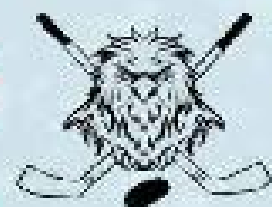


USA Today Bestselling Author
CHARLOTTE BYRD

Kiss



Puck

and

PALM SPRINGS RAPTORS BOOK 1

KISS AND PUCK

A WHY CHOOSE HOCKEY ROMANCE

CHARLOTTE BYRD

CHARLOTTE BYRD
dangerously addictive

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PRAISE FOR CHARLOTTE BYRD

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ABOUT CHARLOTTE BYRD

Charlotte Byrd is the bestselling author of romantic suspense novels. She has sold over 1.5 Million books and has been translated into five languages.

She lives near Palm Springs, California with her husband, son, a toy Australian Shepherd and a Ragdoll cat. Charlotte is addicted to books and Netflix and she loves hot weather and crystal blue water.

Write her here:

charlotte@charlotte-byrd.com

Check out her books here:

www.charlotte-byrd.com

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ABOUT KISS AND PUCK

They're three professional hockey players who never shared a woman. She's a good girl who follows the rules. Why choose?

To get back at my cheating fiancé, I had a one night stand with two hot guys I met at a bar.

Ash and Soren are witty, confident and incredibly easy on the eyes. They said and did all the right things, and I couldn't stop. They are attractive, charming strangers who I will never forget but who I also never want to see again.

Fast forward a few weeks later. I move out of LA and start my first job after graduate school as the official sports psychologist for the Palm Springs Raptors AHL hockey team.

It's all going well until I spot two familiar faces on the ice: **Ash, the laid back surfer dude, and Soren, the arrogant Scandinavian.**

They are the two guys from the bar! What are they doing here? How is this happening?

When we get some time alone, **they promise to keep our night together a secret. But the chemistry among the three of us is irresistible.** We can't stay away from one another.

And things are about to get even more complicated when someone else comes into the picture. **Ryder is a tall brooding hockey player from South Boston and the wrong side of the tracks.**

He wants me to himself, but is he's willing to share? Can the four of us make it work or is all of this going to blow up in my face?

tropes:

- hockey romance
- why choose
- MFM
- new adult
- angsty/steamy
- workplace romance

HARLOW

Driving to the Palm Springs Raptors practice arena for my unofficial first day of work, five words play on repeat in my head, thank God for air-conditioning. It was one thing, living in Los Angeles, it could get warm, even hot, but I could handle it. My body was acclimated to it.

It was a far cry from Coachella Valley in the middle of July. I wonder how long it will take to acclimate myself to the dry, blistering heat. At least my hair isn't frizzing—a glance in the mirror confirms every golden lock is smoothly in place. Sometimes, you have to be grateful for the small things.

And the fact is, I'm only distracting myself from the nerves brought about by my first day on the job. This is it. It's not exactly the big leagues — literally. I'm ready to take on my first sports psychology position with an American League hockey team. But it's a start, which is what I need more than anything now that I'm out of a four-year relationship that was supposed to lead to marriage.

Well, one good thing came of the break-up, I didn't think twice about moving out here, but I might have hesitated if Kyle were still in the picture. Sure, he could sell real estate anywhere, but he had already carved out his niche. At least, that was what he always liked to tell me. Now that I know how much lying he was doing throughout our time together, I have to wonder.

Another distraction. *Get your head in the game.* I want to present myself well to the coach during this first meeting. He

doesn't need to know there are still nights when I wake up gritting my teeth with anger and resentment. There's nothing I hate worse than the feeling of wasted time. And I wasted so much time on that cheating piece of... *Stop it. New start, new life.*

It's better to think of nice things, the perks of the job. My new house is incredible – I've had to remind myself more than once it's just a rental, not really mine, so I shouldn't get too attached. It's sort of corny, I know, but even waking up on an air mattress in a sun-filled bedroom this morning was like taking a glimpse of the future. All the work I put into getting my doctorate is paying off.

Though it'll be nicer once the movers arrive later today and make it possible for me to sleep in an actual bed tonight. A new bed, at that. I'm not about to spend another night in a bed Kyle's bare ass ever touched, even with sheets as a barrier.

So far, I've spoken to the head coach and the staff, but only via Zoom. This will be our first face-to-face meeting. I can't believe I'm this nervous. If there's one thing I learned with all my schooling, it's how to get past this sort of mindset. They're lucky to have me. I am skilled, I'm smart, and I have what it takes to whip these guys into shape.

At least, I'd better, or this is going to be a huge waste of time.

The team doesn't have much of an online presence. That feels like a mistake to me, but then my job isn't marketing. When it comes to the players, I'm pretty much flying blind. That can wait, though. We have another meeting scheduled where I can meet up with them. Today, I will spend time with the head coach.

The practice arena appears like a mirage in the middle of a desert, complete with the shimmering heat lines that promise discomfort once I'm out of the car. At least it's an ice hockey rink, so it will be nice and cool inside.

I pull into a spot near the entrance, eyeing the door, shaking out the last-minute jitters. Everything's fine. I've got this. I know exactly what I'm doing. I pull back my shoulders and take a couple of deep breaths, then take one last look at myself

in the mirror to make sure there's not, like, any food in my teeth or anything like that. No more stalling. It's time to go.

Right away, the heat smacks me in the face even though I was prepared for it—or I thought I was, anyway. Some things there's no preparing for. I waste no time crossing what's left of the lot and the concrete pathway beyond that, then sigh in relief once sweet, air conditioned air welcomes me.

An older man sits near the front door, a crossword puzzle book spread out on his lap. "Can I help you?" he asks with a warm smile. His name tag reads Gus, and I'm guessing Gus is a retiree.

"Yes, I'm looking for Coach Kozak. My name is Harlow Jacobs. We have a meeting today."

"Certainly. You're the doctor they hired, right?"

"A psychologist," I explain. "But yes, I am a doctor." Boy, that feels nice to say. I almost wish my mom were here to hear this exchange. She could record a video to show all her friends.

"You'll find his office down the hall, past the trophy case." I thank him and head in that direction, noting how desolate the trophy case is. The last trophy in there dates back eight years ago. From what I heard during our Zoom session, and from what I remember when I applied for the job, the team is in a pretty serious slump. I'm supposed to help with that—and I will. I know I will.

Though they must be pretty desperate if they're willing to sign me on when I have no real experience beyond my internship.

A sharp voice suddenly rings out and makes me jump, but then my nerves are already on edge. "I don't care what it takes. There's no reason for those jerseys to end up looking worse when they come back from being cleaned than they did when they left." For one brief, breathless moment, I hope that gruff voice isn't coming from the man I'm meeting with. No, gruff isn't quite the word for it. It brings to mind an angry bulldog.

Considering it came from the office Gus directed me to, I'm thinking the bulldog is waiting for me.

I wait until he slams the receiver down in its cradle before taking another deep breath. You can do this. You've got this. All at once, I step into the open doorway before I can lose my nerve. "Coach Kozak?" I venture.

He barely glances up from the keyboard he's pounding away on. "Yeah?" Then, like magic, he puts two and two together, and that angry expression softens to something much friendlier. "Oh, excuse me, Dr. Jacobs. You caught me in the middle of dealing with staff issues."

"I understand."

"It's always something around here." He stands, extending a hand across the desk. "I'm sorry if I got us started off on the wrong foot." The way he pronounces the word *sorry* reminds me of the Canadian upbringing he mentioned during our first Zoom meeting. He's lived and breathed hockey his entire life.

I happily accept the gesture. "Please, call me Harlow. I'm not used to the whole doctor thing yet." *Oh, way to go, genius. Remind the man how little experience you have.*

He doesn't seem to notice, or else he simply doesn't care.

"Please, have a seat. Can I get you anything?"

"No need, thanks. I'm just glad to be inside."

"Welcome to the desert," he says with a chuckle that deepens the lines etched at the corners of his deep-set gray eyes. "You get used to it. How has everything been? The arrangements, I mean?"

For somebody who looks like he rolled out of bed and threw the first t-shirt he could find over his head, Mitch Kozak has a very kindly demeanor. I find myself relaxing thanks to that. When he gestures to one of the molded plastic chairs in front of his overloaded desk, I take a seat. "Everything's been terrific. The movers are coming later today, and I can't wait. The house is spectacular—much bigger than my old apartment, that's for sure."

"Well, Doctor...Harlow, we were highly motivated to bring you on." He takes a seat in his scarred leather chair before

heaving a sigh. “Between you and me, we need all the help we can get.”

“I understand from what we already discussed that it’s been a challenging season.”

He holds up three fingers, and I notice nails that look like they’ve been chewed to the quick. “Three seasons. It’s been three years since the last time the team came close to the playoffs. Even then, they were knocked out in the first round. Still, it was something.” Frustration rings out in his voice.

“Was there any big shake up in the organization? Something that could have precipitated a slump like this?”

“No—at least, not that I’m aware of, and I’m aware of pretty much everything that goes on around here. It just seems like the guys lost their edge. Their drive, their focus. No amount of shouting from me or any of the other coaches has made a damn bit of difference.” He slides a guilty look my way, his bushy eyebrows drawing together, but I only wave it off. I’ve heard much worse language than that and figure I’ll continue doing so as long as I work around professional athletes. They’re not known for being altar boys.

“I’m glad you took this step, and not only because it meant giving me a job,” I add with a smile. “Sports psychology is more than just a trend. More often than not lately, athletes are coming out and attributing their success to their mindset, which is the missing link a lot of the time. You can train until the cows come home, but if your mindset isn’t where it needs to be, you might as well sleep in every day and down a bag of French fries every night.”

“I’m afraid some of my boys are doing worse than that,” he grumbles. “I’d consider myself lucky if all they did was binge on junk food.”

“That’s a matter of mindset, as well. If you believe you have it in you to be a champion, you’ll treat yourself like a champion. That means cutting out bad food, or at least indulging in moderation. No goofing off during training, getting plenty of sleep and cutting out the booze. The team needs to align their actions with their goals.”

The look on his face is what I'd, imagine if I'd just lapsed into Greek out of nowhere. Finally, he chuckles while stroking a chin covered in gray scruff. "I've been hearing that kind of thing more and more but with all due respect, I've been coaching for decades."

"Today's sports are different than they were back then, wouldn't you agree? These athletes train harder, push themselves further, move faster."

"That's true."

"The competition is different as well. Physical conditioning can only take a player so far, and that's the situation it seems you're facing. Look at that young quarterback in Philadelphia. A kid fresh out of college. He had the physical conditioning, and everyone who ever coached him praised his leadership abilities, his work ethic. But the team faced a losing record his first season with the ball."

"Nobody expects a rookie to fall in line right off the bat," he murmurs.

"That's true. Still, he demanded more from himself. In the off-season, he worked on his mindset along with the other aspects of training. And what happened the following season?"

There it is. That spark of light behind his eyes. A smile begins to stir at the corners of his mouth. "They won the national championship and played darn well in the Superbowl, last I checked."

"Exactly. That was the missing link. On paper, he had everything it took and then some. He had to toughen up mentally, even though he was already physically tough."

"Well, if that's what it takes, I'm leaving my boys in your hands. Because right now, they sure don't have that winning mentality. If they have any hope of reaching the playoffs next year, they are going to have to really improve their approach."

"I can only imagine," I murmur in sympathy.

"How about we head into the rink and you can take a look, eh? They'll be practicing for another half hour or so. You'll have the chance to observe them."

“That sounds great.” My hands are tingling, my brain is buzzing. I have a chance to mold these guys, to shape them into who they want to be – and if I can make winners out of them, there’s no limit to what I could achieve in my career. *One step at a time*, I remind myself while the coach leads me from his office to the rink. I can’t get ahead of myself. I’m sure these guys will see right through me if I go into this with the attitude of somebody who only plans on using them as a stepping stone. Talk about counterproductive.

Right off the bat, the fact that the guys are pretty much goofing off when we enter the rink tells me they aren’t taking practice seriously. A couple of them run races back-and-forth, skating hard but laughing while a handful of their teammates watch. Others have flat-out stopped drilling in favor of having conversations on the ice. They could be friends who happened to cross paths while running errands. I would never know they’re supposed to be working.

“Well, here they are,” the coach mutters under his breath, and he does not seem pleased. “Do you think you can make something out of this squad?”

“I’m going to do my best,” I promise. It’s the players who are actively involved in their work who grab my attention and hold it. They’re so fast, I can barely keep up with them as they fly around the rink at top speed. One in particular draws my attention with his quick footwork, the way he seems to effortlessly float around his teammates, leaving them in his dust... so to speak. One of them looks the same as another to me since they’re all wearing helmets, but he stands out.

“He’s good,” I point out, gesturing toward the skater now speeding his way back across the ice.

“He’s got potential, eh?” the coach agrees. “He could be a real leader if he put his mind to it.”

“Well, we’ll have to see what we can do.” The skater in question heads over to the bench, where he takes off his helmet before picking up a bottle and squirting water into his mouth.

And that's when my stomach drops like I've just gone over the first big hill on a roller coaster.

It can't be him, but it is. I've tried to put that night behind me every time it comes up in my memory, which has been pretty often over the past few weeks, even when I was busy in the midst of my move. Who could forget a night spent with two gorgeous, sexy strangers? Even now, I blush at the memory while my body reacts the way it always does at the reminder of being treated the way they treated me.

It helps that I have one of them in front of me now, moping sweat from his brow and catching his breath the way he did after taking me from behind.

No doubt about it. That's Ash, and I have no choice but to work with him.

HARLOW

Oh, my God, this isn't possible. I've heard people joke about the small world we live in, but never have I understood it quite as clearly as I do now, while I watch one of the men with whom I engaged in my first three-way putting his helmet back on before heading out to the ice.

The coach is speaking, but I can hardly hear him over the thundering of my heart. What are the odds? In the whole city of Los Angeles, I happened to meet up — and hook up — with a player I'll now be working with. My head is spinning and I'm pretty sure I'm going to faint if I don't get more air in my lungs, but my throat is so tight I can hardly breathe. Damn it, how are we supposed to work together after that night?

"Dr. Jacobs? Are you alright?" Coach Kozak places a hand on my arm. "You're looking a little pale."

"Am I? I'm sorry. I guess all the craziness is finally starting to catch up to me. It's been a whirlwind, the past few weeks."

"Do you need to take a seat? Do you need something to drink?" Considering his gruff demeanor and almost sloppy appearance, I wouldn't expect him to be so gentle and attentive, sort of like a grandfather. It makes me smile, and I can turn some of my attention away from a man I was truly never planning on seeing again. Damn it, I even gave him a fake phone number! What if he tried to call and realized what I did? I want to melt into the floorboards at the thought. How was I supposed to know?

“I’m all right. Really. Between you and me, this is a little overwhelming,” I confess in a whisper. “As you know, this is my first job after earning my doctorate, and I really want to help your team.” Not the most professional confession, but it’s better than admitting I slept with one of his players.

“Our team,” he corrects with another one of those warm, understanding smiles. “You’ll be just fine. Would you like to go down and meet them now? Once you find out what a decent group of guys they are, it might ease some of the jitters.”

Every single fiber of my being reacts to the idea, and not in a positive way. More like the idea of facing Ash makes me fight off a sudden wave of nausea that makes cold sweat rise on the back of my neck. “No, let’s wait until the meeting we’ve already scheduled,” I suggest as evenly as I can. “I don’t want to invade their practice space with no warning.”

Wow. I almost sound like I know what I’m talking about, and not like I’m completely freaking out to the point where I barely remember my own name.

“As I was telling you, Ash down there has the potential to be a leader. I think if you work with him, you’ll go a lot farther, a lot faster when it comes to getting the rest of the team to fall in line. They follow him. He sort of sets the tone in the locker room.”

Yes, I can imagine he would with his personality. He’s easygoing but there’s something magnetic about him that instantly drew me in.

But he is the last person I need to be working closely with. Obviously, there’s no way of explaining that to the coach without humiliating myself, so I settle for what I hope is a smile and not a grimace. “It would make my job easier to get a natural leader on my side.”

It would be nice if we could get out of here. We’re far up enough in the stands that it doesn’t seem like anyone’s noticed us, but it’s only a matter of time. I’m a woman in the middle of a man’s world — no matter how professionally I’m dressed, I’m going to get noticed. And then Ash will notice me, and I

will die of humiliation on the spot. It's not because I didn't like those guys that I didn't want to meet up again. Far from it. They seemed nice, they treated me well, and we had a good time.

Let's just say a three-way isn't exactly my thing. I mean, considering how much I enjoyed it, maybe it is – but it's too complicated. I can't imagine ever making that arrangement a long-term thing. There would have to be jealousy involved at some point, right? Discomfort, hurt feelings? That's not what I want.

Besides, considering how sick I feel at the idea of anybody finding out what I did, it's pretty obvious there's good old-fashioned guilt mixed in. I was raised to be a good girl. I'm a woman in her mid-twenties with a doctorate, but I can't shake the things I was taught both directly and otherwise. Good girls don't do what I did. The experience is screwing with my sense of who I am, which is not something I need to question while I'm on the cusp of my new career.

As we watch and I try not to run away like a scared rabbit, Ash checks another player into the boards.

“He can be a bit aggressive,” the coach mutters, and I have to bite my tongue so hard it almost falls off or else risk making the mistake of telling him I already knew that.

A taller player skates over to Ash and says something that makes both of them laugh. I follow him with my eyes to the bench, where he picks up a large squirt bottle before removing his helmet and squirting water into his mouth.

Oh, my God. Because this couldn't get any worse? It's Soren, a.k.a. the third member of our three-way.

They never told me they were hockey players! Indignation rises like a wave in my chest until I remind myself I didn't tell them what I do for a living, either. The three of us sort of skated around the subject, no pun intended. What are the odds? Why does this have to happen to me? I need so much for these guys to see me as a professional, and for all I know every single one of them has already gotten a play-by-play of the action.

I need to get out of here before one of them spots me. Yes, I have to come back eventually, but I'll do it when I have a better handle on the situation. This is not the time.

"Oh, my gosh." I make a big deal of checking my phone and wincing. "The movers are supposed to arrive in half an hour, and if I'm not there to let them in, I'm going to end up spending another night on an air mattress."

"Of course, we want you settled in and comfortable. Good luck with that." We leave the rink together, and I can breathe easier when we're standing out in the hall near the lackluster trophy case. "First thing in the morning, we'll get you in with the players so you can start getting to know them."

Lucky me. And to think, I was nervous enough about the prospect before spotting the guys. "I can hardly wait," I somehow manage to assure him, and I must do a good job of hiding my nausea because he doesn't look concerned.

I cannot believe this. Only I could get myself into a situation this complicated and uncomfortable. My knees are shaking almost as hard as my hands as I hustle out to the car, so lost in anger with myself that I hardly notice the heat that threatens to pull all of the air out of my lungs. Maybe I'd be lucky if it did. It would mean not having to face Ash and Soren and explain why I gave them the brush off – among so many other things. Gosh, what if everybody knows? There's no hope of me being taken seriously if I've been the subject of locker room talk. Here I am, wanting to prove myself, wanting to build my career on this job, and I end up sabotaging myself without knowing it. I don't know that this could count as self-sabotage, though. It isn't like I knew anything about them. The anonymity was part of the fun, if anything. After all, I knew Kyle for four years, and he managed to surprise me. Did he ever.

He also hurt and betrayed me, and what I needed more than anything was to be treated well. To be wanted, desired, touched and kissed and pleased. I needed it after having my heart broken.

But looking back, none of my reasoning holds water. If I wanted to branch out, turn over a new leaf, whatever it's called, I should've been smarter. Safer. Now I have this hanging over my head. I've got a contract, a lease, responsibilities. And all it took was one night to possibly unravel all of it.

Pulling out of the parking lot, I turn on the radio and crank up the volume. I need something loud, driving, something I can sing and shout and scream to. But instead of doing any of those things, I pull over and fold my arms over the steering wheel before touching my forehead to them and releasing a shuddering sigh.

What am I supposed to do now?

HARLOW

“I’ll tell you what you’re supposed to do,” Ruby’s strident voice is loud and strong enough that I would swear she’s right here in the room with me instead of practically yelling at me from over the phone. “You’re going to pull up your big girl panties, and you’re not going to make any apologies for having a good time.”

If I don’t stop pacing the shining kitchen floor, I’ll end up wearing a hole in the wood. “That’s easy for you to say. You’re not the one going through it.”

“I know, I know. But I also know I’m right. Okay, so you got spit roasted by a couple of hotties. So what? You’re not the first person in the world who ever did.”

“Could you please not humiliate me?” I whisper, since I know her voice carries. How do I know? The moving guy who just walked in with a pair of boxes labeled *Kitchen* almost dropped them on the floor. It would be nice if I could get through this experience without half of my dishes being broken.

“I’m sure if you ask any of those guys, they will tell you the same.”

“Forgive me if I don’t want to discuss my sex life with a bunch of movers.” My head hurts and my stomach is in knots. “How am I supposed to face them tomorrow?”

“More like how are they supposed to face you? It took three to tango.”

“But they’re not the ones who are supposed to be professionals here. I’m a doctor. A psychologist who is supposed to —”

“You’re a human being. Would you stop setting these ridiculous standards for yourself? You’re an expert regardless of whether you did it with two guys at once. That doesn’t mean you aren’t skilled at your job.”

“You know that, and I know that. But you know how men can be. What happens if word gets out?”

“You’re overthinking it.”

“I don’t think that’s possible. Think about it. What happens if word spreads? What if they already told the story to the rest of the team, like they were bragging or whatever, and the coach or the owners end up finding out? That’s it. I’m finished. Not only would I get fired, but I could kiss any hope of building a decent reputation goodbye. All because I slept with two of the players on my team.” No matter which direction I choose to approach it from, the situation is hopeless.

“You didn’t even know they were hockey players, much less that you would end up working with them. I’m telling you, Harlow, you’re beating yourself up for no reason.”

“But—”

“No buts. I’m giving you facts. You didn’t know who they were. And aren’t you the one who couldn’t stop talking about what nice guys they were?”

“Nice guys who I gave a fake phone number to,” I mutter, retreating to the far side of the room in hopes of staying out of the way. The first floor is mostly open, meaning I can watch everything going on as men walk in and out of the house. It also means there’s nowhere to hide.

“Where is the crime in that? What, do you think they’re going to retaliate over something so trivial?”

I want to believe she’s right. Otherwise, I’m screwed. “I really didn’t need this complication.”

“I know, babe. But it’s going to be okay. No real harm was done.”

Once again, it's easy for her to say. I know her heart is in the right place, as always, but she tends to brush things off too easily.

"Let's talk about fun things, instead," she implores. "Tell me about the house."

"I already told you about the house when I first signed the lease."

"Wouldn't you know it, my short-term memory is all screwed up and I don't remember a thing about it. You'll have to tell me again."

I can't help but smile. "You're impossible."

"Tell me something I don't know."

One thing I can always say about her, she knows how to make me laugh. "Where do I start? I paid as much for a one-bedroom apartment in LA as I'm paying for this three-bedroom house," I begin, marveling at the amount of space that's now mine. "When I think about it, it seems pretty ridiculous."

"I seem to remember you telling me something about a pool in the backyard?"

"Yes, there is a pool," I giggle, looking out over the yard.

"There's a nice little patio, too. I can imagine having parties here."

"See? You're already imagining your life up there. I'm going to assume I am invited to these parties, obviously."

"Obviously," I tell her. "And I'm wild about the orange and lemon trees in the yard. Can you imagine? I can just go out there in the morning and pick them fresh off the trees."

"I'm super jealous."

"There's nothing stopping you from coming out here and staying with me."

"Except for, you know, my job and my life."

"You can relocate."

“You’re a big girl now. You’re making plenty of money. You don’t need a roommate.”

“I need my best friend.”

“And I’m just a drive away. But let’s face it. You have to build your new life, and you don’t need me in the way. Besides,” she adds with a vicious little giggle that leaves me bracing myself for whatever she’s thinking, “I wouldn’t want to be in the way of another one of your sexy little trysts.”

“I’m not going to have any sexy little trysts.” The guys unpacking the kitchen look my way, and I have to turn my back on them to hide the furious flush on my cheeks. “Don’t get the wrong idea,” I whisper, practically fleeing out the sliding door. “I’m not planning on going wild, you know? That was a one-time thing.”

“Sure, sure. That’s what they all say.”

“Who are they?” I counter. “I didn’t know you had a bunch of friends who participate in three-ways.”

I expect her to laugh it off, but she surprises me. “Oh, please. Three-ways, four-ways, big old groups. It’s really not that unusual, Harlow. I don’t know if that’s my scene, but it is for plenty of people... and they’ve all lived to tell the tale.”

“But I’m not all those people,” I whisper, chewing my lip. “I’m me. The serial monogamist.”

“No offense, but look where that got you.”

I open the back gate and step through the privacy fence, then wander around the exterior of the house. It’s better than pacing the floors inside, even if I’m already starting to sweat a little. “No offense, but I take offense.”

“You know I’m right. Are you sure some of this isn’t coming from guilt over, God forbid, enjoying yourself as a sexual person?” Sometimes I wonder if she’s the one with the psych degree.

“It’s coming from me being afraid the whole team is going to think I’m up for an orgy whenever they feel like it.” Now it’s the guys carrying in my new bed who almost drop the frame

when they happen to hear that little gem as I round the corner. I would apologize, only I don't know where I'd start. Times like this, it's better to remind myself I'll never see them again.

You thought you'd never see Ash and Soren again, didn't you?

"That's up to you."

"What do you mean?"

"It's all about how you carry yourself now. If you skulk around the locker room like the girl who feels embarrassed for enjoying her sexuality..."

"So you're saying I should be able to start fresh?"

"Why not? You didn't kill anybody, babe. You enjoyed yourself, and so did they. If it's really bothering you that much, maybe pull them aside and have a discussion about it. Let them know it's as much in their best interest to forget the whole thing happened as it is in yours."

Could it be that easy? I want it to be, sure, but I'm also a realist. "I want you to be right about this."

"So do I. And I'm sure I am."

"You were sure bangs were a good look for you last summer."

"That was a different story."

"You thought it would be a good idea to get a tattoo with your boyfriend's name, and you ended up splitting two weeks later. You're lucky I talked you out of it."

"I was drunk."

"Then there was that guitarist you dated —"

"Are we going to go through every poor decision I've ever made?"

"Maybe." I decide. "If it makes me feel better."

"And you know there's nothing I would rather do than help you feel better, but this ain't the way. You've got to hold your head high, march into that damn arena tomorrow, and take control of the situation. I know you can do that."

Someone speaks in the background, and she offers a muffled reply that tells me she put her hand over the speaker. “Sorry, I’ve gotta go,” she whispers. “Apparently, people expect me to work around here.”

“Those bastards.”

“You sound better than you did when you first called me. Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah. I will.”

“Do you mean it? Or are you saying that so I won’t feel too guilty letting you go like this?”

“I’ll be fine.” I will not, in fact, be fine. Not unless I quit or something, but that’s not an option. I have a contract with the team. I have a lease, and I happen to like this house very much. I would hate to leave, but I couldn’t afford it on my own with no job lined up. Plus, I’m worried about looking unprofessional? There’s nothing more unprofessional than quitting a job when I’ve barely started.

In other words, I’m sort of trapped. But in a good way. I should be thanking my lucky stars for this opportunity. The team needs help, and I would love to be the person who turns them around. Coach Kozak seems like a nice guy in need of a little assistance. I want to be the one to provide it.

This doesn’t have to be a big deal. Ruby is right. I can set the tone. I can walk in there in less than twenty-four hours and be the professional the team’s owners hired. I can do my job. And if Ash or Soren want to discuss what happened between us, that’s fine, but we’re going to keep things professional. I will not under any circumstances allow one night of fun—extremely passionate, hot, toe-curling fun—to get in the way of everything I’ve worked for.

HARLOW

As I check out my reflection in the full-length mirror, I have to admit my makeup skills are on point. Nobody would ever know I hardly got any sleep last night. I look refreshed, on top of my game. Exactly how I need to look this morning. This most important, pivotal morning.

It's amazing, really. I've got years of training under my belt, years of studying and learning, but I can't seem to make myself believe what I need to believe on this bright and sunny morning. That this will be as simple as striding in there and pretending nothing ever happened between me and two of the players I'll soon face. That we were consenting adults and there's no need for guilt or shame or any of that. Just because they've both seen my O-face, I can still mold them into the players they need to be.

I can do this. I have to do this. I will not let a single night ruin what've worked so hard to build.

Which means today, I wear my full armor in the form of a charcoal gray suit I bought myself as a graduation gift, a white blouse, and black pumps. My blond hair hangs in waves over my shoulders, shining and sleek after I spent the better part of half an hour trying to make it look just right. I may or may not have a couple of minor burns on my fingers, but it paid off.

I am a doctor. A professional. I'm going to present myself the way I would have if Ash and Soren weren't part of the team, or as if we'd never met that night. Nothing has to change.

I can do this. And I will.

My stomach is in no shape for food this morning, no matter how many pep talks I've given myself, so I skip it in favor of grabbing a yogurt smoothie from the fridge and gulping it down while pouring cold brew into an insulated travel cup. Now that everything's unpacked thanks to the very helpful, very embarrassed moving guys, the kitchen feels less like a set from a movie and more like somewhere I live. A few plants would liven things up, as would a little artwork. Framed photos, at least. I didn't have a lot of extra space in the old apartment and there weren't enough windows with good light to sustain much in the way of greenery. My life has changed in so many little ways.

Maybe in the future, when I wake up without a cloud hanging over me, I'll be able to sit back and enjoy my surroundings a bit more. I can imagine sitting at the granite-topped island, skimming the news while sipping my coffee. Fixing myself pancakes on the weekend. Hosting dinner parties with friends I hope to make. I'm going to build a life here.

I only have to get through today. I have to set the tone. After that, it's all gravy.

I need to believe it.

My phone buzzes while I'm on my way out the front door. The sight of Ruby's name makes me grin as I tap the message to read it.

Ruby: *You've got this. Go on and make winners out of those guys.*

I appreciate the fact that she kept it short and sweet, and devoid of any mention of the two men I'm most dreading having to interact with. *Please, let them be as nice as they seemed to be. Let them be mature.*

It's not a long drive to the arena, which I'm sure I'll appreciate at some point in the future when I'm not dreading my arrival. I could use a long drive today. A way to delay the inevitable. If a patient ever came to me and explained the sort of situation I'm in now, I would give her all sorts of tips and tricks to help her overcome what she's going through. I would remind her that we all see ourselves as the main player in the movie of our

lives, and that even our biggest mistakes don't seem as huge to anybody else. Because the fact is, everybody's focused on their own mistakes. Their own lives. Their own leading role.

Why can't I take my own advice?

Here I am again, pulling into the arena parking lot. It's barely nine o'clock in the morning, and already it's so hot I'm surprised the asphalt isn't melting. And here I am, wearing a suit jacket. At least the walk from the car to the inside of the arena isn't far. The staff parking is close to the door, and thankfully the sun is angled so I'm parked in the shade—at least for now. It's a reason to hurry inside, anyway, rather than linger and doubt myself.

This is it. This is where I make my first impression. I catch a glimpse of myself in one of the windows near the door, and I almost have to wonder who that self-assured woman is. At least I'm giving off the right image, even if I'm a quaking mess inside.

Gus is seated by the door just like he was yesterday. "Good morning, Doctor," he offers with a friendly grin. "How are things coming along? You getting used to your new place?"

I know he's being kind and welcoming, but that's the kind of question that makes me wonder how fast news travels around here. It doesn't bode well for me if I want to keep a secret. "It's great," I tell him with a smile I don't feel. "I'm loving it. I got moved in yesterday, and I already feel at home."

"That's terrific. It's nice to have a young lady around here. Don't be afraid to get tough with those boys." He lowers his brow. "And if they get tough with you, be sure to let me know."

"I'll do that." I give him a little wave before continuing on, my heels clicking on the laminate floor. Something about the sound straightens my spine a little. It makes me feel powerful. In control.

Mitch meets me in the hall. "Doctor Jacobs, I didn't scare you away yesterday?"

I'm never going to get him to call me anything but Doctor Jacobs, am I? It's not worth trying. "Not even close. I love a challenge."

"Good thing, since the challenge is waiting for you in the conference room. But first, follow me."

This is it. This is where he tells me he knows what I've been up to, and how he doesn't want a slut on his staff.

This is ridiculous. I would never shame anybody else for doing what I did, and here I am being cruel to myself. Ruby's right. I need to stop judging myself so harshly.

Instead of kicking me out, he takes me to a small room farther down the hall. "I would have brought you here yesterday, but the desk hadn't arrived yet. We were using it as a storage space until now," he confesses with a soft chuckle. "This will be your office. Please, whatever you need, let us know and we'll make it happen."

My office. I was so upset yesterday, I didn't think about it. My own office at my first real job. "Wow," I breathe as I step into the room. It's pretty sparse right now—just a desk, a wheeled chair, empty bookshelves under a window overlooking the parking lot—but it's mine. Just like back at the house, I can do what I want. I can make it my own, lend my personality. Right away my brain starts buzzing with all kinds of ideas on how to make it comforting, somewhere the team can feel relaxed when they come in for a session. Plants, for sure. A few candles. I'll hang my diploma on the wall the way I've seen it done in countless movies.

"I'm sure this is going to be great," I assure him with a smile. "I'm really excited."

"I'm very glad to hear that. We want you to feel at home here, like you're a part of the team. So like I said, you just let me know and I'll make it happen." He then checks his watch. "The team should be together by now. What do you say? Are you ready?"

Whoops. Just like that, my anxiety kicks up in the worst way. "Ready as I'll ever be." There's a little bit of a tremor in my

voice, but it doesn't seem like he picked up any fear on my part, so I'll take that as a good sign. I might as well shoot myself in the foot if I give off even a hint of apprehension in front of these guys, and I don't mean Ash and Soren alone. I can't lose sight of the big picture. There's an entire team that needs my help, far beyond those two players.

The conference room is huge, featuring a long, oak table in the center. Around the table there are clusters of guys chatting quietly. All of them are dressed casually, in T-shirts and soft pants like they'll be going to the gym after this. A few of them carry big water bottles, while there are others scattered around the table like the guys claimed their seats when they first came in.

At first, none of them notice our entrance. I don't mind, since it gives me the chance to size them up. Most of the men look to be in their early to mid-twenties, with a handful who might be in their mid-thirties. They all boast the sort of healthy physiques I would expect from professional athletes, broad shoulders and muscular arms played up to perfection by the t-shirts they're wearing. There are a lot of square jaws in the room, plenty of strong backs and thick thighs.

I really need to keep my hormones under control. They are the reason I'm in trouble in the first place. But I would be kidding myself if I didn't at least notice how attractive the men are.

"Here they are," Coach Mitch murmurs. "I'm sure they'll be just as glad to have you here as I am, as we all are."

"Thank you," I murmur, still scanning the room in search of a pair of familiar faces. They're not here. Did I imagine seeing them yesterday? No, that's not possible. I know it was them. It was not my subconscious playing tricks on me. But out of the two dozen or so men milling around the room, I can't find them.

"Are you ready?"

Before we get started, I turn to the coach. "In case I forget to tell you this, thank you."

The skin beneath his gray stubble turns pink. “To what do I owe the honor?”

“You have gone out of your way to make me feel welcome, and I know I can’t take that for granted. Some people would see a girl fresh out of school and figure they could push her around, but you’ve done the opposite. I really appreciate that, and I wanted to make sure you know I see the effort you’re putting into welcoming me into the fold.” I leave out the part where I’m sure it took work for him to come around on the idea of bringing a psychologist into the building. It can’t be easy for a man who looks to me in his late fifties or even early sixties to accept new ways of doing things.

He clears his throat, looking down at the floor. Even the back of his neck is pink. I didn’t mean to embarrass him. “It’s the least I can do. And we need you. These are good boys. They deserve a win. We have to carve out the path that leads us there, is all.”

I’m about to assure him that I intend to do exactly that when the door to the hallway opens again. “Sorry we’re late, Coach,” a man murmurs, and reflex makes me turn to see who was running late.

Which is when my stomach drops. When we’re finally face-to-face and there’s no hiding my presence.

Soren and Ash stand before me—and they both look like they swallowed their tongues.

ASH

What. The. Fuck.

Here I was, thinking we were having a normal meeting before heading in for a workout. Just your average, everyday thing. Did I miss the memo? *Dear Ash, you're about to come face-to-face with a woman you haven't been able to stop thinking about for weeks. Have a nice day.*

I glance at Soren, who's as shocked as I am. How do I know? His mouth is hanging open. I nudge him with my elbow and it snaps shut. Holy shit. What the hell is going on?

"Thank you for joining us," Coach growls. He's got a way of looking at you that brings to mind a disappointed teacher. I might as well be ten years old again, late to school because I missed the bus. "When I call a meeting for nine o'clock, I expect you to be here on time."

"I'm sorry," I blurt out without thinking.

"You're both wearing some nice watches," he points out, glaring at my wrist. "Anyway, go ahead, take a seat. You can all take a seat. Now that we're all together, we can start the meeting." My skin is crawling and I want to demand answers.

Who is she, really?

How did she end up here?

And why the fuck did she give me a fake number?

Not exactly the most important question, but one I haven't been able to let go of. I am not the guy who gets ghosted, and

neither is Soren. Yet we both ended up feeling like assholes when we realized she had no intention of seeing us again. I mean, it's her choice, and she's entitled to spend her time with whomever she chooses.

What can I say? I've got an ego.

The only empty seats at the table are at opposite ends, leaving us no choice but to split up. Soren is quick to grab the chair closer to Harlow, giving me no choice but to walk to the other end of the table. A few of the guys snicker as I pass—nobody wants to be in the hot seat and get dressed down in front of the rest of the team, but that's our fault. These meetings hardly ever start on time anyway, and traffic was heavier than I expected. I figured it was no big deal. I didn't know we were all supposed to be on our best behavior in front of a newcomer.

“Now, everyone.” Coach claps his hands, drawing our attention and silencing the chatter. “I'd like to introduce a new member of our team. This is Doctor Harlow Jacobs. She's just starting with us today, and her office is two doors down from mine.”

Soren and I exchange a look from across the table. What are the odds?

“Doctor Jacobs is a sports psychologist. She's going to get your heads on straight, which means helping you so you stop missing your defensive assignments and passing the puck to empty space. Instead, you're going to start believing that you can win games.”

A sports psychologist. I didn't even know they were bringing one on. Looking up and down the table, it's obvious I'm not the only one in the dark. A few of the guys look incredulous, while one or two snicker and snort with their faces turned away from the head of the table. I have to bite my tongue or risk asking when they suddenly got the idea their shit doesn't stink. We all play on the same team. We all know our record.

“I expect every single one of you to give her your all,” Coach growls while looking up and down the length of the table. “If she expects something from you, you're going to give it to her.”

What a choice of words, considering Soren and I gave her exactly what she wanted back at her apartment. I can't count the number of times I've jerked off in the shower remembering that night. There was something different about her, about the whole experience. I'd never done anything like that before, though Soren admitted he'd participated in three-ways before. It's not exactly the kind of thing guys talk about—we might compare notes the morning after a night out, but that's about it. We don't go into our history.

And now we're supposed to... what? Go to her for treatment sessions?

“Why don't you tell us something about yourself, Doctor Jacobs?” Coach asks, stepping aside so she can take the spot at the head of the table. Damn it, she looks incredible dressed like that. I didn't realize until now that I had a thing for a woman in a suit. It accentuates her trim body while flattering her tits and hips. My dick stirs before I can help it.

Her soft, rich voice makes it stir again, and I have to wonder whether Soren is going through the same torture I am. “As Coach Kozak told you, my name is Harlow Jacobs. I recently earned my doctorate in psychology with a focus on sports. Growing up in my house, there was hardly ever a time when one game or another wasn't playing. Football, baseball, basketball, hockey, soccer, golf. It was a way of life. Unfortunately, I am not extremely coordinated.”

A soft chuckle rises up from those of us who, I assume, have never been balls deep in this woman. But then what the hell do I know? She could've screwed the entire team by now.

“So while my brothers went off to play in high school and college, I hit the books. When I found out sports psychology was actually a thing, I jumped at the opportunity to be a part of the sports world even if I would never be a professional athlete.”

My phone buzzes and I reach into my pocket to find a text from Soren.

Soren: *What the fuck? Did you know anything about this?*

I type out a reply, making sure I don't stare down at my lap for too long or else risk Coach calling me out again.

Me: Right. Like I wouldn't say anything about it if I knew. I'm totally in the dark.

Coach clears his throat and immediately my gaze snaps up, but he wasn't directing it at me. "I know what you're asking yourselves. Why do we need a sports psychologist? And to that I say, look at our record. Look at how sloppy things have gotten around here." I'm not the only one shifting uncomfortably in my chair, looking at the table or the walls or the ceiling. "What's done is done. There's no going back and changing the past. I'm focused on next season. I'm focused on turning this team into the best damn team in the AHL."

And the thing is, he means it. He honestly thinks we can turn it around, and all because he brought a psychologist into the building.

Me: She never told us she worked in sports.

I send the text to Soren and realize my heart is beating much too hard. A look around the table doesn't help—more than a few of the guys are looking at her in a very obvious, easy to identify way. They want to do to her what we've already done. Not if I break their fucking hands first.

The strength of my reaction is startling. What the hell am I thinking? These are my friends and teammates.

Soren's text couldn't have come at a better time, because I need to stop glaring around the table before somebody notices.

Soren: To be fair, we didn't tell her what we do, either. I look up to find him watching me, and he lifts a shoulder.

I'm not in the mood for his calm, reasonable attitude.

Me: What are we supposed to do? Pretend it never happened? It's obvious she prefers it that way.

I watch him read the message. He shakes his head.

Soren: It's not that simple. Women today need to be careful. And she probably figured she was starting a new job and moving and all that, so what was the point?

She could have come out and said that, I reply while Coach goes on and on about everything we need to learn and how we need to come together as a team. I mean, he's not wrong. It would be great if we could get our shit together so there would be a chance of me getting out of this league. I was thinking about *that* the night we met, wasn't I? How the clock is ticking and I only have so much time. I don't want to end up like the older guys around the table who had to give up on their dreams and the NHL a long time ago. I don't want to blink one day and realize I'm thirty-five with nothing to show for my career but creaky joints and dead hopes.

Soren: *She looks hot. Do you think she remembers us?*

Me: *Of course she does. Didn't you see the recognition? And she won't look at us now.*

Sure enough, when I look up from my phone, her eyes dart away. Like she was watching me but can't bring herself to make eye contact.

Soren: *This is weird. How are we supposed to act around her now?*

That's a good question. I've never been in a situation like this before.

Me: *I don't know. I guess we follow her lead? We can't tell anybody else on the team.*

He looks up at me long enough to roll his eyes.

Soren: *No shit. I didn't think that needed to be said.*

Me: *Just making sure. Even though she is kind of a bitch, we should keep it to ourselves.*

Soren: *She's not a bitch. What, because she gave us a fake number? You need to get over it, man.*

I have half a mind to throw the phone down and tell him I don't need him treating me like a kid. I'll feel the way I want to feel. Nobody fucks me then gives me a fake number like it didn't matter. She's supposed to be a doctor? Maybe she missed class the day they talked about how bad it is for a person's self-image when someone does that to them.

“And listen.” Coach’s raised voice grabs my attention, and I forget the phone for a minute. Years of working with the man taught me you don’t ignore him when he sounds that way. “I’ll make a confession. I wasn’t completely on board with the idea when the owners first floated it. I mean, psychology? What does that have to do with playing sports? I’m sure I can’t be the only one. Athletes, men especially, can make the mistake of thinking it’s weak to work out your problems with a doctor, eh?” There are more than a few nodding heads around the table.

“This isn’t just about making sure you all look at yourselves as winners. In some cases, you might have things in your past you need to work through before you can get your head in the game. There’s nothing wrong with that. All we’re asking is that all of you, every single one, is honest with yourselves and with Doctor Jacobs. She’s an expert. She’s not going to tell you how to play, so you don’t tell her how to do her job, either. Understood?”

He lowers his brow, glaring at us. I can’t help my discomfort. “And if you have a problem with it, you bring it to me. Don’t make it her problem. But I’m telling you right now, I’m not taking any pushback on this. You’re going to go into this with the best intentions, you’re going to be as honest as you can, and we are going to turn this team around. Understood?”

I mean, what is there to do but agree with him? It’s either that or get my ass kicked off the team. As much as it doesn’t thrill me, being stuck in the junior league, it’s better than not getting to play at all. This is all I was ever good at.

But why does it have to be her? And where does she get off, standing there at the head of the table, acting like she’s an expert at anything?

I already knew the off-season was going to be a grind.

I had no way of knowing how much of a grind it would turn out to be.

HARLOW

This is fine. I can handle this.

So what if Ash is radiating thick, heavy, negative energy? So what if he stares at me, then quickly averts his gaze whenever I glance his way? Not that I'm trying to antagonize him or anything like that—far from it. That's the last thing I want.

That wouldn't even be starting off on the wrong foot. That would be starting off on the wrong everything.

The coach's advice keeps ringing out in my head. He is a team leader. They are going to follow him. Which means I need to have him on my side, which means I need to make sure he doesn't resent me. Why can't it be Soren, instead? Sure, he can't help but look at me like we've met before, but he's relaxed. Laid back. The opposite of his friend, who clearly hates me.

Right now, that's all I can imagine. It's in the way he holds himself, slouched in his chair, arms folded except when he texts under the table like a kid trying to avoid getting caught by the teacher. I would wonder who he's speaking with if it weren't for the way Soren does the same thing.

Oh, goody. I can just imagine what they're saying to each other. How much respect they've lost—no, on second thought, they can't have lost respect they didn't have. They respected me as a person that night, and I'll never forget them for that. But they didn't respect me as a doctor, which is what I need

now more than anything. I need them to respect me for the professional I am. Regardless of what happened *that* night.

Maybe I'm asking for the impossible. For all I know, that's exactly what it is. I may have ruined any chance to be taken seriously by them.

But dammit, that doesn't mean I can't have the respect of the rest of the team. They are who I have in mind as Coach Kozak gestures toward me. "I've done enough chewing your ear off," he admits, while a few of the guys chuckle. He's tough on them, no doubt, but there's also a lot of kindness behind it. Generosity like he's already shown to me. What a shame his team can't pay him back by winning him a championship.

That's my job.

He turns my way, smiling. "Now, I leave it up to Dr. Jacobs to cover all the many things I couldn't. Doctor, take it away."

Oh, boy. My insides feel all loose and shaky and I can't help but wonder if this is all a bad dream. No doubt my overheated subconscious would cook up something like this. One of those dreams where I show up to school with no clothes on, that sort of thing. If only it were that easy. If only I could wake up, clutching my chest, so grateful none of it was real.

"Hi," I begin, smiling as I look up and down the table at two dozen chiseled faces, many of which are stony as they size me up and more than likely decide this is all a big joke. "As the coach told you, my name is Harlow Jacobs."

Ash's lips twitch in the beginnings of a wry, knowing little smile, while his eyes light up for the first time since he came in the room. I need to stop looking at him, that much is obvious, but he's like a tractor beam. Pulling me in. *Stop it. You've got an entire team to think about.*

"Coach Kozak did a good job of introducing you to the concept of sports psychology," I continue with a little more strength in my voice this time. "Whether or not we want to believe it, what's going on up here—" I tap the side of my head with one finger, "determines what goes on during a game. We might not like it. We might flat-out hate it. But

that's how it is. Unless and until we find ways to work through what's holding us back, we'll be stuck—which, of course, adds more frustration, maybe even a sense of helplessness.”

That seems to get through to them, at least somewhat. I have no doubt these guys can relate to feeling helpless. They want so much to win and might not understand why they can't. “Imagine you're one of those old toy cars that somebody pulls back, then releases. No matter how fast you move, you won't achieve anything if you keep hitting a wall and bouncing off it, then throwing yourself at the wall again. Does that make sense?”

I have to laugh at myself. “I'm not sure how well my analogies land yet.” I can hardly contain my relief when a few feet away chuckles rise up from the table. I can handle this. I'm already doing well.

“That's what all of this is about,” I tell them, making a point of holding eye contact with the team members who aren't practically snickering at me. If I can't get through to Ash right away, I might still be able to get through to them. I stiffen my spine a little and hold my head higher, making it a point to meet Ash's gaze until he looks away. It feels like a small victory, but I'll take whatever I can get.

“My first task will be to go through film of your performance. With your coaches, we'll analyze your strengths, and pinpoint where you could possibly improve. That's no reflection on anybody here,” I'm quick to add, because I don't need any hurt feelings holding us back. “We can all improve. Nobody is perfect at everything, right? Then, it will be a matter of sitting down with each of you and determining what you need to be the best you can be. That's what this is all about, and I want to make sure everybody is clear on that. It's a matter of clearing up anything that needs to be addressed, giving you the tools you need, and turning you into the best version of yourselves—both on and off the ice.”

More than a few of the players staring at me get a look on their faces I was expecting to see, discomfort. “Yes, in case you're wondering,” I confirm, “that means we'll be in sessions

together. One-on-one, completely confidential. Not even your coaches will know what we talk about.”

The relief that clearly spreads across more than a few faces is a relief for me, too. I don't want them holding back just because they're afraid I'll reveal something personal. That's the whole point of doctor- patient confidentiality.

“Does anybody have any questions for the doctor?” Coach Kozak asks. “Don't be shy. I'm sure we're all wondering the same things. It's just a matter of who's got the guts to voice those questions.”

I see it before it even happens. The gleam in Ash's eyes tells me he would be more than happy to go first. There's a heart-stopping moment when I imagine flying across the table and tackling him before he can open his mouth. Sadly, he's too fast for me.

He scrubs a hand over his dark hair, eyes sweeping the room before he asks, “Which hockey teams have you worked with before us?” This jerk. He knows damn well I just got out of school, because I told him and Soren the night we were together. His arched eyebrow says *Go ahead. Let's hear it.*

Why is he acting this way? Like I personally offended him somehow. Like it was all one, big set-up. I wish there were a way to get it through to him here and now that nobody was more surprised than I was to find two men with whom I was intimately acquainted skating around the rink.

He knew how to press my buttons that night, and he's doing it again now. I am literally feeling hot under the collar while he stares at me, almost daring me to answer what would normally be a reasonable question if there weren't a tiny smirk behind it.

“I'm glad you asked,” I reply with a bright smile. “I have to admit, this is my first hockey team.”

He raises his brows and purses his lips in a universally recognized expression. *Welp, there it is, I knew I was right.* It doesn't help that the other guys feed into that energy, shifting in their chairs, frowning, even muttering a little.

It's the coach who puts an end to it, rapping his knuckles against the table. "Quiet, please. Let's allow the doctor to speak."

Remembering the faith he seems to have in me helps a lot. "I haven't worked with hockey teams prior to now, but I have worked with Olympic athletes. I've also worked with athletes who went on to play in the NFL. I performed clinical internships as part of my training. That clinical work was done at USC, by the way," I add, lifting my own eyebrow in a silent challenge. *Is that good enough for you?* Maybe I should pull up my transcripts.

It's Soren's turn to clear his throat and sit up a little straighter. It's not easy, pretending I have never run my fingers through his blonde hair while his head was buried between my thighs. Not the time to be thinking about this. I can't help it—the memories flood my awareness before I can stop them. "What if we don't have any issues we need to talk about?"

That earns him a lot of playful derision from his teammates, who nudge him, laughing like he's completely full of it. Which he is, most definitely, but I'm glad they sort of clear the way for me to smile gently at his question. "I understand where you're coming from," I tell him, "but trust me. There's not an athlete I've ever met who didn't have something buried in the back of their head that needed to be pulled out and examined. I know it's not easy to hear that, but it is true. We all have something, no matter whether we want to believe it or not, that holds us back from being the best we can be. Obviously, nobody wants to come out and admit to that, and I get it. But I assure you, you'll be glad you tried."

He does not look convinced, not that I expect him to. Rather than staring at him and making an example, I turn my attention toward the entire team. "All I ask is that you give it a try. A true, honest try. It can't hurt. And you might end up wishing you had done it sooner."

"And," Coach Kozak adds, "it's required. So I suggest all of you get over yourselves, get it out of your head that big, tough athletes like yourselves don't need help, and give this lady the respect she deserves. Neither I nor the owners are willing to

put up with this subpar performance any longer especially when we all know that you can do better. It's in your best interest to get off your high horses and do what needs doing. Understood?"

When he talks like that, even I want to stand up a little straighter and promise to do my best. That's the thing about coaching. You can know all there is to know about technique, conditioning, all of that. But if you can't command respect from your players, what's the point? From what I see here, they respect the hell out of him—and I doubt they want to let him down. I know I wouldn't. Hell, I know I don't. I want just as much as anybody else to do well for him.

No matter what Soren and Ash happen to think.

HARLOW

My voice is starting to weaken. I'm losing my nerve, and all because two hockey players can't stop smirking at me. No doubt they remember every detail of that night we shared, just like I do.

"I'll reach out to each of you individually to schedule our one-on-one sessions," I conclude, and I am way too happy to bring an end to this. They flustered me. I am officially flustered. All I can do is hope I hid the worst of my nerves.

"Are there any other questions?" Coach Kozak looks across the table. "In that case, meeting adjourned. I want to see all of you giving it everything you've got in the gym." A couple of the guys are nice enough and mature enough to murmur a few kindnesses welcoming me to the team, that sort of thing. They'll never know what it means to hear that, what a relief it is to know there are kind, intelligent men around here. People willing to work.

Unfortunately, they are in the minority. I'm not saying anybody is openly ignorant, except for the two men I happened to sleep with. You'd think out of everyone they'd be the kindest, but not so. All they do after gathering their things is smirk at me.

Unbelievable. What did I do? What was so wrong? We had one passionate night together where we all enjoyed one another. Besides, they were equally involved with it. Yet, somehow I'm supposed to be the one who did something

inappropriate. Fuck this patriarchal thinking. Fuck their misogyny.

Did I really tank my career over a single indiscretion? Was it worth it? The answer would have to be a resounding no. No matter how much fun it was, no matter how memorable. Today should have been the first step in a new adventure, but instead, I feel small and weak and foolish. Just once, I didn't care about the rules, and did something reckless. And look where it got me!

At least Coach Kozak is unaware of what's going on. "I think that went well. Don't worry, they'll come around. I'm sure you know how athletes can be. They feel like they have to put on a front for the other guys. Once you get them alone, things will be different."

I've already had two of them alone, I think to myself.

I know my smile is strained, but I can't seem to appear more natural even for the sake of this very supportive man.

"I'm sure you're right," I somehow manage to choke out. "It wasn't easy, feeling all their eyes on me."

"Let me tell you a secret, I felt the same way, the first time I faced my new team."

"Did you?" It might not solve all of my problems, but his willingness to be kind goes a long way toward soothing my hurt feelings. At the end of the day, that's all it is. I have hurt feelings, and so do they.

"It gets easier as you go on. And I'm sure once they figure out you're the real deal, and that the whole world won't come crumbling down if they open up, things will start clicking." All of a sudden, his face flushes. "Listen to me. You don't want to hear all of this."

"That is not true," I assure him with a laugh. "You have no idea how much better I feel."

He can't hide a grin. "Yeah?"

"Definitely. Thank you."

“I better go make sure everything’s ready for you with the rest of the coaching staff. We’re going to start looking at film right away.”

“I’m eager to get started. Do I have time to freshen up beforehand?”

“Please, take all the time you need.”

I waste no time almost fleeing the room, trying my best to make it look like I’m not fleeing. Is this what my job is going to consist of from now on? Ducking into rooms men aren’t allowed to enter just so I can have a moment’s peace?

It occurs to me there probably aren’t many women around to use this room—administrators, most likely, and maybe women coming in with their kids during the youth figure skating classes that take place in the rink when the team isn’t practicing.

All I know is, it’s empty right now. Once I’ve closed the door, I lean against it, my legs weak, my heart racing. It doesn’t seem right, feeling this worked up when the hard part is over and I’ve made my introduction.

Who am I kidding? The hard part isn’t over. It’s just begun, and that’s why I’m a big ball of apprehensive nerves. I need to find a way to work with the two of them. There must be a way.

To my left is a trio of sinks lined against the wall, with a mirror spanning the space above them. A mirror in which I can’t help but meet my own wide-eyed gaze. Dear God, did I look so much like a deer caught in headlights while I was in there, talking to the guys? I shudder to think.

Breathe. In, out. There is nothing so scary about any of this. If anything, Ash did me a favor there. Running through my credentials bolstered my confidence. It was the reminder I needed that I’m the real deal, that I know what I’m doing. There’s a reason they hired me. And I can get through to his teammates, I’m sure of it. It’ll take time, but we have time now that the season’s over. We can work on incorporating the tactics the guys learn to improve their play before the next season kicks off.

We don't have indefinite time, though. That's the problem. After everything the coach told me about him, I feel like getting Ash on my side would be the equivalent of using a cheat code to get ahead quickly. I just wish I understood what his problem is.

Both of them, in fact. Soren wasn't quite as openly hostile—he didn't have that same sarcastic note in his voice as his friend, but he did seem to have a chip on his shoulder. I mean, what was the big crime? Okay, so I didn't want our night together to extend beyond that evening. Is that such a big deal? These men are professional athletes. If anything, I'd think it would've been the other way around, that they would have been the ones to brush me off.

And that's when it hits me that it would have been preferable for them to be the ones pushing me away. I'm sure handsome, athletic, charming men like them aren't used to getting the brush-off from any woman. I'm not going to flatter myself into thinking I was the first or anything like that, but it can't be the norm.

Isn't it funny? If I were studying this dilemma in a clinical environment, I could come up with all sorts of reasons why those two looked at me like they wished they could spit in my face or humiliate me somehow in front of their friends. I could list all the many reasons why men in their position carry the burden of performative masculinity. I might even turn that sharp, clinical gaze on myself. How I was part of that performance. Two friends, sharing a woman, using her for their pleasure.

This isn't a hypothetical situation. It's not something out of a textbook or a case I'm observing during my internship. This is my life. I'm the woman they used that night. And I used them, too—it wasn't one-sided. Not even close.

This is all too complex, and I know I'm making it that way by overthinking it. Some cold water splashed on my cheeks shakes me out of the tangled web my brain has created, and it's possible to shake myself out of the worst of my self-doubt. I belong here. This is my team. What I do in my free time is

nobody's business but my own. I am not going to make apologies, because there is nothing to apologize for.

Besides, it's not like I thought I was going to stroll in here and immediately be lauded as the team's savior. I'm not naïve, and I know life doesn't work out that way. I knew I would have to prove myself. All I need now is the chance to do that. I don't think it's too much to ask.

All I can do is hope the guys will give me that opportunity. Should I say something to them? The idea leaves me biting my lip, frowning at my reflection.

Would it be a mistake to acknowledge the elephant in the room? Or is it childish to believe we could move past this without anybody mentioning it?

Whatever the answer, I don't need to do anything today. They'll be working out along with the rest of the team, and if anything, it would reflect poorly on them if they decide this is the perfect time to start bragging about our three-way.

Or maybe I'm kidding myself and that's exactly what they're going to do.

I'm starting to feel a little nauseated. Another splash of water helps, but only so much.

The coach is going to start worrying about me if I don't get out of here soon. I can't hide like a scared little kid. I need to face my problems head-on, the way I always have. At the end of the day, it's really not that bad. I can handle derision. I can handle smirks. So far, that's all it's been. I don't need to make a mountain out of what is so far barely a molehill.

Still, even with all my pep talking, I listen at the door before swinging it open. The hall is empty and quiet and I release a relieved sigh before opening the door all the way and stepping through.

"There you are."

I don't need to turn around to see who's stepping out from behind the trophy case, but I do anyway. "Shouldn't you be at the gym instead of waiting for me?" I ask Ash before turning on my heel to find him sauntering my way.

It's crazy, but there's something about the way he moves that gets my heart beating fast. He's got what I can only describe as a cat-like grace that I'm sure helps him when he's on the ice.

That's right. Think about him as an athlete, as somebody you're going to be treating. It's safer that way.

He wrinkles his nose at my question before rolling his eyes. "Are you going to tattle on me? That I'm a bad boy and I didn't go straight to the gym?"

"Is that what you want, Ash?" I am a professional. I am in the driver's seat here. "Do you like the idea of being bad? Do you want somebody to find out and punish you?"

My questions have their desired effect. He falters a little, while a look of confusion crosses his handsome face before his expression hardens into something cold. "Don't play games."

"I didn't think I was."

"You've been playing games from the beginning. We both know it."

"I am genuinely sorry if you feel that way, I can assure you that is not the case. And you know," I add when he rolls his eyes again, "I could just as easily accuse you of withholding information from me. You never told me what you do for a living."

"I didn't think it was pertinent."

"Neither did I."

"Yet here we are, with you using your shrink talk as a weapon."

"I wouldn't have to use a weapon if I didn't feel threatened." I'm tired of him looking at me like I'm the enemy. He wants to take the gloves off? That's just fine. "So unless you've approached me to schedule a session, I'm going to have to ask you to be on your way, so I can be on mine. We both have a job to do. Considering the condition the team is currently in, I'd say we both have our work cut out for us."

ASH

I wonder what she would do if I told her here and now that this attitude of hers turns me on. The whole “powerful woman taking charge” thing. I didn’t know until now what it does to me.

I wonder how quickly her cheeks would turn pink if she knew. How she would sputter and lose her breath, before those eyes of hers would flash fire again. That alone is worth it, watching her come undone no matter how she tries to hold herself together. Like back in the conference room. Who did she think she was kidding with that act of hers? Pretending she’s in control when she’s anything but thanks to my presence.

“I want to talk to you now,” I murmur with a smirk. “I don’t want to wait.”

Her brows draw together and her lips purse and I suddenly want to reach out and let her silky blond locks slide through my fingers. She’s tempting even now—maybe especially now, when she’s put up this barrier between us. I’ve always been a sucker for a challenge. I’m sure she would have some deep, intellectual explanation for that, but I’m not particularly in the mood to have my head shrunk. Now or ever.

“You’re going to have to wait your turn like everyone else.”

“So that’s it? You’re the team’s psychologist, and that means you’re less human? You don’t have to behave like a normal person because you have a PhD after your name?”

“It’s actually PsyD,” she amends with a twitch of her lips. They draw my attention and I can’t help but stare,

remembering how those lips felt wrapped around me. The sweet, simple pleasure of fucking her. It's almost enough to take my breath away.

"My mistake. I'm only a hockey player. I'm not on the same level as you."

"Where is this coming from?" She folds her arms, looking me up and down. "Why the hostility?"

"I didn't think I was particularly hostile. If you would like to see hostility, I would be more than happy to oblige."

"I'll pass," she fires back. "I can't imagine why you would act this way, that's all. Your attitude back there in the conference room was disappointing."

"Forgive me. I wouldn't want to disappoint you, Doctor Jacobs."

"Is it because the power dynamic has shifted?"

She couldn't have picked a worse thing to say. My hackles rise and my chest tightens and I'm fairly sure the last time I felt this way, I got into a fight on the ice. One of the last games of the season when my frustration was at an all-time high. A few smartass comments from a player rumored to be on his way up to the NHL was all it took for me to break his nose. I'm not proud of it.

I couldn't help my reaction then, but I need to do better now. Every damn thing I do or say will leave me up for scrutiny.

"The power dynamic has shifted? Try speaking like a human being and not like a textbook. Because let me tell you, you are not going to get far with that sort of shit." "Thank you so much," she says, eyes wide, one hand over her chest. "Please, is there any additional advice you can give me?"

You wouldn't be so sassy with my dick in your mouth. "Maybe you should look out and not piss off the wrong people."

"Wait, let me grab a pen and paper so I can write this down."

"What's with the attitude?"

"I'm mirroring your energy, pal."

“Pal?”

“That’s what I said.” She rolls her shoulders back and lifts her chin and damn it, she is almost irresistible. If we were alone right now instead of standing in the hallway where the coach could walk out at any moment and give me a raft of shit, this could go a lot differently. I would push her up against the wall and make her remember what we shared. She thinks she can forget something like that so easily? She’s got another think coming.

“You never told us what you do for a living.”

“You didn’t tell me, either. What a shame. We could have had a really nice conversation about that.”

“You weren’t exactly interested in talking, were you?”

“And neither were you. So I’m not exactly sure how any of this could have been avoided. Not to mention the fact that I didn’t accept this job until after that night. Even so, I had no way of knowing it was your team.”

“Isn’t it funny how this could all have been avoided if only I had been able to call you? We could have shared this great development.”

“Maybe...” She looks away first, which is exactly what I hoped, while her voice trails off. Silence settles between us for a beat before she asks, “Why was I not allowed to have a say in whether we met up again or not?”

“You could have come out and been honest instead of lying to our faces and giving us a fake number like we were nothing but a couple of chumps.”

I know as soon as her head tips to the side that I said the wrong thing. “No, you’re totally right. I should have taken the chance of rejecting two men while the three of us were alone in my apartment. I should definitely have potentially taken my life in my hands.”

“You should have known we wouldn’t—”

“No. There was nothing I should have known beyond protecting myself while being as polite as I could. A woman

needs to protect herself. And yes, I might have gone about it a different way, but..." She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, looking at the floor while she does, and in that tiny gesture I see her vulnerability. The vulnerability that first drew me to her. I mean, how much more vulnerable can you get than dancing alone in the middle of a club, arms overhead, moving your ass like you don't care who's watching?

I clear my throat, looking up and down the hall to be sure we're alone. "Listen. If we're gonna work together, we should talk about this."

"No. We should not talk about it. There is no reason why we have to bring it up. It happened in the past, before we knew what we would eventually become to each other. Coworkers," she's quick to add when my eyebrows lift. "That's all we are. *Coworkers*. Why don't we wipe the slate clean and start from the beginning?"

"Is that the kind of shit they taught you in school? Completely avoiding a topic because you don't feel like talking about it? Or because it scares you?"

"It's called setting a boundary, Ash, and I would be happy to discuss boundary setting with you in my office during a scheduled appointment." She's good. I'll give her that.

"I guess I'm just sort of wondering how you're supposed to get me to open up and talk about my feelings when you won't talk about yours."

"My feelings have nothing to do with this." How can she act like she's so high up on her horse? Like I haven't seen the real Harlow. "I am most interested in talking about your performance on the ice. How we can turn you into the athlete you want to be."

I'm the athlete I want to be. I'm not where I want to be. That's the problem, and it's not my fault. I can't carry the entire team on my back.

I open my mouth to say that and even take a breath in preparation... before stopping myself, because that is exactly the kind of shit she wants me to say. She wants me to talk

about how I feel like I've been held back. Like none of this is my fault. Our lack of success, the fact that I can't move up. I am practically a therapist's wet dream when I look at it that way.

I won't give her the satisfaction of opening up so easily when she refuses to open up in return.

"Like I said before, we both have work to do. I'm going to have to ask you to let me go now."

But no. I don't want her to go. Weeks wondering what happened to her, asking myself if I should try to find her, realizing I forgot where her apartment was located—I was too buzzed and too horny to pay attention to where we were going. Now that I have her in front of me, I can't just let her walk away again.

But I have to. It doesn't matter what I want right now. I have to let her go. With my luck, the coach is going to come out any second and get on my ass for harassing her instead of being at the gym. I've already had enough of his disappointment today.

"Well, I wouldn't want to keep you from doing your job."

"And I wouldn't want to keep you from doing yours. It was nice to see you, Ash. I'll be reaching out to make an appointment soon."

"I can hardly wait." At least I have the pleasure of checking out her firm ass as she walks away. She's easily the best-looking thing I've seen around here in a long time.

I'm supposed to be professional around her? That would be enough of a challenge, I'm sure, if I didn't know what she tastes like or what she sounds like when she comes. How powerful it felt knowing I could make her fall apart. I was a king on top of the world.

It was the sort of feeling a man could get used to. Yet I have no choice but to keep my hands off her if I don't want to get kicked off the team for harassing a member of the organization.

And this is only day one. Lucky me.

SOREN

There's music in the air, a beer in my hand, and there's still water dripping from my hair after a swim in my pool. Life has been worse.

“Who wants a steak?” That’s a stupid question, and I knew it before I asked. Like magic, three hands shoot up into the air as my teammates wander over from the basketball net in my backyard.

“Better make it two for me.” Maximus drags an arm across his forehead, snickering. “I don’t know what it is, but my stamina is shit today. I must have worked too hard in the gym.”

“You need to work on that stamina,” Danny teases as he bounces the ball he and the other guys have been screwing around with. “With a kid on the way, you’re going to need it.”

Max grimaces. “Don’t remind me.” But he doesn’t have anybody fooled. He’s thrilled that his first kid is on the way, and a family man like Danny understands that. They aren’t the only two guys on the team with wives, but they’re probably the two most faithful to their women. Not that the rest of the team is a bunch of players, screwing around as soon as their wives or girlfriends’ backs are turned, but it’s rare for anyone to pass up the opportunity to go out and do a little sightseeing when we’re on the road. It usually comes in the form of visiting the various points of interest—meaning the strip clubs, that kind of thing. We don’t bother asking Max or Danny if they’re going to join us anymore.

I head into the house to take four thick steaks out of the fridge, leaving them on the counter to come to room temperature before I slap them on the grill. As a second thought I add a fifth, since something tells me Ash is bound to pay a visit at some point tonight. It's an open invitation, and he knows that. But he was a little late getting to the gym, I noticed, and he wasn't quite himself while running drills at practice.

It doesn't take a genius to know why, and I'm the only person he can discuss it with since I'm the only one involved besides him.

I still haven't quite gotten over the surprise of walking into the conference room and finding Harlow there. She was shocked, too—the girl looked like she'd swallowed her tongue when she first set eyes on us. That would be a shame, since she has a very nice tongue. It certainly worked magic on me when we were together. I can't help but smile to myself at the memory. Not the first time I've revisited that memory, either. If there were ever spank bank material, that was it.

“Yo!” I hear upon returning to the back patio, where the guys have already decided to give up on the basketball in favor of taking a dip in the pool to cool off. I can't blame them. It's a hot one, but then it normally is around here.

“It's about time you showed up,” Ryan calls out. Of course, he is clueless, just like the others. “We were thinking maybe you stayed behind for a session with the doctor.”

Right away, Ash's eyes meet mine. I shake my head slightly—they don't know, I didn't say a word. As far as they're aware, today was the first time we ever set eyes on Harlow Jacobs.

“Yeah, right,” Ash retorts with a roll of his eyes. “I am not about to spill my guts to any doctor. I don't care how hot she is.”

“You heard what Coach said,” Max reminds him. “We don't have a choice.”

“You heard what Coach said,” Ash retorts, wrinkling his nose. “Honestly, I didn't know you lost your balls when you got Rachel pregnant.” Max is way too easy going to ever take

something like that seriously. He only laughs it off before dunking his head beneath the surface of the water.

Danny scowls. “What got up your ass?”

“If there’s anything up my ass, it’s my business.” He is good and pissed, and I’m already over it.

“If you’re going to be in a shitty mood,” I tell him as lightly as I can, “you’re more than welcome to go home.”

Frustration flashes across his face before his features smooth out. “Sorry,” he grunts, and Danny only waves it off.

“You should take a dip,” I suggest, nodding toward the pool. “It will cool you off.”

He only scowls while staring over the water. “I don’t know that anything could.”

“What’s going on?” Ryder asks. He’s not joking anymore, because at the end of the day, we have each other’s backs. On and off the ice, we genuinely give a shit about each other. We have to. We’re a team. And there have been plenty of times when the shoe was on the other foot, like when the doctor first told Max and Rachel there might be complications with the pregnancy, that sort of thing. We might not open up and pour our hearts out, but when the chips are down, we try to be there for each other.

Ash doesn’t answer the question, instead stripping down to a pair of swim trunks and jumping into the water all at once. “I did need that,” he announces with a grin upon surfacing, tossing his head to shake the wet hair out of his eyes.

I settle for taking a seat at the water’s edge. Ryder is the only one so far who’s kept his opinion to himself when it comes to Harlow, but it’s clear he feels similarly to Ash... if for a different reason. At least, I imagine it’s a different reason, unless she’s made her way through the rest of the team already.

I doubt that, however. She’s not the type. And I was watching her pretty closely. It seemed like only the sight of Ash and me upset her.

“What do you think about her?” I ask him when he swims my way.

He lifts a shoulder, rolling his eyes. “What is there to think? It’ll be a cold day in hell when I sit down with a therapist, that’s for damn sure.”

“See?” Ash demands. “He gets it.”

He doesn’t get a damn thing, and we both know it. It’s convenient to be agreed with, that’s all.

“That’s easy for you to say,” Max points out, exchanging a glance with Danny. “Some of us have families to think about. We can’t risk getting fired over something like this.”

“And that’s fine, and I respect that. Personally, I think Coach is full of shit to threaten to fire us over this.”

“It’s mandatory,” I murmur, eyeing Ash. “It’s not really a threat. That would be like saying it’s not fair if we get fired for refusing to practice.”

“Looking forward to a little one-on-one time with the cute doctor?” Danny jokes. I swear, if we don’t change the subject soon, I’ll end up biting my tongue off.

“Steaks should be ready by now.” Even if they aren’t, I would like very much to end this conversation. On the way inside, I turn up the music. “Plenty of beer in the cooler!” I call out after checking to make sure we’re still stocked.

In the air-conditioned kitchen, I take a prepared salad from the fridge, along with some corn on the cob I plan to place on the grill. It’s no surprise when Ash joins me, a towel around his waist. “Don’t drip on my floor,” I warn him. “I’m not going to bust my ass because you couldn’t be bothered to dry off before coming inside.”

“Okay, Mom.”

“And while you’re in here, season those steaks for me.”

He grumbles good-naturedly as he crosses the floor. “If I had known I was going to have to work for my dinner, I would’ve stayed home.”

“And if you’re going to bitch all night, you’re still free to go.” I don’t mean it, of course. I would rather he stayed, even if he is bringing down the party. “What crawled up your ass?”

“You’re not serious.”

“I wouldn’t have asked otherwise. What’s the issue?”

“You think there’s nothing wrong with all of this?”

“All of what?”

“I can’t tell if you’re acting this way to get under my skin, or if you really mean it. We’re supposed to spill our guts to this woman? She’s going to mold us and shape us into the athletes she knows we can be?” He goes so far as to make air quotes, groaning. “This is bullshit.”

“Let me get this straight. You know you can do better than this team. All I’ve heard from you for as long as I can remember is how you feel like you’re being held back. Now here we are, with the opportunity to improve, and you’re determined to find a problem with it.”

I stack the seasoned corn on a plate which I carry to the door.

“You’re refusing to listen to me.”

“No. I’m refusing to act like the sky is falling. What’s the big deal?”

He doesn’t answer me right away, and I have a feeling that’s because he doesn’t know how to put his thoughts into words. I’m not going to force him—fact is, I’m more interested in having fun, kicking back the way I planned to. That’s the reason I invited everyone over, after all, even if only a small handful of my teammates could make it on such short notice.

“Fuck’s sake! I’m starving here. When are we going to eat?” Ryder pushes himself over the pool’s edge and climbs out, heading for the cooler to crack open another beer.

“What’s your hurry?” I ask with a smirk, looking him up and down. “Do you have a date we don’t know about?”

“A date? What’s that?” he jokes. I see what he’s saying. None of us are exactly the dating type, or at least we don’t want to

believe we are.

“Shit all over the idea if you want,” Danny calls out from the pool. “When you find the right person, you ask yourself why you were ever so against it in the first place.”

“Yeah, well, that’s fine for you guys,” he mutters something under his breath that sounds a lot like pussies. We all know better than to take any offense. Ryder’s a little rough around the edges, but he’s a good guy and he comes through in a clutch.

“You don’t think she’ll look at us differently now? Single us out?”

I look over at Ash and find him scowling while he lingers near the cooler. “Why would she do that?”

“We’re not all European, you know.”

“You mean you’re a prude.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Is that a word you would ever use to describe me?”

“No offense, but you’re acting like one right now.” I’m sure it has to do with his American upbringing—they’re notoriously prudish about sex but see no issue with depicting massacres on TV.

I may have come from a family with money and a sterling reputation, but I didn’t inherit their stuffy attitudes. They would much rather I sit at a desk all day, crunching numbers and following the stock market. The way the rest of the family does. But that’s a bit boring for me. Plus, I was always good on the ice.

“It’s not a big deal,” I assure him with a grin as I slap the meat onto the grill. There is nothing like that sizzle. “Really. If she thought there was anything wrong with what we did, she wouldn’t have participated. Right?”

“I didn’t know she was a goddamn psychologist.”

“Neither did I.”

“I don’t need her bringing it up. Like, why do you choose to share this experience with your friend?”

“Why did you?” I ask as I place the corn on the rack above the steaks.

A frown twists his lips while he shrugs. “I don’t know. It seemed like the thing to do.”

“And that’s it. It doesn’t have to go any deeper than that.”

“I don’t need her thinking it did, is all.”

“Here.” I reach into the cooler positioned not far from the grill and pull out a beer, handing it over. “Have a drink. Relax. You’re making too much of this.”

“You mean to say you don’t think it’s weird that we have to face her like this? At all?”

“Honestly? I think it’s pretty funny. Well it is,” I insist when he rolls his eyes. “Like, of all the people in the world? What are the odds?”

“We’ll see if you’re laughing and joking about it when she decides to treat you like a head case because of what we did.”

“What did you do?” Max asks as he approaches the cooler with Ryder behind him.

Ash sounds like he’s choking, so I explain. “Coming in late today. Of all days to show up late, right? Neither of us wants her questioning how serious we are about our work.”

“Maybe you can have some extra-long sessions to talk about it,” Ryder suggests with a wink.

There is no getting Ash out of this mood. His scowl doesn’t lessen a bit. “I don’t enjoy feeling like I have to look over my shoulder all the time now. I mean, what, she’s going to be watching practices? Analyzing every move we make?” He shudders, shaking his head. “I don’t know about you, but that kind of scrutiny just screws with my head.”

“Then you should definitely not be a professional athlete,” I joke. His face goes red and I know it’s because he can’t say what he’s really thinking. It’s one thing to be analyzed as an

athlete. That only feels personal, but it's fleeting. People usually forget about it by the time the game is over and they're back at home.

This is deeper. This is somebody who'll be actively watching us, dissecting what we do and maybe even what we say.

"You know, he's got a point," Danny admits, joining us by the grill. He folds his arms over his inked chest, looking around. "Like, is everything we do up for analysis? That's kind of creepy."

"I doubt it's going to be anything like that. Even if it is, if it gets us winning more games, I'm fine with it. It seemed like she really wants to help."

Ash snorts. "Because it's her job."

"And it's our job to win." He only shrugs before lifting the bottle to his lips and taking a deep gulp. Good. Maybe he'll loosen up a little.

"How do we all want these steaks?" I ask as I begin flipping them. "Rare, I'm assuming."

"You know I like mine well done," Ryder reminds me.

"Yeah, you can leave my property with that kind of attitude." I'm glad he has terrible taste, though, since it gives us all something else to talk about. This is supposed to be a party, after all.

HARLOW

Sitting behind my desk, I force myself to take a deep breath and blow it out slowly. This is it. My first one-on-one session. The office isn't quite where I want it to be yet, but the addition of extra chairs, a few plants, and a diffuser which spreads the scent of lavender through the room has already made a difference. I feel calmer. In charge.

It helps to know I won't be meeting with Ash or Soren until I've made my way through the rest of the team. They are way, way off in the distance—at least, that's how it feels. So I can rest a bit easier knowing there's plenty of time before we'll face each other in the privacy of this office.

There's a knock on my door at exactly ten o'clock. My heart lurches but the rush of panic fades quickly as I stand. This is nothing more than a friendly conversation, or so I tell myself before opening the door to find tall, broad-shouldered, brooding Ryder Sullivan waiting for me.

His dazzling green eyes narrow while a tight, forced smile flashes across his face so quickly, I might have imagined it. "Doctor Jacobs."

"Ryder. Please, come in. Thank you for being on time."

He enters the room with his head on a swivel. No doubt he's thinking about how this room was used for storage only a week ago. "Sure. I didn't want you thinking there's something wrong with me."

"Let's get one thing straight. I look at the entire person, not only at a few random traits or characteristics. Don't worry

about it, okay?" I gesture for him to take a seat in one of the plastic chairs in front of my desk. "I'm hoping to upgrade the decor eventually. I hope you're not too uncomfortable there."

"No, I'm good." He's wearing a t-shirt and soft, knee length shorts that tell me he's coming off a workout, or on his way to one.

"So, Ryder." I take my seat and open his file. "How's it going?"

He arches an eyebrow, his head snapping back a little like he's wondering how to take that.

"Really. How is everything going with you? Anything new in your life?"

"I thought we were supposed to, like, talk about my issues and shit." Unlike his coach, Ryder doesn't bother excusing his language.

"We'll get there. I was hoping to get an idea of a basic starting point before we delve deeper. Moving forward, we can look back here and assess your progress based on where you are now."

"I'm not gonna make any progress." He even laughs like it's a foregone conclusion and I'm an idiot for thinking otherwise.

"Why do you say that? That's a pretty fatalistic point of view."

"I'm Irish. What did Freud say about the Irish?"

"I don't know, what?" I ask, playing dumb.

"That we're impervious to psychoanalysis."

He sits back in his chair, proud of himself.

"That's from *The Departed*, right? I saw that movie too," I burst his bubble and his mouth drops open. He sits up a little straighter and clears his throat.

"Okay, but seriously, people have been trying for years to get me to make progress. It doesn't work."

"And why do you think that is?"

“Don’t, okay? Just don’t. I don’t go in for all this psychological stuff. People are the way they are. And yeah, a lot of it can come from how they started off in life, which kind of puts me behind the eight ball.”

“You think how you started off dictates the way the rest of your life goes?”

“Okay, you know what? I’m out of here. This is a waste of time.” He even goes so far as to stand, making my heart sink. This is my first session, and I’m blowing it.

“I’m on your side,” I murmur, since begging him to sit back down probably won’t go too well. “And I’m not here to judge, just like I’m not here to lecture. All I want is to make you the best player you can be. That’s it. We are on the same team... no pun intended.”

He runs a hand through his thick, brown hair that’s probably a little too long, but it suits him. When it falls across his forehead, it adds an air of mystery. “This is weird for me.”

“You want to hear a secret? It’s weird for me, too. Maybe we can get through it together. What do you say?”

He blows out a long sigh before dropping into his chair. It’s a small victory, but it’s a sweet one. “Okay. Now, I understand you spent time in foster care back in Boston?”

“Yeah. A lot of years.” He cranes his neck to get a look at the contents of his file.

“I don’t know anything that wasn’t in your general chart, so don’t worry about that. Just the basics.”

“I don’t know what you want to know about foster care. I don’t like to talk about it.”

“Not a problem. I’m not trying to force you to talk about anything you’re uncomfortable with.” Though eventually, we will have to get into the touchy stuff. That’s sort of the point. Now, though, the most important thing is to keep him calm and let him know I’m his friend. “But I’m guessing it wasn’t easy.”

He barks out a laugh. “What makes you say that?”

Let's start with the two-ton chip on your shoulder. "It very rarely is. But look at you. Look how far you've come. That's got to mean something, right?"

With his elbows resting on the arms of the chair, he folds his hands over his stomach and turns his gaze toward the window. It's not much of a view, but he seems caught up in it for a while before his chest rises and falls and his already sharp jaw tightens. "You know what pisses me off?"

It takes all of my self-control not to lean in, salivating.
"What?"

"Some of these guys. They, I don't know, act like this is all beneath them. Like just because it's not the NHL, it's dog shit."

"And you don't feel that way."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" The only thing that moves is his eyes, darting from the window and meeting mine before darting away again. "Sorry."

"It's fine. You can speak freely with me. I can handle it."

"Like, they don't have the first clue what it's like when you're a kid and you're bouncing from one place to another, and you're never at a school long enough to make any friends—not that it matters, because you'll be gone soon, anyway. Eventually, you stop trying, because what's the point? You have almost nothing of your own. Nobody expects anything out of you except trouble—I mean, if you're me. And all you can do is hang on to an idea that things will be better one day. You end up watching hockey because that's what they watched at one of the houses you were in the longest. You start following the team. You start dreaming, even if you're never going to tell anybody about it because it's pretty stupid and farfetched. So you keep it to yourself, but the dream doesn't go away. You dream that it will be possible for you, some nobody kid from Boston who doesn't remember having parents and hasn't even had a teacher give a shit about him, because they never get to know him."

The intensity in his voice is enough to take my breath away. “You dream what will be possible?” I murmur. I’m almost afraid to move, much less speak. I don’t want to break the moment.

“That you could ever play professional hockey. That you could live in an enormous house in California with a pool and everything. That you’ll make good money and live a good life.”

His brows draw together and his jaw tightens even further. “Then I have to deal with these assholes who act like they’re doing the world a favor by playing in the AHL. Like it’s beneath them.”

“So hockey has always been important to you.”

“It saved my life. It gave me something to care about. Something to work for.”

“And you started playing from a young age?”

“I got lucky. I was in a nice house for about six months, and they had an older son who had already moved out. He played hockey when he was younger, and they still had his equipment in the garage. The skates were a little big, so I wore extra socks.”

“It was meant to be.”

“I guess.” He lifts a shoulder. “I made it work.”

“Do you hope to one day make it to the NHL? It’s okay if you don’t.”

He shifts in his chair, grimacing. “I mean, would I be upset if I got called up? No.”

“But you wouldn’t be crushed if you never did.”

“I mean, how much more can I ask for? I already hit the lottery.”

Oh, my God, I could make an entire career off this guy alone. I have to contain my excitement at how fascinating he is—and how easy he is to understand.

“Can I ask you a question?” He jerks his chin. “If you’re so grateful for your career and everything it’s brought you, why do you keep getting into trouble?”

Another uncomfortable shift, this time complete with folded arms and a lowered brow. “I should have known you would want to talk about that.”

“It’s worth bringing up, discussing, figuring out. You’re worth it. Life could go a lot smoother for you if you could stay out of trouble and stop getting fined by the team.”

Flipping through his file, I tap a finger against the incident report. “You were in a fight in a bar with a player from the Wranglers. You ended up getting picked up by the cops for that one. What happened?”

The way his chest puffs up tells me he’s still feeling resentful. “He was talking trash from the second I walked in. He couldn’t keep his mouth shut, and when I didn’t react, he just shouted louder to make sure everybody could hear. He was begging for it.”

“From what I understand, you guys won that game.”

“Yeah? So?”

“He was probably talking trash because he was bitter that his team lost the game. I’m sure that’s not the first time something like that has happened. Dealing with a nasty opponent, I mean.”

“Usually it’s the fans who have an attitude problem.”

“What was so different about it this time?”

It’s a good sign, the way he takes time to think about it. “I don’t know. It’s the way he made it sound. Like they weren’t even trying to beat us because what difference did it make? They were already in the playoffs. He made it sound like they let us have a win because they felt sorry for us.”

Ouch. “Did you feel like they handed the game to you?”

“Hell, no. We played a good game that day. We could have gotten a lot farther this season if we’d played that way throughout.”

“But you did win. Why not remind yourself of that and recognize his taunting for what it was?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs his broad shoulders while his full mouth tips downward at the corners. “I just couldn’t let it go.”

“And this is only the most recent example of several,” I remind him as gently as I can. “You’ve worked so hard to get where you are, and it’s clear you appreciate the good things in your life. It would be a real shame if anything happened to take all of that away.”

“I know.”

“I can help you. It doesn’t have to be this way.” I fold my hands on top of the desk, holding his gaze. “What do you think about that? Will you let me help you? I promise, I’m going to do my best.”

He hesitates at first and I hold my breath. Please, don’t let his pride get in the way. Don’t let him sabotage himself again.

“Okay,” he finally sighs. “If you think you can help, be my guest. But I’m warning you. It won’t be easy.”

“I didn’t get into this line of work because I wanted life to be easy,” I assure him with a grin. “And thank you for your honesty. I’d be grateful if you’d tell your teammates that this didn’t hurt.”

He flashes a charming grin. “Who says it didn’t hurt?”

Something tells me this guy is going to be trouble.

HARLOW

What. A. Day. And it's nowhere close to being over yet, barely past noon by the time I wrap up my fourth session of the morning.

Not that it hasn't gone well. Just the opposite. There were moments when I worried about a couple of the players with whom I met, since Ryder Sullivan is not the only player with doubts about therapy. It's sad in general, how even in today's day and age, therapy and mental health can have a bad rap. One would think after all the work that's been done to normalize the concept, to bring it into the mainstream and demonstrate how crucial it can be, it would seem as normal as going to the doctor for a checkup.

Not so, sadly, especially in the case of athletes where concepts of toxic masculinity still linger. Despite how much work we, as a society, have done to get rid of bad ideas, like men should never talk about their feelings and keep everything bottled up, these concepts continue to persist. Some of them think that it makes them weak to talk about abuse they endured and other things that happened in their childhood. They think it weakens them somehow, admitting they need help. If they broke a leg, would that keep them from going to have the bones set, just because they couldn't do it themselves?

I asked that question of one of the players. Danny Hayes seems like a nice guy—stable, affable, with a friendly smile and an easygoing way about him. Once he stonewalled me, because it turns out you can even stonewall a person while smiling to their face. I made that comparison and it was like

dawn broke across his face. After that, it was a more productive conversation. There's still a long way to go, the way there is with all of the guys, but this first meeting is really about getting to know them and familiarizing them with the concept of my job and what it means to them.

It's not surprising that the men with families are in this to provide for their loved ones. This is their job. It just so happens to mean playing a sport they love. They all seem to understand how lucky they are, even if Ryder was right and a few of them don't hide their disappointment at not moving up to the National Hockey League. A couple of them are already at an age where they've accepted how unlikely it will be for them to ever get called up. I didn't sense any resentment, but there might be some to uncover in future sessions. I wouldn't be surprised if a few of them have pretty much given up trying because they know they're never going to make it any higher than they are now.

I have my work cut out for me. That much is obvious. But I didn't get into this field to take it easy.

The team's gone down the hall to the gym for their scheduled workout, giving me some time to myself. I need a walk after sitting at my desk all morning, even if it's just around the inside of the building.

I make sure the files in my cabinet are locked up securely – not that I think anybody would sneak around, trying to take a look at a teammate's information, but I have a responsibility to keep things confidential. Once that's done, I step out into the hall, and immediately I'm greeted by sounds of high-pitched laughter and squealing from the rink. It isn't even all that close to where my office sits, but I learned, once I got settled in here, that the rink isn't only used for team practice.

The team, who is now working hard in the gym. I pass them, or rather, I pass the gym's open door and do my best to keep my eyes to myself rather than peek in to see how things are going. I don't need to see Soren's sculpted, sweat-coated muscles to know what they must look like.

But I hear them in there, joking, encouraging each other as I pass. Are any of them talking about me? Why would they? I need to get ideas like that out of my head. This is not all about me.

The noise from the rink grows louder the closer I draw, until finally I wander inside. There are a few dozen kids down there, and from the looks of it they range in age from around five to ten years old, broken down into groups according to their ages. The littlest ones seem to just be having fun on the ice – isn't it amazing how easily they brush off a fall? They don't take it personally, like a symbol of failure. They get back up and try again.

There are spectators, some of whom must be their parents, sitting in the stands, while others choose to get a little exercise on the walking track that runs higher up along the rink's walls where they can look down on their kids while getting in their steps for the day. That's a nice touch and, for a moment, I consider joining them to stretch my legs.

It only takes a minute or so of the echoing, overlapping voices to disabuse me of that idea. What I need more than anything after hours spent trying to convince the guys that I belong here is a little quiet. That is not to be found in the rink.

It's only when my stomach growls that I realize I haven't eaten since breakfast, and it's already twelve-thirty. Normally, I would bring something in with me, but all that leads to is sitting alone in my office like a hermit. I want to be more a part of things around here, to show my face, to get people used to me being present. Somehow, I guess I figured heading out to one of the lunch trucks that routinely park outside the arena would be a nice treat and an excuse to chat with people I might not ordinarily get to meet.

Sometimes, the ideas we have while we're in bed don't hold water when it comes time to step outside in the heat and actually go through with it.

I can't pretend my mouth doesn't water when I spot the taco truck, though. There is nothing like some nice, authentic tacos. My already growling stomach is practically singing a

symphony by the time the aroma of tacos wafts my way. I'm practically salivating as I take my place at the end of the line.

The petite, dark-haired girl in front of me offers a polite little smile when I fall in place behind her. I've seen her around, come to think of it. We normally exchange a grin and a polite *good morning* or *good afternoon* if we run into each other at the vending machine, but until now that's been the extent of our interaction. She looks to be around my age, and she seems friendly enough, so I gather my courage and tap her on the shoulder.

"Hi," I offer, tucking my hair behind my ear like a nervous school kid. "I figure I should introduce myself since I've seen you around so many times. I'm Harlow Jacobs."

Her sunny smile makes me glad I decided to reach out. "I'm Corey. It's nice to finally meet you instead of just saying hi."

"What do you do around here?"

"I'm one of the figure skating instructors. Just taking some much-needed quiet time." She wiggles a finger in her ear while grimacing comically. "It's amazing how a shriek can echo."

"Ringing ears aside, that must be such a fun job."

"I love it," she says, and there's so much fondness and sincerity in her voice. "I love teaching the kids and watching them master a move. Their faces light up and they're so proud of themselves. And they're so funny! Sometimes, I swear, it is not easy to keep from laughing at the things they come up with."

"I bet." The person at the front of the line steps aside, and we move up. The aroma grows stronger the closer we draw to the truck, and I'm about ready to claw my way over there at this point. I guess I should've eaten a little earlier, but then I was sort of busy trying to justify my existence in the building. Maybe not literally, but it sure feels that way sometimes.

"You just recently started working here, didn't you?" she asks me. "I haven't seen you around for very long."

"I recently took the position as the team psychologist."

“Oh!” Her eyes light up. “You’re the doctor!”

“Does my reputation precede me?” I ask with a nervous laugh.

“Oh, gosh, no. Don’t get the wrong idea, please. I’ve overheard some of the guys talking when we cross paths. Nothing bad, I promise. But they did seem a little worked up over having to spill their guts.”

She rolls her eyes, chuckling. “They’re such babies, aren’t they?”

Her candor is refreshing, and soon I’m laughing with her. “It is a little bit like pulling teeth, trying to get them to open up, but we just got started. I’m hoping once they get used to me, it will be easier.”

“I hope that’s true. I know mindset had a lot to do with my training back in the day.”

“Did you ever skate competitively?”

We move up until she is next in line. “It’s a long story,” she explains while her fair skin colors. I don’t think it’s the heat or the sun making her flush. Did I hit a raw nerve?

“If you want, we can take our food back to my office,” I offer on impulse before she can order. “It’s a lot more comfortable than sitting out here.” I’m surprised the wooden picnic tables and benches don’t burst into flame.

“How could I pass up an offer like that?” she asks, winking before turning around to place her order.

I can’t wipe the grin off my face. Maybe I’ll make a new friend today.

HARLOW

“So you used to be a nationally ranked skater? That is so interesting. I’ve always loved watching figure skating. I can’t imagine being that graceful and athletic. You make it look easy.”

She offers a shy grin while squeezing a lime wedge over her food. “Do you skate?”

The idea makes me laugh. “Please. I’m lucky if I make it out of bed in the morning without hurting myself somehow. There’s a reason I decided to go into sports psychology rather than become an athlete myself.”

“Well, it’s not for everybody,” she admits. “But I’ve always loved it.”

“So did you...” I don’t know a way to put this and almost wish I hadn’t started asking the question now that she looks at me expectantly.

“Did I get injured and have to retire at a young age?” she finally asks with a gentle smile. “No. It wasn’t like that at all.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to come off as insensitive.”

“Not at all. Fact is, as much as I love it, figure skating doesn’t pay very much unless you’re one of the really big shot skaters. Even then, it doesn’t exactly bring in the crowds like the NFL. Costumes alone can be astronomically expensive.” She reaches into her takeout container to pull out her second taco and takes a big bite. Then she snorts while covering her mouth

with a napkin. “Besides, I wouldn’t be able to eat like this if I were in competition.”

“I’m sure you need it with all the exercise you get, teaching the kids.”

“That’s true. They keep me on my toes.”

“Have you always lived here in the valley?”

She shakes her head while reaching for her lemonade. “Gosh, no. I’ve only been here for about six months or so.”

“Another transplant, just like me. Where did you start out?”

“Park City, Utah. That was where my parents moved us back when I first started competing. But I grew up in the state.”

“It must be a huge difference. I mean, the heat alone,” I point out with a laugh, fanning myself even though we’re sitting in my air-conditioned office.

“Utah has the same dry heat so I’m pretty used to it. It just doesn’t get as high.” She laughs at the way I groan and roll my eyes. “Actually, I sort of like it. No, it’s not what I grew up with, but I’ve gotten used to it.” She seems to have a genuinely positive attitude, and I need a little more of that in my life. It’s easy to spend time with somebody who can look at life through a positive lens.

“What about you? You said you were a transplant. Where did you start out?”

“LA. So it hasn’t been a huge shift.” I pick up my grilled shrimp taco and take a big bite, savoring the balance of smokiness and heat with a touch of lime tang. Sublime.

“I don’t know. I’ve spent time in LA. The vibe out here is a lot different.”

“That’s true. But I haven’t been here for very long, so I’m still finding my footing. I only moved here when I started this job.”

“We moved here for my boyfriend’s job.”

“Oh, really? What does he do?”

I'm not imagining the way she sits up a little straighter before pride twinkles in her eyes. "He just started his residency at Eisenhower Medical Center."

"He's a doctor? That's cool!"

Her head bobs up and down. "So I figured I could stay in Utah and never, ever seen him, or I could move out here and at least see him every once in a while, when he has the time."

"His schedule is crazy, I'm sure."

"But it's what he wants more than anything. All I can do is be there for him and..." Her lips twitch in the beginnings of a smile. "Every once in a while, I have to remind him that it was kind of his choice to go through medical school and launch this career."

"Yeah, sometimes you do need that reminder when you're in the thick of it," I muse, chuckling at my memories.

She leans forward a little with her dark eyes gleaming like she just came up with an idea. "Speaking of crazy schedules, there's a food and wine festival starting tonight. There's no way he could come with me. Would you be interested?"

She holds up what's left of her third taco, waving it around enticingly. "There will be more of these."

"Say less," I giggle, and soon she's giggling with me. "I could use an excuse to get out of the house, too. I'm turning into a hermit."

"Then by all means, it is my duty to get you out and about."

I'm really glad I decided to step out of my comfort zone today. Unlike the last time I went against my nature, I doubt this will come back to bite me later on.

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL NIGHT—BREEZY, with clear skies and cooler temperatures now that the sun is on its way down. What a refreshing change, mingling with happy people instead of facing scrutiny and the sense that I have to prove myself.

“I mean, the fact is, there aren’t too many long-term career options when it comes to skating. You either make it to the Olympics—which I never did, though I came close—and that’s about it. At least, if you are on the National level or an Olympian, you can do the whole touring circuit. Skating for audiences, that sort of thing. Many of my friends have a steady gig with Disney on Ice. But the whole thing is kind of a rude awakening, actually,” Corey muses as we weave our way through the crowd gathered in front of a row of food trucks.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur. “That really sucks.”

“Yeah, that’s a good way to describe it. But that’s life. You find a way to use what you’ve learned. For me, it meant teaching kids and adults how to skate.”

“You made lemonade out of lemons.”

“You sound like Sean,” she chuckles, referring to her boyfriend. “That’s exactly the kind of thing he says.”

She then quirks an eyebrow, looking me up and down. “So, what’s your story?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you have a clever way of leading me into doing all the talking.” She gives me a playful nudge with her elbow. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to shrink me, doc.”

“Oh, my, God. Is that how this is coming off? That’s the last thing I’m trying to do, I swear.”

“I’m only teasing you.” We pause to allow a trio of kids to run past in a blur before continuing on with our plastic cups of wine. “So what about you? Are you single?”

When I wince at the question, she groans. “Ouch. Sorry. Touchy subject? I am the queen of shoving my foot in my mouth.”

“Don’t even worry about it,” I assure her, waving a hand. “It’s kind of an ugly situation, but like you said, I’ve tried to make lemonade out of lemons.”

“You’re the one who said that.”

“Oh, right.” I hold up my cup and scowl at it. “Too much wine.” Not true, not even close. More like the briefest thought of Kyle still has the power to shake me off my axis. I wish it weren’t true, but there’s no pretending otherwise.

“What do you mean? How did you make lemonade?”

“I mean, finding out he was cheating on me was just the push I needed to shake me up and convinced me it would be a great idea to move to the Coachella Valley and start a new life along with a new job.”

Her mouth falls open. “Oh, I’m sorry. What a dick!”

She and Ruby would get along famously. “Yes, I agree. He is definitely a dick.”

“He’s also stupid. Look at you. You’re, like, the entire package.” All I can do is laugh, which only makes her more insistent. “You’re a freaking doctor. You’re cute, you’re young, you’re smart and you’re interesting. What the hell was he looking for?”

“I honestly couldn’t tell you,” I admit. “And frankly, now that he’s out of my life, I can’t remember why I tried so hard to make him happy in the first place. Isn’t it funny how that happens?”

“Were you two together for very long?”

“Four years.” She flinches. “And I was all set for a proposal, too.”

“He’s worse than a dick. He’s... a slug.”

I cannot argue with that. “But at least he taught me what not to look for in a long-term partner, so I guess I should thank him for that.”

“But you would also like to kick him in the nuts.”

I can’t help but laugh loudly enough that a couple walking toward us gives me a funny look. “How did you know?”

“Call it intuition. So, are you looking to start something new?”

That question, I can answer immediately. “No way. For one thing, it’s hardly been a month since I caught him. And for

another thing, I don't know that I would want to start something so soon. I'm still a little bruised, you know?"

"Of course. That's only natural." But she's already grinning. "I wonder what he'd think if he knew you spent all your time nowadays hanging out with gorgeous, muscular hockey players."

I blurt out another loud laugh, because the girl is practically reading my mind. "Is it wrong that I have considered sending him a copy of the team's press release from when I was first hired?"

"Are you kidding? I'm actually disappointed in you that you didn't send it in a gilt frame."

Once my laughter dies down, all I can do is shrug. "It's not worth it. He is not worth it."

"You are a better woman than I am," she insists, shaking her head. "And not nearly as petty."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not a saint. I can be just as petty as the next girl."

"But you're a psychologist," she points out. "You probably know that would only be a waste of time, right? Even if it would be funny as all hell?"

"That's pretty much it. It's not going to make me feel any better in the long term, even if I would love to imagine him squirming like the worm he is..." I have to laugh at myself. "Okay, now I know I've had too much wine."

"No, you're just being honest. There's nothing wrong with that." She clicks her tongue, shaking her head while wearing a fake frown. "Poor you, having to spend your days surrounded by gorgeous men when you're completely, totally available."

"I don't know about completely available. I'm still sort of banged up, remember?" And I've already gotten myself into enough trouble. She certainly never needs to know about that — nobody does — so I keep that part to myself.

"Don't pretend it's not fun to hang around them. Some of those guys?" She fans herself while blowing out a heavy sigh.

“They are to die for. And don’t get me wrong. I’m happy with Sean. I followed him out here to the devil’s butthole so I can sweat like a pig whenever I’m not at work. But that doesn’t mean I can’t look.”

“I’m only interested in them in a professional capacity,” I insist, putting my nose in the air. “I have no time for hormones or attraction to get in the way.”

I am such a hypocrite. Maybe the worst hypocrite who’s ever lived. Where do I get off, pretending like my professional ethics are so sterling? We’re only joking around, getting to know each other while we wander from truck to truck to check out what’s available. And it’s not like I can tell her the truth, anyway. I just can’t help but feel like a hypocrite, saying what I know I need to say when the truth is much different.

You didn’t know who they were when you slept with them, you dork. Sometimes, when my self-doubt is at its strongest, I have the pleasure of hearing Ruby’s voice ringing out in my head. “You would get along very well with my best friend,” I tell Corey. “She wants me to lighten up. Not so much that I would start anything with a patient. Just in general.”

“You’ve spent years of your life with your head buried in books, up to your elbows in papers and research and interning. It’s easy to forget that life doesn’t always have to be work — believe me, I went through that phase of my life, too. Always, always training. That’s all there was. It was all I could do. I had to make all that work pay off, you know? Of course, I never did. Not the way I planned to, anyway.”

“Do you ever regret the time you missed while you were training?”

“Not a bit,” she replies without hesitation before jerking her chin toward the next truck. “What about sushi?”

“That sounds great.” We get in line behind a handful of people, and for a while it’s nice to stand still and observe. There are people of all ages mingling in the park, kids running around after having their faces painted at one of the booths, couples holding hands — okay, so it’s not exactly easy to see that, but that’s only because chatting with Corey has brought

the recent past back in vivid color. It wouldn't normally bother me at all. I can remember how it felt back in the day, when I had nothing but hope for our future.

Looking back, I can't believe I was ever that naïve, but there's no crystal ball, is there? We don't know how things are going to turn out. All we can do is hope for the best. I have to believe that the best is right now, while I'm on the precipice of a great career, while I'm making new friends. I could never have lived the big, expansive sort of life I dream of if I had stayed with Kyle. Not with him constantly finding reasons why we shouldn't do new things, meet new people. Even when I tried to encourage him and remind him that expanding his network could only be good for his real estate business, he would shut me down without even thinking about it.

Looking back, I can't help but wonder if he were more interested in keeping me at home, where he could always depend on me waiting for him while he went out and enjoyed himself. It's amazing, really, that I didn't see it before. Hindsight has a way of clearing up a lot of things.

If only hindsight could clear up the reckless decision to sleep with a pair of strangers. All of a sudden, I'm not so hungry anymore, but I put on a happy face for Corey's sake – not to mention my own. I don't want her getting any ideas and asking pointed questions. I am not a very good liar, and she's a smart girl. I doubt much gets past her. She would see through me in a heartbeat.

As it is, she nudges me while we move up in line. "Are you okay? You got very quiet all of a sudden. We don't have to get sushi if you don't want to."

"No," I insist. "Their spicy tuna looks amazing. I just remembered one of the meetings I have on my schedule for tomorrow morning."

"A difficult player?"

"Yeah, you could say that," I murmur, cringing inwardly. "He's going to be a tough nut to crack." Soren's face floats in front of my mind's eye, and Ash with him. I've put it off as long as I can. Those two are my only remaining intro sessions.

It's going to be like ripping off a Band-Aid, doing it all at once rather than dragging it out.

It's just that I'm not sure I want to know what's underneath, is all.

HARLOW

This is it. No putting it off any longer. My stomach is in knots, and I keep wanting to reach for the wastebasket under the desk while I wait for the final moments before my meeting with Soren. I wish my stomach would settle down already, but there doesn't seem to be any calming myself. Here I am, worried about losing my credibility when I could very well heave up my guts during this session. I doubt that would inspire much confidence.

You'd think a psychologist would be better at silencing her negative thoughts. Of all the people in this building, I should be the one with a handle on herself. I definitely should not be prone to spiraling out of control once negative thoughts begin to snowball. Yet here I am, taking slow, deliberate breaths in an attempt to hold back what little breakfast I managed to swallow.

My dread builds with every tick of the final seconds before our ten-thirty session. His inevitable knock on my door is the starting gun that sets off my alarmingly rapid pulse. Here we go. What I've dreaded from the minute I set eyes on him and Ash skating in the rink.

No amount of pep talking myself helps. It seems childish to put a pleasant spin on what I'm dreading most. While we haven't sat down and spent any actual time together yet, every time we cross paths here in the building he gives me the sort of cocky grin that tells me exactly what he's thinking. Why he can't be a gentleman about it and leave the past in the past, I don't know.

I must have been a terrible person in my former life. I've never been a huge believer in karma, but that's the only explanation that's come to mind as I did my best not to bite my nails down to the quick while sitting here like a death row inmate waiting to take their final walk.

It's funny how even though I was waiting for it, his heavy knock sets off my fight-or-flight response. *Easy, easy. He's not a serial killer.* I don't really have to worry about him. And above all else, I have to come off as a mature, competent professional. Which I am. I totally am. I've got this under control.

You know, so long as having things under control means hoping he doesn't see how jumpy his very presence makes me.

My knees are shaking when I rise from my chair, and that's unacceptable. He can wait while I stand in a power pose for a count of five. This particular situation calls for Wonder Woman, so I place my hands on my hips and stand with my feet wide, my head held high, shoulders thrown back. *I am powerful. I am ready for anything. I've got this.*

All it takes is a glimpse of Soren's smirking face on the other side of the door to wash away my confidence.

"Doctor Jacobs." After days of meeting with Americans and Canadians, his slight Dutch accent is foreign to my ears. He's wearing normal workout clothes, but they don't do anything to help me forget what the body underneath them looks like. *Not the time to stroll down memory lane, Harlow.* It's like the sight of him—or even simply the thought of him—makes my brain take off in a direction all its own. And that direction normally leads toward my old apartment and my bedroom there.

I guess it's better than puking all over his shoes.

Maybe it would help if it didn't look like he was barely able to keep a straight face. Like we share a secret and he finds it extremely amusing. Even though he uses my honorific, it's like he's making fun of me. Teasing me, at the very least. Right away, he has the upper hand, and all because he spoke first.

“Soren,” I murmur like a very professional woman who is definitely not about to throw up. “Thank you for being on time.”

“Punctuality is a sign of respect.” So why does it still seem like he’s laughing at me as he steps into the room? Some people are just like that. At least, that’s what I need to tell myself at this most critical of moments. He did seem like he had a cool, relaxed, laid-back attitude. At least, when we were fully clothed and not getting down to all sorts of craziness while our clothes were strewn across the floor.

Stop. Thinking. About that. Harlow.

He scans the small room with a quick glance before pointing to one of the chairs in front of my desk. “Yes, have a seat.”

Relax. You’ve got this. You are in the driver’s seat.

“I’m a little disappointed.” He leans back in his chair, crossing his right ankle over his left knee. The picture of confidence, ease.

But that’s good. I want him to be at ease. I do have a job here, and it has nothing to do with my personal life or any questionable decisions I’ve made recently. It is so important that I keep that in mind, no matter how flustered I am at the very sight of him.

“Disappointed?” I take a seat across from his, my gaze never straying from his chiseled face. “Why is that?”

“You kept me waiting all this time. I thought for sure you would want to see me early on. I might as well be just another one of the players.”

Yes, he is most definitely playing with me, and he’s enjoying it. Indignation flares to life in my chest, hot and bitter. This is all a joke to him. It’s my future on the line—and his, come to think of it—but right now he’s treating it like a joke.

“You are another one of the players,” I murmur rather than throwing a tissue box at him. My hand even twitches like I’m ready to grab it and let it fly.

“I think we both know that’s not true.” He folds his hands over his ridiculously defined abs, raising an eyebrow. “Or was I that

forgettable?”

My insides feel all twitchy and fluttery and I have to clench my jaw to keep my teeth from chattering. That’s the intensity of my reaction to his blasé attitude. I’m so angry and disappointed that my body starts to shake before I get a hold of myself and sit up straighter. “Thank you for leading into the topic I wanted most to discuss before we get started with your professional development.”

“I aim to please.” He leaves it there, but his infuriatingly sexy smirk fills in the blank. “*Which you very well know.*”

“I admit, I’ve spent the week until now debating on how to approach the topic. Don’t be cute,” I warn him with a sharp shake of my head. “I’m not joking. We both know what I’m talking about. It might be funny to you, but it very much isn’t to me.”

“It wasn’t a joke to me, either.”

“Then why do you sit there smirking and grinning like the Cheshire cat?”

“I’m sure whatever answer I provide will end up being scrutinized by the good doctor.”

“Is that so threatening to you? Being scrutinized?”

“Try all you want,” he says with a tight, humorless grin, “but you’re not going to make me break down crying like this is some sappy melodrama.”

“Believe me, that’s the last thing I want. I never was much good at sappy melodrama. Honesty, yes. Emotion, sure. But when it gets dramatic for the sake of wringing a tear from the audience’s eye in the laziest way possible, I tune out.”

“And here I was, thinking you would be the one learning about me today, but you’re sharing so much of yourself.”

“Soren, I’m serious.”

“So am I, Harlow.”

“It’s Doctor Jacobs.”

“It wasn’t always.”

“Actually, as of the night we met, yes. It was Doctor. I told you so at the time.” And I can’t believe I let him lead me into this. Here we are, discussing that night like it was no big deal. But there was nothing wrong with what we did. If I’m not careful, I might start trying to convince myself that’s the truth when I know very well it isn’t.

“Maybe Ash didn’t tell you about the discussion we’ve already had,” I continue, “but I was unaware of your line of work, just as you were unaware of mine. I wasn’t offered a position with this team until you and Ash were already out the door. I was just as surprised as you were to find us thrown together like this.”

“I believe it.”

“Alright. So long as we have that understood between us.”

“It doesn’t change what happened.”

“You’re right, it doesn’t. But what happened has no business leaking into our professional interactions. I won’t allow it. I’m here to do a job, like you are. And we’re going to work together to make sure both of us can perform at our best. Right?”

“It seems like you’ve got the wrong idea.” His shoulders shake when he chuckles. “I’m not interested in tanking your career. I respect the work you’ve done to get where you are. I wouldn’t dream of doing anything to undermine that.”

I can almost believe him. I certainly want to, that much is for sure. I need to, the way a kid needs to believe there really is a Santa Claus.

“Why do I feel like there’s a but attached to what you just said?”

“I have no idea. Tell me. When did you first develop this pessimistic attitude?”

“This isn’t funny.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

“Then stop acting like it is, damn it.”

His eyes widen at my sudden sharpness, but at least I got through to him. I didn't want to lose my cool, but sometimes that's what it takes to shake somebody out of their attitude. It was either that or a tissue box to the head.

At least that quieted him down. "The only thing I ask, Soren, is that you never tell anyone what happened that night."

"Sure, whatever you say." He even waves a hand like it's no big deal. "It's nobody else's business."

"I mean it."

"I believe you do," is his blithe reply. Like we're discussing the weather. My blood will start boiling if this goes on much longer.

"And I need you to promise you'll respect my wishes on this. I'm not asking for much. I need your promise."

"I already told you—"

"No. I don't think you understand what's at stake for me. Word gets around that you and Ash had fun with me, even prior to my employment here, and I could lose my job. In fact, that is exactly what is going to happen, because the owners will lose faith in my ability to be effective. They hired me to get the job done, and I doubt anyone could blame them for questioning my suitability. Word starts getting around the locker room, you guys start making jokes, and I might as well sit here and twiddle my thumbs for all the good I'll do for this team."

"It wouldn't be that way."

"It will not be that way," I insist, raising my voice a little.

"Because you are not going to say a word. Because you are a decent person, and you will do the right thing. Right?"

I'm starting to wonder if there's something seriously wrong with this guy, because in the face of all of my sincere worry, all he can do is smirk. "Wow."

"What?"

"I had no idea I had that much power over you."

“That’s it. This session is over. And if you come into my office with this attitude again, I will tell Coach Kozak you refused to work with me.” I stand, staring down at him, and finally he squirms.

His attention falls on the file I prepared for this meeting, a file which I have yet to reference because I’m too busy wanting to strangle him. “Is there anything in there about my penchant for using humor to get through uncomfortable situations?”

I’m not going to take the bait. I’m not going to let down my defenses that easily. “There will be after this.”

Finally, he drops the attitude, uncrossing his leg and sitting up straight. “You have nothing to worry about,” he assures me, and now he’s not smirking anymore. There’s no playful lilt to his voice beyond the lilt already present thanks to his accent. “I have no intention of telling anyone what went on. I want to win. If you can help us win, I am not going to stand in your way. Fair enough?”

“What if I can’t help you win?”

“Oh, then I will definitely spread word all throughout the locker room of how loud you scream when you—”

“Enough.” I sink back into my chair, almost weak with relief. I believe him. It’s not a matter of trying to convince myself he’s on the level. I really believe he means it.

“You’re going to be fine,” he assures me, and there’s actual sincerity in his voice. “I’ll keep it between us.”

“Thank you. Now.” I open the folder, clearing my throat.

“Let’s talk about areas in which you would like to see improvement.”

ASH

I probably shouldn't be so excited for this session.

Maybe excitement isn't the right way to describe it. I've been looking forward to this morning, for sure. The chance to have a little one-on-one time with her. Ever since we talked out in the hall and she turned me on with that attitude of hers, I've been counting down the days. The hours. There's something about knowing I can break her walls down. It's damn near intoxicating, like the finest wine. I want to savor it, and I'll be able to when we're alone in her office. It's only a matter of time before she's weak for me.

Then again, I could be lying to myself. She may be able to leave the past in the past. It might not be an act, this cool demeanor she puts on. I don't like to think about that, but I can't pretend it's not possible. If there's one thing I've prided myself on, it's my ability to be honest with myself.

Soren went in first – I couldn't get a read on his feelings about being on her schedule. The less we talk about it, the better. It only complicates things, and it still seems he doesn't quite get it. Why it might be a really big deal for her to keep us a secret. He still has the idea that this is all a big joke. I hope he took it easy on her in there.

I can't believe this means so much to me. Since when do I care? How many women have I gone through over the years? Not that I ever mistreated them or anything. I just... never thought about them again. And now here's this woman I can't

stop thinking about. It doesn't help that we happen to work together.

What a shame the person I could talk to and try to work these feelings out with happens to also be the person in the middle of it all. It's ironic, and when I look at it that way I can see the humor Soren sees.

Though something tells me she doesn't see it.

I'm spotting Ryder as he goes through his third set of bench presses, but I have one eye on the clock. "Dude. I could be laying here getting my windpipe crushed, and you wouldn't have a clue." He's scowling as he sets the bar back on the stand, then sits up. "What's with you?"

"Sorry, man. I've got a lot on my mind."

"You mean you have your session on your mind." He's laughing when our eyes meet. "Don't bother lying. I felt that way, too. Kind of distracted, wondering what she's gonna want to talk about. Like, how much does she already know about me?"

"How much did she already know about you?"

He shrugs. "Nothing she couldn't find in my personnel file. But she's smart. And she seems... you know, like she cares. Not like fake caring, like she's paid to care."

"That's good to hear."

"And she's fucking hot."

My molars grind together before I can stop them. "Yeah, you didn't need to tell me that. I have eyes." Good thing he doesn't take it any further than that. No matter what Harlow thinks about locker room talk, I'm not about to stand here while even a good friend disrespects her. I wonder if she'd believe me if I told her how my fists tightened just now.

I'm set to go in there at eleven, and it's three minutes away. "I better move. Don't want to keep her waiting."

"She's, like, ten seconds down the hall," he jokes, snickering. "Tell her I said hi." He's still laughing as he heads over to the

row of treadmills where a few of the other guys are already running.

This morning has crawled. Finally, it's time for us to sit down and clear the air. That's what we most need to do. I can't spend time around this woman and pretend we've never been anything more to each other – even if it was just one night. She needs to understand that. She's a doctor, right? She understands how brains work. She's asking for the impossible if she wants me to forget. It's never going to happen.

And I'm ready to tell her that as I raise my fist and knock on her office door.

“Just a minute!” I don't hear Soren in there, so I guess he must have already finished up. I'm surprised we didn't cross paths – I was kind of hoping to get a feel for the mood she's in, what they talked about. He might have stopped off at the bathroom between the gym and her office. I'm scowling at the missed opportunity when the door opens all at once, leaving me face-to-face with her.

And right away, my heart's in my throat when I see how flustered she looks. “What happened? Are you okay?” He might be my best friend, but he'll end up with a black eye if he upset her.

She blinks rapidly and stares at me like we've never seen each other before. I shouldn't notice her body, but the sleeveless blouse and pencil skirt do something to me. It's like every part of her was designed to drive me wild. How am I supposed to sit in the same room with her and not touch her? What is this woman doing to me?

“Are you going to make me stand all day?” I finally have to ask, since that's better than confessing how badly I want to run my hands up and down her bare arms.

That seems to snap her out of it. “Sorry. Please, come in. Make yourself comfortable.”

“This is nice,” I offer, looking around the small space. She's added personal touches throughout the week, including a few

small plants and some candles. “You’ve turned it into something more pleasant than a storage closet.”

“There’s hardly anything in here,” she points out with a weak laugh. “But hopefully I can improve upon it in time.”

What is it about her that makes me so awkward and tongue-tied? I complimented her on her office. How lame is that? I take a seat in one of the two chairs while she sits behind the desk, and I can’t help but notice how her hands shake when she folds them on the surface. “So,” I begin, “you met with Soren?”

Her head snaps back a little while her juicy lips part like she’s surprised. *Stop looking at her lips.* My God, this is impossible. “You have to know I’m not going to give you any specifics of what we discussed.”

“I didn’t ask for specifics, did I? It was just a friendly question.”

“Yes. You just missed him.”

“Gotcha.”

“I’m going to tell you exactly what I told him.”

I sit up, straight up, tipping my head in her direction.

“What happened between us stays between us. It goes no further than that.”

Does she know her voice is shaking? Maybe she does, but there’s no helping it. Something stirs in my chest, something strangely protective. I don’t like seeing her this way. She doesn’t deserve it. There I was, bitter and angry toward her when she first showed up here, and now I practically have to sit on my hands to keep from reaching out and wrapping my arms around her, because she seems so... small. Lost. I expected her to bust my balls the second the door was closed, but instead, she’s vulnerable and needs reassurance. She needs me to be a decent guy.

And now I wish Soren hadn’t been with us that night. Yeah, it was hot – I still haven’t made sense of why it was so hot, what made it so exciting. I only know without her having to tell me

that she wouldn't be so upset if it had been the two of us alone. There's a stigma around what we did and she can't get over it.

"Listen—"

"No, you listen." I'm too surprised to speak, so I only close my mouth while she winces. "Sorry. I didn't mean it to come out that way."

"It's okay. I've heard worse from angry fans, trust me."

She almost looks grateful. "If anybody finds out what we did, my professional credibility is out the window. I told Soren, and I'm going to tell you, I don't need the team's owners, thinking I won't be taken seriously. Do you get what I'm trying to say? I don't want the rest of the team sitting where you are now, imagining the two of you... taking turns on me."

Her shoulders hunch around her ears before she wraps her arms around herself like she's afraid. I want to tell her she has nothing to be afraid of, but what have I done so far that would make her believe me? I've only been dismissive and cold.

"Can you please, please give me your word?" she whispers.

"Yes. You have my word."

Her eyes go wide. "Really?"

"Is it that difficult to believe?" I finally have to ask. "I'm not some monster. I'm not trying to get anybody fired. And... I have to fight back the rest of what I was about to say, because she doesn't need to hear it. *And I like you.* No, I'm not going to make things even more complicated for her by admitting that. It will have to be enough that I do, and I know I do. There's a reason I was so drawn to her that night. She's a special kind of person. "And I give you credit for trying to whip us all into shape. I know it hasn't been easy. But everybody seems to like talking with you."

I know better than to think she'll accept that at face value – her arched eyebrow doesn't come as a surprise. "Really?" she asks like she's skeptical.

"Really. I think this is all going to work out for everybody."

"It's only going to work out—"

“If nobody knows about us. Nobody’s going to know,” I promise. I even hold up two fingers like a Boy Scout. “Scout’s honor.”

A giggle bubbles out of her. “Okay. Thank you. I appreciate your honesty.”

She turns her attention to the file in front of her, clearing her throat. “Now. Ash. Let’s talk about you.”

I would much rather talk about you. Yeah, that’s not going to get me anywhere. “What do you want to know?”

“Why are you here?”

I snort, since the question caught me off-guard. “What?”

“Why are you here?”

“Because the team signed me.”

“Why did they do that?”

“What are you asking? I don’t get it.”

“From what I understand,” she explains, “you have some pretty stellar leadership qualities. I haven’t had a lot of time to dig into that – I’ve been working so hard to get myself settled in, you understand. But it’s one of the first things the coach told me about you.”

“Is this supposed to, I don’t know, make me feel good about myself?”

“Does it?” she counters in the most irritating way.

“No offense, but you’re being a little obvious.”

“What’s obvious?”

“I think you’re making fun of me.”

Her smile vanishes. “I’m not. I’m sorry if it came off that way. But it’s pretty obvious the idea made you uncomfortable.” She squirms in her chair and even plucks at her blouse the way I fidgeted with my t-shirt.

“I never saw myself that way,” I confess with a shrug. “A leader? Me?”

“Well, sometimes it takes an outside perspective to show us what we don’t see about ourselves. That’s totally normal.”

“So what are you trying to say? I should lead the team to victory?”

“That’s not the kind of job for one person to handle alone. And if you told me you believed that was your duty, I’d gently steer you away from it.”

“Yeah, no shit. Thanks.”

“But your coach seems to think you have it in you.” She speaks slowly, carefully, and for some reason it makes my skin crawl a little. Like I’m being observed, like she’s sizing up every reaction, trying to find my weaknesses or something. I hate how uncomfortable it makes me.

“I appreciate that.” When all she does is stare at me, I shift in my chair, barely biting back a growl of frustration. “I’m not sure what I’m supposed to say. I want to win. I know that much. And...”

“And?”

What the hell? “And I want to be called up. I don’t want to be one of these guys who spends his entire career hoping and dreaming, then wake up one day and realize I got old and there’s no going back and changing anything.”

I can’t believe I just admitted that. I almost don’t want to look at her. The silence that hangs between us is unnerving.

“Alright,” she finally murmurs, nodding slowly. “Thank you for your honesty. We can work with that. If you want to. The reason I’m here is to help everybody achieve what they’re capable of — that means you, too.”

“If you think you can help us, then please. Work your magic.”

“I plan to. It’s easier for me, standing on the outside,” she explains, “but already, I’m beginning to see how the pieces fit together. And I see nothing but potential in front of me.”

I can’t help but grin. “Do you mean right now, or in general?”

The twitching of her lips is like a victory. “If you don’t mind, I’ll keep my thoughts on that to myself.”

HARLOW

It's a good thing I set a reminder on my phone for the meeting scheduled with Coach Kozak, since I might have missed it while thinking about Ash.

There I was, so nervous, practically at my wits end by the time he sauntered in here, and I ended up with a better opinion of him by the time he left. It wasn't the same as with Soren – I believe he'll do the right thing, but he made me work for it, didn't he? Like he was dangling a carrot in front of my face. It wasn't like that with Ash. He seemed to take me seriously from the start. No smirking, no teasing. I could've cried, I was so grateful.

Now, the coach wants to meet with me, knowing I've finished all of my opening sessions. I have my initial impressions typed up in case he wants to review them, and I'm feeling confident and in charge as I step out of my office with a cardigan around my shoulders to ward off the chill I know will run through me as soon as I step into the rink. The guys are playing a scrimmage game today, and Coach Kozak wants me to take a look at them. Now, the real fun begins. Taking what I've learned so far and putting it to good use.

Right away, I shove my arms into the sleeves of my sweater once I enter the chilly space. It's refreshing, though, and it's just what I need to clear my head after spending time with Ash. I don't know what it is about him, but he intrigues me. Maybe because he seems so sincere – is it naïve to think I can trust him? I can't help wondering if there's more there than meets the eye. He seemed to be much more obliging than he

was the first time we crossed paths, out in the hallway. The antagonism was gone. It almost felt like we were in this together and he understood why I was on edge. Not like Soren, who couldn't help gently, but persistently, teasing me.

I need to learn how to separate the past from the present and move on from that night. Otherwise, I'll be stuck daydreaming and maybe fantasizing a little bit when I need to be earning my paycheck.

"Come on, come on! Let's see a little hustle!" The coach claps his hands briskly while his voice echoes throughout the space. "Move your ass! It's a scrimmage, but I want you giving it everything you've got!" He's frustrated, that much is obvious, and my heart goes out to him. I'm sure he wants his guys to do well in front of me, too. That probably plays into his frustration.

"This seat taken?" I ask when I reach the row in which he's seated, a few rows back from the ice.

"If you don't mind me screaming in your ear," he replies.

I only laugh as I join him. "I've been through worse."

"So, you've gone through the whole team by now, right?"

What an interesting way to phrase it. I have to get my mind out of the gutter. "That's right. I just finished up with Soren and Ash today, like we discussed."

"What's the prognosis, Doc?"

"A little murky," I joke, but his smile is very brief. He needs reassurance. "Do you know what? I think you've got a great group of guys here. We just have to find a better way for them to play together. But I know we'll get there. They all seemed ready and willing to do the work."

"Really?" He lowers his brow, staring like he doesn't quite believe me.

"Really. Don't get me wrong. There were hiccups, but they didn't last long."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. Between you and me, I was a little worried they would give you trouble and you'd give up."

“I don’t give up that easily, rest assured.”

We both turn our attention back to the game and the players fly back and forth across the ice. I probably shouldn’t zero in on Ash the way I do – there are so many other players who need help. It’s like there’s a light that shines on him. I can’t help but notice his footwork and the way he seems to effortlessly skate circles around some of the older players.

“I have a problem.”

I turn my full attention back to the coach. “How can I help?”

He opens an absolutely enormous binder balanced on his lap. It’s full of sticky tabs and Post-it notes covered in chicken scratch. “I need to work on new line combinations. The way we have the guys organized right now isn’t working the way it should. I’ve got to admit, I’m scratching my head.”

“You think they might play better if they were teamed up differently?”

“Something’s gotta help them play better,” he mutters. “Until now, we’ve been going off statistics, working it out that way. But that’s obviously not enough.”

I can see where his frustration must be coming from. He’s obviously old-school – I wouldn’t expect anything else from him at his age. Until now, it’s been enough to analyze player stats and match them up that way, on paper, working it out so each shift is equally balanced when the players go on and off the ice. Until now, it’s worked for him. Sometimes – maybe most of the time — things like that just can’t be worked out on paper.

“There’s kind of an alchemy that goes into it,” I muse.

“Personalities probably play into it. Being able to read your teammate and step in where they need you, when they need you.”

“Evidently, and I’ve got a lot of personalities on this crew.”

“How can I help?”

“I want you to help me draw up new combinations. How do we maximize potential? The stats alone aren’t doing it,

obviously.” I hear the frustration in his voice, and all it does is make me want to help.

Unfortunately, the way he’s looking at me, I get the feeling he wants this done sooner rather than later. He might be expecting a bit much. After all, I only just finished my first week.

“All right,” I murmur, nodding. “I can make that happen. It’s going to take a little time,” I add, just in case he’s got the wrong idea. “I’ll need to observe for a little while. See how they interact together on and off the ice.”

“Of course, of course. I don’t expect miracles.” His lips twitch, though, and there’s a twinkle in his eye. “Although I wouldn’t mind if you had a miracle up your sleeve.”

I make it a point to check both my sleeves, pushing them up and frowning. “Sorry. It must be in another sweater.”

His grin changes to a scowl before he cups his hands around his mouth. “Riley! What the hell was that?” I was too busy laughing with the coach to see the way Riley checked another player, slamming him against the boards. “This is a scrimmage game! Stop showing off!”

He grumbles and shakes his head. “He’s always got something to prove,” he mutters. “The kid was born with a chip on his shoulder.”

“But he loves the sport.” It doesn’t feel unethical to share something like that. “It’s his life.”

“Yeah, well, he better remember we’re all supposed to be playing on the same team, or else it won’t be his life that much longer.” He must notice what has to be dismay on my face, because he shakes his head. “I don’t mean that. Sometimes I say these things when I get good and fired up.”

“I understand.” Although really, he’s not too far off the mark. Like I already discussed with Riley, he has a tendency to sabotage himself.

“Those two always work well together,” he observes, pointing out Soren and Ash. “They’re a great double-team combination.”

It is a very good thing I had nothing in my mouth, or else I would have either spit it out or choked on it. “They seem that way,” I manage to agree. “I understand they’re good friends off the ice.”

“Yeah, they are.”

“I’m sure that has something to do with it. There have to be other friendships we could work with. We could pair them up that way, see how it plays out.”

“If you have the time...”

“This is my job,” I remind him with a shrug. “I got nothing but time if it means unlocking the potential in front of me.”

“Whatever you think is best.” He can’t conceal his relief. Finally, there’s somebody with an idea. Somebody might be able to help him. “That reminds me. What do you think about Ash?”

Oh, look, I just swallowed my tongue. “How do you mean?”

“Well, we talked about his leadership potential. Do you think he’s got it?”

“I would like to spend a little more time observing him,” I hedge. He had to notice the way my face turned red as soon as he mentioned Ash. I mean, the man isn’t blind. But he’s got his attention squarely focused on the game. I really need to get myself together, or I’ll end up getting found out – and not because one of the guys spilled the beans. Here I am, practically giving myself an ulcer over the fear that they’ll make me look unprofessional or worse, and I can barely get a sentence strung together whenever one of them trickles into the conversation.

“Morgan! Sanford!” He’s still too busy hollering at the guys to notice I’m tongue-tied. Maybe I should thank them later or something.

“It might save me a lot of time to ask the guys the next time we meet up who they consider to be a friend on the team,” I suggest. I really need to stop staring at Ash. But when I do, I only end up turning my attention toward Soren, instead.

Luckily, they leave the ice, giving me an excuse to focus on somebody else for once.

“And maybe I could ask them what they feel their strengths and weaknesses are,” I suggest. “That was going to be my next step, anyway. Who do they like playing with? Who do they feel brings out the best in them? It might yield some interesting results that have nothing to do with stats.”

“I have no doubt.” Still though, he sounds happy, he narrows his eyes. “Don’t let them bullshit you, either.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re going to tell you what they know you want to hear, just like they do to me. I don’t take it personally – it’s just how it is. When you want to do right by somebody, when you want to, you know... Make them proud.” His voice gets a little gruff. “They’ll want to do that for you, too. So they’ll nod their heads and agree to whatever you say. How strong is your bullshit meter?”

“I’ve always thought it was pretty decent.” Though now he’s got me wondering. Is that what Ash was doing? Telling me what he knew I wanted to hear? And there I was, resting easy for the first time since the day I set foot in this arena.

No, I’m being silly. I need to have a little more faith. Neither he nor Soren had any reason to lie to me about who they were the night we met. They didn’t get into specifics about their lives, but then neither did I. And I still got a good feeling about them. Otherwise, they never would have come home with me.

“I’ll be on my guard,” I promise with a firm nod. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ve got a good feeling about this. I really do.”

“You wouldn’t be telling me that just because you know that’s what I want to hear, would you?” I can’t help but laugh softly when he gets flustered and clears his throat. “I’m just teasing. Sorry. That’s probably very unprofessional.”

“If anything,” he admits, “it’s refreshing. There’s too much testosterone and ego around here sometimes. You’re a breath

of fresh air, Doc.”

We exchange a grin before settling back to watch the scrimmage. While I do, I take notes, reminding myself over and over not to focus too much on any single player.

Even if I can't take my eyes off him whenever his skates touch the ice.

HARLOW

Sunday morning, I wake up with a smile on my face. Today is going to be fun.

While taking a shower, it occurs to me – not for the first time – how lucky I am. Most people would hate having to go into work on a Sunday. Here I am, looking forward to my arrival at the arena. The team is holding an event where kids interested in playing hockey get a chance to skate with the players. It'll be a chance to observe them when they aren't playing, and I like the idea of seeing how they interact with the kids, too. I feel like an explorer soaking in all the information I can. There's something so exciting about it.

Of course, Ruby had her own take on the situation when I chatted with her last night. "You can always tell by the way a guy treats kids if he's worth your time."

"I'm not looking to date any of these guys," I reminded her.

"Sure, sure. It would be the worst thing in the world if you started dating one of them."

"That's exactly what it would be," I muttered.

"Just think how romantic that is, though. You met at work. It was a forbidden romance." Her voice got soft and breathy.

"Your passion could only be denied for so long until... until..."

"You seriously need a hormone balance, because right now they're rotting your brain."

But I'm also a big old hypocrite, because that's exactly what was on my mind even if I couldn't admit it. Maybe not at the forefront, but definitely dancing around in the back.

Let's face it. There aren't many things in this world more attractive than a man who knows how to handle himself around kids. Not that it's a red flag if he's awkward — it might be a matter of never spending a lot of time with them before. But if a man is against the idea right off the bat, let's just say it's not a good sign. At least, not for me.

Since it's not strictly a workday, I can dress down a little bit, choosing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt with the team's logo printed on the front. With my hair back in a ponytail and a pair of sneakers on my feet, I'm whistling when I head out the door with a travel cup of fresh-squeezed orange juice from one of the trees in my backyard. Today's going to be a good day. I can feel it. Any excuse to observe the players and see how they interact together when they're not in the middle of a game can only help me figure out how to help them.

The parking lot is fuller than I've ever seen it when I arrive with fifteen minutes to go before the event is even supposed to start. On my way to the employee parking area, I notice a pair of what look to be twin boys practically tumbling out of an SUV and racing each other to the doors. Their excitement lifts my already good mood. It must be so thrilling for them, the chance to skate on the ice with actual, professional players.

I checked in with Corey to see whether she'd be here, but this is a team event rather than an ice-skating event — besides, Sean has a little free time today, so she wants to take advantage of that. It's probably for the best. I need to focus up without friendly chatter.

The only word that comes to mind when I first enter the rink is *chaos*. Not even controlled chaos, but a flat-out, regular kind that sort of makes me wish I had brought earplugs along. A bunch of six- and seven-year-olds, waiting with barely contained excitement will do that, I guess. Down near the penalty box is Coach Kozak, chatting on the ice with who I guess is someone in charge of the Learn To Play class these kids come from. I am satisfied to hang back and observe,

anyway, so I take a seat close to the door and pull out a notepad, prepared to jot down anything that catches my attention.

Unfortunately, the universe has other plans for me today. It's like the coach senses my presence, somehow, and I look up in time to find him scanning the stands before his gaze lands on me.

He waves me down, and really, what am I supposed to do? Tell him it would be better for me to sit back alone and take notes? All right, maybe that would be a good idea, but I'm not exactly going to shout at him from up here. I gather my things and wear a smile I don't exactly feel as I climb down to where he's waiting.

"Doc! Good to see you." A couple of the kids shriek nearby, and we both wince at the same time. "It's nice to have a little life in here, isn't it?" he asks with a laugh.

"That's true. And it does seem like the guys are taking well to having the youngsters around." They're making their way around, shaking hands with the kids and their parents, getting photos snapped before the lessons begin.

"I made a point to tell them to take it easy last night," the coach mutters out of the corner of his mouth while we watch. "We don't need any of these kids getting the idea that their heroes are a bunch of hungover bums."

"Good thinking."

I look over the ice, glad to see even Ryder smiling pleasantly for once. It occurs to me that he might see himself in some of those kids. I haven't been able to shake the image he painted during our session of a little boy looking for a way out of the situation life put him in. All he had to hang onto was the simple dream of playing in the pros one day. Gazing out at the hyped-up kids, I wonder how many of them feel the same. Are any of them as hungry as he was?

"Why don't you get out there with them?"

At first, I figured the coach must be talking to somebody else. That's why I don't acknowledge him and keep watching

what's going on in front of me, instead. It's so cute, how awestruck the kids seem to be.

"Doc? Did I lose you?"

"Hmm?"

"I said, why don't you get out on the ice with them? I'm going to."

Good for you. I have to bite my tongue to keep that from coming out. "Oh, I don't think so," I tell him, laughing. "It's an event for the team!"

"And you're part of the team now. The kids are here to play with everyone."

Red flag, red flag, this is not a drill. My mouth goes dry as I try to come up with an excuse. "I was really hoping to—"

"I know, I know," he tells me, and it's obvious he's not about to take no for an answer. "I look at it this way. You lace up a pair of skates and get out there, and it might help the guys connect with you a little easier. You know what I mean?"

He's got me there. I don't know why I'm so tongue-tied. There's even a cold sweat breaking out on the back of my neck while my whole body tightens with dread. "I..."

"I insist. It wouldn't kill you to have a little fun." Before I can argue he glides away, already distracted by something else.

I should've told him. I know I should just suck it up and tell the truth. It's not a crime, right? The fact that I've never been on the ice before?

If Ruby were here, she would laugh herself sick... but in a nice way. It's not like she would want me to fall and break my neck. Why can't I just gather up the courage to tell the truth? I don't know how to ice skate. I've never tried to do it before, and we're probably all better off if I never try to do it at all.

Maybe I'm psyching myself out for no reason. I mean, these kids are flying around like it's nothing. I know how to walk in stilettos. It can't be that much different, right? Famous last words, probably, but I don't want to disappoint anybody. When will I ever stop being such a people pleaser?

Deep breaths. You can do this. Maybe if I keep telling myself that, it will magically become true. For now, I have to head up to the rental desk and find myself a pair of skates that I very much hope I don't break my neck in – or anything else.

“Size eight, please?” My insides are as frozen as the ice I am about to skate on. Or fall on. Something tells me that's much more likely. I feel like there's a spotlight on me as I head back down to the front row, take a seat and pull off my trainers in favor of lacing up my skates. Geez, my hands are shaking and my fingers feel stiff and uncooperative. What if I just stayed here? What if I faked being sick? The way my insides are churning, I wouldn't have to try hard. Why couldn't I have told him I don't skate? It's not like he would've made me feel bad. Not him. He would be understanding.

Too late for that now – he's busy helping a group of kids. I don't want to look like a total idiot after I could easily have told him the truth. How do I end up getting myself into these situations?

One thing I know for sure is that the skate needs to be laced up tight, snug, to support my ankles. Once I'm sure they're as secure as possible, I take a deep breath to steady myself before standing – and immediately wobbling.

Crap. At least nobody saw. I throw my shoulders back, say a silent prayer, and step onto the ice.

Oh, my, God, how doesn't everybody fall all the time? Right away, my body starts to slip out of balance. I have to keep a tight grip on the wall, easing my way one tiny little baby step at a time. Oh, Lord, this is so humiliating. At least everybody's busy while I inch my way along the edge of the rink, cursing myself for not having the courage to tell the truth. I mean, what would be better – telling him straight out that I don't know how to skate, or letting him and the entire team know when I fall flat on my ass? Pride goes before the fall, as they say. And something tells me I'm going to fall. Hard.

A pair of kids, like, speed skate past me, and I yelp and grab tighter to the edge of the wall to keep from getting knocked over. How do they do it? I can't say it makes me feel any

better to know a couple of first graders are better at this than I am. It's not getting any easier, either.

Is anybody looking? No, they're still busy showing most of the kids how to hold a stick and manage the puck. Nobody's paying attention to the idiot inching her way one tiny little step after another. I try to hold my head up, to make it look like I'm just taking my time, enjoying myself. Is it working? Probably not. I probably look absolutely terrified.

Get it together. Nobody's actually paying attention to you. Not even Soren or Ash are paying me the slightest mind – they actually seem truly into instructing the kids, which I have to say is a pleasant surprise. I need to have more faith in them.

Okay. I can't hold onto the wall forever. A couple of the kids have already noticed me, and they don't bother hiding their disbelief. I cannot believe I'm trying to save face in front of children. One of them is bound to point out the grown woman making a pathetic scene unless I get the courage to let go of the wall. If I can keep myself upright while holding on, I can do it when I'm on my own. I think I've found my balance. My nerves have passed. This actually isn't that difficult.

Or so I tell myself before I let go of the wall – and instantly hit the ice butt-first.

HARLOW

Ow. Ow, ow, ow forever and ever. My tailbone is screaming. Pain radiates straight up my back, like electricity sizzling through me. I cannot believe I did that in front of everybody. Tears – hot, embarrassed, furious, tears – well up in my eyes before I can stop them, and I really just want to go home. I’ve made enough of a fool of myself for one day.

“Hey. What are you trying to do, freeze your ass solid?”

I don’t have time to react before a pair of strong hands take hold under my arms and haul me back onto my feet. I twist my head around to see who saved me and find a smiling Ryder gazing down at me. I’m too embarrassed to say anything and as it is, there are still tears clogging my throat and making it impossible to speak. What is he going to do next? Make fun of me?

“You don’t look too steady on blades,” he murmurs, sympathetic. None of the sarcasm I expected.

I open my mouth, prepared to thank him and maybe offer him my firstborn child in repayment for keeping me steady when blades scrape the ice nearby, and Soren comes to a stop in front of us.

He looks me up and down, and thanks to the fact that he isn’t wearing a helmet, there’s no missing his sarcastic little smirk. “You’re supposed to be helping us become better hockey players, and you can’t even skate?” he asks before barking out

a laugh that draws way too much attention our way. My cheeks burn and I have to look away.

“Yo, why don’t you lay off her?” Ryder growls. “Don’t be a prick.”

“I was only joking.”

“That wasn’t funny. She’s out here, trying her best, and all you can do is make fun? Why don’t you go play with the other little kids?”

Soren only shakes his head, snickering, before turning around and doing just that.

Meanwhile, my heart sinks until it’s practically in my skates.

“Please. The last thing I need is to start a fight between the players.”

“Oh, it’s cool,” he assures me with a grin. “He’s being a dick. It’s not the first time. Sometimes he needs to be reminded there’s such a thing as manners.” It strikes me as funny that it would be Ryder reminding him. He didn’t seem like the chivalrous type.

“I don’t even know what I’m doing out here,” I confess in a whisper, because why not? What’s the point of trying to save face when I’ve already humiliated myself? “Coach told me to get out here, and I should’ve told him I’ve never skated before.”

“Yeah, you probably should have.” There’s no choice but to follow along when he starts to move, slowly pushing us across the ice while maintaining a firm grip on me. “How is this the first time you’ve ever tried?”

“I grew up in southern California. Surfing was more the thing.”

“Do you surf?”

“Not really.” When he laughs, I have to giggle along.

“So why didn’t you come out and say you don’t know how?”

“Because of that.” I jerk my chin toward Soren, who already seems to have forgotten we exist.

“Coach K would’ve understood. I understand.”

“You do?”

“Sure! So, you don’t know how to skate. I don’t know how to, like, earn my doctorate.”

I wish laughing helped my butt feel better, but it doesn’t. The fact is, I see myself sleeping on my stomach for the foreseeable future, and I don’t know how I’m supposed to ease myself into the driver’s seat before going home later. Still, it feels nice to be supported by him as we take one small move after another.

“Do you want to know something?” he asks.

“Sure.”

“I didn’t learn how to ride a bike until I was sixteen.”

“Really?”

“I didn’t really have a chance, you know? There was nobody around to teach me. Nobody who cared. Plus, my foster parents didn’t exactly go out of their way to get me one. It just so happened I stumbled into hockey.”

“Because one of the kids in one of your foster families had the equipment.”

“You remembered.” A dimple appears in his cheek when he smiles and almost ducks his head like he’s embarrassed. Is it my imagination, or did his hands tighten a little – one at my waist, one on my wrist?

“Of course I remembered.”

“But I’m one of so many. I didn’t expect you to remember something like that, without, you know, looking at notes or something.”

“I remembered you.” And now it’s my turn to duck my head, slightly embarrassed at being so vulnerable. “I’m just really grateful you helped me.”

“Nobody’s born knowing how to skate,” he reminds me. “And unlike some people, I don’t treat it like a sign there’s something wrong with you.”

“It’s a lot easier with you supporting me like this.” It even feels natural, gliding around effortlessly. He’s the one doing all the work, though. I need to keep that in mind. Anybody could skate like an old pro in his strong arms.

“Slow and steady,” he advises. “It’s all about becoming more confident. And practice, too. Pretty soon, you won’t even have to think about it.”

“Pretty soon? You have too much faith in me.”

He has a really nice laugh, the kind that makes me laugh along with him. It’s contagious. I can’t help it. “Come on. Aren’t you supposed to brush yourself off and get up and try again?”

“Sure, but it’s my butt that ends up hurting.”

“I’m telling you, once you practice enough, you won’t fall so much. Maybe every once in a while, but it gets easier.”

What a perfect time for me to almost fall again, but he keeps me upright. “Listen to you, making it sound like I will ever do this again.”

“Oh, you have to!”

“Says who?”

“Says me. The hardest part is over. You laced up, you got all your courage together, and you fell on your ass. It’s all smooth sailing from here.”

I have to stop myself from asking him to pinch me to make sure I’m not dreaming this. I had no idea he was so sweet, charming, understanding. He puts on a front that I’m starting to understand must’ve come from years of having to prove himself. What was it he said during our session? There wasn’t anybody to really care about him, because he was never in any school long enough. What must that have been like, constantly having to start over again?

I can’t blame him for protecting himself by building up walls to keep the world out. I probably would’ve done the same thing. When we’re young, we do what we have to do with the little understanding we have of the world and the way it works.

I have to wonder if there isn't a small part of him left that doesn't believe he deserves what he has. He seems to appreciate it clearly enough. He knows how good he has it. But feeling worthy of it is a different story.

"You're doing great," he tells me, blissfully unaware of my thoughts. "You're going smoother already."

"Yeah, here I am, twenty-six years old and needing somebody to hold me upright."

"It's not such a bad job to have."

Something flutters in my chest when our eyes meet. There's so much more going on underneath the surface, and I'm grateful he trusts me enough to reveal this other side of him. I must be doing a good job if I've earned that kind of trust so quickly.

"I'm glad you came to my rescue. Thank you."

"I'm glad, too." Now that we've made a full trip around the perimeter of the rink, we've come to a stop where I left my shoes. "But it might be for the best if you give it a rest now. I have to get back out there with the kids, and I hate to think of you landing on your ass again."

"Oh, believe me," I tell him with a wry laugh, "I have no intention of skating alone."

"Do you need help unlacing?"

"No, that's okay. You get back out there." Granted, I'm not looking forward to sitting down to get these damn skates off my feet, but I need to gather up the shreds of my pride at some point. "And thanks again. That was nice, actually. I might have enjoyed it more if my tailbone wasn't throbbing."

"Make yourself an ice pack, then put it on there while you lie on your stomach. It'll help." He winks before skating backward like a stinking show-off. "Ask me how I know."

I'm a little breathless as I watch him glide away, coming to a stop in the middle of a group of kids passing pucks back and forth. It's like he becomes a different person when he's on the ice. Like he's confident enough that he doesn't need to be anybody but himself.

Coach Kozak skids to a stop in front of me while I ease myself into a seat so I can get these stupid things off my feet. “You know, you could have told me you’ve never skated before. I would have understood. You’re not going to be much help to the team if you’re too badly injured to come in, eh?”

His fatherly tone is both comforting and ever so slightly irritating, but that’s my pride rearing up. “Haven’t you ever felt like you had something to prove?”

“Only every day of my life since I accepted this position,” he confesses with a rueful chuckle. “And it gets worse every day. Why do you think you’re here?”

“Good point.”

“But you’ve got nothing to prove, Doc. You belong with us, on or off the ice.”

“So I’m not going to get fired because I can’t skate worth a damn?”

“Last I checked, there was nothing in the job description about being able to skate. I won’t ask you to again.”

“That sounds good to me,” I call out while he skates away.

It’s agony, sitting here on my sore backside, but I can forget about it—at least a little—when I observe how easy it is for Ryder to interact with the kids. How encouraging he is, how genuinely interested he seems. And it’s obvious the kids adore him, the way they gravitate toward him like he’s the Pied piper. Kids are always the sharpest judges of character, because they don’t carry around all the layers of conditioning adults carry with them. There’s no making excuses for bad behavior or giving somebody the benefit of the doubt. They go on instinct, and it serves them well. It’s a shame we learn over the years to talk ourselves out of what our instincts try to tell us.

Maybe if I had listened to my instincts a long time ago, I wouldn’t have stuck around and let Kyle break my heart.

Ugh. I hate that he pops up in my thoughts at times like this. I don’t need to think about him ever again as far as I’m

concerned. He's a lesson I needed to learn. I learned it. I don't need him souring the present.

Especially not while observing men who are much more interesting, and not to mention much easier on the eyes.

Get your mind out of the gutter. What else am I supposed to do? Sit here pondering how little I think about my tailbone in my everyday life? It's only when we injure something that we understand how vital it is. What a shame I don't have a standing desk in my office. Maybe I'll bring in an air mattress tomorrow morning so I can lie on my stomach with the ice pack Ryder described.

Maybe he can position it for me.

It's like he hears me thinking about him. His head snaps up and our eyes meet across the rink, making my cheeks flush and my heart flutter the way it did before.

Oh, no. This could be a problem.

HARLOW

“With this in mind, a few team building events might go a long way toward strengthening a sense of camaraderie among the players.”

Check me out, getting *camaraderie* right on the first try. That never happens.

I release a pent-up sigh after finishing the report before rolling my head back and forth on my stiff neck. I've sat hunched over my keyboard for hours, polishing and perfecting the preliminary reports for the coach and his assistants. This is the first set I've put together, so I wanted them to be perfect. I have a sore neck and tired eyes as a result.

But that's nothing compared to my very sore tailbone, practically screaming at me to stop sitting down. I had a long and frustrating night, full of trying to roll onto my back until I finally wised up and placed pillows on either side of my body so I couldn't do it anymore.

Now that my reports are finished, and considering I don't have any sessions or meetings scheduled for the rest of the afternoon, I might head out a couple of hours early. There's no sense in sitting here in agony, right? Not to mention the fatigue resulting from a night of broken sleep. I'll shoot the coach a quick message to clear it with him, but I doubt he'll have a problem. So long as my work is finished and I'm not ducking out on a meeting.

I'm in the middle of typing up a quick email when there's a knock at my door. My heart sinks and I have to fight back a

groan. Just when I thought I could get out early... “Yes?” I call out, determined to be friendly and welcoming even if I currently feel just the opposite.

The door opens slightly. “Sorry if you’re busy.” Coming from Ryder, the word sorry comes out like *sah-rry* thanks to his Boston roots. “I wanted to check in and see how you’re feeling today.”

I wish my stomach wouldn’t flutter like it is. “Hi. Come on in.”

“Are you sure it’s okay? I’m not interrupting anything?”

“Between you and me, I was sort of hoping to wrap things up — but I always have time for a chat.”

“Oh, then I won’t bother giving you these if you’re in a hurry.” He holds up a pink box. “I thought maybe you could use a little cheering up.”

The kindness behind the gesture almost stuns me into silence. “Wow, you really don’t have to do that. But thank you.” Then, I ask, “What is it?”

“You’re kidding. You’ve never had Crumbl cookies before?”

“I’ve heard of them.”

“Well, prepare to have your life changed. I got one of each flavor they had available today. I hope you like them.” He places the box in front of me and opens it to reveal half a dozen large, cheerfully decorated cookies.

“That is beyond thoughtful. Thank you so much.” I probably shouldn’t blush — no, I know for sure I shouldn’t blush — but I can’t help it. I’m flattered, not to mention touched by his thoughtfulness. “You really didn’t have to do this, but I’m not going to say no to some cookies. Especially when you talk them up like that.”

“I love them. I shouldn’t eat as many of them as I do, but sugar is something I can’t quit all the way even when I know I should.”

“It’s never a good idea to cut out something like that entirely. Don’t get me wrong, there are all kinds of things that should

be avoided completely. But telling yourself cookies are off-limits is basically setting yourself up for an obsession. It's better to have them in moderation."

With that, I nudge the box in his direction, grinning. "That being said, would you like one?"

"Aw, nah, they're for you."

"Which means I can share them if I want to, right?" I jiggle the box and giggle when he groans. "Come on. You know you want one."

"I'm a weak man," he sighs before reaching inside and pulling out what looks like a chocolate-chocolate-chip cookie. I point to what looks like a sugar cookie with yellow frosting, and he explains, "That's a lemon."

"Oh, I love lemon. I've got them growing like crazy in my backyard, so that's really fun." The first bite is heaven, and I close my eyes to savor the richness as well as the tang from the frosting. "Unbelievable. I'm going to develop a habit, myself."

He makes himself comfortable in one of the chairs before taking another bite. "Speaking of your house, how's it going? Is everything working out?"

"I mean, it's great," I tell him, and I mean it. "But it's a little bit of an adjustment. I have so much space now."

"You didn't live in a house before?"

"A one-bedroom apartment. Now, I've got a three bedroom house with a pool, and a yard, and I still feel like I have to pinch myself because it's all a dream."

"Yeah, I know how that feels." We exchange a knowing smile, and of course I go right back to the stories he told me during our first session. "Are you going to have a housewarming party?"

"It's funny, I never even thought about it," I confess, picking at the second half of my cookie while I mull over the idea. "I mean, I can think of a few people I would invite, but I don't know enough people out here to warrant a party."

His mouth opens before snapping shut. I arch an eyebrow, and he shrugs. “I was going to say you know us, but that’s probably unprofessional or whatever. It’s not the same as inviting friends.”

“Yeah, that’s a really nice idea, but I don’t want to send the wrong message.” And now, looking down at my cookie, I am annoyed with myself. Who am I to talk about professionalism when I’m sitting here eating a cookie with one of my patients? I should have set a boundary right off the bat. It’s not fair to give him the idea that we’re a couple of friends, when we can’t be. Not if I want to get the job done right.

Although... I could also make the case that it’s easier to get to know somebody in a relaxed atmosphere like this, than it is to sit them down in a more formal session. Great. The line is already blurred, and I’m not doing myself any favors by smiling at him the way I am. He has a nice smile, though. It’s nice to see him walking around without a chip on his shoulder all the time.

“Did I tell you about my apartment back in Boston?” He helps himself to a tissue from the box on my desk and uses it to wipe a few spears of chocolate from his fingers. “You would be exaggerating if you called it a studio.”

“That small, huh?”

“It was more like a room somebody put a sink in. There was one of those little dorm room refrigerators under the counter. And...” He winces and shakes his head. “There was a shared bathroom.”

“Get out! How many people did you have to share it with?”

“Three neighbors.”

“That couldn’t have been easy.”

“No, it wasn’t. But that’s a big part of why I appreciate what I have now, you know? It used to be a hell of a lot worse.”

“Now you have your own bathroom.” I can’t help but grin, just like I can’t help the way my heart stutters when our eyes meet and he grins back. I wonder how many people have seen this

warm side of him before. It's a shame to imagine him hiding it from the rest of the world for one reason or another.

"Well, I better let you go, so you can get out of here like you wanted to." I know he's right, so why is there part of me that wants to tell him to stay? This is entirely wrong. I need to slam on the brakes and stop this before I make the mistake of liking him much more than I should.

Who are you kidding? You already do. There's Ruby's voice, right on schedule, chiding me out of my silly, self-deluded excuses. "Yeah, and now I have a bunch of cookies to take home and binge in front of the TV."

"Sugar is a pretty good cure for just about anything." I can't argue with that.

"We have a session scheduled for Wednesday afternoon," I remind him as I show him to the door.

"I'm looking forward to it." Something about the way he says it — and the fact that he says it at all, considering how resistant he was to the idea of therapy — leaves me feeling warm inside. Like I'm actually making a difference.

My hand is on the doorknob when suddenly, he's placed a hand on the back of my head and is pulling me close and I freeze in total shock for a second before he touches his lips to mine.

Red flag, red flag, stop this. I should. I know I should. The one thing I need to do is push him away. But he tastes like chocolate and he's warm and he's gentle, taking his time like he's got nothing better to do than kiss me as thoroughly as possible.

And that's not all. That's not even the worst part.

No, the worst part is how I can't help but kiss him back.

HARLOW

I should stop this. I really, really need to end this right now. I should have pushed him away the second he touched me, and every second that passes with our lips moving against each other's and our breath coming short and quick makes things that much worse.

And that much harder to end. Every stroke of his tongue against mine, every touch of his hands on my hair, my waist, the back of my neck, makes me sink deeper into breathless, giddy pleasure.

What am I doing? I have to stop this.

And I will. I really will. In another minute... or two.

Even though he got us into this situation, he also ends it quickly by wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me close enough that there's no ignoring the very hard, very obvious bulge between us. Yeah, this can't happen. No matter how good it feels or how nice it is to be held by somebody I genuinely like.

I guess it's good sense finally getting through to me. No matter the reason, I'm glad for it, because it has the effect of dumping a bucket of ice water over my head. "Wait a second, this isn't right," I manage to gasp. Good lord can this man kiss, and now it's all I can do to regain my breath. My heart is fluttering away like a hummingbird, and my head is spinning. That just happened. I cannot believe I let that happen.

"I had to do it," he murmurs, and he doesn't sound apologetic. No, in fact, there's a warmth in his voice that sends a delicious

shiver running down my spine. Now, we know each other differently, and there's no going back from something like that. The way he looks at me is a problem, too, even if it doesn't feel like it while I'm glowing under his gaze.

I am an adult. I am a professional, and I've already made enough mistakes. This mistake is on a totally different level, too, since I know darn well Ryder is a member of the team. At least I didn't know anything about Soren or Ash the night we were together.

"There's no going back and changing what just happened," I tell him, running a hand over my hair to smooth it down. "It is what it is. But it can't happen again. I'm going to need you to act like this never happened. Nobody can know about it." Gee, you'd think I'd be tired of that line by now, but it's not like I started things.

No, but I knew darn well I was starting to crush on him, and a man doesn't bring a woman cookies out of nowhere because he only wants to be friends.

"I won't tell anybody." He even makes a cross over his chest with one finger. "Honest to God. I'm not trying to get you fired."

"Oh, I wish you hadn't use that word," I whisper, trembling as I reach for the bottle of water on my desk.

"Sorry. But I'm not sorry I kissed you. I've been wanting to kiss you for days."

"And that's flattering, Ryder." Holy cow, how am I supposed to take control of this situation when I'm all giddy and flushed? There's still a very big part of me that can't help but react this way because he's a cute guy and he likes me. Childish? Maybe. But it's biology, too. And chemistry. We definitely have that — the air is practically crackling with it.

Enough. Grow up. This isn't high school. "But we know each other in a professional capacity," I remind him as gently as I can. "I can't do my job if we blur the lines, do you know what I mean?"

"You're saying I can't see you outside of work?"

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“And I don’t get a say in that?” He’s being playful, which is a real shame because he is irresistible when his eyes sparkle with a devilish gleam the way they do now. This is not the time for me to forget why I’m here or what’s at stake. I really need to get it together, right this very minute.

Somehow, I manage to maintain my steady gaze without so much as cracking a grin. “I’m afraid not. I’m sorry, but that’s how it is. We both need our jobs, so there can’t be any of... this.” I motion back and forth between us with one finger. “Okay? Nobody knows about this, and we can’t make a habit of it.” No matter how much I yearn to. I mean, the man kisses like he was born to do it.

“So you’re saying you can be an every-once-in-a-while sort of thing?”

My heart is sinking fast. He’s not taking me a bit seriously. Damn it, I should’ve been firm about my boundaries. Now look where I’ve landed myself. I’m sliding down a steep embankment, clawing at the loose earth, trying to climb my way out of it and failing miserably. “Ryder, please. I’m serious.”

“Okay, okay.” He holds up his hands in mock surrender, smirking. “I’m just saying, good luck trying to resist me. I’m like a potato chip. Try me once, and you’ll never be able to stop.”

“I’ll do my best.” Now it’s better that he leaves right away, or else I might burst out laughing and completely ruin any hope of credibility.

He’s whistling as he saunters out of the room and into the hall. Nobody would ever guess what went on between us. I’m glad for that, though I have to wonder how he manages to fake it so well. Here I am, barely standing upright on shaky legs, grateful that I’m able to close the door and lean against it for support.

And here I am, getting myself into deeper trouble than I was already in. What am I doing? Things were already complicated

enough. Now there's a third team member I have to watch out for, a third member whose gaze I'll have to avoid while we're around others for fear of blushing and giving something away.

What right do I have to write off Ryder's behavior as self-sabotage when I'm basically doing the same thing to myself? I have an incredible job full of great people who I really, truly want to help. My professional reputation is on the line. Their next season is on the line. More than a few of them would like to move up to the NHL—I'm sort of carrying their hopes and dreams on my shoulders, too.

And what do I do? I make out with one of the players. Because I'm an idiot.

My hands are shaking and I can't stop berating myself for being weak as I gather my things. I need to go now, right this very minute, before anything else happens to make me regret my weakness. The box of cookies on my desk serves as a silent reminder of how easy I made it for Ryder to come in here and make me forget everything I thought I knew about professionalism and ethics.

At least Ryder helped with one thing, my sore butt is the least of my worries as I stride down the hall, my eyes on the door. I need to get home, take a cold shower, and have a long, hard talk with myself about priorities and boundaries.

It's not enough to have a talk. I need to listen to myself, follow my own advice, and stop caving the second a cute guy looks my way. This is truly turning everything I thought I knew about myself on its head. I've always been the good girl, the smart girl, the girl who doesn't take big risks.

That could be what's biting me in the backside now, I muse as I load my things into the back seat of the car before gently easing myself into the driver's seat. So many years of holding myself to the highest standards, walking the straight and narrow. Eventually I was bound to slip up.

What a shame I'm slipping up at the worst possible time.

No more. That's all there is to it. When I walk in there tomorrow, I'm going to walk in a new woman. Complete

professionalism, all the way. No joking, no accepting little gifts no matter how innocent they seem on the surface. No personal conversations, either. I can't risk it. I've worked too hard to get where I am to throw it away even on the cutest, sweetest, best kisser I've ever met.

HARLOW

“I’m starting to have second thoughts.”

“And I am so surprised.” Corey’s laughing gently as she skates my way. How does she make it look so easy? “I’ve been teaching skating for years. You’re in good hands.”

“It’s not your hands I’m worried about,” I tell her. “It’s my butt. It’s just starting to feel better, finally.” It’s been almost a full week since that humiliation, enough time that the constant throbbing has mellowed into more of a dull ache that only bothers me every once in a while. “I was just getting used to sitting down normally again.”

“You are going to be absolutely fine,” she assures me, waving me onto the ice. “I will not take no for an answer. Get your butt out here.”

“Don’t be scared!” one of the kids calls out. It both warms my heart and humiliates me to think that a group of five-year-olds are watching me. But this was the only time Corey had available, and I might as well take advantage of her generosity. I don’t know why it feels like such a big deal, learning how to skate. I only know that my pride is on the line.

“Easy does it. This isn’t a race,” she tells me in a low, gentle voice as I very slowly, very cautiously begin making my way over to where she waits. “Find your balance, and trust your body.”

“You’re assuming my body is trustworthy.”

“Very funny.”

“It’s easy. Watch.” One of the little girls spins effortlessly on her blades, which I’m sure is supposed to make me feel better. I do my best impression of a smile that probably looks more like a grimace. That’s all I need. A child reminding me of how clumsy I am.

“That’s very good, Poppy,” Corey tells her. At least she’s trying her best not to laugh out loud. “You have really come a long way.”

It feels like forever, but it’s closer to a few seconds before I’m finally standing in line with the rest of Corey’s students for the day. There’s a handful of parents hanging around in the seats and walking above us, and I can only imagine what they must think of me. A grown woman, learning to skate alongside a bunch of little kids. I can’t let this affect my self-image, no matter how clumsy and awkward I feel.

“See?” I ask the kids, wobbling a little but managing to stay upright. “You’re never too old to learn new things. So don’t ever tell yourself you are.”

“That’s right,” Corey agrees under her breath. “Let’s turn this into a teachable moment.”

“I need to do something,” I mutter back, and she only giggles.

“Lauren, why don’t you show Miss Harlow what we learned last week?” Corey suggests while gliding backward down the line like a show-off. The little girl looks all too happy to oblige – it’s clear that kids love Corey, and I can see why. She’s kind, and she doesn’t talk down to them. I know I always hated feeling like grown-ups were talking down to me when I was a kid, something my parents used to laugh off. “*You were born an adult,*” they used to say, and looking back I can see why. I was always very serious, studious, and I wanted to be seen as their equal. Strange, but true.

Lauren somehow manages to push herself forward, then glides a good five or six feet across the ice balanced on one skate with the other leg raised behind her. She might as well have turned water into wine. I’m that impressed.

“How do you do that?” I ask, and I’m not patronizing the kid. I’m truly flabbergasted, because I can barely maintain my balance with both skates on the ice.

“It’s all in here.” Corey points to her abdomen. “This is where your balance comes from. Keep these core muscles engaged, and you’re already halfway there.”

“Are you sure about that? Because I’m feeling it all in here.” I run both hands down the back of my legs.

“Sure, everything works together, but your core is where it starts.”

Fair enough. I make it a point to keep those muscles tight and be mindful of them.

“Now, Miss Harlow, let’s see if you can do that.”

“Are you —” I have to bite my tongue before I can finish that question, since there are a bunch of little skaters standing around and they have big ears. Another one of my parents’ favorite sayings. I doubt the parents would appreciate knowing their darling little girls heard profanity during their skating lesson. “I’m not sure I can do that.”

“Yes, you can – and I didn’t ask you to do it exactly the way Lauren did it. You didn’t give me a chance to finish.” She is an extremely patient person. I have to give her credit. “What I need you to do is simply lift one skate off the ice, even if it’s only an inch. That’s where we’ll start. Baby steps.”

“Baby steps,” the kids echo, and they would all be very adorable if I didn’t feel so stinking self-conscious.

“Do you want us to chant for you?” Corey suggests. Her lips twitch like she’s barely holding back a smile.

“No, I think I can give it a shot, but thanks anyway.” If a five-year-old can do this, I can do it, too. I take a deep breath to steady myself, ever-so-gently push off on my right foot – then lift my left foot barely a fraction of an inch off the ice. Right away, I start to wobble, which Corey notices immediately.

“Your core!” she reminds me. “Engage your core.”

And dang it, when I do, I feel steadier. It's almost like she knows what she's talking about.

"Good job!" she calls out, clapping, and the kids join her. Oh, Lord, this is embarrassing. But because I don't want to look like a total idiot, I graciously accept their applause, nodding in acknowledgment. Pitiful. So pitiful.

Still, I proved to myself that I'm not completely hopeless. I practice a few more times, skating a short distance, back-and-forth, and by the time I'm feeling more confident I join the kids.

"Now," Corey says, standing in front of them, "we're going to practice turning on our blades." She demonstrates what she means, easing herself forward on one blade, then quickly shifting her weight and pivoting until she's skating backward.

All at once, something close to a million red flags start waving like crazy in my head. "I don't know if I can."

"If you can balance on one skate, you can learn to turn on one skate. I have faith in you." She nods to one of the girls. "Sasha, give it a try."

She places gentle hands on the little girl's shoulders and murmurs encouragement as the kid somehow, miraculously does exactly what she's told. She's a little wobbly, but she does it without falling – and her face glows with pride. "I did it!"

"You absolutely did. I'm really proud of you." Corey looks around, beaming. It's obvious she takes pride in what she does, and I can see how easy it is to totally fall in love with these kids. They're adorable, and so eager to learn. Maybe I could take a lesson.

When I wobble while standing still, I raise my hand to get Corey's attention. "Do you think I can use that?" I point to what she called the ice assist box, which really resembles the sort of walker which elderly people use when they have mobility issues. In this case, it's used to keep new skaters upright. It sits off to the side, unused, and right now it looks like my salvation.

“No, I don’t think so,” she decides in a breezy voice. “You’re doing just fine as you are.”

“Am I, though?” I certainly don’t feel that way. It feels like I’m making a fool of myself.

“You’re doing better than you think. Trust me. Would I lie to you?”

“I withhold comment for the sake of mixed company.” This is turning into a pretty miserable experience, all told. My legs are burning, and so is my core. For the sake of the kids, I try to smile and look cheerful when I feel anything but. This was my idea, wasn’t it? What the heck was I thinking?

The relief that runs through me when she declares the lesson finished is almost enough to make my body sag. “You did it,” she whispers as the kids disperse, cheerfully heading off the ice to meet their parents.

“Barely,” I whisper back as the two of us skate toward the wall, which I’m very grateful to grab hold of once we reach it. “I don’t know how you manage this. My body is screaming.”

“You get used to it. Really, it’s not that difficult once you get the hang of it. Now, try a triple axle. That’s difficult.”

“No, thank you. I already respected figure skaters, but now?” I can only laugh, and she laughs along with me.

“Just think. You’re learning something new. How many people ever bother doing that? I admire you, I really do.”

“Can you admire me for being clumsy and oafish?”

“I admire you for being brave.” When I gently roll my eyes, she scowls at me. “I swear, trying to give you a compliment is much harder than it should be.”

“Sorry,” I murmur, because she’s right. “Really, thank you for even taking the time to teach me. You already have your hands full.”

“And yet, somehow, none of them gave me as hard a time as you did,” she observes, whistling lightly as she skates away to prepare for her next class. When I scowl, I’m scowling at myself, because she’s right. I wasn’t very mature.

But there's always the next lesson— and I know for certain she's going to hold me to it. No way will she let me get off easily now that I've started.

HARLOW

It's twilight by the time I leave the arena. The little ones are leaving, too, and a few of them wave goodbye to me before they get in their cars. I'll pretend not to notice the way their parents look at me sort of funny. I can only imagine what they must be thinking, but then that's kind of my business, isn't it? People are allowed to have their own opinions. That has nothing to do with me.

Wow. It's almost like I went to school for psychology or something.

All things considered, that went much better than I'd expected. I didn't fall once. Sure, my legs are jelly and I hope I don't sneeze tonight because my abs are on fire, but I'm in good shape compared to what I imagined. It involved bruising and a cast. Not pretty.

I like driving around here at this time of day, when I have the road leading to the interstate entirely to myself. It's a beautiful night, but then most nights are beautiful out here. There's nothing but desert on either side of the car. I could be the last person on Earth as I sail down the road with my high beams cutting through the encroaching darkness.

As it turns out, there are situations in which that's not a good thing.

Like right this very minute, when a funny knocking sound makes me turn down the volume on the radio. "Please, please," I whisper, like that will help. Like I'll find the sound was coming from the radio and not from under the hood.

No such luck. The noise is just as loud now, even when I slow down as a precaution. “Don’t do this to me.” Nothing I say seems to help. The car is determined to make whatever noises it wants to no matter what speed I’m traveling at.

Until I try to accelerate and nothing changes. “Are you serious?” I tap the gas pedal once, twice, but all I do is continue slowing down.

My heart’s sinking by the time I pull onto the shoulder and cut the engine. “Okay,” I whisper, running my hands over the wheel. “You’ve got my attention, girl. I’ll take you in for a tune-up first thing in the morning. All I need is for you to get me home now. That’s it. Get me there and I’ll take care of you.”

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath and turn the key.

Which does nothing.

“No, no, no.” It doesn’t matter how I beg and plead. She’s not in the mood to listen.

My forehead touches the wheel and my eyes close. Of all times for this to happen. Darkness is quickly falling around me and I’m entirely alone. I’m pretty sure I saw a movie like this once. It did not end well.

After a minute of feeling sorry for myself, I come to my senses and call AAA for help. “I’m not exactly sure of my location,” I admit before describing the distance from the arena.

“No problem. We’ll have a truck out there in half an hour.”

Half an hour? Okay. No sweat. I can stand being out here for half an hour. It’s not like I’m stuck in a blizzard or anything dangerous like that. I’m alone, that’s all. My phone has a signal, so I’m not exactly alone in the world. This could be much worse.

Like, a serial killer could come down the road.

Why does my brain do this to me?

I’d call Corey, but she’s still busy with the class that started after mine ended. Ruby was supposed to have a date tonight, so she’ll be busy getting ready. I don’t want to bug her when

there's no danger. Being freaked out is not the same as being in danger.

No, it's when a pair of headlights pop up on the horizon that danger threatens to show itself. Their reflection in my rearview mirror makes my heart freeze for one painful moment. Pass by. Please, pass by. Should I lie down so they can't see me?

It'll be okay. There's nothing threatening about an approaching car. They'll more than likely breeze on by. I'll just sit here with my nails digging into my palms and my heart lodged in my throat while I watch the headlights get bigger and bigger every second.

I should get on the phone. Ruby won't mind if I call once I explain the situation. Maybe a psycho killer will be less likely to approach and disembowel me if they find me on the phone.

"Get it together." There's a tremor in my voice. Wouldn't it be the height of irony if I ended up getting sliced to ribbons after going to my first ice skating class? I should've known it was a bad idea.

The car's getting closer. I can't get a look at it thanks to the glaring reflection in the mirror. "Keep moving," I whisper.

Instead, the headlights move to the right as the driver pulls over behind me. My chest is tight. It could be anybody. There aren't even any lights along the road. Why did I think taking an otherwise deserted road would be a good idea?

The time it takes for them to open their door and swing it shut might as well be an eternity. Great. They're walking this way, and I still can't see them. They're only a tall, dark figure backlit by their car's headlights. Gravel crunches under their feet as they approach.

I wish I had a weapon. I wish I had a car that hadn't decided to up and die on me in the middle of nowhere.

With a shaking hand, I turn the key as a last-ditch effort at a miracle. Nothing.

When a fist taps the window at my left, I can't help but jump and squeal in fear.

HARLOW

“Hey! Easy, now. I’m unarmed.”

I recognize the voice—and it fills me with a strange mixture of relief and dismay. He probably thinks I’m a total idiot. “Ryder.” I lean back in my seat, blowing out a heavy sigh. Maybe my heart will slow down to a normal pace at some point.

“What’s the matter here, huh? What, you’ve got nothing better to do than sit here on the side of the road?” He’s joking, but there’s an edge of concern in his voice. “What are you doing all alone?”

“The car broke down,” I explain as I open the door. It’s nice to feel the cooler breeze afforded by the night, and I take a deep breath that helps steady my nerves. Now that the fear of being hideously murdered has passed, there’s still the anxiety that bubbles up thanks to the whole *we should never have kissed* thing. Our session this week was fine if a little stilted, but he didn’t bring it up, thank goodness.

Not that he had to. I could see it in his eyes, in the way he could barely hold back a grin.

“This is a Prius, right?” he asks as he takes a step back and studies the bright blue hunk of metal that currently serves me no purpose.

“AAA is on their way,” I explain. “It should only be another twenty minutes or so.”

“Do you need somebody to wait with you?”

“Do I need it? No, I think I can handle it on my own.”

In the glow from his car’s headlights, his lips twitch. “Do you want somebody to wait with you?”

“You see, that’s a different question.” I lean against the car, arms folded. “Yeah, I could use a little company. You wouldn’t believe the sort of things that can go through a woman’s head when she’s alone in the middle of nowhere like this.”

“I think I can believe it,” he murmurs, mimicking my posture and giving me space. I almost want to thank him for that, but I feel like it would be a mistake. It’s better to let him be a gentleman than to make a big deal about it, like I didn’t expect him to be thoughtful or respectful.

“What were you doing at the arena?” he asks. “I didn’t figure you’d be working on Saturday.”

“I wasn’t.” I can’t help squirming a little under his expectant gaze. “I was taking a skating lesson.”

“Great!” There I was, expecting him to be snide or to at least tease me, but he seems totally enthusiastic. “I’m telling you, you’ll be skating backwards in no time.”

All I can do is remember how much effort went into simply staying upright. “I think you have a little too much faith in me.”

“See, that’s why it’s easier to learn when you’re a kid, I guess.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You don’t have as much doubt when you’re a kid. You’re not always reminding yourself of all the things that could go wrong if you take a chance.”

“That’s a very good point. I doubt I could learn to ride a bike so easily as an adult.”

“That’s what I mean. You wouldn’t always be telling yourself you’re going to fall and how much it’s going to hurt. And if you did fall, no big deal.” He chuckles, turning away from me to face the dark, desolate landscape spread out in front of us.

“And there’s not so far to fall when you’re a kid, either.”

“That’s true,” I agree with a laugh. “You’re a lot closer to the ground.” I wish it weren’t so easy to like him. This is making my job much more difficult.

“What kind of car do you drive?” I push away from the Prius and wander toward the car I still can’t make out very clearly thanks to the headlights blinding me.

“You mean my baby here?” There’s obvious pride and love in his voice as he joins me, running a hand over the car’s hood. “This is a ‘69 Stingray.”

“Wow, she’s beautiful.” And he clearly takes good care of it, since there’s not so much as a scratch on the black paint, and the inside of the little two-seater is clean as a whistle.

Somehow, I wouldn’t expect a man to keep his car so neat. Maybe I need to look at my assumptions.

“I bought her back in Boston and fixed her up myself.” I have to smother a smile—he sounds like a proud parent, and I don’t want him thinking I’m laughing at him or anything like that.

“Did you drive her out here?”

He nods and pats the hood. “Yes, ma’am. She did great. Runs like a dream.”

“It’s a shame, though,” I muse.

“What is?”

“I was just thinking, it might be nice to have air conditioning,” I tease, giggling. “And Bluetooth.”

“Bluetooth?” His head snaps back like I insulted him before he blows out a low whistle that drips with disappointment. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. This is true beauty right here. Created back when a car was a car and not, like, an accessory.”

“I don’t know. There were some beautiful cars made back then, too.”

“She’s the best of both worlds, beauty and brawn.”

“And you fixed her up all by yourself?”

“Sure did.”

“So you know about cars. Could you fix my problem, whatever it is?”

“I’m afraid not.” He looks over at my car, shrugging. “All these modern cars? Computers. Back in the day, a guy could take a wrench and do what needed to be done. They did it all the time—working on their cars on the weekend, hanging out in the driveway with their buddies and drinking some beer. You can’t do that anymore.”

“I see what you mean. That’s pretty sad, when you think about it. A whole tradition, gone.”

“Nowadays, most people would rather take it into the dealership and have it worked on, anyway. Fixing up cars is a lost art.”

When he describes it that way, it does seem pretty sad. I can’t think too much about that, though, when it’s so nice to be with him. I shouldn’t feel this way, and I know I shouldn’t, but there’s no helping it. Every time we cross paths, it’s like we pick up where we left off in the easiest way possible. Like two old friends who may or may not have made out once.

We’re so busy talking about cars and all the things he encountered on his drive across the country that I’m almost surprised when headlights approach. “Wow, that didn’t take long at all,” I murmur, checking my phone and gasping when I realize it’s actually been over an hour since Ryder found me here. The time melted away like nothing.

After I make arrangements with the tow truck driver, I turn to Ryder. “Thank you. You didn’t have to spend all this time out here with me. I’m sure you have other things to do.”

“Nothing I can think of right now.” And there it is, that flirtatious note in his voice. I don’t have the heart to warn him against it. Besides, it’s probably better for me to pretend I don’t notice, anyway.

He slides his hands into the back pockets of his jeans, watching as the Prius is hooked up to the truck. “I can give you a ride home,” he suggests. “It will probably be a lot

quicker than if you get a ride from the truck driver. He'll have to take your car into the shop first."

That's a good point, and I really don't feel like spending another couple of hours getting things worked out. "I would appreciate it."

"Maybe we can grab something to eat first?"

Slick. Very slick. What do I do? I could shut this down immediately, but again that makes it look like I'm being suspicious and thinking too much about what happened between us. Sometimes, the less you say about a situation, the sooner it will pass. And I am hungry—the fact that I have food at home and can just as easily fix some of that is only the faintest background thought as I stand here with Ryder's expectant smile doing things to me it really shouldn't.

I'm probably making a mistake.

But I really don't want to say good night. Not yet. Even with the circumstances being what they are, this has been one of the nicest nights I've spent in a while. I'm not sure what that says about me. I need a social life if hanging out by my broken-down car is fun.

"Okay," I decide with a firm nod. "But we're going Dutch."

He snickers. "When did I say I was buying you dinner? I just want somebody to sit with me while I eat."

"Ha, ha." I can pretend all I want, but my skin is tingling and there are butterflies flapping their wings like crazy in my belly as I slide into the passenger seat and wonder where the night will take us.

RYDER

“**W**hat do you think about this place?” I put the car in Park while she stares through the windshield at the nondescript diner. “It’s totally out of the way, in the middle of nowhere, so there’s no chance of anyone finding us together.”

“I don’t want you thinking I’m embarrassed or anything.” She looks my way and sinks her teeth into her delicious bottom lip. “You know that, right?”

“I know. You want to play it safe.” I respect that, even if it meant driving for forty-five minutes before we found a restaurant she feels safe for us to share a meal in. “You hungry or what?”

“Starved,” she confesses in a whisper, which is what makes me open my door. We’re inside in no time, seated in a scarred vinyl booth with a pair of laminated menus in front of us. The soft sounds of classic rock and conversation shared by a handful of guys seated at the counter make me smile in recognition. “This reminds me of my first job. Busboy. I was fourteen, hooked up through the social worker handling my case. I started saving up for real equipment of my own.”

“Industrious. Willing to work hard.”

She says it with a grin, but there’s something about it that rubs me the wrong way. “Don’t shrink me.”

“I’m sorry.” Her face falls and I feel like the idiot I am.

“No, no, you were trying to be nice. I’m being an ass.” I lift an eyebrow. “I’m willing to admit when I’m in the wrong. A good thing, right?”

“I’m not shrinking you.” She pretends to zip her mouth shut.

“Don’t do that. Tell me more about you.”

“No, no.” When she smiles, it’s like the room gets brighter. I’m turning into a romantic sap over this girl. “That’s not how this works.”

“Not how what works? Last time I checked, there’s no law against having a nice conversation with somebody.” The middle-aged waitress comes over to take our order, and we both ask for a burger and fries. “Cheat day,” I whisper when Harlow purses her lips.

“I didn’t say a word.”

Once it’s just the two of us again, I drum my fingers against the laminate tabletop. “Well? I’m waiting.”

“I know, but...”

“We’re not here as, you know, doctor and patient.”

“That’s true.”

“What’s the problem?”

“You always have the answers, don’t you?” She narrows her eyes when I shrug. “Really, there’s not much to say. I’m very simple. No dark, twisted secrets.”

I don’t know about that. There’s something about the way she looks down at the table when she says it that tells me there might be something dark and twisted in her past. My past is dark enough in places, so I’m the last person to give her crap about it, but I have to wonder now. What’s that old saying? Still waters run deep. She might as well be an entire lake.

“The day you first came in to talk to us, you said you were never an athlete but sports played a big part in your growing up.”

“I’m surprised you remember that.”

“I have a good memory.”

“Well, that was true. My dad was, and still is, a football and track coach at the high school where he teaches.”

“Oh, no kidding. I guess that took up a lot of his time.”

“A lot,” she agrees, and her head bobs up and down slowly.

“Then when he wasn’t doing one or the other, he was playing golf. He’s an addict. That, I’ve never really understood.”

“When I was growing up, I figured golf was a rich person’s sport.”

“We were never rich — but we were comfortable enough. Mom didn’t have to work when me and my brother were kids.”

“Is he an athlete?”

There’s pride in her smile. “He ran track at UC Santa Barbara, and he could’ve gone to the Olympics. He was that good. But he tore his ACL at a meet, and that was it. He was never the same even after therapy.”

“That sucks. I’m sorry.”

“I feel like I’ve spent most of my life at sporting events.” She’s opening up, loosening up, and I’m glad. It’s like I’m hungry to learn more about her, as corny as that is. I could sit here all night, even after they shut the place down, listening to everything she has to say.

“Good memories?”

“Sometimes.” Something dark crosses her face, and her smile gets dimmer. “You know, when our team was winning, that kind of thing.”

“And if not?”

“Things would be the way they usually were.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means the house would go ice cold in the middle of a heat wave. I couldn’t wait until one of them or both of them went out so I could breathe again.”

She stares down into her glass, and her throat works before she murmurs, “Do you want to know why I got into therapy? I mean, what first drew me to it?”

“Sure.”

“The only time they were talking to each other without one of them yelling was during family therapy sessions. I actually used to look forward to going to them.”

“So things were bad.”

“Yeah. Things were bad. Do you know what it does to a kid when she knows her parents are cheating on each other and doesn’t want to let either of them down by letting the secret slip out?”

“Holy shit. I’m really sorry.” And when I think about it a little, I could almost laugh. My whole life, I figured kids from the kind of family she described — two parents living together, doing family stuff — had it all. Like there was nothing they could ever complain about, nothing they could ever want, because they already had everything I never did. Now I think about how miserable it must’ve been for her, living in a house like that.

“Well, it helped lead me to my career.” She’s trying to smile, but it’s weak. “That’s not exactly the kind of thing you tell people on your first day at work, though, is it?”

“Thank you for telling me. I mean it,” I say when she snickers a little. “I’m not trying to patronize you or whatever. Thank you for trusting me with that. It means a lot. I know how it feels. When, you know, there’s stuff you don’t wanna talk about.”

“Honestly, I don’t even know why I opened up in the first place.” She laughs softly. “I guess I’m not used to being the one talking about myself.”

“Don’t be so resistant.” She raises an eyebrow and I feel dumb for saying it. “I’m just saying, it makes you look more human.”

“I don’t need to be human – I mean, I do,” she blurts out when I laugh. “I see what you’re saying. I really do. But there have

to be boundaries.”

“Like the boundaries we’re crossing right now?”

Her cheeks go pink in the light from the lamp hanging over the table. “Now that you mention it, yes.”

“I’m just playing around.”

“But I’m not.”

“We’re having dinner. Not even a fancy dinner, just a couple of burgers. There’s nothing wrong with that.” Unless we want there to be. Yeah, why don’t you say that, genius? See how fast she walks out the door.

“Anyway, there are supposed to be boundaries. I really want to do my best. I really want to help you guys.”

“I know you do.” She’s so sincere. So determined. I haven’t met anybody like her since...

No. I’m not doing that. Not here, not now. She doesn’t need to hear my shit. Nobody does. When it comes to Amber, there’s nothing anybody can do, anyway. Nobody can fix what broke when she died. Just thinking about her makes my chest hurt. They say first love is different, and it was for me. I figured we’d be together for the rest of our lives. I sure as hell never thought about asking a girl out to dinner so I could get to know her better – the only thing I usually want to know about a girl is how to get her out of her clothes as fast as possible.

But Harlow is different. I can’t understand how, exactly. I only know she makes me want to risk getting to know someone again.

And I know I don’t give a damn about whether this is right or wrong. Hell, I know it’s wrong. I would never do anything to make her life challenging, so I won’t tell anybody about this dinner, but I won’t pretend it didn’t happen. I couldn’t, not any more than I could pretend I’ve never kissed her — or that I didn’t want to.

“Anyway, Mom has a big career as a real estate agent now and makes tons more than Dad. I guess she was just waiting for us to grow up and move out of the house.”

“They’re still together?”

“Can you believe it?” she asks, snickering. “They probably both know about what the other one is up to. Maybe they’re just comfortable together. I don’t know. I’m not sure I could ever be with somebody who I knew was unfaithful.” Again, she frowns like there’s more to it than she wants to say. I’m not going to force her – I’m too happy that she’s opening up to me in the first place, and I don’t want to ruin it.

But I do want to know who hurt her, because it’s obvious somebody did. I’m not a genius, but I learned how to read people early on. I had to. I needed to know who I was dealing with when I was getting bounced from place to place. If I could figure somebody out quickly, there was less chance of getting hurt.

I have her figured out, top to bottom. She’s the kind of person who really wants to help, and not because it’ll look good for her. It probably comes from living in a house where people were fighting all the time. She wants to make things right whenever she can. She wants to make things better.

And when I look into her eyes and she smiles across the table, it hits me that I want to be better for her. I want to be the person she sees, I want to make her proud of me.

It’s scary as hell. But I wouldn’t trade it for anything. No, in fact, I want to see where this goes. To hell with right and wrong.

HARLOW

It's getting harder and harder to ignore the delicious little tingle that runs down my spine whenever our eyes meet.

There is something about him. I can't put my finger on it. I only know it feels dangerous, but in the best way possible. The sort of danger that's a waste of time to try to ignore.

Once we have our food, it gives me a chance to catch my breath after pouring my guts out. "I can't believe I told you all that stuff about myself," I murmur before sinking my teeth into a surprisingly tasty burger. Beautifully charred, juicy, well-seasoned. I generally try to keep it healthy, which means a meal like this is a special treat.

"I wanted to know. You're an interesting person."

"You know, interesting isn't always a good thing. A rash is interesting." Sure. Let's talk about rashes while eating.

"You're interesting in a good way." He laughs around a mouth full of food. "A rash?"

"You know what I mean."

"I do. And I don't spend a lot of time with people, just for the sake of spending time, you know? I actually suck at pretending to like people who bore me."

"Why do you think that is?"

He's still laughing as he shakes his head. "No, Doc. It's not gonna be that easy."

My cheeks flush. "I'm sorry. Force of habit?"

“Well, let’s make a deal.” He folds his arms on the table and I have to ignore how attractive they are. I’ve always been a sucker for them – the sight of a man rolling up his sleeves to reveal his forearms is basically catnip for me. “Don’t ask questions like we’re in a session, and I’ll make sure nobody ever knows we’ve eaten in front of each other.”

Somehow, he manages to make it sound dirty. “You’ve got it.”

“Like I was saying, I’m not good at faking it. I just don’t have it in me. I never did. I might’ve gotten along better in a few of the houses I was at if I could’ve pretended to like it more than I did.”

“But you were just a kid. You were doing your best.”

He leans back against the booth, shrugging. “I know. But it’s also not a great habit when you’re grown-up. You can’t just shrug off the whole world because you’re bored by it.”

I have to appreciate his self-awareness, even if I know better than to comment on it. He’s right. I can’t bring therapy talk into this, especially since I am the one who keeps talking about boundaries and all that. It’s pretty hypocritical if I try to draw information from him that way.

“Honestly? I kind of respect that.” He arches an eyebrow. “Seriously. People who don’t suffer fools – I respect them. There’s too much bullshit in the world. Why waste time adding more of it, you know?”

“That’s how I see it. I don’t want to be part of the same... I don’t know, game of pretend that everybody else is part of. That’s not me. It never will be.”

“I’m not saying this as a therapist, just to let you know. I think it’s really great that you have a strong sense of yourself. I can see how people might find that intimidating, even. So many people don’t have the first clue who they are, so it makes them uncomfortable when they meet somebody like you.”

He’s pleased. Let him try to hide it, but I see it in his shy grin. “Well, damn. Nobody ever put it to me like that before. Nobody ever bothered trying.”

“What can I say? I’ve read a few books.”

He bursts out laughing with a twinkle in his eye. “There’s a lot of guys in the world who would be intimidated by a woman as smart as you.”

“But not you, though?”

“No. The opposite.”

“Ryder...” I tip my head and give him a look that I hope gets the point across. “Come on.”

“What? You gave me a compliment, I’m giving you a compliment. Isn’t that how it works?”

“Now that you mention it, no, it doesn’t have to be tit for tat.”

“I’m just talking to you like one person talking to another person.” He can’t hide a little smirk as he raises what’s left of his burger to his lips. Nice lips. Lips that feel very good against mine.

Stop it. If he’s incorrigible, I am downright determined to sabotage myself. I know better. I need to do better.

It surprises me that he’s so personable and easy going. So interested in everything I have to say, too. He actually lets me talk and seems to listen rather than waiting for his chance to say something.

In other words, he’s the exact opposite of Kyle. How much time did I spend being bored to death while he went on and on about this or that important person he’d met? About his commission on the latest big sale, or how much faster his listing sold than one of his rivals at the agency? He was always trying to impress me by pretending he was more important than he was. It was exhausting, pretending to be impressed for his sake.

I can’t believe how refreshing it is to be around a man who doesn’t need to brag, and he’s got more reason to brag than Kyle ever did. I’m sitting across from somebody who’s proud of buying and fixing up his own car. Kyle is the kind of guy who always needs the latest model, and he definitely would never try to fix up a car on his own. They couldn’t be more different.

Considering how drawn I am to Ryder, I have to wonder what I ever saw in Kyle in the first place.

But it's wrong. The burger starts to sour in my stomach when I remember that. Having dinner with him like this, even somewhere as casual as a diner where only a handful of truckers are currently eating, is tiptoeing on the line between *professional* and *most definitely not*. But staring into his eyes? Losing myself in the warmth of his gaze, his smile? Going warm from head to toe every time he jokes or flirts? That's so deep into the unprofessional side of things, the line is nowhere in sight.

"Promise you won't tell the coach on me that I was sitting here eating a burger?"

I tap a finger to my chin. "This seems like something he needs to know."

"What can I do to change your mind?"

With a hand against my chest, I gasp. "Are you suggesting I'm the sort of doctor who would take a bribe?"

"More like I'm hoping you will."

I have to grind my teeth together to keep my mouth shut, because otherwise I would end up flirting back. It's so easy to, as natural as breathing. The chemistry between us... It's overwhelming, so strong I'm almost mad that there's nothing I can do about it. Like a little kid stomping my feet and holding my breath until I get what I want. But there's no getting what I want now, since what I want more is to keep my job.

It's all fine and good to tell myself to stay strong until it's time to go. As promised, I put up my half of the bill and a little extra for a tip, then follow Ryder back to the car. My pulse is fluttering like the wings of a hummingbird and I don't know whether I'm dreading what comes next or looking forward to it. There must truly be something wrong with me. I need to stop thinking about him this way, but it's sort of impossible to do that when we're alone in the car and he's taking me home.

"Nice house," he murmurs when we pull to a stop at the curb. "Definitely a step up from a one-bedroom apartment."

I can't help glowing with pride as I gaze upon my new home, even if it's only a rental arranged by the team. It's a symbol of my success—a symbol of all my hard work and preparation. All the more reason to stop this situation in its tracks.

“Thank you for everything tonight.” My voice is over bright, over cheerful. A clumsy attempt at wiping away the tension crackling between us. “You were such a huge help, and I really did have fun.”

“Anytime—and I mean that.”

I'm not going to pretend I don't notice the heavy meaning in his voice. The intimacy. “You know that can't happen.”

“Still, if there's any way I can be of service...” Nope, no double meaning there at all. It's a good idea to get out of the car now, before either one of us says something that will only lead to even worse complications than I've already gotten myself into. I step out, give him a little wave, then start for the house. My heart hurts a little, but this is for the best. I've already made enough mistakes. I don't need another.

“Hold on!” I barely have the key in the lock before I hear footsteps approaching, and I turn with my heart in my throat to find Ryder jogging up the pathway. “You dropped this.”

He holds out my phone and I have to laugh at myself even while cursing my clumsiness. “Thanks. Wouldn't want to lose it.” I take it from him without thinking, wrapping my fingers around the device and touching his hand.

It's true, what they sometimes say in books. There can be a moment where it feels like an electric current sizzles up your arm at the slightest touch from another person's hand. Something so simple and innocent can make your stomach flip and your knees tremble.

And it can make it seem totally normal and even inevitable for the person you're touching, the person who makes your heart race out of control, to lean down and place a gentle kiss against your lips.

HARLOW

“Miss Harlow! It’s your turn.” The little girl to my left tugs on my sleeve and wears a shy smile when I look down at her in confusion.

“Oh, thank you, Sasha.” Well, I’ve obviously gotten better at balancing on my skates, since I’ve been standing here drifting into space and somehow managed to stay upright. When I started out, it took all of my concentration to keep my balance. Progress? Sure, yet somehow I don’t exactly feel proud of myself.

“Let’s go!” Corey claps her hands briskly. “Show me what you’ve got.”

Oh, boy. With as much confidence as I can muster, I push off on my left skate and glide forward on my right, holding my breath, preparing myself to shift my weight and turn around on one blade. I only manage half a turn, and I’m more than a little wobbly, but the kids applaud like I just landed an intricate jump. They’re adorable, and I love them for it.

Corey manages to conceal a soft laugh, but just barely.

“You’re getting there.”

“Thanks.”

“Okay, kids. Thank you so much for paying such excellent attention today and giving it your all.” Corey checks her watch, then eyes the stands around the rink. There are groups of skaters raring to go for the public skate session scheduled after this lesson. “Of course, you can stick around to skate if you want. I’ll see you all next time.”

As soon as the hour ends, a horn blares over the speakers to signal the okay to hit the ice. As if by magic, a few dozen skaters swarm the ice and begin gliding. Because to some people, this is actually fun. Bizarre, but then there's no accounting for taste.

I am all too happy to tuck my tail between my legs and head over to where I left my shoes, but I should know better. "Nope. You're going to get in a little extra practice, girl." Corey takes my arm and pulls me along with her, ignoring my growling and grumbling.

"You can consider it repayment."

"Repayment?"

"Yeah. For basically zoning out all through the lesson. What's up?" she asks with concern in her voice as we make slow progress around the outside of the rink.

"Not much. What's up with you?"

"Don't do that," she murmurs, nudging me with her elbow. Gently, because I'd hit the ice otherwise. "You were a million miles away. I didn't want to single you out, but it was pretty obvious your attention wasn't on the lesson."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be disrespectful."

She shakes her head, making her ponytail bounce. "You weren't. I'm not upset. I'm worried. Is everything going alright? Work, the house?"

"They're fine. Really, things are going great." It's a good thing I'm so busy trying to be graceful, since it gives me an excuse not to look her in the eye while I speak. I've never been a good liar. Granted, I'm not exactly lying about things going well. I'm just... leaving out a whole chunk of the story.

"Something else? Oh, no." I glance over to find her head falling back so she can stare at the roof high above our heads. "Tell me that weasel isn't trying to work his way back into your life."

"Oh, no! Perish the thought."

“Thank God. I was ready to get in the car and hunt the sucker down.” The thing is, I believe her, and we share a laugh which eases some of the tension that’s gripped my body all day.

“You know you can tell me, right? We haven’t known each other for very long, but I like you, and I know how it feels when you’re in a new place without people to talk to. Sure, I have friends back home who I can talk to on the phone, but it’s not the same as having somebody in your face, up close and personal. So, you know, if you ever want to share...”

The thing is, I’ve been bursting all day. Dying for somebody to talk to. Corey’s removed from the situation – it’s not like she spends one-on-one time with any of the players, nor does she pal around with Coach Kozak or any of the other staff members. I’m safe... I think.

“Promise you’ll keep a secret?”

“Of course.”

That’s when I tell her about Ryder. Finding me on the side of the road, waiting with me, dinner. Then, for the sake of context, I confess what happened in my office when he brought me the cookies last week. By the time I’m finished, she’s wide-eyed in shock. “Good for you!”

Okay, so maybe she’s not so shocked. “Excuse me?” I laugh. “I don’t think you’re getting the picture.”

“A hot guy is super into you, brought you cookies, kissed you until your panties melted off —”

“I said nothing about that,” I mutter, while struggling to keep up with her slow, smooth pace. How does she make it look so effortless?

“– and he went out of his way to hang out with you when you were alone, and he makes you laugh. And even though you keep reminding him it’s not a good idea, he can’t keep his lips off you. I fail to see the problem.”

“Did I lapse into another language or something? I am the team’s mental health specialist. I can’t hook up with anybody.”

Her nose wrinkles. “It’s sort of a gray area, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely not! There’s a code of ethics I have to adhere to.”

“You are the team’s therapist. You’re here to help the players improve their performance.”

“Yes. That’s right.”

“But you’re not, like, their personal psychologist. There’s a difference, right?”

As much as I want to agree with her — and I really do, because it would let me off the hook — I can’t give in that quickly. “The whole thing is super unprofessional.”

“I mean, fine, you could look at it that way if you wanted to beat yourself up.”

“What other way is there to look at it?”

She shrugs, then extends an arm to help me steady myself when I start to wobble. “You could look at it as being attracted to somebody. A nice person. Somebody who clearly likes you back. I think it’s silly to pretend something like that doesn’t exist. You can tell yourself all you want that you’re two grown adults who can ignore it, but it’s obvious you can’t.” She slides a guilty look my way. “No offense.”

If only it were all as simple as she makes it out to be. “I just don’t know how I’m supposed to face him now as a professional.”

“You keep using that word.”

“It’s what I am — or what I’m trying to be.”

“Like I said, you’re not anybody’s personal psychologist. You’re a team therapist. And I’m not trying to belittle what you do, at all. But you’re here to help them improve their performance. You’re not digging around in their heads and helping them process trauma and all that. It feels like a different situation to me.”

Then she turns around and starts skating backwards like the show-off she is. “Hey,” she adds with a wink. “Who knows? This could be your way of helping him improve. You could be just what he needs.”

I would tell her she's crazy if it weren't for the sight of the players up above, making their way from the gym to the locker room on the other side of the rink. If only she knew the full story, but she can't. She's a nice person and could turn out to be a very good friend, but we are not at that place yet. I'm not sure we ever will be.

That's why I can't explain the way my mouth goes dry at the sight of Ryder laughing and joking with none other than Ash and Soren. Seeing the three of them together in their workout clothes turns my insides as cold as the ice I'm clumsily gliding over. What if he tells them? What if they tell him? What if they're laughing about me right this very second?

I feel the toe pick catching the ice before the inevitable happens and I scramble in a desperate attempt to stay upright. It doesn't go well – putting it mildly. The next thing I know I'm flat on my face.

“We need to invest in some padding for you,” Corey suggests as she helps me up. I have no idea how she does it – somehow, she manages to keep her balance while helping me find mine. “You okay?”

No, that is not the word I would use, especially when I look up to find all three men watching. I can't read their expressions, but it doesn't matter. I want to die of embarrassment either way.

HARLOW

I would swear I'm having one of those dreams where I can't get out the door no matter how I try. The tank top I wanted to wear has a stain that didn't come out in the wash, so I had to get changed. A mascara accident meant I had to take off the makeup I already applied on that eye and start over.

Finally, it seems like I have everything together. I'm scurrying out the door when a text comes through—no surprise, it's from Corey. She's probably waiting for me down at the park, where a jazz festival is set to take place tonight. Not that I hate jazz or anything, but I wouldn't ordinarily buy tickets for an event like this if it weren't for her encouragement. "You need to get out and stop brooding so much." She has a point. What's the alternative? Sitting around here all night, worrying that every moment Ryder spends around the rest of the team, he could be revealing our secret?

The problem is, Corey's text isn't a reminder to get a move on, the way I expected it to be.

So sorry – something came up, and I can't make it. Please don't be mad.

Terrific. Now I'm stuck with a ticket to an event I didn't really want to go to in the first place, and I'm dressed and wearing make-up and the whole nine yards. Now what do I do?

I'm about to drop my keys into the little dish by the front door when something stops me. I don't know what. Common sense, maybe? The reminder that just because she can't make it doesn't mean I can't go and wander around for a while?

According to the event's website, there will be food and drinks. It might not be a bad idea to wander around for a while, try out a few new things, and listen to some nice music in the meantime. I don't need to have Corey with me.

If I were my own patient, I would tell myself to open up and push myself out of my comfort zone. Why is it so easy to give advice, but so hard to take it? I'm still hesitant as I continue out the front door and lock up behind me. I've never been the kind of person who does well when I'm out on my own – it took ages for me to get comfortable eating by myself while out in public, for instance. Even with a book to read, I always felt conspicuous. But I got over that, so I can get over this. I'm going to have a nice time at this event if it kills me.

Maybe I need to lighten up a little bit.

The sight of a beautifully decorated park perks me up in a hurry. I park my rental and wander over to the makeshift gate to have my ticket scanned, and by the time I'm ushered past the volunteers I'm already tapping my toes to the lively beat of a quartet playing on one of the two stages set up at either end of the festival area. There are a few older couples dancing, while others hang out in chairs and on blankets spread out over the grass. Food vendors line either side of the large, rectangular area, while musicians sit at tables where they've set up displays of CDs to sell. It's a fun, relaxed, vibe, and I'm glad I decided to come by myself. There are worse things than spending an evening listening to music and sampling different foods and wines while surrounded by a bunch of people who seem pretty cool and laid-back.

I almost pass by a table set up in front of one of the food trucks, where cups of ceviche are arranged. The price of the ticket included food, so nothing stops me from grabbing a cup and a disposable fork. When I back away, I hit something firm. Something that lets out a soft grunt.

“Oh, I'm sorry—” The words die in my mouth when I find myself looking up into Soren's smiling face. Good thing I have a tight grip on the ceviche, or it might end up all over our feet.

“I thought that was you.” There’s nothing but kindness in his voice as he looks at me up and down. “You look nice. It’s good to see you here.”

I wish I could say the same, but then I can’t seem to find the words to say anything. Of all people, why did it have to be him? Suddenly, dread grips my heart. “Are you here with the rest of the team?”

He scoffs, laughing gently while shaking his head. “Those guys? They’re not exactly into jazz.”

“But you are?”

“I’ve always enjoyed it. My parents raised me to appreciate different genres – my mother was a musician before she married my father.” I wonder why she had to stop being one, but it’s none of my business.

“Are you here alone?” I ask.

His head bobs up and down. “You?”

“My friend bailed on me at the last minute.”

“Well, if you want some company...” His brows lift. I see the hope in his eyes and it tears me up inside. He seems so genuinely sweet, especially when he’s on his own like this. I don’t doubt being around the other players changes him a little – that’s only human, wanting to save face in front of your friends. Now I’m seeing Soren at his most natural, wearing a t-shirt and jeans and looking totally at ease.

It would be pretty stupid if I refused, wouldn’t it? I don’t have any reason to – at least nothing that wouldn’t come off sounding rude. “Sure. I could use somebody to talk to.”

His smile widens until it’s almost cheesy. “Great.” I really wish he weren’t so easy to like.

“There are some really excellent vintners on the list of vendors,” he explains, nodding in the direction of a cluster of tents where people are handing out small cups of wine. “That was part of the reason I wanted to be here tonight.”

“Are you a wine expert?”

“That’s another thing my parents raised me to appreciate. You see, I come from a long line of financiers, and with that comes a certain standard.” He raises his nose and sniffs the air while making a sour face.

“Oh, I see. And here you are, the hockey player.”

“Not exactly the dream my family had for me. They fail to understand that a man can appreciate a fine wine while also grunting and sweating for a living.”

“Do they ever come to visit?”

“They’re very busy.”

Something tells me I shouldn’t push for more information, so I don’t, instead accepting a cup filled with a light, crisp Chardonnay that pairs perfectly with the ceviche I haven’t had a chance to enjoy while we’ve been talking. “This is fantastic. I don’t keep a lot of wine in the house, but then I’m usually alone. It would seem like a waste.”

“My idea of a perfect evening would be to settle back with some old vinyl records, a nice Chablis, and a tray of fruit and cheese to pair with it.”

“That does sound nice. You’re not much of a partier, are you?”

“It has its place,” he admits with a shrug. “Sometimes you meet amazing people when you go out to a new place.”

I walked right into that, didn’t I? And big surprise, I can’t help but blush at the reference. At least he’s nice enough not to tease me about it. It’s enough that I obviously understand what he’s getting at.

“I have to admit, I don’t know much about wine. I know what I like, but that’s about it.”

He shrugs it off. “That’s all you need to know. What you like. What you enjoy. What speaks to you and awakens your senses.”

When our eyes meet, it’s more than my senses that awaken. A telltale heat unfurls below my waist and it’s suddenly difficult to breathe. Wouldn’t it be nice if I could lean against him and let him put his arm around me the way I see other couples

interacting as they wander from table to table? It would be comforting, for sure, and it would feel so natural and easy.

And it would be a tremendous mistake. It's like I want to get myself into trouble. But some things can't be denied, and I cannot deny my attraction to him. If anything, it's only deepening every minute we spend together while he tells me about his wine cellar. He's clearly proud of it, and it's nice to see and hear his enthusiasm. "I would never expect a jock to have a wine cellar."

"I guess there's a lot about me you don't know."

"I guess there is." *Down, girl. Just because he's flirting, doesn't mean you have to flirt back.* No, it doesn't, but it's fun. And it's harmless, too – he already knows damn well how I feel about what went on between us, and how we can never revisit that night. So far, he's been kind enough not to make a reference, thank goodness.

But he has to be thinking about it, right? Just like I am as he lifts a small potato pancake, topped with smoked salmon and crème fraîche to his full, sensual mouth. That's exactly the word to use for him, too. Sensual. He appreciates music, and wine, and food, and seems educated in all three. He's the kind of person I would like to have as a friend – I'm sure there's plenty I could learn.

By the time we've made our rounds of the entire event, night has fallen, and the park is lit by paper lanterns that cast a colorful, almost magical glow. I feel good — happy, comfortable, glad I came. And I know Soren has a lot to do with that.

What a shame there can't be more than this.

I would swear the man is reading my mind. "You don't think it would be crossing the line for you to stop by my house sometime, do you?"

"Oh. Um..."

"To check out the wine cellar," he insists with a devilish grin that makes me wonder how truthful he's being. "Between you and me, you're the only person I know who seems like they

would appreciate it. You might not know much about wine now, but you seem like you'd like to learn."

"I would," I admit against my better judgment. Really, I should tell him the last thing I want to do is learn about wine. Maybe I'll suddenly develop a wine allergy overnight. Whatever it takes, I need to set the boundary and hold it.

"I could even cook for you," he offers. "Whatever you like. I don't have much of an excuse to cook, so it would be a treat for me."

Why does he have to be so sweet? And so cute, and so charming, and so good in bed? Lord, help me, I am in trouble here.

"We'll see," I murmur— and when his smile widens, it's obvious he knows he's got me on the hook.

And maybe it's the wine flowing through my system, but I can't pretend I don't like it just a little bit.

HARLOW

Is there anything that can strike fear in the heart of a grown woman quite like an impending visit from her parents?

After hours of scrubbing and wiping and polishing, I take a step back and observe my handiwork. The entire downstairs sparkles. There isn't so much as a crumb or a stray speck of dust in sight. The first-floor bedroom which I use as my office is set up exactly how I envisioned it, and I feel extremely grown-up and important. I can't wait to show it off, just like I can't wait for them to see the pool in the backyard. Maybe it's shallow, but I want them to know I've made it. That all the time I spent working my butt off was worth it.

I guess I want them to be proud of me, too. It's not that they've ever made me wonder how they felt, but growing up in my house, I was sort of overshadowed by my brother and his accomplishments. Dad cared about my academic achievements, but at heart he was always focused on sports. His teams, his players, his son, that sort of thing. I want to show him that even though I didn't inherit his athleticism, I'm still accomplished.

I'm a grown woman, but I don't think any of us ever really grows beyond wanting to make our parents proud.

Once it's obvious there's nothing more I can do to get the house ready, I wash off in the shower and go through the motions of making myself look like an actual, human person, instead of a troll who crawled out from under a bridge. By the

time I'm dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, jogging down the stairs, the doorbell rings.

Right away, my insides clench. I really hope they're on their best behavior today, even if it's only going to be the three of us. I don't know if I could handle one of their fights. And now I understand that's where some of my anxiety has come from: wanting to make everything perfect so they'll have less of a reason to pick at and hurt each other.

When I open the door, they both look happy – a promising start. “Wow, this is quite a house!” Dad offers one of his almost crushing bear hugs after crossing the threshold. Right away he's looking around, sizing things up.

And naturally, Mom can't help but add her two cents. “This is a lot of square footage for one person,” she murmurs, sliding designer sunglasses up over her freshly highlighted blond locks while turning in a slow circle. “They clearly spared no expense for you.”

“I guess they thought I was worth it,” I offer with a shrug and a soft laugh. “Come on. I want to show you everything. I ordered Indian food for dinner, and it'll be here soon.” One of their favorites. I hope it helps keep them in a good mood.

“You know that's never a problem for us.” Dad bends to kiss my forehead and I can't help but bask in the warmth of his approval. “This is really something.”

So far, so good. It doesn't take long to show off—the house really isn't that big, after all—and soon, I'm leading them out to the backyard. “I'm addicted to fresh orange juice in the morning,” I confess with a laugh while showing off the trees. “Isn't it neat?”

“This is really impressive.” I can feel myself glowing as Mom expresses her approval. The woman is not easy to impress. “The pool is gorgeous. I would have a hard time leaving for work every day if I had this outside.” I'm sure she'd spend hours at a time swimming laps to keep her petite body trim.

“You have to clean it yourself?” Dad asks, always the skeptic.

“Actually, somebody comes out to do maintenance a couple of times a week. The team set it up.”

“What a life,” Dad observes with a proud grin. “It’s a shame you’re alone out here.” Whoops. There it is. There always has to be a caveat.

“Yeah, well, we can’t have everything.” It’s a relief when I get a text saying my delivery is only a few minutes away.

“Dinner’s almost here. I’ll go in and get the table set.” As I practically flee into the house, I rack my brain for ideas on how to change the subject before the conversation gets uncomfortable. I don’t need to be reminded of how painfully single I am, and how things weren’t supposed to turn out this way. I love them both, but they’re pretty clueless when it comes to emotions. That’s probably why they’ve spent the entirety of their marriage at each other’s throats. They just don’t get it.

Mom follows me inside, and I wish she hadn’t. I need a moment to catch my breath. She’s probably trying to get a moment away from him. I’m surprised they made it here without one of them pushing the other out of the car. “So how is work? Is everyone treating you well?”

I can handle this kind of conversation. “Oh, yeah. Everybody’s great.”

Dad comes through the door just in time to hear me say that, and all he can do is laugh. “You mean a bunch of professional athletes are open to the idea of therapy?”

“That’s right, Dan,” Mom mutters with a roll of her eyes.

“Make sure we all know what an expert you are. Oh, wait. You don’t work with professionals, do you?”

“Actually, they’re coming around.” My voice is a little too loud, my tone a little too bright. The way it always is when I’m trying to steer the ship back on course before they wreck everything. It’s amazing how easy it is to fall straight back into old patterns. “It wasn’t easy convincing them of the benefits, but they’re not stupid. They understand I’m here to help.”

“I don’t know if I could work around all those men,” Mom muses while I hand her a bottle of wine and a corkscrew.

“I don’t know,” Dad mutters. “I think you’d do just fine.” My skin is crawling. Why do they have to do this? Why can’t they behave themselves for a few hours? A single dinner, that’s all I ask for.

“They’re all really sweet,” I insist while gratefully taking the glass of wine Mom has poured. I’m going to need a lot more of this before the night’s over.

“That’s good to hear. You deserve a little sweetness in your life after everything you’ve been through.” Mom pats my shoulder, murmuring in sympathy. Now I’m wondering if I should just take the whole bottle.

“Cynthia,” Dad grunts through his teeth.

“What? I’m not allowed to express sympathy for my child?”

He runs a hand over his salt-and-pepper crew cut, scowling.

“You said you wouldn’t bring it up.”

Right on cue, my stomach tightens and my pulse picks up speed. I feel myself shrinking, getting smaller and smaller with every breath I take, wanting to melt into nothingness while the two of them battle it out. All the therapy they’ve been through, and they haven’t heard a single thing.

“So I’m supposed to forget that my daughter went through hell?” She even strokes my hair as she speaks. I wish it were a comforting gesture. “I’m sorry, but I’m not like you. I can’t ignore the pain of others.”

“Listen to you!” he practically howls when he laughs, throwing his head back and everything. “Such a saint.”

“Alright,” I finally interject, holding up my hands. “That’s enough. I wanted you guys to come and have a nice dinner with me, but if all you’re going to do is fight—”

“It’s fine,” Dad insists, walking around the island and wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “We’ll behave. Won’t we?” The look he gives Mom could melt steel.

“I’m not the one who started arguing,” Mom insists in a soft voice as she raises her glass to her lips. “Looking around, I do have to wonder how Kyle is doing now that he ruined the best thing that ever happened to him. What’s going on with him? Have you spoken to him at all?”

Thank God the doorbell rings when it does, or else I might have no choice but to break down in tears as she asks about the one person I begged her not to mention in front of me ever again.

HARLOW

I swear, the woman is completely clueless. She's my mother, and I love her, but her emotional intelligence is close to nonexistent.

"I swear, if I knew the kind of person he really was I never would've introduced them in the first place," she tells Dad as I enter the kitchen with a bag in each hand. "Some people put on a great front."

My heart is pounding as I set the bags down on the counter. "Can we not talk about this?" I whisper, but I don't think she hears me. She's too busy going through the same diatribe I'm sure she's already gone through countless times. I don't even think Dad is listening, but then what else is new?

"When I think of the time I spent mentoring that guy. He thinks he's such a big shot in his office? He would be nowhere if it weren't for me. And how does he repay me?"

"It didn't have anything to do with you," I remind her in a soft voice while wishing I could melt into the floor.

"I'm just saying, you'd think he'd be a little more grateful for the good thing he had."

Considering she's never shown much gratitude for what she has, I'm not sure how much room she has to speak. The way Dad's jaw tightens tells me he's thinking along the same lines. It's not like he's got much room to talk, either.

I place the containers on the counter and busy myself opening them up since the alternative is crying in front of them, and I

would rather not do that. “I don’t speak to him,” I murmur with a lump in my throat. The one thing, the only thing I asked not to talk about, and of course she has to carelessly launch into the topic.

I shouldn’t be surprised. There were times when I thought she was closer to Kyle than I’ve ever been to either of them. Not only do they have real estate in common, but neither of them cares very much for sports. Since sports were always such a big part of life in my family, it was something they bonded over.

“So he’s not posting pictures of new girls on social media?”

“Cynthia...” Dad whispers. She only ignores him like she always has.

“I’ve blocked him.”

“That’s good. You don’t want the reminder in your face all the time.” She starts stroking my hair again, but I have the excuse of taking the food to the table to free myself. I can’t breathe. Somebody sucked all the air out of the room.

“I’m proud of the way you’re handling this,” she coos.

Dad pounds a fist against the counter. “For God’s sake, Cynthia, would you stop already?”

“What did I do?”

“It’s dead obvious the girl is upset, but you’re too busy running your mouth to notice.”

“She’s fine. I didn’t upset her – did I, sweetheart?”

“Who wouldn’t be upset? You insisted on reminding her of something I’m sure she would rather forget, and why? Because you want to talk about what he did to you. Everything is about you.”

“That is just not true, and I am sick and tired of you making me out to be a villain.”

“Could you two stop, please?” There must be an awful lot of anger in my voice, since they both go silent, staring at me with

wide eyes. “I was really hoping we could have a nice dinner without fighting.”

“Try telling him that,” Mom retorts, jerking her chin in Dad’s direction.

“Somebody has to speak up for the kid every once in a while.”

I’m going to lose my mind. It’s as simple as that. They are bound and determined to drive me crazy. Now, eating is the last thing I feel like doing, so I play with my butter chicken and basmati rice, tearing a piece of naan into tiny shreds while they go back-and-forth in tight, hushed voices.

Is it any wonder that I wasted so much time with Kyle? I was convinced ours was an ideal relationship. Why? Because we didn’t fight like this. That was pretty much my entire criteria. Growing up with parents who live to get under each other’s skin left me completely unaware of what a healthy relationship actually looks like.

I guess it shouldn’t come as any big surprise that I decided to have a three-way with two strangers. That would shut the conversation down real quick, wouldn’t it? If I told them how I spent that night? The idea leaves me barely stifling a laugh. Of course, I would never mention it, not for anything. But it might be fun, watching Mom swallow her own tongue.

No wonder I wasn’t willing to give Kyle another chance. How could I when I’ve been watching this my whole life? When I was a little kid, I didn’t understand what went on behind the scenes of their marriage – I didn’t even know what infidelity was. I had no way of understanding. I only knew they didn’t seem to like each other very much. Eventually, when it was obvious they spent more time fooling around with other people than with each other, I must’ve promised myself without knowing it that I would never put up with anything like that. Not for any reason.

Is there any chance for me to have a normal, healthy relationship when this is the marriage I witnessed every day? Am I doomed to a lifetime of regrettable decisions? I don’t want to believe that, but I have to wonder. I really do. I haven’t exactly made the best choices lately. I figured it was an

anomaly. Usually, I'm too cautious. But I allowed myself to ignore every red flag Kyle ever flew, didn't I? There's got to be something wrong with that. There's got to be something wrong with me.

Why did I want them to come for this visit?

"These samosas are delicious," Dad offers. My head bobs up and down, but there's too much emotion clogging my throat to let me speak. All I can do is savor the silence that falls between us. Even though it's kind of icy and cold, it's better than listening to them fight.

HARLOW

“E ven though you’re out here alone,” Dad says as I lead him and Mom to the door, “I’ll rest easier knowing you’re in such a nice place. You’ve really done well for yourself.”

“You’ll be doing better when you can actually purchase a house of your own.” Because why would my mother allow me to bask in the glow of praise, for even a few seconds?

“I’m working on it,” I say with a sigh.

“Can you just let the kid be happy for a minute?” Dad demands. They were so close to getting out the door, too. Now, he turns to her, glaring.

“What? Why am I not allowed to have an opinion?”

“Enough,” I groan. “Honestly, this is not the way to get a follow-up invite.”

“I just don’t see why I’m always the one in the wrong,” she grumbles. She folds her arms and he does the same and I’m starting to think I’m never going to get rid of them.

The buzzing from my phone is a distraction. I pull it from my pocket and find a text from Ryder, of all people. Yet another mistake I’ve made, even if it’s not nearly as big as the mistake I made with Soren and Ash.

Ryder: I’m in the area and thought I’d see if you’re busy.

That’s it. I have to appreciate the simplicity. He didn’t invite himself over. There are no demands being made. Sure, I’ve

only told him countless times what a bad idea it is for us to spend time together and my words seem to fall on deaf ears, but right now it's just nice to know somebody would like to spend time with me. I bet it would be a lot more fun than what I've gone through tonight.

"Sorry about her," Dad murmurs while giving me a hug. "You know how she is." Yes, and I know how happy he is to pretend he's the hero of the situation. The good parent. If I didn't know better, I would think he enjoys it when they fight in front of me, because it makes him look good.

It's better for me not to say anything, so I don't, hugging him back before gently but firmly ushering him through the door. "I'll give you a call," I tell Mom after kissing her cheek, nodding and murmuring my way through her excuses.

I wonder what it would be like to have parents who leave me feeling happy and lighthearted after a visit. Here I am, glad it's over, waving goodbye as Mom pulls away in her Mercedes – I'm sure she insisted she drive, because her car is so much nicer than Dad's. Just another thing she can hold over his head, while he holds the fact that he supported us for years over hers.

Meanwhile, all I can do is fold up and sink onto the steps, exhausted from all of it. Emotion I've been fighting since Mom first mentioned Kyle rushes up all at once and starts leaking from me in the form of tears. I'm so tired of hoping for more than they'll ever be able to give me. Shouldn't I know better by now? I have a freaking doctorate in psychology, yet there's still a part of me that hopes for more than they'll ever provide. So stupid, childish, but I'm only human. Somehow, every interaction ends up being about them – who's the better parent, who is more supportive. Does it make me a bad daughter if I'm glad they're gone?

Here I am, with nothing but good things in front of me, but all I can think about is how alone I am thanks to Dad constantly bringing it up. I know he only meant it as a concerned parent and it wasn't like a personal insult. I can't help my brain going where it goes. I wish I had somebody to hold me at a time like this.

Of all times for Ryder to come to mind. I never answered his text. Because I'm feeling extremely sorry for myself, and probably because of the wine I drank, it feels like a good idea to text him now.

Me: I'm busy sitting on my front steps crying like an idiot after a visit from my parents.

Then I drop the phone next to me and cover my face with my hands, because as it turns out, there are still more tears to be shed.

It's another few minutes before I hear a car pull to a stop in front of the house. At first I assume Mom or Dad forgot something. Maybe there's one more aspect of my life they wanted to pick apart while swearing it's only because they're concerned about me. I quickly wipe away my tears and brace myself for whatever is coming.

There's no way to brace myself for what I find, a '69 Stingray and the tall, broad-shouldered hockey player coming my way. I'm at a loss for words.

"Ryder?" I whisper when I find my voice, and all I can think about is how terrible I must look. There's probably makeup running down my cheeks, my nose is running. I have definitely looked more attractive.

It doesn't seem to bother him as he sits down next to me without being invited, then drapes an arm over my shoulders. He doesn't say anything. It's enough for him to be here. I never really understood until now that sometimes, you can offer support without saying a word. That's what he's doing, and I can't remember ever being as grateful as I am right now. He's not demanding anything of me. Not even an explanation. He just wants to be here.

It doesn't take long for the tears to slow, then stop. "I'm sorry," I mumble, running my fists under my eyes. "You must think—"

"Don't tell me what I think." He hooks a finger under my chin and tips my head back so we're eye-to-eye. It doesn't occur to me to resist. Probably because I don't want to. Not when he's

looking at me so kindly, warmly, with so much understanding. When was the last time I met someone who gets me the way he does? I don't have to be anybody but me, and he still wants to be here.

He still wants to kiss me, too. I don't stop him. This is all I want right now, sitting here in front of my house, while the sun sets and the world is still and peaceful. I just want to be kissed, and held, and understood.

And when a familiar heat flares to life, it's clear I want more than that. I want to be wanted. Desired. I want to forget everything for a little while – my responsibilities, my screwed-up family life, my loneliness. I want to forget that in favor of feeling good.

His face falls a little when I pull away, breaking the kiss, only for his brows to lift when I stand and extend a hand for him to follow me. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I can hardly wait until we're inside, kicking the door closed behind me before practically launching myself into his arms. “Touch me,” I whisper, breathless and aching, almost consumed by the sudden rush of almost euphoric relief that this is finally happening. After weeks of flirting and telling myself it was wrong, I'm taking what I want.

And he gives it to me, lifting me off my feet so I can wrap my legs around him. Without asking, he carries me up the stairs. I point to my room, but instead of dropping me on the bed, he lowers me slowly before pulling off his t-shirt and revealing a tanned, chiseled body I'm dying to touch. When I reach for him, he stretches out on top of me.

His body trembles against mine, his breath coming short and quick as I run my hands over his shoulders and down his back while he skims his lips over my jaw and down my throat. It's such a thrill, and all it does is leave me wanting more. I am ready for him, for everything he wants to give me.

“Yes, Ryder, yes...” I close my eyes, lost in sensation, and he grinds his hips against me in response. Oh, that feels good.

Now it's a race, both of us frantic to take off as much as possible as fast as possible. He unbuttons his jeans while I slide my shorts and thong down with shaking hands. This is happening. I'm so glad this is happening.

"Look at me," he whispers once he's rolled a condom down his steely length. "Look at me, Harlow."

Our eyes lock and I shiver again while parting my thighs. The way he says my name turns the ache between my thighs into something painful, it will kill me if he doesn't give me what I need now, right now.

And then he does, pushing forward, stretching and filling me. My gasp is stifled by his mouth covering mine, his tongue plunging inside the way he plunges into my heat. All I can do is wrap my legs around his hips and draw him deeper, then hold on tight.

RYDER

I can't remember the last time I looked forward to waking up in the morning. Like, the second my eyes open, there's a smile on my face. There's something to be happy about.

And that something is the girl lying in bed next to me.

I can't remember the last time I spent the whole night in bed with someone. And now I understand what I've been missing out on. When I roll onto my side to find her sleeping peacefully, snoring softly with her golden hair fanned out over the pillow, it does something to me. It touches part of me, it gives me a sense of peace and comfort to see her sleeping like an angel on sheets that smell like perfume and sex.

My fingers twitch with the need to touch her, to just brush the hair away from her face or remind myself of how soft her skin is. I don't want to ruin the moment.

Instead, I ease myself out of bed and put on my jeans before heading out to the bathroom. She's still asleep when I'm finished, so I tiptoe downstairs. I am not much of a cook, but I'm sure I can handle putting a meal together that won't embarrass me.

She said she loves her trees, didn't she? They catch my attention as soon as I step into the bright kitchen, and I go out there to pick an armful of oranges that I bring back inside and juice while coffee brews. If anybody knew I was going to all this trouble even for somebody as special as she is, I would never live it down.

They don't get it. They wouldn't be able to if they never knew somebody like Harlow. She's the only woman alive who could make me drop everything to go to her. It's more than liking her or wanting her. Even if nothing happened last night, it would've been enough to comfort her as she cried. I would've been okay with that.

By the time I'm scrambling eggs in a bowl, I hear her footsteps on the stairs. It's insane the way my heart swells and my insides go all shaky. Who is she turning me into? I don't even mind, especially when she appears wearing nothing but a big t-shirt while her hair sits in a messy bun on top of her head.

Does she have any idea how gorgeous she is? Probably not – she's not the kind of girl who spends a ton of time thinking about stuff like that, which is probably another reason why I like her as much as I do. She's not totally consumed by appearances. That kind of girl bores the hell out of me.

“Good morning. I hope you don't mind me getting comfortable in the kitchen, but I was starving and I figured you might be, too.”

She gives me one of her soft smiles, and I would swear my heart skips a beat. “It's really nice. Thank you. I am hungry.” She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear as she wanders into the room. “I didn't have much of an appetite last night.”

“Are you feeling okay now?”

“Better.” She looks away but can't hide the blush that touches her cheeks. I'm not a total dick so I won't call her out on it, but I have to smile to myself.

“Are scrambled eggs okay?”

“Sure, but you really don't have to go to the trouble.”

“Who said it's any trouble? You're worth it, anyway.” I hardly recognize myself. Who am I? It's like Christmas morning, and all because she came downstairs.

She perches on one of the stools at the island and sips orange juice while I cook. I didn't expect her to be super easy-going this morning — I'm not an idiot, and I know she's got to be

feeling conflicted after last night. All her talk about being professional and all that and look where we ended up. I am willing to give her space and let her talk about it if she wants to.

Really, though, I would rather not get into it at all. We can't undo what we did, and I wouldn't want to if I could. Last night meant a lot to me, more than I expected. And I'm not going to pretend to be sorry.

"Thank you so much," her voice is soft as I slide a plate of scrambled eggs and toast in front of her. "Really, you didn't have to. I'm sure you've got better things to do."

That's a weird thing to say. Better things to do? She sounds like she's talking to a stranger, and I'm anything but. "Don't worry about it. I thought I'd make sure you were taken care of." Her smile is brief, and it stirs up a lot of questions in me as I plate my own food, then sit next to her. Is it my imagination, or does she tense up?

"So, what do you have planned today?" I ask.

"Oh, I don't know." I wait for more, but she goes silent, eyes on her plate.

"It's just I was thinking we could go see a movie. Or we could find some out-of-the-way place to go to dinner. We could even do both. Whatever you're in the mood for." Anything, so long as I can see her again. The thought of walking out of here kills me. I don't want to leave her. It's pathetic, but it's how I feel. I'm still sitting here next to her and I can't wait to see her again.

"I..." She sets down her fork and wipes her mouth on a napkin, then downs what's left in her juice glass before she turns my way. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Why not?"

"You know why not. And I do have things I need to get done today – I was kind of hoping to take the day to catch up on some reports, do my laundry, that sort of thing."

You could still do those things. I have to catch myself before I say something unforgivably stupid. Nobody wants to hang out

with the guy who's clingy and demanding, so it would be better for me to play it cool.

Even though I'm disappointed as hell, I shrug. "Got it."

"It meant so much that you came over last night. I really needed somebody, and you were there for me."

Why do I feel like I'm getting the brush off? That's a stupid question. I *am* getting the brush off. She's trying to come up with a nice way of telling me we're one and done. Now I wish I hadn't stuck around and made breakfast.

"It was nothing," I murmur before going back to my food. "I'm glad I was in the area, so you didn't have to be alone." The words are sour in my mouth, and this whole thing feels like one big joke, but I am not going to force myself on somebody who doesn't seem to want me around. No matter how much I want to be around.

It's like I'm never going to get a read on this girl. She's so hot and cold, like two different people.

And maybe it makes me a total idiot, but I want to get to know both sides. It's like I already told her, I'm not good at pretending to like people, and I suck at hiding the way I really feel. When I find somebody who makes me want to know them, it means they're special.

If there's one thing I'm not, it's a quitter. I'm not going to quit trying to be with her, even if I end up getting kicked in the face for it.

HARLOW

Torture. This is torture. And the worst part is, it's all my fault.

It's amazing, what seems so natural and inevitable when you're caught up in your emotions and in your neediness. It's possible to talk yourself into anything when you feel the way I felt last night; helpless, alone, with nobody who understands. He was here, and I've wanted him ever since we first kissed.

I was weak, and I made yet another mistake.

He's going to hate me for it, but he can't hate me worse than I hate myself. He's a sweet, caring person who obviously likes me. He deserves better than what I'm going to give him. That's the way it has to be. When am I going to stop messing up like this?

One thing I know for sure, just as surely as I know my own name, if he knew what went on with Soren and Ash, he'd hate me. I have no doubt as sweet and kind as he is, all of it would turn on its head once he found out what we did. Men are like that, even kind ones with sweet natures they try to hide behind a rough exterior.

He would thank me if he knew I'm only trying to keep him from getting hurt even worse.

When he says he has to go, it's like a gift. I feel so guilty and wrong but still fight back a sigh of relief when he stands.

"You don't have to worry about that," I assure him when he picks up a sponge at the sink. "You already made breakfast.

The dishes are my job now.” Somehow, even that seems to disappoint him. I can’t say or do the right thing here no matter how I try. Somebody’s going to get hurt, either way. I am so disgusted with myself, I can hardly breathe.

He heads upstairs without a word and finishes getting dressed, and when he offers a hug before leaving, I gladly give him one. I’m not trying to hurt him, and I don’t want to come off as some cold bitch.

Something tells me no matter what I do, he’s going to get hurt. It’s the hope in those steely eyes when he pulls back, the way he looks over his shoulder at me one last time before getting in the car.

Harlow, you really did it this time.

RYDER: Any chance I could come in for an impromptu session?

I close my eyes, leaning back in my chair and taking a deep breath after reading his latest text. He is not making this easy. Honestly, I don’t deserve for this to be easy, but he’s also making it worse for himself by pursuing me like this. I mean, it’s been four days, and he still insists on sending me random messages and offering to hang out. That hasn’t worked, so he’s resorting to bringing work into it.

If I thought he were any sort of threat, I might actually be worried about his tenacity. But it’s not like that. From the beginning, he’s only wanted us to get to know each other better because he likes me – and because I like him, I haven’t been able to resist. Look where that got me. Hurting somebody I genuinely like.

Right now, though? I don’t like him so much because he’s being deliberately obtuse. That’s why I send back the same sort of short-but-to-the-point message I’ve responded with all week.

Me: My schedule is full. Maybe we can schedule something another time.

“Please, lay off me,” I whisper, turning the phone face-down on the desk so I won’t have to look at the screen.

I’m a terrible person. There’s no other explanation for how reckless I’ve been. I took advantage of his availability and of him liking me. I used him to soothe myself. That was wrong. And I know that if I put it to him that way, it would only hurt him worse. But it’s not like I haven’t already told him we can’t be serious together. He’s choosing to ignore that.

If only that made me feel any better. If only he were the only one to blame.

My stomach is growling by the time I finish the work I wanted to have done before lunch. It’s a little late, but the trucks should still be outside. I finally pull together the courage to check my phone as I push back from my desk, and it’s a relief when I find nothing from Ryder. *Please, let this mean you got the message.* Otherwise, I don’t know how much longer I can go without telling him off.

The good thing about being late for lunch is the lack of people outside. I step right up to a cart offering wraps and order a chicken Caesar, which I take to one of the empty picnic benches sitting in a shady spot under a cluster of trees. It’s actually pretty nice when the breeze blows, and it’s not like I couldn’t use a little time outdoors, anyway. I’ve been spending so much time in front of a computer, I’m starting to look like a ghost. *Note to self: get a few laps in the pool later.*

The sound of a familiar voice steals my breath all at once.

“This seat taken?”

He’s got to be kidding, right? Before I can shake off my surprise, Ryder sits across from me with a large salad topped with a mound of what looks like grilled chicken and hard-boiled eggs. Something healthy, the sort of thing an athlete should eat.

Why in the world does he have to eat it with me?

“If I didn’t know better, I would think you’re ducking me.” He spears a bunch of chicken and pops it into his mouth.

“Ryder, this is completely inappropriate, and you know it.” Thank God we’re alone out here, though that doesn’t slow my frantically thumping heart.

“It’s pretty inappropriate for you to give me the brush-off with no explanation, too.”

“You know damn well what’s going on. Please, don’t insult my intelligence.”

“Don’t insult mine, then.”

“I told you from the beginning—”

“Then you slept with me, didn’t you?”

I’m going to jump out of my skin if he doesn’t quit it. “Could you please not announce that so loudly?”

“But it’s the truth. You’re sending some seriously mixed signals.”

“And I’m sorry for that. I really, really am. You were there for me when I needed you, and I won’t pretend it wasn’t amazing when we were together. It was. But it can’t happen again. It just can’t. *We* can’t.”

“Wow.” He looked me up and down like he’d never seen me before, making me fight the impulse to shrink under his scrutiny. There’s so much anger in his gaze. I want to look away, but no. That would be too easy. “You’re not who I thought you were.”

“Pardon me?”

“I didn’t think you were the kind of person who screwed around with other people’s feelings like this.” He scoffs, shaking his head while going back to his salad. “Listen to me, talking about feelings. And we’re not even in a session.”

“I told you it was a mistake, and I’m sorry that I gave you the wrong idea. I really, truly am. You’re a great guy and I like you so much, but it’s not meant to be.” I don’t know how much clearer I can make this.

“If this was the way you really felt about it, you shouldn’t have slept with me at all.”

“I know that,” I whisper back. “I am so, so sorry for being stupid and weak. Is that what you want to hear? You’ve got it. It was a moment of weakness, and I regret it only because I ended up hurting you.”

“I never said I was hurt.” Yes, and he is completely full of shit, too. There’s pain written all over his face and it drips from his voice.

“Well, in case you are, I am sorry. You deserve better than that. But I’m not going to be guilted into seeing you again outside of work.”

Nobody has ever been as interested in hard-boiled eggs as he is right now. “Who’s trying to guilt you into anything?” he mutters out of the corner of his mouth

“You are.”

“Well, take a step back. It’s not like that at all. I’m into you, and I thought you were into me. Maybe I’m crazy, but usually that’s what sleeping with somebody means. It’s not like we were strangers. We already liked each other. So I’m sorry if I got the wrong idea.” He rolls his eyes.

“Why don’t you get it? It doesn’t matter if I’m into you or not. It cannot happen. End of story. No going out, no seeing each other outside of work. It’s over — no, it never started,” I add before he can get the wrong idea. “You’re a great guy, and I would like to be friends, but that doesn’t mean we can have a relationship outside of work. There has to be a boundary, end of story.”

He lifts his gaze, smirking. “Even though I got you off three times?”

“That’s not fair,” I whisper. Not so much the fact that he said it, but the way he said it. Like a snide little joke. My blood is on the verge of boiling.

Then again, what can I do about it? Go to Coach Kozak and tell him I’m being harassed? A whole lot of information would end up coming to light, and I would rather it didn’t.

“Please,” I whisper, practically desperate. “We need to leave what happened in the past. There can’t be a ‘you and me’. I wish it could be different. But you need to stop trying to get me to go out with you, and we can’t let anybody know. Okay? Can you please do that for me?”

“You mean I’ll have to see you around here every day and pretend there’s nothing here?” He gestures back and forth between us with his fork. “Maybe you can do that, Harlow, but it’s not that easy for me. Sorry if that isn’t the answer you wanted, but that’s how it is.”

With that he takes what’s left of his food and storms off. I hate to see him go, especially as upset as he is, but I can’t pretend there’s no relief involved, either. I don’t need anybody strolling along, catching us arguing about this.

When I lift my wrap, prepared to take a halfhearted bite, my gaze happens to drift over to the wrap truck.

Where Ash is standing.

If his look of complete shock and disgust means anything, he heard every word we said.

ASH

I might as well be talking to myself.

I spent the entire afternoon running through what I overheard outside. Stewing over it. Waiting for the time I could tell Soren and get his opinion. Where did it get me? Nowhere.

“So what did you do?” He tosses his gear into his bag, then slings it over his shoulder.

“What could I do? I got my wrap and went inside.”

“So you didn’t confront her?”

“No. What would I have said?”

“I don’t know,” he admits with a shrug. “But you seem pretty upset about it, so I figured...”

Sometimes I don’t get him at all. Out of everyone on the team, I would call him my best friend, yet there’re still so many things about our personalities that don’t match. “You mean you don’t care?”

“She is a grown woman. She can sleep with whoever she wants.”

“That’s not what this is about.”

He rolls his eyes, then checks the time on his phone. “No offense, but it’s been a long day, and I would love to get home.”

“Oh. Well, sorry. I didn’t know you were in such a hurry.”

“Don’t be that way.”

“Be what way? I’m serious. Obviously, I’m holding you up.”
Sometimes, I don’t get him at all.

“Come on. Walk with me.” It’s late, past the point where most of the staff have left for the night. The offices are quiet and closed up, and Harlow’s is no exception. She’s probably in a hurry to go fuck somebody new.

My teeth grind when I think about it. Just when I thought we could move forward somehow. Like there was no reason to resent her or anything.

“How did she seem when they were talking?” Soren’s low, steady tone only makes things worse somehow. There’s no getting to him. I usually appreciate that.

“Pissed.”

“And him?”

“He seemed pretty pissed, too.”

“So it’s not going well. Well, I guess he’s not super easy to get along with. You know what a pain in the ass he can be.”

“I don’t care about any of that.”

We step outside, and the practically empty parking lot means we can speak a little more freely. Even staying late for a hard workout didn’t do anything to ease my bitterness. My body is exhausted, but my mind won’t stop turning the problem over and over. *Ryder? Him?*

Times like this, I would swear Soren can read my mind. He’s chuckling as he runs a hand through his hair, which like mine is wet after a shower. “Are you sure this doesn’t have anything to do with your ego?”

“Do me a favor and stop acting like I’m the only one of us that has an ego.”

“Fine, fine.” He holds his hands up in surrender. “Don’t bite my head off.”

“What I want to know is, why is there a double standard?”

He comes to a stop next to his Jeep. When he frowns, it's like I'm finally getting through. "How so?"

"I don't know about you, but she begged me to keep us a secret." Until now, we haven't discussed what went on during our individual sessions. It doesn't feel like I'm breaking any trust now, since it hardly seems like she deserves it.

"Yeah. I got the same speech. Don't tell anybody, and it can never happen again."

"Exactly!" Finally. He hears me. "Then she can go and fuck him? It doesn't compute."

"He did seem pretty pissy when we were on the ice," he muses, staring at the building.

"Yeah, no shit. Because she's giving him the same bullshit she gave us."

"He's a big boy. He can handle it."

"That's not the point."

"Then what is the point?" He folds his arms, his brow lifted.

"What is really bothering you?"

It's not an easy question to answer. I know deep down what sticks in my craw and won't let me go, but it's a different story putting it into words. I'm not exactly proud of myself for feeling the way I do.

If there's anybody I can be honest with, though, it's him. He might be a pain in the ass, and I would swear he only pretends he doesn't understand me half the time because he knows he pisses me off, but he gets it. "What makes him so different? Why don't the rules apply to him, but they do to us?"

"I don't know. I guess that's the kind of thing you would have to ask her."

The idea was already bubbling in the back of my head before he said it — hearing it only strengthens my resolve. "Yeah. That's exactly what I'm gonna do."

"Hold on." He follows me away from his car and toward mine. "What are you planning to do?"

“I’m going to find her house, and we’re going to have this out.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Why the hell not?”

“I’m not going to bother answering that question, because we both know the answer already.” He grabs me by the shoulder and turns me around before I can open the door. “Think. How does it look if you show up at her house ranting and raving?”

“Who said anything about ranting and raving?”

“You’re right. I forgot. We only met yesterday, and I don’t know anything about you.” He smirks when I shake his hand off.

“Be serious.”

“I am being serious, and that’s why I’m telling you this is not a good idea. If you want to talk to her here, fine. But hunting her down? That’s pretty desperate, wouldn’t you agree?”

I see his point, but I also know that I am desperate. I’m ashamed of myself, but it’s true. I’m desperate to know we weren’t that forgettable. I want to know something that mattered to me mattered to her, too. “I was willing to go along when she made it sound like she was afraid of losing her job. Now I wonder, was that even true? How worried could she have been if she slept with him?”

I can tell he wants to come up with some smartass remark, but all he does is shrug. “You’re right. I don’t know.”

“See? And I’m not somebody who’s gonna stand around and shrug it off. I want to know if this is all a game. I don’t like games – especially when I’m in the dark on the rules.”

“I would just hate to see you go off half-cocked and make trouble.”

“Thanks a lot, Mom, but I think I can handle it.”

“Are you sure about that?” I wonder if he’d be okay with me introducing my fist to his smug face.

“I’m not going to her house,” I insist. “And I’ll think about it tonight and figure out what to say. Okay? No half-cocked attack. But that’s the best I can promise.”

“Alright.” He doesn’t sound convinced, but that doesn’t come as a surprise. “Do me a favor and don’t go after her tomorrow until you come to me first. I’m afraid I might have to run interference.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” He doesn’t look convinced as I climb into my truck. I have to force myself to ignore the way he shakes his head, chuckling as I back out of my spot and turn toward the gate leading out of the lot.

Ryder? Him? She won’t sleep with me again, but she’ll sleep with him? Not that he’s a bad guy or anything, but... Him? What the hell does he have that I don’t have? Why is it fine for her to break the rules with him, and not with me?

None of this makes a damn bit of sense. If I thought I’d get an answer, I would say to hell with my promise to Soren and find her. There’s got to be some way to track down her address in the staff directory. I could at least find her cell number and give her a call – her real number this time. When I remember that little bit of trickery with the fake phone number, I have to ask myself why any of this comes as a surprise. She’s been playing games from the beginning.

Why the hell am I not good enough? Why are neither of us, but Ryder is somehow? What did I do to make her push me away while she welcomes one of my teammates into her bed?

The more I think about it, the tighter my chest gets and the greater the pressure in my head. I won’t be satisfied until I get answers straight from her, and I don’t care what it takes to get them.

She’s going to learn what happens when I get brushed aside, and she’s not going to like it very much.

HARLOW

I have to keep telling myself I'm going to get better at this skating thing.

Otherwise, all I'm doing as I awkwardly make my way around the rink during the free skate session is embarrass myself. Every time I start feeling even slightly confident or like I'm getting a grip on this, I wobble and look around to make sure nobody's watching.

It's getting easier, though. Nobody would ever mistake me for a pro or even a graceful amateur, but it's not such a struggle anymore to stay upright. My ankles are getting stronger, too. Who knew that mattered so much? I feel stronger in general. More secure. Now, I need to work on being a little more graceful. Considering that's never been one of my strong suits, my hopes aren't very high. But I'm trying. Nobody can say I didn't try.

Corey had to hurry out after class and offered no explanation. Not that she owes me one – her life is hers. Maybe Shaun has some free time and she didn't want to waste it hanging out with me during free skate. I don't blame her. If I had a boyfriend, especially one I didn't see often enough, I'd want to be with him over helping a clumsy friend skate around the rink. No questions about that.

“Hi, Miss Harlow! You look really good!” I offer Poppy a little wave as she skates with her parents. Should I take it personally that a child feels the need to be supportive? No. I

need to grow up a little. People aren't born knowing how to do everything.

At least I can say I'm able to keep up with the flow of traffic for the most part. People still have to skate around me sometimes – it's not a race, but they act like it is. I think I'm holding my own pretty well, though. I haven't fallen in a while. That means I'm making progress, right?

I wish I could make progress with Ryder. He canceled the session we were supposed to have today and didn't bother coming up with an excuse. I didn't ask for one. There's no way he wouldn't take it as an insult.

I might have been more than a little relieved. After the way we ended things yesterday, I doubt there's any chance we would've had a productive session, anyway. It's not very mature or productive to avoid the problem, but sometimes that's the best course of action. Time can heal things, or at least soften them.

It's amazing, the way everything can change all at once. I'm getting into the groove of the music playing through the speakers and even starting to enjoy myself when out of nowhere a tall, blond, extremely fast hockey player flies my way before turning sideways and coming to a sudden stop.

A sudden stop that ends up spraying me with ice. It's amazing I don't lose my balance just from the surprise alone, not to mention a face full of ice shavings.

"Watch out," Soren warns, wearing a smirk I can finally see once I've wiped my face free of ice.

Suddenly, my blood feels about as cold as what I just wiped off my skin. "Watch out for what?" I can't stop for fear of falling down and I definitely wish I could skate faster because I would love to leave him in my dust – or ice, as it were.

"I know something you don't know." He's enjoying this, that much is obvious from the sing-song delivery and the twinkle in his eye.

"And I don't suppose you'd like to clue me in, would you?" How I wish I could outskate him, though I'm not sure how

much good it would do while we're both caught up in the flow of traffic circling the rink.

"I'll give you a hint. His name is Ryder, and we know what you did together."

Not exactly a hint. More like an accusation. My heart flutters sickeningly but I keep skating, pretending to be more confident than I really am. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on. We both know that's not true."

"Even if I did," I continue, wracking my brain for my defense while doing my best to keep moving, "it wouldn't be any of your business. My personal life is mine."

Damn that Ash. I knew it. I knew he wouldn't let it go. It was only a matter of time before he blabbed to Soren. Just because he didn't come to me didn't mean he would let it go. Now what am I supposed to do?

"You're right. It's none of my business."

"Then why are you bugging me about it?"

"Because I wanted to give you a heads up before Ash comes down here and gets in your face."

"He has no right to be mad."

"Tell him that. God knows I haven't been able to get through to him."

Terrific. This is exactly what I need. "He's on his way down?"

"He's lacing up his skates as we speak. Don't get me wrong. I don't see what the big deal is. But he's taking it personally."

"He doesn't have any reason to."

"You know that, and I know that, but..." He can barely keep from laughing, and all it does is make me want to shake him. Or at least knock him on his ass. I'm glad he thinks this is funny, while my stomach is in knots and it's all I can do to keep moving forward. Now the other skaters are zipping past us, faster and faster as I move slower and slower. It's not easy to keep up my pace and remember everything Corey taught me

when all I can do is scan the stands around the rink and wonder which direction Ash is going to come flying in from.

What should I do? I don't have the first idea. "I guess there's no point in asking for you to back me up?"

"Listen, I've been doing my best since yesterday. He won't be satisfied until he talks to you one-on-one. Since you're down here instead of being in your office..."

Well, I got myself into this mess, didn't I? Now I have to figure out a way out of it. No big deal, right? I can't silence the groan that works its way out of me — and gets louder when a familiar player comes flying our way. My heart seizes in dread but I hold my head high, waiting for whatever is about to happen.

I only hope he's got enough sense not to start too much trouble in front of everyone.

Judging by the scowl he wears, I have to wonder.

HARLOW

It's amazing to me, the way everybody around us can skate and enjoy themselves. They don't have the first idea what's going on right in front of them, while Ash shoots daggers at me with his eyes once he falls in beside me and Soren. I can practically feel the anger and disgust rolling off him in waves as he comes dangerously close to where I am currently trying my best to keep up with the flow of traffic. It's not easy. But since when is anything easy, I guess.

Before he can say a word, I get the jump on him, shaking my head firmly. "This is not the time or the place to air your grievances."

"Since when do you get to tell me when and where I'm allowed to say what I think?" He starts skating backwards like it takes no effort at all, maneuvering his way around while I need all my concentration to skate straight ahead.

"This is hard enough for me when I don't have somebody in my face," I grumble.

"Then tell me what I want to know, and this can all be over."

"I don't like being forced into things— conversations included." No matter how I try to pretend I'm unbothered, nothing could be further from the truth. I'm practically shaking in my skates — but it isn't guilt or fear making me tremble. It's outrage, and I can't exactly voice it here and now. There's nothing for me to do but bear up under Ash's disdain and try to pretend it doesn't bother me if only because we're around so many people.

“This doesn’t even have to be a conversation.”

“Good, then we’re in agreement. If you’ll excuse me, I’m trying to get some practice in here.”

“I’m surprised you have the energy after making your way through the team.”

“Ash...” Soren mutters. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch him shaking his head.

“No, it’s the truth. What, is it hard for you to hear?” he asks me.

“I don’t appreciate you talking to me, or about me, that way.” I take the chance of glancing up from the ice long enough to meet his blazing, bitter gaze. “And I’m going to ask you to stop now.”

“Just tell me straight up.” He waits for a group of girls to skate by, giggling, before he mutters, “Why was it okay to sleep with him but not with us?”

I swear, I’m about to crawl out of my own skin. It’s the combination of being scrutinized so closely and, let’s face it, getting caught in my own double standard. I mean, he isn’t wrong, even if this is not the time or the place to call me out.

“Well?” he prompts when I don’t answer right away. “What’s your excuse? Why is he good enough, but we’re not?”

“I would just like to say here and now that he does not speak for me,” Soren mutters. To my surprise, he’s chuckling like this is all a joke.

“Laugh about it if you want.” Ash shoots him a death look.

“That’s fine by me.”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I admit. “It’s obvious there’s nothing I can say that will make you understand.”

“Why don’t you give it a try?”

“Why don’t you stop treating me like I owe you anything?” I counter in a tight whisper. “Because I don’t. We never made any promises. We didn’t lead each other on. Just because we had a good time doesn’t mean it has to happen again. End of

story. Why are you making this so much harder than it has to be?”

“That’s right. I’m the bad guy.”

“There don’t have to be any good guys or bad guys here,” I counter a little louder than I need. A few of the people skating nearby – they look vaguely familiar, which doesn’t make things any better – wear puzzled looks as they pass.

“There aren’t any,” I insist in a whisper. “So stop making this something it’s not. Please.”

It’s obvious from the way he scowls that he has no intention of letting it go. I wish I understood, I really do. “I never meant to hurt anybody,” I croak. It comes out a lot more emotional than I want to sound. I didn’t do anything wrong, but I’ve never held up well under scrutiny. The typical good girl who hates the idea of anyone being upset with her.

“Who’s hurt?” he asks, defiant. “Nobody’s talking about being hurt.”

“You sure about that?” Soren murmurs.

While Ash shoots him a dirty look as we round the far end of the rink, I search my mind for something, anything I can say that will put an end to this. I might as well be talking to a wall for all the good it’s doing. He’s determined to make our night together into more than it needs to be.

If I weren’t so angry and frustrated, I might be slightly proud of myself. After all, I’m apparently so good in bed that a hot professional hockey player can’t get me out of his head. Under any other circumstances, it would be flattering.

But not while I’m being judged. It’s sort of hard to be flattered when somebody is glaring at you like you’ve committed an unpardonable offense.

“I just want to know what is so different about him,” he insists. “Why was it okay for you to sleep with Ryder after you made such a big deal about not getting involved with anybody from the team? What made it okay for you to be with him?”

“That’s pretty obvious,” Soren interjects. “He’s hot.”

“Could you stop?” Ash growls. “This isn’t a joke.”

“I would appreciate it if you both stopped. It’s none of your business. I made a mistake, and I’m trying my best to deal with it. I don’t need you making it any worse.”

“A mistake, huh?” He snorts before shooting Soren a look. “I bet he loves hearing he was a mistake like we were. It seems like you make a lot of mistakes.”

It’s a miracle I haven’t bitten my tongue off yet. *He wants you to react. Don’t give him what he wants.* It’s one thing for me to know that, but another to listen to myself. I don’t know if anybody could be strong enough to let somebody talk to them the way he’s talking to me and not respond in anger. I would have to be superhuman not to at least feel something — anger, resentment, disappointment. There’s plenty of that. I’m disappointed in him. I’m disappointed in myself.

That disappointment doesn’t stop me from practically growling at him. “You’re right. I do make mistakes. You were definitely one of them.” I take a second to savor his look of surprise before cutting to my right, hoping to move away from the flow of traffic and back to the benches where I left my things.

“Not so fast.” Of course, he’s much better on the ice than I am, and much faster. He cuts me off, giving me no choice but to fall in once again with the flow of bodies. All I can do is keep up with them, focus on staying on my blades, and ignore the snickering and muttering going on behind me as Ash and Soren follow along. I’m surprised the ice doesn’t melt, I am so flushed and furious. The nerve of him. The nerve of both of them.

“Could you please leave me alone?” I ask when they follow me off the ice once I reach the point where I left my shoes.

“No way. You don’t get to insult me and then storm off.” He is good and determined to make me miserable, isn’t he?

“I didn’t storm off. I skated off.” And now I sit down to untie my skates. It’s not so easy with my hands shaking like they

are. All the things I want to say, but I can't exactly blurt them out here. Especially not with so many kids around.

"I just want to know what he's got that I don't have," Ash insists.

Glancing up from my laces, I grunt, "Could you have a little bit of decorum? Or do you really think this is the time and place?"

"Hi, Ms. Harlow!" One of the girls from class — I don't remember her name, it's either Madison or Sierra — waves as she passes. The kid is a speed demon. I wonder if I'll ever have that kind of confidence.

"Yeah, let's not do this here," Soren agrees. For once, he's not snickering or joking about the situation.

"Fine. But I still want an answer." Ash sits down and begins removing his skates, and so does Soren. Dammit. I was hoping they would stay out here while I made my escape.

I can't say anything other than what I already have. There's no magic formula. There's no special answer that's going to make this any easier for him. Ash can act tough all he wants, but I know he's hurting thanks to his massive ego. Why does that have to be my problem?

They are much faster at this than I am, to the point where they're both back in their sneakers by the time I've stepped into a pair of slides I wore to the arena.

And when I stand up, I find them looking at me. This argument is nowhere near over.

HARLOW

“Could you please let this go already?” It’s unnerving, the way they follow at my heels as I walk to my office. “This is ridiculous. I’ve said everything I have to say.”

“Well that’s very convenient for you, isn’t it? What about everything I want to say?”

“I think you’ve said enough.” I scan the hall once we come to a stop near the trophy case. A reminder of everything I hoped to do here – and everything that’s slipping through my fingers with each mistake I make.

At least there aren’t many people up here, but there are still enough random passersby that I don’t feel comfortable getting into this out in the hall. Going outside is out of the question, too, since there’s bound to be people on their way in and out of the building. Even if they don’t recognize me, they’re bound to recognize two of the team’s stars. “Please, I’m asking you as nicely as I can to let this go.”

“I’m not interested in doing that.”

God, he is so stubborn. I want nothing more than to shake some sense into him.

“You don’t own me,” I whisper. “And I’m tired of you acting this way. I refuse to be bullied over my choices.”

“Your choices? Or your mistakes? Make up your mind.”

“Alright, alright.” Soren still seems amused as he steps in, placing a hand on Ash’s chest. “This is not worth causing a

scene over.”

Ash swats him away. “I don’t need you telling me what to do.”

“For heaven’s sake.” I jerk my chin toward my office. “Let’s at least talk about it in there.” Much more of this and everyone in this building will know our private business.

Once we’re inside with the door closed, Soren plops down on the small sofa against the wall. My newest addition to the office. He’s wearing the same amused expression as before, like he’s enjoying the show. Considering he seems more level headed about this than Ash, he could at least do me a favor and speak up on my side. For all I know, that might ruin his fun.

“So?” Ash’s jaw tightens as he folds his arms. His intensity is equal parts off-putting and intriguing. How much of this is about his ego, and how much is about me? Us? I really can’t afford to entertain questions like that, but when I see how truly upset he seems, I can’t help it. What is he not saying?

“So what?” I fold my arms, too, which makes him lower his brow and growl. It might actually be hot if I wasn’t so irritated with him.

“So, why don’t the rules apply to him?”

“Why do you have such a problem with fairness?” He rolls his eyes, laughing, but I’m not going to let him off the hook that easily. He is not going to be dismissive and snide when he’s the one who started this.

“Don’t do that,” I murmur, shaking my head. “Don’t act like I don’t know what I’m talking about. And this isn’t me speaking to you as a doctor. I’m speaking to you as somebody who’s known people like you my whole life. You act like what I do with my personal life is your business, and it isn’t. I don’t belong to you, or to Soren, or to Ryder. I belong to myself. If I make a mistake, that’s my mistake to make, not yours. But I’m not going to explain myself to anyone. I’ve worked too hard and too long to have anyone questioning my choices.”

I don’t know what I expected. Understanding? Maturity? All I get is a hardening expression and a derisive snort. “Wow. That

was a nice little speech. It's a shame you're completely off-base."

I throw my hands into the air, barking out a laugh. "I'm off-base?"

"By a mile, at least."

"Then please, by all means. Tell me what this is really about since I'm clearly in the dark. Why do you care who I sleep with, Ash? What difference could it possibly make to you?"

"I would like to know the answer to that, myself." Soren stretches his arms out on either side, spanning the back of the sofa. He's the picture of confidence, ease. I don't know how he manages it. Ash is just the opposite – he looks like he's ready to burst a blood vessel.

"Fine. Do you wanna hear the truth?"

"I would love to, because then we could put an end to this."

"The way you talk to the two of us." He waves a finger between himself and Soren. "Like we were two naughty little kids for even acknowledging what happened that night with the three of us. You begged me not to say anything, ever, and I'm guessing you did the same to him." Soren's head bobs up and down, but he keeps his thoughts to himself. "That's fine. I can respect that. What I can't respect is you turning around weeks later and fucking somebody else on the team! Why is that so hard for you to understand?"

"Why is it so hard for you to understand that it has nothing to do with you? I told you. It was a mistake. I wish it hadn't happened. I'm not trying to hurt anybody, and I'm not trying to hurt my career. But... I don't know." I fold my hands on top of my head, shrugging. "It was a complicated situation. That's all I can say. I didn't set off trying to hurt anybody, and that's the truth. The absolute truth."

It comes as a surprise when he lowers his brow. "You didn't feel... pressured or anything, did you?"

"Oh, come on!" I look at Soren, hoping for help, and he only stares open-mouthed at Ash. "No, I didn't feel pressured. He's a nice guy. Why is it so hard for you to believe that I would

want to sleep with somebody else? Am I supposed to save myself for you for the rest of my life?"

"Why was he worth taking a risk for?"

Finally, he's asking a question that seems to make sense. He's finally saying what's actually on his mind. And when he says it, his voice gets low, almost defeated. Almost sad. That night couldn't have meant so much to him, could it?

Maybe I'm telling myself what I need to in order to make myself feel better. Otherwise, I'm a callous tramp, breaking hearts all over the place.

I need to soften my tone the way he has. "I wasn't thinking about it that way in the moment," I explain slowly, carefully. "I don't know what else to say. Just that it had nothing to do with either of you. It was my mistake, and I have to deal with it. But I'm not up for grabs, so get that idea out of your head. I don't belong to you, and you don't get to decide who I sleep with. Got it?"

He doesn't say anything at first, glaring at me while breathing heavily. I hate to admit it even to myself, but his intensity, the way he stares at me in a possessive way... I shouldn't like it. I should hate it.

Instead, I can't help but respond to it, suddenly warm and wet. There must be something wrong with me. I know damn well this is all kinds of trouble, yet I'm standing here with tight nipples and a heart racing like mad. I'm like Pavlov's dog when it comes to him, reacting without thinking, completely enthralled by the chemistry between us. I can't pretend it isn't flattering, knowing he feels so strongly.

He only grunts. "You need to stop kidding yourself."

"Kidding myself? Is that what I'm doing? What, by stating I belong to myself and nobody can tell me who I should sleep with? Thank you so much for the input. I'll take it under advisement."

"Act superior all you want, but you know I'm right."

"I don't know any such thing, and you really do need to get over yourself." My attention returns to Soren. "Could you

please help me out a little bit here? Are you going to sit there laughing the whole time?"

He lifts a broad shoulder. "I was considering laughing the whole time."

"Of course you were." Dammit, he's just as bad. Sitting there all cocky and handsome, acting like there's something funny about this. It makes him just as tempting as Ash is, and that's no good. I'm losing ground with every passing moment the three of us share in my tiny office. The air is so thick, I can barely breathe.

"That's it. Out, both of you. This conversation is over, and we are not having it again." When Ash won't move, I slip in behind him and give him a shove with both hands. "I'm serious. Out. Now."

"It's not that easy." I barely have time to register Ash's growl before he turns on his heel, wraps an arm around my waist, and pulls me in for a deep, all-consuming kiss.

Red flag, red flag!

Yet instead of pushing him away once the shock wears off, I do the worst possible thing.

I kiss him back. Hard, rough, full of anger and regret over the unmistakable connection I can't control. I reach up and run my hands through his hair while our tongues tangle and our teeth clash, and the most delicious, forbidden thrill races through me. All wrong, so wrong, and yet there's no stopping it. It's as inevitable as a crack of thunder after a bright flash of lightning.

The only thing that makes it better is when Soren steps up behind me, sandwiching me between their bodies once again.

HARLOW

I should stop this. I have to stop this. Every second I spend kissing and being kissed by Ash while Soren touches me — my hair, my neck, my hips and shoulders and ass — is a mistake. Something dangerous, something there's no going back from. One of us has to be smart, and it's got to be me.

So why can't I stop this? Why don't I pull away when Ash's tongue plunges into my mouth? Why don't I shove Soren away from me when his erection presses against my ass? Simple, I don't want to. Not when my whole body sizzles hot enough to burn away every last bit of sense from my overheated brain.

"We shouldn't." But my whisper is silenced by another kiss, another, while Soren's skillful touch makes my body sing. I can't let this happen. I can't *not* let it happen.

Ash pulls back so his lips can find my throat. When my head falls back against Soren's shoulder, he finds my lips so he can thoroughly own me with his kiss the way Ash does. I cup the back of his head with one hand, the back of Ash's with the other, already lost in sensation. My body is on fire, the flames lapping at my skin, and every touch only stokes the blaze.

Who am I kidding, pretending I can live without this? The joy of total abandon, giving myself over to something bigger and better than anything I've ever known before? My needy whimpers give away how much I've craved being thoroughly wanted, thoroughly worshipped by the two of them at once.

Soren takes me by the hips and pulls me back, and Ash follows until the three of us move as one, ending up next to the sofa. I take a seat, looking at one of them, then the other, and seeing the same blank, naked need in both of their faces.

Not to mention the need that takes the form of two erect dicks straining to be free from the soft workout pants they wear.

They groan together when I take their covered steel in my hands and begin to stroke while heat pools in my core and takes the form of wetness now flooding my panties. My heart is racing out of control, and I know it's wrong, but somehow that only makes it better. Hotter. Knowing we should not be doing this and doing it anyway. Knowing how easy it would be to get caught but choosing to go through with it.

Soren drags his thumb over my lips, while Ash buries his hand in my hair. No words are spoken because nothing needs to be said. What exists here isn't something that can be put into words, anyway. It's a force more powerful than anything I've ever come up against.

They exchange a meaningful look before lowering their pants and shorts. I take a lick of one, then the other, going back and forth, savoring their helpless sighs. It's a powerful feeling, controlling their pleasure this way.

Until Soren pushes me back, then takes my arms and raises them above my head so Ash can strip away my t-shirt. Our eyes meet before I slide the bra straps over my shoulders, then slowly lower the cups. Both of them are glued to my every movement, stroking themselves while they watch me reveal my body.

It's Ash whose resolve breaks first. He descends on me all at once, growling as he runs his lips and tongue over my breasts. Soren takes off my shoes, then works my leggings and thong over my thighs and down my calves. Even the slightest brush of his fingers against my skin leaves me moaning helplessly before Ash captures my mouth and kisses me deeply.

I was never going to win this fight. I don't know why I ever tried.

I offer no resistance when Soren takes me by the hips and pulls me closer to the edge of the sofa so he can part my legs and move his tongue through my pulsing folds. Ash's mouth stifles my throaty moans before he breaks our kiss in favor of directing his dripping mushroom head to my lips.

Without hesitation, I part them and let him inside, sucking him greedily, giving him everything he so clearly wants while giving in to what I want, too. I don't know what they're doing to me or what's happened to all of my fears. I only know none of it matters now.

"That's right." Ash's voice is a breathless growl by the time he takes me by the back of the head, guiding me while thrusting his hips. "Suck it. Suck my dick." I moan around him while Soren works my clit expertly, his tongue flicking the sensitive bud. My hips buck and grind but he holds me down, forcing me to experience every delicious sensation.

"Let me get some of that." I whimper with disappointment when Soren stands, taking his place at my other side. But Ash doesn't move except to withdraw from my parted lips. Instead, he reaches down between my thighs and drives his fingers deep inside me.

"Oh, my God!" I gasp. Everything else is cut off when Soren takes control, forcing my head down onto his straining dick. Ash's digits plunder me mercilessly, his dark chuckles barely registering in the back of my mind as I struggle to breathe while being used and pleased beyond my wildest dreams.

"I knew this was what you wanted," he grunts while sliding two fingers in and out of my heat. "Lie to yourself all you want, but you can't lie to me. This is what you needed. Isn't it?"

He's right. This is all I wanted. Ever since they first showed me what it means to take on both of them at once, my body has craved it again. The pleasure, the mindless abandon of being taken. The sensation builds until it's overwhelming, the tension growing until I'm sure it will kill me. I can't take any more, I can't, it's too much.

Somehow, instinct comes through at the last second, and I manage to keep from screaming as an earth-shattering orgasm tears through me. “She needed that,” Soren chuckles once I’ve come down from my ecstatic high. He’s right. I did need that, and I already need more. I need everything they can give me.

So when Ash takes my hips in his hands and starts turning me over until I’m on my hands and knees across the sofa’s length, I go with it. It doesn’t even occur to me to resist. What’s the point? I’m tired of fighting what I want.

“You have no idea,” he grunts from behind as Soren stands in front of me, “how I’ve imagined being inside you again. So tight.” I hear a condom wrapper opening, and my body sings in anticipation.

Soren strokes himself, watching with rapt attention as Ash positions himself behind me. The pressure from Ash’s head makes me suck in a surprised breath even though I know what’s coming. It’s the force of him. The intensity behind every movement.

His fingers dig into my hips an instant before he drives himself into my quivering sheath. The strength of his stroke drives me forward, but Soren keeps me balanced with a hand on my shoulder. “Put it in your mouth,” he mutters while running his dripping head over my lips. And here I am, a wanton slut, sticking out my tongue so I can run it around the ridge before taking him into my mouth all at once.

Am I really doing this? Is it really happening? There’s no question, even though it seems unbelievable. I’m taking them on again, here in my office, letting them use me for their pleasure while I do the same. The three of us work together, with the two of them timing their strokes into my mouth and my pussy while I grip them tight.

“That’s nice,” Soren sighs, taking my head in both hands and moving his hips, hitting the back of my throat until I gag. “You’re so good to my dick.” I can’t help but glow under his praise, knowing I make him feel good the way he does to me. The way they both do.

“Getting tighter again,” Ash groans before delivering a slap on my right cheek. There’s something so wrong about it, about all of this, and I’m helpless against what this is doing to my body. He’s right, I’m tightening around him, already close again. I need release. I need what only they can bring me.

It’s close, so close, just beyond my reach. Soren groans in disappointment when I let him fall from my lips, turning my head to whisper one word to the man pounding me from behind. “Harder.”

There’s no time for him to obey before a sharp click startles me out of the moment and sends me hurtling back to reality.

“I saw your car outside. We need to—” Ryder stops dead, the rest of his sentence lost once he takes in the sight of what he interrupted. “What the hell is going on here?”

No, this isn’t happening. It can’t.

It is.

THANK you for reading Kiss and Puck! Harlow and the boys are just getting started. Things heat up on and off the ice in the next installment - [Pucking Disaster](#).

USA Today Bestselling Author
CHARLOTTE BYRD

Pucking disaster



PALM SPRINGS RAPTORS BOOK 2

ABOUT CHARLOTTE BYRD

Charlotte Byrd is the bestselling author of romantic suspense novels. She has sold over 1.5 Million books and has been translated into five languages.

She lives near Palm Springs, California with her husband, son, a toy Australian Shepherd and a Ragdoll cat. Charlotte is addicted to books and Netflix and she loves hot weather and crystal blue water.

Write her here:

charlotte@charlotte-byrd.com

Check out her books here:

www.charlotte-byrd.com

Connect with her here:

www.tiktok.com/charlottebyrdbooks

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