She crosses her arms. Uncrosses them. “We’ve talked a lot about some elements of...us. Being...a forever kind of thing. So if you were traded, would you want me—”

“Yes.” I cross to her and take her hands. It doesn’t feel like enough. I crush her against my chest, and that’s too much. I force myself to hold her, carefully, just by the shoulders, and look her right in the eye. “I would *want* you to come with me. But I would also promise to come back. I travel for work. A lot.” I gesture wildly at the half-full suitcase. “Case in point. So if they send me somewhere for a few months, it’s inconvenient, but not the end of the world. And then we’ll figure out where *we* want to be next year, *if* it’s not here. And if you want to stay here, and we rack up frequent flier miles for a year, that’s okay, too.”

“I miss you when you’re gone for a week,” she whispers. “I’m not going to do well with a few months. I can’t do eight months.”

Neither could I. Not unless she asked me to. I would walk through fire if she asked me to.

“Then we need to make a decision about where we both want to be. I don’t want to be apart from you, either. I have maybe another two hundred hockey games in me. Three

hundred if I'm really lucky. I would never choose that over you. That's a game. I'm not playing when it comes to you. I'm all in. I'm yours. Three hundred games doesn't stack up to anything compared to a lifetime of everything with you. I want ten thousand more nights of hearing you laugh. I want ten thousand more nights where I get to watch you fall asleep. I want ten thousand more nights of knowing you are mine. Nothing else comes close. I don't want anything else. I want this, and you, forever."

She pushes up on her toes and kisses me fiercely, until I back into the wall, and we're both laughing.

"We'll figure it out. But I'm not going anywhere right now." I give her a crooked smile. "Except the shower, and then bed. Preferably with you within holding range for both."

The next day, I take her to the rink with me. She laces up her own skates, but I check them anyway.

The whole time we're skating, I distract her with reminders of how good she tasted riding my face that morning. A long, slow, perfect start to the day.

I love how effective that is at getting her out of her head.

After, we go in search of the good stuff. Mitchey and Gusty are both coffee snobs, and they've brought in a bunch of gear to make fancy pour-over coffees. There are even laminated instruction cards above the coffee cart, so we don't fuck it up.

As I'm carefully preparing the second cup, one of Mabel's PR interns approaches with a video crew.

"Kieran, would you mind if we film you for some YouTube content?"

I say sure, and they move some distance away to discuss the best shot for my "off-the-cuff" comments.

Harper's eyes dance. "I'll get out of your way."

I catch her wrist and rub my thumb against the inside. “Stay.” Her pulse jumps against my gentle pressure. “Do you mind?”

If she doesn’t want to be on camera, that’s totally fine.

She takes a deep breath. “It would look like...”

“Like you’re my girlfriend who can come and go as she pleases here?”

That gets me a secret smile. “Yeah.”

“Like I adore you?”

“Uh...” She’s blushing now. “Yes.”

“Good. Because I do, and you are, and I don’t want you to go anywhere.”

The PR intern returns, and says they want the video of me making a pour-over coffee first. So I make a third cup, which Harper happily takes and drinks.

“You’re going to have to make this a whole series,” I joke as he gives us the next set of instructions. “Players with their girlfriends.”

I sprawl on the couch in the corner, and tug Harper into my side, then drop my hand high on her thigh.

The intern nods approvingly. “This is great. And yeah, people love the family content, for sure.”

Harper stiffens.

I squeeze her leg reassuringly. She looks up at me, and I see a lot in her gaze. The echo of long ago abandonment. The edge of doubt. But bigger than both of those is the fierce determination to stay in this moment and trust me.

I love her for all of that.

“Okay, we have some rapid-fire questions for you, Kieran. What’s your favourite pregame snack?”

“An apple.”

“Favourite late-night snack.”

“Nachos.”

“What did you have for breakfast today?”

I make a thinking sound, and beside me, Harper tenses up in a whole different way. “Let me see, what did I eat first...” I rub her leg, then give the camera a smooth smile. “Pineapple. Just can’t get enough of it.”

As January crawls into February, and the team’s win percentage picks up—some, not quite enough, but slowly gaining ground—the hypothetical question of what we would do in the case of a trade really starts to feel academic. I settle into a good place. In my game, and at home with Harper.

I don’t make the All-Star team, because having Ty Fucking Connor as a teammate really wrecks one’s chances for the team pick, and Jenson and Max win the (possibly rigged) “fan vote.”

Jenson deserves the trip, though.

And I’m really not disappointed when the week off arrives and we get to fly to Manitoba—commercially, this time, because there’s a direct flight, so no mile-high-club shenanigans. We have a polite early dinner with my parents, then drive to my brother’s house that night, and stay up late playing cards and sharing slightly embarrassing, highly endearing stories. The next day we go the rest of the way to the lake, stopping only to get groceries.

And I pay top dollar for pineapple.

As I promised, I take her to Clear Lake for a skating lesson. She practices her starts and stops and turns in between pausing to look at the fish swimming below the ice, and I think about how I’m going to make this woman my wife.

Then she looks up, her dark gaze searching for me, and my pulse thuds heavily in my neck.

I’m going to make this woman my wife *soon*.

Everything else is going to sort itself out, because this connection is all that matters.

CHAPTER 50

HARPER

We return to Hamilton a day before most of the team, because I have to work. Kieran spends the morning doing laundry, then by lunchtime he's texted me to say he's going to the arena to get a workout in.

KIERAN

Might eat dinner here, too? Hayden has Charlie with him, because Becca's under the weather.

He sends a cute picture of Charlie hanging off the squat rack.

Then, just before the end of my shift, he sends me what reads like a very carefully worded text.

KIERAN

Hey! Don't believe everything you see on Twitter. But I won't be home for a bit. Keep your phone on you (but stay off Twitter).

He said it twice.

So obviously, I have to check Twitter.

Ninety seconds later, I say out loud to absolutely nobody, "I really did not have to check Twitter."

I scroll through the tweets with growing horror. Not from random egg accounts, but from journalists I follow. True insiders.

FreidTheMan

Two sources tell me Montreal has made an attractive offer to Hamilton for Kieran Marsh.

ShaynaWritesHockey

Marsh does not have a no-trade-clause. Dick Dorrian has been on the phone all afternoon. Apparently Marsh is at the arena right now.

I drop my phone. Because he went there to work out! Not for any other reason.

Oh my God. *Montreal*.

If it were any other team, I'd laugh it off. But a chance to go back to where he started his career?

I finish my shift handover to the next nurse in a daze. I have to triple check what I'm saying, and then I race to my car.

No more updates from Kieran.

I don't check Twitter again, not until I'm in the parking garage under the arena. I half hope there's a "lol, just kidding" update from either FreidTheMan or ShaynaWritesHockey, but both of them keep tweeting inside sources who say this is about to break in the next hour.

I race upstairs. Because it's not a game day and the team isn't having a formal practice, most of the entrances are locked up tight. It takes three tries before I find a door that is open, and when I burst through it, a security person I've never seen before tries to stop me.

"Ma'am..."

I prefer Miss. "I'm on a list."

He gives me a skeptical look. I probably look wild-eyed and stalker-ish.

I force a pretty smile on my face. "Harper Roberts."

He flips through his sheets, then hands me a visitor's badge. Gripping it in my fist, I race down the hallway with zero idea of where I'm actually going. I vaguely remember a

press room off another hallway, maybe in the space between the practice rink and the—

“Harper?”

I spin around. Kieran steps out of a doorway. He’s wearing black sweatpants and a white sweatshirt with that stupid bagpipe-playing wild boar on it.

He wouldn’t still be wearing the Highlander gear if he was traded, right? Someone from PR would sweep in and tug it off him, all a part of the carefully orchestrated professional hockey game.

“What are you doing here?”

“You put me on a list.”

“I—” He cuts himself off. “Right.”

“Kieran—”

“I have to do a thing. They’re setting up cameras.” He glances behind him, then strides towards me, spinning me around. Half carrying me, half pushing. “We don’t have a lot of time.”

My heart is in my throat.

He tugs me into another room. It’s dark, and there’s a door and a window. I realize we’re looking at the room he just came out of, where a press conference is being set up.

“Are you going to Montreal?” My voice cracks.

It might be the one place where I can’t work, because my French is absolute shit, but fuck it, I don’t care. I’ll learn better French. I’ll take up macrame full time. I’ll start a yoga focused Instagram account like half a dozen other hockey girlfriends.

He presses me against the wall. His mouth descends on mine, hot and sweet. Rough and yearning. I tangle my arms around his neck and let him kiss me, because that’s just as important as whatever the answer is.

The kiss *is* the answer.

“You came straight here?”

“I didn’t want you to be alone. Wanted you to know—”
The rest of that is lost to another kiss.

He’s breathing hard when he stops again. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

He pulls at my scrub top, then shudders when the palm of his left hand finds my bare belly. I wore joggers today, with a yoga-style wide waistband, so it’s nothing for him to slide his fingers down the curve of my abdomen and into my panties.

I gasp.

He doesn’t stop. “Need you. Can’t wait.”

“We can’t fuck here.”

“Don’t need to fuck you. Just need to touch you.” He shudders again as his fingers notch against my slit.

“Can I fuck this later?”

“Yes.” Always.

His eyelids hood over his gaze as he slowly works the tip of his finger into me. “I’m not going back to Montreal.”

My breath catches in my chest. “You’re not?”

He shakes his head. “Everything I want is right here. Right fucking here.” He squeezes his whole hand over my sex. “God, I love having you on my skin. This is amazing.”

I whimper at the heat he’s building inside me. This isn’t the time or place for this, but his fingers feel too good for me to say stop.

“Never gonna let you go,” he whispers. “Never gonna stop needing this.” His fingers spear into me, two of them now. A good stretch, an aching stretch. “Never gonna stop loving you. Never gonna stop craving you. You’re it for me. You’re my one and only. I love you so damn much.”

I breathe the same words back, a mantra of love and need.

“Can you come for me? Need to feel that.”

Clinging to him, I give myself over to it. He kisses me hard, his tongue matching what his fingers are doing. And as a

few reporters file into the next room, I come apart with his hand in my pants.

It's a quiet, staggeringly good orgasm. It leaves my legs feeling like jelly and my panties a complete mess.

He pulls his fingers out and licks them off, holding my gaze with his the whole time.

"Mine," he whispers before kissing me. "Just like I'm yours."

Then he pushes through the connecting door and joins Dick Dorrian at a table on the far wall.

He steepled his fingers in front of his mouth, a dirty for-me-alone smile on his face as his GM starts to speak.

"Earlier today, we received an offer sheet from another team. I understand the details of the proposed trade were leaked to the media—not by anyone on my team, to be clear. I understand why that other team wants Kieran Marsh. He's having a banner year. And since they had him on their team once, they know he's an exceptional leader, as well as a skilled player on the ice. But the thing is, we know that, too. We value *everything* he brings to this team. So tonight I'm thrilled to announce that we've re-signed Kieran to a three year contract. My hope is he never wears another uniform. And speaking of that uniform..."

He turns and gestures for someone to bring out Kieran's jersey.

"We've added an extra element to it, Marsh. We hope you don't mind, but the A has been there for a few months already in spirit."

Kieran fists his left hand in front of his mouth and breathes in deeply before he nods. Breathing in the scent of me as he absorbs the fact he was just promoted to alternate captain.

I catch a choked up cry, covering my mouth with my fingers.

He's going to play the rest of his career here. Recognized as a leader. On a team good enough to go the distance—if not

this year, then soon.

As he holds out his right hand to shake Dorrian's fist, I press my fingers against the glass window.

Even though I'm in the shadows, a reporter notices me.

A tremor of nerves ripples across my body, but I don't move. They smile, then turn back to Kieran.

I exhale, releasing a breath I'd been holding for way too long.

CHAPTER 51

KIERAN

“Drive carefully,” Harper says solemnly as she straightens my tie.

“I’m just going to the arena.”

“Then tell the bus driver to drive carefully.” She steps back to check her work, then nods approvingly. “You look hot. You’re just missing...”

I laugh as her eyes narrow, then she whirls away and dashes into her closet—the bigger of the two walk-in closets in my room, now our room in all but name only. She’s here more often than she’s not, and every time she comes to stay for a few days, she brings more stuff.

And we’ve started a photo and art wall downstairs. The painting Angela did of Harper at work is in the middle, and right next to it is the framed ticket and hotel room key card I got for Christmas. One day soon, we’ll bring her travel photos to join the collection.

When she reappears, she has her hands behind her back. “I got you a little something. A good luck memento, and it should keep your ears warm, too.”

She holds out a new toque, a heavy knit beanie that’s all black except for a red pom pom and a Highlander badge on the side. Inside, it’s fleece-lined.

“This is a nice hat.” I haul her into my arms for a similarly nice kiss. Nicer, even. “Really nice,” I murmur against her lips.

She laughs against my kiss. “You’ll be late.”

“They’ll wait for me.”

“Stop it.” But her laugh is low and husky and perfect, because she knows I’ll never stop showing her I love her.

I make it to the arena with a few minutes to spare. We’re taking a bus to Buffalo, for a special outdoor game in the football stadium there. It’s going to be the biggest crowd I’ve ever played in front of, and it should be an exciting day—even if the snow threatens to make the game itself more chaotic than anything else.

It’s the kind of game that makes me wish I had a more supportive family. Unlike some of my teammates, I didn’t grow up with a backyard rink, and I don’t have parents driving to the game today, because it reminds them of that childhood joy.

Not for the first time, I think about how things will be different if Harper and I have kids. When, I hope.

I’ll flood the shit out of my backyard for the chance to play one-on-one under a starry sky with my kid.

There’s a flurry of press stuff when we arrive at the stadium, then it’s almost a regular pregame routine. We’re the visitors, even though this is technically neutral ground. Buffalo is the home team, and this is their home crowd. They did all the pageantry stuff yesterday.

When this game was put on the schedule before the season started, the narrative probably would have been that we’re being bussed in for the day to get our asses handed to us by the hometown heroes.

But we’re on a hot streak. We’re one point out from the wildcard spot, and this game could clinch a play off berth for us.

Do I want to do that in front of seventy thousand people?

You’re fucking right I do.

The roar of the crowd when we step onto the ice is incredible. Even more incredible is the number of people

waving our crazy argyle pattern socks in the air. Buffalo might be the home team, but we're only an hour away, and *our* fans scored a good chunk of the tickets.

I wear the ugly socks with so much pride it makes my chest tight.

I take a spin around our net, chipping in one of the pucks on the ice for our warm up. Then I look up, my attention drawn into the stands.

Harper is in the fifth row back, wearing a Hamilton jersey and a matching toque to the one she put on me that morning. And beside her, holding a "Snow 'Em How It's Done, Marsh!" sign is Angela.

I scrape to a stop in front of them.

"I bet you never wear the home team's jersey," I holler.

Harper laughs. "Not really much of a hockey fan. Just like to cause trouble."

It's right there, on the tip of my tongue. *Cause trouble for me for the rest of my life.* But we're not doing that in front of seventy-thousand people.

That's a private conversation for later tonight.

"I have to go play a game." I don't want to move from this spot. I never want to stop looking at her. "Doing anything fun after?"

She rolls her eyes at everyone around her watching now. "Players, right?"

"You should go out with him," someone yells.

"I bet he has hot plans already. A party full of puck bunnies."

Then someone busts us. "Pretty sure that's his girlfriend."

She laughs, and I blow her a kiss before heading inside to regroup for the game.

When we return, and stand for the American and Canadian anthems, it begins to snow. At first it's just enough to decorate

the ice and our jerseys, to mute the roar of seventy-thousand people when Buffalo scores, and then we answer them.

But by the third period, it's coming down heavy. Some people leave, because we're up now, four to one, and that's not fun—for them. It's fucking amazing for us, and the fans who crossed the border.

In the fifth row behind the visitor's goal, though, two women are dancing up a storm. Happy girls in a snow globe memory that I'll cherish for the rest of my life.

And when we win, Harper and her mom—and all the other Hamilton fans around them—come spilling down to the side of the makeshift rink.

I shake off my gloves, then scoop Harper up and over the boards. “Hold on tight,” I whisper as she finds her footing. The snow makes it easier to stand on the ice.

She's fucking tiny next to me when I'm on skates and she's just in boots.

“Do you think your mom wants to come down here?”

She glances over her shoulder, then nods.

I gesture to Angela. “Come here!”

She laughs and shakes her head.

“Come on.” I lean across the boards. “I promise not to let you fall.”

Nervously, she sets her hands on my shoulders, and I hoist her up and over to stand next to her daughter.

Someone from the team stops in front of us with a camera. “Can I take a family photo?”

I wrap my arms around them both, me in the middle. “You sure can.”

Then I introduce Angela to Dick Dorrian, and his wife Billie. Harper and I both keep a watchful eye on her mom, but Angela is full of grace and strength, as always. So after a few minutes, I tug Harper a little farther out into the ice. The stadium is mostly empty now.

“I wish we didn’t have to leave right after the game.” Right now, our hard-working equipment team is packing everything up. We’re going straight from here to the Buffalo airport. Our team plane will meet us there, and we’ll fly to Nashville for one more game on the road before playoffs begin.

That’s why I didn’t think Harper would come today. Sometimes, the reality of a packed eighty-two game season is a real romance buzzkill.

She tips her face up to the falling snow. “Two years ago, I never would have thought we’d wind up here.”

I did. I dreamed of this from the very moment I laid eyes on her.

My pulse jacks hard at the base of my throat.

She blinks back at me and smiles. “You knew, didn’t you? That night?”

“That you were the one I’d someday ask to marry me?” I nod. “I sure did.”

Her expression goes soft and dreamy. “I like the sound of that.”

“On a scale of one to *don’t you dare*, how would you feel about me getting down on my knee right now?”

She laughs.

Then stops laughing, because I’ve slid a diamond ring out of a small pocket in my compression pants.

“Are you serious?”

I duck my head to lightly touch hers. “I’ve been carrying this for a month, waiting for the right moment.”

“You didn’t think I was going to be here,” she breathes.

“I always like to be prepared.” I brush my mouth against hers, soft as can be. “Can I?”

Her eyes are wide. And bright. And sparkling. “Right here?”

“Only if you want.”

She nods jerkily at first, then again more rapidly. Happily. “Yes.”

I lower myself to one knee and hold up the ring. “Harper Anne Roberts, will you marry me? I promise you a lifetime of skating lessons, a never-ending supply of ice cream in the freezer, and as many trips to the Caribbean as your sun worshipping heart desires. Mini stick wielding hellions and all.”

“Yes. Yes!” She laughs and leans forward, kissing me firmly on the mouth. Long, and hard, and for everyone to see. “Yes,” she whispers. “I will marry you.”

EPILOGUE

HARPER

three months and twenty-five days later

After we got engaged, we had a few days to make some rapid-fire decisions. Due to the hockey season, the wedding would definitely take place in a summer. So, four months or sixteen months out? We looked at each other and said *four months* at the same time.

Done.

Next question: where. Hamilton? Winnipeg? The lake? A destination somewhere? Back to the Bahamas? Maybe Italy?

My head spun with all the options.

So we skipped the *where* and went to *who* next.

His family and mine. A few teammates, and a couple of girls I went to nursing school with, and I stood up for them in their weddings. Adding in plus-ones for all who wanted to bring them brought us to a guest list of forty people.

That was too many people to coordinate getting to Italy in a few months. Especially the ordinary people on my side of the invite list, who don't have the entire summer off.

A long weekend in Manitoba became the clear winner.

And now it's suddenly upon us.

When Kieran brought me to the lake in the winter, it was just the two of us. We visited with his family on the way, but our time spent here in his luxury cabin was private.

And it was minutes twenty Celsius, so going outside wasn't a top priority, except for one sunny day when we drove to the nearby national park to skate on Clear Lake, which is one of my favourite all-time memories.

Now his sprawling property is teeming with people. His whole family is here. My Mom and Kiley.

Some of our guests are staying on the property, too, in a pop-up glamping caravan park we created with rented RVs. Others are staying at a nearby golf course—but they're starting to arrive. A long line of rental SUVs are parked along the gravel lane.

I take a deep breath. Let it out.

Realize my hands are sweaty, and cross to the sink.

There's a knock at the bathroom door.

"I'll be right out," I say, lifting my voice.

There's a pause. Then Kieran says, "It's me."

I fly to the door and open it.

He's in his suit already, midnight blue and perfectly tailored. No tie, not yet.

"Hi," I whisper.

He rakes his gaze down my slip, to my bare legs and painted blue toenails, then back up again. "You okay?"

I blush. "Did Kiley send you to talk me down from a ledge?"

"She said you could use a hug." He steps inside and wraps his arms around me.

I breathe in the scent of him and the tension in my shoulders starts to melt. "I missed you last night."

"That was your idea," he rumbles.

It was a stupid idea. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"Tradition." I blow a raspberry and he laughs. "I'm all yours tonight."

I lift my face. “I can’t wait.”

He smiles down at me. “Can I kiss you?”

“You better.”

A little exhale just before his lips meet mine tells me he’s a little anxious, too. Not about getting married. We’re both stoked for that. But after being so chill about the wedding planning, we landed here three days ago and it’s been go, go, go ever since.

His kiss is a slow, deliberate reminder of what we’re doing today. Yes, it’s a big party with a lot of moving parts to keep track of. Sure, the portable freezer for the ice cream bar stopped working, and we don’t know how the caterer is going to fix that. And okay, having both his dad and my mom on the same property for three days means we’ve had opinion overload at a time we probably don’t need that.

But today we’re going to make formal what we already know in our hearts. I am his, and he is mine, and this is forever.

“I can’t wait until you walk down that aisle to me,” he says huskily. “Don’t worry about anything else.”

I nod wordlessly, tiny tears threatening to turn my carefully, artfully done eyelashes into wet spikes.

“I love you,” he whispers. “And I can’t wait until all these people are gone.”

I laugh, because same. “But we dragged them all the way here.”

“Okay, they can stay for one more day. Then I want this place all to ourselves again.”

“Naked time for a week.”

He growls, then releases me. “See you in...” He glances at his watch. “Forty-seven minutes.”

“Forty-six. I’m going to be early.” My heart races at the thought of exchanging vows.

Forty-four minutes later, Kiley hands me my bouquet, then steps off the back porch and walks around the corner to where our ceremony space is set up between the house and the lake.

I grip my mom's hand.

She squeezes my fingers back.

And then the music changes, and my feet start moving, faster than we planned.

"Take your time, honey," my mom says quietly.

I laugh a little under my breath. "I just want to see him."

"He snuck into the bathroom!"

Now we're both laughing.

But then she slows me to a stop. "Seriously, Harper." She swallows hard. "Don't race through today. I know you're overwhelmed. But when we turn that corner... You will want to remember that moment. And the next one, and the next. Today is one of the most special days of your life. Savour every part of it. You are marrying a very special man."

I nod my head. "Thank you." There's a lump in my throat. "For everything, Mama. For absolutely everything."

She rearranges our arms, and this time we go slow. We pause once we're around the corner, and I can see Kieran waiting at the far end of our small gathered group of guests. He's tall and broad and handsome. The wind is ruffling his hair, long on top again.

And he's smiling at me like he's just seen the sun for the first time in a long time.

I float towards him.

My mom takes my flowers, and stands beside Kiley.

And then we're holding on to each other for dear life. Do I take this man to be my husband? Absolutely. With everything I

have and with everything I am. Does he take me to be his wife? Forever and ever.

My pulse pounds the entire time and all I can see is his smile. All I can hear is the warm rumble of his voice.

My fingers shake when I slide the ring on his finger. He holds my hand so firmly as he nestles a ring on mine.

The minister only gets as far as “You may kiss—” when Kieran takes my face in both hands and lays one on me that just goes on and on. It takes my breath away, and then he draws me into his arms and repeats the claiming embrace with a slight dip.

And then we’re presented as husband and wife, and nothing has ever felt that good.

We race up the aisle together, to get to the champagne we want to serve everyone, and there’s so much happy laughter. So. Much.

It’s perfect.

And I’m suddenly so glad that everyone we are close to is here to share it with us.

Want a little more Harper and Kieran?

[Click here to see all the bonus content available for this book on my website.](#)

You can get a Ten Years Later bonus epilogue delivered right to your email inbox! Or join the reader conversations about The Playing Game in my FB reader group, and check out the exclusive NSFW art and cut scenes on my Patreon! That and more on my website at:

www.ainsleybooth.com/TPGbonus

And if you are curious about Becca and Hayden, their story begins in Becca’s father’s book, [Reckless at Heart by Zoe York](#) (my small town romance alter-ego).

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True story: I grew up in a hockey-loving small town/rural Ontario community (*cough* real life Letterkenny), and...that was enough of that, for a very long time.

Then I had a baby, and he has loved hockey his entire life. It's pure and wonderful—and infectious.

And then TikTok happened. You know how TikTok sees your soul, and shows you who you truly are?

My feed was non-stop hockey.

Mmm. Okay, TikTok, I hear you.

In October 2021, I shared a story idea with my developmental editor, Kristi Yanta, and she cheered me on from the very first DM. So... thank you, Kristi, for being enthusiastic about this project when it was just a NaNoWriMo concept, and then fitting it in before a planned Pine Harbour editorial date because my muse rearranged my writing schedule, and THEN very correctly cringing at the first draft conflict idea, and reframing it in such a better way that I accidentally ended up writing another 35,000 words. Seriously, thank you for all of that.

I just love how this novel bloomed because of our work together on it!

Another big influence on how I drafted this book is the amazing Theodora Taylor. In every scene, I asked myself, “what would make this even more delicious?”, a question inspired by her book *7 Figure Fiction*. If there are any scenes that feel almost too indulgent for real life, that's a hat tip to Theodora.

And also... Hockey Twitter. But especially the corners of hockey Twitter that celebrate Hockey Is For Everyone. Jashvina Shah (@icehockeystick) and Steve “Dangle” Glynn

(@Steve_Dangle) led me to dozens of other amazing accounts, and now my Twitter account is 78% hockey. Not even sorry about that.

Then there are all the people who helped with details, big and small! Puck was named with love by readers in my Facebook group and on my Patreon. Sadie Haller came in clutch with my questions about very good dog behaviour (that actually mostly ended up getting cut from this book, but will make it into the next one). Molly O’Keefe read an early draft and correctly pointed out that if we talk about vibrators in a bedtime scene, we need to *use the vibrators in that scene*. The doorway gripping? That’s all thanks to Molly’s keen romance eye.

I have a couple of author group chats (*waves to the Emerald Elites and the Feral Authors*) that were *hopping* while I wrote this. Despair, celebration, “what would a hot book boyfriend do???” questions, angst, and nose-to-the-grindstone sprinting...get yourself a group of peers who are doing the same work as you. It’s nice to not be completely alone in this lonely pursuit.

And then, once I finished the book, fellow author Jennifer Lazaris brought her hockey depth knowledge and saved me from using a character name I wouldn’t want to use, due to gross character association. It’s hard to cast an entire team and not accidentally use a name that matches a real hockey player, at least in part! There are so many of them.

Last but definitely not least, the final pass copy editor who catches all of the little things (and a few big things!), making the reading experience just that much smoother, Kim Cannon! Like Kristi, Kim is a hockey fan herself, and it’s a joy to send a book to someone who loves when the ratio of hockey to sex scenes is this close (and there are so many of both in this book. I held nothing back.)

Wait!!! That’s not last.

Two more important acknowledgements:

You, for reading this book from cover to cover, including these thank you notes. Yes, Kiley gets a book. Yes, her hero is

Ty. Yes, I can't wait to write them.

And finally (for real this time), to The Viking. My favourite six-foot-something hero, who really, really doesn't like hockey (he's my Harper, before the evolution of self-awareness), and who has been listening to hockey content for three months straight at this point. Morning, noon, and night. I'm sorry, honey, but we're about to do it all again. But the real-life Bimini research was worth it, right?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ainsley Booth is a three-time *USA Today* bestselling author of erotic romance. Between her two pen names (she also writes contemporary romance as two-time *New York Times* bestseller Zoe York), she has published more than seventy books since 2013. Notable hits include *Prime Minister* and *Hate F*@k*.



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