



all your
REASONS
why

KENZIE REED

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BLURB

I got pucked . . .

Never in a million years did I think that I'd have to become a babysitter in order to secure my place as the publicist for the local NHL team, the Rovers.

Yet here I am, organizing events to help rebuild the public image of their MVP, Mason Raker.

The man may be hot, but his list of issues is longer than the hockey season.

He can't stay out of trouble to save his life, but he will on my watch. Unless, of course, he'd like to wear a diaper and pacifier to our next event. If you think I'm joking, you've got another think coming.

I got saddled with Satan, but I get my revenge with every new costume I force him to wear and every new event he's mandated to attend.

In all fairness, he's been a good sport . . . mostly. And he's more than easy to look at. I can't help but admit he's not as bad as I made him out to be. Every time we're together, he chips away at my walls a little more.

The hate has turned to heat, and sparks are flying. He's doing major damage to my heart, and that's just not acceptable.

I've got plans. Big ones. And none of them involve spending even one night with the hottie, let alone a lifetime.

Wait . . . what?

Who said anything about forever?

Not me. Nope. No chance.

PROLOGUE

THE DAILY SNITCH

April 20th

You've come here for the tea, and we never disappoint. We're not naming any names, but a certain foxy forward whose name rhymes with Jason Faker is in the hot seat—again. Rumor has it that “Rason Baker” is in a fancy-schmancy rehab facility out west, and he's been sent there by the Rovers team owner with orders to clean up—or else.

Remember last year when the heartbreaking hockey hunk ended his six-year relationship with model Lexi Caton, raising the hopes of single ladies everywhere (including moi, I must confess)?

Well, ever since, “Kason Waker” has been spotted around the city slinging back expensive bourbon and going home with a new lady every night. Still, we think that “Spason Laker” is going to be in for a shock when he comes home to find that his teammate, right defenseman Dylan Masters, has claimed Lexi for his own.

Okay, okay, you've got us. We're talking about Mason Raker.

ROWAN

FOUR MONTHS later

“You summoned me?” I sink down on the sofa next to my boss and mentor, Cecelia, owner of Queensby Publicity.

I love being here. It smells like cinnamon and is decorated like a living room, with casual groupings of Bauhaus-style furniture in bright fruity colors, a couple of desks on the far end, and a coffee bar.

Cecelia, a slender sixty-something woman clad in a belted Oscar de la Renta dress with low-heeled pumps, looks every bit the formidable media powerhouse.

“We have a situation,” Cecelia says. She doesn’t look rattled; Cecelia never rattles.

“Oh, shoot. We don’t like situations.” Then I grin. “But we do like chocolate.” I open my purse and triumphantly pull out a box of chocolate ganache, with a New York Rovers logo sprayed across the top, that I snagged on my lunch break. I bought it specifically to show to Cecelia, because the Rovers are one of our most important clients.

Cecelia’s eyes widen. She leans forward and inhales. “Is that from Chocolate Orgasm?”

“You know it is.” I open the box. The chocolates each have an edible picture of a star Rover player. Food technology sure is something these days.

I reach in, pull out goalie Logan Long, pop him into my mouth, close my eyes, and moan. Sweet and bitter silkiness fill

my mouth. Chocolate Orgasm indeed. I would move into that store if I could. Of course, within a month they'd need to enlarge the doorway for me to roll back out, but . . . worth it.

I open my eyes and smile at my boss. "Have one. I know everyone thinks Mason Raker is extra tasty." Everyone but me, I don't add. I've never had the displeasure of meeting him in person, but from what I've heard of him, I can confidently say that Mason is sexy as sin and arrogant as all the Instagram influencers rolled into one.

I push the box towards Cecelia. She makes the sign of the cross and scooches back away from me on the lime-green couch, as if calories might be airborne.

"Stop tempting me, devil child."

"Hey, I did an extra twenty minutes on the treadmill to earn this, and I'm going to enjoy every minute of it." I savor the taste a moment more, then swallow and grin at Cece.

"So, what's the situation? And how can I help?"

She arches an eyebrow. "Well, funny you should mention the Rovers and Mason Raker."

Uneasiness flutters in my belly. "Uh-oh."

"Uh-oh indeed. Yesterday, Mason found out that his teammate Dylan Masters is dating his ex-girlfriend, and he did a big uh-oh when he punched Dylan in the mouth in the locker room."

Oh, not cool. I wince. "Is Dylan pressing charges?"

"No, fortunately. But it was leaked to the press, and now every media outlet on the planet is up Mr. Talman's butt about it. Mason's already considered a problem child—he just got out of rehab."

I nod in agreement. "I remember that. As I recall, he's a bit of a party boy and that's not his first fight. He sure can fill out a pair of underwear, though."

Cecelia's perfectly plucked eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“The billboard.” I protest, blushing. “The underwear company, Joxx, that he endorses?”

And quite well, I have to admit. If Chocolate Orgasm ever put his underwear ads on their ganaches, they wouldn’t be able to keep them in stock.

“The billboard. Of course.” Cecelia stifles a delicate, ladylike snicker.

I give her a wounded look. “Hey. I am a proud member of the increasingly shrinking ‘I haven’t slept with Mason Raker’ club, thank you. I don’t go for immature man-hoes.”

“He does have that reputation.” Cecelia nods. “Well, these days he does. He dated that model and influencer Lexi Caton exclusively for six years.”

“But even then, he was known to hit the nightclubs and bars quite a bit,” I say, not willing to allow her to think highly of a scumbag like Mason. “After they broke up, the tabloids were all over him, snapping pictures of him leaving bars with different women almost every night.”

She nods. “And then he was sent off to rehab to try to save his career.” A heavy sigh escapes her perfectly outlined lips. “This fight risks ending his career. It’s not good for the team’s image.”

“Why don’t they just let him go, then? He’s twenty-eight, right? Probably only a few more years left on the ice, if that . . .” I feel bad saying that. I hate ageism. Twenty-eight is very young to be put out to pasture, but hockey is not an older man’s sport. There are plenty of other things he could do with his life. He already has endorsement deals out the yin-yang.

“He’s still a huge hit with the fans. He’s the reason they sell so many tickets and the reason the Rovers merchandise flies off the shelves,” Cecelia says. She sneaks a glance at the chocolate, then shakes her head and looks away. “Mr. Talman’s not going to put up with it much longer, though, and there’s worry that his star power is starting to lose its shine.”

“All right. Got it. We need to help turn a sinner into a saint, at least as far as the public is concerned.” I nod. “Thank

heavens I'm not assigned to work with him directly. I am more than happy to write up a crisis plan, though. Is that what you're looking for? I can get it to you within the hour."

Cecelia just looks at me, her brows pinched together the teeniest little bit.

My heart drops to the pit of my stomach. "Cecelia. No." She wouldn't. She couldn't.

Cecelia smiled. "Yes." She had.

"I thought you loved me."

Cecelia smiles fondly. "I do love you. Like a daughter. Like the daughter I never had."

"I am right here." Suzanne calls out indignantly as she walks in the room carrying a to-go bag from Greenbacks, a salad bar in the lobby of our building. A tall, slender girl with a bright streak of blue in her black hair, she was Cecelia's late-life oopsie surprise. Cecelia had her when she was in her mid-forties. Suzanne is working for her mother as an assistant for the summer before returning to NYU film school in the fall. Her style is post-punk, with safety pin earrings, flower-painted Doc Martens, and an anime T-shirt, the opposite of her mother's power-dame classic style.

Suzanne sets the bag on the coffee table in front of her mother.

"Oh, right. I'd forgotten all about you." Cecilia smiles at her. "Mostly because you spent an hour flirting with the barista at the coffee shop instead of getting me my lunch. I've got eyes everywhere, you know."

Suzanne stomps off to the desk in the back of the room, muttering about child abuse.

Cecelia returns her attention to me. "Anyway, here's the thing. You're one of my best, Rowan. You have handled every task I have given you and handled it well."

"Thank you, Cecelia. That means a lot to me." It really does. Cecelia ladles out her praise very sparingly, and that's

what makes it so meaningful. If she praises you, you've earned it.

"But if you ever want to be lead publicist for the Rovers, you need to be able to handle the worst they can throw at you."

"And Mason is certainly the worst," I agree glumly. Then my mouth drops open.

"Wait. Did you just say lead publicist?" I gasp. That is my absolute dream job. And even more than that, it would fulfill a promise I made in my teens, a very important promise.

Cecelia nods. "Yes. This is strictly confidential, just between you and me."

"I'm right here," Suzanne yells.

Cecelia waves at her daughter, but her gaze stays fixed on me. "But yes, I'm going to be retiring in eight months. Ansley is more than capable of running the show behind the scenes, but she won't be comfortable managing any of the accounts herself."

Ansley is Cecelia's younger sister. She's amazing at crunching numbers, organizing and rallying the troops, but she isn't as outgoing as Cece.

"I've got an extended tropical vacation planned. Complete with sexy pool boys."

"And now I need therapy," Suzanne calls out.

Cecelia sighs. "Nepotism's overrated."

"What, specifically, do you want me to do?" I am almost afraid to ask.

"Basically, at this point, Mason needs a minder. He needs someone overseeing him and his behavior. He should check in with you before he goes out, and you need to not only come up with a campaign to restore his image, you need to be there by his side while he carries it out. Otherwise, he's likely to get impatient and stomp off in the middle of it. And, needless to say, you need to encourage him to stay off the booze."

Ideas flash through my head. I could do such a good job planning this campaign—and then assigning someone else to do the dirty work of hanging out with Mason. “I know just the thing to help rehab his image. But do I really need to be there with him? He’s a big boy. Can’t he just show up and . . .”

Cecelia shakes her head. “No way. This is too important, and frankly, Mason hasn’t shown the best judgment in the past.”

I take a deep breath and frantically try to think of a way to get out of this.

Yes, Mason is unnervingly sexy. He is also arrogant. And superficial. And rude. Being forced into close proximity with him will be like listening to a dentist drill played on repeat.

“If you can pull this off, it will show me that you can handle the position. I’m sorry. I know he’s a pain, but frankly, that’s our job.” Cecelia narrows her eyes at me.

“What about, say, Knox Harper? Or Paxton Saul?” I say, naming the right wing and the center. “I could make them look sooo good.”

Cecelia frowns reprovingly. “Making a sexy hockey hero look good when everything’s going smoothly is child’s play, Rowan. I could get one of our most junior associates to do that. A publicist’s job isn’t all sunshine and roses.”

I feel a sting of guilt. I’ve never been afraid of hard work, and yes, what she was asking me to do was hard work, but it was part of a publicist’s job. “You’re right. Of course. But do you think Mason will even cooperate?” I ask doubtfully.

Cecelia nods. “Mr. Talman called him in. He had a come-to-Jesus meeting with him. He told him that this is his last shot at staying on the team. I mean, yes, Mason is the star now, but he is, as you point out, closer to the end of his career than the beginning, and everyone’s replaceable. Even me.”

“Never you,” I say fervently. Wow. It’s just starting to sink in.

Cecelia is leaving.

She's been my mentor, my friend, my confidante.

"If you end up getting the position, I'll still be there for you to consult with if you need me," Cecelia says kindly. "I'm going on vacation, not moving into a retirement home. I will still be here to nag, chastise, and shame you as needed."

"Oh, thank heavens," I say dryly.

"It's what I live for." She opens up the bag from the salad bar and pulls out the salad, fork, and napkins.

"Again. Right here," her daughter shouts from across the room.

"Don't you have some email to go through, light of my life?" Cecelia calls out. "Fruit of my loins? Reason for my very existence?"

"Finally, some acknowledgment," her daughter grumbles.

Hope and fear swirl inside me. This is an absolute honor and a huge, huge responsibility. I'm very young for such a position. The fact that she is even considering me for it is incredibly flattering. "If I get the job, I will stalk you relentlessly so I can siphon off your wisdom," I tell Cecelia.

She takes a bite of salad and smiles at me. "I'm sure you will. Now, go ahead and lay your brilliant plans on me."

"Fine. First I need more chocolate." I reach into my chocolate box, pull out Mason Raker, and savagely bite his head off. Mason, apparently, is cherry-filled. The joke isn't lost on me as the red syrup drips onto my chin.

MASON

THE ROVERS CONFERENCE room is empty except for two unhappy people—me and Ralph Talman, the owner of our team. A week ago he sat me down and demanded I attend this shit show of a meeting.

I lean back in my chair, keeping my expression carefully blank, my arms folded across my chest.

I'm a hockey player. And a damned good one. What business is it of anyone what I do when I'm not on the ice?

I don't drive drunk, shoot up drugs, or rob banks . . . so what's the problem?

I mean, when I'm watching a game, watching poetry on ice, watching a battle play out before my eyes, I'm not sitting there thinking, *I heard the left wing banged a puck bunny in the bathroom of an airplane last week*. I'm admiring his moves. Or cursing them, if he screws up.

Point being, it's all about the game. Or it should be.

I sigh heavily and pick up a bottle of Mason Raker smart water, give the picture of me on the bottle a thumbs up, and take a long swig.

Ralph sits next to me, scowling at his cell phone as he taps on it. He holds it up to show me the latest *Daily Snitch* headline.

Hockey Hunk Really Pucked Up This Time

“Hey, they called me a hunk.” I grin at Ralph, who does not grin back. “Come on, loosen up a little.”

“Oh, I think you’re plenty loose for both of us.” Ralph returns his attention to the phone.

Dick.

Thank you for bringing our team to number one in the league, Mason. Thank you for selling more Rovers merch than any other player in Rover history, Mason.

The sound of heels clacking down the hallway towards the Rovers meeting room sets my teeth on edge. I glance at the wall clock, wishing they were late so I could be annoyed, but they are five minutes early.

I stifle a groan.

“Shut it,” Ralph growls.

Okay, in fairness, punching Dylan in the face might have been going a little too far. Then again, so is Dylan dating Lexi. We aren’t together anymore, but I was with her for six years. He violated the bro code on so many levels. Dylan could crook his little finger at any single model, influencer, or actress in the country and her clothes would start unbuttoning themselves—so why did he pick her?

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to make trouble for you.”

Ralph shook his head. “You don’t mean to, but you’re really good at it.”

I give him one of my most charming grins. “Well, at least I’m good at something.” Not if you ask my dad, mind you, but my fans and my stats tell another story.

“You’re good at being a Rover when you’re not screwing with the team’s image,” he grumbled.

I nod in thanks. Ralph’s kind of a father figure to me, has been ever since I first signed with the team. My actual father straight up loathes the career path I’ve taken. He built a commercial real estate company from the ground up and could never understand why I wouldn’t want to follow in his

footsteps and work in a business that was so boring it made me want to give myself a lobotomy with an ice pick.

The underwear endorsement sure hadn't helped in the "earning respect" department, but at that point any chance of reconciling with my dad felt like a lost cause. Maybe part of the reason I did it was to poke at him.

The door swings open, and three women walk in. Ralph straightens up in his seat, sets his phone down on the conference table, and adjusts his Rovers logo tie.

The one leading the pack is an older woman wearing a pink Chanel suit, with frosted white hair swept up into a bun. Behind her trail two women in their twenties, a strawberry blonde in a navy suit with a wary expression and a brunette in a flowery summer dress who catches my eye and smiles in a way I am very familiar with.

Ralph introduces them. The older woman is Cecelia Queensby, owner of Queensby Publicity; the skeptical blonde is Rowan James, and the brunette who likes me a lot is Amanda Rinaldi. The blonde moves like a dancer and has the lean body of one as well.

They all sit down across from me. I catch a quick flash of disapproval in Rowan's eyes and a distinct lack of warmth in her smile. It makes me want to heat her up. She's no pushover, that's for sure. She'd be a lot of work. Too much work.

Not that it matters. The last thing I need right now is any kind of female distraction, especially if it's someone I'd have to see more than once.

Still, something about her draws my attention . . . until Amanda leans forward, giving me a generous view of her cleavage.

"It's so nice to meet you," she trills. "I never miss any of your games. I'm such a fan."

That earns her a throat-clearing sound from Cecelia and an amused curl of the lip from Rowan. Who is clearly not a fan.

"Thank you," I say politely. Keeping it professional. Amanda flutters her eyelashes at me, and I let my gaze slide

away, drifting to the framed posters of the team on the wall.

“You’re going to be working with Rowan, one of their best publicists,” Ralph tells me. “I hear she’s got some great plans to rehabilitate your image. And you guys are going to be doing some traveling together.”

Of course they’ve picked the stick-up-her-butt girl who clearly can’t stand me.

Ralph is punishing me.

This is such bullshit. How is making me miserable going to help the team and my career?

I give him a scowl, which he ignores.

“Pleased to meet you, Mason,” Rowan says coolly.

I don’t reply.

Rowan sighs. “All right, Mason, here’s the deal,” she says. “I am going to need your cooperation if we’re going to turn your image around.

“The public loves me,” I grumble.

“But do they *like* you?” she parries.

I narrow my eyes at her. “Does it matter?”

“They have a schoolgirl crush on you right now,” she concedes, and she can’t hide a little bit of an eye roll at the notion. “We want to make them genuinely like you as a person.”

Well, what I personally want is to play the game I love, and have everyone stop trying to crawl up my ass.

I curled my mouth up in the kind of smile that melted the panties right off my female fans. “And what about you, Rowan? Schoolgirl crush, or does it go much deeper with you?”

She smiles sweetly and ignores the question. “I’m really excited about our plans. We’ll be going on a tour of children’s cancer hospitals. Every two weeks we’ll be visiting a different hospital. You’ll meet one-on-one with leukemia patients.

You'll read books to children, sign autographs, play some card games, and give them Rovers merchandise, including that adorable mascot. We've arranged for extensive social media and press coverage."

The hell?

I straighten up in my chair and give her a patronizing smile. "Aw, that's a cute little idea, but no thank you. Not for me."

Her eyes spark in annoyance. Ah, there was her hidden fire. I want to see more of it.

No, wait. No, I don't. I want to see her walking out the door, and the door hitting her on her shapely ass on the way out.

Rowan returns my smirk with a cool stare. "Thank you, I'm so relieved you think my idea is cute. Her name is Susie. I spent all morning primping her up and making her pretty."

Cecelia coughed into her hand.

Amanda's lip curls up in a sneer and then she flashes a sympathetic smile at me while tossing her hair. Well, look at her, she can multi-task.

She'd be way more fun to hang out with than Rowan.

Rowan would just give me a hard time in general. So hard.

My God. Rowan is actually making me hard. What the hell is wrong with me?

I shift uncomfortably in my seat, crossing one leg over the other, and try to imagine the least sexy things I can think of. Garlic breath. Hairy toes. Old men in G-string bikinis. It helps, a little. I cannot be sporting a woody when I stand up, damn it.

She pushes a business card across the table at me. "There is my business cell phone number."

"Thanks for making that distinction," I say dryly.

Cecelia spoke up. "Mr. Raker, Rowan's idea is a slam dunk, if you'll forgive the mixed metaphor. There is nothing the public loves more than celebrities visiting hospitals, to say

nothing of the fact that you can bring some joy into sick children's lives."

Emotional manipulation doesn't work on me. If it did, I'd be a miserable drone in my father's office.

I grimaced. "I'm not a kid person. I'm not a people person, and this whole thing isn't necessary. I'm also a grown man who doesn't need a babysitter."

"Your recent behavior suggests otherwise," Ralph growls at me.

Amanda uses the cleavage trick on him too, practically lying on the table to make sure everyone gets an eyeful. "I don't see why he has to be dragged around to a bunch of hospitals when he hates the idea. If he's not enthusiastic about it, he won't be able to fake it, and the campaign won't work. He'd do just fine making a few appearances out and around town, making nice with people, signing autographs, acting like the great guy he is. I'd be happy to accompany him."

I nod in relief. No cranky babysitter who mysteriously makes me hard as a rock, no kids asking me weird questions, no hospitals. "That sounds like it would be way more up my alley. I wouldn't have to put on a front."

"Well, that's a shame, because it's not going to accomplish jack shit except confirming for the reporters that you love to go out and party," Ralph scowls at me.

Rowan has already dismissed me, pulling out an iPad and tapping away on it. Probably planning my whole life for me. Would she be tucking me into bed every night too?

Fuck. Fucking hell. I was hard again.

My God, I hate this woman already.

I shake my head at Ralph. "This really doesn't work for me."

"You know what doesn't work for me?" Ralph says. "Getting phone calls in the middle of the night from the media about your latest party games. You know what I want to be

doing in the middle of the night? One of two things. Sleeping or screwing my wife.”

“Uhh . . .” I can’t really think of anything to say to that.

“Well, I certainly would be willing to accompany him to the hospitals, since that’s our plan.” Amanda smiles hopefully.

I idly debate, in my head, whether it would be a terrible idea to sleep with her. Yeah, it would. She’s too eager, and I am not up for anything heavy right now. I also don’t find the idea any more exciting than the thought of a session with my hand. I mean, I’d enjoy it, but at least I don’t have to buy my hand breakfast and call it a cab afterwards.

“That’s Rowan’s plan,” Cecelia reminds her.

Freaking Rowan. My new nemesis.

I push my water bottle towards Rowan. “Would you like a drink of me? I hear I’m tasty and refreshing. Ouch,” I add, as Ralph kicks me under the table.

“You’re an HR nightmare, is what you are,” Ralph snarls at me.

“Thanks, I’m not the least bit thirsty.” Rowan meets my gaze with a challenging stare.

“I’ll take it.” Amanda snatches the water bottle and takes a sip. “Delicious.” She pushes it back towards me. She left a frosty pink lip print on the bottle.

I wink at her, just to annoy Rowan further. “Keep it.”

“Ooh. I will, thank you so much.” Amanda practically quivers with excitement.

Ralph shoves his chair back. “We’re done here, Mason. You will give your number to Rowan so she can contact you, and for the next eight weeks, you do whatever Rowan says. No exceptions, and I’d better not see any negative mentions of you in the news again, or else you’re benched, and you can take your free-agent ass to another team. If they’ll have you at this age.” I wince at the mention of age. It’s not lost on me that I’m approaching the end of my career. “Do you understand?”

He means it. Anger and hurt and frustration churn in my gut. I could just imagine the satisfaction it would give my father to see me flame out and fail.

I manage a pained smile and nod. “Yes, sir. I understand.”

I understand the assignment . . . which is to annoy Rowan so much that she begs to taken off the job.

ROWAN

“Wow, Mason Raker’s babysitter. Living the dream, huh?” My bestie Shelby grins at me as we slide onto our bar stools at the Elevate Lounge, a popular bar in the East Village.

We’re lucky we have those stools; we happened to see two people leaving just as we approached the bar, and we pounced. It’s packed tonight like every night, full of the young, hip, and beautiful, and we have to raise our voices to be heard over the buzz of conversation. The air swirls with the scent of expensive perfume and scented vapes.

“Well, since dreams are technically the same things as nightmares . . .” I give her a wry look. “I could introduce you if you want. You can’t let him drink alcohol or be seen with him in public, though.”

Shelby replies with a dramatic shudder. “Hard pass. I’m kind of friends with his ex, or at least we move in the same circles.” The circles she’s referring to are a group of gorgeous models in their late twenties and early thirties, all of whom came up in the industry together and work a lot of the same international shows.

“What was up with that breakup? Does he have any deep dark secrets I should worry about?” Please say no.

It’s annoying enough that I have to make sort of nice with him for the rest of the season. I don’t want to find out that he dresses up like a baby or only dines on endangered species.

Shelby shrugs. “No really good goss that I know of. They dated for a long time. I think Lexi wanted something more

permanent and maybe she started saying as much towards the end. And then suddenly they were splitsville.”

“What a jerk. Men,” I say, shaking my head in disgust.

“Yeah, he’s an ass. Lexi’s actually a pretty nice person.” Shelly waves at the bartender, a handsome, dark-skinned man with a goatee and a silver ring in his eyebrow. “Can you make me a Gin Rickey, and get my friend an espresso martini?” she calls out.

“You got it, gorgeous.”

She winks at him. “Thanks, babe.”

As he walks off, she adds, “What an ass.”

“Really?” I say, surprised. “He seemed nice.”

“No, I mean what an ass. Check it out.” She’s openly ogling him.

“Shelby. Shame on you, objectifying a person like that.” I can’t resist a peek. “You’re not wrong, though. He must do so many squats.” My butt cheeks ache in sympathy at the thought.

“Hey, are you Shelby? *The* Shelby?” A tall, slender waitress pauses by the bar. Her jet-black hair is styled in two space buns with a zig-zag part, and a silver stud winks from her nose.

“I am.” Shelby flashes a big, warm smile. She is thirty now, and her modeling gigs have been drying up for a few years, so she’s ended up moving into photography. People still recognize her all the time, though; she’s been on *Vogue* covers and Times Square billboards.

“Ooh, I can’t wait to tell my roommate I met you. Can I get your autograph?” the waitress grabs a napkin from the bar and holds it out to her.

Shelby scribbles her autograph with a flourish, adds a heart at the end, and hands it over.

“Thank you sooo much. I love your work; you’re such a classic.” The waitress scampers off.

“Classic.” Shelby winces. “Ouchie.”

“Right there with you,” I sympathize. “What is she, like five? She’s not old enough to be working here. Go home and watch Cocomelon, you infant you,” I say to the waitress’s retreating back.

Shelby is doing something with her phone.

“Are you calling someone?” I raise my voice over the blaring noise of “Empires” by Electric Swing Circus. “My God, this place is so retro-hip, it’s circled back on itself, and I can’t tell if it’s stylish or passé.”

“Best not to overthink it. This is New York. The fastest way to date yourself is to try to be up to date. And I’m sending myself a reminder to schedule some botox.”

“Oh, come on.” I protest. Shelby is an absolute goddess.

“Anyway, back to Mason. You’ve got to survive eight weeks of Mason. Maybe he won’t be all that bad?”

The handsome bartender sets down Shelby’s drink in front of her. “Here you go, hotness,” he says to her. He hands me the espresso martini, but his focus is still on Shelby.

“Aww, I bet you say that to all the girls,” she twinkles back.

“Only the hot ones.” He winks and glides away down the bar.

“He is getting such a big tip.” Shelby grins at me. “Wait, did that sound dirty? I hope?”

“It sounds like you need to slip him . . . your number. And that was meant to sound dirty.” I smile at her and savor a deliciously sweet sip. “As for Mason, he is all that bad. When I met with him yesterday, he was an ass, trying to sarcastically flirt with me and just generally being a jerk.”

Shelby takes a sip of her drink. “Hmm.”

I look at her suspiciously. “What do you mean by hmm?”

“Are you sure the flirting was sarcastic?”

I stare at her in surprise. “Absolutely sure. And you’re not suggesting that I go for Mason, are you?”

She shakes her head. “Oh, dear Lord no. I mean, he’d probably be fantastic for one night, but I wouldn’t go for anything more unless you want to get your heart broken.”

“Thanks, I’m all set there. And I have no interest. None at all. He’s a complete, total, unbearable donkey of a jackass. Definitely not into him. He’s the last guy on the planet I’d grant access to my vajayjay.” Okay, I’m protesting too much. I need to change the subject. “So, my goal is to make his life a living heck for the next eight weeks.”

Shelby arches an eyebrow. “A living heck?”

“Yes. He doesn’t quite deserve hell, but he definitely deserves heck. So here’s my idea. When we show up at the hospital, I have a little surprise for him. He is going to be doing this in costume. And he’s not going to like what I pick, but he has no choice.” I smile triumphantly. “It’ll entertain the kids and also knock his ego down a peg or two. What to choose, what to choose . . .”

“Oooh. So many great possibilities.” Shelby grins wickedly. “I mean, a jackass. Or is that a little too on the nose?”

“I like it, but let’s keep brainstorming. I kind of like the idea of a cow with udders . . . because he’s udderly infuriating . . .” I throw back my head and laugh at my own witticism. Shelby just squints at me.

“No?” I pout. “Okay. Well, it’s got to annoy Mason but be fun for the children. What do kids like?”

Her forehead wrinkles in thought. “A Raggedy Ann doll?”

“Do kids still like those? Wait, I know, I know. A clown,” I crow triumphantly.

She bursts into giggles. “Oh. My God. You’re going to make Mason Raker wear a clown suit. Please tell me there will be a red nose involved. Please, please . . .”

“Oh yeah, baby. And clown shoes.” I am electric with excitement. If Mason’s going to be a rude, sarcastic pain in the hiney, I’m going to dish it right back to him.

We spend a little while going over other costume ideas for him. Some of them are fun, some of them are X-rated. I have to remind her that this is for the kids, and therefore her ass-less chaps cowboy costume gets a big thumbs down.

She tosses back the rest of her drink. “This has absolutely made my night. Unfortunately, I’ve got an early shoot tomorrow, so I’m going to have to call it a night. Drinks are on me. Because you’re making Mason put on a big red nose.”

“Oh, believe me, it will be my absolute pleasure. Thanks, partner in crime. I’ll get it next time,” I say, standing up and grabbing my purse.

I wait while she settles our tab, and then we head for the door. Stepping out onto the crowded street in the August heat, I inhale deeply, drawing the sharp, unique perfume of Manhattan into my nostrils. The baking sidewalk, the traffic fumes . . . call me crazy, but I love it. It reminds me that I’m in my favorite city in the world.

My mother wanted to move here when she was a journalism student. Then she ended up getting pregnant, marrying my father, settling for writing a column for the local weekly . . . I know she loved my dad, and me and my younger sister, but I also know she wanted more. And she pushed me to follow my dreams first, to get established in my dream career before I even considered settling down. It was so important to her.

A buzz of excitement ripples through the crowd as I move down the sidewalk. I look around to see what everyone is looking at.

They’re all staring and whispering about the same thing—a tall, handsome man with a gorgeous chick hanging on his arm. Why? This is New York. The hotness level of New York residents is positively obscene.

”Oh, hell no,” I groan. “Why, universe? Did I sin in a previous life?”

“What?” Shelby asks. She follows my gaze.

Mason. With a date. A surge of annoyance flares through me. He’s basically trying to sabotage my job before we’ve even started working together.

Freaking awesome.

“Well, well, well,” Mason drawls, walking up to me. “If it isn’t my biggest fan. What are you doing here? Stalker much? I mean, this is a little embarrassing, Rowan.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Actually, you’re the one walking in and we’re just leaving, Mr. Jackass and the Bean-stalker.”

Shelby bursts into laughter. Mason shoots her an annoyed look.

The hot chick, who’s wearing a dress so short I could give her a gyno exam, tugs on his arm. “Let’s goooo . . . ,” she whines.

He gently slides his arm out of her grasp. “In a minute.”

“I’m bored.”

He ignores her and nods at my outfit, a vintage Norma Kamali wrap dress. “Nice. I thought in your off hours you dressed up in Mary Poppins outfits and scolded children.”

“Only on alternate Tuesdays. By the way, you’re doing a fantastic job fixing your image, Mason.” I lean in, talking in a low, angry voice. “Seriously. When Mr. Talman reads about this in the tabloids tomorrow, he’s going to hit the freaking roof.”

He shoots me a look of annoyance. “He’s not going to read anything. Brandi agreed that she’s going to be very discreet. Didn’t you, Brandi?”

“My name is Bambi.” she pouts.

Shelby looks at me. “Because of course it is.”

“Bambi was actually a boy’s name in the book,” I tell Shelby.

“What book?” Bambi looks at us in confusion.

“Let’s go.” Mason scowls at me, grabs Bambi’s arm, and tries to lead her towards the bar.

“Mason,” I cry out. I move to stand next to him. “You can’t drink.”

“You think I don’t know that?” he scowls at me. “I’m going to have a seltzer water and hang out for a little while and unwind. Does that meet with your approval, Mommie Dearest?”

“I don’t want to hang out,” his date whines. “I just want to go back to your place. I already told my crew you and me were going to hit it. Oh, and I’m going to need pictures. And maybe a pair of your underwear? The kind in the Joxx ad?”

“Discretion.” I nod at Mason. “Nice.” Then I mutter under my breath, “See you soon, clown.”

“What did you say?” He shoots me a puzzled look.

“Nothing. Please, Mason, don’t just think about yourself. Think about the entire team that you will be letting down if the press gets ahold of this.”

“Good night, Rowan.”

“Let’s go,” Shelby says to me. “He’s a big boy; he can make his own mistakes.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I murmur, but I let her lead me away.

“Taxi,” Mason shouts.

As Shelby and I walk away, we hear angry yelling. “Are you kidding me?” she shrieks.

We glance back to see Mason bundling her into a cab and then walking off down the sidewalk.

Well, thank heaven for small favors, I think sourly, as Shelby and I search for a cab of our own.

As we climb into the cab, an image of my mother flashes through my mind again. We visited New York together a few times when I was younger, and she loved taking cabs. Something about it just felt so Manhattan to her. She'd always have the cab drive by the New York Post building and stare at it longingly as we glided past.

Don't give up on your dreams, she told me when she got sick.

Well, here I am . . . this close to achieving my dream. The only thing standing in my way is a big, arrogant jock-for-brains who's going to do everything possible to tank it.

ROWAN

I WINCE at the smell of lemony disinfectant as the secretary leads me down the hallway of the Manhattan Children's Hospital. The scent summons a rush of memories, none of them pleasant.

“And here we go,” the secretary says, gesturing at the door of the conference room. I've arranged to meet Mason here half an hour before he was due on the ward, so we can go over the plan. It's been two weeks since our meeting and he's taken no initiative to make this experience count. He hasn't even asked for a briefing on how today will go, so this will be the first time he hears about the plans, which makes it much more fun.

I'm lugging a black suitcase on wheels. She glances at it curiously. I smile at the thought of what's in there.

As I walk in, the secretary stands there in the hallway.

“Can I help you with something?” I ask her, puzzled.

“Oh, no,” she says, but she doesn't move from the spot. Then it hits me—she wants to meet the famous bad boy Mason Raker whenever he chooses to grace us with his presence.

I suppress an eye roll. He can flirt all he wants— on his own time.

“Well, see you in half an hour when we're ready for the tour,” I say politely, and I stand there until she utters an irritated hmph, and walks off.

I hope Mason doesn't keep me waiting too long, I think, as I carry the bag over to the table.

But I'm assuming that he will. I brought a book about hockey, *Beauties: Hockey's Greatest Untold Stories*, because I am on a mission to eat, breathe, and dream hockey in preparation for being named as the new lead publicist for the Rovers.

Think positive, my mother always told me. Dream it and you'll be it.

As I set my purse down on the table, I hear a little clinking sound and smile. Ruby, my younger sister, is so sure I'll get the publicist job that she bought me a personalized metal tumbler that says "Congratulations on your promotion. I definitely sort of thought maybe you'd get the job." The wording wraps all the way around the mug.

I love my little sister, and I very rarely give in to the temptation to grab her, pin her, and give her a noogie. Not as often as she deserves, that's for sure.

I settle into my seat, idly betting with myself that he'll be at least half an hour late.

Then again, it seems like everyone bets against Mason.

It's been a few days since the Bambi incident, and I kind of wonder what it's like to know that most people only want to get near him because they want something from him. I mean, Bambi hadn't even wanted to spend a single hour chit-chatting. All she wanted was a notch on her bedpost, the opportunity to brag that she'd banged a famous hockey player.

I think I'd feel kind of lonely if I were him.

A door on the far end of the room bangs open, and I let out small shriek, startled. Mason walks out, and I realize that he actually beat me here. He was just in the restroom.

As he swaggers towards me, all sex and smug confidence, my feelings of pity evaporate in a puff of mist. He needs no one's sympathy. The scornful curl of his upper lip tells me he plans to unleash all kinds of hell on me today.

Well, Mama didn't raise no pushover.

Right back at you, I think.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in,” I say.

He walks over and settles into a seat a few chairs down, with a lazy smile.

“Hello, strawberry. You’re looking less buttoned-down than you did the last time I saw you working.” He nods at me, glancing at my pink polka-dotted puff-sleeve flare dress, matched with low-heeled pink pumps. I accessorized with pink pom-pom dangle earrings and chunky plastic pink bangles.

I shrug, feeling a tiny sting of defensiveness. “It’s a fun look for the kids,” I say “Also, why am I strawberry?”

He’s already looking bored, studying his fingernails. “Strawberry blonde.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Trust you to reduce a woman to her component parts.”

He snorts. “Thanks for making me sound like someone from a *Dateline* special. ‘He was an ordinary guy. Quiet, kept to himself. Seemed so harmless.’”

I reach for the bag and unzip it. “You’re none of those things.”

“I’m making note of the official date and time you called me extraordinary.” He glanced down at the bag. “That’s a lot of Rovers swag you brought with you.”

I smile at him, my eyes glinting with happiness at what’s about to unfold. “Sure is. Oh, and thanks for showing up on time, actually early; that was unexpected.”

You’ll need the extra time to put on the clown suit.

“No problem. My father drilled punctuality into me from a young age. One of the few things I’m glad to have learned from him.” His eyes cloud over at the mention. Interesting reaction. His father was a billionaire commercial real estate broker; I’ve done my research on Mason over the past few days. And it seems he maybe has some daddy issues?

Then again, don’t we all.

Soft music pumping through the air temporarily distracted me, and I flicked an annoyed look at the speaker hanging from the ceiling.

“Now what?” he asks, quirking an eyebrow.

I make a face. “Oh, just that song, ‘Macarena.’ It’s so annoying. I mean, it’s about a woman cheating on her boyfriend with his two friends. Why are they playing it in a children’s hospital?”

“It’s just the tune, not the lyrics. Calm down, Judge Judy.”

“Whatever. All right. Let’s get this party started.” I shove my hand into the bag, past the swag that I stuffed in there to hide my surprise.

He gives me a suspicious look. “What’s that smirk?”

“What smirk?” I said innocently, as I unzipped the bag and pulled out the clown costume. His eyes blaze in anger.

“What . . . you can’t be serious.”

I stare him right in the eye, unblinking. “Dead serious. Deader than a *Dateline* date serious.”

He shakes his head at me. “Absolutely no freaking way. I’ll walk.”

I bet he actually would, with no regard for the kids who are so excitedly waiting for him. Kids who are going through such a tough time, who are just looking for a little light in their day. What a self-centered jerkwad.

Irritation sizzles just underneath my skin. “Mason, try to stop thinking about just yourself for one minute. There’s a ward full of kids who are incredibly excited to meet you. They’ve hand-colored a banner for you. And kids love clowns. And you are going to go up there and entertain them, like you agreed to, or Mr. Talman’s going to bench you.”

His face flushes red. His mouth opens, then shuts. “You . . . I . . .”

I count at least six expressions battling with each other on his face while he searches for a response.

He grabs the costume from me and storms off to the bathroom.

Minutes later, he emerges, glaring bloody murder.

His costume has it all. Big multicolor polka dots. A red nose. Giant clown shoes.

“Revenge is sweet,” he growls at me.

“I’m shaking in my non-clown-sized shoes.”

I pick up my cell phone and dial the secretary. “We’re ready.” I sing out. “So, so very ready.”

TODAY WE ARE IN A CHILDREN’S WARD WITH TEN BEDS. Mason is sitting on a chair next to one of them and I’m standing next to him, handing him swag.

“And here’s your very own Rover toy.” Mason the clown says, holding out the Rovers’ lovable dog mascot. His tone had all the fun and warmth of a man reading an eviction notice.

Six-year-old Juan looks at the Rover toy. “Go on, take it.” his mother urges him. He reaches out and takes it, then sets it down on his bed gingerly.

Juan is completely bald and has a neon-green square bandage on his neck. He’s wearing adorable Rovers pajamas with the mascot on them. He doesn’t look super pumped to see Mason, though. He’s picking up on Mason’s cranky vibes, and it is really ticking me off. I feel like dragging this out any further isn’t going to help cheer the kids up. It might make them cry.

I stand up, smiling at Juan. “Well, that’s it for today. Good luck with everything, Juan. It was wonderful to meet you. And don’t forget to feed Rover.”

I pick up Rover and say, in a high, silly voice, “I like ice cream.” That makes Juan smile.

Mason reaches out and shakes Juan's hand. "I'm so glad to meet you, Juan. I hope you feel better real soon."

"Okay," Juan says.

"Thanks so much for coming." Juan's mother stands up and reaches out to give Mason a hug. He stands there awkwardly for a moment, then returns it.

This is really terrible.

I always suspected Mason was spoiled and self-centered, but this is one of the rare times I hate being proven right.

As soon as we leave the room and shut the door behind us, I stalk off down the hallway without a word, leaving Mason hurrying after me.

At the end of the hallway, he grabs me by the shoulder. I spin around and glare at him. "What?" I snap, shaking his hand off.

He pulls the red curly wig off his head and stands there with his red clown nose, staring at me in exasperation. "What's going on? Are we done?"

"Are we done?" I glare at him. "Yes and no. There are more kids waiting to meet you. And I'm honestly thinking of cancelling." The press had already come and snapped his pictures and interviewed a few kids—who were super excited to meet him, until they actually met him. Then they were kind of wary, but fortunately the reporters had left by then.

"I didn't ask you to cancel." He folds his arms across his broad chest. "I don't want you to cancel. We made a promise to those kids, and we should keep it."

My shoulders sag. He's willing to keep going even though he clearly hates being here. That doesn't help the kids, though, and that is the reason we came today.

I let out a sigh and roll my shoulders, trying to release some tension. "Mason, you're supposed to be a fun clown, and you're giving the kids Pennywise vibes."

He gives me a skeptical side-eye. "Is there even such a thing as a non-frightening clown?"

“Yes, that’s why they have them at children’s parties,” I say in exasperation.

“Did it ever occur to you that I might be freaking out because I have coulrophobia?”

“Colo-what?” I say in alarm. I pull my phone from my purse and try to look it up, but there’s no reception.

“A debilitating fear of clowns,” he supplies.

I stare at him. Where did he get that information from? “I have so many questions.”

He tugs at his polka-dotted suit. “Let me out of this clown suit, and I’ll give you answers.”

“Nope.”

He gives me a winning smile, his brown eyes twinkling and unfortunately making him the sexiest clown that ever donned the suit. “I look so much better without the suit on.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Yes, I’ve seen the underwear ads.”

He replies with an unbearably smug smile, as if thinking to himself, *Of course you did*. “Well, thank you.”

“I didn’t say I liked them,” I scoff.

Then again, I didn’t say I didn’t.

The truth was, I did like them. Objectively, Mason was undeniably gorgeous. Subjectively, he was an absolute ass.

“You didn’t just like them. You looooved them.” He drew the word out, his smile widening. When Mason wanted to, he could be charming as hell, even with a round red nose and giant shoes.

“Did not.” I sounded like a huffy kindergartener.

“You loved them, you loved them,” he sings. “Rowan loves my underpants.”

“That’s the Mason the kids need.” I say. I hold the wig out to him. “Wig up, and let’s go. You can be adorably charming and funny, and please do not tell anyone I ever said that,

because I know people. Bad people. People who can do bad things to you.”

“I think I’m getting your message.” He winks at me. “Tell everyone, is what I’m hearing.”

“Ok, I want you to channel that wonderful Mason funny energy and go back there and clown around for the kids. You can brighten their day, Mason. Please take the hockey stick out of your ass and do so.”

He chokes on a laugh and puts the wig back on.

As we start to walk down the hall, he pauses.

“I’m not just being an ass,” he says. “When I was in grade school, a friend of mine died of leukemia. He just got sicker and sicker, until one day he stopped coming to school and then a few weeks later . . . our teacher told us the news. This brings back those memories.”

My heart squeezes in sympathy. “I’m sorry,” I say, sincerely. “Really. But that was the past, and these kids are here today, and you can bring a little fun into their lives. Can we revisit Juan and then see the rest of the kids?”

He nods. “I’m still planning horrible, horrible revenge on you for this, just so you know.”

A minute later, we pop back into the ward where Juan and the other kids are. Mason loudly announces he has just “one more thing.” to say. And then he bursts into song, a ridiculous made-up song about Rover the dog.

It’s a terrible song.

He has a really bad singing voice, a keep-your-day-job singing voice.

The kids love it. Juan beams from ear to ear. That smile would melt a glacier.

The rest of the visit goes smoothly, with Mason singing, clowning around, and sending the kids and their parents into peals of laughter. He signs autographs, he hands out swag, he charms the pants off of everyone. Of course, the second we’re

done, he practically runs into a men's room to strip the clown costume off.

“See?” I say to him, as we head for the lobby. “Wasn't it worth conquering your cauliflower-phobia?”

“Absolutely not,” he says, plucking a red hair from his shirt and shuddering. “Gah. Why do clowns always have horrifying red hair?”

“Maybe you could give a donation to the hospital while you're here?”

“As part of my publicity stunt? I don't buy my image, thanks.”

“I'm not worried about your earthly image. I'm trying to get you points with the man upstairs so you don't spend the afterlife backstroking through brimstone.”

He makes a snorting noise as we cross the lobby. “Calm your ta-tas. I'll write a check. Anything I write at this point would be generous, because I wasn't planning on using a donation as another publicity stunt. And I'm not taking the town car with you. I have an uber waiting for me.”

Ugh, what an ego. Did he actually think I was hoping to spend the rest of the day with him? “Imagine my disappointment. Enjoy your two weeks off. I've got plenty of time to plot my next move.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Leave the costume at home next time.”

I spin on my heel and walk off, and he follows me through the lobby and out the door.

“No more costumes. I've done my time; I've paid my dues.”

He's still trying to negotiate with my back as I climb into the town car, smiling wickedly as I think about the next costume. I have the perfect choice all picked out.

THE DAILY SNITCH

The Daily Snitch

September 4th

Before the start of preseason camp, Mason Raker has been seen around town spending time at the local children's hospital. A good deed or mandated? Either way, we loved to see the smiles on those kiddos' faces.

However, as we are genuinely terrified of clowns, we're hoping his next appearance includes a costume that doesn't scare us all. A little less Bozo and a lot more Mason would suffice.

And for all that is holy . . . if you snap a pic, share it.

Our biggest question this week? Could the bad boy be changing his ways?

Only time will tell, but don't you fret, my dear readers, this star stalker will spill all the deets as they land on my desk.

ROWAN

IT'S BEEN two weeks since our first appearance, which means my moment of Mason-free bliss is over. On today's agenda: a one-hour ride to New Jersey, trapped in a town car with Mason Raker.

I knew women who would have sacrificed their trust fund and a kidney for that kind of opportunity.

I'm not one of those women.

Am I?

I mean, I wouldn't go out of my way to hang out with him, but I am not totally hating today either.

I have to admit, Mason can have a fun energy when he's not being Mr. Grumpy Skates.

And the opportunity to torture him makes my entire morning. I've gotten twenty-seven texts from him in the last couple of days, demanding to know what costume I've selected for him.

I've responded to every single one of them with a shrugging emoji.

"So, is it true what they say about Mason's . . . hockey stick?" Shelby smirks as we stand in the doorway of our Upper East Side apartment building. She lives three floors above me.

"Don't you say a single word," I warn her. "Your expression says it all. And you're wrong. This is a work trip. A painful but necessary work trip."

Her smirk stretches wider. “Safe sex save lives. I have some condoms if you need one.”

“Shelby.” I groan. “Seriously. Get your mind out of the gutter.”

She shakes her head, still smiling. “It’s more fun down there. You meet the nicest people.”

The town car has just arrived to pick me up, and Mason steps out to hold the door open for me. He looks good. Better than good. He’s sexy, his silky brown hair is tousled and gleaming in the morning sun, and his jeans fit him like they’ve been custom tailored.

Still, I don’t like the smirk on his face as he climbs in next to me.

“What?” I demand suspiciously, not bothering to say hi.

“What what?” he echoes back at me. “My, two weeks went by quickly. Thinking of me constantly, were you?”

“Well, I mostly just passed the time by doodling *Mrs. Mason Raker* on every available surface in my apartment. It’s probably going to cost me my deposit when I move out. You?”

He settles into his seat and fastens his seatbelt as the town car pulls away from the curb. “Did you? How original. I’ve been tapping into my inner arts-and-crafts vibe.” At my skeptical look, he adds, “I hand-made a Rowan James dartboard. My aim is impeccable. If this whole hockey thing doesn’t work out for me, I’ve got that to fall back on.”

Music blasts from the town car’s speakers as we glide down the street.

It’s “Macarena.” That can’t be a coincidence.

He smiles at me. “How you doing? Comfortable?”

“I’ll survive.” I pull out my phone and pretend to scroll through it. After a few minutes, the song ends. I shrug. “That’s the best you got?”

The song starts playing again. Mason grinned at me. Shooting him an annoyed scowl, I lean forward and call out to

the driver, “I’m so sorry, would you mind playing something else?”

“Sorry, ma’am. Mason controls the playlist,” he replies. He sounds genuinely apologetic.

“How many times will you be playing this song?” I grit my teeth.

“I’m not allowed to tell you, ma’am.”

I shoot a glare at Mason. “I will get you for this.”

“You will try,” he says agreeably.

“I control the costumes,” I warn him.

He arches his eyebrows. “I control the playlist. And I will discover every single thing that drives you crazy, I promise you. And I will use it against you, mercilessly. Unless you agree that I don’t have to wear any more costumes and I can just be my adorably charming self.”

I am carefully composing some excellent insults when my phone rings with my BFF Tasha’s ring tone.

I hit FaceTime and answer.

“Hey girl.” Tasha beams a huge grin at me. “You’re looking good.” So was she, with her freckle-splattered nose and light sunburn. Tasha is a pro surfer. She even dragged me out on the water a few times. It did not end well. Dancing is way more my thing.

Her face squinches up in confusion. “Is that ‘Macarena’ playing?”

I nod vigorously. “Yes, it is. And I’m trapped in a town car sitting next to a dead man. Say goodbye to Mason Raker, world’s worst DJ, before I push him out the door.” I angled the phone so Tasha could see him.

His eyes spark with mischief as he grabs the phone from me. I let out a squawk of protest.

“Hey, are you Tasha? Rowan can’t stop talking about you. How’s California? She really misses you.” For a moment I wondered how he knew where he was, then realized that he’d

seen her phone number in the upper right corner, and also the sunny skies and palm trees behind her.

“No way. Really?” Tasha sounded delighted.

“Oh, absolutely. Haven’t I seen you in *Surfergrrrl Monthly*?”

“You totally have.” She laughs.

“You really can shred a wave. Is that how you say it?” He’s trying for cute and disarming, and somehow he totally pulls it off.

“It is. It totally is.” She’s giggling girlishly.

Oh. My. God.

“He’s evil.” I yell, trying to grab the phone. Mason twists away from me and hunches over the phone protectively. I claw uselessly at his arm. Of course, he ignores it. He’s a hockey player; he’s used to taking pucks to the head and getting railed on with wooden sticks. He can handle a little pain.

“We should all get together next time you’re in town.”

“Oh, that sounds like fun. Wine bar?”

“You know it.”

I make stabbing motions at Mason’s neck. Mason’s grin stretches even wider.

“Macarena” finishes, and starts again.

Kill me now.

“You really like that song.” Tasha laughs.

Mason nods. “Yeah, it’s kind of our little thing that we have together.”

“Wow, you have a thing?” she squeals delightedly. “Oh my God, and you told me that New York was like a total man desert. Congratulations.”

I groan. Now Tasha will think that Mason and I had a real thing, and it would take hours to talk her down.

Also, Mason does not need to hear about my lack of a dating life.

“We sure do,” Mason agrees. “By the way, what’s that food she hates again? I’m making her dinner tomorrow and I want to make sure that I don’t accidentally cook it.”

“Oh, you mean shredded coconut.” She nods. “She hates that so much. Wow, you’re hot and you’re cooking her dinner. Rowan, grab hold of this guy and don’t let go.”

“Oh, don’t you worry.” I trill. Out of sight of the phone, I make strangling motions with my hands. Then, with a quick lunge, I grab the phone back from Mason, and chat with Tasha for a couple of minutes, updating her on my new gym and how Ruby is doing at Columbia, before I say, “Got to go. Love you, babe.”

“Love you too.” Mason yells. “Miss you.”

I hang up quickly.

“Oh my God. Could you possibly be any more aggravating?” I scold him as “Macarena” plays for the fourth or possibly the fifth time.

“Yes.” His eyes glint with challenge. “Strawberry, I’m just getting started.”

Two can play at that game. I smile with malice. “Well, then I can’t wait to show you your new costume.”

He gives me a big, innocent blink. “Are you sure you want to go this route? I can be a real bastard when I put my mind to it.”

“Put your mind to it? Pretty sure it’s just an involuntary reflex on your part.” I fish around in my purse, looking for my earbuds. Which, of course, I’ve forgotten at home.

I roll down the window and stick my head out the window, letting the highway noise drown out some of the music, breathing in exhaust fumes as we drive.

“That’s really not healthy for you,” Mason calls out, fake concern lacing his voice. In response, I put both hands over my ears.

Several hundred centuries later, we arrive at the hospital and double-park in the back as instructed. I climb out of the car and haul the bag out. Fortunately, it has wheels. I maneuver it towards the back doors, where several reporters are already waiting for us.

“Mason, who are you dressing up as today?” a woman yells. That’s excellent. Word has gotten around about the costumes, and it’s gained the media’s attention, just like I hoped.

“It’s a surprise.” he calls back, flashing the famous Mason Raker grin. It’s a panty-melter, all right. I’m not even in its direct path, and I feel myself growing slightly damp.

But then I remember “Macarena,” and how I’ll never get that song out of my head.

“Sure is.” I add brightly. “A really fun surprise.”

As I hurry ahead, he jogs after me and jostles me, almost making me lose my grip on the bag’s handle. “Sorry. I’m so clumsy.”

Right. The NHL’s best forward is clumsy.

I accidentally run over his foot. “Excuse me.” I sing out. “My, you are clumsy.”

We make our way into the hospital, “accidentally” jostling each other and apologizing in cheerful, sincere voices as we walk.

“If you tell me what’s in the bag, I’ll give you a signed copy of my Joxx underwear catalog,” he says, as an assistant swiftly escorts us to a conference room.

“I would think you’d know me well enough by now to realize that’s the opposite of an incentive for me. But it’s time for you to change, so I’ll show you for free.” I unzip the bag and reveal a Scrooge McDuck costume.

“What the pucking hell?”

“You’ve earned this one.”

He gives me a puzzled look.

“Our last hospital meetup? When I begged you to part with a few pennies for the kids?”

Mason frowns at me and shakes his head. “You’ve got that all wrong. I’d already written a check before you arrived. That’s why I got there early.”

That leaves me momentarily speechless. And it doesn’t fit with the picture I’ve formed of Mason Raker at all.

Then again, aren’t I guilty of stereotyping him the way everyone else did? The truth is, I don’t really know him that well. I know that he’s funnier than people give him credit for, that he struggled with alcohol addiction, that he drowns his problems in women and bourbon, and that he had some kind of issue with his dad that causes him pain . . . but I didn’t know the real him.

He shoots me a scowl as he grabs the Scrooge McDuck costume.

“Why didn’t you let me know about the contribution, so I could write it up for the press?”

Mason makes a face, like he’s just tasted something sour. “I don’t need recognition for doing the right thing,” he grumbles.

Is he kidding? “Actually, you do. You need all the help you can get.”

“That’s a nope. Big heaping of nope-aroni and cheese.”

I sigh. Much as that frustrates me, I also have to admire him.

Doesn’t mean I’m letting him out of dressing up as Scrooge McDuck, though.

Before we go up on the floor, I grab him by the arm—well, wing. “Listen. It literally kills me to admit this—I mean, I think I’m about to lose ten years off my life from the shame—you can be kind when you want to “Rowan James, are you trying to flirt with me? Is it the duck costume? It must be the duck costume.”

“Most definitely not,” I say severely.

“I’m learning so much about you.”

Don’t let him make me laugh, don’t let him make me laugh . . . “Don’t make me punch a duck. Because I will punch a duck. Right in the beak. Mason, I’m making a point. These kids have been through it, and they deserve your absolute best. I’ve seen you greeting kids outside of the rink, and you did great. When you deal with the public, you’re able to turn on the charm when you want to. Channel that energy, please.”

Ten minutes later, we are at the children’s leukemia ward floor, where Mason is greeted with whoops and cheers.

After the obligatory media pictures, we move on to the good part—greeting the kids. This time, Mason is a natural. As I sit off to the side, he shows them some of his best hockey moves, and makes sure to fall over and do pratfalls.

A ten-year-old boy named Antoine raises his hand. Antoine is dark-skinned and still has his hair, but has the same port that many of the other children here are sporting.

“Yes, Antoine?” Mason says.

“Your costume’s lame, dude.” Antoine shakes his head. “It’s 2000-late.”

“Yes, it is. And you know who picked it out for me? This lady.” He points his wing at me. “So let’s give her a big round of applause.” And he makes a quacking raspberry sound.

The rest of the kids razz me and boo loudly. I stand up and bow. “Thank you, thank you.” I wave and blow kisses, and they laugh. I do an exaggerated curtsy, and they laugh even harder.

We follow it up with swag bags and autograph signing.

Just as he’s finishing up, his phone rings. Instantly, his mood changes. His face darkens.

“Got to take this,” he says, his voice gone harsh.

I nod at him, and he hurries off. As he does, he passes a nurse who is headed straight for the bed of an eight-year-old girl named Mariah, holding a package. Mariah has lost most of her hair and looks like a little bald baby chick.

“It’s my wig.” she cries. “It’s my wig.” She looks hopefully at the nurse. “Can you braid it for me?”

“Oh, honey, I have to make my rounds.” The nurse looks dismayed. Mariah’s face falls. “It’s okay,” she says, looking sadly at the package.

“I can.” I say. “I am the braid-master.”

I walk over and sit down next to Mariah’s bed. Together, we open the package and carefully fit the wig on her head. Then, I set to work.

It brings back memories of me and my younger sister Ruby, sitting on my bed late at night, braiding each other’s hair using magazine pictures as inspiration, speaking in quiet voices so we didn’t wake our mother. Mariah glows with happiness as I keep braiding.

By the time Mason comes back, with a face like a thundercloud, I’ve created a beautiful French braid crown.

“Very nice,” he says to Mariah, forcing a smile. “You look like a princess.”

From the look on his face, I can tell it’s time to go. He isn’t someone who can hide his emotions well, and I don’t want the negative vibes to spread.

Mariah gives me a hug. I blink back tears, tell her she looks beautiful, and Mason and I make our way to the front of the hospital, with me lugging the costume bag.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask, as we head for the town car.

“Nope.” He bites out the word.

“Does it affect your public image in any way?” At his dirty look, I sigh. “I’m sorry, I have to ask, Mason.”

He shakes his head again. “It does not.”

Frustration sizzles inside me, along with an odd worried sensation. He really doesn’t look okay—but it’s not my business and I have no right to pry.

“Okay,” I say reluctantly. “Well, we’re done for the day.”

We ride back to Manhattan in the town car together, the silence so thick between us you could slice it with a knife.

I'd have preferred listening to "Macarena" twenty-seven times.

MASON

I PACE the floor of my apartment, scowling at the latest text that's come across my phone. "Mason, it's me, baby."

How ironic. Because she abandoned me when I was a baby.

This text came because the season is just about to begin and the woman who birthed me loves to pretend that she had a hand in my success.

Traci Stout-Raker figured out quickly that being a mom was not for her. She'd left me to be raised by my workaholic father and a string of nannies.

Like most kids who are abandoned, I figured that it was my fault. I knew how to get my mom to forgive me for whatever I'd done and come back home, though – all I had to do was be perfect.

I was the best-behaved kid on the planet. I was polite. I cleaned my room before the maids ever got the chance. Washed and folded my own laundry. I excelled in every single sport that I ever played in. And sometimes my mom came home, and stayed for a little while, but she always left again, so I knew that I wasn't quite good enough.

It wasn't until I was nine that I learned why my mother came back at all.

She had arrived at the house and headed straight into the house to talk to my dad, after greeting me with a brief hug. I'd

handed her a box that I was so proud of, so excited about. It would show her what a great kid I was.

I was standing in a hallway outside the great room. I danced with impatience, wanting her to come back out and open the box.

But then I overheard the raised voices.

“You cheap bastard.” my mother screamed, and I cringed, because I knew that was a bad word.

My father shouted, “It’s not my fault you blew through the divorce settlement. You want child support? I have sole custody and you haven’t even bothered to visit in two years. So good luck with that.”

My heart twisted into a knot.

She’d come back to wheedle money from my dad, not for me. Never for me. I walked out into the hallway and watched my mother stomping out the front door. As she walked, leaving the door open behind her, she dropped a box on the front steps.

It was the special box I’d made for her. She’d never even opened it to look at the report cards, hand-drawn pictures and handmade gifts I’d put in there for her.

Crying, I’d gone into the kitchen to fetch matches. Then I took the box out onto the front lawn, dumped out the contents, and set them on fire.

Minutes later, as I watched the box burn, my father came barreling out. “What the hell are you doing?” he shouted. Then he looked down at the pile as the paper curled and blackened.

He wasn’t a soft man, but this time, his voice softened. “Mason. Buddy. The problem isn’t you, and the problem isn’t me. It’s her. It’s always been her. Nobody and nothing is enough for her, ever.” He shook his head. “My biggest regret is marrying her without getting to know her better first. But then, if I hadn’t picked her, I wouldn’t have you, would I?” And he had reached out and given me a brief, awkward hug.

Then he looked at the fire. “Go get your nanny to help you put that out and clean it up.”

My father never remarried after my mother left. Dated a lot, never trusted anyone enough to marry them. That’s probably where I got my poor view of romance. Then again, was I wrong? Every woman I’ve ever dated has wanted something from me.

First it was because of my father’s money, then it was because of my hockey fame. Women wanted to marry me before they knew how to spell my last name—and Raker’s not that hard to spell.

As a result, I don’t trust easily, and I find it easier to stay true to hockey than I do to another person.

The cell phone trills again with another text, jerking me out of my unhappy reverie. “Baby boy, I miss you and I just want to have lunch with you. That’s it.”

She missed me? I haven’t heard from her in three years.

The sad thing is, I no longer miss her at all. There’s a numb spot in my heart and mind that she occupies, and if I never see her again, I’d be perfectly happy.

I stuff my phone in my jeans pocket, walk over to the window, and glance across Park Avenue. There’s a liquor store across the street from my building, and I could really go for a beer right now. After all, it’s not beer that has ever gotten me in trouble in the past. It’s bourbon. Warm, smoky bourbon sliding down my throat, relaxing me, making me feel invincible . . .

No. Nope. Not today.

My thoughts are going down the wrong path. I slide my hands into my pocket and finger my sober chip.

Then I pull out my phone and call my sober coach, Andrew. We aren’t scheduled to talk for another couple of days, but Andrew answers after two rings, sounding cheerful. “Hey, Mason. How’s it going?”

I grimace. I don't actually want to talk about my mother, so I deflect, as usual. "Excellent, thanks. Except for that nightmare of a woman who keeps torturing me in the name of 'improving my image.' Please imagine me doing air quotes as I say that."

"Yeah, you mentioned her before. Nightmare?" Andrew says. "Tell me more."

An image of Rowan swims in front of my face, with her tight dancer's body and her shining hair flowing over her shoulders, and the way she chews her pens when she thinks I'm not looking. "Well, she'd be nice if she wasn't dedicated to publicly humiliating me, and she'd be hot if she stopped lecturing me like a schoolmarm."

"What I'm hearing is 'nice' and 'hot.'"

I glare at the phone. "Do not even go there. This woman made me wear a clown costume, and then a Scrooge McDuck costume."

"Didn't you tell me that you played 'Macarena' twenty-seven times in an attempt to make her homicidal?"

My glare fades into a smug, self-satisfied grin. Make me dress up like a clown, huh? "Yes. It was classic."

"So you're basically pulling her pigtails like a boy in first grade. Have you dipped them in an inkwell yet?"

I snort in contempt. "The 1920s sent a message by carrier pigeon. They want their cliché back."

"Yeah, yeah. So, other than wanting me to know how incredibly hot you don't think she is, why are you calling me?"

I imagine the warm sting of bourbon burning my throat, the tension fading from my body, the fuzzing of thought.

"No reason."

"It's not no reason. Listen, I used to be an addict. I've come up with every excuse and lie in the book. So don't bullshit a bullshitter. What's up?"

I sigh. And then I start talking, even though I hate dredging up the ugliness that clouds my thoughts whenever my mother calls.

I tell him about how she's appeared out of nowhere, how she's bombarding me with texts, and how I just want one beer so I can relax, just one, and how I've never had a problem with beer.

"Well, you know what I'm going to say to that. Unfortunately, you have proven to be a person who cannot have just one of any kind of alcohol. It's just not an option for you. And you don't have to do this today. Take it day by day, remember?"

"You're right. Pains me to say it."

"Mason." Andrew's voice is warm with sympathy. "You're one of the strongest guys I know. You are stronger than your mother. You are stronger than alcohol. We've talked about avoiding stressors whenever possible. Why don't you just block her number?"

"Why indeed." I grimace. "I guess there's this tiny little grain of guilt left in me, like I should be taking care of her. But you know what? You're right. This is messing with my head. I haven't even craved a drink in weeks, and now here we are. As soon as we hang up, I'll block her number."

"Why don't you go for a run after you do that? That always seems to clear your head. Do you want me to come with?"

"Nah, I'm better off alone." The words echo in my head and heart as I say them. They're painfully true. Always have been, always will be. Lexi didn't appreciate it, but breaking up with her was the biggest favor I could do for her.

"All right, then. Call me when you get back."

I hang up and change into jogging gear.

I cast a quick glance around my house. I can't stand to be here right now. I can't stand to be anywhere, really, so I'll run until my muscles burn, run from my problems, run until I'm gasping for breath.

I head over to Central Park, which is only a couple of blocks away. I'm just about to start my run when I hear a familiar voice and a trill of laughter that somehow lightens my mood a little. Looking around, I spot Rowan standing by an ice cream cart, next to a girl who looks like a slightly younger version of her. Late teens, maybe.

The two of them are also in running clothes, and I have to admit, Rowan has an absolutely amazing figure. Too bad she's not only been assigned to make me live in purgatory, but she loves that part of her job.

I walk over to them, and as Rowan tries to pay for two ice cream sundaes, I whip out my wallet. "Hello. I'll pay for those two cholesterol bombs," I say, and shove a twenty at the ice cream vendor.

Then I grin at the girl. "Hello, you must be Rowan's daughter."

The girl bursts into laughter. "Now that's a new one. I'm Ruby, and she's actually my grandmother but she looks really good for her age." Rowan elbows her.

"So, who is your hot, hilarious friend, Rowan?"

"Arggh." Rowan glares at me and shovels a bite of sundae into her mouth. Chocolate drips onto her plump lower lip and her tongue sweeps it up. Brief visions of her putting that pink tongue to other uses swims in front of my eyes until, horrified, I banish them. What the hell am I thinking?

Too bad I haven't been in a groupie mood lately, because I haven't had sex in God knows how long, which is the only reason I'd be thinking dirty thoughts about Rowan.

"You really don't recognize him. You've still never watched a single game of any sport, have you?" Rowan looks amused.

Ruby makes a face. "I do not watch the sports ball. I hear that it involves moving a piece of leather from one end of the court to the other end of the court and there are two groups of men who go to war over this. Also, I hear some people actually care where the piece of leather ends up."

“Wrong sport. His involves ice and violence, but close enough,” Rowan says. She looks at me. “Do you just flirt with every single pair of legs that walks by?”

I grab the cherry from her sundae and pop it into my mouth.

“Hey.” Rowan protests.

“Hay is for horses. I would just like to point out that you have a real habit of making me sound like a serial killer. Like apparently I’m attracted to a disembodied pair of legs?” I try to look wounded.

Rowan takes another bite of her sundae. “Hey, you’re the one who reduces me to nothing but hair when you call me strawberry.”

“Strawberry. I like it. Can I start calling you that?” Ruby giggles.

Rowan narrows her eyes at Ruby. “Not unless you want me to ground you.”

“I’m an adult, thank you very much.” Ruby starts shoveling bites of sundae into her mouth.

“Barely. And you’ve got whipped cream on your nose,” Rowan snorts.

“I do not. Do I?” She glances at me, and I nod.

“From the way you’re bantering, I am assuming you’re the big rude hockey jerk who my sister is attempting to make look all cute and cuddly,” Ruby says, wiping at her nose with her hand. “Did I get the whipped cream?”

“Yes,” I say.

Rowan’s mouth twitches in a smile. The blob is still there.

“Big rude hockey jerk, huh?” I add to Rowan.

“So sorry about that.” Rowan smiles sweetly. “She’s my baby sister and I don’t like to use obscenities in front of her innocent little ears, so I couldn’t describe you accurately.”

“Okay, that does it.” I snatch the ice cream sundae from her hand, take an enormous bite, and then hand it back.

She stares down at it in dismay. “Just when I think I’ve seen the depths of the darkness in your soul, you have to go and prove me wrong.”

I grin fiercely. “Never forget that. Especially when you’re considering your next costume choice. I will leave you two lovely ladies to your diabetes-fest. I’m going for a run. See you in just shy of eleven days.”

Ruby is watching us with wide-eyed amusement, her gaze bouncing back and forth between us.

Why am I even here?

Why am I reluctant to walk away?

Rowan shakes her head at me. “Check your text messages, Mason. We have a meeting in two days. We’re supposed to catch up and review how well our little public image makeover project is going.”

“Rumor has it that you like chocolates with a certain handsome hockey person’s face on them. I will buy you twenty of those chocolate boxes if you tell me what my next costume is going to be.”

“After you just savaged my sundae?” She drew herself up, looking at me with a wounded expression. “I think not.”

“Rowan. Is he talking about the Rovers ganaches? Those are like fifty dollars a box. Those things are crack in a box, and I don’t even like sports.” Ruby protests. “Tell him what your next costume is.”

“Are you kidding me?” Rowan laughs. “Keeping that secret is what gives me the strength to wake up in the morning. It’s the only light in my life. Well, okay, except for you. Come along now, Ruby. Evil cooties are contagious and I don’t want to have to get a cootie shot. See you soon, Mason.” She wiggles her fingers at me, and she and her sister walk off.

“See you later, hockey hottie. You’re not as hideous as Rowan described you.” Ruby calls over her shoulder.

I feel a twinge as they walk away, falling into a sisterly rhythm, their strides matching each other.

And Ruby still has whipped cream on her nose.

It must be nice to be close to your family. Rowan probably has great parents, too. She just carries herself like someone who was raised with love. She probably talks to her parents every week, and I'd bet a million dollars that Rowan's mother sees her as a daughter, not an ATM.

ROWAN

I HUNCH over the desk in my office shortly before our meeting is due to start, poring over my notes.

Ruby, once she stopped singing “Mason and Rowan, sitting in a tree,” gave me some excellent ideas and feedback for the rest of the publicity campaign, and I’m rewriting some of my plans to incorporate them.

I glance over at the stuffed Rover dog on my desk. It’s wearing a Rovers jersey, of course. I pick it up. “Mason does not know who he’s messing with,” I inform Rover. “I just had to invest in noise-cancelling headphones that cost me more than a week’s salary as a protective measure, and he will pay. He will pay dearly.”

Rover does not answer. This is a good thing. I’m not saying I’ve ever pulled multiple all-nighters and ended up hearing a stuffed animal talk back to me, but then again, I’m not saying that I haven’t.

There’s a knock on the door, and I call out, “Come in.”

The door opens and a delivery man enters.

“Mrs. Mason Raker?” he asks. “I have a package for you.”

Who the heck?

I stare at him for a second, wondering what this could be about, and then I remember my sarcastic comment to Mason about writing that very phrase all over my apartment. Did he actually . . .

Wow.

“Close enough.” I smile as he approaches me, holding a small cardboard box.

“Who is it from?” I ask.

“No return address. There’s a hockey star named Mason Raker,” he observes. “A really famous guy.”

“There is?” I say, all wide-eyed innocence. “Well, the Mrs. Mason Raker this package is being sent to is definitely not married to a hockey star. Big coincidence, I guess.”

“She’s your boss?”

I nod. “Yep. She’s the worst, honestly. Total slave driver, never appreciates anything I do.”

“I feel that.” He grimaces in sympathy and sets the box down in front of me.

I am then forced to sign *Mrs. Mason Raker* in order to accept the delivery, which seriously irritates me. A gross smell drifts up from the box— one of my least favorite scents.

And then, of course, I have to tip him.

I am so glad that Mason is not here to see this, the son of a . . .

Between those headphones, this prank box, and him eating half my sundae, Mason seriously owes me.

I look at Rover. “What is in the box?” I ask him. The stuffed animal stares back at me with its button eyes. “I have ways of making you talk,” I threaten him.

He stays silent.

I pick up my phone and call Shelby.

She answers after a few rings. “Hey, what’s up? No, do not adjust that light. It’s fine where it is. What’s up, Rowan?”

“Do you think that Mason would mail something explosive?”

“Do I think that— what? Wait, did he send you something? He sent you something. What is it?”

“I don’t know,” I sigh patiently. “That’s why I’m asking. I promise you it’s not a birthday present.”

“My, my, my. Again, I would not take Mason Raker seriously at all, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t take him to bed. He’s hotter than the surface of the sun. Seriously sexy. And sending you gifts? Wow. Maybe it’s edible panties. Maybe it’s—”

I make a wind tunnel noise and then yell, “Oops, I’m losing you.” before hanging up.

Then I stare at the box again.

Suspiciously, I grab a letter opener from the desk and pry the box open. And I make a gagging sound.

He sent me coconut balls. Gross. We all have that one food that makes us throw up a little in our mouth, and this one is mine. It’s not rational, I just hate shredded coconut with a passion that most people reserve for dictators of war-torn countries.

Ugh.

As I’m tossing the box in the trash, there’s a rap on my door.

“No. Go away.” Whatever else he’s sending, I don’t want any.

Probably a personally autographed CD of “Macarena.”

“Are you all right in there?”

Oh, hell. It’s Cecelia.

I am going to keep this campaign, and then I am going to torture Mason until he cries.

“Never better.” I cry out. The door opens.

“How is it going here?” Cecelia stands in the doorway. “I’m not coming in unless you promise me you have no chocolate in the vicinity.”

I set my pen down. “I have no chocolate in the vicinity.”

She strides into the room and leans on my desk, glancing over at my notes. As ever, my heart thrums nervously. I really want her approval, and not just because I want the promotion.

“How do you feel about the campaign so far?” she asks me.

That’s an easy one. I smile from ear to ear. “Well, you know that by all media measurement metrics, our campaign’s been a big success so far. Mentions of Mason’s drinking, fighting, and womanizing have decreased by a measurable amount, and positive mentions, tweets, and posts have increased by 127 percent.”

Cecelia nods. “I would agree. We’re still early days yet, of course, but the beginning of the campaign has gone off without a hitch. However, I wanted to let you know that Amanda has also been interested in the campaign from the beginning, and she’s been voicing her frustration that it went to you when she’s actually more senior.”

Yeah, by like three months. But of course Amanda would make a big deal over it. She’s known for being pretty aggressive in going after what she wants, to the point where she doesn’t mind shoving other people out of the way to get there. I wouldn’t necessarily say that she believes in playing fair.

Uneasiness bubbles up inside me. Cecelia’s expression has gone serious.

“Well, thank you for trusting me with the campaign,” I say. “I hope you’re happy with how it’s going so far.”

“I do trust you, but Amanda will also be at the meeting with Mason, their coach Paul Hartley, and Mr. Talman today, and I’m going to give her the opportunity to pitch her own ideas as well. It’s only fair.”

I rear back in my seat, feeling a sharp sting of hurt.

“I don’t understand,” I protest. “You just agreed that my campaign has been going really well. Is there a reason that you want to replace me in the middle of it? Have there been complaints?” Has Mason complained? The idea is surprisingly

hurtful. I know I forced the clown costume on him, but it ended up going so well, and I proved right in the end. Can he not see that making the kids happy is the most important thing?

“No complaints.” There is a hint of steel to Cecelia’s voice. Cecelia, unlike Amanda, believes in playing fair, and she never lets personal feelings get in the way of business. She always does what is best for the client. “Amanda is also very talented, and I would like the Rovers to have the opportunity to hear her ideas.”

“Of course,” I say, trying and failing to hide my disappointment.

She turns to go, then pauses and glances back at me. “Listen, the campaign comes first. And it’s ultimately up to the Rovers who they want to choose. If they like Amanda’s pitch, then there’s no reason she shouldn’t be able to work with Mason on the next assignment. And then we can just evaluate it meeting by meeting.”

I think of Amanda, giggling and cooing at Mason, agreeing with whatever he said, and definitely not making him wear any goofy costumes.

Cecelia turns to go. I slide open my desk drawer and pull out a box of Rovers ganache. Unhappily, I grab one and take a bite, not even bothering to see which hockey hottie I’m devouring.

“I smell chocolate.” She spins around and frowns at me, jabbing an accusing finger in my direction. “You promised you had no chocolate in here.”

“I had my fingers crossed when I said that,” I say, trying not to snifle.

“It’s only business, darling. Don’t make it personal.” She gives me a sympathetic smile and leaves the room.

I quickly go over my notes again. I’ve memorized all of my selling points and my gaze is staring to blur.

Sighing, I get up and head to the bathroom so that I can stand in front of the mirror and practice my pitch. I need to be

able to deal with competition. And the owner of the Rovers cannot possibly argue with my results, which are obvious in the reports I've emailed to him. The numbers are there in black and white. I even pulled out quotes from social media, and of course included clippings of all the stories about Mason.

A stall door bangs open, and I jump, letting out a squeak of alarm. I should have checked to see if anyone was in here—what if Amanda had been spying on me while I rehearsed my pitch?

Mason walks out of the stall, a huge grin stretching across his face when his eyes alight on me. His hair has that perfectly rumpled look, and his eyes gleam with humor. He's close enough that I catch a whiff of his cologne mixed with his earthy, masculine aroma.

He arches one eyebrow, shaking his head at me. "Rowan, Rowan, Rowan. You are stalking me. Just admit it. There's no shame in it, I'm irresistible."

"This is the ladies' room." I protest.

"It's unisex."

True, unfortunately.

I shoot him a narrow-eyed look. "I got your gift."

"What gift?" He's all wide-eyed innocence.

"The one addressed to . . ." I trail off. Mrs. Mason Raker.

His mouth curves up in a wicked grin. "The one addressed to who, now?"

"Me."

"Well, no, I did not send the gift, but I'm very jealous." He shakes his head. "I should have known there'd be a long line of admirers standing between us."

"Okay then." I start to turn away.

"You're talking to the mirror," he observes. "Let me guess. 'Mirror, mirror, on the wall' . . ."

I stifle a laugh, then remember the coconut balls and try to make myself look serious. “Listen, bud, it’s hard for me to cast my magic spells with you watching. And there’s a certain over-confident Homo sapien who needs to be turned into a toad.”

He doesn’t budge. “But seriously, though.”

“I was practicing my pitch for the meeting.”

“Do you do this for every meeting?”

I shake my head. “No, there’s just a lot at stake here.”

His brow furrows in puzzlement. “Why? Anything happen? Some new rumors?”

I don’t want to tell him that Amanda might get the job, that he might never have to wear a costume again, that the campaign might turn safe, boring, and probably a lot less effective.

I don’t want to tell him how much this all means to me, how it’s part of a promise that I made to my mother, how I feel the burden and the honor of living out the life she never got to.

“No, no. I just mean there’s a lot at stake at every meeting. Because we all care about you so deeply, Mason.” I smile and flutter my eyelashes at him.

He gives me a skeptical look. “Sure. That’s why you stuffed me into a duck suit.” He salutes me and saunters out of the room.

ROWAN

A TRAY of cookies sits on our conference table untouched, next to carafes of water and coffee. All of the cookies are covered in shredded coconut, which is probably why nobody has touched them. I have no idea how Mason pulled that off—did he actually reach out to our caterer? The guy's dedicated; I'll give him that. I have to admit I'm impressed.

And he's sitting there with a smug smile on his face and a gleam of challenge in his eyes.

He mouths something at me, and I swear on my life it looks like he's saying, "Mrs. Mason Raker."

I narrow my eyes at him. Oh, it's on, buddy.

Well, it's on if I get to keep this assignment. I need to stop letting him distract me because it is vital that I'm at the top of my game for this meeting.

He's drumming his fingers on the table, and I may be crazy but it almost sounds like it's to the tune of "Here Comes the Bride."

Note to self: never, ever hand anything to Mason that he can use as a weapon.

Other note to self: I'm upping my costume game. He will rue the day.

"All right, everyone, thank you for coming today, now let's get started."

Nerves jump like little live wires in my stomach as Cecelia waves her hand in Amanda's direction. Amanda leaps to her feet. She's wearing a bright pink wrap dress that somehow gives the impression that it could come unwrapped at any moment. She teeters on spike-heeled Louboutins.

Coach Paul Hartley and owner Ralph Talman seem riveted. Mason barely glances up from his copy of Sports Illustrated, which of course features him on the cover.

Should I have dressed more provocatively? I chose a red tweed double-breasted blazer with a white silk shell underneath and a black pencil skirt, with an unfortunate lack of boobage and leg exposure. My red pumps have low heels because I don't like staggering around in agony for the sake of fashion.

Well, when I got dressed this morning, I didn't even know that today was going to be Public Relations Thunderdome, but even so, I don't think the office is the place to dress sexy. I want to be appreciated and promoted for my skills, not my tatas.

"Gentlemen, this is Amanda," Cecelia says.

Amanda waves at everybody, beaming an enormous smile with Chiclet-white teeth.

"Hello, boys." She flutters her eyelashes at them. "I'm so delighted to see you here today."

I maintain a professional, polite expression, but inwardly wince. Boys? Seriously?

And even worse, Coach Hartley, a blocky middle-aged man with a dented nose from taking a puck to the face, straightens up, clears his throat, and smiles hugely at her. Even Mr. Talman smiles in return.

"Mason," Couch Hartley nudges Mason with his elbow. "Wakey wakey. Meeting's starting."

Mason sets down his magazine and looks up. "Well, here I am."

“Thank you so much for listening to my presentation today. I’ve got some great ideas and I’m so excited to share them with you. I’d like to start by suggesting that we broaden the scope of charities, because I think we’ve been far too limited up until now.” She flicks a sly glance in my direction and instantly returns her attention to the men.

I settle back in my seat, my smile remaining fixed on my face. Okay then. I had expected Amanda to start with an attack on my campaign, and she didn’t disappoint.

“Like what?” Coach Hartley says, leaning forward, his gaze fixed on Amanda.

She smiles at him as if he’s the most fascinating man on earth. “I have started a list, but haven’t reached out to anyone, because of course I wanted to ensure that it was the direction the Rovers organization wants to go in. I wouldn’t want to force anything down anyone’s throat.”

She flashes a friendly smile in Mason’s direction, and my heart sinks.

Maybe he’s complained to other people about the costumes I’ve selected for him. Maybe Amanda heard about it and is using this to snatch the campaign away from me.

“Here’s a preliminary list, though.” Amanda reaches down and picks up stapled sheets of paper from a stack in front of her.

She hands them out to Mason, Cecelia, Mr. Talman, and Coach Hartley.

Really, Amanda?

Mason flicks a glance at his and then looks up at Amanda. “Looks like you forgot to give one to Rowan.”

Is he trying to rub it in, or is he actually trying to help me? His face is blank now, and I can’t get a read on him at all. I’d hate to play poker with him.

“Oh dear, I’m all out of them.” Amanda’s smile broadens.

“I’ll share mine with her,” Cecelia says. Amanda’s smile fades a little bit. Cecelia gestures at me to sit next to her, and I

move into the chair to her right.

I lean down and quickly start skimming over her plan. Reading over the list, something immediately jumps out at me.

She wants Mason to work with a bunch of small local charities. The thing is, Amanda's mother serves on the boards of all of them—something Amanda never stops bragging about. What she never mentions, though, is that several have been accused of fraud and at least two are currently undergoing financial audits.

If Mason were to work with these charities and basically endorse them by promoting their cause, and then the audits end up uncovering proof of fraud, this will turn a public relations coup into a public relations disaster.

However, now is not the time to bring it up. I can't undercut Amanda in front of the Rovers team without also undercutting Queensby Publicity, and I feel a surge of frustration. Cecelia has spent her whole life building up her good name, and Amanda's going to risk dragging it down in the mud—and taking Mason with her.

Amanda continues, her tone excited. "Working with these charities will earn Mason goodwill with the local community, who are the most passionate fans and most consistent attendees at the games. I'll be right by his side to make sure that everything goes smoothly."

"I love it," Coach Hartley says to Amanda's boobs. Could his smile get any goofier?

"Thank you sooo much, I'm really excited to have the Rovers on board with it." she trills, flipping her hair.

Argh. How can Cecelia not see this?

I speak up. "Mason's brand goes far beyond local, though. He's an international hit, and also, local buyers aren't the biggest purchasers of his merchandise."

"She's right, you know," Mr. Talman nods, looking down at the list with a frown. "Merchandising is a significant part of our bottom line." Thank heavens, because he's the one who signs everyone's paychecks, including Coach Hartley's.

Amanda blinks a couple of times, her smile twitching a little, then keeps talking. “In addition to working with these local charities, generous donations will be given in Mason’s name to these specific charities, because this will help to cement his reputation, and the team’s, as philanthropists. These are such good causes and I’m so excited that he’ll be associating his name with theirs.”

“Well, of course, it will be the Rovers who make the ultimate decision as to which direction they’d like to go,” Cecelia says. Whew. Glad she was throwing on the brakes before Amanda went ahead and signed the contracts herself, and gave herself a raise while she was at it. Amanda sure could railroad a meeting.

“Very nice, Amanda. I can see that you’ve put a lot of work into this, which we appreciate. Now I’d like to hear from Rowan,” Cecelia says.

I stand up and brush my hands on my skirt. “I would like us to be involved in other charities outside of hospitals, while staying true to the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. Branching out too much and having Mason work with a bunch of very different charities runs the risk of making it look as if Mason is doing all this just for the publicity.”

“Because he is,” Paul Hartley says, then throws his head back and brays with laughter at his own wit.

Amanda joins him with a tinkling laugh, as if he just said the funniest thing she’s ever heard.

“That may be the case,” I say calmly, “but it shouldn’t be obvious to anyone beyond this room. The public does not take kindly to good gestures made for selfish reasons. We are just now starting to repair Mason’s reputation, and it wouldn’t take much to make it go back the other way. We don’t want to make it look as if he’s just doing this to benefit his reputation.”

Amanda rakes me with a look of contempt and makes a delicate snorting noise. “It already does look that way, because he doesn’t have any specific ties to the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society.”

Mason clears his throat and speaks up. “I actually do have a link to the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, which Rowan knows about. I lost a friend to leukemia when I was in grade school. The kids that we are visiting are the same age as my friend was.”

There is a moment of silence in the room as Amanda swallows hard, blinks rapidly, and tries to regroup.

“I have an idea, which I would like to incorporate going forward,” I say quickly. “It will branch out from the children’s hospitals but stay true to LLS.”

“To what?” Amanda interrupts sharply.

“The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society.”

She rolls her eyes heavenward. “We already know he’s currently working with them. My plan has the benefit of—”

“I’m not done outlining my plan, but I do appreciate your enthusiasm.” I smile brightly and keep talking. “In the coming months, I would like the Rovers to host several charity events, which will fundraise for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. We’ll make it clear that Mason is organizing the event, but we’ll also make sure to feature every member of the team as well. I want to do a charity photo shoot with the whole team, make a calendar, and sell it in shops and on the team’s website, with all of the proceeds going to LLS. And finally, I’d like Mason to be directly involved in working with Habitat for Humanity, helping to build a house for a family that the New Jersey hospital told me about. The mother is undergoing chemotherapy.”

“I like it,” Mr. Talman says decisively, nodding to himself. “We need to give this some thought and decide if we’re going to go forward with Amanda or with Rowan helping to coordinate.”

My heart stutters in my chest. I’ve put in all the work, but it’s so obvious who Mason is going to go with. The easy one, the flirty one, the one who won’t shove him into a costume . . .

“Rowan,” Mason announces. He shoves his chair back, grabs his magazine, and stands up, stretching.

“Excuse me? What did you just say?” Amanda’s eyes widen in dismay. She was so sure that she’d be able to shove me aside and snatch the campaign away.

Mason ignores her. He looks at Mr. Talman. “I’m only working with Rowan. You’ve forced this campaign on me. I didn’t want to do it, but I agreed and I’ve made nice with everyone and I will finish out the campaign this season and do what I’m told, but only if I am working with Rowan. Otherwise, I’m sorry, but it’s not happening.”

Amanda plops back into her seat, her eyes blazing with anger and her mouth puckered up in a furious pout.

“Well, that seems pretty definitive,” Cecelia says to Mr. Talman. “While Amanda’s ideas were very good, Rowan has done an excellent job so far and it really wouldn’t make sense to bring someone else to work on a campaign that Rowan designed.”

Mason turns and walks out of the room, leaving us all staring at his retreating back.

ROWAN

LIFE HAS MANY MYSTERIES.

One of them that I find myself contemplating frequently these days is how Mason always manages to show up looking amazing.

He's due to walk into the hospital's meeting room at any moment, and I bet myself a week's salary that he will look the way he always does.

His wavy brown hair is always just the right amount of ruffled, giving off sexy bedhead vibes when anybody else would look bedraggled. His T-shirt molds to his biceps like it's spray-painted on, his slightly faded jeans flatter his thighs, and his unfairly thick fringe of eyelashes frames sea-glass-green eyes.

The door flies open, and Mason strides through with his long-legged, confident stride, and of course I was right.

"I win my bet," I murmur to myself.

"What's that?" He arches an eyebrow at me.

"Nothing. How long do you spend on your morning routine? Never mind, don't tell me; I'll hate you."

He gives me a quizzical smile. "Well, I shower, shave, and brush my teeth. If I'm in a good mood and don't want to offend people, I put on deodorant."

I stifle a groan. Of course that's his morning routine. Of course he doesn't use various creams, oils, lotions and potions,

pluck his eyebrows, shave his underarms and legs smooth, shape and trim his pubic region, flat-iron his hair, and spend half an hour with cosmetics to achieve a no-makeup look, and then tear apart his closet figuring out what to wear.

He sits on the conference table, casting a glance at the costume bag at my feet. “Well, good morning to you too, Nanny McPhee.” He’s still annoyed that I’m his official babysitter.

“That is a compliment.” I smirk at him. “I loved that movie. Thank you.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “You’re Nanny McPhee at the beginning of the movie.” At the beginning of the movie, she was hideous and warty, changing and becoming prettier by the end.

I JUST GRIN. “SO YOU’VE ACTUALLY WATCHED THE MOVIE. I’M learning so much about you. By the way, you can just wear what you’re wearing. You don’t have to wear the costume.” I have brought a costume, but I’ve decided to spare him today.

Mason shoots me a suspicious look. “What are you talking about?”

“You can wear what you’re wearing. You look fine.” His eyebrows climb with surprise. “I mean, I’m not saying that you are fine in the traditional sense . . . you’re average,” I hurry to clarify. “You’re okay. Never mind. Let’s head on up. We can be a little early.”

“Are you joking?” he demands.

Where was the relief? The gratitude?

“No, of course not. What are you talking about? What’s the problem?” I ask, puzzled.

“You’re being nice and it’s deeply alarming.” He folds his arms across his broad, muscular chest and glares at me. “Go back to being evil so I know who I’m dealing with. Nice Rowan does not compute.”

“Geez, Mason, who hurt you?” I give him a pitying look. “And I was trying to show you my appreciation for picking me instead of the competition.”

He shakes his head slowly. “I went with you because Amelia is actually my type, which would be distracting and eventually lead to issues.”

A small hand grenade of irritation detonates inside me, flinging sharp shrapnel.

Just when he was starting to seem human, he has to go and act like . . . well, himself. No wonder he can’t maintain a relationship; he has to keep a sarcastic wall up between himself and humanity.

“You know what? Never mind. Costume’s in the bag.” I gesture at it irritably. “Plans have changed. You are now required to wear one at every single hospital appearance. Maybe I’ll throw in a song and dance routine for you.”

“That’s more like it. The Rowan I know and loathe.” But there is a hint of a smirk on his mouth when he says it.

I kick the bag towards him. “And her name is Amanda, not Amelia, you asshat.”

“Whatever.” He shrugs. “I was too distracted by her ten-inch heels to remember her name. I kept waiting for her to topple over like the Leaning Tower of Pisa.”

“That’s never toppled. Unless I’ve missed some major international news.”

He unzips the bag and pulls the costume out.

He stares at me, his brows shooting up towards his hairline. “A cock? You’re dressing me up as a cock? Seriously?”

“It’s a rooster, thank you very much.”

“You seriously chose a cock costume for me to wear in front of kids?”

My blood pressure’s shooting up and my face is burning hot. “For the love of God, Mason. Have you ever watched a

cartoon? Foghorn Leghorn? Kids. Love. Roosters.”

He holds the costume up and shakes his head at me. “Sure they do. Sure, that’s what you were thinking of. Roosters. Been driving by my billboard again and again, haven’t you?”

“No, but you’ve been spending entirely too much time staring at your own well-outlined bulge, which is pretty disturbing.” His latest ads have some interesting white elastic placement on bright red fabric, which end up accenting his package like a target.

“Aha.” He flashes me a fierce grin. “If you haven’t been driving by my billboard, how did you know my bulge was outlined?”

He has me there.

My face turns hot. “Excuse me, I have to take this,” I mutter, and I grab my phone from my purse and move a few steps away, pretending to answer a text.

“Game, set, match.” He saunters off, holding his rooster costume. “She likes my panties, she likes my panties . . .”

“Go cluck yourself.” I yell at him.

I close my eyes and work on my calming breathing techniques. One, two, three, four, five, I am floating on a crystal blue sea . . .

I am holding Mason’s head underwater and counting the bubbles as they float up . . . one, two, three, four, five . . . Hey, it’s working. I feel calmer already.

He returns minutes later, smirking out of the beak of a rooster. I grab the handle of the bag and march out the door of the office to the waiting attendant, who is there to lead us to the children’s ward.

As we walk, I smile to myself at the shocked stares we’re getting from nurses, doctors, and nurses’ aides.

“What is that thing?” a doctor says, moving out of our way with a look of alarm.

We pass a group of nursing students.

“Make way for the rooster.” I sing out merrily. They all turn to stare.

“What . . .”

“Why . . .” They murmur among themselves.

“You don’t actually need to draw even more attention to me and my cock,” Mason says to me. “My cock will get plenty of attention on its own.”

“Stop saying that word.” I hiss at him. “Make way for the rooster.” I yell to everybody.

Several heads poke out of doorways to stare.

We round a corner and go down another hallway.

A nurse strides by and pauses. She leans in, speaking in a low voice. “My, Mason Raker. What a nice big cock you have. My name’s Lisa, come back here any time if you’d like any help with your . . . costume.”

“Isn’t she nice, Rowan?” Mason says. “She wants to help me with my costume.”

We move down the hallway. “Cluck off, bird brain,” I murmur.

Mason snickers to himself all the way down the hall to the children’s ward. Yet another room with stark white walls decorated with fun pictures, posters, and paintings that can’t quite hide the sadness of this place.

Mason strutted into the room, flapping his wings, and all of the children burst into laughter.

“I’m right again,” I whisper to myself. “Sometimes it’s hard being me, being right all the time.”

“I can hear you,” Mason says in a low voice. Several reporters hurry over to him, clicking their cameras, and I take a few steps back, fading into the background.

Mason moves from bed to bed, smiling, chatting, crowing, and flapping his wings. He has the room in stitches. He poses for pictures with parents and children, then poses for the reporters.

The journalists are grinning from ear to ear. They are genuinely charmed. They snap a million pictures. I discreetly check my phone several times, and Twitter mentions are blowing through the roof. The *Daily Snitch*'s Twitter feed is all about Mason.

Finally, the journalists leave. Shortly after that, our allotted time is up, but Mason goes and sits down next to a twelve-year-old boy named Harrison.

“How are you feeling today, Harrison?” Mason asks.

“I’m feeling like I could beat you at Uno,” Harrison says cheekily. “I have a deck. Do you think you could play?”

“I can try. You may have to remind me of the rules.”

Fortunately for Mason, the wings have openings for his hands. I have to shuffle the cards for Mason, though. Harrison deals the cards, laying them out on the small desk next to his bed.

I laugh merrily as Harrison slaps a draw four and then a draw two on Mason.

But sitting on a chair by Mason’s side, looking at Mason’s hand, I can see that he is carefully, but deliberately, letting the boy win three games in a row. He doesn’t make it too obvious, but he loses on purpose every single time.

We’ve gathered a small crowd of children and parents, and they cheer every time Harrison wins.

“Wow, good thing you’re better on the ice than you are at Uno.” Harrison crows happily.

“Sure is,” Mason says, nodding agreeably. “If I played this bad on the ice, my coach would bench me for sure.”

Harrison and the other kids laugh and laugh, and Mason throws back his head and does a rooster crow, which ends in a coughing fit.

A nurse approaches and hands him a glass of water.

Harrison glances at me as Mason sips at it. “Did your wife pick your rooster costume out for you?” Mason gags on the

water, and it spews all over him—and me—in a wide spray.

“Hey,” I protest.

“She’s not my wife. Absolutely not. We’re not married.”

“I think they get the point, Mason,” I say, shooting him a murderous look. “You don’t need to be quite so adamant.”

“Why aren’t you married to her?” a little girl says. “Don’t you think she’s pretty?”

Mason coughs and tries to clear his throat. “She’s pretty. Prickly things come in pretty packages.” He tries to wipe his face with his wing but just hits his beak.

“What does that even mean?” Harrison asks, his brow wrinkling in puzzlement.

“Yes, Mason, what does it mean?” I echo icily.

Mason blinks. Water beads on his eyelashes. “It means I am so shocked and dismayed that I can’t even form coherent sentences.”

“Imagine how I feel,” I say sourly. I’m not interested in marrying Mason, but he doesn’t have to sound quite so appalled.

Mason stands up abruptly. “Unfortunately, it’s time to go. I’ve had a fantastic time with all of you. Kids, thank you so much for having me here.”

He’s loosening up and doing better and better with every hospital visit.

As we leave, he’s no longer strutting.

He’s unusually silent as we’re led back to the conference room so he can change out of his costume.

“You weren’t too awful up there,” I say.

“Thanks,” he says somberly, without a hint of sarcasm. Is he dying?

“You don’t actually have to marry me as part of the publicity campaign,” I say, trying to get a smile out of him. “I

did put it in the contract, but Cecelia took it back out. She thought the costumes would be penance enough.”

Not a single chuckle.

He chews his lower lip, a thoughtful look in his eyes. “Do these kids have a list of wishes, like for the Make A Wish Foundation?”

I feel a squeeze of emotion wringing my heart. He’s going from having a tantrum about the inconvenience of coming to the hospital to actually caring. To really, genuinely, seeing the kids in front of him. “You know, I’m not sure. I can find out.”

He nods vigorously. “Please do. I’m going to come back to this hospital, and I am going to make sure that every kid on that ward gets an item from their list.”

My heart does a little flutter. “Wow. Mason, if I didn’t know better, I’d think that the Grinch’s heart just grew three sizes this day.”

That seems to snap him back to reality.

He straightens up. “Don’t get used to it. And now, I need some help unzipping my cock.”

THE DAILY SNITCH

The Daily Snitch

September 15th

Calling all socialites . . . has anyone seen party boy Mason Raker around town? Our sources say he's been MIA. Could he have finally settled down? Or perhaps the Rovers organization gave him the ultimate ultimatum.

We all know that the hunky hockey star is approaching that dreaded age of retirement. Too bad for us. There's just something about Mason Raker in uniform, checking his opponent, that makes us gooey all over. Could he be that dominant off the ice?

This anonymous star stalker can't even fathom the possibility.

More pressing . . . could it be that some lucky lady has him swooning and settling down?

If you have the dirt, we're paying.

MASON

THE PARKING GODS are smiling at me as I carefully maneuver the Bentley into the parking space in front of Rowan's Upper East Side apartment building. I actually snagged a rare, precious spot.

Rowan is standing outside waiting for me, wearing a pair of skinny jeans with boots and an oatmeal-colored cotton cowlneck sweater. As we drift further into fall, the days are getting cooler.

This is our first unofficial meeting, the first time we aren't hanging out because we've been forced to.

Definitely not a date, though. I am not dating anyone, thank you very much, and if I were, it certainly would not be Rowan Nagatronic 2000.

Rowan kept her word, contacted the hospital, and gathered the lists of things that the kids wanted. And in between my training sessions, I purchased something from every list, and also put together goody bags filled with Rovers stickers, pencils, notepads, and our stuffed mascot.

One of my gifts was on the front seat next to me . . . barking.

The plan was for Rowan to call the hospital this morning and see if we'd be able to drop off all the gifts this afternoon. I am hoping we got a yes on that, because the barking gift just escaped from its puppy carrier.

"Sit, puppy," I order him. He ignores me, of course.

Rowan stares as I roll the window down, her eyes widening in surprise. “Mason, what is this?”

“It’s an Escalade. I borrowed it from Beck. Do not tell him about the D-O-G.” I grin triumphantly at the puppy Harrison requested.

It’s an adorable little golden doodle, which works perfectly because Harrison said he had allergies and needed something hypoallergenic.

Rowan rubs her forehead.

She doesn’t look delighted like she should be. She looks like she’s having a bad gas attack. That’s too bad. I like her smiles. When she flashes a genuine smile, it lights up a room and bathes everyone around her in its warmth. Come to think of it, I even like her scowls, because they make me want to mess with her and make her laugh.

“Mason, you can’t get a puppy for a kid without asking his parents.” Rowan shakes her head at me. “Especially a kid who’s in the hospital.”

“But that was the number one item on his list,” I protest. “He really, really wanted a puppy.”

“Mason, every kid in the world wants a puppy,” Rowan sighs. “Didn’t you want a puppy when you were a kid?”

I’d wanted a mom like all the other kids had.

But yeah, a puppy would’ve been nice too. My dad hated dogs and was dead set against it.

“So every kid in the world wants a puppy, so I got him a puppy . . . Hey. Quit it.” The puppy is chewing on the seat belt. I scoop the puppy up in my arms, and it kisses my face and then bites my chin, which makes me laugh.

Rowan reaches through the window and scratches behind the puppy’s ear. The puppy grins at her and pants adorably.

“Well, my sister and I did have puppies when we were growing up, and they are adorable little velociraptors of destruction. The first six months of their life, at a minimum, they are basically on a kamikaze mission to destroy

themselves and everything around them. They chew constantly. You can buy them all the chew toys in the world, but they'll also chew furniture and electric wires and shoes."

"Electric wires? Really?"

"I'm afraid so." She nods. "You don't know if Harrison's family lives in an apartment or a condo where they're not allowed to have dogs. You don't know if they're allergic to dogs."

"We could ask," I suggest.

"And get Harrison's hopes up and then break his heart if it turns out that they can't have a puppy?"

Well, when she put it like that . . .

She continues, "Puppies are canine toddlers who require a lot of time, attention, and training. Harrison's parents are already dealing with a child who is in the hospital. Remember Harrison told us they were at work but they took turns getting days off to come visit him? They're going to have even less time than most people to train a new puppy. And if you leave a new puppy home alone all day long at this young age, it's going to be miserable."

Unfortunately, every single point that she is making is a great one. The only dogs I've ever been around are fully grown dogs owned by my friends. I didn't really think about what a puppy needs.

The puppy nestles into my arms, rests his head on my shoulder, and lets out a deep, long sigh. Something in my heart melts. "So . . . I should return it?" I scrunch up my face in dismay at the thought.

She shakes her head at me as I cradle the dog. "You can't return a dog. That's just cruel."

The dog snuggles in my arms, and I feel tension leaving my body as I stroke his silky fur. Wow, this little guy is better than a bourbon. He's better than a professional massage.

I make a face. It's possible I'm pouting. "I had plans for how this going to go," I protest, even though I know she's

right. “I was going to suggest that Harrison name him—”

“Do not say Rover,” she interrupts. “So cliché.”

“Puck,” I protest indignantly. “I was going to name him Puck. I mean, Harrison was.” I slip my hand underneath the dog and rub his fuzzy little belly. He groans in delight.

“That’s actually pretty cute.” Rowan nods approvingly. “Let’s see, who do we know who obviously loves dogs, and who has enough money to pay for a dog sitter to take care of his dog every day?”

I consider for a moment. Which one of my teammates is she talking about? And how does she know them well enough to know which ones like dogs? And why does that thought piss me off?

Then it hits me.

“Are you talking about me?”

I stare down at the little fuzzleball in dismay.

“Looks like you are now a proud puppy parent.”

“Oh,” I groan. “What have I done?” I don’t know the first thing about taking care of an infant canine. Obviously.

“What, indeed,” she agrees with me. “I work all the time and can’t afford a dog sitter and my apartment building doesn’t allow pets. Otherwise, I’d offer to take him. Can I hold him for a minute?”

“Nope,” I scowl. “I’m annoyed at you for being right.”

“Wow, you must be annoyed at me constantly.” Her eyes twinkle with mischief.

“You have no idea.” I lean down, kiss the top of the dog’s head, and then realize what I’ve just done. I am a big tough hockey player. I do not kiss puppies. I straighten up quickly.

Rowan’s phone rings, and she takes a step back. “Gotta take this; it’s my sister,” She answers quickly. “Hey Ruby, everything okay?”

Ruby says something that I can’t hear.

“Yes, I know I am a worried grandma when it comes to you. Yes, I am always happy just to hear from you. I have to let you go, though. I’ve got a puppy emergency right now.”

The scream of excitement that comes through the phone startles Puck, and he barks in alarm.

“Calm down, Ruby.”

There are loud noises coming from the phone.

“My sister wants to see your puppy.” Rowan rolls her eyes. “I’ll say one thing, having a puppy is going to be a real chick magnet. In fact, maybe this is a bad idea. If you attract any more women, you’ll be a danger to yourself and others. Like, you might become a super-magnet, making women come flying across the street and stick to you.”

I laugh at the mental image she’s just conjured up. “We’re gearing up for the season. I’m trying to focus on training and not women.” Now, why am I telling her that? It’s almost like I’m trying to let her know I’m single and ready to mingle.

But I’m not. I’m still sore about Lexi dating Dylan, even though I have no right to be, and I’m sick of women hitting on me because of who I am, and even though I’m in a severe sex drought, I don’t have plans of ending it anytime soon.

“Anyway, I have an idea,” Rowan says. “Ruby can watch the puppy for the day while we look for a reputable dog sitter who can spend time with him during the day and start working on training. We’ll do the gift giving at the hospital tomorrow instead, if that works with your schedule.”

For a room full of sick kids? “I’ll make it work,” I promise her. Rowan climbs in the car and we drive over to Ruby’s apartment, which is about twenty blocks south of Rowan’s. The puppy nestles in Rowan’s lap the whole time, and she pets its head, making soft cooing noises.

Ruby is waiting outside, bouncing with excitement. Rowan climbs out, cradling Puck. Ruby rushes over to us, greeting the puppy with shrieks of joy. “I love you more than anything in the world.” she cries.

“I’m right here,” Rowan says with annoyance.

“I know. You’re in between me and my puppy.” Ruby scoops it up and climbs into the back seat, hugging Puck and kissing him on the head. Rowan gets in the back and sits next to her sister so she can pet the puppy. Wow. Chick magnet, indeed.

Half an hour later, we are at my apartment building. It isn’t until we are in the elevator that I remember that my apartment’s turned into kind of a pigsty lately. I fired my last maid when I caught her taking pictures of my apartment—no doubt to sell to the tabloids—and I haven’t hired a new one since.

We walk in the door, and I grimace at the funky smell.

“There’s the famous underwear.” Ruby shrieks, pointing at the pile of laundry on my sofa. “Can I get a picture? I want to show it to my roommates.” She sets Puck down on the floor and reaches into her purse.

“No way.” Rowan says indignantly. “We’re trying to make Mason look good. This place is a trash pit. We can’t show it to anyone.”

“That’s a little harsh,” I object.

She points to a stack of empty pizza boxes on the floor. “Trash pit.”

Then she walks over to the couch, picks up my laundry, and carries it over to the hamper in my laundry room. “My sister touched a famous person’s underwear,” Ruby crows.

“Oh, grow up,” Rowan says, but she’s smiling.

Ruby makes a face at her sister. “One minute you think you can tell me what to do because I’m your baby sister and you think you can ground me. The next minute I’m supposed to grow up. I’m getting mixed messages here. Which is it?”

Rowan shrugs. “Whichever one is more convenient for me at the moment.”

I stand back and watch them banter as Puck sniffs around curiously. I wish I had cleaned the apartment, although I also don’t know why I should care what Rowan thinks of me.

Rowan sets her purse down and moves around the room, neatly stacking a pile of magazines, putting couch pillows back in their proper place.

Well, now she's maid-shaming me. I scowl and grab take-out boxes from the coffee table and carry them to my kitchen garbage. After a few minutes, my place is slightly less trashy, and Ruby has rescued Puck several times as he tried to chew the cord to my lamp.

"I see what you mean about puppies," I say to Rowan.

Rowan widens her eyes and does a comically exaggerated gasp, clapping her hand to her chest. My eyes go there, briefly wandering over her small, perfect breasts, and then they snap back to her face.

"Stop the presses. Did you just admit that you were wrong and I was right?"

"I'm sure it'll never happen again. Wait, puppies need to eat, don't they?"

Rowan rolls her eyes.

"Don't have children, Mason." She grabs her purse. "We are now going to Pampered Pooch to get supplies. You're also going to have to make a vet visit appointment, because there's a series of vaccinations that they need."

"Ruby, I will pay you for pet sitting while we're gone," I say.

"Oh my God, I'd do it for free." She kneels down and kisses Puck on the head. "Who's my fuzzy wuzzy wuzzy?"

"And yet, I will cross your palms with silver for this. See you in a while." I look at Rowan. "Do puppies secrete a chemical that turns women's brains to mush?"

"Nope. She's always like that," Rowan says as we head out the door.

Pampered Pooch is only ten minutes away, and I am astounded by the variety of things that people buy for their dogs. There are accessories in every single color and style.

Rowan hurries off to get a shopping cart, and I wander. It occurs to me that the Rovers team hasn't branched out into pet accessories, and we need to do that immediately. I'll tell the coach about it later. My little furry child needs his own Rovers jersey. Maybe I could make one out of a kids jersey, for now? It seems important.

Puck needs a collar and leash. I find the right aisle and am faced with several thousand choices.

Well, he's not wearing pink, because my Puck is a manly man. It's not Christmas, so we don't need a Santa-themed leash.

I pick up a black leather studded collar and looked at it suspiciously. Rowan walks up to me, pushing a cart, and I show it to her.

"Thanks for the thought. Really not my style," she laughs.

"At no point did I suggest that you wear this." I snort, dropping the studded collar back into its bin. "I was just showing it to you because it's funny."

"I saw the way you looked at me." she parries.

"Oh, how did I look at you?"

She opens her eyes so wide, I'm afraid her eyeballs will fall out. "Something like this."

I burst out laughing. "Are you feeling okay? Now I want to call a doctor. I'm very worried."

"Aww, I didn't know you cared."

I flash her an evil grin. "Are you kidding? You have no idea what tortures I plan to inflict on you, and I need you alive and healthy for them."

ROWAN

RUBY and I sit on Mason's black leather sofa, with Mason in an armchair facing us over his glass coffee table. Puck has finally collapsed from the exhaustion of racing all over the apartment, and he's asleep on his new dog bed.

My gaze roams the apartment. I'd lay odds that he paid a very expensive interior decorator to design it from top to bottom.

It's industrial modern style, with steel-accented black leather furniture and polished concrete floors. The walls are adorned with black-and-white pictures from historic hockey games. A massive flat-screen TV glares down at us. I frown back at it.

"What?" Mason asks. "What are you thinking about the apartment?"

"Your designer did a very good job." That is not a lie. The apartment could be featured in a magazine. As long as the magazine was titled *Soulless Industrial Design Monthly*.

"How do you know I had a designer?" He arches an eyebrow at me. "Maybe I did it all myself."

"Did you do it yourself?"

He gives me a disgruntled look. "No, I hired a designer. And now that I've been honest, what do you really think about my apartment?"

"Honestly, it's kind of cold and colorless. No personal touches."

“There’s plenty of color.” He points at some gray-striped pillows on the black couch. “Gray is not a color,” I inform him.

“Agree to disagree.”

“No, thank you.”

Ruby giggles. I glance over at her. “What’s so funny?” I demand.

“You two. You’re so cute when you argue.”

“There’s no us two,” Mason barks at her, looking extremely uncomfortable.

“There is nothing cute about the two of us together whatsoever,” I say indignantly. “Nothing cute at all. It’s a hideous abomination, an offense against science and nature.”

Mason nods vigorously. “We’ve been forced together like incompatible body parts on Frankenstein’s monster.”

“Please. Tell me more,” Ruby snickers.

“There’s nothing more to tell.”

“You guys remind me of how Mom and Dad used to argue.”

Our mom and dad were such a perfect romance story that it kind of ruined romance for me. How could anyone top their love story? They were so enamored of each other it hurt.

“We actually need to head out now,” I tell Mason. “Good luck with your new child. Don’t forget to book the dog sitter we selected.”

He shoots me an alarmed look. “You can’t leave. You have to stay and help me assemble the dog stuff.”

“Mason, you are a grown-ass man. I am one hundred percent confident that you can put together a dog crate and a few dog gates.”

He shakes his head. “No, I can’t.”

That’s another strike against him, I think to myself. He’s a pretty boy billionaire who had everything in life handed to

him. Probably had maids wiping his hiney till grade school. The kind of guy who doesn't know how to boil water. That's not my type, but it's also not my problem.

The fact that I've been thinking about Mason more and more frequently these days, though—that's actually kind of a problem, but I refuse to acknowledge it. In my opinion, the best way to get rid of problems is to ignore them.

Okay, that's the worst way to deal with problems, but there's really no way to solve the Mason problem other than to wait it out. In a few months, the season will be over and Mason's reputation will have been saved, and he can either stay out of trouble or he can set things on fire again. I won't be there to hold his hand forever.

"You'll be fine," I tell him. "Everything comes with instructions."

He gets a sly look on his face. "Or I could call Amara to help me set it up."

I shoot him a glare. "Do you mean Amanda?"

He shrugs. "Whatever."

I'm sure he's bluffing, but the mere mention of her name sets my teeth on edge. "Are you going to hold that over my head for the entirety of this mission?"

"What mission?" He gives me a lazy smile.

"Mission impossible," I huff. "The mission to de-douchify Mason Raker."

Ruby starts giggling again. So not helpful.

"There are penalty points for making up words in this house," he informs me. "The penalty involves setting up dog gates."

"Fine, we'll help you. Big baby," I mutter under my breath.

Mason goes to the kitchen and finds a utility knife, and we begin opening boxes. Ruby and I set to work putting up dog

gates, and Mason goes to work on the dog playpen and the dog crate.

Watching him work, his hands moving swiftly and confidently, I realize he's a lot more handy than he let on.

So why does he really want us to stick around? Could it be that he actually enjoys my company?

I try to focus on the task at hand, but my mind keeps wandering to forbidden places as I watch him. The swell of his biceps, the way the T-shirt molds to his broad chest . . .

Impatiently, I shake my head and force myself to finish the dog gate. I try to tell myself that my admiration is purely aesthetic. I am admiring his body the way I'd admire the perfect forms of cold, hard marble statues at a museum.

Marble statues didn't make my panties damp, however. And thank God above that Mason wasn't a mind reader.

"Done," Mason announces proudly, setting down his screwdriver. "I'll order dinner to pay you guys back for helping me. The Paris Bar makes a mean filet mignon. Or are you more into salmon?"

"Burger and fries for me, thanks. Medium well."

"Me too." Ruby piped up.

Mason gives me a baffled look. "Do you actually eat burgers and fries?"

I squint at him in puzzlement. "Who doesn't?"

"Every girl I've ever dated. The Manhattan female lives off air and a single salad leaf per day. With vinegar dressing, no oil. It's a scientific fact."

"Booo." Ruby gives him two thumbs down.

"Check your science," I scoff. "And you don't date; you sleep around."

"I dated." Mason hesitates. "Once."

"One failed relationship with a model does not inform you on how the average woman eats. I'm getting hungry, now that

you're talking about burgers. Feed me, Seymour."

"Seymour Butts." Ruby squeals and starts laughing hysterically. No, having a little sister isn't embarrassing at all.

I groan. "Did we not retire that joke when we were in grade school?"

Mason is watching us, looking amused. And maybe a little wistful? As far as I could tell from reading his bio, he doesn't have any siblings.

He walks away to place the order and Ruby gets up to make dinner for Puck. Half an hour later, just as Ruby is returning from walking Puck, our dinner arrives.

Mason tips the delivery guy and takes the plastic bag from him, and we move to the dining room. Yes, Mason's penthouse apartment actually has a dining room. A long sturdy wooden table with a distressed finish is surrounded by a mix of industrial-style metal chairs. Above the table, a chandelier with Edison bulbs in metal cages adds a touch of edgy elegance.

The décor isn't terrible. I'm just dying to run through the apartment and add greenery, colorful accents, and some personal pictures. Nothing of Mason's quirky, funny personality shows here, and that's a shame.

Mason proves to be a decent host, setting out craft beer and putting our dinner on gray-speckled plates. He's also ordered a burger and fries for himself.

"Bon appétit, ladies," he says, as he sits at the head of the table and digs in.

I nod at him. "Well, thank you, kind sir. The burger is delicious. It's still not getting you out of wearing your next costume, though."

"I would be disappointed if my evil nemesis suddenly turned good." Mason shrugs.

"By the way, the name Puck is ridiculous for a dog," Ruby says. "Thank you for dinner, though."

“I actually like the name,” I inform her. “I endorsed it enthusiastically. Ew, you’re making me stick up for Mason. Don’t.”

Mason chews and swallows some fries, washing it down with some beer. “What would you have named her?”

Ruby shoots me a smirking look. “I’m more interested in why Rowan thought the name was okay. I thought she would’ve named it Iron Henry.”

“What?” Mason perks up, looking way too interested.

Oh, no. We aren’t going to get personal. I’m already spending too much time thinking of Mason, who does not get to live rent-free in my head. “We’re not sharing stories. Time for us to go,” I tell Ruby, standing up.

Mason stands up too. “I suggest we play a game of quarters. Me versus the girls. If you win, I won’t ever ask about it again. When if I win, you have to tell the story.”

I hesitate.

Mason gives me an evil grin. “Unless you guys are chicken.” He flaps his arms and struts across the kitchen. “Buk buk buk buk.”

“Stop that,” I say. So of course he does it louder. “Arrrgh.” I cry out. “Is this my punishment for the rooster costume?”

“Buk, buk, buk . . .” He struts and flaps. Ruby howls with laughter.

“Fine. If you stop doing that, I will play quarters with you.” I shout. Anything to stop Mason’s demonic clucking.

It’s not that I want to spend any more time with Mason tonight. Not at all.

ROWAN

I STARE down my opponent at the other end of the table. Mason has cleared away all of the dishware and set up red Solo cups at both ends of the table, filling them with water.

It's Ruby and me against Mason. Ruby and I are going to take turns. The first person to get five quarters in a cup wins.

"You're going down," I say to Mason.

He replies with a roguish smirk. "That's what she said."

Ruby and I both groan. "Not in front of my sister's innocent ears," I say indignantly.

That makes Ruby laugh. "Are you mistaking me for some other sister I'm not familiar with?"

I give her a scorching look and wonder if it's too late to put her in a chastity belt.

As for Mason, I didn't mean it as a double entendre at all. I think. Or maybe I did, subconsciously. It's been too long since I've been with a man. There are probably cobwebs down there.

I need to win as soon as possible and get the heck out of here, because I keep thinking of Mason in ways that I shouldn't.

Fortunately, winning won't be a problem.

"There's something I should tell you," I say, after I flip my first quarter. It sails through the air, bounces on the table and

lands in the cup with a splash. I smile in triumph, and Ruby and I high-five each other.

“What is that?”

“I’m a ringer.”

It’s not a lie. I’m good at this... like really good.

“Is that so?”

“It’s true. I’m a hustler. A shark.” I smile and shrug.
“Sorry, not sorry.”

He reaches into the cup, fishes out the quarter, and sets it down on the table. He dries his hand on a napkin. “Tell me more.”

“There’s not much more to tell. You’re not the only one who played quarters in college, champ.” I smile.

“She practiced in her dorm room for hours,” Ruby chimes in. “She’s super competitive.”

I give her a narrow-eyed look. That might be a little too much information, because Mason is guffawing out loud.

Ruby grabs the quarter and tosses it. It bounces, hits the cup, circles the rim—we’re both holding our breath, riveted—and falls in.

We shriek and whoop with joy, waking Puck up yet again. He starts yapping from his pen.

“Aw, you woke up the baby,” Mason says.

“It’s your turn to change him,” I say, and he laughs again.

Puck yodels in dismay. It’s the most adorable distress call ever. We leap up from our chairs and hurry to the living room. Mason picks up Puck and cradles him in his muscular arms. He looks so paternal when he does it, I can feel my ovaries singing inside me.

He’d make beautiful babies, a treacherous portion of my brain whispers to me. It’s the part of my brain that’s wired directly to my clitoris.

“No,” I say sternly.

“No what?” Mason asks.

“Nothing.” My cheeks burn with embarrassment. For the love of dog, Mason has me talking to my fun zone. Out loud.

“Sure it’s nothing.” He looks down at Puck, who’s gazing at him with adoration. “Am I holding him wrong?”

Ruby reaches out and massages Puck’s head. “You’re holding him just right,” she assures Mason. “You’re actually really good with him.”

Mason gently settles him down into his pen. Puck sighs and nestles into the bed. We return to our game.

“All right, college champion,” Mason says, grinning fiercely. “I have a little confession to make. I should have told you from the beginning. I have never, in my life, lost a game of quarters.”

I glance at Ruby, laughing. “Psy-ops.”

“Cyclops?” Ruby looks at me in puzzlement. “We should poke one of his eyes out?”

“Psychological operations. He’s trying to psych us out, but it’s not going to work, is it?”

She shakes her head so hard, her hair flies into her face. “It is absolutely not going to work. Together we are unstoppable.” And we fist-bump.

“I swear, you two. If you say ‘wonder twin powers, activate’ . . .” Mason snorts.

I laugh at the memory of the kids’ show. “By the way, did Zan have the lamest power or what? I mean seriously. He could turn into water? You could just freaking mop him up.”

Mason bursts into laughter. “Well, thank you for ruining my childhood for me. I was big into retro cartoons. Anything else you want to ruin for me? Lion-O, maybe? Aquaman?”

“I could say so many . . . Nope.” I shake my head. “I’ll leave your childhood be.”

Several minutes later, we find out that our wonder twin powers did not, in fact, activate, when we lose the game to

him.

Even worse, he turns out to be a very sore winner. He leaps to his feet and struts up and down the room, flapping his arms and crowing. “Mason won. Mason won.”

“You had to get him a rooster suit,” Ruby scolds me.

I sit down in my chair. “I don’t make many mistakes, but that may have been one of them,” I admit. Mason walks over and holds up his hand, waiting for a high five. “Come on. You know you want to.”

I shake my head. “Nope, because you are not being sportsmanlike.”

“Whatever.” He high-fives himself, then sits down in the chair next to mine, turning it so he faces me. Ruby pulls up a chair and sits next to me.

“You lost, and you will now honor your agreement. Do not argue with me; I don’t make the rules.”

“You totally made up the rules.” I protest.

He grins at me. “So I did. Tell me: Who is Iron Henry?”

“I don’t want to,” I grouse.

“I’ll do it,” Ruby says eagerly. She leans forward, tenting her fingers. Mason is riveted. “When we were kids, Rowan was obsessed with the classic version of a prince turning into a frog by being kissed. Iron Henry was the name of the prince’s helper. The prince didn’t have a name, from what I can remember, but Rowan used to name every stuffed animal she had Iron Henry.”

Mason bursts out laughing. I jump in. “It was my favorite story, and Mom read it to me every night. Now that she’s gone, that memory means a lot to me.”

Mason’s smile fades instantly, replaced by a look of sympathy so sincere it makes hot tears prick my eyes. I miss my mom so fiercely that I don’t let myself think of her very often, because if I do, the dam will break.

“I didn’t know that about your mom. Is your father still with you?”

“One bedtime story per night, champ. Carrying on,” I say, taking over for Ruby. “Iron Henry had three bands around his heart to keep it from breaking. When the prince returned, the bands broke, freeing his heart. I always thought that was awesome.”

Mason makes a face. “You thought Henry’s heart breaking was awesome? You are more twisted than I thought.”

I stare him straight in the eye. “No, idiot. The binds that held him back from truly loving went away and he was free to feel.”

I wait for him to drop my gaze. Staring into his eyes is like falling into the ocean. I feel as though I could fall and fall and never stop.

Ruby clears her throat loudly. “Oh, look at the time. I’m going home. I’ll just leave you two crazy kids alone.”

“I swear to God, Ruby.” I pick up a napkin and throw it at her. It misses and knocks over the cup of water.

I let out a groan. “I’ll clean it up.”

“I’ll help you,” Mason says, and leads me into the kitchen. A basket full of neatly stacked towels sits next to the sink.

I immediately reach for the top towel, in a hurry to get out of here before my internal filter fails again and I say something out loud about Mason’s arms and their effect on my ovaries. But my hand lands instead on his callused one, and what was meant to be a towel-grabbing motion turns into a finger-caressing one.

A jolt of arousal shoots through my body and I stumble back, pulling my hand away.

“Sorry,” he murmurs. But there is something in his gaze, something dark and hungry. Is Mason having the same kind of inappropriate thoughts that I am?

“Don’t be,” I choke out. “It was my fault.”

Smooth, Rowan.

Mason and I each grab a towel, head back into the dining room, and mop up the mess, avoiding each other's eyes.

Minutes later, after we clean the table and Ruby and I say our goodbyes to Puck and Mason, the two of us are in a cab the doorman summoned. "So, you and the hockey hottie . . ." She lets her sentence trail off as we glide down the darkened street.

I don't say a word.

"He's smexy, and he's totally into you, and you're single. Don't look at me like that. He can't keep his eyes off you."

"I am in a committed relationship with my job until I get this promotion. I do not have the time, nor the desire, to be a puck bunny right now."

"Whatever." Ruby sighs and settles back into her seat.

I really need to stay away from Mason Raker. No more socializing, no more fun. Even if I were going to date, it wouldn't be him. I value my heart too much to hand it over to someone with a history like his.

MASON

ANDY ROY, our backup goalie, has a brownstone in the Village. He's single, so our teammates regularly go over to his house to watch UFC matches and act like guys, burping and farting and telling jokes that prove that men never really mature past the age of twelve.

I've left a puppy sitter watching Puck, along with a long list of instructions and a stern order to call me immediately if there are any emergencies.

Is this what being a parent is like? I am so not ready.

As I knock on the door, noise blasts out at me. The door swings open and Andy stands there, with a huge grin on his face and a beer in his hand.

He tries to shove it at me as I walk in, but Beckett snatches it up, swatting him on the head.

"What the hell, man?" Andy bleats at Beckett. "Save it for the rink."

We're following him as we talk, heading towards the living room. There's a giant-screen TV, a sofa and black leather recliner chairs arranged in a semicircle, some framed posters of nineties supermodels in swimsuits up on the walls, a table full of snacks, a cooler of beer, and not much else. It's the ultimate bachelor pad. Rowan would cringe at the beer cans that have been carelessly dropped on the floor.

Why am I thinking about her on boys' night?

“Did that hurt your tender little head?” Beckett smirks at Andy. He hands the beer to Paxton, who just finished one. Paxton crushes the empty can on his forehead, and everyone cheers. Then he starts chugging the beer Beckett handed him.

“Kind of. I’m a sensitive man,” Andy says, and then belches long and loud.

Definitely never inviting Rowan to this kind of outing.

Seriously, why am I thinking about her?

Beckett grabs a bottle of water from the cooler and hands it to me. As luck would have it, it’s a bottle of Mason Raker smart water. Can’t say it’s ever worked, but maybe tonight I’ll chug it and it will chase all thoughts of Rowan from my head.

“He doesn’t drink alcohol,” Beckett tells Andy.

He instantly looks contrite. “Oh, I’m sorry. My bad, man.”

“No worries; you didn’t know. It’s all good. I’m kind of a dick when I drink. So I’m told. Find it better if I just don’t.”

Beckett arches an eyebrow. “Just when you drink?”

I grin, shoot him a middle finger, and go to sit down on the sofa between Leo Voss, a defenseman, and Logan.

The game’s starting in five minutes. I lean forward and grab a slice of pizza. My phone buzzes and I grab it, worried that something’s happened to my puppy. Damn it, this was a new sitter recommended by Ruby, and I shouldn’t have—

Oh. My sitter just sent a picture of Puck reclining on the dog sofa that I bought him, chewing a stuffed Rovers mascot toy, which is very meta, and looking adorable.

“Mason’s whipped,” Logan yells. “Mason’s old lady is calling him to check on him.”

“Mason has an old lady?” Knox demands, from a couple of seats down. “Do tell.”

“Is she hot?” Noah asks.

“Adorable,” I say, straight-faced. “Irresistible.”

“Blonde, brunette, redhead?” Beckett plops down in a chair, reaches into the cooler, and grabs a beer.

“Definitely one of those.” He mock-glares at me. “Okay, blonde,” I say.

“Is it serious?”

“Very serious.” I nod. “As in permanent. Forever.” I mean, that’s not a lie. I’m keeping Puck until he’s old and . . . gray? Do dogs go gray? Anyway, he’ll be mine till his last breath.

Everyone’s staring at me. “What the fuck, man?” Beckett demands. “How did I not know this? I thought we were friends.”

He lunges forward and grabs the phone from me. I try to grab it back, and he jumps up from his seat, dodging me and knocking over a bowl of popcorn, which raises shouts of annoyance from the other guys.

“Give it back,” I yell at him. “Or I’ll kick your ass.”

I jump to my feet, but he dodges, leaping over a couple of guys’ outstretched legs. “You can try. I’m going to text this broad and tell her that you still wet the bed and you— Oh.” He sees the picture and breaks out into huge grin. “Wow. Adorable blonde. You weren’t kidding.”

Of course, everyone starts clamoring to see the phone.

“I don’t know, guys. This blonde doesn’t have any clothes on.” He shakes his head, so they start hooting and hollering and yelling at the top of their lungs and grabbing for the phone.

Finally, he holds it up to show everyone. They burst into laughter and disappointed groans, and of course admire my dog, because my dog is such a handsome boy.

“Jeez, you horny bastards,” Beckett scoffs. “You’d think the internet had never been invented. Did you know they have naked women on there? You can look at them for free.”

After that, the match starts and Beckett and I take our seats. Soon we’re yelling, throwing popcorn at the screen, and

generally acting like Neanderthals watching men pounding each other's faces in.

"He's a pussy," Logan keeps yelling. "My grandma could kick his ass."

Leo glances over at me as the fighters stagger off between rounds. "By the way, what's up with you and costumes, man?"

I should've known this would come up. No way would one of these guys find himself in a similar situation without a hefty number of questions from me.

"Maybe I like dressing up in costumes. Maybe it's a fetish." I narrow my eyes at him. "Don't judge, man. This is the twenty-first century."

"Do you, though?" Leo asks. "Do you have a secret thing for dressing up as clowns and barnyard animals?"

"Cock. It was a giant cock. Kinda like—"

"You think you know a man," Logan interrupts, shaking his head.

"I do not have a thing for dressing up," I admit. "I hate it and it's a pain in the ass. I don't have a choice, though. It's part of my penance for partying a little too hard last year."

"Whose idea was it? Coach's?"

I shake my head. "Nah, he doesn't hate me that much. Also, he doesn't have that level of imagination. It was Rowan, my publicist. And I can't say no." I scowl and grab another bottle of water and down it like it's a beer. Old habits die hard.

"I wish *I* couldn't say no to her," Andy grins lasciviously. "She's not hard on the eyes."

I squeeze my water bottle a little too hard, and it squirts all over me. Everyone laughs but me. If it weren't Andy's house, I'd tackle him to the ground for talking about Rowan.

What the hell am I even thinking?

I'm not mad. I don't care at all if all the guys on the team consider Rowan totally bangable. Not my business. I mean, I feel mildly protective of her, and the thought of any of them

hitting on her makes me want to reach for a hockey stick and do some violence, but . . .

Where was I going with this anyway?

None of them should date her.

“Like really, man . . . what did you even do to that woman?” Beckett asks. “Why has she got such a hard-on for you?”

“Not sure that expression works for a woman,” I frown in consideration. “But anyway, yeah, I think she’s just one of Lucifer’s minions, put here on this earth to torment me. She’s punishing me for crimes I haven’t even committed yet. Thought crimes.”

“Your hashtag mentions are through the roof,” Paxton observes. “So there’s that. The coach and Mr. Hartley aren’t bitching about you anymore. The costumes must be working.”

“Don’t tell her that. I will pay you actual money not to tell her that.” I laugh. “And I will come up with painful ways to punish you if you do. Please do not give her ideas, before I end up dressed up like a cabbage patch kid or something.”

“Maybe your next costume should be a kitty cat.” Noah grins at me. “Since you’ve already been a . . . rooster.”

“God, I hope not. No, cats are too feminine. I won’t do it,” I scowl.

“Unless she tells you to and you can’t say no,” Paxton smirks.

“There’s got to be a line somewhere.” I shake my head. No kitty costumes.

“You fight like a bitch,” Beckett shouts. “Sorry, I’m talking about that weak ass from California, not you.” He gestures at the screen in disgust. “Anyway, carry on. I like talking about Rowan. She’s distractingly hot. Does she distract you?”

“Not in the slightest,” I lie. “I’m just trying to survive her until the season’s over. I mean, you think I want a babysitter?”

The guys immediately start making hot babysitter jokes.

“How bad would I have to be to get my own Rowan?” Logan asks.

“Yeah, when she’s done making you dress up, can you send her my way?” Andy wiggles his eyebrows.

A surge of anger shoots through me and I leap to my feet. “Bathroom,” I announce loudly, and stalk off, even though I don’t need to go.

When I come back, I head to the kitchen for a moment to clear my head. Beckett follows me in there.

“Ignore them,” he says. “You know how they are.”

“Constantly on the prowl for pussy?”

“Well, with the coach working us so hard we’re dead on our feet, nobody has time to get laid.” Beckett sighs dramatically. Then he gives me a quizzical look.

I shake my head. “No. I am not secretly banging the devil-woman who makes me dress up in kiddie costumes.”

“Are you doing okay, in general? You’ve been so tied up lately, I’ve barely seen you. Everything okay?”

“I’ve been busy.” I smile at him wryly. “That’s code for ‘I’ve been staying away and missing guys’ nights out, because that’s the kind of thing that gets me in hot water with the coach.’”

“You’re different. You can handle it.”

I shrug. “I’m going to stay clean and sober this season. And forever. It’s just better for me if I don’t expose myself to temptation on the regular, whether that temptation is bourbon or puck bunnies.”

Beckett’s face has gone serious. He nods at me. “You’re doing amazing these days. I’m proud of you. You know that, right?”

I’m almost tempted to make a smart-ass comment about how I love him but he’s not my type, but I bite down the urge. I tend to push people away when they’re getting too close,

which is something I've talked about in therapy. Beckett's one of my few genuine friends.

"Well, thanks."

"So, about Rowan . . ."

I give him an evil look.

"Does she have a hot sister?" He grins at me.

I elbow him, and head back to the living room. "She does," I inform him. "And she's off limits too."

ROWAN

AS I WALK to my seat at the Queensby conference room table, my cell phone bleeps with the message alert I set for Mason. As always, a little twinge of worry tweaks inside of me.

Please don't be asking me for bail money, please don't be asking me for bail money . . .

I pull my phone from my purse and relax into a smile.

Mason has sent me yet another picture of his canine child. Puck is asleep on his back on the sofa, smiling blissfully, which is funny because big mean Mason informed me that there would be a "no dogs on the furniture" rule in his house.

Yeah, right. Mason has had the dog for one week now, and he's practically named him as his heir. I'd be shocked if Mason isn't letting Puck sit at the dinner table and spoon-feeding him from a sterling silver spoon. With a Puck monogram.

He's captioned the picture: *Paws in the air and he just don't care.*

Damn it. I kind of preferred the arrogant, aloof Mason I came to know and loathe before—well, before I started to get to really know him. When he sends me these pictures, and acts all decent and goofy, it gives me squishy feelings that I don't know what to do with.

Also, I am having disturbingly erotic dreams about Mason every night, which I justify to myself because I haven't gotten any nooky in ages and Mason is my full-time job for the

moment and I honestly just don't have the mental bandwidth to summon up anyone else to fantasize about and . . .

Yeah, right.

I reply with, *Very nice, dorky dog dad*. Then I quickly turn off my phone and shove it back in my purse.

He invited me to meet him at a dog park the other day, and I came up with an excuse because I can't risk getting any closer to him. I'm glad we're getting along, but it can never be more than that.

Don't worry, Mom, I think wryly. I know where my priorities lie.

The sad thing about my mom's frustrated career aspirations is that she was just getting ready to go back into the job market when she got sick. Ruby and I were a little older by then, more independent. I was going to watch Ruby after school, and Mom and Dad would both be full-time working parents, and my mother would finally go back to the career she'd loved so much.

And here I am, with no kids and no relationships and nothing in between me and the job that is the pinnacle of my aspirations—well, nothing but Amanda.

Amanda is sitting across the table from me. Her demeanor has been veering between icy and openly hostile ever since she found out we're vying for the same position. It's very movie-of-the-week, but less fun. If I'm found at the bottom of a stairwell after being stabbed in the back with a Louboutin . . . well, I think we know who detectives should consider a person of interest.

While rest of our team is settling in, I pour myself water from the carafe and Cecelia calls the meeting to order.

We go around the table, each taking our turn to review our current campaigns.

Jessamyn is doing wonders with a gourmet restaurant chain. Paolo is killing it with an indie singer named Shyne. Dori's campaign involves a company making vegan leather products, and celebrities are on months-long waiting lists to

get their new shoes. Amanda is working with a client debuting a national chain of gyms—and of course, lying in wait hoping for the Rovers gig. Everyone details specific metrics, including social media mentions.

Amanda's lip curls slightly when it's my turn to talk about my campaign. My numbers are awesome and there's nothing she can say to that, but from the expression on her face, it's very clear she'd like to.

After I wrap up, Cecelia takes over. "Nice work, Rowan. Truly." She looks around the room. "All of you need to be on call to help in a pinch if Rowan should need it. This project is a priority."

They all nod their heads.

"Rowan, you're running around like a chicken with your head severed. What can we take off your plate?"

She's not wrong, I do have a lot on my plate, but this is too important to place a single thing in anyone else's hands.

"I'm good, but thank you."

Cece levels me with a look that screams *liar*. "As much as I appreciate your hustle, I'm going to have to insist that you offload something. Otherwise, as organized as you are, something will slip through the cracks."

Amanda's hand shoots into the air, and I have to physically refrain from rolling my eyes or saying something cutting.

"I'll handle sending out the invites. It's the least I can do, since I pass the post office on my way home."

Cece points a finger at Amanda. "Good. Done."

Oh, hell no. Amanda will somehow worm her way into taking credit for my project.

"While I appreciate the offer, I really have it handled," I say to Cece, completely ignoring Amanda's smarmy face.

"It's already done, Rowan. Now, run along, everyone. We have things to do."

The rest of the team gets up and starts heading for the door. Amanda is gathering up her paperwork and preening about God knows what. She won the honor of errand runner—yippee for her.

“I have news for you, lucky girl,” Cecelia says to me. “The Rovers have asked me to attend their opening game tonight, and I have great seats. We’ll practically be sitting in their laps.”

Now why did she have to say that? It summons up visions of me sitting on Mason’s lap, with him thick with desire for me and . . .

I shove the image to the back of my mind.

She pulls a ticket from her Hermès Birkin turquoise crocodile-skin handbag and waves it at me. “Oh, how nice for you,” Amanda says sharply.

“Amanda.” Cecelia shakes her head reprovably.

“No, it’s fine. I took you at your word when you said that we’d both have a fair shot at the Rovers position, but I can see that’s not the case. I hope you two enjoy yourselves.” She stands up and stalks out of the room, back stiff.

I stifle a groan of frustration. Can’t Cece see that Amanda’s huffy temperament is a real detriment to being a publicist? Yes, Amanda can turn the charm on like a switch and be delightful for short bursts, but she’s extremely prickly and takes everything personally. I’m worried that someday it will blow up in our faces, but it’s Cecelia’s company, not mine.

“I can’t actually make it tonight,” I say. “I have plans with my sister tonight, unfortunately, but I appreciate it. Thank you.”

I do not have plans with Ruby. What I do have is a desire to avoid Mason unless it’s work-related or child-charity-related.

“Ruby will understand.” Cece smiles at me with her trademark *I will not take no for an answer* look. When I start to protest, she shakes her head reprovably.

Her smile has faded. “This is part of your job. Do you want the job or not?”

Okay, I love Cecelia, admire Cecelia, but she can be a bit of a tyrant. She’s used to getting her own way all the time and doesn’t take kindly to being told no.

I sigh. “All right, I’ll let Ruby know. I’d better head home to get ready.” *It’s okay*, I tell myself. *It’s not like I’m going to be socializing with Mason anyway.*

“Just one moment.” Cece bends down, reaches into a tote bag, and pulls out a Rovers hockey jersey, which she tosses to me.

I look at it and wince at the number 15. “Raker? Oh, come on. That’s a little too on the nose, isn’t it?”

“Oops, sorry, that one’s mine.” She snatches it back. “Take this one.”

She tosses me another jersey—23, Beckett Snyder.

“Fine,” I sigh. It’s a good thing it isn’t Mason’s, because he’d be unbearably smug about it and think I picked it on purpose. The last thing in the world I want is to have Mason think that I am fangirling him.

ROWAN

OKAY, maybe this wasn't the worst idea. I haven't been to a hockey game in ages, and I have to admit that the excitement is contagious. The crowd is roaring with enthusiasm, their energy crackling through the air.

There really is nothing like a sports event to draw together a crowd of people from all over—of every race and profession and religion and political persuasion—and unite them with one common goal.

And tonight that goal is to utterly destroy the Seattle Megs. Boo, Megalodons. Those losers. Those vile villains.

We're sitting right by the ice, our noses practically pressed up against the glass. "These seats couldn't be better unless we were actually on the ice." I shout to Cecelia.

"What?" she yells back over the roar of the crowd.

A puck thuds against the glass and I start, then laugh.

The players rotate in and out of the game. I purposely avoid trying to keep my eye out for Mason. I don't care. I'm here for the entire team, not for him.

Mason scores a goal, and the crowd goes insane. "Mason. Mason. Mason." they chant. I smile to myself. When he succeeds, Queensby Publicity succeeds.

A group of ladies across the rink from us stand up holding a sign. I lean forward to read it.

We want to have your baby, Mason. it says, in enormous Sharpie-written letters.

What, all of them do?

I shake my head, trying to picture how that would work. They'd all live together in one house and raise the half-siblings together and . . .

Cecelia frowns. "Not helping his ladies' man reputation." She raises her voice to be heard. "I guess the man just can't help himself."

I nod. Well, in fairness, he's living like a monk these days. His party boy reputation isn't going to vanish overnight, but we're making excellent headway.

A player slams against the glass, looks me right in the eye, and winks. It isn't Mason, it's his teammate whose jersey I'm wearing. Beck Snyder.

I laugh and give him a thumbs up. He turns and skates off, instantly swallowed up in a cluster of players.

"How is the fundraising planning?" Cecelia asks me during a lull in the noise. "Do you feel confident in your campaign?"

I straighten up in my seat, energy pumping through my veins. I am legit excited about this. Working on a campaign like this is great, but helping families who are living with leukemia is next-level awesome.

"I feel great." I enthuse. "Here's the basics. Mid-November we're going to invite some of the wealthiest families in New York, including celebrities, to the last home game before the holidays and then to a fancy dinner with the team after. They'll have excellent seats, of course, which they will pay for as a charitable donation. At the dinner, we're going to put some really coveted items up for auction, and also hold a toy drive. All proceeds and toys will be donated to the children's hospital. Oh, and during the game, the families and kids who are physically able to will go on the ice."

"Love it." She nods vigorously. "Oh, no, the Megs are going to—nope, we're fine." Her attention is riveted on the

seething, violent mass of humanity on the ice.

A slender blonde next to me leans in and points. “See that guy?” she says excitedly. I nod. Of course, she’s pointing at Mason. “I’m going to sleep with him after the game.” She practically squeals with excitement.

“You . . . are?” I’m not sure what else to say.

She bounces up and down. “I sure am. He’s actually kind of my boyfriend.” She’s a stunner, with a cute little nose and big pink lips and feathery black false lashes. Her pink jacket nips in at the waist, and her denim jeans look sprayed on.

She would actually be his type.

Something dark brews inside me, turning my stomach sour. Mason has been texting me about his boring, early nights. Hitting lights out at nine o’clock, not going out to any clubs or bars . . .

I widen my eyes and pretend to look fascinated and a little jealous. “Really. Wow, aren’t you lucky. Tell me more.” I’m asking for strictly professional reasons, of course.

“Well, we were together just last night. At my apartment. He comes there to avoid the paparazzi.” She smirks. “We did it on my couch and in the shower and on the kitchen table. He can’t get enough of me.” She coyly toys with a strand of hair. “He wants to marry me, but we need to wait until the season’s over, of course.”

Last night? Okay, now I know she’s lying.

“What time?” I snap.

“What . . . time?” Her gloating expression fades and she looks at me, puzzled.

“What time did you guys do it?”

Now she looks alarmed. It is a weird question. “Uh . . . eight o’clock?”

Well, that’s funny, because last night Mason sent me a panicked text because Puck had ingested a single coffee bean and he wanted to know if Puck was going to die. I found him

an all-hours vet emergency hotline. At 7:45 p.m. Which made it unlikely that he was at Blondie's house bending her over the furniture at eight.

“See these excellent seats my friend and I have?” I turn my voice sharp as a knife. “I got them because I am his attorney. And you just committed slander. He was discussing legal contracts with me last night via Zoom, at 8 p.m. You could be sued for ruining his reputation. Watch what you say about him in the future.”

She glares at me, mutters something that rhymes with “mucking rich,” and huffily scooches as far away from me as she can get without leaving her seat.

Have I just been a little harsh? Maybe, but I want to discourage any reputation-harming rumors. And honestly, this makes me wonder exactly how much of his man-whore reputation is accurate and how much of it is wildly exaggerated.

“He's got a breakaway.” Cece shouts, leaping to her feet.

Oops. I wasn't watching.

I leap to my feet too and cheer along with her. I am flabbergasted watching my dignified society lady boss scream her throat raw along with the rest of the crowd.

Staring at the ice, I watch as Mason slices his way across the ice with brutal efficiency, with the Megs right on his heels. With a mighty swing of his stick, the puck sails across the ice and into the net.

As cheers of triumph ring through the arena, I watch Mason glide gracefully away. My heart is thundering in my chest. I have to admit, he's poetry on ice.

MASON

JASE DONOVAN, the asshole from the Megs, cross-checks me with his stick, slamming into my back.

Again.

And again, the ref misses it.

The ref needs a damned seeing-eye dog. Where they hell did they get this guy from? Picked his name out of a hat?

Well, I'm not in the mood. The crowd energy is great, but my energy is all off. And I didn't come out on the ice to take shit from anybody, especially not somebody who wants to provoke me.

I spin around and shove 43 hard, sending him staggering back on the ice. Of course, this time the ref is looking.

The whistle blows and I curse to myself. My teammates groan and curse out loud. "What the fuck." Dylan growls.

I skate over to the ref, scowling.

"He cross-checked me twice," I yell in protest, like it will do any good.

"Two minutes for fighting." His face is impassive.

"Where's his penalty?" I demand angrily. "He just gets off scot-free? He can do whatever the hell he wants?"

"Two more minutes."

Well, fuck me. I know that I shouldn't have argued; I'm just in a crap mood right now.

I storm off to the penalty box and stand there, glowering. Beck is already there for the same thing. Fighting.

“Those assholes,” I snap.

“Shitheels. They’ve been getting away with shit all night long,” Beck grumbles in agreement. “The ref must be banging their coach’s mother.” I bark out a laugh, then settle back into a scowl again.

I glance across the ice to where Rowan is sitting, next to Cecelia. I was surprised to see her there earlier, because she didn’t tell me she’d be here. Not that she has any reason to tell me her schedule. I just would have expected a text telling me she was coming tonight, and not to eff up.

Too late for that, huh?

The seconds on the penalty tick by, and I’m still watching her. More fun than watching the crowd.

She looks good, as always, flipping her shining strawberry-blond hair out of her face, laughing at something Cecelia said.

Beck follows my gaze. He nods to himself. “Dibs,” he says.

For some reason, that pisses me off even more than being cross-checked.

“She’s my publicist. You can’t call dibs,” I growl.

He looks again and whistles. “That’s her? The one you said was totally busting your balls? Wow. You forgot to mention she’s smokin’ hot. Well, I still call dibs. Because she’s wearing my jersey, not yours. So . . .” He looks at me and smirks.

She’s wearing his jersey? The hell?

Not that it mattered.

But . . . the hell? Shouldn’t she be wearing mine?

She’s standing up now, shouting at the players, hands cupped around her face.

And as she turns, I see that Beck is right. She is wearing his number, not mine.

A hot feeling brews in my stomach, but she can wear whatever jersey she wants, I guess. Just like I could have any publicist I want—like Amanda. I could still ask for Amanda.

But I won't. And I know I'm being petty and childish.

The penalty is over, and I skate out of the box and “accidentally” knock the Megs left defenseman on his ass. He scrambles to his feet, shouting curses at me, and I grin.

Oops, my bad. And the ref didn't catch it this time.

The rest of the game, I'm in a pissy mood. I get in fights left and right, I get another penalty, my mood is off, and the crowd seems to feel it too, because the cheering isn't as loud now and my teammates are giving me dirty looks.

“What. The. Fuck,” Beck snaps at me as we sit on the bench.

“I don't know, what the fuck?” I snap back.

“Where the hell is your head at tonight, man? You okay?”

I hate being asked if I'm okay. I just turn away from him, glowering.

The coach gestures at me and I stand up and make my way over to him.

“Yes sir?”

“Get your head out of your ass,” he barks at me.

“The fighting? They cross-checked me, and they're pulling all kinds of shit that they're not getting penalties for.” I protest. “We can't let them walk all over us.”

“Not the fighting, you asshole.” Coach Hartley glares. “You're our top scorer, and you've scored once tonight. What the hell are you even doing on the ice? Are you drinking tonight? We're getting our asses handed to us by the Megs, and the Megs suck donkey balls.”

“I’m not drinking, and I’ll take a test any time you ask.” I say angrily. Damn it, I haven’t touched a drop in many, many months. If I’m going to get shit, I’d like to have done something bad to have earned it.

He glares at me. “Damn right you will. Now put your big girl panties on and get back in the game, and actually play this fucking time.”

I skate onto the ice, cursing, but he’s right. I’m playing worse than I ever have, and we only have minutes left in the game. It isn’t fair to my teammates, and it’s not fair to the crowd who came to see us give our all.

Play is stopped at the moment for a TV time-out. There’s only one thing to do—because my pride doesn’t want me to admit it, but I know what the problem is.

I skate across the rink and rap on the glass.

Rowan is sitting there, and there’s an angry-looking blonde on the other side. As soon as the blonde sees me, she leaps to her feet, wildly excited. “Mason. Hey baby. There you are.” she squeals. “I’ve missed you.” She shoots a look of smirking triumph at Rowan. I have no idea what is going on there, but I’ve never seen her before in my life. I may have gone through my man-whore phase, but I never forget a face.

I ignore her and rap on the glass, gesturing at Rowan. Rowan looks up and gives me a surprised wave.

I gesture again, and she stands up. “What’s up?” she asks, leaning on the glass.

“Take your jersey off.”

She pinches the jersey between her fingers and stares down at it, then looks up at me again. “What are you talking about?”

“Just take it off.” I glare at her.

“Why would I do that?” She’s staring at me like I have two heads. So is Cecelia.

“Because you’re my publicist, and that means you can’t wear anyone else’s jersey.” I sound like a childish idiot, and

she's probably going to give me a ton of crap over it next time I see her.

But if she doesn't take that shirt off, the game is lost. And I'll have let down every single Rovers fan who came to see us tonight.

"Hey." the blonde pipes up, glowering at Rowan. "You said you were his lawyer."

"She's both." I bark at her. I have no idea what she's talking about, and I am going to quiz Rowan about this later, but right now, I am focused on one thing. Winning.

"I'm not a family member." Rowan protests. "What difference does it make? Why do you even care?"

"I'll take off my shirt for you." the blonde cries out eagerly.

"For the love of God, don't. And stay out of this," I snap at her, and she sinks back into her seat, pouting. "Rowan, it's messing with my head that you're wearing the shirt. And it's affecting the game. Take it off or so help me God . . ." I let the threat dangle in the chill air.

"What'll you do?" she challenges me.

I grin fiercely. "I'll make your job so much harder."

Her eyes go wide, and she slips the jersey off in one swift motion.

She's wearing a white blouse underneath the jersey, and her nipples are rock hard. My gaze drifts down there, and my eyebrows shoot up. She crosses her arms over her chest, scowling at me. Then I look up and catch her eye.

Okay, I'm busted checking out her ta-tas.

But she's busted too.

Because now I know what I suspected all along. Our fights turn her on. She flips me the bird, but I just grin wider. I laugh as I return to the face-off circle.

New determination roars through me, and the Megs are screwed.

I'm not distracted any more, not pissed off. I am supremely focused on one thing, and one thing only—serving up shark fin soup.

Only after the game, when the Megs are crying in their locker room and their coach is having an aneurysm, will I unpack why I'm letting Rowan mess with my head like this.

ROWAN

WHAT AN INCREDIBLE LAST-MINUTE GOAL. The crowd is still shouting and cheering, and happiness sings through my veins.

I hold up my hand for a high five.

Cecelia obliges.

“Suck it, Megs,” she shouts, and I burst into laughter.

Never in a million years would I have imagined those words coming out of her elegant mouth.

The Megs are skating off, shoulders slumped, defeated. Whew. I was genuinely worried for a while there.

The adrenaline’s wearing off now, though, and I yawn. “Well, I’m ready to stagger on home,” I say. “What a rush that was. All that screaming wore me right out.”

“Not so fast, grandma,” Cecelia chides me. I groan. A hockey puck to the face is nothing compared to how much it hurts to have a sixty-something-year-old woman call me grandma. “We’re going to head down the hall, where the guys sign stuff after the game. That way, they’ll know we were here for them.”

“They already saw us,” I groan. “Well, Mason and Beck definitely saw us. They were practically right on top of us.”

Cecelia shakes her head. “We need to show our faces to the team. Have I mentioned how incredibly important they are to us as a client?”

I narrow my eyes at her. “No, never.”

She's already moving away. "Suck it up. Let's go."

"I'm putting chocolate on your desk tomorrow," I threaten.

"Thank you. I'll give it to my daughter. That little witch can eat her weight in sugar and not gain an ounce."

With a sigh, as usual, I acquiesce and follow her, letting her lead me down a scuffed hallway. When we reached the guard, we show our badges and he steps aside. I feel a jolt of alarm at the sight of a small crowd of paparazzi buzzing around the hallway, brandishing their cameras. They aren't usually allowed back here for the meet-and-greets.

Cecelia and I exchange looks of dismay. Our goal is to manage all media exposure, and not have the press climb all over anyone on the team unless the team member has been prepped first and we're standing by their side.

"What are they doing here?" I demand of the guard. He glances at them, bored. "They were given clearance."

"By whom?" Cecelia asks, wrinkles deepening in her forehead as she frowns at them.

The guard shrugs. "Not my business. Above my pay grade. I was told to let them in, so I did."

"Not cool," I mutter to Cecelia.

We step away from him, and Cecelia digs her phone from her purse. "I'm calling Ralph," she says, sounding annoyed. I nod in agreement. The owner needs to know about this. She dials, then curses and glares at her phone. "No damn cell reception here."

As she shoves her phone back in her purse, a beautiful woman emerges from a doorway, with a miffed expression on her face, and walks towards us, graceful as a gazelle.

It's Lexi Caton.

Mason's ex. Well, that's just awesome.

And my God, is she lovely. Slender as a swizzle stick, with the most glorious mane of chestnut hair. I'm reasonably self-

confident about my looks—unless I’m in a room with someone like her.

“Lexi. Lexi.” The paps swarm her like flies on honey. “What are you doing in the wives’ room?”

“Are you married, Lexi?”

“Who’s the lucky guy?”

She manages a polite smile, but just barely. She’s clearly annoyed. I don’t blame her. “I was invited, because I am dating Dylan.”

“Oh, shit,” Cece mutters under her breath, and I know things are about to get bad. The players start making their way down the hall, with Mason out front and Dylan trailing behind him.

I stiffen, waiting for Mason to lose it in front of the paparazzi. I can’t rush over and throw myself between them, because it would make it look as if he had no self-control. It’s all up to him.

Mason pauses, staring at the paparazzi, obviously trying to figure out what’s up. Then he glances over, recognizes Lexi, and a look of confusion crosses his face.

That’s it. No anger, no deep hurt, no longing, just confusion.

Dylan hurries past Mason, elbowing him out of the way as if he’s on the opposing team, and hurries over to grab Lexi.

“Lexi.” he shouts, as if the paps didn’t already know her name. “Hey, gorgeous. Thanks for coming.” He grabs her and plants a big kiss on her, clapping his hand right on her butt.

Well, that’s a little much. He’s acting like a middle school kid at a dance with his first girlfriend.

He finally steps back, and when he does, he playfully flips her hair from her face. Then he puts his arm around her and poses for the paps. I can’t really tell how she’s reacting to it. She’s a professional when it comes to dealing with the press, and she waves with a wry expression on her face.

As they put on their show, I hurry over to Mason, who's moved out of the way. Fortunately, all eyes are on them, including Cecelia's. She can't seem to take her gaze off the display they're putting on.

I quickly link my arm through Mason's and hurry him down the hallway until I find an unlocked door, then shove him in, following him and shutting the door behind us. I have no idea what room this is, but at least it's pitch dark, which means it's unoccupied and we've got a little privacy. I need to keep Mason away from prying eyes in case he's about to explode.

I fumble on the wall and find a switch, at which point I realize that I am now standing in a closet with Mason Raker.

Mason is scowling.

"Calm down, please," I beg him. "I'm sorry. I know that's not exactly the most calming phrase to hear. Listen. You just kicked ass on the ice tonight. You have been doing incredibly well, in every aspect of your life, personal and professional. Please, please do not undo all of your hard work by blowing up in public."

"I am calm."

I give him a skeptical look. "You look as calm as a maniac about to go on a killing spree. I know it must be hard to see Dylan and Lexi together, but—"

He grimaces and shakes his head. "It has nothing to do with Dylan and Lexi, but this whole thing has to have been staged by Dylan, based on how he's acting. I've never, ever seen him behave like that before. And why is the press there? Why was Lexi in the wives' room tonight?"

"Those are all very good points." I nod in agreement. "Cecelia and I will be talking to the coach, because that had all the potential to be a public relations disaster. I have no idea what happened, but we will get to the bottom of it. I can tell you, though, that we already talked to the guard, and he said that the press were authorized to come in there. I don't know who did it. It was probably just horrible timing all around, but

we'll make sure that it doesn't happen again. I don't know if we can prevent Lexi from being invited to the wives' area, though. What can we do to help you if that happens?"

He looks down at me, his expression serious. We're standing so close. He smells like male musk, earthy and masculine.

"Rowan, I'm telling you. I don't care about Lexi." The anger has faded from his face and his voice is calm.

"Well, it's not my business. I don't care that you don't care." I maybe sound a little defensive when I say it. My cheeks heat with embarrassment. I'm not a great liar.

He moves closer to me, pressing right up against me, a solid wall of muscle. I try to remember how to breathe.

"I think you do care."

"You're wrong." Now my cheeks are blazing hot.

"That's the best you've got? 'You're wrong'?"

I fan my face. "Whew, this closet needs some air conditioning, doesn't it?" I smile up at him brightly.

"Listen. I. Don't. Care. About Lexi. We broke up for a reason. She was not the one, and it had run its course, and it's fine. Sure, I care about her as a person, but not in any kind of romantic way. I'm more pissed off that Dylan seems to think that I care and he's trying to use it against me, which I don't understand."

I nod. "Sure. Okay. I believe you."

"Listen, Rowan. I'll tell you my truth if you tell me yours."

I huff indignantly. "I am extremely truthful. I have laid plenty of truth on you from the day we met, whether you liked it or not. But go on. What's your truth?"

His eyes burn right into me. His voice goes deep and gravelly. "I hated seeing you in that jersey tonight."

"What?" I shake my head in confusion. He sure is fixated on that jersey. "Why? I was wearing it to support you."

He narrows his eyes at me. “Nope. You had another man’s name on your back. You’re mine—my publicist. You shouldn’t have done that.”

His voice is raspy. I think about how possessive he was when he said the word *my* and wondered why it’s heating me up like a nuclear core about to melt down.

Why do I like his rough, growly voice? Why do I like how he’s pressing up against me?

He leans down, his lips a warm breath away. I tilt my head up, my lips parting as if I wanted . . . no, I don’t. Of course I don’t.

“Your turn. Nothing but the truth, Rowan.”

I gulp. I could lie, but it would just feel wrong. So instead, I crack myself open and bare my soul to the man who scares me on a very deep level. “I . . . I like that you don’t care about Lexi,” I blurt out.

God. Did I just really say that? Could the floor please open up and swallow me?

“And why do you like that?” he grunts.

“I . . . I . . .” My voice dies in my throat. My heart is hammering so loudly, I can hear it pounding in my ears.

I take a step back. He moves closer, like a predator about to pounce, and brushes his lips on mine. They’re shockingly soft, and I swallow a moan of arousal.

“You what, Rowan?”

Before I can answer, his mouth presses against mine, devouring it in a hot kiss. His tongue probes my mouth, swirling around mine, leading it in a silky duet.

Holy shit. Is this happening? Am I going to allow it?

His hand trails up my side and I melt into his touch.

Yep. I’m definitely going with the flow here. It’s too good to stop. I want more.

The world falls away. I press up against him, feeling the hard length of his cock pressing into my stomach. He's frighteningly large, and thick, and I want him inside me so badly I could die.

And my panties are drenched. I arch my back and press against him shamelessly, as he hungrily explores my mouth with his tongue.

My fingers move as if of their own accord, unbuttoning my shirt. His big hands close around mine . . . and gently pull them away.

He takes a step back, and I crash back down to earth, landing in reality with a painful thud.

We are in a closet.

The paparazzi are right down the hall, and I am climbing all over my very famous client—the man whose party-whore reputation I have been hired to fix.

What the hell am I doing?

I stumble back away from him, face flushed with embarrassment, quickly buttoning my shirt up. “I don't know what I was thinking. Mason, I just—I didn't . . . I mean—”

Mason's voice is a low, sexy growl. He slides a finger under my chin and forces me to look up at him. “Rowan, I just want to rip your fucking clothes off and throw you down on the ground and take you so hard that you see stars. I want to eat you until you pass out from climaxing.”

“Oh.” My eyes widen in shock. How long has he been feeling that way? And how is it that he's been having the same fantasies that I have?

“Rowan, the press are right down the hall.” His expression turns serious. “They saw us walk into a closet. I don't want you to end up on the front page of a tabloid. I've been there many times, and it's not fun.

“I didn't know it was a closet.” I moan.

He grins wryly at me and reaches out to smooth my hair. I tug at my shirt, tucking it back into my slacks.

“I promise you, I am going to torment you mercilessly about this when the time is right. But right now, we’re going to walk out of the closet, and if anyone asks why we were in there, you’re going to tell them that you didn’t know it was a closet until it was too late. You stayed in there for a few minutes because you wanted to make sure that your client was all right. And you are happy to report that you were worried for nothing, because your client is completely fine.” He groans and runs his fingers through his hair. “And then I’m going to go home and take the mother of all cold showers.”

THE DAILY SNITCH

The Daily Snitch

October 18th

For all of you who aren't permitted access to the team like yours truly, let me fill you in on the drama with a capital D, or in this case, L.

Lexi Caton was seen exiting the wives' room after the Megs game, and our boy Mason Raker looked murderous. Mason was so incited that he was whisked away before another showdown between him and his teammate, Dylan Masters, could take place.

Fans self

This star stalker is taking a cold shower because there is nothing—and I mean nothing—hotter than a riled-up Mason Raker.

That man is the definition of fine.

We'd be questioning whether his flame was burning strong for the beautiful Benedict Arnold, but there was another distraction that seemed to have all of Mason's attention.

He was seen flirt-arguing (yes, that's a thing) with an unidentified woman at the home opener last week. Turns out he didn't like seeing his teammate's name on her back.

Seems our suspicions of Mason being dominating on and off the ice were correct.

Audible sigh

This anonymous star stalker is flushing her dreams of being Mrs. Mason Raker down the porcelain god. For now. We all know Mason's penchant for parties, playing the field and pu— pucks. I was talking about pucks.

We'll keep you posted on future sightings of the mystery woman. In the meantime, if you have any deets on who she is, you know where to find us.

ROWAN

“I’M NOT FREAKING OUT, you’re freaking out,” I mutter to the brown Rovers mascot toy that sits on my desk. Okay, if I’m talking to a stuffed animal, then maybe I am freaking out.

For several reasons I’m on the verge of a panic attack. The *Daily Snitch* published an article this morning about last week’s game and the shirt incident. They’re speculating that I’m the mystery woman who’s stolen Mason’s heart.

Heart?

No.

Thankfully, Cece has assured me that she’d handle things. My job is at least safe for another day . . . or is it?

We sent the invites a week ago. Well, Amanda did. They were beautifully designed, on the creamiest of paper, with colorful and crisp graphics. So pretty I wanted to frame them.

And nobody has responded yet. Not one single RSVP. I’ve hosted other events before, and I’ve always gotten multiple RSVPs within days of sending the invites.

Is this the worst idea in the history of ideas?

I don’t think it is. Cecelia was enthusiastic about it, and she is very experienced in this arena. She would have shot me down in a heartbeat if she saw any problem with my campaign. So what gives?

I glance down glumly at my box of Rovers chocolates, which are becoming a very expensive addiction. Right now,

even biting Mason in half won't cheer me up.

If I sit here sulking all day long, though, I'm just going to drive myself crazy.

I leap to my feet and head down the hallway, making my way to Amanda's office. Her door is open and she's chatting on the phone. Her voice carries into the hallway, every word dripping with scorn. "Did you see what she was wearing? My God, if you ever see me dressing so 2000-late, please just euthanize me."

I walk in, and she scowls at me and tells the person on the other end, "Excuse me, I have to go deal with something." Then she puts her phone down and looks at me with annoyance. "There's a sign on the door asking people to knock. I'm working."

Yes, I could tell.

I keep my expression pleasant and smile at her. "Have you heard back from anyone about the event?" I try to hide the anxiety vibrating inside me.

She shakes her head. "Not a word. Maybe you'll need to cancel. You should probably start working on that right away; it's coming up soon." She's toying with a letter opener that's shaped like a dagger, and her mouth curves faintly in a smile as she says it.

I've never known anyone to cheer for other people's misfortunes like she does.

I take a deep breath. "Listen, Amanda. I know that we're both up for the same position, and I've sensed some hostility from you about it. The thing is, whoever gets it, we're both still going to be working here, and we are all on the same team. This is a great company."

She sets the letter opener down and stares at me, her expression blank.

"It doesn't help the company to have two coworkers feuding. It can even spill over and hurt our clients and reputation."

“Are you done?”

Well, I tried. I extended an olive branch, and she slapped it away. At this point, I don't know what else I can do to fix things between us.

“Yes, I am.” I turn on my heel and walk out.

“Good luck with the invitations,” she calls out at my retreating back.

I return to my office, worry thrumming through my veins.

I can't believe nobody has even contacted us to say they're not interested. I could see one invitation being lost in the mail, maybe even a few, but all of them?

I plop back down at my desk. I don't have time for this. Tomorrow is going to be a super busy day because it's Mason's next hospital visit and I still haven't picked out a costume. I'm going to be making a last-minute visit to the costume rental shop, I guess.

I also have a message from the hospital coordinator that there are several birthdays this month, and several kids who will be “ringing the bell,” which means that they are in remission and done with treatment, and they're celebrating tomorrow. The media will be there for Mason's visit too, and it's to be a packed house because some of the staff are coming on their day off to celebrate.

So in addition to figuring out what's happening with the invitations, I need to pull together a bunch of awesome gift baskets and pick out a great costume.

No pressure, though.

I send a silent message to my mom, wherever her spirit is resting. *Are you sure that this career thing is everything it's cracked up to be? Because sometimes it's terrifying. I could fail and let everyone down.*

There's no answer, of course, which just makes me feel even more alone.

Okay, I can't wait for the invitees to get back to me any longer.

I pick up my phone and call Tyler Watkins, the CEO of a construction company, to see if I can get his verbal confirmation. He has a personal tie to the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society as well, because his aunt was successfully treated for lymphoma at Manhattan Hospital, so I really thought he'd be pumped about the event.

The administrative assistant patches me through right away, because we've worked together in the past. Tyler's also good friends with Mason's father.

"Hey, chickie, how are you?"

I stifle a laugh. *Tell me you're sixty-five without telling me you're sixty-five*, I think.

"I'm great. Listen, did you get the invite that I sent, by any chance? I'm sorry, I don't mean to be pushy . . ."

"My dear, if I'd gotten an invite, I'd have RSVPd one way or the other. I don't like to be kept hanging myself, so I don't do it to other people. What's the occasion?"

I spell it out to him, and to my relief, he immediately says he'll go. I quickly mark him down on my list. Okay, whew. Well, at least I know that it isn't that people got the invite and hated the idea of the event.

"I'll also be glad to donate fifty thousand dollars towards the toy drive."

I let out a sigh of relief. "Well, thank you so much. You are the absolute best."

"Yes, I am," he agrees affably. "Did you invite Connor and Levy? Or Parker and Sons?"

Connor and Levy is the largest firm of real estate attorneys in the city. Parker and Sons is a huge waste management company. It would be amazing to have them attend.

I shake my head, even though he can't see me. "I didn't, because we've never worked with them before. Do you think they'd be interested?"

"Leave it to me. I'll challenge them to match my donation, and I assure you that they will do so. They're all close friends

of mine, and they know LLS is close to my heart.”

We chat for a few more minutes and then hung up, and I feel a huge sense of relief, but I now really question what happened to the invitations.

I go ahead and make three more calls.

None of the three people have gotten their invitations. And all of them are interested in going. So it was never a matter of a problem with the event—it was just that nobody knew about it.

As I check each of them off the list, I have a churning sensation in my gut.

I have to accept that the invitations were never mailed out. This puts me in a weird position, because I should tell Cecelia, but she’s already sick of what she perceives as a feud between me and Amanda.

So. Out of all those invites, not a single person will have received them. I am not going to be getting a lot of sleep over the next few days.

I call the printer and order a rush job for new invitations, which I will of course personally mail out myself. I will hand-carry the invitations to the post office and send them return receipt requested.

There is an extra expense for the rush print job, but at least they said they’d get them to me by tomorrow.

As I hang up, I get a text from Tyler, saying that Connor and Levy were in for fifty thousand dollars and Parker and Sons came in at seventy-five thousand.

I call him back immediately. “You can’t just tell me such fantastic news with a text. Thank you thank you thank you.” I cry out. “You are the absolute most amazing man in the universe.”

“Well, that’s what my wife tells me every night,” he agrees. He lets out a chuckle. “I knew Parker and Sons would want to outdo me. Hey, it’s all for the kids, right?”

“Indeed it is. And you are a superhero. I owe you big time, and don’t think I’ll ever forget.”

He rings off, and I stand up and start doing a victory dance.

“Woot, woot, party over here . . .” I sing out.

Cecelia happens to come walking by my office at that exact moment. She stares at me, gives me a puzzled look, and walks off.

Paolo is on her heels. I love how he dresses; he always wears a bowtie, which I think should be mandatory for men. I’m going to tell Mason that one of these days.

No, I’m not. He is not my pal; he is my client. My client who I’ve been having dirty dreams about for weeks.

“Dancing? I’m in.” Paolo rushes in, grabs me by the hand, and swings me around.

“What on earth is going on around here?” Amanda pokes her head in the door.

Paolo does a dramatic sweep and dip. He and his wife do competitive salsa dancing. I used to take ballet classes, so I’m not too shabby myself, and I fall right into the rhythm.

“All the world’s a stage.” he shouts out, and Amanda gives us a disgusted look and stalks off.

When she leaves, we stop dancing and burst into laughter.

“She really is a pill, isn’t she?” he says in a low voice, glancing at the doorway in case she’s lurking just outside.

“That’s one way to describe it.” I roll my eyes. I’m glad it’s not just me. I don’t want to think I’m being unreasonable.

“Well, I’d love to dance all day, but duty calls. I’m having a client luncheon. Don’t let her get to you. You’re amazing.” He blows me a kiss and leaves.

I settle back down in my seat and sigh. Even if I get the invites tomorrow and send them out by the day after, it is going to be a very tight window. I can’t just hope that everyone will be able to RSVP in time. The people I’m

dealing with are celebrities and multi-millionaires, who tend to have very tight schedules.

I know what I have to do.

I open up my computer folder with the contact information of every single person on my list and call them all. I tell them about the event, explain that there was a terrible mixup with the invites, and their invites are coming soon but I wanted to give them as much of a heads-up as possible. I wheedle. I charm. I flatter. I grovel.

Within a couple of hours, I have twenty-five RSVPs and \$1.5 million in pledges. Thank . . . the . . . Lord.

It feels really good to be doing this. This is the kind of thing that makes my job entirely worthwhile—the ability to ease the pain and stress of these kids and their families, to make them smile. Doesn't everyone say laughter is the best medicine?

The phone rings with an unknown number. I consider letting it go to voicemail, but I'm still waiting for several important callbacks connected to the event, so I pick up the phone and pray it's not someone who wants to talk to me about my car's extended warranty.

“Rowan James, Queensby Publicity,” I answer brightly.

“Ms. James, hello. You don't know me, but my name is Traci Stout-Raker. I'm Mason Raker's mom.”

ROWAN

MY EYES WIDEN IN SURPRISE.

Mason's mom. She's the last person I would have expected to be on the other end of the line.

I've never seen anything about her in the news. Now, his dad is in the news all the time, being the real estate big man on campus that he is, but Traci is an enigma . . . assuming this is even her and not a member of the paparazzi trying some new angle to get through to me.

"Hello," I say cautiously.

"Rowan, I'm so glad I got ahold of you." she gushes. "I have been trying to get ahold of Mason—it's really important—and his phone number has changed. He does that all the time." She lets out a girlish giggle. "And sometimes he forgets to update me, he's just so busy all the time. Can you just give me his new one? I've got a pen and paper right here."

There's an expectant pause, and she clears her throat loudly to let me know she's waiting.

Riiiiight.

Because I was born yesterday, and scammers never scam, and those Nigerian princes really do have fifty million dollars they want to gift little old me, a perfect stranger.

I frown skeptically at the phone. "First of all, why are you calling me in particular? Why not call the Rovers office?"

“Well, Mason’s coach told me how much time you guys have been spending together on his new campaign, and how you two are really close.”

Interesting thing for him to tell her. Did Mason tell his coach that? I honestly have a hard time picturing him saying the words ‘Rowan and I are really close.’ “So why didn’t you just get the number from Mason’s coach?”

She makes an impatient noise. “He doesn’t seem to have Mason’s new number. I told you, Mason changes it all the time.”

Well, there’s a reason for that, I think. And the reason is that everybody wants a piece of him, and crazy people like the blonde at the hockey game make up stuff about him and maybe he just wants some privacy.

“I don’t just give out my clients’ phone numbers to anonymous people who call me out of the blue.” I lean back in my seat and grab a Rovers chocolate from the ever-present box on my desk. I bite Dylan’s legs off, wishing Mason were here to see that. That would make him smile.

I’ve refrained from eating the Mason chocolate because, these days, doing that sends my mind to inappropriate places and I’m trying to be better.

“I’m not anonymous,” the woman on the other end of the line says, with an edge of impatience. “I am his mother. Traci Stout-Roker. I just told you that. He wants me to have his number.”

Well, that’s not so obvious to me. If he wanted her to have his number, wouldn’t she have it? He’s a big boy; he knows who he wants to talk to.

“Anyone could call and ask for his personal number, trying to get through to him,” I point out. “And it wouldn’t be hard at all for someone to find out the name of his mother.”

“Who would even want to do such a thing?”

Oh, please. “The paparazzi. Crazy stalker fans. An ex-lover.”

“My son doesn’t have an ex-lover,” she huffs.

She’s never heard of Lexi Caton? Does she not even follow him in the news? If I had a famous son, I’m pretty sure I’d have news alerts set up so I could read every story about him, then call him up and razz him about it.

So, this woman is either a stalker or a reporter, and she’s wasting my time when I don’t have any to spare. I should never have picked up the phone.

“Ding ding ding. Survey says . . . you’re wrong. It also says I’m hanging up right now.” I should just hang up without announcing it, but unfortunately my mother raised me to be polite, and the habit still stuck with me.

“Wait. No. Don’t hang up. He has a scar on his right butt cheek.” she cries out.

I massage my right temple with the thumb of my free hand, scowling suspiciously at the phone.

“Yes. That sounds exactly like something that a crazy ex-lover would know. You have a very nice day.” I go to hang up again.

“I’ll tell you how he got it,” she yells into the phone.

And I hesitate. A little angel on my left shoulder cries out, “Hang up on the crazy woman.” A little devil on my right shoulder says, “She could really be his mom, and if she is, this story could be so great. You can spare two minutes of your life to find out.”

“Go on,” I say. “Talk fast. I’m on a deadline.”

“He was six years old. He’d just gotten a slip and slide for his birthday. His father told him not to put it on this steep hill behind our house. He did it anyway. He turned the hose on, jumped on the slip and slide, and went shooting down the hill. And he kept going. He ended up going ass over head into the hedge, and he impaled his butt on the branch of a hedge that was trimmed into the shape of a rabbit. He got up and limped back to the house with the branch still sticking out of his butt. He had to be taken to the ER with the branch still sticking out

of his butt, face down in an ambulance, and he couldn't sit down for a week."

I burst out laughing. That, honestly, sounds too crazy to be made up.

Mason was attacked and severely wounded in the ass by a bunny hedge.

Oh. My. God.

If that's true, I am so going to use that story against him. I am going to weaponize it. I am going to torment him with it.

A bunny costume is very possibly happening in the near future.

Okay, is that going too far?

Nah. This man made me listen to Macarena twenty-seven times in a row.

"There you go," Mason's possible-mother says triumphantly. "Nobody else in the world would know that. Now. The number, please?"

I shake my head in annoyance. It's a great story, but I'm not an idiot. "I still need to call him and check with him first. Why don't you give me your number? If he wants to call you, he will."

"No," she cries out in alarm. "I'm in town and trying to surprise him. He loves surprises." Not in my experience. "You'll ruin this for him, and he'll be really mad at you. This is the kind of thing that has made him end professional relationships before. He will cut you right off. I need that number, now." Her voice has gone sharp and angry.

"I said what I said." I hang up. I get a very sketchy feeling from this woman, mother or not. The way she talks about him, it's like she doesn't know the first thing about him. I mean, I know him better than she does. So I hope it's not really his mother, because that's just sad.

Immediately my phone rings again, and it comes up as an unknown number.

Shaking my head, I pick up my phone to call Mason. I need to find out what's up with this. I wish she'd left me her number to give him.

I pick up the phone to call Mason. Before I can punch in his number, my cell phone rings with Ruby's ringtone, which is, of course, "Ruby Tuesday."

I answer immediately, as I always do for her. "Is this Ruby, or is this someone who's kidnapped her?" I ask. "I have a particular set of skills . . ."

Ruby lets out a loud snort. "Your only skills are being unreasonably paranoid about my safety."

"No, I am in fact quite reasonably paranoid about your safety. This is Manhattan. Crimeville. The streets are so mean, Superman won't even come here these days."

"Wrong. Saw him yesterday, panhandling in Times Square."

"And there you go," I say. "The city broke him. It eats people up and spits them out. You could have gone to a nice safe college in the Midwest and met a boy who herds cows, but no, you gotta follow me to the Big Apple."

"I swear you are insane. I was calling to check up on Puck. You haven't forwarded any cute pictures to me in days."

I pull up the photo app and forward several of them to her.

"Whew. Proof of life. Also, that spiky collar is hilarious. Thank you. When I didn't get any pictures, I was afraid maybe his dog walker had kidnapped him and was holding him for ransom and you were too heartbroken to tell me."

I squint at the phone in disbelief. "Now who's paranoid? Okay, I have to make a work call. Are we still on for coffee tomorrow? Awesome, love your face, and sometimes your personality. Bye." I hang up before she has the chance to move on to grilling me about Mason and suggesting that he has big feels for me, which she seems to be pretty obsessed about these days. She doesn't like hockey, but she does like the idea of me dating someone, and he is undeniably hot.

And undeniably bad news.

Sighing, I grab my work phone and call Mason.

“Hello, evil nemesis, bane of my existence. Where are you right now?” I ask.

“I’m in bed. It’s lonely. Care to join me?”

“One idiotic kiss in a closet does not mean I want you to add my name to the notches on your hockey stick, but thank you for the thought. Why are you in bed right now?”

“I was up most of last night because Puck ate something that disagreed with him.”

“Sorry to hear that. You need to get up and come meet me at the office.”

Puck yaps in the background. Mason yawns. “Intriguing. Why would I do that?”

“Because I am a damsel in distress, and I need your help.”

That earns me a laugh. “You, a damsel in distress? Please put the real Rowan on the phone.”

“Are you coming or not?” I say impatiently.

“Fiiiine.” He lets out a groan. “I’ll be there in an hour, and you owe me. We’ll discuss the forms of payment I accept when get there. None of them are monetary.” He hangs up on me.

Despite my stress over the whole RSVP thing, I am smiling as I push my chair away from the desk. I spin the chair around a few times like a little kid, which makes me dizzy.

I stop and leap to my feet. I start pacing the room, restless energy buzzing through my veins.

I want him to come here in person because I am planning on having him help me make more calls to wheedle more celebrities and billionaires into RSVPing for the event. Also, I want to talk to him face to face about the weird call from the person who might or might not be his mother. That’s something I’d rather discuss in person than over the phone.

It's all strictly business.

So why am I acting like a giddy schoolgirl? Why does the thought of having him visit me here in the office give me such a high?

I close my eyes. So I have a little tiny bit of an inappropriate crush on Mason Raker, who is the lust object of every heterosexual woman on the planet Earth, and who is also a known heartbreaker, and also my client.

It doesn't matter in the slightest. I am never going to act on that crush. I am a mature professional with steely willpower.

No, you're not, three empty boxes of Rovers chocolates whisper to me from my garbage can.

MASON

AS I STALK into the elevator on the ground floor of the building, heading up to Queensby, I'm scowling in annoyance, still huffy about what Rowan said to me half an hour ago.

Idiotic kiss?

Did she actually call it that?

That moment has replayed in my head again and again, when I'm asleep and when I'm awake, ever since that night in the closet with her.

She didn't think it was idiotic then. I didn't imagine her reaction. Her softly moaning against my lips, arching her back, pressing her firm, slender body against me, the sweet taste of her mouth . . .

I had to—very reluctantly—peel her off of me because I didn't want us to get busted by the paparazzi.

And now I'm hard again.

I scowl, glad nobody else is in the elevator, and I quickly reach down and adjust my pants to hide it. I hope. Fortunately, I'm wearing reasonably loose-fitting khaki cargos today.

I try my usual go-to, imagining every disgusting thing I can think of. Rotting food. Rats running across the street. Political talk shows.

Nope. Rowan's face keeps swimming in front of my vision and the blood keeps rushing south at the memory of that kiss, which was anything but idiotic.

It was hot and sweet and sticky and hungry and . . .

Okay.

And not going to happen again.

Probably.

I take a deep breath, square my shoulders, and walk down the hall to knock on the door of Rowan's office.

Then I just shrug and walk in, without waiting for an answer.

Rowan is standing up by the door, wearing one of her "I mean business" navy suits, with a steely, determined look in her hazel eyes. Uh-oh. The last time I saw that look on her face, I ended dressed up as a cock. A cock who got no satisfaction.

"What?" I demand. "What evil do you have planned for me today, devil-woman? Be warned. I've taken two and a half self-defense lessons, and I carry pepper spray."

She doesn't smile. Instead, she shuts the door.

She looks me up and down.

"Okay, I am going to tell you something, and you need to take this in the least sexual way possible."

I give her a wry smile. "Ouch."

"You also need to promise not to report me to human resources. This is not a pass, repeat after me, this is not a pass. Say it."

I arch my eyebrows at her. "I will do none of the above, but color me intrigued."

There's a grimly determined expression on her face. "Take off your pants."

I burst into surprised laughter.

"I'm serious. Actually, turn around and take off your pants."

"My underwear ads not doing it for you anymore? Rowan, I have an entire catalog I can give you. And I will personalize

and autograph every single page.” Also, has she gone crazy?

Also, why am I hesitating?

I mean, I’m hard as a rock every time I think about her these days. So what’s the problem?

Oh, what the hell. I’ve never been known as shy.

I turn around and unbuckle my belt.

“Stop,” Rowan cries out.

I turn around again, buckle my belt and shake my head at her. “Rowan, you are the very definition of mixed signals.”

She groans. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I just wanted to see if you had a scar on your butt cheek.”

I stiffen. Has one of my exes been talking or something? Am I going to read about this in the tabloids, and how pissed is Mr. Talman going to be? “And why would I have a scar on my butt cheek?”

“Do you? Have you ever been attacked by a bush?”

Oh my God. Can she hear herself right now? I hope she can hear herself. “Only every time I step outside my front door.” I throw back my head and roar with laughter.

Her face turns bright red. “Oh. My. God. Everything I am saying today is coming out wrong,” she cries out in dismay, eyes going saucer wide.

She tries to take a step back away from me. She trips over her own feet, and I lunge forward and catch her around the waist. Her slender, muscular body goes stiff with surprise. For a long, long moment I hold on to her, my arms tightening around her, and she stares up at me, lips slightly parted, eyes huge.

Then I set her back on her feet.

She hurries back to her seat and plops down, and I sit down in the chair facing her desk, and as I do, it hits me.

She mentioned me being attacked by a bush.

Plenty of girls have seen my ass. So has my entire team.

But only two people know the story behind it. My dad, who wouldn't have any reason to recount what happened to me on my sixth birthday, and who wouldn't have any reason to talk to Rowan, or . . .

I grimace in disgust. "My mother called you?"

She nods. "She said you changed your phone number and she needed your new one?"

That's a punch to the gut.

"I haven't changed it recently, as you know. What I did was block her number, and I stopped taking any calls from unknown numbers, so she can't get ahold of me."

Rowan winces sympathetically. "I got a weird vibe from the very beginning when she called. Honestly, at first I thought it was some kind of stalker."

I let out a bitter laugh. "Well, you're not wrong. And you need to stay far away from her. Please."

I don't want to talk about it, I think sourly. I don't want to have to explain why I don't want to talk to my own mother. Who would want to? Nobody enjoys dredging up painful, humiliating memories from their past.

She just nods and doesn't say anything else. She doesn't try to pry; she's not one of those emotional vampires who gets off on other people's trauma.

"I am here to support you, Mason, to make your life better. If your mother doesn't do that for you, then I will not give her the time of day. And certainly not your phone number."

I heave a sigh, pacing the floor, suddenly filled with a restless, angry energy.

She's standing there, no judgment on her face.

I realize that I actually do want to tell her. My sober coach knows some of it, but not everything. But I trust Rowan, and suddenly all of this ugliness wants to come out.

"My mother was much younger than my dad. Age-old story. She was young and gorgeous, married the successful

rich guy for his money, then figured out that being a wife and mom was not her thing. My father was a workaholic, and he felt that the job of the man was to earn the money, so I was raised by a series of nannies.” I grimace. “I really wanted a mom growing up. She’d show up from time to time, and I always thought she was coming back for me, and I was always wrong. When I got older, I realized that she only came to us when she needed money. She was nowhere to be found on birthdays, Christmas, graduation, any of my peewee hockey games . . .”

It hurt. The words hurt me to say them.

“Wow. That absolutely sucks. Who the hell does that to their kid?” Rowan is not looking at me with pity. She’s clenching her fists. She’s mad on my behalf.

“Right? I mean, if she’s going to abandon me, she should at least do it right. Disappear for good. But she even screwed that part up.” I let out a bark of laughter. If I make a joke of it, it doesn’t hurt quite as much.

Rowan frowns, chewing her plump lower lip. The words spill from my mouth.

“Anyway, my father eventually got disgusted with her emotional manipulation. From what the maids told me, she’d say things like, ‘You don’t want the mother of your son to be arrested for vagrancy because she’s homeless, do you?’ He finally just got sick of it and said, ‘You’re a grown-ass woman. Get a job and stop partying.’ He and I talked about it when I was in my teens, and we both agreed not to give her any more money. Because yes, when he turned her down, she’d hit me up with these sob stories. Boyfriend stole all her money, she’d been in an accident and couldn’t pay her medical bills . . .” I scowl at the memory.

“That is a terrible way to treat any kid, much less your own child.” Rowan’s spitting mad now. “I’m sorry I was nice to her, because there are some words I would have said, and they would have had four letters in them. Wait, let’s see, bitch . . .” She counts it out on her fingers. “Four to five letters.” Her eyes blaze with fury. She looks like she’s about to throw down.

Her anger is . . . hot.

So hot.

And I'm still aching for her.

I stand up and walk around the desk. My body isn't listening to my brain.

Bad idea, bad idea, my brain sings out.

And then thoughts vanish and there is nothing but need. I don't care that we're in her office, that we work together, that we fight like cats and dogs, that I'm a lousy candidate for relationships and she deserves so much more than a quick fuck . . .

I move close to her, breathing in the sweet smell of her flowery perfume. Her eyes widen in surprise, but she doesn't move away from me. I reach out to grab her by the hand. I will bend her over the desk, go down on my knees, and . . .

There's a knock at the door, and then it flies open. I take a quick step back. Amanda stalks in, and annoyance flares up inside me. She tries to catch my eye, and I look away.

"Cecelia told me to remind you the office is closing early because they're laying new carpet," Amanda says brusquely to Rowan, then flashes me a brilliant smile. "How are you doing, Mason?"

I don't bother to reply.

"Oh my God, I forgot. Damn it," Rowan groans. "I have so much to do. Remember how I told you that our invitations got lost in the mail? I'm mailing out new ones and making calls to let people know the invitations are coming."

"Yeah, you mentioned that . . . but did you mean they literally lost all of them?" I look at her in confusion. "Every single invitation?"

"Yep. Not a single invitation made it to its recipient." She heaves a sigh of frustration.

Well, that makes no sense at all.

Amanda's mouth curls up in a smirk and her eyes flash with malice.

Now it makes sense.

She had something to do with it. Which absolutely sucks, because screwing that up means depriving sick, sometimes dying children and their families of fun, excitement, distraction, and needed funding.

"Hey, my name is attached to this, so I am going to help you make it right. You shouldn't have to bear the whole burden of some weird post office glitch by yourself. You are going to come to my house tonight, and I will help you with the invitations," I say loudly, to make sure Amanda hears me, because I know she has a big groupie-crush on me, and I know it will piss her off.

"That sounds extremely unprofessional," Amanda snaps.

"What's unprofessional about making sure that this event goes off without a hitch?" I smile at her with no warmth or invitation whatsoever.

Amanda glares as she turns and stomps out of the room, stiff and angry, and slams the door shut behind her.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Rowan cocks her head. "I mean . . . things are kind of weird between us, you know, and . . ."

She's right. Things are weird between us, and it is a terrible idea for the two of us to be alone in my apartment.

"It's a great idea. I'm the celebrity. I'm the one they're coming to see. If I make the calls, they'll come."

She chews her lower lip, which sends the rest of the blood in my body rushing south.

"You're right," she agrees.

She grabs her purse and gathers up a bunch of papers from her desk.

As we leave together, I have to acknowledge to myself that this is a mistake. I can't even control myself around her in an

office with an unlocked door and coworkers right across the hall.

But tonight, alone together in my apartment, if she wants me as much as I want her?

I'm going to shoot my shot.

MASON

PUCK IS asleep on his dog bed in the corner of the spare bedroom I use as my office, snoring lightly. Rowan is in my kitchen, working her way down her list of contacts to get RSVPs.

I lean forward in my office chair, setting my cell phone in its holder.

This room is the most Rover-y room possible. All the companies that I have endorsement deals with send me merch, and it's stacked up on every available surface in here—wooden shelves, the sofa and coffee table, and the floor behind my desk. Underwear, socks, shoes, shirts, coffee mugs, magazines with my face on the cover . . . I should really organize all this junk and do something with it. I definitely will get to it sometime never ever. I'm glad Rowan and her sister didn't come in here to help me organize; I think they both would have keeled over.

In my defense, my desk is mostly clear, and my Steelcase Gesture office chair does not have any Mason Raker coloring books piled up on it—any more.

Because I put them on the floor.

Clutter drives my father crazy. That's probably why I let it accumulate.

“Testing, testing,” Beck says loudly.

“This isn't open mic night, Beckett,” Knox, right wing, says. We only call him by his full name when we're giving

him grief.

“All right, roll call,” I say. I have a group of my teammates on a conference call, on speakerphone. “I’m here, obviously, and Beck and Knox are here.”

“Here,” our goalie Logan calls out.

“Half here and half not,” Noah Walsh, left defenseman, says. “Like Schrödinger’s cat.”

“That’s not how that goes,” I protest.

“Present and accounted for,” Paxton, center, chimes in. “Why are we here instead of at a bar and—sorry, Mason.”

“Don’t be,” I shrug. “I can go to bars; I just drink O’Doul’s. It’s all good. We are here for a good cause, gentlemen.”

“Gentlemen?” Noah echoes. “I think you got the wrong group.”

“Keep your day job.” I snort. “We are here to support the upcoming charity auction.”

“We’re here to support Mason finally nailing that publicist? Fine, but we get details,” Beck declares. I glance uneasily at the door and hope it’s really soundproof.

“I will kick. Your. Ass,” I inform him. “Back off the publicist.”

“Oooh,” the guys all chorus. I roll my eyes.

“I’ve already given you the basic details of the event, the when and the where. It’s coming up soon. We want this evening to be an amazing success.”

“Why, exactly?” Logan asks.

“Because it benefits sick kids. Obviously.”

“Are the kids actually going to be there?” he says.

I heave a sigh of exasperation. “Yes, Logan, we are treating the kids and their families to an incredibly fun evening rink-side, and those who are physically able to play with us, will do so.”

“Argh. No kids.” Logan groans.

“Why not?”

“Kids creep me out.” At our groans, he protests. “No, hear me out. They’re like normal human beings but someone shot them with a shrinking ray. How is that not creepy?”

“How are you not getting professional help?” Pax laughs.

“They’re too small, which makes me nervous because I might step on one of them,” Logan continues. “They ask ridiculous questions. Over and over. So there’s something wrong with their brains. And if something is wrong with their brains, that means they might attack at any moment. And bite.”

“That’s zombies, not children,” I interject.

“You know what you do if you’re caught in a zombie apocalypse? Move somewhere cold so you can wear thick clothing,” Beck adds. “I don’t know why they don’t do that more often in zombie movies. For the love of God, the human jaw is not that strong. We’re not Rottweilers. Wear a frikkin’ jacket, you’ll be fine.”

“And maybe a helmet,” Paxton muses. “You know what I’d do in a zombie apocalypse? After I raided the mall, I’d—”

The “what would I do in a zombie apocalypse” talk is always a fun one, but we’ve got other priorities today. “Moving on,” I bark. “Focus, guys. I swear you’ve got the attention span of a bunch of ADHD squirrels who are off their meds. Children will be there, some of them will come on the ice with us, and we will make a good show of it but let them win.”

“Now I have to not just hang out with the Children of the Corn, but I have to let them beat me?” Logan protests. “Wait till word gets out that Logan Long got his ass handed to him by a six-year-old.”

“Yes, Logan,” I snort. “Because the press and your fans will think that you absolutely gave it your all against little junior, but despite that, you were whupped. Or maybe they’ll think it’s adorable and you’re awesome for doing it. Suck it

up, buttercup—this is happening. I challenge each one of you to get four of your most famous friends to RSVP to this event, and get ten thousand dollars in donations, too. Capiche? And I want it done by the end of this evening.”

“So we’ve moved from zombie movies to mafia movies?” Paxton asks.

“If I agree to a host a zombie movie marathon with you all, will *you* move on?” I snark.

That got me a chorus of yeses.

“You owe me,” Noah grouses. “I was going to hook up with the librarian I met last week. I was finally going to satisfy my hot librarian fantasy. I mean, dude, she even wears her hair in a bun.”

“Rovers get clovers, our luck is unmatched, our teammates mean more than some random snatch,” Pax announces, and everybody groans. Pax fancies himself a poet.

“Make him stop,” Beck begs.

“He’s a lousy poet, and we all know it,” Noah adds.

“Stop wasting time and track down some donations,” I say loudly. “And thank you. I am hanging up now.” And I do so, quickly, because our group can spend hours razzing each other, and tonight, we don’t have time for this.

I shove my chair back and head into the kitchen to join Rowan.

She’s sitting at my kitchen table, running her finger down a typed-out list of names. She’s changed into yoga pants and a T-shirt that do strange things to me if I look too hard, so I concentrate very intently on looking only at her face.

She looks up and smiles at me when I come in.

“Thanks for doing this.”

“How’s it going on your end?”

Rowan shrugs, flipping her strawberry-blond hair back over her shoulder. “I’ve gotten some confirmations, and a few regrets since this was kind of last minute. As for donations

...” she rolls her eyes. “Earlier today I talked to one of our most generous donors, and he was amazing, and I guess that set my expectations pretty high. Tonight, I got a total commitment of five grand. Multimillionaires can be unbelievably cheap. I guess that’s how they get, and stay, that way.” She sighs.

“I guess,” I agree. I don’t go along with the penny-pinching logic. I don’t believe in wasting money, but if you are lucky enough to have more money than you need, why would you not use some of it to help make the world a better place for people who do need it? It’s not like I can take it with me if I die, and even if I could, assuming there is an afterlife, what would I need all that money for? Platinum wings instead of gold? A bigger cloud?

“So how did you do tonight?” She leans back in her chair, making her T-shirt stretch across her chest, and I can see a perfect outline of her breasts. If anyone else was doing this, I’d assume that they were doing the old “Oh, I just had to stretch and arch my back and stick my boobs in your face—I didn’t mean anything by it” routine, but with her, I know that it’s not purposeful. She doesn’t expect to be checked out.

“I made some calls, waiting to hear back results,” I shrug. I don’t tell her that I only contacted my teammates, and I’m using them to do my legwork.

Inviting her here tonight was more about getting to spend some time alone with her. She’s been avoiding me lately. Oh, she’ll take my calls, but I’ve suggested a few get-togethers, and she always finds a reason to decline.

And I know why. She’s afraid of what will happen if the two of us are alone together. So am I, kind of, but I haven’t been able to stop thinking about her. And I don’t just want a one-off. I don’t know what I want, but if there’s one thing I’m sure of, it’s that one night with Rowan James would never be enough.

Rowan nods, pushing her list away from her. “I’ve called literally everyone that I can think of. Could you call your father? Does he like to help out a good cause?”

Tension twists inside me at the thought of talking to my father. “I don’t like to talk to him about anything hockey-related.”

“This isn’t hockey, it’s charity,” she protests.

I grimace. She doesn’t understand what it cost me emotionally to go into hockey as a career and defy my father’s edicts, to turn against the person who raised me—sort of. I mean, a bunch of nannies raised me, but my father is the only family I have, and he was occasionally there for me.

“If it’s in any way related to the Rovers, he’s not on board. He’s never been to a single one of my games. He wants nothing to do with hockey and me.” He used to watch hockey games with me from time to time—before I started playing.

And he used to come to some of my peewee hockey games. He just had no idea that I’d make a career of it.

Rowan cocks her head in confusion. “If I had a kid who reached the levels of success that you have, I’d be so proud of them. What’s up with him?”

I shrug and scowl, tapping my fingers on the table. “My father always expected me to take over the company from him. I’m the only heir. He’s ready to retire, honestly, and the only reason he won’t is because I haven’t stepped forward to help him run the company.”

“Do you ever see yourself doing it?”

“There’s a remote possibility, if I felt like I could make the company my own, do more charitable initiatives, make sure that our work is aligned with the best interests of the community where we’re doing business, make sure we’re environmentally friendly, that kind of stuff. But hockey is my absolute passion—it’s the reason I wake up in the morning. If I retired while I was still capable of playing, I’d resent my father and his company so much that I’d fail. It’s just a fact. I know me. Honestly, if I retire, I want to coach and stay involved, because I love the game.”

“Maybe you should sit down and just explain it to your father the way you explained it to me? Because from where

I'm sitting, it makes a lot of sense.”

I shake my head. “I’ve tried, on several occasions. My father thinks it’s a mistake. It’s a physical game, and I could get badly injured. I mean, hell, I could get badly injured crossing the street and getting hit by a bus, or tripping over Puck and falling down the stairs, but he’s fixated on me leaving hockey, and until I do, things are going to be really strained between us.”

She winces sympathetically. “I’m sorry. That’s very hard.”

“I was injured playing basketball at school once, and my dad absolutely freaked. He was a real asshole about it, threatening to sue everyone, shut the school down, ruin people’s lives.” I grimace. That was humiliating, and a huge overreaction. I didn’t want to let my dad make me live in fear of getting a boo-boo, so I tended to act out and act even more reckless. Which drove him nuts and led to a lot of shouting and fights.”

“I mean, that sounds like he really cares about you.”

“More like he wants to control every aspect of my life,” I grumble.

My phone beeps, and I glance at it to see a group text started by my man Beck. *Got my four. Just need the official invite with the dates.*

I type back, *On it.*

Beck adds, *Also . . . \$15k committed boyzzz.*

We all chime in, with me thanking him and everyone else suggesting that he probably just called the Galaxy cheerleaders and promised he’d bang them wearing his official jersey in exchange.

The rest of them chime in with their commitments.

They’ve each gotten at least a couple of guests, with more likely, and at least a few thousand dollars in donation commitments.

A huge grin spreads across my face.

“Ooh, is that good news?” Rowan cries out. “Tell me it’s good news.”

I turn my phone for her to look at it. I scroll through some of the texts.

“Okay, awesome, and your friends are in danger of testosterone overdoses. I’m genuinely worried about them,” she scoffs.

I smirk in reply and set my phone down.

“Let’s see where we are.” Rowan enthuses.

She hands me a pad of paper, and I grab a pen, and she starts adding up numbers on her own pad.

A few minutes later, we compare numbers. Even with the invites having mysteriously “vanished”—that is, ended up in the paper shredder—we’re at double our goal.

We are getting so much money and so much fun for those kids and their families.

I leap to my feet.

“Woot,” I shout. The next thing I know, Rowan and I are jumping around in excitement.

Without even thinking, I chest-bump Rowan as if she were one of the guys, and she stumbles back a little bit, laughing.

“Oh shit. I am so sorry, Rowan,” I groan.

She laughs even harder. “Sorry for what?” she demands. “Is that the best you can do? Weak-sauce.” And she chest-bumps me back.

“Oh, no. That was so inappropriate.” She giggles.

“I’m a big boy. I can take it.” I grab her by the hand and twirl her around.

She laughs. “Oh, I love dancing. Paolo and I dance all the time.” And she twirls around in front of me.

I stare at her in shock. “Paolo?” *She has a boyfriend?* I feel like the breath has been knocked out of me. Some other man is putting his hands on her . . . putting his mouth on her . . .

Rowan gives an incredulous laugh. “You should see the look on your face. Paolo is married, we work together, and he and his wife do competitive salsa dancing. Paolo and I dance because it annoys Amanda.”

“Oh. Well, if it annoys Amoeba . . .” I say, because I know it will make her laugh.

I grab her hand again and do another twirl, and as I do, she trips and falls into my arms. “Ack. I love dancing, but I also have two left feet.”

I sweep her up in my arms, cradling her there. She doesn’t resist, just stares at me, eyes shining.

“I think you’ve injured yourself. I need to examine . . . your ankle,” I say, moving towards my bedroom.

“Is that actually the best line you can come up with?”

She twines her arms around my neck.

I don’t usually have to come up with lines. It’s more like I have to come up with excuses to get women to leave me alone, but I don’t want to tell her how often I’ve pretended to have a headache.

“Did it hurt? When you fell down from heaven?” I grin fiercely at her as I carry her into my bedroom.

“Oh, no. Mason. Please tell me you’ve never said that to a woman.” She’s laughing so hard she can’t catch her breath.

“If I told you that you had a beautiful body—”

“Would you hold it against me?” She finishes the cheesy line with me as I walk into my room, which is dominated by a king-size bed with silky black and gray bedding.

“How dare you objectify me like that,” I mock-chide her, setting her down next to the bed.

And then I don’t know what happens, but some invisible signal makes our clothing fly off.

My shirt falls on the ground. Hers just sails off somewhere as I toss it. I’m pulling down her pants, she’s ripping off my jeans . . .

We're naked, and my entire body is one giant pulse of desire.

"We're doing this," she says, staring at me, eyes huge and dazed.

"If you want to." My voice is hoarse with need.

"Mason, you're an idiot." She presses up against me, her small, perfect breasts crushed up against my chest. I lean down to kiss her and I'm devouring her, fingers twined in her hair. We tumble and fall onto the bed, briefly breaking apart, and then I wind my legs around her and I'm kissing her again, my tongue ravaging her mouth.

She tastes hot and sweet and she moans into my mouth as I slide on top of her. My throbbing, aching cock presses against her firm flesh as I kiss her again and again.

Then I rear back. "I have condoms in the nightstand. Uh . . . haven't been with anyone in quite a while . . ."

"You don't have to tell me that."

But I want her to know that, because the thought of her being with any other man besides me is like a bruise on my soul.

"I also am on birth control, but you can never be too careful," she says. "And if it matters, I haven't had time to date anyone in so long that I think it's grown back and I'm a born-again virgin." She sits bolt-upright, her face flaming red. "Oh no. Did I just say that? I am so freaking awkward."

"I love it," I assure her, and resume kissing her as if I were a drowning man and she were cold, clear water.

I almost said something different—but I can't say that. For all I know, she just wants a one-night stand. Which I'll have to accept.

I kiss her neck and nibble on it. Her hands drift down and she strokes my hard length, then caresses my aching balls, scraping her nails across them ever so lightly.

I grab her wrist and then seize her other hand, pinning them both above her head. "I. Will. Come," I inform her.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

I move down and suckle on her breast, drawing her swollen pink nipple into my mouth.

“Oh,” she gasps, in a tone of wonder. I spend long moments teasing her breasts, moving from one to the other, still keeping her wrists pinned.

“Let go of me,” she protests. “I want to touch you . . . I want you inside me . . .” Her voice is throaty with need.

“Patience, babe.” I grin at her, and she groans in protest.

I move down, kissing my way down her stomach, drawing her wrists down with me. I lap at her navel and move on to the neatly trimmed triangle between her legs. As she spreads her thighs apart, I release her hands and she tangles them in my hair.

I kiss her left thigh. I run my tongue up it.

“Do you want me?” I demand. I need to hear it. I want even more than that. I want her to say how much she needs me, how she can’t be without me, how she’ll sleep in my bed forever and I’ll wake up next to her every morning . . .

“Mason,” she cries out.

And that will have to be enough. I have no right to ask anything at all from her, but what I can do is give her a night entirely devoted to her pleasure.

Carefully, I part her delicate pink lips and run my tongue along the seam of her pussy, lapping up her ambrosia nectar. I move to her clit, sucking the pink pearl entirely into my mouth.

“Oh.” Her voice is a wail.

As I suck and lap at her, she makes wordless sounds, fingers twisting tighter in my hair.

She’s going to come. I know it. She’s going to come for me, and I’ll drink her juices and—

Suddenly she releases me, twisting away.

“Mason.” She gasps.

Oh no. Is she going to stop me? Is she going to leap up and leave me?

ROWAN

I CAN'T LOSE control like this.

I can't let him take me over the edge. I have to take back my power—at least some of it.

“My turn.” My voice is quivering and husky with desire. Wordlessly, he rolls over onto his back and I slide up and kiss his neck, nipping it, then run my tongue along the soft, sensitive skin.

He groans aloud. “Rowan.”

I move down his chest, running my tongue over his nipple, sucking it into my mouth and scraping it gently with my teeth. Then I kiss my way down that broad, flat chest with its light dusting of hair.

His six-pack abs are so defined, it's likely the man does sit-ups in his sleep.

I pause for a moment, letting it all wash over me. I'm here, with him, and the whole world has shrunk down to just the two of us. The desire that pulses through me is so strong it hurts, but I'm relishing the pain, because I'm finally feeling with an intensity that brings me fully alive.

Below his navel is a treasure trail of darker hair that leads me to his thick, erect cock. A pearl of pre-cum glitters on the purplish head.

I lap it up. “Rowan.” He gasps again. “My God.”

I take him into my mouth, engulfing him. His fingers twine in my hair, guiding me, tightening, and his breath grows harsher and harsher. I move my mouth, sucking him into me, my hand clutching the shaft . . .

My need still pulses between my legs, but I can't be helpless for this man, can't depend on him; I have to hold myself back. There are bands around my heart, erected for a very good reason, and if I let him shatter those bands, maybe my heart will tear itself in two.

Also, I love this. Feeling his need for me, the aching throb of his cock in my mouth, hearing his pleased groans . . .

He slides out of my mouth and in one swift move, rolls me over until I'm face-down on the bed. Then he reaches for his nightstand, snatching up a condom.

"Don't move," he growls, going all caveman.

"Your wish is my command."

"If only."

He spreads my legs wide and enters me from behind. He's so large he stretches me, and pain and pleasure mix together. In one swift, savage thrust he pumps into me, hard, then does it again and again. The bed is rock solid, and I press my hands against the headboard and push back against him. Need rises and swells inside me, and it's exquisite torture.

"Harder," I cry out.

"Fuck, Rowan." He grips my hips and pumps into me in a frenzied rhythm until the agonizing ache inside me explodes and shatters into orgasm. Intense heat and light roll over me again and again, wave after wave. I go limp, panting.

With a wordless cry he joins me, his body shuddering. His fingers sink into my hips with the strength of his grip. There will be bruises there, and I want that. I want the memory of this imprinted on me with an ache and a visible mark.

"So . . . good . . ." he says between gasps. He collapses on top of me, slick with sweat, and slowly slides out of me.

I can't move. His arms wrap around me, and I'm so drained I couldn't run if a river of lava were pouring in my direction.

I don't know how much time passes before strength slowly seeps back into my body. My heart is hammering, and realization slowly seeps in.

I just had sex with Mason Raker.

Earth-shattering, addictive, amazing sex—with a bad-boy heartbreaker, with my client, with the one man I should never have gone near. A wave of dizziness rolls over me at the thought.

What the hell have I done? My job is my life. I eat, sleep, and breathe this job. I love this job. I love the challenge of it, love helping people shine and show their best self to the world, because when they do that, they start to feel like that best self and live up to it. Like Mason. I absolutely believe that visiting these kids has helped make him a better person and has given him incentive to stay out of trouble.

And now I've risked it all for . . . a quick roll in the hay? I mean, I could have used my battery-operated boyfriend.

But I haven't. Not in weeks. Because it just isn't the same. I have to admit, what I wanted was Mason. And now I've had him, and . . .

"What are you thinking?" Mason kisses my shoulder.

"Number one, that was freaking amazing."

"We are, aren't we?" He presses another kiss against my neck. "We are so fucking good together. I mean, it's not surprising, is it? Individually, we're amazing. Together, we're amazing squared."

A smile curves my mouth. I like that—too much.

Amazing squared.

I drag my thoughts back down to earth, to reality.

"And number two, things just got very complicated. This was incredibly unprofessional of me. I just—we need to be

able to work together. I need to be able to help you keep it together, and to help the team, and—”

“Hey.” His arm loops around me. “It’s okay. We’ll be okay. We’ll figure it out together.”

But there is no *we*, is there?

It sounds so amazing, though. To be able to lean on someone, to unshoulder a little of the burden that I feel struggling to honor my mother’s memory, to protect my sister, to succeed in this shark tank of a business—

The door flies open. I scream and dive under the covers.

“Pax. How the fuck did you get in here?” Mason yells.

“You gave me a key. What’s the big deal?”

“You’re in my bedroom.”

“I couldn’t remember your wi-fi password. Also, I absolutely kicked ass with my donations.”

I kick Mason under the covers.

“Get out,” he shouts.

“No problem.” When I hear the door shutting, I throw the covers back. “Damn it,” I moan. “I’m doomed. My life is over. This is a conflict of interest, it’s a nightmare, it’s the end.”

“No, it isn’t. Pax adheres to the bro code. He won’t say a word to anyone, I swear to you,” Mason says earnestly. “We don’t do that to each other on this team. Well, with the exception of Dylan, but forget him. My friends and I have each other’s backs.”

I slide out of bed and grab my underwear that’s hanging off the back of a chair. How did it even get there? Who knows? I pull it on quickly. As Mason pulls on boxers and his jeans, I find my T-shirt crumpled in a heap on the floor.

“Argh. It’s ripped.” I moan.

“Hold on, I got you.” Mason hurries over to his walk-in closet. He returns with a white T-shirt, which he hands to me.

I'm sure it fits him like a glove. On me, it's huge, but it's not like I have a choice.

Mason is standing there shirtless, grinning at me.

"What?" I ask, running my fingers through my hair.

"Nothing. You just look adorable in that shirt."

I groan aloud. "This is mortifying." He shrugs and walks towards the door, still shirtless, so I follow him.

Pax is sitting in the living room, with Puck asleep on his lap, his long legs propped up on the coffee table. His thick surfer-boy blond hair is ruffled, and his broad shoulders could almost give Mason a run for his money. He's a hot hockey god, and I admire him aesthetically, but he does nothing for me in the libido area.

He looks up when we walk in, and waves. He's watching *Love, Actually* on Mason's huge TV screen.

"Ooh, I love that movie so much," I cry out. Alan Rickman's character is about to break his wife's heart. "Boo, Harry, you bastard. RIP, Alan." I clap my hand to my heart. There are some losses that you just feel to your very soul, and that was one of them.

Pax flashes a goofy, cheerful grin at me. "Isn't it the best? My favorite part—"

"Pax," Mason barks at him. "You can't just drop by here any time. You have to call and check in first."

"Since when?" Pax gives him a puzzled look.

"Since—well, since from now on," Mason grimaces.

I don't know what to say to that. I can't do this again. This can't be a regular thing. So if Mason is saying that Pax can't stop by because of me—argh, this is all so complicated.

I see that Pax is drinking a bottled water. He's made himself right at home. Mason and I settle down on the far end of the couch. "You want something to drink?" he asks me. "I'm getting myself a water."

I suddenly realize that I'm parched. "If you don't mind," I say to him. He leaps to his feet, graceful as a panther, and stalks out of the room, flashing an annoyed look at Pax as he goes. I wonder how many other people have keys to his apartment.

"Mason's shirt looks good on you," Pax grins. I grab a sofa pillow and throw it at his head. He catches it. "Fortunately, I have cat-like reflexes," he informs me.

Puck lets out a gentle snore. "Aww, little buddy." Pax reaches down and strokes his silky head.

Mason re-appears, holding two bottles of Mason Raker smart water. I remember him at that meeting, smirking about how refreshing and delicious he is, and I smile to myself as I open the bottle while Mason settles in next to me and throws his arm around my shoulder. Mason opens his bottle and chugs half of it as I sip at mine.

"Worked up a thirst?" Pax quirks an eyebrow.

"Dude. You cannot say a word to anyone. I mean it," Mason tells him.

"Please, I'm begging you. I'd be fired. And, uh, this isn't a thing anyway," I chime in. "There's nothing really to say."

Mason gives me a narrow-eyed look. "Rude," he says.

Paxton makes a lip-zipping motion. "I would never say a word," he assures me. "I don't gossip. People's relationships, or, uh, whatever this is, are none of my business and none of anyone else's. And I don't talk about my bro, anyway."

I'm almost done with my bottle of water when my phone rings in my purse from the other room, with Ruby's ringtone.

I leap to my feet and dash in there. What is she doing calling me at this hour?

I pull the phone from my purse and answer. "You okay?"

"No." She's crying. Alarm floods my entire body.

"Are you in physical danger right now? Give me your location."

“I’m not in danger. I’m just upset. I’m such an idiot.” She hiccups a sob.

I let out a breath of relief. She hasn’t been kidnapped, nobody’s holding a gun on her . . . “No, you’re not. You’re fine. I am here for you. Tell me where you are, and I’ll come get you right now.”

“I’m just at my dorm.” She sobs again. “I’m so stupid.”

“No, you aren’t. You’re just upset. What happened?”

I can’t understand her through the sobbing, which has me very worried. It’s not like Ruby to be this worked up.

“I’ll be there in no more than half an hour.” I sling my purse across my shoulder. I just had sex and didn’t have time to shower, my hair is a hot mess, and I can’t imagine what I look like, but Ruby needs me and I’m going.

“I’m coming,” Mason informs me. He’s standing in the doorway, was probably there the whole time. I start to protest, just because I want him to be with me so badly that it makes my whole body ache. And I’m afraid of getting used to this.

Love is dangerous. When you love somebody too much, they leave you, and they take pieces of your heart with them. This has happened to me twice already. I don’t know how much more of my heart I can spare before it won’t be strong enough to beat anymore.

“Let’s go,” he says. He’s tapping on his cell phone. “Uber will be here in five minutes.”

ROWAN

RUBY'S DORM room brings back memories of my time in college, wedged into a small cement block cell with two other girls. At least she only has one roommate.

Her roommate's side of the room is decorated with posters of female rappers and all kinds of framed girl-power motivational messages.

Ruby's, in contrast, is dedicated to all things literary. She has a picture of Gertrude Stein, a bust of Mark Twain, and a poem by Christina Rossetti, written in cursive, adorning her walls. Her bookcase is artfully arranged with colorful hardcovers, a quill and inkwell, more literary busts, and at least a hundred books.

She's sitting on her bed with its purple comforter, hugging a stuffed Garfield from her childhood. Her eyes are red from crying and raccoon-ringed from melted makeup.

She looks up at me, Mason, and Pax, who tagged along with us for some reason. It's 10 p.m.; you'd think Pax would have better things to do than follow us around.

"I shouldn't have called you," Ruby sniffles, grabbing a tissue from her box. She's surrounded by piles of wadded tissue.

"Of course you should have called me." I plop down next to her on the bed and put my arm around her shoulders. "You should always call me. That's what I'm here for."

She squints at my shirt. “Why are you wearing a T-shirt that’s ten sizes too big for you?”

My cheeks turn red. “I was at Mason’s house calling up people for the charity event, and, uh, Puck jumped on me and got my shirt all muddy, so he offered to lend me one of his shirts.”

I shoot a quick, fierce, murderous glare at Pax, just daring him to contradict me.

It’s a sign of how upset Ruby is that she doesn’t call me out, because my story is ridiculous. We live in Manhattan and it’s late at night, so how would Puck have muddy paws? Because he could not have just come back from the park.

“Tell me what’s going on,” I say.

“The guy I was dating, from my Writing Across Media class, just broke up with me. It was ugly. He was kind of a dick about it.” She shrugs listlessly.

Fierce, protective anger wells up in my chest. “What’s his name?”

“Why?” She squints at me suspiciously.

“No reason.”

“I feel like there is a reason. Like you want to look him up, hunt him down, and collect his scalp to use as a warning to others.” Ruby starts picking up wads of tissue and tossing them in her garbage can, which is printed with Shakespearean insults.

“I definitely was not planning on doing all of those things,” I protest.

“Which ones were you going to do, then?” She stands up and runs her hands through her cornsilk-blond hair.

I arch an eyebrow. “That’s on a need-to-know basis.”

“Did he threaten you in any way?” Mason speaks up, going all protective big brother.

Ruby grimaces and shakes her head. “No, he was just a jerk. It happens, I guess.”

“Not to you,” I bark. I shake my head. “And it shouldn’t happen to anybody. I would like to know who this is.”

“No. He could actually cause a lot of trouble for me. I just want to leave it.”

Mason and I exchange uneasy glances. I do not like the sound of that at all. “Ruby, it sounds like that guy is making you feel unsafe, even if it’s not physically unsafe.”

“I really don’t want to talk about it anymore. I’m sorry I dragged you guys all the way here.”

“Eh, we weren’t doing anything,” Paxton says cheerfully. “We’re just glad to be here for you.”

Ruby looks at him skeptically. “And you are who, exactly?”

“Whoa, Paxton, someone hasn’t heard of you. Will your ego be all right?” I ask, widening my eyes in fake sympathy.

“Well, since he’s with Mason, and he’s improbably huge and hot, I’m going to say he’s on your team,” Ruby says to Mason.

“Improbably huge and hot? My ego will be just fine, thanks.” Paxton grins at me.

“Don’t let it go to your pretty little head. I also like to go to the museum and admire ancient Roman statues. Doesn’t mean I’m actually interested in them,” Ruby scoffs.

We stand there for a long moment in awkward silence. I don’t want to leave Ruby alone right now, but she doesn’t want to talk about her vile horrible ex, who I am definitely going to find out more about.

“Hey, I don’t know about you guys, but I’ve worked up a real appetite,” Mason says. “From all that . . . phone calling.”

I kick him in the shins when Ruby’s not looking, and he grins at me.

“I know a great diner. It’s open twenty-four hours.” Pax chimes in.

“I could eat, I guess,” Ruby agrees.

So Mason summons an Uber, and we all troop out of the dorm to wait for it.

“Does he just show up at random times and tag along whenever he feels like it?” I ask Mason, glancing over at Pax.

“Seems that way.” Mason squints at Pax.

“Doesn’t he have anything better to do? Like some librarian?” I remember reading through Mason’s texts.

“That was Noah.” Pax speaks up. The Uber is heading our way now.

“Oh, right, sorry,” I say.

“Librarian?” Ruby asks me.

I shake my head. “Boys.”

“Boys suck.” She glowers. “And so do men. Sorry, present company excluded . . . maybe. But I’m going to be a nun. A nun who can wear whatever she wants and swear if she feels like it.”

“I don’t think they have that kind of nun,” I say to her. Mason holds the door open for us and we all pile in, with Ruby first, then Pax, then me, then Mason.

Pax gives the driver an address in Jersey City, and we pull away. We’re mostly silent during the ride, and I’m painfully aware of Mason’s nearness. He smells so good, and I want to press up against him and feel those hard muscles and bury my face in his hair and breathe him in.

Instead, I ask Ruby how her classes are going, which just earns me a shrug.

We arrive at a dive-y restaurant a short while later. It’s got red-and-white-checked tablecloth, plastic grapes hanging on the wall, and a red glass with a white candle on each table.

“I love it,” I enthuse.

Pax looks at me suspiciously. “You’re not making fun of it, are you? Because my man Luigi is a great guy.” He sits down in a booth, and Mason sits next to him, and Ruby and I settle in across from them.

“Of course not. I like restaurants with character. Restaurants that aren’t part of a chain, that are owned by a person who pours all their hopes and dreams into them.”

A sixty-something guy with a big curled mustache bustles over to us with menus. “Welcome back, my friend. Staying out of trouble?”

“You know I’m not,” Pax grins at him. “I’ll start out with a house red. You?” he asks Ruby.

“Water for me,” she says.

“And me,” Mason chimes in.

“I’ll also have some of your house red,” I say. When he returns with our drinks, I order a turkey club and fries, Mason orders a grilled chicken wrap and onion rings, Pax orders a meatball sub, and Ruby orders a pork roll, egg, and cheese sandwich.

“Yes, we really do eat actual food,” I say to Mason.

He nods. “I like a woman who eats, instead of asking for one lettuce leaf and then staring at my plate the entire time.”

“Well, in fairness, there’s huge societal pressure for women to be unnaturally thin,” Ruby points out. She sips her water.

“Men are such bastards,” Pax chimes in. “Should I punch myself in the face? Would that make you feel better?”

She pretends to consider it. “Maybe a little.”

“No violence at the dinner table,” I protest. “Unless it’s against your ex-boyfriend. Maybe we should invite him here.” I narrow my eyes.

“Leave it,” Ruby warns me.

We change the subject and are talking about the next Rover’s game when our food is delivered. A plate of nachos is set down in front of us.

“Who ordered this?” I ask, looking around the table.

“They know me well here,” Paxton says, grinning down at the plate. “Come here often enough, score free food.”

We all eagerly dive in. It’s amazing. There is nothing like diner nachos and a turkey club in the early morning hours.

“At least I don’t have to worry about my breath anymore.” Ruby shoves a huge chip, piled high with toppings, in her mouth and chews savagely.

“He gave you a hard time about your breath?” My voice is sharper than I intend it to be.

“Rowan? The way you’re holding the knife’s a little alarming,” Mason points out to me.

I glance down. I literally hadn’t even realized that I’d picked up a sharp knife, much less that I was clutching it and pointing in the guys’ direction. I carefully set it down.

“Sorry,” I say sweetly.

“Damn. Don’t get on her bad side,” Pax says to Mason.

“I try not to,” Mason assures him.

“Excuse me? Are you the man who made me listen to ‘Macarena’ twenty-seven times in a row and who also forced me to be in the vicinity of shredded coconut?” I demand.

He grins at me. “That was someone who looks a lot like me.”

“Uh-uh,” I say skeptically, and sip my wine. I glance back at Ruby. “So, listen, this honestly sounds like a situation where —”

She shakes her head. “It’s a situation where you’ll just have to accept that I don’t want this guy to give me any trouble, he and I are done for good, and I’ll handle it.”

“What if he thought you had an improbably hot and huge hockey player boyfriend?” Pax speaks up around a mouthful of sub sandwich.

“I think the order was huge and hot,” Mason says.

“What are you even talking about?” Ruby gives him a puzzled look.

“I’m saying that if he thought you had a boyfriend who’s been known to break a few noses on the ice, he’d think twice about messing with you, and also he’d know that you’ve moved on.” Pax washes down his sub sandwich with half his glass of wine.

“I assume you mean that you’re the fake boyfriend in question?” Ruby frowns at him. “I just came out of a very bad relationship. I don’t want a new boyfriend, and I don’t want a hookup.”

“I don’t want a girlfriend, and I don’t want a hookup either,” Pax shrugs. “But girls hit on me all the time.”

“Aww, boo-boo.” She gives him a fake pitying look. “That sounds so terrible. Can I get you a Band-Aid for the emotional pain you’re going through?”

Pax grins at me. “Your sister is savage. I like it.”

“She’s sitting right here.” Ruby waves her fork at him.

“Anyway,” Pax continues. “I’ve been featured in the tabloids twice this month with rumors about girls that I’m not even banging. Someone even suggested that I’m the new Mason. God forbid.”

“Hey.” Mason glares at him.

“Sorry,” Pax shrugs. “But I don’t want that rep. I really only want to focus on the game. If I had a fake girlfriend and was seen with her consistently, then the paps would go look for someone else to hassle.”

“Hmm.” Ruby looks at him suspiciously. “No nookie.”

“It goes without saying,” I cry out. “If we even agree to this crazy scheme.”

“You are not the boss of me,” Ruby huffs. “I’m almost tempted to sleep with him now, just because you’re saying I can’t.”

Luigi is approaching the table, pushing a cart of desserts. “Uh, I’ll come back,” he says, and backs off, leaving the cart.

“Do I get a say in this?” Pax wonders.

“Debatable.” Ruby reaches out and grabs a chocolate mousse. If she’s reaching the stress-eating stage of her relationship grief, that’s a good sign. It means she’s about ready to move on emotionally.

She looks at Pax and nods. “I will agree to fake date you for a while.”

Pax grabs a tiramisu. “Fine, but I’m not cheap and I’m not easy. Don’t try to get fresh with me.”

Ruby answers with a scornful snort. “I’ll try to restrain myself.”

“And will you agree to call me *boo-boo* in public?” He takes a big bite of tiramisu.

“I absolutely will not.” And that’s the end of the conversation. She clearly won’t talk about her ex, and now I have to hope that Pax is a good guy who won’t try to take advantage of the situation.

ROWAN

TODAY IS a happy day at the hospital. It's the bell ringing ceremony for the kids, and families and staff will be there celebrating. It's being done in the special events room, so the other kids who are still undergoing treatment won't have to watch and feel bad; they're getting their own party, with a puppet show and an ice cream sundae bar.

I'm in a conference room, holding the bag of costume and swag, waiting for Mason to change. For myself, I've picked a fun dress with a flared-out skirt with polka dots, and accessorized with big fluffy pink earrings and bright pink shoes. The kids seem to enjoy my wacky costumes.

Mason walks out of the bathroom wearing his llama pinata costume. He throws his hands in the air with a *WTF* look on his face.

"A pinata? Why do you hate me?" he demands. "I thought you at least liked my d—"

"Ahhh," I shriek. I grab a granola bar from my purse and throw it at his head. "Silence," I cry out. A nurse is outside the door, waiting to guide us to the party. For all I know, she has her ear pressed against the door, listening avidly.

"I was going to say donations," he protests, looking hurt and blinking innocently. Yeah, right. If there is one thing I can say about Mason, it's that he doesn't have an innocent bone in his body. The things he can do with his tongue . . .

I'm damp just thinking about it.

“Behave,” I say icily.

He leans in and lowers his voice. “You were just thinking about the other night, weren’t you?”

“The other night when I hung out with my friend Shelby at a karaoke bar? Why yes, I was. It was eighties night. I sang ‘99 Red Balloons.’ That was such a great music decade, don’t you agree?” I’m babbling now.

“Pretend all you want. We are amazing together.” He’s so close to me, speaking so quietly that he’s practically whispering in my ear.

A strange heat flows through me and pools beneath my belly. The way he looks at me, as if I were the most beautiful, desirable woman in the world, just about undoes me. When he looks at me like that, I feel like a pirate’s chest full of treasure. Like I must be amazing, because he thinks I am. I’m not stressed-out, overworked Rowan, I’m just . . . me, the girl Mason likes.

I grab the bag and quickly move towards the door. I grab the handle and look back at him as he lumbers after me awkwardly in his llama pinata costume. “If I were you, I’d focus more on getting into character as a llama, and less on . . . uh, hey there.” As I pull the door open, the nurse, who was indeed pressed up against the door, staggers, falls into me, and lets out a shriek.

She jumps back huffily. “You could have warned me you were going to open the door,” she cries out.

“And you could have not eavesdropped,” I point out.

She stiffens defensively. “I wasn’t eavesdropping. I was just about to open the door to see if you were ready.”

“We’re ready,” Mason announces, waving his arm at her. She gives his costume a quizzical look, then leads us down the hallway and around a corner to the special events room.

“How, exactly, do llamas behave anyway?” Mason asks as we walk in. “Don’t they spit on people?”

“Uh, as your publicist, I suggest you don’t do that,” I say. “There are certain public relations fiascos that you just can’t come back from.”

“Pick a costume with obvious behaviors next time,” he grumbles. “Dogs bark, cocks—I mean roosters—crow, clowns squirt people with their fake flowers and do pratfalls . . . what the heck does a llama do?”

“I will keep that in mind when selecting the next costume,” I agree.

Reporters immediately start taking pictures. The kids, including Harrison, wave excitedly at Mason, who waves back. Mason ended up getting Harrison a Nintendo Switch, since that was also on Harrison’s wish list and we agreed a puppy would be a bad surprise gift.

“How did you think of the llama costume, Mason?” a woman calls out.

“Oh, you can thank my trusty publicist here for that.” He grins and waves at me. “She has the most interesting ideas.”

“Do we sense a little tension there between you?” a male reporter asks. My heart stutters in my chest. No, no, no . . . Mason can’t be so obvious. I stand there with a frozen smile on my face, looking like a dork. A dork who’s just been shot with a freeze ray.

“I’m just here for the kids, and happy to wear whatever costume makes them laugh. Today, it is a padded pinata, and every time they whack me, I throw candy,” Mason says, and that seems to satisfy the crowd. Whew. That was way too close.

He proceeds to demonstrate as the kids line up to take their turns. His hands are full of bags of candy. They hit him with a soft padded bat, shrieking with glee. He throws candy everywhere. I dive in and give him more candy in between strikes.

In the background, Kidz Bop music plays on the speakers. Parents and kids collect Rovers swag and enjoy the lavish buffet the Rovers team sponsored. There’s face painting and a

craft station. I put temporary tattoos on several kids, with their parents' permission. Then I let kids put Rovers temporary tattoos on my arm. Great, now I have a Mason tattoo, and I am never going to hear the end of it.

"You guys are awesome," Harrison tells me happily. "Even if he sucks at Uno."

"Yep, Uno definitely is not his strength," I agree. "So, I hear you're going home soon."

He nods, and his mother hugs him to her. "He's in remission. Thank you so much for everything that you've done for him."

"Oh, it's all Mason."

She shakes her head. "A lot of it is you. I can see the passion you have for this cause, and I really appreciate it. This has been a terrible time in our life, but you've managed to bring some lightness and fun into it."

She turns away to admire Harrison's candy haul, and I blink really hard because, uh, I have something in my eye. Yeah, that's the reason.

"More candy. More candy. More candy," the children chant.

Mason tosses another bag towards the kids. It hits me right in the face, and the kids howl with laughter. I stagger back, clutching my chest. "He got me. I'm going down," I cry.

They're shrieking with merriment now.

I fall to my knees. "The candy got me. Oh noooo . . ."

"Here you go. This will make you better." A little girl gives me one of her lollipops. She's bald, her head shaved, wearing a pink turban. I unwrap the lollipop, suck on it, and break into a huge smile.

"I am cured," I cry out, and all of the kids cheer at the top of their lungs. There's so much enthusiasm, so much childlike joy here. Being part of it really makes my life better in ways that I can't even articulate.

I climb to my feet and brush off my knees. I bend down and give the little girl a gentle hug. “Thank you so much,” I say to her.

“You’re very welcome. I’ll send you my doctor bill,” she says in a serious tone, and her parents burst into laughter.

Mason is done with the bags of candy, and I don’t need to help him anymore. I carefully move away from him, angling my body away, and I don’t look in his direction at all as he circulates through the room. Then I worry that maybe I’m ignoring him too hard?

Damn, this is complicated.

A female reporter walks up to me. Her frosted hair is swept up into a flattering chignon, and her red dress fits her like it’s painted on. “What’s it like working with Mason Raker?” she asks. She glances his way. “Is he single?”

“Uh, as far as I know. He is really just focused on playing his best,” I tell her.

“Hmm.” There’s a speculative look on her face. “Maybe I should give him my number.” Then she gives me a conniving look. “Unless that would be a problem for you.”

I will cut you.

“For me?” I echo. “Goodness, not in the slightest. He’s a big boy; he makes his own decisions as to who he wants to spend time with.”

And when I cut you it will be with a very rusty knife.

“Because it seems like there’s a little something there.” She’s watching me with greedy eyes, eager for a scoop. For a scandal.

“Oh, we’re work buddies, that’s all,” I assure her, putting on my professional publicist smile. And that’s true, isn’t it?

I mean, we’re buddies with benefits. Well, with benefit, singular. It happened once, won’t necessarily happen ever again.

“Well, then.” She marches over to Mason and starts chatting with him. I move around the buffet table, picking up empty cups and plates. I glance at one of the windows, and in the reflection I can see her looking my way, checking for a reaction.

I toss the plates into the trash.

A minute later, I see her marching off, pouting. She obviously didn’t get what she wanted—a date with Mason, a scandalous scoop, or both.

The reporters file out of the room, and the kids and the parents say their goodbyes and start dispersing. Mason goes to change and returns wearing jeans and a Henley shirt.

“I give that costume a two out of ten,” he informs me, joining me as I help the staff clean up candy wrappers from the floor. “At least the cock was amusing.”

“Wah wah.” I shrug. “The kids enjoyed it. And, by the way, thank you for not spitting on anyone.”

“When those reporters got all up my ass, I came close.” He scowls.

“I know, I know. They’re just doing their jobs, though. And you have to keep in mind, you don’t have to deal with them for long periods of time. Keep a smile on your face and keep it professional for a few minutes, and they get bored and move on to their next victim—I mean, interview subject.”

“Yeah, sure,” he shrugs, making a face like he just tasted something disgusting. “I know it comes with playing the game.”

We finish up a few minutes later, and I grab the roller-bag and we make our way towards the front of the hospital, stopping a few times so Mason can sign autographs and politely turn down various women who are not shy about making their interest known.

He glances at me as we head through the hospital lobby. The lobby is decorated with a fun jungle theme, with cartoony animals and fake palm trees and tropical plants. “I’m not into any of them,” he says in a low voice.

“You don’t have to tell me that.” Even though I wanted to perform a root canal without anesthesia on that reporter who’d been interested in him . . . But I have no right to be jealous at all.

He frowns. “But it’s true.”

“Okay,” I say. “Does it get annoying, getting hit on all the time?”

“Honestly, kinda. At first it was flattering, but that was years ago. It gets old. And really, they don’t know me. They don’t want to get to know me. They want to bang, or date, the famous Rovers forward. Any hot sports celebrity would do.” He makes a face.

I have a feeling it must be exhausting being him sometimes.

“Anyway, I was just wondering, since we’re done here, would you like to go—”

I never get to find out what he was going to suggest.

“Oh, Mason, honey,” a voice sings out.

He stiffens. A woman dodges from behind a big decorative screen painted with zebras.

She’s pretty, but her age is hard to determine, maybe late thirties or forties. She has the same color and shape eyes as Mason.

His mother, then.

She moves towards us. Mason stands perfectly still, glowering.

“Mason, baby.” She throws her arms open wide. “Aren’t you going to give your mother a hug?”

MASON

TENSION TWISTS through my entire body. I glance around the lobby frantically. The last thing I need is for my mother to make a scene in front of the press.

I grab her by the arm and move her down a hallway, leaving Rowan behind.

“What are you doing? You’re hurting my arm,” my mother protests. I barely touched her, but whatever.

“What am I doing? Are you kidding me? Did I invite you here? Did I in any way give you the idea that I wanted to see you?” I snap. “I can’t believe you just barged in here like this. You can’t just show up uninvited.”

Her eyes widen in hurt. I’d believe her more if I hadn’t seen how fast her expressions can change. When I was younger, and she’d show up with her look of panic, desperate for money, almost in tears—and I’d agree to give her a chunk of change—the look would vanish instantly and she’d be all smiles and sweetness.

“You went out of your way to hunt me down here. What is it that you want?” I demand. Being near her makes me feel hot, prickly, and uncomfortable and I want to get this over with as soon as possible.

“I want nothing more than to see you. I just want a relationship with my son.” She’s doing the big wide-eyed hurt look.

I glance around in annoyance and then focus on her. “Did you want a relationship with me when I was in grade school, when I was in high school, when you never came to visit on birthdays or Christmas, when you didn’t come to a single one of my games?”

She actually manages to squeeze out a tear or two, blinking hard. Of course, her mascara and eyeliner are waterproof. She came prepared.

“Your father wouldn’t let me anywhere near you,” she sniffles. “He had a whole big law firm on his payroll and he used to threaten me when I tried to come visit. He said he’d have me thrown in prison. I couldn’t afford to fight him, much as I wanted to. He told me you didn’t want to see me, and after a while I just gave up.”

A small explosion of rage detonates inside me.

“Bullshit.”

She gasps in outrage. “You don’t get to talk to your mother like that.”

Years of hurt, of wondering what was so wrong with me that my own mother didn’t want me, boil up inside me. “If I had a mother, I wouldn’t talk to her like that,” I snap.

She does another gasp—but doesn’t budge.

“Do you think I have amnesia or something? You left my dad and you left me. He didn’t make you go. I was there when you would come and visit, and I could hear you guys talking. I heard my father yelling at you for never visiting, and you coming up with bullshit excuses about how busy you were, about how you couldn’t afford a plane ticket—”

“I couldn’t,” she interrupted.

“That’s the complete opposite of what you just claimed.” I’m so frustrated I want to kick holes in the wall. The gaslighting with this one. “You said he wouldn’t let you see me. That is a lie. You always had the option to visit; you just chose not to. I heard him tell you to act like a mother and come see your son if you wanted any child support.”

“I know he’s turned you against me,” she says sadly, her eyes going waif-big. “I still love you no matter what. No matter what he’s made you think about me.”

“Fuck this,” I snarl, and I turn and storm off down the hallway.

She runs after me. “Wait, wait,” She cries so loudly that several people stop to stare. I slow down and keep walking until there’s nobody near us.

I spin around and glare at her. “Do not try to gaslight me,” I snap. “Do not sit here, look me in the face, and lie about what you actually did. Do not try to put the blame on my father, and do not try to make me think that I am stupid or crazy for remembering what actually happened.”

She blinks hard several times. Her gaze drops to the floor. Her shoulders slump. She is about to move on to a new tactic.

“I’m very sorry,” she says quietly. “I was young and immature when I met your father. I wasn’t ready to be a mother, and I knew I was leaving you with a wonderful man.”

“A wonderful man who threatened to throw you in prison if you tried to visit me?” I scoff. “Admit that was a lie, or I’m out of here.”

“I . . . I was ashamed. I am ashamed. I should have been there for you.” She’s shrinking in on herself, going all meek and pathetic. “I would give anything to have those years back, to do things differently.”

No, she would have done things exactly the same. She just didn’t want to be a mother. But if she didn’t want to be my mother, she should have just stayed away. Instead, greed brought her back again and again, getting my hopes up and then breaking my little heart.

Well, I was long past over it.

“I no longer care,” I inform her. “I did then. I don’t now. Don’t come to any of my events again.”

She heaves a huge, trembling sigh and reaches into her purse. She pulls it out and hands me a piece of paper. “This is

my hotel room. I'm not staying in town much longer. Please call me or come visit me, even just once. I'd like to buy my boy dinner."

I grit my teeth at the phrase *my boy*.

"No, thank you," I say, and I turn and walk back towards the lobby quickly.

"I love you, honey. I miss you," she calls out loudly, and I know that's deliberate. She loves attention, and she's also being spiteful since she's not getting what she wants from me.

Rowan is waiting for me in the lobby. She leads me over to a side area, and we duck behind another painted screen.

"Sorry that happened. Can I do anything for you?" she asks, tilting her face to look up at me. "Like, do you want me to just sit there with you, and not say anything? Do you want to talk? There's an axe playing place downtown—you could get some aggression out."

"I need to head home and call my manager, but I'll text you later," I say. I'm in no mood for company, not even Rowan's.

She reaches out and pulls me into a hug, and I return it, crushing her up against me and inhaling her sweet flowery scent. She fits into my arms perfectly.

"Don't let that woman get to you. She doesn't deserve to live rent-free in your head," she murmurs.

"I know." I release her and step back. "I'll talk to you later." I hurry off, and when I'm outside the hospital, I catch a cab. I'd originally planned to ride the town car back with Rowan, but I just can't handle it today.

I'm itching for a drink. I can taste the bourbon already, smoky and burning its way down my throat, and the anger would fade and I'd be in a haze, not having to think or feel . . .

No.

I call my sober coach, and the phone rings and rings. No answer. That's fair; it's not like he was expecting my call.

I call another sober friend of mine, Maxwell Lancaster. We met in rehab. The phone rings a few times, and I guess he's not going to answer either.

"Damn it to freaking hell, damn everything, what the actual fuckity fuck—"

Maxwell answers. "Mason?" he says.

"That's me. Unfortunately," I grumble.

"Did you just say fuckity fuck?"

"Definitely not. Have you been drinking again?"

"You know I haven't. What's new? What's going on in your life?"

"Oh, you know. Hockey. That's about it, since I've been grounded from fun." I'm feeling sulky. Having my mother around banishes my ability to enjoy anything good in my life. The hospital, the kids' reactions, Rowan, my adorable puppy—I can't even focus on them, because of the swirling churn of anger in my gut.

"Was getting drunk off your ass and waking up next to random girls and not remembering what you did the night before a lot of fun?" Maxwell wonders.

"Stop being the fucking voice of reason."

"You called me because you wanted me to be the fucking voice of reason," Maxwell says cheerfully. "Tell me about something good in your life."

I wish I could tell him about Rowan, but I don't know what's actually happening there and she's sworn me to secrecy anyway.

"Well, the season's going great. My friends on the team are helping me put on a charity event. Apparently I agreed to host a zombie movie marathon. I'm going to have a friend help me with that, I think she'll be good at giving it a real corpse-y feeling."

"What friend?" Maxwell immediately catches me out, and I realize that I'm letting Rowan creep into my head and my

conversations without even realizing it.

“Platonic,” I lie. “How’s your family business going?”

“Busy. Just got back from a month in the Milan office.” His brother owns several luxury department stores. “I don’t think I’ll be able to make it to the toy drive, but I spoke to Chase and we’re each pitching in ten grand, for a total of twenty. Thanks for inviting me.”

“That’s awesome. Must be nice to work well with your family,” I say.

“Is that why you’re calling? Did something happen with your dad?”

“Not my dad.”

“Oh, hell. Did Satan’s mistress make an appearance?”

“Yeah. I don’t know what she wants. She hasn’t asked me for money yet, but I can’t imagine why else she’d hunt me down. She kept trying to call, and when that didn’t work she called my publicist, then she showed up at a charity appearance at a hospital today.” I grimace at the memory. “She gave me her address at a local hotel.”

“What does your dad think?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know; we’re barely speaking these days. He’s still pissy about me being in hockey, says I’m the reason he can’t retire, blah blah.”

Maxwell sighs. “Dude. I think you need to sit down with your mother and just give it to her straight. Tell her to respect your boundaries, or you’ll take legal action, or something like that.”

I nod, even though the idea makes me faintly queasy. “You’re right,” I say. “Let me just get it over with. Thanks, bud. Talk again soon.” I hang up.

With a sigh, I dial her number. “Mason. Baby,” she cries happily. “I knew you’d call me.”

“I am not calling because I want to see you in any way, shape, or form. I am calling to sit down, see what the hell you

want this time, and then that will be it. You understand? Meet me at the Milky Way Café on Broadway, one week from today, 11 a.m. Don't be late." She's always freaking late.

"I'll be there. Oh, honey, I'm so—" I hang up the phone, wishing it were a land line so I could slam the receiver down.

THE DAILY SNITCH

The Daily Snitch

Date ... Do you care? Time for the tea.

This star stalker stands corrected. It was brought to our attention that the woman seen at the Rovers game flirt-arguing with a certain hunky forward was in fact just arguing . . . with her client.

Mason Raker is still on the market, ladies. Turns out she's his publicist. Our bad boy has been working on cleaning up his public image with the help of a professional.

We have to admit, Mason Raker in costume is adorbs. Kudos to the woman we've learned is a junior publicist, Rowan James of Queensby Publicity. Whatever influence she's had on him has us all swooning.

We reached out to Mason for a comment, and he had this to say:

"Strawberry has been good for me. She's a pain in the rear (word has been modified for obvious reasons), but I've enjoyed my time with these kids, which is something she organized."

What we wouldn't give to spend time with the hockey stud.

ROWAN

“HEY, DEVIL-WOMAN. DEALER OF EVIL COSTUMES.” That’s how Mason greets me when I pick up the phone.

It’s a weeknight and I’m in my apartment, pacing the floor and buzzing with a restless energy. I’m not sure what I want to do tonight.

I lean against the wall, closing my eyes and trying not to picture Mason naked. It’s like trying not to think of a pink elephant. Now I can’t imagine anything else. “Hey, Legend in His Own Mind. That’s my new nickname for you. Also, you’re not exactly giving me an incentive to dial back on the costumes.”

“I am not a good man to cross, woman,” he growls.

I let out a giggle. “Ooh, you’re so cute when you try to be scary.”

“We’ll see how cute I am. How about a dozen pizzas at your doorstep, with shredded coconut topping?”

I glare at the phone as if he can see me. “Not unless you want to be Raggedy Ann at your next hospital appearance. Don’t think I won’t. By the way, did you call me for professional reasons or to give me grief?”

“Can’t it be both?”

I heave a melodramatic sigh. “The things I put up with for my clients.”

“I hope you’re not like this with all your clients,” he says, a warning clear in his tone.

“Caveman. What do you want?”

“Right now? I wanna know what you’re wearing.”

Ratty sweatpants and a stained T-shirt. “I’m wearing a lacy pink bra, a thong, and six-inch spike heels.”

He lets out a bark of laughter. “You almost had me until you got to the heels. You hate heels.”

I feel an unexpected tingle at the casual familiarity with which he says that. He does that a lot these days, makes these observations about me like he knows me.

Because he does.

I realize that in spite of everything, I’ve opened up to Mason more in these last several weeks more than I have to anyone else in years. Probably because he makes me feel safe.

A few times when I’ve had a particularly stressful day, he’s asked if I was okay, without me saying a word. When we meet up to review the plans for the campaign, he arrives with dark roast coffee with half and half and one sugar. Exactly how I like it.

It feels so couple-y. It feels so right. And that’s what’s wrong.

All of my life, I’ve made a practice of keeping things casual. Of withdrawing when things start to feel real. But I can’t withdraw because he’s my client, and he’s also more than that.

What he is, exactly, I won’t let myself speculate.

I’ve been silent too long. Mason clears his throat. “Hello, earth to Rowan. We’re having dinner together, by the way. Tonight. That’s why I was asking what you are wearing.”

“Having dinner, as in going out to dinner together? We can’t do that,” I protest. “I can’t be seen with you in public.”

“Ouch.” But he’s laughing.

I let out a sigh of exasperation. “It’s nothing personal, for heaven’s sake. It’s just that you’re hideous and embarrassing and I don’t want anyone to think I’m dating you. I’m a solid eight and a half on a good day, and you’re barely a four at your best. The numbers just don’t work.”

“You’re a twelve, and I’m the lucky ten who’s going to meet you at your doorstep in half an hour. If you don’t want anyone to recognize you, wear a disguise or something. I’ve booked a table at a very nice restaurant, it’s only fifteen minutes from your place, and to make this an offer you can’t refuse, I have important work matters to discuss.”

“Did you seriously just call *yourself* a ten?” But he’s already hung up.

And how presumptuous is he? He thinks he can just snap his fingers and I’ll jump?

Hmph. I’ll show him.

Precisely twenty-nine minutes later, because he can never just be on time, he has to be early, he rings my doorbell.

When I throw the door open, he does a double take. “You can’t be serious.”

“What?” I demand.

“Rowan . . .” He shakes his head. “I have no words.”

“And yet you’re speaking.”

“What sane woman even has this kind of thing on hand, in her apartment?” He waves his hands at me. “You are certifiable.”

“I mean, you never know when one of these things will come in handy.”

“Handy for what?” Mason pins me with a suspicious scowl.

“Terrifying door-to-door salesmen.”

Okay, maybe I went too far, but his reaction was worth it.

I pretend to fluff my hair. “You don’t like it?”

Mason narrows his eyes at me. “It’s several sizes too big for you, so obviously you were planning on making me wear it.”

I just smile and blink innocently.

He heaves a sigh and shakes his head. “You know, some women would have greeted me at the door in the outfit you described earlier. Lingerie and heels.”

“I think we’ve already established that I’m not ‘some women.’”

He shakes his head wryly. “I will wait on your couch while you change.”

“I like me just the way I am.”

“Is this because you’re afraid someone will recognize you? Because if you’re trying to go incognito, there are better ways to do it than”—he motions toward me—“this. A velociraptor? Seriously?”

“Well, look at you, knowing your dinosaurs.” I smile brightly. “Mason gets a gold star. And the costume stays. Hey, you were the one who assumed I had no plans and no social life and I’d jump at the chance to have dinner with you.”

“Point taken.” He leans against my doorway. “What if I cancel the reservation at the restaurant I’d been planning on, and take you somewhere there’s no chance of paparazzi showing up?”

I consider this. “Fine. You may wait on my couch.”

I head off to my bedroom and return in fifteen minutes, now dressed like a human. Well, a human who doesn’t want to be recognized. I have my hair pinned up in a bun and I’m wearing a stylish Hermès-print scarf over it. My dress is a flowing turquoise blue caftan style, hiding my figure, complete with glasses, which were actually part of a librarian costume from a few years back. I can’t help but wonder what has become of my life.

He looks me up and down and nods approvingly.

“Good enough for you?” I say to him.

“Sexy librarian fantasy,” he replies.

I’m smiling as I follow him out to a green Escalade. “Wasn’t this blue last time?” I ask him.

“It’s not Beck’s. It’s mine. I liked his, so I bought one for me. I figured I should be visiting my dad more often, and also I might occasionally want to come and kidnap you and take you to parts unknown. You work too hard.”

He’s thinking about the future. Don’t panic, don’t panic . . .

“You’re walking really fast,” he observes. “Incredibly eager to spend the evening with me?” He opens the passenger door for me.

“Thinking of making a run for it,” I say dryly, and slide into my seat. He leans in and grins.

“Don’t bother. I have really long legs. I’ll catch you every time. Buckle up for safety.” And he shuts the door and walks around to the driver’s side.

Half an hour later, we’re in Teaneck, New Jersey, a city whose name sounds vaguely dirty to me and always makes me laugh. When he pulls in to a little vintage railway car diner, at first I think he’s kidding. Mason Raker is not taking me to a tiny dive diner.

But he walks around to my door and opens it. I slide out and look up at the sign, which says *The Night Owl Café* in blinking neon letters.

The door to the diner opens and a gray-haired woman steps out, wearing an apron.

“Seriously?” I cry out.

He gives me a sidelong glance. “You wanted incognito,” he says, his thick brows drawing together in a frown.

“I know. I love diners so much. My parents used to take me and Ruby to our local diner all the time. This is fantastic.”

He lets out a sigh of relief. “Whew. I was afraid . . . well . . .” He starts walking towards the diner.

The woman at the door gives him a hug. “Mason. Look at you.” she beams. “I haven’t seen you in so long.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry; it’s the season.” He smiles apologetically. “You’ll be seeing me a lot more when the season’s over, I promise. And this is my friend Rowan.”

She ushers us inside. The smell of coffee and griddle-burgers brings unexpected tears of nostalgia to my eyes. All of the seats at the counter and most of the booths are taken.

“He never brings his lady friends here,” she adds to me. “You must be special.”

“Maria,” he groans.

To my surprise, she grabs me and hugs me too. She’s plump and grandmotherly and smells like flour, and I don’t want her to ever let go. Finally, she does, stands back, and looks me up and down approvingly.

“Any friend of Mason’s is a friend of ours. Paul’s babysitting the grandkids tonight. He’ll be so disappointed we missed you.”

She grabs two plastic-covered menus from a stack by the cash register and leads us over to a booth. “Your special booth,” she cries out.

The booths have bright red vinyl seats and little coin-operated tabletop jukeboxes. I am utterly enchanted.

My eyes widen in surprise. I thought I knew Mason. I would never in a million years have associated him with this place. “You have a special booth?”

“Of course he does. It’s the booth of honor. You know he and his dad saved our business, right?”

“I did not know that. Mason, you’re a man of hidden depths.”

Mason’s cheeks actually redden. Is he blushing? He is.

He slides into his booth. “The house red for Rowan, and I’ll have a 7-Up,” he tells her.

“Not until I tell this young lady how wonderful you and your dad were to us.” She gives me a serious look. “My husband was injured a few years back, the hospital bills were killing us, and business slowed way down. Mason reached out to a friend of his, a marketing genius named Chase Lancaster, and paid for a marketing campaign that had customers stretching out the door. And his dad gave us a loan, totally revamped our kitchen, and didn’t even want us to pay him back.”

Mason’s face squinches in embarrassment.

“I’ll get those drinks,” she says.

I nod. “Thank you so much, Maria.”

She nods at me approvingly. “I like this one much better.” And she hurries off.

I look at him in confusion. “Better than . . . ?”

He sighs. “Better than Lexi. I tried to bring her here. She kind of had a hissy fit. She was going on and on about cholesterol and how she had a runway show coming up, and . . . it was kind of embarrassing. We didn’t make it through the door. Maria overheard. So, she’s telling the truth. I haven’t bought anyone else here. I did try, but . . .”

Well, Lexi just dropped several notches in my esteem. No point in dwelling on the negative, though.

“I am going to use up all of my coins tonight,” I say gleefully, and I feed fifty cents into the adorable little jukebox and select an Elvis Presley song, “You Ain’t Nothing but a Hound Dog.”

“This place is great, right?” Mason is looking at me, and I can see how important it is to him that I agree. And I bob my head because yes, it is great.

Maria appears by the table with our drinks. She sets them down in front of us.

“So how long have you known Mason and his dad?” I ask her.

“Oh, since he was a little boy. His dad used to bring him here all the time.”

Wow. His richer-than-King-Midas dad bought him here?

“He was so adorable back then.” she adds.

“Cheeseburger, medium rare, large fries,” he says quickly. “What would you like, Rowan? The same?”

Oh, I sense a story there. Or maybe many stories.

“Do tell.” I slide over. “Sit down for a moment. I want to hear all about what he was like when he was a kid.”

Mason sends me a murderous look. “Rowan would like a slice of coconut pie.”

I kick him under the table. “Rowan would not.”

Maria sits down next to me and looks at us with delight. “She’s perfect for you,” she glows. Then she smiles at me, her face wreathed in wrinkles, and I want her to grandma-adopt me. “Well, when he was little, he was really scared of spiders. One of them ran across his table one time, and he screamed and ran outside, and his dad had to run and get him. His dad killed the spider for him.”

Mason’s cheeks are a delightful shade of crimson.

“Rowan will definitely have what I’m having,” he tells Maria. “We’re pretty hungry, actually.”

But Maria is not to be dissuaded. It’s clear she adores Mason, and also she remembers every single childhood anecdote.

“I’m fascinated,” I coo. “Tell me more.”

Mason glances around the restaurant. A waiter is hurrying from table to table, taking orders. “It’s so busy, though,” he protests.

Maria frowns in reminiscence. “He did actually bring another girl here once . . . when he was in second grade. I never saw her again, though. Whatever happened to her, Mason?”

“I don’t know,” he moans. “That was second grade.” He turns and starts frantically fumbling with the jukebox.

She shakes her head in disappointment. “She was a cute one. Not as cute as this girl, of course.”

“Those are wonderful stories,” I say happily.

“I’ve got so many more,” The man behind the counter yells, “Order up.”

She leaps to her feet. “What am I thinking? We are busy. I’ll go drop your orders.” She hurries over to the counter. “Yellow blanket on a dead cow and frog sticks, times two.” Oh my God. I love this place so much. I want to move in.

“Having fun?” Mason’s cheeks are returning to their normal color. Elvis’s dulcet tones ring through the air. I’m so glad I came.

I give him a look of sad disapproval, shaking my head slowly. “Mason Raker, did you break a second grader’s heart?”

He laughs. “You really want to hear the end to that story?”

“I do.”

“I was super nervous, and I sucked down an entire chocolate shake and puked in her lap on the way home.” He sighs in reminiscence. “Cindy Kopcinzky. I’d been madly in love with her since first grade. She never spoke to me again. Ended up marrying a guy who owns a chain of appliance stores, and last I heard they had six kids. Are you laughing at me?”

My hands are covering my mouth. “Maybe? Wow, you were not smooth back in the day. I somehow assumed that you were always a lady-killer. I figured you were batting those baby blues in kindergarten and all the little girls were fighting to share their Dunkaroos with you.”

“See, you’ve gotten me all wrong.” He shakes his head, looking wounded. “Just like the tabloids do.”

The Elvis song ends.

“Macarena” starts. That’s what he was doing when he was fumbling with the jukebox.

He smiles at me. “You were saying? It’s a shame I’m your ride home, by the way, and you’re trapped here with me.”

“How many times did you put on that song?” I demand. I glare at the jukebox as if it could give me answers.

“I’m thinking I should talk to your sister. I bet she’d have some great childhood stories about you.” He picks up his drink and takes a sip.

“How many times, Mason?” I glare at him.

“Well, I used up all my quarters. Uh . . . seven?”

I stare at him and shake my head very slowly. “You do not want to know what I am planning for our next hospital visit.”

He downs the rest of his soda and smiles at me. “That’s probably true. Worth it, though.”

ROWAN

“GOOD MORNING FROM MANHATTAN.” I’m sitting at my favorite Upper East Side coffee shop with my phone propped up on its little stand, narrating as if I’m a weatherman. The day is chilly, but I’m sitting at an outside table wearing a pumpkin-covered knit cap and a rust-colored wool coat. “It’s a brisk forty-eight degrees outside, sunny with a chance of mugging later today. The air is dry and there are no rain clouds in sight. Over to you, Tasha.”

“Well, here in sunny California, it’s a warm seventy-eight degrees, with a mild breeze on the horizon and a hottie walking by my table right now.” Tasha is also outside at a coffee shop. She angles her phone so we can see a guy in board shorts strolling past, lean and tan with sun-crisped blond hair. “In fact, temperatures are getting considerably hotter right now and on the rise.”

“Here in upper lower Manhattan, where I am taking a brief work break, my friends are weird and their conversations are weirder,” Shelby chimes in.

“Rowan started it.” Tasha shrugs and takes a sip of boba tea. “Aww, hottie’s got a girlfriend,” she adds, moving her phone again so we can see hottie greeting a tan surfer chick with white-blond hair.

“Yes, I know how hard it is for you to meet men,” I say dryly.

“I know, I know, it’s just that imaginary relationships are so much more satisfying. No drama, no morning breath.”

“No flatulence,” Shelby chimes in.

“No cheating,” I agree, remembering my last boyfriend. “No having to fake an orgasm so they’ll just finish already.”

“I never do that,” Shelby declares. “If he’s lousy in bed, I’ll end things and finish it off myself.”

“Yeah, really,” Tasha agrees. “Life’s too short for bad sex, and lousy lays should not be rewarded with thinking that they’ve completed the job. How will they get better if they don’t know they’re not satisfying you?”

“You speak the wisdoms.” I take a sip of my pumpkin spice latte.

“Are you drinking one of those 99 percent sugar drinks?” Shelby asks me.

“Pumpkin spice lattes are life. Do not drink shame me.” I take another sip and lick whipped cream off my upper lip. A gust of chill wind blows a newspaper down the street, and dry leaves rattle on the sidewalk. I breathe in that unique big-city scent of exhaust fumes and fermenting garbage from the nearby garbage can, and smile. It’s ridiculous, I know, but I just love being in Manhattan so much.

My cell phone pings with a message, and I swipe to read it. It’s from Mason. “You left your panties here last night. I’m keeping them.”

The heck he is. Those are La Perla. And they definitely wouldn’t fit him.

I tap out a quick reply. *We will discuss the next time I see you.*

So, tonight? he shoots back quickly.

I don’t know. I’m trying not to spend too much time with him because I don’t want to get used to it. I ignore the text and swipe the screen up to make the message disappear. Shelby and Tasha reappear on the group chat screen.

“You have a goofy smile on your face, and that’s been happening a lot lately,” Shelby observes. “Why is this?”

“She’s right,” Tasha says. She squints at me. “You are weirdly happy.”

“I’m always happy,” I protest.

“Is she, though?” Tasha asks Shelby. “I tend to pick up more of a stressed vibe.”

“Yeah, usually it’s more like an intense, focused, girl-needs-to-get-laid vibe that you’re putting down. Wait. That’s it. She’s getting laid.” Shelby crows in triumph. “Who is he?”

I look around to make sure nobody’s listening. Fortunately, the guy at the table near mine is wearing headphones and completely focused on his laptop.

“Nobody,” I protest.

“Oh, you’re going to play it that way?” Shelby snickers. “Now we’ll have to play detective. Let’s Nancy Drew this situation, shall we, Tasha?”

“We’ll Hercule Poirot the hell out of it until we get to the bottom of things,” Tasha snickers. “Bottom.”

“I swear I can’t believe anybody let you graduate kindergarten. What are you drinking there, Tasha? Boba tea? Let’s make fun of Tasha for drinking trendy drinks,” I say to Shelby.

“I see what you’re trying to do there, and it’s not going to work. Okay, my first guess is the hot guy who works at the bagel shop next to our building. My goodness. The Hole Story suddenly takes on a whole new meaning.” Shelby giggles at her witticism.

A mother is pushing her double stroller up to the table next to mine. I glare at the phone. Now I have to move, so her precious toddlers don’t overhear my pervy friends speculating on my sex life.

I grab my phone and my pumpkin spice latte and move to the other end of the little outdoor area, which is hemmed in by a waist-high iron fence.

I sit down at the table and set my phone up again. Then I scowl at the screen. “Stop pervy-ing up my favorite bagel shop,

and if you are talking about Manuel, he is married with six kids. His wife works at the shop. She slices up the bagels. If I were the type to go after married men, which I am not, I would avoid picking a guy whose wife knows where I live and is very handy with a knife,” I scoff.

“So, she admits she’s getting laid frequently, and now we just need to figure out who the lucky guy is,” Tasha says.

Damn my too-perceptive friends.

“It’s nobody,” I protest.

“The trainer at our gym?” Shelby speculates.

“Oooh, hotness,” Tasha squeals.

“Ewww, grossness. He waxes his eyebrows and pits, and I know this because he’s always posing and flexing in front of the mirror and I get glimpses of his bald pits. Seriously. The most dangerous place in the universe is getting between Marquan and a mirror.” I shudder dramatically.

“Yeah, trainers tend to be really into themselves.” Shelby nods. “And they’ve always got girls hitting on them. They’re like sexy firefighters—everybody wants a piece of them.”

“Well, that’s fine if she doesn’t want anything serious,” Tasha protests.

I sit there letting my two friends analyze my sex life and take another sip from my latte cup. I’m going to a ballet-ercise class later this afternoon. I’m meeting up with Ruby later tonight for a girls’ movie marathon. She’s still refusing to say anything about who she was dating previously, and she doesn’t want me asking anymore, so I’ve let it drop for the moment.

“Rowan? You still with us?” Shelby demands.

I give an unladylike snort. “Honestly, I drifted off for a minute there. Are you two done hallucinating about my alleged love life?”

“I’ve got it,” Tasha crows.

Shelby perks up. “You do? Who is it? Spill the beans.”

“The guy you were in the car with, the one you share a special song with. ‘Macarena,’ wasn’t it?” Tasha looks at me accusingly.

Oh, fudge. I’d hoped she had forgotten all about that.

“She hates that song,” Shelby protests. “What was the guy’s name?”

“Mason Raker.”

My face immediately goes bright red. They break into peals of laughter.

I look around again, but thankfully nobody is sitting near enough to hear them.

“Shhh,” I hiss. “This is total top-secret stuff. Do not say that name again.”

“Can I say, the hockey hottie?” Tasha asks hopefully.

“No, you may not. Too easy to guess.” I glare at her. “I am serious. This could cost me my job, and anyway, it’s absolutely nothing. Nothing is happening. I mean . . . Well, a little something is happening . . .”

I glance at Shelby’s face on the screen. “I know, you think I’m an idiot. And he dated a friend of yours and dumped her for no reason. Which is why I’m not taking him seriously at all.”

“Well, not everybody works out,” Shelby says. “And maybe the reason they were together so long without making it permanent was because there was something important missing from the relationship. She’s pretty, she’s nice, but maybe there was some spark missing, just some basic level of connection. I don’t think he was mean about it, and from what I’ve heard, when they were together he didn’t cheat on her.”

I stare at her in surprise. I didn’t expect her to be supportive of anything but a roll in the hay with Mason. “There’s no relationship potential at all,” I protest.

“Opposites attract,” Tasha says to Shelby. “Enemies to lovers. Those are my favorite tropes. It’s so much hotter that way.”

“Very true.”

“So I need to find someone I totally can’t stand, but who’s totally bangable, and have me some off-the-charts sex, is what I’m thinking.” Tasha nods to herself.

“Do it. And give us all the filthy details. In the meantime, you must spill, Rowan. What’s he like? Lexi would never talk about what he was like in the sack.”

“Well, neither will I. Come on, guys, he gets like no privacy whatsoever. He told me that he caught his maid going through his underwear drawer and snapping pictures. I wouldn’t like it if he was talking about me in the locker room, and I won’t do the same to him.”

“You don’t think he is?” Shelby asks, looking serious.

I consider this, chewing my lower lip. “No, I really don’t. He promised me that he wouldn’t, and I believe him. He knows it would probably get me fired, and I honestly think he wants to protect my reputation.”

“Sounds like a decent guy,” Tasha observes.

I shake my head. “I don’t even know if I’m going to see him again, and it’s not a big deal if I don’t.”

“Damn, girl. Send him my way, then.” Shelby laughs.

“And when she’s done, I will take sloppy thirds,” Tasha chimes in.

“Gross. And he’s a free agent; you can have him. Oh, Ruby’s calling me, I have to let you go. Love you both. Do not tell anyone, please.”

“We won’t,” they both assure me, as I switch over to take Ruby’s call.

“I’m fine, before you ask,” she says when I answer her. “Listen, can we make the movie time a little later? As part of this ridiculous fake dating scheme, I have to go with Pax to this trendy restaurant where the paparazzi always hang out. We’re going to walk in hand in hand, people will yell at him and ask if we’re dating, he’ll say ‘we’re just good friends,’

which is code for, of course we are, and then we'll have dinner and catch a cab together afterwards in front of all the paps."

"Dang, you have this all planned out. It's like a military operation," I laugh. "Are you guys getting along okay?"

She snorts. "This will be the first time I've seen him since we agreed on the fake boyfriend thing. I'm always up for a free dinner. There's nothing more to it than that. Speaking of you and Mason . . ."

"I'm pretty sure we weren't."

"But we are now," she says. "Anything happening on that front?"

"We are work friends. He's being less evil these days. That's all it can be. My job is very important to me, and Mason Raker isn't the kind of guy that you take seriously." I feel a stab of guilt when I say that.

For the past few months, he actually hasn't given me any reason to look down on him like that. He hasn't dated, he hasn't partied, he hasn't gotten in a fight. He's done nothing but take care of Puck, train, kick ass on the ice, and visit hospitals.

He has a reputation that he's going to be trying to live down for years, which isn't really fair, although it is the nature of the fame game.

"What time will you be at my apartment tonight?" I ask her.

"Is 10 p.m. too late?"

"Not at all. I will be waiting with popcorn, ice cream, and chick flicks."

"Sounds like a fun time."

"Bye, babe," I say, and hang up. My latte's gone cold now, so I carry it in to discard the cup, hoping that my friends keep their promise and don't say a word about me and what's-his-face.

As I'm walking down the sidewalk, I wonder how much longer I should let this go on. Should I end it now? Just let him know that—

My phone chirps with a text from Mason. *Rowan. I need you.*

Okay, well, I can definitely skip dance class today and see him one more time, I guess.

And how, exactly, does he need me?

The thought sends a wave of heat sweeping over me and a familiar ache of desire throbs between my legs.

Does he want me in the shower? Like last night? Or bending over his kitchen table? Which happened before the shower?

Another text bleeps. *I have a problem with my mother.*

Oh.

That's how he needs me. Like a publicist, an advisor, not like the woman who wants to climb him like a tree.

I can do that. And honestly, that is all I should be doing. I press my thumb against my temple.

This can't go on like this, it can't, it can't . . .

Then I reply to his text message. *Where do you want to meet up, and what time?*

ROWAN

PUCK IS AWAY for the afternoon, on a doggie playdate that was arranged by Mason's dog trainer. Mason's reclining on his couch, his face stamped with a scowl, when I come in using the key he gave me. According to him, Pax and I have the only copies.

He's barefoot, wearing sweatpants and a white T-shirt, and has a five o'clock shadow on his face. Even with his gloomy-pants expression, he's heartbreakingly sexy.

"I bought ice cream." I say, holding up a grocery bag. "That's my go-to bad mood cure."

"Thanks. Maybe later." He sighs. "You can put it in the freezer."

Wow. This is beyond even the help of ice cream. Must be serious.

After I stow the ice cream, I join him on the couch, setting my briefcase on the coffee table in case we need to do some work.

"Thanks for coming," he says, with all the joie de vivre of a kid who just found out the truth about Santa Claus.

"I'm here when you need me," I say, then wince, wondering if that sounded more personal than professional. Secretly dating a client is a tricky path to navigate.

"So, I agreed to see my mother next week, just to find out what she wants. She hasn't asked me for money yet, but I feel like she's going to. My father and I both made a promise to

each other that we wouldn't give her any more cash. It just runs through her fingers like water, and the more we give her, the faster she blows it, which means that she comes around more and more often. I mean, I haven't seen her in a couple of years, but that's the way it used to be." He shakes his head. "We both really laid down the law a few years ago, and when she realized that the First National Bank of Mason was shut down, she vanished. Until now."

He looks at me wearily. "She's staying at a hotel in town, says she's leaving soon, but I have no idea if that's true or not. She and the truth are not very close acquaintances. What do you think I should do about this?"

"Well, are you asking me for advice from a PR perspective, or from a friend who's got your back perspective?"

"Both, really."

I consider this carefully. "As your publicist, you need to be ready for whatever she tries to pull, which means you need to be prepared with a press statement if she does something to hurt your image. That sounds harsh, but it's just reality. If she goes on the attack, you have every right to defend yourself." I open up my briefcase and pull out a yellow lined notepad and pen.

Mason nods thoughtfully. "Yeah. When you put it like that, you're right. So what do you recommend we do?"

"Well, what can you tell me about your childhood, and her?"

Mason's mouth quirks up in a wry smile. "I had the best-looking mom of all the kids in school. She went to one of my games . . . once. Seduced the coach, broke up his marriage. Are these the kind of warm, fuzzy memories you're looking for?"

I understand his bitterness, but I need to keep him on track. "How old were you when she left?"

"Honestly, she left off and on from when I was a few weeks old. But she left permanently when I was four. She

didn't say goodbye; my dad had to tell me. I cried. I asked what I'd done wrong. He said nothing, and that he'd always be there for me." Mason blinks hard, and his jaw tightens.

"I'm very sorry," I say gently. "How long was it before you saw her again?"

"About eight months. She came to a birthday party, didn't bring a present, and left after half an hour, again without saying goodbye. I got used to that after a while."

I'm scribbling notes.

"Good stuff, huh?" he says bleakly.

"Mason, it's okay to be pissed off. And I'm really glad that you've made the healthy decision to stay away from her. I wish she'd respect your choices, but we'll figure this out and she'll be out of your hair soon enough. I'd like a rough estimate of how many times you saw her after she left."

"Six when I was a little kid, then a few times when I was a teenager." He scowls. "She visited my father more often than me when I was younger. He was the one with the piggy bank."

"To your knowledge, has she ever been arrested?"

"I know of a number of DUIs; that's one reason my father would never let her drive me anywhere." He heaves a sigh. "Also, when she cornered me at the hospital, she first tried to claim that my father was the reason she couldn't see me, said his lawyers threatened to throw her in jail if she even tried. When I told her that I had directly overheard conversations that contradicted that, she got all pouty and said, 'Okay, well, I was ashamed of what I did.' She'll switch stories on a dime; when one thing doesn't work, she'll just try something else."

I'm writing, and I'm furious, and I'm heartbroken for him. It takes all of my professional composure to remain calm and gently query him about the truth of his childhood.

When we're done, I've got enough to put together an excellent response if she runs wailing to the press about how her wealthy son won't give his poor mother a dime.

We've somehow moved closer to each other. I didn't even notice.

I shove my notepad and pen back in my briefcase. We both fall silent. Mason looks at me, and his stare is intense. I feel the pull between the two of us.

Need slowly unfurls inside me, a gentle pulsing ache, but I don't want to make the first move for a million reasons. I still don't trust what we have. I don't even know what we have. He texts me a lot, he calls me a lot, we have amazing mind-blowing sex, he keeps telling me that he's not seeing anyone else even though I haven't asked . . .

And he's also just been through something really heavy emotionally. I almost feel like I'd be taking advantage.

Very carefully, subtly, I move a few inches away from him on the couch and let my gaze drop. I stare at the floor, at his expensive gray and black rug with its abstract patterns. I think about how he hasn't made this apartment a home, and I wonder what home actually means to him.

"Don't do that, Rowan." His voice goes low and urgent.

"Do what?" I guess I wasn't that subtle after all.

"Don't pull away from me." His sea-green eyes burn with hunger as he looks at me.

I sit frozen, my hands clenching together. "I just . . . I just don't want to be your escape."

"Why?" he asks softly. He slides closer to me, and his muscular leg presses up against mine, his body heat warming me.

"Because I want this to be real." The words spill from my mouth unbidden, like a shameful confession.

He's silent, and the room is so quiet that I can hear my own heartbeat thundering in my ears. I just asked for . . . more. I just asked for a relationship, for an acknowledgment that there's something more here than very hot steamy sex.

Long moments stretch between us, and he's not moving away, not flinching in disgust at the thought, not spilling out

excuses.

“This might be the one thing in my life that’s ever been real, Rowan,” He says it gravely, his gaze seizing mine and holding it prisoner. There’s not a hint of humor in his voice.

“Then we shouldn’t mess it up,” I say faintly.

“Would having sex with me today mess it up?” He arches an eyebrow.

“Sex has ruined a lot of good things.” I’m quavery inside, turning his words over and over in my head. Things have just changed between us, which means my life has changed in some way. We’re not friends with benefits. We’re . . . what are we?

We still haven’t named it, and I am not going to push, because I don’t know what I want from him either. Under other circumstances, I’d take the risk that Mason has changed or that I’m actually his person, and that alone is a big risk because he’s a man with a very public past.

But there’s the job, which is everything to me.

Why does such a good thing have to be so complicated?

“So ruin me, Row. I’m tough. I can take it.” That humorous gleam is back in his eyes, and I smack him against the chest playfully, but he grabs my hand and holds it there. I can feel every thump of his heart.

He leans forward, hand cupping under my chin, and kisses me. It starts tender, then gets hungrier and hungrier, until he’s moving in, grabbing my shirt, and pulling it up over my head. It tangles in my arms and he pushes me down on the couch, my arms trapped and pinned by his hand.

“I want you to let me take charge,” he says, and there’s so something sexy about submitting, but with consent.

“Yes,” I breathe.

He cups my face in both hands, sliding on top of me, kissing me until I can’t see straight. He seizes my lower lip between his teeth, tugging it gently, and I moan into his mouth.

Then he moves south. Oh, God. He is so good at that. I whimper in anticipation as he tugs my pants off.

“Don’t move,” he growls. “Don’t try to take over.”

“Are you calling me a bossy bossy-pants?” My voice is breathy as I laugh.

“That’s the general idea. Now stop trying to do everything for everyone else, and let someone else take care of you for once.”

“Yes, sir.” I let out a giggle, which vanishes as he kisses his way down my stomach.

His firm hands spread my thighs apart and he moves between my legs, kissing, sucking, lapping.

I should take him in my mouth right now . . .

No. He’s right. What’s wrong with letting someone give me pleasure?

He spreads the petals of my pussy wide apart and buries his face there, and the heat swirls up inside me until the pleasure is agony. Even then, he doesn’t let up. My hips buck and he holds me in place, which is fortunate, because I almost fall off the couch from the strength of my orgasm. It rocks my whole body and leaves me spent and gasping.

The next thing I know, he’s flipped me over, shoving a knee between my legs, spreading me open roughly.

“You want this?” He’s on top of me as I lie with my face turned to the side.

“Oh, God, stop talking and fuck me.”

Who just said those words?

Apparently, the voice of authority, because he magics a condom out of thin air, the crackle of the wrapper a promise of what’s to come. I’m about to beg for him to hurry, but I feel him at my entrance and finally, he’s inside me, stretching my tight sheath.

His thrusts are so hard that I’m shoved me forward on the couch and I have to reach up, disentangling my arms from my

shirt, and brace myself on the couch arm. Every thrust shoots sensations of intense pleasure through my pussy, already sensitive from just having come.

He comes first, and the sounds of his pleased groans and the pistoning of his hips send me over the edge a second time. “Fuck,” he cries out. “Oh my God . . .”

He gasps, breath heaving from him, and collapses on top of me. Finally, he slides out of me and we lie there wordless for several minutes, as our breathing finally slows.

We roll onto our sides and he throws an arm and leg around me, pulling me up against him.

I rest my head on his shoulder.

“What are you thinking?” he whispers into my ear. “And don’t tell me how you’re thinking about how incredible the sex was, because while that is true, you’ve got that serious look on your face.”

“Do not,” I protest.

“You’re thinking about something work-related. It’s okay. You love what you do, and I love that about you. I mean, I think about hockey all the time, how I can be better, I plan moves in my head . . .”

I let out a laugh.

“Not while we’re having sex,” he adds quickly. “When I do that, I am focused on one thing, and one thing only. Making you come so hard you see stars.”

“Mission accomplished.” I smile at him.

“So,” he persists, “what’s on your mind?” And he actually cares. He wants to know what I’m thinking, what’s happening in my life, how it affects me.

“I’m thinking that as for a personal recommendation about what to do about your mother, I’d have her ass followed and watched around the clock. Gather all the dirt you can. Do a deep dive into her history, any arrest records, ex-boyfriends, her past and current finances . . . and be ready to bury her if you need to.”

Mason props his head up on his arm and grins at me fiercely. “Why, Rowan James, you are positively evil. Should I be worried that if things go south, you’ll bury me?”

I reply with a sweet smile and an innocent blink of my eyes. “I already have the shovel ready and my alibi arranged.”

ROWAN

I SHOULDN'T EAVESDROP. I really shouldn't.

It's a nasty habit, like gossiping or making people listen to you explain who the Bachelor should pick for his bride this season.

Then again, Amanda, or Amoeba as Mason keeps calling her, shouldn't discard invitations that I've worked really hard on, and mess with an event that benefits sick children.

That's how I justify pausing in the hallway outside Amoeba's—I mean Amanda's, damn it. — partially closed doorway when I hear her talking—because she's mentioning our event.

“Night with the Rovers star players, my ass,” she says. “It'll be the Hindenburg when I'm done with it. And Cecelia will finally see who the real power player is at this agency.”

There's a pause, then a trill of laughter. “I know, mother, I know. What can I tell you? I've never liked to lose.”

That forking beeyotch.

“I mean, it would be terrible if the caterers didn't show up, wouldn't it? Or if they delivered ice sculptures shaped like a dick?” Another pause. “Of course, I'd use a burner phone and a voice disguiser. Mama didn't raise no amateur.”

She wants to sabotage, and possibly send obscene material, to a children's party—one with my name attached to it, of course.

I picture myself putting Nair in her shampoo bottle and watching her hair sizzle away on her head. That's the least of what she deserves. She deserves a case of full-body herpes with a side helping of head lice. She deserves explosive diarrhea during the most intimate of moments.

She deserves—

No, thinking like this is not productive.

I need to do exactly what I advised Mason to do two nights ago—gather intel and always be two steps ahead of the game—right before we moved from the couch to the floor.

Mason got his appetite back and discovered some creative uses for ice cream. Then we both discovered that ice cream is very, very sticky, and we moved to the shower. That was my first ever four-orgasm night. Mason high-fived himself afterwards, and I laughed so hard I nearly peed myself. Laughing with Mason is almost as good as the sex, but I don't know if there's anything as good as sex with Mason Raker, not even the Rovers brand of chocolates.

Maybe we should use the chocolates in ridiculously dirty ways the next time I see him.

My God, what that man can do with his tongue . . .

My whole body is hot now. Can a woman in her twenties have hot flashes? Is this what menopause feels like?

I start fanning myself with my hand, while craning to hear what Amoeba—I mean Amanda. — is saying.

“Rowan? What are you doing?” Cecelia's voice, coming from right behind me, startles me so much I stumble back a step.

Amanda leaps to her feet and hurries over.

“What are you doing lurking in the hallway outside of my office?” she cries, suspicion written all over her face. It's funny how the guilty are always the most suspicious.

“Well, I do have to pass your office to get to my office,” I say mildly.

“Now, Amanda, we’ve talked about this,” Cecelia says reprovingly. “She works here. I’d hardly call it lurking.” Interesting. So Amanda’s complained to her about me, and Cecelia told her to back off.

Unfortunately, since Cecelia doesn’t want to be seen as playing favorites, that means I can’t bring any of my very legitimate complaints to Cecelia either. Amanda would furiously deny it, and I can’t prove anything.

However, Amanda has already just unknowingly revealed the kinds of things she might do to sabotage the event. I’m going to have to check in with every single vendor who will be serving us that evening and let them know that if anyone tries to change the plans in any way, they need to contact me immediately. I’m also going to have to do regular check-ins with the invitees that I know well, to make sure that nobody tries to tell them that the event has been cancelled. And I’m going to have to make sure all of the security guards don’t let anyone uninvited in.

Wow. I’m really going to have to keep my ear to the ground on this one. I’m going to have to think like Amanda—which is going to be like taking a refreshing dip in a sewer jacuzzi—to forestall anything that she might try to do.

I’m going to have to recruit my friends and Mason to help me anticipate every dirty trick Amanda could pull.

My biggest hope is that Amanda will get caught trying to sabotage the event—not because I’m being spiteful, but because her behavior is truly, genuinely rotten and she should not be in public relations.

“Actually, I’m really glad you’re here. I’d like to review how things are going for the event,” I say to Cecelia, before Amanda has the chance to lob any more accusations at me.

She bobs her head in agreement, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “Certainly, dear. Give me fifteen minutes; my coochie waxer is waiting for me.”

“She comes to your office?” I say in astonishment.

“Doesn’t everyone’s?” Cecelia looks genuinely puzzled. “Like, where else would you meet up with your coochie waxer? In a dark alley?”

I hope she has a very nice view from that ivory tower of hers.

I start imagining a world where coochie waxers show up at everyone’s place of employment as a normal part of the day—the garage mechanic takes a quick break, the fast food employee ducks into the break room to do their back, sack, and crack . . .

I stifle a laugh. I’ll have to tell Mason about this. He’ll freaking die. Also he’ll never be able to look at Cecelia the same way again. You’re welcome, Mason.

Cecelia’s heading off, and Amanda’s still giving me the death stare. “Were you eavesdropping?” she demands.

“Why? Were you up to something you shouldn’t be?” I give her a wide-eyed stare of innocence and head back to my office. As I’m walking down the hallway, I hear her door slam.

I sit down at my desk and pull out my box of Rovers chocolates and my list of invitees. I take a bite of Paxton’s chocolate, then glance apologetically at Mason’s chocolate. “Sorry,” I say to it. “He’s really tasty. Don’t take that the wrong way.” He absolutely would pout and sulk if he were here to hear that.

I start going down the list of invitees, looking at all the check marks and counting them up. By the time I’m done, Cecelia walks in, presumably with a cooch balder than our national bird. There she is, in her twenty-thousand-dollar suit, looking like the respectable Upper East Side society matron that she is, with a shocking secret underneath her skirt.

Mason is going to die.

“I’ve got 150 confirmed guests, along with 40 local celebrities, and that’s not even including the team itself.” I say happily.

Cecelia sits down in the chair facing my desk. “My dear, you are an absolute superstar. I knew you’d do well, but this is

amazing.”

When I tell her how much money we’ve raised already, her smile stretches even wider. “I am running out of words to praise you with.”

“Oh, Mason did most of the heavy lifting, I have to admit.” I’m glowing from the compliments. “He really, really came through with the celebrities and some of the bigger donations.”

Cecelia’s smile fades, and she peers at me closely, leaning forward. “Uh-oh.”

“What?” I give her a puzzled look.

Her eyes narrow. Her botoxed forehead comes dangerously close to wrinkling. “Why does it look like you’re having dirty dreams about your sexy bad boy client?”

I widen my eyes and give her a hurt look. “Cecelia. I’m sorry, you know I love you, and I try to have a sense of humor and all, but that’s very inappropriate.” The best defense is a good offense.

“Thank heavens.” She gives me a look of relief. “You know it would be a major conflict of interest to date a client.”

I reply with a wry smile. “I think if there’s one thing that history has taught us, it’s that Mason Raker does not date.” I mean, that’s kind of mostly true, right?

“True, true,” she muses. “But still. I’d be an awful friend to not warn you about it. Honestly, dear, you do look a little moony-eyed when you talk about him.”

“How?” I ask her. “Like this?” I open my eyes really wide and blink hard. She bursts out laughing.

“Don’t make my eyes water. I’ll ruin my makeup,” she protests. Thank heavens, my diversion seems to be successful. My next move would have been to threaten her with chocolate.

“Now, who’s doing the catering? And who’s doing the flowers and the ice sculpture?”

I quickly run through our vendor list, again making a firm mental note to stay in very close touch with them. Damn, this

is ridiculous. I can't wait until I get the promotion and don't have to worry about Amanda anymore. I should be able to focus on the client and what's best for them, not worry about sabotage at every turn. Honestly, what I hope is that when I get promoted, Amanda will have such a tantrum that she'll either end up quitting or being fired.

"And, once all the toys have been purchased and delivered to Rovers headquarters, the team will help wrap them."

"Whoa, what?" Cecelia shakes her head. "The team is personally going to do that?"

"Yep, and they're going to put their initials on each package with a sharpie," I say proudly. "The kids will love it. They'll probably save and frame the wrapping paper."

We spend a few more minutes chatting, and after Cecelia leaves, I call the caterer to finalize everything. Then I shoot off a text to Mason. *The toys will be delivered to the Rovers headquarters. Have the guys ready to wrap presents one week from today. We have hundreds of gifts to wrap.*

I get a quick reply. *No way. Do you know how busy we all are during the season? They'll never go for it.*

They're too busy for sick kids?

They're too busy to wipe their own butts.

I make a face as I dictate a reply. *First of all, gross. Second of all, that's . . . disappointing. I already told all the kids that their gifts would be individually wrapped by Rovers players who would initial the wrapping with a Sharpie, and they were so excited. They are going to be really sad and cry and cry when they find out I lied to them. They'll never trust again."*

I send the text. Then I add, *NBD though.*

No big deal? I can practically hear the outraged squawk in his voice when I get the text reply. *You are a master of manipulation, devil woman. That's my new nickname for you.*

I'm sure you've called me worse, I reply.

You're not wrong, he text-huffs.

Listen. About that zombie movie marathon? I know your teammates are counting on you, and I throw a mean theme party.

Tell me more.

I smile. I will make zombie-themed food and refreshments, and I will get zombie-themed decorations, and Ruby and I will decorate. You won't have to lift so much as a pinkie finger. All you'll have to do is pick the movies.

That I can do. OK fine the guys will have a wrap party. And . . . that's a wrap. Ha ha.

Now I'm laughing like a goof.

Oh, shoot.

I am absolutely breaking Cecelia's rules about fraternization. And I think back on how many times Mason's popped into my head just since I arrived at work. I'm going to tell Mason this, I'm going to tell Mason that, he'll love the office gossip, I need to ask him for help with Amanda . . .

Slow your roll, I tell myself sternly. Fools rush in and all that.

I send another text. *Listen, I'm going to be very busy all week preparing for the event, so I'm not going to be around unless it's an emergency.* Subtext: no nookie. No hanging out.

He sends back a quick reply. *I've got a busy week too with practice and the weekend games. Will you be there? Wearing the appropriate jersey?*

I'll try, I answer. I would love to, but I can't make any promises. The event planning has to come first.

What I mean is that I need to stay away. What I mean is that I'm falling for Mason Raker, but I'm going to catch myself before I get hurt.

MASON

MY FATHER IS at home in the afternoon when I stop by, which is not always the case. I called and asked him to meet me there. We haven't actually seen each other in a few months. He still lives in our Short Hills, New Jersey, home, although he also has a Manhattan apartment these days, and a few other residences scattered around the country.

It's a cool day, with a dusting of snow on the vast lawn. To this day, my father still has the landscapers maintaining the topiary bushes trimmed in funny animal shapes. He did that for me when I was little. Of course, at the time he didn't realize I was going to be a little idiot who'd aim his slip and slide down a hill and end up getting his ass impaled by a bunny bush.

It coincided with one of my mother's rare visits, and she didn't even visit me at the hospital. I didn't mention that to Rowan. It's just too . . . I don't know, pathetic?

I park my rented car in front of the house and the butler—yes, my father has one—lets me in. “He's in the parlor,” Reginald the butler tells me.

“Thank you, Reginald.”

My father is reclining on a white sofa and reading a newspaper when I walk in. He wears a custom-made cashmere sweater in a deep shade of midnight blue.

His tailored white wool trousers are paired with polished leather loafers, handcrafted by a renowned Italian shoemaker.

The room is adorned with pop art, including a genuine Warhol, a favorite of his. The sofa cushions are printed with Warhol paintings. The grand piano in the corner gleams like new, with an abstract red vase resting on it, holding a single white rose from my father's greenhouse.

He glances up and sets the newspaper down, and I walk over to sit on an armchair facing him.

"Mason. Long time no see." He gestures at a silver tray, which has a plate of cookies and bottles of seltzer water. I grab one of the bottles and take a sip, to be polite.

"Thanks," I say.

"So, I know you didn't make the drive out here just to see your old man. What's going on?"

I grimace. "Twist that guilt knife, won't you?" I mean, he works in Manhattan, I work in Manhattan . . . he could call me. He's just pissed that I'm still playing hockey, and acting like a petulant toddler who's not used to being told no.

He gives me a wry grin. "That's a father's job, isn't it?"

"And you do it so very well. All right, here's the deal. My mother's in town, and she kept texting me until I blocked her, and then she tried to reach me through a friend, and when that didn't work, she showed up at a public event I was attending."

He narrows his eyes.

"Has she tried to reach you?" I ask him.

"No, but the last time she tried to call, I threatened to have her served with a restraining order. You always go too easy on her." He shakes his head, his brow furrowing, and runs his fingers through his thick, dark hair. He's gray at the temples, and now that I'm here, I see that his hair has more gray in it too.

"I know," I sigh. "And it's coming back to bite me in the ass." Just like a rabbit-shaped bush.

"Well, how can I help? What would you like me to do?"

“Nothing right now. I just wanted to let you know, in case things get ugly. I’m meeting her in a couple of days at a café on Broadway—”

“Mistake,” my father interrupts.

“Maybe. I just want to find out why she’s so persistently trying to get in touch with me. I mean, she knows I’m not going to give her any cash . . .”

My voice trails off.

My father heaves a deep sigh, and pity shines in his eyes.

“What?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. “I think that there’s a part of you that’s hoping she wants a real relationship with her son. And I’m sorry. That’s just not part of her makeup. She does not have a maternal bone in her body, which is not in any way your fault.”

He’s said that to me a million times. How much I actually believe it, I don’t know. I mean, intellectually, of course, I know that my mother is just a selfish human being and that normal mothers love their children and that there is nothing that I did as a small partially developed human that was so terrible as to drive her away.

But any person who’s been abandoned by a parent will tell you that it sows lifelong seeds of self-doubt.

“I know,” I agree unhappily. The worst part of it is, on some level—a very, very low level, like subterranean—yes, I guess I do kind of hope that my mother has turned into a completely different person, one who genuinely regrets what she did, one who wants a relationship with her only child.

But if that were the case, she wouldn’t have lied through her pretty white teeth at the hospital, trying to blame my father for her abandonment.

“Anyway, my publicist helped me to put together a statement in case she pulls something like going to the press and crying about how her rich son won’t give her two beans and she’s panhandling for soup, or whatever.”

“Sounds like something she’d do.” My father nods. “In fact, I’m surprised she hasn’t gone the press route yet. Wait, publicist? You have a publicist? When did you get one, and why?”

I groan aloud. I didn’t voluntarily get a publicist, of course, but I agreed to it to save my hockey career.

“I’m not talking about it, because it has to do with hockey, and you never want to hear about my profession.”

“Yes, I’ve made that perfectly clear for years. And yet you refuse to listen.”

Heat rises inside me. Why can’t the man appreciate how lucky I am to get to pursue my passion and make a great living doing what I love? “Well, I’m not a kid that you can push around anymore.”

“When have I ever pushed you around?” my father grumbles. “I’d love to, but you’re too damned big. I should get myself a taser.”

I burst into laughter. He gives me a grumpy half-smile.

“Hockey is my passion, Dad. I’ve always loved it. I was always great at it, and honestly, it feels really good to be great at what I love. I love being on the ice, I love the rush I feel, I just . . . when I’m on the ice, it transports me. I can’t explain it, I guess. Don’t you ever get that pure feeling of adrenaline rush when you’re . . .”

“Playing golf? Can’t say I do. I do like the drinks cart, though. And the cart girls.” He grins at me. I laugh.

“Seeing anyone special?” I wish he wasn’t such a workaholic, and so bitter and burned by my mother. He dates, sometimes, but I already know the answer I’m going to get.

“Nah, don’t have time for that nonsense. Nor can I afford it.” He snorts. Well, he could—he really could—he’s one of the most successful real estate developers on the planet, and we’re sitting in a mini mansion with a garage full of classic cars and a wine cellar worth millions, but I think what he’s really thinking of is the emotional cost.

“You could meet someone at the country club,” I muse. “Live a little.” Look at me, giving my dad life advice. If that isn’t the dictionary definition of ironic, I don’t know what is.

He pours seltzer water into a crystal-cut glass, drinks it, and sets it down. “Let’s focus on you. You’re going to get seriously hurt one of these days. Do you really enjoy taking balls to the face on a regular basis?”

Unfortunately, I’m also taking a sip of water as he says that, and I choke and splutter, water dribbling down the front of my shirt.

“Oh, grow up,” he says with annoyance. “And don’t drool on my couch. You know exactly what I mean.” He hands me a cloth napkin and I dab at the couch.

“Well, no, Dad, I don’t. Since we use pucks in hockey, not balls.” I cough and clear my throat, smirking.

“So you chose a sport that requires no balls to play,” he muses.

“Ouch.” I shake my head at him.

“Come on. You could be sitting in a high-rise office with a beautiful view of Manhattan, planning and building empires. There’s enormous satisfaction in that. You were good at your architecture classes, I remember. Good at your business classes, too.”

I took those classes just to please him. “I’d make huge changes to your business, Dad. I wouldn’t walk in and run things the way you want me to.”

He brightens up and my heart sinks. Have I just given him false hope? I didn’t mean to. “I’m not interested. I’m sorry.”

“You can change things, of course. You’d be taking over the business. You’d put your own stamp on it, and I’d be proud.”

“I’m going to be playing hockey for at least a few more years, Dad. I will stay in the game for as long as I’m physically able and as long as the team will have me.” It pains me to have this conversation with him again. I don’t want to

fight with him, I don't want to upset him, I don't want to piss him off, but I am my father's son, and I'm as stubborn as he is.

My father's jaw has that stubborn set to it. "Then I'll be stuck there until you come to your senses. Which means I should get fitted for a coffin that will fit in my office." Argh. Not the guilt again.

"Why don't you have Jeffrey take over?" I name his extremely capable CFO.

He narrows his eyes at me. "Jeffrey is old."

"Pot . . . meet kettle." I snort.

"You know what I mean. He's only a couple of years younger than me, not in any position to take over a business empire. He's nearing the end of his career."

"Look, you keep complaining that you want to retire, and I'm saying you have options. Like Jeffrey. He's more than capable of running things until I retire from hockey. He's not an old fart like you."

My father mock-glares at me. "I could still take you."

He couldn't, but I would certainly let him win at arm-wrestling just to save his ego. "I know, Dad. But child abuse is still illegal."

"Damned softy liberals. When did a little child abuse ever hurt anyone?"

"Uh . . . I'll just let that one go, along with the balls to the face comment, but seriously. Talk to Jeffrey. You've got the perfect team in place. All you have to do is step down, and you can spend your days sailing and fishing."

"I don't own a boat."

God, is he a stubborn son of a bitch. "Buy one."

We spend a pleasant afternoon arguing and having my life choices questioned until my phone beeps. It's a text from an unknown number. *Hey sweetie, it's your mom. So she's guessed that I blocked her old number. See you soon. I'm so excited to spend time with my boy.*

“Your mother?” my father guesses, from the look on my face.

“Yeah. I might as well head home anyway,” I tell him.

After I’ve said goodbye, I drive home, return the rental car, and cab it to my house.

I’m about to head in when, to my surprise, I see Lexi standing by my doorway.

“Hey,” I say with annoyance. I still have all kinds of feelings when I see her, mostly of the regretful kind. We both said we wanted a casual relationship, but after a while, as is often the case, she came to want more. When she hinted at it, I was always honest. She could have left at any time, but she chose not to.

I wasn’t happy to have to end things, but I knew it had to be done.

“Mason.” She gives me a surprised look. Uh, I do live here. She doesn’t, so . . . “Why are you here, Lexi?”

“Well, Mason, I live in Manhattan and I have a friend in the area, and after visiting her, I wanted to take a nice walk.”

I squint at her suspiciously. It’s chilly out and she never liked being outdoors in the cold. And really . . . of all places in Manhattan . . . she ends up here?

Lexi shakes her head at me. “Don’t overthink it, Mason. And honestly, I’m not trying to be mean, but don’t flatter yourself. I have no desire to get back together with you. I’ve moved on.”

I’ve got to admit, she’s not looking at me like a woman scorned, or a woman with any romantic interest.

“Sorry,” I shrug. I do get paranoid, but it’s kind of hard not to when everybody wants a piece of you. “So, uh . . . how’ve you been?”

“Good, good. Just came back from a runway show in Milan. The offers are kind of slowing down. I’m taking some acting classes, and I’ve gotten a couple of commercials.”

“That’s great.” And I mean it. I only wish her well.

“Lexi,” a voice shouts. “Hey, Lexi.” And the next thing I know, two photographers are running down the street, aiming cameras at us like guns. I flinch. A car stops, and then another car, and more photographers pour out.

“Lexi and Mason,” one of them shouts.

Lexi stumbles and falls right into me, and instinctively, I catch her and set her on her feet.

“What did you do?” I bark at her. “You set this up? Seriously?”

“I did nothing of the kind.” She shakes her head at me. “For God’s sake, Mason, I’m paparazzi bait and so are you. They follow both of us. It’s not my fault.”

But I’m already backing away towards my doorway.

THE DAILY SNITCH

The Daily Snitch

The date doesn't matter—it's a sad day . . .

Lexi Caton, Mason Raker's supposed ex-flame, was seen outside his apartment looking awfully cozy with him. We wonder if that other Rover stud is aware that his girl is handling multiple sticks . . .

What does this mean for the Rovers? Can these two alpha men work the ice together after all the drama? One can only hope that this isn't the end of an era, because this star stalker can say without a doubt, if it were me, I couldn't look my teammate in the face.

If the Rovers break up over this, poor Lexi will find herself an enemy of the state, no doubt.

Best save your clever costumes for your lover, Mason. She might need to hide out as a cock-a-doodle-do for a bit.

Now that we'd love to see.

ROWAN

TO STAY AHEAD OF AMANDA, I have to go into stealth mode. I'm at my office, but typing all of my plans into a personal laptop with an encrypted password. I'm currently listing every possible thing I can think of that she might do to sabotage the event.

I pause to look over my list. *Release radioactive mutated attack rats* seems unlikely, but this is Amanda we're talking about here.

Replace waiters with lookalike trained assassins—maybe that's going too far?

Okay, I'm being a little wacky, but I'm trying to make a stressful situation at least a little bit fun. I think I've covered every possible angle, both logical and illogical.

My phone dings with a text from Mason. Oh, heck, we're not supposed to be speaking to each other this week—so it must be a problem. His mother? An arrest? A drunken bender?

I pull my phone from my purse and glance at it, and my mouth curves up in a grin.

It's a picture of an amoeba with a circle and a slash through it—our little inside joke, since he can't stop calling Amanda “amoeba” and he's got me accidentally calling her that all the time.

I send him a quick text back. *Stop it.*

He replies, *Never gonna stop.*

Then another text. *Here's the solution to the amoeba situation*, with a link. I click the link . . . and it takes me to the song “Never Gonna Give You Up.”

I reply with a furious *Did you just Rickroll me? Did you just forget who's in charge of the costumes? I have gone easy on you so far.*

“If that’s easy, I’d hate to see you go hard.”

Of course, that text has me flushing with heat and pulsing in all of the wrong places.

That's it. I am turning the phone off for the rest of the day, I text back. In the event of a public relations emergency, please hang up and dial 9-1-1. I mean the front desk.

I immediately turn the phone off and go back to work. I’ve listed the various ways Amanda might try to sabotage me. Now I need to come up with a plan of action to block each possible attempt. Jeez, is this a waste of my freaking time. To make it more entertaining, I pretend that she’s a supervillain bent on wreaking havoc in our city, and I’m the superhero who is the city’s only hope.

A couple of hours have passed when I hear Cecelia’s confident, rapid footsteps tapping down the hallway. I quickly shut off my laptop, shove it in my shoulder bag that’s resting on the floor, and start typing on my work computer, where I have a spreadsheet open and waiting in case of interruption.

Cecelia walks in. “Have you heard?” she asks without preamble.

“Have I heard you’re slaying it in the business wardrobe department? Yes, I have.” She’s wearing a Giorgio Armani black-and-white color block dress with glossy black heels and a rope of pearls.

“Well, obviously,” she says, with a small smile. “That’s hardly news, dear.”

I hold a pen out to her like a microphone. “Cecelia Queensby, women everywhere are asking, how do you always look so fabulous?”

She settles into the chair facing me. “I will take the secret to the grave, but it involves siphoning the souls of my enemies into a jar. I’ll say no more. But seriously, have you heard?”

She does actually look serious. Could this be about Mason? How much trouble could he possibly have gotten himself into in the last couple of hours?

Well, this is Mason, so . . .

But no. He would hardly have been on a drinking binge in the very short time since he texted me. And I should give him more credit than that.

“I have not, sorry.”

“Is your phone on?”

I grab it from my purse and quickly switch it back on. “I turned it off so I could focus on work. I am so sorry,” I say. My phone starts beeping with multiple alerts. I look at it with alarm. “I figured if there was any kind of emergency, the front desk would notify me. What’s happening?”

Cecelia gives me a reproving look, and my heart sinks. I don’t have the luxury of screwing up in even the tiniest way, not with the promotion on the line. “Well, nothing huge yet, but we need to stay on top of this.”

Cecelia pulls a small iPad from her quilted Chanel purse and puts it down in front of me. There’s a picture of Mason and Lexi Caton on the front page—and they’re standing in front of his apartment building.

“Second time’s a charm?” the headline blares. I feel faintly ill. Lexi’s got a huge grin on her face and Mason’s smiling at her.

This happened today. Before he sent me those cute, flirty texts.

“You see the potential problem here?”

Maybe there’s a reasonable explanation for this . . .

I tear my gaze away and glance up at her. “Uh, I can see multiple problems.”

She tents her fingers together. “Do elaborate.”

Well, one big problem is that he’s not going to be able to play very well once I make him a member of the castrato. “Well, number one, the biggest problem I see is that we are trying very hard to get the press to focus on Mason’s ability on the ice and his charitable works, and we don’t want them thinking about him as a playboy again. We don’t want them to associate the words *Mason* and *drama*.”

She nods approvingly. “What else?”

“Lexi is known to be dating his teammate. This whole love-triangle aspect is a nightmare. The press is going to be waiting to see which of the two throws the first punch. And is Lexi going to be allowed back in the wives and girlfriends area? And which guy will be getting her the girlfriend pass?” I can hear my voice as if from a very long way away. I’m doing everything right. I’m sounding professional, detached.

Go, me.

Cecelia nods again. “We’ve identified the problem. How do we address it?”

“Well, I need to speak to him first and figure out what’s going on. We know how important his career is to him. Maybe . . . maybe they just ran into each other?” Cecelia winces. I sigh. “I’ll have a better idea of a plan of attack once I’ve spoken to him. If he . . . if he’s dating her again, I mean, we can’t tell him who to date, but he would need to be a lot more discreet.”

I’m talking about him as if he didn’t have his tongue up my private parts in the very recent past. As if he hadn’t talked about us together with a dreamy look in his eyes.

That lying sack of shredded coconut.

Oh, I’ll be shredding his coconuts all right . . .

Damn it. I only have myself to blame for this.

Cecelia stands up, nodding. “You’re on the right track. He’s very lucky he has you in his corner. Let me know what you come up with.”

As soon as she leaves, I look at my messages. None of them are from Mason. What a surprise. I do have several concerned messages from Shelby, who of course heard about it. I don't answer her, because I have no idea what to say.

I start searching online. It's all over the usual gossip rags. Some of them, citing anonymous sources, say that they got back together weeks ago; they've just been keeping it on the QT and this is them finally going public again.

Other anonymous sources report seeing them discreetly making out in the VIP area of a local celebrity hotspot. The date and time that's named . . . we weren't together that night. So it could be true.

I feel faintly ill. Mason has that rep. He dated a ton of women before Lexi, worked his way through New York's eligible bachelorette population after Lexi . . .

The phone rings.

It's Mason.

"Hey, hotness," he says brightly.

"That's me." I hide the rage brimming in my voice. Screw him. So he wants to have his cake and eat me too?

I'm not going to let my own stupid mistake cost me my promotion. I'm a big girl. I always knew this was just a fling . . . I guess I'm just disappointed because I thought that at least we were going to be honest with each other.

"So, what are you working on? How are the plans to conquer evil and make it suffer?"

"Oh, they're going just great." I smile savagely and open my desk. I pull out my ever-present box of Rovers chocolates, grab Mason's, and squeeze it between my thumb and my pointer finger, holding it over the garbage.

I can't stand the idea of popping Mason in my mouth right now.

I watch the red cherry juice dripping from between my fingers. Then I toss him into the trash.

“Do I get details?” he asks.

“No.” I don’t elaborate.

“Uh . . .”

I grab a tissue from my desk and wipe my fingers off.

Why did he have to lie to me? I would have been fine with a casual fling. Why did he have to make it feel like more, like I mattered to him? He was the one who kept going on and on about how he wasn’t seeing anyone else.

Maybe his mother has ruined his ability to have healthy romantic relationships, but do I have to be collateral damage?

“Welp. Lots to do, gotta go.”

“Everything okay?” Now he’s sounding concerned.

“Never better. Is there a reason you’re calling?”

“Yeah, I wanted to know if you were going to be at the game tonight.”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I say icily. Eff my life, I did tell Cecelia I’d go with her.

“Excellent. You seem to bring me all the luck.”

I hang up, and immediately call the local sports apparel store. “Do you happen to have a Snyder jersey? You do? Excellent.” I hang up, chuckling darkly.

CECELIA IS ALREADY AT HER SEAT WHEN I HURRY IN, JUST AS the game is about to start. She waves at me, and I make my way through the crowd, my stomach sour with anger.

Cecelia is wearing designer jeans, high-heeled boots, and a Logan Long jersey.

“Logan Long?” I ask her as I sit down.

Cecelia sighs. “I like to spread the love. Can’t have people thinking I play favorites. Tonight, Long gets the love.”

“Good choice. Go Long.” I pump my fist in a cheer, pasting a big smile on my face.

The crowd roars for the start of the game, and we’re silent for a couple of minutes, watching intently.

Cecelia glances at me and her brows raise. “Where’s your Raker jersey?”

She raises her voice to be heard.

“In the trash.”

“What was that?” she calls out.

“In my sister’s trunk. I forgot it. I had to wear Snyder. I think Mason’s ego will survive.” I grin savagely.

Mason’s having a great start, which is good, of course. So good. Just freaking awesome. An opponent side-checks him, and the next thing I know they’re whaling on each other on the ice, and the crowd is screaming.

“Brutes are such a turn-on, don’t you think?” elegant, uptown Cecelia asks me.

I laugh, shaking my head. Cece never ceases to amaze me.

“If that’s your thing.” The crowd is getting loud again.

“It’s every woman’s thing,” she shouts. She starts cheering again, joining the crowd, shouting her throat raw. I don’t join her. Mason’s not worth losing my voice over.

I glance back at the ice and see that Mason’s glaring at me.

Must be the jersey.

Well, better get used to it, I think huffily.

“That’ll teach you, lying, cheating, useless son of a skunk . . .”

Cecelia stares at me. Oops. The crowd was momentarily quiet and I’d used my out-loud voice.

“Who are you talking about?” she asks me, looking puzzled.

“The guy Mason was hitting. Have you seen how he’s playing? He shouldn’t even be in the game.” I shake my head in disgust.

“He sure as hell shouldn’t,” Cece agrees, bobbing her head vigorously. “He deserves to get his ass handed to him.”

I look back on the ice, where Mason is looking at me again, and I return his glare. While he’s distracted, a player from the other team slams into him and knocks him on his butt.

Oh, you ain’t seen nothing yet, I think grimly.

MASON

THIS EVENING STARTED out great and went straight to hell.

I was rushed getting to the rink and all my pregame rituals were half-assed because of it.

If that wasn't bad enough, Rowan's wearing Beck's jersey . . . again. She knows how I feel about that. I've made it damn clear.

Does she actually want me to lose my shit?

"What bit your ass tonight?" Beckett asks.

We're sitting on the sidelines, watching the ballet of violence on the ice and waiting to be rotated back in.

"Nothing," I snarl.

"You pissed that your girl is wearing my jersey instead of yours?" he smirks, knowing damn well that I fucking hate it.

I glare at him. "She's not my girl. But it is pretty fucked up that *my* publicist would wear your jersey in public when she's supposed to be supporting me."

"Jesus. You sound like a jealous girlfriend," Beckett scoffs. "You going to put a ring on it?"

I don't have an answer to that, so I just mutter "fuck off," and then we're both called back into the game. It's a good thing because I about kicked his ass. I wouldn't have enjoyed it as much as I will taking my aggression out on some Flying Pigs.

Who the hell names a team that anyway?

I rush out onto the ice, throwing elbows and bowling through my opponents. But my mind is elsewhere. One question keeps circulating on repeat.

Did Rowan do this to me on purpose?

She sounded weird when I talked to her earlier, so odds are, yes, she knew exactly what she was doing. I asked her if anything was wrong. Gave her the chance to tell me what was on her mind.

Not that she needed to. I don't need to be a member of Mensa to work out that she saw the tabloids, and she's pissed.

Damn it.

Why couldn't she just say it? Get it out there and the conversation over with. Before my game preferably.

Women never tell you why they're mad. They throw out hints, or stomp around like a child, but when the opportunity is presented, they say nothing.

I'm a guy. Guys can be pretty emotionally stupid. It's like, help a man out, won't you? Tell us how we screwed up and . . .

Wham. I'm slammed into by two hundred plus pounds of pure fury as someone checks me from behind. I spin around to kick some Flying Pigs tail and see that it's Dylan.

Just what I fucking need.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" I shout, fury boiling up inside me. "Save it for the other team, fucknut."

"Think you can swoop in on my girl?" Dylan shouts at me, spewing venom with his glare.

Fucking pudding-brain.

Teammates are skating past me, and this is the last thing I should be focusing on. "She wasn't with me, idiot. I came home and found her standing outside my apartment building."

"Sure she was," Dylan barks at me. "Pretty fucking convenient, of all the places she could be in Manhattan, she

was there.” His shoulders hunch up and he’s got that look on his face like he’s about to try to throw down, right here, in front of the crowd. That’ll really help our reputation.

Beckett moves in between the two of us. “Back the hell off and take it up with Lexi,” he shouts. “Who, by the way, was with Mason for six years, so you dating her is seriously fucked up. You don’t have jack shit to say to him about anything. Ever. Got that? Go talk to her. Maybe she’s the problem.”

“Damn straight,” I growl, skating off. What was Lexi up to last night? I never knew her to be a girl who played games, but then again, I never thought Rowan would deliberately wear someone else’s jersey to my game when she knows it messes with my head.

In other words, I don’t know women at all, and I should stick to what I’m good at. Hockey.

I proceed to go apeshit on the Flying Pigs. The game is salvaged, even though the refs aren’t happy with us, and the coach is giving me shit like it’s my fault that Dylan keeps bumping into me.

The only reason I restrain myself from dragging Dylan off the ice and kicking his ass is that we’re in public and I’m still on probation. I can’t afford to screw up, and Dylan knows that. That pisses me off even more.

After the game, I lose track of Rowan and Cece. I’m dodging people to try to spot her, but it’s no use. The crowd is thick, and people just keep getting in the way. I’m about to give up when the sea of Rover fans parts, and I catch sight of them headed towards the back. They’re likely headed to the area where everyone’s going to change, sign some autographs, and mingle.

I call out to Rowan to get her attention. I’d think she didn’t hear me, but it’s pretty obvious that she’s simply ignoring me when she picks up the pace, walking faster. She’s moving away from me so quickly, that Cecelia starts trotting to catch up with her.

“Rowan,” I yell, trying again.

Getting no reply, I hurry over to them.

“Cecelia. Excuse me a minute, I need to speak to my publicist.” Players are streaming past us, shouting out cheers of victory. I ignore them.

Cece’s gaze snaps in my direction, and the look in her eyes tells me she might be onto us.

Shit.

The last thing I want to do is make trouble for Rowan. I won’t let them fire her or make me work with Amoeba, especially after what that bitch pulled trying. To sabotage an event for kids with leukemia is next level evil.

I’ve still got some pull. I’ve been handing over win after win this season. They need me, and that’s a fact I will use to my advantage. I won’t let them do anything to hurt Rowan’s career. I hope she knows that.

Although, from her murderous gaze, I’m not so sure she’d believe that in this moment.

Her voice drips with frost. “We’ll see each other in the morning when we get together to discuss Lexi-gate, which, by the way, was not helped in any way by you and Dylan fighting over her on the ice.”

For fuck’s sake. Here we go.

“We weren’t fighting over her.” I sigh, already tired from this topic of conversation. I want to say he started it, but that’s not going to help anything.

Rowan ignores me. “Nine o’clock. Don’t be late.”

I put my hand on her arm and tug her away from Cecelia. I know how it looks, but I also don’t give a damn. I need to figure out a way to make this right. To prove to her that it isn’t what it seems. I move her down a side hall, away from prying eyes.

“You can’t actually be mad about Lexi. A bunch of paparazzi and gossip rags were spewing bullshit about us, and you actually believe them? You of all people should know how

they twist things.” Now I’m pissed too. The more I think about it, the more it’s clear that she has absolutely no faith in me.

Rowan snorts in contempt. “How did you feel about me wearing a Snyder jersey tonight?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” I know exactly what she’s getting at, that I get jealous too, but she’s moving too close to uncomfortable truths.

“Quit trying to play head games with me, Mason.” I’m moving towards her, but she’s backing away.

“Quit running from me.” I glare at her. “You’re acting like a jealous girlfriend,” I blurt the words out, and she turns and stomps off, throwing open the first door she sees.

If she thinks I’m allowing this to end like that, she’s got another guess coming.

I follow her into a small, empty meeting room. “At least it’s not a closet this time.” I chuckle to myself.

“Oh, go fuck yourself, Mason. I can’t believe I ever even gave you the time of day.” Rowan is spitting mad. “No wonder nobody takes any of you guys seriously. You’re as monogamous as an Australian giant cuttlefish.”

I stare at her in confusion, tilting my head to the side.

She blows out a breath of exasperation. “They’re very promiscuous. Obviously, given the context.”

I can’t help but smile, which only seems to piss her off more. If that’s even possible.

Why is she so incredibly hot when she’s mad? Well, she’s hot all the time, but at the moment, it’s all I can do not to push her up against the wall and kiss her until she can barely breathe.

Instead, I go on the offensive. “So we’re an official couple now? Didn’t know we were playing at monogamy.”

“We’re not playing at jack shiznit, you horrendous asswipe,” she snaps, and turns to march out. But I have no intentions of allowing her to leave.

I grab her by the arm and spin her around, pulling her tight against my chest. Our eyes meet for a millisecond and the next thing I know we're kissing hungrily, up against the wall.

Our hands tangle as we both attempt to remove clothes. I'm pushing her pants down, while she's attempting to pull my shirt off. Somehow, we manage.

Clothes fall away and I barely notice how. I'm lost in a haze of lust.

She smells so fucking good. Feels so incredible against me.

Anybody could walk in at any moment—we didn't lock the door behind us—but I can't stop myself.

I grab her wrists and pin them above her head. "Don't wear that fucking jersey again." I brand her mouth with a savage kiss, but she pulls away.

"Screw you. Don't humiliate me by screwing around with your ex-girlfriend and making it public, asshole." She glares up at me and arches her back, pressing up against me. I'm hard as a rock, raging with arousal.

I kiss her again, my tongue thrusting into her mouth, claiming her, devouring her. She tastes sweet and minty, and smells like honeysuckle, her favorite shampoo. I know this about her, like I know where all her sweet, sensitive spots are, and how to make her moan my name.

I want her. But not like this. Not without some resolution.

I pull away from her. "I am not screwing my ex-girlfriend, or anyone but you, and I've told you that a thousand times. Why are you so damned paranoid?"

She jerks her hand from my grasp and slaps my chest. "I'm going to go over to Beckett's apartment and just casually run into him. Hard. You okay with that?"

"You know where he lives?" I snarl, with an intensity that scares me. And she laughs.

She. Fucking. Laughs.

“Screw you.” I kiss her again, in a frenzy. She kisses me back, bruisingly hard.

It’s a flurry of insults followed by our tongues tangling together.

She pulls away finally, gasping for breath. “You are such an asshole.”

“And you’re a psycho.” I wrap my arms around her, holding her in place. “How could you possibly believe that I want anything to do with Lexi? You may be mean as hell but at least I thought you were smart.”

“Are you calling me stupid?” she says through gritted teeth.

I slide my hand between her legs and stroke her. “If you believe that shit, yes.”

“You are getting the worst costume ever,” she yells at me. “I’ll dress you up as a French maid, I swear to God.” Then she gasps as my finger curves inside her and hits her G-spot.

“In front of the kids? That would be in poor taste.”

She moans and arches her back. “I hate you.”

“I hate you more.” I nip at her neck as I stroke her, and she shudders. “You deserve to be punished for wearing that stupid frickin’ jersey.”

“Fuck . . . you . . .”

“I’m trying to, if you’d just stop talking . . .”

I’m stroking her inner wall with one finger and massaging her clit with my thumb. She lets out a sobbing moan and lowers her forehead to my chest. “Bastard,” she gasps. “Please . . . give me—”

I cut off her words, leaning down and pressing my lips to hers while my fingers do work. I find that perfect spot and add pressure. I feel her pussy squeeze around me, and I know she isn’t going to last long.

“Mason . . .”

And she comes, hard, her juices soaking my hand. Her whole body shudders and she surrenders in that way I love, that way that makes me feel like I've claimed her. She comes again and again as I kiss her neck.

"Maybe, but I'm your bastard," I growl at her. "I'm not fucking anyone else. I will not have sex with another woman while I'm with you. Will you get that through your thick head?" I slide my hand out from between her legs.

She rolls her eyes. "So romantic."

Her knees are weak, and I have to hold her up.

"That's me," I murmur into her hair. "A genuine Romeo here to serve."

She peeks up at me. "Is that right?"

I grin down at her. "Damn straight."

"I want you inside me."

I lick my lips, wanting that too, but we're not in the most appropriate of places for such a thing.

"I don't happen to have a condom on me."

"Well, I know I'm clean, and I'm also on birth control. You told me you'd had a recent checkup, and my God this is the least sexy conversation ever."

I chuckle. "Yeah... we've had sexier." I stare into her eyes. "Are you sure this is a good idea? We're not exactly somewhere private."

She shrugs. "Live a little, Raker."

I slide my pants down. "You can't get enough of me," I grin fiercely, grabbing her hips, and lifting her up. I spin her around so that her back is against the wall. She wraps her legs around me for support and I'm a moment away from losing my cool and slamming into her.

"Oh, believe me, a little of you goes a long—oh," she cries out as I enter her.

“You were saying?” I taunt, holding still, my dick as far in as it will go.

“Mason,” she says in warning. “Move.”

I pump into her hard, and she moans with each thrust. Again and again, arousal swelling inside me, roaring like a bonfire.

Her back slams into the wall with each drive of my hips, but her mewling tells me she loves it. She wants more.

Her fingernails dig into my back, pushing me further. I want to carry her off and fuck her somewhere proper, but that’s not in the cards today. We’re on borrowed time and I’m going to make every second count.

I lower her to the floor and lean down to her ear. “Bend over. Hands against the wall.”

She does, looking over her shoulder and grinning when she’s in position.

“This isn’t how I want it, Rowan. I want to take my time.”

“We don’t have time. Make it count,” she says, voice husky with need.

I plunge my cock into her as far as her body will allow and reach around her body with one hand to massage her clit.

I’ll make it count. She won’t want another man near her when I’m done. Only my cock will give her the pleasure she desires.

That thought has me thrusting hard and fast. Like a madman, hungry for release. I pick up the circular movements, wanting her to come.

“Yes, Mason. Yes,” she whisper moans.

The force in which I fuck her is wild and animalistic. I apply more friction to her clit, and I feel her tremble under my touch. She’s so close.

One pump. Two pumps.

Finally, she's crying out. I have to use the same hand I just brought her to orgasm with to cover her mouth.

I come quickly after, a shuddering relief as I spill into her, my body going rigid. I fall into her back, breathing heavily as we both work to get ourselves under control.

"That was so fucking hot," I whisper into the shell of her ear.

Her answering shiver and the way her ass juts out, pushing against my half limp cock, is all I need to know she agrees. I slide out of her, and she turns around to glance up at me.

"Three out of five stars on Yelp. Do not recommend," But there's a gasp between every word, and she can barely stand.

I grin. "Bullshit. You and I both know you fucking loved that, sweetheart."

She shrugs. "I guess I could raise it to four."

This girl will be the death of me.

ROWAN

THE AFTERSHOCKS of my orgasm are still rolling over me as I frantically pull my clothes on and smooth out my hair. In the distance, I can hear the murmur of voices. My heart is pounding in my chest and my knees are weak.

Where is Cecelia right now? What does she know, or at least suspect? I am so close to getting that promotion, that career pinnacle that is everything I've been struggling towards my entire adult life. And now I'm at risk of losing it, along with Cecelia's respect.

"We can't do this again," I say to Mason. He's tugging his pants back up.

"Oh, we're doing it." His eyes have a feral gleam in them, and I can see the ferocity simmering in the depths of his soul, that same fierceness that makes him a killer on the ice.

It feels incredibly alluring and dangerous, like I'm being pulled into a whirlpool. Like I'm drowning.

"This is bad for both of us, Mason. We're never doing anything like this again."

"Having the hottest sex of our lives? Oh, I think we are." He moves closer, cups my face in his big, strong hands, and leans down to brush a kiss over my lips. "I think about you all the time when we're not together, Rowan. This isn't just sex."

I submit for a moment because it feels so good, and his kiss is so tender. Heat washes over me, and I'm damp between my legs and ready to go again.

Voices in the hallway jerk me back to reality, and I leap away from him. He gives me a wry chuckle.

“We’re in a meeting room and I’m consulting with my publicist.” He shrugs, his mouth curling up in a smirk. “What’s the problem? We have all our clothes on.” He glances down, reaches out, and pulls up the zipper of my pants.

“Please. We smell like sex and look like hell.” I reach down and grab my purse from the floor. “An affair with me, right after being seen with Lexi, undoes all of the hard work that we’ve put in. It makes you look like a frivolous player.”

“If anyone found out, it wouldn’t be that big a deal.” He shakes his head. “I haven’t had a single drink since I left rehab, I haven’t gotten in any fights in a very long time except for on the ice, which frankly is what the crowd comes for. I’m not out screwing married women or chasing after barely legal starlets, so my personal life is none of anyone’s business, and they’re not going to can me even if they do find out we’re together. Thanks to your brilliantly evil PR campaign, I have the public image of a roguishly charming movie star.”

“Dear God. Did you actually just refer to yourself as roguishly charming?”

Mason smirks. “All thanks to you, of course.”

Frustration surges through me. “Damn it, Mason, do you think you’re the only one who cares about their career?”

His smile fades. “No, of course not. Listen, if they fired you, you wouldn’t have to worry about money.”

“That’s not it.” The frustration is boiling over now. “Did you ever wonder why I’m so passionate about the leukemia cause?”

“Uh . . . I mean . . . it’s a good cause?” He looks at me in puzzlement.

“It’s what my mother died of.”

Mason’s eyes shine with sympathy. “I had no idea. I’m so sorry.”

“My mother . . .” Emotions swell in me and threaten to choke me. “She was a journalist before she had my sister and me, and her career was just starting to take off, but she decided to be a stay-at-home mom. And she made me promise that before I started to get serious with anyone, I’d make sure that I was secure in my career. I promised that to her. And I meant it. I genuinely love my job. I find it rewarding and challenging and fulfilling. If someone handed me a million dollars right now, I would not quit my job.”

He nods, staying quiet for several seconds, likely sorting through that word vomit of truth. I mean every word. It’s me who stands to lose if this affair got out. He’d walk away fine.

“I get it now. I do. If anyone finds out about us, I will fight for you, okay? I swear.” He makes a solemn motion of crossing his heart with his index finger.

“If anyone finds out, they’ll high-five you and call you a stud, and I’d be the bimbo who is trying to sleep her way to the top.” I hurry out of the room without looking back.

I send my sister a text message. *I’m coming over now. Have ice cream ready or face the consequences.*

Sounds ominous, she replies.

Using your word-a-day calendar, are we? I shoot back.

Fortunately, as I’m making my way out of the hockey arena, I don’t see Cecelia or anyone else I know.

It takes me a little while to get a cab because everyone else is waiting for one too, post-game, so it’s forty-five minutes before I’m walking into my sister’s room.

She’s wearing pajamas with pictures of sushi on them, and her hair is twirled up in a bun secured by two pencils jabbed through it. She has two pints of Rocky Road waiting for me on her nightstand, already opened, with a spoon sticking out of each. There’s a stack of books next to the ice cream, each with a bookmark in them. No e-reader for Ruby—she’s old school that way.

“Damn, woman, I was getting ready to send out the bat signal. I thought you’d been kidnapped,” she huffs, as I grab a

pint and sit down on the bed next to her. “Also, I had to wait till you got here before I could start my ice cream, and my stomach is literally growling.”

“Literally, or figuratively?” I jab my spoon in and take a huge bite. I don’t know what it is about women, bad moods, and chocolate, but these are things that are always found together, like hydrogen and oxygen.

“Literally. I could hear it. I am an English major; I don’t abuse words.”

I take another bite of chocolate. “I feel very bad for cavewomen. Can you imagine a long hard day of wrestling saber-toothed tigers and fighting off ravenous brontosaurus, and your cave spouse won’t help you change diapers, and chocolate hasn’t been invented yet?”

“None of that is historically accurate,” Ruby says primly. “And brontosaurus were vegetarian.”

“Look at me, I go to college.” I pull a face, making fun of her. “I’m smarter than everyone.”

“It’s a lonely burden,” Ruby nods. “Now. Other than mangling history, eating my ice cream, and mocking me, why are you here when you should be out partying? What’s up?”

I sigh and set my spoon down. “I haven’t been entirely honest. I’m dating Mason, kind of. Well, there’s something happening between us.”

Ruby gives me an amused sidelong glance. “Like everyone didn’t already know that.”

“Oh, shut up.” I bury my face in my hands. “I thought I was being low-key.”

“Seriously? That goofy, *I’m so satisfied* look you have on your face all the time these days—you thought that was low-key?” She laughs at me.

“Not helping,” I whine. “Here’s the thing. Mason was seen out with Lexi the other day, and he claims it’s nothing . . .”

“What do you think?”

I heave a sigh. “I don’t think he’d lie to me. I mean, honestly, he doesn’t have a reason to. He could date any woman in the city. He could date women who are ten times prettier than me—”

“I will smack you upside the head.” Ruby glares at me. “Don’t you dare put yourself down like that. Are you actually sitting here saying that you’re lucky that the big famous hockey god would even glance in your direction?”

I manage a rueful laugh. “No. You’re right. I’m smart, I’m successful, I have an amazing dog, I’m sexy AF, I’m funny, I’m stylish, I’m a good friend . . . it’s just that sometimes it does get kind of intimidating that supermodels take one look at Mason and their clothes fly off due to a mysterious magnetic force.”

“Yes, but he’s not hanging out with them. He chooses to spend his time with you, because you’re both pretty, smart, successful, and not a pushover.”

“Thank you. But that brings me to my dilemma. I can’t keep dating him, Ruby, and we also haven’t even really put a name on what we’re doing . . .” I trail off. “Ugh. I know what advice I’d give you. I’d say, don’t let a guy pull the ‘friends with benefits’ thing if that’s not what you want. Demand honesty. Ask him where he sees this going, and if he tries to weasel out of it, that’s your answer right there.”

Ruby nods. “That is exactly what you would, and in fact have, told me.”

“It’s more complicated than that. This job, this promotion, is everything to me, and I’m risking it for hot S-E-X.”

“S-E-X?” Ruby echoes. “What even is that?” She looks at me with big wondering eyes. “Is it when a mommy and a daddy love each other very, very much . . .”

I elbow her. She almost drops her ice cream, and glares at me, then shoves a big spoonful in her mouth.

“Excuse me for trying to protect my baby sister from the ugly realities of life. I still remember helping to change your

diapers. I'm just trying to keep you innocent for a little while longer.”

“That ship has sailed.” Ruby grabs another spoonful of ice cream.

I blink several times, trying to erase the unwanted images that come with her confession. “Anyway, back to me. Tonight is my turn to have a meltdown. I got in a fight with Mason in front of Cecelia, pretty much, and he dragged me off so we could talk about it alone, and remember how I promised Mom that I'd go back and finish college and I wouldn't derail my life and sacrifice my dreams for a relationship?” Emotion rolls over me as memories swim to the surface. Her, pale, wearing a turban, most of her hair gone, the port in her chest. Me holding her hand as she husked her regrets, and her hopes and dreams for me.

Ruby winces.

“What?” I ask.

“Sometimes when she said that, it made me feel like we'd ruined her life.”

My eyes widen in dismay. “No. That's not what she meant.”

My sister lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “Wasn't it, though? What was the reason that she never went back to work? Because at first after she had you, she didn't feel safe having you raised by a babysitter, and also it didn't even make economic sense because newspaper jobs didn't pay enough to actually make a profit after paying for child care, so she just supported dad's job and waited for you to start school. And then I was born, and she had to start the process all over again.”

I blink hard. I had no idea Ruby saw it that way. “Didn't you feel loved?” I ask her.

“I did.” She nods. “She was a great mother, and she adored our father, and they had a relationship that was an inspiration. They respected each other, they treated each other like gold.

But I also felt her frustration and the fact that she wasn't entirely living the life she wanted."

"I mean, nobody gets everything. I never felt like she blamed it on us, and I'm sorry if she made you feel that way."

"We're different people and because of that, we interpret things differently. The point I'm trying to make is that I do not have all the relationship answers. Nobody does. I mean, seriously, look at me."

"We should talk about that," I say, earning a glower from Ruby.

"No, I don't want to talk about it. It's over, I'm fine. I *can't* talk about it." Her expression goes dark.

"Can't or won't?" My big-sister worry-dar is bleeping. There's just something about this relationship that feels really sketch, and I don't think that everything's really resolved.

She frowns at me. "Both. Don't feel like it. Anyway, moving on. People are always trying to make women feel guilty, feel like they're not doing enough, wouldn't you agree?"

I nod, spooning more ice cream into my mouth. I wonder where this is going. She'll tell me to run for the hills, no doubt. Put on my chastity belt and put my nose to the grindstone. Love is for losers, make something of myself, blah blah blah. All the things that I've been beating myself up with.

"Some people try to make women feel like their only choice is being passionately dedicated to a full-time career, and if they leave any room open for a relationship and kids, they're needy, they're desperate, they're losers. Well, I call bullshit. It's just another way of stripping away choice from women." Her voice rises. She waves her ice cream spoon for emphasis. A blob of chocolate falls onto her comforter, and she doesn't even notice. "What kind of corporate capitalist crap are we buying into if the only thing in life that's important is our job? If our jobs always need to come first at the expense of personal connection?"

I rear back on the bed and look at her to make sure that my little sister hasn't been replaced by a proto-feminist pod person. "Whoa. I did not expect that."

"It's true, though. There are some women who sneer and look down at stay-at-home wives and mothers. If those wives and mothers are choosing that, and happy with it most of the time, who is anyone else to say their choice isn't valid? And the same is equally true for women who choose a full-time career that they love. And for women who decide to do something in between. But the point is, we should be supporting each other's life choices, not tearing each other down, and nobody should be shamed for wanting a healthy romantic relationship."

Tears burn in my eyes. When did my little sister grow up and get to be the smart one?

"What?" she asks me.

I sniffle. "Nothing. You're very perceptive. You've given me a lot to think about. I mean, I don't even know where things are going with Mason, and a lot of that is on me because I also didn't know what I wanted and every single time I got together with him, I told myself it was just a one-time thing. Which is ridiculous. We're both starting to catch feelings and living in denial. I mean, he gets mad as hell when I wear anybody else's jersey, and I was ready to spit nails when I thought he was back with Lexi."

"Jersey? Say what?"

I shake my head. "Never mind, it's silly. Thank you for listening. Also, you dropped ice cream on your comforter."

"Oh, fuuu . . . dge. Damn it," she laughs, "I feel like I can't even say real swear words around you, kinda like the way you can't admit that sex exists when I'm in the room."

She leaps to her feet. "Get up," she orders me, and strips the comforter off the bed, scattering pillows, and walks over to stuff it in a laundry basket.

My head is whirling. She is making excellent points. I absolutely love my job, but if it turns out that Mason and I

really do want a relationship together, why should I have to choose? It feels like going back to the nineteenth century, when female teachers were required to be un-married.

We both sit down again. “By the way, fuckity fuck fuck fuck,” she adds. “Ha. I swore right in front of you.”

“How dare you,” I say dryly. “All right. Let’s pick a movie to watch and order way too much pizza. Because tonight is a night for making poor decisions.”

“Woohoo. Let’s chug a whole bottle of tequila each,” Ruby cheers.

I shake my head at her. College students don’t experience three-day hangovers the way those of us ancient ladies in our late twenties do. “Not that poor.”

ROWAN

“WE WISH YOU A ZOMBIE CHRISTMAS, we wish you a zombie Christmas . . .” Pax sings as he lugs a sack of presents into Mason’s living room.

Yes, the only way to get Mason’s hockey buddies to show up on a weekend night to help wrap presents is to hold the zombie movie marathon they’ve been thirsting for more than . . . brains.

“That décor in the lobby is next level, Raker, but this place is insane. I’m guessing you had nothing to do with it,” Pax says, sticking his tongue out like a child.

“And you’d be right.” I glance at Mason, who’s too busy wrapping a present to even look at Pax.

Since it’s the holiday season, the lobby of Mason’s building is decorated with Christmas ornaments and whoever did it went all out. It’s beautiful. Mason’s apartment has a pre-decorated artificial Christmas tree, but the rest of the place looks like the scene of a horror movie.

Which was all my doing.

I actually hit up a friend who works in movie theater merchandising and got a few post-apocalyptic backgrounds, featuring ruined cityscapes with zombies staggering in front of them. I’ve arranged them around the apartment, along with foam gravestones with zombie arms and legs coming out of them, hanging cobwebs, and posters warning of a zombie outbreak. I’ve strung up yellow crime scene tape that says “Stay out—infected.” and signs listing the symptoms of

zombie infection. Oh, and I can't forget the bloody handprint window clings.

I've spent days researching zombie-themed party food and buying the ingredients and putting it all together.

Hey, when it comes to party décor, I do not half-ass it.

Pax drops his bag on the living room floor. He's the last one here; Beck, Logan, and Noah are already manning the wrapping station. Ruby is standing next to them overseeing and helping the ones who are wrapping-impaired, which is most of them. Andy, Leo, Drew, and Hollis stand around twiddling their thumbs. The rest of the guys I don't know well try to look busy. Okay, all of them are basically standing around. Thank heavens they're good on the ice, because none of them will ever land a job in the gift-wrapping department, a fact I'm sure haunts them at night.

Noah brought a lovely girl named Mia with him, and she's volunteered to help, so she's hanging with Ruby. If it wasn't for those two, not a gift would be wrapped.

"Thanks ladies. You're lifesavers."

Mia looks up and offers a smile. Ruby is too engrossed in the task at hand to even bother replying.

I'm passing out glowing green drinks in themed cups that say *Toxic waste*. All our drinks are zombie-themed and non-alcoholic.

The food and drink table has pizza creatively cut to look like chunks of human flesh—I know, gross—and meatballs made to look like eyeballs and zombie cupcakes with pink squiggle frosting that looks like brains and zombie finger cookies with sliced almonds for fingernails.

"You really went all out," Mia says admiringly, as she wraps up another package for Noah. "Here, sign it, dude."

"I feel like a fraud," he sighs and quickly squiggles on it with his Sharpie. "You've done all the work."

"That's because you are," she says reassuringly. "Well, you did hand me the tape. That was invaluable."

“Wrap faster,” Logan commands. “I want to watch movies.”

“Listen, I’m sucking at this as fast as I can,” Noah huffs. “Why we couldn’t just pay someone to do this . . .”

“Because it wouldn’t be as fulfilling . . .”

“It would. It totally would,” he says.

I roll my eyes at him. “Just tape, and sign, and look pretty, okay?”

“Ooh, she called me pretty.” Noah grins at Beck.

“Hey, Paxton,” Mason calls out. “Nice of you to finally make it.”

“I do what I can.” He pretends to be a zombie, putting his arms out in front of him. “Braaiinns . . .” he staggers over to the other players, pretends to sniff the air for brains, and then staggers off, disappointed.

“Funny.” Beck makes a face at him.

“Old,” Logan snorts. “Your dad called from the eighties, and he wants his joke back.”

“Your mom called from the seventies, and she wants her insult back.” Paxton grins, stuffs a piece of pizza brains in his mouth, and moves over to the wrapping table. I hand him a drink.

These guys act like big kids and I have to admit it’s endearing. Money hasn’t changed the fact that most of them are in their early twenties with most of their life ahead of them. Mason’s by far the oldest, but it doesn’t change the dynamics between him and his team.

My eyes land on Mason across the room and he winks at me. I look away, trying to hide the blush I can feel sweeping across my pale cheeks.

Does everyone on the team know about us?

I believe that Paxton wouldn’t tell anyone, but they might have guessed anyway. Mason and I aren’t doing a great job of

hiding it. We're acting overly polite to each other in a way that's not at all natural.

Cecelia hasn't said anything for the past few days, and I think it's because she doesn't want to know. What she's done, instead, is give me a lot of worried, reproofing looks.

Our meeting with the Rovers didn't really go anywhere. Mason flat-out insisted that he had no idea why Lexi showed up in his neighborhood. His coach read him the riot act. I pointed out that the media had let the whole thing drop pretty quickly because the public just wasn't that interested. Unless there was a knock-down drag-out fight, or unless the two of them announced they were back together, the news just wasn't that exciting.

I managed to steer things back to talking about event planning. I avoided Mason's gaze, he acted professional, and although Coach Hartley still looked pissy at the end of the meeting, the owner was happy and he was the one who ultimately called the shots.

All of which helped to keep Cece and I off the topic of taboo relationships.

I shake my head and reach for a roll of ribbon. There's no point in worrying—it's just borrowing trouble. We just need to get through this event, and then I can sit down with Mason, and we can have a talk about where things are going.

"Nice soundtrack," Paxton says approvingly. I of course brought a zombie apocalypse soundtrack to play on Mason's sound system, and right now it's playing "It's the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)."

"So, Mia, what will you do when the zombie apocalypse happens?" Noah asks.

"Hmm." She frowns in thought. "Am I in New York City when this happens?"

"Dealer's choice."

"Let's say I'm on the mainland, because that gives me more options. I mean . . . don't we all have fantasies of going

to the mall and shopping all we want?” She looks at me and Ruby for confirmation.

“Hells yeah.” I bob my head enthusiastically. “Oh my Goth, I would raid Saks and build my dream wardrobe.”

“But who would you be wearing all those designer outfits for?” Logan asks.

She sticks her tongue out at him. “Dream killer.” Ruby and I boo him loudly, and Mia joins us.

“In this fantasy, the other survivors are extremely stylish, and we hold runway shows for each other every night, while eating all the junk food we want because why not.” Mia tosses her hair over her shoulder.

“And watching our favorite rom-coms on repeat,” I add, earning an enthusiastic head nod from Mia.

Mason and Beck look at each other. “That is one weird post-apocalyptic fantasy. Mine takes much more of a Mad Max turn. I’m a warrior fighting my way through a blasted landscape, dealing out justice and slaying hordes of zombies,” Mason says.

“Because of course you are.” I roll my eyes.

“I’d start a perfect society of people who all support each other and contribute equally. We’d take care of the sick and old, and we’d have a farm, behind high walls of course,” Ruby muses. “Maybe on an island because zombies can’t swim. Do not argue with me on this one. Because science.”

“Boring.” Beck hoots and I poke him in the face with a zombie finger, in sisterly solidarity.

“Ow,” he complains, then grabs the finger from me and eats it.

“Congratulations, you are now infected,” I inform him.

“And we’d shoot everyone who annoys us.” Ruby gives Beck a narrow-eyed look.

“Less boring,” he concedes. “What will you shoot them with?”

She looks him dead in the eye. “Crossbows.”

“Very Amazon warrior woman. Am I allowed to say that’s sexy as hell?” Beck jiggles his eyebrows.

“No.” Paxton glares at him.

“Fine,” Beck whines. “How much time do I have before I turn zombie?”

“Usually a few hours, depending on the movie and what the storyline needs,” Noah speaks up. “Wow. We’re going to miss him, aren’t we?”

“Are we?” Logan wonders. “I barely even remember old Beck. He just didn’t have what it takes to survive in this brutal post-civilization landscape, I guess.”

“I’m not dead yet,” Beck protests.

Logan and Paxton exchange glances. “Sometimes I can almost hear his voice,” Logan says somberly, playing the role of grieving friend perfectly.

“Annoying, isn’t it?” Noah says. “Still. Out of our plucky ragtag group of survivors, who would have thought that Beck would go first?”

“Me,” Mason declares. “He’s always stirring up trouble. In the zombie movie, he’d go poke a zombie he thought was dead, we’d all be yelling at him not to, he’d do it anyway, and it would bite him on the ankle.”

“Is this zombie a chihuahua?” Beck snort-laughs. He looks down at a package that he insisted on wrapping himself.

“Arrgh,” I cry out. “Okay, just sign it, and while you are doing so, picture the disappointed tears of the child who is unlucky enough to open it.”

“When this whole publicist thing doesn’t work out for you, have you thought of being a motivational speaker?” Mason grins roguishly. I flip him off and turn away, smiling.

Stop it, I tell myself sternly.

“Speaking of which, where’s Puck?” Ruby wonders. “And why did this just occur to me? I am a very bad puppy auntie.”

“Oh, I had him spend the night at his dog walker’s,” Mason says. “He’d have turned all the presents to shreds. I love him, but he’s a furry little shithead.”

Ruby gasps in mock outrage. “How dare you.”

“He chewed up my favorite running shoes and shit them out on the kitchen floor. He grinned at me while he was doing it.” Mason starts ticking off Puck’s puppy sins, holding up his hand and raising finger after finger. “Chewed up the TV remote, which he should not have been able to reach. Apparently he can levitate. Ate something that disagreed with him and kept me up on the night before a game by repeatedly barfing all night long. Pooped on one of my jerseys.”

I let out a yelp of laughter, then cover my mouth with my hand.

“Not funny.” Mason looks at me with mock hurt.

“Remind me to give him an entire bag of treats next time I see him.” Ruby giggles.

“I will not, because he has a delicate tummy,” Mason huffs.

Did he just say ‘tummy’? Could big mean Mason be any more adorable? I look away quickly to hide the goofy grin on my face and focus on my wrapping.

He’s moved next to me without me even noticing it. It just feels natural for us to be close to each other. Several times, I’ve restrained myself from reaching out and grabbing him by the hand or throwing my arm around his waist.

Frustration wells up inside me. I don’t want to go on like this forever, but it’s also largely on me. I insisted on acting like Mason was my dirty little secret, and now I hate feeling like I’m . . . well, his dirty little secret.

I see Ruby watching me across the table, and she looks away. At the same time, I see Paxton watching her, and I can’t read the look on his face. There are so many possibilities and each one is more troubling than the next.

She's my baby sister. He'd better not have dirty intentions towards her. Big, tough hockey player or not, he does not want to see me mad.

I return my attention to the task at hand, grabbing a package of coloring books and wrapping them quickly, with Rovers-themed wrapping paper, of course. Man, is there anything these guys haven't slapped a logo onto?

"When do we get to watch the movies?" Noah pipes up.

"I told you, no movies until the presents are wrapped, because otherwise you'll never end up doing it."

It takes us another hour to finish. There's no shortage of bitching and whining from the guys, and threats and coercion from me, Ruby and Mia, but it's finally done.

We move to Mason's media room, where he has a movie screen and theater seating. The girls carry in trays of snacks while the boys settle in.

Mason is sitting next to me, and as the first movie—*Night of the Living Dead*—comes on, he turns the lights down via remote control. It doesn't take a brainiac to know what he's up to.

His arm is on the chair arm, pressing up against mine. He casually slides his hand over mine, and heat pulses through me. I let it linger there for a long moment before moving it away.

I sweep my gaze around the room, to make sure that nobody is watching. I'm just about to give into temptation when Paxton catches my eye and winks.

Shiznit.

Shiitake mushrooms.

We're playing with fire here, and sooner or later we'll get caught. And then my whole house of cards will come falling down.

MASON

MY MOTHER'S sitting at a booth waiting expectantly when I walk into the café, which is amazing, because I showed up precisely two minutes early. It's also annoying because I was planning on sitting there for exactly three minutes and then leaving.

She stands up and waves at me, trying to pretend like a doting mother.

I know it's bullshit, but everyone around her seems to buy the act. They smile, looking between the two of us as though expecting to witness some grand reunion.

Sorry to disappoint folks. There will be none of that today.

She's wearing a modest checked jacket and suit, and low-heeled pumps.

I don't know if I'm disappointed or happy that she's on time, dressed appropriately instead of trying to be a forty-something-year-old sex bomb, and not smelling in the slightest of alcohol.

I sit down across from her.

"I pre-paid," she blurts out. "Hi, baby. It's so good to see you. You're looking wonderful."

"You pre-paid for what?" I look at her in puzzlement.

"The meal. I want you to know that I am not going to ask you for money. I'm here for the right reasons. I'm here for you."

Before I can say anything bitter or snarky, the waiter walks up to us.

“Coffee,” I growl, not looking the man in the face.

“Please eat something?” my mother says softly. She gives me a hopeful look and the waiter gives me a dirty look because I’m being a dick, and he has no fucking idea of our history.

“Give me the number three,” I say, without bothering to read what it is. I’m not here for the food.

“I’ll have tea and scrambled eggs,” she says, smiling that saccharine smile that tends to melt all the fools hearts.

When he walks away, I sigh. “I can pay for it.”

“Certainly not.” She shakes her head. “It’s my treat.”

I don’t say what’s on the tip of my tongue because I don’t want to set her off. In public I’d prefer to play her games as to not garner attention and end up in the tabloids. Somehow, they’d spin it that I’m a woman hater. Or some equally horrific lie.

“You didn’t order very much,” I point out. “Can you afford this at all?”

Okay, so I try, but I don’t always excel at refraining from snark when it comes to her.

“Dear, I don’t have your metabolism and I don’t get the exercise you do. I’m trying to watch my figure.” She smiles at me. “Let’s not talk about me. What have you been up to?”

I just stare at her. What’s her angle? Why is she acting like this? She’s never tried quite this hard to sell her story.

Her smile fades, and she nods, with a serious look on her face.

“I’m sorry. I honestly have no right to be here, and I’m sure you are wondering why I came back after all this time.”

“You could say that,” I snap, picking up a fork and inspecting it for no other reason but to avoid her eyes.

“I was a lousy mother, and I am not good with kids.”

That might be the realest thing the woman has ever said and for a split second I wonder if she has managed to change.

No. She’s just incredibly talented at spinning her lies.

“I did know that I was leaving you with the much better parent. But I should have made more of an effort.”

She blinks hard, as if she’s going to cry.

“And?” I grit out, no longer willing to allow these charades.

“I’m getting older. I’m alone. I mean, that’s my choice these days, because I haven’t picked the best men for relationships.”

“You think?” I snort. “My father was the best you ever had, and you broke his heart, screwed him over, and went on to date a string of losers who helped you blow his money.”

I’m being a real bastard, but I’m angry, and I’m hurt, and I’ve been wanting to say these things for a long time. It’s the therapy, and the sober coach, and the rehab, that have finally gotten me to this point. My truths are long overdue in being expressed.

She lowers her head. “I know,” she says quietly. “I’ve been seeing a therapist and working on myself, and I *am* making amends. I am sorry. I am *not* asking you for a dime. I just want to see if there’s any chance of us having a relationship, of us talking sometimes. I want to be able to check in on you.”

“If that’s what you want, then why the scene at my event?”

“I came on way too strong when I saw you at the hospital. When I . . . when I’m called out on my behavior, I tend to get defensive.”

“And make up lies,” I grit out.

She nods. “And make up lies,” she whispers, because god forbid anyone else hears her admit this. “You don’t know much about my upbringing, but my mom was a con woman who made her money hustling men.”

I want to make a smart ass remark about apples and trees, but I manage to refrain. A tear glides down her cheek and she swipes it away.

That's a new move.

If this is an act, it's far better than any of her prior skits. Looking her over closely, I can't help but actually believe that what she's saying is the truth.

It would explain a lot.

"We moved from hotel to hotel when I was a kid, usually one step ahead of the law, and I guess when I'm under stress, I go with what I know."

I rear back in my seat, stunned. This is the first time I've heard any of this. I never knew a thing about my maternal grandparents. It wasn't something that was discussed. I vaguely remember my parents arguing about them once, but she shut that shit down quick and my father, being the pushover to her that he was, dropped it.

She sees the look on my face. "Ask me anything," she says.

I chew on my bottom lip, sorting through the list of questions filling my head. I finally land on one.

"Is your mother still alive?"

She shrugs. "I have no idea, and I wouldn't know how to find her if she is, because she flies under the radar and uses fake names. I'm not sure I actually know what her real name was. She left me in a group home when I was fifteen."

When she says she resorts to what she knows, she isn't kidding. If not for my dad, I likely would've ended up the same way.

I make a mental note to actually hug my father next time I see him. I don't care how weak that makes me sound.

"We stopped getting along, I think because I'm too much like her, and I wasn't little and cute enough to be helpful with her scams."

Holy shit.

“That’s... horrible.” I shake my head, unable to comprehend how anyone could treat their kids like these women do.

That’s a million times worse than what I experienced growing up. I mean, yeah, I had a workaholic dad, but he loved me. He set a good example for me by being hardworking and moral and responsible. We lived in the same house my entire life, and he was fiercely protective of me but also wouldn’t hesitate to read me the riot act if I was screwing up.

I think of the loneliness she must have felt. The fear. How hard it would be to know how to do the right thing when you never had someone acting as a moral compass.

“I’m sorry,” I say sincerely.

She nods. “I appreciate that. Still doesn’t excuse what a lousy mother I was.”

“No, but it explains it, and that helps a lot. I spent most of my life feeling like there was something wrong with me because you abandoned me, and what kind of kid was I that my own mother didn’t want me?” Emotion swells up in my throat and threatens to choke me.

The waiter sets down our coffees and plates and quickly withdraws. The smell of the food makes me faintly ill. After everything that’s been said, I’m not sure I can stomach food.

My mother stirs her tea but doesn’t drink it. We sit silently, neither looking up from our drinks for several minutes.

“I will spend the rest of my life regretting what I did to you,” she says, staring down at the table. “What can I do to make it up to you? If the answer is to stay away forever, if my being around you hurts, I will leave. It will break my heart, but I’ll leave.”

“That’s . . . no. I mean, maybe . . . maybe we could go to a few family therapy sessions together. Might do you some good too.”

I know, I know, I am a manly man who beats up other manly men for a living, but I've found that talking things out has made a world of difference in my life. I can't count the number of times I almost walked into a liquor store or headed to a bar, then let my sober coach talk me down.

Her face brightens. "I'd love that so much." She picks up her tea and sips it, perking up visibly. I feel good about that.

I mean, for my entire childhood, I wanted a mother. My mother. I wanted her to actually want to spend time with me so I wouldn't feel like I was poison. I'm never, ever going to be able to get back those years, but maybe it would be healthy and healing for both of us to have a relationship going forward.

"Oh, dear, my stomach's acting up." She makes a face. "Sorry, TMI? Had my gallbladder out, and it does funny things to my digestion." She stands up. "I'll be right back. We have lots to talk about; don't go anywhere."

"I won't," I say, watching her rush off.

I lean back in my seat, and I feel as if a heavy mantle of lead has been lifted from my shoulders.

It's not me; it was never me. It was her lousy mother and her terrible upbringing.

I grab my phone and quickly call my dad.

"Don't get pissed off at me," I say.

"Uh-oh. Bail money? Help you bury a body? Discreetly pay your doctor to cure something with antibiotics?"

"Dad," I say, appalled. "No, and please never say that again. Listen, I met up with my mother this morning. I . . . I was thinking of going to family therapy with her. She's all for it."

"Okay . . ." I can hear the skepticism dripping from his voice.

"I know," I say. "But she actually seems like she's changed."

“Does she, now?”

A swell of anger wells up inside me. I want to hold on to this happy feeling, but I also can't blame him. “I get it,” I offer in response. “The thing is, I am not giving her a cent, and she's saying that she won't ask me for a cent.”

“That would be a first.”

“She pre-paid for breakfast,” I say, sounding lame to my own ears. I don't know why I thought my father would be happy about this. He's never had a good word to say about her—justifiably so, I'll have to admit.

“Yes, grifters often do,” he scoffs. “She bought me a drink when I first met her. I was amused and charmed.”

“But that's just it,” I burst out eagerly. “She was raised by a grifter until she was fifteen. A con woman who dragged her around from one hotel to the next.”

“No, she wasn't. Where the hell did you get that idea?”

My heart stutters in my chest. “What?”

“Her birth mother died of a drug overdose, and she was adopted as an infant. Her adoptive parents were lovely people, and she made their lives hell with everything from false accusations to stealing to trashing their house and crashing their cars, then ran away for good when she was sixteen. I didn't know that until after she left us.”

I feel as if a rug has been yanked out from under me. “Are you sure?” The question is asked faintly.

“Mason. Yes, I'm sorry, but I am sure. I hired the best private investigators to find out what I was really dealing with. I even offered to let her parents meet you, but they were just happy to know that you were loved and safe, and other than that, they wanted to forget that long, incredibly painful period of their lives. I mean, she broke their hearts.”

“Why the fuck didn't you ever tell me that?” I shout at the top of my lungs, as my heart swells with rage and sorrow.

People's heads snap to me with varying degrees of shock and incredulity, but I ignore them.

“How would it have helped?”

The question is fair. It really wouldn't have. I would just have known that my mother is an even more horrible person than I ever dreamed.

But I'm so angry right now, and I feel so stupid. “Well, she wouldn't have been able to make a fucking fool of me,” I snarl, and I hang up the phone in a fury.

My mother is approaching the table, clutching her purse to her chest. She sees the look on my face.

“What is it?” she asks nervously, taking her seat across from me.

“What do you think would happen if I told my father about the story of your sad upbringing, and it turned out he hired private investigators to look up your past after you left?”

Her eyes go saucer-wide. “He . . . why would he do that? I have nothing to hide.” Her tone doesn't hide the lies.

Her phone starts ringing from her side of the table. She looks down and I don't miss the way her eyes widen fractionally.

The look on her face tells me that she wouldn't want me to know who's calling her—so I snap my hand out and grab the phone before she can. It's the number for Queensby Publicity.

“What the hell?”

I answer, but don't say anything.

“Traci?” It's Amanda's voice. “I got the pictures, very nice. They'll do the job. If you have any more photos, obviously, we'll pay for them.”

“Give me my phone,” my mother shrieks.

Everyone in the diner is staring at us. Some even take out their phones.

This isn't good. We've drawn far too much attention.

I jump up from the table and head toward the door.

“Traci? Are you there?” Amanda snaps. I hang up and quickly go into my mother’s photo app.

She’s got pictures of me with my arms around Rowan, standing outside the front of my building. That was stupid of me, and reckless.

My stomach turns as the words Amanda said come back to me. She likely has these in her possession.

I’ve just fucked Rowan’s career.

“Baby, wait,” my horrible mother cries from behind, grabbing at my elbow.

I twist around, staring down at the vile woman, who’s frantically trying to snatch the phone from my hand.

“How fucking could you.” My voice does not sound like my own. She looks frightened and she should be. I’m scaring myself too, in a way.

“You can’t speak to your mother that way.”

“No, but I can speak that way to a lying, thieving, bitch who’s ruined the lives of everyone she’s ever touched.” My voice is an inhuman growl. “No wonder you don’t need money.”

Other questions are crowding into my head. How long has this been going on? Who’s paying for her hotel? How did Amanda know to reach out to her? But I’m too angry to think rationally.

“Listen up. I will pay you fifty grand to get Amanda to agree to back the fuck off. And then if you ever come near me again, I will dedicate my life to making yours a living hell.”

She bursts into tears.

“No money, then,” I sneer, and I toss her phone to her. She stops crying immediately. “One hundred thousand,” she wheedles.

I bark a humorless laugh. “Fifty, or nothing.”

Her hands shake as she dials. I listen in as she tries to persuade Amanda to back off.

“There’s no way,” Amanda says. “Rowan’s going down.”

I feel as if a river of filth is flowing through my veins. I’ve brought this on Rowan. It’s my fault. Then again, what could anyone expect from me—given what I came from?

My mother just took me to the highest heights, and in minutes, dashed me down to the depths of despair and self-hatred. The worst part of it is that I knew what she was like—I’ve always known—and I’m a pathetic idiot for believing her for one microsecond.

There is so much anger, so much hate in me, that I don’t trust myself to talk to Rowan, or my father, or my sober coach, or anyone.

All I can do is try to protect Rowan from the fallout. This job is everything to her.

I grab the phone.

“Amanda, you freaking vile back-stabbing little skank,” I snap at her. “You’ve got two choices right now. I will demand they replace Rowan with you, but you can’t accompany me anywhere, and I don’t want to be in the same fucking room as you until our extravaganza. You will handle the campaign in name only. And you will agree not to release any information about me and Rowan. Or I will dedicate my life to fucking ruining yours, in really ugly ways, and trust me, you will never recover.”

“There’s no need to be like that.” Amanda sounds huffy.

“You haven’t seen how I’m capable of treating those that cross me.” I hang up the phone.

I turn to walk away.

“You owe me fifty grand,” my mother wails.

“You didn’t get her to back off. I did.” I’ve turned ugly and mean. I don’t want to be in my own skin right now. I’d kill for a bottle of bourbon.

“Give me back my phone.”

I toss it at her, but it lands on the floor, shattering. I walk out to the sound of the woman who birthed me throwing a tantrum that shows her level of ridiculousness. “You owe me a phone,” she screams. “You owe me a phone.”

I lift my hand over my head and flip her the bird, never looking back.

The only question in my mind as I storm off is whether I’m heading to my sober coach’s house or the bar.

ROWAN

I HAVEN'T HEARD a thing from Mason since he met with his mother the day before yesterday, which is concerning. I know how the whole situation with her stresses him out, and I can't imagine what manipulative crap she may have pulled on him when they met up.

Normally he is such a smart guy. He can defend himself from anything that's coming at him—but when it comes to his mother, just talking about her sends him spiraling down into a dark, dark place.

I'm sure that she only wanted to meet him yesterday for selfish motives. A woman doesn't willingly abandon her child the way she did and then show up again unless she wants something.

We have a plan, though. If she tries to blackmail him or anything like that, we are all prepared with a statement for the media. So why hasn't he messaged me and let me know what is going on with her?

I texted him three times to see what was up, which is not like me. I don't want to come across as the stalker who holds up handwritten signs at Rovers games, but I'm genuinely worried, teetering between annoyance and concern.

My third text, sent yesterday, just said, *Let me know you're either not dead or if you are dead you're going to haunt Amoeba*, and I didn't even get a laughing emoji in reply. Rude.

It's messing with my head more than it should. Paolo picks up on it when he pops into my office to steal one of my Rovers

chocolates.

“Take the whole box,” I grumble at him, pushing the box away from me.

He reaches in and grabs one. “No. I need to maintain my beautiful figure so I can still seduce my wife and look amazing in my salsa costumes.”

“Stop being so happy,” I order him. “Tell me something terrible about your wife.”

“She has bad taste in husbands, but I am the fortunate beneficiary of her terrible taste.”

“Whatever.” I scowl. “Love is a fictional construct.”

“Are you feeling all right?” He nibbles a corner of the chocolate square. It drives me crazy when people do that. Why wouldn’t you just shove the whole thing in your mouth and enjoy? Is he just fixated on showing off how much self-control he has?

I heave a sigh and massage my temples with my thumbs. The way he eats chocolates is not the problem. It’s me. I’m being crabby and critical because I’m worried about Mason, and I don’t feel like I can just pick up the phone and call him about anything that’s not work-related.

“Ignore me,” I tell him.

“I generally do.”

I flip him off.

“Once more, with feeling,” he says, as he takes another tiny little bite.

“Arggh,” I yell.

“Man troubles?” he guesses. “Want to talk about it?”

Cecelia chooses that moment to walk in the door.

“I need to speak to you,” she says to me, then shoots a look at Paolo. “Also, this room smells like calories.” She narrows her eyes at the chocolate in his hand.

He quickly stuffs the whole thing in his mouth—ha.—and hurries out of the room.

Cecelia steps inside my office and shuts the door.

When she's all settled into the chair facing my desk, she pins me with a serious look. One that screams *this conversation is going to hurt*.

“It looks like you're about to tell me that my puppy just went to live on a farm.” I try joking to relieve the tension. She doesn't smile in return.

“Cecelia, what is it? You're freaking me out right now. Did something happen with Mason?”

Oh hell. That has to be it. Maybe his mother stressed him out so much he went on a drinking binge—although I have my phone set to alert me if there are any media mentions about him at all, good or bad.

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Is he all right?” I blurt out, my heart hammering in my chest. Is he in the hospital? On his way back to rehab?

She gives me an odd look.

I deserve it. I'm clearly not asking out of professional concern.

“He's fine, as far as I know. He's asked for a change in representation.”

It takes me several seconds to process what she just said. “I'm sorry, what?” I say stupidly. Did Mason actually just . . . fire me?

And did he not have the balls to do it himself? Did he use Cecelia to dump me?

“Could you please clarify what you just said?” I ask.

“Mason has requested that he be assigned another publicist.”

I am actually speechless. Everything was fine between us. If anything, at the zombie movie-thon, he was the one who

kept trying to get physically closer to me and I was the one who kept scooting away from him and giving him reproving looks . . .

And then he met with his mother yesterday . . .

What the hell?

“Did he give a reason?” I keep my tone polite and professional.

Cecelia shakes her head, but the concern shining from her eyes tells me that she knows that I crossed the line with Mason, and things got personal between us. She warned me, and I ignored her, and pretty much lied to her or at least misled her. I feel like an absolute idiot.

“This is rather irregular, considering that our charity extravaganza is right around the corner and Mason has had no complaints that I am aware of up until now.” I straighten up and look her right in the eye.

“All I can tell you is that he was very adamant about it. It’s been decided that Amanda’s going to be taking over for now. After that . . . well, when the season’s over, I don’t know if we’ll need someone to babysit him anymore. His image seems to have been effectively rehabilitated, and we may be able to just focus on the team as a whole . . .”

“Amanda?” I echo stupidly.

She nods.

Amanda.

“Is he on board with this?”

“Yes. He is.”

The hurt and anger churning in my stomach burn like acid. “Cecelia, she deliberately lost the invitations for our charity night. I had to re-order the invitations and call every single person on that list personally. She risked an absolute public relations fiasco for us, and for the team, and I know this may not be the most important thing to you, but she also would have screwed over all of the children and their families.”

She gives me a narrow-eyed look. “That is a very, very serious accusation. What would she say if I asked her about it?”

I meet her gaze unflinchingly. “She’d lie through her teeth.”

“But why is this the first I’m hearing of it? You didn’t say a single word to me about it at the time.” She isn’t wrong and I regret that decision.

“Well, Mason will . . .” I trail off. Mason will back me up, I was going to say. Mason knows about the “lost” invitations. Mason helped me to call all of the people on that list.

Mason, who just threw me under the bus and didn’t even have the freaking cojones to tell me to my face.

“Mason will what?”

I shake my head. I could tell her to call and check in with a number of people on the list who I had personally called and asked if they’d received the invitation.

But that really wouldn’t prove that Amanda was the one who lost the invitations. And what’s the point?

I take a deep breath. “Did you talk to Mason personally?” I ask.

She winces. “He was the one who made the call. I am sorry. You did an excellent job with this campaign.”

“Thank you. We’re about 90 percent done with it anyway.” I switch to my ruthlessly practical mode. “So where does that leave us with the promotion?”

“I am going to have to think about it. I don’t mean to be unkind, but it’s very important that my publicists don’t let their personal and professional lives intersect, if you know what I mean.”

I nod sharply, too angry and hurt to speak.

Realistically, if Amanda gets the promotion, I’m going to have to leave the firm.

As if reading my mind, Cecelia smiles at me sympathetically. “I don’t want to lose you. You are a very talented and valued employee. Your campaigns have been amazing. Here’s what I think that you should do. Email Amanda all of the information she’ll need to take over representing Mason—you don’t have to speak to her directly. I don’t think that would go well.”

“It wouldn’t.” I am gripping the desk so tightly that my fingers hurt.

Mason, what the actual hell?

“I would like you to take the next couple of days off, so you have time to cool down. You have a bright future here. I have other tasks I would like to assign to you, but we’ll talk about it when you come back.”

“Certainly,” I say coolly, as if the bottom hasn’t just fallen out of my world. I leap to my feet and grab my purse.

“Rowan?” Cecelia says, but I’m already moving past her to the door. I keep walking, my heart pounding in my chest, and she tries to follow me, but there is a client in the lobby.

“Cecelia.” the owner of a chain of sushi restaurants cries out, hurrying over to speak to her and I manage to escape the building.

I shouldn’t do it, but I head to where I know Mason will be.

He goes to Central Park three days a week to meet with a dog trainer.

If I hurry, I’ll catch him. I grab an Uber and head on over. Surely there must be a reasonable explanation for this. Like . . . he’s been kidnapped by aliens and they replaced him with a Mason clone. I’ll be able to tell immediately because he will be lacking a sense of humor and he’ll think that bubblegum is an acceptable ice cream flavor.

When I get to the section of the park where he meets his trainer, though, Mason looks fine. He’s got Puck on a leash. He’s talking to the trainer as if everything is fine. The trainer is drinking coffee from a to-go cup and chatting away happily.

All is well in his world.

Well fuck him very much, because he's single handedly screwed mine.

I walk over to Mason, who looks at me in surprise. I have to admit, he doesn't look great. Well, he's Mason, so he always looks hot, but he's got stubble like he hasn't shaved since yesterday, his hair is tangled rather than tousled, and there are faint circles under his eyes.

Still. The motherfucker basically fired me and now he's ghosting me.

"Rowan. I didn't expect to see you here." Puck barks happily in greeting, and I bend down to give him a quick pat.

"No kidding," I say pleasantly. "Anything you want to say to me?"

"Can we go talk in private?" He glances at the trainer.

"Answer me one question. Did I do a terrible job as your publicist?"

His face twists in dismay. "Uh, no, of course not. Could we please discuss this in private?"

I glare at him. "Did you get any of my messages?"

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. "Yes. I'm sorry."

Who is this man, and what has he done with Mason Raker? I shake my head in frustration. "Are you okay? Does this have anything to do with you getting together with your mother?"

His gaze darkens. "I don't want to talk about her."

"Well too fucking bad, Mason. You owe me some explanations and I'm not leaving here until I have them."

He apologizes to the trainer before taking me by the elbow and walking us out of earshot.

"Listen . . . I think we should take a break for a while."

And there it is. "For a while?" I laugh. "Grow a pair, Mason. Say it."

His face flushes. “For the last time, please, can we go somewhere and talk? It’s nothing to do with you, I swear to God.”

The dog trainer stands just a few feet away frozen in place. His gaze shuttling between me and Mason. He might not be able to hear us, but he’s no idiot. He can tell I’m two seconds away from breaking into martial arts and taking out Mason’s power hand.

“Seriously? ‘It’s not you, it’s me?’ I have thought many terrible things about you, Mason, but I never thought you were a sad cliché.” All of my anger and hurt boil up, and I grab Mason’s coffee cup and dump it on his shoe.

“Hey.” he shouts in protest, but I’ve already spun on my heel and I’m jogging off. I glance back over my shoulder. Mason’s trying to follow me, but he trips over Puck’s leash and falls on his ass.

I leave him there, breaking into a run.

ROWAN

“HE DID WHAT?” Shelby shouts into the phone as I settle in at my desk. Amanda isn’t here today—Cecelia texted me to let me know—which is the only reason I came in to the office.

“You heard me.”

“Effing hell. I can’t believe I encouraged you to go for it. I’m an idiot.”

“No, I’m the idiot. I knew what he was like. Everyone knows what he’s like.”

“This is above and beyond, though. I mean, asking to have that bitch replace you? Specifically her? That’s just spiteful.”

“It’s something, all right,” I agree, my voice sounding cold and professional. I pick up a pencil and start writing on my desk calendar. I am calm. I am mature. I am handling this like an adult.

“When did this happen?”

“A couple of days ago. I wasn’t ready to talk about it at the time.” I look down at my desk blotter. I scribbled so hard on it that I went through several sheets of paper. I pick up the pencil, snap it in two, and throw it across the room, but I do it in a mature, calm fashion.

“I wondered about the radio silence. So, what are we going to do to him? I’m thinking tarring and feathering, for a start.”

“I’m just going to politely ignore him from now on.”

“Oh, eff that. He was a total dick to you.”

“He can break up with me. He’s under no obligation to date anyone, including me.” I grab another pencil from the desk and open my box of Rovers chocolates. I stab Mason’s candy with a pencil, in a calm and mature fashion, and take faint satisfaction in watching it bleed cherry juice.

“I know. But having you removed from your position, replacing you with a woman who’s been a bitch to you and who tried to sabotage you? That’s above and beyond. You should be pissed.”

“I guess.” I toss the pencil and the chocolate into the trash. I dump the rest of the box there too. I’ve lost my appetite for Rovers chocolates, which is sad, because it’s like losing your appetite for life.

“All right, you’re in shock right now. I will be pissed off on your behalf. And when you’re ready, we are going to plot our revenge. It can be fictional, you know. It’s just fun imagining the things we could do.”

“Well, I guess replacing his shampoo with Nair would be kind of entertaining.”

“Right on, girlfriend.”

“And signing him up for embarrassing monthly subscriptions because he picks up his mail from the doorman at his building. Dildo of the month club, anyone?”

“Yes,” Shelby crows. “Ooh, let’s deliver a furry costume to the lobby.”

I manage to crack a smile. “I’m supposed to be worried about his public image. Is that going too far?”

“Nothing’s going too far.” She sounds murderous, which I appreciate.

“So he just totally ghosted you?”

I sigh. “No, he eventually tried. He texted me so many times that I blocked him. He also tried calling my cell phone multiple times. There’s absolutely nothing he can say at this point. He doesn’t want to be with me anymore. I don’t need an

explanation. It hurts, but that's life. And getting me removed from the account was a real dick move, but that's business."

"Stop being so reasonable," Shelby yells at me. "Okay, fine, be reasonable. But the minute you get pissed off, call me. Promise?"

"I promise. Now I gotta go. Love ya."

"Love ya more."

As soon as I hang up the phone the sadness kicks in.

The truth is, I am hurting a lot. I'm teetering between numb and furious and confused. I mean, what the hell? Why did he act like I hung the moon, then abruptly pull this disappearing act? From the very beginning, I was the one putting the brakes on things—and I only opened myself up to him because he wanted more.

I honestly didn't think that Mason was a man who played games, and this just makes me feel stupid.

There's a tentative rap on my door.

"Go away," I whisper. Then I straighten up, put on a bright smile, and call out, in my most cheerful voice, "Come on in."

Dori, Jessamyn, and Paolo file in, practically tiptoeing, with looks of concern stamped on their faces.

Dori has a box of cookies. Jessamyn has a potted plant. Paolo has a dartboard set.

They each set down their gifts on the desk.

"You guys are awesome."

"Stop smiling like that," Paolo orders me.

Dori nods. "It looks painful."

I let my face relax into a glower. "Whew. Thank you. I'd never make it as a beauty pageant contestant." I massage my face with my fingers. "So, you guys all heard, huh?"

"Well, at the office meeting yesterday, Cecelia told us about the new assignment and Amanda was sitting there gloating so hard it made me want to puke." Dori makes a face.

“You were doing a fantastic job with that campaign. I loved the costumes. Especially the cock.”

“Everyone knows how much Dori loves cocks.” Jessamyn smirks. I laugh.

“Ha. That was genuine,” Jessamyn crows.

“Thank you guys,” I sigh. “You know what, we all know this is a cutthroat, competitive business.”

Paolo squinches up his face. “Yeah, but we should all be on the same team, not trying to steal each other’s clients. I heard that Mason specifically requested Amanda, which I do not understand.”

“I can’t begin to tell you how much I appreciate the support. I’m moving forward. I’m still one hundred percent dedicated to helping our clients showcase their best selves.”

I stand up and walk around my desk to hug them each. They file out of the office, and I settle back down at my desk, but a minute later, Cecelia’s walking in.

“Good to see you,” she says, a little too brightly. She glances at the box with the dartboard set, then back at me. “We have a new client who will be arriving in about half an hour. This isn’t too complicated; he just needs a press release and a very small campaign. It’s honestly far beneath your skill set, but he asked for you specifically. It’s Arthur Raker.”

“Mason’s father?” I look at her in confusion.

She nods. “Yes. He’s going to be stepping down as head of his company and appointing someone else as CEO. It’s going to be important to show that he’ll still be involved, just scaling back his role. It’s vital to show that the company will still have strong leadership. You’ll meet with him in the conference room.”

“Are you sure this isn’t a conflict of interest?” I ask, receiving a raised eyebrow in return. “I mean... his son did practically fire me.”

She purses her lips. “I can’t begin to understand the dynamics here, but if he asked for you, he clearly thinks

you're more than capable.

“Too bad his stupid, arrogant son...”

My whispered words trail off when I get a look at Cece's tilted head and narrowed eyes. “What?”

“Nothing. Just mumbling,” I say. “Uh . . . okay. Thank you. I'll prepare.” Cecelia leaves, and I scramble to do some quick research on the company and the major players who are currently involved.

My mind races, and I struggle to focus. Why of all people would Arthur Raker specifically request me?

Half an hour later, I'm shaking hands with a very handsome older version of Mason in the conference room.

“You're the woman who's been doing such a great job rehabilitating my son's image,” he says.

My stomach twists because it sounds like he's asked for me not realizing that Mason ditched me. I need this client. To prove to Cece that I'm still her best. So I stuff down those wayward feelings and put my best foot forward.

“That was me,” I agree. Oops. I shouldn't have used the past tense. Sounds a little bitter.

He smiles wryly. “I know a little bit about what happened.”

My mouth drops open at this revelation.

So he does know.

Probably more than I do, I think glumly. He takes a seat across from me. “Your campaign was fantastic, and you really brought Mason out of his shell. Working with those kids has been as good for him as it was for them. He told me that the entire thing was your idea, and he fought it tooth and nail at first, but you were right in the end.”

“Well, thank you for saying that.” Now I'm really confused.

He heaves a sigh. “And he also told me that he had to choose someone else to complete the project, and you were

probably really angry at him, and rightfully so.” He looks at me shrewdly, as if reading my reaction. “And no, he wouldn’t tell me why. I asked him. He just shrugged it off. He met up with his mother in person recently, and unfortunately, that woman can mess with his head like nobody else on earth. I wish I knew what happened there.” His gaze darkens, and his brow creases with anger.

“Me too.” My heart squeezes with sorrow.

“There’s something about the way that he talks about you . . . I can tell you he’s never, ever had that look on his face before for anyone. Not Lexi, the girl he dated the longest. Not anyone. He’s going through something right now. It’s none of my business, but I think he made some kind of rash, stupid decision, which he does sometimes. When he does that, he’s doing what he thinks is best for everyone, but . . .” he trails off. “Anyway, he’s in a terrible mood these days and frankly being a little shit, but he’s not drinking. So that’s something.” He cracks a smile.

“Thank heavens,” I say fervently. He looks at me and nods. “You do really care about him.”

I blink hard, and suddenly I’m almost about to cry. “I do. A lot. He’s a good person, I know that, and I know whatever he did is because he’s hurting.”

But he hurt me too, I think deep down inside. I wish the best for him, but it was probably a mistake from the beginning.

“Moving on,” Mr. Raker says. “I’ve been hoping for years that Mason would take over as CEO of the company. He’s a natural at it. He’s got some great ideas that would take the company in a new direction, but it’s a direction that I’m okay with. But the stubborn bastard isn’t ready yet, and I don’t know when he will be.” His brow creases. “I worry about him all the time, you know. Hockey is a dangerous sport.”

“It can be,” I agree. “Mason is very good at what he does. And life is a dangerous sport. I know it’s hard watching someone you care about do something risky, but he absolutely loves it, and all I can say is that life-altering injuries in hockey are pretty rare.”

He grimaces. “I tell myself that all the time. Anyway, I’m getting too personal. Let’s get back to business. I plan on stepping down in a couple of months, and it is very important to me that when my stubborn asshat of a son is finally ready to take over, the company’s still in great shape. What I want you to do is help me craft a press campaign that will reassure our clients that I am leaving the company in good hands.” He opens up his briefcase and pulls out stacks of paper. “Jeffrey Archer, who has been with the company for thirty years, will be CEO. Here’s a bunch of information about him, his credentials, his experience, and some personal stuff about his family and hobbies and the charitable causes he contributes to.”

“Mr. Raker,” I protest, laughing. “You’re doing my job for me.”

“Hey, I’m not a new kid on the block. I know how this works.”

“I would like to arrange for a photo shoot, and I’d like to have a video crew shoot a short video also. I’d like to film him and you together, talking about the company and its future. We’d have you walking through the office, visiting a site that’s currently under construction, highlight some of your greatest hits.”

He’s nodding agreeably. “Love it.”

We spend another twenty minutes going over our plans. It’s easy as pie, he’s incredibly well prepared, making for zero controversy to be managed, and he agrees with everything I suggest.

He’s the dream client.

When he stands up to go, he pauses and looks at me. “You could call Mason in a week or so,” he suggests.

I smile wryly. “I appreciate the thought.”

“You’re not going to call him, are you?”

I shake my head. “In all honesty, no. He made his decision perfectly clear, and he’s a big boy. He knows what he wants.

And you know what? He'll be fine, because he's got you in his corner."

Mr. Raker reaches out and pulls me in for a hug and for a moment, I go stiff in his arms completely caught off guard. He's like a giant teddy bear and eventually I relax, returning the hug.

When he lets me go, I say, "Tell him one thing for me. Tell him he's lucky to have a dad like you, and I wish mine was still with me, and he should appreciate what he has while he has it. Tell him to stop being a little shit to you, or I'll kick his ass."

Mr. Raker gives me a big, sad grin, and his eyes are bright with unshed tears. "Boy, he really screwed up letting you go."
Sure did.

ROWAN

THE NIGHT of the charity extravaganza is going off without a hitch. Our guest roster is incredible, the press is riveted, we're making national news, and there's a livestream on Twitter. People are gushing about the game amazing, and the celebrities' outfits, and a new celebrity couple who chose tonight to publicly reveal that they're together. It's been incredible. We are even getting some cross-promotion, since our client Shyne sang and signed autographs before the opening of the game.

It's bittersweet. I mean, it's mostly good — we've raised so much money and everyone's having a fabulous time. I've even had the mildly petty satisfaction of being congratulated on tonight's success by all of the guests, including some internationally known celebrities, and watching Amanda stew about being ignored. She was hoping to swoop in at the last moment and claim all the credit, but I was so closely involved with planning and organizing that everyone knows this is my baby. It's kind of ironic—it was because she lost the invitations that I had to personally call so many people and make that one-on-one contact.

So I guess thanks are in order... yeah right.

But still, Mason's here, in a tux, looking achingly handsome, and the Rovers campaign has been stripped from me, and Cecelia's almost certainly going to name Amanda as the Rovers' lead publicist because she's pissed at me for crossing a line with one of my clients. I can't even be angry at Cecelia for that. My aching heart is living proof that she's

right. You can't mix work and play. I'm lucky the Rovers didn't ditch our firm entirely.

I managed to avoid Mason all evening at the rink, but now we're at the reception, which is being held in the special events room in the same building as the hockey rink, and it's a little harder.

He's been trying to catch my eye, but I'm doing everything possible to ensure that doesn't happen. I've very successfully evaded him and managed to stay on the other side of the room from him at all times.

Fool me once, shame on you . . .

"Have I told you that you look amazing?" Paolo asks me.

I will confess to dressing to kill tonight. Probably not literally — although I am wearing some sharp stilettos. My dress is a neon pink Carolina Herrera wrap dress with a low back and a plunging neckline. My hair is styled in a chignon, and I spent an hour painting on my blush, cat-eye makeup, and glossy pink lips.

"A girl can never hear it too many times." I smile at him. Across the room, I accidentally see Mason staring at me, narrow-eyed. Is he actually freaking jealous?

I grab Paolo's hand and he laughs and twirls me around several times. My dress flares out, and I finish with a curtsy. He bows to me, then moves off through the crowd, seeking his wife, who just left us to get a drink.

"Rowan?" Cecelia taps me on the arm.

"Wonderful turnout, isn't it?" I smile. I may be bubbling with hurt and anger at Mason, but I am genuinely delighted about this evening. We have raised so many funds for the kids and their families. They'll get gifts, the families will be able to stay in local hotels right near their kids, they'll have little mini vacations . . .

"It is. I'm so glad. We may have something of a problem, though." Cecelia inclines her head across the room, and I see Lexi striding through the crowd in a determined fashion, her gaze scanning the guests.

She's either looking for Mason or looking for Dylan, and honestly, I suspect the former. She seems to have set her sights on him again.

"Well, I'm sure Amanda can handle it." That may have come off as a little petty, but I'm not wrong, am I? Amanda is in charge of the account now.

Cecelia purses her lips. "The problem there is that although Mason specifically requested Amanda take over the account, he refuses to speak to her directly. Everything has to go through intermediaries. It's really inefficient, he argues with all her ideas, and nothing's getting done as a result. She's getting very frustrated, and I can't say I blame her." I draw in a breath, and she gives me a sharp look. "Rowan, I know you don't like what happened, but I'm going to be blunt, it's partly on you. Possibly entirely on you. And it's only because I really, really like you that I haven't pushed you on what actually happened."

I nod unhappily. "I know. I have only myself to blame. And I still want to see the Rovers succeed and I don't want to see Mason's image take a—oh, hell."

Lexi is making a beeline for Mason. She's like a trouble-seeking missile on a mission.

"If you want me to try to help, I will," I tell Cecelia. "But I don't want to overstep." I look across the room at Amanda, who's trying to flirt with a married movie star, flipping her hair and batting her eyes like mad. He keeps backing away from her, and she keeps moving forward. Suddenly he spots his wife at the bar, and waves wildly at her while Amanda pouts.

Cecelia winces. "Go ahead, please. You're not overstepping. Not with this."

I hurry over to Paolo, Paolo's wife Luisa, and Dori. "We may have a public relations emergency about to happen," I say, inclining my head towards Lexi, who is shouldering her way through the crowd of people standing in between her and Mason. I glance at Dylan, who's standing across the room and

has just spotted Lexi. I look at Paolo. “Are you ready to jump in if things start going south?”

Paolo grabs Luisa’s hand. “You on board, baby?”

She laughs. “You may end up owing me a new dress.”

“It’s on me,” I say to her. “Thank you. I love you both.” I break into a jog and head for Mason and Lexi.

Lexi finally reaches Mason, and she makes a big show of throwing her arms around him and leaning in for a kiss on the lips. He ducks and steps back away from her so fast that she staggers forward and almost falls. He doesn’t reach out to try to catch her and I get sick satisfaction out of that.

Good boy.

Lexi moves forward again and puts her hand on his shoulder. He twists away and I can see an angry, heated argument starting between the two of them.

I look around for Dylan. Yep, he’s seen all this; yep, he’s moving towards them. If the room weren’t so crowded, he’d be there already.

“Excuse me, excuse me, coming through,” I cry out, shoving my way through the crowd, using my elbows, earning glares and muttered insults.

Now I’m practically right on top of them and feeling queasy about it. Mason is glaring at Lexi. “This is not the place or the time,” he snaps at her.

“Okay, sweetie.” She’s all glowing smiles. “When is a better time for you?”

“Can I pencil you in for never o’clock?”

I chuckle because that sounds like something I’d say. Apparently, I’ve worn off on him.

I throw my arm around Mason’s waist. “Hey, babe. There you are. You are so hard to get ahold of.” He immediately puts his arm around my own waist and pulls me in close. “Sorry. I’m very popular.” He grins down at me, and my heart swells and breaks all over again. The look of genuine happiness on

his face as he stares down at me— I want to believe it more than Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy.

Well, I fell for it once. I nearly lost my job over it. I definitely lost my promotion. From now on work comes first, last, and always when it comes to romance.

I smile even wider.

“Excuse me.” Lexi tugs on Mason’s arm and shoots me a look of disgust. “Mason and I were talking. You are interrupting.” She glares at me. He tries to shake her hand off, and when she won’t let go, he yanks his arm from her grasp.

“You were talking. I was trying to get away from you so I could find Rowan.” He scowls at her. She smiles even wider and tries to press herself up against him.

I stare at her, alarm bells ringing in my head. Something is off with her behavior. These are not the actions of a woman in love, desperately trying to win back her man. Lexi is a self-confident woman who’s used to being pampered and fawned over. The way Mason is treating her should straight up infuriate her, and she should be stomping off in a huff.

And I don’t see the slightest trace of affection in her gaze.

“Get your fucking hands off me,” Mason barks at her, loud enough that everyone close to us turns to stare, and he takes several steps away from her. I move in front of him to block her.

“How did you get past the guards?” I ask Lexi suspiciously.

“I was on the list,” she sneers at me. “How did you get past the guards?”

“I wrote the list,” I reply coldly. “You were definitely not on it, and we have very tight security at this event, and yet here you are. So someone helped you crash the event.”

She rolls her eyes. “Dylan, if you must know.”

“No, he didn’t. I saw him when he spotted you, and he was surprised.” I shake my head at Mason. “Something’s behind all

this, from the very first time she showed up after the game. I am going to make sure we find out what's happening."

"Move." I can hear Dylan shouting.

"Watch yourself," someone yells back. Oh, joy. Just what we need, one of the players acting like an asshole at a children's charity event.

"You spilled on my dress. And you were checking out that girl," Luisa shrieks from across the room.

Oh, I could hug her and kiss her. And buy a new dress for her. She's providing the distraction that I need. Now everyone is staring at her and Paolo, who are faking a loud fight.

"You always overreact. I only have eyes for you, baby," Paolo shouts.

I owe the two of them a meal at the nicest restaurant in town. People are craning their necks, turning to stare, moving towards them to enjoy the show.

Dylan reaches us.

"Not here, not now, not in front of the press and families," I snap at him.

"If he doesn't want trouble, he should get his hands off my girl," Dylan snarls, as Lexi tries to grab at Mason.

"She should get her hands off me," Mason snaps. "Take her. Please."

People are starting to glance our way again.

Dylan draws back his fist for a punch just as I jump in front of him. He swings, I duck, and he almost hits me.

"That's it," Mason barks. "You, me, right here."

"Mason, baby, you just don't understand," Lexi shouts. She wants people to think that Mason is the one causing this fight.

"Sorry," Dylan says to me, throwing his hands up.

I reach out and grab him by the collar and drag him aside. He's so rattled by almost having hit me that he allows it. "Are

you sorry that you nearly punched me in the face, or are you sorry that Mason's ex-girlfriend is making a total fool of you —on purpose? Are you sorry that you're about to end my career?"

Dylan's face flushes with anger. He glares at me defensively. "I'm not about to—"

I stand on my tiptoes and shove my face close to his. "If you start a fight with Mason right here and ruin this charity event that benefits sick children, I promise you I will dedicate my life to making sure that you take the heat for it. I don't care if my boss doesn't want me to. I'd do it for free. You will be permanently benched, for a woman who has been trying to climb Mason like a tree while he does everything he can to shake her off. Think about it, Dylan."

I can see Mason struggling to control himself.

Dylan glares over at Lexi, who is pawing at Mason for the dozenth time. "Fuck this, and fuck you," he snaps at her. He spins on his heel and storms off.

I turn my attention to Mason, grabbing him by the arm. He follows me out of the room, through a doorway, and into a hallway.

We stop, and he turns to face me. His eyes shine with relief, and he lets out a deep breath. "Rowan. Thank God you're here. I've been trying to get ahold of you."

"Yes, I know. I've been really busy not speaking to you." I shake my head, fists balling at my sides.

I worked so hard on this event, and it was a disaster. All the good that was done might've been overshadowed by the drama. And although it should've been Amanda dealing with it, I'll end up with the blame.

"Can we please talk?" He runs his fingers through his hair, which is his stress signal. I know that about him. I thought I knew him on such a deep, intimate level.

Turns out I knew nothing.

I suck in a deep breath. My heart throbs painfully in my chest and it hurts to inhale. “We have nothing to talk about. You made your choice. You need to figure out what your ex-girlfriend’s up to before she destroys your career. This is an event for children and I need to go salvage it before it’s entirely ruined. If you’ll excuse me, or even if you won’t, I have a party to attend.” I turn and hurry off, unwilling to turn back as Mason calls out my name.

MASON

THE DAY after the charity evening, Lexi is dressed to seduce. I mean, it's 10 a.m. and we're meeting at Fifth Avenue by Central Park because I refuse to meet her in a coffee shop, and she's wearing a dress that plunges down to her navel, letting her coat gap open to make sure her goods are on display.

Once upon a time, that dress would have had me hard as a rock, dragging her back to my apartment.

I squint at her. "Aren't you cold?" I ask. "That looks uncomfortable."

She glances at my puffer jacket. "Maybe you could lend me your coat." Her eyes do this twinkling thing at me, and her mouth spreads into a wide smile as if she didn't just cause a ridiculous scene yesterday evening.

"Maybe I could stand here while you slowly freeze into a corpsicle, but I don't have that much time to waste," I drawl, bored.

She wraps her coat around her, shivering, and gives me a hurt look. "You never used to be cruel. That Rowan woman has been a terrible influence on you. I miss the old Mason. We were such a power couple, weren't we?"

"What do you know about Rowan? Seems strange that you'd bring her up as if you know anything about our relationship."

Except there isn't a relationship. She won't even talk to me.

Rowan is the best thing that ever happened to me, and I blew it because I wouldn't recognize a healthy relationship if it bit me in the ass. And even after I screwed her over, she came through for me. Seeing her last night and then having her walk away from me again was like having my heart ripped from my chest.

I glare at Lexi. "I hate the term *power couple*, because anyone who wants to hang out with a power couple is a fake-ass social climber I wouldn't be caught dead with."

"Why are you making this so hard?" she pouts. "We were good together."

I'm freezing my nuts off and not in the mood. "Lexi, I'm going to say this for the last time. Cut the crap and tell me what you're up to, or I will not only take out a restraining order against you, I will make sure the press knows about it."

Her eyes fly wide open in shock. "You wouldn't do that to me," she gasps. Her breath puffs in the frozen air.

"There were enough people who saw your pathetic display at the event last night that I can spin the story that you're a crazed, desperate stalker who can't let go. I hear through the grapevine that your bookings are drying up and you're trying to get into acting. Do you think you're going to get any gigs once that restraining order story comes out?" I grind on relentlessly.

Tears well up in her eyes. "You've turned into an absolute bastard."

No, pretty sure I always had that in me.

"Even more reason to stay the hell away from me. Why are you acting like this? This is completely not you." I shake my head at her. "Someone else is behind this. At first I thought maybe it was Dylan, but he's obviously clueless. Tell me now, or I'm on my way to my lawyer's office."

She just glares at me, tears beading on her mascara-coated lashes, not saying a word, so I spin on my heel and stalk off. I don't have all day for this bullshit.

“You son of a bitch,” she screams at my back. “You don’t even deserve a better team.”

I turn to look at her in confusion. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“We were doing it for you,” she shrieks. “Coach Hartley, me, your mother—we were all doing it for you. We were trying to set things up so the Rovers would dump you.” She sees the look on my face but doesn’t rush to explain herself.

She’s too busy crying her eyes out. If this is an act, she gets the part, because holy shit... she’s a mess. She forgot to wear waterproof makeup, so rivers of mascara are running down her face. We’re drawing curious glances from people walking by, but she keeps up the theatrics.

“It was for your own good,” she howls. “Your coach cares. He wants the best for you.”

I shake my head from side to side slowly. “Coach Hartley?” This doesn’t make sense. “You’re deranged. Coach has no reason to want me to screw up, because that reflects poorly on him.”

“Only if you screw up on the ice. If it’s your personal life, that’s no reflection on him.” She sniffles hard.

“You were trying to help me, by destroying my reputation and getting me kicked off the team, when you know hockey is my life?”

“It always was your life,” she says bitterly. “You always loved hockey more than me.”

“Yeah, obviously.” I stare at her in puzzlement. “I told you that from the very beginning. I told you that the game would always come first, and we could have fun together, but that’s all it would ever be.”

“Fuck you,” she spits at me, because I’m telling her the truth.

Again, Rowan’s face swims in front of me. Do I love hockey more than Rowan?

Holy shit. What am I even thinking?

Love?

It's different with Rowan. She never made me feel like she was jealous of the game, like I might have to choose. I feel like I would do whatever it took to fit her into my life. If that's not love, I'm not sure what it.

If only I didn't screw things up so badly.

"Mason," she yells. "Look at me. Pay attention to me."

I suck on my teeth, looking at Lexi and wondering how I ever put up with her whiny attitude.

"Pull yourself together, Lexi and give me a reason not to get that restraining order. Why would you do all of this?"

"Because until right now, I cared about you and I wanted to help you."

I shake my head. "Nope. That's definitely not it." Then I narrow my eyes. "The coach was paying you to start fights between me and Dylan. You're hard up for money, you were living a certain lifestyle you can't afford any more, you're panicking because the modeling dried up, and you saw a way to get back at me for breaking things off, and make a profit too."

I start rambling off all the reasons that would actually make sense.

"You think you're so smart," she sneers.

I stare at her. Her cheeks are tiger-striped with mascara now. Her nose is running. Her eyes are red. Her face is twisted in a frustrated snarl of rage. How could I ever have found her attractive? She's ugly to the depths of her very soul.

"Well, smart enough to dodge that bullet," I say, waving at her. "If you come near me, or Rowan, again, I will get that restraining order. Goodbye for the last time, Lexi."

As I walk off, she screams a stream of curses at me. I shrug and wave my hand to flag down a cab.

My head is whirling. I believe Lexi when she says the coach was behind it, but why?

I need to talk to someone that I can trust, someone who won't stab me in the back. Someone who could actually have a chance of figuring this out. That leaves me with very few options.

I try to call Rowan. Yes, maybe I'm also using this as an excuse to talk to her again, but I know she's always in my corner, even when I don't deserve it.

It goes to voicemail immediately. Again.

I call the front desk at her office and ask to speak to her. "Who's calling, please?" the receptionist asks.

I close my eyes and scowl. If she knows it's me, she won't answer. "Uh, I'm a potential new client."

"She's very busy. I'll need your name and phone number and a few details," the receptionist says primly.

Damnit. Blocked by the gatekeeper.

I hang up.

When I get back to my apartment, I realize I only have one option. Sitting on my couch, with Puck sprawled across my lap chewing a yak cheese chew bar, I call my father.

"Morning, son. I saw the news reports of your event last night. I'm proud of you for what you're doing for those kids," he says.

"Wow. No jab about it being hockey-related?" I say in surprise.

"No, I'm trying to cut back." He chuckles at his own witticism. Then he sighs. "When I hired Rowan, on your recommendation, we had a heart to heart-to-heart about my worries about you and the game, and I guess she helped me to see sense."

A knife wound of pain slashes across my heart. Of course Rowan helped him see sense. She's great that way, clear-headed and supportive but honest. She'd rather speak truth and suffer the consequences than spin comforting lies.

"I fucked up there, excuse my French."

“That you did. And if you think that’s French, I need to call your French tutor and get a refund.”

“I think she’s like seventy years old now? And retired?”

“Let’s cut to the chase, son. You aren’t calling me this morning to ask for girlfriend advice. I mean, if you were, I’d have plenty to give, so—”

“Nope.”

“And it would involve groveling apologies and her favorite flowers and a box of chocolate so heavy you could use it to bench-press with.”

“My coach is deliberately trying to screw me over and get me kicked off the team,” I spit out, needing to get to the root of this call.

“Say what now?” My father barks in surprise.

“He hired my ex-girlfriend to try to stir up trouble and cause public fights between me and Dylan, in the hopes of getting me thrown off the team. I’m also sure that he was somehow behind the whole thing with Amanda and my mother. Traci showing up and stalking me and stressing me out, when the team management knows she’s supposed to be kept away from me . . . who paid for her hotel? Who hooked her up with Amanda? Who helped her hire a private detective to get pictures of me and Rowan?”

“What the hell,” my father says. “You’re absolutely right. But why? Is there some other player that he wants to have replace you?”

“No. That’s the thing. I’m not bragging when I say this—I’m the best guy on the team. And I have the biggest fan base. Getting rid of me would really hurt the Rovers’ attendance and bottom line.” Frustration boils up inside me. “You’ve been in the business world a lot longer than I have, and you have connections everywhere. What do you suggest?”

My father clears his throat. “I have some ideas, but I don’t want to say anything yet. I’m going to put my feelers out, make some inquiries. I will get back to you the minute I find out anything.”

“Thank you so much,” I say fervently. “I know you hate everything about me playing the game, so I really appreciate you doing this.”

“I hate that you might get hurt,” he blurts out. “I hate that I might lose you. I think about it all the time.”

“Dad.” My throat swells with emotion. “I had no idea. You never said that.”

“I . . . I thought the best way to get you out of the game was to have you take over my position. And I also know you’re going to be great at it, when you do. But I am incredibly proud of you, and I understand how much you love the game. I’m not letting that asshole Coach Hartley screw with you or your reputation. I’ll call you as soon as I find out anything.”

“Love you, Dad.” I blink hard—I think there’s an eyelash in my eye.

“You’re not the worst kid a dad could have.” He hangs up the phone, leaving me to pace the floor, trying not to crawl the walls.

All the while, my mind bounces from asshole coaches to Rowan. The woman I possibly — likely— love.

ROWAN

IT WAS MORE fun watching the game rinkside, I have to admit to myself as I curl up on my sofa. I haven't even bothered with snacks, because watching the game is enough to give me heartburn already. I've had half a bottle of wine and I'm woozy, mad, and sad.

Mason tried to call me again yesterday. I think he also tried to get through to me by calling the front desk. I've continued to ignore him.

Not thinking about him takes up all of my energy.

I don't know. Maybe I should talk to him. Maybe he's calling me because he needs help, and I'm leaving him hanging. Or maybe that's just me making excuses because I miss him on a bone-deep level. I miss hanging out with him. I miss his snarky jokes. I miss our toe-curling, mind-blowing sex. I miss waking up next to him . . .

Ugh.

Either way, doesn't matter. He's on the ice, so, obviously, I can't call him.

I cross my arms over my chest and scowl. I shouldn't be watching the game, but I can't stop myself, because at least this way I can see him. It's sad and majorly pathetic.

There's a pounding on the door and normally I'd jump up to see who it is. Not today. It's either Shelby, who lives in the same building as me, so she doesn't have to call on the intercom from downstairs, or a serial killer.

There's no fight in me today.

I heave myself up off the couch, grumbling, and walk over to the door. "What," I yell.

"Open the door. Or I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down," Shelby calls out.

Looks like I'll live to see another day.

Great. Good. Freaking grand.

I grab the door and open it. "I was hoping for a serial killer," I inform her. I need somewhere to direct my rage.

"Looks more like you need someone to put you out of your misery."

Glad to know I'm that transparent.

That's when I realize that Tasha is standing right next to her, looking tanned and adorable. "Tasha," I scream in excitement, foregoing my pity party for absolute joy. There's hugging, there's jumping up and down, there's so much excited screaming that a neighbor opens the door down the hall to glare at us.

"Inside." I usher them in. They've got grocery bags and I wonder what these two have planned.

"Why were you hoping for a serial killer?" Shelby wonders. "So you could punch someone in the face repeatedly and not feel bad about it?"

"You know me too well." I nod.

"We came prepared," Tasha informs me, lifting up a bag.

"And you're here. In actual New York," I cry delightedly. "When did you get here?"

"This afternoon. Shelby called me yesterday and told me Mason was being a giant ass-face dickwad shitheel, and I honestly was tired of constant sunshine, so I figured I'd fly to New York for the holiday season and freeze my ass off here." Tasha and Shelby start unpacking their grocery bags, setting out food on the coffee table that faces the TV. "Ooh, are we watching the game?"

Shelby frowns in thought. “Apparently, we are watching the game and wallowing. I don’t know if this is allowed. Shouldn’t we be watching chick flicks and screaming, ‘Love is a lie’?”

“We can throw popcorn at the screen and mock Mason,” Tasha points out. “I will go make the popcorn.”

Minutes later, we are settled in with wine coolers, popcorn, bowls of ice cream, boxes of cookies, a small pre-packaged charcuterie board, and chocolate fudge. It sounds weird, but somehow it all works together.

The perfect non pity party.

The team is playing pretty badly tonight. Their energy is obviously off, Mason and Dylan are both frankly sucking harder than a Hoover vacuum cleaner, and it’s really embarrassing to watch.

“See, you’ve ruined him,” Shelby says cheerfully. I down my entire wine cooler in one long gulp after that comment.

I ruined him. That’s good, right? Why am I not happier about this?

“Our firm does still represent them.” I grimace at the screen. My God, Mason is doing horribly tonight. It’s like a different man wearing the Raker jersey. I glance at Shelby. “Do you know anything about what Lexi is up to these days? Because she was very obviously trying to set Mason up to get him in trouble.”

“Booo,” Tasha screams at the screen. “I didn’t come here to watch the Bummer Olympics, loser.”

Shelby and I both applaud. We have a group rule that we all have to applaud clever puns.

“I wonder if there’s a profit motive in there somewhere. I hear that Lexi is hard up for cash. She was used to living pretty high on the hog, and she used to ‘borrow’ money from Mason a lot. He paid for absolutely everything when they dated,” Shelby says. “I wasn’t aware of that until recently. She kind of spun things a certain way back when they were dating. What makes you think she was trying to set Mason up?”

“So many reasons.” I shake my head as I think back on them. “All the weird times she’d show up when Dylan was there. She was allowed back in the wives area during one of their games a while back, and she was all over Dylan trying to make Mason jealous. When that didn’t work, she ran into Mason in front of his apartment, and paparazzi just happened to show up at that exact moment. She got into the charity event when we had incredibly strict security. She’s all over Mason again and again, but only when there’s a crowd around . . .”

Shelby’s nodding, but also watching the game. Mason lets a shot sail right by his head.

“Oh my God. Ice, ice, maybe . . .” Shelby chants. Tasha and I applaud for her.

Dylan trips and falls on the ice. We boo. “Ice to meet you,” I yell. “You total puck-up.” They applaud.

I can’t even be entirely mad at Dylan, though. Lexi used him and manipulated him. Yeah, he was a total dick to date Mason’s ex-girlfriend, and to give Mason attitude when he thought Lexi was getting back together with Mason, but I don’t think that Dylan was in on the whole thing. He was just thinking with his hockey stick.

“I think they are actually going to lose tonight.” I stare at the screen and shake my head. “This is truly sad to watch.”

“If Lexi was setting Mason up, what else do you think is going on behind the scenes?” Shelby asks. “Did he ever explain why he wanted Amanda to take over for you?”

I take a savage bite of cookie and scowl. “That’s the weird thing. He doesn’t really want her representing him. He won’t even talk to her. According to Cecelia, he insists that everything goes through intermediaries, and even then, he shoots down all of her ideas. Amanda’s miserable.”

“Good. She sounds like a twatmuffin,” Tasha declares, then chugs down half her wine cooler.

“Accurate description,” I agree.

Shelby nudges me with her elbow. “So? What did he say when you talked to him?”

I just look at her and shove a cookie into my mouth.

Shelby sighs. “You didn’t talk to him, did you?”

I shake my head and chew.

“Because why?”

I swallow. “Because he had Cecelia tell me that he didn’t want me representing him anymore, and then when I saw him in person and tried to ask him about it, he told me he wanted to ‘take a break.’ So I threw a cup of coffee on him—”

“As one does,” Shelby agrees.

“And then I stormed off and have refused to take his texts and calls ever since.” Shelby and Tasha are both staring at me reprovingly now. “What?” I protest.

“Maybe he has some kind of reasonable explanation,” Tasha suggests. “Honestly, from the very first time I talked to him in the cab, I could tell he was into you.”

“What cab? You were in a cab with him?” Shelby demands of Tasha. “You came to town and didn’t say hi to me?”

“No, this was a FaceTime thing. Mason grabbed the phone from me when I was talking to her. It’s a long story involving Mason forcing me to listen to ‘Macarena’ twenty-seven times in a row.” I stifle a snicker at the memory. Our feud was kind of fun. I’m a little sad that I can’t make him dress up in a ballerina costume for another charity event. It would be *tutu* cute.

“Oh, come on. A man does not do that to a woman unless he’s trying to get a rise out of her. It’s like pulling a girl’s pigtails.” Shelby looks at the screen. “Wow. He’s in a mood tonight. He’s in time-out for fighting again.”

“Look, guys, I knew Mason’s reputation from the very beginning,” I tell them. “Being with Mason was hot, it was incredible, it was intense. He was all, ‘I’m not with anyone else, baby.’ without being any more specific than that, and . . . I really made a fool of myself. I let my guard down, and he stomped all over my heart. I don’t see how I could trust him again.”

“I think that what you should do is at least let him try to explain what the hell is going on. If his explanation is just ‘I was having a bad week’ then you know that he was just a fuckboy and it’s time to move on.”

“Language,” I gasp dramatically.

“English, mostly,” Tasha says. “Although my grandmother taught me some Russian. My great-great-grandparents came here fleeing the pogroms. Want to hear me swear in Russian?”

“Only if you can tell Mason to go fuck himself,” Shelby says. “But also, Rowan needs to go talk to him and see what happened, because we are all here for the drama and we need to see how this series ends.”

“Трахни его,” Tasha says, with a perfect accent. We stare at her. “What?” she shrugs. “My grandmother taught me the good stuff.”

My cell phone rings, and I glance over at the charging cradle on my end table. It’s Mason’s father.

“I need to take this, and no, it’s not Mason,” I tell Shelby and Tasha. “Please continue booing the Rovers for me.”

I snatch up another wine cooler, grab the cell phone, and answer, hurrying to my bedroom. I mean, I did tell him he could call anytime, but if he’s calling me at night, I’m worried.

I shut the door quickly. “Mr. Raker. Is everything all right?” I ask, concerned.

“Well, yes and no. Do you have a couple of minutes?”

I settle down on my bed and take a swig from the wine cooler. “Of course. What’s going on?”

I hear a long sigh. “I’ve been doing some digging to help Mason out. I’m sure you know that strange things have been happening with him lately, things that seem designed to provoke him and make him look bad. Ultimately aimed to cost him his spot on the team.”

“Yes, I have noticed that.” I feel a twinge of remorse. Mason and I may not be together, but I still care about him. I can’t just leave him hanging. I did say I’d work on finding out

what Lexi was up to, and I intend to, unless Mr. Raker has beaten me to it.

And apparently he has.

“It all goes back to his coach, Paul Hartley. Turns out the Rovers have been planning to relieve him of his duties after this season. He and Ralph Talman have clashed on the vision for the team and Ralph has had enough with Hartley’s inability to take orders. He found out and called Talman on it.”

“How in the heck did you find out—”

“Don’t ask,” he interrupts me. “It may not have been entirely legal. Money may have crossed palms. Pressure may have been applied.”

“Wow, remind me not to get on your bad side.” I glance at the door. I can hear Tasha and Shelby booing on the other side. Sounds like Mason is having a very bad night.

“You could never get on my bad side. You’re one of the good ones.”

“Wait a minute,” I protest. “What does any of that have to do with Mason?”

He sighs. “The two spoke and Talman was under the impression they were on the same page and things were amicable. He even gave Coach Hartley permission to speak to other teams for employment.”

“That all sounds favorable . . . but again, what does that have to do with Mason?”

“Patience, child. I’m getting there.” He chuckles. “Hartley is a stubborn ass with pride that works against him. It’s half the reason he was being let go to begin with. Organizations don’t get rid of coaches with Hartley’s record without major friction.” I nod, but remain quiet, hoping he’ll get to the point. “Hartley is vindictive, and what better way to go out?” He waits, and when it’s clear I don’t intend to answer, he goes on. “Swinging. He planned to do as much damage to the organization as possible.”

“Which would mean going after the players,” I say, mostly to myself.

“Bingo. If he could cause division among the teammates and ultimately ruin the reputations of the star players, the organization would fall apart. Mason’s a free agent. If he wants to leave at the end of the season, he can.”

“Mason would never leave the Rovers. He loves them. He’s a New York City die-hard.”

“Exactly. He wouldn’t leave them, but he could have his reputation so tarnished that the fans turn on him,” he says.

“They wouldn’t. The fans love him.”

“It happens all the time in professional sports. It could be made to look like he was trying to leave. Seeds of doubt can be planted so easily, and you’d be surprised how quickly a fan’s loyalty can switch.”

I sit there stunned. I drain the rest of the wine cooler. “Holy guacamole. All this was so his coach could go pursue his dream job?”

“Yep, and if Mason was desperate, Hartley thought he’d be able to negotiate a pretty sweet deal with whichever team he landed at. They’d get a star player at a bargain basement price. I mean, Mason doesn’t have many years left in the game, so this would be his last shot with one of the professional teams.”

“What a piece of . . .” I trail off. “So Coach Hartley is behind all of this? Mason’s mother, Amanda, and Lexi?”

“Yep, from what I gather, he recruited everyone he could to help him apply pressure from all sides.”

“Okay. He’s not getting away with it. What can I do to help?”

“I can’t tell Mason. You’re going to have to.”

“What?” I yelp. “I . . . I can’t. He’s playing.”

Mr. Raker lets out a huff of impatience. “Obviously. Tell him first thing tomorrow.”

“I don’t understand. Why can’t you tell him?”

“Oh, a million different reasons. He will listen to you when he won’t listen to me. He’s kind of annoyed at me right now, a little on the defensive, and he won’t necessarily even believe me. He might think that I’m exaggerating to get him to quit.”

“But . . .”

“Nope. It’s got to come from you.”

He hangs up the phone.

“What?” I squeal.

But there’s no one there.

I hurry into the other room to find Shelby and Tasha shaking their heads. “They’re going to lose,” Shelby informs me. “Everything okay? Was that some kind of emergency call?”

“No big deal,” I say, plopping down. I reach for another wine cooler and carefully construct a calm, clear text message, which I type out and send to Mason.

ROWAN

WHY WAS ALCOHOL EVEN INVENTED? What a stupid idea alcohol is.

I lean back on the couch, groaning.

I've gulped down a packet of hangover helper, and I've taken a shower, but it's not helping. Everything hurts and I'm dying. Thank heavens it's the weekend so I don't have to drag myself in to work looking like last week's roadkill, because I'm already on Cecelia's shiznit list.

I curl up on my sofa, squinting at the remnants of last night's girl-fest. Shelby and Tasha helped me clean up some of it before they staggered on home, but we were all hammered. There are empty cookie and fudge packages scattered on the sofa and coffee table, which proves we were a mess.

My head is pounding with a steady rhythm and I'm dreading having to call Mason and spell everything out.

Pound, pound, pound . . .

I massage my temples.

No, wait, that's not my head, it's the door. Someone's pounding on the door.

I get up and stumble over. "What?" I yell. It can't be Shelby again, can it? She sleeps in after late-night parties.

"It's me. I got your text," Mason booms from the other side of the door. I'm suddenly aware that I am wearing bunny

slippers, a faded pink tank top, and neon-yellow sweatpants, and my hair is a snarled rat's nest.

Oh, to heck with it. I'm not trying to seduce him.

I pull open the door and look at him through bleary eyes. He's got a bruise on the right side of his face, which is not surprising because he had a game last night. Still, I wince at the sight of it. I don't like to see him hurting.

Mason lights up at the sight of me. He's still so ruggedly handsome that it hurts to look at him. He's wearing a knit cap and a puffer jacket, and there's a dusting of snow on his hat and shoulders.

He walks in, holding a tray with cups of coffee, a bag of bagels, and a bottle of aspirin.

"I thought you might need this," he says.

"What? Why?" I blink at him.

"I could tell you were having quite the party last night." He walks past me and sits down on the couch, setting down the coffee and bagels. Then he sheds his coat and tosses it over the arm of the sofa.

I look at him suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

"That text you sent? The one that was in Martian?" He leans down and picks up an empty wine cooler bottle and looks for a place to put it, then sets it down on the end table.

I glower at him. "That was a highly thought-out well-constructed communication from a professional publicist. Give me that aspirin." I grab it from him, pour three into my hand, and wash it down with black coffee.

He pulls out his phone and calls up my text, then holds his phone out to me.

I lean over to read it, trying not to get too close to him because I know I'm a weakling when it comes to resisting him—even when I feel like this.

"Mxson, w tlk to me tom abt yor coch."

I wince and straighten back up. “Oh. Okay. Well, Shelby, Tasha, and I had a few wine coolers.”

“A few?” he says, lifting an eyebrow.

I cross my eyes and it hurts. “Ugh,” I say, kneading my head. “We drank while we were watching the game last night . . .”

“You watched the game?” Mason flashes me a grin and arches his eyebrows. “I’m flattered.”

I give him a sidelong glance. “Don’t be.”

“Yeah,” he sighs. His broad shoulders slump a little. “That wasn’t my best work.”

I don’t reply because I won’t lie. It was bad and we both know it.

“So, uh, let’s talk about anything else. Like that text. Can I assume you want to talk to me about my crotch?” he asks hopefully.

I smack him on the shoulder, then wince. “Ouch. That hurt me more than it hurt you. Everything hurts this morning.”

“Sorry for your day. Been there, done that.” He nods sympathetically. “Glad to be on the sober path.”

“I bet. And no, I have nothing to say about your crotch. Jerk. Your coach. I need to talk to you about your coach. I wanted to tell you that your father called me last night and he found out some terrible things about Coach Hartley.”

Mason’s lips slam into a thin line and his eyes narrow. When he doesn’t say anything, I forge ahead.

“Apparently, he has been behind all of this crapola with your mother, Lexi, and even Amanda. He’s been trying to divide the team because he was getting sacked . . .” Mason does not look surprised. “You were the easy target.”

Mason is nodding in agreement.

“Why are you not looking surprised?” I ask.

“Because my father told me all of this already.”

I run my fingers through my hair, squinting at him blearily. “I don’t understand. After the game?”

“Before the game. Part of the reason I played so badly. I was mad as hell. It took everything I had not to pound the coach’s face in. Hartley doesn’t know that I know yet. I’m just trying to decide what to do about it.” He nods to himself. “Probably pound his face in. Yeah, I like that plan.”

“Wait,” I protest, lifting both hands. “Your father made this big crazy deal about how I had to call you and there was no way you’d listen to him about it, and that you probably wouldn’t even believe it coming from him, because you were mad at him or something . . .”

Mason is shaking his head in puzzlement. “Nope. I’m not mad at my father at all. Why would he say that?”

I close my eyes, trying to stave off the headache from hades.

“I’m asking myself the same question,” I groan.

“We discussed it thoroughly, he asked what I was going to do, I told him I was going to shove my hockey stick up Coach Hartley’s ass, he suggested I not do that, et cetera and so on. I did end up agreeing that would be a terrible thing to do to my hockey stick . . . oh, man.” Now he’s chuckling to himself.

“What? And no, please don’t get yourself arrested.”

Mason smiles. “My father lied to you so that you’d have to text me and I’d come over here. He likes you a lot.”

“Ahhh . . .” The light dawns on me. I would have figured it out a lot faster if I weren’t so hung over.

“There’s more,” he continues. “I should have told you this from the beginning, but I can never think clearly when my mother’s around. She, uh, she pulled a real number on me at our meeting, had me thinking that everything was actually sunshine and roses—I know,” he says wryly, seeing the look on my face. “I actually believed that. She spun this whole story about her sad childhood, which it turns out was a total lie. She had me pitying her. I’m the worst kind of idiot.”

Anger surges, momentarily blinding me from the pounding in my head. What a piece of work his uterus landlord turned out to be. It's not fair for any child to have to live with a parent that sucks as bad as she does.

"No, that's not it at all. Every kid loves their parents, even parents who don't deserve it. You wanted to believe the best of her." I shake my head vigorously. "She's an absolute word that rhymes with witch. I'm sorry she did that to you."

"Well, at least I finally found out why she was back in town. Coach Hartley knows how much having her here messes with my head, so I'm sure he was paying for her to stay in a hotel. And it turned out she was working with Amanda and had hired a private investigator to follow us to get pictures of me and you."

I gasp. "W... what?"

He sucks on his teeth for a moment, peering at me as though he's trying to determine where my mental state is at the moment. I look down at my state of dress and realize I probably look extra unhinged. I try not to squirm under his perusal, but it's no use. Thankfully, he doesn't comment and continues on with the deets.

"The PI got a picture of us together in front of my apartment building, kissing. Which was stupid of me. Not kissing you, of course—that's always amazing." He looks at me. "She sent the pictures of us to Amanda."

That cockroach.

"Oh, God." I feel sick at the thought.

"I know. You'd just told me how important it was to you to get that promotion, and I knew this would ruin you. You said before that if our relationship came to light, everyone would want to high-five me for being a stud, and everyone would think you were sleeping your way to the top. It's a sucky thing about society, but it's true. I would have come out of it just fine. You wouldn't."

"I . . . I could have handled it," I protest faintly.

I probably would've lost my job and been kicked out on the streets. But I could've survived that. Right?

Ugh. What a conniving, vicious...

"I couldn't take that chance. I felt like I couldn't be with you anymore. For your sake mostly, but also because my mother had me questioning everything. If she could somehow convince me that she was genuine and pull the rug out from under me, anyone could. I didn't want to drag you down to the depths with me." He shakes his head. "I was standing there, a wreck of a man, feeling like just a dumbass because my mother fooled me yet again."

"Mason." Fury bubbles up inside me. "Why the hell didn't you tell me that? What were we to each other, that you couldn't tell me that?"

"Amanda said she would destroy you if I didn't let her take over the representation. And all I wanted to do at that point was curl up in a corner, or more likely drink until I passed out. So I did what I thought was best for you."

"I... wish you hadn't."

His face goes bleak. "I wasn't thinking, and I wanted to protect you. That was the only way that I could think to do it."

"You just . . ." I'm speechless.

Mason looks at me with longing. "I have missed you so much, Rowan." He leans forward, brushing my hair out of my face. "If I could do it all over, I'd do it differently."

Our eyes lock and my body tingles all over. He leans in for a kiss. My lips part, my heart melting in my chest . . .

The longing that swells up inside me is so fierce that it brings tears to my eyes.

But the hurt he caused is still there. The decisions might've been made out of good intentions, but they were still bad. They broke me.

I jerk back away from him.

“No,” I whisper, closing my eyes and steeling my resolve. “Damn it, Mason. You absolutely wrecked me, you know that? You let Cecelia deliver that news to me about changing representation. You didn’t even have the guts to tell me yourself. I was humiliated. And you didn’t even care enough about us, about me, to give me an explanation. You very nearly cost me my job. And you just took the easy way out, knowing how much it would hurt me. I didn’t want to let you in in the first place, you know that. It wasn’t a secret that I was dodging feelings. Was it?”

“I . . . yes.”

“Yes what, Mason?”

“It wasn’t a secret that you wanted to be cautious all along.” He nods somberly. “I wanted more from you. I pushed for you to let me in, and then I screwed it up.” His head lulls back on a groan. “I’m a mess. Hell, when I dated Lexi, I’d disappear for weeks sometimes, and she just put up with it because she wanted to be dating Mason Raker. I’m not proud of that. I’m not good relationship material, and I knew that, but I just wanted you so damned much.”

“You wanted your cake and all that. Sex without strings. You didn’t want me.”

He shakes his head in protest. “That’s not true at all.”

I can’t . . . I can’t do this. I can’t trust him. I can’t trust myself. I can’t think straight. “You . . . you should go. You need to talk to Ralph about the team, today, and I need to talk to Cecelia.”

I leap to my feet.

“Rowan . . .” Mason stands up, a look of deep sorrow on his face.

“I’m going to my bedroom, and when I come back out, you should be gone.” Tears spill from my eyes. “You need to go, now.”

I hurry to the bedroom without looking back and shut the door behind me.

I feel sick to my stomach.

Everything that he said hurt. From the continued betrayal of his mother, to what he put me through. It's all too much to process and this epic hangover isn't helping.

I can't think straight.

I listen as Mason leaves, wondering if I'm making a mistake.

No. I need to take care of me and my feelings.

When I know he's long gone, I come out and collapse on the couch, bursting into tears.

Even as I'm crying, I force myself to send a message to Cecelia, with shaking hands. "I know it's the weekend, but an emergency has come up and we need to talk."

I'll pull myself together for that meeting, but for now, I'm going to mourn the loss of what might've been.

MASON

“SON, I’m sorry, but this sounds like it should be coming from a guy wearing a tinfoil hat and living in a cave,” Ralph Talman says to me, leaning against his desk. His office is the size of a studio apartment, adorned with Rovers posters, framed *Sports Illustrated* covers, trophies, stacks of jerseys and merch, and multiple sizes of our mascot scattered everywhere. It also has a lot of plants and sun lamps because his wife helped decorate the office, and she thinks that plants have detoxifying properties. Or so Ralph has said on numerous occasions.

He and his wife had lunch plans today, and he’s not pleased. I had to tell him it was a life-and-death emergency. When he arrived at his office and I laid everything out in front of him, he raked me with a look of disgust and fury.

“Mr. Talman, you know me.”

“Only too well.” He glares fiercely. “And I could be sitting at a French restaurant with my wife right now, enjoying boeuf bourguignon, but I’m here with you.”

I knew I’d have to deal with this. After years of my public antics, he doesn’t take me seriously. No matter how hard I work on the ice, and how much money I rake in for his organization. Today, it pisses me off.

I’m not backing down; this is too important, not just for me, but for the team that’s been a second family to me. We have a traitor in our ranks, and we’re all at risk because of him. Who knows what the hell Coach Hartley will try to pull

next? There's too much time left for him to inflict permanent damage.

"You know that I have a short fuse, that I have a problem with alcohol addiction, and that I went through a phase where I dated a lot of women. Have you ever known me to lie to you, or to spout conspiracy theories?" I keep my tone calm and steady. I'm furious that the coach is screwing us all over and I'm the one on the hot seat. I want to lose my temper, I want to shout and swear, but it is of vital importance that he take me seriously.

"Not until today," he grumbles. Then he heaves a sigh. "I don't think you're lying. I think you actually believe this craziness."

"Only because it's true."

"Okay, you want me to believe that Coach Hartley is trying to ruin my team, after the deal I made with him? A deal that guaranteed him the ability to take another position with another team while I pay him the remainder of his contract?"

"Yes."

"And . . . he then planned to drive such a big wedge that you'd be willing or forced to follow him?"

"I'm currently your star attraction, Mr. Talman. Is that so hard to believe?"

He heaves a martyred sigh. "Paul went straight-up supervillain and started conspiring to ruin your reputation so badly with our fans that you'd be grateful when he offered you a position with his new team. A team that may also not accept you if your reputation was damaged that badly."

I shrug. "I don't think he cared what happened to me, as long as I wasn't playing for you."

He takes a deep breath and continues to say Coach's crimes out loud. "He recruited and bribed Amanda from Queensby Publicity, and your mother, and Lexi."

Anger churns in my gut as I think of all the harm that Coach Hartley caused. He made me hurt Rowan. Well, I let

him manipulate me into hurting her. “Unfortunately, yes, he did all of that.”

He shakes his head. “Well, I feel like I’m pretty well connected, and I haven’t heard a single whisper of this. Nothing. And I have people who are actively trying to find something on Paul.”

“It’s why he brought in help. People to do his dirty work. He was very careful to keep this hush-hush. I don’t think the owners of another team would want him if they knew the lengths that he was going to go to, to try to break up our team.”

“Bullshit.” Mr. Talman glares at me. Anxiety swells up in my gut. If I can’t convince him, it’s all over for me as a player—and the Rovers are sunk, because they can’t survive with a man like Paul Hartley as their coach.

“Mr. Talman, I feel so strongly about this that I cannot continue working on the same team as the coach. I don’t expect you to just take my word for it, though. Here’s what I’m asking. Number one, I want you to speak to my father. He can’t tell you all of his sources, but he can steer you in the right direction. Number two, please make some calls to my mother and Amanda. For the right price, I’m sure those two will give you any proof that you need.”

“Now?” he groans.

I nod. “This can’t wait. I can’t play another game with him as coach.”

“Wait outside my office so I can make some calls,” he grumbles. “I don’t know if I hope that you’re right or you’re wrong. Either Paul is a vile human or my star player is a lunatic.”

“I’m surprised you even doubt that Paul’s vile. Aren’t you the one who decided to relieve him of his duties because you couldn’t stand him?”

Mr. Talman levels me with a glare that screams *get the fuck out of here*.

I leave the office, and with nothing to do, I pace the halls.

It's a long, long hour of pacing and stewing. I wish I could call Rowan and have her talk me down, because I want to go to Coach Hartley's office and kick holes in the wall. Hell, I wish I could call Rowan for any reason at all.

But she doesn't want me anymore.

The thought of a future without her feels so fucking wrong. Who will make me laugh until I snort soda out of my nose? Who will keep my ego in check? Who will ever feel the way she did in bed—connecting on a level so deep that it changes everything I know about sex, making it feel so intimate that our souls melted together?

What the fuck... souls melted together?

I'm losing my damn mind and it's all Rowan's fault. She hypnotized me. Ensnared. Freaking owned — owns — me.

I mean, when your soul has fused with another person's, how can you carry on without them?

Do you hear yourself?

“Ugh,” I groan, pulling at my hair.

Rowan has me twisted up in knots, questioning my entire life. The truth is, I'll carry her with me always. Right along with the knowledge that I failed her.

Mr. Talman's door opens. His face looks like thunder.

I walk down the hallway slowly, like a condemned man headed to the execution chamber. I don't know what this means. Is he angry at me, or at the coach? My future hangs in the balance and it's not a position I care to be in. This all fucking sucks.

I enter his office to find magazines scattered across the floor. His chair has been kicked over. There's an overturned plant lying on the floor, dirt spilling everywhere.

“Don't tell my wife,” Mr. Talman says.

I shut the door behind me. “Well?” I say.

“Well...” he says, tapping on his leg, looking two seconds from blowing smoke from his ears. “Coach Paul fucking

traitor Benedict Arnold Hartley is a dead man.” His face flushes red. “That little shit-weasel. That asshole piece of garbage. He is dogshit on the heel of life.” He’s pacing his office floor as he says this, his arms waving. “You know how stupid he is, by the way?”

Relief soars through me, giving me wings. He believes me. “How stupid is he?”

“After I talked to your father and a few other sources, I checked his work telephone. There were some numbers on there that I didn’t recognize, so I called them. One of them, I’m sorry to say, was your mother. When she answered, she screamed ‘Where the hell is my final payment? I did everything you asked, it’s not my fault my son is a selfish bastard.’”

That should hurt, but I think I’m finally becoming numb to my mother’s treachery and her cold, cruel indifference to me. Kick me enough times and scar tissue’s going to build up.

He shakes his head, glowering. “I called another number and Amanda answered. I sort of disguised my voice and mumbled hello, and she said, ‘Mr. Hartley, I think that Mason’s starting to catch on. Lexi was too obvious. I told you she wouldn’t be able to pull it off.’ And then I hung up.”

He looks at me in exasperation. “Dumb fuck didn’t even use a burner phone. He was screwing me over using the company phone. I’m also spotting some irregularities in his expense reports, and I’ve just started looking. I’m going to hand all of this over to our forensic accountant, but I actually think that he was bribing everybody using team funds. If that’s the case, I will press charges.”

“Aren’t you afraid that it will go public and maybe come back to haunt us?” I frown in thought.

He shakes his head. “No. It’s going to make him look like crap, not us. It will ruin his career, as it should. I didn’t sign a thing yet giving him permission to speak to other teams. That’s officially revoked. He thinks other teams are going to get glowing recommendations from me. Ha. He’ll never coach again. If he wants to be petty, that’s his prerogative, but to

screw everyone over like this, and to embezzle company funds, and do what he did to you . . . no team deserves a coach like that.”

“Agreed.” I fold my arms across my chest. “It’s so fucking stupid. He’s a talented coach.”

“He used to be. He’s gotten lazier as the years have gone by. But he still could’ve had a chance to turn things around. He threw his career away for nothing. His ambition got too much for him.” Mr. Talman walks behind his desk, bends over, and picks his chair up. I walk over to the plant and set it upright, scooping the dirt back into the pot with my hands.

“Thanks.” He takes a deep breath and I fear what’s coming next. “Listen, Mason . . . I’m sorry I doubted you. I just didn’t want to believe it.” He scowls.

An apology from Ralph Talman is a rarity. An apology to me? It’s almost laughable considering my history. I’ll take it, and make this solemn vow to earn the man’s respect moving forward.

“Hey, I didn’t want to believe it either. I know it sounds crazy.”

“Listen.” He looks at me, sympathy shining from his eyes. “Things are going to get ugly for the next few days. I don’t know how much of the truth is going to come out. It’s hard to keep these things under wraps for long. People may be talking about your mother, and about Lexi, and the lady at Queensby Publicity. There’s one game before the All Star break. Let’s keep this under wraps while I have people look into the accounting. When that’s done, why don’t you get out of town for a few days. Somewhere away from here so you don’t get dragged into this more.”

“Maybe. Probably a good idea,” I concede, knowing shit’s going to go up in flames, and my name is likely to be drug through the mud before it’s all over with.

“Have you given any thought to what you want to do after the season’s over?”

I nod. I've been giving it a lot of thought. "I think I've got two more good years in me. I want to go out when I'm on top of my game and take over my father's company. I still want to stay involved in hockey, though. I'll do some volunteer coaching. I'd like to see about building rinks in underserved communities, and Rowan really got me going with the charity stuff. I would love to be able to involve Rovers team members in charitable outreach."

He blinks. "So... you want to stay here? After everything?"

I smirk. "I've done my fair share of 'everything', Mr. Talman. So, yeah. I wanna stay here and play for you."

Mr. Talman smiles in relief. Maybe he thought this was going to be too much for me and I'd storm out. "One hundred percent. I think that's an excellent solution for all of us. We'll make an announcement about you committing once all of this nastiness has blown over. We won't go into specifics about what will happen after the two years are up, of course. That can wait until you are actually ready to retire." He reaches out and shakes my hand, pumping it vigorously.

He looks around the office. "And now, I've got to get on the phone with my lawyers. Paul Hartley's going to find out he screwed with the wrong team. Know any good coaches?" He smiles wryly. "I thought I had more time to interview."

"I'm sure you'll find one."

Once I reach the parking lot, I call Andrew, my sober coach. "Hey," I say to him. "Do you have some free time late next week?"

"I can make some free time." I can hear the concern in his voice. "Everything okay?"

"Basically. Yes and no. Everything's okay, but everything's also a disaster. It's a lot to explain. I'd rather tell you in person," I say.

"Do you need me to come meet you right now?"

"No, I'm not in imminent danger of a slip-up, but I appreciate the offer. Things are mostly good. I've found out

some more stuff about my mother, and I think I'm finally ready to move on from that."

"Well, thank God. So, free time . . . does this mean you want to go on a trip somewhere?"

I nod. "Yes, I want to get as far away as possible. I'd like to run from my problems, thank you very much. You choose a place."

"How about golfing, in Arizona?" he suggests.

"Sure. You make the arrangements," I say listlessly.

After we firm up the details, I hang up.

I should be ecstatic. I've identified the source of all my recent problems, purged the harmful people from my life, and made important decisions about my future.

But that's the problem.

What kind of future do I have, if I don't have Rowan to share it with?

ROWAN

“YOU HAVE GOT to be freaking kidding me,” Amanda screams. “You believe her over me? She’s so bad at her job that the Rovers demanded she be removed from the account mid-campaign.”

“Well, actually, Amanda, as you know, it was only Mason who made that request, and it had nothing to do with the campaign itself. I talked to Mason today.” Cecelia is the picture of calm in an ice-blue Chanel suit as we face off against Amanda in the Queensby conference room. Cecelia’s sister Ansley stands by her side, frowning at Amanda.

We also have a building security guard standing by. Amanda’s building pass has been revoked and all of the belongings from her desk are piled into a shopping cart.

“You talked to Mason?” Amanda’s eyes widen in alarm. “What did he say?”

“He told me how you tried to blackmail him with a picture of him and Rowan, and said you would ruin her reputation if he didn’t get her removed from the campaign.”

“Yes, because it is completely unprofessional for her to be banging all of her clients.” Amanda’s face is red with anger as she glares at Cece.

I draw in a sharp, angry breath, ready to spew out a retort. “Amanda, I hope you can hear how many things are wrong with everything you just said, starting with the fact that you just admitted to blackmail.”

Amanda's eyes glitter with angry tears. "I did nothing of the sort." All of her cold, arrogant composure has vanished. Her sneering superiority is gone. She's a cornered animal, her movements stiff and jerky, her face thrust forward and her eyes bulging.

Ansley heaves a sigh and shakes her head in disapproval.

"And moving on to the fact that Rowan's previous two clients were female, heterosexual, and married, and no, she was not sleeping with them," Cecelia says coolly.

"Oh, whatever." Amanda's glossy red lip curls up in a sneer. "Your publicist was screwing her very famous client. She took advantage of a vulnerable man—"

"How many different lies are you going to try on here, Amanda? You worked with a man who was actively trying to ruin the reputation of our client, which goes against our mission, our reason for existence. I know this because I talked to the owner of the Rovers today. We will be lucky if we manage to keep their account after what you pulled."

Amanda clutches her small black purse defensively and takes a step backwards. "You can't prove anything."

"Amanda, you've actually violated the law. Blackmail is illegal. You've also violated multiple terms of the contract you signed with our agency." Cecelia shakes her head at her chidingly. "This is going to end up in court. Mr. Talman is going to testify against you, and so will Mason. We'll have to see who the jury ends up believing, but given that Paul Hartley called you directly from his work phone on multiple occasions, and given that he deposited money into your account, I'm thinking it won't be you."

Amanda staggers back several steps. "I'm calling my mother," she wails. "We have excellent lawyers."

"Are those the lawyers who failed to win the case against three charities whose boards she sits on? Charities which have been found guilty of misappropriating funds?" Ansley speaks up.

Amanda's mouth opens and shuts. Her chest heaves. Finally she points at me, her hand shaking with rage. "She fucked her client," she screams at the top of her lungs.

"You're really stuck on that, aren't you?" I interject with a sweet smile. "I dated a client, which was not actually the brightest idea, but we're both single adults who acted of our own free will, and I am not the first person who developed a romantic relationship in the workplace. We've all seen how inappropriately *you've* acted with Mason, and he turned you down. So sorry for that."

Amanda lunges at me and tries to slap me. The security guard springs forward and grabs Amanda. "Assault, assault." Amanda screams. "Help me."

"Number one, we're the only ones in the office today, Amanda. It's the weekend. Number two, we have security video in this office. You're pushing your credibility through a paper shredder, dear. I'd say quit while you're ahead, but that's no longer even a distant dream." Cecelia's voice has gone hard and angry. "I gave you chance after chance. I ignored my instincts because you do have talent and you had a few good campaigns. I was a fool, and I blame myself as much as anyone. Don't ever set foot in this building again."

The security guard moves a shrieking, struggling Amanda out of the office. Ansley follows them, hauling Amanda's belongings and I watch it all go down without so much as a smile on my face. Because at the end of the day, this whole nightmare will impact the agency and I contributed to it.

Cecelia turns to look at me.

"I'm sorry," I say to her.

"No, I am the owner of this agency and I have to take responsibility for this. I ignored a lot of Amanda's bad behavior because she did manage to ingratiate herself to a few clients. In all honesty, though, they all had personalities just like her. They were nasty, gossipy little mean girls and the reason they needed their reputations rehabbed is because of their own bitchy behavior." Cecelia shakes her head. "We

don't actually need clients like that. We are in the enviable position of being able to pick and choose."

While I appreciate the fact that Cece is focusing on Amanda's crimes, we both know I played a role in all this.

"I screwed up too, though. I did start having an affair with Mason, and when you asked me about it, I deflected your questions, and it was foolish and irresponsible of me."

She frowns. "He's tried to contact you directly a number of times since."

I nod unhappily. "I know."

"When I spoke to him, he asked me to tell you that he wants to speak to you, that he made a huge mistake, and that you were an absolutely amazing publicist and he only agreed to let Amanda represent him because he thought he was protecting you."

"What are you saying?" I look at her in confusion.

Cecelia settles down in a chair, smoothing her skirt. I sit down facing her. "I guess what I'm asking is, what do you really want out of life?"

"I want this." I wave my hand around the office.

"Be a little more specific, dear."

"I love being a publicist. This is what I want for my career. The big clients. The big office. The whole darn thing."

"Why?" she probes.

"I find it rewarding and challenging and fun, and every day is something different. I feel that I'm genuinely helping people. It's like being a nurse, but nobody's puking on me."

"Usually," Cecelia nods.

I stare at her in surprise. "Oh my God. Did a client puke on you?"

"We had a client who was a junkie going through withdrawal. Don't ask me who. Anyway, it was decades ago."

They kicked the habit. Water under the bridge.” She sighs. “It was such a beautiful vintage Kamali dress they barfed on.”

“Ouch. I feel that.”

“Anyway, we all know my marriage imploded spectacularly, and I threw myself into work, but that doesn’t have to be the case for everyone. This job can be reasonably flexible, if you have an understanding partner. One who would do just about anything to make things work with you.” Cecelia gives me a look. “Mason. I’m talking about Mason.”

“I gathered that, yes.” I let out a laugh. I’m a little teary-eyed. “He stomped off and left me.”

“Did he try to apologize and win you back almost immediately?”

“Well . . .”

“You’ve always put relationships on the back burner. I think that some of that is fear, my darling. You lost both of your parents at a young age. You don’t want to suffer any more loss.”

My stomach twists. Losing my parents was horrific. Lifechanging in ways that nobody deserves.

“Of course I don’t. It’s devastating. It’s terrifying. It could break me.”

“It’s also life. You can’t avoid pain unless you stay inside a padded room and have your food delivered to you and have no relationships. And in that case, that’s not living, is it?”

I heave a sigh. “I have to think about this. I’ve spent a great part of my life convincing myself that I didn’t need *that* life. My mind isn’t likely to change that drastically overnight.”

She nods. “I understand that, but the first step is considering it. Giving it a chance to run through that beautiful brain of yours.”

“I will work on that,” I say. “But Cece, where are we? Job-wise? I know that I cost myself the promotion.”

She sighs. “Yes. I was very angry about that. You had the world at your fingertips and threw it all away.”

I swallow, waiting for the blow.

“But that’s exactly what you needed to do.”

I blink. “What?”

“My dear, did I not just say that you needed to consider other ways of living? That’s what you did and how can I stay angry about that?” She takes a cleansing breath. “You did make a mistake, but so did I, in ignoring Amanda’s behavior. Aside from dating Mason, you did everything right. You came up with a brilliant, imaginative campaign, and when things got challenging, like the invitations disappearing, you jumped in and got your hands dirty. You made sure everything went off without a hitch.”

“Well, thank you.” It’s all I say because I want to hear her thoughts. I need to know my future where Queensby’s concerned.

“And the impression I get is that you genuinely love the Rovers. Not just Mason, and not just as a fan, but you care about the individual players.”

I nod. There’s a lump in my throat. “Going to those games, and seeing Mason at the hospital, really showed me how much this team means to people. It’s a common cause for people to rally around. It’s pride in your city. It’s a wonderful, glorious escape. And having met the guys, and spent time with them, they’re pretty great.”

“You know, my sister’s going to be taking over for me, and I think you’ve got considerably more potential than just the Rovers. I can see you taking over the entire agency at some point.”

My eyes widen in shock.

“Ansley doesn’t want it forever. Maybe another five years at most. You’re young, and you could do so many marvelous things with this agency.”

“You actually think I’m ready?” I blurt out.

She shrugs. “Not quite yet, but you’re almost there. A few more years, and you will step into the role very nicely.”

Emotion rolls over me.

“Something else.” Her purse is sitting on the conference room table. She reaches in and pulls out a large box of Rovers chocolates from her purse.

“Cecelia,” I gasp. “You?”

She shrugs. “It’s a special occasion. Now, you are going to close your eyes. I am going to lift the lid. You are going to reach into the box, and select a chocolate, and if it turns out that it’s Mason’s chocolate, then you need to go to him.”

“Cecilia.” I burst into laughter. “Are you suggesting that I stake my entire romantic future on whether I accidentally select the correct square of chocolate?”

She raises her perfectly penciled brows. “Would it help if I told you my psychic told me to do this for you, and that you would make the right choice?”

I snort in amusement. “If I believe that actually happened . . . still no.”

The door opens, and Ansley walks in.

“Good lord, that took you long enough,” Cecelia says to her. “I was afraid Amanda had eaten you.”

“Me? No, I’m pretty sure she’s a gluten-free girl,” Ansley says, looking amused. “We finally piled her into a cab. A patrolman had to threaten to arrest her when she tried to punch me.”

“Good lord.” Cecelia winces. “One of the first things that you and Rowan are going to have to work on, together, is an announcement from Queensby spinning this in the best possible light. Coordinate it with Mr. Talman, because it also involves the Rovers. All right, now, it’s chocolate time.”

“Chocolate time?” Ansley echoes. “You’re allergic to calories, Cecelia. You allow yourself chocolate once a year.”

“Not for me, for Rowan. I’m helping her make a very important life decision.”

“With chocolate?”

“Thank you,” I speak up. “Cecelia actually wants me to close my eyes, reach in the box, and if I pick out the Mason Raker chocolate, then we’re destined to be together? How weird is that?”

“Not one of my sister’s absolute weirdest ideas,” Ansley says, earning her a dirty look from Cecelia. “I’m interested to see how this turns out.” She lifts the box lid in her direction so I can’t peek, looks at the chocolates, and gives them a puzzled look. Then she sets the lid down again.

“Come along now, Rowan. You and Ansley have a campaign to plan, and you’ve got a man to make up with,” Cecelia says impatiently.

I heave a martyred sigh and roll my eyes, but when Cecelia wants something, it’s impossible to say no to her.

“Fine, let’s just get this over with.”

I close my eyes. I reach out with my hand, and feel around for the box, and grab a chocolate. The box lid snaps shut.

I open my eyes.

It’s Mason.

“What are the odds?” Cecelia crows.

“What, indeed?” Her sister echoes dryly.

“Wait a minute.” I shove the Mason chocolate in my mouth and reach for the box.

“No, no, that’s cheating,” Cecelia chastises me. She starts to walk away, clutching the box to her chest. I think of the puzzled look that Ansley gave when she peeked at the chocolates.

“Give me that box.” I demand.

Cecelia starts to power-walk away, which is hard for her because she’s wearing heels. I chase after her, grab the box,

and run for it.

The next thing I know, Cecelia and I are wrestling for the box. “Help me.” Cecelia cries out to her sister.

“You did this to yourself.” Ansley snorts.

The box spills out of Cecelia’s hands and falls on the ground.

“Oh, shit,” Cecelia curses.

Chocolates spill out. Chocolates are everywhere.

Every last one of them is a Mason Raker.

MASON

I'VE LEFT behind the cold and grit and smell of New York City for Arizona. It's a beautiful sunny day, seventy degrees out, and I'm standing on a golf course with my sober coach Andrew, my friend Maxwell Lancaster, and Maxwell's brother Chase.

And I'm hating everything about this.

Chase is there to look into doing a marketing campaign for the resort town where the golf course is located. Maxwell and Chase's wives are hanging out at the spa, and their kids are at the world-class kids' clubhouse.

The golf course is brand new and beautiful, the grass is soft, and the clubhouse is top notch.

I'd rather be anywhere with Rowan.

"You look miserable," Maxwell observes.

Chase nods. "Yep. He looks like he'd rather be getting a prussic acid enema." Chase's golf bag says, *I'll play till the Bitter End*. He and his wife live in the tiny town of Bitter End, South Carolina, which they have successfully turned into a massively popular resort destination.

"Thanks for that visual," I grumble, and take a swig of bottled water.

"So, what gives?" Andrew asks.

"Hold on," I sigh. It's my turn. I walk up to the tee with my Honma Black Berens driver. I adjust my stance. I adjust

my grip.

Rowan's face flashes in front of me. I wonder what she's doing right now. Has she already started dating someone else?

I swing and miss. I literally miss the fucking ball.

Maxwell stifles a snicker.

"Thank you, supportive rehab buddy," I growl.

Maxwell flashes a wry grin. "I'm there for you, friend. And my God, do you look like you need help."

I swing again. The ball sails through air—about ten feet. Then it falls to the ground.

Chase, Maxwell, and Andrew are shaking their heads, smothering their laughter.

A drink cart glides by us, and the beautiful cart driver slows to a stop. "Can I get you boys anything?"

We all shake our heads. Chase does not have a drinking problem, but he's very supportive of his brother and doesn't drink when he's around him.

"My goodness, aren't you Mason Raker?" she flashes a white-toothed smile at me.

I shake my head.

"Really? You look just like him."

I shrug. "Yeah, I get that sometimes."

"So, are you doing anything after the game?"

"Hanging with my friends here." I give her a blank look.

She gets the hint, pouts a little, waves at us, and drives off, heading over to a group of middle-aged men who are already semi-sloshed. I'm sure she'll get a much better reception over there. I'm glad to say that Maxwell and Chase are both loyal to the death to their wives, and Andrew isn't the type to go for women who are flirty and frivolous.

"She was offering herself up on a platter to you, in case you didn't notice," Andrew mentions mildly. "In case you were interested in some kind of non-alcoholic distraction."

“You think?” I scoff. “And no.”

“Interesting...” His words trail off. I don’t say a word. I don’t need to get into this topic with a group of men who have all their relationship shit figured out.

I need to focus on something else. Like hitting this damn ball.

Instead, we spend the next half hour watching me absolutely suck at golf. Bogey after bogey.

My final score is 140. Un. Fucking. Believable. I’ve never been a big golf fan, but I’ve played plenty of games with my father, and this is the worst I’ve ever done.

We retire to the clubhouse and sit outside, where we order dinner and a round of non-alcoholic drinks. The sun is low on the horizon, melting into a lake of glorious reds and yellows, and I am hating this place for no reason at all.

“Mason Raker,” a waiter crows. “Will you sign a menu for me? Man, I love you.”

I smile wryly and comply, happy to see that so far, my reputation appears to be intact. I’ve avoided all televisions, refusing to search for news on what’s going down in New York. It’s why I’m here. To allow the professionals to do their job and clean this shit up.

“Thanks, man.” He hurries off.

“It’s really hot out,” Andrew says to Maxwell. “Feels like 140 degrees.” They all laugh. Har de har.

“Fuck you very much.” I look at the menu. “I’m going to have the prime rib.”

“How much does that cost? \$140?” Maxwell asks, and they all chuckle.

“Are you going to beat that joke to death? Are you going to repeat it 140 more times?” I grouse.

“You are an absolute joy to be with today,” Andrew observes. “Talk to us. Please. Seriously, I know we’re razzing you, but we’re doing it with love. We’ve all screwed up our

lives at various times in various impressive ways. Did I ever tell you about how I tried to pick up a girl at a nightclub one night and barfed on her chest? I was banned for life, by the way.”

“Yes, you have,” I sigh. “At least you have freaking parents who actually care about you.”

Chase coughs. “My dad nearly murdered my girlfriend, now wife, and also poisoned a swamp by improperly disposing of toxic waste, and he’s serving a lengthy prison sentence, and my mother effed my brother and I over really badly, and it took a lot for us to forgive her.”

“Oh, hell. Sorry.” I wince. I remember it now. “Look, guys, I know I’m being a miserable bastard. Feeling like crap tends to do that to you. Why don’t I leave so you can enjoy yourselves?”

Andrew shakes his head. “I wouldn’t have a lot of fun knowing that you’re sitting in your room stewing in misery. So talk. What’s going on with you? You wanted to come here, you promised an explanation, and you have yet to deliver it.”

Our appetizers arrive, and I wait until the waiter walks away. I shove a bite of loaded potato into my mouth, chew, and swallow.

Everyone’s staring at me.

“Eat,” I suggest. “The food is delicious, and expensive.”

“We’re on a hunger strike,” Chase says. “Actually, I’m starving, so start talking, please.” He glances down at his pile of nachos. “I feel faint,” he adds.

They’re not going to let me get out of this.

“Okay. I’m an idiot. I met someone. She’s amazing, wonderful, fucking gorgeous. Actually, Rowan was assigned to be my publicist, and I gave her an enormous amount of crap . . . what?” I ask, as Chase and Maxwell glance at each other.

“This is painfully familiar.” Chase smiles. “My wife started out as my personal assistant, and I wanted her so badly

that I absolutely screwed everything up between us. For years.”

“He did.” Maxwell nods in agreement. “Please, carry on.”

“Anyway, after a little while we started kind of dating. She held back, she didn’t trust me, and she also was very, very dedicated to her career. As she should be. She’s great at what she does. I mean, she managed to make me look like a saint. That’s like scooping up horse manure and making it glitter like the Hope Diamond.” I give a bitter laugh. Self-mockery is always a good defense.

“Give yourself some credit,” Andrew says. “You always were your own worst enemy. You have a good heart underneath it all, and she was able to show that. You worked with kids with leukemia . . .”

I scowl and take another bite of my potatoes. “I didn’t want to. It was all her idea.”

“Dude. You’re starting to piss me off,” Maxwell says mildly. “Stop with the self-pity party, please. Did you do a good job working with those kids?”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “The kids were great. They really changed me, and I mean that sincerely. I was supposed to be there for them, but they were funny and brave and . . .” I blink hard. “They made me a better person.”

“Yes, they did. So hold on to that,” Andrew says kindly.

“A lot happened. My mother left me and my dad when I was a kid, and now she only shows up when she needs money. So, recently, she suddenly reappeared in town and she messed with my head.” I grimace. “It’s stupid.”

“Stop it,” Andrew says. “Your feelings are valid. They matter. Own that shit.”

I nod. “Okay. You know what? It’s okay that I wanted a normal mother who cared about me. Rowan told me that all along. I agreed to meet up with my mother to find out why she kept trying to get in touch with me. She told me this sad story about her horrible upbringing, and for a really short period of time, it made everything about what she did make sense. I was

like, okay, she had a horrible mom, no wonder she didn't know how to raise a kid. And then it turned out to be a total lie. She was adopted by wonderful people as an infant, and she had no excuse for how she behaved and no reason for rejecting me other than that she didn't feel like taking care of a kid."

"That sucks," Andrew says, nodding.

"Man. What a . . ." Maxwell trails off.

"Bitch?" I supply helpfully. "Yeah. That she is."

"Let's talk about Rowan," Andrew prods.

"Let's not. I blew it with her. Last thing I need is to dwell on how bad I fucked up."

"She drop you as a client?" Maxwell asks.

"Nah. She still came through for me afterwards, still helped me when I needed it." I glare down at my potatoes as if it was their fault. Stupid potatoes.

"Okay, you think you blew it with her, but she was still there for you?" Chase interjects. He waves a fork that's dripping with nachos. "Sounds like she still cares. If you don't at least try to make it up to her, you're going to spend the rest of your life wondering what could have been."

"But . . . she said she didn't want to talk to me."

"Yes, when we've been real assholes, women tend to say things like that," Chase says. "So, she's had a little time to get over it now, right? Make an effort. Make a grand gesture. Make a fool of yourself for her. She deserves it, doesn't she? Worked for me."

"Did it?"

"I have the gorgeous wife and kids to prove it." He grins at me and takes an enormous bite of nachos.

I lean back in my chair.

Would Rowan take me back? Her career means so much to her, and I undoubtedly cost her a promotion, and made her look bad to her boss. How could she even make time for us?

Or maybe I'm just making excuses.

Maybe there's a way to—not necessarily have it all, but to make things work. To compromise.

Chase is right. If I don't at least try, I'm going to go to my grave regretting it.

We've got one last game this season, and I need to really, really make it count.

I need to get the girl.

ROWAN

“IT’S GOING to be an amazing game tonight. I can feel it.” Cecelia is wearing her Snyder jersey, and I, under protest, am wearing my Mason Raker jersey.

I got a message a couple of days ago from Mason. *I miss you. Please come watch my game. I promise it will be worth your while.*

I sent a message back. *I’ll be there.*

My feelings are all tangled in knots. I know that what Mason did to me was really lousy. I also know that he was under enormous stress at the time and still tried to do what he thought would help me the most when it came to my job.

And I also have to acknowledge that I bear some responsibility for this whole fiasco too. I sent mixed signals. I wanted him, but I didn’t want to commit at first. I was never fully in; I always had one foot out the door.

“I hope so,” I say to Cece. I look around us. We’re in our usual excellent seats, right up against the glass—surrounded by kids from the hospitals, their families, and some hospital staff. The kids who either completed their treatment or are well enough to attend—including Harrison, Antoine, Juan, and Mariah—are all here. Mariah’s proudly wearing her wig, with Rovers-themed hair clips in. They’re all wearing little Rovers jerseys.

Harrison nudges me. “Here’s hoping he’s better at this than he was at Uno.” He grins. I laugh. “We’ll find out soon, won’t we?”

The Rovers are playing the Minnesota Destroyers. And they are playing their butts off.

“Kill them,” Cecelia shrieks. “Kick their asses.” She leaps to her feet, waving wildly.

I jump up and grab her by the arm. “Cecelia. Watch your language. There are kids here,” I cry out over the roar of the crowd.

“I’ve heard it before,” Harrison yells.

“Yeah, it means butt,” Mariah supplies helpfully. “That’s what you poop out of.”

I give Cecelia a narrow-eyed look.

“Oh, fudge. Shoot.” Cecelia smiles sheepishly. “My bad. I just get carried away.” Then one of the refs makes a call against the Rovers. “You freaking morons,” she yells furiously. I elbow her.

“What?” Cecelia says innocently. “I didn’t swear.”

I roll my eyes. “Sportsmanship,” I say. “Be a good sport. No trash talk. You’re supposed to be setting a good example.”

“Well, that’s no fun at all,” she grumbles. But she turns her attention back to the ice and yells “Go team. Whooo. I hope everybody wins.”

“That’s better.” I nod approvingly.

“Ugh, how utterly boring. I come here to get my aggression out,” she huffs.

The kids are shouting and cheering. Mason is amazing tonight. It’s like watching the ballet on ice, if the prima ballerina was an absolute savage who sent all of the other dancers flying.

I’m swept away by it all, forgetting my problems, just caught up in the sheer joy of the game, screaming my throat raw. And yes, I forget myself a couple of times and scream out a mild swear word or three, which earns me a smirk from Cecelia.

Finally intermission comes, and we collapse back in our seats, happily worn out from all the jumping and cheering. The kids are having an amazing time, which is what matters.

Cecelia and I are chatting about the game and complaining about the refs, when all of a sudden the kids start chattering excitedly and pointing towards the ice.

Has this suddenly turned into a kids' holiday-on-ice extravaganza?

Because there is a frog skating out onto the ice. A giant bright green frog.

What the actual heck?

The skater lifts the frog head just enough to showcase that it's Mason.

Again... what the actual heck?

Stitched across the front of the costume in huge yellow letters are the words Iron Henry.

The frog is holding up a sign, but I can't see what is on the sign at first, because he is moving too fast. The frog twirls across the ice, gliding as gracefully as an Ice Capades dancer.

Where the heck did he find a giant frog costume?

Maybe the same costume shop where I got the giant cock
...

The crowd is murmuring in confusion. Mason skates towards me and holds the sign up high, over his head, for everyone to see.

Now it's on the overhead screens, and the hockey commentators are talking, and everyone only has one question: Who is Rowan?

Because Mason is holding up a sign that says "Forgive me, Rowan. I'm an idiot."

My jaw drops and Cece squeals next to me.

I burst out laughing and crying at the same time. He did not.

That wonderful, amazing, beautiful nutcase.

“Forgive him, Rowan,” someone yells.

“I forgive you, Mason,” a woman shrieks. Of course.

“Second chance,” someone else shouts. Everyone takes up the chant. “Second chance. Second chance.”

He drops the sign onto the ice and behind it is another sign, which reads “Kiss the frog and make him your prince.”

Everyone immediately starts chanting “Kiss him. Kiss him.”

He holds it up, pointing it directly at me. Then he drops the sign onto the ice again, and takes off the frog head, dropping it on the ice.

He skates over to the glass and I leap to my feet. He points to my left and when I look in that direction, I see a guy wearing Rovers gear motioning for me to head his way.

“Come with me. Mason arranged for you to come to the bench,” the man says over his shoulder.

“He did, did he?” I chuckle.

I’m escorted into the area where the players sit, my heart hammering in my chest. Mason is standing there, looking at me as if I hung the moon.

“I was an idiot,” he says.

“You were.”

A wry smile spreads across his face. “God, it’s so good to see you here. I’ve missed you every minute.”

“I missed you too.” Tears spill from my eyes. “And I made a lot of mistakes too, and I should have talked to you sooner. I was just really hurt, but I should have given you a chance to explain yourself.”

“It’s in the past, Rowan.” He takes my hand in his. “I don’t care about any of that. I want you back. I want us to be together again.” Everyone’s watching us. The kids, the

parents, the staff, the hockey announcers, the entire arena, the entire world . . .

At least they can't hear us. Thank heavens.

I swallow hard.

"We can make this work, can't we? You shouldn't have to choose between your career and our relationship."

"She won't have to," Cecelia cries out. I turn to see that she's joined us, an enormous smile on her face.

"She arranged this," he says, smiling over at Cece.

I blink, trying to work out what's happening.

"Why would you do that, Cece? I . . . went against company policy. I messed up."

She shakes her head. "We've rearranged things at the agency, and you'll be able to do both."

"Seriously?" Mason cries out, his eyes lighting up. He looks at me with a huge grin. "So while I was in self-exile in Arizona, sucking at golf and feeling miserable and missing you, you were here changing things up for me?"

"You sucked at golf? How?" Cecelia interjects, looking puzzled.

"In every way possible," he tells her. "Tiger Woods should sleep easy at night."

He looks back at me, waiting for my response.

"Just FYI, I changed things up for me," I inform him.

"Only for you? Are you sure?" he grins at me.

"Okay, maybe I considered you as part of the game plan."

His grin stretches even wider. He leans in, and of course the crowd is chanting, "Kiss her. Kiss her."

"What's it gonna be, princess? You and me? Forever?"

Standing there on the ice, in front of the whole world, I lean in and kiss Mason Raker. It's not a long kiss—I'm not

planning on putting on an X-rated show—but it’s warm and sweet and it sends heat flowing through my body.

He pulls away, leaning his head against mine. “I’m going to take that as a good sign.”

“I’ll talk to you after the game,” I tell him. “Go kick ass and take names. Win it for the kids, babe.”

“I’ll win it for you.” He winks at me and skates away in his costume.

I stumble back to my seat, and Cecelia joins me.

“I am never going to hear the end of that, am I?” I ask.

She’s practically fizzing with glee. “No, and you now have a new assignment.”

I wince. “Let me guess. I have to create a campaign to spin this in a positive way for both Mason and the Rovers, and Queensby Publicity, so this looks adorable and rom-com worthy, rather than weird and unhinged.”

“Yes.” She nods enthusiastically. “I knew I trained you right.”

I settle back in my seat and watch the second half of the game, in which Mason, acting as a one-man army, demolishes the opposing team, and the kids and their parents cheer themselves hoarse.

As the game ends, Mariah tugs my arm shyly. “Hey, braid-lady?”

“Yes, Mariah?”

“Can I be your flower girl?”

“CECE, YOU HAVE THE MOST DEMENTED GRIN ON YOUR FACE. Wipe it off. It looks like it hurts,” I say to my boss. We’re back in the players area, and the Rovers are starting to file in. I keep looking for Mason, but I don’t see him yet.

“I can’t. Tonight was too wonderful.” Her eyes shine with glee.

Pax bumps into me. “So, I don’t have to keep it a secret anymore?” he chuckles.

“No, you still do. You’re definitely not allowed to talk about it with anybody.”

“Rowan and Mason are doing it,” Pax yells at the top of his lungs.

“We know,” Beck calls out. He glances at Cecelia and gives her a thumbs up. “Nice jersey.”

“They all knew?” Cecelia gives me a sidelong glance.

“Sorry,” I shrug. “I was trying to be subtle.”

“Hey, girlie,” Logan flashes me a huge smile. “Go easy on our boy, will you? Also, when’s the next movie marathon? Love me some toxic sludge pudding.”

“How much has been going on that I knew nothing about?” Cece looks mildly miffed.

“Oh, other than the invasion of a small country, fighting off a horde of werewolves, and a few bank heists, really nothing,” I assure her.

“Hmmpf.” She’s pouting.

“I will invite you to the next movie marathon. Just be aware, these guys are really into zombies.”

“There you are.” Mason somehow managed to sneak past me. He grabs me and pulls me into his arms for a hug.

He’s all sweaty and damp, but I don’t care. The hug goes on and on. Players are streaming past us.

“I ran into Harrison,” he murmurs in my ear. “He wants to be our ring bearer, and apparently Mariah is going to be the flower girl?”

“Are we rushing things a little?” I laugh.

Instead of answering, he grabs me by the hand and drags me out of the room. “I don’t want to share you with anyone

else anymore,” he tells me. “You’re mine. All mine.”

“Greedy.” He’s pulling me down the hall, away from the crowd. Around a corner. And to a door that I recognize.

“Just so you know, that’s a closet,” I point out.

“Just so you know, I already know that.” He yanks the door open and moves me in, then shuts the door behind us.

It’s pitch black.

He lets go of me for a moment. I hear him fumbling around. “Turn the light on,” I order him.

“Not yet. Okay, I just locked the door.”

He grabs me and pulls me up against him, and I stumble and fall into his arms. Somehow, in the pitch dark of the closet, his lips find mine, and he’s kissing me, warm and hungry.

I kiss him back as if we’re floating in the depths of space and he’s my only oxygen. His lips are soft and hungry, his hands cradling my face. I press up against him, wanting to feel every inch of him.

This is what’s been missing from my life all along. This feeling of completeness, of finding my other half. What my parents always had, what I yearned for . . . it’s right here in my arms now.

THE DAILY SNITCH

The Daily Snitch

June 1st

Dear reader, it is with great sorrow that I confirm Mason Raker is officially off the market. Seems that "Strawberry" was working double time. She's stolen his heart and all of our dreams. Curse you Strawberry...

Okay... so that might've gone too far. We apologize for the outburst.

With the Stanley Cup approaching and the Rovers securing their spot, we can't wait to see what other forms of PDA we'll be subjected to. It's not every day you see a girlfriend allowed on the ice. But alas, for the team's newest golden boy, anything goes.

We're not bitter at all.

This star stalker is on the prowl for our next obsession, and we can't help but have our eyes on Paxton Saul. Rumor has it he has a Comparative Language degree with a minor in poetry. Can you say swoon? Paxton Saul can wax poetic to us any day.

Until next time dear readers.

MASON

FINALLY, I reach over and turn on the light. I cup her face in my hands and stare down at her.

“What do you see?” She smiles up at me.

“You have a tiny little scar on your forehead, right by the hairline. I’ve noticed it before. It’s kind of shaped like a heart. I missed that scar.”

She laughs. “We both have scar stories. That one’s because of Ruby. We were at a lake and I was trying to get her to be brave and jump in, and she did, and I jumped in after, but it was too shallow and I hit my head on a rock. I’m lucky it wasn’t worse.”

“I love that story.” I kiss her scar. “I love your face.” I kiss her forehead, her nose, her lips, her chin. “I love you, Rowan James. I love you with all of my heart.” I take a deep breath, breathing her in. “I’m so sorry I was an idiot.”

“Well, you were, but you’re my idiot. Because I love you too.”

And then we’re kissing again. My hands are roving over her body, pushing her pants down, and pulling her jersey up over her head. It gets tangled and it takes me a minute to get it all the way off. “Stupid jersey,” I growl. “Whose dumb jersey is this anyway?”

“Some weirdo who’s into weird, kinky costumes. He’s apparently especially into dressing up like a giant cock.”

I bark out a laugh. “I thought you liked costumes, babe.”

I kiss her neck and move down to her small, perfect breasts. I suck her nipple into my mouth and delight in her moan of pleasure. I can never get enough of that sound. I want to hear her make that noise every night, and every morning.

I want to take her away from everyone and everything and devour her. Make her come so hard she passes out. I want her living in my apartment—she'll be moving in with me as soon as I can call a moving truck.

I want my ring on her finger, but I don't want to risk scaring her off just yet. And someday . . . I want little Mason Juniors and Rowan Juniors, and they'll be unbelievable snarky little babies and I'll love it.

“Yes,” she husks, as I kiss my way down her stomach. And then I'm on my knees, between her legs, parting the wet folds of her pussy with my fingers.

“Mason.” She gasps as I run my tongue along the seam of her pussy. I suck the tiny pink pearl of her clit into my mouth and curve my finger up inside her.

I feel around for that place I know will drive her fucking insane. When I feel her tighten around my fingers, I know I've found it. I suck harder, using my fingers to apply as much pressure as possible.

“Mmmh. Oh, God, you're killing me.”

I lick and suck and stroke her until she shudders, until she's almost on the brink.

Then I bite down, just enough to make her squeal as she comes all over my tongue.

When she's limp against the wall, I climb to my feet and fumble with my pants, freeing my aching cock.

Lifting her up, I press her against the wall and pierce her with one savage thrust. I pump harder and harder, until she's gasping.

“Slow down,” she moans. “Make it last.”

“Done with going slow,” I growl, thrusting so hard inside of her that she cries out.

“More,” she demands, and I smirk into her neck, trailing a line of kisses up the curve.

I do my best, holding her hips and slamming her down onto my dick until she shatters, and I feel her come again, the muscles of her tight sheath squeezing me so hard that I explode.

I see stars behind my eyes. Stars, and light, and love.

I’ll never get over this.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR later

“Good game of sports-puck,” Ruby congratulates me. “Even I enjoyed it.”

Damn, I hope so. I played the best game of my entire life tonight. Paxton wanders up to me and holds up his hand for a high-five. I return it. “We rule,” he shouts.

Ruby rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling good-naturedly.

“Son,” my father shouts, moving through the crowd of cheering, crowing Rovers players and their wives and parents. He pulls me into a crushing bear hug.

“Dad,” I groan. “Wow. You’re stronger than I thought.”

“Never forget it. The old man’s got some life in him yet.” He releases me and beams, stepping back. Rowan hurries over and hugs him too, but he’s much more gentle with her.

“Why doesn’t she get the squish treatment?” I demand.

“She’s fragile, and precious.” He reaches out and tousles my hair. “Did I mention, good game?”

Yes, my hockey-hating father came to see our team win our first ever Stanley Cup.

It’s so bitterly ironic that my former coach could have had that notch on his belt—but instead, he’s only recently been released from serving a sentence for fraud.

Well, I’m not going to think about that right now.

We're in the hockey arena's events room, and the mood is off the roof. There's shouting, screaming, champagne, tears. I've already had buckets of ice dumped on me.

And this I know—this is how I want to go out.

I'm going to tell my dad tomorrow.

I pull Rowan away from the crowd and move to the far edge of the room. What I'm about to say, and do, is just for her and me. "Hey," I say to her. "How would you feel about me asking the Rovers to release me a year early?"

She does a double-take. "If that's what you want. Is it?"

I nod. "It is. I just want some time. I'd like a four-month honeymoon in Europe before I take over the reins of my father's company."

Her eyes widen. "A . . . honeymoon?"

"You heard me, babe." I swallow hard. I've been working up my courage to ask the most important question of my life, and trust me to spew it out in the most awkward fashion possible.

"So you're getting married?"

"God, I hope so," I say fervently.

She grins and looks around. I know some people like to make a big public display of their proposals. Not me. I deliberately moved her away from everybody else because this is our moment, just for her and me.

"Do I know the lucky bride-to-be?"

"She's gorgeous, smart, funny, and kind, but doesn't take any bullshit, and she's the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Wow." She smiles at me. "Sounds like someone I should marry."

I fumble in my pocket and pull out a black velvet box, then drop it on the ground.

I pick it up and open it. I take the ring out. I drop that too. It's a square-cut dazzler, and I scramble to pick it up. "Rowan James, love of my life, will you set aside your good sense and do me the incredible honor of marrying me?"

I look up. Tears are streaming down her face. "Tell me all your reasons for doing this," she says, a huge smile on her face as she reaches down and accepts the ring.

"That's a yes, right?" I ask anxiously. "Because I'll happily give you a million reasons if that's what it takes."

She shakes her head. "Yes, Mason. That's a million times yes.. I love you so much."

She slides the ring onto her finger, and I jump to my feet and sweep her into my arms and hug her, lifting her off her feet and spinning her around in a circle.

"Come with me," I order her, setting her down.

"Mason Raker, you are not going to go look for a closet right now, are you?"

"Obviously. It's sorta our thing, babe."

She bursts into laughter—but she doesn't protest. I tug her by the hand, leading her out of the room.

As we walk down the hallway, we spot Ruby and Pax in an alcove. They're having some kind of intense discussion. One that's none of our business.

Rowan grabs my hand and tries to pull me towards them.

"You should leave them be," I advise her.

She scowls at them. "That's my baby sister. They're only supposed to be fake dating."

"Baby, she is a grown-ass woman. A woman who doesn't like it when you tell her what to do," I point out. "I tell you what, I will see if I can get Pax to talk to me later, but if you march over there right now, what do you think will happen?"

"Uhh . . ." Rowan pouts. "She'll be incredibly grateful for my assistance, and she will listen to every word of my good advice?"

I make the sound of a buzzer. “Survey says . . . no. Especially if it’s right in the heat of the moment. I think you need to leave them to work this out on their own, give her the chance to talk to you if she wants to, and just trust that she’ll do the right thing.”

“What if she does the wrong thing and he breaks her heart?”

“Then you can break him in two,” I promise her. “Now, come with me. We’ve got a closet to baptize, Mrs. Mason Raker.”

WANT MORE MASON AND ROWAN? [CLICK HERE](#) FOR A BONUS scene.

AFTERWORD

Thanks for reading *All Your Reasons Why*. If you loved Mason and Rowan, make sure to read the other book in the series, starting with [*A Billion Times No.*](#)

If you prefer a rockstar romantic comedy, check out [*The Rockstar's Fake Fiancé!*](#)

MEET KENZIE

Kenzie Reed lives in beautiful New England and is addicted to happily ever afters. She lives with a pack of rescue dogs and is constantly in danger of adopting more. She has a black belt in sarcasm and makes the worst puns ever—just ask her kids.

She spends her days clearing dog fur from her keyboard and dreaming up snarky dialogue for sexy heroes. Her taste in books ranges from science fiction to thrillers to romantic comedy, and her bookcases have multiple personality disorder.

For news of freebies, contests, and latest releases, sign up for Kenzie's newsletter: