


**TOO
MUCH**

MIAMI

**KATY
JAMES**





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MAN

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Content Warning

Too Much Man contains discussions of bi erasure, serious physical injury, past parental death and on-page alcohol use.

Too Much Man

Katy James



For my mom,
whose love of romance
started me on this journey.
I wish you were here to see this.

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Chapter One

Gavin Williams was hungover, exhausted, and grumpy as hell.

He'd decided to go cold turkey on the heavy-duty painkillers he'd been taking since he blew out his knee over two months ago, and the team doctor had reluctantly agreed. In his two decades playing hockey at the highest level, Gavin had seen firsthand what painkiller addiction could do, and he was damned if he was going to be another statistic. He was so confident he didn't need the pills that he left the bottle at the office.

That night, he wondered if perhaps he had been a little hasty.

During the day the pain hadn't been terrible, mostly because he kept busy hobbling around his rental house, unpacking things that had been sitting in boxes since arriving here in the Philadelphia suburb of Shady Hill several months ago. If he was going to be stuck here doing fuck all aside from shuttling to and from appointments with the doctor and physical therapist, he may as well be comfortable.

But last night... Last night had been hell. After several hours of tossing and turning in his bed, trying to ignore the screaming ache in his knee, he had given up and headed to the kitchen to find the bourbon.

A stupid idea, but hell, for a few glorious hours he felt no pain.

Sometime well after midnight he'd passed out on the couch. This morning he woke to an empty bottle, a soul-destroying headache, and the feeling that he had finally sunk as low as possible.

His phone rang.

"What?" he barked into it once he'd fished it out from between the couch cushions, and then winced as he glanced at the screen and saw who it was. He was supposed to be

mentoring his teammate Carlos, not yelling at him. “What?” he asked more quietly.

“That doesn’t sound like the Gavin Williams we all know and love,” came the cheerful voice of his teammate. “Always has a smile for the camera, never refuses an interview?”

“Fuck off,” he muttered under his breath, realizing when he heard an answering chuckle that he’d said it loud enough for Carlos to hear him.

“So, I’m guessing it’s not a good time to talk about that opportunity I mentioned?”

Gavin groaned. Carlos was a good kid—if a twenty-two-year-old man could be called a kid. He had proven himself to be a rising star on the Philadelphia Firebirds team during his rookie season. Most days, Gavin liked him.

Today was not most days. And unfortunately, Carlos was still talking.

“Wild night last night? Where did you go? The city? Man, I can’t believe you moved out to Shady Hill, how can you stand it?”

“It’s quiet, for one,” Gavin ground out. “Except for you jabbering in my ear.”

God, he sounded like the washed-up old man he was. Objectively, he knew that forty-two wasn’t *old* old, but in hockey years? All but dead.

“Not a wild night,” he mumbled, embarrassed at snapping at his teammate. “I just...” He sighed. Whatever. He wasn’t going to impress Carlos, not anymore. He wasn’t Gavin Williams, three-time cup champion, five-time league MVP, player at the top of his game. Now he was just a worn-out has-been forced to retire. Not that the team had made the official announcement about the career-ending extent of his injury yet. He was in hockey purgatory. “I had a little too much to drink. That’s all.”

“That sucks,” Carlos responded sympathetically. “We can talk later. You know what you should try?”

Gavin perked up. Carlos was a smart kid who did his share of partying. Maybe he had a killer hangover cure.

“Coffee.”

Gavin groaned again. “You know I don’t drink coffee,” he said. He never touched the stuff. He’d never needed it, and he had been almost obsessively fastidious about his diet throughout his career. But what did it matter now?

Carlos laughed. “You drink it if you have a hangover as bad as you sound like you do.”

Gavin forced himself not to moan as he inched up to a sitting position, eyes squeezed shut. He needed to get off the phone before he said something he’d regret. He might not be able to play anymore, but he sure as hell could still be a good teammate.

“I don’t even have coffee in the house. Look—” he began. But Carlos was on a roll.

“Here’s what you do: make yourself presentable and drink a big glass of water. Eat some plain toast. Then walk down to the Friendly Bean. It’s the coffee shop like four blocks from your house—my sister works there.” At the mere mention of walking, his knee struck up a low, deep throbbing. Fucking fantastic. “Did you know that the caffeine in coffee shrinks your veins, and really does help a headache? And also—”

“All right!” He was barking again. He made himself take a deep breath. “All right. Yeah. Thanks. I’ll do that.”

He wasn’t doing that.

Carlos kept talking for several minutes, but Gavin was only half paying attention. Eventually, the younger man gave up trying to engage and told Gavin he’d see him later, and Gavin felt just a little bit more like shit.

He knew that a large part of the reason the Firebirds had signed him to the two-year contract was that he brought experience that the young team badly needed. Sure, his stats had been down the past few years, which was why Vancouver hadn’t re-signed him despite his long and successful history with the club. Philly had hoped to get a couple more good

years out of him, and the truth was he had been playing well with them. Until...

He shook his head to stop the downward spiral of his thoughts, then regretted the movement as his skull pounded in retaliation. What else had Carlos said? Water. Toast. Make himself presentable. He stumbled into the bathroom and laughed humorlessly at the last suggestion when he caught sight of himself in the mirror.

Three days of stubble lined his jaw. He needed a haircut—the streaks of gray were even more visible with a little length. Eyes bloodshot, dark bags underneath. He looked like a surly brute, not hockey's golden boy, or whatever *GQ* had called him a few years ago.

Note to self: no more self-medicating.

He brushed his teeth and changed into jeans and a clean button-down shirt, which for him was a bare step up from pajamas. He didn't bother to shave or fix his hair. What did it matter what he looked like?

In the kitchen, he followed Carlos's suggestions of water and toast, but he couldn't say he felt much better. More like he'd taken a puck to the head and body checks to every other part of him.

Maybe Carlos was right. Maybe he should walk down to the coffee shop—the doctors were after him to undertake “gentle exercise,” whatever the fuck that meant. Maybe coffee really would shrink his veins or whatever Carlos had said.

It wasn't like he had anything better to do.

Decision made, he strapped on his bulky knee brace and grabbed his wallet. He spared a glance for the cane the team doctor had provided, leaning unused in the corner, but walked out the door without picking it up. As he limped down the street to the coffee shop, he tried to ignore the too-cheerful early June sun beating down on him.

He spotted the bright café sign ahead.

The Friendly Bean. Why did every store have to have some cutesy name like that? Why couldn't it just be “Sam's

Coffee”? Not everything had to sound so goddamned *happy*.

Already, he regretted leaving his house. He should have stayed home, where the sun wouldn't blast rays of pain into his head. Where drops of sweat wouldn't trail uncomfortably down his back in the unfamiliar mid-Atlantic heat. Where he wouldn't have to walk past the contented people sitting in friendly groups at the outdoor seating. Where he could have avoided the shooting pain the short walk had caused in his knee.

“*Fuck*,” he mumbled to no one in particular, and pushed open the shop door.

It was even worse inside, where the homey scent of coffee and baked goods immediately assailed his nose. The walls were painted a perky yellow, setting off the mismatched furniture scattered around the cozy space. Chirpy music played through speakers somewhere, and a bright rainbow flag hung in the corner. The place was full of people. Happy people. People who were talking—loudly.

He took a deep breath and hobbled up to the counter.

An attractive woman about Carlos's age—maybe younger—held a phone to her ear behind the wooden bar, facing away from him. He couldn't hear what she was saying over the noise of the café, but he could see that the fingernails curled around the phone were painted a sparkly green. Long, bright pink hair spiraled down her back over her tight black tank top. Earthy brown pants hugged a spectacular ass and clung to her long legs down to a pair of old tennis shoes.

He blinked away. He had no business checking out the ass of some twentysomething barista. He was *not* going to be that guy.

She turned, and for a moment he was distracted by just how pretty she was. Honey skin set off by her fluorescent hair, warm brown eyes, upturned nose and delicately pointed chin, freckles that made her look even younger than he guessed she was.

Then he realized she was looking directly at him. A customer. Waiting to be served.

And she was still on the phone.

“Excuse me,” he said meaningfully, as irritation pooled in his gut. She held up a single slim finger.

He dredged up what he hoped was a patient smile, although what little patience he had was evaporating as quickly as the steam coming off the pot of coffee brewing just past where the woman stood.

When the smile earned exactly no response, he tried clearing his throat, leaning forward against the counter and holding eye contact to silently communicate his urgent desire to place an order. Still nothing.

Then she turned away again.

He pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose.

“Excuse me,” he said again, a little louder this time.

His knee throbbed. His head pounded. He felt a million years old and at the end of his patience. He had lost his career, his mobility, his very identity as a hockey player—hell, he’d even lost his wife, although if he was honest that was the least of his problems.

All he wanted was a cup of coffee, and this pink-haired woman with sparkly fingernails was going to ignore him?

“*Excuse me,*” he said for what he swore was the last time before he gave up and stomped out.

Her head turned toward him, and she looked him up and down. No doubt taking in his disheveled appearance and knee brace. He flushed a little, embarrassed despite himself. He used to be someone completely different, someone people respected. Someone he was proud of. He always made an effort to look put together, because he knew cameras could catch him any time he stepped outside. Throughout his career he’d been so careful: about his appearance, his behavior. He’d been the backbone of the Vancouver team, not just because of his play, but because of who he *was*. The person he was now,

on this particular morning, was someone even he barely recognized. And he hated it.

The woman murmured something into the phone and then pocketed it.

Fucking finally.

He thought she rolled her eyes before turning to fully face him. Unbelievable.

He leveled his best *don't fuck with me* stare at her, the one that made players on opposing teams get the hell out of his way. He knew it wasn't particularly nice to try to intimidate her, given that he already dwarfed her with his 6'4" height. But *goddamn it*, all he wanted was a cup of coffee.

She regarded him, unperturbed. "How can I help you?" she asked politely.

Her voice was lovely. As warm as her eyes, throatier than he would have guessed. Sexy.

"Coffee," he grumbled. "*Please,*" he added gruffly when she simply stared at him.

"Okay..." she said slowly, her voice dropping even lower.

She blinked at him, and he noticed her lashes were long and dark. He gave himself a mental shake for noticing her at all. She had to be a good twenty years younger than he was, and clearly not the brightest bulb.

"Plain coffee?" she asked.

He frowned, then dragged a hand over his face. Why was this so hard? She worked in a coffee shop for God's sake, not at NASA.

"Yes," he growled. Then frowned harder. "What else is there?"

Her delicate eyebrows lifted slightly, and he had the distinct impression that she thought *he* might not be the brightest bulb. He wondered if she recognized him, if she was one of those people who assumed hockey players were stupid.

He wasn't stupid.

But he was pretty fucking frustrated. Not to mention tired, in pain, and just completely done. He wanted to hobble back to his house, crawl into bed, and stay there.

She pointed a finger at the large menu board over the counter, the one he hadn't even noticed.

“We have a large selection of coffee drinks, hot and iced. Espresso, cappuccino, latte, Americano, smoothie blends with coffee...”

He grimaced, his headache like a pickaxe to the brain.

“*Fine,*” he barked. “I get it.”

She smiled, one of those tight, plastic smiles people offered when they really didn't want to smile at all. It was the smile he gave to reporters when they asked about a bad game. The smile you gave to people who were a problem.

She leaned forward to prop her elbows on the counter, looking up at him from beneath those lashes. Her shirt gapped at the top, revealing firm, full breasts.

Jesus Christ, he might be permanently injured but he wasn't dead. He grimaced. Someone this maddening shouldn't be so attractive.

Her eyebrows rose slightly higher, and she grinned. A real grin, one that invited him to join in, if he felt so moved.

He didn't.

“Coffee virgin?” she asked.

If he had been drinking the coffee he was less and less motivated to buy, he would have choked on it.

“*What?*”

She was still smiling, and he had the feeling she was laughing at him. Anger bubbled dangerously close to the surface. He wasn't a fucking joke. He might not be king of the ice anymore, but he wasn't a *joke*. He'd endured months of condescending doctors and too-patient nurses who treated him as if he wasn't a grown man who could take care of himself. That was bad enough. He didn't need the additional

humiliation of this woman laughing at him. He didn't need her fake smile or patronizing attitude. He just wanted to place his order and get the hell out of here.

Another young woman ducked behind the counter and leaned against the back wall, watching him. She looked familiar, but he was too annoyed to figure out why.

"Sometimes people get a little overwhelmed by the choices, it's totally understandable," the first woman was saying. She spoke patiently, but he was well past patience.

"Look, lady," he bit out, and immediately realized his mistake. He knew better than to *lady* a woman.

Her smile dropped immediately. "Plain coffee it is. I'm guessing a large."

Without waiting for confirmation, she filled an enormous cup with steaming liquid and placed it on the counter in front of him.

"New customer special, no charge."

And with that, she turned her back on him again and began doing...something coffee related, probably.

He stared at her blankly for several seconds, until the other woman gave him a questioning look.

"Do you need anything else?" she asked in a soft voice.

"What? No." He scowled at himself. What the hell was wrong with him? What was wrong with *them*? Was he really that hungover, or was this shop a special place in hell? Had he drunk himself to death last night, and this was his eternal punishment?

"Thanks," he made himself say as he turned away.

He grabbed a plastic lid, raised his eyes to the heavens, and took a large gulp of coffee.

Jesus fucking Christ.

He forced the mouthful of hot liquid down, but *damn*...that was disgusting. Bitter, biting, all but undrinkable. It was like licking the bottom of a pan he'd let burn on the stove.

“God, that’s awful,” he croaked. His eyes were squeezed shut as he tried to will the taste out of his mouth.

After a moment he opened his eyes to find both women behind the counter watching him. The seated one looked sympathetic to his plight, but the one with pink hair was openly laughing at him now, which only stoked his rage back to a fiery burn.

“Too hot?” his coffee nemesis asked pleasantly.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, not caring what he looked like at this point.

“That is revolting,” he coughed out. “How can anyone drink this?”

Again, her eyebrows lifted, but she no longer looked amused. “The best coffee in the Philly area?” she asked. “Oh, somehow people seem to choke it down. Maybe it’s not the coffee, but *you* who are the problem.”

The other woman squeaked quietly at that statement, her eyes blinking in surprise.

His blood pressure was through the roof, and not from the meager amount of caffeine he’d managed to consume.

“If it’s such a burden to drink it, then don’t,” his coffee nemesis snapped. “Just give it back.”

She held out her hand like she really expected him to hand the cup back to her.

“What? No. I won’t.” He was being stupidly stubborn, and he didn’t care.

She made a *give it to me* gesture with her fingers. “Just give it over. If you think it’s so terrible, I don’t want you to have it.”

The second woman’s eyes widened, and she covered her hand with her mouth.

“Are you kidding me?” This woman was ridiculous. He should speak to the owner, let them know about her behavior. Except, even in this unshakable funk, he knew he wouldn’t.

He could be a real asshole, but he wasn't about to get someone fired from their job.

“Okay, you two.” The other woman quickly scooted around the counter between them. “Piper, why don't you help the *next customers*.” She nodded emphatically to a family he hadn't even noticed, waiting to be served and watching their altercation warily. “And I'll...sort this out.”

His nemesis—Piper—blinked as if coming back to herself, and he could have sworn he saw her face redden before she quickly turned away to smile at the family.

The woman standing in front of him smiled shyly. She was shorter than Piper, with glasses and messy brown hair tied up somehow on top of her head. Suddenly, he realized why she looked familiar. This must be Carlos's sister, the one he'd said worked at the Friendly Bean.

And here he was, acting like a first-class jackass in front of his teammate's sister. His outrage deflated like a balloon, leaving only fatigue, an aching knee, and the ever-present headache.

“Let me show you where the cream and sugar are,” she said. “I don't like my coffee black, either.”

Oh.

Right.

Feeling like a fool, he allowed himself to be led to a table set with things he assumed were meant to make coffee taste good.

He glanced back over his shoulder, where the woman at the counter was laughing and chatting with yet more customers who had just come into the shop.

She didn't look at him once.

* * *

When the behemoth who had disrupted her morning was safely on the other side of the café door, Piper took a few

calming breaths and turned to Murray, who had retaken her place behind the counter.

“What the actual fuck,” Piper asked between gritted teeth, “was that?”

Murray smirked and pushed her glasses up on her nose. “I believe that was Gavin Williams, hockey superstar and angel among men.”

Piper rolled her eyes. “You mean *ex*-hockey player and all-around asshole.”

She had recognized him right away, of course, although she’d been more than a little taken aback by his appearance. In the photos and interviews she vaguely remembered seeing him in, he looked so polished. Perfectly put together and groomed, perfect professional smile that never slipped, perfect well-rehearsed answers to every question.

This morning he’d looked a mess. And acted like the worst sort of entitled celebrity. She hadn’t been able to keep herself from needling him, trying to puncture that hard shell of grumpy arrogance.

“Po-tay-to, po-tah-to,” Murray said. “Carlos told me he was a good guy—what *was* all that?”

“Carlos thinks *everyone’s* a good person,” Piper replied wryly.

Murray laughed. “True. I can’t believe he came here! I heard he’s barely left his house since the knee thing.”

Exasperated, Piper blew out a breath. “Why couldn’t he have stayed there, then? Like this morning wasn’t bad enough.”

It had been a disaster so far. Saturday morning, their busiest time, and two of her staff had called in sick. One had quit outright over the phone, with no warning. She’d been stuck at the counter alone, when she had a mountain of work waiting for her in the office. Her patience had long since vacated the premises even before the unpleasant Gavin Williams had arrived.

“Thanks for coming in, by the way. I know you’re busy.”

Murray shrugged. Her real name was Summer, but no one called her that. They had first met by chance when Murray was an undergrad at the University of Pennsylvania and Piper was a graduate student at the business school. As a graduate student now herself, Murray held multiple jobs in addition to working on her own research.

“I can always use another shift. Funny how the whole student thing doesn’t really pay.”

“Carlos won’t chip in for your expenses?” Piper teased. She still sometimes found it hard to believe that Murray’s younger sibling was now playing professional hockey with the Philadelphia Firebirds.

Murray rolled her eyes. “Yeah, because I really want to mooch off my little brother.” She leveled a stare at Piper. “It’s not like you to be so short with a customer, even an obnoxious one.”

Piper sighed. It was true. She might have her prickly moments, but she prided herself on creating a friendly and welcoming atmosphere at her café. And that included putting up with the occasional difficult customer.

When she first opened the Friendly Bean two years ago, her intent had been to create a physical place where friends and families could gather. After her parents had died, she’d been compelled to pull together a community not just for herself, but for anyone who needed it. She had achieved that goal, despite being a natural introvert and struggling occasionally to keep her customer-friendly face on. The Bean was more popular than she could have imagined, the heartbeat of their little town.

She was particularly proud that the Bean was a vocally LGBTQ-friendly space. The pride flag in the corner had been the first decoration she’d put on the walls, a declaration as much for herself as for the customers. Since losing her parents, being a part of the queer community had meant the world to her, as a space where she belonged—she was *known*. Every June the Bean hosted events for Pride Month, and throughout

the year they held LGBTQ-themed book discussions. Most people in town knew that she herself was out and proud as a bisexual woman. She hoped that her presence and the atmosphere of the shop could in some small way be a beacon of acceptance and respect. It was important to her that every resident felt welcome here, regardless of who they were or who they loved.

And yet... She certainly hadn't wanted to make Gavin Williams feel welcome. He pushed her buttons like he was born to do it. She never could abide an arrogant man, and arrogance came off this man in waves. Too bad for her that he was also sexy as hell, with his stern blue eyes, strong jaw, and athlete's physique. His obvious appeal perversely made her want to bait him even more.

Just before he arrived, she'd taken a phone call from Jennifer, the director of the Philly LGBTQ youth center, where she occasional volunteered. Jennifer was a classmate from Piper's college days, and they'd reconnected in recent years. Piper always made time for her and the center. But apparently, Mr. Williams, famous hockey star, couldn't wait thirty seconds for his coffee.

Coffee he declared "revolting."

Asshole.

"He just... He was so awful!"

Murray shrugged. "He was. Maybe he was having a bad day, too. He's cute, though. I do love a growly man."

So did Piper.

When Gavin Williams had loomed over her, shaggy and glowering, she'd finally understood the appeal of hockey players. Her pulse had raced as she'd tried to ignore him and finish her call, and his unrelenting glare had sent prickles of awareness down her spine. Good Lord did the man have a physical presence. And piercing blue eyes. And muscles for days. Yeah, he was spectacularly hot, even looking as he did like he'd slept in his car.

But rudeness? *Not* attractive.

Still, she had acted unprofessionally, and she wasn't proud of it.

She sighed.

"That knee brace looked uncomfortable," Murray said pointedly.

Piper shrugged. "Sure. But that doesn't give him an excuse to be such a jerk. He *insulted my coffee*."

Murray held up her hands. "I know, I know. No one has better coffee than the Bean. And yeah, he was...abrupt. But it's not like you to jump down a customer's throat."

Guilt stabbed at her insides and she winced. "I know."

"Why don't you let me take the counter for a bit? Go cool down."

Piper shook her head. "It's okay. I'm fine."

Murray rolled her eyes. "Yeah, you're fine. But you literally pay me to do this job? So, go away and take a minute to breathe."

"But—"

"Please," Murray cut her off. "For the love of all that is holy. Do us all a favor and go away. Grumpy Piper is not customer-ready Piper." Her expression softened. "You know you need time to recharge."

Piper sighed. As usual, her friend was right. "All right, fine. Thanks." She did have several suppliers to call, bills to pay, and apparently an open job to try to fill.

"Yep, no problem." Murray washed her hands at the sink. "Hey, we're having brunch tomorrow at the house—Fern bought some of the good soy sausage at the farmer's market. I think Sloan's coming, too. You should stop by."

Brunch with her friends was just what she needed. As long as her sick employee was back tomorrow for the morning shift, she could open the shop and then run to meet her friends for an hour or so.

Relax. Center herself. Shake the unsettled feeling that lingered from her confrontation with He-Who-Hates-Coffee. A morning with her favorite people would clear the bad taste of *grumpy man* right away.

Chapter Two

“Did you know that Gavin Williams lives in the gray house just down the block?” Fern asked, apropos of nothing.

Piper almost spit out her bite of soy sausage.

They were sprawled around the living room, as they so often were: Piper, Murray, their friend Sloan, and Fern and her wife, Georgie. Fern and Georgie owned the large pink Victorian house, and rented the third floor to Murray. The same third floor which had once been Piper’s, before she bought her own place only a few houses down the street. Sloan lived in an apartment in another big old house on the same street, and had joined their group after briefly dating Piper, before they realized they were much better as friends.

These were her people, and this was her place. Hopkins Street, just a few blocks from the quaint downtown of Shady Hill, only a short walk from her café. A street where she knew all of her neighbors.

Except one, apparently.

“Really?” Sloan asked. She pushed her long black hair back from her face, revealing the shaved sides and ears with multiple piercings. A white sleeveless T-shirt left bare the tattoos that ran the length of both arms. “He’s been basically invisible since he blew out his knee. Murray, you been holding out on us?”

Murray rolled her eyes. “You know I try to stay away from the whole...” She waved a hand around. “Hockey thing.”

While Murray had no interest in her brother’s teammates or chosen sport, Sloan was a huge hockey fan. If she hadn’t known that the famous Gavin Williams was living on their very street, he must have been living as a hermit.

“I saw him,” Fern replied, before stabbing her omelet with her fork. Her graying hair curled out in every direction, and she wore a T-shirt that said “On Wednesdays we smash the

patriarchy.” Mouth full, she continued, “He was struggling to get up those steps. He must have chosen the house before his injury.” She shook her head.

“Wait...” Piper frowned, a sense of foreboding creeping around the edges of her thoughts. “The gray house? The big one with the ridiculous garage?”

She knew that house. It did have a lot of steps up to the front door, situated as it was atop an incline. And on a street filled with old houses of all types—Craftsman, Victorian, and even older—this one was fairly new. It wasn’t that it was ugly, it just...didn’t fit. Especially the four-car garage that took up half the lot. Also...

“Yep, the one just catty-corner to yours,” Fern confirmed, and Piper barely suppressed a wince.

She heard Murray muffle a snort and turned to glare at her.

Sloan put down her fork and narrowed her eyes at their friend. “Murray, would you like to share with the class?”

Caught between two glares, Murray hastily grabbed her mug and made for the kitchen. “Be right back!” she called.

“Coward,” Sloan yelled after her.

Piper sighed. “He came into the Bean yesterday.”

She hadn’t wanted to talk about her fight with Gavin Williams, or whatever it had been. For some reason it had unsettled her more than it should have. She’d dealt with difficult customers before. Many times. She was generally polite but firm. Professional. Unlike her behavior yesterday.

The three women leaned closer.

“Wow,” breathed Georgie, also a hockey fan. “What’s he like in person?”

Piper hated to burst her friends’ bubble, but... “He was a real jerk.”

Georgie let out a disappointed sigh.

“Hot, though, right?” Sloan asked. “I mean, did you see those pictures in *The Hockey Times*?”

Murray snuck back into the room and sat.

“We don’t all keep up with the sports literature, Sloan.”
Fern rolled her eyes.

Piper had been friends with Fern and Georgie since she first answered their ad to rent space in the house. She’d been fed up with living in the city, and as a grad student the chance to live in an antique house in a cute, well-to-do suburb had been too good to pass up. In time, the house had become home, especially after her parents’ death. Although she now owned her own house, she still sometimes missed this one.

“And some of us read these magazines for the articles, not just to look at naked men,” Georgie added. She was wearing a floral sundress, blue to match her long braids. She smirked at her wife.

“I looked at them extra to make up for the rest of you,” Sloan huffed. “As the token woman in the room dating men.”

“Hey!” Murray protested. “I’m not dead yet!” she added in her best Monty Python voice.

“When’s the last time you had a date?” Sloan needled her. “You’re like a nun, but without the authority or link with God or the cool outfit.”

“Did you ever read that book *Lesbian Nuns*?” Fern asked, distracted.

“*Anyway...*” Georgie ignored her. “I did read the *Hockey Times* article. His career stats are off the charts! I mean, not so much these past few years, but wow...could he play.”

“More hockey,” Fern grumbled. Fern preferred reading, gardening, and knitting to sports. Georgie was the sports fan.

“Yeah, it sucks that he’ll have to retire.” Sloan reached up and tied her hair in a knot on top of her head, the ends sticking straight up. “They really could have used him, even if he’s ancient.”

“That seems a little...harsh.” Piper only followed hockey through Sloan and Georgie, but Gavin Williams couldn’t be much more than forty. Old for a professional athlete, of course,

but ancient? She would hate to be considered over the hill just seven years from now.

She stuffed her emerging sympathy back down—Gavin Williams was awful, and he didn't deserve it.

"Says the woman who demanded he give back his coffee because he didn't appreciate it properly," Murray muttered.

Georgie's fork clattered to her plate. "You did *what?*" she shrieked.

"He was being a jerk, okay? And I had a bad morning." Piper knew she sounded defensive. On a professional level she felt bad about giving a customer a hard time... But not *that* bad. He deserved it. If she was lucky, he wouldn't return to the shop.

If she was *really* lucky, she wouldn't run into him on the street. Where they both lived. Across from each other. She groaned.

Selena, one of the three cats in the house, casually sidled up to the group.

"Forget it, bitch," Sloan told the cat. "You can't eat this."

Fern put her empty plate on a side table and picked up her knitting. "Did you really tell him to give back his coffee?"

Piper flushed. "Maybe... Okay, yes." It had not been her most mature moment. "But he was such an asshole! Barky and growly and everything. And *looming* over me."

Murray fanned herself. "So hot."

Fern frowned at her. "What did we say about mistaking toxic masculinity for sexual attractiveness, Murray?"

"See?" Sloan interrupted triumphantly. "He *is* hot, right?"

"I mean, he looked kind of like he'd spent the night sleeping in his yard, but..." Murray trailed off. "Yeah. Hot."

They all looked to Piper for confirmation. He'd been terrible. Rude, demanding, and unpleasant. But her spine still tickled when she thought about his eyes on her, his voice

rough as sandpaper, the set of his strong jaw. “Okay, yes! Yes. Fine. Gavin Williams is an attractive man. All right?”

Georgie smirked. “You don’t sound very happy about that.” Piper stuck her tongue out at her.

“He’s...too much.” Piper gestured vaguely with her hand. “Too much man. All that size and taking up space and feeling entitled to be grouchy at everyone around him.”

“And he really didn’t look good,” Murray added. “His knee was in this huge brace, and he was limping, and he looked miserable. Also like he hadn’t shaved lately. Or showered.” She wrinkled her nose. “So, maybe a little less hot, now that I’m thinking about it.”

“Hygiene is very important for men,” Sloan agreed. “That’s weird, though, he always looks so buttoned-up and wholesome in pictures and on TV.”

Fern gazed thoughtfully into the distance. “It’s got to be hard, having your whole life turned upside down by an injury. And he’s new here in Shady Hill. Does he even know anyone outside of the team?” She looked over at Georgie. “We should bring him some meals. You know, like we did for Mr. Rowland.”

“Mr. Rowland is eighty-five years old and had a hip replacement,” Piper objected. “You really think a celebrity athlete wants your vegetarian lasagna?”

Fern cut her a look. “*Everyone* wants my vegetarian lasagna.”

“We should make him feel welcome,” Fern continued. “He’s part of the community now—he needs to be brought into the fold. Made at home.”

Piper looked doubtfully at her friend. “He just seems... different,” she said weakly.

“Yeah, he’s *hot*.” Sloan pointed a finger at Piper, and then at Murray. “A hot hockey player is in our midst, and some of us are single ladies in need of some action. *Welcome* is only the beginning of what we should be making him feel.”

Murray laughed and high-fived Sloan. Piper pressed her lips together.

“You know I’m not interested in men,” she said tersely.

“No,” Sloan corrected. “You’ve decided not to *date* men. That’s different from not being interested. You put the ‘B’ in bi, Pipe.”

It was true. She’d made that decision shortly after her brief relationship with Sloan. After finding her place in the ready-made LGBTQ community at college, where she’d casually dated mostly other queer people, she’d drifted away from that group in grad school and even more so once she’d entered the workforce. The few times she’d been tempted into dating, it had been so easy to fall into relationships with men, and in turn to let other people assume she was straight. Pushing against the default had felt like swimming upstream, even as that stream washed away her sense of identity. So, she’d drifted, letting the current of what was expected and assumed pull her away from who she really was. It had been her relationship with Sloan that reintroduced her into the queer community in Philly, shortly after her parents had died. She’d needed family so badly during that time, and reconnecting with her whole identity and the people who accepted it had meant everything. She’d clung to that community like a lifeline.

Since then, she’d avoided relationships with cisgender men—those who identified with the male sex they were assigned at birth. When she’d dated them in the past, she felt as if she was viewed differently by the world—even by some within the LGBTQ community—as if they could check off a box marked “heterosexual” and erase the entirety of her identity with their assumptions.

She didn’t want to be erased in that way—she wanted to be seen as her whole self. It didn’t help that in general, her few boyfriends during that post-college period had treated the fact that she was bi like a novelty, like something quirky and vaguely titillating, rather than simply who she was. She’d felt increasingly invisible and diminished. So, she’d cut that dating option right out of her life. It wasn’t worth the risk.

“It’s true.” Georgie finished her food and plopped her plate on the side table. “You can make whatever decision you want about who to be with, but you are who you are. Believe me.”

Piper sighed. “Sometimes I wish I could just be a lesbian like you.”

Georgie pretended to buff her nails. “I am pretty awesome, not gonna lie.” She looked directly at Piper. “But so are you. You don’t want to date cis men? Fine, though we all know gender’s a bullshit distinction anyway. But don’t cut yourself off from possibility just because you think it’s easier to pretend to be a lesbian.”

Piper opened her mouth to protest, then shut it. Then: “It *is* easier.”

Both Fern and Georgie dissolved into laughter. “Oh, sweet summer child,” Fern said when she had caught her breath. “If you think that’s true, I’ve got a bridge to sell you.”

The heat of embarrassment washed over her. She knew better. She knew that as a white, cisgender woman she enjoyed enormous privilege. And that if she did find herself in a relationship with a man, she would never endure any of the discrimination that her friends regularly did. She didn’t think she took that privilege for granted. Except maybe...maybe sometimes she did. She’d have to work on that.

The gray cat, Bartleby, jumped onto Piper’s lap and began kneading. She petted him absentmindedly.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and meant it. “How did we get on the topic of my sexuality, anyway?”

“Well, to recap,” said Sloan, “there’s a smokin’ silver fox hockey player living across the street from you, and he doesn’t know anybody in town. That plus the fact that he apparently looks like death warmed over equals you need to pay him a house call. With benefits.”

“What?!” She stared at Sloan in horror. “I am not going to that man’s house. For any reason. And definitely not for... benefits.”

Georgie laughed.

“He *was* pretty awful,” Murray said.

“Thank you!” Piper was indignant.

“You said you were having a bad morning,” Georgie commented. “Maybe he was having one, too. He’s always so polite in interviews.”

Piper huffed impatiently. “That doesn’t mean he isn’t awful in real life,” she said.

She didn’t know why she was protesting so forcefully. Sure, he’d been rude, but there was something else. Something about Gavin Williams that put her on edge. His arrogance, the way he took up so much space. He was, frankly, a little overwhelming. Maybe that’s why she had felt the need to put him in his place.

“It wouldn’t kill you to be nice,” Fern said in her most matronly voice. “If he’s still awful, you know we’ll support you in cutting him off at the knees.”

“I just bought a pretty kick-ass knife,” Sloan offered.

“What the hell does a librarian need a kick-ass knife for?” Murray looked concerned.

“Decoration.” Sloan smiled evilly.

“I am not going to that man’s house. And since he clearly doesn’t approve of my coffee,” she sniffed, “he’s not likely to come back into the shop. I’m done.”

That was that. She had no need to see the man again. If she met him on the street she would nod and smile and keep walking. His eyes probably weren’t as blue as she remembered, his shoulders nowhere near as broad. And the fluttering in her stomach when his deep voice had rumbled at her in the café was no doubt the result of her long dry spell. She’d feel the same if any remotely attractive person rumbled in her direction.

“It’s not like you to be so close-minded,” Fern said disapprovingly.

“I’m not close-minded, I just don’t like assholes!”

Murray snorted.

Piper glared at her. “You know what I mean. Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“Never!” The other woman stood and stretched. “Want me to make more coffee?”

A chorus of “Yes” echoed around the room. Piper always made sure they were stocked with the good stuff.

“*We* love your coffee,” Georgie reassured Piper.

“Maybe he’s more of a tea person,” mused Fern. “We should bring him some of the Assam we just bought.”

Piper closed her eyes. “Whatever. Bring him lasagna. And tea. But don’t say I didn’t warn you: he’s rude, obnoxious, and not worth your time.”

“Hmmm.” Fern grew thoughtful again.

“And no matchmaking!” Piper threw in for good measure.

“Sure,” Fern replied mildly.

“We would never,” said Sloan.

“We don’t meddle,” agreed Georgie.

Murray looked at Piper with sympathy. “Oh, boy.”

* * *

Gavin limped along the sidewalk toward downtown Shady Hill as Carlos ran his mouth.

“So, I told Coach you’re totally on board with this, right? You are? Since we’re both stuck here for the summer, I mean...” The younger man winced and looked down at Gavin’s knee. “Sorry. It’s just... Anyway. Am I walking too fast? I can slow down.”

“It’s fine,” Gavin said abruptly, and then forced himself to take a deep breath.

He’d once had the energy and enthusiasm of Carlos Silva. All talent, few responsibilities, the hockey world at his feet. Women lining up to date him, potential sponsorships of every

kind. It was a great life. And he didn't begrudge Carlos a single minute of it.

It was just...

"I know this sucks, man," Carlos said in a more subdued tone. "You came all the way to Philly to play and now..." He shrugged and shook his head. "If you want me to lay off, leave you alone, just say the word. Sometimes when I'm having a tough time, I don't want anyone being happy near me, you know? But if you need company, I'm here."

Huh. The kid was a lot more self-aware than he'd been at the same age.

"It's fine," he said again, and realized he needed to change up his vocabulary. "I mean, I appreciate it." He gave a short laugh. "You're right, I'm still new here, and I don't exactly have a lot of company now that most of the team has gone... wherever they go for the summer."

Home, fishing, Europe, Disney World. Anywhere they wanted, really. Sure, they'd have to come back soon to train and get themselves patched up as needed for the season ahead. But over the past weeks, he could admit it had been a little lonely without his ready-made hockey family. Not that he knew any of them the way he'd known his teammates in Vancouver.

And not that he'd been returning any of said Vancouver teammates' calls. He'd even ignored the texts and voice messages from his best friend on the team, Simon.

He'd hoped that shortly after his injury, his former team would have contacted him about the possibility of a management job back in Vancouver. If he'd finished his career while still playing for his hometown team, he knew that would have been the case. Not being able to play would still be an adjustment, but at least then he could continue to be a part of the team, to have some standing in the organization. Surely, they'd still want him, the local player who'd brought them multiple championships, even if he'd spent a year in Philly? But no call had come yet, and he hadn't wanted to discuss his

future or lack thereof with his former teammates. So, he'd ignored them.

He *was* an asshole. He sighed and dragged his thoughts back to the present.

“Anyway...” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I appreciate it. You involving me in this.”

“This” being a series of one-on-one get-togethers with a member of the Philly team, auctioned off online. Carlos wasn't big on providing details, but apparently, he wanted to raise money for the foundation he'd established to support breast cancer research—his mother having gone into remission last year. The team organization was on board, with the PR and social media department already all over it. For some reason Carlos wanted his help, and it wasn't like Gavin had anything better to do.

“So,” he began, trying to work up some enthusiasm. While he was recovered from his monster hangover of yesterday, he still felt like a dark cloud was following him around despite the relentless June sunshine. “These one-on-ones will be held at this...restaurant? And the owner's cool with that? The one we're headed to meet with.”

Carlos grinned. “Yeah, of course! It's good publicity. And the owner's a friend of the family. No way would she have said no to this.”

Gavin nodded. Sure, having team members at the restaurant, and the resulting news coverage, would be good for any establishment.

“And it's not a restaurant—it's the coffee shop I told you about. The Friendly Bean, just down the street.”

Gavin stopped in his tracks and stared at Carlos's back, his gut clenching and his heart sinking into his stomach. “The Friendly Bean?”

“Yeah,” Carlos said cheerfully. Then he realized that Gavin wasn't following him and turned. He frowned. “Your knee hurt? We can go another day if it's too much.”

Right. His knee. Not the fact that just yesterday he had acted like a complete bastard at the same coffee shop where they were now headed. In front of Carlos's sister, no less. Would that woman—*Piper*, for some reason her name was stuck in his head—have told the owner about the surly former hockey player? Shame at his own behavior mixed with a wholly inappropriate reaction to the memory of pink hair against freckled skin, causing his face to heat for two entirely different reasons.

"I'm fine," he said, then sighed. He needed a new word.

He lurched back to a walk.

Carlos chattered the rest of the way, ignoring Gavin's increasingly dark mood as they arrived at the shop.

Same cheerful decor, same crowd of happy people.

Carlos spotted someone across the room and took off in that direction. Whoever it was grabbed him in a hug.

Gavin glanced over to see a line forming at the register, Carlos's sister efficiently serving up drinks from the absurdly complicated menu. This place certainly was popular. People greeted each other in line and at the door. They wandered from table to table, talking and laughing more like it was a party in someone's living room than a coffee shop.

He saw Carlos waving at him from the far corner of the room, so he limped over to join him.

"Your sister works here," he said ridiculously. Like her brother didn't know that.

Something about this place made Gavin feel out of sorts. This place of happiness and togetherness and coffee that was disgusting until you added a cup of sugar and cream. He didn't know anyone here other than Carlos, while everyone else seemed to be one big happy family.

Here he had no team, no goal, no purpose, and he was the odd one out. He was used to being a leader and role model. Someone people looked up to.

Here, he was nobody.

Carlos gave him an odd look. “Yeah, I...know. Anyway, the owner’s waiting for us in the back office. Let’s go.”

Gavin followed Carlos down a long hallway to a separate room. The office was small and stacked with neat piles of papers. A desk sat in the middle of the floor, and behind it sat...his coffee nemesis.

Piper.

Chapter Three

“You,” Gavin Williams said flatly, lurking in her office doorway like an overgrown werewolf.

His face was still scruffy and his hair looked unbrushed, but at least he appeared to be wearing different clothes than yesterday. Extremely ironed, pressed clothes. A white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up over impressive forearms and creased blue pants with a leather belt. Who dressed that formally on a Sunday morning?

“*You,*” she replied in the same tone, knowing it was unprofessional but unable to stop herself. What was it about this man that got her so riled up?

For one thing, he was unfortunately exactly as attractive as she remembered. She’d hoped that her sex-starved brain had been playing tricks on her, but no. Those sky-blue eyes, his broad chest—the whole package, so to speak. If anything, he looked *more* attractive, what with the bare minimum of self-grooming he’d undertaken. It was unfair. Infuriating, really. Someone so deeply unpleasant shouldn’t look like Gavin Williams.

“You two know each other?” Carlos glanced back and forth between them, his forehead wrinkled in confusion.

Gavin cleared his throat. Was he nervous? Guilty? Had a frog in his throat? “Just... I just came here for coffee yesterday. That’s all.”

Carlos’s expression cleared and he laughed. “Oh, right! I told you to come get coffee.” He looked back at Piper. “He was so hungover. Total grouch on the phone.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Piper said, careful to keep her voice even. Hungover. That explained some of the attitude, anyway. She wouldn’t have pegged him for a party boy, but of course she didn’t know him at all. He probably went to those fancy clubs that only allowed celebrities inside. Did they even have those in Philly? She wouldn’t know.

Anyway, definitely not her scene.

She rose and reluctantly extended her hand. *Professional*, she reminded herself. “I’m Piper Welborn. Carlos didn’t say you were the teammate he was working with.”

She tried to keep her displeasure at that discovery out of her voice.

He took her offered hand. It was warm, his skin rough against hers. She shivered slightly at the electricity sparking where they connected.

Yep, she was definitely into him. Just her luck.

Her gaze flicked up to his and she was startled to see awareness reflected in his eyes.

Then he said, “Wait. *You’re* the owner?”

Piper released his hand and sat down slowly, resigned disappointment extinguishing the lingering spark of attraction. She forced her expression to remain neutral. “Yes. Does that surprise you?”

“You’re just... I mean, you’re...” She raised a single eyebrow at him, knowing already what he was going to say, but fully intending to make him say it. “You’re so young.”

He said it.

Carlos laughed, and Piper sighed.

“Everyone thinks Piper’s a college student.” Carlos shook his head, then grinned. “But she’s actually thirty-three, and the big boss around here.”

Piper rolled her eyes and tried not to smile. Carlos had become like the little brother she never had, just as Murray was about as close to having a sister as she was ever going to get. Sure, Carlos was a hockey star now—not Gavin Williams level, but maybe someday—but he never let it go to his head. Probably the relentless teasing from Murray and having his parents nearby didn’t hurt.

Gavin pushed his chair back a few inches, and she noticed him rubbing the side of his leg through the brace. She

wondered if he was always in pain, or if it came and went.

Piper tried to get the conversation back on track. “So...” she began pointedly. “The team is auctioning off coffee dates with players, right?”

“Not *dates*,” Gavin snapped, still rubbing his leg.

Piper stared at him. Did he *ever* speak in a cordial tone? To his credit, he looked uncomfortable under her death glare.

Carlos jumped in with a nervous laugh. “We have to be careful about what we call these things—we don’t want people to get the wrong idea. They’re a chance for fans to have some quality time with their favorite players, but they’re definitely not dates.”

“Sure.” Piper could understand that. She supposed hockey players often felt like commodities and nothing more—and many fans would jump at the chance to take advantage, if boundaries weren’t set. “So, for their money, the fan gets an hour or so of conversation with a member of the team, the breast cancer fund gets a big donation, and the Bean gets some goodwill and PR.”

Carlos nodded enthusiastically. Gavin looked distracted and a little uncomfortable. Piper wondered if he was in pain, and quickly tamped down her sudden flare of sympathy. Maybe she was boring him. Maybe he didn’t care about Carlos’s entirely worthwhile project. Irritation at those possibilities took over, far more comfortable than any softer emotion she might feel for this man. She latched onto it.

“I take it you’re less than thrilled with this whole project?” She couldn’t resist poking at him.

“What? No, I—” He broke off. Had he even been listening? “It’s fine.” He scowled ferociously.

She stared at him. Then she looked at Carlos, who shrugged.

“So, what do you need from me?” She addressed Carlos, giving Gavin Williams up for lost. Whatever his problem was, she didn’t have time for it.

“Just the space. If we can set up so that there’s a bit of a buffer between the player and their...not-date and the rest of the customers, that would be great. If we could clear the shop, that would be even better. The news will cover a few of these, so if you can be here to answer any questions about the café, and maybe talk up the foundation, that would be great.”

“Of course.” She could definitely do that. The shop was doing well, but positive publicity was always welcome. And she was more than happy to help Carlos’s foundation any way she could. His mother’s illness had been understandably hard on both him and Murray. “We’ll set up a table by the back wall, so it’s not directly in line with the windows, and we’ll shift everything else over to give them some space. We can close for an hour or two—no big deal. We’ll corral any press by the front entrance, maybe for a set amount of time only, so they can get their photos and interviews but also keep the auction winner from feeling like they’re in a fishbowl.”

She glanced over at Gavin and was surprised to find him watching her with curiosity. And...approval?

At her look, he nodded. “That should work. We want to balance giving the donor what they paid for with PR for the foundation, the team, and the shop.”

“This is probably going to be a bit of a circus here, Pipe—you’re definitely okay with all of it?” Carlos looked worried that she would suddenly back out. As if. This sort of work was exactly what she wanted for her shop: collaboration, supporting a good cause, and bringing people together. Not to mention helping a friend.

She smiled reassuringly at him. “It’s not a problem. Whatever you need to make this work, we’ll do it.” She reached over the desk to squeeze his hand. “This is a good thing you’re doing, Carlos. I know your mom’s proud of you.”

“Thanks, Pipe,” Carlos said, his voice a little more gruff than normal.

She smiled again and sat back, to find Gavin still watching her with something like surprise.

It rankled. While she might not have been at her best the first time they met, was it really so shocking that she owned her own business? That she could work on a project with a hockey team and actually have some decent opinions? Or was it the connection she had to Carlos that bothered him?

Whatever his problem was, she didn't appreciate it.

She held his gaze, unwilling to back down. After a moment he blinked his gaze away and over to his teammate.

“So, what do you need me for?” he grumbled.

With effort, Piper managed not to roll her eyes. At least now he was trying to sound like he wanted to help. But she wasn't buying it, not after his bad attitude so far today. Why was he even here?

Carlos had regained his enthusiasm. “Well, you're the big draw, right? You weren't here when I first talked to management about this last summer, but you're...” Carlos gestured at his teammate. “You're Gavin Williams, man. Who doesn't want to meet you?”

Gavin shifted in his seat, as if he was uncomfortable with Carlos's gushing. Which made no sense, given the arrogance he'd displayed so far.

“So...” he said slowly. “You want me to be one of the guys up for auction? Even though I'm...” He paused. “Not playing right now?”

Oof. Piper winced internally. Everyone knew his playing days were done—with the extent of his knee injury, covered in excruciating detail on the news, there was no way he would ever play again. He must know that, although it hadn't been made official as far as she knew. Yet he couldn't even say the words.

She noticed he was back to rubbing his leg.

Carlos threw Gavin a sympathetic look, then went back to enthusiastic puppy mode. “I mean, yeah, if you're willing to do a one-on-one, that would be good. But I figure, if people will pay to meet one player, they'd pay more to meet more than one, right? I'll be here and can help out, but I thought...”

Well, maybe you can be here, too. For each meeting. Maybe we can even serve?” He was warming to his topic. Gavin, however, looked completely flummoxed. “How cool would that be? Meet your favorite player and be waited on by Gavin Williams? And me, obviously, but no one will care about that if you’re here.”

Piper stifled a laugh. Carlos really was unbelievably grounded for a star athlete. She often had to run interference between him and the teen crowd in the shop when he came to visit Murray. And Carlos always seemed oblivious.

She looked back at Gavin. He was staring at his teammate as if he’d grown a second head.

“You want me to...*serve coffee*?”

Piper felt her eyebrows shoot up to her hairline at his tone. There was that arrogance, back in full force. Did he think this was beneath him? She already knew he had a stick up his ass, but what exactly did he think was involved in an event where coffee was served?

Carlos looked uncertain, and that got her hackles up even more. She jumped in to defend his idea.

“You’re right, Carlos, that’s a great idea. People will definitely pay more if they get to meet three players and be served by two of them. I can train you *both*—” she cast a look in Gavin’s direction “—so you’re ready to go. It’s no problem. And I’ll be there in case anything comes up.” She beamed at Carlos, ignoring Gavin’s sour expression.

“Great!” The younger man looked considerably more optimistic now.

Gavin picked up a pen from her desk and began rolling it between his fingers. Piper couldn’t help admiring his large, capable fingers, but she also sort of wanted to grab the pen out of his hands and stomp it into the floor. The man made her feel as cranky as that time she’d tried to give up coffee for a week in college, even as her libido hopped to attention with his every movement.

“You in, Gavin?” Carlos tilted his head at his teammate, who was still glaring at Piper.

Then he heaved a sigh. “Yeah. Sure.” His smile looked forced, but Piper supposed at least he was trying. Barely. “Absolutely, whatever you need.”

“Cool.” Carlos grinned at Gavin. “Murray already said she’d train me after she gets out of class tomorrow, so you guys can find a time to bring Gavin up to speed.”

Murray poked her head around the door frame.

“Hey, Carlos, can you drop me at Mom’s house? She wants me to stop by, but my car wouldn’t start this morning.”

Carlos’s eyebrows lowered in irritation. “Seriously, Mur? I thought she was going to pick you up. I *do* have a life.”

“Nah,” Murray replied, unconcerned. “You don’t. Just hockey, and your team’s done for the season. Anyway, Mom said you had to.”

Carlos looked toward the heavens. “I’m not a kid, Mom can’t tell me—”

“Yeah, she can, and you know it. Just let me get my stuff.” She ducked out of the room, and Carlos looked at Piper.

She shrugged. “I mean, *I* wouldn’t cross your mom. Or your sister.”

Carlos made a strangled sound of frustration. “Why do they all still treat me like a kid? I don’t even live at home!”

Piper gave him a sympathetic smile. “Pretty sure you’ll always be a kid to your family.”

Carlos groaned and started for the door. “I’ll text you both later. We’re good, right? They’re going to auction off the first get-together at the end of the week.”

“Yep, we’re good,” Piper replied, and stood as Carlos headed out the door. With Murray’s shift over, she needed to get out front.

Suddenly, she heard what sounded like an excited exclamation from Carlos in the hallway. He reappeared,

Murray in tow, back in the office doorway. Carlos was holding up his phone, not that Piper could see the screen from across the room.

“Check it out! Philly’s going to sign Tyler Valentine! He’s in town right now.” Carlos looked like he was forcing himself to remain calm with effort. “It’s not official. Nothing’s official yet. But... Holy shit, Tyler Valentine? That guy can *skate!*”

The name sounded vaguely familiar to Piper, but beyond “good hockey player” she was drawing a blank.

“That’s...great?”

“Hell yeah, it is!” Carlos pumped his fist. “We could really use him next year. I mean, with...”

He broke off, casting a guilty look at Gavin. It was clear what he had been going to say: with Gavin out, the team needed another superstar. Sympathy almost crept in again around the edges of her irritation. Almost. She watched as he swallowed noticeably.

“Yeah,” he said roughly. “That’s great for the team, if they can get him.”

Murray’s phone rang, and she checked the number on the screen. “It’s Mom. We’d better go.”

She all but dragged her brother out of the room, his excited chatter growing fainter until it disappeared completely.

With Carlos gone, she turned back to the hulking figure still seated in her office. He looked...shell-shocked. She wasn’t quite sure what to make of it. She’d comforted plenty of people in this office: friends, co-workers, even the occasional customer. But she didn’t have a comforting sort of relationship with this man she barely knew. She didn’t even *like* him. Maybe if she waited a moment, he’d make his way out on his own and spare her this awkwardness.

When he didn’t move to leave, but rather sat staring off into space for a good minute, she cleared her throat.

“Well... I should get back to work.”

He blinked up at her as if he'd forgotten she was there, eyes clear of whatever turmoil had clouded them a minute before. Maybe she'd imagined it. He might just be the sort of man who felt entitled to take up space wherever he was, even if that space was her office.

"Oh, yeah. Right." He took a deep breath, then with obvious effort leveraged himself to his feet, one hand on the back of the chair and the other on her desk. He grimaced as he straightened.

And there was that damn sympathy again. He was a real jerk, but she didn't like to see anyone in pain. And this man was clearly in a lot of pain.

"It's...pretty bad?" she asked, and then wanted to kick herself. It was a career-ending injury, *of course* it was bad.

"It's fine," he replied, then scowled.

All right, then.

She moved briskly toward the office door. If he was going to be like that, he could see himself out.

She paused.

"Let me know when you want...training." *Ugh*, she would rather drink instant coffee than spend another minute with this guy, let alone train him. But she'd promised Carlos, and she wanted his fundraiser to be a success even more than she wanted to be petty. "I'm here most days."

With that, she left him standing there, still braced on her office furniture. She would *not* feel bad for a rich, successful, former pro athlete. It wasn't like having to retire at the age of forty-whatever-he-was was going to land him on the streets. He was famous. Handsome. Articulate. Clearly a talented and successful man, with resources and options. She understood that he was going through a lot of change, but if he wasn't willing to be minimally polite to the people around him, he could hole up in his giant house until he was. He certainly didn't need to grump all over her workplace.

The café was bustling as she arrived in the main room. She waved at Owen, the high schooler who had been working

alongside Murray. He was clearing tables, so she tidied up behind the counter while there was a lull in customers, scooping up several dirty cups with one arm.

She turned to grab a clean rag and ran into a solid wall of muscle.

“What the—”

She looked up—way up—into Gavin Williams’s handsome, if still scruffy, face. He was frowning down at her, and if she hadn’t seen his famous smile on television over the past years, she would have wondered if he could smile at all.

“You’re not supposed to be behind the counter,” she snapped.

Why couldn’t he just leave? She didn’t like him, didn’t like his attitude, and didn’t like the unsettled feeling he sparked in her.

She also didn’t like how she couldn’t help noticing just how hard that wall of muscle really was. And how up close, he was even more attractive than he had been from across her desk. And how he smelled like how she imagined a giant redwood tree would smell if it was magically transformed into a man.

He looked distinctly uncomfortable. “I wanted to apologize.”

Piper almost dropped the mugs she held. She tried to take a step back but bumped into the espresso machine.

“What?” She must have heard wrong.

He scowled down at her. “Apologize,” he said, as if she was the one being unpleasant, not him. “To you. For the other day. I was hungover, and not in a good place, and...in pain. I was rude to you, and I wanted to apologize.”

“So, what’s your excuse for today?” The words popped out before she could stop them, but hey, it was a valid question.

He stared at her. “I beg your pardon?”

That deep, resonant voice really was sexy. Especially when he was just inches from where she was standing. She could

almost feel the vibration of the sound.

She sighed. Sloan was right. She might have eliminated cis men from her dating pool over the past decade, but she was still attracted to them. Even this one. *Especially* this one. Because, apparently, the universe had a sense of humor. An enormous, arrogant, grumpy older man was exactly what she *didn't* need in her life.

Maybe if she was bluntly honest with him, he'd go away and leave her alone.

"Today," she continued. "You were short with Carlos and barely tolerant of me back there." She gestured in the direction of her office. "And clearly astonished that I could possibly be the owner of this place, by the way. What's your excuse for that?"

He stared at her, and she braced herself for a fight. It was fine, she wasn't going to be intimidated by this jerk. She could hold her own. Then he glanced away and ran a hand over his chin. The rasp of skin over his whiskers sent a shiver down her spine.

Then he smiled. Just a little.

It was Piper's turn to stare. His features softened into the familiar, handsome face she'd seen on TV. But multiplied exponentially by the fact that he was a real man, standing in front of her, in real life. She could see the gray in his hair. The way his nose bent slightly to the side, no doubt from being broken more than once. The crow's feet that appeared at the corners of his eyes. The desire his rudeness had extinguished flared hot.

She was in trouble.

"You've got me there," he said, leaning down so he could speak softly to her despite the noise of the café.

After a moment he continued, the words coming slowly as if he didn't really want to say them.

"You're right. I've been in a dark place lately—and it's not just you who's borne the brunt." He sighed heavily, his breath on her cheek intimate in this public setting. "Everyone keeps

asking me if I'm all right, or trying to do things for me, or asking if I need them to slow down or if I need to sit. Everyone treats me like I'm going to break. I guess I've gotten in the habit of lashing out. I've been a real bastard to everyone around me, and no one's called me on it. Until now."

"Glad to...help, I guess?" Piper wasn't sure if she was confused by his sudden confession or by his nearness. Again, out of instinct she tried to back up, only to be blocked by her own equipment.

His smile widened almost to a grin, and Piper resisted the urge to fan herself. She could feel the heat radiating off him, he was so close. She really needed him not to be so close.

"Yeah." He straightened, and Piper sighed with relief. "It feels normal. To have someone call me on my bullshit. So, thanks. And I really am sorry." He looked as if he was forcing himself to continue. "The other morning, when I was..."

"Hungover," she supplied. His life couldn't be *that* difficult, if he still managed to get out and party himself into a massive hangover the next morning.

"Right." Again, he rubbed his chin with his hand, and she found herself following the movement a little too closely. What if she reached out and touched him? The skin would be a little rough with stubble, pleasingly scratchy and warm against her fingers. She made herself look back to his eyes. "I'd just gone off the prescription pain medication and was having a bit of a tough time."

Oh.

"So, I did the stupid thing and tried to self-medicate. I don't usually drink much alcohol, but...it seemed like a good idea at the time. I guess I wasn't thinking clearly through the pain."

Guilt and something like compassion settled uncomfortably in Piper's stomach. She'd misjudged him, at least on this one point.

"Anyway, Carlos told me to come get some coffee, and I was desperate, so I did. But I was still in pain, and hungover,

and in a bad place. I'm sorry I was so short with you. And today, as well. I'm just...not myself, with all of this going on."

Well, there went all of her comfortable self-righteousness. What she'd assumed was arrogance was actually pain. He'd still been a dick, but apparently it was enough unlike his usual behavior that he felt the need to apologize. That was something.

"You're not a coffee drinker." She wasn't sure what else to say.

One corner of his mouth turned up. "Never before. And probably never again."

And she had...

"I basically forced you to drink dark roast, black."

His chuckle was like melted chocolate, rich and delicious. "I didn't love it."

She winced. "Yeah, even dedicated coffee drinkers usually take milk or sugar. Or both."

He leaned a little closer, crowding her. Her breath caught as his smile slowly spread across his face, as if he had all the time in the world to stand here talking to her. Everything else faded away, until there was only Gavin Williams, extremely attractive man, nearly touching her. "And you?" he rumbled. "How do you like it?"

Good Lord. Was he...flirting with her? She blinked at him several times, struggling to remember how she drank her coffee. Which was something she did every day. Multiple times. Surely she knew?

The sound of voices nearby startled her out of her stupor. Customers.

Gavin straightened and backed up a step, and Piper sucked in a breath to steady herself.

"You'd better get back to work." His voice was curt and devoid of the humor from just seconds ago.

He glanced around at the machines and sinks and supplies behind the counter. He was frowning again, as if wondering how he'd ended up behind a café counter asking provocative coffee-related questions of its owner.

“Yeah,” she said a little breathlessly. Her body was still drawn to his by its own sort of gravity, yet he was pulling away, seemingly able to shut off whatever attraction he might return. Well, she'd just need to find a way to do the same. She straightened her spine and told her libido to take a break.

“I guess I'll need to come back so you can show me what to do here.” He didn't sound thrilled at the prospect.

She shrugged, trying to maintain her equilibrium amid the whiplash of his reactions to her. “It's no big deal.”

She couldn't keep up with his moods, and she didn't like it. First, he was rude beyond belief, then apologetic, then flirtatious, and now back to borderline rude. Confusion—and maybe a bit of hurt at his sudden retreat—dampened the heat that still smoldered from his nearness. “If you come by one afternoon, I can show you.”

She could tell him it wasn't necessary. She would be on site, anyway, and she was sure Murray could help out with her own brother's event, as well. They could prep drinks and food themselves, and the two hockey players could stick to serving. The idea of making a date with this unpredictable man, even a work date, suddenly felt like more than she could handle.

But she had told Carlos she would, and the two men would feel better prepared if they had the lay of the land before the day of.

He nodded briskly. “Fine,” he said, then scowled yet again.

Before she could suggest a day, he edged out from behind the counter more quickly than she would have thought he'd be able to manage in that knee brace. Piper shook her head and turned to greet the customers waiting patiently. When she next looked up, he was gone.

Which was *fine*, as he said. Perfectly fine, and if her heart twinged at his sudden dismissal, if some traitorous part of her

wished he'd stomp back over and pin her up against the counter again, she ignored it.

She didn't want to spend any more time than she had to with Gavin Williams.

Chapter Four

A few days later, Gavin grumbled his way down the hallway of the Firebirds' training facility, just as he'd grumbled his way through his physical therapy session.

After twenty-plus years of always putting on a good face, always presenting a positive, never-give-up attitude, he recognized that he was now *that guy*. That angry, bitter older player who was facing the end of his career and couldn't handle it. The guy everyone pitied. The guy other players avoided because they didn't know what to say. Because he was no longer a part of the team, not really.

He hated it. And he couldn't seem to drag himself out of this funk.

He knew he was better than this, *had* to be better than this. He was forty-two, not ninety-two. He had achieved his hockey goals and then some, he had financial security to spare, and he had absolutely no right to complain about the hand fate had dealt him.

A vision of pink hair and warm brown eyes flashed in his mind. Piper Welborn had been right to call him out on his attitude. He didn't know her, and yet he'd come to all sorts of snap judgments about her, none of which turned out to be true. Sure, she had provoked him, but it had been his fault for being so rude. Apologizing stuck in his craw, but he would have felt worse if he hadn't made himself do it.

Apologizing hadn't been his only source of discomfort, however. Standing so close to her behind the café counter, he'd been shocked by his reaction. He couldn't help leaning down to inhale her sweet, slightly floral scent. She was probably still too young for him at thirty-three—thank you, Carlos—not to mention nothing like his usual type. But there was something captivating about her, even as she irritated the hell out of him. She was so...alive.

And he felt like a dead man walking.

He had shut down his urge to flirt before it went any further. She was a temptation, and he had to resist. He'd only hurt them both. He was leaving Philly, and his failed marriage was proof that he had no talent for relationships. Just hockey. So, of course, he'd lashed out again, grouching his way out of the café. He hadn't missed her look of annoyance.

It was probably for the best.

She had been right about his behavior, though. He had no excuse. He could either focus on rehabilitating his knee, his life, his future, or...he could give up and sulk.

Right now, sulking was winning, and knowing that he was making all the wrong choices only brought him lower.

Still, he attended his physical therapy appointments as required. The doctors told him he should be grateful. After his surgery two months ago, he hadn't been able to put any weight on his knee for two weeks. Now the medical opinion was that while he couldn't play hockey again and would likely never regain one hundred percent of his mobility, he would otherwise make a full recovery.

For what, though? That was the question that kept him up at night. He had never been good at anything other than hockey. It was his life. From an early age, everyone told him he was a prodigy. They treated him differently because of it. Like he was special. Worthwhile.

What he needed was a call from Vancouver asking him to join the management team. In a leadership position with his longtime team, he could regain his sense of purpose, his status in the hockey community. He could build a new life.

Lost in his thoughts, he almost ran into the man coming around the hallway corner.

Tyler Valentine.

"Hey, Gavin, good to see you, man." Tyler reached for Gavin's hand and shook it.

Valentine was nearly as tall as Gavin, though slighter of build, with dark hair and eyes in contrast to Gavin's own dirty blond and blue. They played the same position, however, at

center forward. Valentine was a speed demon on the ice, an absolute magician with the puck, and one of the league's top scorers. With his movie-star good looks on top of his talent he'd been the darling of the league, until some scandal or other led to him being traded from Pittsburgh to Los Angeles, where he hadn't quite found his rhythm.

"So, the rumors are true, huh?" Gavin tried not to sound negative, but he was pretty sure he failed miserably.

Valentine gave him a sympathetic look, which he wholeheartedly resented. They both knew Tyler was coming to Philly for the express purpose of replacing Gavin, but he didn't want to be pitied for it.

"Yeah. They'll announce it later today, so don't go calling the news channels yet." He winked, and Gavin made a concerted effort not to scowl. "But I'm coming to Philly." He glanced around the empty hall. "This is a great organization. Honestly, I feel lucky they wanted me."

Gavin frowned, confused. "Why wouldn't they want you? You were the third-leading scorer two years ago, second the year before." He laughed bitterly. "God knows I'm not going to be producing goals for them anymore, and Carlos is still finding his feet. They'd be crazy not to sign you."

It was true. All of the big hopes for what Gavin would bring to the team—experience, leadership, maturity—Valentine could easily replace. Sure, the other man was almost a decade younger, but that was a *good* thing. He still had ten years of experience in the league, he'd been to the finals twice, and he had a number of good years ahead of him.

Unlike Gavin.

An odd look crossed Valentine's face, and Gavin tried to remember what the problem had been in Pittsburgh. He paid attention to what players did on the ice, not league gossip.

"Well, I'm just glad they want me." Valentine shook his head, then braced one arm against the wall. "LA just wasn't a good fit." He looked at Gavin for a long moment, his gaze

more perceptive than Gavin would have liked. “You doing okay?”

It was a question he answered many times a day. A question posed by doctors, team staff, random people on the street, his own family. But somehow it sounded different coming from Tyler.

Gavin cleared his throat. “Yeah.” It was a lie, and they both knew it. Gavin was tired of lying. “I mean...no. Not really. Actually, everything’s shit, to be honest.”

They both laughed, and the vise that had gripped Gavin’s heart since his injury loosened one notch.

“It sucks, you know?” Gavin continued, somehow unable to stop the words coming out of his mouth. “What the hell do I know about life after hockey? All I *know* is hockey. I’m spinning my wheels here in rehab, dealing with the physical pain, and the pain’s not even the worst of it. It’s the not knowing. Not knowing for sure what comes next.”

Valentine nodded, but Gavin wondered if he really did understand. Players simply weren’t given the skills to deal with the inevitable end of their career. They ate, slept, and breathed hockey, and there was no room for anything else. No room to plan for a future after the game was over.

“Yeah.” The other man was still nodding thoughtfully. “My mom is always after me to finish my college degree during the off season.” He laughed. “Can you imagine? A thirty-three-year-old hockey player sitting in summer school classes? Ridiculous.”

Gavin rubbed his chin, noting for the millionth time that he really needed a shave. Maybe tomorrow. “Not so ridiculous—you could, you know. Finish your degree. Then you’d have something outside the game, something that’s yours. For... after. Other guys have done it.”

Valentine shook his head, pushing off the wall. “I wouldn’t even know where to start. School? I did okay, especially English, but that shit was a long time ago.”

“Yeah.” Gavin didn’t know what else to say. He was hardly in a position to offer advice. His own life had basically collapsed on top of him, and he couldn’t find his way out from under the heap, let alone help anyone else. “Well.”

There was an awkward pause, and then Valentine laughed again. “You know the worst thing about coming to Philly, is that they’re going to compare me to you.” He let out a long breath. “Can I compare to the great Gavin Williams? ‘Sure, Valentine’s been to the finals, but he’s never *won*. Not like Williams’s three cups. Will he ever be MVP? Like Williams?’ *Fuck.*”

Gavin smiled uncomfortably. “Yeah, well. That’s all in the past.”

Valentine shrugged. “Sure, but it won’t stop the comparison.”

He supposed not. It was the nature of the game, trying to line players up against each other to see who came out on top. It was a special kind of pressure, that expectation to match up with those who came before. As if they were all interchangeable, like characters in a video game instead of individuals with their own strengths and weaknesses.

It was one thing he wouldn’t miss.

“You can’t play my game, though,” Gavin began thoughtfully. While Valentine was often compared to Gavin, they played totally different styles of hockey. Gavin was intense, intimidating with his size and strength. Valentine skated circles around his opponents and looked like he had fun doing it. It threw the other team off their game.

“Whatever the issues were in Pittsburgh and L.A., you can’t bring that shit with you, either. You just need to focus on what *you* bring to the team, what you can do moving forward.” Huh. Maybe he did have advice to offer, if he could get out of his own head for one second. “This team is...different. L.A.’s mostly veterans, set in their ways. There are a lot of young players here still trying to figure the whole thing out. They need someone who knows who he is, who can provide some

direction. You've been doing this a while. You can be that guy. Show them how to win, and how to enjoy it."

Gavin stopped. That was more about hockey than he'd said in two months. He'd been avoiding talking about the game he loved, shutting down conversations with teammates, staff, even fans, who wanted his opinion. But now he realized that talking about it felt...good.

Valentine looked like he was taking it all in. He took a step down the hall, turning to regard Gavin with something like respect, maybe even gratitude. That also felt good. He'd been brought to Philly to provide some leadership, and he'd done fuck all of that since his injury.

"Yeah. Thanks, man." The other man ran a hand through his hair. "You're right. I was off my game last season in L.A., trying to guess what they needed. I need to just play my game." He grinned. "And show the youngsters how to have some fun on the ice." He saluted Gavin. "Got a meeting with the coach—catch you later?"

Gavin nodded in acknowledgment, then continued down the hall and out of the facility. Every muscle surrounding his bum knee screamed in protest as he got into his car. Right after PT was always the worst.

He sighed, and out of habit checked his phone.

One text from Simon in Vancouver, the first in a few days. He really needed to call him back.

He hated feeling weak, and the near-constant pain was getting more than a little old. His conversation with Tyler Valentine had left him with a lot to think about. But right now, he needed to make a quick grocery stop, then get home to his couch, some ibuprofen, and some much-needed solitude in which to lick his wounds and regroup before facing the world again.

* * *

Piper was glad she had walked the half mile home from the train station, because she needed the exercise to decompress

from a busy morning. The Bean had been crowded first thing, the line long, the phone ringing off the hook. She hadn't even made it into her office to check her email.

Then Jennifer, the director of the Philly LGBTQ youth center, had called in a panic—the volunteer who'd been scheduled to open the center and supervise a social group had called out sick, and she herself had a doctor's appointment that morning. So, Piper had called in Murray's help at the Bean and headed into the city.

When Piper began dating Sloan—in those hazy days when she'd just been emerging from her fog of grief for her parents—they'd run into Jennifer at a bar in the city and she'd realized how much she'd missed her old college friend. She jumped at the chance to help out at the center, even though she'd been in the process of setting up the business that became the Friendly Bean and had little time to spare. Not only had her friend been one more reconnection to the queer community she'd lost touch with, but it was important to Piper to ensure that community existed and was available to young people who needed it as much as she did. She only volunteered at the center when Jennifer couldn't find anyone else, but she rarely said no. And she never regretted her time there.

Still, it had been a busy morning. And soon enough she'd be headed back to the Bean for more.

She waved absently at Fern as she passed by the pink house, her friend knee-deep in her vegetable garden.

She tried not to look at the big gray house across from hers as she walked by, but her eyes were drawn to it against her will. A lumbering shape came into view as she neared the front entrance.

Just her luck.

She attempted to pass by as unobtrusively as possible, wanting only to return to the haven of her own home. She was tired and a little crabby after her long morning, and in no mood to deal with the hot-and-cold Gavin Williams—or the unsettling effect he had on her.

Unfortunately, she couldn't help but notice his struggle to navigate the stairs that led to the front door. His knee brace didn't allow for him to bend his leg, which clearly made steps difficult. And by the way he was leaning heavily on the railing, she guessed that he was in a significant amount of discomfort.

And he was carrying two bags of groceries. A twinge of guilt told her that she wasn't going to leave him to his own devices.

She sighed, cursing herself for a softhearted fool as she slid through the opening in the hedge at the front walk, stopping just over the property line.

"Need some help?" She tried to sound as friendly as possible.

The look on Gavin Williams's face as he turned around was anything but friendly.

"I'm fine!" he barked, and then scowled in that now-familiar way. Then he winced visibly. There was a pause, during which he stared at his hand on the railing as if it was personally offensive to him. When he spoke again, his voice was gruff, and it sounded to Piper as if he resented her very presence. "I'm...good."

Okay.

"All righty. Have a good day, then!" It was obvious he was having anything *but* a good day, and she couldn't help but infuse her parting shot with fake cheeriness to underscore the irony.

She turned to leave. She'd done the neighborly thing and offered help and had been snapped at for her trouble. Good riddance, Mr. Williams.

"Wait."

Piper paused, one foot already on the sidewalk when the single word stopped her in her tracks. When no follow-up statement was forthcoming, she turned to face her neighbor. "What?"

He hadn't moved, still staring down at his own hand. Piper wondered if she'd imagined his voice.

"I didn't mean to bite your head off," he finally said.

Piper moved a few steps closer and couldn't resist a wry smile. "That would have been more convincing several bites ago," she said.

She was rewarded with a gruff laugh, and he glanced up. Those sky-blue eyes with their gaze that seemed to pin her where she stood captured her attention as they always did. But today, they weren't crackling with irritation or even warm with humor as they'd been at the Bean. They were wary, a little angry, reminding her of a half-tame wolf, its gaze turbulent even as it stood utterly still.

And he looked absolutely exhausted. The dark circles under his eyes were obvious even from several feet away, and his mouth was set in a grim line, as if it was taking effort to simply stand there.

But it was his posture that hit her. She'd gotten to know a few of the professional hockey players that lived in the town. They all had a certain way of holding themselves, an almost military awareness of their own bodies. Even when relaxed, they seemed poised for action. In her dim memories of watching Gavin Williams on television, she was sure he had been the same.

But not now. His big body was curled in on itself with fatigue, tension, and pain. She had seen the same stance often among the older town residents, among her friends who lived with chronic illness, and even in herself when the endless mental anguish following her parents' deaths had settled in her joints as a nagging ache. Pain wore a person down, the day-after-day grind of simply getting around when your body was uncooperative was evident in the way people in pain moved through the world.

She could see it in this otherwise healthy, athletic man, and it tugged at something inside her. And she knew just as certainly that he would resent any pity or sympathy she might feel for him.

With that understanding, she made her decision. Briskly, she strode right up to him and grabbed the grocery bags out of his hand, continuing up the steps to the front door of his house.

“Hey—” he growled.

“Shut up,” she replied cheerfully. “Just open the door.”

She waited for him to digest this development, then suppressed a smile when he grunted with frustration, but climbed the remaining stairs and unlocked the door.

With a resigned sigh he held it open for her. “After you.”

She held her breath as she brushed past him, overly aware of the heat of his body and the way he towered over her. She felt a bit as if she was entering the beast’s lair as she walked inside, crossing the living space to the open kitchen.

The house was cool and dim, the blinds partly drawn and central air cranking against the summer heat. The place was as modern on the inside as on the outside, the all-white kitchen contrasting against the dark stained wood floors. It looked moderately lived-in, with an enormous couch resting comfortably in front of a large television. Cups and plates were piled in the kitchen sink, a bowl of fruit on the counter. Comfortable enough, but...impersonal.

It was the house of someone who had no plans to stay for the long term.

She set the bags carefully on the counter.

“How long have you lived on Hopkins Street?” she asked, more to make conversation than anything else.

He walked slowly to the kitchen. Piper noted the care he took to put as little weight as possible on his injured knee, the way he immediately leaned on the counter to bear some of his weight.

“A few months,” he answered, his voice a low rumble. “I moved in this spring. From the city. It’s quieter here, and I figured...” He glanced around the room. “I thought I’d put down some roots here, at least for the duration of my contract.”

Ah.

“And everything’s up in the air for you now that you can’t play.”

He glanced at her with what she thought was surprise, as if he hadn’t expected her to put it quite as bluntly. “You could say that.”

“What was it like?” she asked before common sense caught up to her sense of curiosity. “After the injury, I mean.” He’d already lived here in Shady Hill by that time. And she’d had no idea what was going on right across the street from her own house. Maybe Fern was right about bringing him meals—except that they should have done it weeks ago, when he’d first been injured and housebound.

He didn’t answer right away, and she wondered if she’d gone too far by prying into what had to have been a terrible time. Maybe she should make her excuses and leave the man be.

“The first month was a haze of pain and painkillers,” he finally said. “Both before and after the surgery. Pain and disappointment. Maybe more anger than I’d like to admit.”

Piper watched him as he stared straight ahead at the window, his face expressionless.

“I was bedridden for weeks after surgery, but honestly I didn’t even care. I just wanted it to stop hurting. By the time I was up and about again, it was clear that my playing days were over. But the team was out of the playoffs, so I guess it didn’t feel that much different from any other year, except for the injury.” He shrugged slightly. “Until I realized that I couldn’t go anywhere. Do anything. Couldn’t skate. Couldn’t run. Couldn’t go golfing, not that I even like golf. So, I read. Watched TV. Talked to Carlos.” He turned his head and smiled slightly in her direction. “Sulked around town, terrorizing innocent shop owners.”

She laughed, as he’d intended, but she wondered at the brief sketch he’d drawn of his life after the injury. There was a world of emotion underneath his casual words, his voice taut

but a little too easy, as if he was talking about someone else and not his own hard experience.

He pushed off the island and came to stand next to her, resting one hand on a bag of groceries and not meeting her eyes. He paused, then reached a hand out toward her hair, stopping before he touched her.

“Go on.” She gave him permission.

People often wanted to touch her hair to see if it was real. She didn’t usually welcome the invasion of her personal space, but he had stopped himself before actually touching her, so she’d allow it. Also, she kind of wanted to know what it felt like to be touched by Gavin Williams, even as she could kick herself for wondering. Those big hands and thick, capable fingers—what would they feel like in her hair, on her scalp, tracing down the back of her neck? His hands had battled for years with a hockey stick, and no doubt thrown some wicked punches in on-ice fights. Would he be careful with her? Gentle? Would she want him to be?

He took one long strand of her hair between his fingers, examining it, then letting it fall. Her breath caught and her heartbeat sped up in her chest, and she admonished herself for being so affected by him. He’d only touched her *hair*, for God’s sake. And he was barely civil.

“Is it always pink?”

She shrugged a shoulder. “Mostly. I tried blue last winter but I looked like I was left out in the cold too long.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up and he turned his attention to the groceries, removing items from the bags and putting them away with efficient movements. Piper watched him, trying not to stare at his impressive biceps or muscled forearms.

It was a struggle.

“How long have you lived here?” he asked, dragging Piper’s eyes back to his face.

“About seven years,” she answered automatically, then did the math in her head. “Maybe more. Eight? Possibly nine?”

Longer than I thought, I guess,” she laughed quietly. How had so much time passed?

Gavin was still focused on putting things away, which gave her the chance to return to her mild ogling. He was a giant bear of a man underneath his perfectly pressed shirt and pants, and there wasn't an inch of him that wasn't solid muscle. She wondered what he did to work out now that he couldn't skate.

“So, you didn't grow up in Shady Hill?”

She shook her head. “Nope. My hometown's a couple hours away. I saw an ad for an apartment when I was in business school, and I took the opportunity to trade the city for the suburbs. Not to mention a cheap place to live. That didn't hurt.”

He grunted and fell quiet. Piper thought for a moment that he was going to ask her something else, but apparently the conversation well had run dry. She had already barged into his house uninvited, and she didn't want to heap another pile of questions on him. She was curious, though. About a lot of things.

Gavin Williams was nothing like she would have expected, if she had expected anything about him at all.

She was eyeing the front door and planning her escape when he spoke again.

“How'd you end up owning your own business?”

Her defenses flared out of habit. She'd been asked the question so many times, often with an accompanying unpleasant undertone of incredulity. She didn't appreciate the question from Gavin any more than she appreciated it from any of the other people—usually men—who found it unbelievable that a woman like her could succeed in business.

“Woman like her,” meaning, of course, young—although not as young as they assumed—reasonably attractive, and unconventional, at least to their eyes, with her pink hair and definitely-not-business-attire fashion choices.

As if you had to be over forty and wearing a suit to be intelligent. The sentiment, whether spoken or unspoken,

infuriated her every time.

“The usual way,” she snapped, her anger shielding the sliver of hurt that Gavin might share in that unwanted sentiment. Not that she should care what he thought. “I married a rich old guy then murdered him for his money.” She gestured in the direction of her house across the street. “He’s in the backyard. I’m working my way through his fortune with my gross mismanagement of a small coffee shop.” She shrugged. “It’s a living.”

Gavin turned to face her, his full attention on her for the first time since they entered the house. It was...a lot. But she lifted her chin and met his stare with her own, feeling as if she was a mouse facing down a bull. Whatever. She was a *very* stubborn mouse.

Chapter Five

Gavin forgot what he was going to say as soon as he faced Piper head-on, which, to be honest, was why he'd been avoiding looking at her ever since she insisted on stampeding into his kitchen. *Helping*, not *stampeding*, he corrected himself. It stung to need help in the first place, but he *had* needed it, and she had provided assistance without making him feel like he was being coddled or as if she felt sorry for him.

He had been attempting to make small talk, which was not his strong suit—there was a reason pro athletes were given media training and a list of canned responses to questions. He knew he came off as stiff, even arrogant, in public appearances, but he'd only been playing to the script.

His efforts in this case had failed miserably, if the sparks shooting from Piper's eyes were any indication.

With effort, he regained the thread of their conversation.

"My congratulations on your successful murdering, in that case." He tried for humor.

He was rewarded with a small half smile, although her guard was clearly still up. She was fierce when she was angry—a woman not to be trifled with, not that he was given to trifling with women. He'd hit a nerve, although he hadn't meant to.

He forced his hands behind his back, clasping them, to stop himself from touching her again. He wasn't a touchy-feely sort of person, but something about Piper made him want to explore her in a wholly tactile way: to run his fingers through the bright strands of her hair, along the curve of her waist, to brush his hand over those freckles.

Physical attraction could occur between any two people, he told himself. It didn't mean anything. They had nothing in common—they didn't even like each other. And of course, she was a beautiful and successful woman almost ten years his

junior, and he was an ex-hockey player with a failed marriage, bum knee, and a future full of question marks.

But he still didn't want her to be angry with him.

"I didn't mean that I don't think you're capable of running a business," he began, and she arched one dark and skeptical eyebrow at him. He wondered how often her competence was called into question, and remembered Carlos saying that people always assumed she was a college student. Just as he had. *I guess I'm the asshole*, he thought. "I just wondered how you got into it. Did you go to business school specifically to run a café?"

Her face relaxed as she realized that he was not, in fact, questioning her competence. Something in Gavin relaxed along with her expression. He hadn't meant to hit on a sore subject. In fact, he'd been trying to make easy conversation, maybe find out a little about this woman who drew him in even as they seemed to clash at every turn. He'd given her several reasons to think the worst of him, but he found himself wanting her to think differently. Better. To see him as...well, if not as the Gavin Williams he used to be, at least as someone worth talking to. Not some guy who made snap judgments about her age or competence.

"No," she replied, resting her hip against the counter. "I majored in art history in college, but surprisingly enough the job offers didn't line themselves up after I graduated." One hand fiddled with a silver bracelet on her wrist, and he tried not to be distracted by her elegant fingers, tipped today with purple polish. "I thought I'd go to work in a museum, be a curator or something." She paused, and her eyes took on a faraway look, almost sad. "My parents used to bring me to Philadelphia for the weekend sometimes. We'd spend the day at the museum, and I thought it was the most amazing place. I haven't been there in years." Her mouth twisted in a slight smile and she sighed. "Too busy, I guess." She paused for a moment, then shook her head as if clearing her thoughts.

"So, then I decided to do the practical thing and go to business school. I never thought I'd be able to start my own business," she said. "I thought about it—dreamed about it. I

had the whole concept for the Friendly Bean in my head before I graduated. I even wrote a business plan for it for a class project. But the funding for starting my own business was money I didn't have, so I spent a couple years after graduation doing marketing for a company in the city."

"So, what happened?" Clearly, she'd found the money somehow.

She glanced away from him, gazing out the window above the kitchen sink. "My parents died. Were killed, I mean. In a car accident."

"Jesus, I'm sorry."

Gavin's own parents were alive and well, and despite the usual family squabbles he couldn't imagine losing either—let alone both at once. But Piper shrugged a shoulder and continued as if she was describing a regular occurrence instead of the whole foundation of her life changing. But her lips pressed together briefly, her fingers tangled and untangled as her words fell between them. A crease appeared between her eyebrows. There was pain there, a loss he couldn't fully understand. Her words revealed a wound she'd kept well covered, and he wanted to soothe it. But she didn't know him—she certainly had no reason to trust him. And he couldn't sort his own problems, let alone help someone else with theirs.

"They were practical people, and apparently they'd paid for a big life insurance policy at some point. I guess they worried about what would happen to me if they..." She trailed off.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "You don't have to talk about it."

She looked back at him, and he saw her chest rise as she took a deep breath. "It's fine," she said. "It was five years ago." He doubted that made it any easier. "Anyway, they had been really active in their own community, and home and place were important to them. They'd thought my idea for a coffee shop in Shady Hill was great, and so I felt like starting the business would be... I don't know, honoring them, I guess."

He nodded and found himself taking a step forward to place a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him, startled. But she didn't pull away.

"I'm sorry you lost your parents," he said again. "I can't even imagine... I'm sure they'd be very proud of what you've accomplished."

She shrugged again and looked faintly embarrassed. "I hope so. The learning curve was...very steep." She laughed quietly. "Turns out that to run a coffee shop you have to know a *lot* about coffee. I knew the business side of things, more or less, and I'd worked at Starbucks in college, but it took a lot of work to get things where they are now."

"But you did it."

"I did," she said simply, and the years of sacrifice and effort were reflected by the pride in her expression.

She was nothing like what he had assumed. She'd suffered loss with grace. She had taken a horrible situation and turned it into something that was not only her dream, but benefitted other people, as well. And she was looking at him now with that mixture of strength and vulnerability that made him want to pull her into his arms and keep her safe from any other trauma or pain.

Of course, he couldn't offer her protection, or comfort. He could barely get through the day himself, and he certainly wasn't dealing with his own issues with much grace. He was so far down in the hole he didn't even know which way was up. He knew he had to start climbing, just as Piper must have pulled herself out of her own depths after the death of her parents. Sooner or later, he was going to have to find his direction and get to work.

But right now, she was here in front of him, only inches away, and she hadn't yet shrugged his hand off her shoulder. Her floral scent surrounded him, awakening desires he hadn't felt in months. Before he could think better of it, he slid his palm up her neck, and brushed her long hair back from where it had fallen forward.

The vulnerability in her eyes turned to curiosity, and he wanted to lean down and press his lips to her forehead. He couldn't do that, of course. It would be wildly inappropriate, and she would almost certainly smack him and storm out of the house. He held himself very still, hand still cupping her head, giving her the option of stepping away from this, from him.

From whatever the hell it was that he was doing.

Instead, she tilted her head to meet his gaze, the curiosity still there but also the slightest flickering of desire. She watched him for several moments, as if she was deliberating her next move.

Then she shocked him by taking his face between her hands and kissing him full on the mouth.

Surprise and pleasure were a warm rush through his system. Her lips were soft, a little tentative, as if she was tasting some delicacy she'd been longing to try but wasn't sure she'd enjoy. He was suddenly ravenous himself, wanting more than the light pressure of her mouth on his, the softness of her fingertips on his cheekbones—and some dark corner of his mind he hadn't realized was keeping time thought, *finally*. He kept a small distance between them so she wouldn't notice the strength of his reaction to her, and he let her explore as she wished, even as every instinct in him rioted to haul her against him and *take*.

He knew he was a big man, and intimidating to many—that had, obviously, been his job as a player. Or at least part of his job. Women he'd been with had always found his size and strength attractive, or so they'd told him. But he hadn't been unaware of other women—and men—looking at him with something more like fear. That affected him and made him conscious of himself in physical relation to others. Even though she had kissed him, he didn't assume that Piper would be comfortable with him taking the initiative.

So instead of pawing her as his libido clearly wanted, he leaned back just a little, allowing more distance between them, holding himself in check. She wasn't having it. Her hands on

his face pulled him toward her, her mouth seeking his. She leaned *in*, pressing her body firmly against his and branding his skin through his clothes with the feel of her. She smelled like sunshine and flowers and tasted like a promise of something he hadn't felt in a long, long time.

He'd had two, maybe three hookups since his divorce a year ago, and they had been just that: hookups. Two consenting adults interested in scratching an itch and nothing more. He could take or leave casual sex, but he wouldn't have stopped Piper from kissing him for anything in the world.

He should probably be worried about that.

He couldn't help the moan that escaped him as her tongue tasted his lower lip and then delved inside his mouth, looking for more. And *more* was exactly what he wanted, but the sound had Piper drawing back, her expression still curious but her eyes lit with want in a way that set fire to his nerve endings.

"Sorry," she whispered. She didn't look sorry at all.

"It's fine," he croaked, then stifled a groan. "I mean, it's okay. It was good."

Smooth, he was not.

Amusement curved her lips as her hands dropped to her sides. "I should go," she said, glancing around the kitchen as if only now remembering where she was. "Unless you need anything else?"

He certainly did, and if he happened to look down at where his dick was trying to push its way through his jeans, she would know exactly what.

But she was right. Better that she leave now, before things got out of hand. One kiss could be excused, but this couldn't go any further. Not when, if the Vancouver management ever called his damn phone, he'd be leaving as soon as possible.

He drew a breath deep into his lungs, then let it go. And then he let her go, straightening and backing up to put a couple of steps between them.

“Right,” he said. “I mean, no. Thank you.” He cleared his throat. “Thanks for helping with the groceries.”

“It’s no problem.” She smiled at him, and suddenly the room seemed just a little brighter.

She started toward the door, and Gavin found himself following despite the pain in his leg.

“Back to the coffee grind?”

“Oof.” Piper shook her head, but she laughed. “That’s awful. But yeah, I do need to get back to work.”

She paused by the door, on the verge of leaving, and he tried to think of something to say to keep her there, even as he knew he should do no such thing.

“Did you see Carlos’s text?” he finally asked.

Carlos had texted both of them so they would have each other’s numbers, and to remind them to get Gavin up to speed on coffee-making operations.

“Yep,” Piper said, opening the front door. “So, when do you want to come by?”

“Soon,” Gavin replied, maybe a little too eagerly. “I mean... the first meetup is next week, right? So, better sooner than later.”

“Sure—how about Friday afternoon? I’ll be at the shop most of the day. Just text me when you want the full tour.”

Suddenly Friday seemed all too distant, rather than just two days away. What was wrong with him?

“Yeah,” he said, his voice rough to his own ears. It bothered him how much he wanted to schedule another time to see her. They had only just met and hadn’t exactly hit it off right away. But he didn’t like that she was leaving, and he didn’t like that he probably wouldn’t see her again for two days.

And he didn’t like that he felt any of those things.

“Okay,” she said, giving him an odd look. He realized he was frowning and forced himself to stop. “I’ll see you then.”

She gave him a little wave and was out the door.

Gavin stood in the middle of his living room until the pain in his knee became too much. Then he limped heavily to the couch and sat, lost in thought.

* * *

That evening after closing the café, Piper stopped at the town library where she knew Sloan was working the evening shift.

The sun had set, a huge orange orb against the summer sky. But the oppressive heat and humidity lingered, and she was a sweaty mess by the time she chatted with the librarian on the front desk and then poked her head into Sloan's tiny office.

"Mind if I enjoy your air-conditioning for a few minutes?" she asked by way of greeting.

Sloan looked up from her computer and grinned. "Hey! Come to slum it in the nonprofit sector?"

Piper rolled her eyes. "Hilarious. I just thought I'd see if you had a minute between screaming children and entitled rich people complaining about their fines."

"For you? Fines can wait." She pushed back from her desk, and Piper plopped down on an empty chair, grateful to be out of the heat.

"Why do we even live here? It's a swamp out there."

Sloan shrugged. "Yeah, but it's so nice for like two weeks in April."

Piper snorted, then fell silent.

Sloan narrowed her eyes at her. "Okay, spill it."

"What?" She tried to look innocent, more to torture Sloan than to avoid talking. Talking was the reason she was here, after all.

Her friend sighed in exasperation. "We all know you were on your feet slinging coffee all day, it's after eight o'clock, and you *could* be home on the couch watching shitty TV. Which, by the way, is what I very much wish *I* was doing instead of

running a report on purchase requests. But here we are. So, what gives?”

Piper fiddled with a ring on her left hand. It wasn't that she told Sloan everything all the time, although that was near enough to true. They'd first met when Piper stopped in the library to sign up for a library card, about a year after her parents' accident, and discovered they were neighbors. She'd still been grieving—did grief ever entirely relinquish its hold?—and Sloan had been funny, flirtatious, and fantastic for distracting her from the darkness that surrounded her.

During that time Piper had begun to feel more like herself, more like the person she'd been before her queer identity had been lost in the shuffle of the straight-assuming workplace. After they realized they were better friends than girlfriends, they settled into a close friend group along with Fern and Georgie. Murray had come later. Over time they'd begun sharing everything, from romantic troubles to recommendations for menstrual cups to their darkest fears and brightest hopes.

No, she knew she could tell Sloan anything and receive full support—and probably some shit to go with it.

But she didn't *want* to be given a hard time about kissing Gavin. It felt tender, like her muscles after a challenging yoga class. Pleasingly uncomfortable, enough that she both wanted to do it again and wanted to lie down in bed for a long time.

Most of her wanted to kiss Gavin again. Soon.

Part of her wished it had never happened at all.

“I, um...” She glanced around the room as if maybe the stacks of books could have this conversation in her stead. “I helped Gavin Williams with his groceries.” And then she blushed horribly, betraying the fact that her mind immediately offered up a replay of that short but searingly hot kiss.

“Is that a euphemism?” Sloan grinned. “Please tell me it's a euphemism.”

Piper looked skyward for patience. “No! He was trying to carry the bags up all those stairs, and I helped. I don't think he

wanted me to, but I just couldn't watch while he was struggling.”

Sloan leaned forward in her chair. “Was he super grumpy about it, in a hot grumpy man sort of way?”

God, he really had been. Even now desire curled in her belly just thinking about it. Piper sighed. “Yeah.”

“Both the grumpy *and* the hot, right?”

“Sloan!” Piper laughed despite herself. “If you think he's so hot, why haven't you been over to see if he needs...help?” Even as she said the words, a spike of jealousy stabbed her gut at the thought of Sloan or anyone else making a move on Gavin. Which was absurd. Right?

Sloan flipped her hair back and away from her face. “Well, point A, I'm too antisocial to just show up at someone's house or offer help to a stranger. Point B, you're so obviously into him it's stupid, and point C, I'm busy.”

“I am *not* into him!” Piper felt obliged to protest, even though Sloan could obviously read her like a book. Then she frowned. “Busy with what?”

Sloan shrugged. “Let's just say we don't all limit ourselves to specific genders *and* only to people who meet our highest of super-picky standards.”

“You're saying you're getting laid because of your low standards?” Piper smirked.

Sloan smirked right back. “And what would that say about you, ex of mine? What I'm saying is there's a reasonable level between ridiculous limits and low standards. And speaking of your limits, correct me if I'm wrong, but Gavin Williams would not normally meet yours due to the fact that he is *definitely* a man.”

“All I did was help the guy with grocery bags,” Piper grumped. Sloan wasn't fooled.

“You're telling me you stopped by my office at eight thirty p.m. to talk about the fact that you carried bags up some stairs?”

Piper squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed her temples with her fingers. “No.”

“Then spill it.”

“I kissed him.”

She opened one eye a crack, just enough to see Sloan’s eyebrows shoot toward her hairline. And then...

“Wait. *You* kissed *him*? Not the other way around?”

Piper groaned and nodded. She didn’t know what had come over her in his kitchen. Curiosity, certainly, and an impulsiveness she rarely gave in to. She’d thought if she could just push a little on their inconvenient attraction, take the wondering out of the equation, she could put it to rest. Instead, she’d all but caught fire, and then beat a hasty retreat to the Bean.

“Wow. Good for you.”

Piper dropped her hand and looked glumly at her friend. “Is it, though? Is it good for me? He’s a hockey player, Sloan. He’s *the* hockey player. An actual superstar. There’s no way Gavin Williams is interested in *me*... And even if he is, he’s the last thing I need right now!”

Sloan looked confused. “Why not?”

“What do you mean why not?”

“I mean, if he is interested, why shouldn’t you bang a hot hockey player? That’s like winning the sex lottery! Why *wouldn’t* you want to do that?”

God help her, she really did want to do that. The man was smoking hot and she just about burst into flames every time he was nearby. Even as she frequently wanted to throttle him.

She had thought at first that Gavin was an entitled asshole—and true, he was pretty grumpy a lot of the time. But she strongly suspected the bad attitude was pain related and not his actual personality. And to be fair, he had good reason to be grumpy, with a major injury and the loss of his career. He’d certainly been compassionate enough when she’d blurted out the story of losing her parents.

So, why shouldn't she?

"He's not going to stick around," she said as much to herself as to Sloan. "If he can't play in Philly, he's probably going back to Vancouver."

"So?"

"So... I don't know."

"So, even better. You've said a million times you don't want another relationship with a man. Here's your chance to sex-up a hot guy for the first time in...well, let's not even discuss that. And then he's gone. No messy breakup. Again: sex lottery."

Piper laughed despite herself. Sloan made it sound so obvious. Was it?

"He's probably not interested. *I* kissed *him*, and it's not like he swept me into his arms and dragged me off to bed."

Anything but. He'd kissed her back, just a bit, and there had been that low moan that had caused her knees to go so weak that she'd stopped kissing him out of sheer surprise. But he hadn't initiated anything further.

"That's called not being an asshole. I realize it's rare enough as to be confusing when it does happen."

Piper wondered. Was that it? Was Gavin being a good guy, or did he just not want anything more from her? "Hm."

"Just see what happens, okay? Try to get a sense of whether there's something there or not. You'll probably see him around sooner rather than later, right?"

"Friday," Piper groaned.

"You have a...date?"

She shook her head. "No, not a date. I have to show him how to serve whoever wins the auction for the player meetup next week. Carlos basically volunteered both of them to do it."

Sloan snorted. "Remind me to come to the café that day. I need to see this."

"That's not super helpful."

The other woman shrugged and looked at Piper in sympathy. “Look. You may or may not have an opportunity to have a very good time with one of the hottest human specimens to appear in Shady Hill in years. You know you’re going to see him Friday. Just...see how it goes, okay? And...”

Piper stared at her friend, but she didn’t continue.

“And what?” she finally asked.

Sloan sighed. “Just...don’t shut yourself off, okay?” She leaned back in her chair and held Piper’s gaze. “I know the men you dated were absolute shit, and I know how much being visible in the queer community means to you—what it meant to you when we were together, after your parents died. I get it. But you’re a grown-ass woman who can do what she wants. There’s no right or wrong answer here—no should. There’s no little box around what you can want,” she said firmly as Piper opened her mouth to argue. “Don’t miss out because you think it’s not what you *should* want.”

“It’s *not* what I should—”

“Piper,” Sloan groaned, exasperated. “Want what you want. There’s no *should* here. Not with me—not with anyone, really. It’s okay to want.”

Piper sighed. “I can admit that I’m attracted to him. Okay? But a man like that? Not just any man—a huge, athletic, takes-up-the-whole-room kind of man? That’s lot, Sloan.”

Sloan regarded her thoughtfully for a moment. “What if he’s actually a good guy?”

Piper shrugged. “What if he is? He’s leaving town, and you know I don’t want a relationship with a cis man. Can you imagine? A man like Gavin Williams doesn’t get together with a pink-haired queer lady—he’s like, the marrying-the-prom-queen type. The perfect straight couple, you know?” She shook her head. “You really think a man like that would be okay with the woman he’s with being anything else? He’s exactly the kind of man I *don’t* want to have a relationship with. He’s too much. You know how this has gone for me in the past—and Gavin is like every guy I’ve dated times a

million. Do you really think I'd be happy with someone like that? Or that he'd be happy with me?"

Also, she was completely over the experience of having to defend her queer identity when she happened to be with a cis man. A relationship with Gavin Williams would be like stamping her forehead in permanent ink with "I Am Straight." The thought of having to explain her queerness in the face of what people would consider evidence to the contrary was exhausting. He couldn't possibly fit into her world, her life, or what she envisioned for herself.

Sloan was right, her experiences dating cis men in the past hadn't been great. And since back then she'd had little connection to the queer community other than Fern and Georgie, it had been all too easy to erase that part of herself and become what those men expected. Even though it felt like a betrayal of herself, like she'd slowly become invisible, and at the same time utterly changed. And she'd felt so isolated in a life where she didn't even recognize herself.

Whether that had been the fault of the individual men she'd been with or not, she didn't really have the experience to know. But why risk it? At least back then she'd had her parents, who loved her and saw all of her no matter what. Now she had her friends and the community she'd built around herself, and she wasn't willing to risk drifting away from the family she'd created—not again.

Sloan stared at her. "That's a whole big mess inside that head of yours, isn't it?"

Piper glared at her. She knew she had issues, but Sloan was supposed to make her feel *better*. "Anyway, I thought we were just talking about short-term sex."

Sloan sighed. "We are. I'm not telling you to *marry* the guy. Piper, you don't become someone else because of who you're with, no matter what other people think. And maybe—hear me out—maybe Gavin isn't an asshole like every other guy you've dated. You have no way of knowing how it will be if you don't give him, or anyone, a chance. I get it, you know I

do, but I just think you're closing yourself off from things that could be really good for you."

"You think banging a random former hockey player who's leaving town is good for me?"

"*Obviously.*" Sloan looked confused. "Didn't I just say it was? And maybe don't judge Gavin Williams and his entire history of relationships before you—I don't know—get to know him? He doesn't have to be perfect. It's just sex. So, see how it goes."

Just sex. Right.

Piper wasn't entirely convinced, but she couldn't deny how she felt whenever Gavin was around. Her brain might balk at the idea of being with a man, but her body had been one hundred percent on board from the beginning.

"See how it goes," she murmured. Could she?

"Good woman." Sloan grinned at her.

Chapter Six

Friday, Piper was as jittery as if she'd ingested a gallon of coffee instead of her usual two cups. Twice she dropped a mug, and once a plate, until finally Murray told her she was banned from picking up anything breakable for the rest of the day.

"I thought I was the boss," she grumbled. Murray just smiled knowingly at her.

"What time is he coming?" her friend asked, checking the dropped plate for cracks before placing it in the sink.

Piper almost regretted telling Murray about Gavin's planned training, but it would have been hard to hide once the giant hockey player walked into the shop. And anyway, she needed the moral support.

She'd turned Sloan's advice around in her head the past couple of nights, examining each angle and finding no real answers. Sloan had said that Gavin might not be like the men she'd dated in the past, and that she wouldn't become a different person if she was involved with him. But Piper knew better than anyone that there were no guarantees. When her relationship with Sloan had shifted into friendship, she'd dated several women, but none seriously. Honestly, she hadn't had time, what with trying to get the business off the ground.

And maybe, just maybe, she hadn't wanted to get too attached to anyone after losing her parents so suddenly.

She knew the psychology. Loss hurt, and she'd had enough hurt to last her. But even those casual relationships had centered her, brought her back in line with what she knew to be her whole self. And regaining the queer community she'd first found in college had given her the sense of belonging that she'd badly needed. Would involvement with Gavin upend the equanimity she'd found?

Still... Sloan's *see how it goes* echoed in her thoughts, as did the heat in Gavin's eyes when he'd leaned over her behind

the counter. Maybe Sloan was right. Maybe this was a chance to take something she wanted, with little risk to the life she'd built for herself—or her heart. Gavin was leaving, so there was no chance of getting too attached, or too involved. But that didn't mean the whole idea didn't set her nerves so on edge that she could barely hold a mug.

“Around two.” She glanced at the clock on the wall. He would be there shortly. “He texted me a while ago.”

Murray waggled her eyebrows. “Mmmm... Gavin Williams is texting you. Is this love?”

Piper scowled. “No, it's literally him texting me that he's coming at two.”

“I bet he is.”

“Murray! How old are you?”

Her friend shrugged and hauled one of the big bags of coffee beans onto the counter to grind when there was a free moment. “I'm twelve. Emotionally. Anyway, it's just exciting! Watching you two together last week was better than TV. And Sloan said...” She stopped herself.

Piper glared at her. She loved her friends, but sometimes she wished they would tone down the gossip just a little. Not that she wasn't guilty of the same, herself.

Piper sighed. “Sloan said...” she prompted.

Murray sighed. “You already know what she said, so I don't know why you're making me say it. Look, there's Georgie.”

Georgie waved as she entered the café and strode purposefully to the counter.

“Fern is having an emergency tea situation,” she announced. “Apparently there is *no* tea at the clinic, and she ‘can't *possibly* work without it.’” Georgie air quoted the last words and did a fair imitation of her wife. “I said I'd grab her a large since I was taking a late lunch anyway. And I'll take an iced coffee.”

Fern worked as an assistant at the veterinarian's clinic in town, while Georgie was a lawyer with an office nearby.

“So...” Georgie leaned on the counter while Murray and Piper made the drinks. “Sloan said you’ve got a thing with Gavin Williams today. What time is he coming?”

Murray snorted.

“Okay, look.” Piper set Fern’s cup of tea on the counter and forced herself to take a deep breath. “This is not a *thing*. This is charity work.”

“Mmmm... That man does not look like he needs any charity,” Georgie commented. “He looks like he is doing just fine, with the emphasis on *fine*.”

Murray laughed, and Piper groaned. “I just mean that we are *working* together. Just working. On Carlos’s charity fundraiser. It’s nothing else. There’s nothing more.”

Georgie looked skeptical. “That’s not what Sloan—”

They were interrupted as the door to the café opened again.

Gavin.

He eased his big body through the door as if he wasn’t quite sure he wanted to come inside, and glanced around the room before approaching the counter.

Murray handed Georgie her iced coffee and busied herself with cleaning up. Georgie raised an eyebrow at Piper and stuck a straw in her drink.

“Hey,” Gavin said in his rumbly voice.

His appearance was considerably less unkempt than the first time Piper had seen him. There was less scruff on his face—he might not have shaved this morning, but definitely yesterday. His hair was still a bit long but brushed neatly back from his face. And he was wearing jeans so crisp it was a miracle he could bend his good knee, with a blue button-down shirt that emphasized his eyes, not that they needed much emphasis to capture Piper’s attention. He looked like a slightly looser version of the hockey star she’d seen on TV.

It was a good look.

“Hey.” Piper’s own voice sounded like little more than a gasp to her ears. She needed to get a grip.

She glanced over at Georgie, who smirked.

“Georgie, this is Gavin,” she said. “Gavin, this is my friend Georgie.”

“Nice to meet you.” He smiled at Georgie, who looked a little dazzled.

“And you remember Murray.”

Murray gave a little wave from the other side of the staff area.

“Cream and sugar. Thanks for the tip the other day.” Gavin grinned at Murray, who dropped the plastic cups she had been removing from a lower shelf.

Piper shook her head and sighed. Gavin looked amused.

“Anyway...” She tried to move things forward. “Georgie, do you want to just bring a whole box of tea to the clinic for Fern? I don’t want the dogs and cats of Shady Hill in any danger due to a caffeine shortage.”

Georgie peeled her eyes away from Gavin long enough to nod. “She’d appreciate that. Thanks.”

Piper grabbed a box of tea and pointedly handed it over to her friend. “Anything else?”

Georgie waited until Gavin turned his head to glance out the window, then leaned over to murmur, “Yum. Get it, girl.” And then she nodded pleasantly to Gavin as she passed by him and went on her way.

Piper squeezed her eyes shut and pinched the bridge of her nose, trying not to think about what “getting” Gavin would involve, in explicit and graphic detail.

“You okay there?” Gavin’s voice reverberated through her system like faraway thunder.

“Mm-hm,” she managed.

She took a deep breath and told herself to get this over with. Whatever she decided to do about Gavin Williams, she wasn't going to jump him at work, and she had obligations to fulfill in the meantime. First up: training the man to make coffee.

She opened her eyes and found herself staring directly upward into his. He towered over her, a mountain of amused man. She had the distinct sense that he knew exactly what Georgie had said, and exactly what she was thinking. She decided her only hope was to ignore all of that and pretend that he was just another new employee.

“Here,” she said. “Come around the counter.”

She noticed that Murray had made herself scarce as she began to familiarize Gavin with the setup.

“Okay,” she began. “Obviously, you don't need to know about supplies or timesheets or the cash register or anything, and I'm only going to show you how to make the basics. If they want something more complicated, I can make it, or one of the other regular staff can.”

She gave him an overview of the regular coffeepots and tea, where the different types of milks lived, the location of mugs for in-café drinks, as well as what food was where and which could be heated up in the small oven. Gavin was polite and professional as she gave him the rundown. The space behind the counter was tight, but he somehow managed to keep a respectful distance. He asked questions and kept his full attention on her, but there was no flirtation of any kind.

Piper wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed.

Had she misread him in his kitchen the other day? Sure, she had kissed him and not the other way around, but he hadn't exactly protested. Maybe he was used to being pawed at by random women. She knew he was divorced, and no doubt had not lacked for offers of companionship during the time he'd been single. Or even before.

Who was she to think she could hold his attention?

She forced her attention back to the task at hand.

When she was finished, Gavin looked dubiously up at the large menu board. “So, I’ll be honest, I think I’d struggle to even remember all of that.” He smiled self-deprecatingly. “Hockey plays, no problem—but remembering how to make that many different drinks?” he asked, nodding his chin to the board. “That’s impossible.”

Piper laughed and shrugged. “No, it’s just practice. Most new employees get days of training, and they have to work with an experienced staff member for even longer before they can be on their own. It’s a lot. Honestly, you don’t have to do any of this if you don’t want to. I’m pretty sure most people would be thrilled to have your hands on their stuff for even a second.”

Okay, that came out a little more suggestively than she’d planned. Gavin raised one eyebrow but said nothing.

Quickly, she added, “Here, I’ll show you two other essentials: the espresso machine and the milk frother.”

She showed him both, then had him try his hand at it, with some success. She took a moment to rinse the cups out in the sink, planning her next words. She could feel his presence just behind her, waiting.

“So...” She paused, wondering how to raise the issue. She figured he hadn’t seemed put off by her usual direct approach so far. “Obviously, you have to be on your feet if you’re actually serving the player and auction winner, although we can probably make Carlos do most of the running. But they’re paying to see you, too, so you’ll have to be on your feet at least a little bit.”

Gavin tensed almost imperceptibly behind her. She knew his injury was a sensitive subject, and she nearly dropped it, but she was also responsible for the well-being of anyone working in her café, employee or volunteer. She needed to make sure he was accommodated.

“If you want, you can stay behind the counter most of the time, making anything you feel like you’ve gotten the hang of, or letting me or the other staff take care of it if not. Otherwise...” She gestured behind her to where a chair had

been wedged into the corner of the work area. “You can sit if you need to. You *should* sit if you need to.” She managed a smile over her shoulder, which he didn’t return. “I can’t have the great Gavin Williams harmed in the making of any coffee at the Bean. If you need any other accommodations, let me know and I’ll make sure they’re taken care of.”

There was a long pause. Piper finished rinsing before turning around, cup in hand, to find him standing only inches from her. Not that he had much choice in the small space.

“I...have a cane,” he said gruffly, and then seemed surprised that he had offered the information. “Just for now,” he added quickly. “And only if I need it.”

Piper’s brain decided it needed a moment to picture Gavin with a cane. Maybe also wearing a suit. A really nice suit. But still slightly scruffy, and definitely holding the cane. It was enough to make her knees wobbly.

Possibly *she* might need the chair she had set up for him.

“Are you all right?” he asked, and she realized she was staring blankly off into space.

“Oh, yeah.” She pulled herself back into the present reality. “Sorry. So...” She paused. “Do you *want* to use the cane?”

She wasn’t sure why she asked, except that she had never seen him use it in the few times she’d been with him, and this would be a very public event. She wanted to make sure he was as comfortable—both physically and emotionally—as possible.

He was frowning now, the lighthearted charm nowhere to be found. Guilt pricked at her conscience, but she wanted him to know that he could have what he needed while he was in her shop.

“Not particularly,” he finally replied. He glanced down to where she was still holding the empty espresso cup. Slowly, he lifted it from her hands, his fingers sending a little current of electricity through her hands as they brushed hers.

She swallowed.

He reached around her to place the cup in the sink, and she closed her eyes for a moment. His bulk surrounded her, the smell of his soap and whatever laundry detergent he used briefly overshadowing the aroma of coffee and baked goods. She allowed herself to inhale deeply, to notice the heat radiating from his body, and then she opened her eyes and brought herself back to reality as he faced her again.

He could have taken a step back, could have put space between them, but he didn't.

"It's up to you," she said to his chest, not quite able to meet those riveting eyes just yet. "If there's anything I can do to make sure you're not hurting, or to make you more comfortable, just let me know."

Finally, she looked up, and her breath caught as she saw the combination of heat and humor in his eyes.

"Good to know," he said, the corners of his mouth turning up. As she watched, he took a deep breath and lifted his gaze to stare over her head and toward the windows. "I haven't used it," he said quietly. "The cane. I have to wear the brace if I don't want the team doctor to hound me day and night, but... I don't need people to pity me. I don't want them to."

He looked down at her, lines creasing his forehead, and she could see just how much this athletic, successful man hated to be pitied.

She had to admit, she *did* feel sorry for him. He was a man with a severe and painful injury, one which by all accounts might never fully heal. Was sympathy in this case not appropriate?

She wondered if he watched the news coverage where his career was picked apart daily, where the "tragedy" of his injury and inevitable retirement were endlessly discussed—as if retiring at fortysomething wasn't an unusual achievement for a hockey player. As if he didn't have the rest of his life ahead of him; the chance to do something apart from hockey, if he wanted. As if a professional athlete who could no longer play could *only* be an object of pity, and not a potential example of how human beings adapt and change and grow

over the course of their lives. And maybe that was the difference: she sympathized with the sudden challenges his injury had brought into his life, but she didn't *pity* him. Because he wasn't just a hockey player. He was a whole person, with a whole life and future ahead of him, injured knee or not.

"You can't change how people choose to feel about you." Her voice was so low as to be barely audible over the noise of the café. Gavin leaned even closer, his lips mere inches from her ear.

"Twenty years in the league taught me that, Piper." She shivered at her name in his mouth. "It also taught me to only let them see what I am willing to share."

He leaned back slightly so that she could see his face.

"You don't like people talking about your injury," she said.

He shook his head.

"But..." She frowned. "They do anyway. Talk. They'll talk no matter what you do. So..." She trailed off when she noticed his increasingly unhappy expression.

But he wasn't going to let her off easy. "So..."

It occurred to Piper that it might not be in her best interest to piss off the man she had just been seriously considering for an affair. Men didn't usually willingly fall into bed with women who pissed them off. But she had begun this line of discussion and honestly, it bothered her. There was nothing in the world someone like Gavin Williams could do to stop people from talking about him. So...

"So," she continued. "What does it matter if they talk about you using a cane, instead of just the brace? If they're going to talk about you anyway, why not take care of yourself? Do the smart thing and follow your doctor's instructions, instead of hurting yourself just to give people one less thing to talk about?"

He was quiet for several moments, and she waited, still backed against the sink by his enormous frame. She heard Murray just a few feet away talking to a customer, but she was

having trouble focusing on anything but the frowning man in front of her.

“Do you have any idea what it’s like,” he said, “to have every person in your life—even strangers—treat you like you’re broken? Like the *only* thing they feel about you is sorry?”

She blinked at him. “Yes.”

Of course, she did. She had been entrenched enough in the community of Shady Hill at the time of her parents’ death that everyone had made it their business to check on her, to tell her how sorry they were. To *pity* her. As if her parents’ death had become her entire personality. Some days she had felt like the only people who still saw her as a whole person were Fern and Georgie.

Gavin didn’t seem to hear her, or if he did, he wasn’t letting it stop him from continuing. “You have no idea what it’s like to have everything you do watched and analyzed by thousands of people.” Fair enough. “If I suddenly start using the cane, it will be a headline—it will *mean* something, even if it doesn’t. My parents will call me. Reporters will follow me, asking what’s gone wrong. It’s not as easy as just doing it.”

Without thinking, she put a hand on his arm, but he shook it off.

Okay, then.

“You’re right,” she tried. “I don’t really know what that’s like. But...” She should stop. None of this was her business. But something about Gavin’s attitude toward his injury, toward his own care, bothered her. “This isn’t a bad game, or a missed goal. This is your health. Shouldn’t that be more important than what people say?”

His eyebrows knit together as he scowled yet again. He took half a step back, staring down at her as if it was personally offensive to him that she was standing in front of him. In her own shop. Her limited patience began to run out.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” he replied, and Piper’s hands came to her hips. She always resented being

treated as if she was stupid. It would be fair enough to tell her to mind her own business, but this was hardly a situation where extensive knowledge was required to have an opinion.

“Really?” she snapped. “Because what I’m talking about is a man who’s letting his ego get in the way of his health.” She’d learned the hard way that life was short. No one was guaranteed another day, and the least you could do is take care of yourself in the time you were given. “It’s one thing to go scowling around town grumping at everyone because your knee hurts—I get it. But you have access to the best doctors around, right? The best medical care available is at your disposal, but instead you’re risking your recovery because you don’t want the news to mention that you’re using a cane. That’s just absurd.”

Okay, it was a lot to throw at a man she barely knew, but honestly. She could understand not wanting reporters in his business, but they *were anyway*. She knew plenty of older townspeople who struggled just to get basic medical needs met on their meager insurance. And here was Gavin Williams, a wealthy sports star who no doubt had a whole slew of expert doctors on his case, just ignoring their advice. It was infuriating.

He reacted about as well as could be expected to her diatribe.

“Who do you think you are, I—Piper?” She was ninety-nine percent certain he had been about to call her *lady* again, and that was just the last straw. She opened her mouth to retort but he held a hand up to stop her.

A hand. In her face.

Luckily for him he let it drop, instead of pointing as he spoke.

“You don’t know anything about me, or my relationship to the media, or why I do the things I do. You certainly don’t know shit about my medical care, or what I need. And I *definitely* didn’t ask for your opinion.”

His voice rose as he spoke, and Piper glanced around to notice that he had attracted the attention of several customers. As much as she might like to continue arguing with the aggravating giant about his questionable choices, she needed to cut this off.

If he wanted to be an idiot, that was his problem.

“I think we’re done,” she said abruptly, wiping her hands on a clean dish towel. “They’re auctioning the first meetup today, so it should be scheduled for sometime next week. I’m sure Carlos and the team will let you know.”

Without another word, she slid past Gavin and made for the hallway to her office, leaving him standing at the counter alone.

Chapter Seven

On Wednesday, Gavin stood in his living room, staring at his cane.

Over the past few days, Gavin had found himself reaching for it increasingly often, although always inside the house. He had yet to use it outside of the privacy of his own home. The simple support of having something to bear the brunt of his weight helped immensely with his mobility—just as predicted by his doctor. And Piper.

He grimaced at the memory of their last conversation in the coffee shop. He had been focused on remaining professional in her workplace during the training, much as he'd wanted to push her up against the counter and kiss her senseless.

He'd concentrated on keeping his urges in check, and the change of subject to his injury had caught him unaware. He knew Piper had only been trying to ensure his comfort, but as always, the subject caused all of his defensive instincts to rise to the fore. He had snapped at her, and she had reacted as anyone would have when confronted with his bad attitude.

The worst part was, she was right. True, she couldn't possibly understand his experiences living in the spotlight and having his current life-altering problems in the news every day. But the fact was that it *was* in the news, regardless of what he said or did. And he *was* lucky to have access to the best doctors available. Only a jackass wouldn't take advantage of that resource.

Which made him a jackass. Not exactly news.

He hadn't seen or heard from Piper since. Most likely she wanted as little to do with him as possible.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he checked the screen. It was a text from Simon. He sighed and promised himself that he would actually answer this one. Later.

The doorbell rang, which was all the excuse he needed to shove his phone back into his pocket and make his way to the front entrance.

“Hey, bro!” Carlos’s cheerful voice greeted him as he opened the door to another hot and humid day.

“Do people really say ‘bro’?” Gavin asked doubtfully.

Carlos shrugged. “I just did, so I guess they do. You ready?”

He wasn’t, not by a long shot, but since the first auctioned coffee event started in half an hour, he supposed he’d better get it together.

“Yeah,” he said without a trace of enthusiasm. Carlos’s happy expression quickly turned to concern.

“Are you doing okay? We can drive over if you want. Or maybe—”

“Carlos.” Gavin held up a hand to stop the inevitable tide of words. Then he forced himself to take a deep breath and set aside the anger and defensiveness that immediately clamored for release at the first sign of pity and concern. “Look. My knee hurts. It *always* hurts. There’s nothing anyone can do about it except let time pass and follow the doctor’s orders. I have a brace, and...” He grimaced. “A cane. And we’re about to go into a very public situation.” He paused for a moment, thinking of a way to make his point. “Remember last fall when you tweaked your wrist and missed a couple games?”

Carlos nodded. “Yeah, of course. That sucked.”

“Out two games, and it was the lead story on the local news, right?”

His teammate nodded again. “They acted like my career might be over, which was ridiculous. Mom called me five times that night just to make sure I was really okay, and Coach had to answer like a million questions about it.”

“Well, this is like that, except for months.” He ran a hand over his face. “I’ve been doing this a lot longer than you, but it still sucks. So, if I seem less than enthusiastic, it’s because of that. Not because I don’t want to help, or because I’m not up

for it. It's not because of you, and there's not really anything you can do, except tell me when I'm being an asshole. Okay?"

Carlos seemed to be absorbing all of this, and then slowly he smiled. "Yeah. Okay. I got it. Thanks for explaining it."

Gavin grimaced. "I know I've been a real pain in the ass these past couple months—" Again he held up his hand as Carlos opened his mouth to protest. "No, I have. And I know better." He sighed heavily. "It's been a rough time, but I need to get it together. And I may as well start today."

Carlos grinned and leaned over to bump his shoulder against Gavin's. "You haven't been that much of an asshole."

Gavin laughed shortly. "But a bit of one."

"Yeah. A bit." Carlos snorted. "But it's understandable. A lot's happened to you lately."

"You could say that." Gavin shook his head as he turned toward the corner where his cane stood. He sighed. "Piper called me out for not using the cane my doctor gave me." He reached for it, feeling the weight of it in his hand. Now that he'd used it around the house, it felt less awkward, less like an uncomfortable prop and more like a tool. Not exactly welcome, but useful, like his brace. Or the physical therapy that kicked his ass but seemed to be working.

Carlos laughed. "Yeah, she's great, but she's not going to take any bullshit from anyone. I didn't even know you had a cane."

Gavin huffed a short laugh. "That was the plan. But..."

"But Piper's right." Carlos smiled wryly. "She usually is. You going to use it today? We might be on our feet a lot."

"Think so. The media will have a field day, but it does help."

"You gotta do what you gotta do to get better—the media's focused on you now, but your knee has to last you the rest of your life. Unless you get a bionic one, like my grandma did."

"I'm not rushing into any more surgeries," Gavin said. "So, I guess I'd better take care of what I've got." He made his way

to the door, his knee already easier to maneuver around without his full weight on it. “Ready?”

* * *

Piper was harried and exhausted, and the coffee date—correction, the *not*-date—hadn’t even started yet.

The press arrived early, but luckily so had she. As promised, she had set up a comfortable corner of the shop for them near the front door, with a couple of couches and plenty of chairs. With Murray’s help, she successfully corralled them there and convinced them that they would have plenty of time for photos and sound bites before they were kicked out—not that she put it quite that way.

It turned out they were insatiable coffee drinkers, as well, so having them there was great for business. But she was also run off her feet before the main event even began.

On the plus side, it meant that avoiding Gavin had been easy so far. His entrance, with Carlos in tow, grabbed her attention just as the flurry of setup was dying down. Immediately the press clamored for sound bites and photos with both men.

Piper couldn’t help but notice that this Gavin bore more of a resemblance to his public persona than the man she had seen in the past couple of weeks. He wore a neat button-down shirt and tailored pants, and his natural charisma was on full display as he shook hands and chatted with the reporters. Cameras flashed and voices rose excitedly as he entered the café, and Piper realized that this was probably one of Gavin’s first public appearances since his injury.

He was also using his cane.

In the aftermath of their argument the previous week, guilt gnawed at her. She’d meant every word she said, but honestly, she barely knew the man, and berating him about his medical choices had been wildly inappropriate. She couldn’t blame him for being angry at her, but at the same time his inability to hear her had rankled. And his coolness toward her even before

their disagreement was confusing. Gavin Williams as a whole confused her. And pissed her off.

All in all, she had been a mess of conflicted feelings for the past few days and was no closer to sorting them out today. Hence her avoidance of the man in question.

“Oh my God, let’s never do this again,” Murray grumbled, collapsing into the chair Piper had set up for Gavin behind the counter. She glanced over to where he was finishing up with the media, by all appearances comfortable and unbothered by either his knee or the attention.

“Four times,” Piper said absently.

“Huh?”

Piper forced herself to focus on her friend, and not the blindingly attractive hockey player across the room. “Four times we have to do this. This is just number one.”

“Ugh.” Murray leaned her chin on her hand.

Piper couldn’t help a smile. “Hey, it’s not like you have to work these shifts—you volunteered to do it.”

“Past me was obviously clueless. How can those people even drink that much coffee? How do their bladders not explode?” Murray took a gulp of her own iced coffee and stretched her feet out in front of her. “Did you know that Fern massages Georgie’s feet every night?”

“I didn’t really need to know that, actually.” An image of Gavin’s large hands slowly and thoroughly rubbing her own tired feet popped into Piper’s consciousness, and it was strangely arousing. He probably knew exactly which muscles to hit, too. She could picture lying back on the couch, glass of wine in hand, while he gently stroked her aches and pains away. Maybe Fern and Georgie were onto something.

“I need a boyfriend solely for that purpose.” Murray sighed. “Maybe one other purpose, too. But mostly for the foot rubs.”

“Hello, ladies!” Carlos’s voice preceded him as he walked over to the counter accompanied by a very tall red-haired man.

Gavin was waylaid by a tenacious reporter who didn't want to let him go.

Piper grinned at him. "Congratulations on surviving the gauntlet! I'm assuming this is today's victim?"

The red-haired man smiled shyly and held out his hand to shake Piper's. "Hi. I'm Jonas."

"Jonas plays left wing, and also has the best right hook on the team." Carlos mimed what Piper imagined must be hockey fighting. Jonas rolled his eyes and looked faintly embarrassed.

Murray led the player over to where they had set up a cozy table in the corner—far from the lingering media.

"The woman who won the auction should be here soon," Carlos said. "She's like my grandma's age, season ticket holder for decades. Her name's Alice. Alice O'Connor. The front office said her husband won her the get-together as an anniversary present. Jonas will be relieved."

"Relieved that she's a married older woman and not someone angling for a real date?" Piper laughed.

"Yeah." Carlos joined in her laughter. "He's so shy—I can't believe he agreed to do this in the first place. But the fans love him, and he said yes when I asked him, so..."

"People want to help, Carlos. It's a good cause." Carlos smiled at her, and Piper was thankful yet again that she had the ability to do her own part for this project.

Her own smile slipped as she realized that Gavin was finally making his way over.

"Carlos, I—" Feeling like a coward, Piper tried to think of some excuse to leave, even for a minute. "I just need to get something from the back. Give me a second?"

"But it's almost time—"

She didn't hear the rest as she hurried to the back office. Leaning against the wall, she took the opportunity to soak in the quiet. She knew she was going to have to talk to Gavin, to apologize for poking the bear, as it were. And she'd have to find a way to work with him at least through these few events,

without driving herself up a wall over his hot-and-cold attitude, not to mention her own conflicted feelings about him.

But not yet.

She returned in time to see Jonas hugging an older woman wearing what appeared to be a hand-knit Philadelphia Firebirds sweater and the biggest smile Piper had ever seen. Cameras flashed as the two posed for pictures and spoke briefly to the media, Mrs. O'Connor was clearly a little surprised but undaunted by the attention. Once a suitable amount of time passed, Piper urged Jonas and his new friend to take their seats, and Carlos thanked the reporters and gently but firmly urged them out the door.

Then she let herself sag against the counter for a moment.

“Carlos, seriously, how do you deal with that?”

He shrugged. “I dunno, I guess they’re just doing their jobs. It can be a lot when there’s a whole group of them, but we know what to answer and what to avoid. Thank God for media training, or I would’ve lost it the first time I had to talk at a press conference. We had a little of it in college, but nothing like the professional leagues.”

“I think I’m glad I’m not famous,” Piper said.

Carlos grinned. “There are *some* benefits, though.”

“Yeah, I bet,” Piper laughed.

The next hour passed quickly, as Piper and Murray caught up on stocking supplies and cleaned up the significant debris left by the press while Gavin and Carlos chatted with their guests and made sure they had what they needed. A few times, as their paths crossed, she caught Gavin looking at her, as if he wanted to speak to her, but she quickly turned away and focused on the next task. When the time was up, Carlos politely thanked Mrs. O'Connor before Jonas escorted her to the front of the café. After one last hug, she waved goodbye and left.

Piper propped the front door open to signal that they were once again open for business. Soon the café was back to normal, people streaming in and out, eager to hear the report

of the day's excitement. Murray gave Carlos a coffee and Gavin an iced tea, and the two found a corner table where they sat talking.

Piper couldn't help but notice Gavin rubbing his knee through the brace. Her attention was drawn to him again and again despite her efforts to concentrate on her work.

As Gavin and Carlos finished their drinks and rose to stand, Piper loaded the last few mugs into the dishwasher. She made sure that Murray had everything under control before heading to her office, needing to put a little distance between herself and the man who had set her nicely balanced life off-kilter from the moment he grumped his way into her shop.

"Hey," the now-familiar deep voice sounded from behind her in the hallway.

Piper froze. Apparently, distance wasn't what she was going to get.

She turned, the light from the main room of the café casting Gavin's face in shadow in the relative dimness of the hall.

"Hey," she said, for lack of any better reply.

He approached her slowly, his limp even more pronounced after the time spent on his feet. She was gratified to see him using the cane, but stopped herself from commenting on it or asking how he felt. She was tired and confused, and the last thing she needed was to have her head bitten off. Even if she deserved it.

He came to a stop just in front of her, and she had to tilt her head back to look up at him.

"That went well, I think," he said, sounding as awkward as Piper felt.

"Yeah," she replied, then cleared her throat. "It did. Look ___"

"I'm sorry," he said in a rush, their words overlapping. They both paused.

Piper sighed. "I had no right to get in your business. It's your life, and I barely know you, and... I was wrong. I was

wrong to give you a hard time about the cane.”

One corner of his mouth turned up in amusement. “Wrong to give me a hard time, but not wrong about my not using it?”

She laughed quietly, then shrugged. “I have my opinions. But maybe I don’t actually need to share them at every opportunity. Especially when it has to do with someone else’s health.”

He was so close, disorientingly so, and she took two steps back into her office just to have a bit of a buffer. Unfortunately for her peace of mind, he followed, closing the gap until they both stood in the small room, far removed from the bustle of the café.

“Piper,” he said, near enough that she could feel his breath on her face. “I am happy to hear your opinions.”

One of her eyebrows shot up skeptically, and he laughed, an earthy sound that traveled the length of her body down to her toes.

“All right,” he allowed. “Maybe I wasn’t happy to hear your opinion on the cane, but...” He raised the item in question before tapping it back down to the floor. “I *needed* to hear it. And you were right.”

Piper could tell that apologizing didn’t come easily to him. He was no doubt more used to giving direction and being obeyed than admitting he was wrong. Still...

“I am sorry, though,” she said, realizing that apologizing wasn’t exactly in her comfort zone, either. “It was none of my business.”

“Well, Piper Welborn. I’m glad you made it your business.”

“Did you get a lot of questions about it? The cane?”

He shrugged. “A few. I took the opportunity to make it clear that it wasn’t a new thing, or the result of any problem. Just me following doctor’s orders.” He smiled; his stern face transformed into the outrageously handsome one she had seen on the news. *An angel among men*, Murray had called him, and she could believe it when he smiled like that.

He reached out a hand to push a stray lock of her hair back, and Piper caught her breath.

“I’m not staying,” he said quietly, and she knew he wasn’t talking about this afternoon at the café. She thought she heard just the hint of regret in his tone, and discovered the words stung more than she thought they would.

Of course, he wasn’t staying. He was never staying in Philadelphia, not when he couldn’t play hockey. Not that it mattered. Not that it *should* matter. As Sloan said, it was ideal that he was leaving. She should feel relieved, not stung.

“You’ll go back to Vancouver,” she said, willing herself to feel some of that relief. If she followed Sloan’s advice, she could pursue her physical attraction to him during the time he had left in Philly, without the risk of having an actual relationship with him. She could satisfy this physical pull, without any messy entanglements. Ideal.

He shrugged again. “Probably. I’m hoping... Well. Once the fact that I won’t be playing again is officially announced, I may as well go back and see what else there is.”

He may as well. There was nothing for him here, professionally speaking. He’d be much more likely to find a job with the team he had spent all but the last year playing for.

“My parents are there,” he continued. “My friends.”

“Your support system,” she agreed. He could build a new one here, of course, but why would he? His entire life was in Vancouver. Just as hers was here, with her friends who were now her family, her business that was her greatest achievement, and the community that had kept her tethered and connected after her parents were gone. She understood what his city meant to him.

“Mm-hm,” he murmured, and she realized that he was leaning closer, until his lips almost touched her forehead. She closed her eyes.

His breath brushed her skin, the warmth of his body radiating through his shirt, and she could almost hear his heartbeat in front of her.

“Piper,” he rumbled.

“Hm?” She kept her eyes closed.

She felt his chuckle roll through him, and instinctively placed a hand on his chest. His heart thudded against her palm, and his rib cage rose with a quick intake of breath at her touch. Still, she kept her eyes closed.

“Piper,” he said again, and this time she blinked her eyes open to find herself staring at his chest. “Why did you kiss me the other day?”

She glanced up at him, the question surprising her. His eyes held curiosity and some of the same confusion that had plagued her since she had met this frustrating man. At least she wasn’t alone, she supposed.

“I...” she croaked, her face heating with embarrassment. “I just... I guess I’m attracted to you.” She had no reason to hide it, and she suspected he was well aware of the fact, anyway. “I was curious.”

“And now?” His eyebrows lifted in a question. “Has your curiosity been satisfied?”

Good Lord. She felt anything but satisfied at the moment. Her entire body was strung tight with nonsatisfaction, and her eyes dropped involuntarily to his lips.

His soft laugh was closer to a growl. “I’ll take that as a no.” He set his cane against the wall.

This time, he did the kissing.

His lips were firm and sure as they took hers, and his thumb stroked her cheek as if to reassure her. The gentle touch ignited a desire in her that was anything but gentle, and her lips parted in surprise at her own body’s reaction.

Gavin didn’t miss a beat. His tongue slid between her lips to taste, to stroke, to drive her wild. Then he was walking her backward until she bumped into her desk, his large hands cupping her bottom to lift her up onto it. He loomed over her, all hard body and glittering blue eyes, and Piper gave up her fight against her attraction to him, at least for the moment. Her

life had been a series of goals and tasks and responsibilities for so long she'd almost forgotten what it was like to just...let go. To lose herself in someone, in the tide of sensation that engulfed her, shutting down any thoughts of work or the future.

He kissed her again, ravenously, as if he couldn't get enough. She tangled her hands in his hair, feeling pretty desperate herself. She ached for him, a longing that engulfed all other sensible thought, burning it to ash. Her body pressed against his solid chest, reveling in the feel of him as he continued to kiss her senseless.

Finally, needing air, she gasped as she pulled back an inch.

But Gavin wasn't finished.

He pressed wet, openmouthed kisses along her neck, which didn't do anything for her self-control. Neither did his low groan as he nipped lightly at the base of her throat. Her head fell back as his fingers found their way under her shirt, smoothing the vulnerable skin at her waist. Her own hands gripped his wide shoulders as a wave of pleasure tore through her, and suddenly air didn't seem all that important.

She wrapped her legs around him, wanting him close, wanting *him*.

"Hey, Piper—oh!" The voice from the doorway wrenched Piper out of her desire-induced stupor, and she pushed at Gavin's chest until he slowly stepped to the side. Georgie stood in the office doorway, gaping. Piper stifled a groan as her friend's look of utter shock slowly morphed into barely suppressed glee.

"We were just..." Piper had no idea what to say, so she slid off the desk and worked on putting her clothes back to rights as Gavin stood next to her, looking amused.

"Hm, yeah. I can tell you were *just*," said Georgie, and Piper flushed at the knowing look she gave her.

In no time, word of what Georgie had interrupted would travel like lightning through their entire friend group. There was no hiding it. The *thing* that she had so stridently claimed

was not a thing would be discussed, analyzed, and dissected. Worst of all, she would have to endure endless questions about how this had happened, what would happen next, and how Gavin Williams fit into her life.

The fact was, he didn't.

An enormous ex-hockey-playing man had no place in her life. It wasn't what she wanted, and it wasn't what she had planned for herself. Gavin Williams was everything she *didn't* need, no matter how much she wanted him.

But her unexciting dating life had given her friends little to talk about for years, and she knew they'd never let her hear the end of this. She also knew that if it was Murray and Sloan, she'd be first in line to analyze and relentlessly discuss any new romantic entanglements. It was their way, and a way of caring for each other.

But she didn't have to like it when it was her turn. Gavin was more than she'd first thought—more complicated, more compelling, more of a person she could see herself growing to care about. And the scorchingly hot kisses didn't hurt his appeal. But she didn't want her friends digging around in her nascent feelings. Not when she'd yet to make sense of them herself. Not when this thing with Gavin was at most a short-term thing, and definitely not the sort of relationship she'd welcome into her life in the long haul.

"It's nothing, Georgie," she said, then regretted the words when she saw Gavin's expression quickly shift from entertained to irritated.

"Uh-huh." Georgie was unconvinced.

Gavin said nothing, his expression stormy.

In the uncomfortable silence, Piper decided to beat a hasty retreat. "Look, I need to get back to work." She scooted around her friend to the doorway. "Georgie, I am *sure* I'll see you later. Gavin—" She risked a glance at the man who'd had her perilously close to tearing off her clothes in her office just moments before. His eyebrows were lowered and his arms crossed. He was clearly displeased at her description of their

actions as “nothing,” but she couldn’t do much about that now. “Gavin,” she said more quietly, “I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

He didn’t reply, but that would have to do. She grabbed Georgie’s arm and dragged her down the hall, leaving Gavin to find his own way out.

Chapter Eight

“Gavin Williams.”

Two days after the event at the Friendly Bean, Gavin stared out of his kitchen window, phone in hand, as darkness finally fell on another hot and sunny day. He generally didn't answer a call unless he recognized the number, but anything was better than continuing to woolgather alone in the dim solitude.

He had followed Piper to her office in order to apologize and make clear—to both of them, really—that he was leaving Philadelphia. And that whatever the attraction between them, there was no sense in getting involved. Instead, he'd ended up kissing her until they were both gasping for air and desperate for more.

And then she had called the kiss “nothing.”

He knew bullshit when he heard it. She felt the impact of that kiss as much as he had, he'd bet his life on it. Her soft moans had turned him on like nothing else, and he would stake his nonexistent career on the belief that she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Maybe he should be grateful for the fact that she chose to believe it was nothing—after all, he had gone to her office to tell her that *nothing* was exactly what could be between them.

He didn't feel grateful. He felt frustrated and irritated and horny as hell.

“Gavin! How's Philly?”

He almost dropped the phone, surprised to hear the voice of his former General Manager in Vancouver. He'd spoken with Lou Fuller several times since his injury, but his mind had drifted far away from hockey for once, and it hadn't been his voice he had hoped or expected to hear.

That was Piper's.

He cleared his throat and forced himself to focus on the person at the other end of the line.

“Fine, sir. How’s everything out there?”

“Good, good. Listen, I have a proposition for you.” Gavin’s ears perked up. Was this the offer he’d been waiting for? “We want you in the front office back home. Assistant general manager.” Mr. Fuller had never been anything other than direct.

Relief rushed through his body like a current, followed by a punch of adrenaline in his stomach. *Finally.*

Finally, his ticket out of hockey purgatory. He wouldn’t have to stay in Philadelphia, all but in hiding as he waited for his next move to make itself apparent. He wouldn’t have to return to Vancouver with no goal, no status, beaten down and aimless. Assistant GM was no joke—it was second in command of the team, a leadership position in the most literal sense.

It was exactly what he’d been waiting for.

“Thank you for the offer, sir.”

Assistant GM...

Mr. Fuller continued as if Gavin hadn’t spoken. “As you know, assistant GMs manage player transactions, advise on scouting, and help manage contracts and the salary cap. Maybe a little out of your wheelhouse—”

“It’s no problem, sir,” Gavin interjected. He didn’t want Fuller to doubt him for a minute. “I can learn. I can do it.”

“You can do the work,” Fuller agreed. “And we’ll get you up to speed. I have every confidence that you can do this job, Williams. You’ve never let this team down and I know you’re not about to start.”

Part of Gavin wanted to point out that he hadn’t been the one who wanted to part ways in the first place, but this was hardly the time to bring that up.

“Thank you, sir” was all he said.

“And I’m sure you’re eager to come home. The front office will be a change, but it will be almost as good to have you off the ice as on. You were always a leader in the locker room, but

now you can focus on strategy—planning for the larger picture.”

Gavin thought of his conversation with Tyler Valentine, and how good it had felt to offer constructive advice to another player. He certainly wouldn't have as personal an impact on the players in the assistant GM role as he'd had as a teammate. He thought of Carlos, who seemed to look up to him as the mentor he'd originally been brought to Philly to be. He couldn't help Carlos from Vancouver.

But compared to his ties to his home city, those relationships were brand-new. He was grateful to the Philly organization, but he needed to return home. Home was where he could return to the man he had been, before. Someone with standing, who commanded respect. Someone with a focused goal: to win.

He found himself leaning forward toward his kitchen window, trying to get a glimpse of Piper's house. What was she doing right now? Had she thought of him at all the past couple days? Was she still telling herself their kiss had been “nothing”?

“The fans will be thrilled to have you back here,” Fuller was saying. “And so will I.” The ever-gruff man's voice softened, just a little.

“Thank you,” Gavin said again.

“You'll need to come up and talk with management, but as far as I'm concerned, you're the man we need.”

He would need to check in with the Philly people, but there really was no reason *not* to fly out to Vancouver. If management here knew he had a job in the works, he was sure they'd work up some sort of agreement to let him work with another team.

“Sounds good,” he replied. “Just let me know when and I'll be there. Thank you, sir.”

After a few more moments of catching up on the Vancouver team, Gavin hung up with Mr. Fuller's promise to set up a meeting within the week still settling in his consciousness.

His future, just as he'd hoped. A future in hockey, if not as a player then still as an essential, powerful part of the organization. It was something to work for, a way to pay back the team that made his career. A sense of purpose, of pride, made him straighten a little where he stood, even if his knee twinged as if to remind him that he'd never be *quite* be the same again. He was excited and gratified, nonetheless.

He wanted to tell someone.

He thought about calling Carlos, or even Tyler Valentine, but it would be wildly inappropriate to discuss the situation with anyone in Philly before an official decision was made. Simon would keep a secret, but after weeks of Gavin ignoring his calls, would he welcome hearing from him now?

Antsy, he limped to the door. He grabbed his cane along the way, then stopped with his hand on the doorknob, wondering who else he could confide in.

There was only one person nearby who wasn't directly affected by his likely exit from the Philly team. One person he had been wanting to see even before he had something to share.

He just hoped she didn't shut the door in his face.

He carefully negotiated the front stairs and headed across the street.

Lumbering up Piper's front steps, he examined her house, not for the first time. Painted a deep green, it was one of those Craftsman-style homes that looked cozy and inviting as it squatted on the small lot. Tiny windows peeked out from under the sloped roof, and a large screened-in porch covered the entire first floor front. The smell of boxwood rose from the shrubs lining the steps.

He raised his hand to push the doorbell, then froze as he spotted a form on the screened-in porch.

Piper sat on what looked like a daybed covered in pillows, book in hand. But her eyes were fixed on him, wide and startled.

"Hey," he said gruffly.

She smiled, and relief rushed through him. He'd given her little reason to welcome the sudden sight of him at her front door, and after their last interaction, he had no idea how she felt about him.

"Hey," she replied, and gestured to the door to the porch. "It's not locked."

He pushed the door open and stepped inside. Tiny lights hung around the wood ceiling, and a small table and chairs sat to his right. To his left was the pillow-covered day bed, topped by Piper Welborn wearing only a tank top and pajama bottoms, her long pink hair piled haphazardly on her head. A blessedly cool breeze drifted through the window screens, and he could just make out the tight buds of her nipples through the fabric of her shirt.

His mouth went dry, and he momentarily forgot why he was there.

"Want a drink?" Piper asked, and he realized she held a beer bottle in one hand. She set the bottle and her book down and began to stand.

"No." He shook his head and held up a hand to stop her. "I'm good. Thanks."

She tilted her head and looked at him with curiosity, no doubt wondering why the hell he was standing awkwardly on her porch.

"Okay," she said. "Have a seat if you want."

She scooted over to make space on the bed, and without thinking he took it, lowering himself with a grunt as his knee objected. Graceful, he was not, and it bothered him more than a little that this woman was audience to his weakness with every movement.

She flashed him a look of sympathy, but to his relief said nothing.

She rubbed her shoulder with one hand, and his eyes were drawn to the honey-colored skin there. He could just make out the swell of her breasts above the neckline of her shirt, the skin there paler. He wondered what it felt like. Soft, probably.

Warm. His gaze traveled upward to her neck, where a few freckles dotted the curve up to her jawline. He wanted to trace them with his tongue. Suddenly his jeans were uncomfortably tight in the groin area as his dick took notice of the direction of his thoughts.

“So, what’s up?” she asked.

“Hm?” Gavin tried to rein in his wayward lust and focus on what she was saying.

Piper laughed. “Well, don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m pretty sure that other than the kissing, we’ve managed to have a grand total of two civil interactions, and the one time either of us was in the other’s house it was because I basically barged into yours.”

Gavin couldn’t help but smile. “Point taken. So, you’re wondering what brought on this visit.” She nodded. His hand reached over to brush against hers before he could stop it. “Maybe I want to kiss you again,” he said, and then wanted to kick himself. *Smooth, asshole*. And that wasn’t even why he had come. Probably.

She pulled her hand away and frowned at him. “Is that a good idea?”

He was damned if he knew. So, he just shrugged. “I had news tonight, and no one to share it with.”

Her expression cleared. “Aha. So, I’m a convenient set of ears.”

He smiled. “And, more importantly, you don’t play hockey.”

A surprised laugh followed that statement. “That’s certainly true,” she replied. She turned on the bed to face him, her legs crossed in front of her. He wanted to slide a hand up her thigh, to tug the waistband of her pajamas down and... “You have me intrigued, Mr. Williams. What’s the news?”

He swallowed. What the hell was she doing to him? “I might have a job offer from the Vancouver team,” he said more abruptly than he intended. “As assistant general manager.”

Piper nodded slowly, any surprise or disappointment at his news well hidden. Maybe she didn't care if he left. And why should she?

“So...that's really good, right?”

“Yeah. It's perfect,” he said, distracted by a strand of hair that curled against her cheek. He wanted to push it behind her ear but didn't know if his touch would be welcome.

“Well, then I guess you're going back to Vancouver as planned.” He wasn't sure if he heard a note of disappointment in her voice, or if that was wishful thinking. Or why he cared either way.

“Hm,” he said, his attention caught by the way the gentle light played across her skin. He nearly reached up to brush his thumb across her cheek, but clenched his hand into a fist instead.

Her expression sharpened, as if she was assessing him. “My friend Sloan thinks I should sleep with you.”

Gavin's heart nearly burst out of his chest and he was sure shock was written all over his face. His dick swelled hopefully.

Piper flushed. “I mean... I don't know. You're probably not interested. It's just an idea.”

“That's quite an idea,” he said, his voice sounding strangled to his own ears. Every part of his body thought it was the *best* idea. But... “You called our kiss ‘nothing.’” He couldn't help prodding her on that front.

Her cheeks reddened and she glanced away. “Yeah... I might have been a little embarrassed. We were in my *office*, you know.”

“I'm well aware.” He could still feel the warmth of her skin under his fingertips, as if he was touching her right at this moment. “And I just told you I'm leaving Philadelphia.”

She laughed nervously. “Yeah, that's...kind of why I sort of agreed with Sloan.” Her hands twisted together on her lap.

“Not completely, but I was willing to maybe *entertain* the idea. I mean, if you—”

Gavin stared at her for one second before instinct took over, and he kissed her. If nothing else, it cut off her vaguely insulting explanations. She wasn't exactly admitting to an overwhelming desire to be with him, and why that bothered him, he didn't want to know.

He ran his tongue along her lower lip and then suckled it, heat pooling deep in his belly, and lower. She responded immediately, her small gasp against his lips sweet and sexy. He leaned in and took more, tongue exploring, teeth scraping together as they each tried to get enough. Had it only been days and not months since he'd last kissed her? Far too long, either way, and he was desperate for more.

He wrapped an arm around her and shifted them both so that they were lying on the bed on their sides, his good leg beneath him. He rolled so that some of his weight was on her, but not all.

She laughed breathlessly against his lips. “Does that mean you're interested?” Her eyes were like dark caramel, liquid and shining.

He rested his forehead against hers, aware of every inch of her body pressed against his.

“I just told you I'm moving back to Vancouver, and suddenly you want...” He didn't know what she wanted.

She turned her head so her lips brushed his ear, and he shuddered. He had never been this turned on by the touch of another woman, he was sure of it.

“That's...that's kind of it.” The words were warm breath on his skin, and he couldn't help the groan that escaped him. “You're leaving. So, it can't be serious.”

She kissed his jaw and he reflexively ground his cock against her leg that lay between his, causing them both to moan softly.

“You...” He tried to lift his head, to put some space between them while he figured out what she was saying. But she

twined her fingers through his hair, holding him in place as she pressed her mouth to his throat. *Jesus*. “You want a fling.”

“Mmmm.” Her tongue darted out to lick his collarbone. His cock throbbed in his jeans. If he was any harder, he might tear right through the fabric.

But... “Piper.”

He did pull back this time, propping himself on his elbow and gazing down at her flushed face, lips already swollen. She was the sexiest thing he’d ever seen, and he had no idea what he was going to do with her. She didn’t strike him as a “fling” sort of woman, but what did he know? Maybe she had no interest in putting up with a permanently injured ex-jock nearly ten years her senior. Maybe she really just wanted to scratch this itch they seemed to share and be rid of him.

He told himself he didn’t care. He shouldn’t care. He was a disaster when it came to relationships, always too focused on hockey and clueless when it came to giving a woman what she needed—he had an ex-wife to prove it. Piper was smart to avoid anything serious with him. But she wanted him, and he wanted her, and soon enough they would go their separate ways. What could be simpler?

“Until I leave for Vancouver,” he murmured. “You’re sure?”

She didn’t answer right away, and Gavin tried to cool his raging lust, to prepare himself to take his leave. If she wasn’t sure this was what she wanted, he wasn’t taking it any further. And maybe a cold shower and a good night’s sleep would be enough to keep the sight of Piper spread out beneath him from starring in every one of his fantasies from now on.

He doubted it.

Her lips pressed together with resolve, her gaze determined. Her hands came around his neck, her thumbs running down the sides of his throat. And just like that he was just on the edge of control again. He groaned and his head fell to her shoulder.

“I’m sure,” she said in his ear, quietly but firmly. “Until you leave.”

He held himself perfectly still for a moment, even as his body clamored for him to get on with it. He felt Piper's fingers trace along his lower back under his shirt, which had come untucked. Every brush of her skin against his echoed through his body.

"Gavin?" she asked softly.

He groaned in response, lifting his head and taking her lips with his once more. When she pulled away to breathe, he kissed over her ear and nipped her earlobe. She whimpered softly as he suckled her neck, tasting her sweet flavor, the skin of her throat soft and pliant.

"*Gavin,*" she moaned his name and arched up against him.

He forced himself to stop before he bit her, marked her, even as the thought of doing so was shockingly appealing.

"I like when you say my name like that," he murmured against her collarbone. He grunted as she shifted under him and her leg pressed against his groin. He was ridiculously close to going off right here, like this. And they were just *kissing*, for God's sake.

His skin felt hot and tight, his every nerve buzzing, and he realized how much he wanted to take her right now on this porch, this woman who only had a temporary use for him. Who wanted him because he was leaving. A base part of him wanted to fuck her senseless and then haul her back to his house and tell her in no uncertain terms that he wasn't going to be done with her in a few weeks, not by a long shot. To tell her that she was *his*.

But none of that made any sense at all, and so he distracted himself by pushing her shirt up, his hand roughly tracing the curve of her waist and settling on her plump breast. His thumb brushed her nipple and he heard her soft gasp.

He took his time, cupping first one breast, then the other, bending his head to taste. She writhed beneath him, her fingernails digging into his scalp as he sucked the tight peaks. When he eventually released her, climbing up her body to

press a hard kiss to her lips, her pupils were blown wide and her lips parted as she gasped for breath.

She was beautiful, and for now, she was his.

He slid one hand down her stomach, and she shivered. He grinned.

“You’re so sensitive,” he said. “I wonder what else I can make you feel.”

“Oh my God,” she laughed even as she gasped for breath. “I think you’re trying to kill me.”

“You’re not the one who’s about to explode,” he growled against her neck as his hand slid lower, to where she was already soaking wet through her pajamas. “Or are you?”

Her shirt had slipped back over her breasts, but he didn’t let that stop him, taking one nipple into his mouth right through the fabric. His hand delved inside the waistband of her pants, his thumb lightly brushing against where she was swollen with desire. He swallowed hard, forcing himself under control as she arched up against his touch. God, everything about her was amazing.

“Is this okay?” he asked roughly. He thought he felt her nod, but that wasn’t enough. “Piper?”

She wiggled against him, trying to increase the pressure of his hand, and he smiled. “Yeah. *God.*” Her voice was breathless, and she turned her head into the crook of his neck. “Please,” she said against his throat.

He groaned at the sound of that single, pleading word, and pressed his thumb harder against her clit. He pushed one finger inside her, then two, and she whimpered softly as he began a rhythm. He realized he was rubbing his cock against her leg as he touched her, so close to the edge himself he saw stars behind his eyelids.

“*Gavin,*” she gasped.

And then she came on his hand, her core clenching around his fingers as she threw her head back and moaned. Her hips jerked upward as she cried out, the sweetest sound he’d ever

heard. Satisfaction tore through him as she shuddered against him, arcing up and then sinking back onto the mattress with a sigh.

He kissed the top of her head and held himself very still as she came back down to earth. Eventually her breath evened out and her hands traced along his sides to his hips.

“Gavin,” she whispered again.

He felt her fingers between them, trying to reach the button of his pants. But while he wanted nothing more than to let her take him in hand and help him find the release he desperately needed, it wasn't right. It didn't feel right. She said she wanted a fling, but that didn't mean he couldn't do this the right way. He probably seemed absurdly old-fashioned compared to Piper and her friends, but he hadn't been raised to sleep with a woman he barely knew on her own front porch when they'd barely spent any time together.

Gavin hauled in a breath and began to untangle himself from where their limbs were tangled.

“What—” Piper began, her brow furrowing in confusion.

He kissed the wrinkles away, taking one deep breath after another and telling himself he was going to do this right. Even if it killed him.

“Before we go any further,” he said, hearing the raw need in his own voice. He swallowed and tried again. “It occurs to me that we're missing something.”

The furrows were back as Piper blinked up at him. Slowly, he sat up and tugged her to sit with him.

He couldn't resist kissing the tip of her nose. “I'd like to take you out.”

“Out?” Piper glanced around. “Like, now?”

He smiled and shook his head. “Not tonight. Maybe tomorrow?”

She was watching him carefully, as if trying to figure out if he was serious. “You mean a...date.”

“Yes. Like a date. You know, where we talk, and get to know each other. In my experience that often comes before...” His eyes raked down her body. “The rest.”

Her eyes softened and she smiled wistfully. “Gavin. That’s not really... That’s not what this is.”

The words were a punch to his gut, although he was damned if he knew why. The woman he was more attracted to than anyone he’d ever met wanted to have no-strings-attached sex without even a date—where was the problem? But something stubborn had taken hold inside of him.

“We can’t have a meal together? What, are you ashamed to be seen with me?” he teased.

A shadow crossed her face, and Gavin wondered if he’d hit a little too close to home. He didn’t like that possibility one bit.

Then she shook her head and smiled, and all was right with his world again.

“A meal,” she said.

“Well, I’m definitely not going for coffee.” He grinned.

Piper rolled her eyes, then sighed and took his hand. “Okay. A date. When?”

He lifted her hand and kissed it, wishing that he could stay. He wanted to stay on the porch and make love to her until the sun came up and they were both exhausted and satisfied. But this felt right. He wanted to talk with her, to know her, and maybe a small part of him didn’t yet quite believe her when she said she wanted a simple fling.

He needed her to be sure.

“Well, as a not-quite-yet-employed person, my calendar is wide-open. What about breakfast one morning? Is that too hard with your work schedule?”

She tilted her head, thinking. “I could be free tomorrow morning.” She blushed. “Is that too soon? I—”

“It’s perfect.” Tomorrow. He could hardly wait.

Chapter Nine

The knock on her back door startled Piper out of her morning haze, and she nearly dropped her mug into the sink. She peered out the window on the door.

She was unsurprised to see Sloan standing on the steps just outside, since her friends almost always used the back door. Piper glanced at the clock on the wall. It was early, but despite having given herself the morning off, she hadn't been able to sleep in. Dreams of a large, gruff hockey player and all of the things she had done and hoped to do with him had kept her awake. Not to mention the fact that she would be seeing him again shortly.

For breakfast. *Just* breakfast, she told her libido. Gavin hadn't said anything about more happening today...yet.

But Sloan wasn't an early riser, unless she had good reason. Or unless...

"What's wrong?" Piper asked as she opened the door. Sloan strode into the kitchen.

"Okay." She held up her hands to stop Piper from...what, exactly? "Don't kill me, okay?"

That was never a good sign. Piper narrowed her eyes at her friend even as she was relieved that there didn't seem to be an emergency. "Spill it."

Spying the full coffeepot, Sloan grabbed a mug from the cabinet and poured herself a cup. Then she hopped up on the counter to sit, sipping thoughtfully.

"You look awfully fancy for a Thursday morning," her friend commented, taking in Piper's sundress and sandals, a far cry from her usual nonwork uniform of sweatpants and old tank tops.

Piper deflected. "What are you doing here this early? And why exactly am I going to kill you?"

“Okay,” Sloan said again. “So...”

The door opened again, and Murray walked in, her long brown hair a rat’s nest as if she had just rolled out of bed, glasses sliding down her nose as she hurried into the kitchen.

“Did you ask her?” she asked excitedly. “Ooh, coffee.” Murray helped herself to a mug and then sat at the kitchen table.

“What’s going on?” Piper demanded. “Ask me what?”

At her question, both of her friends fell uncharacteristically silent. Piper’s patience evaporated.

“I’m waiting.” She glared at them both.

“You were supposed to ask her already,” Murray muttered in Sloan’s direction.

“I didn’t have a chance before you barged in,” Sloan retorted. “Knock much?”

Piper set her mug down on the counter. “*Now.*”

Murray sighed. “Fern saw Gavin Williams heading toward your house last night. She told Georgie, who said it’s none of our business, but then Fern told me because she was excited, and I texted Sloan and she said...”

“That she’d get the scoop this morning.” Piper shook her head. “That explains why you’re up early.”

Sloan saluted her with her mug. “Early bird gets the dirt.”

“Worm,” Murray corrected. “Birds don’t eat dirt.”

“Whatever. Anyway, since I got up at the crack of dawn and hauled myself all the way over here, what’s the story? Did you and Gavin—” She knocked her shoes together and waggled her eyebrows.

Georgie’s face appeared in the door window. Murray laughed and let her in.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Piper muttered.

“I thought you said we should mind our own business,” Murray teased Georgie, who rolled her eyes.

“Fern sent me. She had to get to the clinic.”

“A likely story,” Sloan said from her perch on the counter. “You know you want the scoop as much as we do.”

Georgie didn’t reply, but shot an expectant look in Piper’s direction.

“You’re all terrible people,” Piper said flatly, trying to hide a smile. It was amazing how she could want to murder and hug her friends at the same time.

The problem was, this thing with Gavin... It was just temporary. Not a part of her life. She knew her friends were curious—nosy, even. She was the same when it came to their business. But she hadn’t been with a cis man since she’d grown this friend group around her, and it felt strange. Off-kilter somehow, and it tugged at some vulnerable part of herself she thought she’d left behind. She knew rationally that they would support her, continue to be her people, regardless of who she dated.

Only, it had been so easy to drift away from her community before. Could it happen again? Her friends might play matchmaker now, but how would a relationship with this man, no matter how short, change her place in the world she’d built? Would she let the queer part of her identity fade into the background until once again she became that stranger to herself she’d been in her twenties? She’d have to tell her friends something, though. The only issue was the timing.

A knock sounded again, this time at the front door.

Georgie frowned. “Who’s that? Fern’s at work, and she’d come around back, anyway.”

Piper closed her eyes for a moment. She cleared her throat. “Gavin asked me out for breakfast this morning.”

Three sets of eyes stared at her. Piper stared right back.

Finally, Murray spoke. “So...okay. I guess the knock at the door means he didn’t stay over.”

“Disappointing,” Sloan commented, and Piper shot her a glare.

“But what happened *last night*?” Georgie asked. “Quick, before you have to let him in.”

“Nothing!” Piper exclaimed, even though it wasn’t true. Quite a bit had happened, and her face grew hot as the memories replayed themselves. Gavin kissing her. Touching her. God, the things he made her feel—it was unreal. He had all but made her burst into flames right there on the porch. Oh, wait, he actually *had* made her combust. And speaking of the porch...

“Liar, liar, pants on fire!” Sloan called after her as she turned toward the front of the house, ignoring her friends’ collective outrage.

She knew it was too much to hope that they would show themselves out before she let Gavin into the house. This was why this whole thing was a bad idea. Sure, she was wildly attracted to Gavin, and now that she’d had a taste of what it would be like to be with him, physically, she was one hundred percent on board with the idea of a fling. And if she was honest with herself, she was even starting to like the big grumpypants.

But she didn’t necessarily want him meeting her friends. At least, not like this. Not with questions in their eyes and assumptions being made. Not without the chance to explain that this was just a simple, temporary thing. Gavin Williams was not for her, not long term, and she didn’t want him becoming entwined with her real life.

“Hi,” she greeted him as she opened the door, perhaps a little more briskly than she’d intended.

And there he stood, a giant man on her doorstep, all but oozing virility. She wondered not for the first time what on earth she was doing.

His gaze swept over her, warm with appreciation. His eyes gleamed as they returned to her face.

“You look beautiful,” he said in that gruff voice, and just like that she knew exactly what she was doing: dissolving into a puddle of arousal right there on her porch.

Pulling herself together with effort, she reluctantly let him inside.

“Thanks,” she said as she led him through the hall to his doom. “So, some of my friends came over for coffee, and I think they’re still in the kitchen. I apologize in advance for them. I’d suggest we sneak out the front, but I’m pretty sure they’d follow us.”

She saw his lips turn up with amusement, but he said nothing. She took a bracing breath and entered the kitchen.

Her three friends were as she had left them, scattered around the kitchen sipping coffee and looking as innocent as the day they were born. Piper almost laughed. She loved them all, but they were incorrigible.

“Gavin, you’ve met Georgie and Murray,” she said as gracefully as she could manage. “And this is Sloan.”

Sloan saluted him with her mug and slid off the counter. Piper prayed her blunt friend wouldn’t say anything too embarrassing.

“So,” Sloan began. “What are your intentions toward our Piper?” Murray gasped and Georgie stifled a laugh.

“Oh my God.” Piper rolled her eyes. “We’re leaving. You all know the way out.”

She turned and ran into the brick wall that was Gavin Williams. He was regarding Sloan steadily, his eyes flickering with humor.

“My current intention is to feed her breakfast,” he rumbled. “If that’s okay with you?”

Piper heard Sloan make a frustrated sound behind her. “That’s not—”

“Sloan!” Murray hissed as Piper turned back around to glare at them all, putting a little distance between herself and Gavin. He wasn’t having it, however, and she felt a strong arm wrap around her and pull her to his side.

“It’s fine,” Gavin murmured into her ear. “I spend—spent—most of my life in a locker room, I can handle a hard time.”

Piper was sure that was true, but she still didn't appreciate it. "Don't mind Sloan, she's basically feral."

"Hey!" Sloan protested, but said nothing further.

"And after breakfast," Gavin continued, "my intention is to do whatever Piper wants. Nothing more, nothing less." He smiled down at her and she thought she heard Murray sigh happily.

"We're all sorry you won't be playing this year," Georgie said, apparently trying to steer the conversation to safer territory.

Gavin nodded, but Piper sensed the slight increase in tension in his body. "No sorer than I am," he replied in what Piper was coming to think of as his public persona voice. "But that's the game."

Georgie was watching him thoughtfully. "You'll probably head back to Vancouver at some point, then?"

Gavin squeezed Piper gently, and she wondered if he was reassuring her that Georgie's question was fine, or about his leaving. She certainly didn't need the latter. As Sloan said, it was an ideal situation.

"I will," Gavin replied, and Piper noticed that he didn't go on to mention the possible job in Vancouver. He probably wasn't supposed to talk openly about it until papers were signed and agreements made.

She glanced at Sloan, who gave her a tiny thumbs-up sign and grinned.

Georgie looked less impressed, her eyes darting back and forth between Piper and Gavin. "Well," she finally said. "Shame to leave when you're just getting settled."

Gavin apparently didn't know how to respond to that comment, but thankfully Murray jumped in.

"Do you want coffee, Gavin?" And then she stopped, blushing, as she realized her mistake.

Gavin laughed. "Thanks, but even with your help that day I just don't think it's my thing." He leaned over to murmur in

Piper's ear, "But I'm sure it's *delicious*, and not at all disgusting."

Piper resisted elbowing him in the ribs. "Not to mention that you're all drinking my coffee in my house, after barging in this morning," she grumbled.

"Do you all always get together in the morning, or..." Gavin asked curiously. Piper glared at her friends.

"No," Murray said quickly. "It was just a coincidence that we all came over this morning. No reason at all. None."

Piper sighed.

"Uh-huh," Gavin said, and she could hear the smirk in his voice.

"Okay," she said, having had quite enough. "We're leaving to get breakfast, which means..."

"That you'll be calling me as soon as you get home, missy," said Sloan, as she finished her coffee and plunked the mug down in the sink. Murray and Georgie followed suit. "We have to talk about...that thing..." Sloan gestured vaguely, and Piper shook her head. Subtlety was not Sloan's strong point.

"I promise," she said, knowing that there was no way she'd get out of telling her friends *something*. But she'd have to convince them that this was a temporary thing. And she'd need to keep any stray feelings on her part in check.

She glanced around the kitchen, at the three women's avidly curious expressions, at Gavin himself, who still had his arm firmly around her. Already, she felt as if things were slipping from her control.

Maybe the whole thing was a mistake.

* * *

Gavin sat across from Piper at the diner and watched her pick at her breakfast.

"Are you going to eat that omelet, or just stab it to death?" he finally asked.

She looked up at him, startled. “Hm?”

Gavin forced himself to smile despite his frustration. Piper had been quiet on the drive here, quiet as they sat and decided what to order, and quiet as their food arrived.

He had thought they had arrived at some sort of understanding last night. It was obvious they had a strong physical connection, but he also *liked* Piper, and enjoyed her company. He’d thought she might not mind his, too. Until this morning.

“I was just wondering if you had something against those particular eggs, or eggs in general,” he said, trying to lighten the mood between them.

Had he done something wrong in front of her friends? They had been dying with curiosity about his presence at Piper’s house, that much had been obvious. He thought that by putting his arm around her he had answered at least part of what they wondered about, without Piper having to verbally respond to them. Which she had seemed disappointingly unwilling to do.

It was one thing to agree to a short-term fling. It was quite another if she was actively embarrassed to be with him. But if she was, why had she agreed to go out to breakfast with him?

“Hm?” she asked again, blinking at him.

He set his fork down. Obviously, egg jokes were getting him nowhere. “Is something bothering you?”

She looked down at her plate and sighed. When she raised her eyes to his again she really *looked* at him, with none of the distance that had separated them since they left her house.

“Sorry,” she said. “I’m just...” She looked like she was struggling for the right words.

Gavin wondered if she was searching for a way to tell him that she’d changed her mind about them. About him. The unexpected depth of his disappointment caused his chest to tighten uncomfortably.

But then she said, “I guess I wasn’t quite ready for a cross-examination by my friends first thing in the morning.” She

laughed, and Gavin relaxed a little. He could understand the awkwardness of having their first date observed by a nosy audience. “I don’t know why, I absolutely should have expected it.”

He smiled. “Friends butting in is a time-honored tradition.”

“Yeah.” She grinned at him. “Especially my friends. Nothing gets by them.”

Gavin shrugged. “It’s not much better when they’re your teammates.”

Piper’s eyebrows raised in surprise. “Do you all get in each other’s business?”

His laugh was loud enough to turn a few heads. “That would be an understatement. Hockey players are the *worst* kind of gossips.”

“Huh. Well, honestly...” She leaned back in her chair. “I can’t blame my friends. I’d be the same if it was any of them.”

“So, what is it that has you out of sorts?” he prodded, still not quite sure if he wanted the answer.

Now Piper did take a bite of her omelet, and Gavin knew she was stalling.

“Piper,” he said, leaning forward and lowering his voice. “If you’ve changed your mind, just say so.”

She shook her head immediately, but the flash of guilt across her face made Gavin wonder if his thought about being ashamed of him was a little too close to the mark. Wouldn’t that be a kick in the pants? Decades of being chased by women and now the one woman who made him feel like maybe his life hadn’t completely gone to shit wasn’t sure if he was worth the effort.

“I haven’t,” Piper finally responded. “It’s not that. It’s...” She sighed and put her fork down again. “I haven’t changed my mind. A short-term fling, right?”

He nodded.

She seemed to be bracing herself for something. “Okay. So, you probably just need part one of the talk.”

He couldn’t help but smile. “You have a multi-part talk?”

“Yep.”

“You are aware that I’m forty-two years old and don’t actually need *the talk*, right?”

Piper rolled her eyes. “Not that talk. I mean the talk where I tell you I’m bi.”

Gavin’s eyebrows shot upward in surprise. “Bi?”

“You know, bisexual. I like both men and women. Actually, I’m attracted to people of all genders, which is sometimes called pansexual. Not all bi people are attracted to all genders, but I am. But I prefer the term bi because I identify with the bi community and because of the history of bi erasure, but either term is fine, really.”

All of this came out in a rush, and for a moment Gavin just blinked at her.

“Okay,” he said.

“Okay?” Piper blinked back at him.

“Yeah, okay. Thanks for telling me.”

“You don’t...mind, or anything? I just like to get everything out there with anyone I’m...you know.” She blushed adorably, and Gavin couldn’t help teasing her.

“Anyone you’re eating breakfast with?”

She threw her napkin at him, and he laughed.

“Piper, I appreciate your honesty. Really. But it doesn’t make any difference to me.”

She nodded. “Okay. Good.”

He frowned. What sort of response had she gotten from past partners? “Did you really think I would care?”

She shrugged. “You never know, people have all kinds of prejudices, and I’ve been surprised more than once. Also, you’re...you know. Hockey.”

Ah. He nodded thoughtfully. “Okay. Yeah, hockey definitely has its issues with homophobia. I’ve seen it myself.”

Piper looked surprised. “Really?”

“Sure. You don’t spend that much time with a group of men and find out pretty quickly who has...issues. Whether it’s homophobia, or racism, or whatever. Guys make stupid comments, and then you know.” He thought about his own words for a minute, and a sinking sensation had his breakfast settling heavily in his stomach. “I’d like to think I called everyone out, every time, but...”

“But?”

Gavin sighed. “But in hockey, the team is everything. We’re not supposed to let ‘personal issues’ get in the way. A lot of that stuff just gets ignored, because no one wants to cause conflict.”

“And ignored means allowed.”

Her comment was like a punch to the gut. She was right, of course. Glossing over the hurtful comments was the same as allowing them. Guys felt comfortable showing their asses if they knew there were no repercussions. Not that blatant displays of hate were tolerated—nothing that would cause bad PR. But in the locker room? Sure.

“Must be hard to play professional hockey and be queer,” she commented. “Or part of any marginalized group.”

She wasn’t wrong. Hockey was an overwhelmingly white sport, and at least on the surface intensely heterosexual. Guys who didn’t fit a very straight version of masculinity were definitely seen as outsiders. Not that there weren’t gay players—everyone knew there were. Gavin himself could name at least a couple, men he’d always been friendly with. But the culture was hardly welcoming.

He cleared his throat. “Yeah. It must be. I’d like to think it’s getting better, though.” But he realized now that they could be doing so much more. He would have to think about that.

“Anyway.” She smiled at him before picking up a piece of her toast. “I just like to let people know where I stand.”

And then she was quiet again.

Gavin sipped his water and mulled this over. He supposed he could understand why she felt the need to discuss her sexuality with him, considering they had agreed to be intimate with each other. And he did appreciate her honesty. It couldn't be easy to feel like you had to disclose a private part of your identity every time you thought you might sleep with someone. Of course, he didn't give a rat's ass if she was bisexual. Why would he? Her past—and future—relationships were her business. Whatever was between them was all that he cared about.

But nothing she'd told him seemed to have any bearing on her hesitancy with him this morning, unless she really believed that he was that asshole who would care that she was attracted to people other than men. And she still looked like something was bothering her.

“So, what's part two of the talk? The part you think I don't need to hear?”

He had a sneaking suspicion that part two was far more relevant to his interests than part one.

She took a bite of her omelet and chewed slowly—stalling again. This time he let her. He wanted to know what was on her mind, but he didn't want to push her for anything she didn't feel comfortable sharing.

“Okay,” she finally said. “So... I made a decision. A while ago. Several years ago. That I didn't want to date cisgender men.”

Gavin felt his brows knit together. Well, that was it, then. This was the other shoe dropping. Piper was going to tell him she'd changed her mind about him.

She smiled awkwardly at him. “I mean, apparently I'm open to making an exception.”

Gavin blew out a breath. He was confused, but it sounded like... “So, you're not telling me you changed your mind? About us.” He hated the note of desperation he heard in his

own voice. It shouldn't matter whether she wanted to be with him or not. In a few weeks, he'd probably never see her again.

"I'm...not." She didn't sound entirely certain. Then she reached across the table and took his hand. It felt too good, her fingers against his rough skin. But her eyes weren't meeting his, instead fixed on where their hands were joined. "I meant what I said last night. I want this."

"Temporarily."

"Yeah. Temporarily. And just sex. A long-term relationship with a man...it just isn't for me." She laughed a little and withdrew her hand. "My past relationships with men haven't been great." She blew out a breath. "And yeah, not all men. I know. But my identity—how people see me—it's as a queer woman. And when you're bi, a lot of people have a hard time with the both/and of that. If you're a woman with a woman, you're queer. If you're a woman with a man, you're straight." Her eyes met his. "I made the decision that I don't want half of my identity erased."

"Okay," he said. He knew all about the importance of one's identity and public persona. That was a major reason why he needed the job in Vancouver—to feel like the man he'd been as a player. Respected. Powerful. Purposeful. Perception was important.

A tiny furrow appeared between her eyebrows as she glanced up at him. "Okay?"

He shrugged. What did she want him to say? "Yeah, okay. You're a grown woman, Piper. You can decide who you want to be with, and under what conditions—you don't owe me any explanations or justification, though I appreciate them."

And the part of him that wanted to convince her that being with him long-term would be fantastic was just going to have to get over it.

The line in the sand she had just drawn was perfect. She didn't want a long-term relationship with a man. What they'd agreed to was ideal. Perfectly ideal, he told himself as he glared down at his plate, spearing a pile of eggs.

“Now who’s stabbing their breakfast?” At Piper’s question he looked up to see her watching him carefully.

He forced himself to relax, to focus on the fact that he was here, with her, for now. And that was good enough. “Sorry.” He smiled, if not enthusiastically. “So.”

“So.” She returned his smile, but there was a wariness in her eyes. Probably because he’d been stabbing, just as she’d said, and looking murder at his eggs. He ran a hand over his face.

“I don’t think I’m good at this.” He set down his fork. “I don’t... I haven’t done exactly this before.”

She looked at him questioningly. “You haven’t had a...a casual relationship before?” She sounded disbelieving.

He frowned. “I have. Of course. I mean...sort of. One-night stands, sure. But not often, and nothing like this. Not for more than one night.”

“Ah. The dreaded more-than-one-night-but-not-long-term thing.”

“Right.”

“I haven’t really done this, either. Not with the intention of it being temporary, you know?” She smiled again, this time with her usual open and friendly expression. It warmed him, somehow. *She* warmed him—thawed him from the frozen state he’d been in since his injury. He’d have to make sure he didn’t get used to it.

She leaned forward. “I think we can figure it out together, don’t you?” Her voice was low and husky, and gave him all sorts of ideas. “You, me, a bed. The couch. Maybe the floor if we feel adventurous. How hard could it be?”

Really fucking hard right now, he thought, but of course she didn’t mean his dick. He cleared his throat. “Right,” he said again. “Simple.”

She nodded, looking both pleased and relieved. “So. We’ve had our date. Want to come over tomorrow night, after the coffee not-date?”

Right. The second auctioned off get-together was tomorrow. He'd almost forgotten. So, they would work together that afternoon and then get started on this nonrelationship of theirs. He tried to ignore the little twinge of discomfort he felt as Piper treated their agreement exactly for what it was: Sex. Temporary. Simple.

“Sure,” he said. “Tomorrow.”

Chapter Ten

Piper was running late the following morning as she hurried to the coffee shop. After tossing and turning throughout the night, she'd overslept.

While she appreciated Gavin's insistence on doing the gentlemanly thing and taking her out for breakfast before they dove into the physical side of their nonrelationship, a date made the whole thing seem less "non" and more "relationship." So, she had tried to steer the direction of their breakfast conversation back to the task at hand: simple, no-strings-attached sex.

But her subconscious wasn't buying it, apparently.

"Hey, Murray," she said absently as she slid behind the Bean's counter and surveyed the situation. Once again, the press was corralled in the corner, but there were significantly fewer of them this time. The shininess of the event had worn off a bit, she supposed.

Murray glanced at her, then over to where Gavin was speaking to a reporter, then back to Piper. "Am I imagining that you two went out yesterday, and that you're...a thing?" She frowned. "You don't seem very thing-like."

Piper sighed. She had indeed taken the cowardly way out and snuck right over to the counter rather than stopping to greet either Gavin or Carlos, even though she'd passed by both of them on her way in. She blamed it on the rush she'd been in and the fact that she'd only had a half cup of coffee before leaving the house.

But she was aware of him. Oh, yes, her senses were attuned to where he stood in her shop, his proximity to her, his every movement. It was as if she'd developed some sort of Gavin radar, and his relative nearness within the space of the café was causing the equipment to go haywire. When his gaze swept around the room toward the counter, warmth spread over her skin and in her belly even as she avoided his eyes.

She poured herself a large mug and turned to face her friend, trying to focus. “We’re not really a thing,” she replied in a whisper. “It’s just...sex.”

“Okay...” Murray replied at a normal volume. “Some questions: One, why are you whispering? Two, is there a rule against saying hello to a guy you’re sleeping with? And three—and by far the most important question—why didn’t you tell me you’re having sex with *Gavin Williams*?” This last question was significantly louder than the first two, and Piper winced.

“Shhh!”

Murray burst out laughing, then looked chagrined when Piper fixed her with her best boss glare. “Why would you want to keep that quiet?” she asked. “If I was banging a hot hockey player, I’d make sure *everyone* knew about it.”

Piper sighed. She was exhausted and grouchy and not up for answering questions, even from Murray. Her head throbbed, her eyes were itchy, and she wished she could walk right back out the door, climb back into bed, and ignore everyone.

It wasn’t going to happen, so she gulped her coffee.

“We haven’t done anything *yet*. We just...we decided to have an affair.”

Murray’s eyes went wide. “An *affair*! That sounds so glamorous.”

Piper glared at her. “It was Sloan’s idea,” she said defensively. “He’s hot, right? And better yet, he’s leaving—going back to Vancouver.”

Murray tilted her head thoughtfully. “When?”

Piper frowned. She hadn’t thought that far ahead, but it was obviously a pertinent question. “I don’t know, exactly. Soon?”

“Like, this weekend soon? Or in a few months soon?”

“I don’t know?” Piper shrugged it off and told herself that she didn’t care if it was sooner rather than later. “A few weeks, probably. Anyway, we’re attracted to each other, and he’s not terrible for a man.”

Murray smirked. “High praise indeed.”

Piper soldiered on. “So, it’s the best of all outcomes, right? We can...enjoy each other for a while, and then there will be a clean break when he leaves. It’s *just* sex. Nothing else—so don’t get invested, and don’t go telling everyone else that we’re dating or whatever. Just. Temporary. Sex.”

“Uh-huh.” Murray sounded unconvinced.

Murray’s skepticism matched her own, now that she’d spent a little more time with Gavin. He was...nice. Thoughtful. Easy to be with. And he’d barely blinked when she’d told him she was bi. That was a new experience for her—in the past, the cis men she’d dated had generally made some stupid comment about how exciting they found her sexuality, and some of the women had been turned off because they thought she was “just experimenting” with them.

But it didn’t matter how nice he was. He was leaving.

“Hey, Piper!”

She could have kissed Carlos for interrupting. She glanced away from Murray’s skeptical gaze to find the younger man loping up to the counter like an overgrown golden retriever.

“Hey, Carlos. You ready to do this again?” Piper handed him a mug full of hot coffee, which he accepted gratefully.

“Oh, yeah. The last one went so well—I mean, it helped that Jonas is such a great guy.”

Something in Carlos’s tone caught her attention. “Is the player coming today not a great guy?”

“Saul Morgan? Nah, he’s okay. Just...kind of antisocial, I guess.”

Piper gave Carlos a hard stare. “Why would he agree to do this if he’s antisocial?”

Carlos shrugged. “He’s not a *bad* guy. Not really. And he’s the team enforcer, which makes him popular with fans—I knew people would bid on him for sure if I could get him to do it.”

“Enforcer... Like, the guy who fights?”

Carlos nodded. “He’s a great player, too,” he said a little hurriedly. “You can’t really just be an enforcer and nothing else these days. But yeah, he’s basically the toughest guy in the league.”

“So, how did you convince the toughest guy in the league—the *antisocial* toughest guy in the league—to have coffee with a stranger for charity?”

Knowing Carlos, it could be anything. He was the sweetest guy Piper knew, but also relentless when he was focused on a goal, whether it be making it as a professional hockey player, or organizing a successful fundraiser.

Carlos flushed a bit. “I had Mom talk to him.”

Piper felt her jaw drop open. “You used mom guilt? Carlos... Your mom’s guilt-tripping skills are *brutal*—that’s not fair to anyone!”

He shrugged and grinned. “Well, it worked, didn’t it? Barely, but still... He agreed, and this guy—” he jerked his chin toward the front door, where a tall, skinny young man was making his way inside to be greeted by Gavin “—paid a lot for this coffee.”

“Okay...” Piper said slowly. “So, putting aside that you have a hockey player who probably doesn’t even want to do this... Where *is* Mr. Morgan? Shouldn’t he be here by now?”

Carlos’s face blanched as he realized they were missing one key ingredient to the morning: the actual hockey player. Luckily, the front door opened again and an enormous, burly man slouched inside just as the last of the press filed out.

She watched as Gavin clasped his hand and said something into his ear. She’d thought Gavin was absurdly large, but this guy...he was like a giant lumberjack, beard and all. And he didn’t look happy.

“There he is!” Carlos said with immense relief.

“Whoa.” Murray came to stand next to Piper, eyes on the new addition. “That is a very large man.”

Carlos shrugged. “We’re all big in hockey.” Murray and Piper stared at him in unison. “Okay, yeah, you don’t ever want to get on Morgan’s bad side.”

“Does he *have* a good side?” Murray muttered.

Gavin seemed to be handling things, introducing Morgan and the auction winner, and getting them settled at a corner table. Piper noticed that he had brought his cane, and also that he seemed to be limping less than in previous days. She felt happier about that than maybe she had a right to.

Carlos joined the three men and Piper was relieved to see Morgan crack a slight smile.

“I would *not* want to come across that guy in a dark alley,” Murray said.

With the two men settled with their coffee, Gavin ambled over to the counter. Piper tried to ignore the flutter in her stomach, which might have been nerves, or something else. She had the ridiculous urge to go to him, to slide her arms around his thick chest and bury her face against his shirt, drinking him in. Instead, she fiddled with the hem of her shirt, unsure of the appropriate etiquette for greeting her not-quite-lover at her place of work.

“Hey,” he said in his gruff voice, and her traitorous knees turned to Jell-O.

“Hey,” she replied quietly. What followed was an awkward silence, broken only by Murray’s exasperated snort.

“Wow, you two get along like a house afire, don’t you?” she whispered none too quietly into Piper’s ear.

Carlos looked confused. “Did I miss something?”

Piper’s headache intensified. “No. You didn’t.” She sighed. “Carlos, can you see if they’d like anything to eat?” He nodded and moved away. She turned to whisper to Murray, “And can you go...do literally anything else?”

With a disappointed pout, Murray left for the back office. Or supply room. Piper didn’t care which.

Of course, now she was left alone with Gavin, if only for a few minutes. He was watching her carefully, as if he also didn't know quite what to say.

"You look tired," he said bluntly. She knew it was the truth, but did he really have to notice?

"Thanks," she snapped, then sighed. "Sorry. Yeah, I'm tired. I couldn't sleep last night."

One of his eyebrows quirked up, and he leaned in to rumble, "Well, I know it wasn't me who kept you up. Not yet, anyway."

Piper leaned against the counter as her knees betrayed her yet again. The rasp of his voice, low and husky in her ear, set her body on fire like a rough surface ignited a match. And yet unease settled in her stomach as he smiled at her, those eyes of his promising all sorts of things.

Piper knew he was flirting with her in exactly the way she had with him at breakfast yesterday, but it irritated her. Or maybe irritated wasn't the right word. It unnerved her. Excited her. Confused her. She *wanted* him to flirt with her, was the thing. But flirting was too intimate away from the neutral ground of the diner, the insinuating words spoken too closely to her everyday life, to her job, her friends. And it was so easy, as if they had immediately fallen into an affectionate pattern she wasn't at all sure she wanted outside of the privacy of her house. The boundaries were blurring, and she didn't even know where she wanted them set. But she would need them, the boundaries, if she was going to go through with their agreement and come out unscathed.

She blinked her eyes away from his, and his smirk vanished.

"Piper," he said.

"Hm?"

He glanced around the shop. "I'm sorry. That was inappropriate."

Confused, all she could manage was another "Hm?"

His frown deepened and his voice roughened with frustration. “Your work. We’re at your work. I just wasn’t... I wasn’t thinking.”

Oh. Probably she *should* care about keeping things professional at work, but that wasn’t exactly the problem. But she didn’t feel like explaining, not that he was even likely to understand.

“Yeah,” she finally replied. “Okay. We should keep things professional.”

He stepped away from her, and his public persona clicked into place. Piper tried to squash her disappointment. Hadn’t she just been upset at his too-personal comment? And now she was deflated that he had put some distance between them. She couldn’t keep up with her own feelings.

She rubbed a hand over her eyes. Maybe more coffee would help.

“Hey.” Carlos’s voice penetrated her thoughts as he crossed back to where they stood. “So, they don’t want any food, but we may want to keep an eye on things.”

“Things?” Piper wasn’t sure what that meant, but it didn’t sound good. She glanced at Gavin.

“Is that guy going to be a problem?” Gavin asked. “He seemed a little pushy.”

“What do you mean, pushy?” Piper asked.

Gavin leaned a hand on the counter. “When he first came in, he was a little annoyed that Morgan wasn’t here yet, and now he keeps asking about all these fights Morgan was in and insisting that he talk about them—over and over.”

Piper was confused. “Isn’t fighting what he does, though?”

Carlos and Gavin exchanged a glance.

“He does fight, but it’s not all he does,” Gavin explained. “And no one wants to endlessly relive the times they were beaten or injured. Morgan is an all-around player, and doesn’t want to be pigeonholed as just a fighter. Being labeled an enforcer is a touchy thing.”

“And Morgan is plenty touchy already,” Carlos added.

“Great.” Piper sighed. “So, what do we do? We need to give the winner of the auction what he wants, but I’m not willing to have any of the players pushed past what they’re comfortable with, either.”

She watched the scene unfolding across the room. The tall young man was talking animatedly, leaning forward. Mr. Morgan’s body language grew increasingly defensive, with arms crossed in front of his chest and a stony expression on his face.

“Morgan’s a professional,” Gavin said. “He’ll be okay.”

Carlos looked less sure. Piper reached for her coffee and took a gulp. At least the press were all gone, just in case there was any problem. No one needed that sort of thing recorded for posterity. But she wanted these events to go well, for Carlos’s sake and for his fundraising efforts. Not to mention that if a fan went around complaining about their treatment here, it could be bad for both the shop and the team. The Firebirds might not agree to future events like this, and that would weigh heavily on Carlos. She wanted him to succeed.

Those hopes were dashed when the young man stood from his chair, leaning over Mr. Morgan.

“Oof, bad move,” muttered Carlos.

To his credit, Morgan didn’t stand, or even move. He simply sat, with the confidence of a man who wasn’t easily threatened. But his expression was thunderous.

“Okay, who’s going in?” Carlos asked, glancing nervously from Gavin to Piper.

Murray came to stand with them. “Not it!” she said quickly.

Piper rolled her eyes. “I will.” She pushed off from where she was leaning against the counter. “It’s my store. I’ll see what I can do to diffuse this mess.”

A strong hand grasped her arm, and she looked up at Gavin. “I’ll do it,” he said. “You don’t know Morgan, and we don’t

know how that twerp is going to react to his diatribe being interrupted.”

Piper knew he was right—Gavin was definitely better equipped to handle the emerging altercation between two large men. But she still felt responsible, and she wanted to clear the worried expression from Carlos’s face.

“We’ll both go,” she replied firmly.

After a brief hesitation, Gavin nodded and let go of her arm. Together, they approached the table, where the younger man was still standing, gesturing with his coffee mug in his hand. Piper frowned as some of the liquid spilled onto the table in front of him. Really, she could go the rest of her life without angry men making a mess.

She pasted on her best dealing-with-a-difficult-customer smile.

Gavin spoke first. “Do you two need any help over here?” Piper noticed that he angled his body in front of his teammate’s, forcing the other man to look at him.

“Nah, man, we’re just talking about that last fight in the playoffs—you know, the one where Morgan pulled the jersey over Nielsen’s head and—” He mimicked several sharp jabs with his fists, and Piper had to keep herself from taking a step back. His face was animated but not threatening, however, and Piper held on to a sliver of hope that the situation could be remedied. Maybe the guy was just really, really enthusiastic about hockey. In her experience, some men didn’t know how to communicate excitement without being threatening.

She glanced at Morgan, who remained silent, with the same closed off, stony expression. Apparently, he wasn’t a fan of enthusiasm.

“So,” she began, hoping to distract the guy from beating up the air around him. “We just wanted to check in, make sure everything was going well. If you need anything, you’re welcome to call us over.” She sent a meaningful look at Mr. Morgan, hoping he would understand that they would continue to intervene if necessary. No reaction.

The younger man was still standing, and he turned his attention to Piper. Again, she stopped herself from taking a step back—something about this guy creeped her out.

“Nah, honey, don’t worry yourself.” He reached over and touched Piper’s arm, and she sensed Gavin stiffen beside her. “It’s just guy stuff. But if you want to help me out when you get off work...” He winked, and she just barely kept herself from rolling her eyes. “Maybe your boss will even let you off early?”

Piper sighed internally, and nudged Gavin with her elbow when she heard his almost imperceptible growl. The last thing this situation needed was more aggression poured over the already flaming fire. To her relief, he said nothing.

With an ease borne of years of practice, she kept her smile in place. “Well, *as* the owner of this shop, unfortunately I’ll be stuck here until closing.” The man blinked at her, and she could see him move her from the column in his brain marked “sexual target” to “person of marginal authority.” She continued, “But if you’d like, you’re welcome to some coupons for free coffee—maybe you can hand them out to your friends? You’d be doing us a big favor, spreading the word. We’re out here doing our best against the giant green mermaid.”

It was a gamble; some people really loved their big chain coffee. But most liked the idea of helping a small company keep their head above water in the face of competition from a giant chain. If she could get him even slightly invested in the store, he was far less likely to cause a scene. Thankfully, he smiled.

“Yeah, that’d be great. Thanks.” He took a step back, his posture receding into unthreatening relaxation. Piper almost sighed with relief. “My grandfather owned a small hardware store—put out of business by Walmart. I know how it is.”

“Great. I’ll make sure we get the coupons over to you.”

The guy nodded and turned his attention back to Morgan. Piper was still working out how best to get the two not-date attendees on better footing when Gavin spoke.

“Hey, do you mind if I join you two?” His voice held the authority of someone who was used to having people follow his suggestions—and the young man was no different. His eyes widened and he nodded.

“Sure, man, that would be great.”

“Fantastic.” If she didn’t already know Gavin, she would have missed the subtle sarcasm in the single word.

She stifled a smile and turned away, pleased that he’d found a way to further distract the other man—by using his own status. And grateful that he was willing to spend the energy needed to keep a lid on the young man’s hotheadedness for an extended period. It was the opposite of what she might have expected from a former hockey player. He could have muscled the other man out of the café, or intimidated him into submission. But he hadn’t. It was a clever solution, and kind, and softened those boundaries she’d been working on, just a little. “What was your name, again?”

“Jeff. It’s Jeff. This is so cool! Gavin Williams *and* Saul Morgan. Gavin, do you remember when Vancouver played Philly last year and Philly was down four goals...”

And just like that, his attention was off Morgan and firmly focused on Gavin. Piper caught the look of relief on Morgan’s face as she pulled over a third chair. Gavin smiled his thanks and sat heavily, then turned back to the two men.

Piper heaved a sigh of relief as she made her way back to the counter. Carlos looked considerably less anxious, and Murray amused.

“What a good team you two make,” she said meaningfully.

Piper couldn’t deny it; she’d been surprised and pleased that Gavin had let her handle what she needed to handle, and only afterward had found a solution for the overall problem. And his willingness to take a hit for their cause by inserting himself into the situation caused a different sort of flutter in her insides. Not physical attraction or nerves this time, but something she wasn’t sure she wanted to examine too closely. His behavior was certainly unlike any of her past boyfriends,

who had preferred brute strength or bullying over finesse. Not that she'd had so very many boyfriends. And not that Gavin was her boyfriend. But still, she admired his use of his stature—literally and figuratively—to defuse the situation rather than escalate it.

“Yeah! Thank God you were able to get that guy to calm down,” Carlos agreed, oblivious to Murray’s suggestive tone.

Piper glanced back to the three seated men, where the younger man was emphatically thumping his own leg as he spoke. “I’m not sure we calmed him down, but he’s happy for now, and Mr. Morgan has a buffer.”

“I just hope Gavin doesn’t lose his mind, having to talk to the guy for the next hour—your other teammate isn’t exactly a sparkling conversationalist.” Murray threw a glance at her brother, who winced.

“Yeah, I mean, Gavin’s good with the public, obviously, but he hasn’t really been in a place recently where he wants to be out there, if you know what I mean.”

Piper certainly did know what he meant. The difference in manner between Gavin Williams, public figure, and Gavin Williams, recovering injured hockey player, was striking even to her, someone who didn’t follow the sport. It made her wonder how much of a toll keeping up that persona had taken on him during his career.

And how much of a toll this morning would take.

“Okay, you two,” she said to break silence that had fallen between them. “Enough standing around. Carlos, can you check one more time if they want any food? And Murray, we’ve got to clean up where the press used half of our mugs before we reopen.”

She kept busy over the next hour, cleaning, restocking, sending Murray to find coupons for Jeff, and generally getting organized for the rest of the day. At long last, Jeff was escorted out the door, with only a few stops for some last-minute exclamations and hockey-themed reminiscences. Once he’d left, they all stood around the shop, stunned into silence.

“Wow,” Carlos said. “People are hard, sometimes.”

Murray snorted and Piper let out a laugh. “You don’t say,” she replied as she shook herself out of stillness and went to grab the dirty mugs from the table. “Literally everyone who works in the service industry is shocked and surprised.”

Carlos rolled his eyes and his sister whacked him with a dish towel.

Piper returned the mugs to the counter, where Murray took them to the sink. She glanced over at Gavin. He was leaning heavily on his cane, despite having been off his feet for the past hour or so.

She wanted to check in with him, her gratitude mixing with concern. She wondered if he was in pain. Or if he was annoyed that he’d basically had to take over the role of nondate for today’s event. And whether he still planned to come over that night, or if he needed time to himself.

Mostly that last thing.

She caught his eye and he nodded at her, but Morgan gestured toward the door and Gavin followed. After a quick wave and last few words for Carlos, the two men slipped out the door.

“Hmph,” Piper grunted under her breath.

“I think the giant stole your boyfriend,” Murray commented from behind the counter.

“*Not* my boyfriend,” Piper retorted.

“Wait, who’s whose boyfriend?” Carlos joined them at the counter, looking back and forth between them. Piper groaned, and Murray wilted under her glare.

“Nothing. No one. No boyfriend,” Murray said quickly.

Piper sighed. “Look.” She wasn’t willing to lie, although she would have appreciated a little discretion. “Gavin and I... we’re not seeing each other, exactly. But sort of. Temporarily. Just while he’s still in Philly—for however long that might be,” she added, thinking that Gavin probably wouldn’t want her to disclose his new job opportunity.

Carlos's eyes went wide. "No kidding. Wow. Wait, really?" He cleared his throat awkwardly, and Piper almost laughed at the utter confusion on her friend's face. "I have to say, I wouldn't have thought he was your...type."

Piper did laugh then. "Yeah, that's what I keep saying, too."

Carlos looked slightly embarrassed. "I mean, don't you usually only—Aren't you..."

"Usually, yes, I am." It occurred to her that for as long as she'd known Carlos, she'd only ever dated women. He assumed she was a lesbian. And honestly, she'd done nothing to discourage that belief. She glanced at the rainbow flag in the corner. It was important to her that she be out, be an obvious part of the queer community and reflect that in her business. But it now seemed strange that one of her friends didn't even know the entirety of her identity.

More than strange. Wrong.

She smiled. "Let's just say I'm flexible. Anyway." She touched Carlos's arm as she moved past him and over to the front door. Time to let the masses in. "It's not anything. Really. No big deal."

She almost, but not quite, believed that herself.

Chapter Eleven

Piper was so lost in thought that she nearly dropped her glass of wine on the kitchen floor when she heard her phone buzz.

She set the glass carefully on the counter and peeled her gaze away from the dark window and to her phone. It was a text from Gavin.

Still up for tonight?

Was she?

She should have taken a nap when she got home from work, but she had been too wound up. It had been a busy day from start to finish, and she was exhausted and overstimulated and nervous all at the same time.

And now it was “go time,” or whatever the appropriate phrase was to describe the official commencement of a meaningless affair. Probably there was a word for it in German.

Her nerves were a tangle of anticipation and expectation, her libido on high alert, eager to get this thing started. It felt like she'd been lusting after Gavin for months, not a couple weeks. Past experience told her to be wary, to be careful with this person who set her body on fire and surprised her with the kindness underneath his grumbly exterior—surely, he wasn't what he seemed. The whole thing was a mess, a jumble of emotion and desire that was a lot for her tired brain to handle. She never liked a mess. She liked clean lines and clear boundaries. But the truth was... She wanted him to come over. That much was clear, and that much was simple. Somewhere between his grumpy moods and their arguments she had actually come to like him, and to care about his well-being. She wanted to see him.

Her phone buzzed again.

If you don't want me to come over, you can just tell me. I won't be offended.

She appreciated being given an out. It helped her realize that she didn't want one. She wandered to the front of the house and peered out the window. Lights were on in Gavin's house and his car was in the driveway. She told herself to stop being silly.

Yes, I want you to come over. She hit the send button, then scurried back to the kitchen to finish her wine. She was going to need all the courage she could get.

A few minutes later, a knock sounded at the door. Piper glanced down at what she was wearing. She'd changed into comfy sweatpants and a thin T-shirt when she'd gotten home, and it hadn't occurred to her until just this moment that she might want to change before Gavin arrived. Too late now.

She opened the front door and her heart rate kicked up as she took in the man filling her doorway. He was wearing dark jeans and a T-shirt, which she assumed was extraordinarily casual attire for him. His hair was damp and mussed as if he had just taken a shower. She wanted to sink her hands into it.

Instead, she took a step back and let him inside.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi, yourself." His voice was low and light with humor.

She led him into the kitchen and gestured to her glass. "Do you want a drink?"

She refilled her own glass from the wine bottle nearby and turned. Gavin stood leaning against the door frame, arms folded across his broad chest. His eyes flicked up to meet hers and she realized she had caught him staring at her ass. A surprised laugh escaped her.

He shrugged, unrepentant. "Hey, sweatpants are sexy."

She laughed again. "In that case, you're definitely with the right woman."

He pushed off from where he was leaning and crossed the room in a few strides, his limp noticeable but less pronounced than earlier that day. He tucked a strand of her hair behind her

ear, the simple touch making her shiver with anticipation. “I never doubted it,” he murmured.

She cleared her throat and stepped back, her waist hitting the counter behind her. Gavin watched her for a long moment and then looked away, walking toward the back door where he looked out into the night.

“Drink?” she asked again, nerves warring with desire, and with the fizzy excitement of having him so near.

He turned his head and she admired his profile: dirty-blond hair curling around his ear, a slight scruff on his jaw, the corner of his mouth turned up as if at some private joke.

He turned around and shoved his hands into his pockets. He dwarfed her kitchen—his presence permeated every corner, every nook. It wasn’t an unpleasant sensation, but it was new, and a little strange. He was just so *large*: his body, his personality, his charisma. She leaned back against the counter for support.

He ran a hand through his hair and smiled at her. “Sure,” he said. “Despite all appearances the first day we met, I’m not much of a drinker.”

“Of either coffee or alcohol,” she added, returning his smile.

“Right. But after this particular day, I could use a drink—of the alcoholic variety. I’m still a little iffy on coffee.”

She grinned. “Don’t worry, we’ll get you there,” she replied, and then her face heated as her naturally dirty mind went to all sorts of places.

She turned to hide her blush, but he was behind her in two strides, one strong arm gently wrapping around her. She could feel his breath on her temple, the solid heat of him against her back. She took a steadying breath. Could she really do this? With him?

“I’ll make sure you get there first, Piper,” he rumbled. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Her libido shouted *How about now?* But her brain still wasn’t quite sure. It didn’t help that she was sleep-deprived

and frazzled.

She wiggled out of his grasp and took a few short steps away, trying to look casual about it. *No big deal, Piper*, she told herself. *There's just an enormous professional athlete in your kitchen promising sexual satisfaction.* Not the most effective pep talk.

“So, what would you like?”

He looked for a moment as if he would call her out on her avoidance tactics, but then only asked, “Beer, if you have it?”

She grabbed him a bottle from the fridge and opened it. Leading him into the living room, she settled on the couch and he followed suit. Maybe talking for a while would help her get rid of her nerves. Or maybe she was just stalling. She drew her legs up, crossed them, and faced him. She watched as he took a long swallow from his beer, his Adam's apple bobbing. He let out a breath.

“Quite a day, eh?”

Piper smirked. “Sometimes I forget that you're Canadian.”

He raised one eyebrow at her. “Born and bred.”

She ran her thumb along the stem of her glass. “Do you miss it?”

She didn't know why she was asking, why she should care. The more she found out about him, the more she was in danger of becoming attached. Which was a terrible idea on so many levels.

He seemed to be considering her question before answering. “At first I did, every day.” He shifted, leaning his side against the back of the couch to face her. “I'd never lived away from Vancouver. I grew up there, went to school there, played juniors there—and then was drafted right into the city's team.” He laughed softly. “It felt like such a gift, to be able to play my entire career at home. It's unheard of. How did I get so lucky?”

Something in his tone caught Piper's attention. She didn't want to pry, but...she really did want to pry. “You feel less

lucky now that you're living somewhere else?"

He shrugged. "I still feel lucky. Of course. And I do miss it. It's...home, you know? Home is important. But I also wonder..." He shrugged again and took a sip of his beer. "Living here is so different. I've visited every city with a team in the league so many times, but it's not the same as living in a new place. I feel like maybe I missed out by staying in one city. There's so much to discover, new people to meet. It's a change. I liked that a lot more than I thought I would."

Piper nodded. She had grown up only a couple hours from Philadelphia, but still, living here was different from living at home. If she'd stayed in or near her hometown, she would have felt...stuck.

"So, now I miss Vancouver, but I also really like Philly, and will miss it here when I leave." Gavin smiled a little.

"You can't win," Piper teased him.

He huffed a laugh. "Yeah. Ironic, I used to be pretty good at winning, and now..."

"Now?"

"Now..." He shook his head and leaned over to set his half-full bottle on the coffee table. "Now I'm not sure what I do. Or what I am. For the past couple months, I've just been... aimless. Angry. Feeling like just another washed-up hockey player."

She frowned. Her heart ached to think that he might really believe those things about himself. "You don't really think that, do you? That you're washed-up, after one of the most successful careers in sports?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure what I am right now."

She studied his profile, all hard planes and the shadow of whiskers. Strength. Roughness. But also beauty. And kindness. A complicated man, so much more inside him than hockey fans ever knew.

"You're a person who would spend a whole morning on your bad knee, and sorting out an obnoxious fan, to help out a

teammate and a good cause.”

His chin dropped down toward his chest before he turned his head to face her once more. “I’m also a person who would assume the worst of an innocent coffee shop owner, and who’s been a real asshole to everyone around him for the past few months.”

Piper grinned. “So, you’re well-rounded.”

Gavin huffed a reluctant laugh. “Piper.”

“No one expects you to be perfect, Gavin.”

“Don’t they?”

She shrugged. “Well, no one who sees you as a person and not a commodity.”

He grunted his answer, and she watched his chest rise and fall as he breathed deeply.

“When my parents died,” she said quietly, “I felt so lost. Like someone had dug up my roots and I was just...blowing away. I didn’t even live with them anymore—I hadn’t lived in my hometown since I went to college. But they were my family, you know? They had just always been there, a part of me. And suddenly that part was gone. I didn’t know who I was without them.”

“Piper.” His voice was low. “I would never compare me retiring from a game to what you went through.”

She shook her head. “That’s not what I mean. Of course, it’s different. But it’s that feeling...”

“Being unmoored from your foundation.”

“Yeah. I just... I get it. It’s hard, and it takes time to figure out how to move forward.”

She knew that better than anyone. It had taken her a year after her parents’ deaths before she could even think about her own future. And it had taken meeting Sloan and slowly reknitting the threads of her community to help her feel grounded and whole again.

“It does.”

An awkward silence followed, during which Piper glanced around the room and grabbed the first subject that sprang to mind.

“You were married,” she blurted, and then cursed herself internally. What man who came to a woman’s house expecting sex wanted to talk about his divorce?

He shifted beside her. It wasn’t exactly tension that emanated from his body, but some sort of instinctively defensive posture.

“I was.” He smiled slightly, his gaze catching hers. “It’s fine, I don’t mind talking about it, if you’re curious.”

Was she? She was, depending on his answer. It would be a little odd if he was heartbroken and still in love with his ex-wife. She was pretty sure she’d have to opt out of their deal at that point.

Not that she was jealous.

“I just... Were you together a long time?”

“Yeah.” He nodded and let go of a long breath. “Yeah, we were. Married eight years, together two before that. Separated about two years ago, divorce final last year.”

Piper blinked. They’d been together for nearly a decade? That was some serious commitment. She didn’t know why she’d assumed his had been a short marriage. She didn’t know why she’d assumed anything.

“So...” Piper ventured. “What happened?”

Gavin rubbed his jaw with his palm. “On the surface, we seemed great. She’s a really nice person, and we both grew up in Vancouver. We knew a lot of the same people. She’s interested in hockey—her brother played in the league briefly, years ago. She knew what the life was like. I’d already won a cup by then, and her parents were *thrilled* when we started dating.” He let his head fall back and he stared up at the ceiling. “I think they had always wanted her to have a high-profile marriage, and as a hockey family the fact that it was me was icing on the cake. I don’t *think* she consciously married

me to please her parents—we really did have genuine affection for each other.”

Piper tried not to let jealously eat at her insides. Clearly, no matter how perfect they’d seemed for each other, in the end it hadn’t been enough. “But…”

He shrugged and looked over at her. “But I don’t think either of us really knew what love was, and we mistook being a good match for something we didn’t know anything about.” He laughed humorlessly. “Also, I was completely checked out. I’m sure that didn’t help. A hundred and fifty percent focused on hockey, on doing what people expected of me. She never complained, because that’s what was expected of *her*, so I thought everything was fine.” He shook his head. “I was so clueless. Once Lauren figured out that I wasn’t the man to make her happy, she laid it all out for me and I could see how I’d screwed up. She wanted out, so that was it. I wasn’t going to argue. I messed up and she was better off without me. From what I hear she’s a lot happier now.”

Piper attempted to digest all of this. She shouldn’t be so happy to hear that he didn’t think he and his ex-wife had ever really been in love, but she was only human. She wondered if he missed her. It didn’t sound like it, but the divorce had obviously been her idea and not his.

“Do you wish it had turned out differently?” Piper asked quietly, not sure if she actually wanted to know the answer.

Gavin sighed, and put an arm around her. “I wish I hadn’t been such a clueless asshole, yeah. I wish I’d listened a little less to the organization telling me I had to focus every part of my life on the game and spent some of that focus on being a better husband.” His mouth twisted in a wry smile. “It’s amazing what perspective comes with being out of the game. I had so many people telling me what I should do, and I was so worried about letting them down that I let down the one person I’d promised to take care of.” He lifted a hand and ran his thumb along Piper’s chin. “But… I don’t think Lauren and I would have lasted in any case. I can’t blame it on us being young, because we weren’t, but I think we were both pretty

immature about marriage. We should have waited for the right person.”

His eyes lowered to catch where her hands fiddled with her glass as she tried to think of something else to say. Something that *didn't* involve discussing either of their past relationships, or family deaths, or the end of his career.

“Piper.”

“What?” Her voice caught on the word, and she knew her face was red.

“You know I’d be happy to sit and just talk all night, if that’s what you want.”

“Would you?” That wasn’t what he was here for.

“Of course. I like talking to you.”

And she liked talking to him. Maybe too much.

“But it’s not why you’re here.”

Gavin let out an exasperated sigh. “I’m here because I want to see you. Yes, we agreed to a...fling. Whatever you want to call it. But it’s not an obligation—I’m not expecting anything from you that you don’t want to give.”

She took one breath, then another. He was right, that was exactly what was bothering her—the expectation, the idea that somehow, she would disappoint him. That she wouldn’t be enough. That he would find fault with who she was and make her feel small. Well, all of that plus the fact that she hadn’t had sex with a man in more years than she’d like to count. And she wasn’t at all sure that it was like riding a bicycle.

“Okay,” she said, because she couldn’t think of anything else.

Gavin rubbed his face with his hand. “What a day,” he said, and she was grateful for the change of subject. “Morgan was on a tear when we left the café. I wanted to move him out of there before he yelled at Carlos for getting him into that situation.”

Piper stared at him. “Really? Is he like...dangerous?”

“Nah.” Gavin shook his head. “Just has a bad temper, and I figured Carlos had enough on his plate without hearing Morgan’s most recent antisocial diatribe.”

“So, you took the heat.”

Gavin shrugged. “They’re both good guys. Anyway, Morgan gave me a ride to the training facility for PT, and he blew off steam on the way. It was fine.” He leaned back and met her gaze. “But you were working the rest of the day, right? And you said you were tired to begin with.”

“Yeah. It’s been a day.” She smiled, wondering what on earth she was going to do. She didn’t really want to make small talk with Gavin for the rest of the night. She wanted more. But he was right, it had been a long day and she was tired, and she just didn’t know how people initiated this sort of thing.

“Look,” Gavin said, holding the arm of the sofa to leverage himself up to standing. Was he leaving? Had she scared him away? “Here’s what we’re going to do. If you want to. Let’s go upstairs. We can run you a bath or shower—whatever you prefer—and then I’m going to tuck you into bed. If you want me to join you, even if it’s just to talk, I will. If you’d rather call it a night, that’s fine. Really—” he cut her off as she opened her mouth to ask if he really meant it. “It’s really fine.” He held out his hand and she took it, finding herself standing once again face to chest with him. It wasn’t a terrible view. “No expectations. Promise.”

Who was this man? He was both decisive and flexible. He let her just...be. Be however she was, with no expectations. And he seemed to like her whether she was competent business owner Piper or exhausted, uncertain Piper. Had anyone outside of her close group of friends ever been this accepting?

She’d be a fool not to take him up on his offer.

“All right,” she said. “That sounds great.”

He gave her hand a squeeze and led her to the doorway. Then he stopped abruptly, and she laughed. “It’s this way.”

She turned around and showed him the stairway, and followed him up. As they made their way up he leaned his considerable weight on the bannister, as if each step was painful. She slowed her own steps, in no rush herself and figuring he'd let her know if he needed assistance. He'd done so much already today, and here he was pushing himself further for her benefit.

"You can sit on the bed, if you want," she said once they reached her bedroom. She tried not to look at the clothes scattered around the floor. At least she had vacuumed the other day. He sat and she paused, standing before him. It felt odd to be taller than him, looking down at his upturned face. His hands came to her hips and she stepped slowly between his legs, her heart rate picking up as she moved closer.

"Thanks," she said softly.

"For what?"

"For...understanding." She let her hands rest on his broad shoulders, feeling the heat of him through his shirt.

His thumbs brushed her sides and he swallowed. "Not a problem."

She leaned down to kiss the top of his head, feeling shy and awkward. Then without another word she grabbed some pajamas and escaped into the bathroom.

In the shower, she washed away the stress of the day, but butterflies still fluttered in her stomach as she considered the man in her bedroom. Also: *There was a man in her bedroom.* Did she want to put off having sex with him in favor of calling it a night and going to bed? She doubted she'd get much sleep, wondering what could have been, what she might have done with him. She knew it was a risk, taking this next step with him. Temporary as it was, she liked spending time with Gavin, and she wasn't self-deluded enough to believe she wouldn't miss him when he left. But she also knew she wasn't in deep...yet. Was the risk to her heart worth it?

When she emerged from the bathroom he was as she'd left him, sitting on the bed. She made her decision as she walked

over to him.

“I don’t want you to tuck me in,” she said, hiding a smile when she saw disappointment in his eyes. Could he possibly want her as much as she wanted him?

“You want me to go?” His voice was gruff but even.

She shook her head. “No. I want you to stay.”

His eyes flew to hers, searching her expression. For doubt, she guessed. She discovered she didn’t feel any.

“You’re sure?”

She nodded and moved to the bed. She sat next to him, his large bulk foreign yet somehow welcome in the familiar surroundings. He felt solid. Grounded. She tucked her legs underneath her and knelt beside him. He shifted to face her.

“What do we do first?” she asked, her voice almost a whisper. *Stupid question*, she thought. It wasn’t as if she’d never done this before. It only felt that way.

He glanced down at his bad knee. “Well, this is hardly the sexiest beginning to this, but I should probably take off this brace.” He leaned down to unbuckle it, then glanced up at her. “Sorry.”

She frowned at him. “Why are you sorry? You need the brace. Here, let me...” She wrestled it free from his leg and set it on the floor.

“Thanks,” he said, his voice subdued. He lay back on the bed, hands behind his head, and stared up at the ceiling. “I have scars. You know, from the surgery. You’ll see them. They’re not...pretty.”

Piper put a hand on his leg. When he didn’t respond, her other hand came to his chin and turned his face toward her. Her fingers traced the rough outline of his jaw. “I don’t care about that,” she said firmly.

And then she leaned over and kissed him.

She felt his intake of breath, his lips warm against hers, his large hands coming to grasp her waist. He sat up, swinging his

legs over the side of the bed.

Before she could think better of it, she straddled him, knees on either side of his hips. He grunted against her mouth and she smiled against his.

She could feel the rough texture of his jeans over his thighs through her pajama bottoms. His chest was hard and hot as she looped her arms around his neck.

“Piper.” He broke the kiss to say her name.

“What?”

He stared at her. “I don’t... I don’t know.” His short laugh was a pleasing rumble when she was this close to him.

“Me neither,” she replied. “But this feels pretty good, and I don’t want to stop.”

It was the truth. She understood why he had stopped, understood that feeling of uncertainty, of wondering if they could really just *do* this. But she wanted to, and if the bulge in his jeans was any indication he wanted to, as well. They were both consenting adults—so why wait any longer?

She kissed him again, his groan when her tongue touched his the only encouragement her body needed to immediately be all in. Heat coiled below her belly, and her breasts sparked with sensation where they pressed against him.

This was why she had agreed to this whole thing. This instant combustion between them, this physical connection unlike any she had experienced before. She wanted this. Wanted to feel, to want, to *connect*.

She tried to slip off his lap, but his arm held her fast.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he growled against her neck.

“Well...” She turned so that her nose was almost touching his. “We can stay like this, or we can take our clothes off—I don’t think we can do both.”

His eyes closed, a smile touching the corners of his mouth. He released her. Slowly, reluctantly. She stood and tried not to

feel self-conscious. It helped when Gavin reopened his eyes and looked at her like he wanted to push her against the wall and have her a thousand different ways.

She slipped her shirt over her head and let it fall to the floor, and kicked off her pants before her shyness could return. She heard his sharp intake of breath and was gratified by the way his eyes devoured her naked body.

“Jesus” was all he said.

“Now you.” She stepped back to him and slid her hands under his shirt. He groaned as she slowly pulled the fabric up, her knuckles brushing his skin. She went inch by inch, enjoying the way his eyes held hers, the way his breathing quickened under her touch, every inch of him vibrating with controlled desire.

His hands pulled the fabric from her grasp impatiently and ripped the shirt from his body.

“Hey, I was enjoying that,” she teased.

“So was I,” he grunted. “Too much.”

She leaned closer and put her hands on his shoulders. His forehead came to rest on her stomach.

“Sorry,” he muttered against her skin. He raised his head to look at her. “I just want you.”

Piper was sure she had never heard sexier words than those, spoken so honestly and with such vulnerability.

Her fingers followed the line of the tightly bunched muscles in his neck. She was in trouble with this man, but she wasn't willing to stop what they'd started. She would worry about it later. Tomorrow. She would build her walls back up and remember why this couldn't ever be more than just sex.

She pushed him, hard, not that it moved him one inch. “Lie down,” she said.

He raised one eyebrow in response, but lowered himself onto the bed, swinging his legs up and kicking off his shoes, which fell with a thunk to the floor. “What will you do with me now that you've got me here?”

Piper lowered herself to her hands and knees by his side on the bed, then sat back on her heels. Her fingers reached over to play with the button on his jeans.

“This looks uncomfortable,” she commented, her thumb brushing against the thick bulge. His hips lifted up instinctively.

“Piper.”

“Hmm?” She blinked at him innocently. Then she popped open his jeans and stroked his cock through his briefs.

“Jesus,” he said again. “Piper...”

“Help me take these off,” she interrupted him, and she tugged at the waistband. She didn’t want any hesitation, any more discussion.

He groaned as he leveraged himself up to sit, and made quick work of his pants, briefs, and socks before lying down once again.

“Better.” She smiled at him. She glanced down at his injured leg, noting the scarring around his knee, which wasn’t nearly as ugly as he seemed to think. It was just a part of him, like the spray of freckles on his arms, or the dusting of hair on his chest. She scooted closer, swinging a leg over his thighs and settling herself there.

“What are you...” he began, but she didn’t give him a chance to finish the thought.

One palm bracing herself on the bed quilt, she leaned over and stroked his cock again, this time feeling the hot, bare skin against her hand. She was rewarded with a low groan from Gavin.

“Piper...”

“Shh,” she said. If she was going to do this, she was going to *do* this. All in. She wanted the whole experience, every sensation. She wanted it all.

She kissed the tip of his cock, already beaded with moisture. It was a little hard for her to believe he wanted her as badly as she wanted him, but the evidence was there. Her tongue

flicked out to taste, and she heard his sharp breath, felt his lower body twitch.

“Piper...”

She huffed a laugh, her breath reflected off his skin. “Yes, Gavin?”

Without waiting for him to respond, she took him into her mouth, one hand at the base of his cock. She kept her movements even, rhythmic, as her tongue stroked him, her lips sucking with each movement of her head. She could feel him throbbing, growing even harder until he was like iron in her mouth. Heard his ragged breath, saw his fists clenching the sheets.

“Jesus, *Piper*.”

With a wet pop she released him and looked up. “What?” She tried and failed to keep her innocent expression in place.

Gavin let his head fall back against the pillow. “I think you’re trying to kill me.”

She climbed up his body, skin on skin, until her face hovered above his. He was hot and a little sweaty, and she could feel every muscle in him, tensed. She felt a little tense herself, but it was a delicious tension, a coiling before the release. She pressed a light kiss to his lips. “I don’t think you understand how this works,” she murmured.

“Really? Maybe you can explain it to me.” His voice was slightly shaky, and she let her weight drop on top of him. Immediately his arms came around her as she braced herself on her elbows.

She didn’t want questions or explanations, so instead she let her legs separate, straddling him as she kissed him, shivering slightly against the warm roughness of his hands on her back. His fingers trailed along her spine, gently, exploring as his tongue explored. She could feel the physical power held in check, the way he was holding himself back, and she wanted none of it. She tore her mouth from his and bit lightly on his neck, at the same time as she pressed her lower body more firmly against his.

She heard a groan before she was flipped over onto her back, the speed with which Gavin had wrested control from her and turned both of their bodies 180 degrees stealing her breath.

“Hey!” she gasped. She gasped again when his mouth came down first on one bare nipple, then the other. He looked up at her, blue eyes gleaming.

“I might be over forty, but I’m not going to last another ten seconds with you on top of me,” he said. “My turn.”

When his tongue again dragged across her nipple, she whimpered.

“What—”

Gavin kissed down her body, not missing an inch: her chest, stomach, hips all the focus of his considerable attention. By the time she felt his hot breath just above where she really wanted him, she was moaning and writhing with anticipation.

“Gavin—”

His chuckle vibrated through her center, and she almost shot off the bed.

“You had your fun, and now it’s my turn,” he said.

He kissed her seam, slowly, gently, the pressure sending sparks up every nerve in her body. And then he licked her, slowly again, as if he wanted to savor her taste. She arched up instinctively, but he had her, his strong hands holding her steady as another of his deep chuckles rolled its way through her.

She laughed, too, joyfully. It all felt so *good*, so free—sparring with Gavin, teasing and being teased by Gavin, pleasuring and being pleased by him.

And then her laugh became a moan as he quickened the strokes of his tongue and she felt herself tense for release, so soon—almost too soon. She wanted this moment, this feeling, to last forever. His tongue dipped inside her and that was it—she shattered into a million blissful pieces, the force of her orgasm rocketing through her so that even after it subsided,

she could feel residual mini earthquakes as they both lay panting on the bed.

“Oh my God,” she whispered as Gavin shifted himself to the side. “Who’s trying to kill who?”

She turned her head to look down at where he sat and couldn’t help a smile at how satisfied he looked. But of course, he wasn’t *entirely* satisfied, not yet, and one glance at his cock told just how much he wanted to be.

“Come here,” she said when she could catch her breath again.

He stretched himself out on his side, facing her. “Was that to your liking?” he asked, still with that same satisfied expression.

“If it was any more to my liking, you’d be picking pieces of me up off the floor for days.” She turned on her side and traced the hard muscles of his arm with her fingers.

“Piper...” he began, but she didn’t want to talk. Or think.

“I want you inside me,” she said. And she did. More than anything at this moment, she wanted him, to lose herself in him, to have him fall over the cliff *with* her this time. “Stay here.” She rolled away from him to rummage in the bedside table drawer, which she had stocked just yesterday.

“I’m not likely to go anywhere with that view,” he commented, smacking her ass lightly with his palm in a way that made her pulse spike—maybe they could explore that more later. But right now...

She nudged him onto his back and straddled him again, ripping open the foil package. “Is this okay?”

Gavin glanced down at his rock-hard erection. “Yeah, this is more than okay. Please proceed.”

She rolled on the condom, taking her time and making sure to add a couple of extra strokes of her fingers. Gavin’s chest rose and fell heavily, and he closed his eyes. Then his hands came to her hips and once again she was flipped onto her back.

“Want this to last more than a minute,” he growled into her neck.

He was a welcome weight between her thighs, his hands pressed into the mattress. She thought he would thrust into her but instead he took his time, inching in, then out, until she sank her fingernails into his ass and squeezed.

“Gavin...”

Again, he chuckled, then moaned as he sank into her, filling her almost to the point of discomfort. His muscles bunched under her hands as he tried to go slow, but slow wasn't working for her. She felt wild and greedy, and she urged him on with her hands and body, gasping his name with every surge.

“God, Piper, it's—”

Whatever he was going to say was lost as she came again, shouting his name this time as waves of intensity sent her arching off the bed as he pressed down, groaning his own release. His entire body shuddered, and he moaned her name against her shoulder before collapsing his weight on top of her.

After several moments he rolled away just long enough to dispose of the condom, then lay on his side, tucking her up next to him. She yawned.

“Nap now, Piper,” he said into her hair, and she could hear the smile in his voice. “Because I don't think you're likely to get an undisturbed night's sleep tonight.”

Chapter Twelve

Gavin was sitting at the kitchen table reading the news on his phone when Piper finally made it downstairs. He suspected she was generally an early riser and felt smug that he had worn her out.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” he said as she shuffled into the room, pink hair a tangle down her back. “I hope you didn’t have to get up for work.”

Piper blinked at him, then rubbed her eyes. She was adorable and he wanted to drag her back upstairs until nightfall.

She shook her head. “Nope. I told the crew I’d be in a little late.”

Gavin arched one eyebrow, and she blushed furiously.

“Not because I thought we... I mean... I just scheduled the morning off!”

He took a sip of the orange juice he’d found in the fridge, enjoying teasing her a little too much. “You want me to believe you didn’t take a few hours off because you knew I’d wear you out last night? Tell it to someone who wasn’t there.”

He had woken her not long after round one for another searing tumble, then she had done the same to him sometime in the middle of the night. And then someone had woken the other around dawn, he wasn’t sure who. Each time he’d thought it couldn’t feel any better, and each time he’d been shaken to his core.

Piper rolled her eyes and started grabbing the makings for a pot of coffee. “It’s not fair,” she grumbled. “You’re a professional athlete. You have stamina.”

“I didn’t hear you complaining last night.”

She turned and stuck her tongue out at him. “Probably I was too worn-out.”

He liked this. Seeing Piper in the morning, messy and half-awake, their easy banter. He liked *her*.

He might have a problem.

He felt an unfamiliar urge to talk about last night, and discuss where they stood with each other. He wasn't usually one to analyze relationships, which hadn't exactly helped his failed marriage. But now he found himself in the uncomfortable position of wanting to discuss things, to make sure they were on the same page. His desire to please Piper was...well, it was a little unfamiliar. He'd never been great about asking what his partner wanted, emotionally speaking. But he couldn't please her if her wants were a mystery. He wanted to know what she was *thinking*, dammit. About them, and about their agreement. Was it possible, after last night, that they could let go of what was between them so easily?

"Piper..." he began, not really sure what he wanted to say. In any case, she ignored him.

"Are you hungry?" she asked as if he hadn't spoken, although there was no way she hadn't heard him. She stared into the refrigerator. "I could make some eggs. Or oatmeal."

Fine. He got it. She hadn't signed up for deep analysis of their nonrelationship. They'd agreed to have sex, nothing more.

He set his glass down carefully on the table and took a deep breath. What was wrong with him? He was leaving. He was going back home, to his real life, and to an opportunity he absolutely could not pass up. Not if he wanted to be *the* Gavin Williams again.

"Oatmeal sounds great," he replied.

She turned and smiled over her shoulder at him, and he wondered if it was relief he saw in her expression. Relief that he was going to let them just go on as planned.

"Great," Piper said. "Sit there and I'll get it started." Piper poured coffee into the largest mug Gavin had ever seen and turned to face him. "You should probably stay off your leg," she added almost apologetically, as if she expected him to be

angry at the very suggestion. He supposed he had been pretty grumpy about his injured status.

“Thanks,” he said quietly, and meant it. In fact, his knee *was* a little sore, stretched out in front of him in its brace as he sat. And they both knew why. He hadn’t exactly been careful last night. He probably would have willingly compounded the injury if he could just keep making love to Piper.

Having sex. It was just sex.

Gavin took another long, slow breath as he watched Piper throw together a pot of oatmeal. He loved the way she moved—competent, efficient, unselfconscious.

But he had no business loving anything about her.

His phone vibrated in his pocket and he quickly checked it. The text was from Morgan, reminding him that he’d agreed to—been roped into, really—attend an informal skate the following week for a few Firebirds prospects and some of the team members who were around this summer. Apparently, the coach had asked Morgan to help direct the practice and provide feedback, but he wanted to skate. So he’d suggested Gavin as a replacement.

To say he had mixed feelings about it was an understatement.

Any opportunity to be around hockey was appealing, but it wasn’t like he was going to participate as a player. And that stung. He’d be firmly in the “off ice” category of staff. He supposed he needed to get used to that before he started work in Vancouver, and this skate was an opportunity to take a first step in that direction.

Of course, there was the minor fact that he had zero coaching experience and had no idea what to look for in a group of skaters, let alone how to direct them. But surely, he could figure it out without embarrassing himself. The last thing he needed was another blow to his pride.

He texted Morgan back, reluctantly telling him he’d be there.

“So, what’s your plan for the day?” Gavin asked.

Piper lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I have to go into the Bean in a bit. Murray’s there all day and we’ve got coverage, but I need to check in.”

“No rest for the boss,” Gavin commented.

Piper smiled as she stirred the pot. “Something like that.”

She spooned oatmeal into two bowls and brought them to the table, followed by maple syrup and brown sugar. “So you can fix it how you like it.”

It was so goddamn domestic, and Gavin had never been good at domestic. He traveled too much, trained too much, obsessed too much about the next game. Not anymore. He could get used to this—lazy mornings at home with a fascinating woman just as driven as he was in her own way. But getting used to it wasn’t an option.

However, he wanted to make sure he claimed a spot in her busy schedule before she whooshed off into her day. If his time with Piper was limited, he was going to make sure he got as much as he could.

“Dinner tonight, maybe?” he asked casually, not at all comfortable with how much he wanted her to say yes.

“Are you offering to cook?” She smirked at him, and he smirked right back.

“Sure am. Did you think a hockey player can’t make a decent dinner?”

She looked almost comically skeptical. “We’ll see. Or maybe this is just a ploy to get me over to your house so you can get in my pants.” She grinned.

“I do enjoy being in your pants, Welborn.”

“Right back at you, Williams.”

This was it. This was where they needed to be. Light, easy. Piper had made abundantly clear that she didn’t even want to talk about anything heavier. And he shouldn’t—*didn’t*—either. He needed to get his head on straight if he was going to enjoy what time he had with her.

And then move on with the rest of his life.

* * *

Piper grabbed her sneakers from the porch and pulled them on just as Gavin's car turned into his driveway across the street. Home from a morning physical therapy session, no doubt.

She waved at him as she opened the door, squinting in the late-afternoon sun, and tried to ignore the fact that her heart hummed louder than the cicadas when he waved back and started across the street to her house.

The afternoon was gorgeous, hot but finally dry after a week of relentless humidity.

Not that Piper had been outside all that much since last weekend, when she'd first spent the night with Gavin. She'd either been working or spending time with him, mostly in bed. Or on the couch. Or floor.

"Hey," she said a little breathlessly when he was in speaking distance. He stood on the front path at the bottom of the steps, as tall as she was at the top of them.

"Hey yourself." His mouth tilted in a half smile, and she was pretty sure her heart tilted in her chest to match. "You look like you're going somewhere."

Piper forced herself to stop staring at Gavin's mouth and pay attention. "Fern asked if I'd help plant some stuff in her garden." She couldn't help a smirk. "I'm pretty sure it's an excuse to pump me for information about—" She gestured between the two of them with her hand.

Gavin raised one eyebrow. "Really? Are we that interesting? Would you like me to come with you and play defense?"

Piper laughed. "I think I can handle it, but you're more than welcome to come." She grinned at him, happy to be outside and away from work for a bit. And with Gavin.

Yesterday at the Bean had been brutal, the swampy weather making people grumpy as they stood in line, their clothes sweaty and faces red. While she was forever grateful that the

Bean's space had central air-conditioning, it also made it a popular hangout among those who wanted to get away from home or work but didn't want to be outside. Good for business, sure, but long lines and cranky customers didn't make for an easy day at work.

But then that evening she had arrived home to a text from Gavin inviting her over. When she'd crossed the street to his house, she found him cooking a full dinner and holding an open bottle of wine. Just what she'd needed. She had thanked him thoroughly in the bedroom later.

They had stayed up late talking—about their childhoods, their families, their likes and dislikes. They had much more in common than she might have guessed. They'd both had stable, relatively happy childhoods. Both felt driven to make their parents proud, to repay them for all that they had given them. And they shared smaller things, as well. They both wanted a dog but had never owned one. They both preferred to wake up early, liked television better than movies, loved long drives, and enjoyed ice cream above all other desserts. They even talked about Gavin's injury, how difficult rehab had been and still was, how much he missed being on the ice.

They did not talk about the future, and certainly not about their looming deadline.

The only problem was, the more time she spent with the man, the more she *wanted* to spend time with him.

But she'd signed up for sex, and only sex. And all the thoughtful dinners and late-night confessions and even that particular feeling she had once they'd worn each other out in bed, the one where their hearts seemed to beat in time with each other, where the world shrank to include only them, so different from each other yet fitting perfectly together—none of that would change what they'd agreed to.

And none of it would change what she knew was best for her, for her life moving forward. She wasn't a person who usually made rash decisions. She'd weighed the pros and cons of pursuing a fling with Gavin. Past experience told her that a relationship with a cis man would only bring difficulties.

He was leaving. And it was for the best.

“You ready?”

She started at the deep voice below her, realizing that she was still standing on the front stairs, staring off into space. She stepped down onto the path. A low chuckle followed his question as Gavin’s arms came around her before she could start toward Fern’s.

“Lost in thought?” he asked, his breath warm on her ear.

She brought her thoughts firmly into the here and now, and glanced toward the street, just in time to see a family strolling by on the sidewalk.

Gavin kissed her cheek, then her forehead, as Piper’s eyes remained on the family. The parents were smiling, looking at them knowingly—approvingly, even. In exactly the way they would never look at her if she was with a woman. Sure, people in Shady Hill were by and large an accepting group. But it wasn’t the same. The assumption was there—the assumption that she was with Gavin, romantically and sexually. No surprise flashed across their face, no quickly covered discomfort.

She couldn’t help but resent it, just a little. It was as if Gavin’s very presence as a man caused half of her sexual identity to vanish in the eyes of the world.

And yet...she didn’t even know that family. They might have been customers at the Bean in the past—maybe they knew who she was, maybe they knew something about her. Maybe they didn’t. Piper laid her head against Gavin’s chest. Were their assumptions worth more than what she had with the man in front of her? Was she less than her whole self because of what strangers might or might not assume? Or was she less because she let those assumptions control how she lived her life?

“What’s wrong?” Gavin asked quietly.

Piper shook her head. “Nothing.”

He took a long breath against her, then he pulled away and smiled down at her. “I’m just going to pretend that’s the truth,

until and if you want to tell me what it is.”

She smiled back, relieved. His acceptance wrapped around her like a protective blanket. She took his hand and they began walking toward Fern’s house.

Gavin’s phone rang in his pocket.

“Williams,” he said in that curt way men had of answering the phone.

The conversation was brief, Gavin offering only a few syllables and the occasional short sentence. She gathered it was hockey related, but whether the person on the other end was from Philly or Vancouver, she couldn’t tell. And despite everything, she hoped it was the former.

When he hung up, she cast him an inquiring glance, even though it wasn’t any of her business.

He slanted a smile at her, as if he knew she was dying of curiosity, but said nothing.

She huffed out a breath. “Well, who was it?”

He laughed, and she punched him in the arm with her free hand. “Hey! Okay, fine—it was Lou Fuller, the General Manager for Vancouver.”

Piper ignored the squirmy discomfort in the pit of her stomach at the mention of Gavin’s once and future hometown.

“He wants me to fly out there this weekend, to settle things.”

Well, this was as good an opening as any to ask the question on her mind. “Do you know when you’d be moving back?”

She glanced at Gavin and saw him take a deep breath. “Training camp doesn’t start until September, but they’ll want me there within a couple weeks. Get settled and on board with what they expect from me.”

Okay, so a couple of weeks. Piper told her heart to stop squeezing itself into a tight knot. She could enjoy Gavin for a couple more weeks, and then let him go. Two weeks wasn’t long enough to get so attached that she’d be hurt.

When they walked into Fern's backyard, the older woman grinned and exclaimed, "Well, isn't this a surprise!" As if Piper hadn't seen her watching them from the side garden as they crossed the street. She suppressed an eye roll as she surveyed the yard, as familiar to her as her own.

Raised vegetable beds lined one side of the yard, with less formal beds of flowers along the fence line. Roses bloomed pink and red near the house. The tangy smell of fresh mulch mingled with earthy cut grass, the heat of the sun baking the scent of the garden into the air.

Piper turned and laughed to see Gavin's arms already laden with seedlings in small pots, Fern bossing him toward the first bed. Gavin looked her way and shrugged.

"Didn't take long for her to make you work," Piper commented.

"Don't think you're immune," Fern shot back, her own hands full of baby plants. "You can grab the rest."

"Isn't it kind of late for planting?" Gavin asked.

Fern's face lit up, and Piper braced for a lengthy garden lecture on successive planting and fall crops. She hoped it wouldn't bore Gavin to tears.

But Gavin listened attentively, asking questions about the different vegetables and flowers, and handing containers down to Fern as she worked. Piper could tell that Fern was careful not to ask Gavin to kneel down with her, his leg still locked in its brace.

After a while, Georgie came out of the house bearing bottled drinks, wearing a suit and obviously on her way into work. She looked as pleased as Fern had to see Gavin.

"Nice to see you out and about," she said. "You've been our neighbor for months, but we've hardly seen you."

Gavin looked abashed at the gentle admonishment, but managed to slide Piper a knowing look. Piper knew he was thinking of the past week, most of which they had definitely *not* spent outside. She blushed.

Fern and Georgie looked between them and then smiled at each other.

“So, you’re headed back home soon?” Georgie asked, echoing Piper’s earlier question.

Gavin nodded. “A couple weeks. It’s not official yet, but I’ll probably be joining the front office for the team. Assistant general manager.”

Georgie’s eyebrows flew up into her hairline. “Well! That is something. Big news, you returning to Vancouver to the front office. That must mean a lot.”

Gavin ran a hand through his hair, leaving a streak of dirt on his forehead. Piper’s hands itched to smooth it away. “It does. If I can’t play, I want to contribute in the most meaningful way I can.”

“And you’ll still be a face of the team, and one of the people calling the shots—even more so than when you were captain,” Georgie said knowingly.

Gavin smiled. “That doesn’t hurt.”

Piper found herself wishing in that moment that Gavin wasn’t Gavin Williams the famous hockey player, and instead that he was a businessman, or mechanic, or anything other than what he was: favorite son of Vancouver, destined to return in glory to his hometown and leave Philadelphia, Shady Hill, and Piper herself behind. Of course, if he wasn’t a hockey player, he’d be a completely different person, and she didn’t really want that. She just wanted him to...

Stay.

She grabbed a random plant and stuck it a little too forcefully into the ground.

She didn’t—*couldn’t*—want him to stay, and she wasn’t even sure where that unwelcome thought had come from. As much as she enjoyed being with him, he wasn’t right for her, and she wasn’t right for him.

Gavin seemed perfectly content pattering around her friends’ yard with her for one morning, but she knew that

someone of Gavin's stature and competitive nature needed a purpose other than making her dinner and providing her with much-needed hugs after a long day. And she needed... Well, she needed someone who fit naturally into her community. Someone who would be happy with her as she was, someone who made her feel that she was enough—better than enough. Like she was exactly who the other person wanted to be with.

Isn't that exactly how you feel with Gavin? Isn't he all of those things? an unhelpful internal voice asked.

It didn't matter. It wasn't going to happen. Even if Gavin was different than the men in her past, even if he made her feel whole instead of divided, even if he fit in surprisingly well with her friends—he was still leaving.

Fern glanced over at Piper and the plant she'd mauled, then smiled warmly at Gavin. "I have no idea what any of that means, but congratulations. It sounds like a big deal."

"That'll be a big change from being on the ice, of course," Georgie said casually.

Gavin nodded slowly, and Piper wondered what he was thinking. She busied herself with the next plant.

"It will. I'm still...adjusting to that." He laughed quietly. "I'm still adjusting to a lot of things, I guess."

His gaze fell to Piper, who dredged up a smile and kept planting. She refused to be anything but supportive and happy for him, even if at that particular moment she sort of wished that Vancouver would fall into the sea.

"Well, congratulations," Georgie said brightly.

Selena the cat chose that moment to streak outside.

"Oh! The door's not shut." Georgie glanced behind her, then back to where Selena chewed a blade of grass, one wary eye on her owners.

"I'll get her," Piper said, grateful for an excuse to stop listening to the others discuss Gavin's job in Vancouver. "You need to get to work."

She edged along the fence until she was behind the cat, then with the speed of years of practice scooped her up in one arm and hauled her back to the house.

“You know better,” she said, and shut her firmly inside.

“Bless her persistence,” Fern said as she hugged her wife before Georgie went on her way. “Nine years old and she’s still making a break for it, like she’s not spoiled rotten in that house.”

“You can’t expect a cat to know when they’ve got a good thing going and just stay put,” Georgie said meaningfully, and Piper felt her cheeks heat with mortification as Fern nodded in agreement. Gavin looked between the three of them, missing nothing.

Piper suppressed a sigh. She loved how well Gavin seemed to get along with her friends, but the last thing she needed was for them to give Gavin a hard time about leaving. She’d known what she was getting into when she’d agreed to their fling, and she was a big girl—she could handle the fallout on her own.

Gavin limped over to where she stood and put his arms around her, pulling her into a long embrace while Georgie and Fern said their goodbyes. She felt his chest expand and then compress as he took a long breath, felt the rhythm of his heart under her ear.

“You okay?” he asked quietly.

She managed a smile and turned her face toward his, unwilling to expose the cracks that were beginning to fracture her carefully constructed defenses. “Of course. Thanks for helping Fern.”

He didn’t return her smile, searching her face for...what, she didn’t know. Another long breath and he released her.

Chapter Thirteen

The following day, Gavin arrived at the Firebirds' practice facility early, wanting to get his bearings before heading to the rink he would never skate on again.

He walked down the long hall toward the locker room, pausing to look at the framed pictures of past stars of the Philadelphia team. While not as old a franchise as some other teams in the league, the history was significant and impressive. He took note of the years each player had spent with the team. Many had played most of their career here, yet none had as long a tenure in the game as he'd enjoyed.

He was a lucky bastard.

Forced retirement was never easy, and no player on skates wanted to go out that way. But he'd long passed the point where his leaving the game could be called "early." He had accomplished everything he'd set out to, and more. And other than his bum knee, he had his health. It was so much more than most other players could say.

He had a chance now to build something new, to start a new chapter. That was lucky, too. He was flying out to Vancouver that night to discuss the job there. It was exactly what he had hoped for once his playing days were over. He could return home, pick up the mantle of Vancouver hockey's favorite son, and continue to help the team succeed from behind the scenes.

He could almost taste how good that would be.

"Hey, Williams." Saul Morgan emerged from the weight room just as Gavin passed by. "You should've joined me in there." He nodded his head back to the door he'd come out of. "It's been a while."

It had. Gavin and Morgan used to regularly meet up early in the morning for a workout. But since his injury, Gavin had avoided the training facility as much as possible, other than for his physical therapy appointments.

“Yeah” was all he said. Morgan wasn’t a big talker anyway, and certainly wouldn’t want to hear all about Gavin’s feelings.

Luckily, Tyler Valentine and some kid Gavin didn’t recognize came striding toward them, full of energy.

“Hey, Williams.” Valentine shook Gavin’s hand. “You in charge of us this morning?”

Gavin’s eyebrows flew upward. “In charge? No one’s putting me in charge of anything.” He cleared his throat, the denial having come out a little more forcefully than he’d anticipated. He tried to lighten his previous words. “Definitely not in charge of *this* whole mess.” He gestured at the three men. “You guys need an expert.”

Morgan grunted. “These young guys need a handler.”

“You and I are the same age,” Valentine corrected his new teammate with a frown.

The younger kid was watching this exchange with wide eyes.

“And who’s this?” Gavin asked.

“Target practice,” Valentine said. “We’re going to stick him down by the net and shoot pucks at him until he drops.”

“Ah, the newly drafted goalie,” Gavin replied, awareness dawning. The Firebirds had pulled a decent draft position that year and chose a young goalie prospect from a junior team in Canada. Opinions about his chances in the league were mixed, but the Firebirds were taking a chance on him. Today was an opportunity for him to get to know some of the team members, and to see what it was like to skate with the big boys.

The kid nodded but seemed too much in awe of his companions to speak.

Valentine laughed. “If I’d known you were going to be here, I’d have warned him,” he said to Gavin. “I think he’s starstruck. Hey, Jones, pick your jaw up off the floor.”

Jones blinked a few times and glanced down at the brace on Gavin’s knee. “Are you...are you skating with us, Mr. Williams?”

Morgan snorted at the kid's formality. Gavin smiled at him, ignoring the pang he felt somewhere in his chest at the thought of joining the skate. "Nah. Too old. But I'm going to help Coach with keeping you in line."

"Cool!" Jones's eyes lit up.

"Come on, Target Practice, let's get you set up with a locker." Valentine led the younger man down the hall.

"Guess he's got his nickname," Morgan commented. And then he ambled down the hall toward the locker room without another word.

Gavin went in search of Coach Burke and found him headed toward the practice rink.

"Williams, good. Glad you could make it."

"Hey, Coach."

Gavin had a good relationship with Coach Burke. The man was probably only a decade older than Gavin himself, but he'd been coaching at the top level for years. He'd come to Philadelphia two seasons ago, and he was one of the reasons Gavin had been willing to relocate. The man rarely smiled, but he had a knack for winning. And he tended to let veteran players play their game while guiding the younger guys toward that sweet spot of playing to their talents and fitting in with the team as a whole.

Gavin respected the hell out of the man, and if it hadn't been Burke who was going to be wrangling the practice with him there was no way he'd have agreed to come.

They walked to the rink in silence.

* * *

"It's freezing in here! You could have told me to bring a coat. And I'm not even interested in hockey," Piper grumbled as they made their way into the Firebirds' practice rink.

Sloan raised a single eyebrow full of meaning.

Piper glared at her friend. “The sport. I’m obviously interested in a particular hockey *player*. Temporarily.”

“So you say,” Sloan replied.

Sloan had been trying to get Piper to come with her to a Firebirds practice for years, and Piper just hadn’t been interested enough to bother. But when her friend had asked her again this morning, her curiosity about what the hockey life was all about had gotten the best of her.

Apparently, the hockey life was *cold*.

“*Temporarily*,” Piper emphasized, although she felt like more and more of a liar each time she said it. Not that her relationship with Gavin *wasn’t* temporary—it had an expiration date closer than the one on the milk in her fridge. But she could feel her heart working up a formidable case of denial syndrome.

Stay. The thought that had first occurred to her in Fern’s garden came back to her. Impossible. She knew how much working for his hometown team meant to him, and she could never ask him to give that up. She wanted him to have what he most desired, even if it left her behind.

“He’s flying out to Vancouver tonight,” Piper said once they had taken their place on the uncomfortable—and chilly—bleachers beside the rink. She watched the players straggle onto the ice and begin skating.

“*What?* Like, for good?” Sloan’s exclamation drew the attention of the other fans around them, and Piper elbowed her.

“No, not for good. Not yet. He’s going to talk to his old team about a job.”

“Oh, no.”

“What? Wait, don’t tell anyone I told you that—I don’t think he’s shared the news yet.”

“Maybe they won’t hire him, and he’ll have to stay here.”

Piper wasn’t going to tell her friend that a small, selfish part of her wished for exactly that. “He played with the team for almost twenty years—they’re definitely going to hire him.

And,” she continued with a quick glare at Sloan, “aren’t you the one who told me it was great that he’s leaving?”

Sloan shrugged. “Sure, but that’s because you said you didn’t want him when you so clearly did.”

“Hmph.”

They were quiet for several minutes.

“These guys are really huge in person.” Piper was changing the subject, and Sloan allowed it. “I never get used to it.”

“I *know*,” Sloan replied, waggling her eyebrows. “And *that’s* why we’re here. Also, I want to see how they’re shaping up for next season.” She frowned. “Uh, speaking of huge and in person...” Sloan pointed across the ice surface. “Who’s that over there behind the boards?”

“What—” Piper forgot whatever she was going to say as she recognized Gavin leaning on the edge of the board in front of him. He was calling out something across the ice, his deep voice unmistakable. “What’s he doing here?”

He hadn’t mentioned that he was attending the team’s practice, not that he owed her a detailed description of his calendar. But...he wasn’t just *attending*, he was clearly acting as some kind of second coach. That seemed significant. Huge, in fact, knowing what she did about his feelings around his injury and the end of his hockey career.

“I’m not the one in his bed, so I don’t know why you’re asking me.” Sloan glanced over at her curiously. “Maybe he’s got a lead on a job here in Philly, too? And this is like...an audition?”

Piper shook her head. “Nope. He definitely would have mentioned if there was any possibility of him staying.”

Right? He didn’t owe her any explanations, or to include her in his plans for the future. But she was sure he would have mentioned it if the Philly team was thinking of keeping him on in some capacity.

Wouldn’t he?

* * *

From behind the boards, Gavin surveyed the players out on the ice. It wasn't a large group, and Gavin didn't recognize a number of them. Recent draft picks, or players on tryout. A few unsigned players hoping for a chance to play this season. One guy Gavin recognized as a career player in the Russian league. There were a million ways into—and out of—the league, and these men were the ones still striving to find a place playing at this level.

“Take that group,” the coach said shortly, pointing to where some of the guys already on the team had gathered in a corner. “Light a fire under their asses while I check out the new ones.”

Okay, then.

Coach hopped onto the ice and skated over to the group of nervous-looking younger guys. Gavin could hardly do the same—already his knee was aching from standing around in the cold.

“Valentine!” he barked out. If the guy was expected to provide some leadership, he might as well start now. He waited until he skated over.

“I can't get on the ice to direct you guys,” Gavin said gruffly. He really hadn't thought this through. It was bad enough he wasn't out there skating, and asking Valentine for help was just salt on the wound. He should have at least grabbed a whistle before coming out here.

Valentine nodded. “Just let me know what you need... Coach,” he teased. Gavin rolled his eyes. He wasn't in a joking mood.

Gavin detailed the drill he wanted to run, just easy passing and shooting to get them in the rhythm. Somewhat to his surprise, the players hustled to get going, just because he said so. He watched them carefully, noting who had kept up his conditioning during the break, who looked a little off, who was busting their ass from day one. He could give Coach all of this information later.

He tried to ignore the throbbing in his knee. He should have worn sneakers instead of his good shoes, and he sure as hell should have put his vanity aside and brought his cane. He couldn't sit and still see the drills well enough, but standing for this long in the cold wasn't great.

His eye wandered over to the bleachers across the ice, where a fairly large group of dedicated fans had assembled. He didn't know why they wanted to watch drill after drill skated by a bunch of out-of-practice players, but he supposed the chance to see their team up close was some sort of draw.

When he'd seen enough, he caught Valentine's eye and gestured that they should all come over. The whole group skated toward him as one, most of the players dropping to a knee, or taking the opportunity to stretch. No chatter, no bullshit, all eyes were on him.

That part didn't suck.

"Okay," he said hoarsely, then cleared his throat and tried again. "Okay." This time his voice carried across the ice. "A few of you look good." A collective chuckle rose from the group. "Some of you might want to avail yourselves of both the weight room and this beautiful sheet of ice that will be free for two hours after the skate. Valentine, don't hold back when you're on—make these assholes keep up with you." Another laugh. "Barker—" he pointed at the young forward who had been a rookie last year—"take your time, find your spot. The net's not going anywhere. And all of you, pick up the pace. You've got your rhythm, now push it. I want to be able to tell Coach you all put in the effort today—and I *will* tell him whether you do or you don't. Okay. Now do it again."

The players took off and again did as they were told. And again, Gavin made mental notes to pass along. Over the course of the skate he started to feel strangely comfortable. Watching the game from this perspective was something entirely different from being on the ice, and yet it felt almost... good. He could see who needed to work on what, which players gelled together, and which probably shouldn't play on the same line. He knew the game and knew what he was seeing.

And he thought he could make some useful suggestions to both the players themselves and Coach.

But the desire to be out there himself was still a stabbing pain in his gut. He could *feel* it, the ice under his skates, the stick in his hand. He was so goddamn frustrated that one single part of his body could steal that from him for the rest of his life. It would never be him out there again. Ever.

He took a step forward to get a better view of Carlos as he took a shot, and Gavin felt his knee buckle under him. He grabbed the boards for balance and groaned.

Goddamn it.

“Carlos!” he barked. The younger player’s gaze shot over to Gavin. “Come around again.”

His teammate nodded and skated back around to run through the drill again. Coach came over to check in.

“You got this? You okay?” the older man asked, glancing down at Gavin’s leg.

Gavin nodded, leaning more of his weight on his hands. “Yeah. I’m good.” Fuck, he didn’t need Coach thinking he couldn’t even stand behind the goddamn boards. “Valentine looks good, but he needs to make the others keep up, not slow his game down. Barker has some second season nerves. And Smith obviously skipped some workouts.”

The coach nodded thoughtfully. “Good. You can give me a full report on each player after the skate.” He turned to watch Gavin’s group.

Gavin tried to focus on the players, their patterns on the ice, the exchanges of the puck, the shots, instead of the bitterness he could feel welling up inside him. He already knew what he’d tell Coach when he reported back—he didn’t need to see much more at this early stage, but the players needed the practice, so he signaled to Valentine to have them run a different drill.

He wanted to be out there. He knew he was being greedy. Selfish, even. He’d had a career most of these guys could only dream of. He had a shiny, prestigious job offer that would keep

him close to the game and allow him to go home to the team where he'd spent most of that career. He'd thought he was getting past his disappointment and anger, but being here brought it all back up. He hated that he couldn't let it go.

He wondered again who he even was if he couldn't play. Sure, he'd go back to Vancouver and bust his ass in the office, but what kind of life was that, really? He wasn't meant to be in an office. But where was he meant to be, if not on the ice? If he couldn't play, what did he really have to offer anyone? He thought of Piper. She was like sun breaking through the clouds on a dark day. That made him the clouds, he supposed, and he didn't like it. She deserved better than a bitter has-been.

He saw Carlos make a bad pass and unthinkingly stepped forward to say something in the coach's ear. A sharp stab of pain shot up from his knee clear to his thigh, and his leg collapsed under him. He grabbed the boards and only barely kept himself from falling over entirely. A glance at the ice told him that his near fall hadn't gone unnoticed—the players all paused to gawk before busily going back to their drills.

Fucking fantastic.

He forced himself to ignore the almost unbearable throbbing in his leg and pulled himself back to standing, only to find Coach Burke facing him.

“Head on back.” He nodded his head toward the exit. “Go see the trainer about your knee, then meet me in the office for your report.”

Burke skated away to gather the full group around him at center ice. Gavin stared after him for a minute before starting the slow, painful trek toward the back offices, knowing the eyes of the players and the fans on the bleachers were all on him.

He had been dismissed.

* * *

As she watched him fall forward, Piper felt Gavin's pain and embarrassment coil like ice around her insides as if they were

her own, even from across the rink. She knew it wasn't in her power to make this right, to take away the physical pain and the humiliation she saw in him. But she wanted to try.

Slowly, Gavin backed away from the boards, wincing as he put weight on his injured leg, and began limping toward the exit.

"I have to—" she began, standing abruptly, but Sloan grabbed her arm.

"What? You can't go back there." She waved her hand toward the path Gavin hobbled along as he made his way to the big double doors. "You can't get over there from here." Sloan stood as well and started edging over toward the end of the bleachers. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"But—" Piper stopped.

Sloan was right. She couldn't get to Gavin. The staff areas weren't accessible to the public. In any case, he didn't even know she was here. He hadn't chosen to share with her the fact that he was working with the team today, hadn't asked her for any kind of support. Which was fair—they didn't have that sort of relationship. It shouldn't have stung.

She would hear from him later. He was due to fly out to Vancouver that evening, but he'd gotten in the habit of texting or calling her in the afternoons to check in. He would tell her what had happened, and she could offer support then.

She stopped in the doorway on their way out of the rink and felt Sloan's arm come around her shoulders.

"Come on, let's go to the bakery and stuff ourselves with cannolis before you have to get to the Bean."

With one last glance back at the players still skating around the ice, she let herself be led outside.

* * *

That night, Piper threw on her pajamas after a long shower and crawled into bed.

She glanced at her phone on the bedside table. For once, it wasn't on silent. She had broken down and texted Gavin a couple of hours after the debacle at the practice rink. Just a casual "Hey, how are you doing?"

No response.

She tried again that evening as she walked the few blocks home, feeling uncomfortably needy and anxious all the while. If Gavin had wanted to share, he would have done so. Instead he had boarded a plane to another country without so much as a word.

That should have told her all she needed to know about where she stood. Their agreement was clear: sex only, and no future. Gavin's future was in Vancouver. She'd set the rules of their relationship with that in mind, but somehow, she'd ended up caring for Gavin despite herself. And this disappointment and gut-wrenching feeling of being left behind...well, it was only the beginning of the heartbreak she'd set herself up for. The boundaries she'd set around her relationship with Gavin Williams had been to avoid exactly this: loss and pain. She shouldn't care.

But she had turned the ringer on regardless and kept her phone by her side all night.

How much was he hurting? What had he been doing at the practice? Had he simply been too busy getting ready to leave for Vancouver to text her, or was it something more?

None of these thoughts were productive, and she crawled into bed and turned out the light.

Sleep didn't come for a long time.

Chapter Fourteen

Piper stretched her legs out in front of her on the ottoman and leaned back on her couch. Her feet throbbed after a busy day at the Bean, and she was smugly happy she'd given herself the next day off. And happier still that she'd invited Sloan and Murray over to distract her from her relentless obsessing over Gavin and his lack of communication this weekend—with the help of a bottle of tequila.

"I am so going to regret this," Sloan groaned from her spot on the floor next to the coffee table.

"You'll be fine. Now shut up and pour." Murray leaned over from her chair and tapped the bottle.

"Easy for you to say, you don't have to work tomorrow," Sloan retorted. But she dutifully lined up lime slices and salt, then poured three shots.

They silently shot, licked, and sucked, and Murray made a contented sound. "I could do this all night."

Sloan snorted. "Please don't. We all know you're a lightweight, and I don't want to have to carry your ass home."

"Any word from your giant lump of hockey player?" Murray asked, licking salt off her hand.

Sloan glared at her. "We are gathered here tonight to *forget* about relationships, not talk about them."

Murray shrugged. "I don't have any relationships to forget about. So, you need to tell me about yours, and then I can forget them."

"That...doesn't even make any sense. No more tequila for you."

"Hey!"

"It's okay," Piper said. Maybe talking would make her feel better. She was so tired of worrying about Gavin, worrying about what it meant that she'd barely heard from him since

he'd flown to Vancouver two days ago, worrying about whether or not he was finished with their agreement, worrying about the fact that she was worrying over their relationship in the first place. All of that worrying had given her a permanent headache, and she wanted to unburden herself. "Gavin's coming back from Vancouver tomorrow."

"Did he have a good trip?" Murray asked, inching toward the bottle again.

"Whoa there, lightweight," Sloan said. "Pace yourself."

Murray sighed in frustration.

"I don't know," Piper said, coming back to Murray's question. "He texted yesterday, but just to let me know he arrived."

She'd immediately texted him back, asking him about his flight, but she'd received no response. Disappointment and hurt had settled in her chest like a stone, and hadn't left since.

"Huh," said Sloan.

"What does that mean, 'huh'?" Murray wanted to know.

Sloan glanced at Piper. "Did you tell her about the practice?"

"Ooh, I want to know about the practice." Murray glared at Piper. "Why didn't you tell me about the practice?"

Piper nudged Sloan with her toe.

"What?" Sloan asked. "I thought we told each other everything."

"It's not really my story to tell..." She stopped as Murray gave her a sad puppy dog look. "Okay, fine." She pointed to the bottle. "Pour again."

She filled Murray in on their trip to the Firebirds' practice as they set up for another drink.

"That definitely sucks," Murray said around a mouthful of lime. "But he probably just has a bruised ego and doesn't want to talk to you about it."

Sloan nodded in agreement. “He’s licking his wounds—men don’t think about stuff like how someone will feel if they don’t text them. He probably thought letting you know he got there was enough.”

“I mean, it *is* enough,” mused Piper. “It should be, right? He doesn’t know I was at practice, or that I was—am—worried.”

Murray rolled her eyes. “You two have spent the last week and a half going at it like bunnies—I’ve barely seen you outside of work because you’re with Gavin when you’re not at the Bean. Not that I mind,” she added quickly. “I’m just saying.”

“You’ve spent all this time with him, and you want more from him,” concluded Sloan. “You want him to include you in his life.”

“I *don’t*,” Piper protested, although her words didn’t ring true in her own ears. She did, she knew she did, but admitting it aloud would make it real. Her feelings for Gavin, her desire for him to stay, her willingness to rethink everything she’d believed was best for her—all of it spread before her like a maze, with no clear path through to the end. “I really don’t. I was just worried, and he’d been texting me every afternoon before this. I thought... I guess I just thought he’d tell me about what happened.”

“Or tell you that he was working at the practice at the first place,” Sloan added.

“That’s fair, I think.” Murray sank back in her chair and crossed her legs. “I know you’re both like, this is just sex, but when you spend time together it’s normal to want to be included in things.”

“He doesn’t owe me that, though,” Piper said. “His future in hockey...in anything, it’s not part of what we’re doing.”

Sloan rolled her eyes but didn’t say anything.

“I still think he’s an asshole for not at least calling you while he’s away,” Murray said.

Piper’s instinct was to agree, but she meant what she said. Gavin didn’t owe her anything. His trip to Vancouver was

about his future. He had no reason to think about her in that context, or to keep her updated, no matter how much her own feelings might have shifted in that direction. And when he returned and they saw each other again—whenever that might be—it would still just be sex, and only for another week or two.

And then it would be over.

If she thought they'd developed something more, something that warranted confidences... Well, she now stood corrected.

"It just makes me wonder..." Piper stopped herself. She didn't really want to discuss it, but tequila tended to make her blurt out whatever she was thinking. Two drinks in and she was ready to tell them everything. She wondered how many more it would take until she could forget about it all, if only for the night.

Murray looked at her questioningly.

"It makes you wonder if he's still interested?" Sloan asked knowingly.

Piper sighed. "Yeah. I guess." Or wonder if she'd been completely off base in feeling that they'd advanced to something more than just a physical relationship. While she'd been developing feelings, had he been losing interest? That was it, really. Her own feelings had progressed to something deeper—but had Gavin's shifted the other direction?

"I'm sure he is," Murray said. "What happened at practice doesn't have anything to do with you two."

"Maybe." Piper wasn't so sure. "He was obviously upset at the rink, then he flies off to another country to talk about his future, and I barely hear a word from him. What if he's changed his mind?" Piper hated the plaintive tone in her voice, so she scooted forward to pour more drinks, just for something to do.

"Okay..." Sloan began carefully. "But let me just point out the obvious here, you yourself keep saying you're not in a *relationship* relationship with Gavin, so you're talking about what, a couple of weeks of sexy times left?"

“Maybe two,” Piper said grudgingly.

“And there’s no feelings involved, according to you—it’s just sex. So...does it really matter if he comes home and doesn’t want to bone down anymore? There *are* other men out there, if that’s the direction you’re going.”

“Which is definitely a new direction,” Murray commented. “I’m still getting used to it.”

Me too, thought Piper. As easy as it was to be with Gavin as an individual, the mental adjustment to being with a man was significant. But she could almost see it, like a sketch of what wasn’t yet a finished painting. An inkling of the idea that she could be who she was, regardless of who she was with. That she could work to maintain the connections she’d made, that her friends would be her friends no matter what. That she could have love, and her found family, and her own identity—together. “It started as just sex, but... It doesn’t matter.” She knew she was lying to her friends, to herself. It *did* matter. It wasn’t just sex. Not for her, not anymore. But the real heart of the matter was... “He’s leaving.” Which had once seemed ideal, but now echoed as a painful reminder of the losses she’d suffered in the past. But she didn’t want to say that out loud, either. So she changed tack. “Also, he’s *Gavin Williams*. I’m pretty sure all this—” she waved a hand at herself “—is not what he’s picturing for his future...”

“Hold up.” Sloan pointed at Piper. “We’re not doing that. You can lay out the rest of your argument, but don’t tell us that you’re not good enough for Gavin Williams. Because that’s bullshit. You’re smart, beautiful, and a great person.”

“It’s true,” Murray agreed.

“Okay, but...”

“No buts,” Sloan cut her off.

“But,” Piper persisted, “have you guys seen his ex-wife?”

“You did not Google his ex-wife, Piper. Say you didn’t.” Sloan shook her head.

“I...might have.” Piper shrugged. “I was just curious! I mean, he’s been *married*. That’s huge!”

She'd tried so hard not to look up Gavin's wife, but really, it was inevitable. She was a nosy person by nature, and deeply curious about Gavin's past, what sort of woman he'd chosen for that serious of a commitment. She'd sat in her office at the Bean, door closed, staring at her computer screen for a good five minutes before typing in the words. And there they were. Gavin looked happy in the pictures she'd seen of the couple. Younger. Confident. And his wife looked the same. Together, they appeared perfectly matched, despite what Gavin had said about their marriage. And the woman was basically Piper's polar opposite.

"Never Google the ex-wife," Murray said.

"*Anyway*, she's tall and gorgeous, and one of those women who wears stuff from magazines, and matching jewelry, and always looks put together."

"You look put together," Murray said. "You're just put together...differently."

Piper rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean. Gavin's image is like...perfect. Proper. King of hockey, you know?"

"Boring." Sloan stood, then grabbed more limes from a bowl on the coffee table and cut them in half. "The Gavin Williams we see on TV? *Boring*. And from what you've told me, he's a lot more than that. Give him some credit, maybe. Has he said he minds how you look, or who you are?"

"Well, no." Hardly. He seemed to like every part of her. He got along with her friends, didn't mind the long hours she put in at the café, and never seemed to expect her to be anything but who she was.

"So, like I said, bullshit." Sloan poured another round. "What else you got?"

"I mean... We agreed, this was just a short-term thing. We both agreed."

"And now you can't ever, ever change your minds. *Obviously*." Sloan handed her a glass.

"Our lives don't fit together, that's all. He's moving away, and he's got the whole hockey thing going on—he's like the

epitome of masculine sports culture, not to mention that hockey isn't exactly a safe haven for individuality and difference, as far as I understand it."

"That's for sure," Murray agreed over her glass.

They drank. Murray leaned over to put her glass on the table, missed, and it rolled across the room. Piper stood to retrieve it and steadied herself on the arm of the couch. She'd forgotten just how strong tequila was.

"But no one's asking *you* to play hockey," Sloan insisted. Murray laughed. "I'm just saying..."

"It wouldn't work, okay?" Piper wasn't sure she believed her own words, but she wasn't sure she *didn't* believe them, either. She knew her fears about how she'd be perceived if she was with Gavin were valid, and she tried to figure out how to explain as she handed Sloan her glass for another shot. "We're too different. The directions our lives are going...they don't connect. At all. We knew that going in, and that's why we agreed to a short-term thing. I don't fit in his life, and he doesn't fit in mine."

"Sure, if you both refuse to make space for each other," Sloan said.

"But not only is he leaving, he's..."

"A man," Sloan finished for her. "You still think that's the problem."

"I don't understand how that's a problem," Murray said. "He can't help being a man. None of them can."

"You're worried that people will think you're straight," Sloan said.

"No...yes. I mean—" Piper felt a blush creep up her face.

"You're worried people will think you're straight, and they won't see you the same way anymore. Because how people see you is so important. You can't possibly be you if people see you some other way."

Piper felt silly hearing the words out loud. But... "Bi erasure is a thing, though!"

Sloan nodded. “Sure. It is. But it’s a thing that you can still work against, even if you’re with a cis man. If you like him, then be with him. And if it’s important to you to be seen, then don’t let yourself be erased. Be queer as hell *and* love the person you love.” She held up a hand as Piper opened her mouth. “Love, like, enjoy banging, whatever. What are you so afraid of? I mean, other than your own expectations of yourself.”

Ouch. Tough love hurt.

Sloan’s words were eerily close to her own thoughts. She wasn’t twentysomething and navigating the world and her place in it for the first time. She was secure in who she was, in the people close to her. The idea of being perceived as something other than what she was still tripped an internal alarm—but she wondered if that alarm was a necessary safeguard, or a defensive measure against reliving past hurts. She wasn’t sure. But even if she could see herself in a long-term relationship with Gavin, it didn’t matter. He was leaving, and *that* was a truth that chafed against even deeper wounds she’d tried to bury.

“Look, can we just talk about something else?”

Sloan gave her a hard stare, but relented. She told them a story about a particularly difficult patron at the library, and Piper was finally able to relax, to think about the world outside of her love life. This was what she needed. She wanted to forget about Gavin for a while, to just get drunk with her friends and not worry about the man who had bulldozed right into her life when she wasn’t expecting it.

She grabbed the bottle of tequila and poured more drinks.

Some time later, Murray had moved to the floor and was laughing at Piper’s impersonation of Saul Morgan at the Bean.

“Oh my God, he was like a huge, hairy, mean bigfoot,” she wheezed.

“What? What does that even mean?” Sloan laughed.

Piper laughed, too, and whether it was her friends’ company or the tequila, she relaxed for the first time in days. She was

dizzy, too, and possibly like she was slurring her words, but that was definitely the tequila.

“Bottle’s nearly empty.” Sloan waved it around, liquid sloshing in the bottom.

“Oh, noooooo...” Murray put her hands over her face. “A trad-egy. Trag-egy. Whatever.” She lay back on the rug, and Sloan nudged her with her foot.

“You’re done,” Sloan said. Murray sat up.

“Nope! I’m fine. Let’s kill it.”

Piper slid forward on the couch, trying to ignore the way the room tilted slightly around her. “Ugh. Was this a good idea?”

Sloan snorted. “It was *your* idea. And again, some of us have to work tomorrow...”

“You feel better, though, right? Right?” Murray threw half a lime at her.

Piper tried to catch the lime, failed, and grinned anyway. “I do, actually. Yes. You guys are the best, and I love you.” She sounded sloppy and sentimental and she didn’t care.

“We know,” said Sloan, taking the top off the bottle.

The doorbell rang, and the three women froze.

“Are you expecting guests?” Murray asked from the floor.

Piper shook her head, then regretted the movement. “You *are* the guests.” She braced herself to stand. “I’ll see who it is.”

“Get rid of them,” Sloan said. “We’re busy.”

As she made her way to the front porch, Murray called out tipsily, “Whomstever you are, you’re keeping me from drinking, and I do not appreciate it!”

Sloan groaned. “I am definitely carrying your ass home.”

Smiling, Piper opened the door. She blinked several times, then looked behind her like the answer to her confusion would be found in the front hall.

Gavin stood before her.

He was wearing a suit, slightly ruffled, and holding his cane and a bottle of wine.

“Am I...dreaming?” She glanced behind herself again. “Did I pass out and no one told me?”

“Piper, get your hot butt back in here and finish this bottle with us!” Murray sang from the living room.

“Oh, dear,” Gavin said, his rumbling voice as always sending a tremor through her. He glanced down at the bottle he was holding. “I guess we won’t be needing this.”

* * *

Gavin regarded Piper with amusement. She was hanging on to the door frame for dear life and staring at his suit as if it was some sort of puzzle she couldn’t make sense of.

She pointed at him unsteadily. “You’re not here, though. You’re there.” She waved her hand in what he guessed was supposed to be the direction of Vancouver.

“We wrapped up a little early, so I figured I might as well come home—I mean, back to Philly.”

He’d texted Piper on his way from the airport, but there had been no answer.

“You’re not coming home until tomorrow, though,” Piper said, thoroughly confused.

Oh, boy.

He hadn’t been entirely sure of his reception at Piper’s house, given that he had been basically incommunicado all weekend. He’d been busy nearly every minute he was in Vancouver, and then Coach Burke back in Philly had called to say the team planned to announce the end of his playing days with the Firebirds—another reason for his early return. He would need to address the media at a small press conference on Thursday. Strangely, he wasn’t as torn up about it as he thought he would be. But it had still been a distraction.

Honestly, the main reason he hadn’t called Piper was that he had still been smarting from the events at practice and hadn’t

wanted to burden her with his bad mood. He'd done enough of that already. He knew she might wonder why she hadn't heard from him, but he figured that was better than being a grumpy asshole—again.

He certainly hadn't expected to come home to find her plastered. It was kind of endearing.

"I guess you ladies are having a party?" he asked. "Are men allowed?"

Piper shook her head, gripping the door frame more tightly. "Definitely not. Men are terrible." She looked him up and down. "You can come in, though."

Hiding a smile, Gavin edged around her when she didn't move to make room. She tried to follow and lost her balance, and he caught her with both hands, pulling her close.

He couldn't resist burying his nose in her hair and breathing her in, even if she smelled distinctly of tequila and lime. He'd missed her, and he hated to think about what it meant, that he'd felt like he was missing an important part of himself while he was away.

He'd missed Shady Hill, too. It had been good to be back in his hometown—familiar, predictable. He'd had drinks with a couple teammates who'd already returned to the city to train. And he'd had dinner with Vancouver's Coach Sullivan in addition to the meetings they'd both been in about the assistant GM job. He loved Vancouver and always would. And yet it had felt...different. His teammates were now former teammates. His coach was no longer his coach. Everything had shifted just a little, both his relationships with the people around him and his relationship to the city.

As he'd told Piper, he felt a bit like he'd missed out by living in the same city his entire life. He *liked* being somewhere different. And despite everything that had happened, he liked his new life in Shady Hill—his new friends, his new neighborhood, and, of course, Piper.

He pulled back, and she looked up at him. "You're really hot," she murmured.

God help him, those words alone, spoken in her honey-sweet voice, were enough to get him half-hard in his suit. He kissed her forehead gently. “And you’re really drunk. Your friends are here?”

“Mm-hm.”

He led her into the living room, where Carlos’s sister and the dark-haired woman from Piper’s kitchen the morning they’d first gone for breakfast were sprawled on the floor near the couch. An almost-empty tequila bottle and the remains of many limes were scattered over the coffee table. The two women both stared at him, then the dark-haired one—Sloan, he remembered—blinked.

“We were just leaving,” she said abruptly.

“What? No, we weren’t, we were going to keep drinking—” Murray stopped when Sloan pushed her with one hand. “*Oh,*” she stage-whispered. “Right.” She smiled brightly at Gavin. “We’re definitely leaving.”

Sloan pulled herself none too steadily up to standing, but she seemed far better off than Murray, who she hauled up with both hands.

“We’re leaving so you guys can, you know...” Murray smothered a giggle while Sloan rolled her eyes.

“Don’t mind her, she can’t hold her liquor.”

Gavin wasn’t sure anyone could hold that much liquor, but he stayed quiet.

Sloan whispered something in Piper’s ear on her way out that made her sigh and shake her head. And then they were gone, stumbling out the door together.

“Will they be all right?” Gavin asked as he closed and locked the door. “I could go with them, make sure they get home okay.”

Piper shook her head again, leaning into him as he put his arms around her. “Sloan’ll make sure Murray gets up to her room at Fern and Georgie’s, and she’ll crash on the couch there.”

She wound her hands around his neck, staring up at him dreamily. Definitely plastered.

“Were you all celebrating something?” he asked as politely as possible as Piper nuzzled his chest. It felt too good, and he knew that nothing more than this was happening that night.

“Nope. Just relaxing.” She pressed herself against him, snuggling in.

“You definitely feel relaxed.” He smiled.

“You’re so nice,” she said into his neck. “Except for this weekend.”

He pulled back so he could see her face. “This weekend?”

“You just...poof!” She snapped her fingers in between them, then settled her cheek back against his chest. “You were here, and then you disappeared. I thought...”

He waited, but she didn’t say anything else. He edged back again, wondering if possibly she’d passed out against him. But then she looked up at him, her beautiful eyes unfocused but definitely sad.

He was an asshole.

“I’m sorry, Piper. I was...really busy.” And angry at the world. And not willing to admit to himself how much he missed her. And worried that Carlos would tell her about what had happened at practice, which was a humiliation he definitely didn’t need, and for sure didn’t want to discuss with her over the phone.

“Too busy.” She nodded without lifting her head. “Too many important things.”

He was really, really an asshole. He should have called. Texted. Anything. Instead, he’d disappointed her, let her down without even trying. He’d let his ego get in the way and he’d hurt her. But he was here now, and he wasn’t going to let her think for another second that she didn’t mean the world to him.

He kissed the top of her head. “You’re important, too, Piper.”

She made a noncommittal sound.

“How about we get you up to bed?”

Piper blinked up at him. “Is that why you came over?”

He frowned. “Sorry?”

“Bed. Me. In it.” She wound her fingers through his hair and kissed his jaw. “You know. That’s what this is, isn’t it? I keep telling Sloan. Sex. That’s it. Just sex.”

He didn’t like the pang in his chest when she put it like that. And he didn’t like the sadness he saw in her eyes when she looked up at him again.

“Piper...”

“Did you get the job? In Vancouver?”

“I... Yes. I did.”

Piper looked like she was working something out in her head, but he couldn’t imagine it was going very well. “What is it, love?”

“I’m trying to figure out how much sex we can have between now and when you leave.”

Despite himself, he laughed softly. “Don’t you need to know when I’m leaving to figure that out?”

She pulled back from him and lost her balance, so he scooped her up in her arms and started for the stairs. “Oh!” She looked down. “Your knee...”

It hurt like a bastard, especially after the long flight, but he could deal. He hadn’t reinjured it at the practice, by some stroke of luck, so he was no better or worse off than he had been. In any case, he suspected Piper wasn’t getting up the stairs without help. And he liked how she felt in his arms.

He laid her down gently on the bed. She looked comfortable enough that he figured she could sleep in what she was wearing.

“Stay here,” he said. She turned onto her side and propped her head on her hand. “I’m going to get you some water and

ibuprofen.”

He smiled and limped painfully down the stairs to the kitchen. The way back up was worse, and he knew he had to get off his leg soon.

Piper sat up slowly and took the water and pills. “You don’t have to take care of me,” she said after she swallowed.

“I want to.” He sat on the edge of the bed. “Do you mind if I stay?”

She blinked at him. She was so sexy, sitting in bed and looking up at him as if he was her dream come true. He was anything but, especially after blowing her off for the past couple days.

“Just to sleep,” he said firmly. “You can figure out how much sex we have left tomorrow.”

“Yes. Stay.” She smiled, but quickly grew serious again. “If you got the job...when are you leaving?”

Fuck, he hated the idea of leaving her. And he hated that he was so bothered by it. What had he thought would happen when he agreed to this affair? He’d never been good at no-strings relationships. It just wasn’t his way. The whole thing had been a terrible plan. He shouldn’t stay tonight, shouldn’t encourage this intimacy that came so easily between them.

But he wanted to stay. He didn’t want to break things off with her, not yet. He was a fool, but he knew he was going to take every minute of time he could get with Piper, until it was over.

“Two weeks,” he said quietly as he took off his jacket, then his shoes and socks. “I’ll fly out to Vancouver on the fourth of July, and the movers come in to clear out the house the next day.”

“The fourth of July,” she echoed, before sliding under the blankets. He kicked off his pants and pulled his shirt over his head before joining her. The suit would be a mess in the morning, but he only had to walk across the street.

She turned to face him in bed, and he turned off the light before pulling her to him. “Do you have to work tomorrow?”

He heard her yawn. “No.”

“Good. I’ll make you a big, hangover-curing breakfast, and then we can watch bad TV until you feel better.”

“Mmm. I’m glad you’re here,” Piper said sleepily.

“I’m glad I’m here, too. I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.”

They were quiet for several minutes. He thought she’d fallen asleep, but then she spoke again.

“I’m sorry about what happened at the practice.”

He must have misheard her. “Sorry?”

She snuggled closer. “I was there with Sloan. She wanted to look at hot hockey players. I didn’t know you were working. You didn’t tell me.”

Piper had been there? She had seen his knee give out, seen the coach dismiss him from practice. He swallowed hard.

“It’s okay that you didn’t tell me. I thought…”

His heart pounded in his chest as he waited to hear what she’d thought as she watched him fail in spectacularly public fashion.

“You’re so brave,” she whispered so quietly he almost couldn’t hear her. “I was so proud of you for trying.”

A tiny snore told him she had finally fallen asleep, and he stared out into the darkness of the room. His head was a jumble of thoughts, his feelings a mess. Shock and embarrassment roiled his stomach, even as he held himself still in bed. He couldn’t believe Piper had been there, had watched him try his hand at coaching for the first time. Had watched his body fail him. Had seen everyone witness his humiliation. Shame washed over him, but then…

I was so proud of you for trying.

He *had* tried. It had been hard, and uncomfortable, and next time he'd put aside his pride and bring his goddamn cane. It hadn't been the perfection he'd come to expect from himself, but he had contributed something the coach needed. It hadn't *only* been a failure. He had something to offer, and he had *tried*, despite everything.

He inhaled deeply and tightened his hold on Piper.

Chapter Fifteen

The Bean was busy the next few days, and Piper felt like she was slogging through mud as she smiled and served and then dredged up the energy to wade through her ever-growing email inbox.

As much as she loved her shop and her work, Piper had been eager to get home where she knew Gavin would be waiting for her. Yes, she'd given him a key to her house, something only Fern and Georgie had. It was easier that way, since he'd offered to cook—again—but she'd known she would want to be in her own home after a particularly taxing day.

She knew her relationship with Gavin was short-lived and, in theory, all about sex, but she'd grown to depend on his presence at the end of the day.

Now, lying in bed with him, the moon a hazy glow through the window, she found herself wanting to snatch as many pieces of him as she could grab in the short time between now and July 4, when he'd fly out of Philly and out of her life. She wanted to be able to hold those pieces close when he was gone, as if her knowledge of him would somehow help mend the wound she knew his absence would inflict. She wanted to understand what made him tick, what individual pieces made up the whole of Gavin Williams.

Before he was gone.

“Can I ask you something?” She turned her head on the pillow toward where he lay sprawled on her bed, his large, muscled form the picture of relaxation and contentment.

He rolled to his side and slung an arm across her waist. The weight felt like a tether, grounding her to him and to this moment, keeping her thoughts from drifting into the uncertain future. “Sure, anything.”

“What's it like, being famous?” That wasn't exactly what she wanted to ask, so she tried again. “I mean, having like...a

public persona, and a private life? Do you feel sometimes like you're two people?"

She'd been curious about this part of him for a while. She knew that behind the confident, poised persona he presented to the world was an actual messy human. And yet, for his work, he had to tuck away that mess and present a clean, sanitized front when in public.

"Huh." Gavin's forehead wrinkled as he pondered her question. "I guess I do, sometimes. We're trained pretty early on to be a certain kind of person in front of cameras. 'I'm just happy to support the organization, we just need to get more pucks in the net.'" His voice effortlessly slipped into the same neutral tone Piper had heard from nearly every athlete in every interview she'd seen on TV.

She laughed. "Yeah, Carlos said he was grateful for the media training."

Gavin nodded, and began rubbing the small of her back with his fingers. "It makes it easier, having a script."

She scooted a little closer to him, breathing in his warm, musky scent. "I wish there was a script for the rest of us. Like...media training but for every day, for all the times we're with other people."

A low laugh rumbled through him. "Yeah. It may surprise you to know that away from hockey I can struggle with saying the right thing sometimes."

"You don't say." Piper smirked at him, thinking about their first meeting. She knew Gavin was remembering the same thing when he winced and groaned.

"Exactly. But in real life you can make things right, can't you? You can correct whatever stupid shit you said before. It's not just a one and done interview—you get to know people and then you see the whole of them. The depth of everything they are. And they see you."

"But what about the people you only know on the surface?" she asked, thinking about customers at the Bean, or the family who'd caught Gavin holding her in front of her house. Were

there parallels there, between his experience as a sports celebrity and her own in trying to craft her identity in the eyes of those around her?

“What do you mean?”

She flopped over onto her back, staring up at the shadows on the ceiling. Gavin propped himself on one elbow and looked down at her.

“Just...” She paused, feeling as if she was untangling her thoughts as she spoke. Maybe he could help her find a path forward through the questions his appearance in her life had raised. “If you only meet someone once, or only see them casually but don’t really get to know them, how can you make sure they don’t have the wrong impression?”

“Hm,” Gavin grunted, his free hand scratching his chin as he thought, then coming to rest on her stomach as if unwilling to stop touching her for more than a moment. “Well, as a hockey player, the media training is mostly meant to keep us from saying the *wrong* thing—something that would embarrass the team or hurt our public image. It’s not really about how to share ourselves with fans or whoever.”

“So, people who see your public image don’t really know you.” Of course, she knew that—that was one of the things she found so puzzling about Gavin’s status as a hockey star. She spent so much of her life wanting to be seen in her entirety, but as a famous person she supposed it was more important to protect himself and his team than to share.

“No, they don’t. But they don’t need to, do they?” His brows lowered in confusion. “They’re not part of my personal life.”

True, she supposed. Was it really that easy to simply not worry what others thought? “But there are things you *don’t* want people to see.” Like his cane. Or how he’d said he felt like a washed-up player because he’d had to retire. “And you *do* want to be seen as a certain kind of person.”

“Do I? I guess I do. Doesn’t everyone?”

“I just want to be *seen*. When I’m with you, I can see people assuming I’m straight. Or—” She shook her head. “I see them not even knowing they’re making an assumption. It’s just a default.”

“And you don’t want the bisexual part of you to be invisible, because it’s important to you.”

“It’s not just important—it’s *me*. Every time people assume their default, they’re not seeing me.” She paused and took a breath before continuing. “And then I just... I get lost. The whole of me is lost, and I don’t... I don’t belong. Not to any one group. Not to anyone.”

The truth of her own words hit her. She just wanted to *belong*. She wanted family, to be seen and known and loved by the people around her. Before her parents’ death she’d lost her wider community in the shuffle of her job and adult life and a string of disappointing boyfriends. And then she’d lost her parents. She hadn’t belonged to anyone. Not until she’d built her life back up and embraced her queerness, her place in that community. The community she’d built at the Bean. Her friends. She knew they were strong ties—knew that the people who loved her now wouldn’t leave her just because of who she dated. But was *she* strong enough to be her whole self?

Gavin waited patiently for her to continue.

“My last boyfriend... He thought it was ‘cute’ that I was bi. His word. It was more like he thought it made me exotic or something—as long as it was just for him. If I was out as queer or involved in the community, it wasn’t for him anymore, and not attractive. Like...my bisexuality was about him, and not a part of me. I had to perform my identity the way he wanted me to.”

“Sounds like he was a jerk.”

She laughed despite herself. “He really was.” And maybe *he* had been the problem, not her, and not her attraction to men—or women, or anyone else.

“Once, we were going out somewhere and I was wearing a T-shirt that said ‘I put the bi in bitch.’”

Gavin snorted.

“He was not amused.” He’d basically thrown a tantrum in her kitchen.

“So, what did you do?”

Piper remembered the sharp sting of surprise and anger, her shock at how her boyfriend had reacted and the self-doubt that quickly followed. “I changed my shirt.” And she’d felt resentful and shamed at the same time. She also hadn’t had anyone to talk to about it. If anything like that happened now, Sloan, Murray, Fern, and Georgie would be at the guy’s door with pitchforks. She smiled at the thought.

Gavin leaned over and kissed her, a soft caress that was more comforting than sensual. “What a dick.”

“He was,” she agreed. But he hadn’t been the only one, just the worst example.

Gavin seemed to be taking it all in, his eyes soft and thoughtful. Eventually, he blew out a breath and spoke. “And so, you don’t date cis men, because the ones you’ve been with made you feel like your identity wasn’t yours, and like it wasn’t okay. And also, because if you’re with someone else, then people *have* to see that part of you. I get it. It makes sense, but...”

“But...” She suspected whatever Gavin was about to say wasn’t going to be the easy answer she was hoping for.

“I’m not bi, and I’m not you. You have to make the choices that feel right to you. But honestly, that guy was a jerk. And as for everyone else... My experience is that people fill in the blanks according to their own prejudices—or defaults—no matter what. You’ll never convince a Calgary fan that I’m anything other than an asshole.”

Piper snorted this time, and Gavin smiled down at her.

“If I focus on being competitive,” he continued, “people think I’m arrogant. If I focus on being a good sport, people think I’m not competitive enough. People believe what they want.” His thumb rubbed just below her breastbone, gently. “It’s not the same, I know. But people who don’t know you,

don't know you. That's just how it is. You can't spend your life worrying too much about it. The people who are close to you know you, and you make sure they see the whole of who you are. And everyone else—well, you just try not to piss them off too much and move on.”

“Just stick to the script.”

“Or at least pick your battles. If an interviewer really goes after me, saying a bunch of crap that's not true, I can either choose to correct them or let it go. Depending on how much it matters to me in that moment. But I choose when that's appropriate, or when it's important to me.”

And she'd been choosing to fight every battle—or, maybe, she'd been choosing to avoid having to fight at all.

That didn't sit well with her. For all that being her authentic self was important to her, had she actually been taking the easy way out? Not that any choice about who one dated was wrong, but suddenly her decision to avoid dating cis men felt as if it went directly against her own desire to live as her full self. Despite the odd looks and sometimes outright hostility she'd experienced when she was with a woman, she'd also never had to explain that she was queer. But weren't the assumptions made by those who saw her with a woman just as one-dimensional as the ones made by those who now saw her with Gavin? Bi erasure was a constant, no matter her choices. There was no easy way to combat it, and no way to avoid it.

And avoidance had never been her style, anyway.

Maybe it was up to her to maintain the ties that were important to her, to nourish her community and hold close the people she belonged to. Maybe that had very little to do with who she was in a relationship with. And maybe, the people who thought less of her for who she dated, or who chose to believe she was one thing or another, were never part of her community in the first place.

Gavin leaned over and kissed her forehead, and then pulled her to him. She nestled herself between his arms, suddenly tired.

“Anything else on your mind?” he asked in his deep voice.

Piper yawned, and he chuckled against her. “Not at the moment, no.”

“All right.” She felt his breath against her cheek, even and constant. “Just let me know if anything else comes up.”

* * *

Gavin held Piper in his arms until her breath evened out and he was sure she was asleep. Then he rolled over as carefully as he could and sat up in bed. He should be worn-out, having finally put in a few decent workouts over the past few days, not to mention the workout he and Piper had shared a little while ago.

But he was restless and unsettled, like he was balancing on the top of a dividing wall, with his Philadelphia life on one side and his future in Vancouver on the other. He knew which side he was going to fall toward, but like any plunge it was certain to hurt. He rubbed a hand over his face.

He glanced at his phone lying on the bedside table, the screen flashing a text message.

It was from Simon.

Gavin blew out a breath. He’d been an asshole long enough. His time back in Vancouver had demonstrated that it wasn’t terrible being around his former teammates. Suddenly the fact that he’d mostly been ignoring his best friend seemed ridiculously immature. Shame flooded through him, hot and bitter.

Gavin pushed himself to standing. He crept as quietly as possible downstairs to the front porch and sat on the daybed. A memory of Piper spread beneath him that first night flashed through his head, and he smiled.

Then he sighed. Picking up the dropped threads of his life in Vancouver meant beginning to tie up those here in Philly, including his time with Piper. He’d known that he wasn’t cut out for a casual relationship, but he hadn’t been able to resist

her. He couldn't regret it, either, even with the sharp ache in his chest that came from knowing he would have to leave her.

He needed to move on, to regain a position of respect in the only profession he'd ever known. He needed to be *Gavin Williams* again. And that meant leaving Philadelphia, and Piper, behind. It was necessary.

That didn't mean it didn't suck, though.

And a part of him wondered if he was the worst kind of hypocrite, telling Piper that it didn't matter what other people thought of her, when the one thing he wanted was the respect and admiration he'd enjoyed when he was playing hockey.

He dialed Simon's number, guilt and nerves lodging in his throat as it rang.

"Someone got a gun to your head right now, that you'd actually pick up your phone and call me?" was Simon's typically ball-busting answer.

Gavin smiled to himself, joy at hearing his friend's familiar voice a physical presence in his chest, warm and bright. Why the hell had he put this off for so long?

"Jesus. Simon. It's good to hear your voice." He didn't have it in him to be anything but truthful. He owed his friend that much.

"It would have been good to hear yours, oh, I don't know, a couple months ago? I've been worried, man. What the hell?"

Gavin winced, knowing he deserved all the anger Simon could throw at him. They'd been teammates and best friends when they played together in Vancouver, and Gavin had done his best to keep in touch while he was playing in Philly, despite the grueling schedule of the hockey season.

And then, when he'd been low and licking his wounds, he'd ghosted him.

"I'm sorry," he said, and meant it from the deepest part of himself. "I...didn't handle the injury well." Understatement. "I was a complete dick to cut you off."

“You were,” came Simon’s retort, followed by a pause.
“That bad, huh?”

Gavin closed his eyes. “Yeah.” He heard Simon’s deep breath, and took one of his own. “We’re not prepared for this, you know? I’m forty-fucking-two years old and I’m *still* not prepared. How can that even be true? One minute I’m out on the ice barreling toward the playoffs, and the next I’m in a goddamn hospital bed, being told I’ll never walk without a limp again, let alone play.”

“Shit.”

There was a world of understanding in the one word, and Gavin wanted to punch himself for ignoring his friend. What if he’d had Simon to confide in the past couple months, instead of hiding out in his house and grumping at everyone who came near him?

They sat in silence for a long moment, quiet in the shared knowledge of how precarious their playing lives were. How difficult a sudden and brutal end to a career could be.

“I heard you were coaching the Firebirds’ practice the other week,” Simon finally said.

“How the hell did you hear that?” Gavin wasn’t actually surprised, hockey gossip being what it was. But the last thing he needed was the tale of his knee collapsing under him to travel around the entire league.

Simon laughed, the bastard. “I heard you’re a natural out there, when you can stay on your feet.”

Gavin laughed despite himself. “Fuck off.” Jesus. One conversation with Simon and he was laughing at his most embarrassing failure. Amazing what a little perspective could do. “It felt good, though—bossing the guys around, seeing what they can do. It was like... I knew what I was looking at.”

Simon barked a laugh. “Of course, you did. You played the game for twenty years, man. It’s not like all of that knowledge got blown out with your knee.”

Gavin snorted. “My common sense was, though. Look, I’m sorry I was such a dick. I shouldn’t have ignored your calls.”

“And texts,” Simon added pointedly.

“And texts. And...everything. I was in a bad place, and I should have reached out instead of blowing you off.”

“It’s okay,” his friend said, and Gavin knew that it wasn’t, not yet. But he would keep apologizing and trying to make it right until it was.

“It was...good,” he said. “Coaching, I mean. That connection with the game, I missed it. I’ve been going to physical therapy at the training facility, but I hadn’t even *looked* at the ice. Not once.”

In fact, he’d even avoided the hallways near the practice rink, making sure he wouldn’t accidentally see the ice from an open doorway.

“Shit,” Simon said again.

“Yeah.” He was quiet a moment. “It felt good,” he finally said. “I felt like myself, you know? At least a little bit. More myself than I had since...”

“Yeah.” Simon didn’t need him to say it. Even now, speaking about his injury was so hard.

“It was good,” he said again. “Being directly involved with the game. I needed that.”

He might not be able to play anymore, but avoiding the game wasn’t an option. Hockey was as necessary to him as breathing, and he had to be close to the game one way or another. He simply didn’t know how to do anything else.

“You sure you don’t want to look into coaching, instead of this office job?” Because of course Simon knew about that, too, even though nothing had been announced.

“No,” Gavin said a little too emphatically. “That’s not what I’m looking for.”

He’d waited so long for Vancouver to come through with the assistant GM offer. It was exactly what he’d wanted, what he *needed*.

“So you’re coming back to Vancouver,” Simon stated.

Gavin stared out the porch window into the night. Somehow, his return to Vancouver seemed more distant now than when he'd first gotten the call about the job, despite the fact that it was only a week away. His post-injury time in Shady Hill had felt like a shadow life until he'd met Piper. Now things were in color again, the darkness of his world once again in daylight.

He knew he needed to take the Vancouver job—he needed to feel whole again, to feel a part of something. To shoulder the responsibility of *his* team. To be who he had been for so many years.

Even if he was starting to suspect he had become someone else. Someone who could fail, could try again, could actually enjoy letting go of the pressure of his playing career in order to just...be.

“Gavin?” Simon’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Yeah,” he said. And then, “Yeah.” He repeated the word with confidence. Of course, he was returning to Vancouver. The past few weeks had been an interlude—a time of healing, certainly, but not his real life. Not who he really was. “I’ll be there in about a week.”

“You know the guys are going to mob you as soon as you get back,” Simon said, a smile in his voice.

“Yeah, I guess,” Gavin replied.

“You don’t sound that excited to come home.”

Gavin thought about Piper, lying upstairs in bed. He’d be happy to see his former teammates, of course, but when the day was over there would be no Piper waiting for him. She’d be three thousand miles away.

What the hell had he been thinking, getting involved with someone like her when he was leaving? It was going to wreck him, living without her, no matter how happy his friends were to see him, no matter how important this job was to him.

“I...am.” His voice sounded hesitant even to his own ears.

“Who is she?” Simon asked, and Gavin couldn’t help but laugh. His friend had always been irritatingly perceptive.

“Maybe I just really don’t want to leave behind the beautiful Philadelphia summer weather,” he teased his friend. It was suffocatingly hot, even this late at night.

“Bullshit. I want details,” Simon countered, and Gavin laughed again.

And then he told his friend all about Piper: their first unfortunate meeting, his stupid assumptions about her, her efficient management of the coffee events, how she didn’t take any of his shit but was still one of the kindest people he knew. Their agreement that they wouldn’t get emotionally involved, knowing he was leaving.

“Yeah, and how’s that working out for you?” Simon’s smirk was nearly audible.

“It is what it is,” Gavin said, as if he could convince himself to be fatalistic just by saying the words. “We have an agreement.”

“What if she wants more?”

Gavin shook his head to himself. “She doesn’t. She...” It wasn’t Gavin’s place to discuss Piper’s sexuality or relationship decisions. “She just doesn’t.”

He hoped she would take something useful from what he’d said about being whoever she wanted to be, and with whoever she wanted to be with, regardless of what other people thought. But he hadn’t lived her experience, and his advice might be worthless. Only she could decide that.

He’d wanted to tell her that she could be with *him* no matter what other people assumed about her, or them. But it hadn’t seemed right to insert his own desires into the discussion. And in any case, he’d be gone soon enough. Why burden her with his feelings, when she’d never asked for them?

“Well,” Simon interrupted his thoughts. “You’d know better than me.”

Gavin grunted. He didn't particularly feel like he knew anything these days. But Piper had never given him any indication that she wanted their relationship to last past its end date, or that she felt anything for him other than friendship and attraction. Who was he to make declarations or demands, when he was leaving in just a few days?

A sneaky part of his brain slid a note under the locked door of his plans for the future: *But what if she did want more?* What if Piper was as discontented with their agreement as he had grown to be? What would he do if she offered the slightest hint that she wanted him to...stay?

His plans, his future, were in Vancouver. But he could imagine it: kissing Piper at the end of a long day, curling up together with a beer or glass of wine, making a weekend breakfast together, sleeping curled in each other's arms every night. No due date on their relationship, no walls between them. It was a beautiful picture. His heart squeezed with longing as he imagined a future so different from the one he was heading towards. Too bad it was only that: a picture.

Chapter Sixteen

Gavin's phone buzzed in his hand just as he was about to pocket it and head out the door.

"Williams," he said into the phone. He grabbed his keys from the counter, shoved them in his pocket, and picked up his cane from the corner.

He was surprised to hear the Firebirds' general manager, Mark Campbell, on the other end. "Gavin. Glad I caught you."

"Hey—hello, sir." Gavin paused with his hand on the front door. "What can I do for you?" He had no idea why the man was calling him on a Friday night.

"How's the knee?" Apparently, Campbell wasn't going to get right to the point.

Gavin stifled his impatience, not wanting to piss off the GM of a major hockey team—and, ultimately, his former boss. But he was on his way to meet Piper at the coffee shop, and he hadn't seen her since last night.

"Doing okay," he answered, leaning against the door. "Some days better than others."

"Yeah, that's the way of it." Campbell paused, then said, "Healing's a bitch, and not a straight line to travel, either. You can feel a hundred percent one day, and back to square one the next. But it doesn't mean you aren't healing."

This, Gavin understood. A few mornings his knee had felt nearly as bad as it had post-surgery, for no discernible reason. Other times he could walk around for periods of time without the cane and have minimal pain. The unpredictability was irritating as hell, but he was trying to take the good times as they came. It wasn't like he could control it, anyway.

He'd learned a lot about letting go of what he was unable to control these past few months.

“True,” he replied, wondering again why on earth the GM was calling him. He doubted it was to talk about his knee. And since he was well and truly finished as a hockey player as of yesterday’s press conference, he didn’t know what else the Philly team could need from him.

“I spoke with Coach Burke yesterday, and he filled me in on your help at the practice last week,” Campbell said.

Gavin groaned inwardly. No wonder he was asking about his knee. There was no way the GM wasn’t going to hear about what happened, but Gavin certainly hadn’t wanted to discuss it with him. He’d thought he had dodged that bullet yesterday.

“He was impressed with your assessments,” he continued. “Especially of the younger players. Said you saw some things he hadn’t.”

That was a surprise, but Gavin would take the compliment. He had certainly done his best, despite the outcome. And as he’d told Simon, getting back into the game—even if from the bench—had felt surprisingly good.

I was so proud of you for trying.

Leave it to Piper to see his public failure as a success. And maybe there was something in that—he had never been much of a risk-taker. There had been no need, not when the things he had been naturally good at had rewarded him so thoroughly when combined with hard work and discipline. He had no coaching experience, no clue about what it took to succeed from behind the bench, but he had tried.

And apparently the coach and GM had noticed.

“That’s good to hear,” Gavin said carefully, not sure of where this conversation was going.

“You know we’re looking for a new coach for player development,” he went on. Gavin didn’t know that, and also didn’t know why Campbell was telling him about it. “I know Vancouver’s looking to take you back on as assistant GM.”

“How—” Gavin had no idea how Campbell could know that, but he stopped himself from asking. Probably the same

gossip channels that had leaked the info to Simon had informed the coach, as well.

Campbell laughed. “I don’t blame them for wanting you back in their organization, or you for wanting to return home. We probably don’t have a chance in hell of keeping you here, but if you’re interested, I’d like to talk to you about this job.”

Well, that was certainly putting it out there. Gavin was momentarily speechless.

“You...want to talk to me about a job.”

“That’s right.”

“Here, in Philly. Working in player development.”

Campbell laughed again. “You got it. You have any interest?”

Did he? He’d never seriously considered the possibility of a coaching position, despite Simon’s nudging. Sure, lots of retired players went in that direction, but it wasn’t what he’d imagined for himself. Player development coach was hardly the sort of job that commanded attention from the press or fans. It wasn’t about being in charge of an organization. But... it was a job working directly with the game. With players. The young kids. The ones who had no idea what they were in for, and almost as little clue about how to get where they wanted to go.

Suddenly, he discovered that he had a great deal of interest in hearing what Mr. Campbell had to say. Not that he could possibly take the job—he’d made a commitment to Vancouver and to his own future—but he was interested in hearing what a position like that might entail. In any case, it would be bad manners to insult the man by turning him down flat, right?

“Yeah,” he said. “Yes. I’d like to hear about it. Thanks.”

“Great.”

They set up a time to meet the following day. After they said their goodbyes, Gavin stared out the window for a few minutes, and then headed out.

* * *

Piper felt silly being so nervous, but there wasn't much she could do about her feelings. Gavin was meeting her at the Bean shortly, and then they were going on a date. An actual date. Of some to-be-determined kind, since Gavin had refused to tell her where he was taking her.

Something about doing an activity together—out in public—both rattled and excited her. It broke the pattern they had established in a way that revealed a new potential arrangement of the pieces of their nonrelationship. They hadn't actually done anything that could be considered a date, not since he'd taken her to breakfast that first day. They'd spent nearly every night together, and a good chunk of daytime when she wasn't working, but they hadn't exactly *dated*.

Because that wasn't what they were doing, and it wasn't part of their agreement. And yet she'd readily agreed when he asked if she wanted to go out. She *wanted* to see that new pattern, even as she knew the pieces wouldn't have time to settle in place before Gavin left.

The door to the shop opened and in walked the subject of her thoughts. Neat, button-down shirt as usual, dark blue pants under the knee brace, and—she was glad to see—cane. He'd finally gotten his hair cut, and he looked the perfect hockey player: Large, solid, and movie-star handsome.

Her heart stuttered in her chest, a reminder of how dangerously close she was to the point of no return with him—or maybe she'd pulled far past that point without even knowing it was happening. Maybe she had been destined to have her heart broken, to lose yet another person she held close to that stupid heart, all along.

“Hey, there,” he said in his gravelly voice as she came out from behind the counter.

He pulled her close, and Piper stole a glance around the shop, well aware people were watching them. Was she still bothered by the assumptions she knew some must be making? She thought about what Sloan had said: *Be queer as hell and love the person you love*.

If she cared about Gavin but tried to hide their relationship—or whatever it was—she was denying her identity just as much as if she only allowed herself to express her affection with someone else. Why should she have to do that?

Gavin said that his whole self was for the people he was close to, while the general public only saw the slice of him that he allowed. Piper knew that wasn't how she wanted to live her life—at least, not exactly. Visibility was important. Representation was important. The more that queer identities were publicly visible, the more accepted they would be. And yet, she knew now that her insistence on visibility had allowed other people's assumptions to dictate her behavior in a way that also was inconsistent with how she wanted to live.

She didn't want her relationships governed by what other people might think, or stifled by assumptions other people might make. Her pride in her publicly queer identity had everything to do with fighting against exactly that, and for the right to be who she was. Fully, unreservedly.

Easier said than done, of course. But still.

She shut the door on her heavy thoughts and took Gavin's hand. "So..." They started out the door. Piper looked back for a quick wave at Murray, who was closing up the shop that night. "Where are we going?"

Gavin unlocked his car and they both got in. "It's a surprise. I don't suppose there's any way I could convince you to wear a blindfold?"

Piper snickered. "Not in the car, no. Maybe later."

The look Gavin shot her could have melted the chocolate on the Bean's croissants. "Hold that thought—otherwise we won't make it."

"Make it where?" she tried, but Gavin only laughed his deep, full laugh.

"You'll see soon enough."

Figuring it wasn't worth pressing the issue, she settled in to enjoy the ride. The quiet neighborhoods of Shady Hill quickly gave way to the bridge over the river, the busy streets of

Philadelphia, and finally the Benjamin Franklin Parkway cutting diagonally through the city. The wide boulevard was lined with trees and behind their branches sat high-rise apartment buildings, museums, and stores. In front of them, up on the large hill at the end of the Parkway, was the imposing facade of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

“Are we...” she began, and then broke off as he made the turn toward the museum’s parking lot.

“You said you loved it here, but that you hadn’t been in years. Not enough time, I think you said?”

Piper was horrified to find herself blinking back tears. How on Earth had he remembered that? It had been so long ago, back when she’d barged into his kitchen carrying his groceries. “Um...” She cleared her throat. “Yeah.”

“Well, we’re making time. Right now.” He grinned at her, and despite the threatening tears she smiled back. Suddenly she couldn’t think of a single thing she would rather do than spend the evening at the museum with Gavin.

They parked the car and made their way inside. As Gavin purchased tickets, she looked around the cavernous entrance hall. She loved the way the space absorbed all of the footsteps and chatter, merging them into one echoing soundwave all around her. It was a grand space, in a grand building, and she had always felt a sense of import here, of being present inside a monument to art and history.

“All right,” Gavin said, rejoining her. “Where first? You’ll have to show me around.”

“Oh, God,” Piper said, slightly horrified. “You haven’t been here before?” She laughed. “I can’t even imagine—this place, it’s like...one of the biggest tourist attractions in Philly. How have you never been here?”

Gavin smiled ruefully and shrugged. “I’ve been a little busy this past year.”

“Hockey players,” Piper sniffed. She took his free arm, noting with satisfaction that he didn’t seem to be leaning much weight on his cane. “Okay. Let’s check out the American art

on that side—” She pointed to their right. “And then head to the other side for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That way we’re just on the one floor. Maybe we can see the rest another—” She broke off. Another time? Not possible. This was the last time she would be at the museum, or anywhere else, with Gavin.

She closed her eyes against the pain that clenched her heart, then opened them and made herself smile. She would enjoy this night, no matter the future.

If he noticed her slip, he didn’t mention it. He leaned in to speak quietly. “We don’t need to limit ourselves to one floor. My knee is fine today. We can see everything if you want.”

“Oh—I didn’t mean that.” She realized his knee hadn’t even occurred to her in her plans. He was barely limping today. “It’s not your knee. It’s just that this place is enormous.” She grinned. “If we try to see everything, we’ll be here until tomorrow—and you’ll have to carry *me* out.”

“Duly noted.” One strong arm came around her waist and squeezed. “But I wouldn’t mind carrying you, if it came to that.”

Piper tried to ignore the now-familiar heat that flooded her body at his touch, although she allowed herself to lean into him for just one breath. She enjoyed his company too much, and she was afraid that she had become addicted to the strength of his hands on her, the soft warmth of his lips pressing to her forehead the way they were now.

But Gavin would be gone in less than a week, and she needed to prepare herself.

She pulled away a little too abruptly, ignoring Gavin’s confused frown.

“Let’s get started.” She smiled brightly and led him toward the steps to the galleries.

They wove through the crowds in the American art galleries, stopping to admire paintings, pottery, and furniture. Gavin kept a firm hold on her hand, and Piper allowed it. He leaned close to whisper comments into her ear, and

occasionally pulled her tight against him, but she tried to keep a safe distance between them.

It was a losing battle. She had no idea how to keep a distance from someone who she was absolutely, positively going to go home with that very night and have sex until they were both exhausted. Someone who knew where all of her sensitive spots were and exactly how to play them. Someone who felt like a rock anchoring the rushing current of emotions that threatened to overwhelm her every time she was around him. Someone thoughtful enough to remember a throwaway comment about a museum, and surprise her with an entire evening there.

But she had to try. Because if there was no distance left, then being ripped apart from him in a few days was going to hurt like hell.

Back in the main hall, they sat for a few minutes on a bench to rest.

“This is an amazing place,” he said, leaning into her just enough that her side tingled from the pressure of him. “Thank you for showing it to me.”

“Oh, we’re not done yet.” She smiled. “We have time for a few more galleries.” She turned her head to look at him, suddenly wondering if he was ready to leave.

As if he read her thoughts, he nudged her with his elbow and kissed the top of her head. “I’m up for it if you are.”

She sighed and let her head rest on his shoulder. This was too perfect, too easy. It felt as if they had done this a million times before—headed out for an evening together, enjoying a museum or some other event or landmark. Sure, the sex was amazing, but she liked being with him. She liked *him*. More than liked him. She enjoyed their time together regardless of what they did. It felt right, being with him.

His eyes met hers as if he was searching her expression for something. Then he blinked away and began to lift himself off the bench.

“Come on,” he said, a little stiffly. “Let’s keep going.”

They strolled through the nineteenth century galleries in silence. Something uncomfortable had settled between them and Piper didn't know how to diffuse the tension.

"Look, that one's my favorite," she said as they came to a gallery with a large painting at the center.

Gavin stopped beside her, and she watched him as he took in the canvas. She wondered what he saw. For her, Cézanne's *Bathers* had always been an oasis of peace, an aspirational fantasy of a group of individuals living and working in harmony, together. With the features and specifics of each figure largely obscured by the broad-brush strokes, they might have had all sorts of backgrounds. Some might have been born female, some might have been born male. Some might not identify with either binary. But the energy of the painting felt feminine to her.

The figures weren't idealized objectifications of women the way many other nudes in the gallery were, nor was this an ode to industrialism, or to city life. It was a world apart. A kind of utopia, a calmly joyous celebration of simply being. She wanted to join them, to rest there a while and feel...safe. Where she could just be as she was, no assumptions or little boxes to put people in.

She glanced at Gavin, who had a half smile on his face. "I'd like to climb into that painting and have a long, quiet nap by the water," he said, which was so surprisingly similar to her own thoughts that she blinked several times. "I'm not sure they'd have me, though."

He turned to her, and she thought she saw a flash of sadness in his eyes. She had no words to give him, no idea of how to reconcile what she felt for him with the fact that soon enough, he'd be gone.

So, she pulled him along, showing him her favorite modern paintings, and the ones she didn't understand, the ones that confused her.

Once they returned to the front lobby, they paused for breath.

“I see what you mean about one floor being more than enough,” Gavin said, rubbing a hand over his eyes. “I think my brain has art fatigue.” He shifted as if he might pull her into his arms, but didn’t. Piper squashed a twinge of disappointment. “It’s wonderful here,” he continued. “Thank you for showing it to me.”

He eyed the grand staircase several feet away.

“We don’t have to go upstairs,” she said hurriedly, noting that he was leaning more heavily on his cane now than when they’d begun.

Gavin smirked at her. “Is that a challenge?” Piper rolled her eyes. Typical competitive pro athlete. “I think we should go up—I’d like a closer look at that statue up there.” He nodded toward the golden statue of Diana, bow and arrow in her hands, that held court over the great hall.

She shrugged. In truth, Diana was one of her favorite pieces in the entire museum. But it was hard to get a close look at her, high up over the stairs as she was, and she hadn’t wanted to push Gavin’s knee more than necessary.

He was already several steps up the stairs when she stopped woolgathering and caught up to him. At the top, he craned his neck to look up at the statue.

“She’s beautiful,” he said. “Strong, without even trying.” He turned to Piper and reached for her hand. This time he did pull her close, and she let him. His head rested on the top of hers. “She doesn’t care that we’re all watching her, admiring her. She’s too busy being herself to notice the rest of us. She doesn’t need anyone.”

Piper smiled into his chest. “Well, she *is* a goddess.”

Gavin leaned back slightly and looked down at her. “That she is,” he said.

She could almost see the wheels turning in his head, could see him weighing whether or not to raise any number of the serious issues that lay between them, issues that she felt might break her apart if she had to discuss them. How they wanted to approach the remaining days they had together. How they

should begin the inevitable separation. And worst of all, how he might ease her way when he left. Because she knew, as certainly as she knew he was leaving, that he didn't want to hurt her.

Of course, it was far too late for her to avoid being hurt. But she could try.

So, before he could speak, she kissed him.

She'd meant to avoid too much intimacy by kissing him, but that had been a poor strategic choice. His hands grasped the sides of her face, strong yet careful, and he kissed her gently, lovingly, as if she was as precious as the gold leaf on the statue of Diana.

His tongue traced her lower lip like she was dessert, to be savored and appreciated. His lips were slightly rough, the feel and taste of him enough to make her knees slightly wobbly. But he had her, his arms snaking around her and holding her steady. She felt cherished in his embrace, like she was finally home after so many years of wandering. She felt desired. Understood.

She felt...loved. No—that wasn't quite right. Gavin didn't love her, though she knew he cared for her. The love was in her own heart, for this surprising, challenging, comforting man. She *loved* him. It was incredibly ill-advised on her part to realize that now, yet she didn't have it in her to regret it. She loved him, and that was a simple, unchangeable fact regardless of what the future held. She loved him, no matter how it might change how some people thought of her. She loved him, knowing that he would leave.

She loved Gavin Williams, and instead of her heart shattering into pieces at not being able to have what it most desired, she felt whole—completed, a puzzle whose last piece slotted into place.

She couldn't regret it.

The sound of applause broke through Piper's focus on the man in front of her. With a little gasp, she broke the kiss and turned her head.

An elderly couple were standing a few steps down, looking up at them with wide grins.

“Well done,” said the woman. The man put his arm around her. “Better than any of the art.”

“My wife’s a romantic,” the man explained fondly.

“Maybe you can get married in the museum,” the woman winked at them. “Someday.” The couple turned down the stairs, arm in arm.

Piper shot a look at Gavin to see if he seemed embarrassed, but he was smiling at the couple as they moved away. She realized that a number of the people scattered around the stairs and landing were watching them with similarly amused reactions.

It *was* romantic, she thought. She was proud to be seen with Gavin, and didn’t care who saw them together. He knew who she was, and accepted her fully, as did her friends and her community. She was still herself, happy to be with the man she loved. Too bad there was no future, no possible wedding, in the museum or otherwise.

She wanted him to stay, and there was no way she could ask him to.

Mirroring the older couple, she linked arms with Gavin. “Let’s go,” she said quietly. If nothing else, she could enjoy the time they had left.

Chapter Seventeen

Piper held on to Gavin's hand as they made their way upstairs that night.

It was dark, the only illumination the last fading rays of the sun and the faint glow through the windows of the single streetlamp on the block.

She welcomed the dark. Here, she could pretend it was just the two of them. That the outside world didn't exist—that time itself didn't exist, that next week would never come, and Gavin wouldn't disappear across the continent and out of her life.

No, she didn't regret loving him. She wouldn't trade her time with him for anything. And yet, her lack of regret didn't mean that his leaving would hurt any less.

Tears pricked her eyes and she forced herself to breathe. To stop thinking. She'd pull herself together tomorrow, slot herself back in the role of his temporary lover, and enjoy her remaining time with him. For tonight, she needed to be with him without thinking of the future.

"Gavin," she murmured into the dark.

"Yeah, sweetheart. You okay?"

Sweetheart. Such a common term of endearment. It meant nothing. But just for tonight, she needed to pretend that it did. Pretend that she belonged to someone. That she was his. In the morning, she'd come back to reality.

"Yeah." She knew she'd been quiet on the way home from the museum, and she made herself smile up at him. "I just want you."

"You have me."

He leaned down and his lips pressed to hers, his large hand on the small of her back just under her shirt. His fingers were rough against her skin, his mouth warm and soft. She took a

moment to memorize this: the contradictions of Gavin Williams. Rough and soft, strong and vulnerable, gruff and kind. How many people knew him this way? How many would know him this way in the future?

She didn't want to think about the future.

She twined her hands around his neck and pulled him closer, kissing him until she forgot past and present as well as future, until they were both breathing heavily and she could feel his erection hard against her stomach.

Gavin kissed her cheek, the corner of her jaw.

"Show me what you want," he said, his breath hot against the sensitive skin of her ear.

She took a step backward toward the bed, then another, pulling him with her. She didn't want to let go of him, not for a second. Not tonight. Not until she had to.

She lowered herself down, and Gavin followed. She began to unbutton his shirt, and pushed his shirt from his shoulders, and he shrugged it off and tossed it to the floor. She reached for his belt, but he stopped her.

"Wait."

He removed his knee brace and then turned back to her. Blue eyes looked back at her seriously as he slowly lowered himself to kneel in front of her.

"Your knee..." Surely that had to hurt.

"It's fine." He pulled her toward him and kissed her, firmly. Then he smiled at her and carefully pulled off her pants. "Hmmm..." She wasn't wearing any underwear, and apparently, he approved. "Lie back."

The deep, rough command turned her on so much she immediately obeyed. She would do anything he asked, anything he wanted—even let him go. Even if it broke her heart.

His palm smoothed against her stomach, the fingers of his other hand on her thigh. His touch was warm and gentle, the

anticipation of what he would do next enough to make her wet just lying there.

“Gavin...”

His lips pressed against her leg, then her inner thigh. Then her hip.

“Gavin!” She wiggled on the bed, needing his mouth on her *now*.

A chuckle rumbled from him, the echo of it against her skin making her moan.

His hand grasped her thigh, spreading her legs further apart. She could feel his broad shoulders between her legs, his breath against her center. She didn't know how she would live without this, without him. But she'd have to. She'd stitch her life back together as she'd done in the past. She'd take what she'd learned from him and reshape her life into something wholly authentic, in a way she'd never managed before. He wouldn't be there to see it.

But he was here now.

One large finger pushed inside of her, and she arched off the bed. Another chuckle.

“Oh my God, Gavin. I need...”

Another finger, and she could feel herself contracting around him. His other hand had a firm hold on her leg, stabilizing her. Her breath caught on a moan as his thumb brushed her clit, just enough to tease. Then enough to make her moan again.

She wiggled again, trying to reach up into the pressure. His hand on her leg moved to her stomach, holding her down.

And then his mouth was on her, hot and hungry, every slide of his tongue sending waves of need through her body. She felt tight, like a coiled wire, and so close to release.

“Gavin.”

His fingers pushed further into her as his rough tongue stroked her *right there*, and she came, gasping his name and

arching up into his hand still on her belly.

Ripples of pleasure washed over her, driving every thought from her mind except for the feeling of being here, with him, just like this. Even after the aftershocks died down and he rocked back on his heels, all she felt was a lingering bliss edged with comfort and...happiness.

His lips brushed her thigh, a light kiss as her heart rate slowly returned to normal.

She closed her eyes.

* * *

Gavin watched Piper as she lay on the bed, her dark eyelashes against her flushed cheeks. He watched as her chest rose and fell, her breath still accelerated from the pleasure he'd given her.

His knee wasn't going to thank him for this, but God, it had been more than worth it.

Something had been bothering her since the museum, that much had been obvious. She'd been distracted and quiet, but hadn't offered any explanation. And if she wasn't ready to share, that was up to her.

At least he could give her pleasure.

He felt a bone-deep satisfaction in giving her exactly that. His dick pushing uncomfortably against his pants reminded him that *it* wasn't particularly satisfied, but he ignored it.

"Gavin," she whispered. He loved hearing his name on her lips. He loved everything about her.

He loved her.

The realization should have rocked him to his core, but instead he only felt a rightness. Of course, he loved her. She had made him feel alive when he'd been half-dead, made him feel like he had some purpose even as he struggled with feeling useless. Every minute he spent with her brought him closer to understanding who he was as a man. Not a hockey

player, not a celebrity. Just a man, who loved a woman who was his opposite and his complement in every way.

He wanted her beyond reason, and he also loved her in a way that he hadn't even imagined was possible.

But he couldn't have her.

And that fact knocked the breath out of him like a dirty hit in a tough game.

"What is it?" he finally asked, his voice ragged in his ears.

Piper rolled to her side on the bed, lifting herself up long enough to pull her shirt over her head. "Come here."

He could hardly refuse, when the woman he loved was spread out on the bed, naked. Trying to suppress a wince as he pushed himself up and onto the blanket next to her, he reached out one arm and pulled her close.

Her hands came to his chest, holding him at a distance.

"I want you," she said.

He huffed a laugh, still trying to negotiate the thoughts rioting around in his head. *I love her, but I can't have her.*

"Insatiable, aren't you?" He tried for humor.

"Mmm..." He was glad to see the smile crease her beautiful face. If they could tease each other, everything would be okay. "Maybe I am."

"Piper..." The urge to say something gripped him, like he had to tell her how he felt. That his heart was heavy with love, sore with wanting her. Even if he wasn't what she wanted, even if he had to leave, to go back to being the Gavin Williams he used to be. Even if she didn't love him back.

"Please, Gavin." She kissed him, hard, and her hands came again to his belt.

This time he let her unbuckle it. He'd let her do anything. Especially when her breasts were pressed up against his chest.

She made quick work of his pants and underwear and he kicked off his socks. And then they were naked on the bed. He

felt strangely exposed, as if without the armor of his clothes she would be able to see through him to his heart. To his love for her, which she hadn't asked for and didn't return.

She lay back on the bed, one hand reaching for his shoulder to pull him to her and the other wrapping around his cock. He groaned, looking down at her. Her hair splayed out across the pillow. Her cheeks were still flushed and her lips swollen from kissing him. Need wrestled with the heartbreak of knowing that in a few short days, he would have to let her go.

She licked her lips, and need won out.

He ground his hips down against her, and she gasped at the friction of her soft center and his hard cock.

“Again,” she demanded. “No, wait.”

He froze. He thought he might expire from lust if she told him to stop, but he'd do it.

“I want you. Gavin, I want you inside me. Now.”

He swallowed a grunt and reached for a condom in the bedside table drawer. She grabbed it from him and he swore he saw stars as she rolled it onto him. Then she guided him toward her entrance and his arms almost gave out from under him as he felt her beneath him. She gasped again, then smiled with her eyes shut, as if the pleasure they brought each other made her happy. He hoped to God it did.

He was lost for her: her softness, her strength, the way she gave everything to him, held nothing back when they were like this. He *craved* her.

Her hands came around his waist as he slid into her, her every movement sending a bolt of need through his body.

“Gavin—” His name ended in a moan, almost a question, a demand for *more*.

“I know,” he managed, and captured her lips with his, wanting to be connected in every possible way, just for now. For however long he had.

He reached down to stroke her with his thumb even as he continued thrusting in and out, right on the edge of control. He

felt her come apart first, shattering around him and gasping his name.

Her fingernails sunk into his skin and the delicious bite of pain sent him over the edge. His release found him with more intensity than he could ever remember, wave after wave of sensation as he joined her in what they'd created together.

When it was finally over, he disposed of the condom and joined her where she had burrowed under the covers. He pulled her close to him, maybe too close, too tightly.

He couldn't help it.

Chapter Eighteen

Gavin tried to focus on the task at hand—packing, specifically—but in truth he was a bit of a mess and frequently caught himself staring off into space, a random object forgotten in his hand.

He didn't even need to be packing. Not really. He'd hired movers to do it for him, and they would no doubt be far more organized and efficient than he was. But he needed something to focus on before he had to head over to the third event at the Bean, and packing was what he'd come up with. So here he was, trying to fit back into a box various items he'd finally just unpacked a few weeks earlier.

Three days to go.

In three days, he would leave Shady Hill and Philadelphia behind. This house, this neighborhood, his teammates—the people who were his new friends. He would leave behind the steamy summer air, the crickets louder than any he'd ever heard in Canada, the people on the street who shared their innermost thoughts without provocation, the seemingly endless debates about sandwiches that claimed to contain steak.

He would leave all of that behind and return to what was familiar. The community he'd grown up in. His parents. His former teammates. The same streets, towns, buildings, and neighborhoods in which he had spent the majority of his time on Earth.

His life, which had veered so wildly off course ever since he signed the contract with the Firebirds, would be back on track. He would take up the mantle of helping to direct the Vancouver team—*his* team—now and for the future. He'd get an office. Buy a few new suits, maybe. Settle in behind the desk. Get to work.

He should be happy.

When, during his playing career, he'd envisioned his ideal life after hockey—and he had tried his hardest *not* to envision life after hockey—it had been exactly this. Exactly this opportunity that he'd been handed by the Vancouver leadership. To be a leader. A face of the organization. Strategize and discuss options and plot a path to another championship—without him on the ice.

What he hadn't really considered, however, was whether he would actually enjoy *doing* any of those things. Or whether he actually wanted to spend the rest of his life in Vancouver.

The taste of a different life, a life outside of his hometown and all of the expectations that surrounded him there, had changed him. He had come to Philly thinking he would eke out a few more years in the game, but he hadn't considered the connections he would make here. Or that he would find it somehow freeing to be in a new place, around new people.

In its own strange way, his injury had been liberating, as well. Sure, it hurt like hell to see his playing days end that way. And he didn't love being injured. In fact, he hated it. But it had forced him to be someone he had never been. Imperfect. Struggling. And sometimes, a failure. He'd had to accept help, and it hadn't killed him. And people like Carlos, and the team management, hadn't turned away from him when he couldn't be what he had been. That had changed him, as well.

These were deep thoughts for a Sunday afternoon, and he was relieved when the doorbell rang.

To his surprise, when he opened the door, it was Tyler Valentine on the other side.

“Hey. Valentine.” Gavin paused, trying to think of a reason the player destined to replace him on the Philly team would be on his front steps. Then he remembered that today was Valentine's turn as the object of a nondate with a fan. Carlos had convinced him to do it after another player had backed out. Gavin supposed he was technically off the hook for this one, given that he was no longer part of the Firebirds organization, but he didn't want to leave Carlos in the lurch.

“Hey to you, Williams.” He nodded meaningfully at the doorway. “Mind if I...?”

Gavin realized he was frowning as well as blocking the door. He backed up, hiding a wince as his knee protested all of the standing he’d done that morning. Not that he had much to show for it. His house was a disaster, somehow, despite the relatively few possessions he had in it.

“Sure, of course. I guess you’re headed over to the coffee shop. You want a drink?”

Valentine threw him an odd look.

“Like tea. Or pop. Or, you know...water. Not alcohol. Jesus. I realize we’re headed to a charity event.”

The other man burst out laughing, and Gavin realized he’d been teasing him. “I figured, but who knows what you retirees get up to when you’re not in training?”

Gavin braced himself for the inevitable sting of having his retired status mentioned. It didn’t come. Huh.

“Yeah. So... What brings you to my temporary doorstep?”

Valentine glanced around the room, no doubt noting the piles Gavin had unsuccessfully tried to sort into an order, any order at all. “Hm. Packing already?”

This time it was Gavin who gave the other man an odd look. “Already? I told everyone after the press conference last week that I’m leaving on Wednesday. You were in the room.”

“I guess I’d hoped I heard wrong,” Valentine said, picking up a stack of shirts—why were his shirts in the living room? He had no memory of bringing them downstairs—and setting them back down.

Gavin narrowed his eyes at the man in front of him. “Did Morgan or Carlos put you up to this?”

Valentine looked briefly surprised, then laughed again. “You’re pretty smart...for a hockey player.” He grinned, and Gavin wondered how a guy whose career had been on the skids for the past year could be in such a good mood. Maybe he could tell Gavin his secret. Or maybe it was his way of

coping, in the same way that Gavin had basically shut down after his injury. “No, neither of them. Mr. Campbell asked—and by asked, I mean told me in the most direct way possible—to stop by and see if there was any way you’d consider staying.” He shrugged. “I’m just the errand boy.”

“Right.”

Gavin maneuvered himself around to a chair and sat. Valentine followed suit, settling on the couch.

“You met with him about the job, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

Yesterday he’d met with Campbell and discussed the player development coach responsibilities. A lot of travel, a lot of time watching the game at all different levels. A chance to keep tabs on the future of the team, to improve and mentor up-and-coming players at the most grassroots level.

It sounded...exciting.

“So, what should I tell him?” Valentine asked.

Gavin cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Well, I have an agreement with Vancouver.”

“To sit behind a desk. Yeah, I know.” Valentine smirked. “It’s a very impressive title. Assistant GM.”

Gavin glowered at him. “I told them I’d do it. And it’s what I want. And I’m leaving on Wednesday. It’s done.” He’d never let the team down before, and he could hardly start now. He might be shit at relationships—look at his marriage, or how he’d frozen Piper out when he’d fallen at practice and taken off for Vancouver—but he always came through for his team.

“Uh-huh.” Valentine gazed pointedly into the distance.

“What?” Gavin barked, and then felt himself flush with embarrassment. He needed to stop barking, and glowering, and generally being a grumpy ass. He knew better, and had been *doing* better. But something about this whole Philly job thing disconcerted him.

He wanted it.

He squeezed his eyes shut at the realization. There was no way he could take the job here.

A scene flashed through his mind. Of him, not on skates but standing on the ice at the practice rink during the Firebirds' rookie camp. A hand on the boards for balance. His knee didn't hurt. His mind was clear. And in front of him were a bunch of young players, looking for guidance and a voice of experience. And he was providing it to them.

Impossible.

He opened his eyes to find Valentine watching him. He'd expected the other man to laugh at him again, but he looked unusually serious.

"The thing is..." Valentine stopped and looked like he was choosing his words carefully. "The team could use someone like you."

Gavin wasn't sure he liked where this was going. "Someone like me? What the hell does that mean?"

Valentine smirked. "You know, someone old." He cackled with laughter and held up a hand before Gavin could curse him out. "*Kidding*. Your face..." He cleared his throat and continued. "Someone with experience in the game, obviously. Not just any experience—*all* the experience. Winning the cup. Playing for two decades. Making the transition to...you know." He glanced down at Gavin's knee.

"Yeah."

It wasn't sympathy Gavin saw in Valentine's expression. Not exactly. It was more like a gentle awe. Maybe respect.

"Man, you've done it all. The good, the bad, the stuff none of us want to think about while we're playing. You know how unprepared we all are for the day we need to hang up our skates. These young kids...they need to know what's coming. They need to know how to be successful in the league—without forgetting that there's more to life, too."

"Hm. Did that speech come from you or Campbell?"

Valentine only laughed.

The doorbell rang as Gavin was mulling over this new development.

“It’s Carlos,” he said absently.

Valentine jumped up to answer the door before Gavin could even consider hauling himself to standing. Thank God for small favors and younger, uninjured people.

“Hey, guys!” Carlos’s boundless enthusiasm was like having a happy unicorn stampede into the room. Gavin realized he didn’t hate it.

Valentine and Carlos both settled themselves on the couch.

“Sorry I’m early,” Carlos said.

“Don’t you usually apologize for being late, not early?” Valentine asked him, leaning over to poke at a pile of stuff on the coffee table.

Gavin should probably tell him to stop rifling through his things, but honestly, he didn’t care. It was nice to have company. He’d battled on the ice with Carlos over the past season, and somehow the younger man had stuck with him even as he’d tried to shut everyone around him out of his life after the injury. He’d told himself that Carlos was simply a good teammate, but that wasn’t the whole truth. Not really. Carlos was his friend. So was Saul Morgan, in his gruff way. And Valentine, and they hadn’t even shared the ice. Somehow, while he’d been doing his best to push people away, he’d acquired a community. Friends. It wasn’t just Piper he was leaving behind, but an entire life he’d built around him without even realizing it.

Carlos shrugged. “I don’t know, I’m just overly punctual. So punctual I’m early all the time, and that bugs some people. So, what’s the discussion?”

“How do you know there’s a discussion? Maybe we’re just sitting here, talking shit.” Gavin found himself teasing the younger man. Teasing...he supposed that’s what friends did.

“Talking shit is still a discussion,” Carlos countered.

“Suppose so.”

“I was telling Gavin what Mr. Campbell asked me to help out with,” Valentine said, still rummaging through the pile. Where had all of this crap even come from? Gavin wondered. It was as if while he had been skulking around town the last few months someone had been depositing things in his house. Things he’d now have to move.

Suddenly the idea of moving his things seemed deeply unpleasant, even with the help of movers. Then a thought occurred to him.

“Wait, you know about the player development job?” he asked Carlos.

“Yeah, of course.”

“Of course,” Gavin repeated. Did anyone in hockey ever keep anything to themselves?

Valentine grinned. “Keep up, Williams. It’s a new day. A new chapter for the team.” He sighed dramatically. “Of course, you’re going to miss it, back in Vancouver.”

“Aw, are you still leaving?” Carlos looked almost comically disappointed.

Gavin was a little taken aback. Would he really be missed?

“Yeah, well. I’ve already told Vancouver...”

“Dude.” Valentine rolled his eyes. “You haven’t even left Philly yet. Have you signed a contract? No. Sure, they’ll be pissed, but what do you really want to do with the rest of your career? Read paperwork?”

Gavin cut him a look. “My career is over.” He gestured to his knee brace.

“What the fuck?” Valentine shook his head at him. “You’re not dead, you just can’t *play*.”

Gavin almost said, *What’s the difference?* But that was the injured beast in him talking. Dead was dead. He was just seriously inconvenienced. Something had happened to him that was out of his control, and he didn’t like it. But change didn’t have to be a bad thing. Maybe.

“If I couldn’t play, I’d teach little kids,” Carlos said. “Or maybe get a graduate degree. Math? I liked math.”

Valentine finally stopped snooping through Gavin’s belongings and looked thoughtful. “I don’t know what I’d do...” He grinned again. “Probably the league would go out of business if I retired, of course.” Carlos snorted. “But I guess I’d go back to school, too.” He nodded at Gavin. “Like you said I should.”

“Well...” Gavin hardly thought anyone should be listening to him for life advice.

“It’s good to think about,” Carlos said. “Life after hockey.”

“Or in Williams’s case,” Valentine added pointedly, “life after playing, but still hockey. You’ve got options. Just don’t make the wrong choice.”

“And you know what the right choice is, I’m guessing,” Gavin said wryly.

“Well, you’re not going to have a fancy office if you stay here, of course.” Valentine looked at him. “And you wouldn’t get yourself on TV for press conferences.”

“I don’t care about that shit,” he lied. Wasn’t that the entire reason he’d counted on the Vancouver job? He wanted the status and respect given to a position like assistant GM—and the possibilities it might lead to, like being GM himself one day. The man in charge. He’d earned it. Anything else, after everything he’d done in Vancouver, would be a step down. No... It would be *seen* as a step down. Other people would see it that way.

That didn’t mean the Philly job *was* a step down. In fact, it sounded like he might be doing more of what interested him.

But he’d already agreed to go back to Vancouver. He’d given his word and made the arrangements. And dammit, his reputation was important.

Luckily, Valentine only made a noncommittal sound and didn’t press further. Maybe he was distracted at the thought of the event at the Bean.

“We should go,” Gavin said. He leveraged himself up and ambled across the room to grab his cane.

“How do these things go, anyway?” Valentine asked. Without waiting for an answer, he continued, “Is that woman who owns the coffee shop going to be there? Carlos dragged me there the other day and pointed her out. She’s pretty cute. Must be smart, too, having her own business.”

Gavin froze. Carlos glanced at him warily, and Gavin wondered what he knew. Had Piper told him about their agreement? Valentine turned to poke at another stack of miscellaneous belongings.

“She’s, ah,” Carlos stammered out. “Piper’s great. And yeah, she’ll be there. You should...definitely meet her.”

Gavin’s unhelpful brain immediately conjured up the picture of Valentine and Piper laughing and talking over the counter at the Bean. Two young, vibrant, attractive people. They’d probably get along great—Valentine was open, charismatic, and funny. Meanwhile, Gavin had been a surly pill for most of their time together.

And he was leaving, while Valentine was staying in Philly.

Piper deserved someone like Valentine. Someone who could make her laugh, who was closer to her own age. Of course, she said she preferred to be with women, and he believed her. Maybe Valentine had a sister. It could literally be anyone—anyone who would see Piper’s smile, enjoy her wit and humor, discover her kindness and softhearted nature underneath her capable exterior. Who would kiss her, taste her sweet skin, feel her move against them in that slow, sensual way she had.

It just wouldn’t be him.

Jesus. He ran a hand through his hair. What a time to come to the completely fucking obvious realization that Piper was going to move on from him. *Should* move on from him. It had always been leading this way: to the next person, the person who would make her happy, who would *stay*. They had agreed to exactly this.

He just hadn't known how the thought of her with someone else would rip him apart. How the very thought of seeing her now, after he'd finally caught on to reality, would be almost too painful to bear.

He needed to let her go.

Gavin didn't realize he was glaring at the back of Valentine's head as if he wanted to rip it off until Carlos cleared his throat tactfully, giving him a wary glance. "We should get going."

Valentine straightened and joined them by the door.

"Cool. Do you think I should ask her out? The coffee woman, I mean."

Gavin forced himself to take a long, slow breath, and not punch Valentine right in the face. Carlos blinked several times.

"What?" Valentine looked at them both. "Is there something wrong with her? She's not like, a puck bunny, is she?"

At that, Carlos laughed. "No, Pipe's barely interested in hockey. She's cool."

Gavin appreciated the way Carlos opened the front door and quickly shepherded them outside, changing the subject and distracting Valentine.

But Gavin wasn't distracted. He thought about Valentine, about Piper in the future. About his own Piper-less future.

By the time they arrived at the Friendly Bean, Gavin was barely able to hold it together when Valentine went right up to Piper and introduced himself.

* * *

Piper was more than a little surprised when a large—and admittedly gorgeous—man walked through the door of the Bean and directly over to where she stood in front of the counter.

He was the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome, and she knew immediately that he was a hockey player by the way he

carried himself.

“Hi,” the man said with a charming grin. “I’m Tyler, today’s victim.”

Ah. Tyler Valentine. The player Carlos and Murray had been so excited about. The one who was supposed to replace Gavin on the team. Speaking of Gavin...

She tried to look around the man in front of her, then realized she was being rude. “Hey. I’m Piper. I own the Friendly Bean.” She managed what she hoped was a welcoming smile. “Thanks for doing this.”

She *was* thankful. Another player had decided that a last-minute Florida vacation was more important than Carlos’s charity, and they’d had to scramble for a replacement. When Tyler Valentine had agreed, bids on the event had gone sky-high. Having now seen him in person, she could see why.

“Not a problem,” he said smoothly. “I’m glad to help.” He glanced around the shop, his eyes lingering for a moment on the rainbow flag. Something in his posture shifted, and he looked back at Piper as if he was debating asking her something.

She braced herself for some vaguely homophobic or ignorant comment, but he only said, “This place is great.”

She tried to look around him again to find Gavin, but like all hockey players Tyler Valentine was just so *big*. And he seemed intent on remaining in her personal space.

“Thanks. So...” She decided she might as well do her job and be a good host. “How do you like Philly so far?”

He leaned a hip against the counter. “Great. It’s a lot different from L.A., for sure. The weather’s a little less...” He trailed off.

“Bearable?” Piper laughed. It was brutally humid today, and she’d had to bring a clean shirt to change into after the walk to work.

He laughed as well, and she found herself relaxing a bit. This would certainly be an easier afternoon than the last

hockey player event. At least, the player in question was a whole lot less off-putting than Saul Morgan.

She finally caught sight of Gavin, all the way across the shop talking to the first reporters to show up. No doubt they were impatient to chat with the newest member of the team, but Tyler didn't seem in a hurry to meet them.

And Gavin looked...off. He wasn't leaning heavily on his cane, but he had a tight, drawn expression that she associated with pain. His eyes flicked over toward her and she tilted her head in a question. *Are you all right?*

His gaze returned to the reporters without acknowledging her, and the slightest chill of unease shivered down her spine.

"So, what's the drill?" Piper jumped when Tyler spoke again. She'd nearly forgotten he was there.

"Oh, um..." Suddenly she felt off her game. She wanted to talk to Gavin. They had spent last night together as usual, and to her relief he hadn't tried to address their relationship, or lack thereof, in any way. Everything had been light and easy, just as they'd agreed. And if when they came together in his bed she felt as if she was telling him without words everything she'd left unsaid since the museum, neither of them addressed that, either.

Tyler cleared his throat politely and put a hand on her arm. She gave him an apologetic smile. "Sorry, I'm a little distracted today."

He leaned a bit closer. "No worries. Just let me know what you need me to do here."

"Yeah." Piper pulled herself together. She explained to him about the media corner, the table set up for him and the auction winner, and the server roles that Gavin and Carlos would play. "I'll be behind the counter—we're a little short-staffed this round, but it should be fine."

Tyler nodded and moved a step away, and Piper released a breath she'd been holding. She hadn't realized how close he'd been, or how strange it had felt. He was an attractive man, and seemingly a nice one, but she hadn't liked the proximity.

She wanted Gavin.

“Okay, I’d better get to it,” Tyler said, and with another grin—this time, Piper returned it willingly—strode over to shake hands with the growing number of media.

Piper busied herself behind the counter, chatting with Carlos, making the drinks for Tyler and his companion for the afternoon—a lovely mother of three, she discovered—and generally keeping everything running as smoothly as possible. Eventually the high schooler, Owen, arrived for his shift and kept her company as the not-date ran its course.

Gavin, however, kept his distance. He didn’t avoid her completely—he ushered the media out the door when the time came, ran service as needed between the counter and the table, and chatted idly with her and Carlos.

But she knew him too well now, and she had the distinct impression that something was wrong.

Once Valentine had given one last hug to the auction winner and escorted her out the door, he made a beeline for the counter.

“That went well, didn’t it?” he asked her with a grin.

She couldn’t help returning it. He was a little polished for her taste, but he seemed friendly and kind, and he had gone above and beyond to make the auction winner feel special. “It did! Thanks so much for doing this.”

“It was my pleasure,” he said. He leaned across the counter just as Gavin walked past, depositing a dirty mug on the surface. “You wouldn’t want to get together sometime, would you? For, I don’t know...” He gestured around the shop. “Coffee, I guess?”

She laughed despite herself, even as she noticed that Gavin was shaking Carlos’s hand and moving toward the door of the café. Was he really leaving without saying goodbye?

“Yeah, I guess.” She blinked. What was she doing? “I mean I...” She what? She was in a relationship?

That wasn't true. Gavin would be long gone by the time she ever went out with Tyler Valentine. She'd be back to being single, as usual. "Look, I... I'd love to get together. As friends. It's...complicated."

That was as close to the truth as she could get. She liked Tyler, and he was new in town. She'd be more than happy to have to have coffee with him. But she didn't want him to think she was interested in anything more. The hard truth was, she could no longer imagine herself with anyone but Gavin. And wasn't that ironic, that the man who'd made her see a wider path than the one within her own narrow dating limitations was the one man she absolutely couldn't have.

Tyler let out a long, dramatic breath, and she couldn't help but laugh again. "Ah. Complicated." He glanced over to where Gavin stood by the door, looking back at them before pulling the handle and walking out. Piper stared after him. "I see. Well, Ms. Complicated, that would be nice—friendship." Tyler nodded at her and waved at Carlos. "I'll catch you later, then."

He pushed off the counter, and Piper stood there for about two seconds before she called over to Owen, "Be right back!" and hurried out the door after Gavin.

She found him less than a block away. "Hey!"

He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, and when she caught up to him, she noticed the set of his jaw, the way he wouldn't quite meet her eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked, a little breathless from running after him. "Is it your knee? Do you want me to go get my car?"

A muscle in his jaw twitched. "My knee is fine," he said curtly.

"Okay. Good. Great." She stared at him, unable to read his mood. "Is...anything wrong?"

He looked at her, his expression indecipherable. Then he shook his head. "No. No, I'm fine. I just..." He ran a hand through his hair and gazed over the top of her head. Something was definitely wrong, and he didn't want to tell her. The

realization that he owed her exactly nothing, that she had no claim to him or his feelings, no right to pry, ran through her like the time the espresso machine had shorted out and she'd received an unpleasant shock. It didn't matter that she loved him. He didn't love her, and he was leaving. "I'm fine," he said again.

"Good. Okay. Gavin..." She had no idea what to say. She *wanted* to know what was wrong, wanted him to trust her with whatever it was. But clearly, he didn't feel the same. She swallowed. "Are we still on for tonight?"

He looked back down at her, and those blue eyes that usually looked at her with such warmth were cold and closed off. She didn't know why. "I'm, uh..." He cleared his throat, then frowned, as if he was thinking about something unpleasant. "I have a...a meeting."

She squinted at him. He didn't sound particularly sure of that. "A meeting."

"Yeah." He shifted more weight off his bad leg. "A conference call. With the Vancouver GM."

"Okay." She supposed she had no choice but to believe him, even though he sounded distinctly unbelievable. "So, that's like...an hour? Do you want to come over after?" She wasn't sure why she was pushing, except that they only had a few days left. She wanted to spend time with him. Didn't he feel the same?

"I don't think I can."

Apparently, he *didn't* feel the same. The first flicker of anger burned away her uncertainty. "Gavin." Why wouldn't he just be honest with her?

"I have to get to PT" was all he said, and the flicker became a full flame.

"*Gavin*," she said more firmly. "What's going on? Talk to me." She might not have the right to pry into his personal life, but she sure as hell had the right to know where she stood with him.

He shook his head. “Nothing’s going on. I’m just...busy tonight. I can text you tomorrow, maybe.”

I can text you tomorrow, maybe.

The hell with that.

“Gavin,” she said again, trying to keep her voice calm. “What is this? You’re leaving on Wednesday, right? Do you want to just...stop? Call this—” she gestured back and forth between them “—off, right now?”

His eyes flicked away, and she knew. She *knew* that’s exactly what he wanted. And she was furious. She was also perfectly aware that the fury was a mask for hurt, and perfectly aware that he was well within his rights to do this. He owed her nothing...didn’t he?

“Look,” he said finally, his expression tired and resigned, and she would have wanted to give him a hug if she hadn’t wanted more to clock him in the jaw. “I’ve got to pack and make arrangements. Like you said, I’m leaving on Wednesday. Maybe it’s better if you...move on.” He waved a hand back at the shop, and she turned her brain inside out to figure out what the hell he was talking about.

“Move on,” she said blankly.

“Yeah.” His tone was neutral, and she just stood there. Angry, confused, and feeling as if she had no recourse. He had no idea that she loved him. He’d made no promises and she’d asked for none, so why should she expect anything other than an easy break? When had her subconscious decided that Gavin Williams owed her a damn thing?

She felt so ridiculous she couldn’t stifle a bitter laugh. “Right,” she said flatly. And then her phone rang in her pocket. She squeezed her eyes shut. “I should get that.” There could be an issue back in the shop.

She looked back at Gavin in time to catch his curt nod.

“Fine.”

He turned and stalked off without another word, and Piper tried not to notice that his limp seemed worse today, despite

what he'd said. She also tried to ignore that her anger had turned into a strange sort of panic. She had lost him—right there in the middle of the sidewalk she would have to cross every day on her way to work—despite never really having had him to begin with. She was left only with the sense of not having been enough for yet another man, and the particular pain of losing a person close to her—pain that she'd sworn she'd do everything in her power to avoid ever experiencing again.

She pulled her phone out of her pocket and turned to walk back to the café, leaving her heart behind her.

Chapter Nineteen

Piper didn't even realize she had fallen asleep until the sound of voices woke her. She raised her head from her arms and took a moment to orient herself.

She was sitting on her kitchen floor, her back against the counter. The tile was cool under her bare feet. One foot was asleep, and she had a crick in her neck. Her head hurt and she couldn't breathe through her nose. The sun was shining through the back door's windows, which she wholeheartedly resented. The smell of coffee wafted toward her.

"She must have been exhausted," a familiar voice said quietly.

"Do you think she's okay?" Another voice.

"Does she *look* okay?" An impatient sigh.

"Hey, sleepyhead." Piper blinked her tear-swollen eyes until Sloan came into view.

She glanced down and saw a large damp spot on her shirt that didn't look like tears.

Fern was sitting at the table. "You spilled the coffee you were holding," she said. "But you didn't wake up, even when we came in and found you." She nodded toward the coffee maker. "A new pot is on the way."

Piper lifted her head and saw Georgie sitting across from Fern. "Hey, hon. I'd ask how you're feeling but..."

"You look terrible," Sloan finished for her. Murray smacked her on the shoulder from her seat on top of the counter.

"She does not!" Murray glanced her way. "I mean, you kind of do. But I think it's understandable *under the circumstances*." She glared at Sloan.

"We don't even know what the circumstances are," Sloan protested.

Murray rolled her eyes. “It’s got to be a man problem. Right?” She looked at Piper. “Man problem?”

Fern held out a hand. “Okay, kids. That’s enough.” She stood and pulled a dishcloth out of a drawer, running it under the sink faucet. She squeezed it out and handed it to Piper. “Here.”

Piper took the cool cloth and pressed it to her eyes. Her brain was fuzzy, like it was clogged with tears and mucus. Her skin was flushed and her throat was scratchy as if she was coming down with a cold, but she knew she didn’t have a virus.

Gavin had broken up with her. Not that they’d ever been together. Not really.

“Gavin...” she began from behind the towel. Everything hurt, but especially her heart. It was a physical pain, as if someone had reached inside her chest and squeezed, hard.

“It’s okay,” Georgie said from across the room. “You don’t have to talk about it.”

“Unless you want to,” Fern added, lowering herself to sit next to Piper on the floor. Sloan and Murray followed suit, then Georgie, until all of them were sitting in her kitchen, together.

“I—” She couldn’t say more, not yet.

Somehow, she’d made it through the rest of the day at the Bean, because she was a professional and she had to. Smiling and chatting with customers, and then wading through email in the office until late at night, she’d kept up the appearance that everything was normal. Inside, once the shock had worn off, she’d felt shattered, then furious, and then finally wrung out.

Cycling through so many emotions while maintaining a composed facade was probably terrible for her health, but sometimes that’s just how it had to be.

When she’d finally arrived home, she tried to keep up the act for her own benefit, picking at a late dinner she didn’t want and forcing herself to shower, change, and get into bed.

And then the crying had started.

No matter how angry she was at the way Gavin had ended things—and really, when it came down to it, he had been truly shitty to dump her out of the blue just outside of her own shop—beneath the heat of that anger was a jagged, wounded ache.

She loved him. And he had simply walked away.

She'd given up trying to sleep when she saw the first rays of dawn peeking through the blinds, and trudged downstairs to make coffee. And then she'd sunk onto the floor, mug in hand, tears still refusing to subside.

And apparently, *that* was when her body decided to sleep.

Fern slipped an arm around her shoulders, and Murray put a hand on her knee. They sat together like that for several minutes, until the coffee maker beeped. Georgie stood, poured a steaming cup of coffee, and handed it to her.

“The Bean is covered for the day,” Murray said. “I called in reinforcements. Tomorrow, too, in case you need more time.”

“You don't have to do anything today,” Fern said.

“And we'll leave if you want us to,” added Sloan. “Or stay. Whatever you need.”

Despite herself, Piper smiled a little. She pulled the towel away from her eyes. “Thank you.”

Sloan shrugged. “That's what we're here for.”

“You know we'll do whatever you need,” Georgie added. She poured herself a cup of coffee and returned to the floor.

Fern cut her a look. “I thought we were just doing tea now.”

Georgie rolled her eyes. “If by *we* you mean *you*, sure. And this is an emergency.”

“It's not *your* emergency—”

“*Anyway*,” Sloan cut in. “We'll stay or go. Your choice.”

Piper looked around the kitchen. Memories of Gavin were everywhere. The kitchen table, the living room. God, the

bedroom. How had he imprinted so thoroughly on her space—her life—in just a few weeks?

“I think...” She swallowed, her throat sore and swollen. She looked over at Fern and Georgie. “Could I come over to your place? I just...want to get out of here.”

Fern nodded immediately, and Murray squeezed her shoulder. “Do you want to stay over? You could have your old room back for the night—or we could share. Whatever.”

Piper smiled through yet more tears at her friend. “Yeah, that would be great.”

“I’ll go grab some clothes from upstairs. Toothbrush and stuff.” Sloan stood and took off upstairs.

“I’ll see if he’s home—in case you want to be incognito going to our house,” Murray said.

Ugh. The thought of leaving the house, of being in view of Gavin’s place, was enough to make her stomach roil.

“His car’s gone. He must be out,” Murray called from the front of the house.

That was marginally better.

“Got your stuff,” Sloan called from the living room. She came back into the kitchen carrying a backpack.

“I think...” Piper swallowed. She didn’t *think* anything. She knew. “I realized that I loved him, and he just...he dumped me. Yesterday, outside of the Bean. I know he doesn’t love me, and I always knew he was leaving but...” She broke off.

“That fucker,” said Sloan. “I will destroy him.”

Piper shook her head. “It’s fine, I just...”

“It’s *not* fine,” said Murray. “I mean, sure, the jerk can feel however he feels—although if he really isn’t in love with you, he’s an idiot, obviously. But breaking things off like that? Not okay.”

Piper had to agree. Her anger rose again to meet the sadness.

“There are respectful ways to end relationships,” Fern agreed. “And that isn’t it. He owed you more than that.”

She supposed he did. She had told herself that he didn’t owe her anything, that their agreement meant that he had the right to do whatever he wanted with her feelings. But that wasn’t true. She wouldn’t have done the same to him. Not after everything between them, everything they’d shared, temporary or not.

She deserved better.

She deserved to be loved in equal measure to the love she was equipped to give. She needed to find someone who felt about her the way she felt about Gavin, and who would treat her with respect and kindness—as Gavin had done until...he didn’t.

She would recover. She was resilient, and had support all around her. She *could* recover from this.

“Okay, honey,” Fern said gently. “Do you want to go now?”

Piper nodded quickly. She needed a change of scenery, and to be surrounded by friends. And if Gavin wasn’t home, she wanted to get across the street as soon as possible.

She stood, feeling an ache in every joint and muscle. She wasn’t sure if it was from falling asleep on the floor or if her body was simply reflecting what her heart felt.

Georgie put an arm around her shoulders and Piper leaned into her. They followed the rest of the group out the back door, around the house, and across the street. Piper tried and failed not to stare at the big gray house on the corner. It already looked empty to her, as if Gavin had left for good. She wondered if, wherever he was, he felt even a sliver of the hurt that was nearly consuming her.

A thought occurred to her as Fern unlocked the door of the pink house. “How did you guys know to come find me?” she asked.

“Oh, honey,” Fern said. “Murray said last night she was worried about you—that you were a little off yesterday. So we thought we’d stop by this morning, just to check.”

“In case you needed us,” Murray added.

Piper stepped inside and closed her eyes, smelling the familiar scent of laundry, cats, old books, and Fern’s cooking. Her friends might be a little overprotective, but she had never appreciated them more than she did at that moment.

* * *

That night, Piper lay on the bed on the third floor of Fern and Georgie’s house, staring out the window at the moon.

It had been years since she had lain in this spot, but it was almost like muscle memory for her to do exactly as she used to do when she lived here. Murray hadn’t moved the bed from its position against the side wall of the bedroom, and in the dark, she could almost make herself believe that she was in the past, that she was still a grad student grateful for her own space in the welcoming house.

So many things had happened in the past few years. Her parents’ death. Opening the Bean. Buying her own house. Focusing on her community and friendships.

Her life had both expanded and contracted in that time, and now she felt as if she was on the verge of more change. She was happy with her professional life, and what she’d created at the Bean. She loved her home, her friends and community.

But Gavin had shown her something she hadn’t even known she’d wanted. Coming home to him each night had been a revelation. She’d always held back in her relationships, regardless of the gender of the other person. She hadn’t wanted to share her home, her space, her thoughts and fears and hopes. She’d learned that to do so meant hurt, and loss. So she hadn’t shared herself, not really.

With Gavin, all of that had come naturally, even within the restrictions of their temporary, no-strings-attached agreement. Somehow, the person she’d sworn not to care for had become someone she didn’t want to do without.

She believed now that she could enter wholeheartedly into a relationship with anyone she chose, despite her concerns about

the erasure of her identity. Gavin was right that what mattered was the people close to her—and that she could pick her battles when it came to the assumptions of people outside of her immediate circle. She knew she could live authentically as her whole self regardless of what other people thought.

She sighed.

When and how she might put any of that to the test was out of her hands, given that she was suddenly, painfully single again.

Gavin had chosen to break things off, and that was out of her hands, as well. He didn't love her, and had never promised her anything more than he'd given. He was moving on, and so would she. And loving him wasn't a mistake, either. Regardless of the loss, the pain, she was glad she loved him. She'd learned so much, grown so much just from knowing him. The love was worth the loss.

She couldn't regret it.

Still. She was angry at the way things had ended.

And she missed him, horribly.

“Hey,” came a whisper from across the room.

Piper turned her head in the dark. She could barely make out Murray's shape inside the sleeping bag on the floor. “Are you okay?”

“That's what I was going to ask you!” She heard the rustling sound of Murray turning to face her.

“I just meant, are you comfortable down there? You know you can sleep in your own bed if you want.” Murray had insisted Piper take the bed, and then wanted to keep her company by sleeping in one of Georgie's old sleeping bags. Piper hadn't protested very hard, glad as she was to have her friend nearby.

“No, I'm fine. This is like a sleepover from when I was a kid, except no annoying little brother to barge in.”

Piper smiled, even if Murray couldn't see her in the dark. “Thanks for letting me stay over.”

“Yeah, of course,” Murray finally said. “We all just want to help. If we can.”

“I know. It does help.” Piper shifted so she was on her side, facing the direction of Murray’s voice. “I honestly don’t know what I’d do without you guys.”

There was a pause. “I’m sorry this is so hard.”

“It *is* hard.” A few more tears leaked from her eyes and ran down her cheeks. “I finally really care about someone, someone who was the complete opposite of what I thought I wanted—what felt safe.”

Another quiet huff. “Yeah, when you break stride you *really* go all out. Not just a man, but a hockey player? *That* hockey player. Just...wow, Piper.”

Piper stifled a laugh despite herself. “Not helpful, Mur.”

“Sorry. He’s just...”

“I know.” She did know. Turns out, what she needed wasn’t anything like what she expected. And unfortunately for her, she had been right to be cautious, although not for the reasons she’d assumed.

The fact that Gavin was a man had nothing to do with their problems in the end. He’d accepted her as she was, never made her feel less than, or uncomfortable because of who she was. But somehow, it still hadn’t been enough.

“Piper?” Murray whispered tentatively.

“Yeah?”

Another pause. “Nothing. Never mind.”

Piper sighed. “Spit it out.”

“I just...” She could almost hear Murray debating whether or not to continue, but she knew her friend always ended up saying what was on her mind. It was one of the many reasons she loved her. “I don’t think he’s leaving because he doesn’t love you.”

The scab over Piper’s heart peeled away, just a little, at the words.

“I mean—wait,” Murray said quickly. “That didn’t come out right. He’s leaving, but not because of you. I think Gavin *does* love you—or at least cares for you a lot.”

“Murray, he doesn’t.” Piper blinked back yet more tears. “I do believe he cares about me, but it’s nothing like love. At least, not the same kind as what I feel.”

“But...how do you know? I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

“Lust isn’t love, Murray.”

Murray gave a little growl of impatience. “I do know the difference. I know I’m not super experienced with this stuff, but the way he looks at you—it’s like it’s been cloudy all day and the sun suddenly came out, and he wants to bask in it.” She sighed. “Very romantic. You being the sun, obviously.”

Piper took a deep breath. “He’s never said a word about how he feels, other than that he likes me as a friend.”

“Mmm. And you, of course, told him *all* about how you’re in love with him?”

“Well...”

“Mm-hm.”

“It doesn’t matter. He’s leaving Wednesday morning. He’s gone.”

She heard Murray sigh. “I know. And the way he ended things sucks—there’s no excuse for that. I just think his leaving has everything to do with other stuff in his life, and not because he doesn’t care about you.”

Piper knew this. Gavin was leaving because his life—the life he wanted—was in Vancouver. He would never give that up, never let the team and fans in Vancouver down, no matter how he felt. Certainly not for her.

“It doesn’t matter. However he feels. It doesn’t matter.”

“It does, though. I think it matters to you.”

Her friends knew her better than anyone. It did matter. She wanted to know how Gavin felt, even if he didn’t love her the

way she loved him. But he'd held that part of himself back, just as she had.

Or maybe she was right, and he really only felt friendship for her.

Either way, he'd made his decision and would be gone soon enough.

Chapter Twenty

Gavin Williams was hungover, exhausted, and grumpy as hell.

He should have been packing. Or saying his farewells to his Philly teammates. Or planning out his first week in Vancouver. He was leaving tomorrow, for God's sake.

Instead, he'd been holed up in his house, alone.

After walking away from Piper two days ago, he'd sat staring at a wall in his living room for about an hour until he couldn't stand his own thoughts anymore. Then he'd grabbed his keys and headed to the training facility, where he'd pushed himself on the weight machines until his muscles screamed for mercy. And then he'd come home to his half-packed house and crashed on the couch, exhausted enough to sleep despite the panic and heartache that clawed around in his chest.

His dreams had been full of Piper, and he had tossed and turned all night.

Yesterday he'd turned his phone off and dropped it in a drawer, wanting to lick his wounds without contact with other members of the human race. Of course, he'd proceeded to pull it out of the drawer several hundred times as he'd wandered aimlessly around the house, just to see if Piper had called or texted him.

She hadn't.

And every time he confronted his message-less phone, he remembered Piper's face when he'd pushed her away. How she'd looked at him like he was a stranger. And how she'd laughed bitterly, because he was just that ridiculous—just another jerk of a man acting like she wasn't enough.

Even if there was an opportunity to try to make it up to her, she was never going to forgive him. She deserved to be left alone, safe from his bullshit.

Last night, the thought of sleeping in his bed—the bed that still held Piper's scent on the sheets—caused his chest to seize

and his stomach to clench, and so he'd jammed himself onto the couch yet again.

He tried to roll over and go back to sleep, but the pounding in his head wasn't letting him do any such thing. And... wait. He wasn't hungover. He hadn't had anything to drink in days, much as he'd wanted to down an entire bottle of bourbon to muffle the never-ending pain in his heart. But he'd learned his lesson the last time.

The pounding was coming from his front door.

Thinking it might, maybe, just *possibly* be Piper come to berate him for how he'd acted—a punishment he'd gladly take if he could just see her one more time—he all but leaped off the couch. His knee gave out as he tried to lunge for the door, and he just barely caught himself on the back of a chair before he went down.

Not a good knee day, then.

Limping the rest of the way, he grabbed the door handle and yanked it open. He tried to ignore the crushing disappointment at the complete lack of Piper on his doorstep.

“You're an asshole.”

Gavin raised his eyebrows at the unusually harsh language from his ex-teammate, but he certainly didn't contradict him. Carlos wasn't telling him anything he didn't already know.

“Come in,” he grumbled, and turned back toward the couch without waiting for his friend. He wasn't really in the mood for company, but then, he wasn't really in the mood for anything.

“And you look like shit.” Carlos strode into the room, slamming the door behind him, and threw himself on the chair opposite where Gavin sat.

“Good morning to you, too,” Gavin said wearily.

“It's the afternoon.”

Was it? Gavin rubbed his eyes. Shit. He'd been in a stupor for two days, and needed to snap out of it even if he was a complete fucking mess. The truth was, he was ashamed of his

behavior, heartsick, and absolutely clueless about how to move forward in this new, Piper-less age. Still, he needed to get himself together so he could leave for Vancouver tomorrow morning. He needed to leave Philly behind, to let Piper get on with her life, to let the Firebirds move forward without him, to keep his commitment to the Vancouver team.

But...he didn't want to leave.

He didn't want to get on a plane and leave behind the life he'd made in Philly. He didn't want to leave the city he'd just begun to explore, and this small suburb where everyone knew each other. He wasn't even sure he had the heart for his dream job anymore. What was he going to do in Vancouver? Sit in an office on the phone? Watch games from the executive box as far above the ice as he could get? Be called "sir" by the players when he discussed lineups and contracts?

Not long ago that had been exactly what he wanted. Now? He didn't know. And it was hard to focus on anything job-related when the hole in his heart seemed to be growing larger and more painful with every passing hour. He thought Piper was better off without him, but his heart didn't want to let go of her. Not yet. Not ever.

"Well?" He realized that Carlos was waiting for him to say something. And still glaring.

Gavin sighed. "I'm going to guess that you heard about Piper." He hadn't been certain before that Carlos even knew they were together, but obviously someone had filled him in.

"You think? What the fuck, man?" Carlos shook his head and frowned at him. "Murray said Piper crashed with her last night. Said she was heartbroken."

And with that, another piece of Gavin's own heart splintered painfully off from what was left of the whole. He hadn't wanted to hurt Piper. It was the *last* thing he wanted. He knew that he had fucked up. He'd let jealousy and his own insecurity get the better of him, and he'd been a complete jerk to Piper. His battered ego had reared its ugly head, forcing him to preemptively break things off with Piper in order to cling to some imagined scraps of dignity—as if that was more

important than being honest and vulnerable with the woman he loved.

“I just...” What could he even tell Carlos? The truth, he supposed. Carlos had been a good friend to him and had asked him a question. He owed him an honest answer. And anyway, what more did he have to lose?

“I’m leaving town tomorrow, and when Valentine said he was going to ask Piper out, I realized that she was going to move on without me. Maybe to Valentine, maybe to someone else—but not me. And I reacted badly.”

“You reacted like an asshole.” Carlos was not mollified.

“Yeah.” Gavin ran a hand over his face. His eyes were scratchy, and he really needed to brush his teeth. And shave. And maybe take a shower. “I did. She deserved better.”

Piper deserved to have him down on his good knee begging her not to forget him, telling her how he felt about her, how wonderful she’d been. Telling her that he would miss her every day for the rest of his life, and that he hoped she would find someone who made her happy. That *all* he wanted was for her to be happy.

Instead, he’d left her... *Wait*. “Murray said she was heartbroken?”

Carlos rolled his eyes. “Duh. That’s what happens when a woman is kicked to the curb by someone she loves. Even I know that.”

Gavin swallowed hard. He’d imagined Piper furious at him, as she should be. Probably stung by how horrible he’d been to her. Maybe a little hurt, given the time they’d spent together. And of course, she *cared* about him. He knew that. But a woman wasn’t heartbroken unless she...

“Piper cares about a lot of people,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“You’re an asshole.” Carlos wasn’t wrong, but Gavin wished he’d change it up a bit.

“So you keep saying.”

“Because it’s true,” Carlos shot back. “Look, I don’t really even understand why she was with you to begin with.”

“Thanks for that.”

Carlos glared again. “I *mean* that even besides you being a man, you guys are pretty different. That’s all. But she obviously really liked you, and I *thought* you were a decent guy. If you were done with her, you should have—”

“I wasn’t *done* with Piper,” Gavin cut him off a little too forcefully. Jesus. He would never be done with Piper. “You think I don’t want to be with her? She’s gorgeous, and funny, and sharp, and every fucking thing I needed this summer, and —” *And forever*, he almost said.

Carlos was still glaring. The kid had a pretty good game face going. No wonder the other teams got out of his way on the ice.

“You’re telling me you broke up with Piper on the sidewalk in front of the Bean, without any warning, and you...didn’t even want to break up with her?”

“Um... I guess so?” When Carlos put it like that, it sounded pretty stupid.

“So, you’re stupid as well as an asshole.”

At least they were on the same page.

The doorbell rang.

“Jesus Christ,” Gavin muttered, dropping his head in his hands.

And then hope blossomed in his chest once again. He raised his head sharply.

“Dude, it’s not Piper. Forget it.” Apparently, his baseless optimism was written all over his face.

Carlos went to open the door, and in walked Tyler Valentine.

“I brought coffee,” he announced cheerfully, pushing a large cup into Gavin’s hand.

“I don’t drink coffee,” Gavin muttered. But he took the cup.

“You do when you look like that,” Valentine replied, echoing words he’d heard just a few weeks before. *You drink it if you have a hangover as bad as you sound like you do*, Carlos had told him on the phone. Before he’d made his first trip to the Friendly Bean. Before he’d met Piper.

Gavin rubbed his chest.

How a simple drink could make his heart feel like it had been run through with a skate blade was beyond him. He stared down at the cup before setting it on the coffee table in front of him. He couldn’t drink it, not without thinking about Piper.

He couldn’t do anything without thinking of Piper.

“Thought I’d stop by, since I heard you’d gone full hermit,” Valentine said, and bumped shoulders with Carlos before plopping himself next to Gavin on the couch. “Guess I wasn’t the only one with that idea.”

Gavin sighed. “I know Carlos came over to yell at me. What’s your excuse?”

Valentine shrugged. “Like I said, I heard you went full hermit. You didn’t think your teammates would come make sure you were okay?”

“But we...” He’d been about to say, *but we were never teammates*, but that was petty. And anyway, what really made someone your teammate? Valentine was here, trying in his own weird way to help him, he supposed. What was more of being a teammate than that? So he just said, “Thanks.”

Valentine shrugged again. “Look, man, I never would have asked Piper out if I knew you two were a thing.”

“We’re not a thing.” Not anymore.

“Only because you were a dick to her.” Carlos was back to glaring at him.

Valentine’s eyebrows knit in confusion. “So, what’s the problem? Apologize. You obviously can’t get along without her.” Gavin scowled as Valentine looked him over, sleep-

rumpled clothes, bristly face, red eyes and all. “Apologize. Grovel. Get her to take you back. What are you even waiting for? You look like shit.”

“That’s what I said!” Carlos gave Valentine his first smile since walking in the door. Then he scowled at Gavin again. “But don’t even think of talking to Piper if you’re just going to hurt her again.”

Gavin dropped his face back into his hands. “You guys. I’m *leaving*. Tomorrow. Why would I go apologize to a woman who I’m sure doesn’t want to see my face, when I’m going to be gone in less than twenty-four hours?”

Carlos and Valentine stared at each other for a moment, and then Valentine smacked Gavin on the shoulder. Hard. Gavin tried not to throttle him.

“Because it’s the right fucking thing to do, you asshole!” Valentine reprimanded him.

Carlos nodded. “You hurt her—she deserves an apology. At least.”

Valentine turned to face Gavin. “And why are you leaving, anyway? What about the player development job?” He shook his head. “Come on, man. You can’t tell me that you want to be in an office more than you want to be helping the young guys?”

Valentine’s words were a little too close to what had been whirling around in his own head yesterday, in between intense bouts of self-pity regarding his screwup with Piper. But he had a *commitment* to Vancouver. He couldn’t just tell them he’d changed his mind...could he?

Feeling harassed, Gavin grabbed the coffee from the table and took a long drink. He stared down into the cup, the liquid light brown with milk and sweet with sugar. Huh. It wasn’t bad. He took another sip.

His phone rang.

Gavin sighed heavily, and answered it, because why the hell not. He obviously wasn’t going to get a moment’s peace today, and maybe it was for the best. He was tired of being in his own

miserable head, and he deserved whatever abuse came his way.

“You’re an asshole.” Simon’s voice echoed Carlos’s words all the way from Canada.

“What the fuck?” Gavin ran a hand over his face. “How the hell do you even know what happened with Piper?”

“With Piper... What? No. I’m talking about the job in Philly! Why the hell are you still coming here?”

“Oh—wait, how do you know about *that*?”

He could almost hear Simon’s eye roll through the phone. “Gavin. Did you or did you not tell me that you wanted to be *in* the game? That working that one practice was the closest you’d felt to yourself since... Well.”

“Since I blew out my knee and had to retire. You can say it out loud.” And so could he, now.

“Put him on speaker,” Valentine said, waving his hand at the phone. Gavin stared at him. “What? If you’re going to have a side conversation, it’s rude not to include your guests.”

“My *guests*? I didn’t invite you!”

“Is that Valentine?” Simon’s voice came through the phone. “Put me on speaker.”

Gavin growled but hit the speaker button, tossing his phone onto the coffee table.

“Okay, to recap,” Valentine said in a loud and clear voice, for the benefit of Simon. “Gavin here has been sulking in his house for almost two full days because number one, he royally screwed up with a woman and hasn’t yet grown the balls to apologize—”

“Fuck you, Valentine,” Gavin growled, but it didn’t have much heat behind it.

“*The balls to apologize,*” Valentine emphasized. “And number two, he’s conflicted about leaving town, but he’s hell-bent on doing it anyway for some reason even though he’s got the job offer he really wants right here.”

“That about sums it up,” said Carlos.

“Well, shit,” Simon said. “I thought there was a real problem here. This is easy.”

“I beg your pardon?” Gavin was fairly certain that losing the woman he loved and relocating his life for a job he wasn’t even sure he wanted was anything but “easy.”

“Come on, Gav,” Simon continued. “Carlos and Valentine are right. You should apologize for being a jerk. If the woman doesn’t want to hear it, you back off. And it’s up to her how she feels about you afterward. But you can’t treat someone badly and then just leave it. Especially not someone you really care about.”

A vision of Piper beneath him in bed flashed in front of his eyes. Naked, beautiful, vulnerable. She’d trusted him with herself, and he’d betrayed that trust. Even if she didn’t love him, she’d given him something precious, something that deserved so much more respect than he’d returned.

“I know,” Gavin said finally, his voice little more than a croak.

Piper deserved an apology for how he had acted. If she didn’t want to see him at all, she could tell him so, and he’d leave. But he had to at least tell her he was sorry, and that she deserved better.

“So that’s that,” Simon said, as if seeing Piper again wasn’t likely to break him.

As if it would be the simplest thing in the world to deliver his heart on an apology-shaped platter to Piper, knowing she would almost certainly tell him to leave and never come back.

“And, look.” Simon was still going. “Gavin, I’m your friend, and you know I want you here in Vancouver. I miss having you around. And you deserve to be rewarded with a fancy job for what you gave to this city. They owe you for those years, and for your success. But if you can work directly with the young players, and that’s what you want? You’re a fool not to take the job in Philly. The decision you make now will shape the rest of your career.”

Gavin caught his breath, taken aback at his friend's bald statement.

Simon was right, of course. Whatever he chose now would shape the rest of his career, which wasn't over, no matter how much he'd convinced himself otherwise while he was wallowing in his forced retirement as an active player. He had *years* still to give to the game. The only question was, where and how did he want to spend those years?

He'd formed the seed of a new life in Philadelphia. Not just his relationship with Piper, but the friends he'd made here. The friends who had come today to slap some sense into him. He didn't have a history here, he didn't have a legacy to regain or live up to—and maybe that was a good thing. He'd told Piper that he'd missed out by spending his whole life in one city, and it was true. He liked Philadelphia. He liked Shady Hill. He liked having things to discover, not knowing every place like the back of his hand. He liked doing something *new*.

“Seriously,” Valentine agreed with Simon. “Do you really want to leave Philadelphia, leave the woman you love without so much as an apology for acting like an ass, and take a job that will stroke your ego instead of one that's actually doing what you want to do? Okay, man. That makes a whole lot of sense.”

Gavin forced one breath into his lungs, and then another, as he absorbed what he hadn't wanted to admit to himself.

All this time he'd thought the path back to himself, to who he'd been before and who he wanted to be again, was to return to Vancouver and take a management job. But Simon was right. He *had* said he'd felt more like himself during his one attempt at coaching than he had in months. And he'd meant it.

What was more important: doing what made him feel like himself, or doing what made others look at him as if he was the same person he'd been five years ago? Was trying to reclaim a past version of himself more important than being who he was *now*? He had changed. His goals were different, and...hell, he wasn't the same person with Piper as he'd been with Lauren. He could apologize, make amends, do better.

Maybe he *could be* enough for her, if she'd let him. Learn from his mistakes and be a real partner. Maybe his life didn't have to be all about sacrificing what he wanted for the good of the team, or to satisfy some idea of what was best for everyone around him. Maybe what *he* wanted was important, too. Maybe he deserved the job he wanted, the woman he wanted, and something other than the life that was expected of him.

Gavin stared at Valentine. Valentine stared right back. Carlos stared at Gavin.

"You guys still there?" came Simon's voice through the phone.

"*Shit,*" Gavin swore.

When he'd envisioned the next few days, it had simply been a matter of scraping his sorry ass off the couch and onto a plane and letting the tide of his past pull him back. Now he was thinking about blowing up his future, and disappointing the entire Vancouver management and fans.

And seeing Piper again.

"What are you going to say to her?" Carlos asked, his expression solemn.

Jesus, what *was* he going to say to Piper? He wasn't willing to just give up on what they had. But she also deserved to make her own decision, on her own terms. She had good reasons for not wanting a long-term relationship with him, and he had to respect that. But she also deserved to know the truth about how he felt.

"I don't know," he said honestly.

"First things first, man," came Simon's voice. "You're due back here tomorrow—you'd better call Fuller."

The Vancouver GM. He'd be lucky if the man didn't grab his throat right through the phone. He hadn't signed any contract, though, so physical and verbal assault was about the worst he could do.

"And you'd better make sure the job here is still on the table," added Valentine. "You've taken your sweet time

making up your mind, and everyone knows you were planning to leave.”

“Shit,” Gavin said again. He wished he’d gotten more sleep.

He felt Carlos’s hand on his arm and looked up to where his former teammate—and friend—was leaning toward him from the chair.

“Don’t worry, man,” the younger man said. “We’ve got your back.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Piper ripped the sheets off the bed and stuffed them into the laundry basket. She had half an hour before she promised Fern she'd come over to help set up for their annual Fourth of July party, and before then she was going to clean all traces of Gavin Williams out of her house. Throw the sheets that still carried his scent in the laundry: check. Scrub the mug he'd used the last time he'd slept over and put it at the back of the cabinet: check. Toss the stray pair of socks he'd left behind in the trash: check.

She'd allowed her personal pity party to go on for a few days, and now she was done.

The last coffee not-date had been yesterday afternoon, and Piper hadn't been surprised that Gavin didn't attend. Carlos had said in an uncharacteristically discreet way that his ex-teammate was "busy." So, Piper put her head down and got through it, relief washing over her when the event was finally over. Too many memories. With that chapter closed, maybe now she'd be able to move on.

She walked from window to window on the first floor, raising the blinds. She'd closed them three days ago when she'd stumbled home from the Bean after Gavin had broken things off. Maybe she'd thought that by closing out the world, she could close herself off from the pain. That certainly hadn't proven true.

Now, she was done with hiding, done with shielding herself. She had fallen in love and had her heart broken, and while it sucked, she wasn't going to let it keep her down.

A movement across the street caught her eye and she quickly turned away. Gavin's car was still in his driveway, and she thought she'd caught a glimpse of someone opening the front door of his house from the inside. But Gavin had been scheduled to fly out to Vancouver early that morning. He should have been long gone.

Maybe his flight was delayed.

Swallowing hard, she returned to the kitchen and started another pot of coffee. Despite her determination to put him behind her, the thought of Gavin as close as across the street was enough to make her knees go weak and cause tears to threaten the edges of her strength. She wasn't going to lie to herself and tell herself that everything was fine. Not when she'd spent a mostly sleepless night staring up at her ceiling, trying not to remember all the times Gavin had joined her in that bed.

But she had a party to go to, and fine or not she was going to enjoy it.

The doorbell rang.

Piper froze, coffeepot in hand. She knew Murray, Fern, and Georgie were all busy setting up for the party. The whole neighborhood would be there, and setting up all of the food, decorations, and tables and chairs was an enormous undertaking. No doubt Sloan was already over there, as well. But maybe she'd stopped by for something they needed down the street.

She made her way through the house and onto the porch, peering through the glass on the front door.

It wasn't Sloan.

Gavin stood on her steps, his eyes down. His brow was creased as if he was glaring at his feet. He looked so much like that first day: imposing, grumpy, more than a little disheveled. Only, she didn't think it was frustration wrinkling his forehead.

He looked up, and she saw it. Guilt. Pain.

His eyes locked with hers and longing swept through her like a tidal wave. All she wanted was to fling open the door and wrap her arms around him, holding him close. Never letting him go. But she didn't even know why he was here. And he'd pushed her away.

She straightened her spine and told her pounding heart to calm down as she opened the door.

“Hi,” she said, grateful that her voice didn’t waver.

“Hi.” Gavin’s voice was strained, his eyes never leaving hers.

“Do you...” Piper cleared her throat and backed up a couple steps. “Come in.”

The invitation slipped out before she’d thought it through. She wasn’t at all sure she wanted Gavin in her house, on this porch where it had all started. Her heart was racing but her body felt frozen, her movements jerky with nerves and, she thought, anger. Yes. She was still angry at Gavin, at the way he’d dismissed everything between them so easily. Deal or no deal, there had been *feelings* there, and he’d stomped on those feelings right there on that sidewalk.

So, why was he here now?

She frowned down at where her arms were crossed in front of her chest, more to stop herself from shaking than as a defensive posture.

Gavin hesitated, then stepped over the threshold. He stopped in the middle of the porch, leaning on his cane. Piper glanced up at him warily.

Gavin looked decidedly uncomfortable, one hand twisting around the top of the cane. “I’m sorry to bother you. I just... I’ll go. I just wanted to tell you one thing, and then I swear I’ll leave you alone.”

Wasn’t that the problem? He’d left her alone.

“I needed to see you. To tell you...” He stopped, his eyes shifting to stare out the front windows.

“To tell me what?” The question came out more sharply than she’d intended. Her heart pounded louder now, so loud she wondered if he could hear it. Was this really happening? She’d imagined so many times over the past few days exactly this: Gavin returning, standing in front of her. In her daydreams he’d told her he loved her, that he couldn’t live without her, that leaving her had been a mistake. He’d told her...

“I’m sorry.” His eyes blinked back down to the floor. His voice was quiet, and Piper wasn’t entirely sure if she’d heard him correctly.

“You’re...”

“I’m sorry,” he said again, louder this time. He raised his head and met her gaze, the intense blue of his eyes pinning her where she stood. “I was a jealous bastard the other day at the Bean, and I hurt you. I realized that I was going to lose you, that I was leaving, and I just... I just lost it and—” He broke off and shook his head. “There’s no excuse for it. I should have talked to you about how I was feeling instead of just breaking things off like that. I’m sorry. Piper...” His chest rose as he sucked in a breath. “I’m so sorry for hurting you. It’s the last thing I wanted. I know you may not feel the same way I do, but that’s no excuse for acting the way I did.”

I know you may not feel the same way I do... What was he saying? Piper opened her mouth to say...what? She didn’t know. And Gavin was still talking, as if he was in a rush to get it all out before she kicked his ass to the curb, which just a few moments ago was a distinct possibility. But now? Her mind was whirling. *I know you may not feel the same way I do...*

“There’s a second thing—sorry.” He winced. “But this is important.” His blue eyes met hers, more vulnerable than she’d ever seen them. “I love you. I wanted to tell you that I love you.”

“What?” The word escaped on a desperate breath, all of the air sucked from her lungs at his declaration.

Looking unsure but resolved, he spoke again. “I love you. I’ve loved you for a while, probably before I even realized it. I had my head pretty far up my ass this summer, and I was too stuck in my own self-pity to realize what I felt—or to tell you, when you had every right to know. I don’t know if you care, or if you have any interest in trying to be together for real, or if you just wish I’d shut up and leave already. Whatever you want, I’ll do it. But I needed to tell you that I’m sorry for my behavior, and that I love you.”

He nodded once, as if he had set a task for himself and accomplished it.

Piper blinked at him, only with effort keeping her mouth from falling open in shock. She resisted the urge to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't actually asleep. Whatever she might have thought would bring Gavin to her door today, this wasn't it.

“Gavin—”

But Gavin didn't let her interrupt. He looked up at the ceiling and blew out a breath. “There's also a third thing, sorry. Sorry. And then I'll go, I swear. I took a job with the Philly team. I'm not going back to Vancouver.” He glanced back down at her, uncertainty still clouding his eyes. Piper couldn't have moved if her life had depended on it. Gavin was...staying? “I took the job because I wanted it. I'll be working more directly with the younger players, and...” He nodded again. “I wanted it. So, I'm staying in Philly. But if you prefer—” He swallowed visibly but pressed onward. “If you prefer I don't stay in the neighborhood, I'll find somewhere else. I'll get a hotel room tonight. You don't even have to see me if you don't want to. I can stay with...with Valentine. Or Morgan. And then find another place.”

Piper took one breath, and then another. It was as if everything she knew had shifted under her feet with Gavin's words. The anger that had sustained her over the past few days—gone. The heartache that had tightened its hold on her every hour closer to Gavin's departure was replaced by a reeling confusion in her head.

He was sorry. He loved her. He was staying.

She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear and stared at him. “Gavin.” She said his name again, but couldn't seem to cobble together any additional words. She wanted to pull him to her, she wanted to yell at him for hurting her, she wanted to cry because... Because he loved her.

He smiled, and her heart cracked open.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “I know this is...a lot.” He laughed quietly, sadness tingeing the sound. “And I’m not saying any of this because I’m asking for anything from you. I just thought you should know those things, and hear them from me. You don’t have to say anything, or do anything. You don’t owe me a thing, Piper.”

Her phone rang from somewhere inside the house, and reflexively she glanced over her shoulder.

“You should get that,” Gavin rumbled. He’d already moved toward the front door.

“Gavin, wait—” Was he *leaving*? He couldn’t...

He stopped.

She had no idea what to say to him. She didn’t know how she felt, or what the next step was. Her phone rang again.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Go get the phone. It might be about Fern’s party.” He smiled again, stealing her breath as he stood in her doorway, the sun slanting in to light his eyes. They’d been so cold the other day when he’d dumped her outside the Bean. But they were warm now, open and vulnerable and patient. Could she trust that?

He was sorry. He loved her. He was staying.

And then he was gone, stepping carefully down onto the sidewalk and heading back toward the big gray house.

Piper stared after him for a long moment, head still spinning, then turned to go inside to see who had called her.

* * *

“He *what*?” Sloan leaned forward to hiss at her, sloshing Fern’s extremely alcoholic fruit punch over the top of her glass.

“He came to my house. To apologize.” Piper glanced around the crowded yard, the party in full swing, but no one was paying them any attention. She wasn’t even sure why she cared if anyone heard her. “And to say he loved me.” The last

part came out in a rush, as if saying it aloud might make it untrue.

“Shit.” Sloan stared at her, nonplussed. “I mean, *obviously* the guy loves you, but showing up on your doorstep to say so after what he did—that’s something.”

“Hm.” She supposed it was. She had to imagine it was difficult, baring himself to her with no guarantee of reciprocation. And she *hadn’t* responded, too shocked to do much more than stand there. But he hadn’t retracted his statement or seemed offended or hurt. No, he’d just laid out his whole heart there on her porch, smiled his gorgeous smile, and left her with the space to decide how she felt about it.

“Hm? *Hm?*” Sloan shook her head and frowned in exasperation. “That’s all you got? The man who broke your heart came crawling back and you didn’t like...make him beg? Push him down the stairs? I guess that would be too much, with his knee and everything. What did you *do*?”

Piper blinked at her friend. “Nothing.”

Gavin had bared his soul to her and she’d...held back. Just as she’d done throughout their relationship. Apparently being brave enough to love who she wanted and being brave enough to say the words aloud were two different things.

Sloan groaned and downed the rest of her drink.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Murray sidled up to them, a fork in one hand and an enormous piece of cake in the other.

“Jesus, Mur, it’s barely lunchtime.” Sloan pointed at the cake.

“Yeah, and I know that’s not juice you’re drinking,” Murray retorted.

“Oh!” Piper realized she hadn’t given Sloan the whole story. Her thoughts had been scattered a million different ways since she’d seen Gavin. “And he’s staying—in Philly. He took a job with the Firebirds.”

“Who? What?” Murray sputtered around a bite of cake. “Wait—*Gavin*? He’s staying?” She turned her head to glare at

Carlos, who was chatting with several people over by the grill. “Thanks for not telling me anything!” she called. Carlos gave no indication of having heard his sister.

“Tell her the other part,” Sloan urged.

Heat crept up along Piper’s neck and cheeks. “He... Um. Gavin stopped by to—”

“He said he’s *sorry*, and that he *loves* her,” Sloan interrupted.

Murray stared at Piper, speechless.

“Um. Yeah.” Piper bit her lip. She had no idea how her friends would react. They had turned anti-Gavin pretty quickly after he’d dumped her. But a low, insistent beat had struck up inside her, telling her that this was her chance. Her chance to take what she wanted, to build that life with Gavin that she’d imagined herself. And that doing nothing, as she’d done on the porch, would get her nowhere.

Gavin deserved better. He’d deserved to know what she felt when she realized that she loved him—but she’d been too afraid. Afraid first of what others would think, then afraid of losing her community, herself, and Gavin himself. And *she* deserved better, too. She deserved happiness and love, deserved it enough to fight for it even when things went wrong. She knew now that the love she felt for Gavin was worth the risk, and yet she’d still held herself back. She’d been wrong.

“Shit!” Murray swallowed more cake. “What did you *do*?”

“Nothing!” Sloan glared at Piper. “She did nothing.”

Murray tilted her head. “Nothing?”

Piper blew out a breath. “I was caught off guard, okay? I didn’t know how to react, or what to say to him. I’d thought he’d already left for Vancouver, and then suddenly he was on my porch, telling me things that—” Things she’d only heard him say in her dreams. Things she only admitted that she wanted down in the darkest, most secret chamber of her heart. Because she’d never imagined he would actually say them. Especially after the way he’d broken things off.

“Hmph.” Sloan tapped the side of her glass with one fingernail. “What was his excuse for the whole...shitty breakup?”

“He said he was jealous.” She knew it was wrong, but the idea of Gavin feeling jealous over her sent a thrill zinging through her. “That he realized since he was leaving, he’d lose me.”

Which meant he wanted to keep her. Another zing.

“Oh.” Murray’s eyes went wide. “So, it was a freak-out-over-losing-you breakup, not an I’m-a-real-asshole breakup. That’s different.”

It was. Love and fear could make people do some really terrible things, and while she wished Gavin had simply discussed his feelings with her, she understood why he hadn’t. She’d held back in the same way, and for the same reasons. And that made his declaration that morning all the more affecting—if anything, since he was now staying in the area, he had more to lose if she told him she didn’t feel the same.

“And you probably want to get around to deciding how to react sooner rather than later, too,” Sloan murmured, angling one finger on the hand holding her glass to point to the side.

Piper turned her head, and her breath caught in her lungs.

Gavin stood in a crowd of people—neighbors who were enthusiastic fans, most likely. He was nodding and smiling, drink in one hand. Piper’s eyes compulsively traveled the length of him where he stood, thirsty for the sight of him after days apart. His jeans molded to his thick, hockey player’s thighs, the sleeves of his light blue button-down shirt rolled up to expose muscular arms. His hair was slightly mussed, as if he’d been running his hands through it. Piper’s own hands itched to do the same.

“Fern must have invited him,” Sloan said.

“Which means she knew he was staying and didn’t mention it—no one tells me anything!” Murray huffed.

Piper was only half listening to her friends. Gavin was *here*. He was staying. And he loved her.

His head turned then as if he could sense her watching him. His expression froze for a moment as he caught her eye, before shifting to a warm but polite smile. He nodded at her and went back to his conversation.

Was that it? Piper wondered. He'd made his confession and the ball was in her court. Was there really no pressure, no pushing for what he wanted above her own desires? Would he really allow her the space to decide what she wanted from him—or to decide that she didn't want anything at all?

She thought back over the time she'd spent with Gavin. There had never been any pressure from him—not for sex, not for a relationship when she said she didn't want one, not for her to change in any way or be someone she wasn't. And now, despite his love for her, Gavin appeared willing to let her take the lead once again.

"You should go talk to him," Murray said.

Piper looked over her shoulder again and saw that Gavin had separated himself from the others. He leaned back against a tree, glass of deadly punch in one hand and the other in his pocket.

And instead of the polite, friendly expression she'd seen before, when she locked eyes with him now it was naked longing she saw. The set of his jaw betrayed his relaxed posture, and she noticed circles under his eyes she hadn't seen before. As if he, too, had spent more than one sleepless night recently.

He looked down at his glass.

"If he smoldered at you any more, he'd catch fire," Murray muttered under her breath.

"I—" Piper stopped and pressed her lips together.

"You what?" Sloan gave her a hard look. "Do you want to be with him or not?"

Piper nodded, her body saying yes instinctively before her mind caught up to the question.

"Yay!" Murray exclaimed, finishing off the last of her cake.

“Do you trust him?” Sloan asked quietly.

Piper wrenched her eyes away from Gavin and looked at her friend. She knew both Sloan and Murray had her back, no matter what decision she made. But having heard Gavin’s words that morning, and seeing him here now, it wasn’t even a decision. She wanted—needed—to be with him. She needed to tell him how she felt, that she loved him back with everything she was. And possibly for the first time in her life, she felt no fear about exposing her heart to a man. It felt a little strange, as if she was missing a weight she’d been carrying around for too long.

She could just...love him. She could love him and be who she was. They could be who *they* were, together.

She smiled. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

“Then you’d better go get him,” Murray said. “Because it looks like he’s leaving.”

Piper’s head snapped around and she could see that Murray was right. Gavin had pushed off the tree and set his glass down somewhere, and he was slowly making his way through the crowd, away from where she stood.

Sloan slapped her on the back. “Go get him, Tiger!”

Piper didn’t waste another second. She wound through the groups of people, making her excuses, if a little impatiently. Finally, she saw a wall of blue shirt in front of her, and she grabbed his arm.

“Gavin!” she said breathlessly.

He turned, and then he was standing in front of her. Someone jostled him from behind, and her palm flattened against his chest instinctively. He was warm from the sun, his heart thudding against her fingers, and *here*. Solid.

“Piper.” His voice was gruff and curious.

“I—You were leaving.” Now that she was with him, she wasn’t sure how to begin.

He nodded, looking down at her hand on his chest. “Not in a party mood, I guess.”

“Oh. I was...glad to see you here.”

He smiled faintly. “Good.”

She took a deep breath. “I wanted to tell you something.”

One eyebrow rose, his smile still curving the side of his mouth. She could see what looked like a mixture of hope and worry clashing in his eyes, but he held still, as if he didn't want to interfere with what she had to say. “Oh?”

“Yeah.” God, why was this so hard? *Just three words, Piper*, she told herself. *Spit it out.* “I'm glad you're staying.” Not what she'd meant to say, but it was a start. She'd get there. For Gavin.

His smile widened, just a little. “I'm glad to hear that.”

“And...” She needed to keep going. She stared at her hand, still pressed somewhat awkwardly against his chest. “And I don't want you to live somewhere else. I want you to stay in Shady Hill.” Another breath. “I want you to stay as close as possible. Because... I love you.”

He blinked at her, and she swore she felt his heart leap against her palm.

“I love you, Gavin. I have for a while, but you were leaving, and...”

“And I never told you how I felt.” His eyes closed, and she watched his throat as he swallowed. His hand came to press hers more firmly into his chest, and she felt him breathe deeply. “I'm sorry.”

She shook her head as his eyes opened. “You don't need to be sorry. I made it clear that I didn't want a relationship, and then even when I knew I loved you, I didn't tell you I'd changed my mind.”

He made a quiet, strangled noise. “I didn't tell you how I felt because I thought you didn't feel the same. But that was a stupid reason. I should have been honest with you, Piper.”

“Me, too.” She smiled up at him. “I guess we were both a little hardheaded.”

He squeezed her hand and released it, and she lifted her arms to place her palms against the sides of his face. “I love you, Gavin Williams. I’m sorry I was so stuck in my own fear that I didn’t tell you sooner. And I’m grateful to you for being the brave one and telling me first.”

His brows knit together. “I had to apologize. I thought you didn’t want to see me, but I needed to try to make things right. I’m so sorry for how I acted.”

Piper rose up on her toes to press a kiss to his lips. God, she had really missed those lips. “I know,” she said quietly. Then she smiled. “But I can guarantee that at some point I’ll mess up big-time, and then we’ll be even.”

A laugh rumbled through him and he kissed her this time, just a little harder. His arms came around her waist and pulled her close.

And then she did what she’d done just a few short weeks ago in his kitchen, and again at the museum. She grabbed his head between her hands and kissed him.

His lips felt like coming home. Even as raw as she’d been feeling these past days, she hadn’t realized just how much she had missed this until his mouth was on hers and he was kissing her like he needed her as much as he needed air.

He loved her.

She didn’t quite believe it. She couldn’t quite believe any of this was real.

“Wait,” she gasped, and pulled away.

Gavin looked down at her, confused, his lust-filled eyes not quite focusing. “What’s wrong?” He frowned.

“Nothing,” she said. “I just want you to say it again. That you love me. I want to hear it again.”

“Oh,” he murmured. “That.”

“Yes, that,” she said, pushing a little at his shoulder.

He smiled and kissed her forehead. “I love you, Piper. I know I’m not anything like what you wanted or anything you

asked for, and I'm probably going to be a bit of a mess for a little while longer, but I'm yours. Whether you take me or not is entirely up to you."

Piper kissed him again, just because she could. He was *here*, and he loved her. "You've been through a lot," she said when she came up for air. "You're allowed to feel things."

He shrugged. "But I can still work on being less of a jerk about it."

"And we can both work on being honest with each other," she said. She couldn't stop smiling, even as her brain struggled to fully absorb the fact that she was here, with Gavin, and they could be together—for as long as they both wanted.

"I promise to be honest with you," he said, his gaze holding hers. "And to love you, for as long as you'll have me."

Her heart swelled in her chest, full of love for the man in front of her. "I can't believe you're staying," she said quietly. "I thought—I thought you were gone this morning. That I'd already lost you." She was a little overwhelmed, to be honest, although it was a joyous feeling, like being lifted up and carried by an enormous wave in the ocean on a beautiful day.

Gavin leaned his forehead against hers. "I didn't want to go," he said simply. "Because of you, and also...because of me. I want a life here. My next chapter—I want it to be in a new place. And I want to do what I *want* to be doing, and not what's expected of me." He lifted his head, his hand brushing back her hair, so gently. "And whatever it is I do, I want to do it with you."

"Mmmm." Piper hummed happily against his mouth as his lips captured hers again. She could stay like this forever, folded into Gavin's strong arms, kissing him beneath the shade of a tree under the hot July sun. It felt like...home.

"Hey, get a room, you two!"

Piper broke away from Gavin with a gasp of laughter, turning her head in time to see Murray pluck a glass of punch out of Sloan's hand and admonish her for bothering them. She

glanced around and saw that they'd attracted quite a bit of attention, people at the party watching and smiling.

"Sorry," Gavin murmured low into her ear. "Does it bother you?"

She knew what he was asking. Did she mind that everyone in the neighborhood knew now that they were together?

She shook her head. "The people who matter to me know who I am." She grinned at him. "And if I feel like it I can go find one of Fern's bi pride shirts and put that on."

Gavin laughed, the sound deep and warm. "Whatever you want." He pulled her close again. "Do whatever you want, Piper Welborn. As long as I can tag along behind you."

She smiled, her face against his chest. She took a half step back and clasped his hand in hers. "What I want is for you to tag along back to my house for the rest of the day." She glanced up at him, suddenly shy. "If you're not busy?"

He smiled down at her, his grin wide and open as the summer sky. "Not yet," he replied. "But let's get to your place and I'll see what I can do."

Epilogue

Piper collapsed onto the bed and let out a long, relieved sigh.

“Oh my God, it’s so good to be home,” she said as Gavin sat down to join her.

He smiled. “You were so excited to finally *leave* home,” he teased her.

It was true. Since opening the Bean, she really hadn’t traveled at all, afraid that things would get away from her, businesswise, if she left. But Murray had stepped up over spring break—more than glad to have the extra hours—and deftly managed things for the last week while Piper joined Gavin in Vancouver to attend his number retirement ceremony.

She rolled over onto her side and looked up at him. “It was great. The city is so beautiful.”

He smiled. “It is.”

Piper had been fascinated to visit Gavin’s childhood home, to meet his parents in person, and to get a sense of where he had come from. She understood now his deeply felt ethic of meeting expectations and keeping his word. It gave her even more of an appreciation for what he had given up to stay in Shady Hill. “And God, the *fans*—you’re like royalty in that city!”

She saw the hint of a blush on Gavin’s cheeks, and thought it was adorable that he could still be embarrassed after literally decades of adoration from his city’s inhabitants.

“They love their hockey,” he said simply. He laid a hand on her hip, and she closed her eyes. She was jet-lagged and tired from traveling, but so content in this moment that she didn’t want to get up and get ready for bed.

Gavin had left their house—formerly her house—three weeks ago, spending the first two weeks visiting various prospects for the Firebirds before she’d joined him in Vancouver.

She hadn't realized that player development coaching involved so much travel, but Gavin seemed to thrive on it. She supposed it was as close to the schedule he was used to as a player as he was likely to get in retirement. It had been hard for her at first to watch him leave, but he was diligent about calling her every night from wherever he was and no matter what he was doing, and each time he returned home he showed her exactly how much he had missed her.

It was her turn to blush.

“What are you thinking about?” His rumbling voice still had the same effect on her as ever, sending a current of desire down her spine.

“Nothing.”

He chuckled, low and deep. “Your face gives you away.”

Gavin's hand slid up to her waist, and she suppressed a shiver. It had felt a little awkward, being intimate at his parents' house, and they had only managed one or two quick interludes. And before that she had gone without him for two whole weeks.

She peeked up at him with one eye. He was looking down at her with amusement, his strong jaw covered in just a bit of scruff after their long day. She was still a little taken aback every time she really looked at his handsome face, even as familiar as it was to her now.

The past nine months had not always been easy. Gavin had still been adjusting to a new life off the ice. When the hockey season had started up again there had been some difficult moments and emotional conversations. She was humbled that he chose to share those feelings with her, knowing as she did how he preferred to keep things under wraps. His physical recovery was ongoing and would be for some time. Maybe forever. He no longer needed the knee brace, but he still used the cane for long walks or standing beside a rink.

It was still sometimes uncomfortable for her to be seen in a relationship with a man, particularly when people clearly made the assumption that she was straight—even when she was

hanging posters for the city's upcoming Pride parade in the shop, or cheering wildly next to Gavin at the Firebirds' Pride Night game. She got more than a few confused looks when she wore her "Queer and Proud" T-shirt while holding Gavin's hand, but she liked to think that maybe those people were forced to rethink some assumptions. That being with the man she loved while at the same time loudly proclaiming her queerness was a form of activism, and not a sublimation of her identity.

Maybe she was wrong, and maybe it didn't make any difference. Maybe people would think what they wanted to think and there was nothing she could do about it. But it was more important to her now to be true to herself than to present a certain image to the world—even if she was still out and proud. And the fact that Gavin took it all in stride was a gift she had never expected to receive.

She rolled over onto her back and took Gavin's hand in hers, placing it over her heart. "I was thinking that I love you," she said.

He raised one eyebrow. "Ah." He leaned down and kissed her, once, softly on the lips. "That's a good thought."

She wiggled closer to him on the bed, still lying on her back. "Yeah?"

His gaze raked over her, and she knew he wasn't seeing her rumpled clothes, the bags under her eyes, or the tangle that was her hair after a day of traveling. He loved her, and thought she was beautiful, no matter what. Desire coiled in her belly under his intense stare, and her heartbeat sped up.

"Yeah." His voice dropped an octave, and she swallowed. His eyes flicked up to hers. "It's late. Don't you have to go to work tomorrow?"

She did. Murray had been working more than full time during her school break, but classes started up again tomorrow and Piper needed to be back in the shop.

"Don't you have to go into the office and report on all the young whippersnappers?" she retorted.

He gave her a half grin. “More like take a lot of shit for what happened at the ceremony.”

Piper laughed. Vancouver had really pulled out all the stops at the game where they raised Gavin’s number up to the arena rafters—old teammates had been there, a video of his many highlights on the ice had impressed even a nonfan like herself, and multiple people in the organization had given speeches. And the fans had gone absolutely wild. Any fear that Gavin might have had that the city blamed him for moving to Philly had been completely put to rest.

He had insisted that she come out onto the ice with him, and Piper had tried not to be intimidated by the size of the crowd, the noise, and the lights. She had focused on Gavin and all the love directed his way. And then, as his jersey was lifted up above the ice, he had kissed her. Not a polite, TV-appropriate embrace. No, this had been a long, sexy, brain-melting kiss that had the crowd whooping and her friends texting her snarky comments for hours afterward.

She laughed again at the memory. She had no regrets.

“What so funny?” Gavin poked her in the ribs, making her squeak.

“Hey! You know I’m ticklish.” She rolled over to her side, and Gavin lowered himself down to lie beside her.

“Oh, I know,” he said suggestively. “I know *exactly* where you’re ticklish. And where I can touch you for a completely different sort of reaction, too.”

“Mmm.” She snuggled close to him, her head under his chin and her lips almost touching his throat.

“I love you,” he whispered. “Let’s unpack tomorrow.”

“You’re that tired?” she asked, just a little disappointed. He was right that they both had busy days tomorrow and should probably get some rest while they could. But...

“No.” The deep baritone of the single syllable was full of intent. It took her tired brain a minute to pick up on the meaning.

“Oh,” she gasped as his hand traced the curve of her ass, then clasped her hip. “I see.”

“I missed you,” he said.

“You just spent the whole week with me.” She couldn’t help giving him a hard time, even though she knew what he meant.

She had missed him, too.

“Maybe you can come with me, sometimes.” He kissed her cheek, then brushed his lips down to her neck. “When I have to travel. Now that you know the Bean won’t fall into rubble in your absence.”

“Well, that remains to be seen, since I haven’t been back yet,” she joked, then moaned as his tongue touched the sensitive skin of her throat. “*Gavin.*”

“I’ve got you,” he said, and he rolled her onto her back, his solid weight pressing her into the bed.

She wrapped her legs around his hips. “And I’ve got you,” she said. And she wasn’t ever letting go.

* * * * *

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First: Coffee. Without you none of this would have been possible.

This book is in many ways a love letter to Hopkins House at Smith College, where I lived for four years and made so many incredible friends. Hopkinites, especially those circa the 1990s, will recognize bits and pieces of our beloved house and its residents in Piper's circle of friends. Hopkins A and B may be gone, but we won't ever forget.

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About the Author

Katy James began reading romance when she was a teenager, filching from her mom's collection stored in a basket under the kitchen counter. She still reads every kind of romance she can get her hands on while also working as an archivist and rare book librarian, being a single mom, wrangling a cat and dog, fixing up an old house, playing the banjo, knitting, cooking, gardening, and generally making all kinds of stuff. And, of course, rooting for the Philadelphia Flyers. She writes charming and sexy stories where the happily-ever-afters are satisfying, empowering, and available to everyone. You can find her online at katyjameswriter.com, on Twitter at twitter.com/katyjameswriter, or on Instagram at instagram.com/katyjameswriter.

Corrine Blunt knows what people think of her—she’s an icy, unapproachable executive. It’s the price she’s had to pay to get to the top. But there’s knowing you have a reputation in the office, and there’s hearing your new intern laugh when someone calls you “Blunt the C*nt” in the elevator on his first day.

Keep reading for an excerpt from Hot Copy by Ruby Barrett!

Chapter 1: Wesley

This elevator is sweltering. Or maybe it’s just the combination of my nerves and this suit that’s making me feel like the air is thick enough to choke on. I tug at my tie. After two years of wearing nothing but jeans and T-shirts, the silk feels like a noose. The only piece of clothing I am comfortable in are my socks.

I stand shoulder to shoulder with a guy almost my height, in a similar suit and tie. Though his looks much more expensive and he seems more at home in it. His blond hair and Rolex glare under the fluorescents. The volume on his phone is turned up so loud I can hear his horrible taste in music clearly through the earbuds.

“Hold the elevator!” a woman calls as the doors start to roll closed.

I step forward, pressing my hand to one side of the sliding doors as she darts in. Her head is down, her thumb scrolling quickly across her phone’s screen.

“What floor?” I ask, but she doesn’t respond, instead tapping the toe of her high-heeled shoe in a metallic rhythm. She sighs audibly, shaking her head at the screen. I shrug and step back again.

“You part of the Hill City internship?” Bad Music Guy pulls an earbud out. The tinny sound of his music fills the small space. What I wouldn’t give for the dulcet tones of the Beastie Boys’ mid-’90s discography so I could avoid conversation

with him. I was such a nervous wreck this morning I forgot my earphones on my bedside table.

I nod and hold out my hand. “Wesley Chambers.”

“Mark.” He smiles wide, showing all his teeth. Like a chimpanzee. “Who’s your mentor?”

My father’s friend Richard Skyler is the CEO of Hill City Marketing & PR, one of Boston’s premier agencies. Dad considered his paternal duties fulfilled when he got me a spot in this program two years ago. After that, it was back to sporadic emails and missed birthdays. I’m not mad at him, though. My father is just a dick. He can’t be fixed.

Luckily, his buddy Richard isn’t an incurable phallus.

“Uhhh.” I scratch the back of my neck, stalling for time. “I actually interviewed for this internship two years ago and I was going to be working with Richard? The CEO? But...” I clear my throat. Sneak a peek at Mark. The sharp edge of his smile assures me that I will not explain the past two years of my life to *this* guy.

“But I had to defer it,” I say. “So, now I have to work with Corrine Blunt.” I can’t keep the dismay from my voice.

I’d met Richard Skyler when I was a kid and he’d remained friends with my parents until their divorce. When I interviewed for the program, Richard and I got along like old buds. And when I had to decline his offer of mentorship to take care of my mom, Richard promised me a spot when I was ready. And he kept in touch: emails, even the occasional phone call.

“Honestly, I’d assumed Richard would be my mentor again. But...it didn’t work out.”

I rock back on my heels, surprised by how disappointed I feel in this moment. The woman is a powerhouse, after all: graduated with an MBA from Boston College at twenty-four. At thirty years old, she’s one of the youngest executives at Hill City Marketing & PR and the only woman in the executive suites. She’s won countless awards for her marketing

campaigns and was Richard's protégé in the first Hill City mentorship program years ago.

Plus, I know I'm not supposed to think about my boss this way, but it's not the worst thing that she's pretty. In her picture on the website she sported a bouncy, dark bob and a bright smile. She seemed happy and welcoming and young, like whatever they mean when they say "bright-eyed and bushy-tailed." I'd felt an affinity with her immediately. I shouldn't complain about having to spend a whole year working with her. In truth, I'm excited, if not mildly intimidated.

I open my mouth to admit that but bite my tongue when Mark says, too loud in this small space, "*Dude*, your mentor is Corrine Blunt?"

I rub my hand over my closed mouth and wince through a nod.

"The lady boss?" Mark laughs, and the cruel sound sends a shiver up the back of my neck. I've been the subject of a laugh like that before.

"You know what they call her, right?"

I stifle a cough and avoid his gaze, staring at my fuzzy reflection in the chrome elevator doors, at the digital numbers counting our ascent. I look anywhere but at this asshole. My eyes finally come to rest on the back of the woman standing in front of me. She stares up at the numbers as well. Her neck is long and elegant. The red temples of her glasses hooked around her ears are the only pop of color on her otherwise crisp black outfit. The scent of coconut wafts from her long, dark hair, pulled up into an intricate, tight bun, not a single strand out of place. It looks painful, to be honest.

She's wearing a black blazer and the type of skirt that makes a woman's ass look spectacular. And the blazer has that ruffle thing around the waist. "*Peplum, Wes*," Amy's voice echoes in my head, tinged with frustration at the number of times she's had to repeat an irrelevant fashion-related fact to me.

"Wes, my man, you're in for quite a year," Mark says, as if I haven't ignored him for the past thirty seconds. The elevator

dings our arrival on the Hill City floor and the woman walks down the hall, her head lowered over her phone again.

“My frat brother Sean got an internship here and worked with her. He coined her nickname: Blunt the Cu—”

I make a spluttering sound. A combination of *no* and *what* and *stop* that comes out sounding like, “*Nuhwst.*” I don’t need him to finish his sentence to know what he was about to say.

“Look, buddy,” I say, and a shocked, stilted laugh tumbles out of my mouth before I can close it. Relief that she didn’t hear him washes over me. “Can you *not* say that word?” I hiss into the empty hallway.

Mark throws his head back and laughs, the sound booming down the halls, solidifying exactly how much I don’t like him. He grabs my shoulder, shaking me roughly. “Oh my god, Chambers. You’re precious.”

* * *

All the interns gather for a breakfast meet and greet in one of the conference rooms. I lean against a wall with a plate of fruit and a mini chocolate chip muffin, chasing a piece of melon around with my plastic fork. Everyone here seems to know everyone else. They’re fresh from the same graduating class and it shows in their excitement, the overlapping convocation stories. After two years, my own graduation is a distant, hazy memory. I’ve launched a few smiles at some fellow interns, but mostly I eat my complimentary breakfast alone, watching people avoid eye contact with me.

While I’ve grown into my legs, feet, and hands and gotten better at shooting the shit with the guys, I still feel like the sore thumb in any crowd. Amy calls it Ugly Duckling Syndrome. I call it being lucky a twin is a built-in best friend.

The piece of melon slips off my plate and bounces off my shoe. I hike up my pants to stoop down to get it and when I rise, Mark stands in front of me.

“Come on, bro. Let’s mingle.”

By mingle, Mark means hit heavily on the only women of color in the room, two interns from Finance. Marisol, a Northeastern grad from Pennsylvania, ignores us for her phone. But the one Mark lays it on thick for is clearly uncomfortable with the attention. With every one of his jokes, Abila's smiles morph into cringes. Her shoulders inch toward her ears when his hand brushes her arm. He stares at her chest and she pulls her cardigan together. I open my mouth. Close it again. If Amy were here, she'd let fly with some asshole-puckering swear words. If my best friend, Jeremy Chen, were here, he'd find a calm way to explain to Mark why his behavior was inappropriate.

I'm just afraid that if I open my mouth to do either, another nervous laugh will end up escaping, especially if Abila has it in hand. I catch her eye, lifting a brow. She rolls her eyes, shaking her head.

"I'm...going to get another coffee," she announces, earning a glare from Mark for interrupting his story of "epic drunken debauchery." "Please don't follow me," she says, her voice laced with quiet disdain.

"Christ, uptight much?" he mutters.

Or maybe she didn't feel like being sexually harassed on her first day, Mark.

Mark's elbow digs into my ribs, spilling my, luckily, lukewarm coffee. I pat at my hand with a napkin, putting the cup on the conference table behind me.

"Wesley! I see you've met my intern, Mark."

Richard pats my back hard enough that I buckle a little under the pressure and I'm so glad I'm not still holding my coffee because I would have spilled over more than my hand. Mark and I greet Richard, Mark smiling that chimpanzee smile again.

"If you'll excuse us, Mark. I need to borrow Wes for a moment."

Something shifts in Mark's smile as we walk away, his eyes snagging on Richard's hand on my shoulder. He suddenly

seems a little less primate-like and a little more sharklike.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t be there for Laura’s funeral,” Richard says, once we’ve found a private space in the corner of the conference room away from Mark’s dead shark eyes.

At the mention of Mom, my stomach drops.

I really don’t want to talk about this today.

“Did you get the flowers I sent?” he asks.

I nod, swallow past my dry throat and dread, and try to get the words to come out. I’m at that point where I think it’s okay. I think I’m okay with my mom being gone. But then someone asks about her or how we’re doing and my stomach clenches, my tongue ties. I realize I’m not okay. I’m small again, a skinny, scared kid who really, really misses his mom.

“Yes, we got the flowers. Thank you,” I manage.

Richard smiles and not for the first time, I wonder how this kind man could ever be a friend to my father. Richard speaks fondly of Mom, repeating stories he’s already told me about the three of them—my mom, my dad, and Richard—in college. The longer he talks about her the less my lungs feel like they’re being crushed in someone’s fist.

“I’m sorry.” He smiles ruefully. “I’m sure I’ve told you all of these before.”

He has, and each story hurts like a knife to the gut, but I’m starving for them nonetheless. Memories of Mom where she was the happy, healthy version of herself. Our last few months together, when she was sick and so tired of being sick, are imprinted on my brain. It’s a relief to be reminded that she wasn’t always that way.

Richard walks me through a maze of hallways, pointing out departments. We pass a large, open concept area he calls the Pit where teams already work together, walking until we reach a sandblasted glass door, the words Marketing Director etched across it. He claps his hand on my shoulder and squeezes, smiling warmly.

“This is Corrine’s office. I know the two of you will get along well.” He points to me and winks as he walks away. “Pay close attention. You’ll learn a lot from her.”

I take a moment alone on this side of the door. I check my tie, catch a glimpse of any stains on my suit in the reflection of the glass. But all I see is a blob of brown on top of my head and dark shapes where my glasses sit. Fuzzy and undefined. That feels depressingly on brand.

I adjust the pant leg I’m in an ongoing battle with, but it creeps up my leg again, displaying my lucky socks. Taking a deep breath, I knock.

“Come in,” a voice calls from the other side of the door.

I step into an all-white office. It’s so bright I squint. So clean, so sterile I want to take off my shoes to not to leave footprints. A small white couch, an armchair with no arms, and a glass coffee table sit in the open space in front of a white desk. Two pocket doors bracket the crisp white wall behind the desk.

And standing across the room, one dark eyebrow arched, her red lips tightly pursed, casting a stark black silhouette in this crisp white space, is the woman from the elevator.

My brain stutters, stalling on the image of her there and now here. Her hair shining under the elevator lights still lingers on the backs of my eyelids. The smell of coconuts doesn’t belong here. That scent belongs back in that elevator. But after two good sniffs, here it is still.

I close my eyes tight, like if I turn my brain off and on again it will work better. But when I open them, it’s still her, with that severe bun and the peplum top and red glasses. The Corrine Blunt I found on the company’s website looked nothing like this woman, who glares at me like she eats bright-eyed and bushy-tailed things for breakfast. Whatever similarities I thought we had have been surgically removed. Every possible reason for why this woman is in Corrine Blunt’s office runs through my head. But it keeps returning to the only horrifying explanation:

Corrine Blunt *is* the woman from the elevator.

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